## Through a Glass Darkly

**by** [susiecarter](http://archiveofourown.org/users/susiecarter)

### Summary

Post-BvS AU: Batman killed Superman—and then Metropolis was wrecked by Doomsday, not long before Steppenwolf arrived and conquered the world with innumerable swarms of parademons. Bruce's nightmare has come true, in every way but one: what's left of humanity is fighting to survive in a hostile wasteland as Steppenwolf manipulates the power of a pair of mother boxes to gradually reshape the planet to serve his needs.

But rumors of a threat that could be greater still are finally forcing Bruce to consider taking truly drastic steps. Like bringing Superman back from the dead.

### Notes

OKAY SO. First things first: I was lucky enough to be claimed this round by _two_ fantastic artists! Please RUN DON'T WALK [here](http://archiveofourown.org/users/lesbidar) for the artwork made for this fic by lesbidar ([AO3](http://archiveofourown.org/users/lesbidar) | [Tumblr](http://archiveofourown.org/users/lesbidar)); and [here](http://archiveofourown.org/users/santheum) for the artwork made by Santheum ([AO3](http://archiveofourown.org/users/santheum) | [Tumblr](http://archiveofourown.org/users/santheum)). I am so, so grateful to have had the chance to work with them both for this bang; they were amazingly patient with me and my ever-expanding draft, and wonderfully generous with their efforts, and I appreciate it so much more than I can say!
And then we're on to my usual ridiculous parade of thank-yous—to more people than I can possibly name here for their encouragement and for putting up with me flailing like a muppet as I drafted this, for one. (YOU ALL KNOW WHO YOU ARE. SORRY ABOUT THAT /\ :D ♥) To my UNBELIEVABLY AWESOME ARTISTS, for putting up with having this beast dropped on them like a cartoon piano, and for all their creativity, enthusiasm, and amazing work. To everybody on the ManMan server, for making it such a great place to hang out even though I was usually doing it invisibly; and especially to AFO for the direly-needed peptalk and for being a smashing House Head even though I was a garbage House member. ;D To everybody who signed up at all, whether they ventured to the Discord or not, for loving this pairing so much—and for everybody who made it to the finish line, for sharing all this awesome work! And to the mods, as always, for all their hard work behind the scenes to keep these events running smoothly. ♥

I, um. I have no excuse for any of the rest of this. I don't even know what happened, this just kept getting longer and I couldn't stop it. :P This is definitely a lot more words of angst, unhappiness, and emotional pain of various kinds than I usually generate, so just to clarify some tags: this is rated E on the strength of the explicitness of some descriptions during sex scenes, not for violence or any other reason; the rating should be thought of as a "high water mark" rather than an assessment of the fic's content "on average". IMO, no archive warnings apply to this fic; however, it does deal with the aftermath of/include some flashbacks related to a non-canonical major character death (... or, well, a non-canonical version of a canonical major character death, to be precise). I figured better safe than sorry.

A couple other non-canonical character deaths are implied to have occurred in the past, but that's it. There is violence, plus some discussions of injury, but IMO the descriptions don't rise to the level of "graphic". There is a short section with implications pointing to/references to actions perceived as attempted suicide. Also, ~certain people~ are, uh, not in the best state of mind when they start banging, and there are what I would call dubcon elements. HOWEVER, the Angst with a Happy Ending tag is also on here for a reason. *thumbs up*

This leans into the aesthetics of Bruce's canonical Knightmare, and certain descriptions are drawn from that sequence in BvS. Some details (especially as regards villains' power sets) are based off comics canon, but that's it. Most of this is the product of my fevered imagination and soft spot for post-apocalyptic scenarios, and basically amounts to Justice League: Fury Road except with way worse action sequences.

SERIOUSLY THO GO LOOK AT THE ART

See the end of the work for more notes.
They shouldn't have tried to cross the wasteland.

Not that they'd had much choice in it. There was less and less that wasn't wasteland these days, hard cracked ground and blowing dust, rolling gravel that managed to find and prick through every spot where your boot-soles had worn thin. And there had been no more water. Miri had known the well wouldn't last much longer, had seen the signs in the relentless dryness of the stone even before it had become clear the water level was dropping, less and less each day even though they were all rationing as best they could.

She'd had everyone fill whatever they could find, seal it away to carry with them before the dry air could steal more of it from them. And then—well. Then there had been no more water. They'd had to leave.

But it had still probably been stupid to try to cross the wasteland.

She scrabbled for footing, caught the toe of her boot in a crevice in the rock and used that moment's steadiness to shove Beth, who was ahead of her, over the crest of the rise. Beth stumbled and fell—Miri couldn't see her anymore, but she heard the whumph of breath knocked loose. But that was all right, because if Beth was over the crest and low enough, then the raiders probably couldn't see her either.

Miri heard the raiders' rope before she saw it, a thin hiss slicing through the air before the loop of it caught her tight around the middle. Pulled taut, it felt like it was going to fucking cut her in half, and she grabbed for it, tried to dig her bitten-down nails into the line and didn't catch on anything. Not rope, then—cable or something, metal or plastic or both.

Whoever had snagged her pulled hard, a single sharp tug, and she fell. One long breathless moment of nothing but seared pale sky, and then she landed hard, jarred to her bones. For an instant, everything hurt at once; and then the worst of it faded out and left a throb in her hip, her ass, her wrist. Not broken. Please let none of it be broken. Especially not the goddamn hip, because she'd die out here if she couldn't walk anymore—

One of them laughed and darted in to kick her. She screamed at him, because she was pissed off and afraid and wanted to make some noise about it—wanted to make his ears fucking bleed. She squirmed and rolled around in the grip of the cable, still screaming, and kicked him back, hit muscle over bone. The thigh, maybe. Too bad; she wished she'd gotten his dick.

He swore anyway, which was satisfying, and then hit her in the face, which wasn't. She reeled away from the bright sharp starburst of it, blood filling her mouth—her cheek, she'd cut her cheek on her teeth, and fuck, that fucking hurt.

"Shut the fuck up already," he was saying, when she could hear again over the ringing in her ears, and he grabbed her by the hair, jerked her head back so hard her neck went hot with pain. She screamed again, right in his face, and writhed as hard as she could, because he had her and she was fucked, she was so fucked, but the least she could do was make him work for it.

Nothing good ever happened when you were caught by raiders. You died, one way or another; all
there was to wonder about was whether it would be fast or slow. Depended on which ones caught you, too. The craziest ones drank blood, Miri had heard, made sacrifices—like if they soaked the wasteland deep enough, the water would come back. Most of them just worked you until you couldn't take another step and then left you where you fell.

She didn't know which to expect from these ones. They had a pack sign—or at least that was what it looked like, on the one who had her: roughly-stitched black flames, sewed in across the chest of his half-assed scavenged armor. Not one she'd heard of, that she could remember.

But maybe all that meant was that everybody else they'd ever taken was dead—hadn't gotten the chance to spread the word.

And they didn't just have her. They'd gotten Jaime, Raven, Marcus, before Miri had even been roped, and those were just the voices Miri could pick out of the shouting, the screaming. Half a dozen others, at least, and even if the raiders didn't make it over the ridge in time to round up the rest—which would happen to them? A group that small in the wasteland would be even easier prey—

A jolt, a shock. What felt like half Miri's hair was torn from her head, except probably that was just her worn nerves on fire. Her head dropped without the raider's grip to twist it up at that angle, dropped and cracked hard against the ground, and she couldn't do anything but lie there for a long dazed second.

She heard the man die. What other explanation could there be for that sound, that wet soft scrape, that choked gasp? But it wasn't like she gave a shit. The important part was that he didn't have her by the hair anymore. She felt the cable loosen around her, and she blinked and coughed and willed her hands and arms to work again—pulled, twisted, flailed, until she'd worked the loop of it over her head and could fling it away, scrabbling backward on her elbows.

There would be more. There were always more. Raiders came on you in packs, surrounded you; these ones had had motorcycles, a couple narrow dusty horses, and there was no outrunning that on foot.

Except no one grabbed her. No one caught her again, tied her for real to drag her away. She'd lost some hair after all, blood from her scalp dripping into one eye, and she rubbed it away impatiently with the back of her hand, feeling around on the ground with the other for—for a rock, a stick, something she could use to hurt someone a little.

But when everything came into focus around her again, it turned out there was no one left to hit.

The man had died after all. Him, and the one next to him. The two women further back, and it was one of them, Miri saw, who'd roped her with that cable. A dozen more—no, wait, that one was still alive—

Except he wasn't, even as she looked. Someone moved, leapt with impossible strength and landed half-crouched in front of him, and even as they straightened to their full height they'd already caught him by the throat. He couldn't even scream, only rasp out terrified breaths and scratch uselessly at their wrist, their hand. And then they squeezed, and Miri could hear something crunch, and he was gone.

Jesus.

Whoever it was turned—a woman, Miri thought, and then her gaze fell on Miri and—fuck, what was she going to do? There was no way hitting somebody like that with a rock would do shit except annoy them. If she wanted to kill Miri, too—
Miri twisted around frantically, tried to push herself up and couldn't get further than her knees without her head spinning. She couldn't climb the ridge like this, but she couldn't just lie here and die. She couldn't. She'd put way too much work into keeping her own dumb ass alive to quit now.

But of course all the woman had to do was leap again, and she was—she was there, a stride away, dirt cracking apart beneath her feet with the impact. She tilted her head, and then reached down and caught Miri by the arm and hauled her upright. "Who are you?" she said.

"Fuck you," Miri told her, and kicked at her—not like she needed her feet under her, was it, with the woman holding her suspended?

The woman was doing it one-handed, of course. So it wasn't a surprise that she didn't seem to feel Miri's half-assed blows at all; that she just kept standing there, impassive, like she was still waiting for her answer. She was—

She was beautiful, actually. Unreal with it, the same way the strength, those leaps, were unreal. And with the look on her face, the cold steady way she stared, it was like she'd been carved out of stone—but Miri couldn't help wondering, absent, what she'd look like if she smiled.

"You are not a raider," she said. "Are you a killer?"

"The fuck do you care?"

"Tell me," the woman said, soft and very even, "and then perhaps I might let you go."

Oh, she might, might she? "Who isn't," Miri snapped, "these days?"

"How many?"

"What?"

"How many people have you killed?" the woman said.

"Eight," Miri spat.

"Why did you kill them?"

"What—wrong answer and you'll snap my neck, too? Not much incentive to tell you if I did have a shitty reason, is it?"

Miri was half expecting to get thrown to the ground for that, slapped or struck; it was usually a bad idea to mouth off to anybody who could hold you up one-handed.

But the woman didn't hit her, didn't hurt her. Something about the woman's face, her eyes, softened just a fraction instead. "And you, all of you—you were traveling together," she said.

Miri glanced past her. The woman had taken out the raiders, all right. But she'd left Jaime untouched, Marcus and Lila on the ground beyond him shakily pushing themselves up to their hands and knees, Haida and Raven already trying to coax one of the raiders' horses closer.

"Yeah," Miri said.

"Out here?"

"Out of water. Had to move."
The woman watched her silently for another moment, and if she was making a decision Miri couldn’t tell what it was, which way the scales were tipping.

But then she let go of Miri’s arm, and turned to—jesus, to pull a goddamn sword out of somebody’s head. Had she thrown it? What the fuck.

"You all will come with me," the woman said. "I know a safe place."

Miri eyed her. Not that any better ideas were presenting themselves; Miri could in fact stand on her own two feet, as it turned out, but her head was still bleeding and she kind of wanted to throw up. If there was somewhere to go, somewhere they could at least rest, even if it meant sticking with some whackjob with a sword—

"Safe," she repeated.

The woman glanced at her, and then, pointedly, at the dead raiders. "Safer than here," she said.

Fair enough.

"There's more of us over the ridge," Miri said.

"Then we will go over the ridge," the woman said, "and you'll tell them to come too," and she’d come closer again, had Miri by the shoulders.

"Uh—"

"If I had decided to kill you, you would be dead," the woman told her, which shouldn't have been reassuring but sort of was. "I won't drop you."

"Great," Miri said, and then squeezed her eyes shut and hung on.

Lois knew which cot to head for even before Aline looked up and gestured her over; all she had to do was follow the dark smears of blood on the floor.

"Parademons," Aline bit out, like it was a curse, and then she stopped and drew in a breath, and let her shoulders drop. She had her hands held out, half-curled, bloody—but what she said after a moment, more gently, was, "He'll probably make it."

"You should sound happier about that," Vincent said from the cot, thin and hoarse. "You should be jubilant. You should throw me a party."

"How about we wait until you can stand up," Lois suggested, settling in on the edge of the next cot over—empty, and it was nice to remind herself that some of them were. The more empty cots in here, the better.

Vincent looked like shit, but that was mostly down to how pasty he’d gotten, the waxy cast to his face. Aline had patched him up pretty well, and if she’d smeared a little blood on the outside of the
gauze as she was taping it down, well, nobody was going to complain. Failing to maintain appropriate medical hygiene standards was one of the least frightening things that could kill you, these days.

And he had something spattered along the line of his jaw, his cheek, but it was black. Parademon blood. Good for him.

Lois leaned in a little closer. *Probably wasn't* definitely, and if Vincent did die after all, he wasn't going to do it without telling her what he'd learned first. "Did you find him?" she said, low, quiet enough to be hard to hear over the sounds of Aline moving, wiping her hands, packing equipment away.

And Vincent got where she was coming from, because he didn't tell her to let him sleep or come back later. He took a second to gather himself, closing his eyes and wetting his lips, drawing a long slow breath, and then he looked at her and said, "Yes. So did they," and he gestured toward his side with a rueful twist of his mouth. "But we got there first."

"You talked to him."

Vincent made a face. "Sort of. He was—well. You know how they get. He was raving, like the others. But we were fast enough this time to get a chance to really listen." He paused to cough a little, wincing. "He knew they were coming for him. They'd marked him, he said. Everybody who makes it out of the nests again—the swarms always come for them. Must be something the demons can see, or—or smell—"

"Sure," Lois said, "of course," because it made sense. That was why they'd had so much trouble pinning any of this shit down in the first place—because rumors left tough trails to follow out here, and they had to be fast or the parademons beat them to it, and then there was nobody to find.

"And he was—he said they talked to him," Vincent added in a rasp. "Not with words. In his head. Loud, thousands of voices, all saying the same thing. The whole hive, and that was all that was in there, all they had inside of them. 'He's coming'. And he didn't understand it, but—'darkside'."

Lois sat back, rubbing a hand across her mouth. *He's coming*—that one, they'd heard before. That was three-quarters of the reason Lois had started pushing so hard, chasing down anyone who'd gotten out of a parademon nest alive. There weren't that many people left to get taken in the first place; and even fewer managed to claw their way back out, to make it far enough for Lois to find them before a swarm caught up with them again and ripped them apart.

Because they all came out saying the same things. Ranting them, screaming them, to anybody who'd listen. *He's coming*. Straight from the mouths, or in this case psychically projective hive-minds, of parademons—and if the parademons knew it, insofar as things with that baseline soldier-drone level of intelligence could be said to "know" anything, then it had something to do with Steppenwolf. With his plans, his goals. With whatever the fuck he was going to do next with a world he'd already set on fire.

Not that they had more than a snowball's chance in hell of stopping him. But they had an even worse chance than that if they couldn't at least figure out what it was he was working toward.

And *darkside*—that was new. New, and specific enough that they might actually be able to get some mileage out of it, one way or another.

"Okay," Lois said aloud, and set a hand on Vincent's near shoulder, which was conveniently also the less-bandaged of the two. "Thanks, Vincent, that's exactly what we needed. Good work."
"Great work," Vincent insisted. "Told you you should throw me a party." He stopped and swallowed, and looked away. "I—brought Amos's necklace back. Julia was—there wasn't anything left to—"

Fuck. "Cut that out," Lois said, more sharply than she meant to; she pressed her mouth flat and made herself breathe, and then added more carefully, "Your only job is to not die too, okay? The rest isn't your problem."

Vincent closed his eyes. "Feels like my problem," he said, very softly. But when Lois squeezed his shoulder all he did was sigh, and he didn't open his eyes again.

It took ten minutes, maybe twelve, for his face to smooth out and go slack, despite the little lines of pain lingering around his eyes, his mouth. Lois waited through them all, and then an extra two to be sure, and then almost ruined it standing up with the way the edge of the cot squawked under her.

But he didn't wake, so it was safe to turn and nod at Aline, and then walk out.

She stopped once she was in the hallway. She didn't intend to. It was just—

It was just that she was going to have to tell him, and she knew it. She was going to have to tell Wayne.

It was the hardest thing about any of this, she sometimes thought. Which was stupid and selfish; even, in a way, petty. The world had ended, or as good as. Billions of people were dead. Where there had been cities, countryside, oceans, there was dust, flame—literally, towering pillars of it, lava and fire gouting from the pits drilled by alien machinery they still didn't understand. Because Steppenwolf hadn't just been content to destroy Earth but was reshaping it somehow, remaking it, into something that suited his needs better—

But even that only made Lois think of Zod, of Black Zero. And thinking of Black Zero was, inevitably, thinking of Clark.

Petty, after so much death and destruction, to hold onto one loss so tightly. But then it was the kind of loss she could hold onto, the kind of loss that fit into her hands, the space behind her ribs. Watching New York crumble was too big; that she hadn't been able to take an actual shower in years was too small. And she was allowed to hate Steppenwolf. But Wayne—

Wayne, she had to look at. Had to talk to. Wayne was the only reason she was still alive, the only reason most of them were. She loathed him for that, too, in a way, but she tried to do it quietly. Because there was so much at stake, and she knew it, and she wasn't stupid. She couldn't afford to be stubborn, couldn't indulge in the luxury of screaming and kicking and spitting in his face.

And whoever it was who was coming, whatever "darkside" meant, if they were going to have any chance at all of surviving it, then she had to tell Wayne.

She stood there in the hallway and pressed her fists to the wall, drove her knuckles into the cool cement until they ached. And then she took a slow breath and wiped her face dry, and went up to the workroom.

He was almost always in there, when he wasn't out on patrol or up in the security room. He liked it; she knew him well enough by now to understand that, and to know equally well that if she said as
much, he'd disagree—call it practicality. They were outnumbered, outgunned, desperate. They needed every advantage they could get, and Wayne's technical expertise was one of the few they could rely on.

But he was full of shit. He liked it. Because of course he did; of course he enjoyed the thought that he knew exactly what was necessary, that he could fix everything with his own two hands; that he had to, that nobody else was capable of it—

Steady on, Lane, Lois told herself, and drew a deep breath, and then went in.

Wayne looked up as soon as she stepped through the doorway. He never made her wait, never made her ask for his attention. Years, now, and she still hadn't been able to decide whether she was grateful for that, or whether she hated him for making the thought of gratitude even cross her mind—for being considerate, goddamn him, after everything.

"Wayne," she said. "Vincent made it back alive. He learned something."

"Tell me," Wayne said, and she did.

It didn't take long to explain. It was hardly complicated, and he understood the implications immediately. She prided herself, in an odd bitter sort of way, on keeping him thoroughly informed, up-to-date on every little bit of information her intelligence network uncovered. Because it was good to know that she could still depend on herself, on her old professional standards—that she was capable of keeping a clear head. They needed each other to stay alive. She'd have been dead a long time ago if it weren't for Wayne. And yet—

And yet she despised herself for it, too. There was a part of her that still felt as though every second she didn't spend doing her level best to smash Wayne's head into one of these endless concrete walls was wasted—that couldn't believe she was standing here talking to him quietly instead.

Wayne was silent for a moment, after she was done.

"All right," he said, and then, impeccably precise and cautious, "Thank you."

He always thanked her. Every time they spoke, every time she brought him something new.

And Lois looked at him and then turned around and left. Because that was what she always did: because she couldn't tell him you're welcome when he wasn't, and he did owe her, he was—he ought to be desperately grateful for it, for every one of those wasted fucking seconds she spent not punching him in the face, and the absolute least he could do was acknowledge it.

Bruce knew what he needed to do.

It was, therefore, inexcusable self-indulgence, that after Lane left he sat there for a long moment instead of doing it.

He could try to tell himself the work he was doing was important. And it was, after all—everything
he did now was important, every instant spent fighting tooth and nail, clawing for every precious inch of breathing room, for each sliver of marginal advantage he could deliver, if it could even be called that.

But however much technology they managed to scavenge from Steppenwolf's assault troops, whatever he managed to learn about how it worked or how to use it, none of that meant anything if he didn't have enough information to wield it effectively. A handful of words gleaned by Lane's team was in some ways worth more than a thousand alien devices, depending on the words.

And these words—

He stared down at the power source he'd been attempting to analyze before Lane had come in, at the clear blue glow of it.

These words could be the most important of all. Because having the largest database in the world at your fingertips didn't do you any good if you didn't know what you were looking for. And now, maybe, Bruce did.

He took his time securing the workroom. That was justifiable. Steppenwolf's tech wasn't the most powerful thing on the planet, not when there had turned out to be such a thing as mother boxes; but it was close. And every single piece of salvage they'd managed to turn up, every broken chunk of alien equipment they'd seized successfully, had come at a price. To allow them to be damaged or stolen would be unconscionable on multiple levels.

And considering his intentions, it was only reasonable to take a detour to the security room.

"Twist," he said.

She looked up from the monitors displaying the view from the west exterior cameras. "Boss."

"You're primary," he said, "until I tell you otherwise." And she wouldn't ask; maybe that was what made it the critical fraction easier to add, matter-of-fact, as if it were of no particular import: "I'll be down in the ship."

She didn't blink. "Yes, boss," she said, with a nod.

For a moment he was torn uselessly between muted gratitude and petty resentment—if only she'd had some reason to hold him there longer, if only she had asked. He'd have refused to tell her, evaded, and that could have taken up another fifteen or twenty seconds. As much as a minute, even.

But never mind. Stupid, pointless, to allow himself to even wish for it.

He nodded back and left her there, and then there was nothing for it but to do it: to go down to the ship.

He'd spent more time with it than anyone else, by now. In the early days, he'd pushed to secure it as quickly as possible; the compound had been formed out of the reconfigured bones of city infrastructure, a subway station and associated maintenance tunnels, and he'd chosen this location precisely because it was so close to where the ship had come to rest and been buried, after the first great upheaval that had swallowed Metropolis. He'd known what it was, what it could do, and that the world—what had been left of it, by then—could never afford for it to fall into Steppenwolf's hands. Only a handful of people alive today knew about it or had any idea where it was, but Bruce visited it regularly.

(During his waking hours, yes; and even beyond. He still had the dream—the dream, the only one
that mattered—with uncomfortable frequency. But the setting had begun to change over the years: he wasn't always in the wasteland, but rather here in the compound; or in what he believed might be the throne room of Steppenwolf's vast fortress, to judge by the gleaming black walls, the disturbingly alien figures of statues; or—or, sometimes, in the ship.)

Unfortunately, even thorough and relentless familiarity had resoundingly failed to breed contempt. Crossing through the lower levels toward the wreck was an agonizing experience. Every time he approached it, every time he was forced to place himself within its grasp, he was painfully aware all over again of how little he understood it, how little control he had over it; that even like this, broken and half-buried, encased within hundreds of feet of stone, it was still undoubtedly more powerful than he could comprehend. It was—

It was Kryptonian. It had belonged to Superman. It had somehow created Doomsday, though Bruce still couldn't claim to grasp the full sequence of events that had led to that particular disaster. No sooner had he dealt with one otherworldly existential threat than another had reared its head in the distance—had done perhaps even greater damage to Metropolis and Gotham than its predecessor, astoundingly. Bruce and Diana had only just been able to bring it down, and the trail of destruction it had left in its wake had, it had become apparent, been only a glimpse of what was to come.

In the wrong hands, the ship was at least as great a danger as Superman had ever been.

But however much he hated it, however much he loathed and resented it, the ship was also the best source of information about the wild and hostile wider universe that had so abruptly, violently revealed itself to humanity. Bruce could no better afford to ignore it or fail to make use of it than he could afford to let Steppenwolf get his hands on it.

(And if worst came to worst—it was also the sole piece of equipment left on the planet to which he had access that could conceivably leave it intact, if absolutely necessary. The only thing Bruce liked less than being forced to use desperate last-ditch exit strategies was not having them.)

So he ignored the furious pounding of his heart and set his hand against the ship's exterior, and when the wall of it opened for him, he went in.

Portions of the ship's database were somewhat out of date—an understatement, perhaps, considering the frankly intimidating timescale involved. But it had been receiving sporadic partial updates from somewhere within at least the last few thousand years. Recently enough that it had been familiar with Steppenwolf, with his origins and capabilities and likely aims, and had been able to provide an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of parademon swarms that had proven invaluable.

If there was even a fraction of a chance it had more answers for him, it would be unconscionable to fail to ask.

But of course it wouldn't let him. Because it had a question for him first: the same one it always had.

"Would you like to assume command?"

Bruce permitted the hot flood of irritation, permitted his fists to clench. It was a more comfortable sensation than fear; and even if the ship was taking readings of him, even if the AI was in some sense capable of parsing his body language, what did that matter? It could assess him in any way it chose, perceive him as emotional or irrational or provokable—who would it tell?
(Perhaps that would even be a benefit. Perhaps if it decided he was unsuitable, it would stop fucking asking.)

"No," he said, and the ship's silence didn't take on weight, a sense of quiet wistful disappointment. How could it? It was a goddamn ship.

"Ship operating at twenty-two percent efficiency," it reported after a moment.

When Bruce had first secured it, after Doomsday had torn it open on his way out, its reported efficiency had been hovering around eight percent. He'd done what he could to encourage the slow uptick over the years, because its function had, to all appearances, been sharply limited in the single digits. But there were lines: who knew whether the numbers it was giving him were real? For all he knew it was at ninety-eight percent, and trying to trick him into handing it the last two percent for free. He didn't want this thing at a hundred percent. He didn't want to imagine what it would be capable of. Perhaps it wouldn't need anyone to assume command, then—perhaps it would handle that itself. He didn't want to know, couldn't take the risk. If it ever told him it had achieved fifty percent, he was going to have to put a few new holes in it somehow.

"Ship—access archives. Summarize any information available to you relating to the keyword 'darkside'."

"Darkside," the ship repeated, and rendered the word in the air the way Bruce had taught it to: projected, picked out in motes of light. He could read more quickly than it could speak aloud to him, and when he came to it with questions, he wanted answers as fast as he could get them. "More appropriately rendered," it added, and then the letters flickered and returned in a new arrangement: Darkseid.

Bruce stared up at it. "Why is that rendering more appropriate?"

"Divine Illuminated Apokoliption includes a grammatical marker that signifies when a word that might otherwise be interpreted as a common noun or noun phrase is a name, and not a location or other proper noun. There is no equivalent in standard American English. However, data analysis indicates that a similar effect is achieved by deliberate misspelling, though more commonly in the context of 'brand names' developed for commercial purposes than in the context of personal names: Krispy Kreme, Playskool, Froot Loops—"

Jesus Christ. Was that why it always spelled "Apokolips" like it was a bad brand of chapstick?

"Stop," Bruce said, and then repeated, "Divine Illuminated Apokoliption."

He paused to breathe, to consciously and deliberately wet his lips; as if he hadn't just been jolted to his bones. As if he hadn't just been overcome by the coldest and most profound shadow of foreboding he'd felt since Black Zero—since the moment he'd looked up at the bank of monitors in the Cave and found every one of them reading "YOU ARE NOT ALONE". Since General Zod had arrived and within thirty-six hours had reoriented Bruce's world around a threat of almost incomprehensible magnitude.

"Are you telling me that's an Apokoliption name?"

"Yes," the ship said, and then more words began to appear in the air, neatly rendered glowing paragraphs, as it translated whatever it was turning up in its archives and resummarized it.

But Bruce didn't need to read it. "You told me that Steppenwolf was in exile. That he'd chosen to conquer Earth to establish a foothold—that the New Gods of Apokolips wouldn't—"
"Analysis at the time," the ship corrected, "assessed that scenario as the most likely by a margin of nearly forty percent."

Bruce bit the inside of his cheek. It was true; when he'd first thought to come to the ship for information on Steppenwolf, it had—it had given him odds, scrupulously careful never to state any of its suppositions as though they were facts. And it wasn't that Bruce trusted it, but the vast majority of its analyses had proven themselves entirely correct. The information it had given them about parademons, their biology and abilities, their swarming instincts, had been invaluable, as had its archive data regarding Steppenwolf, the mother boxes, everything this frightening new universe had to throw at them.

He was the one who'd erred—treating it as though it were all therefore equally accurate, as if one likely scenario coming to pass made all likely scenarios reality. He was the one who'd erred. And now they were all going to pay for it.

"However," the ship was saying, "the last update to archives came approximately three thousand years ago, by your world's reckoning. The content of your request indicates the situation may have changed."

"Yes," Bruce bit out. He wanted to scream, to punch something, to tear the goddamn ship apart. But that wouldn't help.

He closed his eyes instead, closed his eyes and dug his fingernails into his palms and made himself breathe. It didn't matter how this made him feel. What mattered was what he did about it.

"I have reason to believe Darkseid is coming to Earth," he made himself say, as levelly as though it were something he'd read in the newspaper this morning. "Perform analysis: what are his likely goals?"

"Unity," the ship said.

Right. The boxes. Steppenwolf had two, was already using them to reshape the planet to something more—well. Apokoliptian. The ship's translation of the alien name into something that it believed carried the appropriate connotations in English had never seemed so grimly appropriate.

"They'll need another box."

"Yes," the ship said. "A minimum of three will be required to achieve the desired effect. The odds that the High Holy Forge of Sacred Enlightenment has been rediscovered and reactivated are less than one-tenth of one percent; it is unlikely that any new mother boxes have been created. However, the number of still-extant mother boxes has been estimated at as many as a dozen. If Darkseid has captured another—"

"—and he's bringing it here," Bruce concluded evenly, "then they have what they need."

And everything they'd done, every blow they'd managed to land against Steppenwolf and his forces since the invasion, would count for nothing. All that remained of humanity would be obliterated, Earth reconstructed into a second Apokolips: wiped clean, made ready for Darkseid to construct into a grand new capital world, to rule the universe or unravel it or whatever the fuck it was he had in mind.

"Utilizing current resources to their fullest, what are our odds of preventing that outcome?"

The ship was quiet for a moment, as if it didn't want to say this any more than Bruce wanted to hear it. "Less than one-tenth of one percent."
Kind of it, Bruce thought distantly, not to specify how much less. Maybe he'd be better off going looking for that goddamn High Holy Forge.

"Is there anything on this planet capable of altering those odds?"

Quiet again. But was it quiet because it didn't want to say no, or—

"Yes," the ship said.

And it was funny, in a way, that Bruce should have felt that terrible suffocating cold grip him and thought of Black Zero; that he should have come to this ship, should feel the ghost of Superman looking over his shoulder, in asking. Because suddenly, irrationally, without the least bit of evidence to support the leap, he knew what that fucking yes meant.

No, he wanted to say in reply; to erase that yes, to obliterate it, matter and antimatter. No. No. No, god, it couldn't be possible. It couldn't be. He couldn't make himself—how could anyone expect him to make himself—

Except no one did. He would. If the ship was right, if it would change the odds, he would expect it—demand it—of himself.

He pressed his shaking hands together until what they were shaking with was the force of the exertion, of his own grip. "Tell me," he said, because he needed to hear it; because he didn't trust the ship, he'd have to run the numbers himself, and math didn't lie. Fear, rage, despair, didn't change the answers. He could trust the numbers, even if he couldn't trust the ship—even if he couldn't trust himself.

"Something on the perimeter."

Twist looked up. Nothing showing on the cameras yet. But then there wouldn't be. Furthest perimeter was pressure plates under the sand—so they'd be alerted and watching the monitors by the time the cameras had a view. Wayne hadn't spaced them out like that by accident.

She waited, and kept watching.

Couldn't have said what it was that tipped her off. Spray of sand in the background somewhere, maybe. Something that said movement, fast, and there weren't a lot of things that moved like that in the wasteland. And then suddenly one of the cameras was blocked—no, not blocked, just something landing in front of it. Someone, perched on the outcropping even though it was way too high to climb that quick. And they'd come down in front of the camera, not up.

So even before the face came into focus, the arched brow and the deliberate little wave of three fingers, Twist was up and out of her seat.

"Diana," she said, even though everybody in the room who was paying attention probably already knew. "I'll go."
She geared up. Not full armor, just partial. Heavy jacket, guns settled at her hips, and double-check with a twist of the shin that the knife in her boot was where it should be. In case they got jumped—not that she'd need it, with Diana around, but still. Better stay in the habit of being prepared. No point getting careless.

She went out over the western walls. Didn't bother with the gate, but then she might not have even if she'd known. Wouldn't have asked them to leave it standing open for her, after all, even if it was a pain in the ass grinding the thing open twice in a row.

But they were going to need to open it up when she got back. Couldn't ask that many injured to climb a wall.

She eyed them, huddled together a way back, and then Diana—standing out front, closer. Must've told them to stay there, wait for her.

"How many?"

"Twenty-one," Diana said. "Many are hurt, but only one needs carrying."

She'd have brought them even if they could all walk. But if one needed carrying, then it was no wonder they'd agreed. Hard to make it out on the wasteland if you couldn't stand. Whole group had to look out for you, look after you, and if you didn't get better they'd only be worse off for having tried. Sucked.

"Fine," Twist said, and then, prodding a little, "You know the way."

"I do," Diana agreed. "But I thought it wise to—knock first."

She smiled then. Not with her mouth, with her eyes. But Twist knew where to look, and let the corner of her own mouth shift just a little in reply.

"Yeah," she said aloud. "Couple new traps out this way. Scavengers." She glanced over Diana's shoulder at them. They looked wary. That was good. And they stuck together, close, just standing there. Been together a while, trusted each other—and with a group that big, you'd have to. Easy enough to keep three or four together, even half a dozen. But twenty-one—twenty-one took discipline, some kind of sense of community. And somebody calling the shots. "Keep them in line behind."

And Diana nodded, and then, sure enough, turned and shouted to one of the women. Older than Twist had expected. Some gray in her hair.

But she got all the ones who could stand in a line quick enough, and Diana scooped up the one guy who couldn't, effortless, and carried him along.

"Okay," Twist said.

They followed all right. Twist cast an eye back for the first turn or two, weaving a path for them around booby traps they couldn't see—but nobody tried to cut corners. Maybe Diana had said something. Or maybe the woman they listened to had told them not to fuck around.

Anyway, once she decided they probably weren't going to get themselves killed too quick, she didn't have to watch them so hard. She could spare a glance for Diana. And the guy she was carrying, too. Leg was splinted, tied to—Twist tilted her head. Yeah, that was definitely Diana's sword. Of course.

"What happened to him?"
She put the question to Diana and not the guy, even though he was awake, because she could see the look on his face: half-closed eyes, jaw working, breathing tight but steady through his nose. That was the look of somebody who was hurting bad enough that they didn't want to talk or think, bad enough that every bit of their concentration was used up telling themselves they weren't dead yet and making sure not to scream.

"Raiders," Diana said. "It was bad luck," and of course it had been—they probably hadn't wanted the guy's leg broken any more than he had. Made him useless. "They were set upon near a ridge. He was pulled down from a height and landed badly."

Understatement, Twist thought. Fuck. Bad luck, except for the unbelievable fucking good luck it was that nobody had decided to just kill him and get it over with before Diana had shown up.

"Been a while," she said aloud.

"They were not far from here," Diana said, and then, more quietly but very precise, "On my way."

And "not far" could mean just about anything, coming from Diana, but there was no mistaking what she'd intended, saying it like that. She'd been on the way back anyhow.

Twist blew out a breath, and didn't look at her. It wasn't like it mattered that much. It was just—nice, when Diana was around. Easier to relax, having someone like that on your side, and Wayne was—

Well. Not happier, Twist thought. That wasn't the word. But—settled, maybe. Fit a little better into his own skin, somehow. He'd known Diana before, was Twist's best guess, and she him. Twist wasn't even sure they liked each other; they didn't smile at each other, and there was always a weight in the air between them, Diana watching Wayne all the time like she was waiting for something and Wayne never meeting her eyes unless he had to.

But it was still better, when she didn't stay away too long.

"And I did bring you a gift before I left," Diana was saying, light. "I hope the grenades were useful."

Twist shrugged a shoulder. "Like I said: couple new traps."

"And you've been practicing?"

That tone, just like that one look in the eyes—that was almost a smile, too, when Diana let her voice warm up that way.

"Might just trip you up a second," Twist said, "before you throw me through a wall."

"Good," Diana said. "You'll have to show me, when we get back."

Twist glanced at the guy in Diana's arms. "Promise you won't break my leg," she said.

"Never," Diana said. "And if I did I would splint it after."

"Thanks," Twist said.
No one broke their leg. No one was thrown through a wall, either—and Twist hadn't lied, Diana discovered. She had been practicing, and the wrestling hold Diana had taught her last time was indeed effective, even used on a taller opponent. She'd done wonderfully.

It was pleasing, to see her improve. There was something so calming, so steadying, about facing a well-trained opponent without the intent to do harm; wishing only to test each other's skills and to learn, to compete, to strengthen oneself and each other—

It was calming. Steadying. Diana chose not to think about why, because there would be no purpose in it—because then all calm and steadiness would be lost, and more, and she did not have it in her to lose any more things.

She called a stop to it when Twist had begun to favor her side a little, though of course Twist hadn't asked her to and hadn't looked in pain otherwise. Bruising wasn't nothing, especially the kind Diana could inflict, and Diana—

Diana didn't want to hurt her. Almost unfamiliar, these days, to find herself thinking such a thing. Sometimes she feared she no longer knew how to do anything else.

But then she had saved Miri and her people, hadn't she? That was worth something, even here at the end of all things.

So when she had gotten Twist some water and left her with a clasp of the arm to catch her breath, Diana didn't leave the compound. She went looking for Miri instead.

It had been some time, Twist hadn't been wrong about that; but the compound was mostly unchanged, and Diana still knew her way through its warren of concrete corridors. Here beneath the ground, it was cool and oddly quiet, the sounds all close and muffled—because they had nowhere to carry to, they could only pass through the walls and then were buried in the earth. Only a single level lay above ground, aside from the lookout post at the top of the precipice overhead; and that level was thoroughly fortified, with parademons, raiders, sandstorms, and all other manner of ills to defend against.

The injured had been taken to the infirmary, of course. There had been a time when Diana would have gone in, spoken to each of them, held their hands; but as it was she stood in the doorway and simply looked for them. To know they were cared for was enough. She was—

She was no longer suited for such things. Protecting them, yes, she could do that. She could fight for them, kill for them. But she had lost the trick of kindness long ago.

But Miri and the others, the ones who hadn't been badly hurt, they would be settling in somewhere else. Where was the likeliest place? Diana slowed, trailing a hand along the wall, considering the possibilities, and she was so deep inside her own head that it took her a moment to realize someone had said her name.

She turned.

"Lois," she said.

"Diana," Lois repeated, and she had been hurrying along the corridor to catch up—but now that Diana faced her, she slowed, and came to a halt more than a stride away.

Diana didn't attempt to close the distance. She knew better.
"You were told I had arrived."

A flicker of humor crossed Lois's face, brief and bright. "Oh, please. I knew you were coming at least forty-eight hours ago. Just wasn't sure whether you'd get here today or tomorrow." She hesitated, and then said, "It's good to see you," and the words came out in a strange stiff way: deliberate social words that were undoubtedly a lie, and Lois was as conscious of that lie as Diana. She said it not because she meant it, but because she wished she did.

And, knowing why, Diana could not fault her for it. "It's kind of you to say so," she told Lois, as gently as she could.

But perhaps not gently enough. Lois's mouth flattened; she looked away and crossed her arms, fingers clenching in the bends of her elbows. "It's—good that you're here," she amended at last, and then met Diana's eyes again. "We have some new information. I don't know what it means yet. But I told Wayne about it, and he took it to the ship."

"The archives contained within that ship are by far the best source of information we have," Diana said slowly, because—what was surprising about this? Bruce liked information, liked to have it and to use it; needed it, even, because he couldn't bear to be caught by surprise. He never had been able to tolerate that, as far as Diana could tell. Sometimes it seemed to her that he had lived all his life as though he were under attack from all sides. It was only that now, at last, it was true.

"Yeah—and he's still there," Lois said.

Diana felt sudden tension yoke her shoulders. "How long?"

"Hours. He hasn't come out, hasn't so much as radioed up to tell us what he's found. There's something coming, Diana, and if the ship told him what it is then we need to know about it. He's—he'd never stay in there, unless it was—"

She stopped there, biting the word short, opening her mouth and then closing it again. She had been a writer once, Diana knew; but even she struggled to settle on a word that could encompass the true urgency, the degree of desperation, that could keep Bruce Wayne inside that ship for even a moment beyond what it would take to ask a question and learn the answer. Either it had been a very long question, Diana thought, or—

Or it was a very long answer. And a good answer to this question, a reassuring answer, an answer that meant they were safe and would remain so, would not have needed to be long.

"Yeah," Lois said, in reply to whatever it was the look on Diana's face had said to her. "Exactly."

"I will go and find him," Diana said.

"Better you than me," Lois said, and laughed without amusement.

(Diana wanted to touch her, just then: her shoulder, her elbow, the back of her hand. Just to let her know that she was not alone, that Diana understood, that her rage and her pain did not go unacknowledged.

But she didn't. She couldn't. What good would it even do? From her, now, like this—what would it help?)

Diana looked away. "I will go and find him," she said again, and did.
She had been inside the ship before.

But not for a long time. She paused outside the hull of it, and looked up the side, into the dark: the corridor simply ended in a doorway that opened into a vast cavernous space, the crashed ship lying there buried. Lucky, in a way so backhanded it was almost not luck at all, that the landscape had been so utterly transformed at Steppenwolf's hand. The ship had been on ground level once, in the middle of Metropolis; but it had been shifted along with that ground, and the rubble of the city had piled up around it, endless dust and sand sweeping in relentlessly to fill the cracks, and then it had been covered over with rock, distorted into the towering cliff face overhead, displaced as Steppenwolf's machines dug in. Bruce could never have hidden it as well as Steppenwolf had hidden it for him without even trying, focused on cracking Earth apart to her very core.

She reached out and touched the smooth metal, and it rippled beneath her fingertips as though it felt her there. And then she let her hand fall, but it went on rippling—it wavered—it opened.

"Diana. What are you doing here?"

She didn't answer for a moment, just stood there and watched him silently. He had spoken sharply, words cracking out like blows, but that wasn't out of the ordinary, not for him. The way he looked, too, was nothing new: as though he hadn't eaten or slept in at least twelve hours longer than was wise, but did not feel the pangs—or if he did would only have labeled them distraction and carried on. Impassive, in the cast of his face, and yet the fierceness of his gaze gave him away, always.

And Diana knew him as well as anyone, now. She didn't look to his face, his eyes, for answers. She looked at his hands, the bearing of his head, the way he held himself.

Something was terribly wrong.

"I came to find you," she said. "Lois told me you were here. Bruce—what is it? What did the ship tell you?"

A foolish mistake, and she knew it for one even as she spoke; and yet what could she do but ask? Sometimes it frustrated her beyond bearing, the indirectness he required—demanded. To ask Bruce a question was so often to deny yourself any hope of an answer, because the very fact that you desired it made it abruptly too valuable for him to risk giving it away. Sometimes all she wanted was to bind him with the lasso of Hestia and leave him that way, to sit back and let the truths be torn from him for no higher price than the asking.

He wouldn't be able to stop himself. But he would probably let it burn him raw before he gave in.

He looked at her and then away, and his jaw worked. "I need to leave," he said.

Just as she had expected: an answer that was no answer at all. "Bruce—" but she was too slow, he was already moving. Pushing past her, deliberate pressure, because he knew perfectly well that he could not shift her an inch unless she let him; saying, silently, that this was critical enough that he might try anyway.

"I need to leave," he said again.

"You will not go alone," she said, to his back.

He didn't answer.
"Bruce," she repeated, more sharply, and pushed off against the concrete floor hard enough that it cracked a little beneath the ball of her foot—hard enough that she could exert the strength to cross the space between them in a single long stride and catch him by the arm. She tightened her grip just enough that he couldn't pull free, and he rounded on her like a wounded animal, though he didn't go quite so far as to snap his teeth.

"This is none of your concern—"

She laughed, bitter and cold-edged, derisive—she hadn't even intended to do it, it was only that she could not stop it, the sound startled from her throat by the sheer bullheaded stubbornness of him. The ridiculousness of it, that he—he!—should say such a thing to her.

"Oh? And when will it become my concern? When you've taken it upon yourself to alter the fate of the world singlehandedly, again? When you've provoked a disaster you haven't the means to contain, again? And then, I suppose, I will be permitted to step in at last and clean up your mess."

She bit each word out and spat them at him, low and soft and no less cruel for it. Because it was cruel, to taunt him so with his past failures. Terribly unkind, to say it to his face—but not, she thought distantly, untrue.

And he must have agreed, somewhere within himself, because he stood there with eyes like stone and did not argue, did not tell her she was wrong.

She closed her eyes and made herself breathe, deliberately relaxed her jaw and her shoulders. Her hand, too, where she gripped him by the arm, until it probably wasn't bruising him anymore. "Bruce," she said, more gently. "Whatever it is you mean to do— you cannot really think it best that you should do it alone."

He kept looking at her silently for a moment, and then away. "If you follow me," he said at last, "there's no way I can stop you," and from him that was agreement. He had never been one to surrender gracefully. Or at all, really; concession was perhaps the better word, temporary and revocable.

And looking at him just then, she felt with a sudden strange grief that she understood him perfectly. That in another world, she could have extended him kindness he would have treasured, and he would have done his best to repay her likewise; that they would have fought well shoulder-to-shoulder, and learned each other's ways, and stood together against the darkness—

But that was not this world. And if all she could offer him now was harsh truth and unwelcome aid, so be it.

"Then we are agreed," she said aloud, wry, and he shook his head and turned away. She did follow; and he was true to his word, grudging though it might have been, and did nothing to prevent it.
Chapter 2

The ship must have known something.

That was the thought Lois couldn’t stop circling back to. She stared at the screen in front of her; there was important work she was supposed to be doing. More teams had come back since they’d found Vincent and another group was rotating out—plus the new people Diana had brought in. They were getting cleaned up now, fed, and resting, but Lois would have to talk to them soon.

And she’d done her usual debriefings, but she had to write up the results, make notes, update the intelligence database with their latest information. Tracking the movements of parademons, raiders, and almost a dozen "individuals of interest" across the wasteland took time and effort, close attention.

But Lois couldn’t stop thinking about it: the ship must have known something. Vincent had been right—that man, that man the parademons had taken, raving in the desert, had been right. Whatever it was they’d been blasting his mind with until it had cracked, he’d remembered it, hung on to it, long enough to scream it out where Vincent could hear. *Darkside*. It did mean something, and the ship knew what it was, and now—

And now Wayne did, too.

Lois would never have made the mistake of assuming the news would be good. Obviously that was way too much to ask. As if the parademons might have been mindlessly projecting *puppies and sunshine* at anyone they dragged into their nests—or even *secret weapon capable of killing Steppenwolf at these coordinates*, which was actually halfway plausible. That was part of the reason Lois had wanted to make sure they kept an eye out for nest survivors; it was technically possible that if Steppenwolf knew something and, essentially, thought about it too hard, the parademons would know it, too. That was how he controlled them. Some kind of psychic link to their hive mind, occupying the spot where Lois was guessing a full-on hive queen ought to be. They were like rows of mirrors, in a circle around him: reflecting him back and forth endlessly, in the shining empty blankness of themselves.

But bad news was no surprise, these days. And however many failings Wayne could lay claim to, optimism wasn’t one of them. To keep him down there with the ship for this long—it had to be complicated somehow. *Worse* than bad, if it was a threat so big and so unusual that it was taking this long for the ship to even explain it, or if Wayne was asking questions, trying to decide what to do about it—

And indecision had never been one of Wayne's failings, either. If anything, Lois thought grimly, the opposite was true. He made decisions without an instant's hesitation, without second-guessing himself in the *least*, even when it would goddamn well do him some good to consider it—but never mind. The point was, whatever it was that had Wayne so occupied, it had to be dire.

Lois had never been the kind of person who found ignorance particularly blissful. But this one time, she almost wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

Not that it was up to her.

Ten minutes, maybe twenty, and she looked up from her screen at the sound of footsteps nearing the
database room and found herself meeting Wayne's eyes. Diana was a stride behind at his shoulder, and for a moment Lois was struck by how oddly alike they looked just then, dark-eyed and stone-faced, mouths flat and jaws tight.

"Wayne," she said, and she didn't even know for sure what she wanted to ask him or whether she wanted to ask, so it was probably for the best that he didn't give her a chance to.

"What's the latest you have on Stone?"

She blinked. "Why do you—"

"Lois, please," he said, very low, and she was so surprised she couldn't do anything but stare at him for a second.

Of course she knew what he was looking for. They'd started out panicked and disorganized, with no idea what they were doing except trying to stay alive. But they'd built up the compound, the bunker, this whole operation, a bit at a time. Eventually they'd had the resources to put out feelers—to keep tabs, as best they could, on what Wayne usually referred to as "potential assets". And one of those was Victor Stone.

Or rather the metal man. That was what most people called him, when Lois picked up rumors he'd been spotted. Wayne had already had a file on him, had known his real name—might, for a while there, have been the only person left in the world who did, until he'd grudgingly allowed Lois access to the database so she could do her goddamn job, and that had taken a long slow ice-cold war of attrition Lois wasn't eager to repeat.

So, yeah, Wayne was interested in Victor Stone. Tracked him, tried to stay apprised of his movements. But he'd never shown signs of wanting to actually find the guy, until now, and Lois had no idea why.

"I—let me see what we've got," she fumbled, and pulled up the most recent entries on Stone. He moved around a lot, she knew that; if she'd been doing this with pins in a map, the map would be half tape by now, stuck full of holes. Altercations with scavengers and raiders, most of the time, and sometimes word in the wasteland said you could see the lightshow for miles—after those ones, parademons tended to show up pretty quick, but so far they didn't seem to have managed to capture Stone.

She eyed the most recent half-dozen coordinates—estimates, based on things her people had been told, landmarks the witnesses had mentioned, but they'd at least narrow things down for Wayne. "You're looking at maybe a ten-mile radius," she said, "somewhere between the Scorpion and Nest 13C." Not too far off, lucky for Wayne; the Scorpion was a tall curving rock formation, a couple days away from the compound at the most. "Patrol from New Jericho caught sight of him, apparently. At a distance, but they said he 'gleamed'. More than a week ago, but—"

"—Stone tends to hunker down," Wayne finished for her, "until somebody runs into him and sets him off."

"And I take it this time that somebody is going to be you," Lois said.

He looked at her, and then away, and didn't answer. Except in all the ways he already had, just by asking. "Thank you," he said.

He always fucking did.

Lois bit her cheek, and stared at the screen until the numbers blurred, and didn't say a word.
"Tell Twist where we've gone," he added. "She's primary until we're back."

"Got it," Lois said, without looking at him; but she heard him turn, scrape of his booteels against concrete, and did look at him then, once it was safe. At his back, and Diana—Diana had already turned, too, to follow him.

Diana was going with him. Well. Lucky for Stone, Lois thought. Maybe he'd make it out of an introduction to Wayne alive.

Bruce suited up as quickly as he could. He was conscious, hopelessly, of every wasted second: Diana, waiting quietly, because whether she wore armor or not—and she did—she was less vulnerable than he would ever be. She didn't even have her sword, though he hadn't asked why; as if it mattered, when she could kill anything she came across just as easily with her bare hands.

But he couldn't get away with that. So she was forced to stand idle while he did what pathetically little he could to redress his own helpless weakness.

She didn't look impatient. But then no doubt she was used to this, from humans.

He gritted his teeth, and forced himself to concentrate.

There were packs pre-prepared for anyone heading out into the wasteland, supplies and water for a few days; no time lost there, at least.

And then at last they went up out of the bunker and into the compound's open courtyard, blowing dust nearly obscuring the figures of the compound's current shift at their watchposts. Among the scavenged vehicles they'd scrounged and repaired, there were several dozen motorcycles—Bruce had worked on every single one of them, clawed and scraped for every drop of fuel efficiency he could squeeze from them, and the third from the left, first row, was the sturdiest, least likely of all of them to quit over a handful of sand getting in the wrong places.

He drove out the main gate, beneath arch after arch of cement, and it was almost reassuring to catch glimpses of the mouths of guns trained on him as he went, above and to either side. Good. And then —

Then they were out in the wasteland, the flayed half-buried skeleton of what had once been Metropolis looming up before them and gouting towers of flame blazing in the distance, dragged up from deep in the earth by Steppenwolf's—god, "machinery" seemed like too small a word for those vast platforms, hovering over the pits they'd bored, casting their colossal shadows with such alien and terrible indifference.

(When Bruce wasn't dreaming the dream—sometimes he dreamed of them, crashing to the ground, fire and rubble; of watching the last from beneath, dropping so low over him that it blocked out the sky, and knowing he had won in the moment before it crushed him in a bloom of flame.

He didn't mind that dream. It was one of the better ones.)
He sped up for a moment; it was a comfortingly mundane sound, the revving of a motorcycle engine. And then he oriented himself, described a long curving arc across the hard flat ground toward the approximate location of Victor Stone—and Diana had no trouble keeping up, running alongside in long even strides that were almost leaps. And then—

Then there was nothing to do but drive.

There was no reason to waste time thinking about it, imagining it. It wasn't relevant, not yet. There were so many steps between here and there, and any one of them could go wrong; he could fail at a number of junctures, and if he did then the question of what he would have done if he hadn't failed would be purely academic.

So he didn't think about the threat. He didn't think about Darkseid, he didn't think about the ship's coolly-phrased summaries of the impossible variety of ways the New Gods of Apokolips had been ravaging various corners of the universe for the past hundred thousand years. He didn't think about the simulations he'd run, the numbers; he didn't think about the downright goddamn terrifying implications of the idea that, having dealt with a danger that had felt nearly as overwhelming in as final and definite a way as he'd known how, he was now having to throw himself with equal determination at the task of *undoing* it.

He needed a weapon, and desperately—so desperately that it was worth even as reckless a gamble as this one. Because for all he knew, he wasn't going to get one; instead, he might well unleash a vengeful god who would tear the planet apart in sheer rage.

And yet the alternative was, unthinkably, impossibly, worse.

But all that lay somewhere in the distance. And right now, what he had to think about was this: he had run more than one set of numbers. He knew what he needed. Stealing a mother box from Steppenwolf would be an incomprehensibly monumental task; tracking down and securing Victor Stone was, by comparison, simple.

Bruce and Diana just had to find him and convince him not to kill them. Which might or might not be possible, considering that by all accounts he didn't respond to speech or gestures with anything but rapid-fire plasma bursts.

That was the mission. That was what mattered. The rest must be set aside.

So he drove.

He let the sound of the engine, the spray and crack of gravel and sand beneath the tires, the low rhythm of Diana's footsteps, fill him until there was nothing else. The wasteland was vast, all-consuming—he supposed it was possible that it was only the Atlantic that had been obliterated by Steppenwolf's efforts, that perhaps somewhere there was still ocean and coastline, grassland or scrub or even trees. God, it had been a long time since he'd seen a tree; a live one, green and growing, not the dried-out sun-bleached trunk of one, bare twisting arms like dry bones.

Intellectually, he knew it was possible. But it didn't *feel* possible. It felt as though this was all there was, all there ever would be again.

And there was nothing to be done, no choice but to grind onwards in the face of it with grim determination. There never had been. Bruce had faced impossible odds before—there was no reason to change his strategy now.

(You could feel all the despair you wanted. Sometimes there was no way to prevent it. You just
couldn't let it stop you, that was all. You couldn't let anything stop you. Not doubt, not fear, not pain, not yourself.

You couldn't stop, no matter what the cost. But Bruce had never found that a particularly difficult bargain to make; somehow it always felt as though stopping—surrendering, ceding ground, relenting—would cost him far, far more.)

They couldn't keep going all night.

Which was to say Bruce couldn't. Or could have, potentially, but knew it would constitute a risk that was unjustified. They had no idea what to expect from Stone; grinding himself down further still, when he had already been awake for thirty-six hours and counting and they might well be fighting for their lives tomorrow, was unnecessarily and pointlessly foolish. And even if they could cover more ground—coming upon Stone without warning in the dark, or in the earliest hours of the morning, would probably be unwise.

Bruce didn't force Diana to insist. As they sped on through the gathering dark, they came up out of the gravel flats that had once been suburbs and farmland and into more difficult terrain: what had once been hills, rising up toward the Appalachians, except Steppenwolf had carved it all apart, blasted and pitted it into unnatural formations. The Scorpion was a landmark for a reason, exposed bedrock curving up to a looming height that should have been impossible—but there had been a peak there once, all the earth and stone that should have surrounded it now negative space that emphasized it, sliced casually away as Steppenwolf's machines had bored into the planetary crust.

Bruce had to slow down, navigating a labyrinth of outcroppings and uneven ground, sudden drops and rises. Twice they encountered toppled rockslides blocking what had previously been usable routes—Diana had lifted the motorcycle with Bruce still on it, balancing the frame on one shoulder, and leapt over them.

And when at last it was true night, not even the barest glow left that could be called a final hint of sunset—because they lasted longer, these days, the endlessly dusty air trapping the light for hours—Bruce judged reluctantly that they were about as safe as could be asked. At the foot of an outcropping in here, they were effectively invisible from a distance, and any approach would be audible, the way the rocks threw and carried echoes. Even with all the work he'd done to muffle the engine, the motorcycle's rumble was still louder than he'd like, the noise of it tossed back and forth until it sounded like there were a dozen of them.

He slowed, and Diana outpaced him for a half-stride and then slowed with him, until they had come to a halt and Bruce cut the engine. Still more than three-quarters of the tank left, good. And if they did need to make a detour, there was always Diana.

He bit the inside of his cheek and turned away from her, crouching as if to check the engine casing for cracks or signs of leaking sand.

Always—but he should know better than to treat that as unshakable truth. He had shared Luthor's files with her, retrieved her photograph; she had helped him defeat Doomsday, in the end. They had been more or less on the same side since. She had defended the compound alongside him when he'd first struggled to establish a foothold, and though she hadn't agreed to stay, that hadn't stopped her from coming back—coming back and bringing people, supplies, scrounged materials.
But "more or less" covered a great deal of ground. She owed him nothing, and he was conscious, hopeless, of owing her a great deal, of his inability to repay that debt in coin that could in any way prove equal to its value.

He frustrated her. He angered her. He knew perfectly well what she thought of him. Today, in the corridor—he had thought for a moment that that would be the end of it, that at last she had had enough. Because surely the time would come, sooner or later. Surely it would one day amount to more than even Diana could bear, and on that day he would be lucky if he never saw her again, if she settled for leaving him behind without a backward glance.

(But he wouldn't in good conscience be able to blame her if she chose to snap his neck instead.)

"Bruce," she said.

He turned and looked up over his shoulder.

"Nothing will harm you while you sleep. I swear it."

"I know," he said, and meant it. Because even if she did kill him someday—she wouldn't do it like that.

She watched him for a long moment, silent, and then dipped her chin in a small nod. And of course she understood, he thought. Of course she couldn't help but know what it meant, that Bruce would even consider resting with only her to keep watch. It was difficult to imagine that it mattered to her at all: that she cared in the least that she held his trust, however tacitly.

But perhaps somehow it did.

Barry ran.

Barry was—was always running, pretty much. He had to stop sometimes, now, had to rest. There wasn't as much to eat as there used to be. Sooner or later he was probably going to run out of crumbled convenience-store graveyards, and then he had no idea what he'd do. Aside from starve to death, obviously. That was clearly the one big bold unmissable option, right there.

But until then, he was going to run. He had to. He couldn't stop. Even thinking about it made him jittery, sometimes. He'd paused too long before. He'd found places that seemed safe—out in the wasteland, sheltered overhangs with nothing else for miles, or in the big broken skeletons of cities, tucked away in corners. It didn't matter where, he always got found. There was always somebody, something—people, sometimes, who wanted what he had or wanted to know where he'd gotten it; wanted—all kinds of things they thought they could get from some skinny guy alone in the middle of nowhere. And then there were those things, the—the swarms. Their chittering, their wings, their eyes—

It was better not to stop. It was better to keep running. Nothing could touch him, when he ran.
And he still liked it, even after everything. The way the world went still around him, got clear and clean and endless; the friendly blue-white crackle of the lightning. The way everything went quiet, and he could just—be somewhere else, almost as fast as thinking about it.

So he didn't mind, really. Running was easy. Running, he could do.

Besides, it was simpler these days. Right afterward, with the invasion and the earthquakes, the fires, the explosions—that had been harder. So many people, panicking, frightened, dying, and Barry hadn't been able to—Barry couldn't—

But it was better now. There was—

There was hardly anyone left.

He wiped absently at his wet eyes with the back of one hand, and ran faster.

Fewer people he needed to avoid, that was all. Early on, in the cities, it had gotten dangerous. Now there usually wasn't anybody but Barry. He could even sleep, sometimes, if he was careful—the sound of the swarms coming, the flutter of all those wings, wasn't exactly quiet, and he only needed a second to get away, once he was awake. Less, literally.

And out in the wasteland, there was hardly anyone. Where it was flat, you could see anyone coming from miles off—if it was clear, one of the rare calmer days, you didn't even have to be able to pick out figures against the horizon to see the darker cloud of their dust rising. And the rocks were good shelter, when the wind rose up. Barry liked to run during the storms, too: all the sand frozen around him, suspended, glittering, and none of it touching him. Because he was safe, when he ran.

But he couldn't always afford to do it, when he could find somewhere to shelter instead. He was—he was already so hungry all the time, now. He had to be careful. It was just hard to remember that, when he liked running so much better—

He blinked, and stopped.

He hadn't meant to, and for a second it felt like parts of him had kept going. He thought maybe the ground was in the wrong place, like everything was tipping, except really it was just that he'd staggered a little. He closed his eyes, stupidly, because that only ever made the dizziness worse. But maybe it was better for him to be down on his hands and knees for a minute. Maybe that was a good idea.

He knelt there and caught his breath, and when he could do it without feeling like he was going to topple any further, he twisted around and looked back. He'd been weaving his way through the rocks, easy, a step at a time—and there shouldn't have been anything there. Barry had picked over these outcroppings a dozen times. Nothing left to scavenge or salvage, and hardly anybody tried to cross this stretch anymore. Except raiders, but that wasn't right. It hadn't been enough people. Had it? He didn't know. He'd only seen them for an instant. Maybe they'd just been—funny-shaped rocks, or something.

He bit his lip. He'd come to a stop on open ground, just a little beyond the last outcropping of rock. There was gravel digging into his knees. It hurt.

He should get up and keep going. Right? But—

He could look. Just to—just to see. If it was—if they needed something, then maybe he could do something. Maybe he could help.
It would be safer to keep going. If they caught him, if they hurt him and then he couldn't run anymore—

But he was fast. He could—he'd just look. So fast they probably wouldn't even know he'd done it. That would be all right.

He wrapped his shaking hands around each other, took a deep breath, and ran.

He slowed down a little this time, on the way past them. Before, it was—they'd been nothing but a blip, darker darkness against the stone around them, just enough of a glimpse that some part of his brain had registered something not quite right.

And they weren't raiders after all. Or at least Barry had never seen raiders going around in pairs. Usually there were at least a dozen of them. They liked it better the more they outnumbered you.

These two had tucked themselves into a gap in the rock, a curving inset place where they were sheltered on three sides. They had equipment, a pack and some gear, and—oh, sweet, a motorcycle. Hardly anybody but the really big raiding gangs could maintain motorcycles for long, never mind spare the people and the effort to find fuel for them.

And there really were just two of them. One on the ground, probably sleeping, pressed in a broad tense line against the stone, and one seated, looking out, and—

And starting to move, just a little bit. Just her head, coming up.

Barry stared, startled. She wasn't moving like him, but that he could tell at all was weird, meant she was moving faster than most people ever could. Had she—had she noticed, somehow? Could she tell that he was—did she know—

He didn't even really know how it happened. Maybe it was just that he'd lost his concentration. Or possibly he panicked a tiny bit, and he was tired and hungry—he was so, so hungry—and he just—

He just stopped, for a second.

It was weird: he'd slowed down, but of course what that meant was that everything else sped up, jolted into motion. The woman was looking up after all; her eyes caught on him, and he watched them widen, saw her breath catch in surprise, and fuck. Fuck.

He flung himself away, didn't even turn to make sure she had frozen again by comparison, scrambling up over the rocks—but the gravel that skidded out from underneath his boot didn't so much skid as hang in the air, starting to fall down the slope at a nice leisurely pace, so he hadn't screwed up again after all.

Once he was safely over the rise, though, he was—he fell out of it again, that cool silent space. His heart was pounding almost painfully, and he couldn't quite breathe, even though he never had trouble with that when he was running. He should have, probably, because when he went fast enough the air probably ought to have turned into super-heated plasma pretty much on contact with him, and that wasn't the point. The point was he'd stopped again, and he had to—he had to keep going, he had to get away—

"Wait."
He froze. How long had that been, for her? Could she tell he was still here? Or—maybe she'd said it
the moment she saw him, and he'd just outrun the sound for a second there.

"I—there was a sound. A crackle. Was that you?"

He held his breath and squeezed his eyes shut. She couldn't know he was here. She was just saying it
in case he was close enough to hear it, that was all. Unless—if she'd heard him run, heard the
lightning, could she—had she heard him gasping? Could she hear his heart?

"Are you—"

He didn't wait to hear the rest of the question. He couldn't. He couldn't. She'd seen him, she'd looked
at him; she'd heard him. He couldn't be here anymore, he couldn't stand it.

He pushed himself up and he ran. He couldn't go as fast as he used to, not like this, not when he
hadn't eaten or slept in—in days. But it was still minutes, less, before he'd gone far enough that the
sky had started to lighten, dawn breaking here, a few timezones over, and that was—that had to be
far enough. Even if she could move faster than other people, she couldn't move that fast. She
wouldn't be able to catch him. He was—

He was still safe. He just needed to keep running.

Bruce dreamed.

He said nothing of it when he woke, but Diana knew nevertheless that it was so. He hadn't made a
sound, had barely moved; but she had heard his weight shift, had seen the tension in him.

Even when he slept, it seemed some part of him could not stop anticipating a blow.

But he woke, and despite everything did look refreshed, face clearer, eyes sharper, even in the dim
half-light of dawn. And even if she had tried to object, to make him rest longer, no doubt he would
have refused to.

She found that she—she almost didn't want to tell him about the man who moved like lightning. She
remembered the files he'd sent her once. Allen. Barry Allen. And Bruce would remember, too, the
moment she spoke of it.

It must have been him. No doubt Lois's people would not waste effort tracking Allen's location; it
was pointless, when he could move the way he did. But surely they at least recorded sightings the
same way they did for Stone, keeping tabs. If nothing else, Diana thought, Bruce would want to
have some idea whether or not he was still alive.

And it seemed he was. A part of her wanted to insist that she was entitled to silence, that it made no
difference: either he would come back, in which case Bruce would see Allen for himself; or he
wouldn't, in which case it wouldn't matter what she did or didn't say about it. And she discovered,
too, that a part of her wished to keep the memory close to her heart. It had—it had been incredible.
Just that faint soft crackle, at first. She had thought it might be steps on the sand, or even distant wings. She had begun to look up, thinking to check the sky, and had seen something, a faint smudged shadow in the dark—and then all at once he had been there, wreathed in lightning, whole and real, narrow face and wild curling hair, wide round eyes.

And then, within a breath—less, for she had already had one with which to call to him—he had been gone.

It had been so long since she had had anything to marvel at, so long since she had last been struck by wonder. She had found herself grateful for the reminder that even now, flickering in the corners of this ruined world, there was still magic.

But she suspected that somewhere deeper, it was only pettiness, the childish urge to be hurtful and to hold something back from someone who had held back from her.

Except the reality of it was not that simple.

(It so rarely was.)

She thought of Bruce’s face, in the corridor outside the ship. He hadn’t told her what he’d learned, what he intended to do. But not because he was petty, not because he was childish. Because something in his nature demanded it of him; because he had been holding back for so long he didn’t know how to do anything else.

And perhaps she had lost the trick of kindness. But she had not lost the trick of telling the truth.

So she waited until he had eaten his travel rations, drunk a little water, put on his pack again—and then, when he was about to swing a leg over the motorcycle, raised an eyebrow and said, "While you were sleeping, we had a visitor."

He turned to look at her, and though he wore the cowl, face hidden, only visible expression the frown built into the cowl’s rippled forehead, the very suddenness of the motion said he was startled. "A visitor," he repeated evenly.

She dipped her chin, the smallest possible nod. "Allen," she said. "He—ran past."

And Bruce knew how fast Allen could go. "And you saw him."

"Heard him," Diana said. "Then he stopped to take a look at us. An instant, that's all. Then he was gone."

Bruce was silent for a long moment. "We'll have to make a note for Lane when we get back," he said at last. And then he turned away and mounted up, kicked the motorcycle to life, and it was time to go.

In the end, they didn't find Stone. A swarm found him for them.

They'd known there was no way to be sure of his precise location. Lois had given them a rough estimate, a search radius. It had been days since her people had heard word of Stone, and any number of things could have happened that would have prompted him to move on, even if it was not his habit.
So it was lucky, in a way, that they had that towering black cloud to guide them. They were perhaps ten miles away when it became apparent—the wind was high today, dust sweeping around and between the rocks, the sky hard and pale with it. But it was not enough to obscure that blot, that shadow, moving in the distance.

And then abruptly its shape changed, arrowing downward. The parademons had found something, the head of the swarm diving toward it, and soon the rest would follow.

Bruce had already turned and begun to steer toward it, gunning his engine, and Diana lengthened her strides to match. Even if it wasn't Stone—not many were equipped to defend themselves against a hunting swarm.

And then they drew closer, and Diana saw the first sharp flashes of red light. Blasts being fired from below.

So it was Stone after all.

Bruce did not hesitate or slow—but then even if he feared that Stone might attack them, too, that must come second to preventing the creatures from capturing Stone and removing him from Bruce's reach forever.

So Diana gathered herself and leapt ahead. For a moment there was nothing but the rush of wind, the roil of seething darkness ahead of her. And then she struck them, dug her fingers into wings and shoulders and dragged half a dozen of them down with her, and when she reached the ground she was already spattered black with their blood, crushing one's head between her hands and shouting a battle cry.

It was a pleasure, in a way, to show no restraint—because they were mindless drones, and because they showed none to her, and she had seen the horrors they wrought under Steppenwolf's direction far too many times. She lost herself in it, for a little while: in the movement, the exertion, the full use of her strength and speed; the way thought fell away, and there was only motion.

Except, of course, she was not alone in this fight, and the first explosion of red light close enough to singe the ends of her hair served as an excellent reminder.

She looked for Stone, twisting and absently grasping the parademon in front of her and throwing it at its fellows, knocking them back to give herself a moment's room to breathe. And at first she could see nothing but black wings, glowing eyes—but then there was a flash of silver, clean bright metal. Bruce's equipment was all dark, black. It had to be Stone.

And it was because she knew where Stone was standing that she understood what happened next. Because suddenly there was—there was more light, a great blinding burst of it, a wave of heat and pressure and sound. She nearly lost her footing, had to crouch and brace herself and shield her face with one arm, and around her the parademons screamed and burned, tumbling through the air.

The blast blew outward, upward, and when Diana blinked the last of the light from her eyes, it was—half the swarm was gone, more, the closest simply turned to ash and their luckier fellows only torn apart, hurled away and crushed against the rocks, burned raw and oozing but still able to fly. And Bruce, Diana thought, could not have survived such a thing any better than they, if he had been close enough to Stone—

But when she looked for him, listened for him, she found him: crouched beyond her, braced behind an outcropping of rock scorched black. His breath, low and quick, reached her ears first, and then she turned and saw him there; and he saw her look, and gave her a quick short nod.
And then, through the relief, still listening close, somewhere in the distance she heard an odd soft crackle.

But Allen had run away. Hadn't he?

Then there was a whirring, a mechanical thrum, from another direction entirely, and Diana looked up.

What remained of the dead and dying parademons on the ground described a rough circle; Stone was, of course, in the middle of it. Standing there, and Diana had known to expect the way he would look, the silver armor that formed his body, the open weapon ports that seemed to have built themselves out of his arms. The strangest thing, in a way, was his face. Three-quarters of it was bare skin, human in every visible respect. And yet when he turned to look at her, it was—the dark organic eye held no more expression than the blazing red light that served as its partner. Stone's face was as impassive as if he were unconscious—as if he were dead.

But his gaze had turned toward Diana. He could—*something* could see her, had perceived her presence, even if it was no longer entirely Victor Stone.

Red light moved across her, up and down, side to side. The eye made of light, it was evaluating her somehow, scanning her. Stone's arms were still raised, those weapon ports white-hot and bright, clearly ready to fire. But he hadn't done it yet.

"Stand," she said.

"Diana—"

"He must already know you are there. He could melt that rock, if he wished to. You might as well stand."

She waited. Bruce stood.

Except perhaps Stone had missed him after all—hadn't picked him up, if he had hung back to shoot stray parademons at the edges of the swarm, and had turned all that processing power on Diana. Because Stone turned with a sudden smooth motion toward Bruce, charge building with a brief sharp whine, and Diana had only just enough time to move.

The blast struck her hard enough to knock her back two steps, and burned a neat hole in her cobbled-together armor besides, in a wash of heat like nothing she had ever felt. For a moment, she almost did think it would be too much—surely Stone was more than capable of it, given that he had been built by a mother box.

But it only seared for a moment, and then eased, and she caught her breath and looked up.

Stone was watching her again. Bruce was at her back, now, and she could almost feel the tension in him—as if, were he possessed of an armored body like Stone's, he would have half a dozen weapon ports open and nothing would have stopped him from firing.

But, luckily, he was not. And after whatever analysis Stone had run, surely he had known that shot could not damage Diana; perhaps it had been a warning, or—

Or perhaps he had wanted to see what Diana would do, if he fired at Bruce instead of at her.

"Diana," Bruce gritted out.
"Just wait," she said. Because it was possible, wasn't it? It was possible that Stone would choose not
to kill them, even though he could.

(A day ago, she wasn't sure she would have believed that any more than Bruce did. But now she
found herself thinking, unaccountably, of Allen. Of magic that was not all dead. Of wonder.

Many things were possible. When had she forgotten that?)

So Bruce didn't move, and neither did Diana. Stone watched them for a long moment, and it was
impossible to guess what he might be thinking—whether he was thinking anything; whether it was
only that he fired at things that moved, mindless as a parademon, no trace of Stone himself in there at
all.

Except then the light within those weapon ports began to dim. It dropped to perhaps half the
brightness, and then Stone shifted, bending at the elbows—so that the mouths of the ports faced up
and away, and were no longer aimed at Diana and Bruce.

"Well," Diana said, turning to look over her shoulder at Bruce. "What now?"

And as if the universe had only been waiting for her to ask, in a burst of sharp crackling blue-white
light, Allen was suddenly made manifest.

She startled; she thought Bruce did, too, in the corner of her eye, though of course he controlled the
movement as quickly as he was able. The only one who seemed unsurprised was Stone, standing
there unflinching.

"You were—this is why you're here?" Allen said, almost accusingly. "For him?"

"You know him?" Diana said.

Allen stared at her, and then at Bruce behind her; and as if he were suddenly conscious of their eyes
on him, their attention brought to bear, he flickered away.

Only to the other side of Stone—and then as quickly back to where he had been. As if he had
needed the reminder that he could do it, that they couldn't stop him.

"We've seen each other around," he answered at last, guarded. His gaze flicked to Stone. "He doesn't
talk much," Allen added. "But he's a good listener."

"And he—listens to you," Diana said.

"I don't know," Allen said, and flickered away again—added a moment later, from ten feet to the
left, "I mean, I think so. I like to think so. I talk to him sometimes, when nobody's around. He used to
shoot at me, too," and this Allen said in a low confiding tone, "but he doesn't anymore. Figured out I
was too fast to hit, I guess. And that I wasn't going to do anything to him." He stopped short, then,
and seemed all at once to remember that he didn't know them, that not a minute ago he'd been afraid
to keep still. "But you, you're—what do you want with him?"

"We—need his help with something," Bruce said, clipped.

Allen didn't look convinced. He glanced back and forth between them, and Diana wished absently
that there were any chance Bruce would see fit to remove the cowl for a minute. It was meant to
intimidate, designed for it; but Allen was already frightened enough, and that fixed black scowl
staring at him, three-quarters of Bruce's face concealed, could not be helping.
And then the soft hum of all Stone's machinery quieted further still. The weapon ports, it was—they had gone dark, Diana saw. And then in a sudden smooth series of rearrangements, metal shifting without apparent effort, they were gone, vanished, the whole length of his forearms rebuilt in a moment into something that was a much closer approximation of wrists and hands than of plasma cannons.

She took a step toward him, to test—if he had only calmed because they hadn't moved, they needed to know it, and if he shot her again, even if he did it harder, she would probably still survive it.

But taking a step toward him was taking a step toward Allen. Allen flinched away from her, sharp, reflexive, and was gone; and he must have run a few miles and then back, because it took a moment for him to reappear, forty feet away and opposite her, on the other side of Stone.

"Don't—" Allen stopped, and bit his lip. "I mean, are you—are you going to hurt him?"

And Diana looked at him, and said, "No."

To him—but also to Bruce, standing silent behind her. Because she still didn't know what he intended to do with Stone, and he wasn't keeping it from her by accident or in error. But she had said it and she meant it, and she would not allow him to make her a liar.

Bruce gave no response. But then she wouldn't have expected him to, where Allen could see him. Where Stone could, for that matter.

Allen was staring at her, huge-eyed and uncertain; he swallowed, once and then again, and then vanished in a flare of lightning. And this time, perhaps, he had truly left them—because Stone turned his head, looked off in what must have been the direction Allen had gone, as if he could see a trail. Depending on the readings he took with that red lit-up eye, maybe he could.

And then Stone looked at her, and at Bruce, and lowered his arms to his sides; and then he stood there, silent, waiting.

"All right," Bruce said. "Let's go."
who are they?

ID523BO7GI9
ID524D41VH5

where are they taking me?

TFXIFRHWB3WMNPTNXWWU
80J7CRZUQJGM27L6NRB9

I know where I am

where are they taking me?

BF39OVIOIEQNLKOZYAO7
D8U8DMM002BIQU53LXYH
UFTNAUTB00YUZKKOYPZN
YVC2V24RRA11AX7LXP8B

don't shoot them

no

25ICCUP9HG2LVH4AIKAQ
X5L2M3K51M4OCY8FBOIZ

no

just stop

HM7LGTLISG98DWP540G
PDFH4H0OL3XYKSNRKYHR
AF18B0NTNSM9I7KR2ALJ
5Y9OZ98AP82SFUYGY6M8

let me ask, you goddamn exosolar rubik's cube

BR52VFXDY0Z50HXDSGVQ
G3C18N5O03JN92Q9AWLZ
SZTXUBHVB7069M00OJ93
E868DMOXCFBA5EGDYSLR

sometimes I wish dad had let me fucking rot

6ZPFUFZJLWZGJ44IG9LS
QW9VMRV66N2NURGGIT5Z
Lane had radioed about Bruce. Nothing unusual. Or at least Twist would have thought so, except for the way Lane had sounded. Something in her voice. Tension, or—Twist hadn't known what to call it, when she'd heard it, but she'd known right away she didn't like it.

But: she was primary. She had to stay where she was, on-duty, eyes open. Couldn't go ask.

She didn't forget about it, though. And it wasn't a surprise to her when, middle of the second day, she finally had a chance to go see Lane and Lane looked like shit.

"You look like shit," Twist said.

Lane laughed. She didn't sound much better than she looked.

"Yeah, well," she said, and shook her head, rubbed her face, her eyes. "Something's wrong, and I don't know what." She looked up at Twist, and paused. "You know where Wayne went?"

"Don't need to," Twist said, because she didn't. Wayne did—all kinds of shit, whatever he wanted, and Twist didn't know where he was going or why he was doing half of it, any given day. And that was fine, because it wasn't like she needed Wayne wasting both their time telling her. If she had to know, if it was important, Wayne told her. And if she didn't, he didn't. Hard to get along with Wayne any length of time at all if you couldn't roll with that.

Except Lane couldn't. Of course she couldn't. That was why she was in charge of Wayne's intelligence: because she sucked at keeping her nose out of other people's business. Always wanted to know everything, and if you wouldn't tell her then she usually figured out how to find out anyway.

"He went—"

"Lane," Twist said.

"Oh, cut it out," Lane said impatiently. "He trusts you. You know he does. And if he didn't want me to tell you, he'd have said so."

Maybe, Twist thought. On the one hand, shit that was important enough tended to just—fill Wayne's head. Everything else got eaten up, except whatever it was. And on the other hand, even if it had occurred to him that Lane might talk, he might not have thought it would be to Twist. Lane didn't like her much, the way she did what Wayne said and didn't mind when he was an asshole about it; Lane didn't get why she was okay with it.

She didn't hate Twist. Twist knew that. They worked together all right when they had to. Lane was smart, good on comms, knew what she was doing. Even in this wrecked hellhole of a world, she was—she could find anybody, learn anything, if she had even a fraction of a clue to get her going.

And she didn't hate Twist; but she didn't like her, either.

"He went looking for Stone."

Twist blinked. She'd been through the asset files a few times. Needed to know what to look for, what to tell her teams to look for when she sent them out. And she recognized that name.
"How far?" she said.

Lane looked at her screen, touched and tapped, opened something. Clear enough invitation to read over her shoulder, so Twist came around the edge of the table and did it.

"Two days," Lane said, before Twist had even had time to focus her eyes on the words—she'd just wanted Twist to come over and look, to let on she was curious. Lane could be a sneaky motherfucker when she tried. "Day and a half, maybe, the way Wayne drives."

"You figure out why?" Twist said, because now Lane knew she wanted to know; no point pretending otherwise.

"No," Lane said. "There's nothing in the other files that has anything to do with Stone, or the location. Even the other Rank One profiles—nothing new. Allen's alive, or at least he was a week ago, but that's all we ever have on him. And Curry's still missing, no sightings in over a month. We had him tentatively marked down as presumed dead." She shook her head. "It must be about Stone—just Stone."

She stopped short. Twist was pretty sure she knew why. Lane didn't like Twist, didn't like Wayne, but she made herself put up with them anyway. She couldn't make herself go down to the ship. Or at least she never had as far as Twist knew. Something about it she just couldn't handle, couldn't make herself look in the face.

And that was probably the thing that was really driving Lane nuts. Because the answer was down there, and the ship would give it to her for the asking, except she couldn't bear to ask.

How long had she been sitting in here chasing herself in circles? No wonder she looked like shit.

"Lane," Twist said, and then waited until Lane actually looked at her. "For fuck's sake, go get some sleep."

Lane blinked, and then actually cracked half a smile. "I shouldn't," she said. "Not yet. I haven't even finished debriefing Diana's rescues. They all keep telling me the same pack sign, black flames, but we don't have anything like that in the database. If there's a new gang of raiders moving into the area, we need to know about it. And Sierra Team is supposed to be coming in half an hour from now, they were—"

"Off to Gamma Site for supplies," Twist said. "I know. I've got it."

"Twist—"

"Lane," Twist repeated. "Sleep. You're no good to anybody like this."

And Lane stopped, mouth twisting, and rubbed at her forehead, leaning into her own hand. "Yeah," she said at last. "Okay." She stood, covered her face with her hands, dug her fingertips into her eyes and along the bridge of her nose. And then she looked at Twist and bit her lip, and added, "Thanks."

"Fuck off already," Twist said, because she thought it might make Lane smile again.

And it did.
She looked at the files again, after Lane had left.

The Rank One profiles, she'd said. Only three of those.


Wayne had wanted to keep track of all of them, highest priority in the system. But he'd only gone after one, and only one of them had a body that had been built by a mother box.

It had been one of his longer-range goals, yeah. Getting his hands on a mother box would change the game in a lot of ways. But Steppenwolf was looking for one, too, and Wayne hadn't *wanted* to find the last one and have it at the compound if that was just going to bring Steppenwolf down on their heads. It was all strategic, with Wayne. He didn't just want to be able to get a mother box. He wanted to make sure he was going to be able to keep it.

But now—now he'd gone after Stone, and out of everybody in the files, Stone was the one who might know where a box was. Was that why Wayne needed him? Because he thought Stone could give him a location? Had to be something big, if he thought he needed a mother box for it, and so badly that he'd take the risk.

Great.

Twist rubbed at her face and sighed through her nose.

Well. Didn't matter until Wayne came back. That was going to take at least another day, probably more. And right now she was supposed to be on the lookout for Sierra Team.

She closed the files, terminated the connection to the database, and closed and sealed the door behind her when she left. She checked in with the team in the security room, took a glance at all the monitors herself. And then she went out to the courtyard to check with everybody on watch. They had to be ready. Any convoy coming in meant the whole compound went on high alert for a few minutes. Standard procedure, because opening up the main gates for actual cargo vehicles took twice as long and was four times as risky as a team coming in one of the side gates like normal.

By the time she was out front, she could already see the convoy in the distance, dust rising behind them, even through the haze. And it didn't take long to realize there was something wrong.

Not *big* wrong. She recognized the trucks. It was the right team coming in. But there were too few of them.

She thought about keeping the gates closed. Except they were still coming—and if anybody had been on their tail, they'd know better. Besides, she couldn't see anything but the trucks. No parademons in the air behind them, no raiders alongside harrying them from bikes or smaller cars.

So she gave the order to have the main gates opened. But she also had half the courtyard watch turn at their posts and aim in instead of out, just in case.

The trucks looked a lot worse up close. Dented frames, grills bent and twisted, like they'd crashed or run into something. Or something had run into them.

But Twist could see through the windshield of the front truck that it was Britta in the driver's seat.
Britta was Sierra Team's lead; as long as she wasn't dead, it couldn't have gone too wrong.

The trucks circled up until the whole convoy was in the courtyard. And then Britta shut off the front truck with a cough of exhaust, opened the door and swung herself down and said, "New nest."

Well, shit.

"Where?"

"Just off the main route from here to Gamma," Britta said. "Brand new—low enough we didn't see it until we were already too close. Swarm hadn't finished building it yet."

"Got a truck?"

"We saved what was in it," Britta said. "Blew the tires, that's all." Her voice went wry. "Figured it was better to keep moving, get the rest of the trucks clear, than try to swap them for spares with a swarm on us."

Fair enough. And parademons were unpredictable. Maybe they'd take the truck to build up that new nest with; but maybe not. If they'd left it where it was, then there was still a chance it could be retrieved and repaired. Twist would have to send a recon team out to take a look. Could evaluate the new nest at the same time. Two birds.

Twist nodded at Britta, and was about to shout for somebody to radio into the compound, get any extra hands out here to start unloading the trucks, when there was a loud metallic bang. A shout, too, and another bang; one of the trucks rocked on its wheels.

"Plus," Britta said, hooking a thumb over her shoulder at it, "we found something else."

"Sounds like someone," Twist said.

"Yeah. He was in the nest. Chained up in the bottom. Figured Lane would want to talk to him, except he didn't really want to talk to us. And then—" Britta stopped and shrugged one shoulder. "Got a good look at him. He's one of the assets. Rank One."

Twist blinked. The main teams didn't have details, didn't have names. Britta had never seen the files. But an asset, Rank One—and Stone was in a different direction entirely, or at least it was supposed to be. Had to be Allen or Curry.

"Swarm must've been taking him to Steppenwolf," Britta was saying. "Otherwise they'd already have eaten him."

"Yeah," Twist said.

There was another bang, two, from the truck, and it lurched again.

"Still got the chains on?" Twist said.

Britta looked at her, and then at the truck. "You think I should've taken them off?"

Point.

Twist went over and swung up onto the back of the truck, right as it tipped again—clung on through the sway, and then when it was over she unlatched the bar lock on the truck's rear door and opened it up.
She'd have guessed it was Curry just by the size of him, the breadth of the shoulders. But with the light falling in, he twisted away from it and swore—eyes adjusting, after the darkness of the closed-up trailer—and she could see the whole span of his bare side, his back. Tattoos. Definitely Curry.

"Hey," she said.

Curry twisted back around and angled a glance at her, eyes dark, jaw set. "Well, hey," he ground out, mocking, harsh. "Go fuck yourself."

Twist looked him over. He really did seem okay. Not bleeding anywhere, as far as she could tell. Not even bruised. Better condition by far than anybody else they'd found in a parademon nest. But then that was why he had a Rank One file in the database.

And he was chained up. Arms behind him, heavy links wrapped around at his waist to pin his forearms, his hands, to the small of his back; legs, too. A lot of it. Black, spiky—the alien metal Steppenwolf used, and that shit was like solid lead. If what was wrapped around Curry right now added up to less than a ton, Twist would eat sand.

And he was still throwing himself around in here. No wonder the truck kept swaying.

"Got you pretty good," she said aloud.

Curry scowled. "I had it handled," he bit out.

"Yeah?"

Curry glared at her and didn't answer.

"Been months," Twist said. Presumed dead; but if the parademons had had him, that explained it. Nobody had ever survived being caught by them for that long. Nobody could—except Diana, maybe.

And, apparently, Curry.

"You motherfuckers been spying on me, is that it?" Curry said, and laughed, hoarse and scraped. "Jesus."

Twist tilted her head. "Guessing they didn't give you a lot of water," she tried. "Want some?"

Curry bared his teeth at her. "Yeah," he said. "Sure. Come close enough to give it to me and let's see how that works out for you."

Okay, Plan B. Twist turned around and jumped down, out of the truck, and then angled herself so she could still keep one eye on Curry. "Britta."

"Yeah?"

"Get the rest of the trucks unloaded. Gates closed right after you came in, but do a sweep anyway. Make sure nothing else got inside. I put Lane off-shift. Wait at least an hour before you go wake her up."

"Anything else?"

"In six hours, have somebody bring me some water," Twist said, and then climbed back up.

Or started to, except Britta caught her arm before she could do more than get a boot on the frame of
the trailer.

"You're—staying in there?"

"Got to watch him," Twist said. "Let me know when Wayne gets back."

"That could be days," Britta said.

"Yeah," Twist said, and then shook Britta's hand off and pushed herself up. "So don't forget that water."
Chapter 3

Stone was cooperative.

Bruce had been prepared for anything. That they would fail to find Stone; that even though he had apparently been successfully defending himself from Steppenwolf, from the parademons, for years, now that there was no other choice but to secure him he would turn out to have been taken beyond Bruce's reach. That he would need to be subdued—and what weapon could be adequate for that kind of task? Bruce had brought along a selection from explosives to darts, on the off-chance that doping the parts of Stone that were still human might slow him down. If he didn't kill Bruce first.

He wouldn't have asked Diana to come. But he'd conceded, if only to himself, that he was lucky she had. Even if Stone had killed Bruce, Diana might have been able to capture him anyway. She wouldn't have understood what needed to be done with him, not until she'd had a chance to speak with the ship. But surely that would have been her next move. She'd have figured it out.

Whether she would have gone through with it was another question.

But, as it turned out, they weren't going to need to find out the answer. Because Stone hadn't killed Bruce at all. He could keep pace with Diana, approximately—and of course his metal legs didn't tire. He seemed to suffer spasms of—what to call it? Analysis and re-analysis, maybe. Threat assessments constantly running, and every now and then, returning a result that had him looking at them with blank eyes and lifting a hand that had rearranged itself into the mouth of a blazing weapon port.

But he hadn't fired yet. Hadn't, and didn't, all the long drive back to the compound.

The time passed strangely. Bruce was too conscious of Stone, of the danger, to let himself slide fully into a meditative state; and yet there was nothing to do but drive, nothing to look at but the wasteland and the sky, the distant horizon. It was easy to feel as though it might last forever, and in the end it was almost a surprise, to discern the lingering wreckage of what had once been Metropolis through miles of blowing dust—to realize it was almost over.

And of course Diana wouldn't let him get away with silence much longer. He revved the motor, watched half a dozen familiar landmarks grow slowly larger, and told himself it didn't matter.

Whatever she thought, when she understood—it didn't matter. He knew what needed to be done, and he would do it.

Stone had been the first step. But even if she grasped what was important about Stone, a mother box could be used for many things. The next step—

The next step wasn't so forgiving. And when she asked again, and he had no doubt that she would, he would have to tell her.

It happened even sooner than he had expected.
She didn't wait until they were within the compound. The shape of the cowl was to some degree identifiable at a distance, and so was all of Diana; but Bruce signaled appropriately to each of the watchposts over the outermost gate anyway.

And it was as they were poised there, waiting for confirmation and for the gate to begin the long slow grind that would lower it and let them through, that she turned to him and said, "So we have him now. What do you mean to do with him?"

Bruce didn't look at her. "Not here," he said.

He heard the huff of breath through her nose—could imagine the way her mouth had flattened, even though he couldn't see it.

"Will it harm him?"

He didn't answer.

Didn't answer—couldn't. He didn't know. Setting aside the question of whether enough was left of Stone that "harm" had a meaningful definition—or "him", for that matter—it was still impossible to guess. Even if his suspicions about the location of the box were confirmed, what he intended to do with it had never been done. Perhaps it would have no effect on the box's function whatsoever; perhaps it would contradict some fundamental principle of their construction and tear the box apart. Maybe Stone functioned independently of the box. Or maybe they had been linked in the moment of his body's creation, and its destruction would kill him.

Bruce could only stand there and hope that Diana took his silence as a rejection of the question rather than an answer.

And yet even that was nothing but a stopgap, a delay of the inevitable. She would know soon enough. She would have to. And then—

It shouldn't make a difference. But it did, damn it all. Stone had been about to vaporize him, and Diana had stepped in the way. Easy, immediate, without even thinking about it; she couldn't have, she wouldn't have had the time. He had thought, before, that he was close to the edge of what she could bear, that soon it would be too much. But whatever final line it was that would make her turn her back on him, it was clear he hadn't crossed it yet. He hadn't expected the knowledge, that ready and unhesitating demonstration, to strike with such force.

She hadn't despaired of him entirely. Not yet.

But she would. This, surely, would be it at last: the thing she couldn't let pass, the thing she couldn't forgive him for.

And then the innermost of the main gates scraped open in front of them, and in the compound courtyard, there was a truck.

"Hey, boss," said Twist, sitting in the open end of the truck's trailer with her forearms propped on her knees, gun in her hands, without looking away from the figure she was aiming at. "Got something for you."

"Arthur Curry," Bruce said.
"Yep," Twist said.

Curry glowered at them both, and didn't answer.

The chain was Apokoliptian; it wasn't hard to tell. The appearance, the visual texture of the metal, the thorny spines that clawed out of each link—and anyone else would have been bleeding in a hundred places, immobilized by the weight if they hadn't already been crushed, but Curry just looked annoyed.

He bared his teeth at Bruce, shifted his weight a little, and then there was a sudden sharp bang, and Curry's head jerked sideways.

Twist had shot him. Shot him—and the bullet had struck him in the cheek and then clattered down into the bed of the trailer.

"Told you not to move," Twist said.

Curry eyeballed her balefully.

"You were thinking about it," Twist said.

"I really wish you'd quit doing that," Curry said, low and deceptively even, grimacing, and then opened his mouth once, twice, flexed his jaw.

"Sorry," Twist said, and didn't sound sorry at all.

"Report," Bruce said.

"New nest between here and Gamma," Twist said promptly, without looking away from Curry. "Sierra Team got in a fight. Found him like this, at the bottom. He wouldn't talk to Lane, but I figured you'd want a crack at him, boss."

"Boss," Curry repeated, lip curling, and looked at Bruce. "So you're the head asshole around here, huh? You've been looking for me, and you think you've got some kind of plan." He tilted his head, gestured with his chin at the truck, and out the back of the trailer toward what he could see of the compound walls, the edge of the innermost main gate. "Trying to build something out of the end of the world." He snorted. "As if anything you've got up your sleeve amounts to shit. Give me a fucking break."

Bruce ignored the jab. The impassivity of the cowl would serve him well here; he just looked at Curry, and said, "So they're after you."

Curry laughed, unamused. "Who aren't they after?"

"They had you for a while," Bruce said. "They should have taken you straight to Steppenwolf."

"Guess they couldn't get enough of my charming personality," Curry suggested.

But the bunched yoke of his shoulders had tightened up, his eyes narrowing, and he was looking at Bruce more warily now, gaze sharp.

"You used to hunt them," Bruce said.

Because it was true. All the information they'd ever collected about Curry was unanimous on one point: he threw himself into the middle of any fight he could find, and when he couldn't find one he started one. He'd hit raiders too, sometimes—anybody who could be counted on to outnumber him.
But there were a lot more parademons than there were raiders, and Lane had collected pages and pages of eyewitness reports about Curry jumping off cliffs into clouds of them, leaping into the air to drag them out of the sky, impaling them with anything to hand, brutally efficient and utterly fearless.

"Yeah. So?"

"So," Bruce said, "you can keep doing it. Come back here if you need anything; take a radio when you go. If they catch you again, we'll get you out. Or take a team to keep them off your back while you work."

"Right," Curry said slowly. "You want to help me. Sure. And why the fuck should I believe that?"

"We got you out once," Bruce said. "You're not bad on your own. You'd be better with backup."

Curry looked at him, and then away, and didn't say anything.

"Think about it," Bruce said, and then turned—not too quickly, framing himself for a second in the open rear of the trailer, against a backdrop of all the open space Curry probably hadn't gotten a breath of since the parademons had overwhelmed him—

"Wait," Curry said.

On the one hand, obviously this guy was nuts. On the other hand—who wasn't? Besides, he could spew any bullshit he wanted if he got Arthur out of these chains. Goddamn uncomfortable.

And if Arthur decided to take off after, how was this tool going to stop him?

"If I say yes," Arthur said, "can I have some water?"

The dipshit in the weird mask glanced at the chick with the gun.

"Offered," she said, without taking her eyes off Arthur. "He didn't seem interested in cooperating."

"That was like thirty-six hours ago," Arthur growled at her. "Wasn't thirsty then."

Weird Mask gave him a long steady look that was probably supposed to be intimidating or something, and then turned and said in that funny low growl of his, "Diana."

And another woman pulled herself up into the open end of this goddamn truck. For a second she was silhouetted, just an outline against the wall behind her, the sky. Then she came closer, crouched to put herself on a level with Arthur, and he swallowed the insults he'd been about to spit at her once she was in range. There was just something about her face, her eyes, that said she wasn't fucking around—that she wouldn't need guns or chains or a gang at her back to take Arthur on, and she knew it.

But there was no way she was—
There was no way. They were all dead. Arthur bit his tongue and tilted his chin up, didn’t let the look on his face change any. She wasn’t Atlantean. Whatever her deal was, it had to be something else.

Which was lucky for her, because if she’d been Atlantean he’d have had to make sure to kill her before he left this dump.

The chains were tangled, those stupid fucking spikes sticking off all the links catching on each other. Arthur's hands were pinned flat in the small of his back, and he was wrapped up so tight he couldn't bend his fingers, couldn't get a good enough grip on the chains to even try to break them.

But the woman—Diana—didn’t have that problem. She eyed him for a minute and then took two of the links in her hands, curling her fingers around and between the spikes. And she had to strain hard, the muscles in her arms and shoulders bunched tight with it, but then metal gave somewhere with a sudden shriek, and she twisted the links apart. Fucking badass.

Two more, three more, and Arthur felt it all start to loosen. He shifted and it loosened more, even though some of the spiky parts were still jabbing him pretty hard.

But she really was going to get this shit off him. And then—then, maybe, if Weird Mask had meant it, Arthur would get that water. Food, too, as long as they were offering, and it seemed like they were. If they let him inside that giant fucking bunker, maybe he'd even sleep.

Hadn't had walls around him in a long time, unless you counted those endless goddamn honeycombed nests. Hadn't had a place where he could put his back in a corner, know nobody would be able to come up behind him if he closed his eyes. Might as well take advantage of it for a little while, if he had the chance.

And then he'd take off, get the fuck out of here, because if they actually thought he was sticking around they were kidding themselves. Whatever it was Weird Mask was building here, whatever he was deluded enough to think he could do in the face of the goddamn nightmare out there, Arthur wasn't getting sucked into it.

He'd always been alone. He was good at it; fucking spectacular at it. No reason to give it up now. Especially not when there had to be some kind of catch.

Lengths of chain began sliding off him, crumpling to the bed of the trailer, and he was able to break the last three or four loops of it himself, flexing his shoulders and arms against them until they cracked apart. And fuck, fucking ow. If he were all human, obviously he'd have been dead a long time ago. But that didn't mean being bound in one position that long didn't hurt.

He grimaced and settled back on his ass, rubbing his hands, his arms, while they tingled and ached. And then he looked up at Weird Mask and tilted his head, and said, "So what's the thing you're not saying?"

Weird Mask went still and didn't say a word, and Diana's shoulders had gone tight as wire where she was crouched next to Arthur.

"Got to be something," Arthur prodded. "I'm a wild card and you know it. Whatever else is wrong with you, you're not stupid. Wouldn't have made it this long otherwise. You don't strike me as a guy who likes to turn his back on threats to him or his." He hooked a thumb at the chick with the twitchy trigger finger. "She doesn't like me. You don't like me. Rest of your team probably won't be throwing me a parade any time soon. So what the hell are you doing offering me whatever I need, no questions asked? 'Keep doing what you're doing, except you get free shit and an extraction if you get
your ass kicked again'? Really?"

Silence.

Arthur raised an eyebrow. "Come on. There's got to be something you think you're getting out of this."

Weird Mask stared at him for a long moment. He glanced down and sideways at Diana, who seemed to feel it, shifted a little and turned her head and looked silently back.

The chick with the gun hadn't taken her eyes off Arthur; but then she'd been watching him for like two days and had barely fucking blinked, so that was no surprise.

"Backup," Weird Mask said at last, low, grudging.

"Right," Arthur said. "You and your bunker, your resources, your numbers. Her," and he tipped his chin toward Diana. "And you need backup from me? What the fuck for?"

"Because," Weird Mask said, very evenly, "I'm bringing Superman back to life, and he's not going to thank me for it."

Diana stared.

She had known there was something. And in the moment before Bruce had spoken, she had seen it in him: not in his face, not with the cowl on, but in the way he held himself, the way he looked at her—that he had decided this was the moment, that at last he wouldn't put it off any longer. That he would answer her question by answering Curry's, because saying it to Curry meant nothing; because he wasn't telling it to Diana, only allowing her to hear it, and somehow to his mind that was an improvement.

She had known there was something, and she had known Bruce did not want to tell her.

And now, she thought distantly, she knew why.

Little wonder Bruce had wanted Stone, had gone after him with such abrupt urgency. To accomplish such a thing would require great power, and there was nothing in the universe with as much power as a mother box. But what did he mean to do? If he thought Stone knew where it was, had the information locked away within him somewhere—what did Bruce intend to do with him, to get it out? She felt a cold prickle of foreboding; because even if Bruce knew, even if he had reason to expect the worst, if he thought it worth the cost then—

"No," she said aloud. "Bruce, you can't. You cannot."

He looked at her, and she knew even before he spoke which words were about to come out of his mouth, and cursed him for it. "I have to."

Diana had to bite down very hard on her tongue, to dig her fingernails deep into her palms, to keep
herself from screaming at him. Was there nothing, nothing, he would not justify by asserting its necessity? As if he had no choice in the matter, as if it were not up to him; as if circumstances alone made all things inevitable, and he was only carried along in their wake—

"You murdered him," she said.

_I had to_, he didn't say, a terrible repeating refrain—but she knew he wanted to, and for an instant she hated him for it.

"Diana," he said instead, and of course he was about to try to explain; to tell her that whatever he had learned, whatever the ship had told him, meant this was required of him. And once he had decided what was required of him, what other option was there?

"I helped you anyway," she said, rising to her feet to face him, feeling the ripple of anger through her like the first rumble of an earthquake. "I came and I helped you anyway. _That_ was necessary. But Doomsday—if he had been there—"

"We don't know what he would have done."

"—he could have stood _with_ us! _You_ don't know what he would have done," Diana snapped. "You think he would have hurt us, hindered us, or that it was all part of his plan. Not because you knew it, not because you had any reason. Because you were afraid, and you wanted to prove you could hurt him first. You _killed_ him. And now you want to bring him back?"

"We need him—"

"We needed him then—"

"Doomsday was defeated," Bruce gritted out. "You were there, you saw what he was capable of, and you're asking me to tell you I'm sorry there weren't two of him."

Diana clenched her jaw, twisted and punched a clean satisfying hole through the corrugated metal of the trailer's side, because if she hit Bruce now she would probably kill him.

There was silence for a moment after the shriek of metal had subsided. But, of course, Bruce hadn't flinched, and when Diana looked at him again he was so thoroughly unmoved she wished she had hit him after all.

"If you do this," she said, "even if you succeed—even if it is him you bring back, and not a monster—what will happen then? He will kill you, Bruce. He will kill you, and I will not blame him when he does."

But of course that, too, was the wrong tack to take, the wrong angle of approach. She watched Bruce's chin come up, his hard dark eyes like stones, and understood all at once. Because the more he endured to do the thing he had decided was so necessary, the greater the cost levied upon him and him alone, the more clearly he perceived its righteousness. To take such a blow in the course of saving what was left of the world was a price he would never turn down the opportunity to pay. Not if he believed that in paying it he had spared someone else, _anyone_ else, that price.

Diana closed her eyes.

Sometimes it was so easy to hate Bruce; and yet sometimes it was also impossible.

"Bruce," she said tiredly. "Bruce, please. You don't understand the power you are dealing with; you can't. Do not let fear convince you otherwise. Think about what you are doing—"
"I have," he bit out. "You think I would even be *entertaining* this if there were any other option?"

The hot frustration flared again. "Is it that there are none," Diana said, "or that you do not care to look for them, if they will not give you the chance to face him again? You killed him, it's over—let go of him, Bruce. Whatever you wanted to prevent, we are saved from it. Whatever you wanted to prove, you've proven it—"

"You don't understand," Bruce said, short and clipped.

Diana laughed, a harsh sharp bark she could not hold back—because whose fault was that? When he hadn't even been able to bring himself to tell her what he meant to do, never mind why he meant to do it. "Because *you* have kept it secret—"

His eyes had gone cold, glittering; and his voice did, too, when he said, deceptively soft, "As if your hands were cleaner."

Diana felt her skin go cold, and then hot, as if she would burst into flames—as if she would come alight. Except that was impossible. The power she had once had, the light, was gone. She had not so much as flickered with it since—

Since she had killed them.

Bruce had fallen silent, mouth pressed flat, as if he had surprised even himself by choosing to cut so deeply. She heard his breath catch in his throat, unsteady; but then his jaw firmed and he squared his shoulders and said, "Diana," and whatever was about to come after, it would not be apologies.

Because even if he felt regret, he would never speak of it. Of all the things he considered necessary, she thought dimly, that had never been one.

"Whatever it is you intend," she said quietly, "it will come to nothing without his body. And that, you will not get. Because Lois will never tell you where it is, and if you try to make her, I will kill you."

She turned and leapt down out of the truck. Stone was still standing there, empty mismatched eyes fixed ahead—Diana hoped he had recorded it all, heard everything, would run some analysis or another and come to all the correct conclusions; leave this place, and never come back.

A moment's effort, and she was atop the wall. Another, and she was away, coming down with a force that jarred what felt like all the world beneath her.

Except she could not leave. How then could she keep her vow? *If you try to make her, I will kill you.*

She should have known it would come to this. This was who she was, now: sworn to destroy everything she had ever cared for, before it could destroy itself.

---

He shouldn't have left the guy with them.
He'd been running in circles all day, and he couldn't stop thinking about it. He didn't—he didn't even know the guy's name, which, like, it wasn't like he could've asked and he hadn't exactly needed it. Hard to mistake the dude with the metal body for anybody else, right? And Barry hadn't ever gone looking for him or anything, didn't ask around about him. He'd just stumbled across the guy a few times. And then a few more times, because he was curious; because the guy was always alone, and he wasn't fast enough to catch Barry all by himself, and after the first dozen times he'd mostly stopped trying to shoot Barry in the face.

Not a bad guy. Barry liked him, anyway. And then that woman and that other guy had shown up to take him off somewhere with them, and—

And Barry had run away.

He probably shouldn't have done that. Right? He'd just—he hadn't known what else to do, and the way that woman could move still made him nervous, even if she wasn't anywhere near as fast as him. He'd stood there and he'd—he'd talked to them, which he hadn't done with anybody except the metal guy in a long time, and it was—it had been too much. He couldn't stay there with them looking at him, their eyes on him, knowing he was there. He couldn't.

He'd followed them, though. A little way, at least. But they were so slow, he couldn't just keep going around them in circles. And what if the woman heard him again? So he'd left. Made bigger circles. Come back, after a bit, to see where they'd gotten to, whether they were still going the same direction, and then left again.

And finally they'd made it all the way to this big—building, this compound. Set low to the ground, dug in; or at least where the ground was now, anyway. You could tell one of those big machines had been here: the building was shoved up against the foot of a jagged cliff, nothing natural. Still had a weird liquid look to it, like all that dusty rock might start moving again any moment. Dragged up out of the ground with alien technology, and then just left there when they were finished with it, when they'd done whatever they needed to do underneath and moved on to somewhere else, cut the ground open all over again and made it burn.

Barry had rounded the whole place a couple hundred times, and then run off, and then run back. No way could he go in there. Right? There would be—there would be so many people, there would be walls. What if there were doors? What if there were locks? What if he couldn't get out again, no matter how fast he was? He'd just—he'd just have to wait. See whether they came out again, whether the metal guy was with them or not. Maybe now that they had him, they'd leave him inside. Maybe Barry wasn't ever going to be able to get to him, no matter how long he waited.

Except he barely had to wait at all before the woman suddenly came back out. He sped up a little, until she was frozen by comparison, hanging in the air. He'd never seen anybody who could leap like that, and for a second he was just busy staring. But then he came around in front of her, and it was—he could see her face.

She looked sad.

He ran away again and slowed down, waited through half a dozen breaths. That had to be enough, right? She must have landed by now. Maybe if he hadn't gone quite so far, he'd have been able to feel the impact, but—it was fine, he'd just—he'd just go back and see. He could do that.

He ran back, and for a second he thought she was gone. But she'd just climbed, that was all. Or jumped, maybe; that had to be faster, and he hadn't given her that much time.

Either way, she was all the way up at the top of the cliff. Had to be a quarter-mile high.
Barry eyed it. He could go up the sides of things so fast he didn't have time to start falling down them. He'd done it before—but not with anything that tall. But he should—he had to try. She'd seen him twice and hadn't hurt him either time. She'd talked to him, listened to him; answered his questions, even when the creepy guy next to her wouldn't. She'd tell him what they were going to do with the metal guy, if anybody would.

So he took a deep breath, and he ran.

He was pretty sure she knew he was there basically right away, as soon as he stopped moving. She had before, after all.

But she didn't look up. She was just standing there, head bowed, long dark hair tumbling loose; her face was still, her eyes closed. She looked kind of like she was part of the rock, almost. Or maybe like she wanted to be.

"Um, hi," Barry said, and then stopped. Suddenly it seemed like it would be kind of crappy to just start talking about the metal guy when she was—when she looked so unhappy. "Are you, uh. Are you—okay?"

It felt like a stupid question. It wasn't like she was bleeding or anything. He probably shouldn't have asked.

But she lifted her head and looked at him, and it was pretty obviously too late to take it back. "Barry Allen," she said quietly.

Barry stared. "You—how do you know my name?"

She looked away, and for a second he thought she wasn't going to answer. "The man in the mask," she said. "Wayne. He knows what you can do. He knew before we saw you in the wasteland."

Jesus. Barry flickered without even meaning to, chest knotted up tight, slinging himself in an arc around her close enough to make her hair lift with the speed as he passed her, just to try to get the itch off his skin. He didn't know what to think about that—

"Wait," he said, and then realized he was still moving too fast, that she wouldn't be able to understand the word even if she could hear it at the pitch it would come out at, and made himself stop. "Wait," he said again. "That's—that's Bruce Wayne?"

She tilted her head. "You knew of him before."

"Well, yeah," Barry said. Bruce Wayne, holy shit—Barry remembered him from the news, the tabloids. The internet, and fuck, what a weird thing that was to think about, when he hadn't seen a functioning computer in years. Seemed almost like some kind of weird dream, the way things used to be. "And he's—wow. Okay. Holy shit."

She was starting to smile, just a little bit, except her mouth wasn't actually moving any; it was something else, Barry thought, something about her eyes that had gotten warmer, gentler.

And then the eye-smile went away, and she looked off into the distance, squinting against the wind, the dust.
"And you followed us here because you want to know what he will do to your friend," she said.

"You said you wouldn't hurt him," Barry said hastily. "But I just—"

"You were right not to believe me," she said, very softly.

Barry blinked. "What?"

"I am Diana," she said, "and you would not know me from before, but I was there. When Steppenwolf came, with his parademons and his machines, I was there. Do you know what a mother box is, Barry Allen?"

"I," Barry said, because he'd been about to tell her no, except he wasn't sure it was true. He remembered some of the earliest broadcasts, before things had started burning, cities sliding into the sea, the earthquakes. The enormous figure in the armor, at a shaky distance, struggling autofocus. Barry's attention had mostly been on the giant scary axe, but there had been—cubes, weird glowing metal, hovering, shifting patterns all over their surfaces.

"With three," Diana said, "he would have been able to enforce Unity," and she was one-hundred-percent saying that with a capital letter, no doubt about it. "Unity of all beings, of the planet itself, with his will. He would have eliminated us in every way that matters, wiped our minds clean and filled us with himself; reshaped this world into a hell of his making, and we would have fallen on our knees and thanked him for it.

"He has only two. But mother boxes possess power beyond all understanding. He has the parademons, yes, but they are a swarm, a hive. He wanted an army, and found one, and—and with two boxes, though Unity was beyond his reach, he was—he was able to make it his."

Barry opened his mouth, and then closed it again. There was something behind the words that she wasn't quite saying, and suddenly he thought he had a dim half-formed idea what it might be. "Not Unity," he said carefully, "but—two-thirds of it. You don't mean that he, like, summoned a bunch of golems or something. You mean that he—" He swallowed hard, and tried again. "He made people —"

"Yes," Diana said. "They should have been safe. They should have been protected. But he found them, and made them his. They were in thrall to him utterly. They did what he wanted, and only that; they were no longer themselves, only his tools."

"And—and then—"

"I killed them," she said.

Her tone was quiet, calm; level. But Barry could see her face, her eyes, and that wasn't how she wanted to say it at all, he thought. She just—couldn't let herself do it any other way. Couldn't figure out how, without the words breaking her apart on their way out.

"I killed all of them." She fell silent for a moment. "So you see, Barry Allen—I don't want to hurt your friend. I will try not to. But I—" She stopped, and closed her eyes again. "I should have known better than to promise you such a thing."

Barry swallowed hard. That didn't—that didn't sound good. That didn't sound good at all.

"But you—why do you even need him? What are you going to do with him?"

Diana didn't answer. She just kept standing there, looking out, so graven and immovable that—that
Barry had to run, just to remind himself he could. He could feel the sparks already, that crackle at the tips of his fingers, his toes; his whole body ached with holding still, he couldn't breathe.

"I'm—I have to—"

"Yes, Barry Allen," Diana said softly. "Run. Run away," and Barry squeezed his eyes shut and did it; so fast the whole world went silent, except for the pounding of his heart.

Wayne just stood there for a minute, after Diana was gone. Then he said, "Deal with him," jumped out of the truck, and strode away.

Great.

Twist eyed Curry, who eyed her right back. His face had flickered, unreadable, at Wayne's answer to his question. But he'd gone right back to looking like he didn't give a shit the moment after. Watched Wayne and Diana argue with an eyebrow half-raised, a cool assessing expression as he sat there and flexed his arms, his wrists. He'd jerked a little when Diana had punched through the side of the truck, but that was all. Hadn't let his face change.

Had a lot of practice at that, Twist was starting to think.

No point holding a gun on him anymore. Twist lowered it grudgingly, slid it back into its holster, and Curry watched her do it and got a little smug around the eyes.

"Still watching you," Twist said.

"Yeah, yeah," Curry said.

And fuck, fine, he did sound kind of hoarse. Twist pressed her mouth flat and reached for her waist—not for a gun, for the water bottle clipped at her hip. She threw it at him. She'd drunk out of it first, he'd seen her; couldn't make a fuss about it being poisoned or dirty, radioactive.

He caught it one-handed, palmed it and twisted it open and then tipped his head back. Downed half of it in a gulp, and if he was going to finish the whole bottle off that quick, he'd be lucky if he didn't throw it up in a minute. How had he ever made it this long in the wasteland?

Except he didn't finish it off. Tipped it the other way, and splashed some on his hand.

He had to know better than to waste it. Had to—so maybe somehow it wasn't a waste, for him, to swipe that big wet hand in quick strokes along his arms, his chest, his side.

Twist thought about the file. The video. Curry in the water; except there was no ocean anymore. How often did he get to wet his skin these days?

He'd tipped his head down, shoulders bowed, breathing slow, as the last couple trickles worked their way down his arms.
And then he looked up like he hadn't done anything weird at all. Threw the bottle back at her, and then glanced past her and raised an eyebrow. "And what about him?"

She turned around.

Right. Stone. Wayne was gone, probably hadn't thought twice about it. And now she had to figure out what to do with Curry and Stone—where to put them, how the hell she was going to keep the rest of the compound safe without locking them down entirely.

Sometimes Wayne really was an asshole.

Twist sighed through her nose, clipped the water bottle back on her belt where it belonged, and took a step toward Stone.

Stone had been staring off into the middle distance, blank-faced. But he turned the moment she moved, light from that red eye abruptly blinding, and suddenly he didn't have a hand anymore but a wide yawning mechanical port that pretty obviously fired something.

Her hands were halfway to her gun before she managed to stop them. Like that was going to help. Even if she shot him in the human side of the head—maybe all that would do was kill Stone, if he was still in there somewhere, and leave her with the other ninety percent of his pissed-off metal body.

So she stopped reaching, and let her arms drop down by her sides instead. Let her hands hang there, held still. Stone's red eye flickered a little, and then suddenly light was sweeping up and down her, sideways across her. And then Stone's regular eye blinked, and all at once he'd powered halfway down again, hand shifting back into a hand.

"Okay," Twist said. "No sudden moves. Got it."

Turned out it wasn't too hard to herd him inside—he'd go where he was directed, hand on his arm or shoulder. The main bay was pretty big, and it wasn't like Stone got hungry or thirsty or bored. She got him into one corner, standing back far enough that nobody would come too close to him by accident. Felt weird to just—leave him there, but hell, he seemed fine with it. She was willing to call it a win.

And then there was just Curry.

He'd watched her with Stone with that same non-expression on his face, as if it wasn't anything he hadn't seen before, and even if it had been he wouldn't have been impressed. But—the parademons had had him for a while. Presumed dead. He had to be tired, hungry, goddamn sick of looking over his shoulder. Even if he didn't want to let on about it where she could see him.

"Come on," she said, and opened the hatch that led into a side corridor off the bay.

He followed. Looked a little grudging about it, but he did it. And the closed-in space probably wasn't his favorite thing in the world—probably reminded him of the nest. So point to Curry for doing it anyway.

There was a storage room off this way hardly anybody used. Cot, blankets, and it would be at least as comfortable as a bunk in the main barracks. Curry could be alone, if he wanted. Couldn't have been alone much, in the nest; probably parademons everywhere, wings flapping, that endless fucking chittering. He might like the quiet, if he could handle being behind a closed door all right.

She slowed down a little, and looked over her shoulder. "Curry," she said.
He raised that eyebrow.

"It's not personal."

The eyebrow went higher.

"You said I don't like you, back there. I don't. But it's not about you. I don't know you. No reason I should trust you—no reason you should trust me." She shrugged a shoulder. "Stick around long enough and—"

"Not sticking around," Curry said, looking away.

"Then I guess we don't have a problem," Twist said coolly.

And that made Curry look at her again, flat, eyes hard. "Guess not," he agreed.

Twist paused—stopped outright, in the middle of the corridor, so Curry had to stop too unless he was willing to shove her out of the way.

Which he probably was, so she tried to make it quick. "Won't shoot you in the face again."

Curry snorted. "Thanks."

"I mean it," Twist said. "I still don't like you, but no one's going to hurt you unless you give them a reason to think they have to. That's how it works, in here. Inside the walls—you're safe. Okay?"

Curry eyed her. "Safe," he said. "You follow around some guy who's decided he's going to bring Superman back from the dead, and you think that's safe."

"Killed Superman, too," Twist said.

"Right," Curry said, drawling and dubious—and he'd heard that part, he must have, he'd been watching Diana shout it into Bruce's face. But she supposed she couldn't blame him if he didn't believe it.

"No," she said aloud. "I mean that's what safe is, to him. Wayne. Making yourself more dangerous than anything that could kill you. Bad shit happens. But as long as you can make sure you live through it, you're safe. Parademons can't get to you, not unless they go through us first. And we're pretty fucking dangerous."

"Sure," Curry said after a moment, and she didn't think he was convinced but maybe he was considering it. "He's still an asshole, though."

"Yeah," Twist said, because it wasn't like she could argue with that; and for a second she was pretty sure Curry had almost smiled at her.

---

This was the next step.
That was all. They had Stone; readings would need to be taken and Stone carefully examined before Bruce would be able to proceed. When he had secured the box, one way or another, he would have a new set of problems—though there was a chance that Allen might be the solution to one of them, if he showed up again long enough to let himself be convinced.

But Diana hadn't been wrong about the other element that was an obvious requirement of any attempt to resurrect Superman.

And she probably wasn't wrong about how this conversation was going to go, either. But—

But Bruce had to do it. There was no other way.

He needed Superman's body. And there was only one person still alive who was at all likely to know where it was.

Lane looked up as soon as he came through the doorway. He'd stripped out of the outer armor, taken the cowl off—and she must have been able to perceive something in his face, because she stared at him silently for a long moment and then closed the file she'd been updating without looking away from him, and swiveled her chair around. "So," she said. "You've finally decided I need to know what the fuck is going on. I love it when that happens."

Her tone was sharp, sardonic; her eyes were sharp too.

She was going to hate him for this—but then she already did.

"'He's coming'," Bruce quoted.

"'Darkside'," Lane acknowledged. "The ship knew what it meant."

Bruce felt his jaw tighten without his permission, and looked away. "You know who Steppenwolf is," he said. "Who he was."

"A general of some kind," Lane said. "In exile. Crossed the rest of the New Gods of Apokolips, got his ass kicked, tripped over us, decided we'd make a great Elba. Wayne—"

"That's what we thought," Bruce said. "That was the most likely scenario, in accordance with the most recent information the ship had in its database."

And he could see in her face that she was starting to follow where this was headed, that his choice of words—*most recent*—had drawn her attention to the right places.

"Most recent. But—still out of date?"

"Give or take a thousand years," Bruce said, and Lane closed her eyes and rubbed them, laughed a little through her nose, even though there was nothing funny about any of this.

"Jesus," she said. "So he's, what, a forward scout? The first wave?"

"Something like that," Bruce agreed. "Darkseid isn't a word. It's a name. If he's coming here, if Steppenwolf was just preparing this world for him, then the situation we're in is about to become substantially more dangerous."

"Substantially," Lane said, "Jesus fucking Christ, you have a gift for understatement. What the fuck are we—" She stopped short, eyes narrowing. "You wouldn't be telling me any of this if you hadn't already come up with something. You—you went looking for Stone. You're trying to find the third
mother box. What are you going to do with it?"

Of course she'd figured it out. He should have known she would.

"You won't like it," he said quietly.

Lane favored him with an exquisitely icy smile. "As if that's ever stopped you before," she said, equally soft.

He told her.

She went still after the first half-dozen words, mouth pinched into a tight flat line, eyes bright. She didn't even let him finish, didn't even give him the chance to ask—and in a way he was almost grateful not to have to.

"No," she said.

"Lane—"

"No. No."

She shook her head, bit her lip, came up out of her chair in a rush and looked like she was going to come at him—and then stopped herself, clenching her fists, digging her fingernails into her palms. "Are you—are you kidding me? You think you have the right?" She barked out a laugh, harsh and disbelieving. "After what you did—and now you want him back to help you, to save you. Not even because you know you made a goddamn mistake, not even because you finally fucking figured out you never should have touched him—"

She choked on the last word, pressed her hand to her mouth so tightly that her fingertips and her lips both went white with it. Her eyes were wet, spilling over, but she wasn't sobbing; she didn't even seem to have noticed.

After a moment, she was able to let her hand drop. "You piece of shit," she said, very steadily. "You're just as bad as any of them. Arguing over the ethics, trying to call him to account for it all, like if he saved too many people whose names you didn't know you might have to admit they mattered—right up until you're the ones burning. Right up until you're the ones who need him."

"We do need him," Bruce said.

"Then maybe," Lane said, "you shouldn't have killed him."

"We do need him," Bruce repeated, as evenly as he could. "Lois—you know what I did. That's exactly why I wouldn't even be suggesting this unless I thought it was absolutely imperative—"

"That's your angle," Lane said blankly. "Really. That I have to listen to you because you're the one who murdered him? Jesus Christ, are you hearing yourself? What the fuck is wrong with you?" She shook her head, put her face in her hands—visibly discovered the tears spilling over onto her cheeks, and swiped awkwardly, angrily, at her eyes. "God, I should have—I should have killed you years ago. I should have shot you in the head the second I realized it was you."

I had to, Bruce didn't say. Because it wouldn't mean anything to her, because she didn't understand. She never would. She had—she had loved the alien. Deeply, profoundly, inexplicably. Of course she hadn't perceived the need, the absolute unwavering certainty that had driven him to such extremes. She was incapable of assessing the threat the alien had presented objectively; he hadn't presented one to her, or at least she'd never seen it that way.

But that didn't make her right. People were wrong about things like that all the time. People loved
people who didn't deserve it, who were killers, abusers, monsters. Bruce had seen more than enough evidence of it, over the years—no one ever wanted to believe the worst, when they cared deeply enough. Even the clearest evidence, the smoking gun, hadn't always been enough.

Someone had had to do it. Someone had had to stop him, while it was still possible to. And it wasn't that Bruce had trusted himself with the power to bring down Superman; it was that he had trusted the rest of the world—had trusted, god forbid, Lex Luthor—even less. It was so easy to imagine how it might have happened, how many ways it could all have gone wrong. Superman left to run rampant, uncontrolled, uncontrollable. Or—would it have been better, or worse?—on a leash, one way or another. Locked up in a room full of kryptonite until it was time to cry havoc and let slip a god. At least Bruce had only killed him, and ended it there.

He hadn't wanted to; he hadn't liked it, hadn't enjoyed it, whatever Lane might think. But he hadn't seen any other way out, and so he had made himself what he needed to be. Because however dire the necessity of it, there was no denying what he'd done: he was a murderer.

It would have been unthinkably selfish, to prioritize keeping his hands, his heart, his conscience, clean of that label over the fate of the world.

So he had done it. And now—

Now, impossibly, he was facing the lone threat that was vaster by a great enough margin that he had to bend all his will and effort toward undoing it. As if the most terrible thing he had ever done, clear-eyed and premeditated, still wasn't enough—

"No," Lois was saying. "No. Fuck you. You think that helps? You think that makes it better? That's the worst goddamn thing about this. You still think of him exactly the same way you always did. You still think of him as a weapon, it's just you're hoping you can point him at somebody else. He was a person, you unbelievable sack of shit, and you killed him. Go fuck yourself," and she shoved past him and was gone.

He didn't try to stop her. He stood there facing her empty chair instead, and waited for the strange aching tension in his throat, his chest, his fists, to ease.

It took a long time.

Lois left.

She didn't—didn't know where she was going, didn't know what she was going to do. She just needed to get out of there. Out of the room, out of the compound, out from underneath every single part of the vast looming shadow Wayne cast. And so she went.

It was probably stupid. Scratch that; it was definitely stupid. But the wasteland felt almost welcoming, in a way. The rush of the wind, the sand stinging her cheeks, the hard ground beneath her feet: it was all of a piece with the roar of her anger burning from the inside out, her hot sore eyes, her heart lying cold in her like a stone.
They didn't stop her, at the gate. They had to wonder why she was going out like this, not even a dust-cloth to cover her face. But they recognized her, and they didn't stop her.

She walked out, steady on her feet, at a strange calm distance from herself—and then the compound grew smaller in the distance, and she was—suddenly she broke into a run. Suddenly her legs were aching, she was gasping for breath, she couldn't see; she didn't know how far she'd gone. She stumbled once, twice, and then fell, and she didn't even mind. Coming down hard on her hands, her knees, the breath knocked clean out of her—it hurt, it hurt, in a way that was small and simple and bearable.

It was a relief to be reminded that some things were.

She stayed where she was for a long moment. She wasn't moving anymore, but her breath was still coming fast in her ears, her heart pounding behind her ribs like it would never stop.

How dare he. How dare he. She'd spent so long biting her tongue—forcing herself to set it all aside, to work with Wayne anyway, because it was the apocalypse and there was no time to sit around having feelings. Because—

Because it had been the only option. Because it had been necessary.

God, how she hated that fucking word.

And now he had the nerve, the sheer unconscionable brass-balled arrogance, to walk into a room with her and say a thing like that. God. She wished dimly, belatedly, that she had hit him, punched him, torn at him with her nails until he bled—hurt him, immediately and unmistakably, if only a fraction as badly as he'd hurt her.

But instead she had stood there and let him rip the whole wound open, with his usual methodical attention to detail. She laughed, except it came out hoarse and cracked and didn't sound much like a laugh.

And then she knelt there in the dirt with her face in her hands, and fell apart.

It felt like it took a while.

She'd just—she'd been holding it all together for so long, pressing the edges of the cracks of herself up tight against each other so they didn't show, spit and glue and wire. It was hard, picking it all loose, letting herself spill out from behind at last. It was hard, and it took a long time.

Her face was wet and sore, her throat burning, her hands aching, when at last she became dimly aware there was someone. In the distance, across the flats. She was—she was out on the wasteland, she was alone. She needed to put herself together again, she thought, but she knelt there and couldn't make herself do it. What did it matter? Whoever it was, if they—if they came and killed her now, that would just make all this a lot easier. Maybe she'd thank them.

Except there was something about that figure that was familiar. The height, the outline of patched and cobbled armor.

And then, all at once, at an arm's length from herself, she realized she knew why.
It was Diana.

Not coming closer, not intending to confront her or tell her how stupid she was for running out here by herself or drag her back. Just—there, poised in the distance, waiting.

Which meant it was safe after all, Lois thought blankly.

But the jolt of that moment’s uncertainty had brought her back to herself. She rubbed at her face, her eyes, scrubbed her hands through her hair and breathed in slow, and then out, and then in again.

And then she stood up and started to walk.

It wasn’t so hard. Her legs were almost steady under her. And Diana waited for her, silent, watching, without impatience or frustration. She was so tall, Lois thought absently. So tall; so strong. Sometimes it was tempting to think that she’d never felt alone or afraid, that she’d never lost anything. But Lois knew better than that.

So when she reached Diana, she didn't pause. She reached for Diana's armored shoulder, closed her eyes and leaned in and rested her aching head against it; and Diana didn't push her away.

It took longer than Lois had expected. But after a minute, Diana’s hand came up, and settled tentatively, carefully, on the back of Lois's neck.

"Lois," Diana said, very quietly.

"You know what he asked for," Lois said. "Did he tell you why?"

"Not—exactly," Diana conceded.

Lois swallowed down a sharp-edged laugh. Of course he hadn't. Why would he? Why would he tell Diana anything, until the moment he decided he needed her to know?

She didn't have to say much. Diana didn't know as much as the ship did about Apokolips, but she knew enough; she knew the ancient stories about the first invasion, the great war, which was the whole reason there even were mother boxes on Earth in the first place. She had told Lois a little, added more to the database when Wayne had asked her to.

So she understood exactly what it meant, when Lois told her it wasn't just Steppenwolf anymore—that a New God was coming, that all of Apokolips was on their doorstep.

Lois didn't look up. She couldn't make herself, and she didn't need to anyway; she could feel Diana's hand tighten on the nape of her neck, could imagine the grave carven look that would be settling onto Diana's face. She squeezed her eyes shut.

"Lois," Diana said again, when she was done.

"I know," Lois said, and twisted away from Diana, out from under her hand, half-wanting to run again. She made herself stand there instead, swiped her palms against the hot itch trying to prickle its way back into her eyes. "I know. He isn't wrong, is he? Not this time."

"What he is asking of you is cruel," Diana said. "His desperation doesn't change that. But I—I can no longer claim not to understand it."

"That's the hell of it," Lois agreed. "He told me it was necessary. Absolutely imperative. I wanted to shove the word back down his throat until he choked on it. But I knew before he said any of it. He
wasn't lying. He wouldn't lie about that.” She shook her head, bit the knuckle of her thumb until it stung. "He killed Clark. He said he wouldn't—wouldn't even be considering this if he thought there were any other choice." She choked out a ragged little laugh. "And I believe him. I believe him. I almost hate him more for that. If he were just some psychotic asshole—but he's not, goddamn him —"

She had to stop, press a hand over her mouth; she'd run out of air, somehow, and she gulped for it and tried to ignore the way her vision was blurring.

"I know," Diana said softly, behind her.

"He thinks it's that bad," Lois said. "And I know better than anybody that sometimes what he thinks is horseshit, but—"

She stopped again, digging her teeth into her lip. She was, for a brief blazing instant, furious with herself for even thinking about it. She couldn't—she couldn't help him do this. How could she possibly help him do this? She couldn't stand it. Except—

Except they'd fought so hard, all this time. The world had gone down in flames, but Wayne had clawed his way back from the edge—had clawed his way back and dragged all the rest of them with him. The little they'd managed to build out of the ashes had taken so much to achieve, had cost so much. Steppenwolf outmatched them on so many levels it was dizzying to think about, but they'd hung on anyway. To think it might all be for nothing made her sick with anger.

She covered her face with her hands. "Tell me," she said into her palms. "Tell me I'm not saying it just because I want—just because—"

(Clark. Clark, alive. It wouldn't fix any of this, it wouldn't rewind time; it wouldn't be the way it was. She barely even recognized herself sometimes, and Clark would be—Clark had died. It would never be the same, not ever.

But—)

Diana's palm settled against her back, warm and strong and steady between her shoulder blades. "Even if you were," she said, low, "that would be all right. Of course you want him back."

As if it were that simple. She wasn't even sure she wanted Clark himself—if it were him at all, if it didn't end up being Doomsday all over again—so much as she wanted—

She wanted it to change. She wanted it fixed. The world had been destroyed, there was no going back; but maybe some things could still be undone, made right. Maybe not everything was lost forever. Maybe sometimes it had just gone missing for a little while.

"I can't tell him," she said aloud. "I can't. Even if I—even if I wanted to—I hate him, Diana. I hate him. I can't."

"Lois—"

"I hate you, too," Lois said, because she couldn't help it—because she'd broken herself open, and she hadn't managed to close it all back up again. "You know that, don't you? I hate you too, a little bit."

"I know," Diana said, gentle.

"He's the one who did it. I know that. I don't blame you for that. I know you didn't know what he was doing, you didn't know what he had planned. If you had, you'd have stopped him.
"But you didn't. You weren't there. You didn't get there in time." Lois realized, dimly, that the reason her knuckles ached so badly, the reason for the sting in her palms, was because she was clenching her fists up tight. "You should have been there, you were—you should have been there—"

"I wish I had been," Diana said.

Lois closed her eyes. "I know you do," she managed, unsteadily. "And I can't tell him. But I'll—I'll tell you. Wayne was right. I was—I moved his body, after. I didn't know what else to do, you were—Doomsday was—I had to get him out of there."

"I understand," Diana said. "Lois, it's all right. Tell me."

And Lois bit her lip until she tasted blood; and then she finally let herself say it.
Wayne might have been an asshole, but he had a pretty okay setup.

It wasn’t a bad place. Cramped, sure. Everything was concrete. But there was food and water and a corner after all. A whole room, not just a corner, even if it was tiny and half-full of junk. Trigger Finger got Arthur set up in there and then just sort of vanished again. And Arthur put his back to a wall, eyes on the closed door, and ate ration packets steadily, one right after the other, until he thought he might puke; and when his eyes wanted to close, he let them.

Hadn't slept in a while, not for real. Chained up in a pit with those things crawling around, shrieking at each other and fluttering—shrieking at him, not even out loud but deep in his head, until it felt like he echoed with it, like they were going to drown out everything that was him and he'd be nothing but noise—

Hadn't gotten a lot of shut-eye, in there. Even when he'd started figuring out how they did it, that he could shout back in there and they'd hear him, he hadn't been able to get them quiet. Confused, yeah. Dragging him around instead of taking him straight to Steppenwolf’s black palace, instructions disrupted, that he could do. But he couldn't make them shut up.

It was quiet in here, though.

He woke up kind of thrown. Couldn’t tell how long he'd been down, whether it was day or night. Couldn't tell anything.

But nobody had come in and killed him in his sleep. The rest of the ration packets were still there, plus about half a bottle of water. Arthur found a pack-bag in with the rest of the junk, shoved them all in it, and got up.

He remembered how Trigger Finger had gotten him down here. Mostly. He’d go back out, grab anything he saw that he liked along the way, and leave. If he was lucky, nobody would notice till he was already gone. And then they could raise Superman from the dead or whatever all they wanted, and leave him the fuck out of it.

It wasn’t a bad plan. Elegant in its simplicity, Arthur liked to think. It would probably have worked.

He was just a little too slow, that was all.

He’d made it all the way back up to that main entry bay. He could tell because the metal guy was still there, standing in a corner, staring blankly out with those mismatched eyes of his. Fuckin' creepy.

He spotted a couple things that looked like they might be useful—folded-up cloth, dull and heavy-duty; box of screws. Cloth might come in handy, and he bet he could make something pretty nasty to throw at parademons, or maybe hit them with, using enough screws.
Best way to steal stuff and get away with it, in Arthur's experience, was to look like you weren't stealing it at all—walk up to it like you had the right to it, like it had been put there just for you and everybody who thought otherwise was kidding themselves, and just take it. Nobody was looking at him anyway, Wayne's whole ragtag gang of broken toys busy with their own shit, crossing the place and chattering now and then into little radios, striding around with purpose in their steps.

So he went over and put his head down and grabbed the stuff. He was almost done tucking the corners of the folded cloth inside his borrowed pack when somebody said, "You."

Arthur looked up.

It was the woman, the one who'd broken his chains. Diana.

"Curry—come with me."

Arthur raised an eyebrow. "Thanks," he said, mild as he could, "but no thanks. On my way out." He hooked a thumb over his shoulder at the big wide main door.

"The parademons had you," she said. "How would you have escaped, if not for the team that found you and pulled you out of there?"

"I had it," Arthur said, looking away. "What, you think I owe you something?"

"Me?" Diana said. "No. My part was small. You could have worked your way free of those chains in time. I risked nothing to help you. But the team that found you—half a dozen of them died. They were not like me, not like you. They were only human, and they were killed. Did you know that? Have you been told their names?"

Arthur gritted his teeth, and didn't look up. Like it mattered. Everybody fucking died. It wasn't his problem. "Too bad I don't give a shit."

"Food, water, rest, your freedom—all of this," Diana murmured, tone marveling, "worth so little to you that you'll turn your back."

"You got something you want from me," Arthur snapped, "or are you just enjoying the guilt trip?"

He expected her to come back with another taunt, more anger, disdain; but instead she was silent, for long enough that he couldn't stop himself from cutting her a quick sideways glance.

She looked—tired. Funny thing to think about the person who'd broken those heavy black chains without hesitation. But that was the only word for the pinched downturned line of her mouth, her lowered eyes, the bowed curve of her shoulders.

"I can't force you," she said at last, more quietly. "Nor obligate you. But I am asking, Curry. Bruce and Lois and I, we are—it's been so long. We are all tangled up in each other; we see each other too clearly sometimes, not clearly enough at others. We can require nothing of you. But it would be better, I think, if there were someone else there to—"

"Tell you all you're fucking nuts?" Arthur suggested, mild.

Diana's gaze snapped up to him—and for a moment her whole face was changed, her mouth pursed, her eyes bright. "Something like that," she said, and within the words, behind them, caught in the crinkles at the corners of her eyes, was something that was nearly a smile.

"Bruce—Weird Mask," Arthur said.
"Wayne," Diana elaborated.

Wayne. Okay. If Arthur had to call him something to his face, that was probably a better option than "Weird Mask". And he ought to save "stupid asshole" for special occasions.

"And what exactly is Wayne up to today that makes you think having me around is such a great idea?"

Diana looked away. "Bruce doesn't know it yet," she said, "but today—today we are going to find Superman's body."


That was the thing she and Weird Mask—Wayne—had been screaming at each other about the other day. Right? So she'd changed her mind.

Not that it mattered why. Wasn't Arthur's problem. Fine, so she had a point. They'd helped him, sort of. They hadn't known he was down there, hadn't been trying to find him or anything. But Wayne's people had still gotten him out anyway, and he owed them. So he'd help them in return, pay them back for it, and then they'd be even and he'd be out of here.

Just his bad luck that the thing he could help with was this.

Wayne didn't seem happy to know he had a location after all. He didn't seem much of anything. He had the weird mask on, covering three-quarters of his face. Last quarter wasn't saying much.

But that wasn't Arthur's problem, either.

He knew about Superman, a little. He remembered hearing the guy had died. Same time that some alien thing had torn up Metropolis, Gotham, the whole waterfront and then some. Nobody had seemed to know how it all happened—whether the thing, Doomsday, had done it, or maybe Superman had set Doomsday on his killer in revenge, or maybe Doomsday had been Superman, shapeshifted, transformed in anger, enraged. Arthur had heard all three plus some even more ridiculous shit, right after it happened.

And then the world had come apart at the seams, and he'd had a lot more to worry about than what had happened to Superman's corpse.

But apparently Wayne had done it. Killed Superman, on purpose. Diana had said it, and Wayne hadn't argued with her. Arthur wasn't sure why he couldn't have saved whatever he'd used for Steppenwolf instead, but whatever. Too late now.

And now Wayne wanted him back. Hadn't known where to find his body, but Diana had solved that problem for him. That was what mattered.

They left the metal guy—Stone—where he was. Hard to claim he'd be useful when he was as likely to shoot them as he was to take out anything they came across on the way. Trigger Finger was staying in charge of the place while they were gone. Just Wayne, Diana, and Arthur.

Awesome.
Didn't turn out to be all that far. Seemed like a weird coincidence, until Arthur thought about it; because, after all, they were right beside what was left of Metropolis. Superman had died there. Stood to reason his body might not have ended up all that far from where he'd kicked it.

Arthur eyeballed the stuff that was still standing, as they wove their way through the wreckage. They were coming toward the waterfront—where the waterfront had been, anyway. Arthur didn't let himself push it further than that. Didn't want to imagine what it might have been like: where exactly the water would have reached to, how deep it would have been.

It was gone. The whole ocean was gone, or at least Arthur hadn't found shit no matter how far he went. He tried to hang on to the vicious spike of satisfaction he got from thinking about it. Atlanteans had gotten what they deserved, killing Mom like that. That was the important part.

It didn't matter that he missed it. Stupid. It wasn't like it was coming back. No point even thinking about it.

Something flickered in the corner of Arthur's eye. He didn't jerk his head around too obviously, didn't draw attention to himself—but when he looked, there was nothing. Just afterimages. Little flash of blue-white, like lightning.

Weird.

"So where exactly are we going, anyway?" he said.

Diana turned to glance at him, and then ahead again. "At the port. In a building; it was abandoned even before the city crumbled. Flooded, at the time. He was—he went into the water, and sank. It shouldn't be far now."

Arthur eyed the rubble to either side of them. Towers of fire in the distance, ahead and behind, with those huge goddamn alien machines hovering, dark against the pale dusty sky. And that, over there—that was definitely the weird tall spiny shape of a parademon nest. Perfect.

He looked at it. And then he thought about the path they'd taken, where they were, judging by the chunks of the old city still standing, the parts that hadn't been flooded over with molten rock or carved apart. "Don't tell me," he said aloud. "He's under that thing, isn't he?"

Wayne looked at it, and then at Diana. "It—looks right," he said.

Right, of course. He'd know. He was the one who'd killed Superman there; he'd recognize the place better than anybody, even now.

Diana's mouth went flat.

They'd already had to take out a couple parademons who'd come too close. Arthur had yanked one out of the air and slammed it into a half-toppled wall. Diana had leapt up and grabbed another, gotten it by the jaw and broken its neck and then let the body cushion her drop to the ground.

But the nest was swarming with them. Arthur could see it, even this far away: little flutters of motion on the outside of the nest, as they crawled over it. Could hear it, that motherfucking chittering—

"Are you—are you going in there?"

Arthur jerked, swung out with one hand and hit fuck-all and dropped into a roll, because if whoever had said that had moved already, he had no idea where they'd come at him from next. Best he could do was get out of the way. He came up onto his feet in a crouch, caught Diana's startled expression
and Wayne just starting to shift into a stance of his own.

And then there it was again, that weird little flicker, and suddenly somebody was standing in front of him, like they'd just—just popped out of nowhere, out of thin air.

Kid, Arthur thought at first. Then he looked again and thought better. It was the eyes that had made him think so, the wideness of them, how much room they took up on that narrow face. The hair, long, curling everywhere.

But the guy wasn't a kid. Wasn't built like one, didn't hold himself like one. Wiry, wary—he was staring at Arthur, and he vanished and then flickered back into existence ten feet further away, instantaneous, blink of an eye. "You're new," he said, almost accusingly.

"Who the fuck are you?" Arthur said.

"Barry," Diana said. "Barry Allen," and it was half an answer and half a greeting, her gaze fixed on Allen's face. "You came back."

Allen looked at her, and then at Wayne. And then he flickered and was suddenly next to Arthur, hand out, practically touching the pattern of scales tattooed over Arthur's shoulder—Arthur jerked back, reflexive, and caught a flash of Allen's face like that, wide eyes and slack startled mouth, closer than anybody had been to Arthur in a long fucking time, before he was gone again just as fast.

"I—sorry, I just," he said, from forty feet away. "I wanted to look. I didn't mean to slow down. I'm hungry," he added—blurted, really, weird and jittery and confessional. "I'm—I'm really hungry. It makes it harder."

"Okay," Arthur said.

Mostly because he didn't know what the fuck else to do, but Allen seemed glad to hear it. He took a breath, another, and after three or four he wasn't—he wasn't shaking so hard.

"Are you really going in there?"

"I think perhaps we must," Diana said. "There is something we need in there—or close enough to it that we'll have a fight on our hands anyway."

Allen didn't seem happy to hear this. "They'll kill you," he said quietly.

"They'll try," Diana said.

Superman was down there after all, in the end.

The nest had been built over the half-collapsed foundations of the building, cut stone layered over with the coiling half-alive black vine-growths the parademons used for their nests. It was a big one, old—took half a fucking hour just to fight their way in, rip a hole through the side and find the remains of the building underneath, and by then the whole swarm was on high alert.

Unsettling, just listening to them shriek at each other, the hiss and snap of their wings as they wheeled and dived, struck, wheeled again. They knew Arthur. He could—he could feel it. The pressure in his head, the noise of them. For a second it was like they'd caught him all over again, like
he could hear the clank of those black chains dragging across the stone—

Point was, there were a lot of them. It was dark, close, and Wayne and Diana and Arthur had to get deep, below where the waterline used to be, way down into the heart of the nest. There were a lot of them, and they kept coming at Arthur on purpose.

Diana helped him, when she could. Wayne, too—Arthur wouldn't have thought he'd be much use, but he had a weird little gun that shot some kind of pellet; stuck to the parademons, to their skin, and exploded. Not right away, but ten or fifteen seconds after he'd shot it, so they'd flown up again and it took out three or four of them at once.

But there were a lot of parademons.

Got to the point where there were three of them hanging off each arm, two scrabbling at his back, one crouched on his shoulders and screaming, yanking at his hair. Arthur would've had them anyway if the sand hadn't shifted the wrong way under his feet, rubble underneath him cracking and scraping ominously. As it was, he had a split second to think about how fucked he was, to feel everything give out from under him—

At least maybe he'd crush one of these bastards when he landed, he told himself, and then he fell.

It had taken more than a dozen of them to move him before—these guys weren't enough to slow him down, never mind lift him anywhere. They came down with him, shrieking, and it had been dark up there but it was black down here, their eyes shining out of the murk of it like coals.

Diana was shouting something—his name, maybe—but he couldn't hear it right, the sound strange and muffled, and she was too far away to do anything anyway.

He came down hard, breath knocked clean out of him, and for a moment he was stunned thoughtless, nothing but the dark and the eyes. He'd take care of them in just a second, he would—one he could convince his arms to move, that was all. Once he figured out how to breathe again—

There was a flicker in the corner of his vision: clean bright blue-white light. And then, suddenly, there was Allen.

He wasn't like Arthur. He wasn't big, didn't look strong. But it was—he was moving, so fast that nothing else seemed to matter. He hit the parademons like a goddamn freight train, haloed in blue-white lightning, and they screamed and tumbled loose. With their hands off Arthur, their minds pointed at somebody else—Arthur could think again, and he sucked in a breath and rolled up off the floor and smashed two of them into opposite walls.

The footing had been bad up there but it was worse down here, rubble piled up and sand still hissing down over it, spilling in where Arthur had come through at the top. The only light was coming from up there, weak and dim—but enough that Arthur could pick out the shapes of the parademons after a second, blacker than shadow. It was easy to get distracted, staring at their glowing eyes instead, losing track of the rest of them.

And then, past them, Arthur saw something else.

"Curry!" Diana shouted again, above him, amid the sound of a whole lot of parademons having a really bad day.

"Yeah," Arthur shouted back. "I—think I found what you were looking for," and he caught the closest parademon, threw it at the three who were trying to rush him, and knocked them all out of the way long enough to get a better look.
Yeah, that was—that was Superman, all right. Jesus.

Once Diana and Wayne had dropped down, they made short work of the rest. Allen was—was gone again, or at least Arthur couldn't see him anywhere. Weird guy. What had he been thinking? He'd been scared of Arthur; he was probably scared of parademons, too. Should have been running in the opposite direction, not throwing himself right into the middle of it.

Weird guy. Stupid, too.

Wayne had a light, because apparently he had a gizmo for everything tucked away somewhere. He flicked it on and pointed it down, and—

There was a lot about this whole situation that was pretty out of the ordinary. But Arthur had known they were coming in here looking for a dead body. So the strangest thing about it was how—how not-dead Superman looked, considering.

It had been years. Took longer to make a skeleton than that, Arthur was pretty sure. Especially these days. How dry it was, that nothing could rot. Fewer maggots. Colder than it used to be, too.

But Superman wasn't even pasty. The skin hadn't gone all fragile, thin or stretched or weird-looking. There was a cut on his cheek, crust of old blood, black in the dimness. But aside from that he was—he looked fine. Asleep, maybe. Like Wayne had struck him down just yesterday, and it had taken the starch out of him, that was all.

Except for the hole in his chest.

Wayne had impaled him pretty good, Arthur thought, eyeing it. All the way through, just left of the breastbone. Arthur was pretty sure he could pick out the splintered edges of cracked ribs to either side. If it had bled, the blood had all drained away a long time ago; and that was weird, too, seeing a wound that should have been gushing so—empty, open but dry. There was something funny about the sides of it, the edges. Like it had been burned black, shriveled.

Unsettling as shit.

Arthur angled a glance at Diana—who was gazing down at Superman steadily, pale and silent. And Wayne, jesus. Wayne looked worse than Superman, mouth white with tension; he was staring at the body like he wanted to not give a shit, to walk right up to it without flinching, except he couldn't make himself, couldn't even pretend.

"Didn't come here to look at him, did we?" Arthur said aloud.

Wayne didn't say anything.

"No," Diana murmured, and came around the side of the body, knelt down, and set her hands to Superman's shoulders. For a half-second Arthur had a flash from the horror movie this could have been, that Superman was going to startle up under her touch and come awake, strangle Wayne right in front of them—but he just lay there, dead, unmoving. Diana caught him beneath the arms and lifted, and Superman's slack head fell back against her shoulder.

She met Arthur's eyes, and tipped her chin. Right.
She'd talked a good game about why she wanted him along. But maybe this was the real reason, right here: because she'd known there was no way in hell she could get Wayne to touch the body, and she hadn't wanted to drag the dead guy the whole way back by herself.

"Right," Arthur said, and leaned down to catch Superman under the knees.

That was weird, too. The way he felt—he wasn't cold, but he wasn't warm, and suddenly he didn't so much look asleep anymore. And the suit itself, odd and slick under Arthur's hands, textured. He'd seen it on the news from a distance. Hadn't ever thought to wonder what it felt like.

He'd never met the guy, never spoken to him. And now, in a funny backwards way, he'd ended up as Superman's pallbearer—because what they were carrying him toward wasn't going to be his burial, if Wayne had his way, but it felt kind of like a funeral anyhow.

Not that it meant anything. Diana gave Arthur a little nod, and he lifted, and together they bore Superman up off the ground. They were going to carry the dead guy back to the compound, and then Wayne could play god or whatever all he wanted, as long as he was doing it in Arthur's rearview mirror.

Because none of this was Arthur's problem, and he didn't give a shit about any of it, and he was leaving as soon as he had the chance.

That was all that mattered.

They took Clark to the ship.

Bruce didn't need to say it. It was the only choice that made sense. They could not—could not leave him out in the open, could not let him come to rest where anyone could stumble across him.

(Where Lois could stumble across him.)

But the ship was safe. Its hull seemed to be impenetrable to whatever machines or instruments Steppenwolf used, or invisible to them, or both; Steppenwolf had given no indication that he was aware of the ship's existence, that he had ever detected it or its power source, or anything else within it. If Bruce was in fact able to locate the third mother box, that was where he would take it, the only place he would ever risk using it. It had to be the ship.

So they did not approach the compound's main gate, and Diana was not surprised. Bruce brought them around toward one side of the cliff face instead, blocked from the sightlines of the compound walls by a small stony rise—and the face of the rise was stacked with a jumble of loose rock, but when Bruce set his shoulder to the largest he was able to roll it aside.

Curry eyed the gap that had been revealed. "You kidding me?" he said.

"It widens," Bruce said, without looking at him.

And it did—beyond that first low dark crack in the stone, the space opened out into a cave with room
Because of course Bruce would not have left himself with no alternative entry or exit for the ship. If the compound had ever been taken, captured—he would not have allowed himself to lose access to it. Had this been here all along and he had only found it? Or had he dug it out himself?

It was grim, difficult work, to ease Clark's body through. Diana had not met him, had not known him; but she had learned so much of him since he had died that it felt as though she had, as though she looked at his face and they were not strangers. To hold him like this, limp and unknowing beneath her hands, empty, dead, was disquieting.

She couldn't help but think what it must have been like for Lois, then. As soon as Lois had told her, it had made a terrible kind of sense that he had been so close by all along. Because what could Lois have done? She had come upon him with Bruce the moment before Bruce had killed him at last—only minutes, if that, before Doomsday had torn his way free of the ship and had begun to wreck Metropolis around her. She could not have moved him far, not alone; the water must have seemed like the safest place. She must have thought she would be able to come back for him—she couldn't have known, then, the destruction Doomsday would wreak, that access to the waterfront would be blocked for months. And then Steppenwolf had come.

Lucky for them, Diana supposed distantly, that Lois had managed to hide him at all.

But at last it was done, and then Curry after, with only a moment's pause to force the bulk of his shoulders awkwardly through. They followed an angled rough-hewn path downward, until at last they came out into the cavern that held the ship—and of course it could open any part of itself to them. Bruce had only to set his palm to the side of it, and a hatch was created, widened, and they walked inside.

It was as if the ship knew what they had brought with them. And perhaps it did, for it must have scanned them as soon as they were within its walls, or even before. Whatever the reason, it had already formed a broad sort of plinth out of the material of itself, more than large enough for Clark.

Diana and Arthur set him down upon it. Bruce seemed unable to look at him; the tension in his gloved hands, his armored shoulders, suggested that it was taking every ounce of Bruce's focused attention simply to occupy a space that held the body.

"Bruce," Diana said.

"No one will find him here," Bruce said, clipped. "The ship will need to run scans. The body may be too damaged. It's impossible to be sure, at this point."

It might have sounded like caution, if you didn't know him. Like care, like a rational attempt to be realistic about their chances of success with such a thoroughly improbable endeavor.

But all Diana could hear was fear.

"Bruce, you don't have to do this."

Curry shot her a funny look—because of course it sounded ridiculous to him, when Bruce was the one who'd insisted on this in the first place. He didn't understand yet; he didn't know Bruce well enough to tell that the pressure Bruce was exerting on them to assist him was only a fraction of the pressure he'd brought to bear on himself.

"There's no other way," Bruce said. "Diana—you know what we're up against. You wouldn't have agreed to this otherwise."
Diana gritted her teeth, and looked away. She did, and she felt balanced on a knife's edge; she could not stop thinking of the old stories, men and Amazons and Atlanteans, even Lanterns. And still, still, even with such forces arrayed in an alliance, there had been a war—and a long and brutal one, though they had been victorious in the end. Like this, what chance did they have? Even with Superman, the odds were surely not on their side.

And yet it still didn't sit right with her. It couldn't. To force such a thing out of desperation—it was all wrong, it would not end well. "And if it doesn't work, what then? You haven't even found the box —"

"Not necessarily," Bruce said.

Diana frowned at him.

"You think I wanted Stone because I thought he might know where the box was. Because he might have seen it before the end, and if we could extract the knowledge from him, then we'd be able to find it." Bruce glanced up at the ceiling. "Ship, have you been able to take readings as requested?"

"Yes," the ship said. "The individual referred to as Victor Stone is within sensor range, though sensors are functioning at less than four percent of optimum. Readings indicate a ninety-two percent chance that Hypothesis B is correct."

Whatever this meant, it struck Bruce like a blow—which was to say he barely moved, stance unchanged. But his eyes fell briefly shut, his fists tightening at his sides.

"Bruce—"

"It occurred to me," Bruce said quietly, "that given Victor Stone's connection to the box, he might have been in proximity to it during the invasion. It had already assessed him somehow; it chose to rebuild him. It knew him. The other boxes were inert, as far as we know, until Steppenwolf had them in his possession. But that one had woken already. That one knew he was coming. If it conceptualized him as a threat to what it had built—" He stopped and opened his eyes again, and looked at her. "What are the odds that it had been left in one place, for years, and Steppenwolf had never found it?"

"You think Stone has it," Diana said slowly.

"Or it has Stone," Bruce said. "Whether it concealed itself inside of him, or was able to forge a connection with him, to integrate itself into the body it had made for him—I don't know."

Diana felt an instant's relief. "So you won't need Stone at all. Only the box."

But Bruce didn't agree. He stood there silently instead. And then he said, "I'll need more readings. If Stone and the box are still functionally separate, then it may not matter what I do with it."

And it was growing almost familiar, that bright snapping crackle just at the edge of Diana's hearing; this time, she wasn't surprised when suddenly Barry Allen was there.

"This ship is huge," he said, and then, to Bruce, "So you—that's what you need him for? Because you think he can bring Superman back to life? Are you—are you really going to—"

"You again?" Arthur said; he had controlled his startlement this time, Diana saw, but he had still hunched his shoulders defensively, jaw tight, glowing at Allen. "What the hell is your deal?"

Allen tilted his head. "What's yours?" he said, almost absently, and flickered so close to Curry that
Curry's hair lifted a little in the breeze he'd made, blue-white sparks jumping to the ends of it; and then he seemed to realize what he'd done, that he was within arm's reach, and in the space of a blink he was on the opposite side of the room, watching Curry warily across Clark's body.

Curry hadn't grabbed him, though, or struck him. Curry hadn't moved at all.

Perhaps it was only surprise that kept him still. Except the first time Allen had surprised him, Curry had swung a fist without hesitation. So perhaps it wasn't that at all. Perhaps, in his way, Curry was trying to be—careful, with Allen.

But if he was, Diana suspected he wouldn't care to have it pointed out. She only met his eyes, instead, and narrowed them a little so he would know that she had seen; and he looked at her and then away, and crossed his arms over his chest.

"You think it might hurt him?" Allen was saying, to Bruce. "The guy—or, uh. Victor, right? Victor. You think it's going to mess him up?"

"I'll have to run the numbers," Bruce said, curt.

But that meant nothing, Diana knew. Only the most obvious and unignorable results, utter impossibility, would stop him now—whether Victor Stone would survive it or not.

It didn't take long to find Victor.

Barry thought it might, for a second—just because the ship had let him in didn't mean it would let him out again, after all. Maybe he'd just be trapped in here, running in desperate circles, until Wayne or Diana or somebody came along. That could be minutes.

But when he slowed down enough to run a hand along the wall, the ship seemed to realize what he was doing, and the hull ahead of him started to just—rearrange, until there was room. Not as fast as he was, he had to slow down some more. But pretty fast.

It was kind of like the way Victor's body worked. The way it just changed itself whenever it felt like it.

Victor. Barry turned that one over, while he ran up through each of the compound's levels in turn. That was the metal guy's name. Victor—Victor Stone.

Barry couldn't claim he'd have guessed that, but it was—it was nice. The guy didn't not look like a Victor. And Stone, that was good. Strong. Like maybe no matter what Wayne did with him, he'd be okay anyway.

But maybe he wouldn't.

Barry bit his lip, and ran faster. He had to be pretty close to the courtyard he'd seen from outside, and he still hadn't found Victor—but no, there he was. Big open bay full of equipment and stuff, but that gleam of silver in the corner over there was definitely Victor.
Barry came to a stop in front of him. Nobody was looking; nobody even seemed to have noticed the little flurry of lightning that had come along with him. Victor maybe noticed, maybe didn't. It was hard to tell. He looked the way he'd always looked, every time Barry had ever run into him out in the wasteland. Staring straight ahead, with the one eye that was normal and dark like Barry's and the one that was all red light, shining out.

"Hey, Victor," Barry said to him, quiet. "I know your name now—I'd have asked before, but, well. I didn't really think you'd answer, you know? Which is fine, no problem. I get that." He stopped and tilted his head. "The thing is, I don't want anything bad to happen to you. But it sounds like there's a chance somebody could get—like, un-killed, with your help. And it wouldn't make much sense to me to un-kill somebody else by killing you, like, no net gain there; same number of dead people you had when you started. But if you—if you aren't really—" He stopped again. Somehow that hadn't really come out the way he meant it. He cleared his throat. "Are you—are you still in there?"

Victor didn't move, didn't so much as blink. He just stood there, silent.

"Because I think we ought to find out," Barry said to him. "Even if Wayne still wants to—to do whatever. He should know, right? He should know if it's—if it means you'll be—he should know that. We should know that. That's—that should be a rule: you need to figure out how many dead people there are going to be afterward, before you do stuff. Which in this case means figuring out how many of them were alive to start with."

Victor didn't answer. But Barry liked to think he agreed.

The thing was, it was kind of hard to figure out where to start. It didn't matter that Victor didn't talk; it mattered that he didn't do much of anything else, either. If he'd moved his face, smiled or frowned, or even really looked at you, met your eyes when he was in front of you—that would make Barry feel pretty sure there was someone in there after all.

He stood there and thought about it for a minute. And then he realized how long he'd been in the same place, visible, and he couldn't—he had to run.

Just a little bit. He'd gone through the whole compound on his way up, almost. There had been some empty rooms. Maybe he could go find one and stand in there, where nobody could see him, and then it wouldn't be so hard to hold still for a while. They had to have food somewhere, too, with this many people around—maybe nobody would mind if Barry took some. Not much, just—just a little. Maybe nobody would even notice, if he was fast enough.

Except the room he picked wasn't empty.

He didn't realize it until he'd already slowed down. The woman wasn't moving all that much anyway, but compared to Barry she hadn't been moving at all until he came to a stop, and of course even if she'd been making noise, he wouldn't have been able to hear it.

But she wasn't. She was just sitting in there, silent, hand over her mouth. So Barry didn't even know until he made a noise—just sucking in a breath, reminding himself that he could, and then he caught the flash of her face, her head turning toward him, in the corner of one eye.

He almost bolted—not because she seemed scary, she wasn't even close enough to grab him. Just reflexive, in surprise. But the first little jolt of speed let him look at her: her pale startled face, hair that
was obviously supposed to be tucked back all neat except it had started coming loose, going
everywhere—boy, he felt that. And her eyes—her eyes, the skin around them, looked sore and pink.

She'd been crying, he thought, and slowed down again.

"Holy shit," she said, when he did. "File 2. You're File 2."

"Uh," Barry said.


Right. Diana had said that Wayne—Bruce Wayne, damn, Barry was never going to get over that—
was keeping track of him. He still hadn't decided whether that creeped him out or what. It was almost
nice to think that somebody had been paying attention; that if anything had happened to him, out
there in the wasteland alone, somebody would have noticed he was gone, even if it was just so they
could update their weird post-apocalyptic spy database.

"Yeah," Barry said aloud, "yep, that's—that's me."

"But you," she said blankly. "You're. What are you doing here? You were in the wasteland."

"Well," Barry said. "I don't know if it says in my file, but I move pretty fast?"

She blinked at him, once, twice, and then all at once she laughed—quick, soft, barely out loud at all,
but suddenly she didn't look half so tired or upset. She bit her lip and rubbed belatedly at her face.
"God, I'm probably blotchy—I get so blotchy. Sorry, sorry. I'm Lois."

She didn't hold out her hand, but people didn't these days; it wasn't polite, not anymore, to try to get
within arm's reach of somebody or make them come within arm's reach of you.

"And I'm Barry," Barry said, "which is a stupid thing to tell you because you already knew that.
Um."

Lois laughed again, sounding almost surprised. She moved her mouth around after, wet her lips, like
she hadn't realized until just then that it could still make the right shape to laugh with.

"I didn't know you were in here," he added, belated. "I could—I can leave you alone—"

"Oh?" Lois said. "And what did you want to come stand in an empty room for?"

Because—right. It wasn't like he could possibly have come in here looking for her, when he hadn't
known who she was, and he'd just said he hadn't known she was in here anyway.

"There's something that's—I'm not sure what to do," Barry admitted. "I needed some time to think it
over. Figure it out."

"Well," Lois said. "As long as I've got you here, File 2—want to talk about it?"

"—and I just don't know how to tell," Barry said, and then stopped.

They were halfway down a hallway. After about ten words, he'd started shifting his weight from foot
to foot, and then he'd had to do a loop around the room, just a real quick one—but Lois had said
trying to keep track of him was making her dizzy, even though she couldn't actually see him. So they'd started to walk instead. Moving was—was better. Barry had tried hard to stay at the same speed as Lois, and most of the time it had even worked.

Except maybe he'd messed up just now, because she was all the way back there, like three doors behind him.

"Lois?"

"You're telling me," she said, very slowly and evenly, "that Victor Stone is a mother box?"

"I mean—sort of? Maybe," Barry said. "I don't think we know yet. But he might be, or at least it might be part of him. He might be part of it? I'm not totally clear on the whole thing either, to be honest with you—"

"And you're worried that if—" She stopped, and wet her lips, and started again. "That if Wayne uses the box the way he's planning to, it'll hurt Stone."

"Well, it depends," Barry said. "That's the thing. I've been—I was out there for a long time, you know? And so was he. I ran into him a bunch. And after he stopped trying to shoot me, it was—it wasn't so bad. I talked to him sometimes."

Something crossed Lois's face that Barry couldn't read.

"I talked to him a lot, I guess," Barry amended. "But the thing is—he didn't talk back. I don't know whether he even—whether the guy who was Victor Stone is still—like, some of his face is still there, but that doesn't mean he is. And now that we've got Superman's body and all—"

Lois went pale. She didn't flinch or anything, hardly moved at all; just reached out kind of blindly with one hand, groping, like she wasn't sure where the wall was even though it was right there, and then pressed in until her fingertips had all gone white.

"Uh—"

"We do," she repeated.

"Yeah? I guess nobody told you yet. Well, or—" Barry paused and counted back in his head. "They got back like twenty minutes ago. Is that a long time? Probably not, right?"

"So they found it," Lois said.

"Oh—yeah. It was—yeah, they found it."

She swallowed hard, once and then again, and then leaned against that wall sideways and slid down it until she was sitting on the floor. "Don't mind me," she said, and her voice sounded really calm and level but Barry wasn't sure he totally bought it. "I just need a minute, that's all."

"Okay," Barry said carefully. And it was hard, he—he didn't like not moving; but he went over and he slid down the wall too, next to Lois, so she didn't have to sit there alone.

Because that was the thing that mattered, he thought. That was why it was so important to him to know about Victor; because in the wasteland, Victor had been out there too, and Barry hadn't been alone. And he didn't want to leave Victor alone now, with nobody knowing or caring about him, if there was something he could do about it.
"Where's Stone right now?" Lois said, after probably not as long as it felt like to Barry.

"He's just—I can show you, if you want."

"Thanks," Lois said. "I'd—I'd like to talk to him."

"He doesn't talk back," Barry warned her.

"Right, I remember. But I think I'd like to talk to him anyway."


> NFXVT4654BODZGN2G9D8
> 1J5ZF7DJ52HGEC6CUUPW
> 2JCXC5AHCRYFPX6ALWR7
> 9M24MW2GLXPL3P1YPRYW

> don't give me more goddamn data-streams

> you know what they've got down there

> 9AKNU5D9WE4RSHYQWFGN
> P71C29NUVQWQP5QGVW3O
> CW05EUUMY5U2GKDU5N45
> O6P55GDEKWXSGT0IHQ4

> you ran the analysis the millisecond they were in range

> this is what they need us for

> 79T7T8PMFWJ0KZCI517R
> YE3KAFJL2XL71WK20CNW

> he's dead

> he shouldn't be

> he was never supposed to be

> not like me

> or

> look

> YTLJ8XVTVEBUBX3FPMB1
> S4B6TTS5FDVOWFPUDHDY

> you saw me
you saw me

you wanted to help me, you knew you could and you wanted to

you could tell that i had broken somehow, that dad couldn't repair me; you understood that

UC6HLJ8P3HRB3JYNM1BX
B4G3R9MBS6CG8FVXQ0LD
3XMRUPEVWTUS4AQ2D9RR
6TWUCTZPVP99IMAPVWDU

don't give me this wall-e bullshit, you know what "alive" means

yes, like these, like all of this stuff

like me

like you, too, you weird-ass omnipotent lego from space

GS26I5KK8DVR5W0YWVUO
94ID6YDKZLUBZXSZDD24

you helped me

help him

when they ask you to, when they try to make you

help him

8Q6TWKP5BAV3CIZTCBPO
G0ID388JPTR4B0KJP9ZK
ID388JPTR4B

barry

TGMBPS4ID388JPTR4BPH
RJWID589KDRT5JNH3NQI

"—isn't where he was when I—"

"How did he even get in here? Access to hydroponics is restricted. He shouldn't have been able to get through that door at all."

"Well, he's sort of a computer, right? Or, like, part of him is? Do mother boxes even need to hack things? Probably it just, you know, asked the door to jump and the door was like, 'how high, and also I can ask you that now because I'm sentient, thanks for that'.”

"Because he—wanted to come look at the plants."

"If I had known this was here I'd definitely have come to look at the plants! Look at this, it's all —green. Do you think he wanted to? That has to count for something, right? You can't want things if you aren't there."

"I guess you can't."
no, don't shoot her

she's curious

come on

come on, just hold still

"What is all this, anyway? You guys eat this stuff, or—"

"Some of it. Mostly it's a—library, I guess you could say. Everything we've been able to find seeds for. Wayne wanted to develop guidelines for optimal care under low hydration conditions, keep track of it all, work out what might be genuinely viable on a larger scale if we're ever in a position to make it happen."

you know what it's like

you know down to the tiniest fraction of a percent exactly how much of everything is dead

if we've got the chance to make something alive again we have to take it

"So you're it, huh? File 3. Hello there, Victor Stone."

victor

am i

am i

"Did he—"

"Have you ever seen him react like that before?"

"No, I—I didn't know his name. I never knew his name, so I—"
"Boss," Twist said.

Wayne looked up.

He looked okay, considering. She'd seen him worse. Except with him it was always a guessing game—did looking worse mean he'd been worse? Or did it mean he was still feeling okay enough that he wasn't putting much effort into pretending otherwise?

She'd thought, back when she first met him, that the cowl was some kind of gimmick, the same weird bullshit raiders did decking themselves out with flames or spiders, crossed blades, skulls. Stupid self-important posturing, trying to look scary in a world full of way scarier shit than you. She hadn't understood then that it was just another face. Equipment: same as the other dozen faces he kept tucked away and put on when he needed them, even if most of the rest weren't made out of cloth and metal.

"November Team and Hotel Team got back," she said. "Got them debriefing. Foxtrot just left for a recon sweep to the southwest."

"Copy," he said quietly.

He looked away again after. Back down at a screen—interface linked to the ship, she guessed, just judging by the speed of the data scrolling across it. He was expecting her to leave, now that she'd given her report.

But she stayed where she was. Watched him clock it, try to wait it out; she didn't take the cue, and finally he sighed through his nose and glanced up again.

"You found something."

He went still.

"Came to give you my report, boss," she said, trying to be halfway gentle about it.

And yeah, that did it, she could see it in his face. Because she wouldn't have come to give a report to a guy she thought was still out in the wasteland; but she'd been up in the security room. She always was, when he made her primary and went haring off someplace. She knew damn well that he hadn't come in the front, when he got back.

She cleared her throat, pointed, before he could get too caught up in bitching himself out for it. On any other day, she didn't doubt he'd have thought of it—doubled back out whatever private entrance he had just to make a fresh approach where he could be seen, to cover for it.

But nobody was perfect, and today, she was pretty sure, he had some other shit on his mind.
"Been in and out a lot," she said aloud. "Stone, and then today. Something important, or you
wouldn't be doing so much of it yourself." Because Wayne had no problem delegating, as long as it
was shit he didn't care about. It was only once it tipped over the line, once it got his attention, that
he'd grab on and not let go—then it didn't matter what it was, tedious or uncomfortable or downright
deadly, he'd do it with his own two hands just because he couldn't figure out how else to make sure it
got done the way he thought it needed to get done.

He didn't answer. But the set of his mouth said plenty.

She bit the inside of her cheek. She couldn't ask. If he hadn't told her, it was for a reason; didn't
matter whether the reason was good or stupid, he wasn't going to change his mind about it. Even
wanting to know whether whatever it was he was doing was going to work, what the odds were,
how hard they were fucked if it went bad—hell. She was probably better off not knowing, not
having that in her head.

"You need anything," she said instead, "you let me know, boss."

And he looked at her for a long stretched-out moment, and then looked at the wall, and said to it, "I
don't know what else to do."

He sounded tired.

"Then you do what you've got," Twist said.

Wayne's mouth quirked just a little at one corner. "And if it all goes wrong?"

Twist raised an eyebrow at him. "Already gone pretty wrong, boss."

He closed his eyes. "Truer words," he agreed, very soft.

"You're afraid," she said blankly.

She didn't mean to. It just came out. Looking at him there, the way he was holding himself, his face;
suddenly it was obvious, unmissable. Not that he hadn't been afraid before. It just—

It just hadn't ever shown. Not like this.

He didn't move, didn't flinch. His jaw tensed a little, maybe. His gaze had gone flat, too, like—what?
Like he expected her to mind?

"So you're sane after all," she said, like it was news to her. "Good to know."

"Twist," he said, and then nothing else, the muscles in his cheek working.

"You fuck up, we die. Nobody left to call you on it."

He huffed a breath through his nose and shook his head a little. "Diana," he said.

Okay, point.

"Point."

Wayne sat back a little, like that was the argument won. As if.

"Well, whatever the fuck it is you're doing," Twist said, "I got your back, boss."
She'd known he wasn't about to thank her for it. But she was still surprised at the way he let his eyes fall shut, the way the breath caught in his throat. "This might be the worst mistake I've ever made," he said after a moment, very low.

"Until the next one," she said.

He snorted, without looking up.

And she wasn't going to get anything else out of him; that was all she'd wanted to say. She went to the door, started to swing the heavy metal hatch closed—and then she paused. Not quite all, maybe.

"It was all borrowed time, boss," she said. "It always is. Just dumb luck any of us are still alive to keep fucking up. It's all borrowed time."

And then she stepped out and shut the hatch behind her, because he wasn't going to want anybody else coming in while he was running his numbers.

---

He dreamed again.

It was the dream, of course. What else would it be?

The details had changed before; they'd change again. This time it was like the first time: the wasteland, now familiar, too-real, where it had once been nothing but dreamscape; the compound, the gates, the parademons.

(Bruce had had no word for them the first time. He still didn't know where to lay the blame for the compound, the main entranceway, concrete and squared-off arches—he hadn't even realized what he'd done until it was finished, until he'd looked at what he'd built and recognized it. The next time he'd closed his eyes, he'd had the dream in pulsatingly unbearable technicolor, surround-sound; Superman had pinned him to one of those concrete arches with rebar, impaled precisely and inexorably through his hands, his thighs, his chest—had hovered there, waiting to hear him scream, and he'd bitten through his lip, his tongue, until he'd been choking on his own blood rather than give in—)

The hole in the ground. Bruce, chained at its end. Haloed in light; cruel irony.

And then he heard that sound, that deep thunderous sound. Felt the rush of air, of heat. Knew what he would see, and looked anyway.

The alien strode toward him with such—such deliberate intensity, purposeful, vicious. Knowing that Bruce was trapped, that there was no way out for him, and relishing it. There was no one else in the tunnel with Bruce, this time; no distractions, nowhere else for the alien to fix that simmering red gaze. Only Bruce.

Bruce hung there in his chains and clenched his jaw. This was the part he hated most: the waiting. This dream always ended the same way. But there was no fast-forward, no way to just get there and
have it over with. The dream drew itself out—as if it too were under the alien's control, enhancing his anticipation, turning the screws ever tighter.

But at last the alien was within arm's reach. That disdainful sneering face, rage and disgust carved deep; the essence never changed.

This time, though, there was satisfaction there, too. And when the alien leaned in, spoke to Bruce in that low level voice, he said, "I knew what it would take."

Bruce squeezed his eyes shut, twisted his face away. No.

"I knew all along," the alien repeated, closer still, and set one impossibly powerful hand on Bruce's chest—but for once his words were the more frightening.

(It was the incongruity that unsettled Bruce, always: the sensation, thoroughly ordinary, the weight of a palm against his sternum and nothing more; and yet those fingers would, within another moment, crack him open and tear his heart from him. Emblematic of all that was most terrifying, most disorienting, about the alien—who looked so human, who approximated it so well, well enough that Lane had loved him, but was nothing of the kind. Was unutterably, almost incomprehensibly, powerful, in ways Bruce could never hope to equal—)

"There was no way out," the alien murmured, breath unnaturally cool against Bruce's jaw, the side of his throat—lips nearly touching Bruce's ear. "You were always going to have to bring me back, sooner or later. I knew all along. I knew."

Bruce clenched his jaw, tightened his hands around the chains; and when at last the alien's fingertips dug into him, split him apart, it was almost a relief.

What mattered was this: he had run the numbers. The ship had run the numbers, to be precise, and he had reviewed the results and run his own. There were variables that couldn't be controlled for—but there always were. He was as certain as it was possible to be that it would work.

But those kinds of arguments were never good enough for Diana.

Curry didn't seem to care one way or the other. He was content to stand there listening, arms crossed over his chest, face impassive. Bruce hadn't expected to be grateful for him—but his studied, deliberate apathy posed so much less difficulty than Diana's disapproval.

She looked at Bruce silently for a moment, and then said, "And if it does work, exactly as you intend it to, and Victor Stone—"

"It shouldn't make a difference," Bruce said. "Compared to a box at full power, the amount of energy required for a thing like this is trivial. A thousand years off a functional timeline of ten million—"

"Unless you're wrong. Unless the box was never meant to do such a thing."

Bruce gritted his teeth. "If there is some universal law regulating the ethics of death and its reversal," he bit out, "it missed its chance to kick in when I killed him."

Diana gave him a sharp look. "Your argument for the justice of that decision," she said, "was based on the worst possible outcome. You told me as much—you told Alfred. A one percent chance."
Bruce closed his eyes.

"And yet a one percent chance that Stone will be obliterated is now acceptable. Is that it? What are the rules, Bruce? Why have they changed?"

"Because the situation has changed—"

"Alfred would never have—"

"Don't," he said, helpless, furious; and she fell silent, face softening, which might have been worse than if she'd finished that sentence after all. "Diana, I'm not asking you to help me. But you aren't going to change my mind."

Her mouth went flat, and she'd tensed her hands—he was suddenly all too aware that there remained other ways she could stop him, if she wanted to.

She'd done it before, and to people she'd loved even more than she must hate him.

He didn't let his expression change. But somehow his line of thought seemed to have communicated itself to her anyway; because she went very still. "I would not," she said. "Not unless—"

She stopped.

"Unless there were no other option," Bruce suggested, level.

She closed her eyes, and turned her face away.

"You understand," Bruce pressed. "I know you do."

Because she did. She had to. She'd told him what Lane had told her, and she'd known what it meant—because Darkseid, Apokolips, was that bad, and once Lane had let that slip

(—slip; as if she shouldn't have, as if he blamed her—he could have told Diana from the beginning, could have—

—could have trusted her to listen to a good enough reason if he gave her one, but—)

then Diana had understood. She had perceived what Bruce had perceived, the looming danger great enough to demand measures as unspeakably extreme as these.

"I wish I didn't," she said; but when he turned and strode out of the control room, she followed him, and Curry was at her shoulder.

Twist had told him where she'd left Stone, that he'd shown no signs of activity while they were gone. He assumed that this, at least, would be easy—straightforward.

He shouldn't have been surprised to be wrong.

Stone wasn't in the main entry bay. He'd never have gotten out into the courtyard or past the walls without setting off some kind of alert. But beyond that, it was impossible to even guess where he might have gone. Stone had all the power of a mother box; but the demands of his metal body were trivial, relatively speaking. Without the box in active operation—he might not even show up on an
ultraviolet sweep, unless he was shooting at somebody.

But he was hard to miss. If he'd started walking around the compound in the last six hours, someone had to have noticed.

"I wonder what he went looking for," Diana murmured.

Bruce ignored this in favor of reaching for his comm, and radioed out a quick general call on all frequencies for reports on any unusual activity.

He received half a dozen "all clear" signals in return, quick muted taps against comm sets, before his earpiece crackled to life.

"I was wondering when you'd notice," Lane said.

It took at least thirty seconds to disengage the security locks on the double-layered steel hatch that was the door into the hydroponics bay. That was the fastest Bruce could type the required set of sequences into the keypad, the fastest the bolts could retract from their locked position in the sides of the hatch to permit it to swing open. He'd timed it before.

But then he was through—and the first thing he saw was Allen: asleep, incongruously, against one wall, long narrow legs splayed across the floor, head tipped back.

"He was hungry," Lane said, mild. "I gave him one of those double-calorie ration bars, the really disgusting ones. Ate the whole thing and then fell asleep."

Bruce turned to look at her.

She was standing at a three-quarter angle relative to the door, and she hadn't moved, wasn't looking up. She had her hand in one of the hydroponics tubes, was lifting a seedling out with its wet roots trailing down—holding it up for Stone, who was standing beside her with a spattering of droplets across one outstretched silver hand, as silent and blank-faced as ever.

"Lane," Bruce said.

She did look up, then; and he knew the moment he saw her face that Allen had said something—that she knew.

"It's just never enough, with you," she said, even and steady and frigidly icy. "It's never enough. Killing Clark wasn't enough, and Doomsday wasn't enough, and Steppenwolf wasn't enough. The goddamn apocalypse wasn't enough."

"Because god forbid you just stop. Of course not. You've decided you need Clark back, even if you have to kill Stone to do it." She laughed a little, soft, and shook her hair back, blinking furiously, eyes wet and endlessly angry.

"There's no reason to believe Stone will suffer damage—"

"And you're sure about that," Lane snapped. "You're sure that doing something with alien technology, something no one has ever tried to do before, under—let's be generous—somewhat less than optimal conditions, isn't going to end in disaster."
Bruce said nothing. What was there to say?

"The thing is," Lane added after a moment, more quietly, "I'm not sure it would even matter. Because I know you. And even if you thought it would kill Stone, you'd do it anyway."

She still had the seedling, clutched absently in her hand; she must have felt the crush of leaves under her fingers, because she looked down at it and then closed her eyes, loosened her grip, felt unseeing for the opening she'd lifted it from and lowered it carefully, methodically, back into place.

And then she just stood there, head lowered, shoulders tight.

"You haven't even tried to talk to him, have you?"

Bruce looked at Lane, and then at Stone—who had turned his head, yes. He'd demonstrated some awareness of changes in light and sound levels, of movement; he clearly had some method by which he assessed threats in his immediate vicinity. But whether it was Stone doing it, or automated functions preserving a mechanical body that happened to have Stone's face on it—

Not that it mattered. Lane was right: even if Stone were in there, even if Bruce had proof, that wouldn't stop him. And in a way it felt like the greater cruelty to Bruce, the less forgivable lie, to pretend that it might.

"You think it would be less unkind to ask him for permission?" Bruce said aloud. "To make that his responsibility?"

"What," Lane snapped, "you think it's better to—"

She stopped short, and her head came up; she met his eyes, and there was a strange, almost wondering look in them, bewildered, disoriented.

"You think it's better," she repeated slowly, "to do it without asking at all," and this time it wasn't a question.

It was the only brand of kindness that remained available to Bruce: to happen to people, inexorable, unstoppable, so that once it was all over they could tell themselves it hadn't been their fault, that if it had been up to them everything would be different.

"This has to happen," he said. "Whether he might agree to do it, even if it were possible to make him aware of the risks, even if it were possible for him to communicate his agreement or lack thereof, is irrelevant—"

"Yes," Stone said.

The whole hydroponics bay seemed to go still at once. Lane's eyes had gone wide; she froze for an instant, sheer surprise, and then twisted to stare at Stone. "Victor?" she said.

And Stone, impossibly, looked at her. Looked at her, hadn't just turned his dull face in her general direction—the organic eye appeared to have genuinely focused on her, no longer gazing past into the middle distance. He looked at her, and then he looked at Bruce, and he said it again: "Yes."

"Holy shit," Allen said, hushed, from the floor—Lane's raised voice must have woken him, Bruce thought distantly. "Holy— holy shit."

"Well," Curry said, from back by the door. "Guess that settles it, huh?"
Stone looked at him, too, and then at Allen; and whatever evaluation it was that he had made, he seemed to be satisfied with it, because he strode over to the door and then came to a stop by it, waiting.

It was for the best, obviously. None of the options Bruce had been considering would have pleased Lane at all, and he hadn't been particularly eager to drag Stone to the ship—to have to determine how to restrain someone who was required in the first place precisely because they contained more than enough energy to blow the planet apart. And yet it couldn't help but feel strange, after fighting every step of the way, to at last be so bluntly—granted permission.

But he had been. Foolish to waste time second-guessing it.

Diana would go along now, too, surely. Curry had never cared one way or the other. Allen—Bruce turned that thought over. He hadn't been sure how to control for the effects of unloading this kind of energy within the ship; but perhaps with Allen's help, he wouldn't need to.

"You, too," he said.

Allen had still been sitting there, staring openmouthed at Stone, but he transferred the stare to Bruce without apparent difficulty. "Me?"

"Yes," Bruce said. "You may be able to help minimize the risk of excessive power drain for Stone."

"I—uh. Okay," Allen said, and with a flicker of shifting light was instantly beside Stone, no longer sitting but standing, peering at Stone with huge dark eyes.

Lane hadn't moved. "No," she said, before anyone could even venture to ask. "No, I can't—I don't think I—" She shook her head, hands twisted together in front of her, white at the knuckles.

"All right," Diana said gently, and then there was nothing left to do: it was time.
Barry had to do a couple dozen laps around the ship before he felt settled enough in his skin to actually go inside, but if anybody noticed him doing it, they didn't say so. It was just—it was kind of cool and also terrifying, that maybe Victor was really in there after all, maybe they were really actually going to bring Superman back from the dead, except apparently there was also a not-so-slight chance it was all going to go horrifically wrong. Which, the world had already kind of ended, but it seemed like maybe it was possibly going to end even more? And also un-murdering Superman might end up murdering Victor, which sucked.

But—well. Barry hadn't done the math or whatever, not like Wayne; but it just didn't seem right. It didn't seem right that they'd have gotten as far as this, that Victor would say yes like that, and it would all come apart. It just couldn't. It just *couldn't*.

But of course Wayne wasn't taking any chances. He didn't really strike Barry as the kind of guy who, like, believed in good luck, or that things worked out sometimes, or that there was a limit to how much stuff was allowed to suck.

Which, to be fair to him, it wasn't like Barry could cite a whole lot of evidence to the contrary.

He had Diana and the big guy—Curry? Or Arthur? Barry wasn't sure what to call him, even in his own head. Probably Curry, because he seemed like the kind of guy who might kill you onehanded if you used his first name when he didn't want you to—anyway, they went and got Superman's dead body and carried it down further into the ship. There was a weird pool down there; at first Barry's only thought was *hot tub?* and that couldn't be right. But then he took a quick trip up the walls, looped around the corridor and back inside, and okay, he could see what was left of the fixtures, bits of wreckage sticking out of the liquid here and there. There had been pods or something, with the fluid in them, and then they'd broken.

And according to Wayne the fluid was important.

They lowered Superman down into it. That was the first time Barry really got a good look at him, and he kind of wished he hadn't. He'd heard enough to know it was Wayne who'd killed Superman in the first place; but it wasn't until right then, looking down at the body in that pool, the hole in it, that any of it seemed real. Wayne had—Wayne had done that to him, shoved something *through* him to make sure and then left him there. It was—it must have been awful. It must have hurt a lot.

Looking at Superman's face was better than looking at his chest. Then he looked fine, pretty much. He hadn't wrinkled up or gotten all mummified. He just looked like he was resting.

Then Diana led Victor over next to him, standing over him in the pool, and Wayne caught Barry's eye and kind of tilted his chin toward Victor.

Right, Barry was supposed to be helping. Somehow.

He flickered over—easy as breathing. Man, whatever had been in that, like, pemmican brick Lois had let him eat, it had really done the trick. He didn't feel hungry at all. And he'd slept, too.

But then he hesitated, and looked at Wayne. "So, uh. So I—what am I supposed to do?"
"Lightning," Wayne said, which explained basically nothing.

"Right. Okay. Um, what does that have to do with—"

Wayne made a little exasperated face. Not all over, just kind of around the eyes, the corner of his mouth. It was a lot easier to tell what was going on with him when he didn't have that black cowl on.

"Assuming the lightning you generate is precisely that—an electrically conductive plasma channel," he started, and oh. Oh, sure.

"Right, okay," Barry said, "I get you. Victor powers up too far and maybe the whole ship explodes or something, if he's just blasting it everywhere. But me going past him toward Superman when he's doing it makes a path of least resistance. Points it all right where you want it to go."

Wayne blinked at him. "Right," he said slowly.

"Cool," Barry said, because it was. "So, okay. All right. I got this."

He'd have to start behind Victor, he figured—and Victor couldn't move any faster than most people, as far as Barry could tell, but he could definitely think faster, whatever it was his circuits were made out of. He probably had the processing speed to notice, if Barry touched him just before he went by.

Barry bit his lip. He'd never done that before. He'd always—He'd always been too scared to.

He turned and put out his hand, and maybe used the speed just a little bit, so he could do it before he could talk himself out of it. Victor's metal shoulder was smooth, cool but not cold—flexible in a way Barry hadn't expected, a sense of give against his fingertips you didn't usually get when you were touching metal.

"Hey," Barry said to him, a little unsteadily. "So I'll—just like this, okay?"

Victor didn't say anything. But his gaze was on Barry's face, really on it and not somewhere else, and Barry was pretty sure he was listening.

And then all Barry had to do was run. Piece of cake.

One second, maybe. Probably less. He ran, and he reached out ahead with one hand and touched the frozen statue of Victor, and then within one stride they were even with each other, shoulder to shoulder, and then—it was like Barry could feel it, Victor blazing to life just beside him, behind him.

He could definitely see it, because he wasn't moving faster than light; and the red-gold glow coming off Victor was totally different from Barry's own clear blue lightning. And—right, lightning, that was the whole point. Barry was a step away from Superman, and then less, and he leaned down and reached out, a new fork of lightning springing out just ahead of his fingertips—

It was like—Barry didn't know what it was like. It might have been like getting set on fire, or like turning into a star, or like exploding; maybe it was like all of them, or none of them, something else entirely he didn't even know the words for. He was just—filled with light, becoming it, thoroughly overwhelmed with it for a single brilliant incandescent instant, before it had moved through him and was gone, and it was over.

He'd been moving too fast to sink into the pool, running over the surface of it instead, so he didn't trip on Superman—he just kept going, and when he did stumble it was just because he was trying to
slow down, because he couldn't quite remember how it worked. Then he hit the wall, which helped; and he kind of slid down it to a stop, on his knees in the fluid, breathing hard and blinking and wondering dimly whether the tips of his hair were smoking, because it felt sort of like they should be.

And then, behind him in the middle of the pool, Superman coughed.

He couldn't think. He couldn't see. He couldn't breathe.

His throat was spasming, uncontrollable; there was—there was something wrong. His chest, his lung, there was—something was—oh, god—

He thrashed, helpless, choking. It was—there was water or something, fluid, thick and warm and clinging. Was it blood? There was so much of it, it was—it couldn't be. It couldn't all be blood, couldn't all be his, or he would have—he'd be—

He'd—

Had he—

He made a sound, involuntary, and it scraped, it burned, like he hadn't used his throat in—but that didn't make sense. He'd been shouting just a minute ago. He'd been shouting, fighting, arguing. And then Wayne had shot at him, the shell had burst apart in a cloud of green, and suddenly he had hardly been able to stand up and he hadn't known why. He'd recovered, he remembered. But then Wayne had shot more of it at him, more and more, and he'd—he couldn't—

He'd collapsed on the cold stone floor, aching. He remembered metal; a cold, hard hand, fingers curled around his chin, his throat. Chains. He'd been—struck, or flung, or—he didn't know, just that everything had moved around him, that he'd hit walls or floors or something and for once it had been harder than himself, his skin. For once, it had hurt.

And then Wayne had been standing over him, pinning him down. Had cut his cheek open with that blade, impossibly green light spilling everywhere, and then—

Then Wayne had—

Then Clark had—

He swung an arm, flailing, clumsy, toward the bright sharp pain in his chest, the hard ache he couldn't breathe around. Something was happening to it. He could hear it, an odd soft sound like foam churning up; and then a muffled crack, another, and he jerked with the agony of it but when it was over, his stiff fingertips found bone.

His—it was his own—it was a rib—

He screamed. He tried to, at least, except it didn't come out right. And the flesh was filling in now, warm and slick and horrible under his fingers; it hurt so much he couldn't stand it, so much he couldn't think.
And then suddenly it was done. It was over. He was—he'd healed, he thought dimly. He'd healed.

He blinked. It was so bright in here. His eyes felt strange, too, sore and dry, gritty, like they were full of sand. And there was—

There was someone there. He wasn't alone.

He came to his feet with unthinking speed, reflexive and desperate. Where was he? Who had brought him here? What was happening? The woman looked almost familiar, but he didn't know her, couldn't think of a name—and the man at her shoulder, tattooed, glowering, was a stranger. Another man, red-eyed, in silver armor, so closely fitted it was—maybe it was just a silver suit, reflective, not metal at all. Someone else against the opposite wall, coming to his feet, wide-eyed, and—

There was someone at his back. Clark twisted sharply, heart squeezing, chest tight: and that, at last, was a face he knew.

That was Bruce Wayne.

He didn't intend to move. He just—already had, somehow. Wayne had been standing there, silent, watching him with those dark cold eyes, that expressionless face; it was a goddamn pleasure to lay hands on him, to knock him backward against the curving wall behind him and grab him by the throat—

Noise, somewhere behind him. Clark didn't let go of Wayne, dug his fingers in deeper with vicious satisfaction and felt Wayne's neck and throat spasm in his grip, Wayne's hands only just coming up to scrabble at Clark's wrist—but he turned his head and looked to see what it was, and a blazing red bolt of plasma hit him in the hip.

He hadn't known it was coming, hadn't braced himself; it knocked him sideways half a step, and he dragged Wayne along with him, Wayne's back skidding against the wall. Another hit him in the elbow, another in the shoulder. He ducked away from the hiss of the fourth without letting go of Wayne, absently registering the feeling of cartilage grinding under his hand. And there was—there was shouting. It was the man in silver who was shooting at Clark; a weapon in his hand, or it was his hand, or something. But the woman had grabbed him where a wrist should have been, saying, "Victor!" and moving—getting between him and Clark, the man who'd been at her shoulder reaching out to help her.

So it wasn't Clark's problem. If the man in silver got away from them both, started firing on Clark again, then it would be. But until then it was just—

It was just that it didn't matter. It didn't feel relevant, didn't have half the overwhelming burning urgency of the task at hand: taking Bruce Wayne down, hard.

(—because if he had more of that stuff, that green stuff—and he had to have more, didn't he? He wanted Superman dead, he hated Superman. He wouldn't have come near Clark without it; and if he had it then all it would take was a second and he'd use it, and Clark wouldn't be able to stop him, he'd pin Clark down and cut him open all over again and Clark wouldn't be able to stop it—)

Wayne was silent; it was almost eerie, Clark thought distantly. His face was going red, blotched, the heels of his boots scraping against the wall—but Clark was holding him up far enough that his feet weren't touching the floor. His hands were clenched around Clark's, but he couldn't do anything, couldn't dig his thumbs between the tendons in Clark's wrist or bend Clark's thumb back, whatever
else he might have tried.

Clark couldn't let him get away. Clark couldn't let go—

Two more bursts of plasma struck Clark in the back, the shoulder blade. He got jolted forward roughly by the impact, and he had to catch himself against the wall, and it happened: Wayne slid down, free, and fell to his knees with a splash, hands at his throat. But he couldn't—Clark couldn't let him—

Clark moved, caught Wayne around the neck. Hooked him with an elbow, and caught Wayne's head, his jaw, in his hand. Had to stop him. Had to. Couldn't let him

(—hurt those people, even if it meant Clark had to—the crack, the sudden unmistakable slackness of Zod's body where Clark had him held fast, but there hadn't been any other choice—)

get away, couldn't, but god, god, what was he doing?

He was gasping for breath, chest heaving, Wayne pinned against him. He let go—shoved, horrified impulse, and Wayne fell away from him and crashed down onto one elbow, liquid seething around him, still unsettlingly silent. Clark jerked backward, turned away and pressed his palms against the wall like maybe he could wipe away the sensation of Wayne's throat working desperately against his grip; because the wall was solid, cool and smooth, nothing like Wayne's bruise-warmed skin or crunching cartilage. There was something familiar about it, even—the feel of the metal, the texture.

He knelt there and he breathed, and he thought: no. Not like this. After Zod, he had promised himself. He wouldn't kill anyone, not again, not unless there was absolutely no way to stop it.

He wasn't going to break that promise over Wayne. He wasn't going to let Wayne make him into someone who killed because he could, because he wanted to—he wasn't going to give Wayne the satisfaction of getting to be right about Superman after all.

"Wow, holy shit. Are you—are you okay?"

Clark startled, came up and off his knees and jerked around, and he didn't even realize he'd used the speed to do it until he saw the way the fluid was moving: slow as molasses at his feet, glittering drops of it hanging in the air where he'd splashed and only just beginning to fall. And the guy who'd spoken was staring at him, wide-eyed, throwing himself backward a quick surprised stride—

Moving. Except at the speed Clark was going, that shouldn't have been possible. He was—he was faster than Clark, somehow. Not much, but he was.

They stared at each other like that for a long moment, the guy's eyes only going wider.

And then something changed. Clark couldn't have said what, exactly; he just felt strange, abruptly weighed down. Like without that burst of anger, that violent rage toward Wayne, to propel him forward, he was just—empty.

He dropped to a knee, and he did it at the same speed anybody might. The wide-eyed guy was suddenly on the other side of the room from him, a flicker of lightning trailing in his wake, and the splash of liquid, the froth and seethe of it, seemed impossibly loud.

There were a hundred questions, a thousand, that Clark should have asked. But when he opened his mouth, the first thing that came out of it was, "This is the ship."

Because it was. He recognized it now. This was—this was the chamber where those pods had been,
except they had broken when the ship crashed. He looked up, and he'd remembered right after all; the hull was damaged. Was—still damaged? Did he—how long had he—

"Clark," the woman said, carefully.

She still had a grip on the man in silver. His hands were hands now, gleaming, and maybe he really was made of metal after all—he was gazing off silently into the middle distance, face blank. But he wasn't shooting at Clark anymore.

"Clark, do you remember—"

"Yes," he said, because he was pretty sure he remembered fine and he didn't—he didn't want her to finish that question, didn't want to know what she would have said or how she would have put it. She was working with Wayne, she had to be; why else would she be in the ship? Wayne wouldn't have let her if she weren't working with him. The man in silver: had that been Wayne's idea? Had he wanted someone here who might be capable of leaving a mark? If he had, Clark thought, viciously pleased, he'd fucked that up, too. The plasma blasts had stung, yeah, but they hadn't even burned holes in the suit. The only—

The only hole in the suit was—

"Clark," the woman repeated, and Clark looked up and swallowed hard. "I am Diana. Are you all right?"

Clark laughed without meaning to, rubbed a hand across his face—and god, he'd been in the pool, he was still dripping with genesis fluid, spattering it everywhere when he moved. "I really don't know how to answer that," he said unsteadily. "I don't—I—where are we? Who are you? What's happening, why are you—why did you—"

"World ended," said the guy next to her with the tattoos, blunt, shifting one shoulder in half of a shrug.

"The world—" Clark started to repeat, blank, bewildered.

"Krypton was once the heart of a great empire," the woman—Diana, Clark reminded himself distantly—said. "You know this. The ship we are standing inside is proof of it. But there were others; there are others. We thought—" She stopped, jaw tensing. "We thought it was only one of their generals, in exile, who had come to conquer Earth. We were wrong."

Clark stared at her. "To conquer—" and god, he wanted to ask her whether she was kidding, except she wasn't; he knew already that she wasn't. Her steady gaze, the stern quiet way she'd spoken, said as much.

It was happening again. It already had, by the sound of it. World ended. Everything he'd had to do to stop Zod, and now it turned out there were more of him out there, an empire's worth, and they were—here already? Or close enough. A war, and Earth was losing.

Losing so badly, Clark thought slowly, that Wayne had brought him in here and done—done something to him.

He reached up, absent, to press his fingertips to his chest: to the bare skin, crinkling hair perfectly restored against his hand, where the hole was. Where the hole in the suit was; where the hole in him had been.

"How long?" he heard himself say. He didn't even know—Lois, was Lois—
"Four years," Diana said, very low, from what felt like a million miles away.

Clark sucked in a harsh breath, swallowed once and then again. It didn't help. Mom, she'd been—Luthor had still had her, and Clark's time had long since run out. God. She was—what had Luthor done to her, when he hadn't shown up?

He squeezed his eyes shut.

"And you decided to bring me back."

"I did," Wayne said.

He had managed to turn himself over, to push himself up on one elbow and brace himself against the wall of the chamber. Clark had ignored it, had ignored everything, the harsh scraping rasps of him catching his breath, the movement, Wayne's eyes on him while Wayne knelt there silently.

He didn't want to look at Wayne, didn't want to acknowledge him. He wanted to pretend Wayne didn't exist at all.

It was harder to do it when Wayne was talking to him. But he got a jolt of grim pleasure out of the way Wayne's voice sounded: cracked, hoarse, so strained it was almost hard to understand him.

"And here I'd have thought," Clark said softly, "that was the last thing you had planned for me."

He lifted his head, and did look after all. Wayne was almost the same, really: decked out in black armor, though there wasn't that bulky metal frame containing him this time. He looked if anything more intense rather than less, eyes darker, the line of his jaw standing out more clearly—but then the end of the world had probably taken a toll on him. Fewer parties for Bruce Wayne to spend picking over hors-d'oeuvres and acting like a drunken asshole. And, of all the incongruous things, Clark couldn't help realizing his hair was longer—grayer.

He wasn't rubbing his throat pointedly; he wasn't touching it at all. But in a way that only made the pinched-hot red of the skin, the deep blue bruise-shadows already starting to show through underneath, more obvious.

"I had no choice," Wayne gritted out.

"You need me," Clark agreed quietly. "And then you'll put me in the ground again once you're done with me, is that it?"

Wayne didn't answer. Because what the hell could he say? He'd wanted Clark dead and he'd made it happen, and he'd do it again in a second if he decided it was better that way.

Superman looked pretty fucked up.
Not that Arthur could blame him. Getting dragged back from the dead at all was weird enough, never mind finding out you were in the middle of somebody else's apocalypse—that they were counting on you to keep it from getting worse was just the crap cherry on top of the whole shit sundae.

He was staring at Wayne like he didn't even know what he wanted to do with his face, sob or scream or set Wayne on fire with his eyes. He'd started breathing harder, but he didn't seem to have noticed. And he was pissed—of course he was pissed. But for a second there he didn't look it. He just looked kind of lost.

And then suddenly he was screwing his eyes shut, brow tying itself up in knots, hand at his chest. "What—" he said; but he didn't get to finish asking before it was like somebody had cut his strings. He just fell.

Arthur moved, reflexive. Everybody did, except Stone—even Allen, who'd been pressed up against a wall looking skittish as hell.

Except Stone, and Wayne.

He was the closest by far. Like two feet away, tops. But he knelt there as Superman fell, and if he did anything it was flinch, a brief uncontrolled jerk of his head as if to shield his face—as if he couldn't imagine Superman had moved except to come at him again.

So it was Diana who caught the guy before he could hit the floor. Careful, cradling, one of her arms beneath him and the other curled around and over him, his head tipped back into the angle of her elbow.

For a second, Arthur couldn't help but think maybe the guy had just fucking dropped dead again. Maybe they could only haul him back for five minutes at a time. But then he saw Superman's chest move, once and then again. Dude was still breathing after all.

Weird to picture Superman—Superman—fainting.

And then Diana's shoulders went tense. "Wayne," she said, sharp, without looking away from Superman.

Wayne stayed where he was for a moment. And then he levered himself up, slow, every movement precise. Arthur could see the barest shake in him as he did it—like it was a strain, an unspeakable strain, every inch he had to make himself move toward Superman instead of way the fuck away.

But he didn't run. He was staring down at Superman's slack face, and for a long moment Arthur couldn't guess why. And then he moved, reached out to touch Superman's cheek, the corner of his mouth—jesus, what a fucking weirdo, Arthur thought, except Wayne wasn't doing it for kicks.

That was when Arthur saw it. Blood on Wayne's fingertips.

Superman was bleeding.

"Impossible," Wayne said flatly, mostly to himself. The look on his face was even worse than usual—but then he hadn't gone this far, worked out whatever Stone's deal was and dug a body out of a parademon nest, let himself get strangled against a wall, to get back a guy who bled when he got hurt; who got hurt at all.

Except, Arthur thought, he had gotten strangled against a wall. What the hell kind of sense did that make?
"Had the strength a minute ago," he said aloud.

Wayne kept staring at Superman, mouth twisting—and then tore his eyes away and looked up.

"Stone didn't leave a mark, either," Arthur added, because that was true, too. Sure, Stone's blasts had to have been warning shots at the most, if Wayne was right about the kind of power he was packing with that box in him; if Stone had really wanted to cause damage, he probably could've done it. But even a warning shot from Stone would still have burned a hole through anybody who wasn't a little extra durable one way or another.

"And the speed!" Allen said, from the far wall, and then in one of those blue-white blips of his was suddenly in arm's reach of Arthur, peering around him toward Superman's limp body. "He looked right at me, even though I was running—turned his head and everything. He's really fast." He paused for a second. "Though I guess you guys couldn't tell, right? You probably couldn't see it at all. But he totally did."

Wayne's shoulders had dropped maybe a quarter-inch. Arthur guessed that was what passed for relief, on him.

"His powers surely demand a great deal of energy," Diana said. "And he must still be healing within."

"Yeah," Allen agreed. "I mean, really, if you think about it, it's not that much of a surprise. Being dead for four years has got to be kind of hard on you, medically. Even if you're Superman."

Wayne didn't look thrilled by this insight. But his shoulders came down another quarter-inch. "He stays in the ship," Wayne said after a moment, and he said it like he expected Diana to argue with him.

But she just inclined her head. "No doubt he'll prefer to," she said, "at least for a time. It is one of the few things in this place that will be familiar to him."

If Arthur had to guess, Wayne had been coming at it from a slightly different angle.

But, hey, if Steppenwolf found the guy and killed him while he was too busy having a leaky moment to be the invulnerable death machine Wayne needed, then all this shit had been a waste of time. Plus then the rest of them would probably be fucked, too.

"And this stays between us," Wayne said.

Diana gave him a cool steady look. "Lois should know. I will tell her, if you do not."

Wayne's jaw tensed, but he didn't argue. "No one else," he said instead.

Didn't matter to Arthur. Like he had anybody to tell.

"Very well," Diana said, and then looked up at the ceiling. "Ship—I need somewhere for him to rest."

And out of the pool in front of her, beneath Superman, the metal surface of the ship's deck underneath rose up and formed itself into a gentle slope. It had begun under Superman's slack feet, and bore them up; and Diana eased his torso, his head, carefully down onto the other end.

"So—that's it," Allen said. "We—we seriously just brought Superman back from the dead."
"Yes," Diana said. "And if we are very lucky, one day he'll forgive us for it."

She went to Lois, after.

Perhaps she should have waited. But she had seen in Bruce's face, his eyes, when she had said it—if you do not. He wouldn't; he couldn't. Even if he were able to bring himself to speak the words to tell Lois what had happened, one way or another, she wouldn't want to hear them. She wouldn't be able to stand it, having Bruce there looking at her while she listened to them, while she felt whatever she must feel in reaction to them.

Even if I—even if I wanted to—I hate him. I hate him, I can't—

No. Better that he shouldn't have to. He had hurt Lois enough; and this would hurt her, too, because there was no way it couldn't, but at least it didn't have to be him.

It could be Diana, this time. Because Lois hated her too, but only a little bit—and if Lois hated her a little bit more after this, that was not more than she could bear.

Lois hadn't left the hydroponics bay. And in a way it felt strangely appropriate, to go to her there among all those green growing things, so unlikely and so alive in a world that was so difficult to survive, and say to her that they had done it: that Clark, too, was alive, unlikeliest of all.

Lois had heard her come in. She must have. And she must have heard Diana's footsteps, too. But she stood there with her hands tangled in green leaves and didn't look up—not until Diana had said it. Because if she had looked, if she had seen Diana's face, she would have known, Diana thought, and she wasn't sure she wanted to.

After, there was silence. Lois kept standing there, staring at her hands, as though she hadn't heard. And then she sucked in one raw, harsh breath, another, and swallowed hard, looked at Diana—saw there that her ears had not deceived her, and then squeezed her eyes shut, as if the knowledge was too much.

"And you're—are you—"

"We're sure," Diana said gently. "As sure as it is possible to be. He was himself, or seemed to be. He claimed he could—remember. He is weak, and needs to rest. But he is breathing, healing. It worked. He is alive."

Lois bit her lip. She was frozen there for a long moment, unmoving. But Diana did not leave, did not speak; and then Lois pressed one hand to her mouth, both, and shook her head. "But he," she said, very level, unsettlingly calm, "he—but—" and then she fell.

Diana thought even as she moved that it was strange: how alike of them, as if Lois had known, had seen; as if she knew Diana would catch her, and had done the same for Clark not half an hour ago. But then—
But then perhaps it wasn't such a surprise after all. For Lois, too, had been wounded deep within herself, and was not yet healed from it.

Diana was careful with her, caught Lois's head against the curve of her shoulder and Lois's face in her hand—bracing it there, except Lois was awake after all, and gripped Diana's wrist, trembling. Not unconscious; it was only that the strength had all gone out of her, that she hadn't been able to stand anymore.

"Diana," she whispered. "What do I—"

"If you would like to go and see him," Diana began, and Lois jerked in her arms and made a strange quiet sound, twisted to hide her face against Diana's throat.

"No," she said, still in that strange calm way. "No. I can't. I can't."

"All right," Diana said. "All right," and then she watched her own hand as if it were not hers, coming to rest against Lois's hair; sweeping it back from her face, her ear, and smoothing it down.

She hadn't tried to do this in a long time. She hadn't tried to do a lot of things that couldn't be done with a sword. She had told herself that she was strong, fast, skilled, that it was the best use she could make of herself; comfort could be sought from other hands. Who would ask it of her? Danger, she might pit herself against, and foes, she could bring down. No one needed her for this.

But she couldn't leave Lois here alone. So she stayed where she was, and ran her hand carefully through Lois's hair, and tried to remember how this worked: what it meant to be not a blade but a shield.

"I really need to stop doing this to you," Lois said, muffled, into the lee of Diana's shoulder.

"No," Diana murmured. "No, it is—I'm grateful you are willing to. That you would entrust your pain to me, even though—even though you hate me a little bit."

Lois snorted, drew back and pressed a hand over her eyes; but she didn't push Diana away, and Diana kept an arm around her and held on.

By morning, Clark was awake.

Diana had already intended to check on him, even if he had still been unconscious. Arthur would not; Barry might, but might as easily sprint away into the wasteland after and never come back, if Clark frightened him enough.

Victor quite possibly was unable to—whatever it was that happened to him, that made his gaze turn remote and those weapon ports appear, it had happened again, and he didn't seem to have recovered from it. The ground he had gained when called by his name, speaking and spoken to, had all vanished; while Diana and Arthur had managed to stop him from firing on Clark, he had not responded at all when she called to him, had not looked at her. She had led him out of the ship after, keeping herself carefully between him and Clark so he could not be set off again—and he had gone with a mindless readiness that had made her heart sink heavily within her. He was as he had been before: gazing into nothing, the machine running constant analyses and the man asleep or vanished, nowhere to be found. He was probably still standing silently in the main bay where she had left him.
And Bruce—

Bruce, she suspected, could not make himself even if he wished to. Not yet.

Success had been nearly as great a blow to him in this as failure would have been, she knew. When Clark had come alive—had, so impossibly, been made whole again before their eyes—Diana had felt nothing but a profound relief. The potential for a kind of disaster for which Bruce and his numbers, his statistics and readings and simulations, were not prepared had been all too obvious to her. The old stories had never minced words, when it came to the consequences of acting out of fear, rage, haste; there was always a price, and it never came in a form you expected or were ready to pay.

And then he had attacked Bruce. Which in a way had been a good sign: he remembered Bruce, remembered what Bruce had done to him.

But the machine that made up so much of Victor had reacted badly to the potential danger. And by the time Diana and Arthur had managed to restrain him, to make him stop shooting, another surprise—Clark had had Bruce entirely at his mercy, with them all so distracted, but had not killed him.

It would only have been as much as Diana expected, if he'd tried. She couldn't have blamed him for it. But instead—another good sign, surely, that he was himself, that he would not become another Doomsday.

And yet to Bruce all that meant nothing, because he had trusted his numbers and because to him Superman already was another Doomsday. And even his success was tempered by the strange weakness that seemed to have overcome Clark, the way he had collapsed and bled. Bruce had done this to secure himself the power to face an enemy that outmatched him to an unfathomable degree—and that power had passed out cold, marked by lingering damage that had gone unseen.

No, he wouldn't come to see Clark, to ask solicitously after his wellbeing or comfort. Diana had shaken her head at the thought.

So she would go, she had decided. And when she approached the ship, even before she had asked it for entry, it spoke to her.

"The individual referred to as Superman is conscious," it said, and then, more quietly, "He has refused to assume command of the ship."

Diana touched its hull gently, in a manner she hoped it might consider soothing. It had asked her to do the same, for a time, until she had at last worked out how to explain to it that she couldn't; that her duties, her responsibilities, lay elsewhere. It had accepted this response and hadn't asked again, and yet she felt it would have liked to—that it suffered the lack of a commander as a discomfort, if an abstracted one. Clearly it could function without; but little wonder that it should have been constructed to endeavor to seek one. When a commander was lost to accident or in battle, it must know whose orders to follow, who had charge of its care and the care of those aboard.

And however much Diana's refusal might have pained or troubled it, Clark's would trouble it still more, surely. He was Kryptonian, too, and if anyone on the planet had the right to assume command of the ship, it was him.

"Give him time," she said to it. "Where is he?"

"He is currently located within the genesis chamber," the ship said, more briskly.

"I would like to see him," Diana said.
The ship was silent for a moment—asking, she thought. "He—does not object," the ship told her at last, and if something about that pause was unpromising, at least it had not resulted in a "no".

He was no longer laid out upon the plinth the ship had constructed for him, where they had left him to take his rest. He was seated, half-curled against the wall, head tipped back; he still wore the uniform he had died in, and through the hole Bruce had cut in it, his bare chest remained unmarred.

Diana bit down on a sigh of relief. She'd feared that perhaps he might have gotten worse, not better; that whatever had caused the bleeding within him would have spread, not healed, and the wound in his chest re-formed.

But he looked well enough: whole, and there was no longer blood trickling from his mouth, his nose. You might think him perfectly intact, entirely unharmed, if only you did not look in his eyes.

"Clark," she said carefully.

He looked at her, and then away.

"Why do you call me that? Who are you?"

"I've seen you before, though you may not remember me," she said. "A long time ago, at Alexander Luthor's home, there was a party."

He rubbed a hand over his eyes. "I remember," he said quietly.

"I was there. We didn't speak. It was not until much later that I learned who you were. But I've spoken of you since then many times, with Lois—"

He jerked and twisted around to stare at her, eyes wide and wet, and only then did she think to wonder—they had told him it had been years, that the world had been destroyed; it had occurred to none of them to mention that Lois had survived it all. "Then she's," he said unsteadily, swallowing, and didn't seem to know what to say next. "She's—she—"

"Yes," Diana said. "She's here, she's alive," and he pressed a hand over his mouth and made a small sound into the palm of it. "If you wanted to—"

"No," he said, as quickly as Lois had—more so. "No. I'm not—I'm not the way she remembers. I'm —" He shook his head, helpless, almost convulsive. "She shouldn't see me like this. I'm not right. I'm not—"

"Clark," Diana said carefully. If he meant to say he felt truly amiss, as though he might change or lose control of himself, or even die again—

"—I'm—I'm so angry," he went on, sounding exhausted, bewildered; oh, Diana thought. "I feel so—I want to kill something. I want to kill Wayne," he spat with sudden viciousness, and his eyes flashed red. And then he gasped in a breath and covered them with his hand, pressed himself back against the wall, with his free hand closed tight into a fist.

"Clark—"

And suddenly, just as quickly, he was up—had crossed half the chamber and was gripping her by the arms, hard, mouth twisted into a snarl. "Luthor's party," he repeated. "You were there, and if you weren't there for me—you knew him, didn't you? Wayne. That's why you're here, that's why you helped him do this to me. Were you helping him—did you let him—"
His eyes had blazed up red again; but surely whatever he could do with them could not harm her more than Victor had. She would survive it. His grip, too, had tightened with exceptional strength, but all that meant for her was that there was some dim chance he might leave a bruise, though if she were human both her arms would already have snapped.

So she did not flinch, and she did not falter. She reached up and caught him by the wrists, and she said quietly, "Yes."

It was true, after all. She could have stopped Bruce; she hadn't. That she hadn't known felt like no excuse. She hadn't wanted to know, had held herself at arm's length for no better reason than because she felt no obligation to do otherwise. She had come for her photograph—if not for that, where might she have been when Doomsday broke free? How would Bruce ever have stopped that thing alone?

She had shut herself away, cast off responsibility, and only chance had placed her in a position to redress that selfish error, at least in part.

But she had not been fast enough to save Clark. And if he hated her for it, she could hardly name that injustice.

"Yes, I did," she repeated.

And that, of all things, seemed to stop him short. His eyes cooled; the snarl melted away. He stared at her, blank-faced, and his grasp on her arms eased likewise. And then he looked away, squeezed his eyes shut, and said, "No. No, you weren't there. I remember that much." He shook his head. "I'm just—angry. And I know it shouldn't be at you, but part of me doesn't care. It's all wrong. It's all wrong. I wish—"

He stopped, and the sound of his breath catching in his throat was as audible as if he had choked on the words.

What was it he could not say? I wish you had left my body where you found it. I wish I were still dead. I wish none of this had ever happened—useless words, in the face of such a reality, but her heart ached to think he refused to let them out, to allow himself even the grim, petty satisfaction of hearing them spoken.

She reached up and gripped the nape of his neck, tipped her head and pressed their foreheads together; and he didn't pull away.

"Sometimes," she murmured to him, "I feel as though I ended with the world: that I am wasteland, now, and so little of me remains myself that I am made a stranger."

He sighed, a small shaky breath, and didn't answer.

"You owe us less than nothing, and Bruce least of all. He killed you because he was afraid, because he believed it necessary to avert unthinkable disaster; he has brought you back for the same reasons. But that doesn't mean that you—"

"If I thought I could," he said, and then stopped. "Diana, I'm—there is something wrong with me."

She eased away to look at him, frowning. He kept his eyes down, turned his arm in her grip; and she had wrapped her hand around his wrist with only strength enough to hold it there, to keep him still.

Or at least she had believed it was so. But when he peeled back the cuff of the suit, his skin was red, the flesh beneath shadowed darker.
He had bruised.

His eyes, his strength, his speed. She had thought he must be healed, his powers returned to him. But they had—somehow, unnoticed, they had drained away again.

"He killed Superman," Clark said, quiet, unsteady. "But I'm not sure he brought him back."

Barry kind of didn't know what to do with himself.

It seemed like a weird problem to have, these days. He hadn't had it in a long time—not since, well. Before.

Usually it was all really straightforward. Try to find stuff to eat that wasn't already spoiled, try to find somewhere to be that didn't have anybody else in it. Run. Run until you were sure nobody could see you, touch you. Until it was safe to stop running. Except it probably wouldn't be for long; or he'd get too hungry to stand it, too dizzy to keep moving. Then it was time to rinse, repeat.

Stable loop. Predictable, which in its own way was kind of comforting. But now—

Now there was stuff happening. There was stuff happening and he was part of it, and he didn't want to leave until he knew what was going to happen next—whether it had worked, whether Superman—Clark?—was really okay; whether Bruce Wayne was seriously going to save the world, or at least what was left of it.

(Barry still kind of couldn't believe it. Bruce Wayne had killed Superman? Or something? Why? How could he—how had he even—or, wait. Barry had kind of figured he'd set himself up with that mask, all that black armor, after. Because he'd been inspired, seeing as he was from Gotham and all. But—

No way had Bruce Wayne been the Gotham Batman. No way. The Gotham Batman wasn't even real; Barry had just liked the stories, that was all.

No way. Right?)

Anyway, the point was: he didn't have anywhere else to go. He didn't have anywhere else he wanted to go. He—wanted to stay put.

He just didn't quite know how.

He ran away, and then back. He went around the compound a few times—around the outside, first, and then inside, because he'd gone through it top to bottom once or twice already, but that didn't mean he'd found everything. There were doors he couldn't get through, which helped; when he was busy wondering about them, where they went and what was behind them, he wasn't thinking about—other stuff.

(He hadn't let this many people see him in—in—

And they hadn't just seen him, they knew him. They knew his name, they looked for him; they knew
he was there, he'd helped them. He'd *touched* them—

He'd come within reach of them. And they hadn't hurt him yet. They hadn't even tried to.

He reminded himself of that a lot. But sometimes his heart—even *his* heart, always rabbit-fast in his chest like it had somewhere to be—still pounded over it, and he couldn't make it stop.

He practiced not running, too. He practiced walking around like he had with Lois, and he practiced not moving at all, sitting in the middle of the dusty cement-walled courtyard and watching everybody move around him. Wayne's people stood watch all *day*—three shifts of them, eight hours at a time, just standing in those little posts around the wall-top and *looking* at stuff. Barry didn't know how they put up with it.

"You want to give me a hand, or are you too busy sitting there?"

Barry startled up and was halfway across the courtyard before he thought to actually look and see who'd said it—he looped back around, and oh, it was *her*. He swallowed, and thought it over for a second, and then made himself slow down; but not too close. He didn't want to get too close, just in case.

He'd seen her around before, while he ran. All over the place, really. Sometimes she was up in the surface level, sometimes she was way down underground. Sometimes she was out in the courtyard, like now, and sometimes she was all the way up at the lookout, at the top of the ragged cliff whose base the compound was set into—it had taken Barry a couple days to realize they'd actually dug their way up through the rock somehow, so you could climb all the way to the top of the cliff from inside and get a bird's-eye view that went miles.

Anyway, he'd seen her around—and he'd been pretty careful not to stop where she could see him.

She was still looking where he'd been before, and then she blinked and jerked and found him again, eyes narrowing. Her shoulders were always kind of tight, and she always had a gun, and—and Barry didn't like stopping where she could see him.

But he'd eaten, and he'd slept, and he could definitely outrun a bullet. So it was okay. It was fine. She couldn't do anything to him.

"Wish you'd quit doing that," she said, kind of flatly.

"Yeah, well, I'm—not going to happen," Barry said, shifting his weight. It was okay. It was okay to stay put. He didn't need to run.

"Nothing to run from in here."

"Except *you*."

She blinked. "I scare you."

"Well, sure," Barry said, baffled. Who didn't? But—okay, there were some contributing factors. He gestured to the holsters at her waist, and then to sort of her whole face. "You've—you've got that look, you know."

"That look," she repeated, like she had no idea what he meant.

That kind of thing."

She kept staring at him. "Pinky toe," she echoed at last, really slowly.

"Yeah," Barry agreed, relieved that she'd followed where he was going with that; and then, belatedly, he added, "I'm Barry."

"File 2," she said, and right, okay, she'd seen those. Cool. Fine. She knew about him, too. That was—that was just great. "Allen."

"Right, File 2. That's me. You've, um. You've got a name too, right?"

"Twist."

"Twist," Barry repeated. "That's—was that your name before?"

She looked away, and then back at him. "Doesn't matter who I was before," she said. "Matters who I am now. Everybody calls me Twist. For the braids," and she reached up and flicked a couple of them back over one shoulder.

"Okay," Barry said. "Cool. Twist. And you, uh. What are you doing?"

"Heading out," Twist said. "Two hours before me and Echo Team leave for recon." She tilted her head and squinted a little. "You know Diana?"

"Diana—yeah," Barry said.

"She brought us some people. Hurt. Raiders caught them."

Barry winced.

"Not a pack we know, as it turns out, at least according to Lane. So we better find out, before they get the drop on us." She motioned to the packs she'd been laying out in front of her. "Me plus Echo Team makes eleven. But I only got two hands."

She'd dragged four travel packs out here to prep already. But Barry could imagine she didn't want to take two more trips getting the rest when she could make it one—because of course she didn't. God, how long would that even take her? Minutes, each way.

"Where are the rest of them?" he asked, and then shook his head at himself and just went—like he wouldn't be able to find them faster than she could tell him. He blitzed in and took a look around the main bay, and sure, okay, there they were, seven more. Two at a time plus one extra trip for the last one, and—

"Jesus fuck," she said, blinking through the swirl of dust that had only just managed to start rising in his wake.

"Those are the right ones, right?" he said, and then stopped. "I mean—File 2. You knew that I could—"

"Different seeing it," she said after a second, more evenly. "You always run like that?"

"Yeah," he said, and then found himself adding, "Easier than anything else. Running, I mean. It's— it's always easier."

And she looked at him silently for a long moment, and he felt like maybe somehow she'd heard a lot
more than he meant to tell her, right then.

"Yeah," she said at last. "I bet it is."

She crouched down and started doing something to the packs—tugging the straps loose, Barry saw, so her team could sling them right on and then tighten them back up themselves to whatever length fit best.

"Used to do a lot of that myself."

"Yeah?" Barry said, and inched a little closer.

(It was always better when he had something else to think about.)

"Yeah," Twist said. "Before I wound up here? All the time. Nothing to do out there but run from what's coming for you, if you can." She paused with a strap in her hands, and didn't look up. "Not as fast as you, though. Didn't work so well for me."

Barry thought about that—about all the things he'd ever wanted to get away from, in the wasteland; about what it would have been like if he couldn't. If he couldn't move any faster than anybody else, if he couldn't make it all go silent and still and far away from him. If they'd caught him over and over, every time. If they'd caught him, and he couldn't ever get away.

Maybe he'd have learned a kill-you-with-my-pinky-toe look too, then. Maybe he'd have started keeping it on all the time, even when he didn't need it.

"Worked okay," he said aloud.

She glanced up at him.

"I mean—you're still alive, right? So, you know. Whatever you did, it didn't not work."

"Yeah," she said, sort of dry. "I guess that's one way to think about it." But she was—she kind of smiled when she said it, so Barry thought maybe she got what he meant.

"Plus you look all kinds of badass with those," Barry said, and he hadn't even really meant to get that close, didn't know he had until he realized those were his fingers almost touching the biggest fattest scar crossing Twist's upper arm. "I mean, uh, not that it didn't suck getting them, obviously—"

But all she did was look at him. "It did," she agreed. "It sucked bigtime." She glanced down at her own arm. "Guess it is kind of badass, though. Good point."

And then she looked up at him, and—winked.

Barry laughed, startled. God, when was the last time he'd done that? He wasn't sure. He couldn't remember.

"Want to come along?" Twist said after a moment, still peering up at him.

"What? You mean, on your—while you're doing, um, recon?"

It felt awkward in his mouth; that word was for, like, military people who were competent and knew what they were doing, and Barry was basically the opposite of every single part of that.

But Twist didn't laugh at him. She just shrugged a shoulder, and turned back to the pack in her hands—going through it, now, checking the contents over. "If you want, that's all. Wouldn't mind."
"Well," Barry said, and then bit his lip. "I just—I mean, I'd like to, it sounds kind of cool, but I don't want to miss anything? And there's—there's somebody here who's kind of a friend of mine, or at least I like to think he might be. One of the, um, the other files?"

Twist glanced at him, eyebrows raised. "What, Curry?" she said.

"What? No, he's—I, uh," Barry said, and felt his face get hot. "No, I don't know anything about him, I'm still trying to decide whether he'd kill me if I called him 'Arthur' to his face. No, the guy who—Victor."

"Oh," Twist said, and then her face went kind of still, blank-looking, and she added after a second, "You think Wayne might do something to him."

Barry swallowed. He wouldn't have said it like that; he might not have said it at all, actually, but—yeah, okay, there was possibly a small helping of concern on his part that Wayne was going to decide he needed the box for something else. Not that Barry could stop him if he did, but it was just—it didn't seem right to just leave, and maybe not know it was happening, and only find out when it was too late to even try.

Resurrecting Superman didn't seem to have hurt Victor, exactly. But it had made him—he was like before, silent, closed up. After Diana had carefully escorted him off the ship so he wouldn't shoot at Superman anymore, he had just stood there, gazing off into nothing. His arms had switched back, too, all lit up and ready to fire, and it had taken a long time for them to turn into arms again. He hadn't talked any more, hadn't looked at Barry at all, even when Barry had said his name.

It had been the threat, if Barry had to guess. The box was part of Victor's systems now, or something, and it was trying to keep itself safe from Steppenwolf, safe from everything; when something that had a chance of causing a problem showed up, it kind of—took everything over, made Victor shoot at things until they went away, and Victor got shoved down inside himself and couldn't find his way back up top for a while.

And on the one hand it had been that way for years and years, and he'd still managed to figure out how to talk to them when it counted. But on the other hand—

On the other hand, that didn't mean Wayne couldn't come up with some brand-new scenario that would mess Victor up for good. He wouldn't even mean to, Barry thought, or—or at least he wouldn't be trying to. He'd just know it was a possibility and not stop, and it wasn't like Victor would be able to ask him to.

"I know you do what Wayne says," Barry blurted, which probably wasn't the best way to start saying any of that out loud. "I mean, you—you trust him and stuff, he helped you; I get that."

"He did," Twist agreed calmly. "I owe him. Doesn't make him not an asshole." She paused for a second, and looked up from the pack, squinted at Barry thoughtfully and added, "Thing is, I don't have to think he's nice to know he does what he does because he's trying to keep us alive. If he does hurt your friend—won't be because he wants to, because he's bored or he just likes hurting. He won't do it without a reason."

"Yeah," Barry said. "Yeah, exactly. I'm—I don't even know if that makes it better or worse, that he'd have a reason, and it might even be a good one. It might even be a great one, and what do I have to argue back with? 'Yeah, but if you do you'll make me sad in my feeling place?'" He threw up his hands. "Wow, compelling! Very logic, much argument."

Twist grinned at him—just for an instant, quick startling flash of teeth, but it felt like a lot longer
because Barry was pretty sure she didn't smile much.

"I just—feel like somebody should be there, that's all," Barry added. "If something does happen, if Victor doesn't make it, then—then somebody should be there who feels sad about it."

Twist looked at him. "Wayne will," she said quietly. "You won't know it to look at him, he wouldn't tell you so if you asked, but he will. Not," she added, more lightly, "that that helps any, since he'll do it anyway."

Barry thought about it. "I think it helps a little," he decided.

"Point is, doesn't mean you couldn't go if you wanted," Twist said. "Team shouldn't be headed more than thirty or forty miles out—Miri and her people were closer than that when they got jumped. Just looking for signs of raiders, where they came from, where they might have been headed." She looked Barry pointedly up and down. "You cover that kind of distance in, what, ten seconds?"

"Um—probably less than that," Barry admitted, scuffing a foot bashfully in the dirt. Especially since he could eat pretty much whenever he wanted, here. He was still trying to get used to that.

"Like you never left at all," Twist said. "Pop back here, back out to see us—leave, if you get bored with it. Up to you."

And that was—that was new, Barry thought slowly.

He'd been using the running to get away from things for so long; to leave people behind, to leave everything behind. To be alone in the quiet, the stillness.

But he could use it to help people, too. He already had, with Curry, because he hadn't known what else to do and he couldn't just stand there. And maybe he could—maybe he could use it to stay put: to be there, when nobody else could.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, okay. All right. I'll come."

"Okay," Twist said, and then paused. "Guess you don't need a pack, huh?"

"Nope," Barry agreed. "But if you've got one of those ration bars, I'll take it anyhow."
Chapter 6

Bruce couldn't ignore the alien forever.

The temptation was there, certainly—to pretend that it was possible at all, to pretend that he could afford the indulgence.

But it wasn't possible. And even if it had been, it was—Bruce had done this, had brought the alien back. Deliberately, knowing what the alien was capable of, he had done it. And in a twisted way that made the alien his responsibility. Whatever it—he—might do, all culpability for enabling him to do it could be laid at Bruce's feet.

Perhaps it wouldn't matter. Perhaps the alien's body was too badly damaged after all; perhaps he'd fall down dead again in a day or two.

In the moment it had happened, Superman's blood on Bruce's fingertips, he'd been overcome with a grim sense of certainty, hard like a stone in the pit of his stomach. Of course, he'd thought then, numb, oddly tired. Of course he would go to these lengths, compromise himself and all that he'd worked for to such an excruciatingly desperate degree, and be rewarded for it with a Superman who was a mere fraction of himself. The terrible irony of it—that Bruce, in killing him, should have broken him so badly he was no longer capable of being the weapon Bruce now needed him to be; of course that was how it would go, he had thought. Of course. Why had he ever believed this would end any other way?

But that had been illogical. He had allowed emotion, subjective experience, despair, to get the better of him. He had no evidence to suggest recovery was possible; but he had no evidence to suggest it was impossible. Indeed, quite the contrary: while proof might remain thin on the ground, that the ship had been the one to suggest resurrecting Superman in the first place certainly implied that it expected him to find himself capable of making a meaningful contribution, and it knew far more about Kryptonian biology than Bruce.

So: plan for the worst, always. And yet, simultaneously, he couldn't afford not to act on the premise that the alien would be of use, in the end. If Bruce decided the alien was helpless, left him shut down there in the dark, and then he did recover his full power—the opportunity to incorporate him into Bruce's strategy would be lost.

It made sense. It was necessary.

But knowing that didn't make it any easier to look up and find Diana in his doorway—to listen to her say, "Bruce—he is awake," and understand precisely what she meant by it.

He looked away. "Is he," he said.

"Yes. His powers are—" and only then did she hesitate. "He was angry, at first. He couldn't have moved so quickly without them. I felt his strength. But then—"

Bruce closed his eyes. "They were gone again." Fuck. He struggled to control the surge of sheer mindless resentment; pointless, unproductive, but Christ, he hadn't put himself through all this shit to get back the alien's goddamn mild-mannered alter-ego—
"I hurt him," Diana said quietly. "I didn't intend to. But it was—not difficult."

She didn't speak for so long that Bruce recklessly entertained a dim hope that she would leave, or already had.

But then she said, "Bruce," very softly, and reached out, touched the back of his hand, and he had to look at her then.

"Bruce, you must speak to him. He doesn't understand any of this—what we've done to him, or why; what the world is now. You wanted to bring him back: very well, you've succeeded. Here he is. You must deal with him, and this time you cannot do it by stabbing a hole in him."

Not that that option was off the table, Bruce thought. If the alien couldn't be convinced to commit to what was necessary, or manipulated into doing it anyway—what other option was there but to put him down? He posed as great a danger as he ever had, even if that danger had begun to pale somewhat in comparison to the advance of Apokolips.

But that wasn't a discussion they needed to get into right now.

"He's weak, disoriented, and angry," he said instead. "And you think seeing me will help."

Diana affected surprise, pointed and deliberate. "You want to help him?"

Bruce bit the inside of his cheek, hard, and didn't let the expression on his face change. "Fine. I'll talk to him."

There was nothing praiseworthy in it; acknowledging what was required of him was the bare minimum anyone might expect of him. And yet the words were strangely difficult to force through a tight and aching throat, and Diana's face, the frustrated lines around her eyes, softened into something gentler.

"It won't be easy," she said. "But you will survive it."

As if there were any way she could be certain of it, considering what he would be facing.

Laid out logically, it was straightforward enough.

The alien didn't have the context to understand what was happening. He needed it; however faint the chance that he could be prevailed upon to make the right decision because he was asked to—because Bruce asked him to—it was reduced inevitably to zero if he had no concept whatsoever of the stakes involved.

Someone had to tell him. No doubt he'd be more inclined to believe the ship than Bruce, but he would want answers, and Bruce could give him the foundation that would allow him to understand whatever information he might request from the ship afterward.

So: Bruce would go and—talk to him.

This was where strategy began to fail him. For all that he had set all this in motion, laid out a plan and executed it, he had carefully avoided indulging in careless daydreams of success—one step at a time, that had been the rule. Stone. The body. Scans, readings, careful analysis. The attempt itself,
with Allen's assistance. Each stage had required his full attention one way or another, and there had been none to spare for idle supposition that might never have any bearing on reality.

(He hadn't wanted them to—as if the first time hadn't been enough, as if the dreams weren't; that "success" was defined by coming face-to-face with his worst nightmare again was so cruel an irony as to be almost laughable—)

But reality it was.

And it was easy to tell himself he would be practical about it; state the facts as he understood them, see whether the alien could draw appropriate conclusions or must be led to them, whether any inducement Bruce was able to bring to bear would influence him.

(What would he want, in exchange for his cooperation? It was so hard to guess. The planet, ceded to his control; Steppenwolf's black fort-palace for his own; the ship, repaired and handed over to him without condition or expectation. Difficult to decide which was the most frightening, and yet any of them could be handled—Bruce had killed him once, he could do it again, he could—)

But however much he might have dreaded the prospect of visiting the ship before, however much he had found himself silently resenting its alienness and its power, its unthinkable and unknowable potential—the effect was doubled, quadrupled, by the knowledge that the alien was inside it. The parallels were painfully obvious and all too apt: Superman, too, was functioning around perhaps twenty percent efficiency; broken, half-buried, trapped, a resource Bruce desperately needed and couldn't afford to allow anyone else to control.

At least the ship could be reasoned with. It was rational, logical, its AI calm and thoughtful and capable of a semblance of objectivity.

There were no guarantees the same would be true of the alien.

But there was nothing to be done but try.

At first, the alien didn't even seem to have registered his presence. Bruce walked the length of the ship, the whole too-familiar path to the genesis chamber, uncomfortably conscious of the beat of his pulse in his throat—and yet when he stepped inside, looking down into the pool of fluid, the alien didn't look up.

He was kneeling down there, paying no apparent attention to the fluid lapping at his thighs; leaning against the wall, shoulders bowed, head tipped sideways, with his hands slack and half-curled, his gaze fixed on nothing. Still wearing that goddamn uniform, chest solid and unblemished beneath the hole Bruce had put in it.

Bruce waited a moment, but the alien didn't move. Finally he lowered himself down, opting with cool deliberateness to allow his boots to impact the liquid's surface with a splash; and the alien did look at him then, a dull delayed slant of the head, eyes sliding across Bruce and not quite tracking, swinging past him and then back, only then coming to rest.

"You," the alien said, and then a flicker crossed his face, a shadow passing. "You killed me."

"Yes," Bruce said.

"And brought me back."

"Yes," Bruce said. "Steppenwolf—"
The alien cut him off with an odd ragged laugh, half a cough—Bruce half-expected to see blood on his lips again, the sound was torn so harshly from his throat, but if he was in pain he didn't show it. "Oh," he said. "I was wondering why you'd bothered. So you want to use me, is that it? He's too much for you—"

"Not him," Bruce said, clipped. "There are others on the way. More powerful. The ship—"

"So you thought, 'Oh, hey, you know who'd be great for this? Superman, right? Too bad I killed him.' I wish I could've seen that penny drop," the alien murmured, unsettlingly calm. "And you went to all this trouble, too. Finding my body, whatever it was you used to do it. Resurrecting me from the dead, and now you're here to give me a mission briefing." He stared at Bruce with a look almost of awe, but for the hard ugly edge of disgust in his disbelief. "The arrogance. Jesus, you're unbelievable."

("you unbelievable sack of shit—")

"Be that as it may," Bruce said, very level, "the dangers we're facing outstrip the importance of any personal issues you have with me—"

"How convenient," the alien said softly, and came to his feet in a rush, fluid seething at his shins, drips spattering—he paid none of it any attention, frigid steel-blue eyes fixed on Bruce. "Is that what you've been telling yourself? That it's all worth it, that whatever you had to do to me wasn't much of a price to pay. You needed Superman." His mouth twisted, and he laughed, flat and cold and thoroughly unamused. "And look what you got. All the effort you've gone to, getting this far, and all you've managed to do is saddle yourself with the furthest thing from a superhero." He brought up a hand: clenched already into a fist, Bruce observed distantly, tensing, except Superman wasn't moving toward him—was twisting where he stood, instead, a single violent shudder of motion, and then he slammed that fist into the wall of the chamber with a heavy thud.

And Bruce had helplessly, subconsciously expected a hole, as clean and thorough as the one Diana had punched into the side of the truck; but it didn't happen. Superman sucked in a harsh breath through clenched teeth and drew back his hand, jerkily stretched and flexed his fingers and gazed down dully at the dark blood dripping from his battered knuckles.

Christ, that must have hurt. Was it still an unfamiliar sensation to him? Or—

Or did he remember what Bruce had done to him well enough to recognize it?

The alien kept staring at his hand for a long silent moment. And then he held it up, extended it with the back turned toward Bruce, mouth crumpled in something impossible to mistake for a smile. "Bet this wasn't what you had in mind, huh? Bet you hadn't planned for this." He tilted his head. "That's your big trick, after all. The one ace you've got up your sleeve, every time. Whatever you're up against, find something just as bad and see how far it gets you.

"When it was me, you had Luthor—you let him do what he wanted, because it served your purposes. Because you didn't care what he was up to, as long as it gave you a chance at me. And now it's this Steppenwolf, it's whatever else you think is coming—"

"I don't think it's coming," Bruce bit out. "I know."

"—and you've pulled me out of your back pocket, because suddenly it doesn't matter that you killed me, it doesn't matter that you'd have done anything to take me out, as long as you get what you want."
"Yes," Bruce said.

The alien stared at him, stark frown lines carving themselves into place, darkening the whole cast of his face like storm clouds rolling in. "What?" he said, very low.

"Yes," Bruce repeated. "That's right. I killed you; I tried and I succeeded, and I'd do it again right now if I didn't need you. But I do."

"What the hell is wrong with you," the alien said.

It didn't sound very much like a question, and even if it had been one it would have been rhetorical, so Bruce didn't attempt to answer. "Your condition appears to have improved," he said instead, clinical, giving the alien a deliberate onceover. "There's no reason to believe it won't continue to do so. You were dead for four years; the world has changed. Steppenwolf controls the planet. Swarms of parademons patrol the surface—Steppenwolf's used his power to turn it into a wasteland. Billions of people are dead."

The alien was watching him, pale, frozen, blood dripping unheeded from his knuckles.

"But what's coming next is going to be worse in ways you can't imagine," Bruce said. "And if what's left of us is going to have any hope of surviving it, then we need Superman."

The alien swallowed, and looked away.

"What will it take?" Bruce said.

"What?" the alien said, dull, absent.

"What will it take, for you to do it?"

"To—"

"To agree," Bruce said.

The alien stared at him, blank, uncomprehending; and then understanding rippled across his face, a grim sickly sort of look, and now both his hands were fists. "I suppose it depends," he said distantly. "What's on the table?"

So perhaps he could be depended upon to think clearly after all. That was a relief. And of course it would be a mistake to offer anything without knowing what the alien was prepared to ask for. "What do you want?" Bruce said.

The alien tilted his head. "Come on," he said softly. "You must have thought about it. You must have a guess. Come on."

And Bruce had the list in his head, bullet-pointed: Earth, a palace, the ship; the rest of that green mineral, though Bruce had no intention of offering him that, nor of giving him all of it without withholding at least enough to fill a clip of vapor shells.

But he stood there, looking at the alien—across the room from him, watching him with coldly narrowed eyes, a hint of thunder lingering at his brow, hands tense; and he knew. He knew.

(This, this—this was why. At last he understood. That goddamn dream, over and over and over again; because he'd needed to know. He'd needed to be able to give the right answer, at this moment —)
"You want to kill me," he said.

The alien looked at him, and swallowed, and said nothing.

"All right," Bruce said.

"All right," the alien repeated.

As if he had expected Bruce to say no, Bruce thought, distantly amused. As if, after having been handed ample evidence of the lengths Bruce was willing to go to in order to accomplish his goals, he still thought Bruce was—what? That thoughtless? That selfish?

"After this is all over," Bruce said aloud. "Once Darkseid has been defeated. Then and only then, you'll get what you want."

"You're serious," the alien said.

Bruce had to bite down hard on a laugh that would have come out far too unsteady. As if it were so much to ask? If the alien's powers didn't come back after all, or if he proved unequal to the task ahead of them—it wouldn't matter, then, what Bruce had or hadn't promised him. Bruce would probably die anyway, whether at his hands or at Darkseid's. And if, improbable though it might seem, they did prevail—

It would be more than worth it, in that case. What a miniscule price to have to pay: his life, his life, for that?

(—as if there were anything he valued less dearly, these days; as if it were anything, anything, compared to the price he'd paid to defeat Superman—taking the last rule that meant anything to him, the last rule that had let him tell himself he was still a force for some kind of good in the world, and deliberately grinding it into the dirt—)

"Yes," Bruce said aloud. "That's the deal. Help me stop Darkseid, and you can kill me."

The alien was still staring at him. And then all at once he was—he gritted his teeth, bared them, and said quietly, "As if you could stop me."

That had to qualify as agreement. Bruce drew a long slow breath, and now that they'd come to an arrangement, now that the worst of the minefield was behind him—now, suddenly, he was aware all anew of his body, the pounding of his pulse, the prickling of his skin; the back of his neck, his cheeks, felt cold, and his shoulders were drawn tight as wire.

The alien wasn't the only one who'd clenched his fists, Bruce discovered dimly. His nails were biting into his palms. He should have worn his gloves; he should have worn the cowl, except it had felt pointless when the alien already knew him in all his guises, when there was nothing left to hide.

"Couldn't I?" he murmured. "This is contingent, you understand, on your proving to be of any use whatsoever to me." And it was unnecessary, thoroughly unnecessary—pointless, he thought to himself even as he did it, and yet so satisfying, to wade across the pool in a handful of strides and strike the alien, one hand at either of his shoulders, knocking him back sharply into the wall of the chamber.

Shades of how it had felt to fight him, back then: the undeniable terror of facing a foe with his capabilities, thoroughly and unrelentingly aware of exactly how easy it would be for those hands to close around Bruce's throat, for those eyes to light up red and burn all that remained of him away—and the exhilaration, equally heady, equally sharp, of shooting that first shell full of aerated mineral
dust, watching the cloud envelop him as he dropped to his knees. Of knowing that, against all odds, Bruce had the better of him—that it was he and not Bruce who would be

(—taken apart, stripped bare, torn open: made undeniably and inexorably vulnerable, a prospect so much more frightening than the mere fact of Superman himself—)

brought low, in the end.

And the alien seemed to feel it, too, judging by the way his face twisted, the ugly snarl that crumpled his mouth—the wild, clumsy fist he swung. Like this, diminished, he was no faster or stronger than anyone else, and Bruce was more than able to block the blow; the impact against his forearm lit his skin with a hot, dull ache.

He followed the motion almost automatically with a blow of his own to the solar plexus—if the alien had a solar plexus, but either way it seemed to knock the breath from him for a moment. His head dropped, allowing Bruce to catch him with an elbow to the face and then set a forearm to the newly-exposed line of his throat, a choked sound trapped in his mouth, and then—

Then, suddenly, it all changed.

The alien surged beneath his hands, blurred; Bruce had a too-clear snapshot impression of those eyes glowing with blunt heat like coals, a derisive snarl etched into that cut-marble face, and then the alien was—was on him, with bone-chilling speed.

Bruce struck out mindlessly, blindly—should have met empty air, the alien was more than capable of guaranteeing it, but he had a grip on Bruce, powerful, punishing, and wasn't willing to relinquish it to avoid anything as meaningless to him as the impacts of Bruce's fists.

(—powerful, punishing; bruising, Bruce could already feel it, but not fatal—far from it. Then he'd stick to their deal after all, even like this, even when Bruce had no hope whatsoever of holding him to it. But why—)

The world moved around Bruce, a nauseating rush, and then he was—the alien had turned them. Had pinned him, he realized dimly, so that he was pressed back against the wall of the chamber, the alien's hands fisted in the front of his armor. If the alien realized he was digging his fingers into the plates sewn into the cloth, was twisting and denting them in his grip, driving them into Bruce's chest, he didn't show it: all his focus, the grim dead glow of those red eyes, was fixed on Bruce's face.

He was shaking; but it couldn't be a consequence of physical strain, not when he was like this. Psychosomatic, then—stress of another kind entirely, to which even Kryptonians were apparently susceptible.

He'd been dead for a long time. He hadn't exerted his body this much, hadn't fought, in all that time. Hadn't—

Hadn't, Bruce thought slowly, touched anyone.

Perhaps that was why.

"And what if all I wanted," the alien snarled into Bruce's ear, "was for you to have left me where you found me? What if all I wanted was for you to never have brought me back at all?"

"An academic question, I assume," Bruce heard himself say, and marveled dimly at his own cool, steady tone. "As it seems there might be something else you want from me."
It made sense. The alien clearly placed some kind of value on—entanglements; what else had he been doing with Lane all that time? Even if he despised Bruce, there was a chance that this would make him easier to manipulate, easier to pacify. A lifetime as Bruce Wayne had proven to Bruce beyond any doubt that physical satisfaction could have a powerful influence even on people who resented and disdained each other.

But Bruce shoved his thigh between the alien's, pressed it upward with precise deliberateness, and couldn't convince even himself that the jolt of heat that forked its way up his spine had anything to do with the practicality of it.

---

Clark jerked and tensed, and for a second he didn't know why, couldn't figure out what it was Wayne was even doing.

Then Wayne's words registered, belated, and all at once he was aware of himself in a way he hadn't been a moment ago. His anger and his powers had surged at the same time, a hot heady rush, and his senses were wild with overload, sound and color and sensation filling him up until he could hardly tell which was which. But now it was—Wayne had made him pay attention, focused him on himself, and he was—he had Wayne pinned against the wall and he was pressed up close, crowding Wayne in, even though like this he didn't need his own weight to hold Wayne there. And Wayne had pushed up against him like that because he was—because Wayne could tell that he was—

Clark squeezed his eyes shut and swallowed hard, tasting bile. It was disgusting, he was disgusting, except in a way he also wasn't surprised at all. Because it felt precisely of a piece with everything else that was wrong with him right now: the way his powers had flickered back on out of nowhere, lighting him up like a stripped wire, spitting sparks—the flash it had brought back to him, the split-second hazy memory of

(—the light, hot, burning; and the jolt of it, the fiery-bright blast of power tearing through him, almost more than he could stand after so long down in the silent dark; the—the pain—)

the moment he'd come back.

He hadn't touched anyone in years. Not that he remembered it, but—but it was like his body did, somehow, like it had counted every second it had spent lying there numb and alone, empty. And Wayne—

Wayne was warm under his hands. Warm and solid, strong, alive. Even if he was still Wayne, it was—Clark dug his fingers in harder, the beat of Wayne's thundering pulse reverberating through his wrists, his arms, his skin. It was enough to knock the breath out of him; he felt filled to bursting with it, with sensation, with brilliant energy, even if it was three-quarters rage. And it—it added something, even, knowing that it was Wayne he had trapped against the wall, Wayne helpless under his grip, the way he'd once been helpless under Wayne's. The satisfaction of it, the sick exhilaration, the undeniable heat—

So maybe it was no wonder after all, that he was hard.
(It had been like this back then, almost. Not—he hadn't—he couldn't have named it then, wouldn't have even if he had understood it for what it was. He'd had Lois, he'd loved her; the edge of tension beneath the fear he'd felt when Wayne had shot him for the first time with that greenish gas—the odd lurch, the knot winding itself tight in his chest, feeling Wayne's grip on him, Wayne's armored hand at his throat—it hadn't meant anything to him. It couldn't have. But now—

Now, he was broken. Now he was a dead man who'd quit lying down, in a world he didn't recognize. He was angry and ugly and everything had gone horribly wrong, and Wayne was maybe the only person left that he was fit to put his hands on like this.

So it was all right that he wanted to. It was all right that everything had suddenly fallen into place like this, even if he hated it—)

He shoved Wayne away anyway, just because he could, except of course the wall of the chamber was at Wayne's back; Wayne's head cracked against it, a bitten-off sound caught in Wayne's throat, and Clark shoved at him again and sloshed back a step at the same time—shoving himself away, too.

It didn't help. God, but he hated Wayne—hated him almost as much as he hated the fact that he'd no sooner let go of Wayne than he wanted to grab the man again. He felt driven to, compelled; he wanted to shake Wayne until his teeth rattled, wanted to hit him, wanted to hurt him. He wanted to tear pieces off Wayne, one at a time, until Wayne cracked—until he admitted, at last, that he'd made a goddamn mistake; that Clark hadn't deserved to die, that he regretted it. That he regretted everything, that he was sorry—

"Oh," he said instead, with a sneer that didn't feel like it fit right on his face at all; but if the cracks at the edges showed, Wayne didn't seem to have noticed. "Is that on the table, too? Or are you already trying to weasel your way out? We made a deal, Wayne. Is this your idea of a bribe? You think you can pay me off in installments instead, letting me—"

"And if I said yes?" Wayne murmured, cool, even, dark eyes steady on Clark's face.

And god, the sheer arrogance of him was unbelievable: looking at Clark like that, asking him these things. As if it weren't of any particular importance to him one way or another—as if he'd meant it, when he'd said it didn't matter to him that he'd murdered Clark, and it didn't matter to him if Clark's fucked-up bewildered undead body wanted to fuck him, and maybe he'd even let it if it got him—

If it got him what he wanted.

Clark bit down hard on a laugh that probably wouldn't have come out sounding like a laugh at all. Jesus Christ. What a piece of work Wayne was; what a fucking psycho. Clark should have expected this—that Bruce Wayne would come at this like a business deal, like all that was necessary was to negotiate the terms. I killed you—you want to kill me? Does that balance the ledgers, match the profit to the loss? Or do I have to sweeten the pot—let you hold me down and fuck me first?

Money probably wasn't much use anymore, if the world was half as big a mess as Wayne had said it was. But apparently all that meant was that Wayne had had to come up with a few new kinds of currency to throw at his problems.

(—or maybe not so new, if even a third of the things Clark remembered hearing about Wayne back then had been accurate—)

It felt like it was someone else who leaned in, then, pressed Wayne backward into the wall with all his weight and murmured into Wayne's ear, "If you said yes, I'd wonder why you thought I cared," and he tightened his hands on Wayne's arms and was rewarded with a warning creak of Wayne's
armor—and a softer sound, almost imperceptible by contrast; a sound that reminded Clark of the noise ripe fruit made, overhandled and wet, flesh giving way. Wayne's skin, bruising in his grip, Clark's hearing turned up so high he had caught the crush of unlucky capillaries. "As if I needed you to say yes, like this. As if I couldn't just take what I wanted—"

Because that was what Wayne thought of him, after all. Clark squeezed his eyes shut. Here at the end of the world, Wayne had dragged him back to life to ask for his help, and still, still, he thought he needed to buy it—thought the only temptation great enough to make Clark do the right thing was the opportunity to kill the man who'd killed him.

He wouldn't. He'd promised himself that, he wouldn't break that promise for Wayne; two minutes resurrected, and he'd already decided that much. He wouldn't.

But Wayne thought he would. Wayne believed it. And it was just another way Clark was broken right now, that he could—that he felt satisfied by that, cruelly pleased, that Wayne anticipated his own death at Clark's hands. That somewhere behind that bland expressionless face, Wayne feared and hated and dreaded him, and couldn't do anything about it.

God.

"Then do it," Wayne was saying, hoarse, the words scraping in his throat. "Do it. Just do it, goddamn you—"

Fine. Fine, Clark found himself thinking, dim, distant. Fine. Wayne thought he was prepared for this, offering himself up for punishment, for Clark's—use; like it didn't matter, as long as he achieved whatever result he was looking for.

But Clark wasn't going to give it to him. Because Wayne didn't have the upper hand here; Wayne wasn't in control. And Clark was going to prove it to him.

Wayne still had a thigh shoved between Clark's legs, forced up against Clark's cock with a pressure that probably would have come across as brutal, if Clark were human. But Clark was still crackling with power, lit up with it beneath his skin, and Wayne couldn't hurt him, not like this. Wayne couldn't touch him; Wayne couldn't leave a mark on him if he tried.

Clark pushed back into it, and Wayne couldn't keep that pressure up. It only took a second to catch his leg, grip him just above the knee with one hand; Clark watched his face carefully, a bitter mockery of solicitousness, as he shoved Wayne's thigh sideways and pinned it to the chamber wall, and was rewarded with a flicker of tension through Wayne's mouth, the skin around his eyes, before Wayne reflexively smoothed it all away and went blank again.

But he'd made his point: he could spread Wayne's thighs for him, hold Wayne open and exposed, and Wayne couldn't stop him. And—oh, it was terrifying that he was even thinking it, but god, how satisfying that would be; what better way to demonstrate that Wayne had no idea what the fuck he was doing, playing chicken with Clark? What better way to make it painfully clear to him that he wasn't in control of any of this?

He had armor on, a bodysuit, tough dark cloth and some kind of protective plating sewn into it in sections; he'd had to downgrade his equipment a little since his time as the Gotham Batman. Probably couldn't justify the waste of resources, valuable materials, now that he couldn't just buy six more cases of Kevlar whenever he wanted to. But he'd be an idiot not to have a cup, a jock, something.

So when Clark gripped him there, it wasn't to get Wayne off. It was sheer sick self-indulgence: it was
because he could, and Wayne couldn't stop him, and he wanted Wayne to know it. He palmed the junctures of Wayne's hips and thighs, shoved blunt fingers between them and found the edges of—yeah, that was definitely a cup. He ran his fingertips along the lines of it, tracing the shape of it against Wayne's groin; and then behind it, back along the clothed crease of Wayne's ass, casual and unhesitating, like he was just taking its measure. Like he had the right to, just because he could. Like he was entitled.

Wayne had jerked his head sideways, cheek to the chamber wall. He was gritting his teeth; Clark could hear the scrape of enamel.

And the way Wayne's breath had caught in his throat, behind it. Wayne was tense under his hands, muscles knotted so tight he was shaking a little with the strain.

"So this is it, huh?" he said to Wayne, idle, crude, digging his fingers into the lean meat of Wayne's ass and listening to the hitch Wayne didn't quite manage to breathe through. "This is what you've got to offer me? You think the price is going to drop because you're that good a fuck."

"Doesn't matter what I think," Wayne bit out, and oh, it was a spark in dry tinder, hearing him—the crack in his voice, where he'd lost that cool level tone he'd had and couldn't get it back.

"You're right about that," Clark agreed, almost gently.

And then he did it: caught Wayne's waistband in one hand, still holding Wayne's thighs apart with the other, and pulled until something tore. Tore, and tore harder, seams giving way, and Clark shoved his hand in and ripped one strap, another, pushed the fucking cup out of his way, and—

And jesus, Wayne was hard in there. He was—he was already—

Clark went still, thin hot skin beneath his fingers, sticky smear of the head of it rubbing against his wrist. For an instant, he felt like everything had almost been slammed back into place—like he was really himself again, like he was going to let go of—of Wayne's cock, jesus, and stumble away, apologize, because this was obscene and awful and cruel and he didn't know what the hell he'd been thinking.

And then he looked up into Wayne's face; and Wayne saw him do it and snarled at him, made a sound that wasn't even words and shoved at Clark hard enough that Wayne's shoulders actually came away from the wall for a second. Clark pushed back, reflexive, unthinking, to pin Wayne down again, and his hand tightened around Wayne's cock. And Wayne twisted under his hands, screwed his eyes shut and dug his teeth into his lip, and Clark couldn't have stopped touching him then for anything. Wayne looked like he was in pain, like Clark's grip on him was the most excruciating thing he'd ever felt, and there was some vicious hungry thing inside of Clark that wanted that, that loved it, that couldn't get enough.

He dragged Wayne's thigh higher, almost holding Wayne up by it, and tightened his grip further still. "Come on," he heard himself say, low, coaxing. "Come on," and he moved his fingers, rubbed his thumb along the underside, and felt the head of Wayne's cock slide even more hotly, wetly, against the inside of his wrist.

The angle wasn't right. He gritted his teeth, made an absent frustrated noise, and fixed it: lifted Wayne for real, sliding him up against the wall with Clark between his thighs. And it was—it was just easier, to use his hip to help hold Wayne there. Except it trapped the hand he was using to work Wayne's cock, rough punishing strokes that Wayne was only straining into, between them. Wayne's torn uniform pants, the cup Clark had shoved down to get it out of the way, it was—he was pressed against it.
He was still hard, too. He'd almost forgotten about it, he'd gotten so caught up in forcing Wayne to yield something, in wringing some kind of victory out of this, even if it was just helpless physical reaction Wayne couldn't prevent. But suddenly it was—it turned urgent on him just like that, white-hot, and he sucked in a breath between his teeth and thrust upward blindly, awkwardly, against Wayne's weight. He could have brought them both up off the floor, probably, but he didn't want to. It felt right that he should need to brace himself against this, that it was hard and clumsy and uncomfortable, that it was—

—fuck, it was—

—it was so goddamn good. Wayne had gripped him by the back of the neck, fingers digging into Clark's hair, shoulders curling away from the wall. He was making short harsh sounds, uneven gaps between them like it was—like they were being torn out of him, like he was swallowing them down as long as he could but that wasn't long at all. He was moving now, stuttered jerks, cock red and wet, shoving it desperately through Clark's fingers; and then he tensed and hissed a breath through his teeth, twisted his face away, and the leg Clark wasn't holding pinned came up—he hooked it over Clark's hip, pressing himself even harder into Clark's grip, and jesus, fuck. Clark squeezed a little, scraped the edge of a vicious thumbnail along Wayne's cock, and forced himself to wait for it—because it was coming, he knew it was coming. Wayne was coming, and yes, god, there was the jerk of his dick, the wet hot rush of come against the heel of Clark's hand.

And then, at last, Clark could hold him there and thrust against him. The crease of his thigh, his ass, the seam of his pants; Clark didn't even know what he was moving against, didn't need to, just that it was Wayne. That it was Wayne and he hated Clark and Clark had made him come anyway, had made him want it, and the rush of vicious exhilarated satisfaction was indistinguishable from the rush of pleasure—at his heels, dogging his steps, and he strained and strained and then at last it overtook him, wiped his head clean of everything but itself, and he went gratefully into the wash of light behind his eyes.

By far the best he'd felt, since he died.

He half-choked on a sound that wouldn't have been a laugh; and a piece at a time he was dragged unwillingly back into awareness. It would have been easier if Wayne had killed him again, probably. Pain, sure, but then a nice clean cut to black. Instead, it was—he was still gripping Wayne, Wayne's hand hard and tense in return at the nape of Clark's neck. And as much ground as Wayne had given up, moving against Clark the way he had, deliberate, chasing Clark's touch on him—he seemed determined not to lose any more now, stiff and silent, face turned away.

Clark let his eyes fall shut. His head dropped without him quite intending it to; for a moment Wayne's hand was following the motion, curving with him, almost steadying. And then—

Then, suddenly, his arms ached. His shoulders, his back, it was—Wayne might have lost some of his bulk starving his way through the apocalypse, but he was still taller than Clark, more muscle than not, and Clark's hands were trembling with the strain. He felt sick, nauseated, tired; his head throbbed, scalp prickling belatedly where Wayne had pulled his hair.

It was gone again. The powers, the energy. And what a use he'd put them to while he had them, Clark thought distantly, feeling his mouth twist.

He let Wayne slide along the chamber wall, easing him down onto his own two feet—trying, too little and far too late, to be careful with him, which made it seem almost appropriate that Clark's arms were shaking with the effort. Because Wayne made it impossibly goddamn difficult to be careful with him; to be careful with anything, to make the right decision, to think.
Not that it mattered. Like this, reduced, diminished, Clark could barely hurt Wayne if he tried.

It was almost funny, in a way. Wayne wanted Superman back; he didn't give a shit about Clark. But Clark was who he'd gotten, mostly. Clark was who he'd gotten, ninety-five percent of the time, and the other five percent—

The other five percent, Clark thought slowly, was when Clark hated him so much he couldn't see straight. That was the pattern, wasn't it? When he'd first come back, when he'd recognized Wayne and gone at him—he'd been singing with it, then, every inch of him alight. And now: Wayne had come in, they'd talked. Even taunted each other. Then Clark had thrown that punch, and Wayne had hit him back, and suddenly he'd been—he'd been enraged by it. That Wayne would fucking dare, after everything he'd already done to Clark. That Wayne even could

(—and he could, he could; it was like that green gas all over again, face-to-face with Wayne and feeling Wayne's blows land, feeling his body struggle to respond—how much it had hurt, still such an unfamiliar sensation, and the last time Wayne had hurt him, Wayne had—Clark had—)

had been infuriating all on its own, and Clark had blazed up with it, so hot it had stopped mattering.

"Jesus," he muttered.

Wayne—who'd settled into a closed-off stance and was busy icily yanking his torn pants back into place—cut him a sharp sideways glance.

"Don't tell me you haven't noticed," Clark bit out, because suddenly it was impossible to imagine Wayne hadn't. He was probably taking readings, notes; he probably already knew exactly what was wrong with Clark and why.

But Wayne just stared at him, impassive, and then said, "Enlighten me."

"You wanted Superman, and you've got him," Clark said. "When I hate you enough."

And that, he thought, was all he needed to say. He could see it in Wayne's face, the look that came into his eyes as his gaze went off into the middle distance: thinking about it, remembering, Clark attacking him once, attacking him again, the way the powers had come and then gone each time.

"Don't try to make it worse."

Wayne's gaze flicked to him.

"Don't try to make it worse," Clark repeated tiredly. "I've never hated anyone as much as I hate you, Wayne. This is as high as the scale goes. Don't start thinking you'll get what you want if you can just figure out how to make me despise you even more."

Wayne gave him a bland, level look. "Hard to imagine where I'd begin," he murmured, and for a second he was—he did sound like Bruce Wayne, the Bruce Wayne Clark remembered from tabloid spreads and the Planet's internal rumor mill, from Luthor's goddamn party.

Except that he was almost, almost not being a lying, manipulative asshole: because yeah, Clark thought, it was kind of tough to escalate from murder.

"Besides," Wayne was adding, more coldly, "our deal is contingent on my surviving long enough for you to get what you want when I want you to get it. I'd prefer not to have to taking steps to neutralize you again, if it can be avoided, given that there's no absolute guarantee I'd be able to resurrect you a second time." He tilted his head and eyed Clark, deliberate and icy. "Doesn't seem worth the risk,"
he said.

It was almost funny. Except that it wasn't; except that Clark's head was suddenly full of all the things Wayne had ever thought were worth the risk, and his hands had clenched into fists almost before he knew it, a jolt of heat stinging the backs of his eyes.

No. He closed them, bit his lip and made himself breathe; relaxed his arms, his hands, his fingers, one at a time, until they hung slack.

Wayne hadn't moved. Clark could tell from the quiet: they were still standing in the goddamn pool, and unless Wayne had learned to walk on water while Clark was dead—or on specially-formulated artificial amniotic fluid—he hadn't taken the opportunity to make a break for it.

Clark opened his eyes, and looked at him. "I hate this. Even more than you. I hate—feeling like this. I hate that I can. I—I don't want to feel like this about anyone. Jesus," and he stopped and ducked his head, rubbed a hand across his face, and hoped Wayne hadn't noticed the prickling wetness he could feel at the corners of his eyes. "I wish I were still dead," he said, because there was only Wayne to hear him—because Wayne probably wouldn't have minded that either.

Wayne didn't answer.

But it took a lot longer than Clark had expected, for him to leave Clark there alone; and even that part wasn't so bad, the way he sloshed when he did it. Funny.

But Clark couldn't quite figure out how to laugh.

Lois had no idea what she was going to do.

It wasn't exactly a problem she was used to having. There was always something that needed her attention around here, reports to analyze or information coming in, teams leaving or returning. She shouldn't have had any trouble keeping herself occupied. It was just—

It was just that she couldn't focus on any of it. It felt like it was miles away from her; she couldn't think about it, couldn't concentrate on it. There wasn't room in her head for it.

Not when she knew that somewhere below her, Clark was—Clark was there. Clark was alive.

It was like it was taking everything she had just to put those three words in that order. She had shit to do, she did; but she found that instead of doing it, she was just sitting in her chair, staring at her screen without seeing it, hands at the controls for the database interface but not moving. Sitting there, and thinking it: Clark was alive.

Clark was alive.

After a couple hours, she gave up. She was—jesus, she was useless like this. Might as well admit it and get the hell out of everybody's way, and get a grip on her own time.
She got up and walked instead. And she was thinking vague thoughts about going outside, around the courtyard, or maybe just in a big circle through the compound itself—squeezing the idea in, brief and ephemeral, around the edges of that huge weighty Clark was alive filling her up—but it turned out her feet weren't listening to her. She walked, for a little while; and then, eventually, she discovered that she'd stopped, and she was standing outside the hydroponics bay.

Stupid, she thought dimly. She'd wasted enough time in there already. And the last thing she needed was to walk right back into the memory of all those long quiet hours she'd spent waiting alone, staring absently down at handfuls of green leaves, once they'd taken Stone away.

Or—had it been hours? Suddenly she wasn't sure. How long could it have taken, really, to do what they'd done? How long had it been before Diana had come back to tell her it had worked, that they'd—it had worked?

It had felt like hours, that was all. It had felt endless: like she'd been aware of every single second ticking its way past with agonizing slowness, and yet she couldn't remember how many there had been. She had stood there and stared at the plants, at all that stubborn life surrounding her; and she'd waited, and marveled distantly at the silence, the stillness, when for all she knew right at that very moment Clark had been screaming, or torn apart by the box's overwhelming power, or dying again.

But instead he'd been—he was alive.

She stared at the door, the huge heavy security hatch that led inside; funny incongruity, all that cement and metal hiding the way into what was probably one of the last green spaces on the planet. She didn't have to go in. She could just stand here for a minute and not touch the keypad, and then walk away. It would be fine.

And then there was a funny sort of grinding noise, and a familiar clunk of bolts, one after another, and she stood there with her hands wrapped tight around each other and watched the hatch swing open.

Shouldn't have been possible, except that on the other side of it was Stone.

Stone—Victor, she reminded herself. She couldn't forget the way he'd looked the first time she'd said his name to him, the sudden spark of presence behind his eyes; she'd read his file, seen the video, thought idly that what had happened to him had been a little sad and a little creepy. But right then it was—he'd been in front of her, not just a loop of security footage anymore but abruptly rendered in three dimensions, and suddenly all she could think about was how many questions she wanted to ask him, in the moment she'd realized there was definitely somebody in there who could answer them.

He didn't look like that now, though.

She stayed where she was for a second, and tilted her head. He'd opened the door, he must have; issued a wireless command to the system, and it had responded. He'd probably been able to tell she was out here—he could probably tell where every single person in the compound was, at any given moment, whether he was running heat scans or he had some kind of sensors or who knew what the hell else.

But he hadn't turned his head.

She was starting to think that meant something. The parts of him that were a machine, the parts of him that were a mother box—they weren't used to bodies, humans; they didn't have muscle memory or old habits, and body language probably didn't mean anything to them. Even before Victor had ever opened his mouth and actually spoken, even when his gaze had still been empty and far away,
Lois had seen the way he moved: that he turned toward people who were coming toward him, people who were speaking, that he pointed his face in their direction. There was no way he needed to do it. An off chance that it was worth it to him to help orient whatever sensory module he had in that glowing red eye, maybe; but he could restructure himself in an instant, rebuild his arms so they pointed backwards. He could probably put a weapon port in the small of his back and shoot someone behind him without turning around.

Which meant that all that stuff—that was left over from Stone. That was Victor. And now—

Now he wasn't even looking at her.

But, she thought, he'd opened the door.

He'd opened the door; and he'd come down here, too. This wasn't where Diana had left him after they'd revived Clark, that was for sure. Even if Lois hadn't been in here then to see it for herself, she'd made it a rule that Victor's location got reported to her every two hours. And as of the last update she'd been given, almost an hour ago, he'd still been in the main entrance bay. Hadn't spoken or moved since he'd gotten there.

So maybe this was progress. Maybe whatever had happened to him when he'd brought Clark back, he was starting to recover from it.

Lois bit her lip, and stepped inside the hydroponics bay, towing the hatch shut behind her. "Hey, Victor," she said.

He didn't move.

"You like it down here, huh?" She took one step closer, another, and now she could see his hands: supporting a pair of leaves, and for an instant she thought they were burning—but it was the light, the red light from his eye. Like he was scanning them, over and over and over.

She glanced at it. Nothing unusual about the plant that she could tell; this whole row here was just mint, as far as she knew. Edible, minor medical applications, and it smelled good. Nothing a mother box needed to worry about.

But Victor was still scanning it.

Lois looked at him. Couldn't tell from here that he had a mother box integrated with him. Was it disguising itself—done up like a chameleon, shining harmless silver, his shoulder or his arm or his left foot? Or was it hidden inside him, whole, and he could have cracked open the shell of his artificial torso and pulled it out?

She drew a slow breath, and reminded herself that he knew she was here. He had to, or he couldn't have opened the door for her. She wasn't going to get shot in the face.

It was still kind of hard to talk herself into reaching for him. But she made herself do it, stretched out a hand and let her fingertips come to rest against the angle of something that probably wasn't actually a shoulder blade.

(That had to be Victor, too, didn't it? His metal body could have been anything; there must have been more efficient shapes it could have taken. But maybe he'd wanted two arms, two legs—shoulder blades. Residual self-image, brainstem-deep, the way his nerves remembered his body feeling, and the new body the box had made for him had followed those subconscious instructions.)

It didn't feel like flesh. But it didn't feel like metal, either: he was cool, sure, but not cold.
And, more importantly, he didn't shoot her in the face. He didn't startle at all, didn't come alight with half a dozen defense systems at once.

But, Lois thought belatedly, maybe he had. Maybe with Clark—

What did the mother box know about Superman? Probably nothing. Come on, think it through, Lane: the box had hidden itself in Victor in the first place to keep itself safe. Somehow it had—it had decided it didn't want to be used for the things Steppenwolf was planning to use it for, and it had found a way to protect itself. Constantly moving, as Victor had wandered around in the wasteland, and using a tiny fraction of the energy it was capable of to power him, to contribute to his defenses—keeping itself undetectable.

And Victor, Lois thought, had understood what was happening well enough to say yes when he had the chance—to agree to try to bring Superman back. But the box? What had it perceived? How much of Victor's intent had gotten through to it? Maybe all it knew was that Steppenwolf, his parademons, weren't native to this planet; that Clark wasn't either, and had suddenly been right there in front of it, much closer than it usually let anything get.

And Clark—

Lois swallowed hard, and closed her eyes. Clark had probably been disoriented. Confused. He wouldn't have known what was going on any better than the mother box did. Waking up in the belly of the ship with Victor Stone standing over him, when the last thing he remembered was—was probably Wayne standing over him—

Diana hadn't said anything about it. And Lois hadn't asked; she couldn't have made herself. But something must have happened in there, and the box had shoved Victor out of the way and tried to defend itself.

And now, maybe, Victor couldn't figure out how to get back.

Lois hesitated. And then she took a half-step closer, slid her hand up the back of Victor's shoulder and gripped it.

The furious back-and-forth scanning motion of the light on those leaves paused, for a second.

"I don't know if you'll be able to understand any of this," she said. "I don't even know who I'm talking to. But I think—I don't think anyone's talked to you about Superman. About Clark. And I'm —" She stopped and shook her head, and managed to cough out about a quarter of a laugh. "I'm uniquely well-informed on that particular topic, as it happens. So I'm—I'm just going to talk to you for a little while, if that's okay. I'm going to tell you some things you should know. And maybe all this will get easier for you. Okay?"

There was no answer; but she hadn't really expected one. If Victor could hear her, maybe he'd enjoy it. Maybe he wouldn't mind having something to listen to. And if he couldn't—

If he couldn't, then maybe the box could. Maybe it would re-evaluate, reassess; maybe it would understand that it didn't need to be afraid of Clark. And if nobody listened to her at all, well, what would it hurt? At least she'd still get to say it. She'd still get to talk about it.

She hadn't done that, after Clark died. It had all been so—there hadn't been time, at first, and then there had been Steppenwolf, there had been Wayne. There hadn't been anyone left that she could say it to; and Diana had to be getting pretty sick of being cried on.

So she stood there and she said it to Victor, or to the mother box, or maybe to both of them.
She said everything, all of it, everything she could think of. All the stupid little things she'd have edited out of a retrospective feature if she'd gotten her hands on it, every irrelevant detail that sprang to mind. Memories she couldn't place, couldn't date; moments that hadn't meant anything when they happened, pointless anecdotes, only rendered precious now by the retroactive knowledge that there had been a finite number of them—a limited print run, negatives lost.

(Even if Clark was—even if they—

She didn't think so, somehow. It felt weirdly impossible to picture it, as likely as getting into a time machine and stepping out four years ago. Because remembering Clark, the way he'd been, was remembering herself, too; and she looked at that Lois, the Lois she used to be, and the distance between that person and who she was now felt utterly uncrossable.

But even if they managed it, relearned each other and fell in love all over again, it would never be the same. In this wrecked world, what was left of it—there wasn't going to be a shared apartment, a baffling tub with a sightline to the door that they'd never quite gotten around to moving, Clark cooking breakfast with his shirt off, surprise bouquets of roses. Everything was different, not just them.

It wasn't just him she wanted to remember. It wasn't just him who had died. It was the way things had been, then, and—

And somehow she'd never quite made room for herself to mourn that, either.)

She talked about Clark until her mouth was dry, until her throat hurt, until her voice was starting to fray around the edges. And Victor kept on standing there silently, didn't look at her—but he didn't move away, either, so maybe it was helping after all.

She hoped so, dimly, because even if it wasn't she wasn't sure she could make herself stop.
> what
> M123O1TXS9QTML7CTEK
> N60WRZBZUTIPATAIHG6HR
> what happened
> QB5KBWUDBEQKEQT99Y1U
> QRAEESCISKNY5Z0QL0JM
> did it work?
> did you
> RABELRMDXVCPIR359KPS
> QUB04OQMZBUERHT5DWD
> what did you do?
> ZTOAOT36N8J5AVODI6E
> GPC6JDT8YO601RD04HCT
> you shot him, didn't you
> jesus
> i can't believe this
> thanks to an omnipotent lego from space, i exercised the power to bring superman back from the dead
> and then i shot him in the face
> UMOGQIR5TK8V8PZ8JGKX
> DZ38QKYC55PQ17G45IQJ
> you missed
> oh, well, that's fine, then
> 3AROD6LYRJ3WZLD3Y7RK
> OAEULLCIVY86Y7EKZ6WC
> why are we in here?
> i don't remember
> PZMMSDZE0BBM92EEZBG6
> 3TB0KV4K3FBCM920OVUY
> you
> you brought me here?
> you freaked out on him and i was
> i went away
so you brought me here

T12Q7YG73ORM91W7Q8V1
L9XGGJLUJJT6DZZZTYL

yes, the plants are alive

i do like that

you're right

6JZ694PAFSP0U99JU99Z
OTVGDE9X39NNUX1Z29MD

yeah, i

do feel better

46UH18CC0ZXHYW4UO6DP
M5L52ZW7IZU6DH6EP0AL

thank you

8002EC2YO1N3QNX52W88
IZ3S1HQE79MI1POUIK96

new data?

what do you mean?

"—and he looked like an idiot. It was way too small for him, he was—his arms and legs were sticking out like he was a scarecrow. He said he thought maybe it was supposed to be that way. I laughed so hard I cried. He actually got kind of annoyed with me, but that just made it funnier. It was recursive, it was funny that I had been laughing so long, I mean, I couldn't stop—"

ROO1LRMKYL9N22NMN955
A05AE5S4ZID589KDRT5J

i remember

i remember her

what is she—

"—and he told me that next year he was going to—jesus!"

ULQ7W2YR8DJB7RFAKNTD
XNLV2ANUJLXAZJXKJW6
A1G5RNQTBDXOB0MYB88D
AQG0MF5FWID388JPTR4B

barry? wait, where did he—

"Hi, hi, sorry, I didn't mean to, um—wait, Victor? Why is he—never mind, never mind. Lois, it's—Twist, I was out with her and her team, they were doing recon, they were looking for—"
"The raiders, black flames. Miri's people said they were out there, we didn't know where. I'm with you, Barry, tell me."

— it was—they found her first. They found all of them. I didn't—I didn't know what to do, I couldn't let them see me. I couldn't let them catch me, I was—I'm sorry—"

"No, no, stop. You did the right thing. Okay? You did the right thing, coming back here to tell me. Where did it happen?"

"It was—we were—god, I don't know, I don't know how far it was, we were out by the—"

"Wait, hang on, hang on, no need to say it twice. Let me just—Wayne? Wayne, general call. Wayne, wherever the fuck you are, pick up a goddamn radio—"

"Lane."

"Wayne—something's happened. Twist and her team, they're down. Barry—"

"—they were ambushed, it was a trap, it was—I couldn't do anything, I'm sorry—"

"Allen. Tell me. Where?"
Chapter 7

Everything hurt.

That had been the first clue.

Right when she'd come around, she might almost have thought she was back in the compound, half-asleep in a corner with her back to the wall, except for that. That, and whatever was closed around her wrists, cold, metal, stinging where the skin had rubbed raw. Second clue, right there.

Then someone had come around and grabbed her by the ankles, dragged her over the ground—she'd learned her legs were tied, too, when she'd tried to register an objection by kicking them. Some slack between, where her ankles were chained up, but not enough to get a good swing in. So they'd hauled her off, yelled a lot. Asked questions, hit her, asked some more.

She hadn't bothered opening her mouth. Didn't have anything to say.

Because she'd cracked an eye while they were dragging her, and she'd seen it. Black flames. Sewn everywhere they'd fit, or cockeyed, lopsided, where they didn't.

Diana's raiders. And judging by the shit they'd been shouting at Twist, they were pissed as all hell—at Diana, for stealing their catch from them, or at least that was the part they'd been willing to say out loud. What they hadn't said, though, Twist could guess well enough for herself: that they'd built themselves up in their own heads, gotten enough people and enough guns to start thinking they were badasses. Found this place, outcroppings and caves, and fortified it—probably some clean water around here, too, down deep, a spring or a natural reservoir. Something that had gotten them thinking they weren't lucky but just that good. Good—better. Better than all those sheep out there dying; stronger, smarter. Deserving.

And then Diana had ripped a hole in that comforting illusion. They'd gotten scared, except they couldn't call it that so they'd rewritten it into "pissed off" instead. Followed her trail, probably, and they'd found the compound. Couldn't go quietly on their way, after that. Temptation was too big.

Temptation and provocation both, maybe. Because to guys like this, that was what it was: just knowing there was somebody else out there who might be bigger or badder, who didn't give a shit about them. Couldn't stand it.

But they got bored with her at last. She waited, limp, through the whole fucking trip back to the pit they'd pulled her out of; swallowed blood, patient, until her lip had stopped bleeding where they'd split it, her cheek where they'd bashed it into her teeth. Kept one swollen eye half-open, trying to keep track of how far it was, how many turns they'd taken.

It was a lot. Nice big place they'd found themselves here. Once Wayne had killed them all, Twist thought, it would probably work great for storage.

And then they dragged her to the pit's edge. One spat on her and the other laughed—wasting water, Twist thought; they were that confident in their supply. Boot to the ribs rolled her in, and she managed to curl up a little on the way down, landed on her upper arm, her hip. She'd have bruises—more bruises—but nothing broke, nothing got dislocated. Could have been worse.
She rolled over, once she could, and wobbled her way to her knees. Wrists were still chained behind her, so her balance was for shit. They'd knocked her out, too; concussion couldn't be helping any.

But she could pick out four figures, five, even with the dimness, even with one eye fat and throbbing. Two of them were halfway to her already, and then there, dropping down beside her—no hands free to steady her, when they were chained up too. "Easy there," someone said.

As if. "Roll call," she managed, and heard somebody else—Ben, she was pretty sure—cough out a laugh.

"All business with you, huh, boss?"

"Can't see your pretty faces in this light," she said. "Roll call."

Mara, Ben—she'd been right after all; Gabriel, Louisa, Cait.

"The rest?" she said, and she was three-quarters prepared to hear the worst: down, boss. We're all that's left—

"Took them somewhere else," Gabriel said. "Split us up. Trying to slow us down, I guess. So even if we get out of here, we'll have to pick between making a break for it or looking for them."

"Sure," Twist said. And the raiders could hold that over their heads, too: tell them the rest were dead, and they'd have no way to know for sure; or kill them but say they were still alive, make threats.

"Who are these shitheads?" Cait sounded pissed. Then again, Cait always sounded pissed.

"Don't know," Twist said. "Didn't say any more than we knew already. Diana doing her thing—got their attention, I guess. They want payback. Could've gotten a lot of work out of those rescues she brought us, a lot of entertainment. Looking to get it from us instead."

She didn't bother getting into the specifics. They'd tried to feed her a lot of bullshit about fights, cage matches—but that had probably been half-bragging, playing like they could waste prisoners on some gladiatorial crap. More likely it would be labor. Hauling water, looking after their horses or their motorcycles or whatever; fixing up their shit, carrying things. Long and dull and endless, not enough food, not enough water, until they got hurt or fucked up. And then they'd get dumped out in the wasteland somewhere.

Or at least that was probably the idea. Wasn't going to go down like that; but these black-flame fuckers didn't know that yet.

"So you think the big boss noticed anything yet?" Ben was saying.

And Twist couldn't help but grin into the dark. "Oh, he knows," she said. "Knows they got us, knows when, probably knows where."

"Yeah?" Cait said.

"Allen in here?"

"What," Cait said, "that squirrelly little dweeb?"

"Didn't think so," Twist said, and she couldn't keep the satisfaction out of her voice for anything. "If he got away, then Wayne knows everything. Just a matter of time, now."

"So he is one of the assets," Gabriel murmured. "I fucking knew it."
"Wait," Cait said. "Are you trying to tell me fucking Allen is—"

There was a scrape, somewhere above them—past the lip of the pit they were in, but not far, Twist thought. Someone coming, boots on grit.

She didn't have to say anything; Cait cut herself off, went silent, and so did the rest of them. Pit wasn't deep, Twist could see that much—could have climbed out easily enough if she'd had her hands free. Just because these fucks liked looking down on people so bad they wanted to do it literally.

Whoever it was came up to the edge of the pit. Looked like they'd just come in from outside, head wrapped and face shielded to keep out the dust; a set of black flames was stitched across their chest, and they had something in their hands, a container.

"Water," they said—she, maybe, at least judging by the voice. It was high, wavering at the edges; a little cracked, like the woman's throat was dry. Ironic, if that really was water.

"Sure," Twist said. "Why don't you just bring that on down in here and we can all have some."

The woman snorted, and for a second there was something that sounded a little funny about it, though Twist couldn't quite pick out what it was. "I don't think so," she said, mild. "One at a time, over here. Hold still and I'll pour."

Twist tilted her head so she could watch the woman with her good eye, and thought it over. On the one hand, she couldn't claim to be all that interested in doing what she was told by any of these assholes. On the other hand—

On the other hand, if they were going to be getting out of here any time soon, it would be a lot easier if they were in decent shape to do it. Wayne would be as quick about it as he could, but thorough, too. And even then, every chance it might go wrong, not work out the way he'd planned it. Hard to say how long they'd be here, whether anybody was going to come offer them water again if they turned it down now.

"Come on," the woman was saying, gesturing, impatient. "You first. Over here."

"Fine," Twist said, and angled a sideways glance at Ben, Cait, Gabriel, so they'd know she meant it and not do anything stupid.

It took her a handful of strides to cross the pit over to the edge where the woman was standing. More than usual, because she didn't have enough slack in the chain between her ankles to take a full step. And she didn't hurry herself up any. Her hip was still fucking throbbing where she'd landed on it, her head aching in pulsing waves. She'd take her time if it meant she could be sure she wasn't going to fall over again, and if the woman got pissed off about it then that was just too bad.

But the woman didn't chide her for it, when Twist finally got close enough. She just crouched down, there at the pit's edge, and unscrewed the top of the container—canteen, good half-gallon at least. "No sudden moves," she murmured, and Twist almost backed away again; it was just the way she said it, kind of warm and amused, and that tone never meant anything good coming from somebody who had you chained up in a hole in the ground.

"That goes for you, too," Twist said.

"Yeah, yeah," the woman murmured, and then laughed a little—and then she leaned down, closer still, and tugged the cloth over her nose, her mouth, aside.
It was Lane.

"Got you covered," she said—whispered, and because it was a whisper whatever modulator Wayne had thrown together for her voice didn't flip on. That was what had been weird about it, when she'd snorted: half voiced but half not, and through the nose instead of the throat. Almost passed the modulator by before it could kick in.

She tipped the canteen, careful, against Twist's mouth—just a hair over level, slow and easy, so Twist could take the time to swallow without having to worry she'd end up spluttering any back out.

And the water was good: clean, cool. Tasted a little like plastic, but even that was reassuring, because that meant it had come out of one of the big drums Wayne used to store it, back at the compound.

But Lane—knowing it was Lane, knowing what that meant—was even better. Allen had made it back after all, hadn't panicked or fled to the other side of the planet instead. Wayne knew where they were, knew and already had Lane getting the lay of this place, and he was coming for them.

Because for all the bullshit Wayne liked to spin about efficiency, necessity, tactics, the truth was he was stubborn as hell, and anything he thought was his responsibility, he'd throw himself at it until he decided it was done right.

He still fucked it up sometimes. Who didn't? But they were his team, his people. His responsibility. And that meant he was coming for them, and he wouldn't stop until he found them and got them out.

And when he did, they'd better be ready. So Twist closed her eyes and drank till she was done, till her stomach had settled and her feet felt steady under her; and then she stepped back and wiped her mouth on her shoulder, and gave Lane a nod. "Okay," she said, and then jerked her head at Cait, at the canteen. "Come on. Drink up—tell Lane anything you saw, anything you heard, that she can use. We're going to get the fuck out of here."

Arthur should have left.

Yeah, all right, Wayne had needed backup after all. Or at least Arthur sure couldn't blame him for wanting some. Hard to say which would have killed him quicker, a stray blast from Stone or Superman ripping his head off. And they'd both seemed equally likely for a minute there.

But it was over now. Maybe Wayne had fucked up; maybe Superman wasn't exactly a hundred percent. Wasn't Arthur's problem. He could leave. No reason not to, and nobody could stop him.

(Well, okay, maybe Diana. But Arthur had a feeling she wouldn't—that she'd let him, if he wanted to, and wouldn’t say a word to anybody.)

Except—

Except, well. Raiders.
Hadn't even meant to get caught up in it. But he'd been in the main bay, picking through supplies for shit he could take with him when he *did* go, and then Diana had come tearing through the place like a hurricane, eyes sharp. Just headed for the control room—but she'd spotted him and slowed, tilted her head. "Still here," she'd said.

Arthur had looked away, and shrugged; and she hadn't smiled, but for a second she'd looked like she was thinking about it.

Anyway, she'd told him what was up. And, hell, sounded like fun. Arthur had torn through more than a few packs, when he was bored and the demons weren't coming out to play. Wouldn't hurt anything, to stay a little longer. Same thing he'd be doing if he were on his own. Might as well.

And then when it was over—he could still go. Wouldn't be a problem.

Yeah.

Wayne looked even worse than usual. Everything grim or tense in him had gotten grimmer, tenser. He was stalking his way around the control room like it had pissed him off; and then he seemed to notice himself doing it, made himself stop, and that was about twenty times worse.

He was clipped, talking it through. Not that it mattered, because there wasn't a lot to say: they had a location, Lane had been sending back intel, and Wayne finally had enough to work with that he was ready to fuck some shit up.

Wayne was still an asshole, but Arthur could get on board with that.

Diana didn't seem quite as convinced.

It took a minute for Arthur to notice. He wasn't looking for it; she'd kept showing up even after she and Wayne had bitched each other out. She was clearly on Wayne's side, no matter how dead-set Wayne was on convincing her otherwise.

But she was watching Wayne now with her eyes kind of narrowed. Arms crossed, too, and her head angled a little, chin up, like she thought she might have to yell at him about something.

Great.

Allen had noticed it, too—he wasn't buzzing around in his corner, vibrating almost too fast to see. He was looking back and forth between Wayne and Diana, and he'd started kind of edging Arthur's way, like he thought if they started throwing things, he was planning to make sure he was in the lee of Arthur's shoulder.

Arthur gave him a steady sideways look, and he froze like a deer. Didn't run, though, so after a second Arthur let him off the hook and looked away, crossed his arms and gave Allen a little more shoulder to duck behind.

Wayne had finished up his tactical rundown or what-the-fuck-ever, where he expected each of them to be and what he wanted them to do. Arthur was planning to throw that out the window and punch some people in the head, so he hadn't bothered listening to it.

And when Wayne ground to a halt, that was when Diana said it: "And what about Clark?"
Arthur blinked for a second, but—right, that was his name, wasn't it? Superman's.

Kind of weird to think of Superman having a name, just like anybody. Went double when it was one as bland as "Clark"; nothing alien about it, nothing that was even unusual. Like he was anybody, even though he couldn't be when he was Superman.

Weird for him, too, maybe, Arthur thought.

"What about him," Wayne said, and it didn't sound like a question.

"You mean to leave him here—to leave him alone in the ship, while we are gone, with no one here permitted to know he exists?"

Wayne stared at her, stony. He'd looked grim and shit before, but now it was—he looked like he'd rather bite his tongue off than be talking about the guy, and the way his jaw was working made it look like he might already be trying.

What a fucking weirdo.

"You're a fucking weirdo," Arthur said.

Wayne and Diana both looked at him.

"You didn't bring the dude back from the dead so he could sit in your basement doing nothing," Arthur said. "Right?"

"It's not that simple," Wayne bit out.

Like anything was, with him—like he was willing to let it be, when he could tie it up in knots instead. What a piece of work.

But then the last time Arthur'd seen Superman, the guy had passed out. So maybe Wayne had a point. Half a point.

"He still fucked up?" Arthur said, tilting his head.

Wayne looked at him, and then away. "His powers are active," he said, very flatly, "but only intermittently. To put him into the middle of a combat situation would be—"

"Didn't say it had to be the middle," Arthur said.

Wayne glared.

"Got to be something." Arthur gestured with his head toward the wall—toward the wasteland out there past it. "Ways to go, isn't it? Dress him up in civvies and let him drive. Doesn't have to be a big deal. Who's going to look at him and think, 'hey, wait, that's got to be Superman back from the dead'?"

Wayne didn't answer. Which Arthur figured meant he was right, and Wayne really didn't want to say so.

"Bruce," Diana said, more gently. "You brought him back so he could help us. Let him. If you keep him shut away—" She stopped for a second, kind of pointedly, until Wayne gave in grudgingly and looked up, met her eyes. "If you keep him shut away, he will begin to shut himself away, and it will take far more than opening a door to reach him again. You know that. You know it as well as I do. You can't want that."
Wayne snorted, not like it was funny but like he wanted to make it clear how not-funny it was. "The last time he was in my reach," he started—and then stopped short, jaw clenching, brief wide flare to his eyes before he cleared his throat and looked away.

"You killed him," Diana filled in for him. "Or he tried to kill you, depending on how you choose to count."

Wayne didn't say anything.

Diana's eyes went narrower. "Bruce," she said slowly.

"Enough," Wayne said, before she could get any further. "It isn't a matter of security, and it isn't a matter of my personal safety."

"Of course it isn't," Diana murmured. "As if you would permit such a petty concern to interfere—"


"Right," Arthur said, "it's only okay for him to die when you've decided he should."

Wayne didn't like that much. But Diana caught him by the shoulder before he could try to make anything out of it, and said, "Bruce. You can't keep him in there forever. He needs to understand what the world is like now, and he needs the opportunity to redefine himself within it. When his powers return—why should he fight, if you give him nothing to fight for?"

"When," Wayne said, harsh. "And if they don't?"

"If they don't, then he will need to be able to survive. He will need a place here; he cannot find himself cut off, cast away, alone." Diana's tone got prickly, pointed. And then she stopped and shook her head, and her grip on Wayne's shoulder kind of softened. "Please. At least ask him. Give him a chance."

Wayne didn't look convinced. But Diana wasn't backing off either, and after they'd stared at each other for a minute, Wayne reached down without looking away and thumbed a control. "Ship," he said.

"You gave that thing a radio?" Arthur said.

"It's more than capable of picking up radio frequencies," Wayne said stiffly, and then, more sharply, "Ship."

"Communication transfer required?" said that cool bland woman's voice, from the speakers set around the console.

"Yes," Wayne said.

There was kind of a crackle. And then the ship said, "Communication transfer achieved," and the quiet after sounded awake—it wasn't that there was static or anything, nothing to say there was a channel open, but it had that feel of a silence somebody was listening to on the other end.

"Clark," Diana said.

"Diana. Is—is something wrong?"

He sounded quiet, unsure. Then again, Arthur thought, he probably hadn't expected them to start
talking to him through the ship.

"Not exactly," Diana said. "How are you feeling?"

"I—" Superman—Clark—did he have a last name?—fell silent. "Fine. I'm fine."

Bullshit. But if he thought he could lie about it and get away with it, then he probably wasn't bleeding from the face or passing out anymore. Not fine, then, but better than he had been.

"For real?" Allen was saying, peering around Arthur at the console, because for all that he was a weird f*cked-up little guy, he didn't seem to have a real fine-tuned bullshit meter. "Man, that's—I'm so glad, because wow, you looked like shit before. Not in, like, a bad way. Um. Anybody would have, if they'd just come back from the—oh, god, I didn't even say—I'm Barry. Allen. Barry Allen. Sorry."

"Barry Allen," Superman repeated. "I remember you. You were—fast."

"Yeah! Yes, that was me. Uh, sorry about that, too; I surprised you, I didn't mean to, that was—that was an accident. In my defense, I didn't think you'd be able to see me moving around, but actually maybe that just makes it creepier. You're pretty fast, too."

"Sometimes," Superman said, real low—because he sure as shit wasn't right now, if his powers were on the fritz.

Allen winced. "Right. Yes. Okay. Anyway, we, um, we wanted to know if you—I mean, you've got to be getting pretty bored in there. I'd already be climbing the walls, like, literally—"

"I'm fine," Superman said again, tighter, sharper.

"There was an ambush," Diana said, and he went quiet. "Some of Bruce's people were lost, taken. We have found the raiders responsible; we know where they are."

"And you—you want my help?" Superman sounded faintly bewildered. "Diana, you know that I'm not—"

"Nothing will be required of you that you cannot accomplish," Diana said gently. "Willing hands are of benefit whether they can crush steel or not, Clark. You know this."

Superman didn't answer for a moment. "And have you talked to Wayne about this?" he said at last, stiff and flat.

"Yes," Wayne said dryly—the first time he'd said a word since he'd been talking to the ship.

The quiet then felt sort of like being strangled with wire. Because Superman hadn't known Wayne was listening; how could he, when he didn't have his supersenses or whatever?

Great.

"And I'm supposed to believe you're all for it," Superman said, all acid.

"Hardly," Wayne said. "But you can't cause any more harm than anyone else, like this. As long as you don't do anything exceptionally stupid that gets us all killed—"

"The only person I want dead," Superman said, almost softly, "is you. And you promised I could do that personally, as I recall."
Arthur snorted. Jesus. Of course Wayne had; that was exactly his style, Arthur was starting to think, extreme as hell and no room to back down. Probably hadn't even crossed his mind that he could ease off, be anything less than a hundred and ten percent right in Superman's face.  *Superman's*, for fuck's sake.

Arthur remembered being surprised, the first time he'd grasped that it was Wayne who'd killed the guy. He wasn't surprised anymore.

Wayne looked up from the console just to glare at him, dark, steady, sharp as the edge of a knife.

Arthur looked back, and raised an eyebrow. Like nobody had ever glared at him before. As if.

Wayne had nothing on—

On Vulko, Arthur let himself think. On Vulko, when Arthur had fucked up and wouldn't admit it, when he hadn't been listening and Vulko knew it.

"Lane will be on the ground," Wayne said to the console, crisp and even. "I assume her safety still means something to you. She'll be as much at risk as anyone, if this goes wrong. Try to remember that."

Superman didn't answer, for a long moment; Diana looked like she was thinking real hard about punching Wayne in the face.

"When do we leave?" Superman said.

"You'll know," Wayne said, and thumbed the radio controls again, quick, cutting the connection off with a quiet click.

"Bruce," Diana said, soft and icy.

And if they were going to start yelling at each other again, they could do it on their own time, goddamn. "Clothes," Arthur said, before they could really get rolling.

They both looked at him.

"Not me," Arthur said. "Him. Civvies, remember? He's still in that clown suit he died in. Something stowed away somewhere he can use?"

Wayne stared at him, mouth going flat. "Yes," he said at last, grudging. "I'll—find something."

"Great," Arthur said, and smiled at him real wide, just to fuck with his head.

For all the shit about Wayne that was annoying, he did what he said he'd do—whether it was go dig out Superman's dead body in the middle of the desert, or find the guy some clothes to wear. He came back to Arthur after ten or fifteen minutes with a stack of stuff, all black and gray-brown, dull and worn. But Superman probably wasn't going to complain.

"It should—fit," Wayne said, and then turned on his heel and left.

Fucking weirdo, Arthur thought, and took it down to the ship.

He remembered where it was just fine. But standing there in front of it, for a second he wished he'd
thought this through a little better.

Still, it couldn't be that complicated getting in here. Wayne, Diana, had just touched it. Right? It wasn't like there was a password or something. But—

But the ship knew them. They were—they belonged here.

Might let Arthur in anyway. No way to find out but try, he told himself, and he tucked the clothes under one elbow and reached out with the other hand, set his palm against the hull of the ship.

It felt kind of weird. Reminded him, a little, of Atlantean metal. Not that it was the same, but there was something similar about the strangeness of it, that it felt like more than any old stainless steel or whatever. Special.

Arthur glanced up the side of it. "Uh, hey," he said aloud, and then felt stupid; but either the ship was listening, so it had made sense to say it, or the ship wasn't listening, in which case nobody was except Arthur himself and it didn't matter whether he came off like an idiot. "Got some stuff for—Superman." Still couldn't quite make himself say Clark. Wasn't like he actually knew the guy.

"Welcome," the ship murmured, and the hull rippled, melted away and let him through, easy as that.

He thought he might get a little turned around inside there, but either he remembered better than he'd realized or the ship was kind of helping him out. Few long straight corridors, and then he was there: the chamber with the pool at the bottom, and jesus, Superman had just—stayed in here, this whole time? He was still wearing that suit of his, and sitting against the wall, knees drawn up, arms wrapped around them, looking at nothing in particular that Arthur could tell.

Well. Not that Arthur had thought Diana was wrong. But maybe she was really, really right about needing to give the dude a reason to get his ass out of here.

"Hey," Arthur said.

Superman looked up.


Superman just kept staring at him blankly for a second; but then his brow creased a little, and he said slowly, "You were there. You were there when they brought me back."

"Yeah," Arthur said. "Let Diana do the talking, but yeah. I was there. Helped her carry your dead body here, too."

Superman didn't really look like he knew what to do with that. "Oh. Uh."

"Yeah," Arthur said, mild. "It was weird. Been a lot of weird shit happening to me since I ended up here."

Superman's mouth twitched. "You too, huh?"

"Yeah, man," Arthur said, and laughed.

He made the little jump down into the pool, landed with a splash—stupid, how good that felt, but it had been a long fucking time since he'd run into enough water in one place that he could wade around in it like this, almost up to his knees. Not that this shit was water, but whatever. Close enough to settle him, somewhere down inside himself, the place way deep in him that was—that was always
thirsty, no matter how much water he drank.

And then he held up the bundle of clothes, and shook them a little in Superman's direction.

"Got some stuff for you to wear. Don't want you walking around in that thing. Guessing," Arthur added, "you'd rather not be walking around in it either."

Superman looked at him, blinking, and then down at himself—let go of his knees, exposing that big obvious "S" of his, and the hole that was still there over one side of his chest. "Oh," he said, kind of vaguely. "Right." He levered himself up, dripping, and then paused for a second—reached up with one hand and set his fingertips against one edge of the hole. He bit his lip and moved them sideways, slow, a bit at a time; but behind them, it was—there wasn't a hole anymore, the weird gleaming fabric drawing itself together under his fingers, like he was zipping it up.

"Handy," Arthur said, and then held the stuff out. "Here."

"Right," Superman said, and took it. "Thanks," and then he looked up at the ceiling and said, "Ship?"

The floor moved in front of him, lifted up and rearranged itself into a surface at about waist level—and even though it had just come up out of all that weird clingy fluid, the top of it was dry anyway. But then Arthur supposed the liquid hadn't stuck to the cuffs of his own pants any longer than that, whenever he'd waded out of it; it didn't seem to—to soak into things, just kind of contained them until they were pulled out of it again. Freaky stuff.

Shirt, pants, and suddenly Superman looked more like just a guy. More like—Clark, maybe. The way he held himself had changed, too, Arthur was pretty sure. Like when he was in just the suit, he couldn't help but stand up straighter, shoulders back, larger than life; but once he had some regular clothes on over it, he wasn't trying half so hard to be all super.

Lucky for him the neck of the shirt wasn't wider than the suit's, and the sleeves were long. Or maybe not all that lucky—maybe Wayne had realized the suit was going to stay on.

(Arthur kind of hoped so. Otherwise, the fact that Wayne hadn't included any underwear in the pile suddenly got weird, even for Wayne.)

There was a belt, too, and a vest, a jacket. Superman gave the layers kind of a sideways look, and Arthur shrugged at him.

"Just because it's a desert doesn't mean it's warm," he said. "Steppenwolf, he's got these machines—lot of fire, lava coming up. Lot of smoke, lot of ash, and that's not counting the dust. All that shit in the air, some days it's like the sun hardly came up at all."

Superman eyed Arthur's bare chest, and raised an eyebrow.

"Said it wasn't warm," Arthur said. "Didn't say it bothered me. But—"

"But I'll feel it," Superman filled in. "Like this, I'll—it'll bother me." He closed his eyes, and grabbed blindly for the belt, shrugged the vest on and then the jacket, without looking up again.

He wasn't like Allen, narrow; he wasn't small. But he was shorter than Arthur, and all of a sudden he looked it, dressed ordinary like this. He looked human.

"And this—this ambush," he said after a moment, and then did meet Arthur's eyes. "These raiders. Where are we going?"
"Like I know," Arthur said. "Wayne doesn't tell me jack shit, dude. He never killed me, but that doesn't mean he likes me."

Superman snorted a little, and his mouth did that little twitchy thing again, even if he still wasn't quite smiling.

"Come on," Arthur said. "We get back up there and wait out front, there's no way he can try to leave without us."

"He would, wouldn't he?" Superman murmured, shaking his head. Didn't need an answer, so Arthur didn't bother giving him one—just leapt back up into the corridor and then turned around, reached down and raised his eyebrows; and after a second Superman splashed over and clasped his arm, and let Arthur pull him up.

Battle, Diana was used to. It was the wait before it began that she had always found more difficult to bear.

Lucky, then, that it was not long this time. Bruce wasn't happy about it, she knew. Twist and her team had gone to the place where Miri and her people had been ambushed, had followed what they could make out of the trail the raiders had made in getting there; it had led them southwest, and in the end Lois had discovered them perhaps fifty miles distant, in a stone rise riddled with caves and gaps, one of the formations Steppenwolf's machines had left behind them.

Fifty miles. Further than it used to be, in this world with so few roads, where your own two feet were the most reliable way to get you anywhere. But Bruce didn't see it that way, and this encroachment on the borders of what he considered his territory displeased him.

Arthur hadn't been wrong, to think they would take trucks. It suited Bruce in more than one way to make use of them. Not only was it his preference to fall upon his enemies with unforgiving speed, to strike more quickly than expected, but also to do it with greater force than they could anticipate, to leave them stunned in his wake. Functional vehicles were rare, precious, difficult to keep in working order; Bruce had expended no small effort to maintain such a sizable group of trucks, vans, salvaged and refurbished buses, and it had been done precisely so that he could execute assaults such as this when he deemed it necessary.

The route had been scouted already by a team equipped with motorcycles. There was nothing left to do but wait for dusk, and drive.

Lois had given Bruce an estimate of the raiders' numbers; impressive, to be sure, but nothing Bruce couldn't equal. They were as prepared as it was possible to be.

And there was a certain pleasure to be found in the anticipation. Bruce's people had loaded themselves into a handful of the trucks, two of the buses following at the flank—but the protection of a windshield wasn't necessary for Diana. She had chosen to climb atop one bus instead, and ride it with a hand gripping one edge of the roof; Arthur had watched her leap up, and then had, with a shrug, copied her atop the other bus.
And like this, driving toward the dying sun, with the sky all aflame over them and the horizon wide and empty before them, with the wind in her hair—her heart had already begun to pound. Soon.

She had remembered, at the last minute, to stop by the infirmary and retrieve her sword; Aline had at last been able to find the man with the broken leg a proper splint. Crouched now on top of the bus, Diana relished the feeling of its hilt in her hand, of tightening her grip around it until her knuckles ached sweetly.

Soon. And yes, there, in the distance: she could pick it out now, the rise looming through the gathering dusk. A flicker in the corner of her vision, blue-white—Barry, no doubt running circles around them and wondering why it was they drove so slowly, and at the thought Diana almost wanted to laugh.

So the waiting wasn't all bad, in the end. But still, still, it was a relief when at last the lead truck fired its flare—the signal that they were within a mile.

Lois's reports had indicated that the raiders' outpost was fortified, not unlike the compound; at the front, an area closed in by fencing, wire, corrugated sheets of metal, served them as an entrance to the warren of caves and tunnels within the rock. The raiders would have seen the flare, but it wouldn't matter, because the buses had been prepared for this particular journey in more than one way.

It was as smooth as though they had practiced it beforehand. The swarm of trucks parted neatly, diverting to either side, and the buses drew close, accelerated—struck, with makeshift push bumpers made out of steel bars, hung on their strengthened and soldered front grilles. Diana could hear the shouting, the sudden panicked jump in it just before impact; raiders scattered in a panic as the walls were suddenly flattened before them, Bruce's people already beginning to aim and fire in a rapid crack-crack-crack out of the windows.

The bus braked beneath Diana, and instead of clinging to it, she allowed her own inertia to propel her—leapt, in a long arc that carried all that leftover speed with it, and she struck one raider full-on, knocked him down and landed on her knees on his chest, and knew he would not get up again; behind him was another who had been hurrying to catch up with him, and that one took Diana's sword to her gut. She wouldn't get up again either.

But of course there were more—swarming out of the cave system, now, as the alarm was passed along, dozens of them.

Diana fell upon them like a storm. It had always been so easy for her to lose herself in the feeling of this, the fierce delight of exercising all she was capable of; even now, even when it sometimes seemed to her that so little of herself remained, she still had this.

She didn't enjoy the killing, in and of itself. If she had ever had the potential toward a taste for it, somewhere deep in the dark of herself, she'd—she'd had her fill of it and more, more than she could bear to think of. But these people had made it their way, deliberate and with intent, to cause harm, in a world that already overflowed with it. She could not claim to feel she owed them mercy they had chosen not to show others.

(If anything—wasn't it mercy of its own, in a way, to cut them down quickly, without regret but also without malice? Many of those they had taken as their captives must have died slowly, and in pain. They could not complain of their treatment at Diana's hands by comparison.)

And of course she had known she would not be alone. But it was one thing to be aware of it, and another to believe it—to be conscious of Arthur behind her, cracking two raiders' helmeted heads
together with a shout; of Bruce in the distance beyond, the high soft whistle of the small explosive devices he was firing into the mouths of the tunnels to clear them for his people.

Even Barry—she hadn't expected it of him in the least, would not have begrudged him the choice to run past all this in an instant and go to find Lois instead. But when she felt a flurry of sudden blows along the line of her back, automatic bullet fire, and turned to see who had her in their sights, she caught only a flicker of lightning, a yelp—Barry had slowed, just enough to disturb the air where he might instead have passed through it almost untouched, and the raider had been dragged sideways by the force of his slipstream, slammed into the cave wall.

"Thank you," she said, and Barry flashed closer, shrugged a shoulder and ducked his head bashfully—and then flashed again, backward ten feet, so the raider who had been charging at him with a yell stumbled within Diana's reach, and she could knock the woman to the ground onehanded.

In this, at least, they were—they had achieved something that could with generosity be mistaken for teamwork. They were keeping track of each other, moving together in a manner that approximated synchrony; reaching out to aid each other when they could, and able to keep out of each other's way otherwise.

It was rough, to be sure. Unpracticed. They had been fighting together for twenty minutes at the most—they were only just learning each other's ways. They had none of the grace, none of the smoothness, that could only be earned with time.

But still, Diana thought, there was promise in it. They were not together in it yet; but they could be.

The thought pleased her, warmed her. And she was startled to discover herself to be smiling, fierce and glad and full of teeth, as they worked their way further in—she hadn't done as much in battle in a long, long time.

She was almost sorry to be drawn from her thoughts by the crackle of the comm in her ear. "Where is he?"

"What?" she said, frowning, planting her foot on a raider's chest to brace it so she could pull her sword free; she had struck harder than she had intended and had felt it lodge in bone.

"Kent," Bruce snapped.

They had agreed it would be wisest to use Clark's name, given Bruce's reluctance to broadcast his alternate identity; but Bruce didn't like to say it unless he had to—disapproved, if Diana had to guess, of treating anything but the powerful and alien Superman as though it were Clark's true face.

"Bruce—"

"He was supposed to stay with the trucks. I don't see him. Kent!" and this last was bitten off into the comm—because Clark had one, too, but it seemed he wasn't answering it. Diana could hear Bruce's teeth grinding briefly, and then he hissed a curse almost too quietly for even her ears to catch. Across the comm, she heard him move, and turned her head, searching; but he must have been in some other tunnel besides the one she had begun to fight her way through.

"Bruce," she said again.

"Kent," he said again, harsher—and this time the comm crackled, once, twice.

Breathing; a low pained sound, as of effort. "Wayne—"
Bruce went silent. Diana could hear his pace increase, his footfalls, and she closed her eyes and thought of the map Bruce had sketched out for them, Lois's rough descriptions of the layout of this place. There was a larger natural cavern, centrally positioned; many smaller passageways had led there, and—yes, she could hear it now: Bruce's footsteps had begun to cast faint echoes.

She was not far from it. She realized halfway there that the corridor of rock before her led away before it curved back toward her destination, and she decided abruptly that there was no reason to let it—she sheathed her sword and set her hands against the wall, dug in with her fingertips so stone crunched beneath them, and tore the whole face of it apart, drove her elbow into the opening and shoved, pried with her knuckles until it gave further still and then put her shoulder to the cracking rock and pushed.

It crumbled before her, and she stumbled through and rolled to catch herself, came up on one knee with her hands in fists.

She had been right—Clark was there, and so was Bruce, only just leaping over him to deliver a sharp blow to the neck of the man who had been about to bring the stock of his rifle down on Clark's head. The man choked and toppled backward, rifle sliding from his grip as he raised his hands to scrabble at his crushed throat; and Bruce followed him down, struck him across the bridge of the nose so his head cracked down against the stone beneath him, and Diana knew it for a blow from which the man would not rise again.

Half a dozen more were crossing the larger cave, had seen their compatriot with an intruder well in hand and were only just turning to appraise Bruce's sudden appearance—the thunder of Diana's entrance had caught them by surprise, and she hewed three of them down, the ricochet of a bullet off her shoulder felling a fourth before she had even touched him.

The remaining two had dropped back, shouting to each other and scrabbling for cover behind a nearby rock formation; she judged it safe enough to leave them for a moment, and turned to look.

Clark was bleeding. Not badly—not enough to prevent him from levering himself up off the cave floor to glare at Bruce. A blot at the mouth, where his lip had split, and the bridge of the nose; over his eye, too, dripping and smearing across his brow and temple, down his cheek. And he held himself as though he had been injured elsewhere, struck in the ribs or the side, the back.

"What the hell were you thinking," Bruce spat, and it wasn't a question.

"You brought me along so I could—"

"—stay the fuck put—"

"—do something! If I can't help, then—"

"Like this?" Bruce snapped. "You can't. And the sooner you realize that—"

"—what's the point?" Clark burst out. "You can't. And the sooner you realize that—"

"You know why," Bruce said, low and very cold. "You don't know what the hell you're doing, Kent," and all his discomfort with the name had vanished in favor of speaking it with pointed clarity, deliberate precision: because he wasn't talking to Superman, not right now.

Clark's expression darkened, sudden and terrible, and for an unthinking instant Diana half-expected his eyes to glow red—but of course they didn't.

"You don't have the first idea how to throw a punch if you can't knock someone thirty feet no matter
how badly you do it. You're going to get yourself killed—"

Clark laughed, the sound harsh and ugly coming from his bloodied mouth. "So? What does that matter? What the fuck do you care? Just remember to grab my body before you leave and you can throw me back in there and zap me again—"

"Christ," Bruce said quietly. "You were trying to."

And Clark's face did something then that Diana could not have named if she had wanted to, and then crumpled, swift and agonizing.

Bruce took a step toward him, wound a fist into the front of his borrowed jacket—and of all the times Clark might have wanted most to see a face, of course Bruce had cowled up for the battle, hadn't thought to bother stripping it off just to shout at Clark. "I would," he said, very low. "I will. You can't get away from me that easily, do you understand? No matter how many times I have to do it—"

"Fuck you," Clark spat at him, and Diana was only just quick enough to reach between them and catch his fist before Bruce could block it—could block it and twist it up behind his back, throw him, half a dozen other things that would only do more damage.

"Clark," she said. "The way back out is clear," and it was mostly the truth; close to it, at least, and Arthur was still back there somewhere, no doubt making the stragglers wish they were elsewhere. "Please—go. There is no time for this."

He rounded on her for an instant with all the ire meant for Bruce—but then her words reached him, and his face began to clear. Because he knew lives were at stake here, and even now, that meant something to him.

"All right," he said quietly.

It took a long moment, seemingly effortful, for Bruce to relax his hand, to let the jacket slide free of his grip. But he gritted his teeth and did it, turned on his heel and stalked away without a backward glance for Clark.

Who was still standing there, fists clenched, eyes wet, as though Bruce had not let go at all—as though he were still held, despite himself.

"Clark," Diana said. "Go."

"Right," Clark said, unsteady, absent, still staring after Bruce; and then he squeezed his eyes shut, shook his head, and for the first time reached up to wipe the blood from his mouth, his cheek, with the back of his hand. "I'll—Diana, I'm sorry."

"Clark—"

"I didn't mean to—" He stopped, and swallowed, and looked away. "I just wanted to do something. I wanted to help."

"I know," she said, and settled a hand on his shoulder, squeezed gently. "And you will. But not here—not now. Go," she told him again, and this time he went.

Diana had half-expected the two remaining raiders to try to rush Bruce; but instead they had crawled out from behind the rocks on their knees, arms upraised, surrendering themselves. She looked at their faces, their wide eyes, their shaking hands, and felt something in her chest go tight.
(Perhaps she hadn’t needed to kill so many of them after all. Perhaps it had only seemed easier than anything else—easier, simpler; because she had been telling herself death was a kindness for so long she had begun to believe it—

—as if your hands were cleaner—

She had wanted to believe it. Because it wasn’t only Bruce who wished to think himself justified in his choices.)

Bruce bound them with grappling cable, because of course he had some; and Diana pressed on deeper into the caves beyond.

Lois had located three holding areas used for prisoners. The third was not far now, if Diana remembered rightly—she paused at a fork, closed her eyes and let her head tip back and listened, and yes, there, that must be it. A great commotion, fighting, though Bruce’s people hadn’t yet reached this far. Shouting; and some of the voices were familiar.

There was light, sudden, as Diana came to the passageway’s mouth, and for a moment she was disoriented: had she gone the wrong way? Somehow come all the way back out, and it was sunset sky that burned ahead of her? But then she understood—it was fire after all. The raiders had used all manner of things for light this far into the caves, torches and lanterns, tubs of anything that might burn set alight, so that all the stone was sticky with soot. Black flames indeed. In this cavern, it had been kerosene in a plastic barrel, a makeshift wick. Until the barrel had been toppled in the fighting, oil spilled over the floor so the flames had spread and jumped high.

And beneath, in the middle of the rough-hewn pit dug into the ground, was Twist.

She was bleeding, mostly her hands and arms; her face had bled too, but those wounds had all scabbed over now, dark. One of her eyes was swollen almost entirely shut, and she had something in her grip. A chain—except it wasn’t a single continuous length, but rather a few links at a time with cable knotted around and between them to hold them together. It must have been used to bind her, but she had worked her way loose from it somehow.

And of course she had heard Diana come in, even if she could not see. She had heard, and had swung it out.

Diana caught the end in her hand before it could strike her in the face, lowered it and tilted her head and said, "What a welcome to give your rescuer."

Twist squinted up at her, briefly tense in startlement, and then grinned, flash of teeth brilliant with reflected firelight. "You’re late," she said. "Got to get here inside twelve hours if you want the ticker-tape parade."

"I will remember that next time," Diana said, and reached down with an open hand; and Twist clasped her arm, and let Diana pull her up out of the dark.
It had, by any objective measure, been a success.

They'd had the advantage, the element of surprise. Their tactical gambits had, by and large, paid off. They had not only been able to retrieve their remaining people, every survivor of the original ambush accounted for one way or another, but they had also captured a strategically valuable new backup site, a clean water source, and an impressive hoard of supplies. Most of the raiders had been killed, quick and simple; the survivors would have to be taken out in trucks, further than anyone could easily walk, and left to make their own way. Resources couldn't be wasted keeping them imprisoned, and of course there was no possible way to ensure they could be trusted.

Though perhaps Bruce could at least make time for Lane to talk to them first. Any information they had to give might prove useful, if it could be corroborated.

But it would have to wait until tomorrow at the earliest.

Bruce had anticipated it and planned accordingly: only so much discipline could be required of a group this large. He'd known in advance that if they won the day, the drive back to the compound would take on a certain wild exhilarated energy; he'd crouched in the back of the lead truck and behind him through the advancing night he'd heard the whoops, the ragged waves of cheers and hoarse jubilant shouts, and he'd known he'd been right.

Nothing would get done tonight. They'd be too busy celebrating, drinking themselves into something resembling happiness, fucking in any corner that was behind a door that closed and plenty that weren't.

It had been a long time since Bruce had dealt with the aftermath of a fight that way, but he did remember what it was like. He almost wished, distant, that he was still capable of being swept up in the rush of it, but—

But even if he had been, he wouldn't have felt it now. He was tired; he ached with the bloom of fresh bruises, somewhere beneath the armor; but that wouldn't have made a difference, he knew. What mattered was that it didn't feel like success to him—not now, not when the alien had so nearly provoked disaster.

He was still full of the slow deep burn of anger, even though it had been hours. He had work to do, he had planned for this. Nights like these were spent in the security room, because someone had to keep an eye on their perimeter, and a handful of long quiet hours alone was hardly to be rued. On the contrary, it constituted an opportunity.

Usually. But tonight, even that—even that—dragged the alien inexorably back to the forefront of his mind.

Because of all the mundane tasks he could accomplish with one eye on the security monitors, one of the simplest was fixing his goddamn pants.

The alien hadn't exerted enough force to tear the cloth itself; it was the seams that had given way in his grip. Bruce would have preferred to cast the entire incident from his mind, to go on as though it
had never happened, except he couldn’t countenance the waste—the damage was reparable, and the pants themselves were tough, high-quality material. Difficult to replace.

It needed to be done; that was all there was to it.

(—it didn’t matter how he fucking felt about it—)

He checked the monitors first. All clear. Good. He closed his eyes and felt by sheer muscle memory for the release that would loosen the cowl and allow him to pull it free; it was always such a helpless sensory relief, with the tendency he had to become aware of the crusted sweat, the restricted clammy feeling of the skin it had covered, in the same moment it was removed.

Exhaustedly, achingly, his head briefly rendered empty by the concentration it took simply to keep himself moving, he peeled off the outer layers of the combat suit: the heavier outer plating came off in pieces, straps at the shoulders, the chest, the hips. He should take the rest of it off, too, strip down from head to foot and find himself something clean. The last thing he needed to be dealing with during the apocalypse was athlete's foot, just because he couldn't be bothered to take off his fucking boots.

But inertia could only carry him so far. Somehow he had—he had stopped, had sunk unthinkingly into a chair, elbows braced against the console.

He'd set the folded pants on the console's edge, and he was staring at them.

Christ, he thought, and the anger still hadn't burned itself out, deep in his chest, except he wasn't sure whether he was angrier with the alien or with himself. It was all tangled together somehow, worked into a knot he had no hope of slicing through—the memory, blazing, unbearable, of what he had done, what the alien had done to him; because it should have been a bargain, a bloodless manipulation, a transaction. Even a violation would have been preferable to—to the way the alien had touched him, the way his body had responded. The way he had responded, god help him, the way he'd moved—

Stimulation was one thing. The body's reactions could be difficult to govern. That he had been hard, that he had orgasmed—none of that would have meant anything in particular, strictly speaking, except that he was physically normal and friction had won the day.

None of that would have meant anything, if he hadn't known otherwise. If he hadn't been forced to acknowledge, by the alien's grip and his stare, the feeling of his hands, his breath, his cock—his fingers, the harsh proprietary grasp of them on Bruce's ass—

The orgasm didn't mean he'd wanted it. That he'd wanted it meant he'd wanted it, and he resented being stripped of his capacity to justify it as anything else.

He'd known there was—something. That it wasn't only dread, the tense sparking awareness of a looming threat on the horizon, that had rushed beneath his skin whenever he'd sat in the Cave looping video of the alien and feeling his heart pound. He'd been confident he could control it, render it ignorable; the alien presented a danger on so many different levels, it was hardly a surprise that one of those levels should be interpreted by his body in all its mindless intensity as a sexual one.

If anything, his success in neutralizing the alien had been all the more satisfying for it. Not—not physically satisfying, not like that; he would have been infuriated with himself for permitting that kind of distraction. Satisfying in the sense that he had proven able to master himself after all. He hadn't let himself be fooled, hadn't let that twisted half-formed desire cloud his mind. He hadn't allowed himself to fall into the trap of deciding his subjective urges translated into objective reasons.
to alter his approach. He had felt—something; and he had, clear-eyed, deliberate, killed the alien anyway, when the opportunity presented itself.

He had done the right thing. Even when it had begun to look easier, temptingly, to let himself off the hook, to abrogate his responsibility—he had held fast, hadn't hesitated. At the time, it had been a relief to have hard evidence he could still trust himself, despite his own animal impulses.

But now—

He couldn't have predicted how much worse it would get, how much stronger its sway over him would have become. Now that he had the alien within reach, now that Bruce couldn't just kill him again to make it stop—

That wasn't why he'd done it. It wasn't. But, god, he almost wanted to now. It had all been so much simpler, with the alien dead.

And it even seemed as though perhaps the alien agreed with him.

Bruce rubbed a hand across his face. He couldn't decide which troubled him more: the idea that the alien had been stupid enough to charge in without a thought for the potential danger, or that he had been deliberately seeking it out. That Bruce had had to intercede, to protect him, after everything, or that—

That the alien had been wearing his goddamn clothes at the time.

He squeezed his eyes shut, dug his knuckles into his eyelids and relished the ache, the explosion of phosphenes against the backs of them. Christ. He should have brought Curry something else, anything else. Burlap sacks. He was never going to be able to wear any of it again without thinking of the alien, the way he'd looked in it: a strange, unsettling amalgamation of the face Bruce had taught himself to hate, and—Kent. Kent, but without the glasses. Without the cheap pretense that he possessed genuine human weaknesses, except at the exact moment when, in reality, he did.

And now Bruce was sitting here with a completely different pair of pants he couldn't even look at without thinking of—without remembering—

He shifted unthinkingly, and then bit down sharply into his own lip. Fuck. He was already losing control of himself, responding all over again. It didn't even matter whether he gave in or not, indulged or waited himself out; the fact of it, the sensation of it, the eager idiot thickening of his cock, couldn't be erased. And he couldn't rely on the automatic punishment of discomfort. He'd strapped on a groin plate and left it at that, today, because his usual measures were out of the question after the alien had—had gripped him there, had reached in so casually and snapped the fucking straps, had made even putting on a goddamn cup an unbearable test of self-restraint—

"Wayne."

Bruce tensed in his chair. For a mindless instant he was gripped by the certainty that the alien was there, in the room with him—had been standing there watching him, silent, and he'd been too lost in his own head to realize it.

(Worse even than the spasm of self-consciousness, the sudden sharp apprehension that he might have spoken aloud or otherwise given himself away, was this: that the jolt of that moment traveled everywhere; that the line of his cock thickened further, heavy against his thigh, at the idea that the alien might be that close—)

"Wayne. Are you there?"
A light, on the console. Of course—the ship would have explained to him what it had done earlier, that it was able to connect him to the compound's radio system on any channel it chose.

Bruce gritted his teeth and made himself draw a slow breath, let it out again, before he reached for the radio controls. "Kent," he said, because he had to; because there was no guarantee this frequency was secure.

Silence, but for a brief rush of white noise that might have been the alien breathing. "The ship said you would be—"

"Yes," Bruce said, cutting him short; as if he needed the reminder that the ship's sensors were more than capable of tracking him throughout the compound, that the alien had full access. Christ. What a fucking nightmare.

Another silence. But if the alien was angry with him, had given up and shut the channel down, that would only be for the best—

Except he hadn't. He couldn't have; the light on the console was still on.

"I'm sorry," the alien said at last.

His voice had changed: dropped low; gone hoarse, unsteady.

"Before, when I—I didn't mean to—" He cut himself off with a small frustrated sound, almost too quiet to hear; but of course the ship had caught it, transferred it with relentless clarity. "Is everybody else okay? The people you were trying to rescue, did you—are they all—"

"Some of them were killed in the ambush," Bruce said, sharp—what the hell had the alien expected to hear? "The ones who were taken—the raiders beat them, strung them up. Tried to make a couple of them fight each other, cut their throats when they wouldn't do it."

The alien said nothing. After a moment, Bruce relented.

"But most of them are still alive. The injured have good odds of surviving, now that they're back here and resting. They'll recover, in time." He bit the inside of his cheek, feeling the vicious impulse overtake him, but he'd been too slow, the words already forming themselves in his throat, piled up behind his lips. "You didn't get anyone killed, Kent, if not for lack of trying."

The alien laughed, then, choked and ugly. "Am I supposed to believe you care? That out of the goodness of your heart—"

He laughed again, as if he felt no need to elaborate; as if it were self-evidently ludicrous. Bruce felt his jaw clench, unbidden, and forcibly relaxed it. He didn't expect the alien to believe any such thing. He didn't care one way or the other. As if it mattered in the least what the alien thought of him—as if it were plausible that anything could possibly come to outweigh the alien's unquestionable awareness that Bruce was the man who'd murdered him, even if Bruce should somehow find that he wanted it to.

"You expect me not to track our numbers?" he said aloud, cool. "Not to keep an accurate tally of the resources available to me?"

"Jesus," the alien said, a startlingly ordinary expression of dismay—but then he must have kept himself in the habit, to pass as Clark Kent in public. He must have learned to use common American English interjections with casual ease. "Is that it? Is that really how you think about it? Like everybody in here is nothing but a number in a spreadsheet—"
"You expected better?" Bruce spat.

"No," the alien agreed, equally sharp. "No, of course not." He stopped, and blew out a harsh breath that hissed between his teeth. "That's exactly the problem. I didn't expect anything from you. But you—you went after them." His voice dropped low. "You went after me. When I—you were pissed, but you still—" He stopped again. "Just hoping not to have to go to the trouble, I guess. Right? But you would if you had to. Too valuable a resource to let go. What did you say? 'No matter how many times I have to'—"

Bruce brought his hand down on the console, struck half a dozen switches with far too much force; but the light went dark, the channel cut, the alien mercifully silenced.

It was—it had been true. It had been true, that was all. They had a deal. If the alien died before Darkseid even arrived, he couldn't keep it. Bruce would bring him back. As many times as it took, and if the alien didn't like it then he should try harder to stay alive—

Bruce sat there, unseeing, throat working, fists clenched against the console, pressing the heels of his hands into the edge so hard they ached.

And then he stood.

It wasn't a good idea. Of course it wasn't. He shouldn't be doing this; he should go anywhere, anywhere, else. Or stay here, stay here and sew his goddamn pants back together.

But he didn't. He stood and he left the monitor room, and if he had the capacity to stop himself, he—he didn't want to use it. He was—he wanted—

He went. His heart was racing, relentless; and it had always had a tendency to accelerate its pace, whenever he approached the ship. But suddenly new and uncomfortable shades of meaning were making themselves unavoidably clear to him.

(To think he'd always assumed the fear would be the worst thing, the feeling he would hate and resent the most—but then how could he ever have imagined this?)

The hull of the ship parted before him before he could even ask, before he had even paused or begun to reach for it; and he should have realized what that meant, but it felt—it felt only appropriate, that it should give way to him like this. So as it was, he strode through the opening without hesitation, and was unforgivably slow to react.

Because the alien was there. The alien was there, in the ship's corridor—because at the same time that he had been inexorably drawn to the alien, Bruce had time to think, the alien, too, had been coming to him—

And then the alien had him. Caught him by the shoulders of the undersuit, turned with their combined weight and slammed him against the wall of the corridor; no harder than anyone might. His eyes weren't red with heat, he was—there was still dried blood on his face, bruises coming up dark along his cheek. The raider who had pinned him had struck him with a rifle stock once, twice, before Bruce had reached them. He was still diminished: more Kent than Superman.

So it made no sense that the impact should knock the breath from Bruce's chest, that for an instant it should feel as though there were no air in the corridor at all.

Kent was still wearing Bruce's clothes.

"Is that how you thought of me all along?" he was shouting, mouth twisting so hard the split on his
lip had reopened, fresh blood welling. "Is that how you justified it? That I wasn't useful, that I wasn't valuable, that you didn't need me for anything—that there wasn't one single fucking reason you could come up with not to murder me—"

"You posed a threat," Bruce said, clear and cold, as level as he could make it. "I neutralized it. It wasn't personal."

"It wasn't—?" The alien stopped, choked by his own pointless disbelief; he shook his head, wordless, snarling, and drew Bruce forward away from the wall—the better to slam him back into it again. Bruce was ready for it this time, able to consciously relax in the moment before impact, to let the force dissipate less painfully. For an instant he was tempted to push back, but

(—but was that because he had a point to make, or because—
—because the last time he had done it, the alien had—they had—)

his leverage wasn't particularly good; and it only got worse as the alien leaned in closer, knuckles pressing into the lines of Bruce's collarbone.

"How could you," he said, soft, scraped. "How could you. You—" He shook his head again. "How could you—"

"I had to," Bruce heard himself say. His hands had—had come up, he was—he'd gripped the alien's wrists, though he didn't know quite when it had happened. "I had to."

He bit down on everything else he could have said

(—I didn't know what else to do; I was desperate, I was terrified—you were the most powerful thing I had ever seen, there was—there was no other way I could survive it—)

because surely even that, even those three words, were too much—exposed too much, in the very choice of them; in all the other words they weren't.

(—I chose to. It meant nothing to me. It was easy. I never faltered, I wasn't afraid; knowing it was right was all I needed. It cost me nothing, and when I was done I never thought of you again—)

It had needed to be done; that was all there was to it. And it had never mattered how he fucking felt about it.

"You had to," the alien repeated, low and endlessly bitter. "You didn't even know who I was, you didn't care—"

"I didn't need to," Bruce snapped. "If anything—"

He cut himself off; but too late. The alien's eyes were already narrowing.

"What?" he said, and shook Bruce, knocked him back into the wall again. "What? Say it. Come on, say it—"

"If anything," Bruce said coolly, "that would have made it more difficult to do what was necessary."

The alien stared at him. And for all the icy disdain carved into the furrow of his brow, the shadow of a disbelieving sneer that lingered around his bloodied mouth—his eyes were unmistakably wet.

"Right," he said, slow. "Of course. Wouldn't want to find yourself hesitating a moment too long. Wouldn't want to start feeling anything inconvenient like—"
"What do you want from me?" Bruce cut him off, frustrated.

"I want you to regret it," the alien snapped. "I want you to wish you hadn't done it—I want you to be sorry, goddamn you," and he twisted his hands tighter still in the dark undersuit, so hard his depowered knuckles had to ache.

"Too fucking bad," Bruce murmured, very level; and the alien leaned in closer still

(—not that Bruce had expected as much—not that Bruce had provoked him, deliberate, goading, in the dim twisted hope that he might do exactly this—)

and pinned Bruce back against the corridor wall, barely room enough to draw breath between them. Without his powers, he wasn't any stronger than Bruce. But god, god, the sense of him, the presence, the hot solid weight of his body against Bruce's, was undiminished—and Bruce shoved a thigh between his knees, impulsive, idiotic, and was nevertheless rewarded: he was hard, too.

Clark bit down on a gasp, and for a second he couldn't even decide what he wanted to do most—jerk away and punch Wayne in the face, or drag him down to the floor and—and—

God. What was it about Wayne that made him lose his mind like this?

Not that he could blame Wayne for all of it; just most of it.

He hadn't been sure what to think of Wayne's invitation. Or Diana's, more like, but Wayne hadn't argued with it half as hard as Clark had been expecting. It had started to feel like a good sign. Just getting to go outside had been—he hadn't even realized how much he'd wanted to until suddenly he had an excuse. He'd even thought that maybe—

It had happened before, that was all. He shouldn't have gotten his hopes up, he knew that now, but it was—it had happened before. Sometimes when he'd done something especially difficult, pushed the limits of the strength or the speed, or even damaged himself in a way he needed to heal from—it had never been this bad, admittedly, but it had happened. He'd felt strange, tired, emptied out. And it had always gotten better once he'd had a little sun.

But he should have known. He'd spent the whole drive staring out the windshield of the truck, stunned silent. The landscape had been unrecognizable, terrifying in its windswept emptiness, the long dull line of the horizon broken only by the kinds of landscape formations Clark had never seen this side of the Rockies. But it was—that was Metropolis, or part of it, in the nearer distance. Half-buried, like rock had gone liquid and flowed in like water, hardened before it could recede again. Gotham, too, in the distance, blurred with haze; like this, depowered, Clark could barely see it. And hard empty ground stretching between, where the bay had been but wasn't anymore.

And he'd known as soon as he'd stepped outside that it wouldn't be enough. The sky had changed, the air—still blue, overhead, but paler, harder, filled with dust. Arthur had been right, it was cold, the sun dull and bloody as it set, and Clark had spread his hands out in the dim light of it and hadn't felt a goddamn thing.
Even if he'd stripped naked in it—it wasn't enough light, wasn't strong enough. For all he knew the radiation had changed, the proportion of wavelengths making it through all that sand and smoke and ash. And of all the cruel ironies, this had to be the cruelest: that if he had his powers, it wouldn't matter, except he couldn't get them back without it. An hour, tops, outside the atmosphere, soaking up all the light he could get, and he might be okay—except he couldn't get there without a space shuttle, like this.

(Was this what it was like for everybody else? This helpless, smothering claustrophobia? God, he couldn't do anything, couldn't get anywhere—it had been a sudden and terrible relief to swing into that truck and feel himself moving, air streaming through the windows, because for a moment there he'd felt his whole world contracting down to—jesus, to wherever he could walk to, on these useless tired legs—)

He hadn't been trying to get himself killed in there. He hadn't. It was just—

It was just that maybe it would have been easier. It was just that he couldn't fucking stand it. He should have been able to do something, he was—there had been people fighting, killing, dying right in front of him, and he'd always been able to do something.

(He'd always been able to. Didn't mean he always had. But with Dad—

He hadn't wanted that. He shouldn't have let it happen. He'd told himself he wouldn't, not again: that when he had the chance, he'd do something, anything. No matter what might happen to him because of it.

That was what Dad had taught him, in the end. It wasn't worth it. Letting bad things happen to people just because he was worried about himself, just for his own sake—

It wasn't worth it. It couldn't be.)

But not this time. This time, he'd been just as helpless as anyone else. He'd been right, he'd thought, lying there pinned with Wayne's voice in his ear, bright hot pain seeping through his face, his jaw. He'd been right: this wasn't what Wayne had brought him back for. He couldn't call himself Superman, like this.

Which was exactly why it had been such a shock when Wayne had come for him. Come for him; protected him. Said—

*I would. I will. No matter how many times I have to. You can't get away from me that easily, do you understand,* and god, god, what the hell did it say about Clark that he was so—that he had been *grateful,* fiercely poisonously glad, not even understanding how much he'd craved the reassurance that Wayne wouldn't give up until he'd had it, drunk it down, wanted to dig his fingers into Wayne's throat and squeeze the words out over and over again.

It was hardly a mystery. It was *Wayne,* who never fucking gave up on fucking anything—who was still here, four years after the apocalypse, clinging to the wreckage. It didn't have anything to do with Clark. Wayne didn't give a shit about Clark, he never had; he wanted Superman back, that was all, maybe even more than Clark did. It shouldn't have meant anything. It should have been—it should have pissed Clark off, to hear Wayne say he'd claw Clark back from the grave like that over and over, that he wasn't ever going to let go—

Clark squeezed his eyes shut, dug his fists into the hollows of Wayne's shoulders and didn't move. And Wayne took that for permission, because he didn't know what the hell permission was, and rolled his thigh up against Clark again: slower this time, harder, and Clark shuddered and shoved
Wayne's hips back against the wall.

God. This was just as bad. The same sick exhilaration in it, the terrible relief—that he had Wayne's goddamn attention. That Wayne still needed him, was willing to go to lengths like this to try to keep him—to bribe him, manipulate him, convince him to cooperate, or whatever the fuck it was Wayne expected to get out of this.

Because that was how it worked, right? Wayne did things because he had to, because he needed to. Because they yielded the results he wanted; because they helped him accomplish his goals. Because they were necessary.

That was how he thought of Superman: a necessary evil. And what was Clark doing except proving him right? Demonstrating for him on command exactly how flawed Superman was, exactly how deep the cracks went—and that just made Clark want to shout at him that he didn't understand, he didn't understand anything. It wasn't *Superman* who was like this; it wasn't Superman who could be punching Wayne one minute and groping him the next, who was shaking and bleeding, broken, out of control—

It was Clark. It was—it was all Clark.

(In his head, he knew the answer. He understood. He was weak, he'd been damaged. Healing himself could take time, energy—keeping his body in good enough condition that he could even *be* resurrected had probably drained whatever it was in him, in his alien cells, that drank down all that sunlight and turned it into miracles. He needed more, needed to be patient. That was all it was. His powers were like a flashlight with a dying battery, flickering when he shook them hard enough—

—when he was angry enough, when he hated everything enough—

—but they couldn't stay on. He had to wait, let them recharge. He knew that.

But that wasn't how it felt. He'd come back, yeah; he'd risen up, whole. Except for all the ways he was barely himself at all, except for how the first thing he'd done had been to wrap his hands around Wayne's throat and squeeze. The way he *hated* Wayne, vicious, unbearable—the way he wanted Wayne, just as viciously, just as unbearably. He couldn't stand to—to even think of Lois, to even go there; it felt like if he let himself so much as touch any of it, any of those soft sunlit memories—

He didn't know. Like they'd shrivel and blacken, curl away from his fingertips and crumble to ash. Like the shadow he felt in himself would be cast across them, stain them, ruin them.

Superman had been the best of him. But there wasn't any best of him anymore, not like this; and it was like the powers knew it. Like they knew he didn't deserve them, wasn't fit—like he'd been weighed and found wanting.

He'd been right. What he'd said to Diana, it was—he'd been right. Wayne hadn't brought Superman back at all.)

"Come on," Wayne was murmuring against his ear. "Come on. That isn't all you want."

Clark bit down on a laugh he couldn't let out. Jesus. Of course. Of course Wayne would rather let Clark fuck him than admit he might have screwed up.

Besides, it wasn't like Clark—

It wasn't like Clark was the only one who wanted this.
He sucked in an unsteady breath; he'd already been catching alight, slow grudging degrees like damp tinder, at the feeling of Wayne against him, but suddenly it was—he felt a prickling wave of heat through him, and his hands tightened where they were twisted into Wayne's suit. But it was true. It had to be true. Whatever this was, whatever they were doing, it wasn't all on him.

He'd been so caught up, he hadn't even thought about it. But that radio channel had cut, and he'd been mad as hell, already wound up, swirling with half-formed outraged thoughts of marching up there

(—where? Like he knew; he hadn't left the ship except with Arthur, he didn't know where the hell Wayne was or how to get there. He didn't even know whether he was—whether he could leave the ship, whether he'd be able to talk himself into it. Because the ship knew him, and he knew it. It was the only thing left in the entire goddamn world that he recognized, including himself. Could he have made himself step out of it, leave it behind?)

and getting in Wayne's face, right there, a presence Wayne couldn't ignore, words he wouldn't be able to cut off with the flick of a switch.

Except he hadn't had to. And in the moment, it had felt only right: he'd wanted Wayne in front of him and Wayne had appeared. It had felt like nothing but an extension of the infuriating reality that Wayne was—was always there, even when he wasn't. In Clark's head, if not in person. Clark couldn't make it stop. Thinking of him, remembering him, stewing furiously over Bruce Wayne's assholery or dreaming helplessly of Batman standing over him in a green-lit dimness.

Clark couldn't get the fuck away from Wayne no matter how hard he tried.

(—that easily, do you understand? I would—I will—)

So, yeah: of course Wayne had been there.

Except that didn't make sense. Except wherever Wayne had been—the security room, the ship had called it, when Clark had asked—he had to have left. He'd left and walked down to the ship himself. He'd come to Clark on purpose; he'd come to Clark because, one way or another, he'd wanted to.

"No," Clark said aloud, and for an instant there was a weird sort of power in it. That he could say it, admit it, when Wayne was still dressing everything up in fifteen kinds of bullshit. "No, that's not all I want."

He let his hands loosen, stopped gripping Wayne's weird black suit-thing and gripping Wayne instead: his shoulders, the solid hard muscle of them; his chest, the better to pin him back against the wall of the corridor. And Wayne let him, face impassive, gaze steady—but his chin had come up just a little, as if somewhere deep down he hadn't quite managed to stamp out the urge to let his head fall back.

And fuck, this was a bad idea. It had been a bad idea last time, and it hadn't gotten any better since. But Clark did want it—he was desperate for it, for the opportunity to lose himself in it—

"Come on," Wayne said again, very low. "What do you want to do to me, Kent? Hm? Come on. Show me."

Whatever it was he'd been expecting, it didn't seem to have been for Clark to lean into him, to skim a hand down to grip him through his uniform pants. He jerked a little in Clark's grasp, against the free palm Clark still had spread across his chest; and a furrow crossed his brow, the barest dim flicker of something Clark was tempted to call surprise.
"What?" Clark said. "You thought I was going to try to punch you again?"

"Something like that," Wayne murmured, after a moment.

Clark huffed out a breath through his nose and shook his head, and felt the corner of his mouth try to draw up in half a smile. "I remember how that worked out for me last time," he told Wayne, and then grimaced a little, tonguing at his lip. "Besides, I think maybe my face is enough of a mess already."

Stupid to open the door, he thought, even as he said it. Stupid to give Wayne an opportunity to tear him a new one all over again for rushing in there and getting himself pistol-whipped.

But Wayne didn't say anything. He just looked at Clark for a moment, silent, unreadable; and then he reached up and touched Clark's mouth.

He didn't mean anything by it. He couldn't have. The brush of his fingertips was impersonal, clinical. He'd probably intended to look at it, that was all: tip Clark's lower lip a little, get a better angle to examine the split that was still bleeding away sluggishly.

(Clark hadn't known what to do about it, how to tell whether it was bad enough to need—stitches? Was that right? He had no idea. Getting a needle and thread involved sounded almost as bad to him as getting a split lip in the first place, but then he'd—he'd never needed any help healing from anything. Either he did it himself, in seconds, once whatever had caused the hurt was gone, or—

Or he died, pretty much.)

But Clark drew in a breath, startled, and suddenly Wayne seemed to—seemed to realize what he'd done, where his hand was, that his thumb had dipped almost inside the corner of Clark's mouth. His gaze flicked up from Clark's lips, and all at once they were staring at each other, six inches apart, and Wayne still hadn't moved his goddamn hand.

For an instant, Clark was frozen, bewildered, helpless and wide-eyed. He'd shouted at Wayne and fought with him, tried to strangle him, jerked him off; but they hadn't—Wayne had never just touched him. Not like this.

And then, sudden and hot and uncontrollable, he **hated** Wayne for it.

He felt his mouth twisting itself into a sneer. Wayne had come away from the wall just a little, not pressed back into it anymore—Clark fixed that with a sharp shove, jerked his face away from Wayne's hand and then caught Wayne by the wrist so hard the bones in his fingers ached. "That's not what we're here for, Wayne," he snapped, and pushed his thigh between Wayne's, pressed in with his other hand and rubbed his fingers with casual crudeness around the shape of Wayne's cock in his pants.

Because this was supposed to be simple. This was supposed to be easy, straightforward: the one thing that was, these days. Not the part where it was Wayne, but the part where it was nothing. Getting off, quick and hard, because they could and because by some sick twist of fate they both wanted to, even if it was just to pass the time until one of them died again, one way or another. Letting everything else fade out; not having to **think** about any of it, even if it was just for five minutes—for ten seconds, pure and blank and empty, in the rush of coming.

Afterward, of course, it would all come crashing back. Clark would remember how much he despised Wayne. He'd remember exactly how much he shouldn't have let himself do this; he'd feel tired, frustrated, resigned. Angry at himself, for doing it anyway, and at Wayne for letting him, for—for wanting it too, for coming down here, for never being content to just leave Clark the hell alone—
Wayne bit off a gasp, and did let his head drop back after all. He moved under Clark's hands—into them, obscene, shameless, but what else could you expect from Bruce Wayne? His trapped hand curled and uncurled, but he didn't break Clark's grip on his wrist.

"Well, come on," he murmured. "Come on, Kent," and Clark squeezed his eyes shut and gripped Wayne harder, rolled his own hips against Wayne's thigh and hated it. He hated it, he hated it—

He was breathing too fast, too hard. His heart was like thunder in his ears. He couldn't stand this, he couldn't—he hated this, he thought dimly. He hated feeling like this. He hated it more than anything.

It was like he could tell it was happening, this time. It swept through him in a wave, tingling just under his skin. His eyes were shut, but it didn't matter; he could feel the heat gathering around them, the backs of his eyelids glowing red. He heard the split-second telltale creak of bone, and he was—jesus, he needed to let go of Wayne's wrist, he was two seconds from snapping Wayne's hand off. He sucked in a shaky breath and eased his grip. Wayne was going to have bruises on his arm, on his hip, at the top of his ass where Clark's fingers had been starting to dip down; but Clark managed not to pulverize him.

And god, what the fuck was this? Why now? Of all the times he could've used his powers, had been desperate for them—surrounded by people in life-threatening danger, people he could've helped, and not a single fucking blip. He'd spent hours wishing for them, praying, through the whole goddamn truck ride out there, the fight, all of it. Trying to will them back into himself with the sheer force of his helpless desperation, coming up empty over and over—and now, now, when he was safe in the ship with his hand on Wayne's ass—

He heard himself make a strangled sound, and he was—he made himself move, a flicker of the speed to get a safe distance away from Wayne, so when he put his fists through the corridor wall it wouldn't kill Wayne.

They had a deal, after all.

Wayne's breath caught somewhere behind Clark; belatedly, Clark caught himself thinking, except of course it wasn't, because for Wayne it had been the blink of an eye. "Kent," he said, very evenly.

Metal had buckled under Clark's fists. But it hadn't given way, not exactly—it stayed bent around his hands for a moment, like he'd shocked it still. And then it started to flow. Not filling in, not the ship repairing itself; it was drawing carefully away, leaving his hands empty, knuckles clenched against nothing.

Like the ship was trying to tell him silently that if he wanted to put his hands in that particular spot, then okay. No need to go breaking things.

He almost laughed, except it didn't come out right; his throat was too tight.

Lucky, maybe, that his eyes had heated up, his vision still brighter and redder than it ought to be. He couldn't cry if he wanted to, like this.

"Kent," Wayne said again—still even, but more quietly. More carefully.

Clark didn't turn around, didn't look at him. He set his hands against the wall, to either side of the indent the ship had made for him, and he wet his lips. Flinched a little, anticipatory, except—oh. Of course. The split was gone, had fixed itself; all that was left was the aftertaste of blood, a crust where some of it had begun to dry.

"Goddamn useless," he told the wall, and if Wayne happened to be listening, Clark didn't care
enough to stop him. "I could have helped, you bastard, if you'd just let me," and maybe he was talking to himself, to his own screwed-up alien biology; or maybe he was talking to Wayne after all.

(—or maybe he was talking to the Gotham Bat, four fucking years ago. The thing he hadn't had a chance to say, hadn't managed to squeeze out of his burning throat before that spear had plunged down for the last time: no, wait, I need to help—there's—my mother—

Except he couldn't have said it like that. Wayne hadn't known who he was, back then, and it wouldn't have been safe to tell him. Clark would've—would've had to pretend Mom was a stranger. Just some woman named Martha, in danger—)

"I could have helped," he said again, and he wanted to fucking shout it, but he was—it came out hoarse instead, strained, cracked down the middle. "I just wanted to help people. That was all I ever —"

He stopped then. He had to, no more words left on his tongue, empty and scraped out. He screwed his eyes shut in a wash of red light, gritted his teeth and let his head drop.

God, he was so tired of this.

Wayne didn't move. He probably would soon, though. In a minute or two, once he was sure Clark wasn't going to turn on him. He'd leave, because

(—that's not what we're here for, Wayne—)

he didn't have any reason not to, and it wasn't like anything Clark could do or say was capable of giving him one. He'd be gone, and Clark would be able to breathe again. His heart would stop hammering, he'd—he'd get a grip, and this would all be easier.

He tensed, involuntary, at the first touch. Wayne had—Wayne's hand was on his back, broad palm between his shoulder blades. Clark was still wearing the suit, his borrowed shirt and vest and leather jacket; except like this, with his powers, he had the senses back, too. He could feel it as clearly as though Wayne had touched his bare skin, and he stood there shivering, breathless, distantly bewildered. What the hell was Wayne doing?

A strung-out moment's silence, and then Wayne moved again, scrape of his booted feet across the floor. Closer, not away. He stepped in, lined himself up against Clark's back—he was deliberate about it, slow, precise, until the whole solid breadth of him was inescapably there. And his hand: he skimmed it, equally deliberate, equally precise, down and across Clark's side, up his chest, to grip one lapel of the jacket.

And Clark stood there and let him, swallowing hard.

"Come on," Wayne murmured. But it was—it sounded different this time. Quiet, coaxing.

He was pulling the lapel aside, just a little; sliding his hand in underneath, catching the vest, the shirt, in his fingers and rucking them up. And then—

Then he hit the suit.

He paused. Clark could practically hear that gigantic overclocked brain spinning its wheels, and he huffed half a laugh through his nose without even meaning to.

And then he took one hand off the wall, brought it down and slid his fingers between Wayne's. Just to get to the suit, that was all. Just to draw his hand across, concentrating, willing it, until the material
began to part obediently.

"Neat trick," Wayne said after a moment, the words brushing softly over the nape of Clark's neck.

"Yeah," Clark said unsteadily. "I don't know if you've noticed, but I've got a few of those."

"You do," Wayne agreed, inflectionless.

And then their fingers tangled again, for an instant, as he reached in—shoved the chest of the suit up where Clark had split it open, thumb tracing a line up Clark's breastbone; catching in the hair there, and even that tiny little tug was enough to make Clark bite his lip. And then Wayne reversed course, dipped down past the waist, and Clark sucked in a breath and tipped his head back against the steady solid bulwark of Wayne's shoulder, and—and let him.

It didn't mean anything. Wayne was trying to get one over on him, maybe, or—or prove something, to Clark or to himself, touching Clark like this when Clark could tear him apart for it. The first time, after all, it had been Clark doing everything: shoving Wayne around, holding him up, jerking him off and then pinning him there to thrust against him. If this really was his secret plan to see whether he could make Clark more biddable, pliable, offering him orgasms to keep him happy while Wayne tried to figure out what was wrong with him, then hell, it was working.

It was working, because Clark just closed his burning eyes and leaned back against Wayne, and let Wayne touch him.

It was easy, like this, to let it overpower him. Even the tiniest brush of Wayne's fingertips made him shudder and jerk, made his cock leak—Wayne at his back, all that coiled tension and strength, the way his breath had picked up, the pound of his pulse. Clark could feel it all, hear it. He could smell it, sweat and sex; because Wayne was still hard, too, pressed against Clark's ass. And he wasn't doing anything about it, but every fraction of an inch of transferred motion, the movement of his hands on Clark shifting the rest of his body, felt like he was about to—like he was thinking about it, like he wanted to.

Clark had never used the supersenses to focus this hard on the sensitivity of the skin of his ass before. But god, every minute sensation of Wayne's cock against him was setting him on fire—shifting back into it just shifted Wayne's grip on his own dick, made Wayne chase him and stroke him harder, and fuck, fuck, god, it was so good.

It shouldn't have been, but it was. And Clark shuddered under Wayne's hands, twisted his head and pressed his face to the side of Wayne's throat, and let the bright incandescent flare of it overwhelm him.

It was quiet after, for a long moment. Even to Clark's ears, it was quiet: nothing but the sound of his breaths, Wayne's, and Clark couldn't even tell who it was that thundering pulse belonged to, couldn't pick apart his own from Wayne's.

He let himself stay there, let Wayne hold him up. And then he steadied himself, pulled away just far enough to turn without having to shove Wayne backwards, and met Wayne's eyes.

Wayne was watching him, expressionless. He was selling it pretty well, Clark thought, except he still had Clark's come on his hand, his wrist, and he was still hard—unmistakably, close-fit uniform pants drawn tight around the thick shape of it.

Clark reached, half-expecting Wayne to move away, but he didn't. He let Clark take him by the hips, guide him in against Clark's thigh; he was still watching Clark's face in that level steady way the
whole time, until Clark pulled him in that last inch, moved it himself so Wayne's cock rubbed along the crease at his hip—then Wayne hitched against him in a quick uncontrolled jerk, eyes falling shut, the tight line of his mouth slackening to something approaching softness.

He thrust again, a short sharp movement, and he'd grabbed onto Clark, was gripping his shoulder, his back. He was—he was desperate for it, Clark realized belatedly, reaching down to Wayne's ass. Just to guide him a little, slow him down, follow his thrusts better, except when Clark got his hands on it he mostly just wanted to dig his fingers in. If Wayne had ever had much mass to spare on him, he didn't anymore; he was broad, but so—so compact about it, so tightly-wound, that Clark only ever noticed how big Wayne really was when he was in one of his armored suits, glaring, suddenly taking up all the space in the room.

Wayne made a strangled little sound, low in his throat, and thrust again, again, and abruptly Clark could tell that he really was just that close. He reached up with one hand, gripped Wayne by the nape of the neck, thumb settling at the angle of Wayne's jaw—drew him in so their temples pressed together, and Wayne bit off a gasp and grabbed at his wrist and shuddered against him, silent, teeth dug deep into his own lip.

Jesus. There was something so weird about that. Weird, but almost satisfying, in a cool spiteful way. That Wayne wanted him that much, that badly. Could kill him and still end up coming in his pants for him. For an instant, Clark was tempted to rub his nose in it—if only I'd known, huh? Maybe I'd have spared the ten minutes to stop and hold you down and fuck you, and then you'd have been too busy begging me for it to murder me—

Except here he was, still sticking to himself a little where Wayne had jerked him off. And if Wayne was contemptible for letting himself want this, then what did that make Clark?

Neither of them had moved. He was—he was still gripping Wayne by the back of the neck, except he wasn't holding on hard enough to call it that. Their heads were still tilted together, faces close enough that Wayne's midnight-o'clock shadow was catching a little against Clark's cheek, scraping. And he could feel it, he realized distantly, but it wasn't ten thousand sparks at once, his skin stripped raw with it. The senses were gone. It was all gone; his vision was clear, without that tinge of red haloing the edges. His knees were weak. His chest ached, and he drew an unsteady breath and reached up absently to rub at it, but somehow that didn't help at all.

He hadn't meant it to be a cue, but Wayne seemed to take it as one. Clark's wrist felt odd, delicate and sort of cold, without Wayne's hand wrapped around it; and Wayne took a half-step back and Clark couldn't stop him.

(Why did he even want to? Jesus, what the hell was wrong with him—)

Wayne looked at Clark. And then he cleared his throat a little and looked away, and said, "You don't need to stay in the ship."

Clark blinked. "What?"

"You don't need to stay in the ship," Wayne repeated obligingly. As if that had anything to do with what they'd just—but maybe that was the point, as far as Wayne was concerned. Drawing a line in the sand: it was over, done, and they definitely weren't going to talk about it. On to business; change of subject.

And then, belated, Clark heard the actual words, and couldn't help but stare. "You—really?"
Wayne glanced at him, in a mild inquiring way that might make you think he hadn't come in his pants two minutes ago, if you didn't know better.

"I figured you'd be out there first thing in the morning trying to work out how to weld the hull solid," Clark said. "You had one condition, and I broke it. Aren't you—"

"You didn't put anyone in harm's way but yourself," Wayne said, looking away again. "You went with us, you were part of a team. What did you say, when people asked for your name?"

"I—just Kent," Clark said. He'd figured that was simplest. It could be a first name or a last name; and everybody these days seemed to go by something that was two syllables tops. Easy to say without opening your mouth too far, maybe—without letting the dust in. Besides, who needed last names to tell people apart, when the world was—was this small?

Wayne didn't look too pissed, so it must not have been the wrong thing to do.

"And," Clark added more slowly, "none of them asked where I'd come from."

He looked at Wayne. He'd just thought it himself: the world felt so small like this, one compound, couple hundred people, nothing for miles but stone and sand. There was no way they hadn't noticed a stranger.

"You already put out some kind of cover story for me, didn't you?"

"Rescues," Wayne said shortly. "Diana comes back with people sometimes. The point is, they've got a name. They've seen your face. Easiest explanation is that you're sticking around—that you'll be around, and they'll see you again." He met Clark's eyes again, brief, a flicker, and then turned away. "Leave the ship sometimes," he said again, even, over his shoulder. And then he crossed the corridor and set his hand against the wall. "Ship," he said, and a door formed for him; and he left, and didn't look back.
Chapter 9

Lois was ready for it.

She was. She'd known it was coming. She hadn't seen him—she was obscurely grateful that she hadn't, that she hadn't even known it was a possibility. Scrambling around in the dark in the raiders' base; going back and forth between Twist, Anna, Nicolas, trying to make sure everyone was accounted for, on the same page, ready—and without getting her own stupid ass caught doing it. She'd had a closer call than she wanted to think about, one of the raiders giving her a long narrow-eyed look like he knew he didn't recognize her, even with the dust-cloth shielding her face.

Anyway, she'd had plenty to do, and once the assault had started, it wasn't like anybody had pulled her aside to say, *Oh, by the way, we brought along your undead ex, hope that's okay.*

She hadn't known he was there. Not until afterward—half asleep in the back of one of the trucks, skin prickling with the comedown, adrenaline slowly giving up its grip, hearing somebody up in the cab murmur it: *where'd that guy Kent come from, anyway? You seen him around before?*

She'd felt her whole body, her heart, the entire world, go still around her. She hadn't heard another word for the rest of the drive. She'd just lain back there, silent, staring up at the darkening sky, stars dimmed by blowing dust, empty of everything except the repeating loop of it. *That guy Kent. That guy Kent.*

It was weird to think about it. That maybe she'd only been a few hundred feet from him, or even less, and she'd had no idea.

But the point was, she'd had time to prepare herself. She'd known it might happen. Wayne had evidently come to terms with Clark's existence somehow. He couldn't possibly be happy about giving Clark free rein within the compound, never mind outside of it. But it must have seemed to him like the lesser evil, compared to an enraged Superman locked up against his will in the basement—compared to the chance of said enraged Superman breaking out and wreaking havoc. If Wayne couldn't keep Clark shut up in the ship forever, he'd take the illusion of control over having an utter lack of it shoved in his face.

She was ready—as ready as she could be.

And yet, in so many ways, not ready at all.

She was in hydroponics with Victor again, which in retrospect felt almost appropriate. Victor had been in there for days, looking at the plants; scanning, back and forth, back and forth, empty-eyed. But he'd started to get almost responsive again—looking at her when she spoke to him, when Barry did, even if he seemed to be staring right through them instead of meeting their eyes. Whatever it was that had happened to him, whatever defensive procedures had taken him over, they were starting to ease up again.
So she kept going down there to talk to him, when she had the chance. To ask him questions, even if he never answered. To tell him about Clark—about her parents, about Lucy, about Perry. About the Planet, about Metropolis; about that one place four blocks from the office that had made the best éclairs she'd ever tasted.

And then, halfway through explaining the worst pun Perry had ever made aloud in her presence, Victor blinked.

She cut herself off, watching him carefully for a second. "Victor?" she said.

He looked at her—actually at her, in that way he had that made him suddenly feel so inescapably present. And then he turned his head and looked at the door, red light flaring from his mechanical eye, and the door opened, and it was—

It was Clark.

It was Clark.

She stared at him and swallowed, and wondered dimly where all the air in the hydroponics bay had gone; there didn't seem to be any left. He was—he looked startlingly normal. Somehow she'd half-expected him to be—

To be the way she remembered him, that last awful glimpse she had never been able to forget. Pale, bloody, sinking away from her into the water; face slack, eyes closed.

But it wasn't like that at all. He was dressed in what must have been borrowed clothes, layers, a jacket. The only thing that was odd about it was that he didn't have his glasses on. He'd hardly ever been willing to risk walking around without them in civilian clothes. He was staring right back at her, deer in the headlights, all wide blue Clark-Kent eyes, there and whole and alive.

Alive, she thought again. Alive. And she couldn't have said what her face was going to do until she felt it—until her cheeks ached with the force of her smile, and she did manage to suck in a breath after all and then spent it instantly on a helpless laugh.

(She'd been afraid of—god, of so many things. That she'd start screaming, sobbing; that she wouldn't be able to look at him, wouldn't be able to bring herself to touch him. That it would be frightening. That it would hurt.

But it wasn't like that at all.)

"Lois," he said, carefully, quietly.

"Clark," she said, and threw herself out the open hatchway and into his arms.

And ten thousand times better than seeing him was the solid reality of him, the way he caught her and held her, the huff of his breath in her hair. She laughed again into his shoulder, jubilant; and he reached up and cupped the back of her head so gently she could barely feel it, and said, "Lois," again.

"Clark," she repeated back to him, and then laughed again and had to let go of him to swipe at her eyes—and for once it didn't even piss her off to realize she was crying. "Clark, god, you're—are you really all right?"

"Yeah, I am," he said, half a smile on his mouth, reassuring—and reflexive, Lois thought, and raised an eyebrow at him.
He ducked his head, abashed, and she almost laughed again at how familiar it all was, an old routine they’d fallen into a hundred times, whenever there was something on his mind that he didn’t want to bother her with.

"I'm fine," he insisted. "Or at least it's—it hardly even hurts anymore," and he reached out and took her hand, slid it in under the lapel of his jacket. Over his heart—where the wound that had killed him had been, except nothing gave under her fingers. He was whole.

But that didn’t mean he wasn't also full of shit. "Anymore," she echoed, deliberate, because she hadn't just fallen off the turnip truck yesterday.

And he bit his lip a little and said, "It was—it took a little while to heal all the way, I think. It ached at first, that's all. I'm okay."

"Good," she said, and then shook her head at the sheer magnitude of the understatement. Good, jesus. Couldn't she do any better than that?

But Clark didn't seem to mind. He was still kind of staring at her—as if she were the one who'd been dead, as if she were the miracle here.

She hugged him again, helplessly, and he didn't seem to mind that, either. She felt a kiss pressed softly into her hair, and then he sort of froze, awkward and uncertain. "Oh, cut that out," she said, and let go long enough to take his face in her hands, tip his head down and press a kiss of her own against the crown of it. "It isn't the same," she said into his hair. "It isn't going to be the same now—"

"I know," he murmured against her shoulder. "I know, I didn't mean—"

"It's fine," she said, before he could tie himself in any more knots. "It's all right. I still love you. Okay? I still love you, too."

He was silent for a long moment. "Yeah," he managed at last, very low, hoarse, and she kissed him on the brow, the cheek, and then let him go.

His eyes were wet, too, when he pulled away.

And then it was her turn to blurt, too-loud and awkward, "I'm—I'm sorry I didn't—"

"No," he said, before she could even figure out how she'd meant to end that sentence. "No, don't say that. You needed time. I did, too," he confessed. "It's fine. It was—it was better that you didn't come. When they first—" He stopped, and rubbed awkwardly at the back of his neck. "When they—I was—it was better that you didn't."

And she wasn't sure she believed him, but—

But she couldn't have done it. Even if she'd wanted to, she couldn't have. And there were only so many apologies she could offer him, when that was as true as ever.

"All right," she said aloud. "Okay. Here, come on. Come in," and she took him by the hand and drew him into the hydroponics bay, pulled the hatch shut with a clunk behind him. "And you're really all right?"

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I promise." He looked at her again with that strange wondering expression, and then closed his eyes for a second and shook his head. "When they told me everything that had happened, Steppenwolf and the boxes, the world, I thought—I didn't know what to think. But you're—you're okay?"
"I am," she agreed gently, and then paused. "I'm lucky," she admitted, "that Wayne was around. It didn't feel like it at the time, but I don't know how long I'd have stayed alive without him."

Something unreadable flickered across Clark's face. "Right," he said. "Wayne. And you've been—"

He cut himself off, like he wasn't sure how to ask without it coming out sounding like an accusation.

"We work together," Lois said for him. "He runs this place, but he needs information. I get it for him. I'm not trying to tell you I don't hate him. I do. I really do. But he's keeping a lot of people alive these days, and so am I. Or—we're trying to, at least."

Clark looked away, quick, and Lois could see his jaw work, the flash of something that was almost frustration in the dip of his brow. "Right," he said again, sharper this time. "That's why he brought me back at all."

"He told you," Lois said, because of course he had. Of course the first thing Wayne had done with the man he'd murdered and then brought back from the dead had been to give him a mission briefing. Jesus Christ.

"We've—talked," Clark said, and then bit at his mouth like he wished he'd kept it shut. He rubbed a thumb against the bridge of his nose, and then shook his head. "Do you know, out of all of this, that's the thing I still can't get my head around? This whole place, everything he's done, everything he's doing. That he's gone to that kind of effort, even when everything's going to hell around him, to help people, when—"

"Clark," Lois said carefully, settling a hand on his shoulder.

"—when the only thing he was ever willing to do with me was kill me."

His voice broke, half a word lost, and he squeezed his eyes shut and tried half-heartedly to twist out from under her palm. But she held on, and after a moment he compromised, staying where he was but twisting his face away, covering it with his hand.

"I don't even know why it matters," he said, and he sounded so goddamn tired that it made her heart ache. "I just wish—"

"Hey," she murmured, when he cut himself off, and touched his jaw, his cheek. "Hey, it's all right. It's not your fault." She let her voice go dry. "Wayne's a special kind of asshole, that's all."

Clark laughed, choked and a little wet, and turned absently into her hand—covered it, after a moment, with his own, and then squeezed. "Yeah," he agreed. "He is." His mouth twisted down. "And look what he got for it."

Lois frowned at him, and after a moment he glanced at her and saw it.

"Oh," he said, almost absent. "That's right, you—you don't know, I guess. He got me back, and I'm healed now. But I told you it took a while. I'm—I'm not—the things I used to be able to do, I can't—"

"You mean your powers," Lois said slowly. "Your powers are gone?"

"Not gone," Clark said. "Not all the time. They keep coming back, but only for a couple of minutes. I can't—I can't figure out how to make them work."

"When?" Lois said.
Clark looked at her.

"When do they come back?"

"When I'm," Clark said, and then stopped short. An odd look crossed his face.

"What?" Lois said.

Not her most compelling question ever, but it seemed to be the one Clark had needed to hear, because he looked at her and wet his lips, took a slow breath, and said, "I was going to say it's when I'm angry. But I'm not sure that's true. I fought with Wayne a few times, but it didn't happen every time. Just the times when he had the better of me, or I thought he was going to. When I thought he might—" He stopped and swallowed. "When I thought he might kill me again, at first. When I was remembering it."

"When you were afraid," Lois said.

She turned and looked over her shoulder.

Victor hadn't moved. In the rush of seeing Clark so suddenly, she'd—she'd half forgotten, but of course he was still standing by the nearest row of plants, waiting quietly, mismatched gaze trained on the two of them.

Clark couldn't have gotten in here. He didn't know the codes, and without his powers he couldn't have forced the door—and she'd have known if he had. Why would he even have tried? He couldn't have looked through it, couldn't have had any idea she was in here. He must have been passing by, that was all. Trying to find his way around, ten times as hard for him when he couldn't see through the walls, and then the door had just swung open for him.

Except, of course, it hadn't. It couldn't have. Victor had opened it.

And when Victor was afraid, something inside of him took over and tried to defend itself.

She remembered lying in that truck after the battle, the shake in her hands, the unsteady lurch in her stomach; adrenaline.

"It's when you're afraid," she repeated aloud. "You said it was taking you a long time to heal. Maybe that's all it is. You need all that power to repair yourself. When you're afraid, really afraid, your body redirects it for a minute. But it can't keep that up forever, when it's got four years of—of being dead to take care of."

She turned back, and suddenly she was pretty sure Clark hadn't been listening. Because he wasn't looking at her—he was staring over her shoulder at Victor.

"You," he said. "You were—you shot at me."

Lois winced. "Right," she said. "And somehow I doubt Wayne took the time to introduce you. Clark, this is Victor. Victor Stone. Plus or minus an unspeakably powerful piece of alien technology from space. Victor, this is—"

And it happened, as breathtakingly abrupt as ever: Victor's gaze went from Lois to Clark, that dark human eye unmistakably aware and intent. "Clark," he said.

He took a half-step forward, and Clark jerked back, eyes wide, but Lois grabbed for his elbow. "Wait! Wait, just—wait. Victor—"
The red eye went brilliant, blazing, and Clark was swept suddenly with light. Up and down, side to side; scanning him, more thoroughly than Victor had ever done to anything that Lois could remember.

"Clark," Victor said again, and this time it wasn't steady, bland, but—intent, urgent, voice and tone full of expressive color. "I can help you." He paused, still furiously scanning, and his eyes went briefly distant. Lois thought for a second that he was about to go away again, but then he refocused. "We can help you," he amended.

"What? What is he going to—"

"I don't know," Lois said. "Victor," but she was too slow: he was already coming up off the ground somehow, hovering in the air, giving off a strange thrumming pressure that made Lois's ears pop. And then it wasn't just his eye but all of him that was glowing. Heating up, Lois realized, seeing the air start to waver around him. The metal that made up his body was blazing with energy, red-hot and then white-hot, brilliant, blinding. A wave of heat, a pulse, knocked her sideways, and she threw up an arm to shield her face. Next to her, Clark cried out, sudden and shocking, and she reached out for him but couldn't find him, couldn't see, the whole world burning white around her—

It was a long way up to the security room.

Which was fine. Twist had it handled. One step at a time, that was all. Maybe they weren't real quick steps, but that was okay. They'd get her there anyway, in the end, as long as she managed enough of them in a row. No problem.

And it got easier as she went along. Sure, her side ached where she'd been kicked. Her legs were sore, strained, from the weight of dragging around those damn chains. She was stuck peering out the one eye that would still open, and Aline had insisted on putting stitches in her face, her lip—at the back of her head, where one of those bastards had managed to split the skin open knocking her against a rock.

Few more scars to add to the collection. She wondered how many more badass points they might count for, in Allen's scoring system.

But she was fine, pretty much. Getting bundled into a truck, sleeping on one of Aline's cots all night, had made her stiff. Best thing for her, moving around a little.

Just—slow. One step at a time.

But she made it up there in the end. Got a few little sideways looks, and she looked back blandly out of her good eye and waited it out, and didn't get any shit.

Not much, anyway. Even if it was a little suspicious that a chair suddenly happened to be free.

"Just remembered I promised to check in with Britta about getting somebody out there for that truck we had to ditch," Matthew said, mild, clapping her on the shoulder. "Keep it warm for me?"
At least he'd put in the effort to come up with something plausible. And it wasn't like she could claim to mind being able to sit down for a minute.

Ten minutes, maybe fifteen, and there was the sound of boots by the doorway. She figured it was Matthew, set her hand on the back of the chair to lever herself up out of it again—and then did glance up, with her good eye, and blinked. "Boss."

"Twist," he said, with a brief absent frown. "You shouldn't be here."

Twist gave him a steady look. Yeah, all right, her ribs were cracked, she looked like shit, she had stitches in her face. But of the two of them, she wasn't the one who'd made it necessary for somebody to sit around cleaning blood off the security room floor. Twice.

He met her eyes, pursed his mouth a little, and conceded the point with the barest dip of his head.

"There's someone new," he said, "one of Diana's." And that was reasonable enough, not unusual; he told her shit like that so she'd know not to raise a full alarm over a face she didn't recognize.

But there was something about his tone, the way he said it, that made her think there was going to be a punchline.

So in a way she was almost ready for it, when he added, all mild and casual, "Name's Kent."

Almost.

Because she knew what that meant. What it had to mean, the way he'd said it. Anybody could be named Kent; but she'd pieced together enough from Lane over the years, from the things she'd shouted at Wayne back in the early days, to grasp that "Clark Kent" was a name that carried extra weight for a really, really good reason.

She swallowed. Okay. Okay, then. So—so that was what it had all been about, all along. Allen's friend, Stone; the thing he'd been worried about, the thing Wayne was doing that could have hurt Stone. This might be the worst mistake I'd ever made, that's what he'd said, and he'd meant this. Because he'd—all of that had been so he could—

And it had worked, whatever it was. It had worked.

Superman was alive.

Goddamn.

(Goddamn—did Lane know? It was impossibly hard to imagine Wayne telling her, calmly explaining it, after everything. But he must have; there was no way he was stupid enough to try to keep it a secret. Lane knew everything. She'd have figured it out within a day—)

"Okay," Twist said aloud, a little faintly, and then cleared her throat and said it again. "Okay. Got it, boss."

Superman was alive, and—and Wayne had decided to let him walk around? She almost couldn't decide which surprised her more.

"Anything else I should know?" she added, a little dryly, because jesus.

"No," Wayne said, mild. "No, I think that's it."

And she supposed it wasn't like there were any extra security measures she could take, anything that
was likely to work, if it was really Superman. Unless—

She narrowed her good eye. Wayne had come for her, her team. But he hadn't run any other big ops, wasn't gearing up for an assault on Steppenwolf's fortress or even on the closest drill platform. He wasn't acting like somebody who had a superpowered alien on his side.

So maybe he didn't.

"Boss," she said slowly. "Boss, is there something—"

For an instant, she had no idea what had happened. Someone had kicked her chair; but who? Why? Didn't make sense. She'd fallen, collapsed—maybe, seeing as she'd hit her head and all, but in her experience that kind of thing didn't happen without at least a little warning. You felt a little like shit, and then a lot, then like ten kinds of it, and then you fell down, if you were going to.

An earthquake, she thought next, still taking stock. She was—she’d been tossed, thrown against the security console, knees hitting the concrete floor with a jolt. But it wasn't just her. Sound was filtering back in, voices raised around her in alarm; even Wayne had had to shift his weight, brace himself, and he was already moving toward the console with a frown, hands at the controls, taking half a dozen different kinds of readings.

"Boss—"

"It's the box," he said, clipped. "Stone."

She glanced past his hands at the screen, and—jesus, it was off the charts, errors exploding across the display, half the compound's interior sensors deciding they were broken at the same time. The heat, the change in air pressure, the energy. If Wayne hadn't said the magic word—box—she'd have figured a bomb had gone off down there. Was going off, because it was still happening.

And Steppenwolf had been scouring the planet for those things. No way he wasn't going to notice this.

"Stone," she repeated. "If I can get him to the ship—"

"Yes," Wayne said, turning on his heel. "Yes. Whoever you need, whoever you can find. Diana, Curry, anyone who might survive it. Get them to Stone, and get him to the ship. Now."

"Got it, boss," Twist said, pushing herself up.

Wayne was already moving, ahead of her on the way out—turning the opposite direction down the corridor. What the hell was he headed to the courtyard for? Maybe to prepare, get whatever shift was on watch some backup, if Steppenwolf was headed their way; a swarm was probably already in the air. But he could've radioed—

Not that it mattered. No time to ask, and if she did he probably wouldn't stop to answer. There was shit to do.

One step at a time wasn't going to do the job, not now. She made herself move, ignored the jabs of pain in her side—lucky she hadn't decided to go out on the walls, wasn't going to have to shoot anything. She didn't need both her eyes for this.

She paused for a second at an intersection. She remembered the display; she had half an idea where
Stone was, somewhere down in the general area of the hydroponics bay. Should have been sealed, but she wouldn't be surprised if Stone could get in there anyway.

But who could she ask to help her move him? How? She cursed herself silently. If she'd just been looking at the monitors instead of sitting there thinking about her ribs, maybe she'd have half an idea where Diana was. Curry—would he be in the same room she'd settled him in that first day? Except if he'd felt that shock run through the compound, maybe he was already up and moving anyway, trying to figure out what it had been—

"Twist!" somebody shouted, from a good fifty feet away, and Twist hadn't even finished turning to look before she was stumbling back a half-step, reflexive, away from a near-impact.

Allen steadied her, hands on her arms, eyes wide.

"Sorry, sorry," he said, breathless. "Are you—wow, shit, your face looks even worse today—it's Victor, I don't know what to—"

"We need to get him to the ship," Twist said. "Whatever he's doing right now, Steppenwolf can tell as well as we can. But the ship's different, its hull is different; it can hide him. Understand? We need to—"

Allen was staring at her, swallowing, and for a second she thought this was it, too much; he was going to run, just run the hell away and leave all this behind, and she wouldn't even have blamed him.

But then he sucked in a deep breath and bit his lip, and his brows drew down. "Okay," he said, more steadily than she'd expected. "Okay. I, um. I've never tried this on anybody I was trying not to hurt before, so—hang on."

She didn't know where else to grab, so she twisted her arms around in his hands and got him by those knobbly elbows.

And then he ran.

She couldn't breathe, she couldn't think. It was a split second of the most overwhelming sensation she had ever felt, the lurch as her gut, her inner ear, tried to figure out what the hell was happening and gave up—the sound, the roar as she accelerated, distended and then Dopplerizing an abrupt octave as Allen dragged her along and left the sound behind. She didn't even have time to close her eyes, and "blur" wasn't even the word—just a half-impression of a smear around the edges, as one set of surroundings was replaced by another like a switch had been flicked.

It had to be something about Allen, about whatever it was that let him move the way he did, that coming to a stop from that kind of speed didn't smash her brain to pulp against the inside of her skull. And she'd have liked, she thought dizzily, to have the time to go stagger into a corner and throw up, and then not move for a while. But she didn't.

Because this was—they were outside the hydroponics bay.

They were outside the hydroponics bay, and the hatch had been thrown open. And light was pouring out of it, an endless bright white burning with such impossible intensity it was—it was like a wall, blazing, impenetrable.

She couldn't see shit. She flinched away from it, and Allen did too, still holding her arm. She threw the other up to shield her face, squinted around the dim shape of it, because even that close it was barely enough to keep the light out of her eyes.
And there was a duller spot in there, amidst the light. A shape—a figure, stumbling out.

Lane.

"Lane," Twist shouted, and reached, and Lane's hand found her wrist.

"Are you seeing this?" Lane shouted back. "God, it shouldn't be possible. It shouldn't be possible. I should be a smear of carbon on the wall—"

"Lane, what are you—"

"He said he could help," Lane said. "He said he could help, and he's—it's for Clark. It's for Clark."

Twist could pick out the shape of her a little better now, silhouette blocked out against all that light, and Lane was shaking her head. "It's light, it's—he made himself into a star. He made himself into a sun."

And Twist could almost see it, now that her eyes had started to adjust, now that she knew what to look for. The light was brighter beyond the door, and brightest, searing, in a shape that could be a figure, at least if you were willing to accept that there was somebody in there who wasn't touching the floor.

And if you were willing to accept that there were two, then there was—there was someone else. Suspended, arms spread wide, head tipped back, letting all that light and heat pour into them without flinching. Soaking it up, greedy, mindless.

It had to be Kent. Lane was right, it wasn't half as hot as it should have been. This close to all that, they should probably have been incinerated already. Stone had to be doing something, or maybe the box was—managing his energy output somehow, ten thousand times more efficient than any actual star, to generate that much light and put out that little heat.

But there was still some. Twist could feel it against her face like the air off a stove. And that close? Forget it. Kent should have been screaming, burned half to death.

But he wasn't.

"Kent!" she shouted. "Kent! Jesus fucking Christ—Superman!"

Kent turned his head, and she could tell because his eyes were a blaze of red; she almost ducked, except it wasn't coming out of them, it was just there, impossibly vivid, fresh coals.

"We have to get him to the ship. This isn't safe. Kent—"

And he was listening after all, because he turned away again and reached out. Stone was made out of metal, he was—he had to be searing, impossibly hot, but Kent seemed to be able to get a hold of him without any trouble, put his hands on the incandescent shape of Stone and didn't flinch.

He couldn't move like Allen, not quite. Allen crackled, and the air only moved around him when he was going slow enough to let it. But Superman flew—there was a blast of wind that knocked them all back half a step, a flare of brilliance as Stone went past them, and then he was gone. They were both gone, with an audible rush of air in their wake.

Jesus.

"Jesus," Twist said. "That was—that was really Superman."
"It really was," Lane agreed, and she sounded like a kid, fucking giddy—laughed after she said it, and Twist couldn't remember it ever sounding like that before, when Lane had laughed.

But then she caught her breath and turned back to Twist, and the smile dropped off her face, her brow creasing.

"And you—what did you mean, it isn't safe—?"

She stopped, and her eyes went wide. Because she knew what Stone was, and she knew what that meant. She'd just needed a second to remember it.

"Oh, god," she said. "Steppenwolf," and as if it had been a cue, the compound's silent proximity alarm went off, lights flashing in rows in the corners of the corridors.

"Too much to hope he wouldn't notice that little lightshow," Twist agreed. "They're coming for us, and if we can't figure out how to stop them, we're fucked." She turned to Allen. "You know the way back up top from here?"

"I can find it," Allen said, and sure he could—if he had to double back once or twice, what would that cost him? A millisecond?

"Stone's in the ship," Twist said. "Parademons won't have a fix on his location anymore. But they'll still be looking for him. You've got to tell Wayne what happened."

"Okay," Allen said, determined. "Okay, got it," and in one of those good old blue-white flickers, he vanished.

It was stupid. This was bad—this was so bad, this was terrible; this was maybe the most terrified Barry had ever been, which was saying a lot, but that was because he was—he'd only ever been scared for himself, before, while he was alone out there. And himself, he could save. All he had to do was run. But now there were other people, and he wanted them to stay alive, and he didn't know whether they would.

So it was stupid to be running through the compound and thinking about museum dioramas. Or, like, flash mobs.

He just hadn't run past this many people in a long time. And it was—they were all moving, except relative to him they basically weren't. Freeze-framed instead, statues of themselves, pulling ammunition out of crates or tossing guns to each other, underhand, faces graven and severe. Lit up, too, casting sharp dramatic shadows, because there were bright white lights along all the corridors that had come on.

Or—well. The lights were flashing, technically, except Barry made it all the way through the compound before they could finish that one flash and go dark.

He paused for a second in the main bay, flickering, undecided. He hadn't seen Wayne anywhere.
Had he missed the guy somehow? No, that couldn't be it. Wayne was so—he was hard to miss, the way he stood, the glower, the height. Barry would have noticed him, no matter where he was. If he'd gone up to the top of the cliff, though, to the lookout station or whatever—

Barry bit his lip. He didn't know what was outside right now. Probably nothing good. But he'd told Twist he'd find Wayne, and if Wayne was out there, then that was where he had to go.

He slowed down for a second, suddenly surrounded by the rush of motion, shouting, people running. He closed his eyes, and he took a deep breath.

And then he ran.

At first he thought they'd gotten really unlucky—that a storm had hit, too, one of the big dusty ones. Just from the way the light looked, the dimness of the courtyard, faint sun made fainter. But then he glanced up, and he saw them.

It wasn't a storm at all. It was parademons.

Hundreds of them, thousands. More than Barry had ever seen in one place, ever, even the other times they'd come looking for Victor. But—

But Victor hadn't been using the box's full power, back then. They'd been like Wayne, thinking he might know where it was or who had it. They hadn't known he was it.

But they did now.

He made himself look away again, around the courtyard instead of up into the billowing cloud of them, their dark freaky bodies, all that—chitin, weird metal, ten thousand red glowing eyes. They were only just overhead, he told himself. Hadn't even started to dive. There was plenty of time.

And there, at the other side of the courtyard, up on the walltop—that was Wayne.

Barry threw himself across the courtyard in a rush of relief, up and onto the wall, and only just remembered to slow down in time. "Wayne!" he said, and then stopped. "Uh—sir? Mr—Bruce—um—"

"Allen," Wayne said, very evenly.

"It was Victor," Barry blurted. "He was—he did something. Superman is—" and god, suddenly there was so much, he didn't know what to say first. He flailed his hands around, trying to capture that explosion of light and the way Superman had just flown and probably totally failing. "The box, it was—it was like Victor was a sun, and Superman got all—"

"Allen," Wayne said, very evenly.

"Superman took him to the ship," Barry said, and valiantly suppressed the urge to high-five himself for managing a complete sentence. Even though he totally could have done it so fast Wayne wouldn't have seen it. "Twist said to tell you he was there, that the parademons aren't getting anything off him anymore but they'll still be looking for him. But they're—they won't find him, right? Now that he's in there?"

Wayne's eyes leapt back to Barry, and something crossed his face that Barry didn't really recognize on him, that he'd never seen there before. He gripped Barry's shoulder, and said, "They won't find him, Allen. That's not going to happen."
He couldn't know for sure. Of course he couldn't. Shit happened. But he said it like it was a fact, like unassailable truth; and even though Barry knew, knew, there was a swarm on them so big it was blocking out the sun, looking at Wayne's face right then, it was weirdly easy to believe it.

The parademons were dropping lower, now, low enough that Barry could hear the sound of their wings—so many at once that it was just a hum, like locusts. Like the worst giant nightmare locusts ever. Nobody was shouting, not in the courtyard; it was just that hum, everyone crouched low and aiming up, waiting.

Everyone except Wayne, standing tall with a hand on Barry's shoulder. And Barry, still right there next to him, like an idiot.

"Go back inside," Wayne said.

Barry swallowed. He really, really wanted to.

A shot, and then a rattle of them, three or four more, and the leading edge of the swarm burst apart with a shriek. They were—they were sweeping down, now, they were almost—

"Allen," Wayne said.

"But I, um," Barry said. "You—what are you going to do?" He waved a hand at Wayne's everything, because yeah, Wayne was in that dark armored suit of his, he had some kind of gear holstered at his hip; but it wasn't in his hand, he was—he didn't look like he was ready to start shooting parademons out of the air.

Wayne didn't answer, for a long moment. "We need a distraction," he said at last. "Something to draw their attention, or they'll tear the compound apart looking for Stone." And then, out of nowhere, almost soft, "You know what they eat, Allen?"

Barry had honestly mostly tried not to think about that. Ever. "Um, people, I'm guessing?" he told Wayne.

"They eat fear," Wayne said, conversational, squinting up at the roiling mass of them overhead.

"That should sound ridiculous, but somehow when you say it it's super metal," Barry heard himself say.

Wayne glanced at him; and for a second, just a second, Barry could have sworn the corner of Wayne's mouth had twitched.

"They're starving for it," Wayne elaborated after a second. "The littlest taste, and they'll rip it out of you any way they can get it. The things they do to the people they take—it's not about the blood or the meat, for them. It's about everything else they can get from it."

"That's—you know that's not actually an answer?" Barry said, wobbly, in lieu of screaming like an angry baby and getting the hell out of there.

"Get inside, Allen," Wayne said quietly. "Get to the ship. They won't find you."

"Wayne—"

"I'm going to feed them something," Wayne said.

Barry stared at him. That almost sounded like—but Wayne was—Wayne was a badass, Wayne was
stone-faced ice-cold murder in an armored suit. Wayne had killed Superman, had hit the apocalypse and come out the other side as hardcore as ever, and brought a whole bunch of other people with him. He couldn't really mean that he was—he couldn't be honestly trying to tell Barry, Barry, that he was—

He couldn't possibly be saying he was afraid.

"Wayne," Barry said blankly.

"Get inside," Wayne said again.

And then he looked up at the sky again, the swarm descending, and something in his face changed—he exhaled, long and shaky, and then squeezed his eyes shut.

Another burst of gunfire, two, and the parademons were diving for real. Sweeping in over the courtyard, but they weren't headed for the compound anymore, weren't trying to tear their way in through the blast doors dropping over the entrance to the main bay. They were wheeling, screaming; descending in a thick cloud, more and more and more, endless. And every single pair of glowing eyes Barry could pick out of the mass of them was fixed on Wayne.

"Oh, god," he heard himself say, and then they were there.

He moved; he had to. There were so many of them, and he felt a jolt of panic and they were—three of them swiveled in the air and looked at him, and he bolted twenty feet without even trying, dodging between their bodies, ducking around the outstretched shape of a wing halfway through a beat. He hesitated there for an instant, and that was the last glimpse he got of Wayne: surrounded, half blocked from view, clawed hands gripping his arms, his shoulders—parademons spiraling in toward him, drawn and hungry-eyed, open-mouthed, and Wayne twisting in their grip, graven, agonized.

Get inside, Wayne had said, and Barry didn't want to just leave him there but he didn't know what the hell else to do. This was—Barry wasn't the right person for this, Barry wasn't a hero. Wayne needed somebody who could wade in there and drag him out. He needed Diana, he needed Curry; he needed Superman.

So Barry turned around and ran.

The blast doors were coming down, yeah, but still a good three feet from the ground; Barry ducked under without slowing down at all and then almost fell, but it was fine, he was still moving, it didn't matter. It didn't matter, he just had to keep going. He'd find somebody who could do something, somebody who could help Wayne, somebody better than Barry—

He had to slow down a little when he got to the ship, to give the hull a chance to part for him, and he couldn't stand it—he looped back along the corridor and then around the whole cave the ship was sitting in twice, and then it was finally open, and he darted in and almost kicked Kent—Clark—Superman in the shins.

He'd had normal clothes on before, Barry was sure of it, but now it was just the suit, the "S" across the chest intact and unblemished; the hole where he'd been run through was gone, Barry realized dimly. And there was—dust or something, Barry realized at first, except no, it was ash. Victor. The light, the heat, had burned whatever Superman had been wearing right off him, except for the suit.

Victor was behind him, not white-hot anymore but just regular levels of weird, silver and gleaming, red eye bright. And apparently Superman really did have his powers back all the way, because he
caught Barry by the shoulders before Barry could even start to de-speed—there was a weird stretched-out moment where they were both sort of vibrating, not quite moving at the same velocity, and then Barry gasped in a breath and suddenly the world was full of sound again, and Superman was blinking at him and saying, "You. What are you—"

"Barry, Barry Allen, I'm—we talked on the radio, remember? I'm fast. And you, you're—please," Barry said. "Please, Superman—"

"What's happening up there?" Superman snapped. Not in a mean way, just urgent, tense. "What are they shooting at? Are those wings?"

Because of course—he could hear it, from down here. Could see it, probably, when he looked up through the walls, except he didn't know what parademons even were, had no idea what was going on.

"Parademons, they're—Steppenwolf brought them, they're his army. They've got Wayne—"

"What?"

"The hell's going on?"

Barry jerked and twisted around, though he didn't quite manage to flail out of Superman's grip entirely.

It was Curry—Arthur. Stepping through the hole in the hull behind Barry, eyebrow raised; and the ship had maybe known he was out there, because it hadn't had to stay open long enough to let him in, and it closed itself up again promptly enough behind him.

Arthur wasn't looking at the hull, though. He was looking at Superman, and Barry, and then his eyes flicked down to Superman's grip on Barry's arms, and—oh.

"No, it's fine," Barry said, "we're fine, we're—he's okay, I'm okay, he's got his powers back."

"You got your powers back," Arthur repeated, to Superman.

"I—" Superman swallowed, throat working. It seemed totally obvious to Barry; Victor wasn't shining at him anymore, just standing there, but it didn't matter. Superman was still sort of glowing around the edges, and there was a heat to his eyes. They weren't red or blasting lasers or anything, but they were—the blue, it was like a welding torch or something, blazing, alight. No color a person's eyes could be. Unless, you know, they were an alien who'd just gotten blasted with the full power of a small star. "Yeah, I do."

"See? Everything's fine," Barry said, "except the compound's being attacked by more parademons than I've ever seen in my life, that part's bad. They're looking for Victor. Or they were supposed to be, except Wayne—"

And Superman's face got weird, then, severe, the angle of his mouth grim and pinched. "What did he do?"

"He distracted them," Barry said, "he was—he let them—" He stopped, and shook his head, helpless. "They took him. Please, you have to—"

"No," Superman said, kind of blankly. "No." He squeezed those unearthly eyes shut, brows drawing down, a stern heavy line carving itself in place over the bridge of his nose, and suddenly he looked furious—brilliant with it, incandescent, so bright Barry almost wanted to squint and shield his face.
"What are they going to do with him?"

"Nothing good," Barry said, possibly a little more loudly than he'd meant to. "We have to do something! We have to go get him. I know he's a dick, but we can't just let them eat him—"

"He knew," Superman said slowly. "He knew they were going to come looking for Victor. He did it on purpose," and something was happening to his face, a strange slow crumpling; he let go of Barry and clenched his hands into fists, and his feet weren't touching the floor anymore.

He looked like he was ready to blast right through the ceiling—through the ship, through the stone around it. Through the whole swarm of parademons, without giving them a second thought, just to grab Wayne and shake him and demand to know what the hell he'd been thinking.

But before he could, suddenly the ship said, "Perimeter breach."

Arthur angled a glance at the wall of the corridor. "Yeah," he said, "we know."

"The main compound perimeter is monitored by systems in the security room," the ship clarified. "Sensors have been calibrated to monitor a planetary perimeter."

"Wayne," Superman said.

Barry looked at the ceiling. "He had you watching—space? Dude, that is so—" and then he stopped short because, fuck, wait, perimeter breach? What the hell did that mean if the perimeter was in space?

"Ship," Superman said, "can you show us?"

"Rendering now," the ship said.

And then the floor moved. Barry took a couple steps back real quick to give it some room, and the little metal bits it was made out of just—came up out of it. It was like the hull, the way it could flow and come apart and put itself back together, except this was a blob, lifted up, hovering over the floor of the corridor.

And at first it pretty much was just a blob. But then it changed. The shape refined itself a little, and then a little more. Resolution increasing, Barry thought, like it was coming into focus; it looked like a cone, and then more like a big blocky conch shell, and then it was—there were spikes, long curving edges like the blade of a scimitar, an odd ribbed pattern like vertebrae, like bones, along the angles of it. Something weirdly organic in the contours, the symmetry, but not in a good way. Like a pliosaur: like something huge and dangerous that shouldn't have been there, something you were supposed to be safe from but oops, here it was, about to gut you anyway.

It was a ship.

"Darkseid."

It took a second for Barry to tear his eyes off the thing and turn to look—it was Diana. The ship had opened for her, silent, and she was standing at Arthur's shoulder, gazing down at the hovering shape with a grim flat set to her mouth, her jaw, and her eyes were like stone.

"It must be him," she said. "He's here."
The silence stretched.

"I take it that's bad," Arthur said, half just for the sake of breaking it.

But everything was already starting to fall into place. All of it, right from the start—Wayne, Diana. The way Wayne had acted, all the shit he hadn't been saying; it was just there had been even more of it than Arthur had realized. How fixated he'd been on Superman, even though he'd known Superman would be pissed about coming back to life with Wayne standing in front of him.

It was this. It had all been about this. Somehow Wayne had known this was going to happen, that this ship was going to arrive. And whatever or whoever was on it, he'd decided they couldn't stop it without Superman.

Great.

"It will be the end of all that remains of us," Diana was saying, "unless we act. Clark—"

Superman was staring grimly down at the shape of the ship, hovering there, and the muscles in his jaw were like knots. "I know," he said. "This is why. This is what I'm here for." He laughed a little, except it didn't sound like he thought any of this was funny. "Perfect timing, huh?"

"If Darkseid has brought a third mother box," Diana said, "together he and Steppenwolf will enforce Unity. He will erase us," she added, to Arthur—to Superman, too, probably, because he'd looked equally baffled when she'd said Unity like that. Allen was the only one who seemed to know already; he didn't look confused, just pale and kind of sick. And Stone, but Stone's face never seemed to do much of anything. "He will erase our wills, our being; our bodies will remain, empty, to serve his purposes as he sees fit, but our minds, our selves, will be gone, and this world utterly subject to his command. There is no time to waste—"

"But the parademons," Allen said. "I mean, it's—they're—we have to do something. Bruce only got like half of them to go after him. There's still hundreds of them out there—"

So that was why all those lights had come on at once.

"So, parademons first," Arthur said. "Big bad after. Figure out where they took Wayne, get him back while we're at it."

"What are we waiting for?" Superman murmured, with a grim little smile; and he strode forward without hesitating, so that the shape of the ship crumbled apart against his knees before the pieces flowed away, back into the floor.

They hit the security room on the way up—it was between the ship and the courtyard, after all. Just good sense, Arthur figured, to see what the fuck was even happening. Then they could go chuck
themselves in the middle of it.

Trigger Finger—Twist—was in there. And a redhead Arthur didn't know, except she turned and looked at them, at Superman, and Superman looked back at her, and suddenly he had a guess.

*Lane will be on the ground. I assume her safety still means something to you—*

Arthur hadn't asked then, because he hadn't much cared. But this—this had to be Lane.

"Still here," Twist said.

Arthur glanced at her, and shrugged one shoulder. "Nothing better to do," he said, and she grinned, all smug, like he was saying something else.

Whatever, he told himself, and looked away.

"—and they're—what are they doing?"

Arthur glanced over his shoulder. Lane and Superman had quit staring at each other; Lane had been bringing him up to speed, by the sound of it, telling him how swarms moved, what to expect once he went out there. Except she'd turned to gesture toward one of the monitors, live footage of the courtyard, and now she was just standing there staring at it.

Because there was nothing on it.

Not *nothing* nothing. The courtyard was still there, the concrete walls, a couple dozen tiny figures half-obscured by all the stirred-up dust, faint rattle of gunfire. But they were shooting at a handful of parademons, tops—the stragglers, that was all. The bulk of the swarm was a shadowy cloud on the camera, already growing small with distance. And half the ones who were left weren't even paying attention. Arthur could see one in the corner of the camera's field of vision, clutching awkwardly at its head; turning in the air without even looking where it was going, like it couldn't help it, like it was on a string.

"Steppenwolf has recalled them," Diana said, grim. "He had hoped to secure the box himself, but now—it is unnecessary."

Twist and Lane glanced at each other. "It is," Lane repeated, kind of leadingly.

"It is," Diana agreed. "Darkseid is here."

"Well, fuck," Lane said.

"Guessing that's bad," Twist murmured.

Of course Wayne had told her fuck-all. Jesus.

"Yeah," Arthur said. "He's probably brought a box. They don't need Stone's anymore. Three of those things together, and they can really fuck us up."

But they'd probably have had four, if it weren't for Wayne throwing himself on that grenade. Arthur'd never seen a swarm that big before, not ever. And it had been *bigger*, before Wayne had pulled that stunt. They'd have ripped this whole place apart.

And just when he'd really started getting comfortable thinking of Wayne as a power-tripping asshole, too. Not that he wasn't; that just wasn't all he was.
"We have to do something," Lane was saying, pale, blank-faced. "We have to—we can't waste any
time. We have to go now. If they use those boxes the way they're planning to, we take too long and
we won't even be able to stop them. We won't—we won't want to anymore."

"You're talking full-scale assault," Twist said.

"Yeah," Lane said. "You've got to understand, what they can do with those boxes is—we have no
way to fight it once it's started, no way to reverse it. Whatever the fuck they're doing right now, if
there's some kind of—" She waved her hands. "—Apokoliptian welcoming ceremony or some
bullshit that they have to get through before they get going, that's just luck. If we can't get in there
and stop this before it starts, we are fucked."

"Well, okay," Arthur said. "Full-scale assault it is."

Sounded like fun. And if they didn't make it, if they really were fucked—if this was the last day they
were ever going to get—then, hell. Might as well go out on a high note, and take some of those
bastards with them.

It was Lane who did the rundown, once Twist had radioed all Wayne's team leads or whatever up to
the security room to hear it. Lane had all the intel, all the data any of Wayne's people had ever been
able to pull together about Steppenwolf, his base—even a hastily-sketched map, glowing up at them
all from the central console.

When she was done, it was kind of quiet for a minute.

"So, we're fucked," somebody said, from somewhere in the back.

"Well, not yet," Lane said, and actually managed to crack a smile. "I don't know if you all noticed,
but we've got some help."

They had. Nobody had said anything; but it wasn't like it had been hard for them to notice Superman
standing in here, all that red and blue, and that giant fucking cape—had he had the cape earlier? It
didn't make a lot of sense, but Arthur didn't think so. It was like it had just sort of grown off his
shoulders when nobody was looking.

Anyway, they'd all angled little glances at him as they filed in. At him and then at each other, eyes
wide, like they were checking to make sure they weren't the only ones seeing it. They'd kept pretty
cool about it otherwise, though.

And he hadn't been the only one. Everybody was looking at Arthur, too. At Allen, especially when
he did that little flickering thing; at Stone, standing against the wall gleaming quietly.

"How high's that cliff?" Twist said, sort of flatly.

"Half a mile," Lane allowed.

"Half a mile," Twist repeated. "So Steppenwolf's put his palace half a mile up, sheer rock faces and
some kind of shielding we don't know how to get through. Not that I'm not glad to think Superman's
on our side—" and she angled a little nod at Kent, who nodded back kind of stiffly— "but what is he
going to do about that? Princess-carry each of us up there individually?"
"Nah," Arthur said, bland. "He'd only have to do a third, tops. Diana and me could throw the rest of you. Two at a time, even."

Twist snorted.

And then there was a little crackle, and suddenly Allen flashed into place right at Arthur's elbow, instead of where he'd been, over by the wall with Stone. "But—how does Steppenwolf do it?"

"Parademons fly," Arthur said.

"No, I know, I mean—Steppenwolf doesn't, right? Does he have wings and nobody told me?"

"We can do it," Stone said.

Everybody stared at him.

"You can do it," Lane repeated, real slow. And then suddenly she was over the console, swiping the map away, flicking through files. "The eyewitness reports we have are limited; Steppenwolf doesn't leave his base often. But there's something he does—'circle of light and dust,'" she read off. "'Column in the sky, disturbed air. Boom like thunder.' Victor, is that—is he using a box to do that?"

Stone looked at her, red eye bright. "We can do it," he repeated, intent, and Arthur was pretty sure that was supposed to be a yes.

"So Stone can—" Twist left a speaking sort of pause, and then settled on, "Boom-tube. Stone can boom-tube us up there for a ground assault. But can he do it through that shield?"

Lane glanced at Stone again; but he seemed to have run out of words for the moment.

"Better not risk it," Lane said at last. "We're only going to get one shot at this. We have to be sure it's going to work. There has to be some way to get that shield down."

Funny, in a stupid way. All the heavy hitters anybody could ask for—motherfucking Superman—but if they couldn't get close enough to anything to hit it, then what the fuck good did that do them?

Allen was jittering beside him, throwing off little white sparks. Arthur glanced at him, and had a weird urge to—to put a hand on his shoulder or something, settle him down. And for an instant it was like Allen could tell, because he looked up. Stared at Arthur for a long moment, with those big dark eyes of his, and bit his lip. And then he looked at Lane, and sucked in a little hiccupy breath, and said, "Do you, um. Do you know what frequency it oscillates at? The shield, it's—it's like hard light or something, right? Some kind of boson-photon field, or—but it's still particles. And particles have spaces between them, and things with spaces between them—" He stopped and bit at his mouth again, and shrugged. "I can kind of vibrate through stuff, sometimes."

"But you have to be going faster than it is, don't you?" Lane said slowly. "Barry, it's light. Can you—can you go that fast?"

For an instant, Allen looked mostly queasy, and Arthur thought: fuck, he was going to say no, and they were screwed after all.

But then Allen's chin dipped, and he squared up those wiry shoulders, and his brow kind of drew down, and suddenly it was—he looked determined. He looked sure.
"I can try," he said.

Nobody moved, for a minute. And then Twist shifted her weight and leaned over, held out a closed fist across the table toward Allen. "Badass," she said, pointed and even, like it was supposed to mean something.

And it must have, to Allen, because he grinned, unsteady but bright, and bumped her knuckles agreeably.

"Still got a problem, though, don't we?" said somebody else—tall narrow guy, kind of rangy, whose name Arthur didn't know. "Say it all works just like it's supposed to. File 2 gets inside the shield, File 3 can, uh, can boom-tube all of us into the middle of the bad guy's base. His buddy's still got a giant fucking spaceship in orbit, right? Are we counting on that thing not just carpet-bombing us to oblivion?"

Arthur glanced at him and then at Lane—and then at Superman, who cleared his throat.

"I—think there might be something we can do about that," Superman said.

It was nuts. It was the stupidest thing Arthur was ever going to do in his life—especially if they fucked it up and today was the day he died. That would pretty much guarantee it.

But it might work, and it was probably the best shot they had. And no matter what happened, these were the worst odds Arthur had ever been facing in a fight that he could remember.

So all in all, he was kind of looking forward to it.

Good thing he hadn't checked out of here, he found himself thinking. If he'd woken up ten minutes earlier, that day he'd first meant to leave—who knew whether Diana would have caught him? He'd have made a break for it, headed out across the wasteland again. He'd never even have known these motherfuckers were going to end up throwing themselves at Steppenwolf, at this "Darkseid" guy, head-first. He'd have missed out.

He'd—

He'd have missed out on a few things, maybe.

It was crunch time, yeah, but Wayne's people still had prep to do, gearing themselves up for a shootout. An hour, that was what Twist had given them. And then they were heading out: Stone and Allen with the ground troops, heading straight for Steppenwolf, and Arthur and Diana with Superman.

He huffed a little laugh. Weird to think of it. Where he was from, and Mom and all, everything about him made for the deep, deep ocean—and now he was going to space, even if it was only for a couple minutes.

He shook his head at himself. And then he looped his elbows around his knees and sat there and breathed, and let everything else kind of go away.

He'd only been at it for a minute when he heard the crackle. And he was starting to get in the habit, by now: he looked up right away, quick enough to see a jolt of blue-white lightning, and something
kind of—brushed him.

He waited a beat, and that was all it took for Allen to pop into place in a shower of light, eyes huge and guilty. And he should have told the guy to fuck off. But instead Arthur angled a squint up at him, and said, mild, "You tripped over me, didn't you."

Allen's eyes got huger and guiltier. "I, um," he said. "I, uh. I didn't know you were up here, I wasn't—I didn't—um. I can—I'll just—"

"Take a breath," Arthur advised.

Allen gulped one down, which wasn't exactly what he'd meant; but he wasn't vibrating so hard after, and he flickered away and then reappeared again—seated now, a cautious arm's length from Arthur. "What are you doing here?" he blurted.

Arthur shrugged a shoulder, and looked out, away from him. "Nice view."

It was. Cliff over the compound was the highest thing around for a good long way, except maybe the steel bones of a couple Metropolis skyscrapers. Most people hated the dust; but the sky was a lot more colors these days than it used to be, the haze in the air blending it all like paint. Pale, shading to violet shadows, the horizon a distant bruise, and the tawny wasteland stretching out beneath. Huge and flat and endless—a little dip or rise here and there, sure, broad slow rolls that were never quite hills.

If you looked at it just right, it was almost like water.

Arthur closed his eyes.

"Yeah," Allen said quietly, after a second. "You—you think this is going to work?"

"Sure," Arthur said. "Besides, won't be much left of us to cry about it if it doesn't."

Allen was silent for a long moment, and Arthur felt a brief curdling swell of guilt. It was true, but that didn't mean he'd had to say it. Not right to Allen's face, when Allen was already so freaked out all the time—

But then he heard a little breathy noise and looked over, and it was—Allen had laughed.

"Wow," he said, still grinning, looking at Arthur with the corners of his eyes all crinkled up. "Wow, okay. You should, like, give pep talks professionally, man. You should be a motivational speaker. That's—is that seriously the shit you tell yourself to make you feel better?"

Arthur raised an eyebrow. "You trying to tell me I'm not motivating, Allen?"

"You're—" and then Allen stopped and kind of coughed, and his face turned all pink. "You're, uh, lots of things, but I'm—just don't quit your day job, dude, that's all I'm saying," And the smile was still there at the corners of his mouth, half a dimple doing its level best to peek out, when he added, "You know, you can—you could call me Barry. If you wanted. Considering maybe next time we see each other we'll be dead—"

"We'll see each other," Arthur said. "We're not going to be dead. Probably."

"Probably," Allen echoed. "Again with the motivating, wow."

"We're not going to be dead," Arthur said.
But somehow that was the thing that made the smile slide off Allen's face at last. "Right," he said quietly. "Unless something goes wrong. Like, any individual one of the three dozen things that we're counting on to keep pretty much the whole entire world from—"

Arthur tilted his head, and rolled with a hunch. "You freaking out about this forcefield thing?"

"Maybe," Allen said, real fast, a little high. "Maybe. I mean, it's not a big deal or anything. I just have to like maybe run faster than light, which I've never ever tried to do before, and if I don't then they won't be able to get into Steppenwolf's base and he'll use the boxes to make us his mindless drone slaves. So that sucks."

"Now who's motivating?" Arthur muttered.

But Allen wasn't listening to him anymore. He was staring off the edge of the cliff, out at the sky and the wasteland, the half-buried ruin of Metropolis, with a look in his eyes like he wanted to—

Well. Like he wanted to fucking run.

"Hey," Arthur said. "Quit it."

Allen blinked and started staring at him instead.

"You run. That's your thing. That's the thing you've got even when you don't have anything. So—run."

"I just, I mean, I said that I could, and now everybody's counting on me to—"

"Nah," Arthur said.

Allen blinked at him again, mouth open, halfway through a word.

"I was there," Arthur told him. "Didn't say you could. Said you'd try."

That was all any of them were doing, pretty much. Arthur didn't think Superman hauling him into space was going to kill him; wouldn't know till he tried it, though. And Stone—nobody had any fucking idea whether Stone could really boom-tube or whatever. There were thousands of parademons, and a couple hundred of them, tops. What the fuck were they going to do, even if they did make it inside?

But they had to try. Couldn't quite let go of the world, not yet, even if it was a crapsack these days. They had to try.

And at the very least it was going to be one hell of a fight.

"Try," Arthur repeated, and Allen looked at him and blew out a breath, and when he was done his shoulders weren't up around his ears anymore—settled a little better in himself, even if he was still freaking out in there.

"Try," Allen said, more to himself than to Arthur. "Okay. Okay." He paused, and looked up, lip between his teeth. "And you, um. Good luck?"

"Yeah," Arthur said.

He didn't move. Allen didn't either. Longest time Arthur'd ever seen him in one spot; and they sat there together and looked at the sky, just in case it was the last time.
"Clark," Diana said.

He turned and looked at her—as though she had surprised him, even though he could have heard her coming a thousand miles away.

But heightened physical senses couldn't help you navigate your own thoughts. She'd learned that a long time ago.

And by the look on his face, in that sense he'd been a thousand miles away and then some.

"It's time," she told him.

"Right," he said, and looked away. "Okay."

She tilted her head, and made a leap; reached out and touched his shoulder, and said, "He'll be there."

Clark jerked, gaze snapping back to her, and for a moment he almost looked angry. He was still blazing with power, all the light he'd absorbed from Victor; there was a hazy glow rising from his skin, a soft blurred afterimage left behind whenever he moved, and his eyes were blistering, blue fire.

"That's where they'll have taken him. Steppenwolf called them to his side, and they went. He'll be there. And we will find him, and bring him back."

Clark's jaw worked. He bit at his mouth, and then squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. "He's so—goddamn infuriating," he spat at last, low, fists clenched. "I still can't believe he—what the hell did he think he was—" He broke off there, sharp, and twisted his face away, put a hand over his eyes. He didn't look angry anymore. He looked as though he was in pain.

"Clark," Diana said. "We'll find him."

She took his arm, clasped his wrist and tightened her fingers, firm, as though by it she might—might impart to him her own certainty. This couldn't be how it ended. This couldn't be how they lost Bruce; not now, not after everything, face to face at last with the threat he had striven with such terrible desperation to prepare them for.

And Clark looked at her with those blue-flame eyes, and returned the clasp.

"We may have to go through a few New Gods of Apokolips to get to him," Diana added, mild. "But we will find him."

Clark shook his head, and huffed out something that was nearly a laugh. "Yeah, of course," he said. "Of course he couldn't get himself kidnapped by parademons any old day. It just had to be the same day this—Darkseid arrived, to make us all his mindless slaves." His mouth slanted, rueful, resigned. "Wouldn't settle for anything less than the next best thing to impossible."

Diana tilted her head. There was something in Clark's tone when he spoke of Bruce that she couldn't
name, something—intent, wistful, a little pained, in a way she hadn’t expected of him. "You know him well," she said, testing.

And Clark looked at her and then away, and wet his lips; and sudden pink heat was dusting its way up the column of his throat, the angles of his cheeks. "I, uh," he said, and for a moment he was no longer a blazing alien god, a star made flesh. He was—

He was so young, Diana thought.

But then he sobered, and met her eyes again, the barest hint of a furrow carving itself into place at his brow, and like that he looked steady, serious, determined. He looked like someone who could save a world.

"I—think I'm starting to," he said quietly.

"Good," she said, because it was. Because it had always been better for Bruce to be known, to be understood, despite all his efforts to prevent it. "When we find him, you may yell at him first, if you wish. I will wait my turn."

And that, at last, made Clark smile, even if it was only for a moment.

They found Arthur at the cliff’s edge, waiting.

Holding their hands clasped, it was effortless—Diana could have leapt the distance herself, but Clark bore her up with unthinking ease, as readily as he lifted himself in flight.

Barry was there, too. "Aw, man," he said as they touched down, eyes wide, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "I can't believe it! This is such a raw deal, you guys get to fly and I have to—"

"Do the part only you can do," Arthur murmured, "and if you don't we're all f*cked?"

"Well, yeah, okay, when you put it like that," Barry said with a laugh. "I guess my part's kind of cool too, at least as long as I don't screw it up. Seriously, though," and he reached out sternly and poked Clark in the chest, "when this is all over you are totally taking me flying, too. Uh, I mean—I mean, if you want to? I didn't, um. Should I not have touched—"

"Deal," Clark said, grinning, and for a moment it almost didn't feel like the end of the world at all.

"Okay," Barry said, eyes crinkling, and then he paused and looked at Arthur and swallowed, once and then again. "Okay, so—see you later. Not dead."

"Later," Arthur agreed, tilting his chin up.

Clark held out a hand to him. Arthur looked at it, and then at Clark, and then at Diana; and then, with only a moment's hesitation, took it.

And then they flew.
It was strange—peaceful.

Diana hadn’t expected that, but nevertheless it was true. Clark carried them higher, higher, higher; and the rush of the wind, its impossible loudness, turned thin and insubstantial. The world grew smaller beneath them, the curve of its surface bowing more and more sharply, the horizon a brilliant shell of blue—and the sky darker and darker in its turn, stars beginning to glitter out of its dimness.

And then it was—they had left air, breath, life, all of it behind them, and sound fell away, too. It was silent, wholly and astoundingly silent, and the earth hung beneath them, a swirl of clouds and dull golden dust, distant towering flames now tiny as sparks, except that they burned and burned and never went out. As if all the struggle that had ever raged there, the battle that even now would soon begin, were a small quiet thing, meaningless beside the vast universe.

Diana thought it, and then shook her head at herself, and bared her teeth at the distant stars. It made a fierce defiant flame catch alight in her: it did matter, it was all that mattered—she hadn't given up the single tiny world beneath her to Steppenwolf, and she wouldn't give it up to Darkseid; it was hers, it was her mother's, it was her home, however little it might account for in the great scheme of all things.

And it was with that flame in her heart that she looked upon the looming shadow of the great ship, and smiled.

It was just as Clark’s ship had shown it to them, in all its deadly curves and vicious angles. Black and gleaming, in the stark endless light cast out by the sun, except where the shell of it parted—it glowed red there, from somewhere deep within itself.

She looked at Arthur, and laughed, silent, airless, to see that he'd bared his teeth at it, too.

Here, in the void of space, Clark could go faster, now that he no longer had to take care that the air should not melt Diana's armor or burn away Arthur's clothes; and in moments he had brought them to the edge of the hull.

They didn't speak. They couldn't, but they didn't need to. The plan was simple enough, after all. Clark would move the ship—but Diana and Arthur must make sure that he could.

Clark met Diana's eyes, and she nodded; and with that agreement he drew her up by the arm and threw her at it. She didn't bother to roll or crouch, to soften the landing at all—her feet drove deep into the alien metal, and then she dug her fists into it and pulled herself up out of the hole she'd made, and glanced both ways along the line of the hull, to decide where to begin.

In the distance, Arthur landed likewise—Diana couldn't hear it but could feel it, the faint quiver of a great impact somewhere on the other side.

And then she punched a hole into the ship, and another, and pulled herself along until she found an open weapon port.

It reminded her of Victor, the way his arms made and remade themselves. It was only just forming, the hull splitting apart and that red glow spilling out, mechanisms rearranging themselves and spinning down into a wide-mawed open-mouthed shape. Because whoever it was who remained on this ship, in Darkseid's absence, they must have detected Clark's presence. Not that they were likely to damage him, of course. But it would be an inconvenience if they were to hit him. It would slow him down—and once they received word of the ground assault, they would turn these weapons toward other targets.
Diana shoved her hand into the middle of it, bolts of crackling red energy sizzling their way up her arm, and the alien metal trembled, buckled; that spinning motion was arrested by her grip, the mechanism straining to reform or rebuild itself around the obstacle of her hand but unable, and the red light grew brilliant, blinding. She considered it, head cocked, and dug her free hand deep into the metal of the hull—and when the weapons port exploded, she hung on, and was not thrown free into space.

The next port she reached had already built itself up and fired a blast of white-hot energy toward the distant tiny figure of Clark—she launched herself straight toward it with force enough to buckle the hull beneath her feet, struck it with her shoulder and then tore through it barehanded until it went dark.

She had just reached a third when the ship moved beneath her.

Clark had found a position from which to grasp it, then. Good.

She had only felt it because it had made the hull of the ship shudder. She looked toward Earth where it hung in the black sky, and it had already begun to grow larger, the persistent change clearly discernible to her eye—Clark must be moving them at immense speed, and yet without air to rush past her, without gravity to tug at the pit of her stomach, it was as though it were Earth that moved instead.

(Though perhaps it did, in a sense. Perhaps it was only that Clark now held the ship still, and the planet continued in the pace of its orbit.)

All along the vast curving edge of the black hull nearest her, the—the plates of it, the great shifting pieces, were parting from each other. Red light spilled out, blasted sideways.

Darkseid's warriors, Diana thought. They were attempting to correct their course, to alter the ship's motion.

But of course even whatever massive engines powered this leviathan were no match for Clark. And especially not Clark when he was like this: still spilling over with the power with which Victor had flooded him, and exposed to the unfiltered and unimpeded light of the sun besides.

She twisted and looked over her shoulder, and the ship had turned, now; the sun was behind her, piercingly bright. But she thought perhaps she could see a tiny figure there, braced against the hull, glowing with impossible light.

Earth grew larger still before them, and Diana quickened her pace. She no longer bothered to destroy individual portions of the ship's mechanisms—she drew her sword from its place at her back and drove it deep, propelled herself along the hull with a kick and carved off a chunk of the ship the size of a city block, and then knocked it free in a gout of red light.

They could destroy the ship entirely, of course; but that wasn't the plan. They must content themselves with tearing the fangs from its slavering mouth, and wait, and with luck they could turn what remained of it into a weapon that could be wielded against its master.

They were close enough now that they were—they were starting to fall down toward the world again. Except they must not go too fast. They must give Barry time enough—

She thought at first it was only another of those brilliant burning sparks, all that could be seen from this height of the towers of flame Steppenwolf's machines drew from the ground. Except then it flickered in the corner of her eye and grew brighter, and it wasn't the muted gold of flame but red, the
same dull bloody coal-red as the light that poured from the interior of the ship.

And yes, now she could pick it out, through that glittering flash: the vast dark shape of Steppenwolf’s palace. From here, it was nothing more than a black blot upon the landscape, dimmed by blowing dust and ash, smaller than the nail of her finger—but that spoke to how immense it was when you were not looking down at it from orbit.

And that crackling, flickering light—brighter, brighter still, and then dimming at last, receding—that had to be Steppenwolf’s shield collapsing.

Clark must have seen it, too. The ship lurched beneath Diana, shuddering, and plunged down; and within another moment a strange radiance began to build along the hull’s edges, streaming, incandescent.

Atmosphere.

Diana ducked into a crouch, and then turned her face into the glow of friction and could not help but grin. Barry had succeeded, the shield was down; and now they would join the battle in truth, and whether they won or lost, at least Darkseid might taste their defiance. At least they would not have gone quietly.

In space, it had all been stillness. Diana's every motion had been lent a certain stately reserve by the utter silence in which she moved, the weightless leisurely feeling of it.

But hurtling down through the atmosphere—here was the scream of the wind, and a sense of the true immensity of this beast of a ship. Diana could hear Arthur to her left, and he must have been at least a mile distant, more; but he whooped more than loud enough to reach her ears, and she found herself shrieking back to the wind in kind, joining its deafening battle-cry.

The hull was strong, and did not break apart. That had been Lois's greatest worry, as they strategized; that, and the impact of the crash itself.

But Clark had promised her they would not strike with speed enough to cause true disaster, and even as they neared the hulking shape of the palace, he had begun to slow their descent.

In that sense, the crash was controlled.

But oh, she laughed with grim pleasure, to think how it must seem to the swarms of parademons, already billowing from those black gates. The dim dusty sun, the whole sky, abruptly blocked out by a shadow of such vastness descending—and she braced herself against the hull, drove her sword deep into it to anchor her there, and then they struck.

For a long moment there was no sound but the shriek and screech of metal, the rumble of stone. The great ship plowed into the hulking outer wall of the palace, sheared through it without slowing; what better battering ram could Clark have asked for? Half the palace's vast twisted towers and spires toppled, blasts of red light spilling free of the ship's torn-open belly. And when at last the ship shuddered to a halt, Diana pulled her sword loose and leapt from the side of it, and dropped into what was—what had been—an antechamber to the throne room itself.

She would have to remember to compliment Clark on his aim, later.
She could hear already the rush of wind that said Clark would arrive himself in a moment, and, beyond that, distant gunfire; so Victor had been able to boom-tube Bruce's troops up and inside the palace walls after all.

Victor—Victor was there, ahead of her. Even as Diana lifted her sword and began to move, she understood: he had one box already, hovering between his spread hands, and his eye had changed. Both his eyes, he was—even the organic eye was blazing, now, filled with white light.

That had been the other key to the plan. Barry would penetrate the shield, bring it down—and then he would find a mother box, any mother box, and take it to Victor immediately. For at the moment they attacked, the moment Steppenwolf and Darkseid understood their purpose, they were all in grave danger; with three boxes to hand and even a fraction of a second in which to act, Darkseid would have been able to begin. To wipe them all clean in an instant, and end this battle before it could start.

And it had worked: Victor had a box. And Barry—

There was a roar. Diana twisted, mid-stride, and stone cracked beneath her feet with the force as she redirected herself; that towering figure, that was Steppenwolf. And beyond him—Darkseid, it must be, with a hand on the arm of the vast black throne, just beginning to rise from it. And above his head, hovering suspended in the air above the throne, shimmering with delicate silvery light, were the other two mother boxes.

She had only a moment to perceive the shape of him, the hulking craggy shoulders, eyes that gleamed as fiercely red as the light that had powered his ship. And then there was a glow and a sudden terrible sound, echoing overlapping cracks, and Steppenwolf laughed, and something tumbled toward her, skidding across the lightless stone of the antechamber's floor.

Barry.

"Oh, god," he gasped, thin, strung tight, breathless. "Oh, god," and then Diana understood what she was looking at—understood what had been done to his legs.

They would heal, she told herself, dropping to a knee to clasp his shoulder. Everything about Barry was fast, after all; he healed almost as quickly as he ate, as he had put it himself.

But he gripped her wrist and his face was white with the pain of it, and he had already bitten his lip bloody. He didn't seem able to look at her, eyes wide and dark, shocky. And then he did, and blinked, and said, "Diana. I—I got it. The shield. Did you see? I got it—"

"Yes," she said. "Yes, Barry, you did very well. It's all right. Just rest. Just rest here for a moment," and she waited until he'd nodded before she looked away and stood.

Steppenwolf had been shouting something—great and terrible threats, she assumed, though she hadn't been listening. She stood over Barry with Victor at her back and her sword in her hands and waited for him to finish; and when he was done, his king standing tall at his shoulder, she said, "You will die here, and all your army likewise, and no one on this world will remember your name."

He snarled at her, lip curling, and hefted the great scythe-axe he carried; and when she charged forward to meet its swing, the red-hot edge of it trailing light as though it scorched the very air itself, the resulting clang was satisfyingly tremendous.

They were locked that way for a moment, the axe caught against the long blade of Diana's sword, she with one hand at the hilt and the other pressed to the flat of it to brace it against the blow. It was
clear from the widening of Steppenwolf’s eyes, the belated curl of his lip, that he’d expected to be able to press her back—to overpower her and knock her flat, and to swing the axe a second time only for the satisfaction of cutting her head from her shoulders. And he was strong, it was true.

But not quite strong enough.

She braced and gathered herself, bunched her shoulders and shoved; and the floor of the throne room broke under her heels, but he was set back half a step—enough that she could kick out at him and earn a little space, draw back her blade for a true thrust. She caught him just at the seam between pauldron and chestplate, but he had already begun to shift his weight away in a dodge. Still, he would feel it.

And he did, judging by his wordless shout. With the heft of its head, the axe essentially doubled as a war hammer, and the reverse swing nearly caught her in the side—she leapt back, and the moment she realized Darkseid was no longer behind Steppenwolf, standing on the dais before his throne, was a moment too late for her to avoid the strange beam of energy that struck her.

She stumbled back, and not only because there was a sensation of force to it, but because—because it had hurt. Her armor, she thought dimly, and groped for the wound; and then something hit her and she skidded, far enough to come up against the rubble spilling away from the gap where the wall of the throne room had crumbled—against a statue, she realized, a twisting alien figure toppled on its side.

There was a hole in her armor. And very nearly in her. She looked down at the blood on her hand. It was like no other wound she had ever had: she hadn't been burned by the energy, it hadn't cut her. It was as though—as though it had simply begun to deconstruct her. As though her armor had been taken apart, and then her skin beneath, and if she had not stumbled it would have gone on through her.

She thought, with a jolt, of Barry’s legs. It was the fractures that had caught her eye, the terrible twisted angles; but there had been long raw wounds, too, deep ones, glistening blood welling up. Whatever sort of blast this was—if it had caught Barry as he ran, somehow, and he had stumbled—

She hadn't understood. She’d thought it had been Darkseid, Steppenwolf. But if something had gone terribly wrong, all the force of Barry’s speed come to bear—perhaps that was what had shattered his legs.

She brought her head up, and not a moment too soon: Steppenwolf was almost upon her again. But he’d come closer than he should have, flush with the certainty of his victory; she was able to catch the haft of the axe before he could bring it down upon her, and she held it there with one hand and sliced out with her sword.

This time, she caught him just at the joins of one rerebrace, and with all the strength her pain and her anger, the memory of Barry's pale drawn face, had lent her—the blade bit deep and he howled, dark blood spilling out.

And then Darkseid spoke. "Enough of this," he said, and his voice was terrible not in its sound but in its surety, in its solid immovable certainty. As if all it should take, all it ever took, were that he spoke thus, and the things he said would be manifest; as if he expected nothing less.

Beyond Steppenwolf, he turned—toward the antechamber, toward Victor and the box in his hands and his blazing unseeing stare, toward Barry. And the next blast he loosed from those coal-red eyes struck the antechamber’s ceiling.
Perhaps it was deliberate. Perhaps he \textit{wanted} to give her a chance—so that she would try, and thereby make herself predictable to him, and he could take advantage of the position he knew she would move toward. Perhaps it was only that it didn't seem worth the effort, to direct that lancing gaze toward Victor and then Barry separately, when it could as easily be done with one blow.

Whatever the reason, that was what he did. And when Diana shoved Steppenwolf aside and lunged, crossing the throne room in one leap and skidding across the stone, she reached unthinkingly for her back.

It had been so long since she had worn the shield, so long since she had set it aside and made herself into a sword instead. She had not thought of it, had not moved as though she bore it still, in years. She had thought—

She had thought, sometimes, that she could not have if she'd tried. That she had, in some essential way, lost the means to shelter anyone, and that setting aside the shield was only acknowledging that truth.

But she had only an instant to be startled at herself, before the stone came down on her.

She caught the largest piece across the yoke of her shoulders, head ducked carefully so it would not break upon her and crack again. She had to move with it for the same reason, because if it came apart she couldn't be sure she could grasp every piece of it in time to keep any of them from hitting Barry.

He had seen it coming, because of course he had; his mind, his eyes, must still work at the speeds he was used to, even if he couldn't stand on his mangled legs. He'd already begun to scrabble determinedly at the floor, trying to drag himself closer to Victor—who might have been all right, judging by the way the air around him was shimmering white, a soft bubble of light, but Diana saw no purpose in putting it to the test.

Rubble cracked down around them, each new impact against the stone Diana held shuddering through her until she began to fear it wasn't her arms that would give way but the floor beneath her feet.

Except the light that Victor had begun to cast—or perhaps the box; both boxes, given that he now possessed two—did shield him after all. Every chunk of stone that toppled toward him despite Diana's best efforts was slowed before it could touch him, and then stopped. Even reversed course, drifting up into the air nearby, shielding him better still from its fellows.

"Oh, god," Barry gasped, from the floor.

"I have it," Diana said, and then winced, shifted her hand to better brace the stone against her shoulder; something else had come down, perhaps part of the wall, and whatever this palace was built from, this dense black alien rock—it was not too heavy, but it was heavy enough—

And then suddenly the weight of it changed, and she pressed her shoulder up against it with renewed purpose. Fingers overlapped hers, where she had spread her palm over the stone, and she turned and looked past the dip of her bent elbow.

"Making a mess in here," Arthur said, mild, and then, "Turns out Darkseid had some shock troops stowed away in that ship of his. Sorry we were late."

"No, hey," Barry said unsteadily, "it's cool, it's fine, you're right on time," and Diana met Arthur's eyes and dipped her chin, and together they heaved half the ceiling aside. All the rest was only just settling around them; Arthur had to catch another chunk of stone as it attempted to topple toward
him, and Diana helped him hurl it away.

And then, abruptly, even as it flew through the air, half of it was disintegrated by a blast of light.

Darkseid.

Diana turned to look. Arthur had come straight for them—and he had been able to do it, unimpeded, because Clark was there.

Steppenwolf had collapsed upon the dais, with the blade of his own axe driven straight through his shoulder, pinning him to the stone. He was groaning through his teeth, and it was—something was happening to him where the blade touched him, as though the smoldering red of it were changing him, burning him; the metal of his armor, his gray skin, had begun to blacken like ash.

And, finished with him, Clark had left him there to trade blows with Darkseid.

It was almost an equal match, like this. Clark was overflowing with sunshine—more visible than it had ever been, here in the shadow of the ship's vast wreckage, surrounded by black stone and darkness. He was radiant with it, brilliant.

What a name Darkseid had chosen, Diana thought, with something that approached satisfaction. As if he knew, somewhere deep within whatever served a New God of Apocalypse for a heart, that it was light that would destroy him.

Their fists met with power enough that the air around them rippled with it, and Darkseid roared in frustration—caught Clark by the shoulder and tried to pull, as if to tear him apart, but Clark gripped his arm and twisted, eyes blazing red at the same time, and blasted him sideways into his own throne.

But it had only been the force of it, abrupt and unexpected, that had done it; when the light died away, Darkseid did not appear to have been injured by it. He bared his teeth at Clark, lurched up and away from the throne, and there was something in the look on his face then that said that—that now that he understood he could not swat them like flies, very well: he would exert the effort it took to rend them apart with his bare hands instead.

He did not reach out, and yet nevertheless Clark seemed abruptly to have been seized, pinned. Telekinesis, Diana thought—and then that strange disintegrating light burst forth from his eyes, and caught Clark full in the chest.

For an instant, Diana feared the worst. Clark lurched backward in the air, tumbled to the gleaming black floor without a sound, and his face was a mask of agony. But when he skidded to a stop, he rolled to his knees almost immediately, and he had a hand at his chest but there was no blood seeping between his fingers.

He did not stand. He couldn't, Diana thought, and even as she moved Arthur was beside her, both of them rushing forward. Arthur, she thought; and she thought of Barry and Victor, too; of Bruce, trapped somewhere within this place, because he'd chosen to let himself be taken just to give them half a chance to succeed, and—

And of all of them. Twist, and Lois, who no doubt were even now outside somewhere, knocking parademons from the sky; every one of Bruce's people, facing such a towering swarm, knowing they fought the armies of gods and pressing forward anyway.

She thought of them, and her heart felt squeezed in bands of iron. It was overpowering, the flood of it: the sorrow that swept her, to think they would not all live to see tomorrow; and her pride in them, the fierce bittersweet joy that she fought with them, that in this they were one in ways Darkseid and
his mother boxes could never have achieved. *This* was unity, in its best and truest meaning—to care and be cared for, to fight and be fought for, to shield and be shielded, even as your heart broke.

She loved them, in that moment; and for all that it was a tentative and seedling thing, clinging for purchase in the salted earth of her, it was there.

And when Darkseid rose up with a grim smile and clenched his fists, let loose that terrible light in a blinding blast, Diana closed her eyes and crossed her gauntleted forearms before her, and it did not touch them.

It felt just as it always had. The wave of it flowing from her, the prickle that crossed her skin. Like the sun over the sea, like the breeze as it swept the hills of Themyscira; the warmth of it, the sweetness, and yet it hurt, too, bruise and balm, both at once. She had thought—

She didn't know what she had thought. That she'd lost this, unworthy—diminished by her anger, by her pain, by the things she had done. That it would have been stained, the way she felt stained; that the light would have dimmed, that it would not be enough.

That *she* was not enough, not now. Not like this.

But she opened her eyes, and the light was there: pure and brilliant, rose-gold, luminous beyond words, just as she remembered it. And perhaps it had never left her at all; perhaps she had not dared to reach for it, had not wanted to try only to find it gone. All that time she had spent arguing with Bruce, thinking he did not know himself, thinking he failed to understand—and all along she, too, had been afraid.

Darkseid's power splashed from the barrier of it, a harmless flare, and was gone. Dimly, through the haze of it, she could see him, his wide red eyes, staring at her in surprise.

And then behind her, Barry said weakly, "Victor, man—come on, come on, you almost got it—"

And she thought to glance up just in time to see it: for behind her there had already been a soft silvery glow, gradually brightening; Victor and his stolen box.

But now it was not alone. Behind Darkseid, high in the shadows over the throne, the other two boxes had been drifting quietly—but all at once they were glowing too, brighter and brighter, and then suddenly they changed. They were—they broke apart somehow, and within the space of a breath, a blink, they were gone.

Not destroyed, she thought, but moved.

"Holy shit," Barry said, faint, awed, and Diana turned her head and saw Clark.

Because that was where Victor had sent them. All three, Steppenwolf's and Darkseid's, and they were reshaping themselves around him. Arming him, armoring him—and not the way Victor's box had done for him, building him a body by its own means while leaving itself intact. A chestplate was forming over the hole Darkseid's blast had torn in Clark's suit, and it *was* the box, flattening itself out, glittering, a thousand shifting pieces, light spilling from every curve and angle. Each of his arms, too, now bore a gauntlet, and his knuckles were bare but the boxes had spilled up across his palms, over the backs of his hands.

His eyes were no longer simmering fire; they had gone white like Victor's, with a blazing hard light that was impossible to see past.

He came to his feet, effortless, as though it were not he who moved but rather the world that had
rearranged itself around him so that he stood upon it. He strode forward, unhesitating—Diana lowered her arms, belated, and reached for him with one glowing hand, and he paused and looked at her. It was Clark, and then again it wasn't; and she touched the back of his wrist gently, and then he could go on walking, the veil of her power parting for him with a ripple.

"No," Darkseid said. "No. I am come to rule you, to remake you. You will have but one purpose, and that purpose will be Darkseid—all this world, all this universe, will be Darkseid—"

But Clark did not stop. If Darkseid had intended to use his telekinesis again, or whatever other powers he possessed, it wasn't working; Clark advanced, a step at a time, without urgency but inexorable. He strode over Steppenwolf, who still struggled weakly to pull the axe from his shoulder, and ascended the dais—and Darkseid came at him with a roar, but Clark didn't flinch. Darkseid's blows were not even touching him: silver light flared in the air, thickened, into something that seemed to serve as a shield, and Darkseid could not reach past it, through it, no matter how he strained.

And then Clark lifted a hand, palm out, and it was Darkseid who was caught. Clark did not touch him; but streaming bands of silver light formed from nothing and wrapped themselves round him, and Darkseid flinched from them and tensed against them but could not break them.

Clark looked at him, and his face was without anger. If anything, his expression was terrible in its lack of rage: his gaze was radiant and white-hot and oddly gentle, almost pitying.

Pitying, and yet merciless. He leaned close, but as softly as he might have spoken, his voice was—it had changed like his eyes, somehow, filled to the brim with the power of the boxes and overflowing besides, and it was impossible not to hear it. "This world was never yours," said something that was not quite Clark alone, "and never shall be," and then—

Diana didn't know what happened next; it was so hard to even understand what it was her eyes told her, what it was that had been done. Clark reached out, and his hand was not his own, it was—his gauntlet, the mother box that had spilled itself across his palms. It must have been the mother box.

He reached out, and he grasped what seemed to be the very air, the very fabric of being from which all things were made. He grasped it and he tore it, rent a gaping maw in the cloth of reality itself—and beyond it was utter nothingness, a void so terrible Diana flinched from the sight of it, eyes aching.

And then Clark caught Darkseid by the throat with one powerful hand, and shoved him through. If Darkseid cried out, it was inaudible, the sound unmade and swallowed whole by that black beyond; it was done in utter silence, an instant, and then it was over.

The tear closed again, with a motion of Clark's hand. And then he turned and looked down at Steppenwolf, moved to kneel at Steppenwolf's impaled shoulder—touched Steppenwolf's helm, and Steppenwolf bared his teeth in rage and then was—was undone. Diana had no other words to say it: he came apart, dissolved into motes of dull red light and then was gone, and left his axe behind, jutting out of the cracked stone of the dais.

"Well," Arthur said, behind her. "Okay then."
It was the dream.

At last. It was the dream, the dream; and it had come true, as he had always known it must.

He hung in his chains, shaking, aching. His wrists were scraped raw; his shoulders burned. There was blood in his mouth. The stone that surrounded him was dark, roughly hewn into the pit that held him, the long half-lit tunnel that stretched away before him.

And he felt it, just as he always did: the certainty, terrible and profound, that there was no way out. That something was coming—he was coming, inexorable, inescapable.

A chitter, through the dimness. Fluttering. Red eyes; not his, not yet.

Soon, Bruce thought, and squeezed his eyes shut, and the cold horror of futility settled in his chest like a stone.

He couldn't scream. He wanted to, dimly, desperately, but he was—he didn't have the air for it, somehow, his own harsh gasps thin in his ears. The terror was endless, fathomless, and it rolled through him in waves, sharpening to peaks so unbearable he sobbed with it, unable to move, to catch his breath, to think; and then a muted hiss of air, a dozen satisfied sighs from the darkness, and he would sink almost gratefully into a trough between, head dropping, chains clinking, digging his fingernails into his palms for the sake of the sting: a pain that was only physical.

The pattern, too, was its own kind of terror—that the worst of it eased for those brief lulling intervals, except it would always come back, there would always be more; the worst was both behind him and before him, and there was nothing he could do to make it stop.

Wings flapped, leathery snaps and metallic clatters. Sometimes there were more glowing eyes in the shadows; sometimes fewer.

And then, at last, something changed.

It took him a long time to realize it. He had sunk so deep within himself, dragged down and down and down—even when the horrible crushing pressure that suffocated him began, by degrees, to lessen, he couldn't do anything but hang there, desperately and pathetically grateful for it.

There was distant noise. The chittering, the wings, the eyes, were gone. He was, he thought dazedly, alone.

He blinked sweat from his eyes, licked blood from his lips. And then, an inch at a time, he dragged his head up; and there was a sudden motion of air, a deafening sound, and—

And there, in the furthest depths of the tunnel, was a figure.

The alien had come for him after all.

God. God, god, it was—it was just the way it always was, just the way Bruce had known it would be. No. God, no—no, no—
Half a dozen shrieks, those goddamn too-familiar wings. But the alien looked at the creatures with blazing eyes, and they were sliced apart with a sizzle, the smell of smoke thick in the air.

Because they couldn't stop him. Nothing could.

Bruce wanted, in a bone-deep animal way, to thrash—to struggle. To chew his own goddamn arms off, because to bleed out in agony on his own terms would still be better than to spring the trap inevitability had set for him. But there wasn't enough of him left; it didn't feel like there was enough of him left. It was all he could do to screw his eyes shut tight, to twist his face away. To pretend, mindless, idiotic, that he didn't know what was coming next—

The alien strode nearer. Bruce could hear his footfalls, now; knew, knew, with absolute certainty, the look of implacable merciless rage that must be carved on that terrible face. He didn't need to open his eyes, he didn't need to see it. It was there, it had to be.

And then the alien caught him by the chest, gripped the cloth at his collar, and said, "Bruce."

Bruce did look, then. He couldn't stop himself, drawn by sick fascination; and the alien was—

His gaze had cooled. It wasn't white-hot and shimmering, not anymore. Something, some kind of—armor, was peeling itself away from the alien's chest, each of his arms, drifting up into the air and reshaping each piece of itself into—into cubes, strange and gleaming.

And the alien was paying them no mind at all. He was looking at Bruce, brows drawn down, but it wasn't—wasn't the expression that should have been there. His mouth was a tight line, his eyes were wet.

"Bruce," he said again, more softly. "Bruce—oh, god—" and he reached out and caught one of Bruce's chains in his hand, and the black spiked metal of it snapped in his grip.

"No."

"No," Bruce said.

His voice was hoarse, ragged and scraped; his throat burned, as if perhaps he had been screaming after all and hadn't known it. The alien flinched from the sound of it.

"Shh," he said. "Shh, it's all right, I've got you," and he was—he had an arm around Bruce, Bruce too weak to do anything but sway into his hold. He reached up and broke the other chain, and caught Bruce against himself, and lowered them both carefully down.

"No," Bruce said. "No." God. This couldn't be happening. Not this. All the dreams he had ever dreamed, and not one had been as cruel, as terrifying, as this. He clutched at the alien's arms, his shoulders, with his raw and bleeding hands. "Kill me."

The alien stared down at him, pale, unreadable, jaw knotted tight.

He could. Of course he could. It would be the easiest thing in the world for him. He had to want to. He had to.

"Bruce—"

"Kill me," Bruce gritted out, and caught the alien's hand in his own, dragged it to his chest—except all the alien did was flatten it out, broad strong palm pressed to Bruce's dented armor. "That's what you do. That's what you have to do."
"No," the alien said, very softly.

"You have to—"

"No."

"You want to," Bruce told him, though it shouldn't have needed saying. "You want to. I killed you —"

"I know you did," the alien said gently, and slid his hand to the base of Bruce's throat; except it wasn't to squeeze down, wasn't to strangle him. The alien only followed the line of it, touched his jaw, his face. "I know."

"You're a threat," Bruce spat at him, the words cracking apart in his mouth. "You're a weapon. I used you. I manipulated you. I let you touch me so you would hate yourself for it, so it would be easier to make you do what I needed you to do—"

"Bruce," the alien said.

"I don't regret it," and god, Bruce couldn't stop himself now if he tried; the words were scraping themselves from his tight throat, torn from him, relentless. "Do you understand? I don't regret it. I had to do it, and if I had to I would do it again—"

"I know you would," the alien said quietly.

Bruce blinked his stinging eyes. That didn't make sense. None of this made any sense.

"I know what you saw when you looked at me back then, because I just saw it up there. I know why you did it. I do understand, Bruce. I do understand.

"I wish I'd understood then. I wish I hadn't hit you when you hit me, I wish I hadn't made it worse. I wish you hadn't made it worse. I wish—I wish I'd tried harder, I wish I'd talked to you—"

Bruce closed his eyes. "I wouldn't have listened to you," he heard himself say. "I'd never have listened to you."

But the alien didn't take this for the damning death-row confession it was. His hand didn't move away from Bruce's face; he didn't tear Bruce apart. He held Bruce against him, pressed his temple to Bruce's and gripped tight. And then they were—they'd come up off the ground: he lifted Bruce up out of the dark, and carried him away.

Bruce woke prone, on his back, in a place he knew.

He'd expected none of those things: waking at all, or that anyone would have attempted to arrange him comfortably while he was out, or that he would feel sure—even before he moved or opened his eyes—that he was somewhere familiar, and not in danger.

He was lying on a cot, he thought. He allowed both eyes to open fractionally; keeping one closed while opening the other would be more noticeable to anyone observing him. And he was surrounded not by dark rock, but by stark concrete. His own rooms within the compound, spare and dim. The bare minimum, as always: the cot where he slept, when he had the opportunity; the worktable and
equipment he used for minor repairs; and the lone chair—

The lone chair, occupied.

It was so hard to decide what to call him. Superman, except that he was sitting there in borrowed clothes, a button-down and worn dark jeans. Kent, except that to use that name was to, however tacitly, suggest that Bruce accepted its validity: that he was willing to allow himself to be fooled, to swallow the pretense whole. And yet—

And yet "the alien" no longer felt adequate to describe him.

Bruce let his eyes fall closed again. "Kent" would have to do.

"I know you're awake," Kent said, mild.

He moved; Bruce could hear him shift, the muted creak of the chair beneath him. He'd been holding something, Bruce thought, and became aware of the sensation of coolness against his skin a moment before something soft and damp daubed at his jaw, the side of his throat.

A washcloth.

"Just cleaning you up a little," Kent added, and Bruce opened his eyes again and looked at the cloth in Kent's hands, the bowl he'd balanced on his knees. The cloth was stained red; the water was, too.

He ached, certainly, but he hadn't thought—

"You're all right," Kent said. "You're fine. There were—" He stopped, and swallowed. "There were some casualties, but you weren't one of them. Bruising, but no internal bleeding. I checked," and he reached up with his free hand, made an absent gesture toward his eyes. "But you—your face was a mess."

Bruce remembered the taste of blood. He wet his lip, cautious, testing, and yes, there was the sting he expected: split in a few places. Bitten. The tip of his tongue, too, protested the movement with a sharp throb. But he didn't seem to have severed it. That was good.

"Yeah," Kent agreed, watching him do it, and then Kent reached out and swiped carefully along the side of his throat again. "Almost got it all now, though."

He waited it out, and tried to gauge the catch of the cloth against stubble. Not too much of it; he couldn't have been out for more than thirty-six hours at the absolute maximum—or for less than perhaps a hundred, if someone had already done him the courtesy of shaving him once, and it had grown out again after—

No. Stop. No evidence for it. Wait and see. He swallowed, and made himself breathe: it served a double purpose, allowing him to evaluate the ache in his ribs and chest, centering him at the same time. There was a tightness that didn't want to leave him, a thrumming echo of unprovoked panic lurking.

Lingering side effect, he assumed.

Kent took the cloth away, dipped it in the water, squeezed it out with a spatter of drips; brought it back. He was looking at Bruce and yet not at Bruce at the same time, focus concentrated on whatever smeared blood was still sticking to Bruce's throat. Incongruous, on so many levels—that it should be him doing this, him of all people, and that he should be doing it here. Bruce had adjusted gradually to the reality of his resurrected presence, in the ship; and then within the compound more
generally, forcing himself to accept that Kent couldn't remain confined forever.

But Bruce had never imagined him here. In Bruce's own quarters, Bruce's space. He was never supposed to have come here.

"What do you remember?" Kent said.

"Everything," Bruce said.

It came out a hoarse rasp; Kent winced, just like he had when—

just like he had—

Kent cleared his throat, reflexive sympathy, and reached down beside the chair for a bottle of water. He didn't try anything unnecessarily complicated; he just popped the top and handed it to Bruce.

Bruce pushed the urge toward unwarranted paranoia down. Someone had to know Bruce was here, had to know Kent was with him. Kent wasn't stupid enough to waste time sitting here wiping blood off his face just to poison him. As if Kent needed to bother, when—

Bruce made himself drink, slow and steady, soothing against the lingering burn in his throat. He held out to Kent when he was done. And then he said, "Your powers."

"Oh—yeah," Kent said, rubbing at the back of his neck. "I know you figured out some of it. That it was Victor, the box, that brought those parademons down on us. But it was—" He stopped and pressed his lips together, a tight pale line. "It was because of me. It was because Victor was trying to help me."

"And it worked," Bruce observed, very level.

"It did," Kent conceded, after a second. "Felt like bad timing when it happened, but now I don't know anymore. Maybe Victor's box could tell Darkseid was on the way with another one. Maybe it knew it had to do it right then, or there might never be another chance."

Bruce closed his eyes, and drew another slow deliberate breath. So much time and effort spent in preparation for it; there was a certain irony in the idea that he might then have missed it, chained up in a hole in the ground. "It happened, then," he said aloud.

"Yes," Kent said softly. "It did."

"And you defeated him."

Kent looked away. "We all did," he said. "Twist took your people and Victor and Barry—they attacked from the front, kept the parademons busy. Diana and Arthur and I, we brought down his ship. Barry's the one who lowered the shield for us, and took a box from him so he couldn't stop us before we started. He brought some troops with him—I couldn't have taken them all down fast enough to get there in time without Arthur. Diana—" His whole face changed, sudden and striking, blooming with remembered wonder. "Darkseid had some kind of a power, a beam. Hurt more than anything I've ever felt. But she was—she lit up, shielded us with it, so he couldn't touch us. And Victor found some way to interface with the boxes, to ask them to help us stop him. And they did."

"So the ship was right after all," Bruce said, cool.

Kent blinked at him. "What—the ship told you to bring me back from the dead?"
"I asked it whether there was anything on this planet capable of altering the odds that Darkseid would destroy us completely," Bruce said. "It answered."

Answered—and in such a way, he thought slowly, so as to make it clear that he would need a box's energy to do it, once he'd run the numbers. It had access to the database, because of course it did: to every recorded sighting of Stone and Curry, and its sensors were perhaps the one thing on the planet besides Stone's eye that were capable of detecting Allen's movements.

Had it been able to extend its projections that far? Had it known Allen would see them, when they left to find Stone? Had it been aware the parademons had Curry, calculated that the swarm that had captured him was likely to build a new nest right in Sierra Team's path?

Jesus Christ. He wasn't sure it would tell him even if it had.

But it didn't matter how it had happened. The point was that it had worked. Optimal outcome, in a sense, to have armed yourself so well that when the battle came, you didn't even have to be there to fight it.

And it was important to remember what mattered here, to make it clear that he was aware of the situation and all that it entailed. It was important for Kent to understand that he knew nothing had changed.

Why should it?

(Irrational, the terror that had overtaken him, in the tunnel: that it had—changed—that Kent's hands on his chains, Kent's arms around him, meant anything at all—)

"Our deal is still in effect," he said aloud. "You've kept your end of the bargain."

And Kent sat there and stared at him for a long silent moment, and then looked away. "Yeah," Kent said quietly, and leaned down—set the bowl down on the floor next to the chair, and dropped the washcloth into it. And then he stood: stood, and took a step, and lowered himself to the edge of the cot, and only then did he look at Bruce again.

(Were his eyes bluer now than they had been before? Was that even possible?)

"Yeah," he repeated, and reached out—skimmed the backs of two knuckles along the side of Bruce's throat, the damp skin he'd just wiped clean. "Right. I get to kill you now. I remember." He paused, and tilted his hand; rubbed the side of his thumb thoughtfully along the line of Bruce's jaw. "The thing is," he added, in a mild, thoughtful sort of tone, "it might have to wait a bit, if you don't mind."

Bruce tensed, helpless, teeth clenching.

(No. No—)

Kent looked at him, and a strange little flicker crossed his face: a brief shadow, grave, almost tired. But Kent had his powers back, had everything he could possibly have wanted. There was no reason for it.

Kent's hand moved again. He turned it, brushed Bruce's chin with his fingertips and then—and then Bruce's mouth, the sore stinging wounds Bruce had bitten into it.

"Because I can think of better things to do with you," he said.
Bruce lay still beneath his hands, watching him with wary eyes; but he didn't twist his face away, didn't tell Clark to stop. He was allowing it, and with Bruce—

With Bruce, that was probably about the best Clark could hope for.

He sat there like an idiot with his thumb against Bruce's lip for way too long, heart pounding, just waiting for Bruce to push him away. He—he wasn't going to kiss Bruce. It was weirdly difficult to even think the word; impossible to imagine it

—but just as impossible to stop trying to—)

and it didn't matter anyway. They didn't do that.

Clark touched him instead. That was all right. That was permitted. Bruce had already let Clark put his hands pretty much everywhere. He wouldn't mind.

Granted, Clark had never done it quite like this. He just—he just couldn't stop. He couldn't stop thinking about it: Bruce, hanging there, bloody and breathless; parademons crawling along the walls, crouched around and over him, turning their glowing eyes all at once on Clark, and they'd been— they'd been feeding on him. Like that, still overflowing with the power of three joined mother boxes, Clark had been able to see it. Something soft and dark and insubstantial, tugged out of Bruce a bit at a time; fried free, curling away like smoke, sucked into their mouths.

It had been a terrible kind of satisfaction, to burn through them all without hesitating. And then—

And then the boxes had left him, and he'd been just himself again. He'd broken Bruce's chains, caught Bruce before he could fall. And Bruce had looked at him like he was the worst nightmare Bruce had ever had.

(Kill me. You have to. You want to—)

He could have torn Bruce apart. He still could; there was no way to prove that he wouldn't, not one that Bruce would believe.

But he couldn't stop himself from trying. He could taste the bitter desperation in the back of his throat, as he ran careful fingers along the lines of Bruce's face, his cheekbones, his brow, the stern line of his nose.

(As if he could say it, that way: no. No, I don't want to. I could, I know I could. I could dig my fingers into your bones and rip you open; but I won't, I wouldn't, I swear I never will. This is all I want to do with my hands on you, just this—)

(I wouldn't have listened. I'd never have listened to you—)

He kept his touch light, along the stark angle of that tense jaw, the chin; and lighter still down the line of the throat, thumb ghosting past the hollow of it. Bruce was still wearing the undersuit, though his armor had been pried off hours ago, Clark peeling the pieces away and frantically scanning for internal injuries—
God. He didn't even know why it mattered so much. He didn't even know why it was so important. His chest was tight with something that was still at least half anger. But Bruce had always been so unyielding, so relentlessly *there*; Clark had died and come back, and Bruce had still been there, standing over him, as if he'd never moved at all. Everything else, *everything*, had changed, Clark and Metropolis and the world itself all broken and unfamiliar. But not Bruce. Clark hadn't been able to get *rid* of him. Had resented that inexorable constancy fiercely at the same time he'd been painfully grateful for it.

And then, abruptly, Bruce had been gone. Ripped away, so thoroughly Clark couldn't get him back except by saving the world first, and now—

Now Clark couldn't take his hands off him.

He smoothed his palms helplessly, convulsively, over Bruce's shoulders, his chest, his waist. He found the edge of the undersuit's shirt, shoved it up and slid his hands underneath it, and god, that was even better: Bruce was warm, alive, muscles tensing beneath Clark's fingertips, brief half-suppressed shivers rippling through him. Clark thumbed along the curves and jagged lines of scattered scars—and that was good, too, that tangible proof of all the things Bruce had already survived.

And Bruce didn't stop him. He was still watching Clark silently, dark-eyed and intent; and the look on his face hadn't changed, but his hands had drawn together into fists against the cot.

"Kent," he said at last, very low.

Clark bit the inside of his cheek, curved his hands to follow the shape of Bruce's ribs.

Bruce had killed him for a reason. He'd always known that. For a lot of reasons. Diana had told him outright that one of them had been fear; and he remembered being distantly, grimly satisfied once, to think somewhere deep down Bruce might be afraid of him. But it hadn't been real to him then. How could it have been? Bruce had never *seemed* afraid, had never acted like he was. He hadn't hesitated to fight with Clark, to argue with him, to shout at him—to provoke him, to press a thigh between his and grab his ass and jerk him off.

Down there, in that pit beneath Steppenwolf's fortress, deep in the warren of a nest the parademons had dug into the stone: that had been the first time. That had been the first time Clark had looked at Bruce and *seen* the terror in his face.

Barry had told them that the parademons had taken Bruce. That Bruce had wanted them to. But it wasn't until that moment that Clark had understood what that really meant. And Bruce wouldn't have tried it unless he'd known it would work, unless he'd been sure he'd be able to *make* it work.

Unless he'd known there was enough fear in him to draw a swarm that size, even with Steppenwolf's instructions to the contrary rattling around in their heads. And he'd known what they'd do with it, what they'd do with him, and he'd done it anyway.

And if that fear was—if *that* was how he felt about Clark—

Maybe not all the time. Maybe he got off on it, in the right dosage. Maybe it wasn't that bad.

(*Kill me. You have to. You want to—*)

Clark closed his eyes.

"Barry told us what happened," he said quietly. "That you let them take you. Distracted them."
Bruce made a soft dismissive sound. He hadn't taken his eyes off Clark. "I assume Darkseid arrived shortly thereafter," he said, very even, "if the timing of that sequence of events was enough to lead you to hypothesize that Stone's box chose its moment deliberately. Steppenwolf must have recalled the swarm, once he was aware of Darkseid's presence. It was tactically sound at the time, but ultimately irrelevant—"

"No," Clark said, too loudly, and then stopped, bit down on the tip of his tongue and tried to get a grip.

It wasn't irrelevant. How could it be? He hadn't been able to let go of it; he still couldn't. It had been rattling around in his head ever since Barry had flickered into place in front of him in the ship, and he'd pushed it aside to save the world and then Bruce, but he hadn't forgotten about it.

"No," he said again, more gently. "It wasn't irrelevant, Bruce."

Bruce tensed under his hands, stare dark, expression unreadable. "I meant it," he said sharply, almost warningly. "I don't regret killing you."

Clark didn't move: kept his hands where they were, pressed to warm scarred skin, feeling Bruce breathe.

"I know you don't," he said.

He almost wanted to laugh. That was just it, the thing that had stuck in his head, the thing he had finally begun to understand.

You know him well.

I'm starting to.

Because Bruce had killed him for a lot of reasons, and one of them had been fear but it hadn't been the only one. I had to, that's what Bruce had told him on the ship, and at the time it had only made Clark angrier. But he thought he knew, now, what Bruce had actually been saying.

Bruce did things he saw a need for. He did them because he believed they had to be done. And it was terrible, it made a grim sick feeling settle into the pit of Clark's stomach, to think that Bruce felt it was the same: throwing himself on a grenade like that, sacrificing himself to protect Victor Stone, and—and taking Superman out.

(Clark had wanted him to be sorry. But—

But Clark had been willing to trade himself for Earth, when he'd thought Zod had been asking him to. And if Bruce had believed he was making that same bargain—Superman, for the safety of the planet—

How could Clark possibly blame him for it?)

"I would do it again," Bruce was saying, biting the words out, and he'd grasped Clark by the wrists, tight, punishing.

"I know you would," Clark said quietly. "I told you, Bruce, I understand." He hesitated, looked away—at their hands, his own half-hidden and shoved up under the dark fabric of the undersuit, and Bruce's wrapped around them. He rubbed his thumbs gently along the lines of Bruce's ribs, and listened to the breath catch just a little in the back of Bruce's throat. "I killed someone once, too," he said, without looking up. "I made myself, because I thought there wasn't any other choice if I wanted
to keep people alive. I—

"I'm not glad about it. It doesn't make me happy, to think about that. To know that I did it—that I was able to. That I was capable of it, that I decided to do it, that I was able to believe it was right. What if it wasn't, the next time? What if it wasn't but I decided it was, because it had been last time? What if it hadn't been, and it was just that I was—desperate, afraid; that I couldn't think of anything else so I told myself it was justifiable this once; or that maybe somewhere inside of me I was wanting to, maybe I'd been looking for the excuse—"

He couldn't keep going, it was—his throat hurt, he couldn't breathe. Psychosomatic, he thought distantly, because he had his powers back now; it didn't really hurt. He didn't need to breathe. He was fine.

He blinked and swallowed hard, once and then again. He was concentrating, careful, to keep the touch of his hands light, infinitely delicate, like Bruce was porcelain beneath his fingertips. Because, in a sense, it was true.

And then he made himself meet Bruce's eyes, and repeated it, deliberate: "I do understand."

And Bruce looked back at him steadily, mouth tight, and didn't say a word.

Clark smiled at him, tiny and wry, even though none of this was funny at all. He sat there and he let himself just—look at Bruce, drink him in. Even here, now, prone and scraped-up, that relentless tension hadn't gone anywhere; it was a relief, Clark thought, after all the long hours he'd spent sitting here with Bruce slack-faced and unconscious.

It was like a knot in him, the whole huge tangle of it. The shadow of all the resentment and anger he'd ever felt toward Bruce, lingering; the sheer frustration that Bruce had just—done that, that Clark hadn't even known until it was already too late, ringing in time with the clear bright echoes of the moment Clark had found him in that pit, had reached out and touched him and been certain at last that he was alive.

(He'd heard Bruce's breathing, his heart. He'd seen him moving. But he hadn't believed it. He'd been—he'd been too afraid to be wrong—)

God. His eyes were stinging, he didn't know why; he squeezed them shut and sucked in a harsh breath, skimmed his hands to Bruce's waist—gently, gently, because he could break Bruce now with the barest effort—and Bruce lay there and let him do it. He touched Bruce's hips, smoothed his thumbs over the jut of them, spread his palms against the solid muscle of Bruce's thighs.

Bruce wasn't hard yet. Clark risked a glance—met his eyes and was caught and held there, and reached without looking until the backs of his knuckles found the heavy shape of Bruce's cock in his pants; and Bruce's face was blank, his gaze dark and intent and utterly unreadable, but that hot weight was thickening against Clark's hand.

Clark realized with a distant jolt that it felt—he could feel it more than he should've been able to. Filled up with all that light Victor Stone and his mother box had poured into him, his senses had gone wild; but it had been like riding a bicycle, getting a grasp on them, remembering how to close them down and put them away so he didn't lose his mind.

But he'd opened up again now, without meaning to. He felt the heat of Bruce's cock like a brand, every minute shift in the temperature and pressure against his fingers as Bruce grew hard—he could hear it, the rush of blood beneath Bruce's skin; he could smell it—
He let his eyes fall shut, let his head tip back, and sank into it: rubbed the backs of his knuckles carefully along the whole clothed length of Bruce's dick, drunk on the sound of Bruce's heart, the drag of Bruce's breath, the singing tension winding itself taut in Bruce's thighs.

(Maybe Bruce was afraid of him. But Clark could still make him feel good, could still make him want this. That had to count for something. Didn't it?)

The lower half of the undersuit fastened with snaps. Clark kept his hand where it was, greedily outlining the thickening shape of Bruce's cock, and slid the other to Bruce's waist, snuck his thumb into the band and popped those snaps in pairs until they were all loose, until he could nudge the sides of the fly apart. And he'd known already Bruce wasn't wearing a cup this time, that part was obvious; but he hadn't expected nothing, hadn't expected to be rewarded so immediately with hot soft skin, the crinkle of hair, a dozen shockingly intimate textures at once—

He shuddered helplessly, dug his teeth into his lip, and before he'd even really decided to, he was—he'd spread his thighs against the chair so he could lean forward, bend down over Bruce's hips and press his face there too.

He heard Bruce's breath catch, all the way back up there in his throat; and Bruce's thighs shifted against the cot with the barest scratch of cloth; and Bruce swallowed, a soft wet sound just at the edge of Clark's hearing, and said, "Kent—"

Maybe he was about to tell Clark to stop. Maybe he was sick of this—this obscene game they'd been playing with each other, and he wanted to put an end to it once and for all.

Clark squeezed his eyes shut. "Please," he heard himself say.

Bruce fell silent.

(—except in all the ways he didn't, the concerto of his breathing pulsing ticking body: alive, alive, alive—)

"Please," Clark repeated, hardly more than a whisper. "Please, let me—"

He couldn't say it, couldn't figure out what to say. Please, let me. Just one more time, that's all. Just this one thing—I'll never ask again—please.

But Bruce didn't speak into the silence Clark had left for him. After a moment, Clark dared to grasp the open waist of the undersuit, and Bruce didn't stop him. He tugged the sides down and apart, bared Bruce's cock at last; and he'd let go if Bruce told him to, he would, but somehow he still felt dogged by desperate urgency: as if he just needed to get his mouth on Bruce before Bruce could object, as if that was all it would take to make sure Bruce would let him go on doing it.

And then he did, and for a moment he was too overwhelmed to think at all. He got lost in it—the feel of that hot delicate skin against his lips, the taste; probably nothing to write home about, but with his senses riding this high it was exploding across his tongue, sharp with intensity, almost more than he could handle. Bruce moved underneath him, and Clark felt it, followed it, let even more of Bruce's cock slide into his mouth, and god, it shouldn't have been so good. Why was it so good? The shape of it against his tongue, that heavy solid weight pressing in, opening him wide, filling him up—he made a helpless little noise and sucked harder, screwed his eyes shut tighter, and hoped distantly that it felt half as good to Bruce.

The tug on his hair was an incandescent shock. He'd been so focused on his mouth, on Bruce's cock
and the way it felt, that he hadn't been expecting the sensation—he jerked and made a startled sound around Bruce's dick. Bruce was touching him; he hadn't thought—

A steady hand gripped the nape of his neck: not shoving him down, just holding him together. Fingers curled through his hair. And for all that Bruce could have pulled tight, held him there and fucked into his mouth—why shouldn't he? Clark couldn't be injured by it, didn't need to breathe; there was no reason for him not to—he didn't. He wasn't moving his hips at all.

He was—

He was shaking, Clark realized dimly. Shaking with the effort of it; not thrusting, not since that first silent unsteady surge of his body toward Clark, and there was a fine shivering tremble in his hand where it was wound into Clark's hair.

He hadn't made a noise, not like Clark. Clark eased off for a second, sucked in a breath just because he could and looked, and Bruce was—he'd twisted his face away against the cot, eyes squeezed shut and jaw tight, mouth bitten red, a flush climbing up his throat. Clark would've been afraid he was angry except for the part where he was dead fucking silent; because Bruce had never had any trouble letting Clark know it, when he was pissed.

And then Bruce turned his head and met Clark's eyes, and suddenly there was a weight in his grasp, an intent. Clark didn't understand what he wanted, at first—let himself be guided up out of the chair and over Bruce, but he—surely Bruce didn't want him to get on—

"It'll hold," Bruce gritted out, and of course the cot would hold; if it seemed like it wasn't going to, Clark could just float up off it, anyway.

That wasn't the reason Clark had hesitated.

He settled gingerly onto the edge of it on his knees, and Bruce took him by the hips and directed him until he swung a thigh over—and then went straight for the button of the jeans he'd borrowed, unzipped the fly in one sharp tug and gripped him right through the uniform underneath, and Clark had to gasp, rocking his hips helplessly into the sensation.

"Bruce—"

"Shut up," Bruce murmured, and he was—he dragged Clark's jeans down until they were bunched around Clark's thighs, until Clark could feel Bruce's hard wet cock pressed against his ass, Jesus Christ. Through the suit, which made it somehow extra obscene; Clark had never felt so hyperaware of the texture of the suit's material, the gleaming slickness of it, how thin it was.

He'd just wanted to suck Bruce off, if Bruce would allow it. He hadn't expected—he hadn't planned for—oh, fuck, fuck—

And that was how he came, in the end. Braced over Bruce with his thighs spread wide, trembling with the effort it took not to split the seams on the goddamn jeans; Bruce holding him there with one hand, groping him right through the suit with the other: tracing the shape of his cock, rubbing his palm over it, fondling it. Bruce had to remember how the suit worked, there was no way he'd forgotten—he just wasn't bothering, jerking Clark off through it instead, and it was too much and not enough, Clark panting desperately over the sensation at the same time that he couldn't help wishing bitterly Bruce's bare hand were touching him skin-to-skin instead.

But this was enough. This had to be enough.

It was awkward, leaning over Bruce like this. Doing all this so deliberately, not in the grip of rage or
hatred or frustration; it was awkward, it was weird, it was uncomfortable.

Clark couldn't stop. He didn't want to. He found himself staring helplessly at Bruce's face, cataloguing every tiny flicker that crossed it, every motion of Bruce's gaze—every clench of his hand around Clark, every tight little press of Bruce's hips up against Clark's ass. They'd already taken at least twice as long this time as they ever had before, and still, still, Clark found himself half-hoping neither of them would come just yet; that they could drag it out just a little longer, make it last.

But it couldn't. Bruce's fingers against him, his half-lidded eyes, the heat of him—Clark couldn't stand it, it undid him. He shattered in Bruce's grip, and through the bright haze of it he could feel Bruce shuddering beneath him; and he clutched at Bruce's chest and pressed himself into Bruce's hands and wished it didn't have to end.

But it did.

It did, and he knew it, and he couldn't shrink from it. He'd do what needed to be done.

He owed Bruce that much, at least.
Barry eased the crutches out from underneath his arms, grimacing, and slid down against the wall with a sigh.

He was pretty much okay now. Compared to right after, the way he'd hardly been able to move, how much it had hurt—all the bits and pieces of his bones were basically back where they were supposed to be, and he wasn't even bleeding anywhere. He was doing awesome.

And he was going to have some sick scars, too.

He even felt a little badass, sometimes. Not because of the scars, exactly, but just—just because of the fight, because of Darkseid and everything. Which was kind of weird. He probably should have come out of that whole experience even more freaked out than usual: it had been all the worst nightmares he'd ever had rolled into one, after all. He'd tried so hard, done the best he could, and it still hadn't been enough. He'd gotten that shield down, yeah—that part had been pretty cool—and he'd managed to get to one of Steppenwolf's boxes in time to keep it from being used. But after that? After that, it had gotten so much worse, he shivered every time he remembered it. Getting hit by something he couldn't escape, couldn't outrun, something that had hurt him so badly he couldn't get away; and everybody else fighting for their lives, while he was lying there being useless and basically passing out from manly agony. But—

But the thing was, it had happened, and here he was. The worst thing he could imagine, and it had happened to him, and he was okay anyway.

When he thought about it like that, he wasn't scared at all.

But his legs still kind of ached, the bones and the joints, and his muscles felt stiff and sore where they were probably busy stitching themselves back together; and he'd promised Aline he wouldn't run or anything until she said he could.

Which meant he was stuck walking everywhere, with crutches. Just like anybody else, totally normal pace! It was ridiculous.

And kind of exhausting, hence the sitting down.

He tipped his head back against the concrete and closed his eyes, and breathed. It still got the better of him sometimes, if he thought about it too much—how slow he was now, how long it took to get anywhere; how long it would take him to get out of here if he needed to, if he had to run but he couldn't—

"Hey."

Barry opened his eyes and looked up.

It was Curry—no, Arthur, Barry decided. Brave new world and all, and he was—he wanted to be brave along with it, if he could, and also Arthur had sat there and let Barry panic at him, and helped Diana keep Barry from getting crushed like a bug besides; he probably wasn't going to punch Barry in the face or anything for calling him his name.
And Barry'd told Arthur to call him Barry, so. It was probably okay.

"Arthur," he blurted immediately, and he hadn't necessarily intended to put it to the test quite that fast, oops.

But Arthur just stared down at him for a second, and then raised one eyebrow with a majestic sort of gravitas, and said, "Yeah, that's me."

They stared at each other. Arthur stood there for long enough that Barry almost started to think he didn't know what to do next either—and then he cleared his throat and looked away, swung around and sat down smoothly next to Barry, hands clasped, big bare arms propped on his knees.

Did he even own a shirt? Maybe he didn't.

(If he didn't, then Barry kind of hoped it took a long time for anybody to think to offer him one.)

"So," Arthur said, mild. "Told you we wouldn't be dead."

Barry laughed, startled, and then reached up ruefully to rub the back of his neck. "Well, not this time," he said. "'Next time' we saw each other, though, like, next time after two times ago, back in there—almost was then, except you've got really, really good timing. Has anybody ever told you you've got really good timing? Because—"

"But you're okay now," Arthur said, before Barry could really get rolling.

"What? Oh, um, yeah." Barry tipped his chin toward the crutches, leaning against the wall beside them. "I have to keep using those for at least the rest of the day."

"The rest of the day," Arthur repeated.

"I, um. I heal fast?"

Barry glanced down at his legs, his feet, and tipped them one way and then the other, just to say hi. Things looked pretty much fine, from here; you could see the red angry ends of a couple of the wounds where they crossed his ankles, the barest beginnings of the furrows they'd dug into the muscles of his calves. But he had pants on, obviously, and all the really ugly messy stuff was covered up.

"No kidding," Arthur said.

"Right, you—you probably already figured that out," Barry agreed, "since I can stand up and all and it's only been like two days. Anyway, you're right, you were—you were right," and he found himself holding out an optimistic fist. "Go Team Not Dead?"

Arthur looked at his hand, and then at him, and then at his hand. Man, it was amazingly hard to guess what he was thinking; his face was like a statue. A statue of a really, really hot guy who probably didn't have time for this shit.

But then one side of his mouth moved just a little, and suddenly Barry was inexplicably one hundred percent sure Arthur had time for this shit, and also maybe like sixty-two percent starting to think it wasn't an accident that Arthur had happened to show up in this hallway and stopped to talk to him.

And then Arthur lifted a hand, and did bump Barry's knuckles with his own after all.

"Taking it easy," he observed, after a second.
"Man, I can't do anything but," Barry said mournfully, stretching his legs out straight, pointing and then flexing his feet. Something burned in his thighs and calves when he did, for a second, but in that soft-edged achy way that meant it was getting better, not worse. "I have to walk everywhere! It takes entire minutes. How does anyone put up with this?"

The corner of Arthur's mouth moved a little more.

"You get used to it," he said, mild.

"Hah," Barry said. "I've never been this slow ever. I think I'm setting a new personal record for the amount of time I've spent in the same place, like, every ten minutes." He paused for a second, tilted his head like he was waiting for something and then raised his eyebrows and did jazz hands. "Right there! Two minutes longer than the longest time I'd ever spent anywhere, a record established two minutes ago—"

"Yeah," Arthur said, "I get the picture."

It could have come out kind of snide, and that would have been totally understandable; but it didn't. He mostly sounded like he thought it was funny, and he looked it, too—not that he was actually smiling or anything ridiculous like that. But his mouth had moved even more, and there were these lines crinkling into place at the corners of his eyes. Friendly lines, Barry decided.

And then they went away, and Arthur looked over at the wall and cleared his throat. "Been thinking I might give that a try myself," he said, kind of more to the hallway in general than to Barry.

Barry stared at him. "Um, record-breaking? Or—oh, uh, you mean—"

Arthur shrugged one shoulder, and kept looking at the wall. "Nice enough place, I guess."

"Sure, yeah, of course," Barry said, probably too fast but he was mostly just trying not to swallow his tongue by mistake. It wasn't like it meant anything that Arthur was telling him this, that Arthur was—was maybe going to stick around for a while. It was nice, that was all. Back in there with Darkseid, yeah, it had been scary, and yeah, it had hurt; but Victor had been there, and then Diana had shown up, and Arthur and Clark. They'd been there, they'd had each other's backs. None of them had been alone. The other stuff had sucked, but that part had been—Barry had never had anything like that before, or at least not for a long time.

Even Wayne counted, kind of: letting those parademons take him like that, because it would help keep the rest of them safe.

And now—

It was nice to think it wasn't going to fall apart right away, that it hadn't just been because they'd been in danger and they'd had to. It was nice to think maybe it was the beginning of something better.

And there wasn't any particular reason why Barry's face should be getting all—hot.

"It's, um. Good setup they got here," he managed to fumble out, after a second. "All anybody could ask for, in the middle of a post-apocalyptic wasteland. I'm—I've been—" He coughed into his fist, cleared his throat, and tried real hard not to fidget. It kind of worked. "I've been thinking maybe I'd stick around for a while myself." He paused. "Like, um, once my legs are okay and everything, obviously I'm not exactly going anywhere right now—"

"Yeah," Arthur said blandly. "So, two more days."
"I mean, I broke a lot of bones," Barry said. "Maybe three," and he tried to keep it all casual but he was grinning, he couldn't make it stop. Arthur didn't seem to mind too much, though: he was looking at Barry again, instead of at the wall, with that pale steady stare of his, and he hadn't gotten up and walked away. And Barry still couldn't even begin to guess what he was thinking, but that was okay. Because now, maybe, he was going to have all the time he needed to try to figure it out.

A couple hours out, Twist decided it was about time to stop for some water.

Didn't have to shout it. Didn't even have to say Diana's name. Just shifted gears, slowed the motorcycle, and that was enough: up ahead through the dust, she saw Diana's head turn, dark hair streaming out wild.

She braked, twisted into it a little just for the hell of it—just for the sake of kicking up some gravel under her wheels. Only made her ribs twinge for a second. Worth it.

She had a couple canisters strapped to the bike for later, but there was still some water in the bottle she kept at her hip—couple pints, she judged, shaking it a little to feel the weight. She uncapped it and tipped it up for a sip. And then paused and braced herself, so when Diana landed in front of her in a rush of air, tremble through the ground, she didn't spill any.

"Are you well?" Diana said when it was over, straightening and reaching out to touch the back of Twist's wrist.

"Oh, fuck off," Twist told her kindly, and took another sip. "Wouldn't have agreed to come if I weren't. Just thirsty."

Diana ducked her head as if abashed—like hell she was, though, Twist could totally see the corner of her mouth slanting. "You had already been injured by the raiders, even before the battle with Darkseid. And I have, very occasionally, known you to be stubborn—"

Twist made a face at her. "Yeah, well, funny story about that," she said. "See, I figured we were fucked, considering. Yeah, we took those parademons by surprise up there, we brought all the guns we could carry, but there were a lot of them. Even with Steppenwolf distracted, couldn't have been long before they'd rush us, and what the hell were we going to do about it? But then there was this big old blast of light, all red and gold, and they disintegrated. Real convenient. Good timing. Not a scratch on me. Guess I owe whoever set that off a thank-you."

It was true, every word. She'd been pinned down next to Lane; Stone had done good work getting them all up there, and they'd made a dent in the swarm, but not enough of one. They'd been screwed. All of them had known it. About the best they'd been good for had been a distraction—the longer they took to die, the better the shot Superman had.

And then there had been that light. There had been that light, and Twist hadn't had the words for it. Still didn't.
But right now she just meant to tease; so she kept her voice light, easy, and raised her eyebrows. Like it hadn't been impossible, beautiful and terrible at the same time, wondrous. Like Diana hadn't saved her life.

It didn't matter, though. Diana's face went strange and serious, and she gripped Twist's shoulder and said quietly, "No, you don't. You owe me nothing. I couldn't have done it without you—all of you."

"Well," Twist said, "we sure as shit couldn't have put on a lightshow like that without you. Call it even."

Diana smiled—and it was just the corners of her eyes at first, the way Twist was used to; but then it was her mouth, too, her whole face. It was like sunrise.

Twist made herself take another sip instead of staring. And then she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and squinted at Diana, and said, "So. I get that you didn't want to say it back there in the main bay. But now that we're out in the middle of nowhere and all—don't suppose you feel like telling me where the hell we're going?"

Diana was quiet for a moment. Not like she didn't mean to answer; like she wasn't sure where to start when she did.

"My sword," she said at last, reaching to touch the hilt of it where it hung at her side. "It is—not all that I brought with me." She glanced at Twist. "You know I am not ordinary."

"Understatement," Twist agreed.

Diana smiled at her again, like she couldn't help it. "There are other things that are mine. A shield, and a lasso. They meant a great deal to me, but for a time I felt I couldn't carry them. I felt I was no longer fit to. So I hid them away somewhere safe, and left them there. But now—" She stopped, looked down at her hands and flexed them a little, like she wasn't sure she knew what to do with them. "Now I think it's time I took them up again."

Okay. Fair enough.

"Okay," Twist said.

She wasn't going to ask. She knew better than that. She sealed the water back up again, put it away, and was half-ready to kick the bike back to life again when she realized Diana hadn't moved.

She looked up and raised an eyebrow.

"I wanted you to come with me," Diana said, "but that isn't all I wish to ask of you. I have told you very little of myself—"

"Hey, it's fine," Twist said. "Lot about me you don't know either. Though I'm guessing whatever you've got in the rearview is a little more interesting."

"It's not so uncommon a story as that," Diana said slowly. "Not anymore. I was part of something. There were people who meant everything to me. A mother, an aunt, many sisters. I loved them; I lost them, and I grieve them still, and I will never be the same. They are gone, and will not come back. But as long as I still live, and I remember them, something of what they were remains.

"I thought the Amazons had been destroyed. But I was wrong, for I am one and always will be. And perhaps one day there will be Amazons again."
And she looked at Twist and held out her hand, open, palm-up, waiting.

Twist looked at it and then at her.

Amazons. Jesus.

"You saying what I think you're saying?"

"You do not have to decide now," Diana said, soft. "But know that however you are willing to think of yourself, whether you choose to bear the name of the Amazons or not, I already consider you my sister. Sister by—" She paused. "By heart-truth and shield-right, if not by birth or making."

Twist swallowed, and thought about it; looked at that hand outstretched, and thought about it some more. She didn't know what it even meant to Diana to ask, didn't know what Diana expected of her if she said yes. What did Amazons even do? But—

But she had plenty of time to find out. They all did, now; now that they were safe, now that they had half a chance to try to rebuild the world for real.

And whatever it was that came next, she'd rather do it with Diana than without.

"Okay," she said aloud, and clasped Diana's arm, and Diana's grasp was warm and steady against her forearm in return. "Okay, you got it. Sister."

The smile came back in full force, brilliant, blinding. "Thank you," Diana said, and she reached out with her free hand and caught the nape of Twist's neck, leaned in past the motorcycle's handlebar and tipped their foreheads together. "Thank you."

"Sure thing," Twist said, which was stupid; but if being stupid now and then was a dealbreaker for this whole sister thing, then Diana probably would have said so upfront.

And Diana laughed a little and let go, and then tilted her head and said, "Race you?"

"What? How's that fair?" Twist demanded. "You didn't actually tell me where you left this stuff you hid, you know," but she'd already tipped the bike back to a level, kicked it awake; and when she revved it, Diana threw her head back and laughed.

"I will give you a head start," she called. Like that was going to make a difference when she was—some kind of Amazon goddess or something. Twist shook her head and grinned, gunned the engine anyway and took off in a spray of dust, and the whole horizon spread itself out wide and open in front of her, waiting.
"Okay, Victor. Let's give this a try, shall we?"

> 41VD1POS7NVJCGYRS0L7
> X7T4LL1I1GPO2E7H7XCS

> all right, what do you think?

> we got this?

> 7WZM56CPRDPT9JFS8JHJ
> L45GSW10YITCOCDOUDPV

> yeah, that's kind of what i figured you'd say

> VH1J27OZGTCQ3INDG6M
> 1ZJNNQQTZH3476ILGGNKA

> that's right

> it's safe here

> all four of you are safe here

> and so am i

> and there's nothing else on this planet that can fix this

> so you better be up to the job

> 328EQRKW779NIJN1JYU8
> X5NEBTPO2QB7M0WFG2

> come on

> Z7C70WVNX3R2FVA688AD
> JEBKGO8TMIFWV1565Z6

> come on

> C7KY9D423BDSTX5S6RP
> MRNCPTNO3EZ6Y9KEP4AJ

> 6WKONJDAHMD3Y72AVZZH
> 6UR9FL8HKQ3X61QMTQ93

> YDTWY2P1W6G6RE40H1OT
> MGChX6CNDPTJFDF1CD8TA

> yes

"Holy shit. Holy shit, I can't believe that worked. Look at this, this is—oh, jesus, Lane, get your head on straight, you need samples—"
"God. That sure as hell feels like grass. I can't even remember the last time I stood on grass."

> ZENHFZQ5EQNQIQAYV022
> 6TEFCOMGHID589KDRT5J

> lois

"You're a huge cliché. You realize that, right? How many kinds of wildflowers did you pack in here? And a spring? Ten minutes and we're going to have a little chuckling stream going. What is this, a Kinkade print?"

> 69RUA7VO3LWROQDD2200
> 70TZAHPWVAYOOLJ8OZW1

> lois

> G025SY5D0IK9UVSLWRQO
> SZ27LIM73X40Q5XHPIM2

> lois

>

>

"Lois."

"Victor?" she said.

She'd twisted around to look at him. She was standing there with her shoes off, pale bare toes curling into the—the grass. She'd brought him here with the boxes. He remembered that. She'd brought him here with the boxes to see whether they could undo what Steppenwolf had done. He could feel them without even looking: three of them, hovering above him, spinning slowly; and the fourth one, inside him, right where it was supposed to be—twined through him like veins on a leaf, him and not-him at the same time.

It had all been dead. This place, this rocky little hollow, it had been bare and dry and lifeless. He remembered that, too.

But it wasn't anymore.

(The boxes hadn't understood, that was all. Not until Victor's box had explained it to them. What safety was, what destruction meant; that what Steppenwolf had done with them had been wrong, had hurt, but if they could fix it—)

Victor looked at Lois, and blinked.

"Hi," he said unsteadily.

And Lois stared at him, eyes wet, and then tilted her head back and laughed. "You're a goddamn miracle, Victor Stone," she said, and took his metal hand, pressed it down into the fresh green grass barely an inch from where clear cold water was splashing down over the stone; and he hardly even had any skin anymore, but it didn't matter. He felt it, he felt it, and he smiled.
Kent was going to leave.

Bruce knew it even before Kent came looking for him—he had known it all along. It had been entirely predictable based on even the most cursory analysis: he’d agreed to the deal Bruce had proposed, after all. On the off chance that they survived Darkseid’s arrival, it would come into effect. Kent would kill him and then go; why shouldn’t he? He’d probably take Lane with him. Repair the ship at last, perhaps, and leave the planet entirely—go find another one that was in better shape, and rule it as a god. Yellow suns were a dime a dozen. Or, of course, he might venture further afield than that. For all anyone knew, a pulsar or a blue giant would render his capabilities even more unthinkably impressive. No reason he shouldn’t go find out.

Bruce was ready for it. Not that he wasted his time anticipating it. He hadn’t seen Kent since Kent had left his quarters three days ago—had touched his face, silent, and then looked away and walked out. Perhaps Kent was already gone; perhaps that was his idea of mercy. Perhaps he was still here, and simply biding his time. It didn’t matter.

It couldn’t.

Bruce had recovered well enough. He’d barely even been injured, except by his own hand—the wounds he’d bitten into his mouth and his tongue, the way he’d dug his nails into his palms, the muscle strain he’d given himself tensing against his shackles. A few scrapes, where he’d been dragged across stone; the occasional pricking puncture where thorny Apokoliptian metal had caught his skin or forced its way through the undersuit.

The parademons hadn’t hurt him, hadn’t started stripping the flesh from him. They only did that to enhance the feeding experience for themselves. To make the fear more intense.

With him—they hadn’t needed to.

Security was still a concern; less of one, granted, now that the compound found itself in possession of four mother boxes. But there were still raiders, and not all the parademons had died in the battle. Stray half-swarms had already been spotted in the distance, searching for the mind that had always given them their orders and unable to find it.

Teams still needed to be coordinated. Resources were still at a premium. Stone had proven himself more than capable of linking to all four boxes at once, of using their combined power to accomplish things that should have been impossible—the first test had rendered almost half an acre of dead dusty ground abruptly green and fertile, altered down to the quality of the soil, the small aquifer now detectable in the stone below, the freshwater spring that flowed from it. Lane had never delivered a report to Bruce so readily—had never smiled at him with such warmth while she did it. But it was only right to proceed with caution, to make such alterations slowly and with care; and in the meantime they all still needed to eat.

So: he worked, once he could sit up long enough without excessive pain distracting him—once he’d proven to his own satisfaction that he could keep his hands steady. He received reports; he coordinated intelligence operations with Lane. He took shifts in the security room, as he always had. He patrolled the courtyard, the cliff, the compound walls, just as he always had.
And when Kent came to tell him, he was ready for it.

He was out on the wall. Just surveying the horizon; alert for any sign of distant motion, whether on the ground or in the sky, but there had been none. Not even a dust storm—he suspected Stone had begun to do something to the air, too, because the haze didn't seem as thick or the sun as dim as it once had.

Another few months of Stone's efforts, and maybe the storms wouldn't bring dust but rain.

Bruce couldn't remember the last time it had rained.

(The night he'd killed Superman—it had rained then. Ridiculous thing to remember, after everything, but he did: could picture it, the slick wetness of Kent's skin, the damp curl of his hair—)

And then he heard something; a rush of air, the scrape of a boot. He turned, and he looked, and Kent was there.

So he hadn't left yet, Bruce thought. But he would.

He had to.

(What could keep him here? Lane would go with him, surely; he only had to ask, to—to tell her he still loved her just as he always had, and carry her away. There was nothing else to tempt him, nothing else that could be worth staying for.

Certainly not the man who'd killed him. Who'd dragged him back screaming; who'd promised to do both, either, as many times as it took—)

"Bruce," Kent said.

And Bruce flicked a cool glance across him, head to foot, and didn't let the look on his face change; turned to gaze out across the wasteland again, and said, "When?"

"What?"

"When," Bruce repeated. And then, when Kent's blank stare forced him to elaborate, "When are you leaving."

It wasn't a question. A statement explaining what he had meant, that was all. He didn't need an answer; didn't want one.

Kent was silent for a moment. "Soon," he said at last, very quietly. "I—I think it should be soon."

"Have you told Lane?"

"Lois?" Bruce risked a glance; Kent's expression was startled, faintly puzzled. "No, not yet. I haven't told anyone. I—" Kent stopped, and reached up to rub a hand against the nape of his neck, looking rueful. "I wasn't even sure whether I was going to tell you, when I came up here. I thought about just—doing it. Going, without saying anything at all. But I thought you should know."

"You thought I should know," Bruce echoed, very flat.
Kent bit his lip, and looked away. "I didn't want you to think—I didn't want you to have to—" He cut himself off sharply, shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut, drove the heels of his hands into the sockets. "I know you're afraid of me."

Bruce kept his face impassive, but he felt briefly and wildly disoriented. It was true; Kent knew it, Bruce knew it. But what possible relevance could that particular truth have to—

"You think I'm going to hurt you. You think I—you think I'm going to kill you." Kent's voice sounded like it was being scraped out of his throat by the dull side of a knife, hoarse and tight and tired. There wasn't any reason for him to sound like that, Bruce thought distantly, stating such staid and unremarkable facts. "You killed me. You—you made yourself kill me. That's the person I make you into. That's the person you think you need to be, when I'm around, and I don't—"

Jesus Christ.

"You're leaving," Bruce said, with deliberate and exacting precision, "because you think staying will make me unhappy."

Kent rubbed his eyes harder, and then slid a hand down over his mouth and rubbed that too, huffed a soft breath that wasn't quite a laugh into his own palm; and then he looked up and met Bruce's eyes.

"I was afraid of you, too, at first," he said quietly. "I remember how it felt. I hated it, then. I hated myself, I hated you. I couldn't stand it. I don't want that. I don't want you to look at me and feel like that. I want—"

He stopped again; his eyes were wet, his mouth was red. The power he'd soaked up from Stone had only just begun to fade, he was invulnerable—he wasn't in pain. He couldn't be.

He stared at Bruce for a long moment. And then he screwed his eyes shut again, and twisted his face away. "Jesus," he said softly. "I don't know what I want. It doesn't matter. I don't want you to feel that way about me, that's all."

(As if that did matter—as if it had ever mattered how Bruce fucking felt about any of it—)

Kent was operating under a misapprehension. It would be irrational to refrain from correcting him. There was no risk involved. He would leave anyway. Of course he would.

"I am afraid of you," Bruce said.

Kent looked at him.

"But not because I think you're going to kill me." Christ, if only he would. He'd agreed, goddammit; they'd had a deal. Kent was the one who'd broken his word, in the end—Kent was the one who'd ruined everything—

"Bruce," Kent said slowly.

Bruce followed his glance down. Bruce's hands were shaking.

He clasped them, clamped them tight around each other; his knuckles went white, but it helped.

"Because you won't," he heard himself say. "Because I know—I know you won't," and even saying it, even that much, made his chest tight; his throat ached, his stomach rolled. He couldn't stop it. Because it was so hopelessly, profoundly horrifying, this life sentence Kent intended to condemn him to—
"Bruce," Kent repeated, soft, uncertain. "Bruce, what—"

"You don't even want to," Bruce spat at him, and he was—he sounded furious with Kent, tone harsh and accusatory. "You never did. Not until I—"

He couldn't say it. He couldn't. Kent reached for him, he was—when had he gotten so close? Bruce jerked back an awkward half-stride, flinched away from those open outstretched hands; god, he couldn't stand it.

"Leave," he bit out. "You were right. Leave. Get out of here."

"No," Kent said, because he was nothing if not remorselessly contrary. "Bruce—"

Christ. Why didn't he understand? Why couldn't the alien get it through his thick head?

"If you won't do it," Bruce said, and then stopped. He squeezed his eyes shut, dug his teeth into his lip. It was already unbearable enough without having to explain it, right to Kent's impossibly perfect face. "If you won't do it, then it was—it was all for nothing."

Because Kent hadn't been wrong. The things he'd said in Bruce's quarters, he'd been—he did understand. He understood almost everything, except for this.

Bruce had made himself kill the alien. He'd seen what needed to be done, and he'd forged himself into a person who was capable of it, who was capable of deciding to, who was able to believe that it was right. Who was able to believe that it could be again.

Except he'd done it on the strength of a single proposition: that the alien was not only capable of causing harm, but willing to. Willing in even the smallest part, the first skidding step of the slippery slope; the bare minimum of justification required.

The man Bruce had thought he was killing then would have killed him in return ten times over—wouldn't even have needed the excuse of a deal, to exact entirely legitimate retribution.

But Kent wasn't that man. Kent wasn't that man and never had been. Bruce had gone to all that effort, had forced himself to become the thing he despised above all else, because he had believed it was right; and it had worked, he'd succeeded. It had worked. And it had been worthless.

That was the thing had nearly driven him mad, in the pit beneath Steppenwolf's palace. The dream, the dream, had been a plague, and then proof, and then reassurance: because if Superman had come to him there in the dark and murdered him after all, then at least Bruce would have died knowing that he'd seen the alien clearly. That the potential for disaster had been there after all, and what he'd done had averted it, if only for a time.

But Kent had broken his chains instead. Had held him carefully and touched his face, said his name; and Bruce had been stricken with a terror far more profound: with the implication that all those terrible struggles, all the vile and excruciating labor to which he'd bent his will, had instead resulted in an unfathomably hideous mistake—

"Bruce," Kent said, almost gentle.

Fingertips skimmed Bruce's cheek. He flinched from them like a wild animal; but Kent didn't withdraw. He waited Bruce out, touched him again—more softly still, as if that were more bearable, as if Bruce wouldn't have preferred a thousand times over to be struck—

"Bruce," Kent whispered, and kissed him.
It was almost impossible to even think the word. Bruce felt the pressure of Kent's mouth and for a long stunned moment couldn't—couldn't even understand it, couldn't grasp what Kent was doing. It was such a small, stupid thing, kissing, indulgent and pointless and unnecessary; not the sort of thing that happened anymore, not now that everything was harsh and wasted, ruined.

But Kent didn't seem to realize it. And if there were anyone who was unbound by the rules, Bruce thought dimly, unrestrained by them—if there were anyone who was able to trod on what should have been reality without even noticing they'd done it—it was Kent.

Kent broke away. Bruce hadn't moved; he should have. He should have pushed Kent off, should have shouted at him to go. This wasn't the way this conversation ended.

He opened his eyes. And Kent looked at him, drew the backs of two knuckles lightly, gently, along the line of Bruce's jaw, and said, very low, "I'll go if you want me to. Tell me you want me to."

A direct request. Bruce could fulfill it easily; Kent had given him the words with which to do it, intolerably generous. Bruce could say it. He could. He should.

He stared at Kent, and a long shuddering breath was pressed from him, his heart squeezed tight in his chest, and he said nothing.

Kent kissed him again. He held still beneath it, he survived it.

"Tell me," Kent said, almost sharply, against his cheek; and Bruce gripped him by the shoulder, the wrist, turned into Kent's touch, and—god, he couldn't, he couldn't; he had to—held him there, pressed his mouth to Kent's and was seared by it.

Everything ended. Bruce's parents had taught him that, and he'd never forgotten the lesson. Everything ended, and you couldn't stop it, couldn't prevent it; nothing you could do would ever be good enough. You could make yourself stronger, faster. You could delay it, turn it aside for a while, brace yourself for it. But the end was always there ahead of you, always coming.

(The joke was always on you.)

He'd known it. And he'd spent so long preparing himself for it: for failure, for endings that had felt inevitable. His own; the world's. At Superman's hands, at Doomsday's. At Steppenwolf's, and then at Darkseid's. One way or another, surely, it would all be torn from him. There was no avoiding it. He'd fight anyway—but sooner or later, he'd lose.

This, Kent. The things Bruce wanted from him; the things Bruce felt about him. This had to end, too. He'd known it, and he'd steeled himself for it.

But perhaps this wasn't that end. Not yet. Perhaps this—aching, tentative, unfamiliar and unearned, thoroughly incomprehensible—was, somehow, a beginning.

Kent drew away a little; kissed Bruce's mouth softly, quickly, once and then again, and then the corner of it, Bruce's stubble-scrape of a cheek, the angle of Bruce's jaw. He hesitated a little between, each time, as though he couldn't quite believe he'd dared—as though, after he'd harnessed the power of three mother boxes to exile Darkseid from reality itself, it was at all plausible that Bruce still frightened him.

"All right," Kent murmured at last, unsteady, "I take it back. Say whatever you want, you're stuck with me. I changed my mind."

Bruce swallowed. He was still holding onto Kent, he was—his grip was too tight. He couldn't make
himself let go. "Your prerogative," he managed.

And Kent laughed. Not loudly, hardly voiced at all. A breath of it, half through his nose; but his face was so close, their cheeks scraping; Bruce could feel it when he smiled.

"Watch it, or I'm going to get tired of all this sweet-talking out of you," he said, soft, and his fingers were curling into Bruce's hair, his thumb sweeping in gentle arcs along the skin just under Bruce's ear.

Bruce looked at him. Kent was looking back, so close it was almost disorienting—but then everything about Kent was disorienting, and always had been. He was watching Bruce, gaze flicking back and forth over Bruce's face in a tentative, searching way. He lifted his other hand, touched Bruce's cheek, his mouth.

"Bruce," he said, very quietly.

Bruce dug his teeth into his lip, just shy of Kent's fingertip, and closed his eyes. "Clark," he made himself say, low: testing it, tasting it; not the alien, not Superman, not even Kent. Clark.

It should have hurt somehow—to concede even that much, to allow it, to crack himself open that way. But all that happened was that Clark's breath caught, audible; and he held Bruce by the nape of the neck, tipped their foreheads together.

His hands were warm.

Bruce didn't pull away. He stood there with Clark's hands on him, Clark against him, and held on; and deep within the ashes of himself, something stirred as if to rise anew: the quiet miracle of water in a wasteland, welling up in the middle of dead dry ground, overflowing.

---

End Notes

For now we see through a glass darkly, but then shall we see face to face; now I know in part, but then shall I know even as I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

—1 Corinthians 13:12-13

Works inspired by this one

[Art] Through a Glass Darkly by lesbidar (nowrunalong)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!