The Last

by Rigil_Kent

Summary

All people leave a legacy. For some, it simply has a more lasting impression. A tale of the DC Universe with the Trinity at its heart. Uses the "Man of Steel" movie as a springboard.
A/N: This is a fairly lengthy story, using *Man of Steel* as a springboard for a "legacy" tale. I'll be picking and choosing what I want to use from the DCU, whether it is from pre-Flashpoint, to *nu52*, to the DCAU, to whatever else I feel like. Below is how I would have done this BMvSM movie instead of what looks to be a rehash of TDKR.

---

**Metropolis Rebuilds in Wake of Zod Invasion**

*Published September 25, 2013 / Associated Press*

METROPOLIS, N.Y. - President Obama marked the three month anniversary of the failed Kryptonian invasion with a visit to Metropolis and a promise of additional federal funding to assist in the rebuilding efforts. Speaking before a crowd of survivors, he pledged to ensure that the tragedy which claimed the lives over twenty thousand and leveled most of downtown Metropolis would not be repeated.

“The United States stands with Metropolis in this dark hour,” Obama said. “The entire world stands with Metropolis.”

Obama refused to comment on the so-called “Superman” although his administration insists that the Kryptonian named Kal-El was instrumental in stopping General Zod and has been equally helpful in the months since.

Following the speech, the president toured the most heavily damaged parts of the city.

---

HE WAS EXHAUSTED.

Sixty-three consecutive eighteen hour days of hard, physical labor was taxing, even to him, but Clark knew it was far more than that. Since Zod, he’d avoided wearing the Suit except when absolutely necessary – it was easier to move among the humans without it if he was completely honest and right now, Metropolis needed a tireless, inhumanly strong emergency worker a lot more than it needed a Superman. The worst part, though, the part that kept him working long past the moment when he felt like collapsing in bed and sleeping for a year was knowing that far too much of this destruction was his fault. Why hadn’t he made more of an effort to minimize the damage? Why hadn’t he tried to take his battle with Zod out of the city itself? How many had died because he hadn’t been careful enough?

“Third shift!” the construction foreman bellowed. “Let’s pack it up! Sun’s setting!”

Adjusting his hard hat – as if he needed it; still, regs were regs and if he wanted to stay under the radar, it wouldn’t do to attract too much attention – Clark fell into step behind the other workers. They were all big men, his size or even taller though more than a few of them carried a lot of extra weight around their bellies, and at any other time, most of them would have laughing and joking with one another, despite their exhaustion. Their grim expressions were to be expected: spending all day knee-deep in the ashes of a once-great city drained any hint of humor from even the most robust of souls.

Clark waited until no one was looking his way – one advantage of super senses was always knowing when someone was looking at him - and took to the skies. He kept his initial speed low so as to
avoid causing even more damage, but poured on the acceleration once he was clear of the city. It took only a few minutes before he reached Kansas airspace and, as expected, there were three surveillance drones circling over the greater Topeka area. Yesterday, he’d intentionally broken the sound barrier above that city, just to see what might happen. Swanwick had clearly noticed and, despite Clark’s agreement to lend assistance to the U.S. government from time to time, the general was obviously still trying to identify him. It was frustrating to still be so untrusted … but all too understandable.

He reached the farm a few seconds later, dropping down out of the sky twenty miles out of Smallville and hugging the ground the rest of the way. Even before he landed, Clark could tell his mom was asleep – her heartbeat was steady and rhythmic – so he avoided the front door and floated toward his open bedroom window. Rebuilding the house … or at least making it livable again had been his first action once the bruises faded, but it was just a patchwork job. He could do better.

Clark grimaced. That was becoming his mantra lately, wasn’t it? He could do better.

No. He would do better. He would show Earth that not all Kryptonians were beings to fear. He would prove himself worthy of Earth.

And, by God, he would make his father – both of them – proud.

But first, he needed to get the military off his tail.

Three Months Later

Clark hated these debriefings.

Ever since he’d agreed to help out Swanwick and the Department of Metahuman Affairs with rogue superhumans in the hopes that it would help rehabilitate his image with humanity, these sorts of weekly meeting with the general to review the events of the previous seven days had slowly become a scheduled thing. Clark wasn’t exactly sure how that happened but suspected it was Swanwick’s laid back ‘I’m not a threat’ vibe. Lois had warned him early on that the general had a reputation for being a manipulative, sneaky bastard, though he at least was considered fairly honorable among her father’s clique of senior military command.

The debriefings wouldn’t have been that bad if Swanwick didn’t invite Luthor along as often as he did. Ostensibly, the man was just an advisor who the U.S. government paid billions to develop weapons, but Lois was positive Lex was bad news even if she couldn’t actually prove it. From the moment he first spoke with Luthor, Clark knew she was right. There wasn’t any single thing about the man that was really wrong – Luthor was charming, intelligent, witty, and knew how to play a room – but something about him simply rubbed Clark the wrong way. It certainly didn’t help that, thanks to his enhanced senses, Clark could tell when the billionaire was lying to him … which was fairly frequently, actually.

Like right now.

“From everything we can tell,” Luthor was saying, “this … Bat person only operates in Gotham and possesses a number of metahuman abilities that make him difficult to apprehend.” Swanwick frowned – he was doing a lot of that lately and Clark wasn’t sure why; in fact, something had been off about him for several weeks – and Lex shrugged in response to the unspoken question. “My people think he’s a stealth-based meta – he can turn invisible, teleport and might even be able to change his appearance. There are even unsubstantiated reports that he can fly.” This last part was said with a sidelong glance in Clark’s direction and, as was always the case, Luthor’s heartbeat
changed ever so slightly.

“Wayne Enterprises also recently reported a hijacking of several million dollars’ worth of equipment that the authorities believe were taken by this Bat-Man,” Swanwick interjected. “A considerable amount of this equipment is military grade so we can’t rule out the possibility that terrorism is involved.”

“I’m more interested in getting confirmation that this Bat-Man actually exists,” Luthor said. The smile he gave Swanwick never touched his eyes. “To be honest,” he added, “I suspect the internet theories about this just being a police operation using a number of different specially-trained personnel to have some merit. The captain in charge of Gotham’s taskforce to apprehend this vigilante has Special Forces training, I believe.” This was said with a questioning glance in Swanwick’s direction and the general hesitated for a heartbeat too long.

“I served briefly with Jim Gordon,” Swanwick said slowly. He frowned, as if he were considering the option. “He is certainly capable of this sort of asymmetrical thinking.”

“I’ll look into it,” Clark said flatly. Luthor’s heartbeat jumped once more, though there was little sign of it on his face. Swanwick nodded and stepped aside so Clark could depart.

“I still don’t trust him,” Luthor said once Clark was out of the room. They remained oblivious to just how sensitive his senses were and he’d never felt the need to fill them in. “How do we know those other Kryptonians are really in this … Phantom Zone?” Clark took to the sky, ears still attuned to the conversation taking place behind him.

“You’ve reviewed Doctor Hamilton’s research notes.” Swanwick’s tone was flat and devoid of the humor he’d shown flashes of since Clark met him. “So far, Kal-El has shown no inclination toward deception.”

“That you’ve noticed.” Luthor was silent for only a moment. “I still don’t trust him.”

Gotham City was a pit.

Lois had warned him when he told her about his meeting with Swanwick and Luthor, and he’d thought he was prepared after spending a couple of hours researching the city online, but the moment he stepped off the bus and got his first real look at the city from ground level, Clark realized he hadn’t been ready at all. A tangible sense of despair and fear seemed to hang around the inhabitants, and he could not help but to notice how few dared to make eye contact. He was nearly swarmed by desperate-looking prostitutes as he exited the bus station – they were all too skinny and even without using his enhanced senses, he could tell all of them were drug addicts – who snarled curses at him the moment they realized he wasn’t interested. By the time he reached the hotel that he’d already made reservations for, he’d fended off five separate attempts to lift his wallet and a pair of mugging attempts. The urge to get the hell out of this city now was hard to suppress and he couldn’t help but to wonder if a shower would be enough to wash the stink of Gotham off.

The following day was even worse than the first. He spent most of it prowling around the East End district since it was here that this Bat-Man was most commonly sighted, and it was only due to his sheer size and abilities that he did not end up another statistic. The entire district felt like a slum, with prostitutes on every corner, drug-dealers in every alley, enforcers for local criminal organizations bullying everyone they encountered, and the poor unfortunates who lived here simply try to get by. Broken bottles littered the sidewalk and entire tenements were filled with homeless. After the third body he stumbled upon, Clark stopped calling 9-1-1 on his cell to report it, especially since the dispatchers he’d spoken to sounded both indifferent and terribly overworked.
At first, the locals seemed openly hostile toward him, answering his questions with insults and threats, but somehow, word got around that he was a reporter, and the tone of the interviews began to change. Once they were satisfied he wasn’t an undercover vice cop, the hookers answered eagerly – the Bat-Man wasn’t a threat to them and were, according to more than a few of them, responsible for beating the hell out of their abusive pimps. Several of the local shopowners were just as effusive with their praise – one, a bent-backed, white-haired grandmother who had a rundown pawn shop, told an unlikely story about seeing the Bat pay homage to where the Waynes had been murdered twenty or so years ago, which only convinced the old woman that he was Gotham’s avenging spirit here to bring justice to the scum who had ruined the city. She had other theories – he was a Kryptonian like that Superman fellow or maybe a creature brought back from the grave by the last survivors of the Miagani – but Clark excused himself and made a discreet exit.

After going ahead and buying a Gotham Knights jacket from her. He paid too much for it and gave it to the first homeless person he encountered after. It didn’t fit anyway.

If the people just trying to eke out an existence approved of the Bat, the criminal element most certainly did not. He managed to impress one of the local gangs with a foolhardy stunt – a judicious use of his enhanced speed and strength to take away a gun from one of the kids who threatened to shoot him – and they quickly claimed the Bat wasn’t an issue. Even without his senses, he could tell they were lying. Half winced anytime someone claimed to have met the Bat or beat him in a fight, and at least that number constantly watched the roofs, as if they expected a bat-shaped figure to swoop down on them at any moment. This encounter opened the door to other members in the criminal element and, by dusk, Clark had interviewed more thugs and would-be murderers than he had ever met in his life before now. Each and every one of them tried to hide how terrified they were of this Bat-Man, but none of them succeeded, and Clark returned to his hotel with more questions than answers. From everything he’d learned, this Bat-Man was more like Robin Hood than a terrorist, although to be fair, wasn’t Robin Hood considered a criminal by the government of his day?

He watched the local news while he worked: WayneTech was announcing a new software platform that was supposed to make Windows obsolete; Captain Gordon of the GCPD was credited for saving some kids from a deranged kidnapper who had just been released from Arkham that day; district attorney Dent announced his intent to push forward with bribery and corruption charges against the mayor who continued to plead innocence; and then, the kicker: the White House officially canceled the president’s planned tour of Gotham due to ‘security concerns’ which made him the sixth president in a row who had avoided visiting the city. The local anchors savaged the president’s decision, coming just short of calling him a coward, which Clark thought ironic considering their earlier remarks about him following a precedent set by previous administrations. For that matter, if he wasn’t bulletproof, Clark didn’t think he’d want to visit this city.

In mid-diatribe from the pretty anchor, the screen on the television fuzzed and froze. Barely a second later, the image being displayed changed to a green question mark that began rotating. Clark glanced up.

“Citizens of Gotham,” a male voice announced, “this is the Riddler.” The question mark continued to revolve. “Riddle me this, riddle me that,” the person continued, “who’s afraid of the big bad bat?” The unseen man laughed. “Because the police have been woefully inept, I am turning to this, the idiot box that holds so many of you hostage, to advise you that money cannot buy happiness … so I have taken all of yours. Kings and queens may cling to power and the jester’s got his call. But as you may discover, the common one outranks them all.”

Clark was in the suit and out the window before this so-called Riddler had finished his mocking remark. The sun had already vanished behind the clouds and Clark arced up into the sky, focusing
his enhanced senses on the abandoned factory he’d noticed during the day’s work. Dried and peeling, the paint on the massive Ace playing card on the factory’s roof had demanded notice. Exactly as he expected, deep within the bowels of the building, a single man sat before a wide bank of computers. Above him, there were a half dozen other men, setting up what looked to be lanes of fire and places of concealment. Clark smirked. This … Riddler intended to ambush the Bat-Man.

He struck the roof at just under two hundred miles per hour, smashing through the concrete as if it were simply wet tissue paper. Two of the ambushers opened fire immediately, screaming as they sprayed wildly, and Clark straightened from his landing crouch and started walking forward, ignoring the soft rain of bullets as they struck his crest and fell to the floor. He waited until there was no way for them to have not realized who he was before speaking.

“Surrender and you won’t be harmed,” he said flatly. All but one of the men on this floor immediately threw down their weapons and, after an extra moment of consideration, the last man did the same. Clark pointed to the ring of debris surrounding the hole in the roof. “Kneel there and do not move until the police arrive.” When they hesitated, he concentrated on the ever-present heat just behind his eyes. His vision briefly fuzzed out – it always did when he used this ability and additional concentration was required to actually see the things he was burning – and he frowned before pushing the heat back. Just the hint of red was enough and the men scrambled to obey.

The Riddler had backed up to the wall and stared with open horror as Clark tore the door to his sanctum off its metal hinges and tossed it aside. Unlike the thugs upstairs who were still kneeling – Clark checked – this man wasn’t dressed in urban camouflage but rather wore a ludicrous green suit with a black tie that had a prominent green question mark upon it. Strangely, he also wore a domino mask, also green.

“You are not the Bat,” the man said with wide eyes. Clark smirked.

“Are you sure?” he asked. He cast his eyes around the room and noted a cell phone. As he strode across the floor to retrieve, he eyed the computer monitors set against the wall … and his good humor dwindled. “When were you intended on broadcasting the riddle?” he demanded with a frown. Riddler’s heartbeat trebled and Clark looked at him.

“Thirty minutes,” the criminal replied. “How did you know to come here?” he asked.

Clark didn’t answer.

But he had a good idea who was responsible.

Captain Gordon was not a happy man.

The sandy-haired police detective was solidly built, with an easy grace that Clark had seen in many soldiers, but walked with a very slight limp that hinted at an explanation for why he was former military. He wasted no time in having the Riddler and his goons hustled away to waiting squad cars, and glowered at the hole in the ceiling. From where he floated some five hundred feet above the Monarch Playing Card Company factory, Clark could see the captain’s face – Gordon went from confused, to angry, to resigned in a matter of seconds – and decided to make his presence known. He dropped through the cloud cover and came to a floating stop just above the roof where only the captain could see him.

“Hello, Captain,” he said.

“Is there a reason you’re in Gotham?” Gordon asked without preamble. This close, Clark could smell
tobacco and cheap cologne, as well as hints of a more feminine scent that were fading. “Gotham’s in bad enough shape without you coming along and doing what you did to Metropolis.” Clark blinked.

“That was Zod, sir,” he replied calmly. “I’m trying to help.” Gordon glowered and fished out a pack of cigarettes.

“That was Zod, sir,” he replied calmly. “I already have one nut dressing up like a bat,” he added and Clark noted how the man’s heartbeat altered slightly. “We don’t need someone like you.”

“As you wish, sir,” Clark replied. He began pushing against gravity and steadily rose. “I apologize for any inconvenience I may have caused you.” He was out of sight in less than a second but smiled slightly at Gordon’s next remarks, comments he doubted anyone else was meant to hear.

“At least this one has manners.”

Rather than returning to his hotel room, Clark concentrated on the strange sensation in his chest that allowed him to defy gravity and floated quietly for a long moment. Gotham stretched out before him like a glittering painting and even at this distance, he could hear the sound of sirens without having to utilize his special talents. Anger swirled within his stomach and frustration – he could not blame Gordon for the man’s distrust of him, not with the sheer damage wrought in the wake of the Kryptonians led by Zod, and it once again made him wonder if he was doing the right thing. Should he spend even more time in the Suit? There were so many people who needed help, who needed someone to defend them or save them … but what right did he have to do that? If he did too much, would they come to rely on him? Would his very presence stifle their creativity and ability? Jor-El had meant for him to be a symbol of hope … but how could he do that when humanity was so afraid of him?

“People are afraid of what they don’t understand,” his father had told him and he had taken that warning to heart. All too often, it had turned out to be true though there were the occasional glimmers of hope – Lois was one of the first in a long time who had not freaked out completely when she learned what he was.

A shrill, high-pitched noise pierced his musings and drew his attention toward the freight yards near the center of the city. There was no immediate cause of the sound and he was just about to turn away when a trio of cars suddenly squealed to a halt, disgorging what looked like a veritable platoon of heavily armed thugs wearing ill-fitting suits. Clark hesitated only for the span of a single heartbeat – Gordon would not be pleased, but these men meant to murder people – and he threw himself forward at just barely subsonic speeds. A quick glance with his enhanced senses verified the target vehicle wasn’t occupied and he landed on its hood with crushing force and an explosion of noise that threw four of the assassins to the ground. The rest oriented toward him quickly and, despite clearly recognizing the crest of the House of El, opened fire with their illegal submachine guns. Clark straightened and then blurred forward, tearing the weapons free and crushing them into useless scrap.

The bravest of the lot drew a knife and lunged forward, shouting his defiance.

Clark let the man break the knife against his chest before casually backhanding the criminal. None of them realized how much fine control it required to do that without turning the man into Jello and he wasn’t of a mind to tell them.

“This ends now,” he growled, calling the fire to his eyes once more. He raked the heat vision across the trunk of one of the intact cars, melting wide, gaping holes in the metal and turning the extra weapons inside into so much slag. The heat was so sudden, so intense, that the explosives within were simply vaporized rather than detonating. His face still creased in a scowl, Clark turned away from the now retreating thugs and glared at the armed security guards who had belatedly rushed out to respond. They could have been clones of the men now running and Clark suddenly realized that
this entire facility was probably owned by one of Gotham’s many criminal syndicates. This had been
gang versus gang …

And someone had led him straight to it.

He rocketed up into the sky without a word, vanishing between blinks of an eye, and soared through
the stratosphere angrily. Gotham was seven hundred miles from Metropolis, but he covered the
distance in a matter of minutes. Dropping down from the sky, he slowed his speed to subsonic and
darted toward Lois’ apartment. She answered his knock with bleary eyes.

Lois hurried him out of her apartment less than an hour after he arrived – she was supposed to be
interviewing the governor today and absolutely had to get some sleep if she was going to be sharp
enough to catch him in the lies she expected him to provide when questioned about the campaign
irregularities uncovered by the Planet – so Clark returned to Gotham and his hotel room. There was
no transmitter hidden in the walls as he’d feared and the television was just a television, so he turned
on ESPN and watched the tail end of a football game between two teams he could honestly care less
about. Sleep was out of the question, especially with the far too routine sounds of gunfire in the
distance and the constant wail of sirens. How even a normal human managed to tune this noise out
was beyond him.

The following day should have been a repeat of the first, but Clark decided to go to WayneTech
instead of doing more man-on-the-street interviews. His Planet credentials worked and he soon found
himself chatting with one of WT’s junior executives about the stolen merchandise. The list of missing
stolen equipment was eclectic – there were three prototype suits of light battle armor intended for the
infantrymen of the future, a wide variety of electronic equipment that ran the gamut from
eavesdropping and surveillance to miniaturized low-light gear, and a host of other non-lethal crowd
control weapons. It was the latter section of the list that honestly interested Clark the most since he
couldn’t think of a reason why a terrorist would actually want such a thing.

Mister White wasn’t especially impressed with his progress when he reported in later that day,
though he was certainly curious about the angle Clark outlined. The rumored Bat-Man had never
been more than tabloid fodder until recently – after Zod and the other Kryptonians forced Clark into
the limelight, it was harder to ignore the notion of a guy dressed up like a bat running around
Gotham – and gave the greenlight for Clark to keep digging.

But Clark kept running into dead ends.

The GCPD refused to comment – the official stance on the Bat-Man was that he was an urban
legend, and that Gotham did not and would not tolerate vigilantes – and none of the people who
would go on record about the Bat were remotely believable. Clark took to lurking in the clouds at
night, using his enhanced vision to try and locate this guy, and even that wasn’t very fruitful. Oh, he
stepped in and stopped more than a few crimes, but made sure to do so at speeds too quick for
normal people to even comprehend so Gordon wouldn’t have a panic attack, but the Bat remained
elusive. Clark began to wonder if he even existed.

On the sixth day of his investigation – the last day as Mister White had made it clear the Planet was
done with this story unless something major broke – an immense explosion tore open one of the
numerous heavy cargo ships sitting in the Port of Gotham. Clark didn’t even hesitate to dive toward
the crippled ship and he spent the next three and a half hours ensuring the fire didn’t spread to the
other ships in the area. As the largest inland general cargo port in America, Gotham’s docks were
always busy and Clark had little doubt more than a small portion of the shipping was illegal, but that
wasn’t important at the moment.
His presence drew quite a number of cameras and onlookers – even Gordon showed up with the mayor and commissioner – but, for a change, none of the people in charge screamed for him to leave. In fact, the mayor was effusive in his praise. If you listened to him, the city itself would have been burned to the ground if it wasn’t for Clark. When he climbed into the sky, satisfied that he’d done all he could to help, Clark let his forced smile fade. Barely thirty minutes into the rescue efforts, he’d discovered the remnants of an explosive aboard the ship and it took him another hour to discover that the ship itself was manned with only a skeleton crew who would have had plenty of time to escape if the ship couldn’t be saved. This entire event had been a distraction.

A quick patrol over the city revealed the true target: one of LexCorp’s subsidiaries had been broken into. Clark peered through the walls and noted with a dark frown that whoever was responsible was long gone. He shook his head in muted admiration and returned to the hotel room.

Instantly, Clark knew someone else had been here. He scanned the room quickly, finding no less than four bugs, one of which was actually a miniature camera spliced into the hotel’s cable network. The bugs themselves matched the models of those stolen from the WayneTech facility so Clark squared his shoulders and looked directly into the tiny camera.

“I’m not your enemy,” he said calmly. “I think we’re on the same side.” The abrupt ring of the courtesy phone caused him to jump and he shot the camera a wry smirk before picking up the handset.

“Clocktower,” a dark voice ordered. “We need to talk.”

It wasn’t difficult to locate the Clocktower. Centered in Old Gotham, it dominated the district and looked down on the smaller buildings like an older, wiser sibling. Gothic and ornate, it looked to belong more to a city somewhere in Europe than here in the United States, and Clark took a long moment to admire it. He located a mostly concealed but open hatch near the roof and floated down through it, halfway expecting an explosion or machine gun fire or something else. What he found instead was a workshop filled with the kind of lab equipment one would expect to find in a police station. A wall monitor dominated the far wall – the computer attached to it was using WayneTech’s new Oracle operating system, Clark noticed with a smile – and flashing across the screen were blueprints, medical reports and other scientific reports. His good humor dwindled the moment Clark noticed the distinct LexCorp symbol stamped on most of the documents.

“Lex Luthor is investigating means to neutralize you and your abilities,” the Bat-Man declared as he stepped out of a shadow off to Clark’s left. His voice was gruff but to Kryptonian ears, the low pitched hum betrayed the electronic devise disguising the man’s vocal patterns. He was a large man and the heavily-modified combat armor he wore did little to impede his movements. Clark glanced once at the man’s belt – at least three different gadgets were active – then back up to meet the opaque lenses hiding the man’s eyes. He concentrated ever so slightly and, to his vision, the concealing mask fell away to reveal the man’s identity. Clark blinked.

That wasn’t what he expected.

“I wish I could say that surprises me,” he said as he crossed his arms. “I’ve known he was up to something, but I didn’t know what.”

“There’s more,” the Bat-Man said. He nodded toward the screen which changed to a grainy photograph of General Swanwick. The general was holding some sort of device in his left hand – it wasn’t quite a glove, but definitely extended halfway up the man’s forearm and wrapped around his hand while leaving his fingers free. Clark frowned.
“That symbol there on his hand,” he murmured. “I’ve seen it before.”

“Is it Kryptonian?” There was a distinct, accusative tone to the question and Clark shrugged.

“I have no idea,” he replied. “I didn’t even know I was Kryptonian until seven months ago.”

“Since the general came into contact with this object,” the Bat-Man said, “his actions and activities have significantly changed. Where before he resisted certain of Luthor’s more esoteric experiments, now he seems to have directed Luthor in certain directions.” A click of the remote device hidden behind his cape later, the screen shifted to several wiring schematics. “The ongoing Project: Metallo is one such example as is LexCorp’s latest defense contract which replaces and upgrades numerous computer targeting systems for the military.” Clark inhaled – he had heard all about both from Lois over dinner last week – and kept his eyes on screen.

“So what do you recommend, Mister Wayne?” he asked without looked at the armored figure. He could almost sense the shock in the other man and finally looked him. “I looked through your mask,” he said. “It only seemed fair since you bugged my hotel room.” The other man frowned – his heartbeat returned to normal, but his body language displayed his discomfort.

“We need more information,” Bruce Wayne said. “If the device Swanwick encountered is Kryptonian, we need to know what it does.” His frown deepened. “I had hoped you would know since you’re Kryptonian, but … you were raised as human, weren’t you?”

“I was.” Clark glanced away. “I … I might have an idea.” He turned toward Wayne. “I retrieved what was left of the scoutship Zod crashed.” It hadn’t been easy and he knew for a fact that the government had secured numerous other pieces, but the majority of the craft he’d relocated to somewhere safe. The small shuttle Zod had used to reach the scout ship had still been parked on the ice and, to Clark’s continued fascination, the two vessels had effectively merged into one over the last few months. “The database aboard isn’t complete, but we might be able to use it.” Wayne was silent but nodded and strode toward the computer. He shut down and unhooked a portable hard drive and offered it to Clark.

“I’m trusting you with this,” he said flatly. Clark smirked.

“If you like,” he replied, “you can keep it.” His smile deepened. “Up for a road trip?”

As it turned out, Wayne wasn’t enthusiastic about being flown to the North Pole but had a personal plane that he was interested in giving a test flight. It was of a design Clark had never seen before, but then, he’d never been much of an aeronautical buff even before he learned he could fly. Clearly designed or at least retrofitted to fit in with Wayne’s Bat motif, it had swept wings and just looked aggressive as hell. It was also a one-seater, which meant Clark would have to fly under his own power which suited him fine. Of all his gifts, flight was easily his favorite. Wayne gave him a hands-free headset that somehow filtered out the noise of the air around them so they could talk. Under normal circumstances, the jet wouldn’t be able to make this flight without having to refuel, but Clark solved that by scanning its underbelly to locate the strong points, then carrying the aircraft on his back. Six months ago, when he first started flying, this would have been impossible to accomplish, but he’d grown much stronger since then.

It took several hours to reach the site of the Kryptonian scout craft, which gave Clark plenty of time to think. Most of his interest was directed at the billionaire sitting in the jet above him – Clark’s investigations and research over the last week had turned up few indications that Wayne was dangerously unhinged. Okay, that wasn’t entirely true since the man did dress up like a bat and beat up criminals, despite being in the top ten on Forbes’ list, but from what Clark had seen of Gotham
thus far, Wayne was lucky to be this sane. The tragic loss of his parents when he was a kid was a well known story, especially since most of the subsequent reports were inevitably laced with disapproval over the latest antics of Gotham’s first prince. If only they knew …

He only briefly gave thought to the mess involving Swanwick and Luthor, but quickly turned his attention to something else. At the moment, he didn’t have enough information and making decisions without all the variables was a certain way to disaster. Instead, he focused on what they did know and that curious three-circled symbol he knew he’d seen somewhere before. But where?

Snow and ice had covered up the slowly regenerating scout craft, leaving only the doorway accessible, so Wayne’s black plane looked ridiculously exposed once they’d landed. Clark almost smiled at the armored man’s sour look – he looked as out of place here as his plane – and then led the way into the Kryptonian vessel. Instantly, the hologram of Jor-El materialized and, not for the first time, Clark felt his stomach clench. Thus far, he’d been unable to do more than retrieve his biological father’s appearance and vocal patterns; whatever Zod did when he was here had stripped away the personality.

“Greetings, Kal-El,” the hologram said emotionlessly. “I am detecting an unauthorized human. Do you wish to sound an alert?”

“No,” Clark said. “He’s a guest.”

“Reclassifying. How may I be of assistance?” Clark glanced at Wayne and this time, he did smile at the way the billionaire was looking around with open interest.

“Are you capable of reading data from an Earth hard drive?” Clark asked. “We have a potential Kryptonian symbol we want to research.”

“Unknown.” The hologram turned toward a wall that folded out into a wide shelf with a small depression. “I will endeavor to accomplish this task to my utmost capability.” Wayne extracted the hard drive from a pouch hidden at the small of his back and placed it on the shelf.

“If I’d know you were going to do this,” he growled, “I would have just printed a copy of the picture for you.” Clark shrugged.

“Accessing,” the hologram of Jor-El stated. A horizontal bar of light began crawling down the length of his body and it took Clark a moment to realize that is was simply a progress bar. At the midway point, it stalled and the far wall transformed into a crude three-dimensional image of General Swanwick holding the weird device. “Query,” the hologram declared, “is this the artifact you are inquiring about?”

“It is,” Clark muttered. Once again, Wayne was studying the technology on display with open envy and fascination.

“Confirmed Kryptonian origin.” The image flashed and transformed to a different device, but one that bore the same three circle sigil. “Brain InterActive Construct,” the hologram continued. “Artificial intelligence developed by Kryptonian scientists four hundred solar cycles ago. Intended to maintain day-to-day operations of Kryptonian birthing matrix, it was deactivated ninety-three planetary rotations after its initial deployment. Thirty-seven warrior caste were killed implementing the deactivation.”

“Okay,” Clark muttered. He glanced at Wayne who was frowning. “Why was it deactivated?”

“Brain InterActive Construct was deemed dangerously unsuitable for the task it was developed for
and was considered a malicious intelligence intent solely on self-preservation as opposed to successful continuation of Kryptonian bloodlines.” The hologram tilted its head. “Senior Scientist Jor-El reopened Brain InterActive Construct research in his thirty-second cycle but intentionally severed all higher functions.”

“Jor-El.” Wayne glanced at him. “Relation of yours?”

“My father,” Clark replied. “Why did Jor-El reopen this research?”

“There is no data on this.” The hologram tilted its head again. “Warning: Brain InterActive Construct algorithms detected.” Clark’s breath caught.

“Where?” he demanded. The wall shifted and transformed yet again, this time reforming into a relief map. From the looks of it, the signal emanated from Nevada…

“Groom Lake,” Wayne growled. “But what is the objective?”

“Brain InterActive Construct upload to planetary satellite system appears active,” the hologram continued.

“We need to go now,” Clark snapped. He eyed the hologram. “Do you have the frequency of the headsets we’re using.”

“Yes, Kal-El.”

“Then monitor the upload progress and provide us status reports every ten minutes.”

A hundred miles north of Groom Lake, Wayne ignited his jet’s engines and Clark let the Bat-plane go. He poured on the acceleration, leaving the dark aircraft behind, all the while straining his senses to their maximum. Already, he could hear the sound of sirens, even at this distance, and two highly advanced aircraft were beginning to orient toward him. Tilting his head slightly, he concentrated.

“Mayday, mayday,” one of the pilots was saying into his radio. “I am declaring an emergency! I have no control over my aircraft!” A flash of light was Clark’s first warning that missiles had been fired and a moment later, four fast-moving objects streaked toward him. A normal person wouldn’t have had time to react, but Clark banked hard, corkscrewing through the clouds while focusing on the heat behind the back of his eyes. One of the missiles exploded outright, while two others abruptly curved down and smashed into the ground. The fourth missile tried to follow his tight turn which gave him enough time to send another pulse of fire at it.

“The jets are under the Construct’s control,” Wayne said, his voice easily picked out among the noise. “They’re trying to eject but—”

“I’m on it!” Clark shouted. He pushed harder and streaked down toward the first of the jets. The pilot was struggling with the ejection controls and visibly jumped when Clark slid alongside him. Without warning, the jet rolled – it definitely wasn’t the pilot’s doing as Clark could see both of the man’s hands – and very briefly tried to go evasive. Grimacing, Clark pursued. He punched his left hand into the fuselage of the jet, then tore the clear canopy free with his other hand. The pilot gave him a quick thumbs up before gesturing toward the ejection seat. Clark nodded his understand and simply ripped the seat free before tossing the whole apparatus (complete with the pilot) away from the out of control aircraft. After ensuring the parachute had deployed, he pushed away from the jet and accelerated toward the other one which was now banking toward him. Gunfire erupted around him – the bullets slammed into him with terrific force and it hurt – and he darted forward underneath the jet, trailing his right hand through the fuselage. Smoke exploded outward as he arced up through the
exhaust and back toward the nose. As before the pilot was gesturing, though this time, he was pointing away from the crippled jet. Clark followed the direction they man was pointing and nearly cursed.

The other jet, now unmanned, was still mobile and had reoriented toward them. A long tongue of fire flashed out as the plane’s gun erupted. Reacting without hesitation, Clark blurred forward, tearing the canopy free of the jet he was currently atop and pulling the ejection seat free with both hands. Metal shrieked and tore, but he ignored it as he half-turned his head and concentrated on the approaching jet. Heat sprang from his eyes and, a heartbeat later, the aircraft vanished in an immense fireball. A quick glance at the pilot he’d just rescued confirmed the man hadn’t been hit, but in his haste to get him free, Clark realized he’d damaged the ejection seat.

“Hang on!” he shouted to the pilot as he kicked off the second plane as it spiraled toward the ground, the seat still in gripped in one hand. The pilot started screaming as Clark angled them toward the parachute of the other man and it took Clark a half second to realize the screams were laughter and glee.

He touched down alongside the first pilot, now grounded and extracting himself from his seat, and lightly placed the second pilot down.

“How are you all right?” he asked the two men even as he scanned them with his enhanced senses.

“Holy hell, that was awesome!” the second pilot – his nametag identified him as Hal Jordan, Captain – exclaimed as he rapidly unstrapped himself.

“Thanks to you,” the other pilot – Steve Trevor, Major – replied. He glowered at the smoking craters that were the two crashed jets. “Everything just went haywire,” he said before glancing in the direction of the military base. Clark did the same, wincing at the sight unfolding before him. Soldiers and airmen were taking fire from vehicles and equipment that should not have been able to operate independently. He drew breath to tell the two pilots to stay here, but both of them had already drawn their sidearms and were starting to jog in the base’s direction. Clark smirked.

“This isn’t going to be comfortable,” he warned as he slid closer to them and took a careful hold of the harnesses they wore over their flight suits. “But I think I can get you there more quickly.”

“Outstanding!” Jordan declared with a broad grin that earned him a sour look from Trevor.

He released them a hundred feet or so from the base outskirts so they could join a team of armed Marines before flashing forward to assist with the unexpected attacks. A trio of heavy battlesuits – they reminded Clark of the one in District 9 and the stylized LexCorp logo embossed upon their chests didn’t surprise Clark of the one in District 9 and the stylized LexCorp logo embossed upon their chests didn’t surprise him in the slightest – pursued a squad of unarmed airmen scrambling for cover, but shifted their attacks toward him the instant he appeared. Energy blasts of unknown origin flashed out from the three battlesuits, narrowly missing him as he blurred forward. A quick x-ray glance confirmed the suits were empty so he punched through the first, tore the arm off the second and flash-fried the third. Even as the armless mech staggered in a circle, desperately trying to orient its other arm on him, Clark stepped closer and kicked its legs out from under it. He smashed a fist down through its power core before it had even struck the ground.

“Superman!” one of the Air Force personnel cried out. She pointed toward something behind him and Clark began to turn.

And a solid wall of crimson light picked him up and threw him into a truck.

Metal squealed as he pulled himself free and he glanced up. Icy shock coursed through his body at
the sight before him. General Swanwick … or rather, what was left of the general strode slowly through the carnage. His right arm was gone and in its place was a long cybernetic device that seemed to shift and transform in the same way that the world engine thing had changed. Half of the general’s face was missing, exposing what should have been bone but looked instead like glossy metal. His left eye gleamed red. A quick scan with his senses revealed Clark’s worst fears – there was hardly anything left of Swanwick. Bones had been altered somehow and turned into a dense, hypersteel. Where the heart should have been was … something else, something mechanical and organic, all at the same time. Trillions of tiny … things swam through the Construct’s veins but they weren’t blood cells.

“Ah, Kal-El,” the general said in a voice that was most definitely not his. “I had not anticipated this engagement to occur so soon.” The thing that was no longer human continued its slow approach. “You are aware of my identity?”

“The Brain InterActive Construct,” Clark replied. He pushed the ruined truck away. Behind Swanwick, he caught sight of a flash of movement entering a building – it was Wayne, which meant he must have ejected from his jet over the base – but kept his attention on the former general. “How are you still operational?” he demanded. “You should have died with Krypton.”

“Indeed, I should have.” The Construct lifted its cybernetic arm. “One of General Zod’s scientists – Jax-Ur – reactivated me. I believe he intended to use my capabilities to displace the general.” The Construct’s arm shifted to something that almost resembled a hand. “This primitive creature encountered my core matrix and erroneously believed I was simply another weapon.” The Construct looked up and met Clark’s eyes. “He intended to use this weapon against you, should it become necessary.”

“What the hell is that?” A squad of marines had come within visual distance and their forward progress faltered at the sight of the Construct. “What did it do to the general?”

“I remade him,” the Construct announced. “And through him, I will remake this world.”

“Not a chance,” Clark replied. He blurred forward, heat exploding from his eyes, but two feet away from the Construct, he slammed into an unseen wall and rebounded. In mid-air, he righted himself and froze in place.

“Your actions are not logical, Kal-El,” the Construct announced, turning its back on the marines. “These primitive creatures are not worth your concern.”

“On the contrary,” Clark replied tightly, “they’re the reason I’m here.” He tapped the House of El crest. “This means hope,” he said, his eyes still searching for a weak point. “But you’re just a machine. You can’t understand.”

“Perhaps.” The Construct glanced away …

And four more battlesuits tore through a warehouse wall. These were armed differently than the first three and they opened fire instantly. Bullets and energy blasts tore through the ranks of the Marines in the half second before Clark could reach them, but he shoved aside the guilt that surged through his stomach as he blurred forward to engage the exo-suits. Rockets streaked through the air, slugs whined past his air, and Clark pushed himself to move faster than ever before. He took blasts meant for the defending Marines, batted aside ordinance intended to blow them to pieces, and walked his own heat-vision across the attacking automatons. Beside and around him, the Marines responded, unleashing their own firepower against the exo-suits.

“We got this!” one of the Marines shouted to Clark. “You take out that Brain Construct thing!” The
man was wounded but did not stop firing. Clark nodded and threw himself into the sky once more.

He hit the Construct at just under Mach One, smashing through the invisible force screen with a boom that leveled one of the massive antennas the Construct had turned his attention to. Fire flashed from Clark’s eyes, burning away more of the late general’s flesh to reveal a skeleton of pure metal. The Construct’s eyes gleamed as well and suddenly, searing pain exploded through Clark’s body. A metal fist smashed into his face, sending him stumbling back into another antenna.

“Your actions are not logical, Kal-El,” the Construct declared. Its right hand shifted and transformed into a cannon-like device. “I cannot allow you to interfere with my primary programming.” Crimson light blasted from the being’s arm.

And the pain. Oh, God, the pain. Clark dropped to his knees and struggled to keep from screaming. Weight pressed in on him, crushing him, squeezing his organs and bones. He couldn’t breathe.

“As you see, Kal-El,” the Construct said, his voice reaching Clark’s ears despite the agony coursing through him, “I have already anticipated this encounter. Nothing you do is adequate.” Clark groaned and once more tried to struggle to his feet.

An explosion of fire suddenly wreathed the Construct, staggering it and knocking the energy cannon that was its right arm off-target. A second and third blast rattled the former general and Clark glanced up as the agony evaporated. The Marines had taken down the last of the exo-suits and somehow, seized control of the weapons. They laid down a withering barrage of fire against the Construct, hurling grenades and rocket-propelled incendiaries and regular bullets. Air Force personnel, among them the two pilots Clark had rescued, joined the onslaught, and it was just intense enough to give Clark a moment to recover.

“I need two more minutes to jam his frequency,” Bruce Wayne’s voice drifted through the air, inaudible to everyone but a Kryptonian. Grimacing, Clark shook his head to clear it, narrowed his eyes, and blurred forward once again.

He hit the Construct with everything he had, the shockwave shattering glass and knocking several of the attacking military personnel to the ground. The Construct reeled back, but Clark pressed on, grabbing the right arm as it began to alter and squeezing tightly. He heard and felt the metal tear, but didn’t let up.

“Keep shooting!” he bellowed as he smashed his other fist into the Construct’s torso. Heat erupted from his eyes nonstop, burning away the last scraps of the former general’s uniform and melting entire chunks of the Construct’s skeleton. It tried to speak but Clark didn’t hear it over the rain of steel erupting from the defenders’ firearms and his own shouts. He pulled hard and felt the cyborg’s arm come lose. Sparks and something that was not blood splashed out, igniting almost instantly under the torrent of heat erupting from Clark’s eyes. The Construct shook and twitched and spasmed ….

And Clark punched his fist through its chest.

He tore out the thing that was not a heart and crushed it. Instantly, the Construct froze in place and a barely audible hum began building rapidly. Without thinking, Clark threw himself and the thing that was no longer human into the sky.

The Construct exploded before he could breach the atmosphere and the sudden detonation smashed into Clark with crushing force. He tumbled end over end, barely conscious, and fell toward the Earth with increasing velocity. His impact shook the ground and he staggered back to his feet, ears ringing and vision blurry. It took several long minutes before he regained his equilibrium enough to retake
the skies.

By the time he reached the military base – what had Wayne called it? Groom Lake? – the situation looked to be well in hand. The fires caused by the Brain InterActive Construct’s unexpected attack were being tended to and medics were checking over the wounded. Clark touched down next to the senior of the two pilots who was in deep conversation with the wounded Marine.

“What the hell was that thing?” the Marine demanded immediately. He had captain rank, Clark finally noticed, and his nametag read STEWART.

“And what did it do to the general?” Major Trevor asked.

“It was the Brain InterActive Construct,” Clark replied tightly. “One of Zod’s scientists reactivated it when he shouldn’t have and it … it altered the general. Rewrote him, I guess you could say.” As he spoke, Clark scanned the base for any sign of Wayne but found none. He did find Lex Luthor, slowly regaining consciousness, in a room with a bank of computers. From the looks of things, he’d been treated rather roughly, though Clark didn’t know if it was Wayne who was responsible or the Construct.

“Brain Inter … that’s a mouthful,” Captain Stewart muttered. “Brainiac. Let’s call him that.”

“There’s going to be a lot of questions about this,” Major Trevor said. He offered Clark his hand. “But those of us here know whose side you’re on.” Clark smiled and returned the handshake, taking care not to crush the major’s hand.

“Thank you, Major.” He shook Captain Stewart’s hand as well before pushing up off the ground. The surviving soldiers shouted and cheered as he rose toward the sky, and he threw a quick salute to them all. He glanced back once and, the last thing he saw of Groom Lake was Lex Luthor, standing in the doorway of a building and glaring at him.

For the next few weeks, things were crazy.

Luthor spun the story in the media as being Clark’s fault and a sizeable percentage of the population seemed to believe him right up to the point where an anonymous source released actual recordings of the incident that clearly showed Clark actively defending or fighting alongside the military personnel against automated weapon systems that prominently wore the LexCorp logo. Major Trevor – now Lieutenant Colonel Trevor – and Captain Stewart testified before Congress about the incident, which was carried on all of the major networks, and both men were quite vocal in their refusal to blame any bit of what was being called the Brainiac Incident on him. The public clamored for his side of the story and finally, ‘Superman’ gave an official interview with a reporter.

Lois thought it was hysterical that the person he turned to was none other than Clark Kent, rookie reporter for the Daily Planet.

The interview cemented his place at the Planet, at least for the time being, although Clark found it increasingly difficult to juggle his dual roles as ace (but still relatively new) reporter and caped superhero. He had his suspicions that Mister White knew about his alternate identity, but to Clark’s relief, the older man never treated him any differently. When he screwed up – which was fairly often, actually – Perry chewed him out just like he chewed out everyone else, and when he scored big – as was the case with the Superman interview – Mister White simply asked when his next story was coming.

A week after the Brainiac incident, Clark received a text message from an unlisted number that read
simply Gotham. He ducked out of the office – officially, he was chasing a lead – and flew out of
Metropolis, still in his regular slacks and dress shirt. Wayne Manor was on the edge of Gotham and
he hovered in the clouds for several minutes, scanning the surrounding environs for anyone who
might see him arrive. When he knocked on the door, an older man with a thin mustache answered.

“Mister Kent, I presume?” the man asked in a distinctly British accent. Clark smiled.

“Clark,” he said as he offered his hand. “I guess I’m expected.”

“You are, sir.” The butler – if that’s what he was; Clark had no idea – led him through several
cavernous rooms, several of which were larger than the Kent house before finally stopping outside
an open door. He tapped lightly on the wood. “Mister Kent to see you, sir.”

Bruce Wayne was still dressed in a robe despite it being three in the afternoon, but his demeanor as
he greeted Clark was nothing like the vapid airhead so many people saw in the interviews on
television. From where he sat behind his desk, he nodded.

“Thank you, Alfred. Would you like coffee, Mister Kent? Or tea?”

“Coffee’s fine,” Clark replied. The butler – Alfred – made a discreet exit. “I’m presuming he knows
about your nightlife?” Clark asked with a smile as he took a seat in one of the chairs in front of the
desk.

“I’ve been reviewing the data from the Groom Lake incident,” Wayne said, as if Clark had not even
spoke, “and I’ve made some troubling discoveries. Before we shut it down, the Brain InterActive
Construct uploaded a considerable amount of its code to a number of satellites around Earth.” Clark
frowned.

“And?” he asked.

“And several of those satellites have since sent transmission pulses to various spots in the galaxy.”
Wayne leaned back. “I don’t think this is over.” Clark sighed.

“No,” he muttered. “I don’t either.”

---

A/N #2: Even though the BMvSM stuff has Wayne as being older than Clark, I'm going the opposite
way. My Bruce is younger, early to mid-twenties, just starting out but already full of awesome.

I'm also mentally using the maps from DCOnine for Gotham and Metropolis.

Also, in this version of reality, there is no Chicago or New York City. They've been replaced with
Gotham and Metropolis respectively.
Year Two: Amazon

United States Vows Increase Military Presence in Atlantic

Published June 15, 2014 / Clark Kent / Daily Planet Online

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Pentagon announced plans to increase the number of ships patrolling the Atlantic in the wake of several major terror strikes against sea-going vessels.

Last week, three cruise liners came under attack by militants operating under the banner of the Kahndaq Liberation Army. The simultaneous attacks indicated a level of cooperation never before seen in the KLA and suggested a greater intelligence network than was previously presumed.

The metahuman known as Superman intervened and resolved the crisis without bloodshed at the behest of the American government and the United Nations. Currently, the KLA terrorists are being held in an unknown location and the Kahndaq Republic is petitioning for their release, despite the KLA’s stated goal of overthrowing the sitting government.

HE WASN’T TRAINED FOR THIS.

Seated at the controls of the F/A-18F, Lieutenant Colonel Steve Trevor silently cursed the United States government. He wasn’t sure whose brilliant idea it had been to cross-train Air Force pilots with the Navy, but right now, as he waited for clearance to launch from the deck of the *George H.W. Bush*, he wanted to find the man (or woman) and punch them in the face. He was an Air Force pilot, dammit, not a squid. Most of the jets he normally flew weren’t even capable of making a carrier landing, so why the hell did he need to know how to do this? Stupid bureaucrats.

“Black Lion Two One Three, you’re next in line.” Steve tried not to jump – his backseater, Lieutenant Etta Candy, would never let him live it down – and keyed his mike.

“Black Lion Two One Three, roger.” This would be his sixth official catapult takeoff – the first in the F/A-18F – and, despite his hundreds of hours in a cockpit and the confirmed ten kills he’d made over Iraq, he still felt like a complete rookie. Only a stupid squid would think this was a good idea.

“Relax, Ace,” Lieutenant Candy said. “You’ll do fine.”

“You better hope so,” Steve retorted as he went through his checklist for a third time. Flaps, stabs, brakes. All good to go. “Good to go,” he said. “Ready in the back?”

“Ready in the back.” If Candy was amused, she kept it to herself.

“All right.” Steve rolled his shoulders. “Let’s do this.”

“Can’t be any worse than getting pulled out of a crashing plane by Superman, right?” This time, he did hear Candy’s smile.

“Stuff it,” he muttered, his eyes locked on the yellow shirted deckhand. They had an official title and Steve normally knew what it was, but his brain was focused on the task ahead. He waited … and waited … and then, the signal was given.
The F/A-18’s twin engines roared as he applied power and the sudden acceleration pushed him back into his seat. They cleared the Bush’s deck a second and a half later and, exactly as he’d been instructed, Steve resisted the sudden urge to pull back on the stick. The Atlantic flashed by underneath them and he slowly banked to the right.

“Good shot,” he murmured. His eyes scanned the displays in front of him. “Good engines. Good end speed.”

“Gear up,” Candy murmured softly, a subtle reminder of the thing he had not announced.

“Gear up,” Steve replied. He flipped the appropriate switch and then began the slow bank to his left.

“Better than sex, eh, Ace?” Candy asked wryly.

“You’re clearly doing it wrong,” Steve replied, earning himself a chuckle from his weapon systems officer.

“Black Lion Two One Three, turn heading two-nine-oh. How copy?” Steve shifted his grip on the flight stick and began the slow turn.

“Black Lion Two One Three, good copy.” He pulled back slightly on the stick to gain altitude. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed his wingman – Captain Bobby Reynolds – slide into position at his right.

By all rights, that should have been Jordan there, but Highball had gone and gotten himself permanently grounded by fooling around with some general’s daughter. Last Trevor had heard, Hal was pushing to be released completely and, with how rapidly the Air Force was downsizing these days, Steve expected it would be granted. What Jordan was going to do next, he had no idea – it was hard to envision Hal not in a cockpit – but he expected it would be explosive.

Still, this was just a routine combat air patrol and Bobby could handle that. Steve tried to relax and focus on the mission ahead of him.

An hour into the CAP, they received new orders and, in the wake of 9-11, the instructions were more than a little troubling.

Oceanic Flight 343, out of Madrid and bound for Metropolis, had deviated its course rather significantly and was no longer responding to radio transmissions. Steve punched up the coordinates and let the jet’s autopilot take over while he glanced over his systems once again. Behind him, he heard Candy stirring and could almost feel her tension.

“My uncle was one of the pilots scrambled to intercept planes back on nine-eleven,” he remarked in a voice barely betraying his own concern. “He always told me he didn’t know if he would have been able to actually pull the trigger if it came down to it.”

“Could you?” Candy asked softly several moments later. Steven nodded.

“I think so, yeah.” He inhaled deeply. “Better a hundred people here than a thousand or two thousand elsewhere, right?” He frowned – that didn’t sound very decisive, did it? He glanced to his left where the other F/A-18F cruised and triggered his radio. “Black Lion Two One Four, are you getting anything from Oceanic Three Four Three?”

“Negative. Frequency is clear.”
“Roger that. I’ll take lead.” Steve wet his lips. “Maintain distance of one mile from Oceanic Three Four Three while I move to engage.”

“Copy, Black Lion Two One Three. You have lead.”

His nerves had settled substantially by the time they closed to visual, but Steve couldn’t help but to feel something was wrong. It wasn’t the rattlers that so often crawled in his stomach just before the shooting started … and yet, at the same time, it was. From the clipped, professional way his backseater spoke, Lieutenant Candy clearly felt it too.

“Oceanic Flight Three Four Three, this is Black Lion Two One Three of the US Navy,” Steve said into the open frequency. “You have altered your course and are not responding to radio transmissions. It is imperative that you acknowledge, Captain.”

“Getting a lot of interference with the targeting suite,” Candy announced. “It isn’t active jamming but … something is preventing us from locking on.”

“Stupid LexCorp crap,” Steve muttered. He keyed his mike again. “Oceanic Flight Three Four Three, this is Black Lion Two One Three. Please respond.” He glanced over his shoulder briefly. “I’m going to take us in closer,” he said. “Maybe their radio is down.”

“Maybe.” Candy couldn’t have sounded more doubtful if she tried.

As he nosed the F/A-18F closer toward the cockpit of the jumbo jet, Steve felt a cold shiver crawl up his spine. He ignored it – just nerves, he told himself – and kept one eye peeled for threats. There was nothing there… Not a damned thing.

“No flight crew,” he growled. He pulled back on the stick and banked away from the flying ghost plane. Glancing down at his dials, he bit back a soft curse. “You’re not superstitious, are you?” he asked carefully.

“We’re in the Bermuda Triangle,” Candy responded. “I know.” Her breath caught. “What the hell was that?” she demanded.

“Where?”

“On the damned plane! I saw something move!” Steve stared at the jet himself, fighting the urge to run and hide, but saw nothing. He shook his head.

“I’m going to contact the Bush,” he began.

With a shriek of tearing metal, things that could only classified as … monsters tore free of the jumbo jet and hurled themselves through the air. Steve’s reaction was automatic – he jerked hard on the flight stick and kicked power to the twin jets. Candy was screaming something at him, but he’d already slipped into that place his mind always went when he was about to die. Nothing could disturb him here. There was only the jet and the Enemy.

“I’m going master arm on,” he said flatly as the monsters swarmed through the sky. “This is Black Lion Two One Three engaging.” The M61 Vulcan in the nose of his jet burped and a trio of the smaller creatures simply ceased to exist. “Breaking right,” Steve continued.

“This is Black Lion Two One Four, Fox Two!” An AIM-9 Sidewinder corkscrewed through the sky and detonated against an even larger thing. The beast tumbled away, then righted itself and surged
up, arrowing through Black Lion-214’s tracer fire. With a roar that Steve could feel from hundreds of feet away, it ripped the cockpit apart. A shower of crimson dotted the sky as the … thing tore into the pilot and WSO. There was no way either of them could have survived.

“Fox Two,” Steve snapped as he dropped the reticle onto the already disintegrating -214 and triggered the missile. It arced through the sky and slammed into the beast’s hide. The impact alone knocked the thing free from the dying jet, but the resulting detonation of the Sidewinder’s ordinance caused even more damage. It wouldn’t have been enough – the damned thing had already taken on AIM-9, but -214’s fuel tank chose than moment to rupture.

“Bank left!” Candy shouted and Steve obeyed without hesitation. Another of the horrid creatures flashed through the air, narrowly missing them. “This is Black Lion Two One Three declaring an emergency!” she exclaimed across the radio. “We are under attack!”

The ring of steel against steel had finally ceased and Hippolyta glared down at her daughter, now revealed to be the Masked Champion who had bested wild-eyed Artemis of the Bana herself. She should not have been surprised that Diana defied her in this – when had the girl ever obeyed even once in the last hundred years? She had nodded her understanding when Hippolyta forbade her from entering this contest … and then promptly ignored those very orders. Had not the entire Assembly observed firsthand how easily she defeated all comers – save Artemis, who proved to be a more canny opponent than anyone anticipated – Hippolyta knew she would be well within her right as Queen Mother to strip this title from her daughter.

“The Champion is recognized,” the hooded Oracle announced from where she sat at Hippolyta’s feet. It was impossible to determine which of the three wore the robes this day – were they nude and standing bare in Apollo’s grace, Hippolyta was unsure if she could tell them apart – but today, she did not even bother trying to guess. All of her focus, all of her anger and fury and fear was centered upon her daughter.

Diana stood straight and tall, as nude as any of the other combatants, but in every way, she outshone them. Her beauty was greater, her arms stronger, her smile brighter. She had cast aside the concealing helmet that had hidden her identity – it was tradition, for all combatants to conceal their faces so friends and lovers would not know one another and withhold their blows – and the sweat from her endeavors glistened in the sun. Under Hippolyta’s steady gaze, Diana’s smile faltered slightly, but she knelt as was proper and bent her head.

Silence fell over the amphitheater as all eyes turned toward Hippolyta and waited for her reaction. She carefully schooled her features to reveal no sign of the inner turmoil twisting her stomach into knots. Yes, she could admit, if only to herself, Diana was ideal for this task – she was the strongest and fiercest warrior, and had been blessed by the Gods themselves with amazing abilities so far beyond her sisters … but those abilities were also the very reasons she had no business venturing out into Patriarch’s World. She was too curious by half, too headstrong, and far, far too stubborn. And should Hera learn the truth …

“By strength of arms and quickness of mind,” Hippolyta intoned slowly, her tone betraying her disapproval only to those who knew her best, “you have proven yourself Themyscira’s Champion.”

She lifted a hand in a very slight gesture toward Phillipus who stepped forward, holding the imaculately carved crate Lord Hermes himself had delivered when he announced Olympus’ order.

“Step forward, Champion,” Hippolyta continued, “and received raiment that will announce your allegiance.” Diana rose slowly and, for a change, obeyed.

She said nothing as Phillipus slowly dressed her in the panoply, her eyes locked on Hippolyta defiantly. The undergarments went first, followed by the stylized cuirass sculpted from some godly
metal that shined like gold and the battle skirt crafted from cured manticore hide. According to the Messenger, both would turn aside any weapon crafted by Man and protect her from harm should her cause be Just, though what exactly that meant, Lord Hermes did not say. Next came the greaves and sandals which miraculously melded together to form protective boots, followed by the embossed bracers that promptly molded themselves to Diana’s forearms. She shook her left arm slightly and lo! A nearly transparent hoplon appeared! Diana laughed lightly at the murmur of surprise and briefly experimented with the shield of Hephaestus – expanding its size, altering its shape, and even refocusing it into a narrow weapon – before Phillipus discreetly cleared her throat, reminding her they were not yet done. The short, wide-bladed xiphos went at Diana’s side and it too seemed to shift ever so slightly at her touch, lengthening fractionally as if adjusting to her greater than average height. A helmet of the same metal the cuirass was crafted of hid most of her lovely features from view, but allowed her long hair some freedom. The half-cloak that was a brighter crimson than any Spartan ever knew was secured to her armor and fell to her waist. And finally, the Lariat, said to have been culled from strands of Gaea’s golden girdle. Hippolyta refused to smile at the sudden flinch Diana gave when she touched the Lariat – it was pure Truth, honed into a weapon of Peace, and even the ancient stories of Hippolyta’s youth spoke honestly: Truth burned.

“You have been Called to a great Duty, Champion of Themyscira,” Hippolyta said once Phillipus stepped back. Hippolyta’s throat closed up at the sight before her. Gone was Diana, the recalcitrant, stubborn, obnoxious brat of a daughter she loved so dearly, and in her place stood a young woman, not yet a century old, wearing the accoutrements of war and charged with waging Peace. Hippolyta wanted to spit. A warrior of peace. Feh! There could be no such thing! The Gods were truly unjust. “Father Zeus and Mother Hera have declared your Cause – Ares, Lord of War and Prince of Slaughter, has gone mad.” Hippolyta felt her lip twist – when had he ever been sane she wondered. Alcaeus, he who had become Herakles, had marched to his tune, and vile Akhilleus as well. Iason and Perseus and Theseus all had been tainted by his madness. How many Men had listened to his dark whispers and only now did the Olympians chose to act? “You are charged with going forth into Patriarch’s World and waging Peace.” It was a ridiculous mission, one with no chance of success, yet the Gods had spoken and it was Hippolyta’s duty to obey. She opened her mouth to add more, to offer some small suggestion that she hoped Diana would actually listen to.

But the sky caught on fire.

And Diana sprang into the air without hesitation or fear.

Alarms shrieked nonstop as Steve rolled the heavy fighter yet again in a desperate attempt to shake pursuit. Their weapon systems had long since run dry – he’d emptied the last of the Vulcan’s ammo into a third of the huge bat-winged monsters and accomplished nothing more than pissing it off – and nothing they’d tried thus far had worked. The damned jumbo jet continued along its path, encircled by these … things and Lieutenant Candy couldn’t reach anyone on the radio. All that answered was an ominous static …

And an occasional laugh that did not, that could not exist.

“Hard right!” Candy shouted from the backseat and Steve jerked the flight stick in response. This time, it wasn’t fast enough and he felt more than heard the tear of metal as one of the creatures flashed by the jet, its talons scoring the underside of the jet. “Shit!” Candy smacked her controls. “We’re losing fuel!”

“That’s it, then,” Steve muttered. He rolled the jet, orienting its nose toward the jet. “Get ready to punch out,” he ordered. When she didn’t respond, he half-turned his head toward her.

“Yes, sir,” she said. “It’s been an honor flying with you, Colonel.”
"And you, Lieutenant." Steve grinned darkly. "I’ll see you on the other side." He lined up the useless gun reticle on the jet and kicked in the afterburners. With a fierce snarl, the F/A-18F sprang forward, engines screaming. "Punch out now!" Steve shouted. He reached for the ejection controls and felt the canopy explode upward. Wind screamed at them as he pulled.

A great metal bird fell from the sky.

Diana knew it was not a bird, but that was her first thought as she observed the thing descend from the heavens, trailing fire from a gaping wound in its side where a smaller, angrier-looking metal thing had punched through it like an arrow fired into a target. She hesitated not in the slightest as she streaked through the sky toward the thing – if it continued along its current path, it would fall upon Themyscira and that was something she could not allow. A strange smell clung to the metal bird, but she pushed it aside as she reached the thing and pushed, applying her great strength to its hard skin. With a groan of tearing metal, her hands plunged through the surface and Diana cursed softly – was the entire thing so unbalanced, so easy to break? She dropped twenty feet below it and examined its surface, seeking something that might hold fast.

By the time she discovered a sturdy enough place to shift its trajectory, the great metal bird was dangerously close to the island. She heaved mightily, feeling the strain in her muscles, and to her great relief, its course shifted. It continued its steady descent, but thanks to her efforts, it would miss the island entirely. She grinned brightly as she let herself fall another fifty feet away closer to the ocean before arrowsing up and around. Her thoughts froze.

Standing prominently atop the metal bird was a man, cloaked in shadow and fire, but with eyes that burned. He laughed at her, his voice black and terrible and full of horror, and even as she realized what she was looking at, he gestured. A massive blade wrought of shadow materialized in his hand and he stabbed it downward, the blade tearing through the hard skin of the metal bird.

The world vanished in a flash of fire.

She barely had time to bring up her left arm and summon Hephaestus’ gift before the shockwave struck. It hammered against the barely visible shield and the sheer impact threw her back. She struck the ocean hard, sliding and bouncing across the waves for a great distance before finally slipping under the water. Pain trickled through her body but she pushed it aside and swam up, breaching the surface quickly and hurling herself into the air once more. The shield at the ready, she cast her eyes around for the shadow-man, but he was already gone.

“What in Hera’s name was that?” she murmured softly to herself, realizing in a moment that she had lost her helmet. A flicker of motion drew her attention to the island and she frowned – a figure in green with a solid head was dragging something onto Themyscira. Frowning, she climbed into the sky to gain a better look. The helmet could wait.

All Steve wanted to do was collapse on the sandy beach and pass out.

His arms and legs screamed with exhaustion, and it was physically painful to even move, but he struggled through the pain and rolled Candy over. She wasn’t moving, wasn’t breathing, and he fumbled at her parachute harness with fingers that didn’t want to work. Her helmet came loose and joined his on the dirt and he leaned closer, turning his head so he could feel her breath. Nothing. His cold fingers detected no pulse.
“You don’t get to die on me, Lieutenant,” he said through chattering teeth as he unzipped her flightsuit and slowly began CPR. One, two, three, four … he pushed down on her chest thirty times, then tilted her head back, lifted her chin, pinched her nose, and sealed her mouth with his. Two quick breaths, then back to the chest compressions. “Come on, dammit,” he muttered. Thirty more compressions, then two more breaths. Repeat. His arms felt like iron bars, and he nearly sobbed when she suddenly coughed and spat up water. She was still barely conscious but by God, she was breathing again. He slumped forward.

The crack of wood breaking sent a jolt of adrenaline coursing through him and he reacted without thinking. His service pistol cleared the holster in a smooth, perfect draw and he half spun, fully expecting to see another of those hideous monsters. Instead, he found himself staring at a vision of impossible loveliness.

Black hair fell past her shoulders, though it looked to have once been tightly bound together. Dusky skin highlighted a flawless face just this side of imperious. Her blue eyes were chips of ice. And … and she had a sword in her hand. She gestured with it toward Candy, snapping something in a language that Steve didn’t begin to comprehend, and his exhausted mind took too long to catch up. Was this woman a Valkyrie like his crazy grandfather told stories about? That would mean she was here for Candy …

“You can’t have her,” he growled as he trained the pistol on the vision. “She’s not dead!” The woman’s expression shifted slightly – confusion followed by annoyance – and she took a step forward, still gesturing with the sword.

Steve squeezed the trigger.

The pistol boomed loudly on the beach but the vision … she moved faster than should have been possible. Her left hand flashed up and just as suddenly, the sand in front of Steve kicked up a tiny geyser. He glanced at it, then at her. She’d blocked the bullet. She’d blocked the bullet!

He was still staring at her, the pistol aimed in her direction, when dozens of other women poured out of the forest. Like the vision, they were wearing armor straight out of a sword and sandals flick, and carried spears that suddenly looked a lot more intimidating than they would have in normal circumstances. One of them, a towering black woman with arms that Steve would have killed to have, shouted something that could have only been an order – he recognized a sergeant when he saw one – and the other women sprang into a dense formation arrayed in front of him, their spears at the ready.

“Candy,” Steve muttered as he nudged his unconscious WSO with his free hand, “please wake up. For the love of God, wake up.” His head swam as he tried to keep the pistol pointed at both the vision in silver and steel, and the battle formation. This could not be happening.

And then, the four-legged eagle-lion thing landed. It was as big as a horse with wings that were larger than most jets he’d flown. When it roared, the Earth itself seemed to tremble.

Mercifully, Steve passed out.

“A man.” The whispered word was repeated over and over again, but Diana paid it little mind as she stepped closer to where the two curious-dressed strangers lay. Both wore the same garments but the smaller, darker one was unmistakably female. And, judging by the man’s actions immediately prior to Diana’s arrival, she had been injured. He had been desperate to save her. How curious.
“Get her to the Healing Isle,” she ordered sharply as she toed the unconscious man onto his back. He was not feigning as she had expected and she took a moment to study his features. As oppressors went, he was not displeasing to the eye, though she did not understand why his golden hair was shorn so close to his head. Was he a servant of some sort? No, their garments were too alike … a soldier then. She thought of the smaller metal bird embedded within the larger one. “He was defending her,” she mused aloud. “He thought I meant her harm.”

“My Princess,” one of the warriors called out as she strode forward, gripping tight her spear. Open fear was in her eyes, which was not a look Euboea wore often. Diana held up her hand.

“Do not harm him,” she instructed, which caused another look of consternation on Euboea’s face. “Bind him and have his wounds attended, but do not harm him.”

“The law…”

“I saw a thing today that I have long been taught could not happen.” Diana locked eyes with Euboea. “I saw a Man willing to lay down his life to protect a sister.” Several of the other warriors shifted in place. “I saw that same man risk himself to bring her to shore rather than abandon her to Poseidon’s less than tender mercy.” She drew a deep breath. “And I fear I saw Ares the Warbringer this day.” That certainly shut them up. “We need to question this man, learn how he breached our defenses and what he knows of the outside world.”

“As you instruct, Princess.” Euboea’s disapproval of the order was clear on her face but she would not go behind Diana’s back in this. Which left only one other person to convince.

Queen Hippolyta herself.

Diana remained kneeling before her mother, still reeking of smoke and sweat, and waited patiently for the queen’s temper to cool. She had not taken news of a Man on Themyscira well, but the strange vision that Diana had seen atop the great metal behemoth she took even more poorly. If circumstances were different, Diana thought she might smile – her mother was never keen on change and now, it seemed events were rapidly outpacing her.

“You are sure of what you saw?” Hippolyta asked. It was the third time she had made the same inquiry and Diana’s annoyance at her mother’s implied distrust leaked into her voice when she replied.

“I am, my queen,” she said. “Specifics were hidden from me, but he was cloaked in fire and shadow, and wielded a black sword that screamed when he lifted it.”

“I see.” Hippolyta inhaled. “Rise, girl. You are my daughter, not a cowering servant.” Diana’s lips twitched as she stood – had she straightened before Mother gave permission, she would have faced the rough side of the queen’s tongue. “I question your wisdom in allowing this … Man to live.”

“We have need of information, Mother,” she said simply. “I knew not whether his companion would survive…”

“She will,” Hippolyta said, “though Epione is not dispositioned to returning the woman any time soon.” She frowned. “Her injuries were severe.”

“Then we should question the Man.” Diana placed a hand upon the Lariat, nearly hiding the wince at the sharp stab of pain that shot through her hand. “And before you ask, Mother,” she said, “yes, I am
curious about him.” It seemed accepting the Truth was the only way to handle this relic and Diana made a mental note about that in the future. She continued speaking, even as her mother’s face darkened. “I have no intent to bed him or let him harm me as you obviously fear, but his garments and the woman’s are so alike … they are uniforms, I think.”

“ Implements of war,” Hippolyta hissed. “And now they have pressed women into their madness.”

Diana frowned. Had she not been trained to handle a sword and bow since before she could walk? Had she not been drilled with shield and spear for decades? Was she not a warrior herself? No woman of Themyscira was fully accepted lest they could wield implements of death and murder … yet here her mother chastised Men for the same. Diana’s sense of moral outrage revolted against the hypocrisy, though she wisely held her tongue. Hippolyta’s thoughts on Men were all too well known, even if Phillipus had once admitted the queen’s stance had hardened since Diana’s birth.

No matter, Diana told herself, taking great effort to hide the disapproval she felt at her mother’s comments. If I am to wage peace, then it must start at home.

“I will be judicious and cautious when I speak to this Man,” she said to her mother. “If he is bound in the Lariat,” she added, choosing her words with care, “he will be compelled to speak Truth. I will know his mind.”

And perhaps, this Man would be the answer to her own prayers.

Opening her eyes, Etta Candy discovered the insane dream she’d just experience still hadn’t ended.

She was stretched out on an absurdly comfortable wicker bed, stripped completely nude, with pleasant aromas drifting up from the bandages wrapped around her torso and arms. A pleasant breeze, carrying with it the smell of the ocean, ruffled her hair and, somehow, made her relax even more than before, which was strange since she didn’t even like the beach. Gulls circled overhead and the day was warm, but not stifling. This place felt like paradise.

The sound of soft voices caused her to turn her head, and she froze the instant she laid his eyes on the speakers. There were four of them and by God, even to a straight girl who didn’t swing that way, they were some of the most beautiful women she’d ever seen. Two of them looked to be Colonel Trevor’s age, with that battle-hardened, hard-won weary wisdom in their eyes she always saw when he looked at her, while the other two appeared to be barely in their twenties, just a few years younger than Etta herself, with raven-black hair in one instance and a deep brown in the other. One of the older ones was black and her skin was so dark it might as well have been carved from ebony. The tallest of the women was also the youngest but, from the way the others spoke to her, was very obviously in charge. Only one of them was not wearing archaic armor, though only the leader’s appeared to be molded from metal.

With a soft groan, Etta forced herself to sit up. They were in a raised pavilion of some sort, constructed of what looked to be actual marble, and a squad of women did calisthenics in the sun below under the watchful eye of a woman whose age was frankly impossible to determine. Every single one of the women present was tall and in the kind of physical shape that Etta could only dream about reaching.

Wonderful. I’ve died and gone to Super-Model Heaven. She shook her head.

Apart from a single, uninterested glance, the women ignored her and continued their quiet conversation. Etta didn’t recognize the language, but then, she’d always sucked when it came to different linguistics which had embarrassed the hell out of her dad who spoke, at last count, six
different languages and was able to follow a conversation in at least twice that number. She glanced around for her clothes and, when she found no sign of them, Etta glared and rearranged the light sheet draped across her body. There was no sign of Lieutenant Colonel Trevor.

Actually, there was no sign of any men, anywhere, which was more than a tiny bit troubling.

“Excuse me,” she called out. All four women glanced at her, their expressions remote but troubled. Etta forced the friendliest smile she could manage onto her face. “Do any of you speak English?”

“English.” The unarmored woman nodded in response to the leader’s glance. “I speak English.” Her accent was curious – almost British, but with something else that almost brought to mind Indian. “I am Epione.”


“Oh … kay?” The woman named Epione frowned and glanced up at the dark-haired leader who frowned.

“Is he your master?” the raven-haired youngster asked. Her voice was clipped and sharp, but not harsh and bore an equally unusual accent. Etta blinked and stared at the woman as if she had gone mad.

“My what?” she asked. “Listen, lady, I don’t know who the hell you are or where I’m at, but … Jesus! No, he’s not my damned master.” Etta scowled at her. “What the hell kind of backwards place is this if that’s the first thing you think when you look at a black woman?” She pointed at the ebony-skinned woman standing next to the girl. “Are you her master?” she demanded. “Is that how things are done here?”

“Peace,” the dark-haired young woman said. She had colored under Etta’s tirade and the other three women were not hiding their smiles very well. “Your ways are unfamiliar to us and it was decided—this was said in a tone that implied the girl did not entirely agree with the decision; as a relatively junior officer who quite often had to shut her mouth and obey stupid orders from idiots whose only qualifications were that they’d served longer than she had, Etta knew all about that tone. “—that the Man could not be trusted, no matter that none may deceive the fires of Hestia.” Etta frowned – she understood about half of that – but the young woman continued. “Let us begin anew: I am Diana, daughter of Hippolyta, and you are welcome to our island.” She approached and crouched before Etta. “Your … Colonel?” She frowned again. “He said his name was Steve, not Colonel.”

“It is Steve,” Etta said. “Colonel is his title.” Comprehension flashed across the dark-haired woman’s face.

“Oh,” she said. “That makes his answers more comprehensible … though why he could not have explained it thus I do not know.” She shook her head. “No matter. He told us of how you came to our island but we would hear the tale from your lips fresh.” Etta wet her lips.

“This is going to sound crazy,” she started before glancing around and noting once more how archaic in terms of style everything looked. The clothes, the armor, the architecture, it was all from a bygone age. She shook her head. It probably wouldn’t sound crazy to them. “There were monsters on the plane,” she began.

Barely a day later, they left Paradise.

As beautiful and as peaceful as the island was, Steve was really glad to get away from it, mostly
because he was frankly tired of being watched by all of these attractive, dangerously fit women like they expected him to sprout a second head or start breathing fire at any second. His understanding of Greek mythology was definitely untrustworthy since most of what he knew he’d gleaned from watching reruns of Xena back during college, but from what Etta told him once she was released, the women here were Amazons … which didn’t really make much sense to him since that was a river in South America. He nodded and rolled with it, pretending to understand what the hell Lieutenant Candy was talking about all the while trying to get another look at the gorgeous vision in the gold and silver armor.

When the vision – Princess Diana, he learned, which always made him think of the British Di who’d died in the car crash – announced that she would be escorting him and Candy back to the States, Steve had almost expected to see a magic boat, or a horse with wings or hell, flying reindeer, but instead, the princess led the two of them through a palace of gold and shimmering marble and into a massive room containing a stone platform with a strange-looking doorway-shaped rectangle on top of it. Eight grim women with battle-scuffed armor and lethally sharp spears stood guard at specific points in the room Steve guessed were compass points. Another woman, this one with features strikingly similar to Princess Diana but not a lick of mercy in her eyes, was also present, and she was the only woman other than Lieutenant Candy not wearing armor. She exchanged sharp words in that gibberish of a language with the princess, glared very briefly at him, and Steve had the uncomfortable realization he was looking at the queen.

Despite the tension between them, Diana and the queen embraced, and then, the princess strode up the stairs to the doorway, gesturing for him and Candy to follow. He helped the lieutenant when she faltered slightly – it was amazing Etta was even able to walk already! – and, by the time they reached the top, the doorway was gone.

In its place was a hole in the air.

“This just keeps getting weirder and weirder,” Steve muttered. He watched the princess step through the hole and vanish. Inhaling deeply, he followed.

And the world fell away in a blinding flash of light.

Steve was certain he heard Lieutenant Candy gasp … although, to be fair, it might have been him as he suddenly felt a rush of air and a disorienting sense of falling sideways – this was a dozen times worse than the few times he’d been parachuting. The air pressure was wildly intense, bordering almost on the painful, and breathing was more difficult than it should have been. He forced his legs into action – one step, the princess had said – and the wind that wasn’t actually wind screamed at him. The blinding light intensified and then, with an audible pop, it faded.

And they were somewhere else entirely.

Steve staggered forward another step before dropping to his knees and inhaling deeply. Bile tickled the back of his throat and he focused on not throwing up. Beside him, he felt rather than saw Etta do the same thing. His muscles trembled and his mind raced. What the hell was that? And why was his body freaking out like this?

“Breathe deeply,” the princess ordered from where she stood behind him. “Your discomfort should pass momentarily.” Her voice betrayed no such ‘discomfort’ and it took a moment for Steve to recognize how distracted she sounded. He forced his head up, trying desperately to ignore the dwindling but still overpowering vertigo, and found himself looking at an American city. They were in a park somewhere, with exquisitely cut grass and well-trimmed trees framing skyscrapers in the far distance. The princess’ eyes were riveted upon the structures of steel and glass.
“Hera,” she murmured softly, her tone one of awe. It was the first time since he’d first looked upon her that Steve had seen her less than a hundred percent certain. She slowly turned in place, her eyes wide. “Hera,” she repeated before glancing briefly toward Steve. “Have you ever seen structures so high?” she asked. “Is this the abode of giants?”

“Actually, I think it’s Boston,” Etta rasped. She too had recovered enough to look up, but unlike Steve, her eyes weren’t riveted on the vision of dark-haired beauty. Diana blinked.

“Then this is your home?” She frowned. “Why would you need such mighty buildings?”

“There are a lot of people in Boston,” Steve replied. He forced himself to his feet, balancing awkwardly on unsteady legs, and offered Lieutenant Candy a hand.

“Then I look forward to discovering what other wonders this world holds.” The princess gave them both a brief, appraising look. “You have recovered,” she declared. “Good. We shall part company here. I have my own tasks to undertake. I wish you safe travels.” And without another word, she looked up.

And flew away.

Steve stared at the dwindling figure as she vanished into the clouds over the city, knowing his jaw had dropped. He glanced at Candy and found her doing much the same.

“A flying princess from an island of magical super-models,” the lieutenant muttered. “How the hell are we going to explain this one, sir?”

“Is it any worse than an alien who shoots lasers out of his eyes and bench-presses tanks?” He fumbled his wallet out of his flight suit pocket. “Boston … that’s Hanscom Air Force Base.”

Nodding toward the street, he continued. “Let’s get a cab so we can report in.”

“Command is going to love this,” Etta mumbled.

The trail she followed was a twisty, erratic one that carried her across the length of the city.

At any other time, she would have loved to been able to pause and study the incredible buildings and architecture of this Boss Town as Etta Candy called it, but the wonders of this world would have to wait. The enchanted token Menalippe had provided her would not last long – already, Diana could feel its power leaking away – and if she was to locate the Warbringer, she had to act quickly. So she pushed aside her intense desire to simply stop and gape at the marvelous towers of glass and stone, and instead, focused on her hunt.

As befit a Lord of Olympus, Ares’ trail was not limited to the Earth. It carried her to the top of the mightiest buildings, through the lowest of sewers, and then, to the middle of the bay which was teeming with boats of all sizes. Her ability to soar through the air drew much notice and she soon had two … things pursuing her though they could not maneuver as well as she and were certainly slower. Both carried occupants, which made them aerial chariots of a sort, and were held aloft by rapidly spinning blades. Despite her haste, she did pause ever so briefly to admire the ingenuity behind such conveyances before pressing on.

To her disgust, the trail led directly back to the same park that she’d arrived in with Colonel Trevor and Lieutenant Candy. She found the source of her hunt quickly enough – he sat alone on a wide bench that gave him an excellent view of the city proper. Rather than the monstrous form she’d seen earlier, he appeared as an old man, bald of head with a white beard that fell to his chest. His rumpled clothes looked much the same as those worn by the inhabitants of this world … but he was without
shoes.

And he stank of blood.

At her approach, he smiled and looked up. Diana felt a frisson of terror crawl up her spine at the black emptiness she found where his eyes should have been.

“Lord Ares,” she said in a calm voice. It would be improper to not show a God his due respect, even one as dark and terrible as this one. “I have been charged by Olympus to take you into custody and return you to Father Zeus.” The old man cackled.

“Have you indeed?” He leaned back and studied her. “I have slumbered for nigh on seventy years, my dear,” he said simply. “I have no desire to return to my father’s prison.” The God of War made a broad gesture with one hand, encompassing the whole of the city. “I had thought my time away from this world would have lessened my presence but these people, these humans, they worship me more than ever.” He smiled. “The names may change – overseas contingency operations, international coalitions, jihad … jihad. Such a lovely word … so easy to abuse.” The old man chuckled. “And abuse it I shall. I will remind them all what true War is.” With startling speed, he pushed himself to his feet. “There is a place within my host for you, Child, should you be willing to set aside this foolish duty set before you.” Diana squared her shoulders and dropped her hand upon the Lariat at her side.


“I would expect no less from the daughter of Hippolyta,” he said with another smile. “Children,” he called out loudly, “attend me.” A pair of figures materialized at his side. One was tall and broad, with curly blonde hair that flared out from his head like a lion’s man, while the other was slender and cold of bearing. Both were garbed in uniforms nearly identical to those Colonel Trevor and Lieutenant Candy wore, but that was where any similarity ended. “Deimos, Phobos,” the God of War said, “kill her.” He flickered out of existence with a sudden boom that caused Menalippe’s token to burst into flames, but Diana barely noticed.

Because two gods were trying to kill her.

“That’s the most ridiculous story I’ve ever heard.” The general speaking was one Steve knew only by reputation – Lane was Army, after all, and Trevor didn’t make it a habit of hanging out with four stars, especially those in a different service branch – so he wisely kept his mouth shut. It was a surreal experience, being alternately chewed out and interrogated by the Joint Chiefs over a video connection, but Steve had to admit, it definitely beat having it happen in person. Less spit from emotional officers, and far less chance for him to lose his temper and punch one of them. “Under normal circumstances, I’d have you both thrown into a deep, dark hole for the rest of your lives … but things have changed…”

“Sir?” Steve exchanged a confused look with Candy.

“An hour after you dropped off their scopes, the Bush was attacked by what could only be called monsters.” Admiral Strom announced. The Chief of Naval Operations, he was the oldest and most recognizable of the officers on the video screen. “These … creatures you describe are identical.”

“We were forced to request assistance from the … Kryptonian to retake the Bush,” Lane said sourly, “and even he had some trouble with them.”

“More importantly,” Strom added grimly, “we’re getting unsubstantiated reports of this sort of thing
happening all over the globe.” He glowered. “If your information is correct and this is the prelude to a larger invasion-” In mid-sentence, he cut off as a disturbance drew his and the other Joint Chiefs’ attention. At almost the exact same moment, a master sergeant rushed to where Steve was standing.

“Metahumans fighting in downtown!” he exclaimed. Steve looked at a television on the far side of the room and his breath caught.

It was Diana.

She struck the unyielding stone of a building and felt it shatter into lethal fragments underneath the impact, but Diana refused to cry out in pain.

Instead, she let her body go limp and rolled to the ground before spinning back to her feet, the invisible shield at the ready. It caught another spray of acid from Deimos, now almost completely transformed into an armed snake-man. His brother, Phobos, roared with fury, features still stuck halfway between lion and man. Blood dripped from all three of them – the battle, begun nearly a half turn of the glass ago and very quickly carried from the park into the city, had gone ill for all – and Diana’s chest was heaving with exhaustion, but she would not yield.

By Hera, she would not yield.

With a shout of her own, she sprang up into the air, twisting and spinning to come down upon Phobos with all of her might. Her xiphos sang as she ducked around his blindingly fast counter-blow and slammed the sword into his chest. The blade shrieked as it pierced his godly flesh and he staggered back, aggression and rage dwindling away. Whining softly like a wounded cat, he fell, the suddenness of his defeat tearing her weapon away.

But again, Diana refused to hesitate. Seize the initiative whenever you can, her instructors had told her. Create your own opportunities and use your enemy’s strengths against them. Phobos had been strong but not fast – his brother was the inverse.

With her now empty sword arm, she snatched the Lariat free from where it dangled off her armor and threw herself into the sky. Deimos could not fly – neither of them had seemed to possess this gift – but he was able to scale walls so quickly it almost seemed that he could translocate at will. He would scramble up and over, then hug the edges and strike from distance … so she did not allow him to do so. Where before she’d sought distance to better protect the screaming masses fleeing from their conflict (and potentially maneuver Phobos into the acid spray, she had to admit), this time, Diana arced over the stone roof and accelerated toward where she knew Deimos would appear.

Hephaestus’ translucent shield smashed into Deimos’ scaly face with terrific force as he breached the rooftop, and the snake-man flew back under the force of the blow, slamming into the great window of the building next to them. Blood flew, both from the impact of the shield and from the shards of glass as they punctured his flesh. Diana pursued, pushing harder against the staggered Deimos, and they crashed through another stone structure, slamming into the ground beyond. She flicked her wrist and the Lariat obeyed, coiling around the momentarily stunned snake-man before he could recover.

“Yield!” she ordered and to her great relief, he froze in place.

The sounds of battle abruptly faded and she realized that eyes were upon her. Looking up, she found hundreds if not thousands of frightened people staring or pointing. There were men and women, boys and girls, some with skin like Phillipus’ and others who were paler than even Menalippe, and all of them were staring. She saw confusion and fear, shock and amazement. Some of them approached hesitantly – there were dressed alike, in clothes of dark blue with identical devices upon
their breasts and weapons in hand like the one Steve had used against her. Guards or some sort? Warriors? No matter.

“Stay your hands,” she called out, glad that Athena’s gift of wisdom had allowed her to learn Trevor’s language so quickly. “I am no enemy.” She rose, pulling Deimos up – the crowd and the blue-garbed men gasped at the barely moving half-man, half-serpent tangled up in the Lariat.

“Diana!” A familiar voice cried out and she turned her head. There, weaving his way through the crowd and accompanied by a number of stern-looking men with strange weapons, was Colonel Trevor. He flashed something to one of the blue-garbed men and rapidly approached. His step faltered at the sight of Deimos. “Bobby?” he asked hesitantly. The snake-man did not respond, its eyes intent on Diana. She glanced at Trevor, then back at Deimos. His now shredded clothes … yes, he had been wearing the same garments as Steve. She briefly recalled the colonel’s tale, of fellow pilots slain by Ares’ monsters. Or not slain, as it would appear, but instead, pressed into his service. Diana sighed.

“I fear your friend is gone, Colonel Trevor,” she said. “His spirit was consumed by Deimos who used his flesh to visit grief to your world.” She gave him a consoling look. “I regret your loss.” Turning her eyes back to Deimos, she frowned. “Speak only Truth, son of Ares,” she ordered. Deimos hissed and writhed. “What is your father’s plan? Tell me now.”

“Chaos,” the snake-man hissed. “A weapon of incalculable destruction fired in the heart of this mighty nation’s seat of power.” Deimos shrieked – the blue-garbed men and those that had accompanied Trevor stepped back, but to his credit, the colonel did not. “War will come as these mortals lash out against those they hate and fear!” Smoke began trickling up from the snake-man, causing even more trepidation and concern. But strangely, not for Trevor.

“Washington,” he said in a horrified whisper. “He’s going to hit Washington.”

“War comes!” Deimos exclaimed before jerking and twitching. His skin flaked away, bursting into flames as his soul departed the mortal shell it had briefly occupied. With startling rapidity, the body encased in her Lariat collapsed in upon itself and disintegrated. Diana ignored it. There was no time to think on whether the godling was truly dead or had simply escaped.

“Point me to this Washing Town,” she ordered as she secured the Lariat to her belt. She should not have been surprised to discover her *xiphos* was once more in its scabbard – truly, Lord Hephaestus did marvelous work. “I must get there at once!”

“It’s four hundred miles from here,” Trevor said instantly. You’ll never-“

He did not finish his remark as Diana stepped closer to him, seized him with her right arm, and threw them both into the sky. Trevor made a most unpleasant sound of surprise as she arrowed them up toward the clouds, calling upon the magics in her shield bracer to envelop them both.

“Which direction?” she asked. Trevor pointed, his eyes wide, and Diana altered their trajectory. She ground her teeth together and pushed for greater speed.

And the skies over Boston boomed with their passage.

By the time they reached D.C., Steve was ready to swear off flying completely.

He considered himself a fairly intelligent man but, for the life of him, simply could not fathom how Diana was able to do what she was doing. They streaked across the sky at speeds far in excess of the sound barrier … yet somehow, the g-forces that should have turned his body into mush were simply
absent. Seeing the coast streak by and knowing that only her hold on him – and dear God, she had muscles like steel rebar – was preventing him from tumbling to a messy end … yeah. If he got out of this, he was going to get a nice, comfortable desk job and swear off flying forever.

The sound of gunfire caused the princess to angle sharply toward the Pentagon as they breached Washington air space and, as they drew closer, Steve felt his stomach lurch. Monsters straight out of legend hacked and slashed their way through unarmed soldiers, airmen, marines and officers. There were giants with just one-eye, and actual walking skeletons, and a thing with a bull’s head and biceps thicker than Steve’s head, and …

Diana did not hesitate. Before he realized what was happening, Steve found himself rolling on the grass as she released him and pounced, hurling herself into the center of the skeletons and going to town with that short sword of hers. In seconds, she’d decimated their ranks and bounded straight toward one of the giants with a loud shout that drew its attention. Steve shook his head and somehow managed to tear his eyes away. Bomb. Right. There was a bomb somewhere around here.

He linked up with a team of armed Marines several steps later and their commander – a gray-haired man who looked like you could break rocks with his face – provided him with a sidearm. None of the Jarheads were officers and most looked like they were barely out of diapers. To his surprise, they also had a dark-suited civilian with them. It took Steve all of three seconds to recognize him.

“Bruce Wayne?” He stared at the torn suit and knuckles that showed obvious signs of recent use. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Contract talks,” Wayne replied with a smirk that barely touched his eyes. Up close, he seemed larger than the gossip rags made him out to be. “Trying to steal some of LexCorp’s business.” He gestured toward where Diana had felled one of the giants and was moving against a second – many of the soldiers and Marines who had armed themselves were rallying behind her. “I wasn’t expecting Clash of the Titans for lunch.” A hollow boom announced the passage of Diana’s latest foe – it smashed into a concrete wall and toppled – and she arrowed over them toward a cluster of other monsters. Steve bit back a curse – at the very center of that formation was a man-shaped thing encased in shadows and fire.

Ares. It had to be.

“Follow me!” he shouted as he sprang forward.

Monsters and men wearing armor obsolete for thousands of years seemed to spring out of nowhere, wielding tooth and claw and blade with frightening capability. Against modern firearms, they possessed no great resistance but their sheer numbers more than made up for that. Steve lost half of his Marines in their initial charge, but picked up a mixed squad of Army and Navy guys and continued their assault. To his surprise, Wayne more than held his own – the billionaire never once picked up a gun that Steve saw, but he punched and kicked and pulled out some crazy judo shit that was borderline amazing. Then again, the man was from Gotham and in Trevor’s experience, there were two kinds of people who lived there: fighters or corpses.

He lost sight of Diana as she tore through Ares’ horde, but several minutes later, just as his team punched through the monster’s formation, he caught sight of her again, this time squaring off against the shadowy figure he took to be the God of War. They slashed and battered at one another, with Ares laughing and shouting what had to be insults in that language Trevor had heard on Themyscira. The two passed from sight once more and Steve would have considered giving chase to lend assistance if it wasn’t for one thing.

And that thing was an armed thermonuclear device.
“Oh, shit,” he whispered as he and his squad – he’d lost some more people, picked up a couple new ones – fanned out around the bomb. “Anyone EOD?” he asked hopefully. Once again, Wayne surprised him.

“That’s a WayneTech DT-3600 it’s attached to,” he said, kneeling in front of the device. He flipped open a phone. “I might be able to disarm it.”

“In three minutes?” Steve glanced around – the men and women of his squad … boys and girls, really, were all on the verge of panic.

“Keep the monsters away,” Wayne replied, “and I’ll do my best.” He popped open the tiny computer case, all the while eyeing his phone. Steve would have said something, would have wished him luck, but the monsters in question chose that moment to attack once more. Shouting orders, he emptied several rounds into a bird with metallic feathers.

And in doing so, he never saw or heard Bruce Wayne make a very quick phone call.

Ares’ rage was terrible to behold.

His blows rained down upon her shield with such force that each sent her skidding back across the ground or into the metal conveyances arrayed around the strangely-shaped compound. With a roar, he kicked great plumes of dirt and stone through the air at her, before once more rushing forward at impossible speeds. Defense was not an option – he was the God of War and would easily smash through even the stiffest of shields – so Diana chose evasion. She counter-charged, then threw herself hard to his left, accelerating rapidly to put as much distance as she could manage between them.

“You little whore!” Ares bellowed. He hurled something at her – it was another of the wheeled conveyances – and she narrowly dodged it as it smashed into the earth. “I offered you a place at my side,” he snarled, “but now, all you will have is a place on your knees!” With blinding speed, he covered the distance between them and brought his black sword down in an mighty overhand slash. At the last instant, Diana shifted her stance, kicking out with one foot while ducking back from the blow. It was just enough – the kick wasn’t enough to truly hurt him, but it did knock him off-balance enough that he had to stagger to avoid falling. Diana danced back.

“You yield, my Lord,” she said simply. Her eyes darted for something that would be adequate to slow him and alighted upon a formation of the warriors who had defended against Ares’ onslaught. They were armed with the long weapons she had seen unleash such fierce destruction earlier and none of them seemed inclined to hold back. She shifted her position, so as to better conceal their approach from the god’s eyes.

“I am the God of War!” Ares bellowed as he righted himself. His sword whistled toward her once more, forcing her to dive away from it. Her own xiphos clattered on the ground as she released it and Ares stomped an armored foot upon the blade, shattering it with a loud boom. “This world will be mine!”

“To Hades with you,” one of the warriors shouted in passable Greek. Ares half-turned, his eyes burning with fury.

And the warriors of this Washing Town unleashed their own rage upon him.

The din was intense and Diana instinctively threw up Hephaestus’ shield to protect herself from the onslaught of projectiles that erupted from their weapons. Ares was caught off-guard and the warriors’
fire caused him to stagger back. Knowing it would be inadequate, Diana ducked behind one of the overturned metal conveyances, seized it by the thick metal upon its undercarriage, and threw herself and her makeshift weapon toward Ares’ back. She struck with crushing force – the metal chariot crumpled around the god – and without hesitation, hurled herself back and up, staying out of Ares’ reach. He stumbled forward, roaring with rage as he tore the conveyance away and sent it sliding across the ground. With a flex of his legs, he sprang up into the air toward her.

And caught another wave of defensive fire from yet another team of warriors squarely upon his chest.

Diana surged forward, diving toward him as he struck the ground with a shudder. She smote him with both fists, the impact actually denting the metal of his helmet, before rolling away from his counter-strike and darting away once more. He was no fool – this time, he did not pursue, but instead clambered to his feet. Black fire curled up from his hands as he glared at her.

A sudden buzz was the only warning either of them had of new combatants and a line of what looked to be solid light lashed out from a newly arrived wheeled conveyance and tore into Ares. He howled with pain, and Diana leapt forward once more. This time, she snatched the Lariat from her waist – it had worked against Deimos. Would it hold the God of War? Her invisible shield sparkled and glittered from the rain of metal being unleashed by the military chariot, but held long enough for her to get within reach of Ares. She ducked underneath his wide swing and the Lariat curled out, wrapping around him and flashing brilliantly. Ares struggled for a moment and the golden rope burned even brighter.

Ares fell.

Bruce was worried.

The counter was rapidly dropping – under thirty seconds now – and his damned ace in the hole was late. Around him, the lieutenant colonel – someone called him Trevor during the firefight – had organized a sufficient defense for the moment, but they were starting to run low on ammunition. Casualties were high as well, though not as bad as the initial charge.

“Wayne!” The colonel sounded as concerned as Bruce felt, but a bare second later, a sense of displaced air changed the mood. “Oh, God,” Trevor said, his tone one of abject relief. “Am I glad to see you!”

“Took you long enough,” Bruce snapped. Even in his stress, he managed to keep his voice soft. No one else would be able to hear him. Dressed in his distinctive Kryptonian garb, Clark smirked.

“You should stand clear,” he ordered.

The sound of battle abruptly ceased.

All around them, the dead men and things Ares had summoned collapsed or simply melted away into smoke, leaving behind only carnage and death. Encased in the Lariat, the God of War fell to his knees. He was defeated but still defiant.

“Hephaestus,” he snarled as he strained against the Lariat. “I will destroy him.”

“I think not, my Lord,” Diana said. Her breath was still coming in ragged gasps and she hurt all over. She gave the warriors in the metal conveyance a thankful nod and gestured for the others to stand easy. It was an instinctive gesture on her part but the obeyed hesitantly. Many, upon seeing the God
of War captured, turned immediately to their dead and wounded.

“You think me beaten,” Ares said with a dark smile. “It is you who are beaten. You who are out of time.” He looked in the direction of the strange five-sided building and Diana followed the direction of his gaze. A blur of blue and red flashed up into the sky, shaking the very air with its passage, and the God of War inhaled sharply in surprise.

And a long moment later, a star flashed overhead in the daylight sky. All eyes turned toward it, including Diana’s. She was curious but too exhausted, too sore to care exactly what had happened. The rush of battle dwindled and vanished, leaving her barely able to stay upright. A flutter of movement to her side warned her of Lord Hermes’ arrival and, when she looked at him, she could not help but to notice that time itself seemed to have come to a stop around them.

“I come bearing tidings from Father Zeus,” Hermes announced. He smiled bleakly at Ares. “He is most displeased at your actions and declares that you must serve a penance.” Ignoring the snarling curses coming from the God of War’s mouth, the Messenger shifted his unearthly eyes to Diana. “Ensure he remains wrapped in Hestia’s fire,” he instructed. “He will remain powerless until released.” With another smile, Hermes was gone.

And time restarted.

An unheard summons drew her to Hera’s temple.

None of the guards reacted to her passage – since Diana’s departure on this fool’s mission, Hippolyta had spent a great deal of time in reflection and prayer – but she could sense them silently filing out around her, forming a protective ring of armor to watch over their troubled queen. She would have smiled, but a terrible warning in her heart warned her against appearing happy or even content.

Kneeling before the elaborately carved representation of the Queen of the Gods, Hippolyta closed her eyes and once again whispered her sincere hope for her daughter’s safety. Diana’s fate was out of her hands but she hoped...

“Ares is bound once more,” a strong voice announced. Hippolyta gasped and promptly bowed her head. The statue was suddenly alive and strode across the temple. “But your daughter’s tasks are not yet complete.”

“Yes, my queen,” Hippolyta murmured. She looked up and froze at the look Hera was giving her. She knew. Oh, Gods, she knew.

“I do,” Hera said in response to the unspoken question. “And I am … displeased at your lack of loyalty to me, Hippolyta.”


“You are no more to blame than any of the others,” she said in a frosty tone. “Had you not raised your daughter to be true to me, then there would be talk of reprisal.” Hera looked away. “The trials before your daughter will make those of Alcaeus seem soft, I fear,” she said and Hippolyta felt her heart freeze in her chest. “Darkness comes and your daughter must be a beacon of light. Pray for her, Hippolyta. Pray for us all.”

The statue was once more cold marble.

And Hippolyta began to pray.
The day had already vanished into night, but still, Diana could not tear herself from the words engraved upon the wall.

Steve had told her this President Lincoln was a great leader of his people, a man who had taken his nation to war to undo a terrible injustice, and indeed, upon reading his words, she could not deny the eloquence of his words. He wrote of liberty and freedom … but spoke only of Men. Equality among the sexes was something that would take many more years, Steve had admitted, but she had her doubts that it was so.

Still, the dark-skinned woman who took charge of Ares, yet bound in a piece of Hestia’s Lariat cut from the whole – which strangely seemed no different in length after the fact – was proof that this … America had advanced somewhat. There was no denying how quickly men stepped when ordered to by that Ms. Waller who spoke softly and watched all with the eyes of a predator.

Upon turning over Ares, Diana had expected her task to be complete, but Hermes had returned once more with a new mission from Olympus – to wage peace with Patriarch’s World. It seemed a nonsensical task, one that could have no end or beginning, but she was silently grateful as it meant she could continue to see the wonders of this world. There was so much to see in this world, so many places to visit that she had heard of only in story or not at all.

The clearing of a male throat behind almost caused her to sigh in frustration. Steve’s interest in her was not wholly unappreciated – he was pleasant to look at certainly, and nothing like the repulsive, misogynistic trolls her mother had claimed all men to be like – but she was simply not interested at the moment. There was too much to see, too many things to do.

“Did you forget something, Steve?” she asked, the name feeling awkward on her lips. He had insisted she use it instead of his rank and she had finally acquiesced.

“I’m not Colonel Trevor,” an unfamiliar voice said. Instantly, Diana spun, automatically assuming a battle-ready stance in case of attack, but the stranger did not move. He floated there, a half foot above the ground with both hands hanging at his side. The clothes he wore were striking – dark blue dominated, with red boots and a cape of crimson. An unusual crest covered his wide, muscular chest and his face was pleasing to look upon. He was smiling and she recognized him from the various photographs she had seen throughout the day.

“Superman,” she said carefully. Oh, how her mother would loath a being with such a name, especially one that seemed to be an Adonis given flesh. He smiled wryly.

“Wonder Woman,” he replied, using the ridiculous moniker some fool herald named Kent had draped upon her. “My name is actually Kal-El,” the man in blue and red stated. “And I wanted to meet you.” He nodded to one side. “We wanted to meet you.” A shadow detached itself from where it lurked and resolved into a man wearing armor and a mask that concealed his face.

“We need to talk,” the newcomer rasped.

The cell was cramped and untidy, with no comforts whatsoever, but Ares, God of War, paid it no mind.

He sat calmly on the bed, his hands still bound by the damnable Lariat, and refused to even look at his shackles. When he escaped, his vengeance would be terrible. The Amazon would be first – and how had she been able to stand against his wrath? None save other Olympians had ever done so! He frowned. Perhaps … perhaps Father had strayed once more? It would require some further study.
“You struck too early,” a soft voice declared from the shadows. Ares looked in that direction.

“Fortune favors those who do not cower,” he said. “Have I not done as you ordered?”

And Zeus, father of the Olympian Gods, nodded.
Year Three: League

Rise in Number of Metahumans Troubling, Government Says

Published October 16, 2015 / Lois Lane / Daily Planet Online

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The rapid increase in unsanctioned superhumans operating within the United States is troubling, Department of Metahuman Affairs Director Amanda Waller told US lawmakers Thursday, adding that unless action is taken soon, federal law enforcement will soon be unable to handle the added threats.

“Even working in conjunction with known non-hostiles like Kal-El or Princess Diana of Themyscira, we are facing a critical understaffing in all areas,” Waller said, as the US administration tries to sell its plan for increasing the DoMA budget by $30 billion.

The hearing grew contentious when Waller refused to comment on allegations that her department was linked in any way to the controversial Cadmus Project, recently revealed to the press by anonymous whistleblowers and confirmed by Congressional oversight investigations. Director Waller is expected to invoke her Fifth Amendment rights in next week’s Senate committee hearing regarding her involvement with the extra-legal activities taken.

Click for more from Daily Planet Online

HIS GUESTS WERE LATE.

It was just as well – Bruce himself had only just returned to the Cave and still stunk of sweat, blood and, embarrassingly, perfume. That damned thief in the catsuit had been in a … playful mood tonight when he encountered her in the Diamond District and he’d got a face full of something expensive but pleasant-smelling when he tried to put an end to her latest silly game. She should never have been allowed to get that close and it was his own damned fault. He was just lucky she hadn’t wanted to hurt him. And then, she’d led him in a pointless chase across the city that ended when he lost her in the East End. She always ended their game … she always went to ground there, which was another data point to consider.

The sound of voices in the west tunnel was not his first warning that Clark and Diana had arrived – well hidden motion detectors and cameras had identified their rapid approach and recorded their aerial game of tag which Diana always referred to as training and Clark called ‘goofing off with someone else who can fly’ – but his mood soured further at their laughter and apparent good cheer. Being around them when he’d had such a frustrating night was always difficult, especially if they were in such high spirits.

“No, that would result in a roughing the passer penalty,” Clark said as the two floated through the tunnel and toward to the wide platform dominated by Bruce’s current car obsession. “Once the quarterback has released the ball, the defense has to avoid hitting him like that … unless he tries to block for someone on his team.” Diana gave him a sour look.

“What a ridiculous game,” she muttered. Ever the Kansan who grew up on the sport she now ridiculed, Clark gave her an equally annoyed look.

“Don’t shoot the messenger,” he replied. “You’re the one who asked me to explain the game to you.”
“I did not expect it make so little sense.” For a change, she was not wearing her full battle armor – instead, a white peplos concealed much of her body, although Bruce wasn’t entirely convinced that the clothes weren’t simply hiding her silver and gold cuirass from sight. She had pulled some equally impossible things out of mid-air before, such as the pair of glasses she’d presented to Clark as a birthday gift earlier this year. Specially crafted by Hephaestus himself, they did … something to Kent’s face when he wore them that made him less memorable, despite his physical size. His features weren’t actually changed – he still looked the same, he was just easier to forget. To Bruce’s continued disgust, it required more than a small bit of effort on his part to circumvent the effects, and Kent delighted in the gift for the freedom to walk among humanity it provided. He had not been doing too badly on his own, but the glasses helped immensely.

“You’re late,” Bruce snapped as the two approached. They exchanged a look he recognized – it was their patented ‘Bruce is being grumpy today’ expression, which he saw far too often – and that only darkened his mood further.

“Sorry about that,” Clark said with a bright smile. He nudged Diana with one elbow. “Somebody got the fool notion in her head that she was faster than I am so we had to have a race.” The princess scowled.

“Our next competition will be maneuverability,” she said. Bruce grunted in dark amusement at how quickly the smile slipped from Clark’s face. For all of his abilities, the Kryptonian was about as subtle as a rock and he would just as soon smash through a wall than go around it.

“Looking forward to it,” Clark said in a voice that implied the exact opposite. “So, I was in California yesterday,” he began, as if his fight with the bizarre clone of him that Bruce was convinced Luthor was behind had not been televised on every news network on the planet, “and I ran into the Green Lantern.”

“Hal Jordan,” Bruce murmured. Clark sighed and rolled his eyes.

“Hal Jordan,” Bruce murmured. Clark sighed and rolled his eyes.

“Hal Jordan,” Bruce murmured. Clark sighed and rolled his eyes.

“Yes, Bruce. You were right. Jordan is the Lantern.” Diana frowned.

“What is a Green Lantern?” she asked.

“Sort of a space cop,” Clark replied. “The next time you’re at the Fortress, I’ll have the A.I. give you a data-dump on them.”

“The sooner the better,” she stated. “I dislike being in the dark.”

“How’s this weekend? Lois is in Ankara, covering the G20 Summit, so I’m free … pending world-shaking calamity, of course.”

“Of course.” Diana paused, her eyes turning distant. “I will need to consult with Steve,” she said after a moment, “but I believe I am free.” She smirked. “Pending world-shaking calamity, of course,” she repeated. Clark snickered and looked to be on the verge of saying something else, but Bruce cleared his throat. He was too damned tired to put up with their jokes. Clark gave him a sheepish look.

“Where was I?” Kent asked.

“Hal Jordan,” Bruce said darkly.

“Right. So, he confirmed our theory – there have been at least a dozen extraterrestrial events in the last month and he hasn’t been able to identify their origin either.”
“So it’s beginning.” Bruce leaned back in his seat and glared at the monitor. “And we’re not ready.”

“I invited him to Gotham next week,” Clark continued, earning himself a black look. He shrugged. “Give me some credit. I didn’t tell him who you were. We can use that Clocktower base of yours for the meet, can’t we?”

“I could ask Barry Allen to attend as well,” Diana offered quickly. She had met the speedster several months earlier and had been impressed by his professionalism. “He expressed interest in Kal’s idea about a team.” Her use of Kent’s Kryptonian name had long since ceased making Bruce smirk, even though, as far as he knew, she was the only one aware of Clark’s dual identity that used it. Even Kent called himself by his Earth name. A mischievous look crossed her face. “Perhaps you can race him,” she said to Clark. “Your news media is calling him the fastest man alive, after all.”

Before Kent could respond – he had an expression that looked torn between interested and insulted – Bruce’s computers began beeping an alarm. He frowned at the results crawling across the screen. All five of his satellites, retrofitted with specialized sensory capability designed for this very thing, had identified massive energy spikes within Metropolis city limits. He started to open his mouth, to tell Clark and Diana about the threat.

But the two were already gone.

“So that’s what that feels like,” he murmured as he turned back to his computers.

They surged up through the clouds together, still at subsonic speeds, but Clark held his tongue.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noted that Diana’s white dress was gone and, in its place, she was wearing the battle armor he so often saw her in. Her expression was one he rarely saw: disgruntled. Though she might try to deny it and quite frankly did whenever it was brought up, she had a competitive streak a mile wide and hated being inferior in any way. His superior speed was once such item of contention between them … and now, it was essential.

So he waited.

“Give me your hand,” Diana finally said, her lips tight. She offered her right arm and he took it, shivering slightly as something cold but unseen slid over them both. Automatically, his eyes shifted briefly to the bracer she wore on her left arm and was now holding tightly to her chest. It gleamed and glittered, but even his enhanced senses could not discern its power source or the extent of the invisible shield surrounding them both.

Magic, he scoffed mentally. Any sufficiently advanced technology and all that.

With the forcefield protecting them, Clark pushed against gravity and they soared upward, faster than Diana would normally be capable of. He felt them shatter the sound barrier but continued to accelerate. In seconds, they breached the upper atmosphere and arced down, the sheer speed of their re-entry causing her shield to spark and glitter against the atmosphere. Already, Clark could see Metropolis, even though it was still a hundred miles away and his expression darkened at the chaos enveloping Little Bohemia. Fires were raging and several figures, larger than normal humans, bounded from rooftop to rooftop, pausing upon each landing to blast away with some sort of energy weapon. A pair of police helicopters orbited the district and, with a bit of effort, Clark could see sharpshooters firing from the choppers. He let go of Diana’s hand and felt her shield pull away from him.

“Take them,” she instructed softly. “I will see to the fires.” Clark nodded.
And dove toward the arsonists.

A quick x-ray scan as he approached revealed an unexpected anomaly – these things weren’t human. Their internal skeletal structure was similar enough to that of a man, but their brains were much smaller and the general density of their entire bodies was much greater. The weapons they fired appeared directly connected to them via tiny cables and wires. If he wasn’t mistaken, they actually seemed to be using their own endothermic biologic functions to power the devices in some way he did not fully comprehend. Clark pushed the concerns aside. Step one in containing this incident was obvious: get these damned things away from populated areas.

Streaking past one of the helicopters, he smashed into the first of the non-human things at just under three hundred miles per hour, dropping his shoulder and tackling the thing before it even knew he was there. His speed rapidly dropping, he carried the thing several hundred feet over the bay, frying its gun connections with his heat vision and crushing the weapon with his hand before releasing the creature to fall into the water. Arcing up, he hovered there for a fraction of a second, confirming with his enhanced vision that the thing was briefly neutralized, before pouring on another burst of speed and aiming toward another of the creatures. This one seemed warned of his approach and opened fire with the energy weapon. Clark rolled out of the way of the incoming blast, which only slightly altered his approach vector. This time, he left his outstretched fist lead the way and he struck the thing square in its armored chest. He felt the cuirass crumple – the armor wasn’t metal, but neither was it organic – and the kinetic force of his blow threw the thing into the sky. It tumbled end over end, and would have smashed into another building, causing even more damage, but Clark accelerated once more, streaking past the same helicopter he’d buzzed earlier and snatching the non-human thing at the apex of its flight. A flash of heat vision and a squeeze rendered its weapons powerless. It did not resist and he smirked at the realization his initial strike had knocked it unconscious.

“I have the third one under control, Kal,” Diana’s voice drifted to his ears. Clark glanced up and found her, hovering at the far end of the district, the last of the non-human things hanging limply from the entangling golden lasso she carried. He returned his attention to the thing he’d captured and gave it a more thorough examination. If he had to guess, Clark would say it was some sort of cybernetic being – the gold and crimson armor it wore appeared melded completely with the creature’s body, and a pair of round ocular devices completely replaced both eyes. It only had three fingers and a thumb on either hand – a sweep of x-rays confirmed an identical number of digits on its feet – and the teeth … nothing natural needed that many teeth.

“Appreciate the assist,” Captain Sawyer said when he floated down to join her several moments later. As the senior commander of Metropolis’ newly formed special crimes unit, she had a unique position within the police department – she and her team officially belonged to every precinct in the city but was permanently assigned to none of them, which gave her wide latitude and an unprecedented level of autonomy. Even more curious, she answered only to the mayor.

“I was in the neighborhood,” Clark replied, dropping his unconscious hostile onto the ground where a team of SCU cops swarmed forward to secure it. “You should call in STAR Labs,” he added. “These things aren’t human.”

“Noted.” Sawyer glanced away from him and smirked at the approach of Diana. “Date night?” she asked, the remark causing Clark to give her a sour frown. He wasn’t sure which tabloid had started the rumor that he and Diana were romantically involved, but it was a non-story that refused to die. To his silent relief, Lois had laughed it off and now had a terrible tendency to tease him with suggestions about where ‘Superman’ might take his ‘Wonderful girlfriend’, each more outlandish than the previous.
“There was a third one that I dumped in the bay,” he said, ignoring Sawyer’s innuendo. She nodded.

“Already have Port Authority pulling him out.” She paused, tilted her head to listen to her earpiece. Clark glanced away and pretended he could not hear every word. “Sounds like the vultures are descending,” Sawyer said a moment later, the words causing an instinctive flash of anger inside Clark’s chest. He knew that a lot of people did not like journalists, but it never failed to hit him anew just how much they were disliked by certain members of society, soldiers and police officers especially. “Fire department has everything under control. If you want to dodge more questions, now would be a good time to bolt.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Clark rose quickly into the sky, knowing his departure would be noted and emulated by Diana. Somehow, whenever they worked together, she remained absolutely aware of his location and activities, even if her back was turned. As he suspected, she shook the hand of the firefighter – a woman, Clark noticed with a smile he quickly forced back – and then leaped into the sky. Within moments, they both floated high above Metropolis, hidden mostly by cloud cover.

“They weren’t human,” Clark said shortly. Diana nodded.

“Nor were they minions of Ares.” She gave him a look. “Our Gotham friend should know this.” It was perfectly said – even here, hundreds of feet away from the nearest human who might be able to overhear their words, she knew to take care with Bruce’s identity. Clark snorted.

“Do you think he doesn’t already know?” They shared a laugh. “I’ll check with him before I head home.”

“Good.” Diana grinned. “Do not forget our race,” she said as she accelerated away from Metropolis. Clark smiled before throwing himself in the opposite direction.

---

Five days later, Diana stood silently in the cramped Clocktower base and watched Bruce try to pretend he was not horribly uncomfortable with the presence of four metahumans in his city.

Oh, he pretended very well that none of them concerned him, but she had grown quite skilled in perceiving truth where only lies reigned in the many months since becoming Themyscira’s champion. She remained unsure if it was due to the Lariat or some other ability gifted to her by the Gods, but she found it useful nonetheless. Useful yet troublesome at the same time. When Steve told her he was not troubled by the foolish and inaccurate gossip spread by the tabloids about her so-called romance with Kal, for example, she knew he lied to save face, but by Aphrodite, she knew not what to do about it. She knew much of Steve’s difficulties stemmed from his professional job – officially, he was her liaison with the American government and was tasked with ensuring her planned Themysciran embassy favored them, which was something she could not and would not do, and that caused a great deal of pressure upon his shoulders – but personally, they had so few things in common that it was difficult to simply be one another when they were together. Compared to her, he was fragile – had she tried, Diana knew she could easily break him were she not overly cautious – so naturally, he sought to pretend otherwise, which inevitably lead to more conflict. So many of the cultural things he took for granted she did not understand and the inverse was also true. She knew he was frustrated – Hera help her, she was frustrated too! – but what to do? Diana shoved the thoughts aside. It was a matter for a later reflection as at the moment, as her attention needed to be on the here and now.

“Listen,” the Green Lantern – Hal Jordan, she knew, both from Clark’s use of the man’s name and Steve’s immediate recognition of his former wingman when Lantern was first interviewed; his amusement had been quite vocal, especially when Lantern identified himself as a member of an interplanetary law enforcement organization – said hotly, “I already told you what I know, Bats!”
Under the partial face-concealing mask, he glowered at the dark figure staring back at him. “These things don’t conform to anything in the Guardians’ database!”

“That tracks with the A.I. at the Fortress,” Kal interjected. He intentionally stood between the two men, his manner very obviously intended to be calming. “I spent a couple of hours reviewing the database and, at best, the A.I. thinks they might be extradimensional.”

“Wait.” Jordan shifted his attention from Bruce to Kal. “You have an actual, functioning Kryptonian database? You didn’t mention that.”

“It never came up,” Kal replied calmly.

“The Guardians will want it,” Jordan declared.

Kal stiffened.

From where she reclined against the wall, Diana tensed as well. In the year since she had met Kal, never before had she seen him in this light. At Jordan’s careless, foolish words, the relaxed, confident and friendly man she’d met was instantly transformed into a dangerous, unyielding being of incalculable power who encapsulated everything her mother feared. He stared at the Green Lantern, not moving or blinking, and everyone present was suddenly aware of an intense heat in the room.

“If they want it,” Kal-El, the last son of Krypton, said softly, “they are welcome to try and take it.” He crossed his arms, at once reminding Jordan how large he was. “That information is too dangerous, for anyone.”

“Even you?” Lantern challenged.

“Especially me,” Kal replied. “I acknowledge that your Guardians want to keep this data out of the wrong hands,” he continued in that chilling, nearly emotionless voice, “but as the last Kryptonian, I neither recognize nor accept their authority in this.”

“All right, let’s calm down a little bit here.” Barry Allen suddenly stood between the two men, the mask he normally wore to conceal his identity pushed back. “Let’s focus on the matter at hand,” he said quickly, the words rushing out of his mouth so quickly it was difficult to understand what he said. “These demon things … how did they get to Earth?”

“They didn’t breach the atmosphere,” Jordan said. He held up his hand and the ring flashed brightly. Instantly, an image of the world appeared, tinged in a glowing green light. “I’ve got some markers in place that will alert me every time something man-sized or larger enters or leaves the atmosphere.”

“Good to know,” Bruce murmured from his shadow.

“And man,” Lantern continued, flicking a frown at Kal, “I get pings all the time because of you. Is there a reason you have to do that all the time?”

“I can fly,” Kal replied, relaxing slightly and once more becoming the man Diana considered her friend. “Tell me you don’t do the same ever since you got that ring.” Jordan snorted, his lips curling up slightly.

“Fair enough,” he said with an understanding nod. From where she leaned, Diana had to agree as well. As a child, she’d driven her mother quite mad with her tendency to see how high she could go or how far over the ocean. Once, she’d gotten so lost, it had taken her almost a week to find her way back home and Hippolyta had been quite unable to decide if she was furious or too relieved to punish her.
“Hmmm.” Barry studied the green image for a moment. “Do we know where these things have appeared?”

“Yes.” Bruce shifted slightly in his corner and another image of the globe materialized, this one bathed in white light and projected from something hidden in the ceiling. Lantern shook his head – Diana did the same – and allowed his own projection to vanish. “Each sighting I am aware of places them along coastal cities.” Several pulsing lights of slightly different color appeared on the slowly rotating globe.

“You missed Jacksonville,” Lantern said. “I showed up right after that fish guy, Aquadude, had smacked them around and turned them over to the base police.” Bruce grunted and did something that added a new icon over the curiously-shaped protrusion near the southern part of the United States.

“They call him Aquaman, actually,” Kal offered. He glanced briefly in Diana’s direction and she shot him a frown. People still called her by that ridiculous Wonder Woman name he had coined while writing for his Daily Planet. She wondered if the Atlantean king’s media name was his creation as well.

“We should consult him,” Bruce said. “He might have additional information we lack.” Diana pushed herself off the wall.

“I will make contact with him,” she declared. “Atlantis is known to Themyscira.” She did not bother mentioning that they nearly went to war over a misunderstanding three hundred years ago. Doing so was not relevant – the two nations had better than average relations, and Atlantis had not stupidly sent a male ambassador for the last three centuries.

She was lost in thought and mostly silent for the rest of the meeting, departing quickly once it was concluded and before one of the frustrating males – likely Kal, as he seemed far more attuned to her moods than Bruce – could corner her and inquire about her health. Right now, she just wanted to hit something.

And later, after another brief, tense conversation with Steve that ended in yet another senseless argument, the desire for uncomplicated violence intensified. It was fortunate that Circe chose that moment to stir up trouble as it gave Diana something to do or rather, someone to hit.

Hera help her, Men were stupid.

Dinner was lovely, but Clark was too distracted by recent events to give it his full attention.

Lois seemed not to mind as she split her attention between eating and reviewing her notes from the day’s interviews with the G20 delegates. For her, the day had evidently quite been busy, though not as productive as she would have desired. As was his tendency with her, ever since she’d asked some rather pointed and difficult questions he’d been unwilling to answer or even acknowledge, the US president went out of his way to avoid her, which should have angered her but instead always made her laugh. Clark had to admit he was fairly envious about that element of her personality – unlike so many other members of her profession, Lois was able to set aside personal beliefs and treated all politicians the same, regardless of whether or not she happened to agree with them. As far as she was concerned, they were all bottom-feeding scum wearing pretty suits, regardless of their party affiliation.

Needless to say, she was almost universally loathed in Washington, D.C., a fact she claimed to take great pride in.
It had been a spur of the moment decision on Clark’s part to fly here to Ankara for a late night dinner, but now, as they sat in uncomfortable silence, he had to wonder if he shouldn’t have just retired to the Fortress for the night instead. His head pounded – the noise of the planet was getting to him again – and his growing frustration at the lack of action on the part of the world governments was beginning to turn into actual anger. What was it going to take to make them listen? God, he just wanted to punch something.

“You’ve been rather quiet,” Lois remarked suddenly, her comments breaking his train of thought. Clark looked up and found her studying him, tapping her lips with the overly expensive pen he’d bought her a few months ago, with an expression one he recognized all too well. She was about to ask him some difficult questions. He sighed.

“Thinking about some stuff,” he replied. She nodded.

“I don’t think you could have given me a better lead-in,” Lois said with a slight smile. “Rumor has it that you and your … super-friends are recruiting.” Clark grunted and her smile deepened. “Any truth to that?”

“Off the record?” She rolled her eyes but nodded. “Then, yes.” He fought the urge to lean back in his chair – these things weren’t sturdy enough for a regular human, let alone one with the bone and muscle density of a Kryptonian. “We’re trying to make some plans in the event of another extra-terrestrial incursion.” He frowned. “So far,” he continued with a scowl, “none of the people in high office seem to have taken my warnings very seriously.”

“About Brainiac?” Lois picked at the remains of her kofta – she had seemed to like it well enough, but, like most women Clark knew, didn’t eat enough of it.

“In the last month, there have been nineteen extra-terrestrial incursions,” Clark said. “I’ve reported them to every government agency I can think of as soon as I become aware of them, but still, nobody does a damned thing about it.” He pushed his empty plate away. “Instead, they sink money into crap like Cadmus because they’re afraid I’m going to snap and start killing people.” The continued lack of trust in some quarters still stung.

“People are afraid of what they don’t understand, Clark.” His dad’s words echoed in his years, even now, twenty years later.

“That’s because Luthor still has a lot ears,” Lois pointed out. She blew out a frustrated breath. “I was this close to nailing him with that clone fiasco,” she grumbled, holding her finger barely an inch from her thumb. Clark held his tongue – he didn’t want to mention that Bruce had admitted to doing some digging himself and had a few plans he wanted to put into play. As the usual target of Luthor’s vitriol, Clark was all for that. “So what is your plan?” Lois asked after a few moments. She leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table and cradling her chin as she looked at him. “Organize the metahumans into an army? That’ll only make the governments more afraid.”

“No, not an army,” Clark replied. “But a team, definitely. We’re all stronger together than we are apart.” He met her eyes. “But these incursions … I’m afraid a lot of people are going to die before the idiots in charge do anything.”

Lois smirked – from the glint in her eyes, Clark knew she was about to make some biting comment, likely about the collective intelligence of the people running the government or how history had a terrible tendency to repeat itself because people were stupid – but her phone began buzzing. She frowned at it and Clark understood why: he recalled quite clearly her turning it off when he knocked on her hotel room window. Picking up the phone, Lois blinked in surprise before pushing it toward him.
“It’s for you,” she said. Clark hesitated only for a moment before glancing at the screen.

He was out of Lois’ hotel room and climbing into the sky less than a second later.

Steve was the last person that Diana expected to encounter in Metropolis.

He was not wearing his uniform for a change, and did not recognize her at first, which was entirely the point of the enchanted spectacles she wore, twins to the ones that she had presented to Kal as a gift. Though she was loath to admit it to him, she had quickly realized a sense of envy over how easily her Kryptonian friend could vanish within the multitude of humanity and walk freely among them, which led her to seeking Hephaestus’ aid. The Lame God had been fascinated by her request – in all his centuries, he had never encountered a supplicant seeking to make themselves appear more normal and he crafted the twin devices mostly out of curiosity than any other emotion. To her surprise, he’d refused payment, instead making a simple statement about enjoying the work, especially since it was not weapons.

When Diana joined Steve at the outdoor restaurant table, he frowned, opened his mouth and then visibly hesitated. A heartbeat later, recognition flashed across his face.

“Diana?” he asked hesitantly. She smiled and nodded. “I didn’t recognize you.” Chuckling, she tapped the spectacles with one finger and he rolled his eyes. “Stinking magic,” he muttered, which only increased her amusement. Both Kal and Bruce had said much the same thing at various times since she met them. She remained unsure whether it was because of their unfamiliarity with the Art or if was simply a masculine reaction to something they did not understand.

“Why are you in Metropolis?” she asked. Instantly, Steve’s good humor vanished.

“I could ask you the same thing,” he replied. “This is his city, isn’t it?” The flash of anger that coursed through her must have shown on her face because Steve held up a hand. “No, I’m sorry. That … I shouldn’t have said that. I’m just being an idiot right now.” He drained the beverage in his hand – from the smell, it was one of those weak American beers she detested so much – and gestured to the waitress for a refill. “DoMA sent me here to look into those … things you and … Superman snacked around last week.”

“I was not aware you were working for Director Waller,” Diana replied. She smiled at the waitress who delivered Steve’s drink and quickly ordered a white wine. Steve waited until the girl was gone before replying.

“I was not aware you were working for Director Waller,” Diana replied. She smiled at the waitress who delivered Steve’s drink and quickly ordered a white wine. Steve waited until the girl was gone before replying.

““That makes two of us,” he said. “Waller evidently pulled some strings and now, I’m on detached duty with her department.” He narrowed his eyes slightly. “So why are you here?” he asked.

Diana opened her mouth to answer the question – her reason for being in Metropolis was much the same as his; Bruce had asked if she would check something for him and Kal was evidently unavailable – but a sudden series of massive booms echoed through the air. Almost immediately, sirens began howling and the citizens of Metropolis reacted accordingly. Most scrambled out of the streets and sidewalks, scurrying toward the buildings that all bore a distinctive sigil painted upon their doors. Once, after she had assisted him against a foolish idiot who used toys to wreak havoc, Kal had glumly admitted the symbol Metropolis now used to denote the location of emergency shelters was originally the Kryptonian seal for the House of Zod. It had been an ancient and honored House, one noted for loyalty, fidelity, honor, and selflessness. And now, because of the actions of one madman, it would forever be remembered as a symbol of terror and death.

At the moment, though, those thoughts barely crossed her mind as she sprang up from her seat and
hurled herself into the air. Behind her, Steve shouted out her name, but Diana did not look back. Instead, she clashed her two bracers together, triggering the transformational magics within. With a flash, her civilian attire vanished, leaving her in the battle armor she was more comfortable in. Pushing for more acceleration, she cast around for the origin of the explosions.

She found it immediately. Dozens of shimmering tubes hung in the air, and through these portals a vast host of creatures poured forth. Diana recognized the creatures instantly, though these bore wings that held them aloft unlike the ones she and Kal had defeated earlier. The creatures roared and screeched, blasting away indiscriminately with their weapons. At first, their onslaught seemed to be slaughter without purpose, but Diana instinctively recognized that it was not – they were establishing a beachhead, an area under their control to serve as a base.

This would not do.

She struck the first of the creatures in less than a second, her *xiphos* flashing out and severing its weapon arm. Even as it shrieked in sudden agony, she was already striking again, kicking it hard into the chest and sending it spinning into a tight formation of the things. It slammed into its allies with an immense crack of splintering bone and armor, and Diana was among them before they fully realized they were under attack. Her sword dipping and stabbing, her translucent shield sparking against their counter-strikes, she forced them back.

A blur of crimson flashed across the city streets and wherever it went, panicked civilians simply vanished. Barry. It could only be him. Diana smiled tightly as she batted away one of the demon’s fierce blows, ducking underneath a second and bringing her knee up into its jaw. Black blood erupted forth and teeth shattered from the impact.

Her foes temporarily fallen, she cast around for the next group and was unsurprised to see Barry still flickering in and out of sight. A blast of emerald light heralded the Green Lantern and Jordan swept into sight, accompanied by a quartet of glowing aircraft summoned by his magic ring. One of the jets splintered into fragments that almost instantly coalesced into dozens if not hundreds of missiles that promptly rained down upon a grounded formation of the demons with fierce but surprisingly contained explosions. As if that was not awe-inspiring enough, a black-clad shape plunged toward the ground from the disintegrating aircraft and then, with a sudden motion, Bruce’s cape flared out and stiffened. He soared downward.

“Citizens of Earth,” a dark and terrible voice boomed, seemingly coming from everywhere. “I am Darkseid and I claim this world as mine.”

Locating the source of the voice was not difficult. He stood atop a floating war-barge, his arms clasped together at the small of his back. A veritable giant, his face was cruel and sinister, with eyes that burned and skin that looked to have been chiseled from rock. Heavy armor protected him and he studied the destruction with a cold indifference that fired Diana’s blood.

She was airborne and en route toward him almost before he was finished speaking.

Diana arrowed through the formations, weaving around their energy blasts with speed and grace none of them displayed. She was vaguely aware of Jordan blasting away around her – hammers of solid light smashed aside entire companies, clearing her path – and the crimson streak that had to be Barry continued to appear and disappear in disorienting flickers, but her focus remained on the gray-skinned giant. He half-turned at her approach, his eyes narrowing, and, even at this distance, she heard his dark growl.

“Olympian.”
Light flashed from his eyes, crashing into her upraised shield with the sound of thunder. The heat was immense, boiling the very air around her, and only Hephaestus’ gift prevented her skin from bursting into flame. She heard screams – they were from the flying demons closest to her as they combusted – but rolled into mid-air, twisting up and around the war-barge. It should have been enough as the maneuver broke the giant’s line of sight, but the energy blast only seemed to intensify. Under the impossible heat, Hephaestus’ shield splintered and cracked.

And Diana screamed.

Clark could hear everything.

The booms of the extra-dimensional transport tubes, the screams of panicking civilians, the sounds of flesh cooking under the energy weapons, even the announcement of the would-be invader that he had come to conquer, he heard it all. The radio transmissions of the emergency services were loud enough for him to recognize individual voices and the hurried reporting from Cat Grant, the helicopter anchor for WGBS On The Spot News who everyone in Metropolis watched because of the skimpy outfits she wore echoed loudly in his ears.

But above all, he heard Diana scream.

And it enraged him.

He curved down toward Metropolis, pouring on more speed than he’d ever tried for, and the very air around him trembled as he tore through the sky. His cape was gone, lost somewhere over Europe in his hard push for acceleration, but the loss of it never entered his mind as he arrowed toward the thing that called itself Darkseid. Too late, the giant reacted to his approach and started to turn.

The impact was devastating. A shockwave of sheer concussive force exploded outward, shattering windows and other breakables in all directions for hundreds of feet. Raw kinetic energy smashed the floating platform into ground, tearing into a hundred different pieces and sending dozens of the demon things to the ground where they ripped great gouts of concrete free. Darkseid himself cratered in the street, his impact causing the ground throughout Metropolis to tremble. He roared, though if it was in anger or pain Clark couldn’t tell. Eyes burning, the giant sprang up and into the air.

And a giant, glowing green baseball bat came out of nowhere and smashed into him, sending him flashing upward.

“And the crowd goes wild!” Jordan exulted, and Clark could hear the same kind of reaction from observers everywhere, but he blurred forward, throwing himself into the air after the spinning giant. **Contain the incident**, he told himself. This … Darkseid’s current trajectory would carry him into another section of the city that was simply unprepared for it and Clark could not allow that. He hit Darkseid from an oblique angle, stiff-arming him away from the city and toward the open bay.

“And the crowd goes wild!” Jordan exulted, and Clark could hear the same kind of reaction from observers everywhere, but he blurred forward, throwing himself into the air after the spinning giant.

“Kryptonian!” the gray-skinned monster snarled in the half-second before they struck the water and it almost sounded surprised.

At the last instant, Clark tried to alter his own trajectory, to avoid the water, but Darkseid lashed out with a frighteningly fast blow that smashed into Clark’s face with enough force to crush the hull of a battleship. Staggered and off-balance, Clark reeled away and skipped across the surface of Metropolis Bay. Shaking his head, he pushed against gravity and slowed his uncontrolled spin. Rising up, he found the gray-skinned monster standing a half foot above the waves.

“A Kryptonian bearing the sigil of the House of El,” the giant rumbled, his voice like grating stones.
“You are not Jor-El,” he added with a frown, “but you have his bearing.”

“T’m his son,” Clark replied tightly. He floated closer, intentionally slipping sideways as he did. “And this world is off limits to you.”

“How do possess such power?” the giant demanded, his eyes almost instantly shifting heavenward toward the sun. “Ah. Curious. A Kryptonian under a yellow sun.” He gestured with one hand. “Come then, son of Jor-El. Let us see how capable you truly are.”

He found her half-buried under the remnants of a building.

Cursing under his breath, Bruce struggled to shift the large slabs of shattered concrete that pinned Diana to the ground. She was still unconscious, with her golden armor now blackened and smoking, but as far as he could tell, she was still alive. Glancing around at the unmoving and barely recognizable corpses of the things that Darkseid had destroyed in his effort to stop her, Bruce shook his head.

He abandoned the efforts to shift the debris – there had to be several tons here, and he was only human – and leaned back and surveyed the situation. The military had already arrived to augment the Metropolis police department, which was more than a little interesting. He had a very good idea about the response time for most American special forces units and this far exceeded their abilities … unless they, like him, had expected the strike. He frowned. Clearly, at least someone in the government had listened to Clark’s warnings after all. Further investigation would be necessary later, when the situation was contained and the innocents were no longer in danger.

“Flash, this is Batman,” he said into the headset microphone integrated into his cowl. “I need smelling salts from a first aid kit-”

“Here you go,” Allen said. It was unnerving – he was there one second, and the next, he was gone, leaving behind only the trauma bag Bruce recognized as belonging to a paramedic. Shaking his head, he dug through the pack, found what he was looking for, and popped it underneath Diana’s nose.

She woke instantly and with a gasp, shoving aside the tons of broken concrete with barely a second glance or even a hint of strain. Shaking her head, she looked around.

“Hera,” she growled, “that hurt.”

“Are you all right?” Bruce asked as he rose fluidly to his feet, grimacing only slightly at the sight of Diana casually brushing aside even more slabs of masonry that he would not be able to budge without heavy construction equipment. She nodded.

“Yes, I think I am,” she replied with a frown at the darkened nature of her armor. Even her bracers, once the brightest of silver, appeared clouded and murky. Glancing up, she scanned their immediate surroundings and her frown deepened. “Is that thunder or artillery?” she asked.

“Neither,” Bruce replied. “Superman has engaged Darkseid. He’s keeping him contained.”

Scowling, Bruce tapped out a quick command on the integrated wrist computer and winced at the aerial footage of the fight. Somehow, Kent had managed to push the gray-skinned thing to the currently abandoned Stryker’s Island Penitentiary – the two were systematically leveling the old prison facility, but the engagement threatened to spill back into the city proper at any moment.

“We need to aid him!” Diana said sharply. She tensed, clearly on the verge of hurling herself into the air, but Bruce grabbed her arm.
“What we need is a plan,” he said sharply. “Flash, Lantern, Aquaman, rally point alpha. Diana-”

His next words were lost as she grabbed his outstretched arm and carried them both into the sky. Bruce bit back the urge to snarl a curse and pushed back a wild sense of vertigo as they darted toward the spot he’d pre-designated as rally point alpha earlier this week when he’d identified Metropolis as the most likely target for an actual invasion. It was not as if he were unaccustomed to great heights – in Gotham, he probably spent more time hanging between buildings than he did on the ground – but normally, he had more control over the situation.

The headset concealed within his cowl confirmed his earlier suspicions: Diana’s associate – Bruce still wasn’t sure whether the man should be classified as friend, lover, or something else entirely, and it seemed improper to ask – Colonel Trevor, was directing a counter-offensive against the invaders and it sounded like he had more assets at his disposal than Bruce had expected. By the sound of things, they had cordoned off the entire district and were bringing down anything not human with copious amounts of firepower. Good. That made things easier.

“What we need is a plan,” he said the instant they touched down. Lantern and Flash were already there, and Bruce could see Aquaman – what a ridiculous name, he thought – in Metropolis Bay, engaged against a quartet of the invaders that were trying to reinforce their master. “Go in hard and fast,” Bruce instructed. “Hit him and keep hitting him.”

“Diana,” he said the instant they touched down. Lantern and Flash were already there, and Bruce could see Aquaman – what a ridiculous name, he thought – in Metropolis Bay, engaged against a quartet of the invaders that were trying to reinforce their master. “Go in hard and fast,” Bruce instructed. “Hit him and keep hitting him.”

“Kal, I’m coming in from the west,” she murmured as she shot up into the sky.

“Lantern, we need the island contained,” Bruce continued. “Nothing gets in, nothing gets out without our say so.”

“On it.” Jordan streaked up, angling away from Diana’s approach and glowing brightly against the skyline. Silently, Bruce nodded his approval – by drawing so much attention, Lantern would give cover to Diana’s approach … if that was actually Jordan’s intention and he wasn’t just showboating for a change. Bruce pushed the thought aside and focused on the mission once more.

“Continue your evac operations,” he told Flash, “but stand ready to assist at a moment’s notice.” Allen didn’t respond, even with a nod, and simply vanished. The air around where he had stood a heartbeat earlier popped at the sudden displacement, but Bruce ignored it and refocused on the battle. His cowl had built-in magnification, which he quickly triggered just in time to see Diana strike.

“Continue your evac operations,” he told Flash, “but stand ready to assist at a moment’s notice.” Allen didn’t respond, even with a nod, and simply vanished. The air around where he had stood a heartbeat earlier popped at the sudden displacement, but Bruce ignored it and refocused on the battle. His cowl had built-in magnification, which he quickly triggered just in time to see Diana strike.

She came in low and fast, first hugging the water and then, the ground. Kent and this Darkseid were wholly focused on one another, blasting away with their respective eye beams or striking at each other with punches that could shatter steel, but at the last moment, Clark blurred to one side, the action causing his opponent to instinctively shift in defense … which left him wide open to Diana’s attack. She led with the short-bladed sword that Bruce had seen cut through military-grade battle armor like a laser went through warm butter, and the blade flashed upward, clearly intent on taking the creature’s head. Darkseid recoiled in surprise at her unexpected appearance and it was almost enough to prevent Diana’s strike from connecting.

Almost.

Even at this distance, Bruce felt the roar of mingled rage and pain from the gray-skinned giant as the Olympian-tempered blade slice through his flesh and into his left eye. There was a sudden flash – crimson light, brighter than any explosion that Bruce had witnessed, and Diana was suddenly tumbling. She smashed through concrete walls but righted herself almost instantly and threw herself back at her enemy, discarding what looked to be the shattered remnants of her sword. A blue blur flowed forward – Kent – and the two resumed the attack.
A boom echoed overhead and Bruce instinctively huddled deeper in the spot he’d chosen to act as a command and control asset. Glancing up, he glared at the sudden appearance of another of these trans-dimensional tubes, but promptly ignored the things spilling out as the troops under Colonel Trevor’s command unleashed a murderous barrage of fire at them. It took long seconds for him to relocate the fight – he frowned slightly when he realized that Aquaman had joined Clark and Diana; that wasn’t part of the plan – and keeping them in sight was difficult. More of the portals boomed open …

And quite suddenly Bruce saw something he had not noticed before.

There, on Darkseid’s belt, hidden underneath some sort of protective, armored sheath, was a rectangular object that flashed and pulsed, and each time it did so, another of the trans-dimensional tubes opened. Flicker, boom. Flicker, boom. Flicker, boom. Yes, they were definitely linked in some way. Correlation did not imply causation, but right now, they were out of options. At any minute, the fight could spill off the island and into the city…

“Flash,” he said into his comlink. Allen suddenly appeared next to him and Bruce tried very hard not to jump. No wonder Gordon hated it when he did that. “Darkseid has a device on his belt that’s flashing,” he began, reaching for the door breaching explosives secured to his belt. His intent was simple – blow it up and see what happened – but Allen seemed to shimmer slightly and then was suddenly holding the flashing device.

“Huh,” he said as he turned it over in one hand. “It calls itself a Mother Box and I don’t think it likes me very much.” Bruce flinched away from it automatically, halfway expecting it to explode in their faces. When nothing happened, he glanced skyward. No more of the portals were opening. He looked back at Stryker’s but the massive glowing green dome that now encircled the entire island prevented him from locating any of the combatants. They were still going at it, though; the Earth continued to tremble and shake. They were out of time. Hesitantly, he reached for the device.

Comprehension and understanding flooded his awareness at once. In the span of a single second, he saw alien vistas that defied belief, non-human intelligences that were both malign and benevolent, entities that were neither intelligent in the traditional sense nor unthinking by any stretch of the word. He saw vast empires that spanned entire galaxies rise and fall, and wars between hostile species that obliterated entire solar systems. Time ran backwards and forwards, and, in a single picosecond, Bruce Wayne looked upon the face of creation.

He was forever changed.

“All right,” he said an eternity later. Allen was still standing there, looking at him, hand outstretched from where he had offered the device, and from the look in his eyes, Bruce knew that he had experienced the same thing. It didn’t matter. There was still a god to stop and a world to save. “This is the plan.”

From where he floated, high above Stryker’s Island, Hal Jordan could see everything.

Military jets and Army helicopters roared over Metropolis proper, meeting and throwing back the attackers with a fierceness that indicated long preparation and special training. There were casualties, of course, but that couldn’t be prevented, not in an actual pitched battle like this with an enemy wholly intent on victory, but the sheer aggressiveness of the defenders caught the extra-dimensional aliens by surprise. As former military himself, he couldn’t help but to be impressed.

Still, the cynic in him couldn’t help but to wonder how much of this response had originally been meant for Superman.
The muscles in his right arm were beginning to tremble with the effort necessary to maintain the containment field under the force of the blows happening within. For all of his joking and good-natured mocking of the three humans within – well … the three non-gray stone giants from a different dimension since Superman was Kryptonian, Aquafresh was a fish-man who claimed to be from Atlantis, and Diana was a super-model with an emphasis on super from an island full of immortal Greek legends; he wasn’t sure if any of the three really classified as human, even if they were fighting to protect the planet – he had to admit, they hit hard. The shockwaves alone from the blows they dished out smashed his barrier like runaway trains that inexplicably kept crashing. Once, barely a month after he’d gotten the ring, he’d used it to contain the explosion from a hijacked cruise missile, but that had been nothing compared to this.

And that didn’t even include the gray giant punk who hit even harder.

Just as bad were the dozens of the invaders who kept throwing themselves at the emerald barrier or discharged those high intensity plasma beams at it in an attempt to cut through. A smaller number of them launched attacks at Hal himself, surging up with those anti-grav wings, and he had to split his concentration ever so slightly to swat them out of the sky. He’d even reached an unspoken arrangement with one of the Army attack helicopters and redirected hostiles directly into their line of fire; that particular Apache even returned the favor once or twice by dropping a couple of the invaders trying to sneak up on Hal when he was distracted by other attempts to breach the shield, or by the brawl between the four living gods he currently had sealed up on the island, or by the overpowering urge to just go home and take a nap.

Thanks to the ring, he maintained perfect awareness of what was happening within the giant bottle – Supes was nearly a constant blur of motion, his fists flashing forward so quickly it was impossible for Hal to see when one punch ended and the next began, but each one of them rattled the ground when they struck; at the same time, Aquafresh and the Queen of Hotness alternated their own attacks, ducking and weaving and lashing out with their trident and lasso respectively – but Stone Guy just refused to go down. Black blood leaked out of the ruin of his left eye, smoking and hissing as it fell to the dirt, but he dished out as much as he took. His counterblows rocked Supes back, the impacts sounding like thunder, and striking with speed unexpected for someone his size, he caught hold of Aquafresh’s trident with one hand before hitting him with a brutal left cross. The blond man was sent spinning away, barely conscious.

Without conscious thought, Hal reacted. Tendrils of solid green light darted forward from the lip of the emerald barrier and enveloped the staggered Aquaman, abruptly arresting his fall and redirecting him toward the bay. Hal released the man as soon as he felt him start to revive under the water and refocused on maintaining the containment field. He didn’t know how much he had left, not when these damned powerhouses kept trying to knock the damned planet out of orbit.

“Lantern,” the Bat’s voice echoed in his ear, “stand ready to let Flash through.”

“Copy,” Hal hissed through clenched teeth. Another squadron of the stupid demon things were attacking the barrier, this time from the north.

“Power levels at thirty percent capacity, Ring-bearer Jordan,” a disembodied voice informed him, though he knew only he could hear it.

“Can you take out the guys on the north side when you approach, Flash?” Hal asked. He was suddenly aware of Supes and Wondy tag-teaming Red-Eyes … and the bastard was holding his own.

“Make a hole … now.” Barry’s voice was, as usual, calm, laconic, almost bored-sounding, but Hal had worked a few cases with him and obeyed without giving it much thought. A man-sized hole
appeared in the barrier – on the north-side, of course – and Hal let it remain for a fast count of exactly one before sealing it back up. The ring updated him instantly – all seven of the demon things on the north side were down, their anti-grav backpacks inexplicably missing, and a biological entity may or may not have passed through the hole at a prodigious rate of speed. Hal grinned. Fastest man alive, indeed.

“Must suck for your girlfriend, though,” he murmured, too softly for anyone else to hear.

“Lantern, stand by to reduce containment to Superman and Wonder Woman only.” The Bat still sounded as imperious as ever. If nothing else, the man had balls for a dude who dressed up like a flying mouse. “Now!”

Hal obeyed instantly – his barrier splintered and shrunk, suddenly enveloping Supes and Wonder Babe, much to their surprise and Red-Eyes’. A heartbeat later, something on the giant’s belt suddenly exploded – it wasn’t a small detonation either, but rather something significant enough to actually stagger the monster. His hand darted to where the explosion had originated…

And in that instant, with a titanic boom, another of the trans-dimensional portals opened up right behind him.

Wind wailed with hurricane force, sucking the shattered remnants of the prison toward the vortex. Hal cried out in surprise at the unexpected tug of gravity trying to drag Supes and Wondy into the gaping hole. He strained against it – this was worse than that stupid black hole test Kilowog had put him through. He felt rather than saw Superman begin taking slow, ponderous steps toward where the princess had already driven her hands into the ground. Hal groaned with relief as he merged their respective bubbles but still … still … the pull…

Darkseid stood firm, unmoving, unyielding … unimpressed.

“All units, this is Batman.” Hal was only barely aware of the voice across his headset as he strained to pull away from the vortex. “Orient on Stryker’s Island and fire. Broken Arrow.”

“This is Sentinel Six Actual.” Now that voice, Jordan knew well … but what the hell was Zipper doing in Metropolis? “Confirm Broken Arrow. Bring the rain, boys and girls.”

The sky over Metropolis lit up and Hal was suddenly aware of hundreds of missiles screaming toward him. His groan of effort turned into a shout as the ordinance streaked by him, their own acceleration only intensified a hundred-fold by the implacable tug from the swirling hold in the sky. The stone giant was suddenly wreathed in dozens of explosions, some small, some not, but all slamming into him with a cumulative effect. He staggered back an unexpected step…

Superman hit him a heartbeat later.

Hal wasn’t sure when the Kryptonian had battered through the protective globe, but he pounced, eyes flashing and burning. With punches that echoed so loudly they could be heard across the state, Supes pushed the battered, one-eyed giant back to the very lip of the event horizon. Hal’s eyes darted down to the princess – as if sensing his look, she glanced up to him and nodded, one hand still anchoring her to the ground against the wail of wind – and Jordan drew in a deep breath.

And then, he hit Darkseid with absolutely everything the ring had.

There was no subtlety to it, no cute manipulation of the light to form a battering ram or his favorite projection, a F-22 being piloted by dozens of mini velociraptors. This time, it was nothing more than a column of solid light and power, driven by his indomitable will and enhanced by his barely
contained rage. It smashed into the giant at exactly the same instant Superman’s latest punch impacted and the twin blows struck with more kinetic energy than every single nuclear weapon on the planet. Caught unprepared by the dual attacks, Darkseid tumbled back through the vortex, vanishing at once. Superman half-turned, suddenly seeming to slump with exhaustion. He started to fall forward…

But a golden lariat, hurled by the most beautiful woman Hal had ever met, wrapped around the Kryptonian’s chest and pulled him back from the brink.

Mere seconds later, the extra-dimensional portal sealed shut with another earth-shuddering boom. It was over. The Battle of Metropolis—the Second Battle of Metropolis, Hal corrected himself—was over.

It took nearly a month for the fear of a second invasion by Darkseid to die down.

In the interim, the threat level for all major powers was elevated to their highest readiness point, and, to his surprise, Clark found himself summoned to the United Nations for a debriefing about what his ‘Justice League’ was going to do to prevent another incursion. The name was something of a surprise—he would later discover that Lois had coined it in her earliest reports about how the G20 Summit responded to the televised attack on Metropolis—but he liked it well enough to keep it. Naturally, there was a small group of vocal opponents of the League, though they transcended political leanings. Those on the far right were convinced the League was the first step toward forcing a single world government, while those on the equally extreme left clamored for that very thing and then accused them of being inhuman tyrants and overlords who did not care enough for humanity when they didn’t. Clark didn’t have any proof, but he was certain that Luthor was bankrolling both sides of the extremist argument.

Diana was invaluable during the UN meetings thanks to her upbringing, and Aquaman—Arthur—was equally competent, so Clark let the two of them handle the delicate negotiations necessary to give the League something resembling official recognition. Certain nations complained—the more conservative Islamic countries refused to vote in favor of the resolution because Diana did not dress in a manner they found appropriate, and Russia balked at the last minute for reasons of statecraft that Clark didn’t actually understand—but in the end, the League was officially recognized as equivalent to a General Assembly observer akin to the Red Cross.

“Useless,” Bruce had muttered later, even though Clark thought it was a positive step forward. Diana agreed with him—while at the UN, she’d started the ball rolling to have Themyscira recognized in the same way—but Wayne remained unmoved. “The UN is a toothless waste of time,” he’d said sharply. “Expect them to try and suck us into their bureaucratic black hole.” He’d smiled then, that creepy grin that never looked quite right on his face. “We should have gone to the G20 instead.”

“I think we’re on the right track,” Clark mentioned to Diana later. They were floating above Metropolis, having just departed a dinner thrown in the League’s honor by the mayor. Clark had nearly refused the invitation—he was afraid it was a politician’s gambit to get headlines for a hotly contested upcoming election—but Diana had accepted. None of the others were able to attend—Bruce snorted in disgust, Barry claimed a previous engagement, Arthur said he had plans with someone named Mera, and Hal was off-world at the moment—and his and Diana’s attendance together would probably set off another round of tabloid rumors, but the dinner actually turned out to be useful. Both New York senators were present, along with the governor and only one of the Representatives had to cancel, and all of them seemed at eager to work with the League in some fashion. Finally, Clark truly felt like he was living up to his father’s—both of them—dream. Finally, he was becoming the symbol of hope.
“Yes,” Diana said. “I think we are.”

And then, naturally, Hal had to return from Oa with the information he’d learned about Darkseid from the Guardians, information they had been loath to provide. There was no way this was over. Not yet.

Darkseid would be back.
WayneTech Announces New Employment Initiative

Published August 2, 2016 / Vicky Vale

GOTHAM CITY, IL. – WayneTech has announced plans to help at least 20,000 people within the greater Gotham area under the age of 30 find employment over the next three years.

This Youth Employment Initiative will offer jobs and create thousands of apprentice positions and traineeships by 2019.

As part of the new initiative, further details of which will be announced in September, WayneTech will also encourage its other U.S. subsidiaries to offer a job, apprenticeship or traineeship to young people.

Click for more from Gotham Post Online

IT TOOK DIANA NEARLY A DAY TO TRACK HIM DOWN.

Kal had just returned from a week-long trip to Oa with Hal Jordan, but rather than throwing himself back into the line of fire and ensuring the entire world knew that their ‘Superman’ was back on the job like he had the previous three times he’d departed Earth briefly, he’d vanished, seemingly dropping off the very face of the planet, which with him was something entirely possible. Needing his input on a number of League matters, not the least of which being whether they should go forward with the planned team expansion, Diana started at the usual places – his apartment in Metropolis, Lois Lane’s apartment, Bruce’s cave, the Kent farm which was oddly empty, and even the ever-expanding Fortress – but he wasn’t at any of them, which forced her to get more creative. Relying on her excellent memory, she then visited the places he’d mentioned loving to go to once he learned to fly: the Grand Canyon in Arizona, the Great Pyramids in Egypt, the city of Petra in Jordan, and then finally, the Great Wall of China. It did not occur to her until China that she could simply ping his communicator.

By the time she finally did find him, sitting on a deserted beach on a tiny island in the South Pacific, the day was mostly spent and her temper, ever her bane, was short. The raw beauty of the location quickly cooled her anger, though, and she dropped down to the sand to take a seat alongside him without a word. Kal barely reacted to her presence beyond reaching into the cooler at his side, extracting a bottle and passing it to her. She sipped – it was that glorious beer Hal always brought back to Earth from some distant planet she didn’t know the name of – and watched the sun sink below the horizon.

All in all, this was a more than satisfying way to end the day.

It was always a matter of some curiosity to her how comfortable silence could be with Kal. They could sit and relax for hours without speaking a word … though the madness of the world so rarely gave them the opportunity. Steve had never learned this trick and always had to talk when they were alone, even when Diana simply wished to enjoy the silence, which was yet another probable reason their relationship had not worked. He did not need validation or ego stroking as she feared, but simply could not tolerate the quiet, whereas she longed for it at times and Kal seemed to be the same. Idly, Diana wondered if her Kryptonian friend sought silence because he so rarely experienced it thanks to his enhanced senses. She glanced at him, wondering how to phrase such a question, but
froze at the expression on his face. Her heart faltered briefly – what had happened? What was wrong?

“Mom has cancer,” Kal said softly in response to her unspoken question. Diana inhaled sharply. “The doctors give her six months to a year,” he continued, still staring at the rapidly darkening sky. His expression darkened. “She’s known about it for a while now …”

“I’m so sorry, Kal,” Diana murmured. She hesitated, unsure what to do or how to act. What was appropriate between male and female friends who were not romantically involved? She decided to go with her instincts and wrapped her arms around him tightly. Had he been human, she would have broken bones or pulped internal organs, but to Kal, it was just a warm hug. From the shuddering inhalation she felt him take, it was exactly what he needed.

“The worst part is,” he said in a voice that was far too calm, “I’ve been so damned wrapped up in my own life, in between running around saving the planet from insane monsters like Luthor that I didn’t even think to check in on my own mother.” Anger tinged his voice then. “What kind of crappy son does that make me?” He kept talking, the words rolling out of his mouth before she could begin to respond. “And do you know what she told me? Why she didn’t tell me that she was sick? Because she didn’t want me to worry.” The muscles in his shoulders were trembling and, with exaggerated caution, he set aside his own bottle. “I have all of these amazing abilities and I can’t even save my mother.”

“There are treatments,” Diana began, her thoughts already turning to Epione. Had anyone ever considered attempting to cure it with magic? On Themyscira, it was unheard of for a sister to pass because of illness or disease, but she did not know if there had been any research in that field in the centuries since the Gods gave them their paradise.

“I know,” Kal said. “Mom said her doctor has already looked into some of them – most are still experimental and so expensive…”

“Have you spoken to Bruce?” Diana leaned back and studied her friend. The tension in his body was even more evident in his expression – he looked angry, frustrated, tired, and confused, but most of all, he looked lost. She had seen him giddy and goofy, furious and determined, but always, always, he’d seemed sure of his place in this world. Oh, he’d claimed to have spent nearly two decades walking the Earth just trying to find the answers to his questions, but she had never seen that side of him before. Seeing this vulnerability in him unnerved her.

“I haven’t spoken to anyone,” he replied. “Mom threw me out after she told me – she said she was going to see her sister but I don’t know if that’s true or she was just tired of me freaking out – so I flew around for a while, then came here.” His expression crumpled. “God … I just remembered … the excuse I gave to Perry for the Oa trip? I told him my mom was sick.” Kal closed his eyes then, visibly struggling for control, and Diana hugged him even tighter. They sat there in silence for a long time – she didn’t hear him cry or break down as she nearly expected but he did draw in a single, ragged breath – and he finally straightened, once more composed and poised. Only his eyes revealed the pain and fear he now internalized. “Thank you, Diana,” he said, his smile tight but genuine.

“Of course,” she replied as she extricated herself from their awkward position. They rose at the same time.

“You were looking for me, I guess?” Kal asked. Diana nodded.

“I was, but it is of little importance next to this.” She pursed her lips. “I will consult with Epione,” she added a moment later. “If there is a cure for this disease found on Themyscira, she will know of it.” A sudden flash of self-recrimination flooded through her then – how much other suffering in the
world could be eased by treatments known to the Amazons? As a princess, raised to rule and schooled in the arts of war, it had not even occurred to her until now to inquire. If Themyscira could ease those pains, then would not that be a major step forward in her ridiculous mission to wage peace? She glanced away, suddenly unable to meet Kal’s eyes, even though his attention was focused on the dark sky.

“Thank you,” he said simply. “Good night, Diana,” Kal whispered before floating slowly into the sky. He looked strange, wearing his Kryptonian garments with the portable cooler in one hand, and at any other time, she might have jested with him over it. Not now, with his mother facing a bitter future and he heartsick over the thought of losing her.

Her own thoughts heavy, Diana took to the skies as well, summoning Hephaestus’ gift to protect her as she accelerated through the night.

Barely a week after his return to Earth, Clark found himself facing the UN Security Council once again.

This time, though, there was no triumphant meeting with smiling and relieved ambassadors in the wake of a repulsed invasion, but rather, a cluster of small-minded, petty bureaucrats so focused on their own advancement that they made him sick. Against Bruce’s recommendations, Clark had informed the UN about his intent to deploy a Kryptonian mobile research platform in orbit over Earth which he intended to be used by the Justice League. Discovered by the Green Lantern Corps, the facility was the primary reason he’d accompanied Hal to Oa.

And while he was there, he’d discovered the Guardians to be just as small-minded and as petty as the UN, who were absolutely convinced that he was one bad day away from trying to conquer the entire damned galaxy. It didn’t matter the evidence Hal brought to the contrary, or the years of hard work Clark had put in trying to prove to his adopted homeworld that he wasn’t a villain in the making. The Guardians had an opinion of him and refused to acknowledge any facts that ran contrary to that opinion.

Evidently, bureaucrats were the same whatever species they might be.

Here, though, the annoying busybodies he had to deal with were less worried that he was going to deploy some mysterious Kryptonian super-weapon than they were that they would not be able to use such weapons themselves. Even the United States, the so-called bastion of freedom and democracy, seemed to be salivating at the thought of Kryptonian-designed tools of war, which only intensified Clark’s barely hidden anger. With his mother’s sickness constantly preying on his mind and the troubles he and Lois were experiencing, he just wasn’t in the mood for these sorts of games.

“How can you not know what is in this station’s database?” the Russian ambassador demanded yet again. This was the fourth time Clark had been asked some variation of this question and he knew his frustration was stamped upon his face from the way several of the delegates shifted in their seats.

“If I gave you a computer with the human genome completely mapped out,” Clark began tightly, “but all of the notes were in English, could you read them, Ambassador Brusilov?” The whipcord thin ambassador sneered.

“If I gave you a computer with the human genome completely mapped out,” Clark began tightly, “but all of the notes were in English, could you read them, Ambassador Brusilov?” The whipcord thin ambassador sneered.

“Neither am I,” Clark retorted before the other man could continue. “And as I grew up on Earth,” he continued, “my Kryptonian is not especially great.” From their expressions, none of the ambassadors appeared to get it. “Think of it this way,” Clark said. “Ask a man from Boston with an especially
pronounced accent to speak to an Irishman.”

“Is alcohol involved?” the British delegate asked wryly. Laughter echoed in the Council chamber and Clark offered a slight smile.

“What conditions do we have that this is not a weapons platform?” the Chinese ambassador asked through his translator. Clark sighed.

“As I have explained,” he said patiently, “this was a mobile, deep-space, research facility. There are no weapons on it nor does the League intend to install any.” He continued before they could ask the question a tenth time. “I have already stated an intent to open parts of the platform up to the citizens of Earth once I am satisfied that everything is in working order and we won’t experience sudden decompression or loss of atmosphere.” The urge to begin drumming his fingers upon the table nearly overtook him, but he thrust it aside. “The principal goal of this facility is to provide early warning for any additional non-terrestrial incursion attempts.” He nodded toward the United States delegate. “I believe the Hubble has snapped images of at least two such attempts that were circumvented by the Green Lantern assigned to this sector.”

“Three, actually,” the American ambassador said grudgingly. She glanced quickly across the table to the British delegate – to someone with his enhanced senses, it was obvious to Clark that the two were romantically involved in some fashion. The cynical part of him, the part that had grown to distrust all persons in power, wondered if the two were married and cheating on their respective spouses.

“So the intent, as I understand it,” the British ambassador began, tapping his pen against the table, “you want to use this facility as a sort of … watchtower to enhance the defense of the Earth?”

“That’s exactly the idea, sir,” Clark said quickly. “The Green Lanterns have identified no less than seven hostile civilizations within striking distance to Earth,” he said. As expected, the Security Council and the observers shifted around in concern. “Some of these civilizations – the Khunds, for example – have a well-deserved reputation for barbarism and cruelty.” He paused for effect. “Two of the aborted invasions of Earth have been led by Khunds and we have every reason to expect they will try again.”

“Why?” The French ambassador looked more troubled than the others, but then, she was born in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and had grown up in the ruins of Europe, which meant she likely understood such threats better than the relative youngsters sitting alongside her.

“What do all conquerors want?” Clark let his eyes slide to the other Council members. “They want more.” Once again, he paused for a long moment. “The signal upload by the Brain InterActive Construct three years ago was apparently an invitation to known despots and tyrants throughout the galaxy to come here and conquer.” He frowned. “A Kryptonian caused this trouble when he reactivated the Construct,” he said slowly, “and a Kryptonian intends to see it undone.” Several of the delegates nodded their approval of this, but to Clark, it was one of the core lessons his dad had taught him: you clean up after yourself. If Zod’s people hadn’t reactivated Brainiac, this wouldn’t even be a problem, but they had and there was no point in crying over something that already happened. “In addition to this first response and extra-solar observational capability,” Clark continued, “the League is already in negotiations with certain non-governmental organizations and companies to lease space aboard this … watchtower for additional research projects.” Watchtower. He liked the name – it brought to mind an image of stability and defense, so Clark made a mental note to encourage the rest of the League to start using it as well.

Dear God, he reflected with an internal smile. I’ve become a politician.
After that, the meeting threatened to deteriorate once more into pointless squabbling – the more belligerent Council members wanted even more concessions and access to the Watchtower which he wasn’t inclined to provide – but the League communicator Clark wore on his wrist underneath his left sleeve buzzed loudly enough to startle the Council members. Offering them a lopsided smile that probably didn’t touch his eyes, he lifted his arm up to his ear.

“I need you in Gotham as soon as possible,” Bruce stated. His voice was too low for any of the humans present to hear, but they clearly understood when Clark stood.

“I’m sorry, but there is a situation I must see to,” he said calmly. He did not quite blur to the door, but he certainly moved faster than was entirely necessary. No one tried to stop him as he made his way to the nearest exit, which was, as usual, surrounded by reporters and photographers. The cameras began clicking and flashing immediately, and each of the journalists shouted over one another.

Clark heard them all.

He rocketed up into the sky without deigning to answer a single question, but the foolish queries by the paparazzi pursued him. The tabloids were still buzzing over the abrupt end of Diana’s relationship with Colonel Trevor, but the intimations they made about the cause – that the colonel wasn’t ‘super’ enough for her or because he had discovered she was involved in a ‘super’-affair – absolutely disgusted him. He had no misconceptions about certain parts of his profession, but that didn’t stop him from wanting to fry their cameras with his heat vision or maybe tossing their tape recorders into the sun.

Even worse, though, was how weird Lois had become right around when Diana’s relationship fell apart. She was quiet a lot of the time, or watched him when she thought he wasn’t looking, but the strangest moments were when he played with her sister Lucy’s baby girl. There was a weird look in her eye that, at first, he’d thought was a subtle hint she was feeling maternal, though, from the sound of her heartbeat, it almost seemed more like she was afraid of something. He hoped to God that it wasn’t him. Was she afraid he was going to hurt her niece? Or was it something else? Clark grimaced – for all of his abilities, he still didn’t understand a thing about women.

Thirty miles out of Gotham, he winced at a sudden pulse of sound in a frequency far too high for humans to hear. It was too focused to be an accident and Clark angled sharply toward its origin, dropping down to hug the ground so as to avoid notice. He slowed to a stop just to the left of Bruce’s boat and crossed his arms.

“The sun is out,” he said calmly, “and you’re still in the cowl?”

“Long night,” Bruce grumbled. He scowled. “I need your help.” Clark followed the direction of his gesture and frowned.

“Let me get this straight,” he said slowly. “You pulled me out of a meeting with the United Nations Security Council just so I could move a giant penny to your underground trophy room?”

“Yes.” Bruce was silent for a moment. “Is that a problem?”

Clark laughed.

Once the giant penny was secured in the Cave, Bruce turned his attention to other issues.

Exhaustion rode his shoulders more than normal, though that was almost always the case when he had to deal with Harvey – the guilt twisted and snarled in his gut once more, even though he knew it
wasn’t really his fault – but he pushed it aside and focused his attention on Clark. It was still odd seeing Kent in the new outfit – according to what Clark told him, it was an expedition hard-suit intended for extended operations in hostile environments; it could generate an air pocket solar visor around his head so he could breathe and communicate with others while in vacuum virtually identical to the ones Zod and his cohorts utilized when they ran amok, and as Bruce had seen with his own eyes, the suit could even extend over Clark’s fingers to provide a perfectly sealed system. Discovered on the Kryptonian research vessel currently in orbit around Io, Clark had somehow convinced the onboard A.I. to key it specifically to his genetic code so no one else could use it.

Bruce wanted one so badly it hurt.

Oh, he didn’t actually say so, and he knew Clark could see his poorly hidden envy. In their continuing game of friendly one-upmanship, Kent intentionally wore the suit every time they interacted, almost daring him to ask about it. Before his mother’s illness came to light, Clark would even smirk and assume a heroic stance when they talked, with fists on his waist and his posture erect to emphasize the pseudo-armor. Had it not been so irksome, it might have even been amusing.

Bruce had his pride, though, so rather than actually inquire about the suit, he had instead discreetly begun redesigning his suit to emulate certain of the functions he saw in the Kryptonian outfit. Human technology wasn’t quite capable of replicating all of it (or even most of it), but if Bruce had his way, he’d drag WayneTech kicking and screaming into the future. And he always got his way. Always.

Except … Selina had left. She’d left and might not be coming back. He hadn’t gotten his way then, had he?

“These are for you,” Bruce said as he pushed a glossy, embossed folder into Clark’s hands. “Congratulations,” he added. “You now have an excellent health insurance program … one that just happens to also cover your mother, regardless of any pre-existing conditions.” Clark swallowed.

“Thank you,” he said softly. Bruce shrugged.

“This isn’t a guarantee,” he pointed out. “Even with these experimental treatments, there’s only a fifteen to twenty percent chance of remission for someone in her situation.” Bruce grimaced – he sounded like he didn’t give a damn and Clark deserved better. “I’m still looking into alternate courses of treatment,” he started, but Clark waved him off.

“You’ve done more than I could have asked for,” he said. “There’s no way I could have afforded something like this, not on my Planet salary.” Exhaling deeply, his shoulders slumped and he rubbed his temples. “I’m hoping the Watchtower database will give me more,” he added. Bruce frowned.

“Watchtower?” Clark smiled.

“Something the British ambassador said in reference to the station. I liked it.” He shrugged. “I figured it was better than calling it the Justice League Space Clubhouse.” Bruce’s lip twitched.

“According to the Weekly World News,” he remarked slyly, “we should call it Superman’s Space Harem.” He snickered at the black expression that flashed across Clark’s face. For months, that particular tabloid had been clamoring about what they claimed to be the ‘real’ reason for the expansion of the League – the addition of Hawkwoman and Black Canary promptly led to an explosion of ridiculous tales about so-called Kryptonian orgies and other unfounded sexcapades that infuriated Clark in a way few other things did. The women all linked to Superman in these stories – Diana, Dinah, Shayera – seemed to find it alternately amusing or just something to be ignored, but Kent? He legitimately wanted to burn the tabloid to the ground.
“The database aboard the Watchtower is more intact than the one I have at the Fortress,” Clark said with a sour look on his face, “so I’m hoping I might be able to find something … anything that could point the way to a breakthrough.” He exhaled bitterly. “Not sure how much luck I’ll have, given how different humans and Kryptonians are biologically. I spent nearly two hours just trying to get the A.I. at the Fortress to understand what I was looking for in the first place.” Bruce grunted.

“How is your mother?” he asked after a moment. Clark looked away.

“She’s handling this better than I am,” he muttered. “I’ve never seen someone so zen about this sort of thing.” Clark balled up his fists. “All I want to do is punch someone or something … but God, that won’t accomplish a damned thing.”

“Diana hasn’t had any luck?”

“No.” Clark rubbed his temples. “Amazons might die in battle or in an accident, but not of sickness so that’s led their medical studies down a different path.” He scowled. “She’s afraid to release a lot of their techniques to the public because they’re almost solely in the realm of combat medicine and God only knows the morons in charge don’t need further encouragement to start shooting at each other again.”

“Still,” Bruce said softly, “it might be worth reviewing for accident victims. New emergency room procedures, that sort of thing.” He made a mental note to have Lucius check with the Wayne Foundation – they could open official negotiations with the Themysciran Embassy to consult on possible new trauma care. He glanced up and saw Clark’s eyes swim out of focus – he was using his enhanced hearing to eavesdrop on something … although, once again, Bruce had to wonder if it actually was super hearing or if it was some form of extra-sensory perception that Kent’s brain translated as noises he could hear. Sound could only travel so far in atmosphere, but somehow, Clark could still hear things, even if the distance was sufficiently great for the molecular vibration to dissipate. He shook his head – Clark could fly and bench press mountains, not to mention shoot lasers from his eyes yet the thing that Bruce constantly focused on was his hearing?

“I need to go,” Clark said a moment later. “There’s a train crash in southern Canada that could use my help.” He was gone a moment later, blurring toward the nearest tunnel exiting the cave. Bruce blinked – could he actually have heard something that far away? Or … maybe it was something else entirely, something he was overlooking in his overestimation on Clark’s abilities. He flipped on one of the televisions secured against the far wall and shook his head at the obvious answer: CNN and Fox were both showing aerial coverage of a derailed train.

With a sigh, Bruce turned it off. There wasn’t anything to do. And he needed to sleep.

The Watchtower was officially brought online two months later.

To assuage the concerns of the UN Security Council, Clark initially had Hal secure the Kryptonian space platform in orbit over Mars rather than Earth. This made transit to the station difficult for anyone but him and Jordan, though this was probably for the best since Clark hadn’t fully vetted the entire facility. Three weeks after parking it over Mars, Hal relocated it to a stable, geosynchronous orbit over Earth.

From that point, Clark spent all of his free time in the newly christened Watchtower, either interfacing with the artificial intelligence aboard or sitting in a flash learning chair that imprinted decades of Kryptonian knowledge and science directly onto his brain, all in the desperate race against time to save his mother. Bruce had offered to use the flash training as well, but even a cursory amount of research quickly revealed that the process would not work on the brain of a homo sapiens.
So Clark thanked him for the offer, but refused to risk frying his friend’s brain.

He became almost a virtual hermit, a stranger to his friends and co-workers, and spent as little time in the suit as necessary. When he did don the cape, such as when the latest group of would-be extra-planetary invaders showed up led by a particularly annoying tyrant calling himself Despero, Clark was finally able to vent his frustration and fear. Their battle he quickly took into orbit and then the moon where he unloaded on Despero with a ferocity that frightened even him. Later, the media would hail him for acting so decisively to keep civilians safe, but the truth of the matter was that Clark hadn’t even thought about that. He’d just seen a problem he could actually solve by punching it and instinct had taken over. Civilian safety never even occurred to him.

Once more horrified at his lack of forethought, he threw himself back into the flash learning. By the end of month four, he’d obtained the equivalent of a medical doctorate … but it was utterly useless. Everything the A.I. could teach him was centered on Kryptonian physiology, not human. What difference did it make if he knew how to cure dozens of diseases with the application of solar power if that wouldn’t do more than give his mother a sunburn? He came very close to tearing apart the Watchtower in anger then, but choked it back.

“Clark, you need to stop this,” his mother told him when he visited shortly thereafter. She was frail-looking now, so different from the vibrant, strong woman he thought of as Martha Kent. Her loss of hair was hidden underneath a wig, but there was no way to look at her and not realize she was sick. “The world is too important for you to concentrate entirely on me.”

“I don’t care about the world,” he replied. “I care about you.” She’d laughed then, and told him he was being silly before asking him again to tell her about visiting Oa. Her eyes danced at his descriptions – if Hal had not been off-world at the moment, he would have summoned the Lantern to Smallville and demanded the man use his ring to show her everything.

The following day, he took her into space.

She was wearing a Kryptonian enviro-suit salvaged from the Watchtower, but the raw joy in her face as they crested the planet and watched the sun rise was almost too much for him. Clark let her drift and experience the joys of zero-gee, and then flew her to the Watchtower so he could show it to her as well. One of the servitor robots was waiting for them at the airlock and Martha stared at it with wonder.

“Greetings, Kal-El,” the servitor said in its pleasant, androgynous voice. “I am detecting an unauthorized human.” Clark cocked his head, the motion triggering the semi-transparent solar visor to retract into his hard-suit.

“This is my mother, Kelex,” he said.

“Re-classifying, sir.” The servitor drifted slightly closer. “Greetings, Martha Kent,” it said. “I am Kelex, servitor of the House of El. I am at your disposal.” Martha glanced up at Clark, then jerked in slight surprise as her own helmet retracted and disappeared into the gear she wore.

“He’s really helpful,” Clark said. “Evidently, the Kelex personality matrix is permanently assigned to the House of El.” He shook his head. “I knew Kryptonian social culture was rigid, but I didn’t know how rigid until this little guy came online. Would you believe that every single male member of my House had this same personality in their robots?”

“That is not entirely accurate, sir,” Kelex announced. “I am merely a copy of the core Kelex personality matrix housed in the central database and will modify my behavior according to your responses. Over time, this personality may shift to better serve you.”
“This is amazing, Clark,” Martha said.

“It gets better.” He stepped closer to her and wrapped one arm around her. “I can show you
Krypton.” Martha’s breath caught. “Would you like to see it, Mom?” he asked with a smile. She
nodded and Clark lifted them both into the air. Kelex floated behind them as he flew toward the
holo-imager, keeping his speed slow not just for Martha’s sake but also so she could take everything
in. It was not a long trip, but he extended it as much as possible. “I just discovered that this capability
was even available,” he said. “It’s like …”

“A holo-deck?” she asked. At his look, she smiled. “We knew you weren’t from Earth, Clark, so
your dad and I kind of became science fiction fans.” She chuckled. “Oh, you should have heard him
argue with the television whenever Star Trek came on. Every time they did something stupid, he’d
throw a fit and call them idiots.” Her smile brightened. “And then, he’d get embarrassed as hell the
minute he realized I was laughing at him.” She turned to look at him, her eyes bright. “When you
started developing your powers, we sort of tuned out of the shows. Their aliens were just humans
with bumpy foreheads or strange ears who couldn’t do a third of the things you could … so it just
seemed silly to try and figure out some deep message from a made up show about imaginary aliens.”

“Especially when the real alien made things so difficult for you?” Clark smiled to hide his own self-
doubt, but Martha clearly saw through it.

“Stop that,” she ordered. “You and Jonathan butted heads so often ‘cause you were more alike than
either of you realized. He was so scared that the government was going to come and take you away
from us … and then you started developing your powers … I wanted to take you out of school and
teach you at home, but Jon was afraid you’d never learn how to deal with other people if we did.”
Clark said nothing – he didn’t know what to say – and drifted slowly to the deck. The holo-imager
was offline at the moment, so there was nothing immediately obvious differentiating this section of
the Watchtower from any other. It was bowl-shaped, with thick walls and easily sealed hatches. He
was still trying to figure out how to turn this into a combat training room; right now, nothing aboard
was strong enough to withstand some of the blows he or Diana could dish out.

“Ready?” he asked. Martha nodded. “Kelex, bring Kandor online though keep atmospheric levels set
to Earth-norm.”

“Compliance, sir.”

Around them, the walls of the Watchtower seemed to fall away and were suddenly replaced by a
Kryptonian city. Citizens strode by them, wearing their curious-looking clothes and carrying on
conversations in what was effectively a dead language. Massive buildings climbed up into the distant
sky and the red sun glittered overhead. Great ships lumbered through the air, casting dark shadows
across the streets. Martha gasped and turned slowly, her eyes wide and clearly intent on seeing
everything.

“This is amazing,” she said. Clark smiled as he watched her. Damn, but it was good to see her happy
again.

Naturally, the alarm chose that moment to sound.

“Multiple Khundian signatures detected at three two seven by two zero eight by eight four,” Kelex
announced. “Distance: nineteen light-minutes.”

“Sonova-” Clark inhaled and looked at his mother. She smiled.

“Go,” she said. “I’m okay here.” Clark grimaced, then quickly nodded. He blurred away, flashing
toward the airlock. His solar visor deployed the instant the hard-suit detected the atmosphere change and he flexed his fingers as the protective gloves formed around them. The pressure change was noticeable to him as the external airlock hatch cycled opened and Clark pushed off, accelerating rapidly through the hard vacuum.

A flash of green light caused him to frown – Hal was supposed to be offworld, handling some issue with someone or something called Sapphire; from the embarrassed way Jordan promptly changed the subject whenever asked about specifics, chances were good that Sapphire was not only a woman, but also one of Hal’s ex-girlfriends – and as he drew closer, Clark was surprised to realize it was a different human wielding the ring. The man was dark-skinned but amazingly fit and he wore his hair shaved in an unmistakably military manner, but the difference between his constructs from Jordan’s was even more apparent: where Hal had a tendency to be constantly surrounded by airplanes and jets (or dancing cheerleaders, though he didn’t do that very often around Diana since she’d once glared at him and then hit the construct so hard it splintered into a trillion pieces), this Lantern stuck more to the basics with laser-like blasts that bored through Khundian hulls or solid barriers to block incoming fire. There was a kind of workmanlike efficiency to this Lantern that contrasted with Hal’s tendency to show off.

By the time Clark reached the engagement, it was already over, with the debris of at least three frigate-sized starships drifting and dozens of smaller craft shattered beyond recognition. The survivors were already lumped together in an immense emerald globe and the Lantern was judiciously seeking any other potential rescues. He glanced at Clark’s approach, did a quick double-take at the presence of the solar visor but nodded in greeting. His ring pulsed briefly and Clark felt the crackle of his comm-unit before he heard it.

“That’s a new look for you, sir,” the Lantern remarked. Clark blinked – he knew this man. “I like the new suit though.”

“John Stewart,” he said with surprise in his voice. The Lantern nodded.

“John Stewart, alternate Ring-Bearer for Sector 2814,” Stewart said. “The Guardians decided that Darkseid’s direct presence on Earth spoke of need for a second Lantern.” He flashed a mirthless smile. “I pulled the duty.” The former Marine glanced toward the wreckage and scowled. “I let a couple of them get away on purpose – hopefully the word will get out that we’re not playing around anymore.” His dark look took in the prisoners floating in his bubble. “After I drop these guys off at a Lantern holding facility,” he continued, “I’ll report in with you, sir.” With a flash of his ring, he darted away, the sphere containing captured Khunds reforming into a much larger construct that rapidly became what honestly looked like a flying troop carrier.

“Don’t call me ‘sir,’” Clark muttered under his breath as he re-oriented himself toward the Watchtower.

Martha Kent died on a Wednesday.

She went peacefully in her sleep, in the hospice she’d moved into a month earlier (against Kal’s wishes) when her condition began to deteriorate and the experimental treatments failed to slow the ravages of her cancer. Kal wasn’t on Earth when she passed, although he had visited her only hours earlier before rushing straight back to the Watchtower where he once again threw himself into his studies.

The day of her funeral came and went – Diana attended, cloaked and hidden by Hephaestus’ magicks, and she was momentarily surprised to see Bruce here, but then, he’d discreetly allowed it to become common knowledge in media circles that he’d met Mr. Kent when the reporter was on
assignment in Gotham and an unlikely friendship developed … which honestly wasn’t that far removed from the truth.

Kal vanished almost as soon as the funeral was over, appearing only sporadically in his guise as Earth’s ‘Superman.’ When he did appear, he struck with such intensity that everyone on the planet noticed. He ripped Schott’s latest killbot into pieces, smashed apart not one but two of Luthor’s elaborate machinations to destroy him, and then, following their murder of two Daily Planet reporters, tore through the organized crime syndicate called Intergang with such fury that it would likely take years for them to recover. Days turned into weeks, which then turned into months, and still, Kal continued to act so oddly. The media went wild with speculation as to the nature of his mysterious disappearance – the tabloids naturally came up with the most outlandish explanations, far too many of them directly tied to Diana herself – and even the members of the League started whispering. Diana should have been disgusted or at least surprised when Bruce dumped this in her lap, but she wasn’t. In fact, she’d halfway expected it.

So here she was, tapping softly on Lois Lane’s apartment window at eight in the morning.

“Shhh!” Lane pushed open the door of her balcony and ushered Diana in, a harried look on her face and her voice low. “I just got the little monster to sleep!”

“The monster?” Diana glanced around, automatically tensing. She frowned at the sight of Lois’ apartment – on the three or four times she’d visited, everything had been in its place, as if Lois loathed disorder, but right now, it almost appeared as though a tiny hurricane had passed through and left only a mess in its wake. There were disheveled cushions, open suitcases shoved into a corner and several blankets tossed onto the floor. Lois herself appeared exhausted, with dark circles under her eyes and her hair hanging limply.

“My niece,” Lois said. She collapsed onto her sofa and leaned forward to bury her head in her hands. “I love the little beast … but my God, I think that kid hates me.” Diana felt her lips curl upward, but she quickly schooled her expression to one of studied concern. “She cries all the time, even when she’s not hungry or needs changing or … God …”

“Where is your sister?” Diana glanced around again, nodding at the suitcases. She suddenly remembered Kal mentioning prior to his mother’s passing that Lois’ sister was visiting. He had insisted that he was not complaining about the younger Lane even as he did exactly that.

“Dad came into town last night.” Lois straightened. “I’m not sure which one of them had the bright idea to leave that little monster here with me when they went out to breakfast, but I’m thinking about shooting them both when they get back.” She shook her head. “This is Dad’s less than subtle way of trying to encourage me to ‘settle down and stop trying to be a man in a man’s world.’” Lois glowered. “Jerk.” She glanced up. “You’re looking for Clark?”

“I am.” Diana sighed softly. “I did not want to pressure him so soon after Martha’s passing but …” Lois smirked.

“Those chickens in tights elected you to see how he’s doing, right?” At Diana’s look, Lane’s shrugged before blowing out a frustrated breath. “I haven’t seen much of him lately … in between Dad not liking him at all, and Lucy flirting with him at every opportunity she can, and now Martha … he’s been throwing himself into his work like you wouldn’t believe.” She abruptly blinked. “Actually, I guess you probably do have a good idea, don’t you?”

“I do.” Diana looked away, wondering how best to phrase her next question. She had no desire to imply things of which she had no knowledge. “You have more experience with men than I do,” she said softly. “Is his behavior normal for one who has suffered this kind of loss?”
“Because I’m a wonderful human being,” Lois stated with a tired smile, “I’m going to ignore the implication about my romantic history with men I doubt you intended and answer your question with another question. How would you describe him right now?” Diana frowned and crossed her arms.

“Reserved,” she answered immediately. “Distant. Detached.” The last word came the hardest, but Truth was always painful.

“Not the exact words I would use,” Lois said slowly, “but accurate enough.” She sighed. “You haven’t lost any family, have you?” She continued before Diana could even respond. “Everyone grieves differently. Clark told me that he struggled for a long time after his dad died and that was before he had donned the tights and cape. You know how much stress he’s been under in between half of the governments treating him like he was about to go crazy and the other half acting as if he was the Second Coming …” She frowned. “But … I’m just as worried as you are. He’s pushing himself so hard …”

The sound of keys in the door caused Lois’ head to snap up. Her eyes widened as she glanced between Diana and the front room.

“It’s them!” she said in an urgent whisper. “You can’t … he can’t … they can’t see you like that!”

“So they will not,” Diana said. She struck her bracers together, feeling the transformational magicks wash over her. The weight of her armor vanished and was suddenly replaced with the feel of rough fabric against her skin. Her tiara shifted and altered in size, turning into Hephaestus’ enchanted glasses, even as the embossed bracers shrank, and became slim and decorative. With a slight smile, Diana pulled the glasses off of her head and pushed them up on her nose.

“Neat trick,” Lois murmured. Comprehension flared in her eyes. “His glasses! That’s where he got those!”

“Lois!” a masculine voice called out. Almost instantly, the sound of a baby stirring in a different room caused Lane to glare in the direction of the man now entering. He was of average height, solidly built and with a warrior’s bearing. The instant he saw Diana, his stride faltered slightly and his eyes narrowed. Several steps behind him was a young woman with blonde hair and a striking resemblance to Lois.

“See to your monster, Lucy,” Lois ordered before glaring at her father. “I just got her to sleep and you had to come in here shouting like we’re in the barracks.”

“I’m sorry,” General Lane said, but he did not actually like he meant it. Instead, he kept his eyes on Diana. “Who’s your friend?” he asked. Diana offered her hand.

“Diana Prince,” she said. “I am an old friend of Clark’s.”

“So, your boyfriend has his ex-girlfriends stop by and you’re okay with this?” Lane shot a frown of disappointment in his daughter’s direction, which only intensified Lois’ anger. She looked to be on the verge of losing her temper.

“I appear to have come at a bad time,” Diana interjected. “Lois, we should meet to have lunch later this week.”

“I’ll see you out,” Lois said. She escorted Diana to the door, shooting dark glares over her shoulder in her father’s direction. “I’m sorry about that,” she murmured. “He’s a jerk who needs a punch to the face.” She glowered. “He’s going to check out your name,” Lois added.

“That is of no concern,” Diana said. “A friend ensured that it will withstand most scrutiny.”
“A Gotham friend?” Lois asked with a smirk before shaking her head. “Give me a call later this week,” she ordered. “We’ll put our heads together about Clark.” Diana nodded. “Now, if you’ll excuse me,” Lois said with a frown and dark look cast toward the sound of her father’s voice, “I have to go murder someone. I may need a character witness for the trial.” Diana smiled.

“I might be able to do that,” she said. “It would no doubt help if the body is still intact.” Lois rolled her eyes in an exaggerated manner.

“Well, so much for my disposal by woodchipper idea.” Diana chuckled slightly and turned away. She heard Lois shut the door behind her. The shouting began before Diana was even three steps before.

Thirty seconds later, she was airborne.

Clark enjoyed the silence.

He floated in space, midway between Venus and Mercury, and stared at the glowing orb that was the sun. Even at this great distance, he could feel the effect of the solar radiation on his body. It wiped away his exhaustion, super-charged his muscles and, in general, left him feeling like he could do anything. Here, in this moment, he could smash meteors, shatter moons, juggle comets, boil seas from orbit with his heat vision … he could do anything.

And still, his mother was gone.

The comm-array set in his hard-suit’s belt vibrated and Clark frowned. He didn’t want to talk to anyone right now, but duty was something he understood all too well.

“Receive,” he said into the integrated headset that was part of his solar visor.

“Unknown mass displacement detected inside Jupiter orbit,” Kelex announced. “Ring-bearer Stewart has already moved to investigate.”

“Acknowledged,” Clark replied.

“Additionally,” Kelex continued, “you have received multiple messages from Princess Diana and Ms. Lane.” Clark grimaced – he’d tried his best to avoid both of them for the last couple of months as he grieved and continued his studies. That was another reason for this … recharge. His imprint learning was done – the whole of the Kryptonian database was finished. He was finished.

And he was exhausted.

Already, the flash training was beginning to pay startling dividends – through various shell companies set up for his use by Bruce, Clark had released a dozen new cancer treatments prompted by his discoveries, all of which were racing through the FDA trials and could potentially revolutionize the medical industry. None of these would have saved his mother – at best, they might have extended her life another few months – but they were a start. At first, he’d wanted to just give these new discoveries to the world for free, but Bruce had talked him out of that.

“There are enough people who still don’t trust you to lock these treatments up in testing for decades,” Wayne pointed out. “And that doesn’t even take into account the pharmaceutical companies that are going to take a massive hit when some of your discoveries make their drugs obsolete.”

So Clark had acquiesced and channeled his research through Bruce, who then generated new identities for the imaginary people ostensibly responsible. He seeded these made up doctors and
biologists and chemists through dozens of different companies scattered throughout the medical industry so no one would necessarily link them back to him. Some of the companies had ties to Wayne Industries, some did not.

Absolutely none of them were linked to any of Luthor’s holdings. That was part of Clark’s requirements and Bruce had been excruciatingly thorough in his own research.

“Acknowledge the messages,” Clark said calmly to Kelex, “and advise them both I will return their calls shortly.” He winced at the implication Diana and Lois were teaming up on his absence, but filed it away and let the warmth from the sun continue to soak into his bones. Here, there was nothing to concern him, nothing to distract him, nothing to cause further grief. He forced his muscles to relax.

“Incoming transmission from Ring-bearer Stewart,” Kelex said moments later. The headset crackled and the servitor’s voice was suddenly replaced with Stewart’s.

“Green Lantern to Superman,” the former Marine said from millions of kilometers away. “Please respond.” Clark did not open his eyes as he spoke.

“I read you, Lantern.” There was a noticeable lag due to the vast distance between them.

“Good. I need you here as soon as possible.” Lantern did not sound under duress, but there was something in his voice that Clark didn’t like. “I’m just outside Jupiter and I’m looking at the energy signature we detected. It’s a ship.” He paused and when he spoke again, Clark’s world was forever changed.

“And it’s Kryptonian.”
Year Five: Heirs

Billionaire Takes In Circus Orphan

Published June 18, 2017 / Vesper Fairchild

GOTHAM CITY, IL. – Sources inside Gotham City Child Protection have confirmed that Bruce Wayne has filed paperwork to assume temporary guardianship for Richard Grayson, the circus acrobat orphaned in such a dramatic manner one week ago.

Wayne, 29, was an eyewitness to the deaths of Grayson’s parents, John and Mary Grayson, when their high wire snapped during a performance at the Haley Circus in what was initially called a tragic accident but is now believed to have been a homicide linked to an extortion ring. Authorities are still investigating.

An orphan himself, Wayne is a well-known backer of charities for underprivileged children throughout Gotham. According to tax returns obtained by the Gotham Post, Wayne contributed over three million dollars to local charities last year alone, most of these monies dedicated to orphans and families affected by violent crime.

Click for more from Gotham Post Online

HE FOUND THE BOY PERCHED ON THE ROOFTOP.

Bruce approached quietly, recognizing from Grayson’s body language that he was perfectly at ease with the height even though he was still quivering with fury. Less than a week had elapsed since the circus, since he felt his heart shatter at the sight of another boy kneeling over the bodies of his parents, and Bruce still wasn’t sure what had come over him when he asked if young Mister Grayson could stay at the Manor while Gotham’s absurdly slow bureaucracy labored to determine what to do with him. He didn’t have the time needed for a grieving boy, especially one so young and so angry and so like he was at that age…

“You went out there tonight,” he growled, his voice causing Grayson to jerk in surprise. The boy never lost his balance, even when startled. A part of Bruce noted that with more than a little admiration. “To the circus,” Bruce added. “Don’t bother denying it.”

“Batman…?!” Grayson’s eyes widened. “What are you doing here? What do you know about me?!” He was scared but defiant, and the ever-present rage was still there.

“I know enough,” Bruce replied. He studied the young man carefully, noting how easily Richard shifted his place on the decorative edifice. They were a hundred feet from the ground with very little to catch onto should he fall, but Grayson barely seemed to notice. And from what Alfred had said, that was the case when inside as well – the chandelier would probably survive, but Bruce wasn’t sure his butler would.

“I keep thinking about what happened,” the boy said tightly, anger in every line of his body. “My father always checked the lines. It couldn’t be an accident!” At once, Bruce recognized what was eating at the young man: like he had with his own dad, Richard very likely worshiped his father and if this turned out to be the elder Grayson’s fault, then that meant the older man’s negligence had killed both of the boy’s parents. For a very long time, Bruce had wondered about that himself – why had his father been so calm, so quick to yield to that shaky man with the wide eyes? Had he been to
blame? Was there something Thomas Wayne, M.D., could have done to prevent that tragedy? Even now, the idea that his father might have erred gave Bruce pause.

And to his further surprise, he realized he could not let this boy suffer the same way.

“It wasn’t,” he said with a frown.

“What?” Grayson’s eyes, which had drifted away from Bruce’s – he was examining the cape with a child’s fascination, even despite the anger – snapped back up.

“The trapeze rope that snapped,” Bruce said. “It was made to look like it was worn out.” He paused briefly, wondering why he was explaining this, but the words kept coming. “I found traces of an acid on the rope. Just enough.” His voice darkened. “And I’ve seen what that acid can do to people.” The old familiar stab of guilt punched him in the gut. Harvey. Lost to the madness that was Gotham. Perhaps it was best Selina was gone. Would this city swallow her up as well?

“I want to help.” Grayson rose to his feet in a fluid motion that Bruce had to envy. The boy stood tall and firm, fists clenched at his side and purpose in his face that Bruce recognized all too well. It did not seem that long ago when he glared at Alfred in the same manner.

“You will,” he said, the words tumbling out of his mouth before he could stop them. “When the time is right. I promise.” Almost instantly, he wanted to drag that promise back … but The Batman could never be seen as indecisive, even by a thirteen year old boy.

Grayson mentioned something else before Bruce could make his escape, something about a fat man which matched elements of his investigation, but there were other, more pressing matters to handle at the moment. The Hangman Killer was still on the loose, Gordon had assembled a new taskforce to take down some of the more … exotic criminals running loose in the city, and Selina … she was still gone.

And it was Father’s Day.

Somehow, he found himself standing before his parents’ graves, staring at the elaborate tombstones and wondering how things would have worked out if he’d just sat through that damned opera. Would he have been able to give his dad a father’s day gift in person? Or would some other senseless tragedy have robbed him of years? Would he have faded and finally passed in his sleep like Clark’s mother? Would Gotham have chewed Thomas Wayne up and spat him out in some other way? If he closed his eyes, Bruce could still smell their blood, could still taste the gunpowder in the air, could still hear the sharp retort of the pistol as it stole two lives. Even as he was dying, his father tried to reassure him.

“It's okay,” Thomas Wayne had murmured.

But it hadn’t been okay. And it still wasn’t okay. Anger warred with grief, and he wondered at his sanity. Others lost close family members every day and had for decades, especially in this cesspool of a city, but he could not let it go. Why? Why was he still trapped in that moment? What was wrong with him?

“I … tried to get out here sooner,” he said softly. He could almost see his dad’s amused look – it was the same one he wore whenever Bruce had done something he shouldn’t have. “I don’t have any excuse,” he murmured before the words once again began tumbling out. He told them about Richard, about how the boy had lost his own parents, and how badly it hurt seeing the same pain in a different boy’s eyes he’d felt so long ago. Tears did not come, of course – Bruce couldn’t remember the last time he’d actually cried which, according to much of the medical documentation he’d read was
something of an anomaly as well – but as he touched his father’s name, he felt a renewed rush of grief.

Grief … and rage. Somewhere, in Gotham, at this very moment, another boy or girl was hugging their daddy for the last time. Somewhere, another monster was about to inflict the same pain on an innocent child. Bruce clenched his fist and ground his teeth together.

Not tonight. Not on his watch.

Tonight, he would show the monsters why they were afraid of the dark.

Not even the peace and serenity of Hera’s temple could ease her discomfort.

Diana rose slowly from her knees where she had knelt before the icon of the Mother, but guidance remained frustratingly absent. Her decision to spend the evening in prayer and meditation was not uncommon – out there, in Patriarch’s World, she had so little time to attend to her spiritual needs that she invariably needed it when she returned to Themyscira – but the intensity of her need was. Ares was no longer bound.

The God of War was loose upon the world once more.

No one in the American Department of Metahuman Affairs knew how Ares escaped from the containment cell – from the recordings, he was there one moment and simply gone the next – and, while they were concerned, none of them quite understood how grave the situation truly was. Even Steve, who had witnessed the war god’s insanity firsthand, was not inclined to dedicate adequate worry regarding his escape.

“That’s what you and the League are around for, right?” he’d asked with a tight smile. It was the first time she had looked upon him since they decided to end their courtship nigh on two years ago and Steve had aged. He wore it well enough – the streaks of silver in his hair lent a distinguished look and the new wrinkles on his face appeared to be from smiling – but the change was undeniable. Had she needed another reminder that these mortals were short-lived, Steve’s appearance would have served perfectly. By her reckoning, he was perhaps a year shy of forty and, though he was still fit and active, his healthiest years were behind him. And yet, Diana stood still. In three years time, she would see her first century of life pass and she remained as she had since five and twenty. Barring death by violence, she would remain thus for all time.

Never before had Diana felt this lonely.

She walked slowly from the temple to Hera, breathing in the comforting air of the island as she trod over familiar ground. There were more sentries standing watch tonight than normal, which pleased her. Unlike those in Patriarch’s World, her mother had taken the warnings about Ares to heart immediately. If the God of War meant to strike here, he would not find them easy meat.

Her feet carried her to Hermes’ shrine and she automatically knelt before the icon. In recent days, she had learned a newfound respect for the Patron of Travelers, and she silently thanked him for his protection as she ventured to lands she’d only heard of or read about. Four years had passed since she departed the island and still, she had yet to lose her wonder at the sight of places she’d never seen. In their own way, they were all beautiful, whether it was the stark desolation of the Arabian desert, to the cosmopolitan cites of America and Europe, to the primitive feel of deepest Africa where no humans had ventured for centuries. Was this why Hermes was so often portrayed as absent from Olympus?
She knelt there for a considerable time, long enough for her silent shadow to grow bored and approach. Artemis’ steps were light, but her frustration was palpable and it made Diana smile. Her friend had never enjoyed guard duty, especially when she would rather be actively seeking out their enemies.

“Has my mother assigned you to watch over me, Sister?” Diana asked. The flame-haired woman came within striking distance and stopped, glowering down at her which only intensified Diana’s amusement. They were of an age and, had the Bana-Mighdall come to Themyscira much sooner, it was probable they would have been raised as sisters.

“You know she did,” Artemis replied. Her voice was silky and smooth, so unlike her normally abrasive personality, and she crossed her arms as she spoke, not bothering to hide her general contempt for all things religious. To most of Diana’s tribe, that very thought was heretical, but Artemis did not care about how others perceived her. In that, she was much like Kal’s lover, Lois, who made little effort to conceal her distrust of those in power. “I do not know why,” Artemis grumbled. “As the Champion of Themyscira, you should not be concerned about a mere god of war.”

“I see your disposition is as affectionate as ever,” Diana said with a smile as she rose quickly to her feet. Artemis shot her a scowl, but Diana ignored it. She began walking and Artemis easily matched her pace.

“Are you going to be about this mystical nonsense for much longer, Princess?” the flame-haired woman asked. “I have a wish to see my bed before the sun rises.” She frowned. “Although a skin of wine would not go amiss.” Diana laughed softly.

“That does sound pleasant,” she remarked. “I have an offworld beer I must introduce you to.” Artemis clearly perked up at that and looked to almost be on the verge of an actual smile. She drew breath to comment.

A gong sounded.

It echoed across the breadth of Themyscira, so powerful that the very ground trembled, and a heartbeat later, lightning cracked the sky. Wind howled and thunder boomed. The gong sounded again, this time striking a discordant note that set Diana’s teeth on edge. She whirled back toward the origin – Hermes’ shrine – and clashed her bracers together, instantly triggering the transformative magics within.

“Up spears!” Artemis bellowed, her voice somehow carrying over the thunder rolling through the heavens. “To arms, you bitches! To arms!”

Diana was already airborne, darting toward the eye of the storm. Hurricane-force gusts battered at her, threatening to dash her to the ground, but she pressed on, willing herself to continue forward. There, at the very heart of this disturbance, she could see a tear in reality, a vortex that spat forth ribbons of light and fire. The statue of Hermes glowed bright against the maelstrom, as if the god himself were preventing the portal from shattering the island. Diana landed next to it, instantly summoning Hephaestus’ shield and stepping forward, as if she were standing next to other hoplites and readying their wall of armor. The wind continued to howl and she concentrated, expanding the size of her shield to cover more area. She took a step forward.

And nearly cried out in surprise when a body tumbled through the hole in reality.

The gusts of wind carried the girl through the air into one of the ornately carved columns that held the shrine’s roof up. Her impact shattered the marble and she spun off it, still limp and unmoving.
With her right hand, Diana instinctively snatched her lariat free and sent it flashing toward the girl. It wrapped around her, arresting her tumble, and Diana side-stepped quickly, placing herself – and her shield – between the girl and the portal. She heard rather than saw Artemis seize the child. Refocusing her full attention on the vortex, Diana felt her breath catch.

She saw Themyscira.

It was aflame and shattered, with temples burning and flashes of light she took to be weapons-fire. An immense explosion threw great geysers of rock and dirt into the air. Something dark but massive tumbled through the sky and vanished in another fireball. A wave of heat washed out of the vortex.

And for the span of a single heartbeat, Diana saw a woman standing before the vortex.

She was dressed in green and gold, with a face so similar to Diana’s mother it was jarring. Blood caked the woman’s face and her blonde hair was burnt and smoking. Her eyes widened the instant her gaze locked with Diana’s and she opened her mouth to say something.

But in that instant, she vanished in a column of fire.

With a shuddering explosion, the vortex vanished. The detonation shattered the shrine to Hermes, sending marble and stone fragments spinning. Diana staggered back a step, grunting with the effort as the released energy splashed across her invisible shield. It pounded at her, striking with force she had not experienced since Darkseid, and she strained to hold her place, to absorb the heat and fire and killing energy into Hephaestus’ gift. It would not be enough. She was pushed back another step.

And then, the girl who had fallen through the cracks of the world sprang to her side.

With a flicker, a second unseen barrier sprang up, originating from bracers nearly identical to those wrapped around Diana’s arms. They locked their shields together, pressed back against the maelstrom and a flood of unseen power joined them from somewhere else. Diana did not question the unexpected boon, but instead, accepted it as a gift and poured it into her will. Their shields sparked and danced. Together, they held the line.

The force from the vortex lessened, then faded entirely, leaving only destruction and two pairs of brightly glowing bracers in their wake. Diana sagged in relief, noting that the girl dropped to her knees, before forcing herself to stand upright. She glanced around, wincing at the fractured marble that had torn great divots into the ground. The statue of Hermes was untouched, she noticed with a smile, though it had inexplicably been turned to face the vortex and the god’s hand was held aloft, as if he were gesturing for someone to stop.

“Thank you, my lord,” Diana said softly. Even with the girl aiding her, her strength would have been inadequate had he not discreetly intervened.

“Princess!” Artemis drew closer, her eyes locked on the girl. To Diana’s mild surprise, a bruise was forming on her friend’s face.

“I am unharmed,” the girl announced before Diana could speak. She rose and turned to face Artemis. Whatever she had to say died the instant her eyes fell on Diana. And for her part, Diana did not know what to say either.

The girl had her face.

“Bring my mother, Artemis,” Diana ordered.

“By your command, Highness,” the flame-haired woman turned and vanished at a run.
“Who are you?” the girl asked at the same time Diana posed the same question. Hera, it was like looking in a cracked mirror! The girl even tilted her head the same way!

“The portal you came through,” Diana said after a moment. “I saw another Themyscira.” The girl immediately looked toward where the vortex had been and frowned.

“I do not know of this … Themyscira,” she said slowly. “If you speak of Ilios, then that was my home.” She frowned. “My mother … did you see her?” The girl began looking around. “She was to follow.”

“I saw a woman in gold and green,” Diana admitted, “but the fires took her. I am sorry.” The girl’s shoulders slumped. She did not weep but was clearly pained. When she looked up, Diana met her eyes and refused to look away.

“This place is Themyscira, then?” Diana nodded.

“And I am Diana, daughter of Hippolyta, who rules.” The girl’s eyes widened.

“Hippolyta?” she repeated softly. “How … she died, millennia ago…” Shaking her head, the girl looked up. “I was named Despoina by my mother, Antiope, who ruled Ilios in the name of the gods.” She swallowed. “But everyone calls me Donna.”

The noise of the Daily Planet was deafening.

No one paid much attention to him as he weaved through the obstacle course of reporters’ desks, trash cans knocked askew, errant office chairs and the most lethal of all threats, the computer cable tripwire. The rattle of printer wheels grinding, of fingers banging against keyboards, of metal spoons thundering within coffee cups, of humanity in general thudded and pounded against his skull, and Clark grimaced.

“You look like hell, Clark,” Lois murmured as he slid into his desk chair. She was chewing on her pen and squinting at the page in her hand, intentionally ignoring the reading glasses perched on the top of her head that she constantly insisted weren’t necessary. Later, when no one else was around, she would use them, but only when she could not be seen by anyone. “Everything okay?”

“Difficult night,” he replied. Lois rolled her eyes – she knew full well that he’d been at the Fortress, trying to determine how to unseal the Kryptonian stasis-tube he had retrieved from Jupiter orbit without killing the girl inside; the damage the pod had taken prior to discovery was fairly significant and Clark was far from certain that just opening it wouldn’t kill the girl outright – and then tossed him a wink before returning to work. She only did that when Lombard was bothering her again and, normally, Clark would give Steve a careful look just a little shy of intimidating, but today, his head hurt too damned much. He carefully sat down in his office chair, pinching the bridge of his nose and wincing. Dear God, humanity was noisy today.

And just like that, all of the noise, all of the unrelenting sound battering against his enhanced senses suddenly vanished, as if someone had simply flipped a switch.

“Good afternoon, Kal-El,” a calm, measured voice said. Clark looked up slowly, his body tensing only slightly as he took in the dark-skinned man in the rumpled green suit and battered leather jacket. A badge was secured to his belt and, from the stylized design, it identified this man as Detective Jones of the Special Crimes Unit. Whoever this man was, though, he was not human. His body’s temperature was too low, his heartbeat barely existent, and he was far too light on his feet for a man his size. Out of the corner of his eyes, Clark could tell that no one seemed to be paying attention to
them; even Lois, who was, in his expert opinion, the nosiest woman alive, did not even glance up from her desk. “I apologize for visiting you in this way,” the man who was not Detective Jones said, “but this seemed the easiest method to present you with this.” He placed a thin rod on Clark’s desk – it was a Kryptonian control key! – before offering a slight smile that looked odd on his face. “It should allow you to access the stasis pod.”

“How do you know that?” Clark asked. Part of him was screaming in panic – here he was, carrying on a conversation with this … not-man in public about things he desperately wanted to keep private and yet, for some reason, he wasn’t freaking out – but it all felt distant, muted, like he was observing someone else’s thoughts.

“I knew her father quite well.” Not-Jones smiled again. His eyes shifted, as if he was hearing something that Clark couldn’t. “My time here is limited,” he said. “We shall talk again soon, Kal-El.”

And then, he fell through the floor.

The cacophony of noise that had vanished moments earlier returned just as abruptly, slamming into Clark with the force of a runaway truck. He grunted softly, his eyes still locked on the floor where the stranger had disappeared. Had that just happened? It didn’t seem possible … he wouldn’t have a conversation like that with someone he didn’t know. His gaze shifted, falling on the black control key now resting on his desk.

Clark swallowed.

“Can you let Perry know I had to duck out?” he asked tightly when a quick scan of the building revealed no sign of the dark-skinned man. Lois looked up and frowned at his expression. “Something has come up and I need to check it out.”

“Super,” she said with an almost smirk. “If he asks, I’ll tell him you’re checking out that shooting on Shuster.” Clark almost groaned at her sneakiness – now, he would have to check out that particular incident since he knew Perry would ask about it – but nodded instead. Shaking his head, he stood, grabbed the control key, and walked toward one of the larger break rooms near the back of this floor – unofficially, it was called ‘the smokehouse’ due to the large open window that allowed the smokers on the staff to duck in to get their nicotine fix without completely violating the ‘clean-air’ policy of the building. The window was a little taller than Clark himself and opened up onto the fire escape. No one was present at the moment and, with a quick sweep of his enhanced vision, Clark was fairly certain the coast was clear. He blurred through the window, then accelerated sharply away from the Planet, curving up and deeper into the city. Moving too fast to be recognized as anything but a simple blur, he darted through the air, triggering the Kryptonian suit’s systems as he twisted around the artificial canyons of the city and climbed into the sky. Instantly, the hard light hologram that gave him the appearance of slacks and a shirt fell away, revealing the easily recognizable blue and red of Superman. The cape, firmly secured to his back in a stiff square, suddenly quivered and unwrapped itself. With his left hand, Clark pulled the glasses off his face and placed them on his belt. As they always did, they shifted and shrank, turning into just another indefinable lump on the red belt – he still didn’t understand how they worked, or how they knew when to go into camouflage mode, or even how they deflected people’s attention from him, but whatever their secret was, it couldn’t be magic. Magic simply couldn’t exist. It was just technology he didn’t understand yet.

He slowed to a hover once he reached a height that would make him impossible to see by normal human eyes, and began scanning the streets and alleys around the Planet for some sign of the stranger. When he found nothing, he expanded his search, all the while trying desperately to remember everything he could about the man. Already, his memory of what the stranger looked like was fading, as if the entire moment had been a strange dream he’d just woken from. Clark couldn’t
remember the man’s skin color or how tall he was or even what had been said. If it wasn’t for the control key in his hand, he doubted he would remember … remember … what the hell was he doing up here? He had the key that could unlock that tube!

The solar visor had not deployed yet as he breached the upper atmosphere and Clark slowed for a moment, luxuriating in the still silence of space. For the first time in several weeks, his headache eased, prompting him to mentally schedule a trip to the Moon for a few hours. More and more, it was beginning to look like he would need to park himself in a vacuum for a few hours every couple of weeks if he was going to be able to handle the noise of humanity. He could still concentrate through the noise and ignore most of the worst, but the strain …

He entered a section of the Watchtower that was normally sealed off – access was only possible through a single external airlock that only he had access to at the moment – and floated toward the stasis tube secured in the very center of the laboratory. Thus far, he’d been able to determine very few little about the occupant thanks to the extensive structural damage. The occupant was a she, likely less than twenty years of age, and with a skin tone that resembled that of a Caucasian. Briefly, Clark wondered if there were any blacks on Krypton, or just people with darker complexions than his, or the equivalent of Asians, but he thrust the idle thought aside as he examined the control key.

“Online,” he said as soon as his solar visor retracted into his suit. A subtle whir answered him. “I have the control key for this tube.”

“Acknowledged, sir.” Kelex’s voice floated out of the hidden speakers but the actual servitor droid was not present as Clark had relocated it to the Fortress. “May I inquire where you obtained it, sir?” Clark frowned.

“I have no idea,” he said. He didn’t have it yesterday … in fact, he was pretty certain he didn’t have it this morning when he walked into the Planet. “I want a full spectrum analysis of it,” he ordered as he placed it carefully on one of the scanning trays. “Use an isolated system but make sure it actually is what it looks like.’

“Compliance, sir.” Clark glanced at the tube briefly before frowning once more.

“While you’re at it,” he said, “let’s do a neural scan on me. I have no memory of how I got this thing and that is unacceptable.” The leftmost wall unfolded, reshaping into a chair. Clark slid his cape out of the way and took a seat. He leaned back and waited.

“Scans complete,” Kelex’s disembodied voice announced. “Which shall I review first, sir?”

“The key.”

“Acknowledged. According to my scans, this control key’s composition conforms to expected Kryptonian alloys and parameters. My initial review of the internal circuit indicates it is not a system override key, but a dedicated system one.”

“Any idea about the creator?” Clark asked.

“No, sir.”

“Wonderful.” Clark shook his head. “And the neural scan?”

“As you know, sir,” Kelex replied, “your physiology under a yellow sun is difficult to quantify, but I am detecting dwindling indications of neural manipulation within your frontal lobe.”

“Telepathy,” Clark guessed. “So whoever did it tampered with my short-term memory while talking
to me. Smart fellow.” He made a mental note to review possible ways to combat such future assaults. “Any long-term damage?”

“Not that I can detect.” Kelex was silent for a moment. “Would you like me to schedule regular scans to ensure this does not continue to occur?” Clark nodded.

“Yes.” He pushed against the floor and floated to his feet. Even before he was fully upright, the chair retracted into the wall. “Let’s give that key a try,” he said. “Bring the atmosphere to Krypton standard.” As soon as his hard-suit recognized the change in atmospherics, it deployed the protective solar visor. Clark grimaced slightly – he hated that his body was simply incapable of handling his native environment, but he’d adapted to Earth too well.

“Ready, sir,” Kelex announced moments later. Wincing at how heavy he felt, Clark picked up the control key and lumbered toward the stasis tube. Locating the access port was easy and the key snapped into place. A moment later, the pod’s internal lighting activated and entire sections began to peel away, revealing more than the girl’s face. Clark’s breath caught.

She was wearing the seal of the House of El.

“Body temperature stabilizing,” Kelex announced. “Neural patterns normalizing. She should wake momentarily.”

She did. Slowly, the girl opened her eyes. A clear lack of coherence reflected on her face as she glanced around, still wearing the expression of the heavily drugged. She blinked as she looked up at Clark and slowly, comprehension replaced the confusion. Her eyes widened as she glanced around rapidly. She looked back at Clark.

And screamed.

“Relax!” Clark said in his best Kryptonian. According to Kelex, his accent was ‘abnormal,’ which Clark took to mean atrocious, but it was evidently clear enough to the girl as she scrambled out of the tube and back-pedaled away from him. “I am not a threat!”

“Who are you?” she demanded. Her Kryptonian was smooth, flawless and spoken so quickly that Clark had some difficulty following her words. “Where is my Father? Where am I? What are you-”

“Wait!” Clark held out a hand, hoping to forestall her rush of questions. “My name is Kal-El,” he continued. “My parents were Jor-El and Lara.” Confusion flashed across the girl’s face then.

“What?” She glanced over him, frowning at the presence of the solar visor. “They have no children,” she snapped.

“They did, actually,” Clark replied. “Evidently, I was a freebirth.” He meant the words to be soothing, but they had the opposite effect as she recoiled and stared at him with horror. *Might as well tear off the whole band-aid all at once*, he reflected. “I’m sorry,” he said, “but Krypton is gone.” He placed his hand against one of the wall controls and triggered the shutters. They slid away, revealing Earth. The girl’s eyes widened even more.

“What … how …” She closed her eyes, drew in a deep breath, and visibly composed herself. When she opened her eyes again, she locked gazes with him. “Where am I?” she asked.

“In orbit over Earth,” Clark said. He gestured toward the planet. “I grew up here, after my parents sent me away from Krypton before it was destroyed.” He glanced away. “I spent the first thirty-three years of my life not even knowing I was Kryptonian.”
“That … that would explain your accent,” the girl murmured. “I need proof … quantifiable facts that I can verify before … wait.” Her eyes narrowed. “If Jor-El sent you from Krypton,” she said sharply, “then how do you know it is lost?”

“Zod saw it die,” Clark said sadly. He glanced toward one of the optical cameras. “Kelex,” he called out, “I need some chairs.”

“Acknowledged, sir,” came the instant response. The floor shifted as a pair of wide chairs rose up. To Clark’s surprise, the girl actually seemed to relax fractionally. It struck him then – Kelex. She would know his voice since all male members of the House of El had the same servitor personality matrix.

“Kal-El,” she said slowly, as if testing the name. “I knew my aunt and uncle were renegades … but a freebirth?” She shook her head.

“Aunt?” Clark repeated. It took him a moment to fully comprehend the Kryptonian word and translate it to its English counterpart. His breath caught. “Who are you?” he asked.

“Kara,” the girl replied. “Kara Zor-El.”

The girl who named herself Despoina did not resist as Diana led her to the Hall of Judgment.

It was a portentous name for such an unassuming chamber, with Hippolyta’s high-backed chair facing a small, elevated platform around which a handful of benches were scattered. Here, the queen passed sentence upon those charged with crimes against the nation, but the chamber had not been used even once in Diana’s memory. Her mother was already present, attired in her most queenly garments, with Phillipus standing in attendance, fully armed and ready for battle. The girl’s steps faltered as she caught sight of Hippolyta, but she held her head erect and continued forward.

For her part, Diana was more than a little confused. Why was her mother insisting on speaking to Despoina … Donna here? The girl was no criminal. Without thinking, she squared her shoulders slightly and tensed her muscles, as if in preparation for a fight. If needs be, she would defend this girl who looked so much like her…

“Am I being charged with a crime?” Des … Donna asked. She looked Hippolyta in the eye and refused to blink.

“I concur,” Diana said. “She has done nothing wrong.” The girl glanced at her with something like surprise on her face, but she quickly smoothed her reaction away and resumed her poised stance. To Diana’s mild surprise, her mother almost cracked a smile.

“Be at ease, both of you,” the queen instructed. “The throne room was damaged by your little encounter earlier.” She rose from the throne and approached, her eyes locked on Donna. “You claim to be the child of Antiope?”

“I claim nothing,” Donna replied. She swallowed but otherwise appeared unruffled. “My mother was Antiope, queen of Ilios.” She cocked her head. “You look much like her,” she remarked softly. “Her hair was different, her eyes … but you … you look like her.” The girl’s voice caught slightly, to which Diana shot her mother a dark look. Hippolyta softened slightly and clapped sharply.

“Guards!” she called out. Artemis stuck her head into the room, which made Diana frown slightly. The Bana-Mighdall venerated Antiope as a sacred ancestor. How would they react to a child claiming to be her daughter? The peace between their two tribes was tenuous enough. “Bring us chairs!” Hippolyta ordered. As Artemis turned to obey, the queen smiled at Donna. “We shall hear
Donna’s story turned out to be a dark one with many familiar elements. As with their world, her mother was sister to Hippolyta, but events differed from nearly that point. It was Hippolyta who pursued war against Herakles against Athena’s explicit wishes and would later remain in Man’s World for reasons Donna did not know. She would later be murdered thanks to the machinations of Medea, which led to Queen Antiope and her tribe withdrawing entirely from the known world. Hera herself would relocate Ilios, though Priam would use the name for his own nation which was sacked by the Achaeans some forty years later.

“We only ventured back into Man’s World some months ago,” Donna said some time later. “And that was because the sky turned black and the ground trembled for days and days.” She sipped from the diluted wine that Artemis brought along with the chairs. “Beings from the stars with powers that rivaled the gods had descended upon Man’s World where they waged war against each other and nearly destroyed the entire planet.” Diana inhaled sharply, drawing all eyes to her.

“With your permission, Mother,” she said. Hippolyta nodded and Diana knelt before Donna. She began tracing Kal’s seal in the dirt. “Did one of these beings bear this symbol?” she asked.

“He did!” Donna glanced between them. “He fought against the others but fell when they united against him, though I understand he did not fall easily or without taking some of his enemies with him.” The idea of Kal dying in battle against such overwhelming odds caused Diana to grimace slightly for some reason and she tried to ignore her mother’s gimlet stare as she returned to her seat.

“And they were responsible for the fires I saw?” she asked. Donna shook her head.

“No.” Her expression hardened. “That came later. Demons from the sky fell upon Ilios.” She shivered. “Their master was a one-eyed giant of stone.” Diana froze.

“Darkseid,” she said. Donna’s head snapped around.

“You know of him?”

“I took his eye,” Diana replied. Her weapon hand ached in remembered sympathy – the sword itself had shattered and even Hephaestus could not salvage the pieces, despite his great skill. “On this world, the man who wore that symbol,” she said, gesturing to Kal’s seal in the dirt, “survived and was victorious. He and I and some others threw Darkseid back when he came to this world.” Even now, nearly two years later, she could still recall how badly it hurt when Darkseid blasted her with those eye beams of his.

“Then this world was mightier than mine,” Donna said. She turned her attention to Hippolyta. “I have no claim to hospitality, Your Highness,” she said, “but I do ask for shelter and sanctuary until such a time that I might be able to return to my world and retake it from Darkseid.”

“And you shall have it.” Hippolyta offered her a soft smile. “Though we may be from different worlds, we are still family. Any daughter of Antiope is welcome here.”

“Welcome, sister,” Diana said. She smiled.

But out of the corner of her eye, she could not but to notice the Bana-Mighdall guards watching Donna with a strangely fervent light in their eyes.
With each moment that passed, the urge to swoop down on the piece of slime and beat him to within an inch of his life swelled, but this particular investigation required patience, not violence. Stopping one dealer wasn’t enough – he needed to follow this little fish to the larger sharks providing this poison and then break the backs of this entire operation. He snapped photographs of each person who visited the dealer – time permitting, they would all be quite surprised when he paid them a visit.

“Incoming left,” a familiar voice announced via the earpiece in his cowl, and a moment later, Clark stood on the building next to him. Kent was wearing the hard-suit as normal, though the familiar blue and red had been replaced with black. Yet another one of the special features of the suit allowed Clark to change the colors by way of the integrated controls on the belt. He called this camouflage mode … and Bruce had some really good ideas about how to incorporate something similar in his next generation suit. “Drug dealers?” Clark frowned. “I thought you were focusing on that hangman killer?”

“I’m multi-tasking,” Bruce replied tightly. “What do you want?”

“Perry is harassing me about the rumors Bruce Wayne has taken in an orphan,” Clark said. “Since he knows I’m your friend, he … asked me to abuse my friendship and make inquiries.”

“Noted.” Bruce snapped another set of photos. “Tell him Wayne threw you out and threatened to sue the Planet into the ground if his privacy was violated.” Clark gave him smile.

“I’d already intended to say something like that, actually,” he said. “Taking in a kid though … that’s pretty out of character for you, isn’t it?”

“Young men looking for revenge don’t need encouragement,” Bruce said flatly, repeating something that that Alfred had told him. “They need guidance.” He glanced toward Clark. “I’ve been where he is and I know the rage.”

“He’s thirteen, Bruce,” Clark shook his head. “How can you even consider bringing him into this kind of life?” Bruce glowered – he’d heard these same arguments already … but only inside his head when he chastised himself for encouraging Richard. What did it say about him that his conscience sounded exactly like Kent? He scowled.

“This is Gotham City,” he said darkly. “We have two kinds of people here, Kent: predators and prey. I’m trying to ensure he isn’t a victim.”

Clark was silent for several minutes. He crossed his arms over his chest, concealing the darkened House of El symbol, and stared at the city with a deep frown on his face. Twice, he opened his mouth to reply, and twice, he kept silent. Finally, he shook his head.

“And what happens if he dies out here?” he asked carefully. “This isn’t a game … you know that.”

“I do.” Bruce exhaled. “I won’t let him engage until I think he is ready. That might be two months. It might be two years.” He lifted his camera.

“That man is wired,” Clark announced.

“He’s a vice cop,” Bruce said with a glower. “I’ve had an eye on him for a while. Watch for money to change hands.” As he expected, the dealer passed over a roll of money which the police officer took and pocketed. Bruce snapped a half dozen pictures – he would ensure that Gordon received these images later; what the commissioner did was his business – and fought back a dark smirk at how angrily Clark glared at the now retreating cop. “Was there anything else?”

“Actually, there was.” Clark sighed. “I think I tracked down that telepath I’ve been looking for,” he
“I think he’s—"

“John Jones,” Bruce said flatly. “Detective-Sergeant with the Special Crimes Unit under Captain Sawyer.” Kent scowled.

“I hate you sometimes,” he muttered. “I really, really do.”

“He’s not human,” Bruce continued. “I don’t think he’s a threat – his closure record is actually quite impressive – but you might want to check in on him anyway.” He cocked his head. “How’s Kara?”

“Frustrated.” Clark grimaced and rubbed his temples. “She’s having more trouble acclimating to Earth’s atmosphere than she would like to admit,” he continued, “so she takes it out on me.” He shook his head again. “She’s also not real pleased with my choice of careers. Evidently, the House of El are members of the Thinker’s Guild and I’m acting like a Warrior which doesn’t sit well with her at all.” Bruce grunted and snapped another set of photographs. He frowned in recognition of the latest client – it was one of the anchors for the WLS six o’clock news whose public struggle with substance abuse was well known in Gotham – before glancing back toward Clark.

To his utter lack of surprise, Kent was gone.

“I hate it when he does that,” Bruce muttered.

He returned his attention to the drug dealer below.

With a low boom, Clark broke the sound barrier.

He continued to accelerate, pouring on the speed as he arced up and over greater North America. Canada flashed under him, then the Atlantic ocean, before finally, he breached the air space over Europe. Angling down, he bled off much of his speed as he streaked toward mid-Germany and the giant scorpion-like robot running amok through downtown Frankfurt. Explosions and tracer fire lanced up – the military had arrived.

Contain the situation, he reminded himself as he arrowed down through the clouds. Seemingly at the last instant, he pulled up so he didn’t crater into the street and he flashed toward the hostile, staying mere inches above the concrete. A scan of the eight-legged robot revealed very little – there were heavy sheets of armor covering the more sensitive parts and quite a bit of it somehow blocked his x-ray vision – but he was able to easily recognize the aesthetics.

Glowering darkly, Clark pushed harder and the speed of his flight rattled parked cars and set off alarms. The military had done an excellent job of cordoning off the zone – the few civilians present were either media or local police – but the smoking wrecks that had once been armored personnel vehicles indicated it had not been easy. Twisting around a corner, he flashed toward the giant machine, heat bubbling from his eyes and carving a vicious furrow through the robot’s chest. He slammed into it at just under seven hundred miles per hour, the force of the impact picking the monstrosity up and knocking it back into a hastily erected barrier wall.

Apertures on the robot slid open as slabs of armor fell away and missiles streaked out and toward him, but he had come to expect this sort of thing from Luthor and his eyes flashed, incinerating the dangerous ordinance before it could curve away and hurt the innocents of the city. Most of the missile vanished in fierce explosions, but two resisted the beams and curled toward him, detonating with small thunderclaps.

Agony screamed through him and Clark tumbled back to the ground. What the hell was that? His body felt heavy and slow, like it did when he was operating in a Kryptonian atmosphere. He shook
his head and looked up, just as the robot righted itself. More of the ports slid open. His head spinning, Clark focused on the ever-present heat behind his eyes.

But nothing happened.

Crimson light streaked from the robot’s projector arrays upon its tail, burning into Clark’s body with the intensity of a thousand suns. He cried out in sudden pain – it was like his skin itself was on fire or the blood in his veins had become molten lava – and he struggled to move. His muscles twitched and spasmed, but he couldn’t move.

“Finally.” An all-too familiar voice spoke over the pain and Clark was vaguely aware of Luthor’s face appearing on the surface of the robot. If he followed his usual pattern, the display was set to a frequency no human could see and the mocking comment was made in a pitch not even dogs could hear. There would be nothing to directly tie him to this murder machine and a dozen things providing him with plausible deniability. In fact, at this very moment, Luthor was supposed to sitting in a jail cell in the middle of Nevada, with no access to outside technology whatsoever while his latest appeal walked its way through the court system. “Do you have any idea how difficult it was to replicate Brainiac’s solar projector? How much money I had to spend just to get the correct frequency?” Luthor’s image smiled maliciously. “But I succeeded. I always succeed. And now, Kryptonian, you die.”

With a whir, the robot’s two massive pinchers slid forward, seizing Clark by the arms and slowly drawing him closer to the light burning through his body. He struggled against their grip, fought to find the strength to tear free or rocket up into the sky, but his body refused to obey. Pain pounded through him. He was vaguely aware that the robot’s stinger was preparing for a final blow but he couldn’t move.

“Any last words, Kryptonian?” Luthor asked.

He never saw it coming.

A golden streak slashed down from the sky, slamming into the robot at just over the speed of sound. The impact carried the armored figure through the robot and into the street below, tearing free great gouts of concrete. Windows and other breakables shattered in all directions at the resulting shockwave, and Clark himself was sent tumbling. He hit the ground hard and slid, but already, his strength was returning and his vision was clearing. Without thinking, he threw himself up into the air, just in time to see another great chunk of the robot crumple under the impact of blows that could shatter mountains. His savior floated above the smoking ruin that had once been a Luthor death trap.

She was fully encased in her battle armor, a fierce expression on her face as the barely transparent shield emanating from her left bracer sparked and sizzled in the air. A great spear was in her other hand and it dripped black from where it had punched through the robot’s hull and penetrated the thing’s inner workings. With a casual snap of her right hand, Diana flicked the viscous fluid – oil? Robots needed oil, right? Clark made a note to check with Bruce later – off the spearhead.

“Are you well?” she asked with a casual but quick glance. “I came as quickly as I could.”

“And just in time it seems,” Clark replied. He winced – the pain had not fully abated – before giving her a smile. “I’m pretty sure you just saved my life,” he said. “Thanks.” The smile she returned lit up her face and her eyes danced with merriment.

“I just happened to be in the neighborhood,” she said before gesturing toward the robot again. “Is it dead?” Clark nodded.
“Looks like you knocked out its central processing unit on your first strike,” he commented as he slowly returned to the ground. He gave a thumbs up to several of the military personnel still in the area and they visibly relaxed. A second later, he heard one of them radioing headquarters to advise them that the situation was contained.

Diana frowned as she eyed him and the obvious way he was favoring his left side which still stung like hell. She released the spear – it should have clattered to the ground, but instead, it shrank and seemed to almost retract into embossed bracer on her right arm where, a moment later, he could see only a stylized representation of a spear – and flexed the fingers of her left hand, which deactivated the shield. Clark still hadn't figured out the technology behind her gear, but he would continue to research them. There was no way they were magic.

“This was a close one, Kal,” she murmured, her voice so low no one else could hear her words. “I know you do not wish to consider it,” she continued, “but Luthor … he needs to be put down.”

“That isn’t my decision,” Clark replied. He floated toward the lead officer – a major by his rank insignia – and gestured toward the robot. “Do you need any further assistance?” he asked calmly. The major shook his head.

“No, sir,” he said in only slightly accented English. “Thank you for your timely arrival.” He shifted his eyes to Diana. “And to you, ma’am, for your even better timing.” Diana smiled at him, unaware of how devastating that expression was to mere mortals.

“The League is always happy to assist, Major,” she said brightly in perfect, unaccented German. She began floating upward, slow enough for Clark to recognize that was his unspoken cue to join her. Together, they climbed higher and higher, faster than most commercial aircraft, but slow enough to continue their conversation. “He won’t stop until you are dead, Kal,” she said.

“And the moment I kill him,” Clark replied, “is the moment the world stops trusting me again.” He shivered – even now, five years after the fact, he still had nightmares about Zod’s death; try as he might, he could not see any way he could have stopped that monster but it haunted him still – and glanced at her. “As long as he focuses on me,” Clark said, “he’s less likely to target his madness against others.” She frowned and he continued before she could respond. “Kara is having difficulty with fine control of her strength,” he said as they continued to gain altitude. “And it’s frustrating the hell out of her. Out of both of us, actually.” Diana nodded her understanding. “So I want to bounce an idea off you,” he said.

Kara Zor-El was, in Diana’s opinion, a smug, self-centered, conceited, spoiled fool of a girl.

Kal’s cousin had barely set foot upon Themyscira before she began complaining about the lack of the comforts she was accustomed to. The architecture and general lack of technology appeared to displease her, and the expectation that she would assist in the various manual labor chores necessary caused almost open shock, but the discovery that she would be instructed in the use of martial weapons almost caused open panic.

“I am a member of the House of El,” she said, disgust dripping off her words. She spoke English reasonably well now, though with a curious accent. “We are Thinkers, not Warriors.” Diana looked at her calmly – Kal had warned her she might be recalcitrant because, according to him, Kryptonians were so rigid in their mindsets, one could barely reason with them; she still wondered if he noticed the irony of the statement, considering the source – and then did the only thing she could in this situation.

She punched Kara in the face.
It was hardly a real blow – she’d traded harsher strikes with Kal during their all too infrequent sparing sessions and was fairly confident that Bruce would have been able to take this strike with little more than a deep bruise – but from the way Kara reacted, one would think she had been gutted by a spear. The Kryptonian girl staggered back, stumbling over the loose rocks on the training ground before falling back, landing hard on her arse. Diana crossed her arms as she looked down at the girl who was cradling her nose with both hands while tears leaked out of her eyes.

“You struck me!” she said in a high-pitched voice.

“I did,” Diana agreed. She crouched before Kara. “I know this is difficult for you,” she continued, “but your world, your way of doing things? They’re gone.” She watched as the words sank in. “Krypton is lost and there are only two Els remaining. You have to do things differently now.”

“I spent sixteen cycles training to be a member of the Thinker’s Guild!” Kara retorted. According to Kal, she had not yet mastered her heat vision principally because of how uncomfortable it was to utilize, so Diana was not worried about looking the girl in the eyes. “I have no desire to be a warrior!”

“Then don’t be,” Diana replied. “Become the greatest scientist this world has ever known … but you are not leaving this island until I am satisfied that you can defend yourself.” When the girl pouted again, Diana almost sighed. “I promised Kal that I would see this done, child,” she said, “and Hera help me, if I must strip your hide from dusk to dawn to batter some sense into your dense skull, I shall.” A low, delighted laugh from the direction of the queen’s seat almost caused Diana to flush – those were very nearly the same words her mother had told her decades ago when she went through a phase where she had no interest in martial training. Her mother had to be amused at how things had changed. “Beyond this island, the world is a dangerous place,” she continued. “Your cousin tries to better it, not just by example but by deeds.” She frowned. “Is he the only El worthy of that crest?” she asked. “Or are you simply unequal to the task?”

Anger flashed across the girl’s face, followed closely by fear and a quickly buried sadness. Silently, Diana cursed herself – though she might conceal it, this young woman was still grieving for lost family. An idea struck her then and she straightened.

“Donna,” she called out. The summoned girl approached, dressed in the training gear of a warrior’s apprentice, and Kara obviously noticed at once how similar Donna looked to Diana. Even more importantly, she observed her youth. Only a few years separated the two and both were grieving. Where Kara evidently hid away her pain, Donna embraced it and focused into a rage that Diana feared would eat her alive. Perhaps what they both needed was a friend to help them both find some balance. “I am assigning you the duties to teach Kara shield and spear.” Donna opened her mouth to speak but just as quickly snapped her mouth shut. “She has no experience with fighting so teach her well.” Diana returned her eyes to Kara. “What say you, child?” she asked. “Are you as worthy of that crest as your cousin?”

Her jaw tight, Kara Zor-El rose to her feet.

“Teach me,” she commanded.

And Diana smiled.
Experts Baffled By Greek Storm System

Published February 22, 2018 / Ronald Troupe

ATHENS, GREECE. – An unprecedented storm system continues to cover much of mainland Greece in thick clouds, causing massive delays in air travel, according to the Hellenic National Meteorological Service, which said during an emergency bulletin on Tuesday that downpours and thunderstorms are expected to continue and might be accompanied by a shower of hail.

Large hailstones fell in Imathia, central Macedonia, on Tuesday, causing damage to crops, cars, solar panels and resulting in twelve injuries.

This unprecedented storm system developed with little warning and has lingered for much longer than experts believed possible.

Click for more from Daily Planet Online

THE SKY WAS ON FIRE.

Thunder boomed. Lightning stabbed downward, exploding against the mountain surface with a shower of dirt and shattered rock. Dark clouds blocked out the sun, but there was no rain despite the atmospheric conditions so conducive to it. The wine-dark sea rolled and twisted, churning angrily as if in response to the fierce storm overhead. Diving temperatures chilled the air, despite the time of year.

And floating in the middle of the Aegean Sea was a woman.

Waves carried the battered figure toward a desolate stretch of abandoned beach, hurling her ever closer toward looming rocks that jutted up and out of the water, but somehow, she missed them all, as if the sea itself was protecting her, cradling her, directing her. Barely aware of her surroundings, she instinctively dragged herself forward when her feet touched solid ground, finally collapsing on the white sand where she lingered in that hazy twilight halfway between consciousness and complete oblivion. Her garments were torn and shredded, and her exposed skin was criss-crossed with cuts and slashes. Bruises decorated her face and arms. Great chunks of her sodden hair had been hacked free. She looked more dead than alive.

Thus, Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, returned to Greece.

She jolted awake a long time later.

Her body trembled as cold wind continued to wail and she groaned with the effort needed to crawl to her knees. She looked down, noting with exhausted relief that her left hand was still balled up in a tight fist. The sharp contours of the totem presented to her by Hermes himself dug into her palm, but she ignored the discomfort. Pain could be managed.

With agonizing slowness, Hippolyta staggered to her feet. Muscles stiff from abuse, she bit back the urge to weep when her footing faltered and she stumbled to her knees. Still shivering, she hugged her arms around her body in a desperate attempt to retain warmth before glancing around in a vain effort to identify her surroundings – the air tasted like home, but the rocks were not familiar. She could not
see the sun because of the clouds so she knew not what time of day it was, but none of that was important. All that mattered was accomplishing her task.

Her entire body trembling, she limped away from the beach, clutching the tattered remains of her clothes tighter. Each step was agony – her left knee was swollen and both of her feet were bloody – but she limped forward, forcing herself to stay in motion, to not falter even a single step. The totem in her left hand dug deeper into her skin, but that gave her something to focus on, something to light the last flickering embers of hope.

“One time and one time only,” Hermes had told her when he pulled her free from the Oracles’ abode, “that totem will take you to where you must go.” The god looked at her, bleeding and beaten himself, and smiled. “Husband your strength, Hippolyta, for it will be needed in the coming days. We … all of us are relying on your strength.”

And then, she’d been falling from the heavens. The dark sea had rushed up to meet her, accepting her into Poseidon’s embrace, but he had spat her out and carried her here.

Light and sound drew her on – she could hear laughter and other sounds of merriment – and she limped through the haze of pain of exhaustion. The mission … her task … she could not fail. By Hera, she would not fail.

“Oh, my God!” a masculine voice cried out. The light suddenly blinded her and Hippolyta automatically threw up her right hand to shield her face. It took a long eternity for her brain to fully register the voice and the language, but by then, there were already others crowding around her, throwing warm blankets over her shoulders and directing her toward more light. There were too many voices speaking at once for her to fully register what was being said – instinctive fear swelled up when she heard Men and she recoiled away from them, at which point they were promptly replaced by women who spoke in soothing tones.

“Go get Doctor Kapatelis!” one of the women snapped as she and another maneuvered Hippolyta into a camp chair of some sort. “Kelly, I need that first aid kit of yours!” The woman touched Hippolyta on the face. “Ma’am?” she said. “You’re safe now. You can relax.”

“Not safe,” Hippolyta replied, unknowingly slipping into her native tongue.

“I’ve never heard that dialect before,” a newcomer announced. She was older than the rest, with short-cropped white-streaked blonde hair and unusual-looking spectacles perched upon her nose. Two men – boys, really; Hippolyta doubted they had seen twenty summers yet – hovered anxiously by her side, and the matron quickly jerked her head to the left. “Bobby, go get the truck ready.” One of the boys sprang to obey. “Jimmy, get on the phone and try to find out if there’s a doctor in town.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the other boy said. He too fled.

“My name is Julia Kapatelis,” the woman said in fluent Greek, though it was the modern dialect Hippolyta disliked so much because it lacked the poetry of the tongue she knew. “Can you understand me?”

“I speak English,” Hippolyta replied after a long moment. She hugged the blankets closer and looked around. “Where … where am I?”

“Skryos,” the woman replied. “This is an archeological dig but we thought there was no one around for ten miles or so.” She frowned. “May I ask your name?” Hippolyta opened her mouth to respond, to answer with the truth, but prudence held her tongue. Ares would be looking for her now. He would have to know she was no longer a captive and his rage would be terrible to behold. Hippolyta
“Lyta,” she said, though no one but Antiope had used it in her youth. Even Phillipus was more formal when they were alone and the gods knew she had more right any other to be free with her tongue. “I must get away from here,” she said quickly. “I must …” She trailed off. Where would she go? The Oracles had given her the answer but she had not the wit to puzzle it out, not when the whole of creation and her Amazons suffered, not when Ares …

Overhead, thunder cracked again and lightning lanced across the sky. The wind, which had eased, picked up once more, shrieking with Ares’ rage as he unleashed the power now at his fingertips. Torrential rains fell, pelting the ground and skin alike with bruising force. Kapatelis and her students – for what else could she be other than a teacher? – reacted with great consternation, while Hippolyta buried herself deeper within the blankets. It had been a mistake to sit. Now, her body, so long abused, demanded rest.

“That’s it,” Kapatelis announced loudly. “Pack it up. We’re breaking camp and heading back before this storm gets completely out of hand.” There were a few groans and some muttered comments, though they were lost in the rapid thunder. Flashes of great streaks of lightning coursed downward, stabbing into the Aegean. Despite her exhaustion, Hippolyta smiled then. So, Poseidon had not knelt before him. Perhaps there was time yet.

She lost track of time as her mind, dulled by days of pain and lack of sleep, drifted, but somehow, Kapatelis managed to get her into one of the horseless wagons where it was blessedly dry and even warmer than before.

“I must not slumber!” Hippolyta told herself, but she slipped closer and closer to darkness with each moment that passed.

“It’s cold where we’re going,” Kapatelis’ question came out of nowhere and jolted Hippolyta awake. She turned bleary eyes to the woman who was seated behind a circle of some unusual composition. It was a directional aid of some sort, like a tiller, though she did something with her feet to make this conveyance move. Hippolyta studied the woman’s profile for a moment, opening her senses to her host’s spirit. Warmth and peace washed over her and, for the first time in a very long time, Hippolyta relaxed.

“Yes,” she replied softly. “Thetis brought you to us when you were a child,” she continued, once more unconsciously lapsing into her native language. “Pythia blessed you, I think, after Epione tended to you.” She smiled sadly. “Diana was the only one who could calm you when you grew fussy.”

She realized that her host had grown silent and looked to her left. Kapatelis’ eyes were locked on the road stretching out before them, but her hands clung so tightly to the round tiller device that Hippolyta could see her knuckles had turned white.

“Dear God,” the woman murmured. “That actually happened.” She shuddered. Finally, she turned her head to meet Hippolyta’s eyes. “Who are you really?” she asked.

“Hippolyta. I am queen of Themyscira, of the twin nations of Amazons.” Hippolyta grimaced. “In exile now, seeking an answer to a riddle that will once again free my sisters from bondage.” Her sisters … and her daughter.

A riddle. That was it. Had not Diana regaled her with tales from that ally of hers, the one she called Bat-Man? He had a foe who taunted with riddles and this Bat-Man solved them. And did not the riddle itself speak of his wisdom? Silently, she thanked Athena for the knowledge imparted to her. There was still a chance…

“I must escape Greece,” she said. “How far is this Gotham?” Kapatelis blinked.
“Gotham City?” She looked incredulous. “Why the hell would you want to go there?” Hippolyta
leaned back in her seat and shivered.

“Because Ares has taken Zeus’ thunderbolt,” she whispered, “and there is one in this Gotham place
that might answer a riddle given to me by Apollo’s Oracles.”

Two days later, she was airborne, traveling upon one of the fantastic marvels of this age.

With no way to directly contact this Bat-Man – Julia admitted that she had, until Hippolyta spoke of
him, thought he was a myth of some sort since he was never photographed or seen among the Justice
League – the next course of action was to seek him out. From Skyros, they took a ferry to the town
of Kymi, and then climbed aboard a long conveyance Julia called a bus. It took them to Athens …
which looked nothing like Hippolyta remembered it from her last visit, nigh on four hundred years
earlier. Once in Athens, Julia made a few calls before producing a set of documents that amusingly
identified Hippolyta as her daughter, Vanessa. As the trip would cost a considerable amount of
money, Hippolyta then directed her to a known contact inside Athens; an Amazon who had grown
weary of Paradise, Orithia had traveled to Man’s World thirty years earlier where she lived as a
mortal and discreetly watched over the many financial accounts Themyscira had set up decades
earlier for their rare ventures into Patriarch’s World. At the now aged Orithia’s urging, Hippolyta
upgraded their tickets to something called first class.

The flying conveyance – an airplane, Julia called it – carried them into the sky, which Hippolyta
would have marveled at any other time but her concern over Diana, over Donna, over Phillipus and
the other Amazons gnawed at her belly. She drank too much of the offered alcohol, though it was
weak stuff, barely worth using as even medicinal cleansing, and found her appetite was absent.
When they landed some four hours later, she was distraught to learn this was but the first leg of the
trip and the rest would take another eight hours.

Her sleep during this second flight was fitful and unsatisfying. The dreams Morpheus visited upon
her were dark and terrible, of Diana subjugated by the hateful Ares now that he usurped his father’s
crown, or of the same depredations being visited upon young Donna who was blossoming into the
same beauty as Diana, or loyal and much-loved Phillipus breaking under the lord of slaughter.
Twice, she jolted awake, very nearly convinced that Ares had unleashed Deimos and Phobos upon
them, but Julia calmed her fears with the revelation that the storm over Greece was still raging.
Hippolyta took great comfort in the knowledge that Poseidon refused to yield – in his honor, she
would personally see that a great temple be erected in his honor, one much larger and more elaborate
than the shrine he currently possessed.

It was dark when they landed in Gotham, but even the air had a dark and sinister smell to it. Men and
women alike eyed them as they departed the airport, and Hippolyta could not tell which of them
seemed more dangerous. Julia arranged for them to be taken to a place where they could sleep –
Kapatelis was visibly exhausted, but Hippolyta could feel the too familiar sensation of a hunt
drawing to a close. She pointed to a great symbol of light being projected onto a towering building of
glass and metal.

It was a symbol of a bat.

“There!” she exclaimed. “What is that?”

“That’s the Bat Signal, Lady,” the driver of this conveyance said. His English was slurred and
difficult to comprehend. “The police usually just light it when one of the crazies are loose.” He
offered a yellow-toothed smile. “That generally means a bunch of mooks are going to have a really
bad night.”
“Take me to it,” Hippolyta demanded. When he started to protest, she thrust a handful of the paper currency Julia said was so precious in this world. “Take me there now.”

The driver obeyed.

“It’s a police station,” Julia identified in Greek when they arrived and exited the foul-smelling yellow vehicle. The light had long since gone out, but Hippolyta guessed it was stored upon the rooftop. “They won’t let us in,” she added. Hippolyta frowned.

“Police.” The word was close enough to the Greek πολιτεία that she recognized the intent. “We shall say nothing to them then.”

Once inside, she directed Julia to seek a place of safety before setting off for the roof. Accessing it turned out to be less difficult than she anticipated – first, she used the stairs to reach the topmost floor where she quickly found the door to the roof was tightly secured. This led her to stealthily maneuvering through the upper floor, seeking an unattended and open door. From there, she simply climbed through a window and ascended the last few feet by hand.

The source of the great light was immediately obvious – a large, round device with a bat emblem secured to the clear surface. She hunted around for the activation lever or device, but could not find it. Frustration boiled in her belly.

“The roof is off limits, ma’am,” a stern voice declared. She whirled and found herself looking at three men, two of which were dressed in the blue uniform she had seen so much of. The third was more comfortably attired, with a brown long coat and clothes that looked to have been recently slept in. He was unshaven and the mustache adorning his upper lip was peppered with white. Thick spectacles covered his eyes. More importantly, he wore authority and control like a prince.

“If you know a quicker way to summon this … Bat-Man of yours,” Hippolyta replied sharply, “then speak now! I have need of his counsel at once!” The two men in blue exchanged a look – she recognized its unspoken meaning, that she sounded like a madwoman – and, as one, dropped their hands to the weapons holstered at their sides. Hippolyta stiffened at the threat and allowed her arms to relax. The bracers shifted slightly against her skin and she drew breath in preparation for battle.

But the mustached man did not issue the order to attack. Instead, his eyes flickered to her arms and he frowned.

“Commissioner?” one of the blue-garbed men asked, but he shook his head.

“I’ve seen those kinds of bracelets before,” he said softly, his voice clearly not intended for Hippolyta’s ears. “My name is Jim Gordon,” he continued in a louder voice.


“I already did.”

Hippolyta frowned. She opened her mouth to comment, but suddenly sensed a shadowy presence to her right that had not been there before. Moving quickly, she half spun, instinctively bringing up her bracers to ward off any impending attack. The horned shadow did not move from where it was perched and, when it spoke, its voice was dark, raspy and not entirely human.

“Hippolyta,” it growled. “Queen of Themyscira and regent of the two tribes.” The shadow tilted its head toward Jim Gordon. “I’ll handle this.” Gordon turned away, shaking his head and muttering something under his breath, but Hippolyta kept her eyes on the black shape. He moved closer,
resolving into a man wearing blackened armor and a dark cloak. “I’m presuming there’s a reason why you’re in Gotham,” he rasped.

“Ares,” she said sharply. “He has taken Zeus’s thunderbolt, seized his crown … and my Amazons are once more prisoners to his madness.” The dark figure stiffened.

“Diana?” he asked.

“Taken,” Hippolyta growled. “I sought the means to help my tribes but the Oracles gave me nothing more than a useless riddle!” Fear weakened her legs – Diana had been in Ares’ hands for three days, perhaps four now. Hippolyta wanted to scream.

“What riddle?” the Bat-Man asked. Every line in his body betrayed his concern. He held up his hand before she could speak. “They gave it to you in Greek?” he asked. Hippolyta looked at him – what kind of foolish question was that? Of course they did! – and nodded. “Then don’t translate. Let me hear it exactly as they told you.” She felt a hot flash of self-disgust flood through her then. His logic was faultless. English was far from her first language and some of the nuances … Hippolyta shook her head, cleared her thoughts, and began to speak.

“Hear your fate, O dwellers in Themyscira of green leaves,” she recited, “When your famed, great town is sacked by Zeus' ruin, Then must she who wears the crown on troubled brow, Seek out the wisdom of bats to point the way, For not the strength of lions or of bulls shall hold the bane, Strength against strength; for he holds the power of Zeus, And will not be checked until the voice of the One God stands on Olympus high.”

The Bat-Man was silent for such a long moment that Hippolyta almost wondered if she would need to repeat the prophecy. Finally, he grunted.

“Similar phrasing to what the Spartans received prior to Thermopylae,” he growled. “Voice of the One God … “ Abruptly, he stiffened, snapping his head around to pin Hippolyta with his white eyes. “How reliable is this … prophecy?” he demanded.

“It came from Apollo’s own Oracles,” she retorted. Hope, long since forgotten, burned in her chest. He had guessed something. With a flick of his cape, he extracted something from his belt and brought to his lips.

“It’s me,” he said into it. “I need you in Gotham immediately.” There was a crackle – evidently, this Bat-Man heard something she did not because he spoke again. “It’s about Diana.” The crackle happened again and he lowered his arm.

“You have summoned someone,” Hippolyta said eagerly, forgetting for a moment that he was a Man. “Who?”

“The Voice of God,” he replied wryly. A distant boom echoed over the city and a streak of light falling from the sky drew her attention. Heat boiled off the new arrival as he came to a sudden and complete stop just above the roof. His distinctive crest drew Hippolyta’s eye and she glanced up. He was taller than she expected, with a broad chest, powerful arms and a face that she recognized as being quite appealing. The blue garment he wore appeared to be some form of armor, though if half of what Diana had said of him was true, she could not understand why he would need it. His eyes were the same startling blue that his cousin’s were and they widened as soon as he saw her. She froze at the very rapid eye flick he gave her – from face, to arms to the uncomfortable clothes Julia
“Queen Hippolyta?” he guessed, eyes flickering back and forth between her and this Bat-Man. “If this is about Kara, she should be back on the Earth next week.” Hippolyta hesitated – Hera, could this have been prevented if she withheld her permission for Kara Zor-El to visit her dead world with the Green Lantern John Stewart? – but the Bat-Man spoke into the brief silence.

“It’s Ares,” he rasped. The Kryptonian – Kal-El, Hippolyta reminded herself before suddenly realizing what the Bat-Man had noticed. Was it truly that simple? She wanted to howl at her oversight – gave his dark-clad ally a sour look. The Bat-Man did something underneath his cape and, when he spoke again, he sounded like a normal man. “He’s taken over Olympus.”


“Okay,” he started to say, his expression indicating hesitant disbelief. Hippolyta wanted to shake him – Diana often had commented with equal parts amusement and annoyance about this man’s continuing disbelief in magic.

“He has Diana.” The Bat-Man’s pronouncement caused an instant reaction – Kal-El stiffened and his expression darkened rapidly.

“I see.” His voice was a low, angry rumble, like that of an oncoming storm, and the skin underneath his eyes darkened to a reddish color. “Tell me everything,” he ordered, his voice brooking no dissent. So Hippolyta obeyed.

She told them how unprepared Themyscira was when the first lightning bolts fell from the sky, how Ares’ inhuman forces fell upon their defenses and obliterated them, how fully half the Bana-Mighdall never answered the call to arms, though she knew not whether that was because they were traitors or if they were already slain. Diana’s fearless defense against the creatures of fear and terror she spoke of, and how Zeus’ thunderbolts dashed her to the ground where the foul creatures bound her in unbreakable chains. Artemis of the Bana-Mighdall had rallied to her princess’ side, though that was no surprise as she was ever the most loyal to Diana, but she too was overpowered and bound. Hippolyta spoke only briefly of Donna’s capture or of brave Phillipus’ sacrifice – if she was alive or dead, Hippolyta knew not – to free the queen from her own torture and bondage. She only briefly spoke of the travails she faced in her efforts to reach Apollo’s Oracles who gave her a riddle, and then Hermes snatching her away before he cast her into the sea.

And during her quickly spoken tale, she could not help but to observe the effect her words had upon these two males. They exchanged a single look early on and the rage on their faces grew with each world. The Bat-Man she could only read by his lips, and his constant opening and closing of his fists, but Kal-El … his features were easily deciphered. Hippolyta had seen this look many times before.

He was in a killing mood.

“How do we get to Olympus?” he asked in a very low, very dangerous voice. The Bat-Man was watching him and making no attempt to hide it.

“Clark,” the dark-clad man said but Kal-El silenced him with a glare.

“Shut up,” he snapped. “This is Diana. She’d walk through fire for us. I’ll be damned if I won’t do the same for her.” He returned his cold blue eyes to Hippolyta and she held out the totem she’d barely put down since she received it.

“Hermes said I could use this,” she said. Her skin crawled at the thought of what she had to say next.
“You will need to touch me when I invoke its magics.” Kal-El did so at once – merciful Hera, his skin was hot! – but so did the Bat-Man. Hippolyta thrust aside the nausea swimming in her stomach and instead focused on her need. Mount Olympus. She needed to be there alongside these men.

Something unseen tugged at her. It burned and froze and healed, all at the same time, and she let it surround her, envelop her, become her. She was certain that, for a heartbeat, she could almost hear Hermes’ soft laugh.

And then, the world exploded around them.

Her vision cleared long before her ears stopped ringing.

They had materialized within a massive throne room, decorated by elaborate statues and marble friezes that, somehow, moved. Dominating the center of this chamber was an elaborate globe that looked exactly like the world of men, albeit on a much smaller scale. The small planet slowly revolved in place, with cloud cover obscuring some parts of it and leaving other places open to view.

A ring of high-backed seats circled the globe, but most of them were not occupied. Instead, the Olympians who should have been sitting proudly were chained to the floor, on their knees, many bearing physical injuries and other signs of abuse. At a glance, Hippolyta recognized them immediately: Apollo, Athena still wearing her golden, face-concealing helmet, Hephaestus, Hermes, and even Hera. Hephaestus especially looked to have singled out for great pain – his already deformed leg was bent back in a direction nature had never intended for it to bend and his face was barely recognizable underneath the bruises and cuts. Notable in their absence were both Hades and Poseidon.

But all of this, Hippolyta saw without truly comprehending. Her eyes were locked upon the three kneeling forms next to the massive throne that sat upon a raised dais. Two of them were female, one was almost certainly Zeus himself, but none of them were clothed. She barely recognized Diana underneath the golden chains that hid some of the bruises and cuts, but the other woman, who had suffered even greater was undeniably Aphrodite. Rage trembled in Hippolyta’s heart, rage and fear, but she was frozen in place, unable to move as Ares slowly rose from where his lounged in his father’s chair.

His armor glittered and danced in the light thrown off by brilliant Apollo, and he was not wearing a helmet for a change, revealing the cruel face of a boy only just into adulthood. Malice gleamed in his eyes and, when he smiled, lightning crawled down his arms and enveloped his hands.

“What is this?” he demanded in a voice that echoed like thunder. “Mortals in Olympus unsummoned?” With a casual gesture, he sent a bolt of lightning flashing toward Hermes. Held down by restraints, the god could not dodge and caught the blast full on the chest. He shrieked as his muscles twitched and shuddered. “I know this is your doing, Brother,” Ares snarled.

“Enough.” Kal-El rose from the floor, his hands clenched tightly as he glared at Ares. His feet did not touch the ground as he began floating toward Ares who looked at him with surprise.

And then laughed.

“Is this the best you can do?” he roared. “This is the Champion you choose?” He shifted his cruel eyes to Hippolyta. “A man,” he said with a black smile. “You sought out a Man to fight for you.”

“My name,” the Kryptonian said in a flat, unemotional voice, “is Kal-El.” The skin around his eyes began to turn red. “In Hebrew,” he continued through clenched teeth, “it means Voice of God.” Ares
“Well, then, Kryptonian,” the god of war said as he raised his hands and summoned his father’s thunderbolt, “let us see-”

He never finished his threat.

In mid-sentence, Kal-El blurred forward, slamming into Ares with a titanic boom that shook the entire throne room and carried them both through the marble wall. They disappeared from sight for a moment, but then, the Kryptonian tumbled back, lightning dancing up and down his body. He did not cry out, but instead, focused his eyes on the laughing Ares. Heat boiled out of his eyes, carving a lethal gouge into the god of war’s armor. This time, it was Ares who cried out in pain and surprise, but Kal-El flashed forward once more, his hands moving so fast they seemed to be a solid wall of motion. He struck, again and again and again, each blow shaking the throne room. At no time did the burning light from his eyes cease and Ares staggered back from the onslaught.

But Hippolyta knew it would not be enough.

As the god of war, Ares was simply too great, too powerful to be defeated by a mere man, no matter the world of his birth. This man, this Superman would fall. She did not care, though – as long as Ares was occupied long enough for her to rescue Diana, the entire world could burn. Without a word, she sprinted forward, kneeling before her battered daughter and fumbling with the golden chains wrapped around her. Pain stabbed through her body as she touched the metallic links and she snatched back her fingers. She tried once more, pushing aside the resulting agony as the enchanted links resisted all efforts to be moved. Despair started to set in and she looked around for something, anything that might help her.

Instead, she found the Bat-Man.

He was on the far side of the throne room, kneeling before the shackled Apollo and whispering urgently while pointing the direction of the fight still taking place. To Hippolyta’s surprise, the god of the sun smiled and quickly nodded, to which the Bat-Man backpedaled away quickly, raising his dark cape to cover his face. Hippolyta did not know why … but a moment later, cried out in surprise.

For Apollo, god of light, began to glow.

It was as if the sun itself had visited Olympus, and Hippolyta quickly shielded her eyes. She did not understand why the Bat-Man had urged this, but returning her gaze to the fight, she began to comprehend.

Ares’ armor hung off his body in shattered scraps, dented and scorched alike, but still, Kal-El attacked. With each moment, he seemed to grow stronger, more powerful, faster … and angrier. Even Ares’ counter-strikes of lightning or weapon seemed incapable of slowing the Kryptonian down. He batted aside wild sword blows, slid out of the way of lightning blasts or simply took them upon the chest without blinking as he continued to strike. His own armor suffered nearly as much damage as Ares’, with great chunks of it torn free and smoking, but Hippolyta could see the skin underneath heal from any wounds inflicted almost instantly. The sun. It was making him stronger.

Ares was not as fortunate.

With vicious brutality, Kal-El unleashed a terrifying wrath upon the god of war. He battered Ares mercilessly, throwing him into walls with such force that godly-crafted marble shattered, and then followed up with blurring punches and kicks that came on at impossible speeds. The heat from his eyes ignited Ares’ hair and scorched flesh, but still, he came on, dodging and parrying the god’s
counterblows with startling speed and moves Hippolyta recognized as coming from Amazon training.

Weak lightning splashed against Kal-El’s sigil as Ares steadily weakened until finally, the Kryptonian’s hand darted out and seized the god of war by the throat. He slammed Ares into a wall – it buckled and trembled under the impact – and held him there with a grip of iron. The electricity crawling around the god’s arms flickered and faded, before flashing across the throne room where it enveloped the shackled Zeus. With a roar, the father of the gods rose to his feet as his power flooded back into him. His chains broke apart with a thunderclap.

“Enough!” he bellowed, his words an ironic echo to Kal-El’s colder declaration moments earlier. With an almost casual gesture, Zeus sent streaks of lightning toward the other imprisoned Olympians – like a living thing, it crawled and danced, shattering the locks and chains holding them down. Those that could – Apollo, Athena, Hera – rose, and Zeus turned his eyes briefly upon Hippolyta. She felt the heat of his gaze but refused to look from where she held onto Diana’s hand. “He is beaten, Kryptonian,” Zeus thundered. “Release him.”

“Why?” Kal-El’s response was low and hard. He had not budged from where he stood, holding the barely conscious god of war against the cracked marble wall. “He’ll just keep doing this, over and over and over, until he wins.” There was a knowing tone to his voice and the Kryptonian narrowed his eyes. “Or you kill him.”

“Kal-El.” Strangely, it was Athena who spoke. The grey-eyed lady strode forward, her features still hidden behind her golden helmet. Only her eyes could be seen. When she spoke again, it was in a tongue Hippolyta knew not. Her words instantly caused Kal-El’s head to snap around – he narrowed his already suspicious eyes and stared at Athena. She spoke … but he did not budge.

“Kal,” Diana murmured softly. The chains that had been holding her were gone, dissolving into dust. She clung to Hippolyta but stared at the Kryptonian through swollen eyes. “Please.”

For a moment, he did not react. He stared at Ares, his arm unmoving as he held the god of war by the throat. Finally, he inhaled.

“Listen to me, you piece of crap,” he said in a voice that could crack ice. “If you touch her again, if you touch any of them again, I will end you.” With a mighty heave, he hurled Ares toward the ground in front of Zeus – stone cracked under the impact. The Kryptonian glared once more at the unmoving god of war before floating toward Hippolyta. He did something to his gauntlet which promptly released his scarlet cape. Without a word, he knelt beside Hippolyta and offered the garment to cover Diana. “She needs immediate medical attention,” he began.

Events happened quickly then and it was only later, when she was no longer fully focused on Diana that some of the more worrisome elements came to mind.

First, Zeus convened a quick summit of the Olympians present – only Apollo ignored him as he attended to the wounded; Hephaestus, the most badly injured, refused to be healed until Aphrodite’s pains were eased, a gesture that did not go unnoticed by the goddess of love, though at the time, Hippolyta did not even realize what had happened. When Apollo touched Diana with his glowing hands, the bruises and cuts faded away, and she exhaled deeply before sliding into a deep sleep.

“She will sleep for a time,” the god of the sun said before he moved on. Hippolyta almost sobbed with relief and clung to her daughter with tight arms. She would live. She was safe. By the Fates, Diana was safe.
“For crimes against this throne,” Zeus rumbled some time later, “you are stripped of your birthright and banished to Tartarus for all of time.” Ares tried to reply, but his jaw was broken and Zeus paid him no mind. Instead, he placed his hand, surging with electricity, upon the god of war’s chest. Light flashed then, so bright that it blinded, and when he withdrew his hand, Zeus seemed even greater than before. “Take him hence, Hermes.” The god of boundaries touched the barely moving Ares and both vanished with a soft pop.

Zeus then turned to other matters, other crimes. Hippolyta herself stood accused of breaking a great law, of bringing mortals to Olympus itself, but many of the other gods spoke up for her. The Kryptonian was barely mortal, Hera declared, and thus did not count. Athena countered by declaring the Bat-Man was descended from wily Telemachus, sired by the mighty Odysseus, who was himself a descendant of Aeolus; had he chosen the totem of an owl, she said, she would claim him as her own. At that very moment, Hermes returned and claimed distant kinship by that same lineage, a fact which visibly disturbed the Bat-Man greatly. Apollo raised the stakes by declaring he would openly stand against Zeus should the Thunderer chose to punish Hippolyta or the mortals she had brought to their salvation.

“And I would have a mighty weapon at my disposal should the need call for it,” Apollo concluded, flashing brightly just long enough to remind everyone how powerful his assistance had made Kal-El.

And through it all, the Kryptonian was an unmoving, silent guardian who stood between Diana and the Olympians, as if he meant to throw them down as well. It was … he was …

He was terrifying.

How would anyone, even Diana, be able to stop him when he went insane with power? The gods themselves feared him, though they cloaked it in terms they hoped would hide their cowardice, and after what she had seen, Hippolyta understood that fear. Herakles, at his worst, would not slow this potential monster down for more than a short time. And Diana claimed to be his friend. Hippolyta shivered, but held her tongue and swallowed her terror. He was the starving tiger she rode into a battle she could not have otherwise won; as long as she could aim him toward her enemies, she might be safe. Perhaps that was why Diana befriended him? No, her daughter was too honest to do such a thing.

She was never happier than when Hermes returned her and Diana to Themyscira with a further promise to begin returning the captive Amazons, hidden away by Ares but easily accessible to him. The Kryptonian and the Bat-Man were in attendance when Hermes translocated them from Olympus to her home, but Kal-El held onto his dark-clad ally and they both hovered a solid foot above the green grass.

“I know your law, Highness,” he said simply when she looked at him. “No men may walk the ground of Themyscira.”

Hermes took them away then, after the Bat-Man provided her with a speaking device that would allow her to communicate with the Justice League and keep them apprised of Diana’s condition, and, for a time, the island was empty save she and her daughter. Alone, finally safe, her composure cracked and she wept, letting all of the fear and pain and misery drain away. Her daughter would live. By the gods, her daughter would live!

Diana slumbered for nearly a week, barely moving, barely breathing. Over that time, Hermes appeared sporadically, each time bringing with him more of the displaced or abused Amazons. Some, like Donna and Artemis alike, were filled with fury and rage over what had been done to them, but most simply accepted it for what it was, another instance where the gods were cruel and petty. Those wounded – Phillipus, for example, and Hippolyta was nearly undone with relief at
seeing her still alive – recovered, but there were many slain to be given the final rites. The day after
the first of these funeral pyres, the Nereides appeared with new daughters, children who would have
been lost in Poseidon’s watery grasp. They were orphans all, infants and toddlers, and would be
raised as Amazons. Some believed their lost lovers had been reborn in the bodies of these infants,
others wept at the loss of their spirits, but all rejoiced at the new children. Soon, Themyscira was
once again filled with joy and laughter.

Somehow, the tale of what had transpired and Ares’ punishment became known throughout the
island and it brought greater change than Hippolyta could have ever expected. Women who had
thrived on their misandry – the warrior Daphne, or Faruka whose hatred of men was eclipsed only
by her love of pears – openly and publicly wondered how they could honor this … Superman. He
had saved them from further abuse and rape, and defeating Ares? Why even Herakles could not
manage such a task! Murmured questions became open debate, and with each suggestion, Hippolyta
cringed. Could they not see the danger here? Herakles had seemed trustworthy at first and they were
still suffering from that miscalculation. This Kryptonian, this Kal-El was potentially more terrifying
than ten Herakles!

Time passed. The question of honoring Kal-El continued to simmer but never became a truly
important issue as Hippolyta refused to acknowledge it. Diana woke, rejoiced in her sisters’ freedom,
and then returned once more to Man’s World to resume her hopeless task to ‘wage peace.’ She
would return briefly, bringing with her to visit Julia Kapatelis, to whom they owed so much. Donna
resumed her studies, still gathering a rapt Bana-Mighdall retinue who hung on her every word. Kara
Zor-El returned from her visit to the stars and her lost homeworld. She was more subdued now, less
prone to hysterics or spoiled tantrums, and began to embrace the lessons in a strange, analytical
method devoid of much passion. She rarely wore her Kryptonian sigil, which suited Hippolyta fine –
at some point, the strange notion of molding the girl into a defensive weapon against a potential
onslaught by Kal-El occurred to her and, try as she might, Hippolyta could not shake it. At no time
did she truly act upon it beyond a few leading remarks or subtle hints intended to more firmly align
the girl with Amazonian tenets. Life resumed normalcy.

But even with this, even with the discovery that the Bana-Mighdall had not betrayed them and had
been instead deceived and harmed themselves by Circe before Pallas-Athena located and rescued
them, Hippolyta could not forget the terrible specter of Kal-El holding Ares by the throat.

“If you touch her again,” he had snarled, “if you touch any of them again, I will end you.” Did that
mean he thought of Diana and, by default, the Amazons as his now? All of them owed him a debt …
but what would he expect in payment? How long would it be before he came, demanding their
obedience? Hippolyta shivered.

“Are you well?” The question caught her by surprise and she nearly sprang up, but just as quickly,
turned her defensive stance into a kneel as she caught sight of the golden helmet. Pallas Athena stood
calmly by the archway of her chambers that opened up to the sea. Once more, she was clothed in
sparkling mail or clothes that doubled as armor, and her eyes, still the only feature Hippolyta could
see, appeared content.

“Forgive me, my lady,” Hippolyta began, but Athena waved it off.

“There is nothing to forgive,” she said. To her surprise, Athena then removed her concealing helmet.
Golden hair fell down her back, but it was her face that gave Hippolyta pause, for she had seen this
woman before. Or rather, she had seen a young Kryptonian girl who would grow into a face much
like this one. Athena gave her a soft, knowing smile but did not explain the resemblance.

“You have endured much in the name of the Olympians,” she said simply, “and I am loath to ask for
more, but I must charge you with a sacred task.”

“Command me and I shall obey,” Hippolyta replied through tight lips. Her emotions were still too raw for proper respect, but she’d interacted with Athena enough to know the gray-eyed lady would forgive her.

“This helmet must be hidden away for a time,” the goddess said. “Events have been set into motion and the Lords of Chaos would seek it out to slay him but Nabu is not yet ready to return.” Hippolyta blinked. Nabu? She did not know that name. Athena smiled as she looked at it. “He and I … we have long been old allies, but it is time for us to part ways.” It might have been Hippolyta’s imagination, but she could swear the empty eye slits of the helmet flashed briefly. “When his time returns, Nabu will make it known.” She held out the golden helmet and Hippolyta hesitantly accepted it.

Ice filled her veins the instant her fingers touched the metal … if it was metal. There was a presence, an immensely powerful sense of … something lurking just out of sight and she felt a staggering sensation of disapproval. Her island had fallen into Chaos and needed to be righted. For a heartbeat, the urge to don the helmet came to her, but it faded, as if it were the action of a weakened woman summoning her strength after a long illness but finding it inadequate. Hippolyta tore her eyes away from the helmet.

But Athena was gone.

And the helmet … the helmet was just empty metal once more.

Hippolyta shivered.
Year Seven: Bridges

Supreme Court Refuses to Hear Luthor Appeal

Published November 3, 2019 / James Olsen

METROPOLIS, N.Y. – Death inched closer to Alexander Luthor on Tuesday, when the U.S. Supreme Court rejected the best legal chance the convicted murderer had left to avoid execution.

Luthor was sentenced to die for killing thirty-six people two years ago in Denver, although the former CEO of LexCorp insists he was framed by Superman.

In a list of unsigned orders issued Tuesday, the nation’s highest court said it would not hear the last appeal Luthor is legally guaranteed, bringing an end to a very quick appellate process and clearing the way for an execution date to be set. Luthor, 48, may file further appeals, but they are not certain to delay his execution by much time.

Click for more from Daily Planet Online

IT WAS THE ONE SENTENCE NO MAN EVER WANTED TO HEAR.

“We need to talk.”

The previous times he’d heard this – from Lana in his senior year of high school, from Lori in college, from Chrissy when he was on walkabout – Clark had been caught completely by surprise. In each case, it was followed quickly by the ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ explanation, even though he knew that, no matter what they said, it was him. He was the weirdo, the freak who was so afraid of losing control that he was hesitant about initiating anything resembling physical intimacy, the guy who always had an excuse why they needed to wait, the strange one who just didn’t fit in. With Lois, he’d almost thought they had avoided the issue thanks to her knowing about his otherworldly origins from day one, but, as time passed and he grew more powerful from constant exposure to the sun, their relationship suffered. Even before the incident with Ares and the subsequent super-charge by Apollo, though, he’d almost been afraid to touch her.

As much as he wanted to blame their lack of physical intimacy for this, though, the truth of the matter was they’d been drifting apart for a while now. Their respective jobs certainly did not help – everyone knew Lois was Perry’s heir apparent, even Lombard who wanted the position so bad it hurt, and Clark was spending more time in the cape than he wasn’t. Long ago, they’d agreed to avoid discussing politics – though she hid it really well, Lois actually did believe in a benevolent and helpful government, while Clark trended more toward the libertarian stand on things thanks to his parents, both of whom were rather vocal about their desire to just be left alone – and Lois was almost contemptuous toward football, which Clark still thought to be the greatest game on the planet, even with all the wussification rules that had been forced onto it. Hell, he’d gone to more games with Bruce or Diana than he had with her … what kind of American didn’t want to go to the Super Bowl? And their tastes in music? That was best left untouched – she’d agreed that as long as he didn’t play Johnny Cash in her presence, she would avoid inflicting that urban hip-hop stuff on him.

Food was another thing they argued over – she lived on fast food and takeout, while his travels after his dad’s passing had given him a newfound appreciation for home-cooked meals.

But the biggest point of contention between them was children. He wanted them, she didn’t.
“I’m not mother material,” Lois had insisted each time he brought up the idea of them adopting down the road. Oh, there was never any thought of them actually having a child together, not with the fundamental differences in biology; as far as he could tell, based on genetics alone, the only person on the planet who could bear his child was Kara and even it wasn’t creepy as hell, it wasn’t remotely an option. He’d hoped that, with enough time, Lois would change her mind but if anything, she’d only hardened in her resolve to not be a mother. Her sister’s daughter only cemented her theory and, as much as he hated to, Clark had to admit she was pretty incompetent when it came to little Lacey…

So here they were, alone in her apartment for what would very likely be the last time.

“We need to talk,” Lois repeated. She looked as uncomfortable as he felt, but Clark smiled.

“No, we don’t,” he replied. “You think we should see other people.” Lois’ expression crumpled and she collapsed onto her couch.

“I’m sorry,” she started, but Clark knelt in front of her, a sad smile on his face.

“I think we both knew this was coming,” he said.

“I feel awful,” Lois mumbled. “You deserve someone who can love you for you, not … that.” She punctuated her statement by touching the House of El sigil on his chest. Clark smiled again – in the last couple of months as they tried to work through their problems, she’d been quite vocal about her self-disgust that she was attracted more to the super than to man. He didn’t hold it against her, not with his growing realization that he was drawn more to the ideal she represented than anything else.

“And you deserve some idiot who thinks that golf is actually a sport,” he replied lightly. Despite the situation, Lois laughed out loud. Without warning, she threw herself forward and wrapped both arms around him. He suspected she was hugging him as tightly as possible … but he barely even felt anything.

“I don’t want to lose my best friend,” she whispered. Clark smiled.

“You won’t.” With exaggerated caution, he returned the hug. “I’ll always be around.”

He left a little bit later after promising to have dinner with her this weekend. To his surprise, he wasn’t sad or angry or even confused. In fact, all he felt was a sense of relief. He still loved Lois – he counted her as one of his closest friends, on the same level as Diana and Bruce – but he wasn’t in love with her and probably hadn’t been for a long time. They were just too different in all the ways that really mattered and, for some stupid reason, he’d been feeling like he was holding her back somehow. He knew it was a dumb thought, but just couldn’t shake it.

What did bother him, though, was how … isolated he was becoming from humanity in general. Most of his close friends were metas – or close enough in Bruce’s case; Clark knew walking nuclear reactors and men with wishing rings who were afraid of the scary man from Gotham who didn’t have powers – and now, he was once again alone in the world. He shook his head – that wasn’t entirely true, was it? He had family now, even if it wasn’t quite the kind he’d dreamed about. And if Kara’s theories were correct about their longevity under a yellow sun, they would be family for a very long time. Would it be enough in two hundred years when everyone he knew was long gone? What about five hundred, when they were all dust? Sometimes, he dreamed of standing in an endless graveyard, each headstone representing someone he knew who had died of old age. Already, he could see it coming true – he was a few months away from hitting his fortieth birthday (or at least the day his parents chose to celebrate as his birthday; for all he knew, he might have already passed that mark) and he looked almost exactly the same as he had since hit twenty-five. Pretty much everyone he knew was getting older and he was standing still.
Never before had Clark felt this lonely.

He knew it was stupid to feel that way – life had a strange way of changing everything when he wasn’t looking and just thinking about the future always made his head hurt; curiously, it also made the ring finger of his right hand tickle, but it had done that since he was a teenager and he still didn’t know why – but man, sometimes it was hard to see the bright side of things at moments like this. Everyone expected him to be the Man of Steel, with a ready smile and enough power to shatter planets but the wisdom to not abuse it. None of them seemed to care that he wanted the same thing everyone else did as long as he was there when the sky was falling.

Clark sighed. And pushed the thoughts away. There would be time to feel sorry for himself later. Right now, he had work to do.

A few hours later, after he dealt with a runaway winged dinosaur-dragon thing in Russia and a mid-air emergency involving a 747 out of Australia – two of the engines failed and the pilots nearly panicked when the third started showing signs of going out too – he dropped out of the sky and landed lightly on the property that had once belonged to his parents. One of the very first things he’d done with the money earned from the medical breakthroughs thanks to his Kryptonian studies was to pay off the back taxes; he’d even bought out the surrounding farms which had been mostly abandoned. He’d reinvested a lot of capital into the Smallville economy by hiring locals to handle the day labor and it wasn’t like it took him much time to actually do the work if no one else was available. Besides, the extra space gave him a little privacy Metropolis didn’t afford him and also gave him the chance to experiment with some new farming methods stolen (although he preferred the term ‘borrowed’) from the Amazons. The smell of something burning made him smirk as he opened the front door and entered. Kara glared at him from the kitchen.

“This would be easier if you allowed me to install-“

“No,” Clark interrupted firmly. “My house, my rules.” He smiled at her foul expression. “I’m not making you use your heat vision to cook that … whatever it is,” he pointed out. “There’s a perfectly good oven sitting there.”

“The princess insists that I use my abilities until they are second-nature,” Kara replied. Her instinctive use of Diana’s title made Clark smirk; he didn’t know what the Amazon had done to beat sense into his cousin, but it had worked fairly well. He honestly didn’t think he’d ever heard her use Diana’s actual name – it was always ‘the princess’ this and ‘the princess’ that. Kara rubbed her temples. “I still do not have the fine control of my vision abilities that you do.” Abruptly, she frowned. “I thought you were visiting that Lois person tonight.” The distaste in her voice was palpable and Clark nearly winced. Evidently, she’d still not forgiven a certain Daily Planet reporter for hanging the unfortunate sobriquet of Supergirl upon her. When she learned that Clark was romantically involved with Lois, things had become even more uncomfortable. For some reason, he had no desire to tell his cousin about the decision he and Lois had just made.

“Something came up,” he said simply. “What exactly were you trying to cook anyway?” Kara blushed.

“Pancakes,” she admitted softly. “Though my results have been less than optimal.” Clark laughed.

“Here,” he said with a grin. “Let me show you what you’re doing wrong.”

There was something going on with her cousin.

For the last week, ever since he had returned from Metropolis earlier than expected, he had been …
different. Kara was unable to put her finger on what exactly it was that had changed about him, but something was undeniably altered. He still teased her in a way that seemed impossible for a boy who should have been, at best, three or four years old according to her sense of time, and still squandered his talents with this ridiculous Warrior guild charade in the hostile environment hard-suit, and even continued to waste time with this Clark Kent identity, but his smile was not quite as quick as before and he had a tendency to be more silent than she thought he should.

Her attempts to decipher the source of the change proved to be fruitless. Whether it was his continued friendship with that Bat character in Gotham or the thirty-plus years of hiding his true nature from humans, Kal-El quite successfully concealed whatever was consuming so much of his mental bandwidth. The plus to that, however, was his lack of attention to her activities – he’d barely noticed when she quietly announced her intent to do some traveling now that the princess announced her martial skills were ‘no longer completely hopeless.’ With Kal-El not paying adequate attention, she’d snuck out so she could see this planet he was so obsessed with protecting.

Today was Fawcett City, the largest metropolitan settlement in the American northwestern state of Minnesota and, according to her internet studies, the home of the best cheesecake in the nation. There were other things she wished to investigate – the campus of the University of Minnesota, for example, as well as the various art museums since, according to her late father, a culture could be judged by the kind of art it displayed – but, if she were truly honest, it was the cheesecake that interested her the most. Krypton had nothing like it and she both cursed and thanked Kal-El for introducing her to it.

The large black sunglasses she wore covered a substantial portion of her face – where did Kal-El get those glasses he wore? – and her hair was mostly tucked under a wide-brimmed hat that was, according to the entertainment news, what girls her age wore this year, so Kara was not especially concerned about being identified. Her continued disinterest in acting like a Warrior continued to prevent the erroneously named Supergirl from gaining much notoriety, and that certainly helped her walk alongside humanity without causing the kinds of reactions her cousin or even the princess might.

“Double-slice caramel cheesecake up,” the heavyset man with the expertly groomed beard announced from behind the counter of the ludicrously decorated pasty shop. Kara paid, using the credit card Kal-El had provided her, and then retreated to a corner table with her delicious prize. She was the only customer present at the moment, though that changed several moments later when a scruffy-looking, dark-haired boy entered. He was, by her reckoning, Donna’s age or perhaps a little younger, and there was the same kind of hard-won weariness in his eyes. By the threadbare look of his clothes, he was likely destitute or at least severely impoverished, though that did not stop him from ordering a triple-slice of the same cheesecake Kara was enjoying.

“No charge, Billy,” the bearded man said with a smile. When the boy started to frown, the older man continued. “Happy birthday, buddy.”

“I don’t want a handout,” the young man said softly. A human would not be able to hear them from where she sat, but to Kara, they might as well have been shouting. By Rao, this planet was noisy.

“And I’m not offering you one.” The bearded man pushed the cheesecake forward. “It’s your birthday, son. You deserve something nice.”

After some further grumbling, the boy grudgingly accepted the gift and took a seat at the nearest table. He ate slowly, alternately his attention between the food and Kara herself. Discomfort began to set in as his looks lasted longer, and Kara considered eating faster. She could finish this heavenly concoction and be gone before he began harassing her. That option vanished a moment later.
“Nobody move!” The would-be robber who burst through the door held his pistol at the ready and the desperation in his eyes was only a fraction less intense than the fear on the bearded man’s face. Kara tensed fractionally – she was quite certain she could neutralize this quickly, but knowing how to fight and actually getting into fisticuffs were two entirely different matters. If she misjudged the force of a punch, she could easily kill this man. She glanced around for something else and her eyes fell on the dark-haired young man.

He hadn’t moved.

In fact, he continued to eat as if there was not an armed gunman mere steps away from him, though it was quite obvious that he was aware of the criminal. The boy watched him steadily, chewing calmly and frowning. He swallowed.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” he said simply. When the older man swung the pistol toward him, the boy placed his fork down on his table. “I mean, really … who robs a cheesecake store?”

“Shut up and put your wallet on the table!”

“Do I look like I’ve got a wallet?” The boy shook his head. “Come on, man. Things are tough for all of us, but this? This is just stupid.” The criminal glared.

“If you don’t shut up,” he snarled, “I’m going to put a bullet between your eyes.”

“You’d risk life in prison for a cheesecake store and a mouthy kid?” The dark-haired boy shook his head again. “Dude, you’ve lost your mind.”

“I’m warning you!” The would-be shooter took a step closer.

“Think this through, man,” the boy continued. “I know how rough things are right now but this isn’t the answer.” Kara’s eyes narrowed as she found a suitable way to neutralize this situation. With one more step, the criminal would be underneath one of the deactivated fans hanging from the ceiling by a fist-sized cable. By the sound of the stressors she could hear, the fan was of substantial weight and would serve her purpose perfectly. She grimaced – there was absolutely nothing more uncomfortable than doing this – and focused on the ever-present heat lurking just behind her eyes as she lowered her sunglasses. It was painful – Rao, it stung! – but she felt the brief spurt of fire flash from her eyes. It sliced through the cable holding the fan and, with a loud crash, the heavy thing fell, crashing into the would-be robber with a loud thunk. He collapsed with barely a sound though a quick scan of him assured Kara that he was still alive. She exhaled softly in relief.

Absolute silence reigned for a long moment. The bearded man behind the counter leaned forward, breathing heavily – his heart rate was too high for someone of his age and girth, though it was beginning to slow – but the dark-haired boy studied the fallen man, then glanced up to the ceiling. He frowned before carefully kicking the unconscious man’s gun away.

“You better call the cops, Danny,” he said. Very carefully, he glanced in Kara’s direction, but he never spoke.

The law enforcement officers arrived soon after – Kara wanted to leave long before that, but this ‘Linda Danvers’ identity Kal-El had provided for her would not have done that, so she waited – and took their statements once they secured the criminal in a pair of wrist-cuffs. As soon as they gave her permission, Kara ducked out of the shop and fast-walked away.

To her concern, the boy followed.

She silently cursed herself for not being adequately familiar with the city layout as he somehow
managed to keep her in sight at all times. Despite the cold air, there were more than enough citizens to make blurring to safety a bad idea, which also removed the option of flight. Finally, she turned down an alley and let the boy approach. He smiled.

“Hi,” he said. “That was a neat trick,” he said. “Does it hurt coming out of your eyes like that?” Icy shock washed through her and she used her perfect recall to remember the moment. His seat … oh, Rao … he had a perfect view of her reflection! She glowered …

And blurred forward to grab him by the throat.

He grunted when she thrust him back against the brick wall. Despite her fear and momentary anger, she was still careful not to injure him too terribly as she leaned forward and met his eyes.

“Give me one good reason why I should let you go,” she hissed. Threats were not normally her style – Donna was clearly a very bad influence on her – but this fool had surprised her! He grinned.

“One reason?” he asked. “I can give you one word.” His smile widened at her confusion and he looked up. “Shazam!” he shouted.

Lightning boomed overhead, even though it was a perfectly clear day, and a solid lance of light stabbed downward, enveloping the boy and throwing her back. Instinctively, Kara threw up her arms to defend herself – her ears were ringing and her vision danced – but nothing happened. She blinked the spots away and looked at the boy.

Or rather, she looked at the man standing where the boy had been. He stood silently, at least as tall as but even broader than Kal-El, with thick, meaty arms and clothes that had been completely transformed. A golden lightning bolt was emblazoned upon his chest and the scarlet of his shirt and pants was even brighter than the cape her cousin wore. His face was different as well, though it seemed obvious to her that he was still the same person, only aged by ten or fifteen years.

“I’m going to go out on a limb here,” he said in a deep baritone, “and guess you’re Superman’s cousin?”

“Captain Marvel,” she said with some surprise. “You’re him.” The big man offered his hand in a gesture she’d come to recognize.

“That’s what they call me,” he said softly as he glanced over his shoulder. No one was close enough to hear him, but several of them were pointing. “Welcome to Fawcett City.” He was about to say something else when a distant siren of some sort began sounding. Without a word, he sprang up into the air, an annoyed look on his face.

And, after barely a second of consideration, Kara followed him, the hard-light hologram hiding her bodysuit falling away. Kal-El would not hesitate to lend assistance and she would not shirk from his example.

They reached the source of the alarm in seconds – it was a lending institution with the name Wells Fargo prominently displayed in giant, golden letters and the moment they identified it, a trio of armed criminals rushed from inside, each carrying large bags. The lead man froze at the sight of them, and the second stumbled into him before following the direction of his gaze. Marvel grinned broadly as he floated in mid-air, crossing his arms over the prominent lightning bolt he wore. Kara slowed to a stop several meters to his left but kept her arms at her side so the House of El crest could easily be identified. All three of the criminals glanced toward a waiting car and Kara focused on the heat behind her eyes. Instantly, one of the vehicles’ front tires burst apart and the driver’s eyes widened.
“There are a number of ways this can go, guys,” Captain Marvel said loudly. “One of them involves you being admitted to the hospital with broken bones, heavy bruising and a persistent ringing in your ears that just won’t go away.”

“Not to mention,” Kara interjected, “second degree burns.” She focused on the heat once more and a second tire blew. Marvel snapped his fingers.

“Right!” he exclaimed. “I’d forgotten about that!” He smiled again. “The other option,” he continued, “involves handcuffs but no broken bones.”

“How about you shut the hell up before I shoot this bitch,” a new voice called out. A fifth robber pushed his hostage out of the bank, his pistol pushed harshly against his captive. Instantly, Kara tensed. She drifted away from Marvel, who had dropped his friendly smile and was instead watching the gunman with the intensity one dedicated to an especially dangerous animal. His entire body was poised and ready for action.

“And there’s the jackass,” the Captain said. His eyes flickered very briefly to Kara and he shifted slightly in the air, putting a little more distance between them. “I figure you’ve got about thirty seconds before this gets really ugly, man.”

“Uglier than it already is?” The gunman pushed his hostage forward, sparing a brief glare at his compatriots who had already tossed aside their own firearms.

“Oh, yeah.” Marvel glided a few inches forward but stopped moving the instant the gunman shoved the gun closer to the girl. “You have no idea how ugly this can get.” He rolled his head, audibly cracking his neck with pops that were just shy of gunshots in terms of percussion. The criminal stared at him, visibly torn between fear and awe. He barely seemed to notice that Marvel had slid another foot away from Kara, or that she was still drifting closer to the bank itself. By her calculations, the man’s peripheral vision was inadequate to watch them both and Marvel was doing an exceptional job of drawing attention to himself. “Now,” the Captain said with a smile that didn’t touch his eyes, “I’m going to give you one reason how this could end up badly.” Kara blinked at the strange emphasis in his words, then quickly deciphered his meaning. Her estimation of his mental faculties increased – they had only just met and already he was capable of speaking to her in a shorthand the criminal could not comprehend. “And that reason is … Supergirl.”

Kara blurred.

The criminal inexplicably tried to wheel his firearm toward her – as if this primitive weapon would do more than tickle – but was clearly unprepared for just how fast a Kryptonian could move under a yellow sun. By the time he registered her presence, she had already gripped the barrel of the firearm and squeezed, crumpling the metal into useless slag. Just to make sure the weapon was rendered completely useless, she tugged it away from him, her far superior strength causing him to stumble toward her while losing his hold on his hostage. Captain Marvel was there in an instant – like her, he blurred forward, almost seeming to teleport from one location to the next – and he casually steadied the terrified girl with one hand while dropping the other on the criminal. There was no way the man would be going anywhere.

“I did warn you,” he said as the criminal stared in horror at the mangled mess Kara left of his pistol.

A phalanx of law enforcement personnel swarmed the bank within moments, but the would-be robbers were already face down and waiting. The authorities seemed to know Marvel from the way they greeted him – Kara was unsure whether it was approval or annoyance in their faces, but none of them looked at him with fear like they did her. Or, for that matter, the way some people looked at her cousin right after he had saved their lives. She gave a quick statement – two in the same day; she
wondered what Kal-El would think – and took the air as soon as possible.

“Hey,” Marvel called out. He joined her, moving easily through the sky with a grace she still had not mastered. “Thanks for the assist back there,” he said with a grin. He offered his hand once again. “We got interrupted before, but I’m Billy. Billy Batson.” Her surprise must have shown on her face. “If I can’t trust Superman’s cousin,” he said, “who can I trust?”

“My name is Kara.” She shook his hand and returned his smile with one of her own. “Kara Zor-El.”

Through a hole in reality, two refugees appeared.

Wind and lightning presaged them, the former so intense that it flipped over a car and threw it into a wall while the latter tore great divots from the concrete. The vortex itself appeared without warning, first seeming to be only a tall, vertical line that slowly rotated into an open hole that looked upon a world with red skies. Fire and hail rained down upon the surface of that world, detonating with fierce explosions or columns of living flame. The crimson skies were crisscrossed with hundreds of flying creatures and great, floating barges of war, all seemingly dedicated to breaking the world.

And from this maelstrom tumbled two women.

One was clad entirely in white and red, with short-cropped blonde hair and ample bust, while her ally was dressed entirely in black and purple, with only a white cross dominating the hardened cuirass encircling her torso. Both were battered and bruised, with burns and still bleeding cuts prominently displayed; the dark-clad woman in particular seemed barely conscious as she slid to a stop on the concrete road, but the other woman twisted in mid-air where she floated for a moment, her eyes red and her hands clenched. The portal continued to rotate, growing smaller with each moment, and cerulean lightning danced around its perimeter, flickering and flashing and growing ever more erratic. The woman’s eyes widened and, with blurring speed, she darted toward her unmoving companion, scooped her up with no discernible difficulty, and then sprang up into the night sky. They rocketed away from the collapsing portal.

Within seconds, it vanished completely, exploding with a ground-shaking boom that set off car alarms for miles and rattled windows for easily twice that distance. The blonde woman glanced back as she carried her insensate companion and blinked at the sudden appearance of a man in red at the portal site. If she didn’t know better, she would swear that it was Wally standing there, but he was gone less than a heartbeat later, so she was not able to confirm her desperate hope. Instead, she continued climbing, angling sharply toward the tallest of the buildings in this unfamiliar city. Once she reached its roof, she lowered her ally to the surface and gave her a quick scan. Relief set in – nothing was broken, there was no internal bleeding, and all of her injuries were superficial – and she sank down next to the dark-clad girl in bone-deep exhaustion.

Her name was Karen and she had just watched her world die.

“When are we?” came a soft, pained voice some time later. Karen jolted awake from a light doze – she wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but the sky was brighter so she guessed an hour or two – and glanced down at her friend.

“It looks like Central City,” she said. The comment caused an understandable frown – in their world, most of the entire American Midwest was gone. Central City had been ground zero when one of the first Flash’s rogues went insane and lost control of his weather-based powers nearly fifteen years ago. Karen turned her eyes to the sky and concentrated on her enhanced vision. A moment later, she grimaced. “I don’t think we’re in the right place, Helena,” she muttered.
“Right place or right time?” Helena Wayne, known as Huntress when she was wearing the black and purple, pushed herself into a seated position with a soft groan. Time travel had been their original intent with the desperate hope they could warn the Justice Society about the impending invasion before it was too late.

“Both, maybe.” Karen gestured toward the sky. “The constellations are out of place,” she said, “so we’re definitely at least close to the right time, but there are satellites that shouldn’t be there and a Kryptonian space station that I’ve never seen before.” She closed her eyes and tilted her head to focus her enhanced hearing. It took a few moments to sift through the sheer noise, but finally, she isolated the sound of a radio morning show.

“And in our League Watch,” she heard one of newscasters remark, “Superman and Wonder Woman met with the United Nations yesterday but refused to comment on questions about whether the Justice League would be further expanding its roster.”

“Do you think the rumors about him and Wonder Babe are true?” another radio personality interjected with a smirk in his voice. “I know if it was me—“

“We’re definitely not in the right place,” Karen said as she refocused her hearing. “The news people are talking about a Justice League.” She shook her head. “Let’s get you healed up and then figure out what to do next. Maybe they can help.”

“Maybe.” Helena grimaced as she shifted where she sat. “We’ll need some clothes,” she started.

“**You’ll** need some clothes,” she quickly corrected before tapping her belt. The hard-light projector built into her suit sparked and flickered, briefly altering her appearance to a more civilian one before failing completely. Helena snickered.

“**You were saying?**”

“We’ll need some clothes,” Karen repeated sourly. As much as she loved Earth, she hated wearing human clothes. They always felt weird to her, though she was never quite able to put her finger on why. Her mood soured even more when she realized they would need to steal them. From the look on her face, Helena recognized the train of her thoughts.

“You need to think out of the box,” she said. “Use those super senses of yours, find a crack den, smash it open and take the money from them.” Karen gave her a flat look.

“What’s this?” she asked wryly. “You don’t have a Bat Dimensional Credit Card Thing in that utility belt of yours?” She pushed off the roof and floated a foot or so above it, scanning the city with her enhanced senses. There. That looked like a good place to start. “I’ll be right back,” she said before throwing herself toward the rundown part of town.

“Like I’m going to go anywhere,” she heard Helena mutter.

At the last moment, Karen changed her mind about how to approach this and climbed back into the sky so she could observe for a little bit longer. Normally, she’d just kick in the front door, toss all of the scumbags around until they finally got the point that their pop guns were useless, fry the drugs themselves with her heat vision, and then leave, but if a Flash actually lived in this city, then he could be there the instant someone reported a flying woman and she wasn’t ready to answer questions just yet.

From a bank of clouds, she watched the goings-on for a solid thirty minutes, identifying where they
kept the majority of their product and their ill-gotten money. Fortunately for her, they were both in the same room, buried deep in the middle of the small house. There was always one gunman present in that room, but like all the rest, he looked to be addicted to their product as well and thus, wasn’t very effective. She waited a bit longer, noting that most of the dealers and guards were so stoned they probably wouldn’t have noticed if she had walked in through the front door. Shaking her head in disgust, she acted.

With a titanic crash, she smashed through the roof of the central room, then blurred toward the startled guard and gave him a quick thump to the head with flick of her index finger. He slumped backward, already unconscious, and she tossed him onto a nearby loveseat that she then picked up and jammed against the door. Another blur took her to the stack of cash which she tossed into a nearby duffel bag that looked to be intended for this very purpose. She quickly scanned the rest of the room, her eyes automatically stopping at the threadbare long-coat tossed over the back of a chair. It barely fit but managed to cover up her suit which was all she really needed at the moment. Gathering the duffel, she looked at the carefully arranged piles of narcotics but didn’t bother trying to identify them. Instead, she simply let her heat vision wash over them. A moment later, she was climbing back into the sky, fast enough that she’d be seen as little more than a streak to anyone looking. Behind her, she could hear the other druggies still trying to shove the door open.

The secondhand store she located was perfect for what she needed and the cashier didn’t even blink when she paid in cash for the clothes she chose. Now dressed in the uncomfortable pants and shirt – she kept her costume’s boots since they were far more comfortable than anything else in the store and didn’t look that strange with her clothes – she then paid a visit to a second store where she bought some clothes for Helena. Finally, she hit a big chain store where she purchased a first aid kit, some groceries, and a paper.

Helena was still seated on the roof of the building when she returned, though she’d removed her mask and was using her cape to protect against the cold. Instantly, Karen cursed herself – temperatures so rarely bothered her, it had not even occurred to her that her friend might be freezing – and settled in next to her.

“Daily Planet?” Helena frowned at the paper. “I’ve never even heard of them.”

“I looked around but couldn’t find a Star,” Karen replied as she used her heat vision on their food. Soon, it was bubbling hot. “Look on page two.” Helena flipped open the paper and froze. “He looks like your dad to me,” Karen said hesitantly. She really didn’t need to say more as her friend read the article involving Bruce Wayne’s thirtieth birthday bash in Gotham and how it was nearly spoiled by a pair of the city’s most notorious rogues – Riddler and some moron calling himself Cluemaster; they weren’t working together, but rather, seemed to be competing somehow – both of whom were taken into custody by police after the Batman beat them into submission.

“He’s thirty.” Helena shuddered. “My dad is only seven years older than me.” She made another face. “That means my mom is two years older than I am. Ick.”

“If it’s any consolation,” Karen interjected with a smirk, “I think your dad is pretty hot.” Helena’s expression was worth it so Karen continued. “I mean … look at that chin! And that smile! Totally hot!”

“You can stop at any time,” Helena said with another dramatic shiver. She frowned. “He’s still single,” she remarked suddenly, ignoring the malicious grin Karen gave her. “Mom and Dad were already married in 2019 on our world.” Helena glanced up. “Until we have a better grasp of what’s going on,” she said, “we should probably keep a low profile.”

“They might be able to help.” Karen tapped the front page of the paper and the picture of this
world’s Superman. He looked different than her cousin in some ways, the same in others, but just seeing the House of El symbol worn so prominently made her hopeful.

“They might,” Helena agreed. “But how would they react if they knew how we got here? What we did?” Karen looked away – she wasn’t proud of how they’d managed to activate this portal … but if she had to do it over again, she wouldn’t hesitate.

“All right,” she said softly. “We give it some time.” She frowned. “But let’s keep the option open. This … Justice League might be able to help us.”

Helena nodded, but did not reply. From her expression, Karen could tell her friend was already deep in thought and formulating plans and options. For all she insisted she was nothing like her father, Helena was very much a child of Bruce Wayne. And he always had a plan.

Gotham was strangely silent for a change.

Perched atop one of the taller buildings within the East End, Bruce stared quietly down at the activity taking place upon the streets of his city. Even now, at three in the morning, there was activity taking place as the night owls and criminals and late shifts transited to their destinations. Late night buses continued their lonely routes, rarely carrying more than one or two people, and police cars prowled the darkened neighborhoods, ostensibly watching for crimes but, in far too many cases, actually acting as lookouts for less than legal endeavors already underway.

Tonight, he was alone. Richard was at home, ostensibly recovering from his bout with the flu but in reality preparing for an upcoming football game, and Barbara was thankfully busy with family obligations. Under his cowl, Bruce frowned – he wasn’t sure when it had happened, but his lonely crusade had become a three person act, with an acrobatic fifteen year old boy and a highly intelligent seventeen year old girl backing him up. Nearly two years had passed since Barbara first donned her own makeshift costume and joined the unending war on crime, and Bruce was still trying to talk her into early retirement. Richard also was uninterested in abandoning this life, even though it was not what Bruce wanted for him.

“My classmates watch Simpson reruns when they go home,” he’d said with a grin. “I get to punch criminals in the face and dodge bullets.” Bruce knew what he meant but still, he questioned the wisdom of letting the boy run around in a cape. At least he’d talked Richard out of having an all-yellow cape and bright green pants.

Barbara was another matter entirely. Knowing she was Jim Gordon’s daughter was bad enough, but he had no emotional hold or role in her life outside the mask that could assist him in shutting her down. Even worse was Richard’s encouragement of her – he’d been responsible for her obtaining a superior set of armor based on what he wore and, of course, he’d also accidentally let slip Bruce’s identity when he thought she already knew it. Part of Richard’s actions were fairly obviously rooted in his attraction toward Barbara, but he was also right when he argued how invaluable she’d been in a few of their investigations. Her skills on the computer were superior to even his and Bruce had unconsciously begun to delegate tasks and research he’d normally do to her.

“Now all you need is a Bat-dog and you’ll be a nice, happy, mal-adjusted Bat-family,” Clark had recently joked. He’d then started speculating on whether a certain burglar might consider trading in her cat ears for a bat cowl, at which point Bruce had walked away. It wasn’t fair. Around everyone else, he could scowl darkly or give them an intimidating look that would cause stammers … but Clark either ignored him or outright laughed at him. Diana did something similar, though she more often gave him a counter-look that could only be defined as bemused.
The creak of sudden weight upon the not entirely steady scaffolding warned him that he was no longer alone, but he did not tense or react. Instead, he waited and tried to figure out why he wasn’t worried. She was a criminal. She stole things, for fun and profit, yet he couldn’t bring himself to shut her down like he did all of the others. Was it because he knew what she looked like under the mask? Because she knew what he looked like under the mask? Because they’d seen each other naked?

“You’re out late, stud.” Selina joined him at his perch, smiling at the scowl he wore. She leaned back against the railing, ignoring the ominous groan it gave, and crossed her arms. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were stalking me.”


“Today?” She shook her head. “No, today was very boring.” With a suddenness that should have bothered him, she slid closer and pressed her lips against the side of his cowl. “I bet you could make it less boring though.”

Overhead, ominous clouds gathered and silent lightning danced among the heavens. Bruce tensed – ever since Olympus, he’d looked at the skies differently, especially during storms; lightning caused him to flinch now, which it never had before – and Selina very clearly misinterpreted his reaction. Her smile dropped away and suddenly, she was glaring. She pulled her hand away.

“Your loss,” she murmured before diving over the railing and plunging down the side of the building. Bruce could not help but to react – he half lunged to grab her, but by then, she was already gone – and he grimaced at his response. Already, he could hear her laugh drifting up to mock him and a moment later, he caught sight of her again as she swung away on a grapple line … a grapple line that had been on his belt moments ago. He barely bit back a curse. It was going to be a long climb down.

By the time he pulled back into the Cave, it was almost five in the morning and he was exhausted. Alfred was waiting silently beside the hydraulic ramp that slowly rotated the car back into place. The expression on his butler’s face was as inscrutable as ever, but Bruce was almost convinced he saw Pennyworth’s lip curve up slightly. As soon as he removed his cowl, Bruce noted the source of Alfred’s amusement: Selina’s lipstick stood out rather prominently against the black armor. It was a good thing nothing else had come up.

“A successful night, sir?” Alfred asked in that dry British manner. Bruce glowered.

“What do I have today?” he asked as he began removing the armor and placing it into the storage locker.

“How Wayne is scheduled to attend this evening’s shareholder’s meeting, sir,” Alfred replied, “although I do not think anyone will think it out of character if he misses it.” Bruce exhaled in relief at that – there was nothing he hated more than those kinds of self-congratulatory gatherings. Meeting the shareholders was one thing, but the executive board had a tendency to turn these dinners into more political nonsense as they jockeyed for position and tried to outdo each other. If most of them weren’t necessary, he’d throw them out on their well padded asses. “Providing, of course,” Alfred continued with another twist of his lip, “he is seen at young Master Grayson’s football game.”

“That’s tonight?” Bruce frowned. He thought it was … Friday. Today was Friday. Dammit. “Six o’clock,” he said aloud, wincing at the thought of being in the presence of screaming parents who seemed intent on humiliating their offspring. He made a mental note to remind Richard not to draw too much attention to himself when he led his team to victory.

A message was waiting for him when he sat down in front of his computer via the untraceable email
account he’d set up to communicate with Gordon and Bruce hesitated for a long moment before opening it. Three times in the last month alone he’d had to take down Joker after the psychopath escaped from Arkham and it only seemed like a matter of time before things went south again. Within the GCPD, there was even an unofficial ‘shoot to kill’ standing order that went into effect the instant Arkham reported his escape – Joker had actually been shot a dozen times now, but somehow, always managed to survive. The current mayor had even hinted in press conferences about making that official department policy … and Bruce honestly couldn’t say he blamed him.

The message was simple: Approved, 2130.

Bruce leaned back in his seat and stared at the monitor for a long time. Finally, he closed it down, finished undressing, and went upstairs to get some sleep.

Richard’s team crushed their opposing rivals, 42-7, with their star wide receiver (and former circus acrobat) personally responsible for three of the touchdowns. With the clock ticking down to his scheduled meeting, Bruce gave Richard permission to join the rest of the team for after-game pizza – he even slipped Grayson his credit card so none of the parents would have to worry about paying for the food – and then discreetly returned home where he donned his armor and cowl.

The previous night’s hinted at storm arrived shortly before he reached Arkham, with the rain falling in heavy, fat drops that splattered against the car’s windshield. Thus far, he’d resisted calling it the Batmobile like Richard did, but if he was honest with himself, Bruce actually thought of it that way now. Cold November air greeted him when he climbed out of the sleek vehicle and he strode toward the door, ignoring the nod Gordon gave him. The commissioner handed his empty coffee cup to the police officer who had driven him – Alvarez, Bruce thought it was – and then followed him in. The receptionist pointed the way, even though he knew it by heart; how many times had he trod this same path, bearing a laughing madman to a cell in the hopes this would be the last time? Another police officer waited outside Joker’s cell – it was telling that none of the other inmates, not Harvey, not Ivy, not even Jones or Grundy warranted such extra security – and he saluted Bruce as he opened the door.

Joker sat in a mostly dark cell, seated at a metal desk bolted to the wall and the floor. The edges were rounded but even Croc would have had difficulty pulling it free. Moving quietly, Bruce watched as the white-skinned inmate continued his silent game of solitaire. He hefted the other chair – a wooden one, he noted; it was too easily breakable and should not be here, not with Joker and his proficiency with hand weapons – and then sat down across the table.

“Hello,” he said darkly. “I came to talk.”

He could not recall the last time he felt this relaxed.

Eyes closed, Clark leaned back in his chair and enjoyed the silence. Here, there was nothing to bother him, no incessant human noise that battered against his enhanced senses without pause, or the pressure to never misuse his superhuman abilities, or to always be there when people needed him the most. For the time being, he was utterly and completely alone, surrounded only by towering mountains, hard vacuum and a view to die for.

Yes, he decided. The moon was one of his favorite places to visit.

For the last five years, he’d made a habit of coming here for a couple hours every month or so – his record was a day and a half, but that was following a six month stretch where he’d been so damned busy both in and out of the suit he hadn’t had time to get away – where he could just relax and let his ears recover. The solar visor was deployed but covered only his nose and mouth so he could breathe.
He’d already slept for several hours and was nearing the point where he really needed to get up and go back home, but the urge to just stay here for a little while longer was pretty overwhelming. What exactly did he have to go back to? A cousin that he really didn’t know all that well who didn’t share many of his morals or beliefs? A fortress of solitude … emphasis on solitude? A job he liked most of the time and loathed at others? Another job … that was the same. Not to mention a host of enemies who hated him just because he was different or had kicked their ass when they were trying to kill people? Yeah, staying here for a little while longer until he worked himself out of this foul mood seemed like a great idea.

The sudden change in atmospheric pressure caused him to react without hesitation; he was up, off his seat, body poised for battle, even before his eyes snapped open, but he relaxed almost at once at the sight of Diana. She was smirking at him, her left bracer shining and sparkling in the earthshine, and he realized that she’d reshaped her shield into a small dome around them. Clark blinked – he hadn’t known she could do that. But then, Diana was always surprising him.

“Do you know how long it took me to find you?” she asked as she floated toward the other lawn chair. Originally, Clark had brought it up here for Kara, but she’d used it only once or twice as, somehow, she managed to cope with humanity’s noise a lot better than he did. He didn’t think that was fair at all.

“Kinda the point,” Clark said with a smile. He lowered himself back to his seat before digging into the cooler and extracting a beer. Tossing it toward her, he leaned back. “It’s my day off.”

“Since when do you take vacations?” Diana asked. She took a long pull from the beer – it was her favorite and Clark wondered if she knew how much it annoyed Hal to be the person responsible for ensuring the Watchtower’s supply of it was always stocked.

“You’re one to talk,” he replied with a smile. “I’ve barely seen you lately.” Diana looked away and instantly, Clark wanted to kick himself. She’d never said it aloud and he would never ask, but Clark was fairly certain Ares had done more than smack her around last year. Once more, a terrible rage swelled up within him, but he pushed it back, swallowed it, and focused on erecting a wall of ice around it. Diana was strong – if she needed him, she’d tell him.

“Things have been … difficult,” she admitted. The smile she gave him was a sad one. “Mother is more convinced than ever that you are Herakles reborn.” Clark scowled and this time, it was he who looked away. What exactly did it take, he wondered, to convince that woman he wasn’t a monster in the making? He come to her aid when she asked, fought a freaking Olympian god for her, and even made sure Bruce respected their stupid laws when Hermes teleported them to Themyscira. All he’d wanted to do was keep an eye on Diana while she recovered, but he’d kept his mouth shut and didn’t push. “Pay no attention to her, Kal,” Diana said as she reached out with one hand and placed it upon his arm. “She does not know you as I do.”

“It’s hard not to be insulted,” he muttered, “when she lumps me in with that piece of crap.”

“She judges all men by that standard, I fear,” Diana glanced around and frowned. “Why do you come here?” she asked. “It is very … stark.”

“It’s quiet.” He sighed. “Did you know I have to sleep in the Fortress now?” Diana shook her head. “Metropolis is too loud, even if I try to use one of Bruce’s sensory deprivation chambers.” He shrugged. “So I generally fly up to the Fortress and sleep there.” He gestured at the barren moonscape. “Then, once a month or so, I come up here for a couple of hours. Nobody to bother me.” He shot her a mock frown. “Up until a nosy Amazon insists on tracking me down and showing off with her not-magic forcefield bracelet.” She rolled her eyes as he glanced around to look at the dome. “I didn’t know you could extend it this far.”
“I am experimenting with different applications of this very magic bracer.” Diana was silent for a moment and when she spoke again, her voice was much softer. “Kal,” she said, “I know we have not talked much since … since Ares.” Clark instantly came alert and shifted to a seating position to face her, leaning forward slightly so she could tell he was giving her his undivided attention. To his surprise, she blushed slightly and glanced away momentarily. “And I know Mother never thanked you,” she began.

“I didn’t do it for her,” Clark said automatically. “If the situation was reversed,” he pointed out, “you’d do the same for me.”

“I would.” Diana inhaled and looked up. “Still, I cannot help but to feel I owe you my thanks.” Clark grinned at her.

“It’s what I do,” he joked. “Beat up the bad guy, talk some crap to Bruce and save the girl.” Diana’s eyebrows shot up at that and he winced. “Shouldn’t have said that last part, should I?”

“Probably not,” she said with a smile of her own. “I am magnanimous, however, and shall forgive you.”

“And that’s why you’re awesome,” Clark replied. He glanced down, wondering if he should mention his suspicion about Athena. Her mastery of the Kryptonian language had been perfect, though some of the words she used when she tried to talk him down were archaic, even to an staid language like that of his biological parents. In the wake of that empty sleeper pod he’d noticed on the scoutship when he first discovered it, there seemed to be only one explanation.

“Would you have done it?” Diana asked abruptly. She was intentionally not looking at him. “Would you have killed Ares?” Clark’s good mood faltered.

“Yes.” The word came out harsher than he wanted it to. Even now, the anger, the fury, the seething rage pushed at him and made him regret bending to her wishes despite how hypocritical it made him. How many people had died because of Luthor’s madness? How was he any different than Ares? Clark inhaled deeply and refocused on calming himself. “I’m glad it didn’t come to that,” he said, “but if you hadn’t said anything, I would have killed him.”

“I think … I think I would have as well,” Diana murmured. She forced another smile on her face. “Do you have another beer?” she asked. “This one is empty.” She tossed the bottle toward him and Clark caught it as it tumbled lazily through the zero-gee.

“As a matter of fact,” he replied, “I do.” He deposited the empty in the freezer and extracted the last two beers. Handing one of them to her, he waited until she’d opened it. They tapped the bottles together and drank. “So tell me,” Clark said, “how are things going with Donna?”

They talked for another hour, with Diana regaling him with tales of her cousin’s training and the misadventures the young girl got herself into. Clark had heard many of these stories from Kara, though they’d been told from the point of view of someone actively involved in many of these exploits, so hearing it from an outside observer cast them in a far more amusing light. By the time, she withdrew the not-magic forcefield back into her bracer so it surrounded only her, both of them were laughing so hard it hurt.

Minutes later, they breached Earth’s atmosphere and Clark, braced for the wall of sound, flinched nonetheless. As expected, though, it was more than manageable. He blinked through the noise and half-turned to face Diana when he caught the snippet of a news broadcast that washed away all traces of amusement.
“Something’s happened in Gotham,” he said, reaching out for her hand. She accepted, even though it probably wasn’t entirely necessary – in the last few years, her own speed had increased tenfold to the point that she could generally keep up with him unless he really tried to pour on the speed. Even so, that still not-magic forcefield she could extend to surround them both made flight even easier than normal.

They reached the Cave in minutes only to discover Richard seated before the great monitors. His face was stained with tears and he was mostly in costume – sans mask, of course – but he glanced up at their approach.

“He’s at Northwestern Memorial Hospital,” Grayson said.

“How bad is it?” Clark asked automatically. His heart sunk at the response.

“Bad.”

“She might not walk again,” Bruce growled when they joined him moments later. He wasn’t in costume so both Clark and Diana had donned their own civilian attire, he by activating the hard-light holograms built into his suit, she by clashing her bracers together. Bruce was a little apart from where Jim Gordon sat outside his daughter’s room – at a glance, Clark could tell the commissioner was not in great shape either physically or mentally. “The bullet is lodged against her spine – I’m flying in specialists now to see if they can remove it.”

“If I can help,” Diana said softly, “let me know.” She walked away from them, angling toward Gordon. Clark watched for a long heartbeat, noting the exact moment Gordon observed her decorative bracers and intuited who she was. Gotham’s police commissioner made no comment about it, though, and accepted her comfort with the expression of a man who might have just lost everything. His sharpness wasn’t a terrible surprise – even though he didn’t have any proof, Bruce was convinced the man knew who he was behind the cowl but saw The Batman as a necessary evil in a city like Gotham.

“Joker?” Clark asked softly. Instantly, Bruce’s face contorted with rage, but he closed his eyes, breathed deeply and somehow found his center.

“In custody.” The two words were nearly spat out. “I almost killed him, Clark.” He glared at both fists. “No one would have blamed me if I had …”

“You would have blamed yourself,” Clark replied. Automatically, he glanced toward Diana – she was speaking softly to Gordon – and his thoughts instantly drifted to the conversation they’d had not long ago. As the child of farmers, he knew that feral animals sometimes needed to be put down and the Joker was definitely that. No one would have thought ill of a police officer if he’d shot and killed Joker, but Clark had his doubts The Batman would get the same benefit of the doubt. That was another one of the reasons it was so important to set the example he strived for as Superman – the world cheered for them when they saved lives, but Clark had a terrible suspicion that their cries of joy would rapidly transform into screams of rage the instant heroes began killing. Fear would drive them and those more interested in personal power than the common good would ride that fear to places of authority.

Still, he tried very hard not to think about how close he’d come to killing Ares last year.

“How do I face him?” Bruce asked softly. He was looking at Gordon now, a stricken expression on his face and he walked away before Clark could respond. Frowning, Clark watched him go, wondering about the best way to help his friend. A moment later, though, his eyebrows shot up in surprise when he saw a dark-haired woman he recognized intercept Wayne and redirect him toward
a chair where she sat with him, clinging to his hand. At any other time, Clark would have smiled at the sight of Selina Kyle and the open affection between the two (contrary to what Bruce always insisted), but today … today, he just wanted to hit something very, very hard.

But instead, he cautiously walked toward James Gordon and offered his hand.

“Clark Kent,” he said, wincing at the automatic narrowing of the commissioner’s eyes. “I’m a friend of Bruce’s,” he started.

“I know who you are,” Gordon replied. There was a harsh edge to his words and Clark only hoped he was imagining the double-meaning. He glanced briefly toward Bruce – the flash of recognition in his face when he saw Ms. Kyle was undeniable, but he returned his eyes to Clark’s. “Are you here for your paper, Mister Kent?”

“No, sir.” Clark hesitated, not entirely sure what to say. As he looked at Gordon, he saw a man barely clinging to control, desperately afraid and looking for anything that might make things better. How many times had Bruce told him how amazing this man was? How courageous? According to Bruce, Jim Gordon was Gotham’s own Horatius, standing at the bridge before the endless horde of madness the city had fallen into. And right now, that man needed hope. Without letting himself think it through, Clark removed his glasses – Diana inhaled sharply – and looked Gordon in the eyes. “However we can help, sir,” he said, abandoning the instinctive hunch he’d started utilizing when wearing the glasses, “we will.” Gordon looked at him, eyes wide, and finally nodded.

“Thank you,” he whispered. Donning his glasses once more, Clark took a seat across from Gordon and leaned forward.

“Tell me about Barbara,” he said. The commissioner breathed deeply.

And a moment later, he began to speak.
United Nations to Hold Closed Session with Justice League, Green Lanterns

Published April 20, 2020 / Lois Lane

METROPOLIS, N.Y. – The deeply divided United Nations Security Council will hold a closed session on Tuesday regarding last month’s extraterrestrial incursion amid intense lobbying by the countries most affected to authorize a global war footing.

The Justice League is expected to be in attendance as the UN attempts to determine the next course of action following the most recent attempted invasion by the Khundish Empire. Kal-El, more commonly known as Superman, was instrumental in repulsing this invasion attempt and is expected to testify about the League’s attempts to circumvent future attacks.

Immediately prior to this meeting, China and Germany officially declared their backing of a proposed joint American-Russian planetary defense network that will incorporate the Justice League Watchtower’s early detection and warning system to provide global overwatch.

Click for more from Daily Planet Online

THERE WAS FEAR IN THE ROOM.

His back straight and his head high, Clark sat silently, flanked on either side by the two Green Lanterns assigned to Earth. Hal wore his usual ring-generated mask to at least partially conceal his identity, but John made no such attempts, though that might have been due to the concentration required to maintain the real-time transmission to Oa. Floating just above the floor, squarely between where Clark sat and the Security Council was an image of a Guardian. It was not Ganthet, which disappointed Clark more than he expected – Ganthet was easily the most open-minded and least frustrating of the Guardians, which wasn’t to say he was a fun guy to hang around with by any stretch of the imagination – but at least this one hadn’t started tossing out the back-handed insults about the ‘primitive culture’ of humanity.

The desire to shift in his seat had grown exponentially for Clark over the last hour and he silently blamed both Diana and Kara. When the UN announced its intention to meet, there had never been any question as to which member of the League would represent them, much to Clark’s continued disgust. He recognized that he was the face of the League, but God help him, he wished the more politically minded members – specifically, Diana or Arthur, King of Freaking Atlantis – would handle this kind of dog and pony show. To make matters worse, Kara had quickly (and repeatedly) encouraged him to don a facsimile of the House of El ceremonial battle armor to prove to the UN that the League was taking this entire situation seriously. Though he had no proof of it, Clark was fairly certain the armor was Diana’s idea – it was both encouraging and frustrating at how easily those two got along – and he had to admit, it was a good public relations move.

But dammit, this stupid armor was the most uncomfortable thing he’d ever worn.

“We are … not ignorant of your plight,” the Guardian was saying. It was weird, seeing his lips move out of sync with the words everyone was hearing, but according to John, the translation was perfect. In fact, each of the ambassadors was hearing this in their native tongues. The only drawback was that it required absolute concentration, so John was effectively out of the discussion. “The Lanterns we have assigned to your Sector have repeatedly encouraged more direct action.” There was an almost
annoyed undertone to the Guardian’s remark which caused both of the human Lanterns in question to smirk. “To that end, we have organized a summit with the hostile parties in thirty of your solar days.” The Guardian actually frowned. “Once you have selected an appropriate ambassador to represent Earth,” he – or she; Clark honestly couldn’t tell, though he leaned toward he – said, “one of our Lanterns will escort that ambassador to Rimbor to facilitate talks.”

“What sort of talks?” the American ambassador began just as the Guardian’s image winked out. All eyes turned to John.

“The transmission was terminated on his end,” Stewart said flatly.

“He hung up on us,” Hal added.

Instantly, the meeting degenerated into angry and fearful shouting as the ambassadors each began trying to talk over the others, usually in their native languages which turned the entire thing into a loud cacophony. Clark winced slightly before glancing at Hal.

“What do you know about Rimbor?” he asked.

“Not exactly the best place in the galaxy,” Hal replied, “but they’re fanatical about maintaining their neutrality.”

“So it’s like the Switzerland of space?” Clark asked.

“Switzerland by way of Gotham,” John interjected. “It’s neutral because every lowlife piece of crap in the quadrant goes there to spend money.” He glowered. “I’d say it’s more like Tortuga in those pirate movies than Switzerland.”

“Then why would the Guardians arrange a summit there?” the British ambassador asked abruptly. Too late, Clark remembered that there was a live microphone only a half foot or so from his face. He glanced up and realized the Security Council had fallen silent and were listening.

“Rimbor is … a contradiction,” Hal said. He gestured with his ring and it quickly projected a spinning representation of the planet in question. Clark barely choked back a smirk – he fully planned on harassing Jordan about this blatant Star Wars rip-off later. “Officially, there are no laws on the planet so anything goes, but the gangs that rule there make a killing—"

“Literally,” John muttered.

“—on the off-world imports,” Hal continued, utterly ignoring Stewart’s remark. “What they really want, though, is respectability, so a hundred years ago, they convinced all of the stellar nations who made use of their ports to sign the Rimbor Accords.” He paused, clearly unsure how best to phrase the next part so John spoke up.

“Any stellar nation who signs the Accords must seek formal permission to attack another member of the Accords at the risk of uniting all other signatories against them,” he said.

“That’s it, then!” the French ambassador said. He was a young, vivacious man who was too excitable by half. Clark missed the former delegate from France – when she passed last year, he’d attended her funeral in his guise as a reporter and came very close to showing up in the cape. “We must simply become a signatory!”

“It isn’t quite that easy,” Hal said. He killed his Rimbor image and it faded away, exactly like the hologram in Return of the Jedi. “To be eligible to sign the accords,” he continued with a wince, “your ambassador has to run through a gauntlet and defeat each champion of the other signatories.”
“To prove your mettle,” John added. “There have been … fatalities by those who attempted this.”

“That’s barbaric!” the American ambassador snapped. Both Lanterns shrugged.

“Like I said,” Hal said. “They’re a contradiction.”

Clark sighed. Even as the delegates began whispering urgently to themselves, having killed their microphones in a vain attempt to avoid being overheard, he knew exactly what was coming. And he wasn’t remotely surprised at what came next.

“Kal-El,” the secretary-general began slowly, “would you be willing-“

“Yes.” Clark’s interruption caused them all to glance at each other with surprise, but he could see the relief on their faces, could hear it in their heartbeats. There were hopeful smiles all around but they were tinged with something he could only call … expectation. For a long moment, the ambassadors sat quietly, watching him, as if they were waiting for him to say more. Or, more likely, to ask for some concession for the League.

Clark remained silent.

“This should be put to a vote to the general assembly,” the secretary-general declared after a long moment of awkward silence. “Kal-El, with your approval, I will draft the recommendation to appoint you as Earth’s ambassador to this Rimbor Summit.” Clark nodded silently. “We will contact the League when we gather for the vote.”

“Thank you,” Clark said as he pushed himself to his feet. The two Lanterns followed suit and, for the next few minutes, all three of them shook the hands of the ambassadors. Finally, they were able to take their leave.

“They were expecting you to make a couple of demands,” Hal muttered under his breath.

“Which is why I didn’t,” Clark replied. “We’re all in this together and now isn’t the time to start screwing each other over.”

There was a small army of reporters waiting for them outside and Clark immediately zeroed in on Lois. She had Jimmy with her today – he was coming along nicely as a reporter, especially with Mad-Dog Lane there to mentor him – and she gave him a wink no one else could have possibly noticed. The shouted questions were deafening, even to normal humans, but they quieted when Clark raised his hand.

“The League has no statement at this time,” he said simply. “Thank you.” Without another word, he floated up into the sky, both Lanterns at his side. The reporters continued to shout out questions they had to know would not be answered, but buried in the din, Clark heard a familiar voice that made him smile.

“That isn’t fair, Clark,” Lois murmured, so low that even Jimmy who was standing next to her could not hear it.

“Tell me about these Accord signatories,” Clark instructed as he and the two Lanterns angled up toward the Watchtower. “If I’m going to have to fight them, I’d like to know what I’m facing.”

Gotham City by day was only slightly more horrifying than by night.

Dark glasses concealing much of her face, the woman who currently called herself Helena Bertinelli
carefully picked her way through the heavy crowds outside the massive department store, her attention intent on a single man several dozen yards distant. No one else paid him a great deal of attention apart from the normal disgusted glances all transients received in this part of town, but Helena knew better. His physical conditioning was too good for him to be a person of the streets and, though he concealed it exceptionally well, he was very clearly following someone without drawing too much attention to himself. Had she never seen this particular disguise before, Helena suspected that even she would not have given him a second glance.

But ‘Matches’ Malone was an old favorite of her father’s.

Pausing briefly to give the appearance of window shopping, Helena watched her dad … watched this world’s Bruce Wayne continue to discreetly stalk his prey, mingling with the other panhandlers and easily diverting attention away from himself whenever it was necessary. At any other time, she would have loved to just spend some time observing him – he was in his prime, perfectly poised between youthful ability and hard-won wisdom; in her world, by the time she became aware that he was The Batman, he’d already started easing out of the more active role necessary thanks to a body incapable of absorbing more abuse, so seeing him like this … it was amazing – but the identity of the person he was shadowing convinced her otherwise.

“Karen,” she said under her breath, knowing her friend would be able to hear her through the noise, “you’ve picked up a tail.” She could see the instant Karen heard her – in mid-step, the statuesque blonde woman tensed and started to begin cautiously looking around – but more importantly, she could see her dad … dammit … she could see “Matches Malone” realize he’d been made. Without breaking character, he merged into a particularly dense crowd of lunch-time suits rushing to get back to their offices and let them carry him away. “He bolted, but you need to head west,” Helena said softly. The presence of the Bluetooth headset prevented her from appearing to be speaking to the air, but she turned away from the store and walked away nonetheless.

Barely four steps away, she realized that she’d picked up a tail as well.

Frowning, she continued walking calmly, pausing every now and then to admire certain shop displays. Her shadow was a woman and Helena’s heart sank the instant she recognized the dark-haired woman – could this day possibly get any worse? Why, yes. Yes, it could.

“Is there a reason you’re stalking him?” Selina Kyle asked a moment later once she had drawn close enough to speak. For a moment, Helena forgot how to talk. Seeing her mother like this, so young and vibrant and without a single gray hair or wrinkle … it struck her like a bullet. She blinked the moment away.

“I’m sorry?” she asked in a calm voice. Step one was to deflect. Moth … Selina gave her a smile that was a shade warmer than feral, but only just.

“You’re very good,” she remarked, “and I probably wouldn’t have made you if you hadn’t warned off the blonde.” Selina leaned forward. “And if I made you,” she said with a wicked glint in her eyes, “you can bet that he did too.” Her smile faltered after a second and quickly transformed into a frown. There was the vaguest hint of recognition in her eyes, like she knew she should know Helena but didn’t. “Who are you?” she demanded, an edge creeping into her voice. Instinct kicked in at that moment – a deep-rooted part of Helena’s psyche knew this particular tone very well and it always required absolute and immediate obedience lest punishment be just around the corner.

“Helena,” she said automatically. Somehow, she just barely choked back her instinctive use of her last name. “Helena Bertinelli.”

“Helena.” Frowning, Selina glanced away. “My mother’s name was Helena,” she murmured. Strike
now, Helena’s instincts screamed. *Now, while she’s off-balance.* From Selina’s stance and momentary distraction, there were at least six different attacks that could temporarily immobilize her long enough for Helena to make an escape.

But she could not make herself move.

The moment passed – Selina blinked and once more raked her cool green eyes over Helena – but the sudden approach of a uniformed police officer caught them both by surprise. He studied them both with a wary expression, one hand resting on his holstered pistol. This was Gotham, after all, and he’d be a fool to underestimate anyone.

“So there’s a problem, ladies?” he asked calmly.

“Of course not,” Selina said with a bright smile. She slid closer to the police officer with a smooth, slinky grace that he very obviously noted with some approval. When she placed one hand on his chest and blinked seductively at him, he returned her smile with a broad, goofy grin of his own, utterly unaware of her other hand liberating a set of keys from his belt. “My friend and I were just discussing the best place to get a pedicure,” Selina added. She glanced over her shoulder.

But Helena was already gone.

She’d backed away from the two as soon as she recognized Selina’s seduction gambit, and let the lunch crowd carry her away. In mid-step, she pulled her hair free from the tight tail she’d had it in and removed the sunglasses. Her jacket she slid off her shoulders and quickly balled it up. 

Don’t look back, she told herself. Keep walking. I am in a hurry and have no time to waste.

At the first chance, she ducked into a shop – it was a Starbucks and she ordered an overpriced latte before sliding into an uncomfortable wooden seat that provided an excellent view of the street outside but had even better concealment. The complimentary paper added additional protection and, a minute or two later, when a frowning Selina walked past the shop, she never noticed Helena.

Relief set in, though Helena did not relax.

She’d nearly finished her coffee when Karen ducked into the store and joined her. Helena glanced up at the hat and aviator sunglasses her friend was wearing and smirked.

“That might work,” she said, “if you weren’t twelve feet tall.” Karen scowled – at just a shade over six feet tall, she’d always been overly conscious of her height.

“Listen, midget,” she said with an annoyed growl, “I’m not the one who just decided to start talking to my mom out there.” Helena flushed and glanced away.

“Wasn’t the intent,” she muttered. “She caught me shadowing dad, who was following you.” Helena shook her head. “Would have liked to have known why she was following him around though …”

“I’m more concerned about why he was following me,” Karen grumbled. She glanced away and narrowed her eyes. Helena followed the direction of her gaze – it was a brick wall, of course – and tensed. “I’ve got to go,” Karen said. She didn’t quite blur toward the door, but there was no concealing how quickly she moved. Helena shook her head. Karen would have asked for help if she thought she needed it. Finishing her coffee, Helena stood and exited the shop. There was still a lot of work to do, especially if she and Karen were ever going to get home, or failing that, if Huntress was going to once more stalk Gotham City.

She never noticed the young man in shop across the street discreetly watching her.
The Cave was normally silent during the day.

Wearing only a pair of sweat-pants and a dark shirt, Bruce stared at the monitors in front of him with rapt attention, as if simply studying the images displayed could unlock their secrets. His day-time excursion had not been entirely wasted, even if Selina very nearly ruined his well-laid plan with her own unannounced stalking. Richard had done well, never drawing even the slightest bit of notice as he followed the dark-haired woman who was, regardless of what her driver’s license might read, not Helena Bertinelli.

“I lost her somewhere between Finger and Sale,” Richard said. His wet hair still showed hints of the reddish dye he’d used to change his appearance. “Pretty sure I saw the blonde babe a little bit later,” he continued, “but I didn’t stick around to confirm.”

“Good.” Bruce tapped a key on his keyboard, which immediately brought up a series of images of the ‘blonde babe’ herself. The photos captured Ms. Karen Starr in various actions – buying a paper, shopping for groceries, and even applying for various jobs – but it was the second group of images that were far more interesting. In those, the blonde woman flew, or used heat vision, or tore through steel with her bare hands. Bullets did nothing to her and, based on firsthand experience, Bruce knew she had some sort of enhanced sensory capability. In short, there was only one thing she could be.

Frowning, Bruce leaned back in his seat. Thus far, this woman had operated entirely in the shadows and targeted only criminal enterprises, but still, the presence of a third Kryptonian on Earth, one evidently operating without Clark’s knowledge, was more than a little worrisome. He hadn’t informed Kent about this woman’s existence yet mostly because he wasn’t sure how he’d take it. Over the last year, she’d tripped nearly all of his very carefully hidden non-terrestrial sensor arrays, which promptly led him to investigate further, especially when both Clark and Kara were accounted for. This inquiry led him to the other girl, the dark-haired one who was not who she claimed to be, but there was something else about this Karen that kept bothering him, something … familiar…

“Is it just me or does she look a lot like Kara?” Richard asked. Bruce blinked. That was it. That was what was bothering him. He frowned.

“She does,” he replied. He located the clearest image of the woman’s face and dropped it into a folder on his personal server for the facial recognition software. A few additional mouse-clicks and the process was running – in a few minutes, it would map the picture and compare it with the photos he had on file of Clark’s cousin. In the meantime, though, he brought up the captures of the dark-haired girl and resumed his study of her recent activity.

Thanks to Barbara’s efforts, he had proof that the woman claiming to be the last scion of the late (and frankly un lamented) Bertinelli crime family out of Metropolis wasn’t even related to them. For the most part, the woman’s forged history was impeccable – there was just enough of a paper trail for it to seem believable, yet no major flaws that would set off any alarms. She’d ostensibly gone to Met-U, where she earned her Bachelor’s and Master’s in Education – they’d caught a lucky break there, when Barbara learned two of the professors Ms. Bertinelli supposedly learned under still maintained hand-written attendance records; at her direction, Richard then broke into the school and confirmed there wasn’t any trace of someone with this woman’s name from the time she was supposed to be attending. Attempts to obtain the woman’s DNA turned out to be frustratingly difficult – she was at least as paranoid as Bruce himself – and the woman’s domicile was rigged with almost as much surveillance as Bruce had in the manor.

“Question,” Richard called out from the parallel bars he’d wandered off to. Bruce glanced in his direction. “What has this Helena Bertinelli done that is turning you into a creepy stalker?” He flashed a good-natured grin in Bruce’s direction.
“She’s working with an unknown Kryptonian in my city,” Bruce replied. He pulled up another file – this time, it was a series of purchases made through various dummy companies, all created in the last year. Bits and pieces of highly specialized infantry equipment, riot protection gear, high-tensile decel cable, rappelling gear, flashbangs … put together, they added up to someone who knew what she was doing. Throw in a couple of the other reports he was investigating, mostly centered around a woman in black and purple cutting through some gangs with techniques Bruce himself had perfected, and it was a troubling and confusing picture.

“And the fact she chatted with a certain cat burglar today doesn’t bother you?” Richard was grinning broadly as watched Bruce for a reaction – at sixteen, he was very much aware of Selina’s physical charms, but rather than lusting after her like he did with far too many of Bruce’s other female acquaintances, he’d instead started treating her as if she were his long-lost older sister. To Bruce’s further disgust, Selina adored the boy in a similar manner and, in the too few instances she was in the manor, she and Richard spent most of their time laughing and teasing him. He scowled.

Too often. Not too few. She was here too frequently. Damn that woman.

“Don’t you have homework to do?” he growled as he minimized the Bertinelli/Starr investigation and glanced at the message from Clark flashing on his screen. Bruce wanted to groan – while he acknowledged the League was both a good idea and a necessity in this world of super-crime, he hated meeting on the Watchtower. He acknowledged the message and then put his system into a power-saver mode. Exhaustion pressed down on him as he prised himself out of his seat – it had been a long night already, and this daylight excursion into the city didn’t help. He passed Alfred on his way to bed and didn’t bother replying to the older man’s question about dinner. By the time his head hit the pillow, Bruce was already asleep.

That evening, he was back in the city, prowling the corner of Finger and Sale. Richard wasn’t present for a change – despite it being only April, he’d asked for and received Bruce’s permission to hop a flight to Metropolis where he intended to surprise Barbara for her birthday. Guilt churned in Bruce’s stomach every time his thoughts drifted toward the former Batgirl; despite the efforts of the best surgeons in the world, the damage inflicted by Joker’s bullet left her unable to walk. Clark was researching some promising treatments, though they had not yet borne fruit, and Diana was also looking into some more esoteric methods of healing that neither Bruce nor Barbara fully trusted. The former Batgirl was a Gordon though, and refused to let a disability ruin her life. She was racing through her first semester at the Metropolis University with a course load that would make a lesser woman buckle.

An audible pop behind him made Bruce instinctively wince, though he managed to hide that fact and barely reacted when a dark-haired girl stepped into view. She wasn’t dressed for anything but a show – or perhaps an especially kinky date, though he’d never tell her that – and flashed a killer smile at him as she removed that ridiculous top hat she wore everywhere.

“Your taxi has arrived,” she said with a smirk. And, despite his best efforts to prevent it, Bruce sighed.

Getting to the Watchtower was, for him, a constant reminder of how frail he truly was when compared to the many other members of the League. Normally, he was forced to rely on the active Earth-based Lantern but with the recent addition of a teleporter like Zatanna to the League’s ranks, that harrowing trip was no longer entirely necessary. Unlike Clark, Bruce personally had less difficult accepting the realm of magic – half of what Kent did seemed like something straight out of fairy tales anyway and the other half defied physics as Bruce understood them – but having to rely on a flighty stage magician barely older than Richard or Barbara with whom he had far too much personal history was a recipe for trouble. God help him, he still remembered when she was still
wearing pigtails.

Zatanna took his hand, mumbled something in that nonsensical gibberish she used, and the world vanished in a rush of silent thunder. When Bruce opened his eyes again, he almost flinched at the brightness of the Watchtower’s lights. This was another reason he disliked visiting this Kryptonian relic – it was hard to be a shadowy figure of terror when there weren’t any damned shadows to hide in. Here, he was just a nut with anger management issues, borderline sociopathic tendencies and expensive black combat armor who had an unhealthy attachment to his city.

Bruce frowned. So. That was the kind of mood he was in. He made a mental note to avoid Selina tonight – she never responded well to him when he was like this – and wondered briefly what brought it on in the first place. Shaking his head slightly, he filed it away for later review and followed Zatanna through the oddly-shaped hallways and to a door shaped at least in part like the House of El crest Clark wore. It slid open, revealing the conference room. Already, most of the League was assembled, though it appeared Arthur was absent again, which honestly wasn’t a surprise. Even more than Bruce, the Atlantean was uneasy here, orbiting the planet and so far away from home.

At the far end of the conference room was a massive diamond-shaped window that overlooked Earth. Automatically, Bruce’s eyes slid toward Zatanna and he barely bit back the smirk at her instinctive if admittedly slight recoil from the view. He wasn’t sure if it was an accident or entirely intentional on Kent’s part, but the view always felt like one was falling toward the planet which was unbelievably disconcerting to the unprepared. Only a handful of League members were completely unaffected by it – Clark, Diana, the Lanterns – and several of the less mature personnel (meaning Hal and Ollie) derived ridiculous amounts of glee over watching newcomers step through that door for the first time.

Standing at the far end of the conference room, facing the viewport and silently arguing, stood Clark and Diana. Kent was still wearing the formal Kryptonian outfit and struck an imposing figure – Bruce noticed Zatanna’s posture straighten slightly but decided against telling her not to bother. From personal observation, he’d seen Clark watch only one woman with what could only be considered bedroom eyes and he was involved in a soft disagreement with her now.

“Can we get started?” Bruce growled as he took his seat. His voice modulator was turned off principally because he hated using it here on the Watchtower. Whether it was just natural acoustics or some sort of hidden Kryptonian tech, he always sounded like he’d just finished gargling razor blades dipped in salt and lemon juice. On the rooftops of Gotham, after he’d just broken a mook’s face, it sounded appropriate. Here, not so much. “I’d like to be back home before dawn.”

“Agreed.” Clark ignored the irked look Diana gave him and turned to face the rest of the League. For her part, Diana simply crossed her arms and scowled. “The United Nations has asked me to go to Rimbor to represent Earth in a summit arranged by the Guardians.” He went on to explain the purpose of this summit and Bruce quickly realized he was frowning again. Diana also looked displeased – evidently, whatever they had been discussing when Bruce arrived wasn’t this if her surprise was any indication – but the rest of the League looked approving. “They’re going to put this before the General Assembly tomorrow or the next day,” Kent continued, “but I don’t expect there will be much trouble getting it passed.”

“When do you leave?” Diana asked. It was interesting, Bruce noted, that the other members of the League waited for her to make the first comment. Now that he thought about it, they did that a lot. His frown deepened the instant he realized he was guilty of it as well. Clark glanced toward the two Lanterns.
“Shouldn’t take but a day to get there, even if we go really slow,” Hal said with a shrug.

“There are preliminary meetings you need to attend, though,” John added. “I recommend we leave in two weeks. Two and a half if you absolutely need to stay a little longer for some reason.”

“Then clear your schedule for me,” Diana ordered. Instantly, Hal exchanged a smirk with Ollie which – thankfully – Diana did not notice. “Your personal combat skills remain deficient. We shall remedy that.”

“I do okay,” Clark began. Diana shook her head.

“You rely too much on your abilities,” she retorted. “This is not up for debate, Kal.” Despite his black mood, Bruce struggled against the urge to smile at the look Clark shot her.

Thankfully, the meeting broke up soon after that – everyone was too busy with personal issues or activities to waste time with pointless trivialities for a change, though Bruce didn’t know why he had to be here at all for something as simple as this; couldn’t he have just teleconference in? – and various Leaguers disappeared. Some – the Hawks, the Lanterns, Firestorm – were able to leave under their own power, but those incapable of surviving re-entry clustered together for Zatanna to teleport them Earthside, leaving Bruce alone with Clark and Diana for a few minutes.

“You’ll need someone to watch over Metropolis in your absence,” Bruce said as the other Leaguers vanished in a subdued pop. “Your enemies will be coming out of the woodwork while you’re gone.” Clark frowned.

“I will coordinate with Kara to see no harm comes to Metropolis,” Diana said calmly.

“Thanks,” Clark said. He sighed. “Not looking forward to telling Perry I need even more time off,” he muttered.

“You’ll also need to speak with J’onn,” Bruce interjected. “Just in case this takes longer than expected.” Clark nodded, then noticed Diana eyeing him with a frown. “What?”

“I have not yet met this … Martian,” she said slowly. Bruce grunted – neither had he actually. As far as he knew, Clark was the only person who had spoken with the man.

“He’s not exactly a people person,” Clark began. “I’ll check with him, see if I can talk him into chatting with you.”

“How’s Lois taking this?” Bruce asked softly. Over the last several months, Kent had become amazingly silent about the state of his personal life. The veteran of many break-ups, more than a few of which he’d caused and far too many centered on a frustrating thief who came and went as she pleased, Bruce had a pretty good idea why. He wasn’t wrong.

“We’re … not together anymore,” Clark said, glancing away. Diana’s head snapped around so quickly that Bruce could swear he almost heard a sonic boom. Emotions flashed across her face – surprise, hope, confusion, hope again, doubt – so quickly that, if he hadn’t been discreetly watching her, Bruce wouldn’t have seen them at all.

So. Very interesting. That confirmed another of his theories. He wondered if he should say something or if he should just keep his mouth shut. His political instincts argued the former – much of the world adored these two, but together? How quickly would that love turn to fear? – but his brain told him to stay silent. It wasn’t as though he was an expert on relationships by any stretch of the imagination. Hell, he still didn’t know what to call this … thing he had with Selina, not to mention the confusing mess of emotions centered around Talia.
“This training you want to do,” Clark said, returning his attention to a now poised and controlled Diana. “When do you want to get started?”

“As soon as possible,” the Amazon replied. “I was not jesting when I spoke poorly of your martial ability.” She nodded toward Bruce. “If he had but a third of your abilities,” she said, “I fear he would quite handily defeat you.” The pop of Zatanna reappearing allowed Bruce to make a quiet exit.

“Ready to go?” the magician he still recalled seeing in pink pajamas asked. He glanced back to where Clark and Diana stood – they were still arguing, with Kent trying to defend his martial prowess and Diana gleefully poking holes in the Kryptonian’s ego – and nodded.

“Take me to Gotham,” he instructed softly.

Rimbor was every bit as disgusting as the Lanterns had made it out to be.

The sky alternated between an ugly purple color and an oddly hazy orange, but the worst part was easily the smell. No part of the planet seemed to escape the horrendous stench and Clark spent more time than he would like to admit wearing his solar visor just to escape the urge to vomit. He wasn’t sure if it was due to pollution, was a natural part of the planetary environment, or was due to the sheer number of differing alien biologies coming together, but whatever it was, there seemed to be no way to hide from it.

Only one of the planetary continents was urbanized. In the city he where spent most of his time in between meetings, there was no rhyme or reason to the buildings’ architecture – he saw skyscrapers that resembled mushrooms or bore onion domes like those in Moscow, and straight rectangles that almost looked like mirrored glass, and weird honeycombed lumps that were connected to each other by long walkways – and the atmosphere was constantly filled with starships and shuttles and aircraft. Entire neighborhoods were covered by flickering energy screens that Clark learned were differing atmospheres.

As it turned out, the reason the other continents were mostly abandoned because they were where the various Trials took place. By the end of the tenth day on Rimbor (which also marked the end of day five of Earth’s Acceptance Trial), Clark knew them better than he ever wanted to. The southernmost continent was the most undeveloped, with lush forests and sweeping mountains twice as tall as anything he ever saw on Earth, but by the end of his encounter with the Almeracian champion yesterday, more than half of it was a shattered wasteland. She’d been one of the tougher opponents he’d ever faced, with enhanced strength and telekinetic attacks that freaking hurt nearly as bad as the punches Faora or Zod threw. He still wasn’t sure which was more uncomfortable – causing so much destruction or having to face the woman’s attempts to get him into bed after he’d been declared the victor, especially in the wake of what happened immediately before he departed Earth.

“Stay safe, Kal,” Diana had told him before leaning forward and kissing him. He’d been so shocked at her action that he froze in place for a single heartbeat and then the feel of her lips against his, the soft warmth of her hand on his chest, the smell of her hair … they’d all hit him at once.

And he’d wanted more. Oh, God, had he wanted more.

Diana had pulled away before his brain fully registered what had just happened, her face flushed but as inscrutable as ever. With John Stewart lurking nearby, waiting to carrying him to Rimbor while pretending he had not just seen what happened, Clark knew this wasn’t the time to discuss the kiss – at least it hadn’t been Hal; Clark knew everyone on the planet would know about it before lunch if Jordan had seen it – but he fully intended to sit down with Diana and find out what was going on the moment he got back home. Was that supposed to be the kind of kiss exchanged between friends?
Because if it was, things on Themyscira were a lot more interesting than he thought they were. If it wasn’t … then what the hell did it mean? Even now, twelve days after the fact, Clark couldn’t shake it from his head.

Today was the Khundish champion and Clark expected nothing but dirty tricks. He knew John was in orbit, monitoring the combat but forbidden to intervene if he wanted to maintain Lantern neutrality. Still, nothing the Khunds had brought to the table in their aborted attempts to invade Earth had been especially lethal, at least to him, and they’d never shown much imagination.

He heard the whistle of incoming missiles long before they were actually a threat to him and Clark pushed against the planet’s local gravity, rocketing up into the sky with a low boom as he broke the sound barrier. Locating the ordinance was easy – there were five of them, all streaking forward at just over Mach Five – and Clark could see the ugly fighter-craft responsible. Already, it was beginning to fire its gun and streaks of light flashed toward him. Orienting toward the fighter, Clark accelerated forward, focusing on the ever-present heat behind his eyes. With fierce explosions, the missiles vanished and he curled around the fireballs, picking up more speed as he did. Tracer fire screamed past him.

Arrowing up, Clark smashed through the fighter’s invisible force screen at just over four times the speed of sound. He felt the barrier buckle and collapse – something on the fighter itself exploded at nearly the same moment – but didn’t slow his approach. Instead, he stabbed his left hand into the superstructure of the fighter, tearing through the metal. And in that moment, he recognized his mistake.

This fighter was not manned.

The sudden explosion would have vaporized a non-Kryptonian and it certainly did not feel good to him either. Raw kinetic energy threw him into a mountainside and he struck with a ground-shaking boom. Grimacing, he shook his head to clear it – moron, he snarled at himself; he was acting without thinking again – before throwing himself back into the sky. He found four more of the fighters incoming – they were unmanned as well – and a quick scan with his enhanced senses located the origin point of the Khundish signal transmission. It was well over three hundred miles away, nearly on the other side of the southern continent, but Clark surged upward, streaking by the incoming drone fighters so quickly they could not do anything but observe his passage.

He reached the Khundish command vehicle in moments and, with an almost casual effort, peeled its doors open. The warrior inside fired a dozen times with his sidearm and then, when it ran empty, inexplicably threw it at Clark, as if that would finally stop him. He caught the weapon in his left hand, crushed it to useless slag and tossed it back.

“I yield, Kryptonian,” the Khund snarled angrily. Clark nodded slightly and glanced to the orange sky, waiting for the flare announcing a victory. When it did not come, he looked back at the Khund whose eyes had widened. “I said I yield!” the champion exclaimed. He backed away from Clark, as if he was afraid for his life.

“I don’t plan on killing you,” Clark said. The translation matrix built into his hard-suit automatically converted his words into Khundish. He cocked his head suddenly, frowning at a distant noise. That sounded like …

“Is that thunder?” the Khund asked hesitantly. Clark frowned.

“No,” he crouched. “Get to safety,” he ordered before pushing once more against Rimbor’s planetary gravity. He streaked up into the sky, his senses straining to detect the source of the shockwaves he could detect. With a flick of his wrist, he deployed his solar visor. “Lantern,” he said
into the comm-line, “this is Superman.” A shriek of static answered him and he winced.

That distraction was very nearly fatal.

A streak of gray flashed through the upper atmosphere, traveling so quickly that the very air around it burned, and collided with him before Clark even realized the threat was incoming. Caught unprepared, he was sent tumbling, the armored monster barely an arm’s length away and pounding away with massive fists covered in heavy armor and protrusions. They smashed through a mountain – the shockwave from their impact alone shattered another of the great peaks – and Clark barely clung to consciousness as thousands of tons of rock tumbled down around them. The monster rose, roaring something unintelligible, and heaved great slabs of the disintegrating mountain at him.

His vision swimming, Clark retaliated without thinking, blurring forward and slamming both hands into the beast’s craggy face. There was no finesse to his attack, no grace or skill, only raw power, and it sent the monster flying backward into another mountain. The earth trembled. The sky blackened as great plumes of powdered rock flew.

But the monster did not fall.

Instead, it sprang back toward him, unlimbering some sort of massive mace-like weapon that sparked and glowed. Clark concentrated – white hot heat ripped from his eyes – and threw himself to the side, narrowly dodging the giant’s wild, overhand blow. The weapon struck the mountain with a deafening boom, but the beast dragged his club free from the collapsing rock and swung again. This time, Clark let Diana’s training guide him – he slid forward, ducking in close to the monster so he could grab its arm and use the beast’s own momentum against him. With a surprised squawk, the monster tumbled through the sky.

Clark pursued.

His foe seemed incapable of flight so Clark shamelessly abused his advantage. He darted in behind the monster and struck again. For the first time in a very long time – since Darkseid, actually – he did not pull any of his punches and the impact of his blow threw the beast toward ground where it cratered. The resulting explosion was horrific, but to Clark’s surprise, the monster staggered to its feet, shaking its head in what looked to be an attempt to clear it. With another roar, it crouched and threw itself up at him. At the last instant, Clark slipped to the side, ducking under the creature’s surprisingly fast blow and then bringing his knee up into the monster’s jaw. His knee struck like thunder – teeth shattered, blood flew and something that looked a lot like a tongue tumbled away. This time, the beast’s howl was one of pain, but Clark darted away, pushing against Rimbor to put some distance between himself and the now falling monster. He waited until it hit the ground before blurring down and forward.

He struck at just over Mach One, the impact carrying the gray-skinned thing back into another avalanche of stone. Already expecting a rapid counter-attack, Clark threw himself back into the sky, pouring his heat vision into the area surrounding the beast’s impact point. Rock melted under the onslaught and ran like liquid mercury, and when the monster staggered clear, its entire body smoked and hissed. Screaming a roar that shook the ground, it took three steps and jumped.

Blurring to the side, Clark danced around the beast, still raking it with heat that barely seemed to do more than inconvenience the damned thing. In mid-jump, rage and frustration on its face, the thing half-twisted and hurled the club at him, but Clark side-slipped out of the way, then thought better of it and darted toward the weapon. He caught it with one hand – dear God, it was heavy! – and then readjusted his hold on it so he was using both hands, never taking his eyes off the monster, now landing. There were two things he figured could happen – the thing would try to jump again or it would attempt to remotely trigger some sort of self-destruct on the weapon in which case Clark fully
intended on throwing the club right back at the monster.

It chose the former.

He could see the instant it recognized its mistake, but by then, Clark had already taken a batter’s stance four hundred feet in the air. As the beast tried desperately to alter his trajectory, Clark floated toward it and then swung with everything he had.

With a boom that shattered the club, he knocked the monster straight into an even larger mountain. The force of impact lit up the sky like a nuclear bomb and a heartbeat later, a shockwave smashed into Clark. He pushed against it, discarding the fragments of the mace-thing as he struggled to maintain his position in the air all the while trying very hard to ignore how wobbly his muscles felt. Narrowing his eyes, he scanned the tumbling rocks with his enhanced vision. He found the monster a moment before it pushed aside an especially large slab of rock and began pulling itself out.

“Oh, come on!” Clark snarled. He blurred forward once more, slamming into the partially buried thing with a thunderous boom. It staggered, unable to avoid taking the full brunt of the blow, but did not fall and instead, retaliated with a lightning fast backhand that caught Clark on the jaw. His vision swam, but he lunged forward, his fists flashing so quickly they looked to be a solid wall of light. He heard rather than saw the rest of the mountain begin tumbling down around them, but ignored it as he kept punching.

And then, finally, with an explosive groan, the beast toppled.

His breath coming in ragged gasps and his entire body aching, Clark took several quick steps back, not dropping his guard in the event his enemy was faking. His muscles felt like rubber and he had to blink away droplets of blood from a still leaking cut above his eye. The feel of cold air against exposed flesh let him know just how badly his hard-suit was damaged. If this was any indication of what was in store for him with these Trials, the rest were going to suck.

“Impressive.” The voice was low and dark, like granite rubbing grinding together, and Clark recognized it instantly. He half-spun to face it.

But agony unlike anything he’d ever experienced sent him to the ground.

He screamed. His armor, already splintered, fell apart, bursting into flame from the intensity of the blast. Clark felt his skin blister, could smell his hair catch on fire, could taste only heat and pain. The agony doubled and then trebled. He couldn’t move, couldn’t think, couldn’t …

“Apart from myself,” the voice rumbled, “no one has ever bested Kalibak in single combat.” There was a darkly amused tone to the voice as it drew closer. “You should be proud, Kal-El.”

More pain came then, washing away coherence. Clark trembled on the precipice of complete oblivion. Something colder than anything he’d ever felt touched his neck and stayed there. The agony ebbed.

“He is secured, Master,” a malevolent voice hissed.

“Then we are ready for transport.” Something lifted Clark up.

“And this one?” another voice called out.

“I have no use for those who fail me,” the first voice rumbled. “Do with him as you will, Desaad.” There was another whisper of movement and then, a titanic boom. “We return to Apokolips.”
Darkness beckoned and Clark let it take him.

Hal Jordan was bored.

In his well-traveled opinion, there was nothing less exciting than sitting around with the other members of the League and listening to the alpha dogs – Bats and Fish Boy right now – bicker over something that no one else gave a damn about. If it wasn’t Bats, Hal would have blown this stupid meeting off and made himself scarce, maybe by cruising out to Jupiter or Saturn and doing something with the ring the Guardians would throw a fit about, but Bats was Mr. Scary, himself, with the black cape and armor and ability to make you wet yourself with just a look even though Hal knew he shouldn’t be worried. He had the universe’s most dangerous weapon on his finger. What the hell could Bats do? It still pissed Hal off that the jerk scared the snot out of him.

In Kal-El’s absence, Bats and Aquafresh were butting heads in what was clearly an attempt to establish dominance, but to Hal, having seen the exact behavior with Khunds, their entire argument was a colossal waste of time. He glanced sideways to where Barry sat and was unsurprised to see his buddy appear to be bored as ever. Hal smirked the instant he noticed the coffee cup in front of Flash inexplicably move around on the table in between eye blinks and then completely vanish entirely - he wondered if anyone else realized Barry was getting up and leaving the table, then coming back before the human eye could even notice it.

“Enough.” Diana’s tone was firm and unyielding, and the two men wisely shut up. In Supes’ absence, there was never any doubt who was the big cheese, even if officially she wasn’t the team leader. “Both of your points are well made,” she continued, giving the two men a quelling frown when they drew breath to resume arguing their positions. It was enough – they both glowered but kept their mouths shut. Hal wondered if it was because she was the hottest woman he’d ever seen – as much as he loved Carol, he’d cut off his own arm to do very naughty things to Wonder Babe and he knew from firsthand observation that every single male Leaguer felt the same way, even Barry who might as well be dead thanks to that evil woman, Iris – or if it was because she could kick both of their asses.

At the same time. Blindfolded. Hal almost smiled at the mental image.

“We shall table this discussion until a more appropriate time,” the princess said before turning her eyes toward Dinah. She began talking about something else Hal could care less about and he mentally divorced part of his active mind from the dull as dishwater meeting. It was a trick he’d learned on Oa – the logical, focused part of him continued to pay attention while he devoted the bulk of his mental faculties to other, more important matters, like imagining what Wonder Woman looked like naked. Okay, that wasn’t entirely true – he was also reviewing the latest Sector reports his ring pumped directly into his brain in an attempt to determine where next hotspot would most likely be so he could head it off before it got really ugly or out of hand, not to mention composing his latest report to the Guardians about recent activities in the Sector, plus there was the always possible chance he’d need to defend himself in a tribunal regarding his worrisome ties with the Star Sapphire Corps. Carol was free of their influence for a change, but having wielded the power of a Lantern, Hal knew it would be hard for her to completely turn her back on the Sapphires if they offered her a place in their ranks once more. He wondered what he would do if she said yes. He glowered abruptly. She hadn’t said yes when he’d offered her a ring. Was it because it was just a boring diamond?

His ring pulsed.

Hal was out of his seat and flashing toward the airlock before his divided consciousness fully registered the motion and returned to normal. He heard Diana call out to him, saw Barry flicker in and out of sight around him, but his instincts had taken completely over. By the time he reached the
airlock, the ring had already erected the protective armor that would be necessary for an emergency hyper-jump. He darted through the hatch almost before it opened and, with a brilliant flash of emerald light, he streaked away from Earth at superluminal speeds. His ring pulsed again and he ground his teeth together. Every member of the Corps knew this alert by heart and none of them ever wanted to receive it.

Lantern in distress.

Digging deep, Hal focused on speed. There was no time. A brother or sister Lantern needed help. Pain stabbed through his skull but his speed, already a hundred times the speed of light, doubled. Tripled. Tripled again. And again. His muscles quivered and the armor trembled.

Reality tore as he flashed back into realspace long moments later. Automatically, he swatted aside the broken wreck of an Almeracian cruiser with a casual swipe of emerald energy fashioned in the shape of a giant hand. There were hundreds of such ships, all from different races and all blown apart from weapons-fire, drifting in orbit over a blackened, scorched world. Hal sent a rapid, omni-directional pulse of questing energy and frowned at the results: his ring did not recognize the decaying energy signature responsible for the destruction of these vessels. None of them had destroyed each other. As impossible as it seemed, they looked to have been fighting together against an unknown enemy.

A second flash of emerald light signified the arrival of another Lantern answering the distress signal – instantly, Hal’s ring identified the newcomer as Tomar-Re. As one, they both instinctively oriented toward the origin of the alert. Hal glanced around – for some reason, this place looked familiar. Catching his curiosity, his ring instantly updated his mental star-charts and Hal’s breath caught.

Rimbor. This was Rimbor!

Tomar-Re reached the Lantern in distress first, but Hal was there barely a second later. Anger coursed through him at the sight before him – John was alive, but just barely. Both of his arms were broken and his left leg was simply gone from the knee down. The former Marine’s face was a mottled mass of bruises and burns. His ring-generated armor flickered and pulsed, a certain indication that it was very nearly depleted. Automatically, Hal reached forward, touching his ring to John’s. He felt the sudden drain of power, but with two Lanterns – Flash. Flash. Flash. – correction: with five active Lanterns in-system, Hal was confident that they could handle anything.

“His injuries are severe,” Tomar-Re announced after consulting his own scan. “His ring automatically placed him in emergency hibernation.”

“John’s tough,” Hal growled. He concentrated and quickly erected a protective barrier, complete with comfortable hospital bed, around his fellow human. “I’ll get him to Oa.”

“And then return,” Tomar-Re said grimly. The Xudarian surveyed the destruction before sighing. “We will need your assistance in containing this incident.” Hal nodded – the signatories of the Rimbor Accords would want revenge for this and there was a better than even chance they would start shooting at each other within the week.

Wrapping another thought construct around himself and John, Hal hurtled out of the system toward the nearest warp point. Behind him, he could sense Tomar-Re assuming command of the Lanterns as they went to work investigating the destruction. His eyes drifted toward John’s battered form – what the hell could do that to a Lantern? Dear God, even Abin Sur hadn’t looked this bad when he fell into Hal’s life so long ago – and he concentrated on more speed. Something tickled at the back of his brain, something important, but John’s medical needs took precedence over everything else.

In his urgency, he was halfway to Oa before he remembered that John had not been the only member
of the League on Rimbor.
SHIRUTA, KAHNDAQ – United Nations observers said Monday one of the American reporters who was kidnapped three months ago is believed to be dead.

According to the reports, gunmen kidnapped Clark Kent, 41, Friday along with three employees of a pro-regime TV station covering the violence in the Shiruta suburb of al-Tal. These three later appeared in an online video, saying they were being held by rebel forces who were treating them well.

Kent was a freelance journalist most recently affiliated with the Daily Planet who entered Kahndaq to investigate allegations regarding the use of banned chemical weapons in the civil war, now entering its sixth year.

Click for more from Daily Planet Online

LOIS LANE DIDN’T KNOW WHETHER TO LAUGH OR CRY.

Standing in the doorway of her apartment, she stared at the mess within. For only the briefest of seconds, she was afraid she’d been robbed, but her eyes quickly fell on the unmoving form slumped over on her couch. Diana’s hair was still wet and she was dressed in the black bodysuit she’d taken to wearing underneath her golden armor. The breastplate and hardened skirt – the whole kit was properly called a panoply, according to experts, though Lois didn’t know why they refused to simply call it armor – was carefully laid out on the floor in front of the couch, but much of it was still covered with the goop Lois remembered seeing Toyman spray all over Diana. According to his mocking diatribe, it was expected to be strong enough to cement her in place while he went on his merry way.

It hadn’t been remotely strong enough to contain her rage.

The news stations were still running with Diana’s furious assault – according to the last reports Lois had listened in the cab, Schott was in intensive care although hospital staff believed he would eventually make a recovery. No one interviewed or reporting honestly seemed to give a damn if he lived or died, but that wasn’t an especially big surprise as this latest spree of his had claimed the lives of four children, all under the age of ten. When Diana ripped the offensive little troll out of his ruined robot exo-suit, it seemed like the entire city held its collective breath, as if they were waiting to see what she would do. If had been Superman, there wouldn’t have been any question, but this was the Amazon Princess herself, who carried a sword or spear and had demonstrated a willingness to use it against the various aliens who sought to invade her world.

But Diana had not killed the little monster, and instead had handed his barely conscious butt over to the Special Crimes Unit before going straight to work assisting the public works people. There were fires to help put out, smashed cars to relocate, trapped citizens to free and injured to attend. From her desk at the Planet, Lois had watched all of the live reports, wondering if Diana was intentionally trying to emulate Clark. For the last eight months, she’d served Metropolis exactly like he had, swooping in to smash apart bank robberies, or stop the latest mad scientist from blowing up the planet, or just to rescue kittens from trees, and the whole world had noticed. That she adopted the
black bodysuit at the same time Kal-El was declared missing in action by the Lanterns was yet another thing that caused gossip – was she grieving over a lost lover, the questions went, or was this some strange Amazon custom she refused to explain? Through it all, Diana smiled and kept her head held high, as if unmoved by all of it.

Seeing her like this, though, so utterly exhausted that she didn’t even hear anyone enter, caused Lois to sigh. Clark’s absence had encouraged the nuts to come out of the woodwork and not a day passed that Diana didn’t have to deal with yet another threat. It was a daily gauntlet she had to run and she was beginning to pay the price. Everyone and their insane brother wanted to test her, to see if she was equal to the task once handled by Metropolis’ favorite son.

Hanging up her coat, Lois carefully navigated through the landmine of gear. She’d given Diana permission to use her apartment whenever necessary – far too many of the nutjobs in the city seemed to favor horribly messy plans and the Amazon quite frequently needed to clean up in the aftermath – but this was the first time the situation was quite this bad. She glanced once more at Diana, her lips quirking, and then reached for her phone.

Her first call was to Kara to arrange for Clark’s cousin to take over patrolling for the rest of the evening – the magic phrase was ‘Princess Diana needs rest’ and Kara nearly fell over herself agreeing to do so, which always made Lois grin. Once that call ended, she made another call to cancel her date – it wouldn’t do for Diana to meet him, not yet, not while the Amazon was so clearly too tired to think straight. There would be questions that frankly no one was ready for. Finally, she called another number, one that only a handful of people had.

“‘It’s me,’” she said the instant the line was picked up. “Do you know if Diana is on monitor duty tonight?”

“She’s supposed to be,” Bruce Wayne replied. As was always the case when she talked to him, Lois felt a frisson of giddiness crawl up her spine. Just knowing that the man she’d once lambasted as symptomatic of everything wrong about Gotham City was in truth the scariest man alive made her fingers ache with the urge to write his story. She’d never violate his trust, of course, not after Clark went out on a limb and vouched for her, but dammit, she was tempted. “Why?”

“Because she’s passed out on my couch,” Lois said simply. She smirked into the phone. “I walked in the door, made three phone calls, and she hasn’t even moved.” Wayne grunted.

“I’ll see to it,” he muttered before disconnecting. Rolling her eyes at his lack of social graces, Lois tossed her phone onto her desk.

“Jerk,” she muttered under her breath. Shaking her head, she paid a quick visit to her bedroom where she grabbed a light blanket to drape over the slumbering Amazon. “I hope you don’t roll over in your sleep like Clark did,” she murmured, remembering all too well how easily he’d broken her last couch while asleep. If she’d needed another reminder that he wasn’t quite human, that would have worked wonders.

Retiring to her desk, Lois booted up her laptop and quickly put Diana out of her mind. She was pretty certain that this latest piece on government malfeasance – honestly, what kind of idiot governor agreed to let Lex Freaking Luthor have an iPad? He might as well have given Luthor the keys to the front door of the prison! Was it any wonder that madman escaped? – was going to give Perry a coronary so she wanted to make sure it was worded exactly right.

The sound of Diana stirring a few hours later snapped Lois out of a riveting online exchange with one of her regular sources inside LC-Tech. Previously known as LexCorp, the new board of directors had scrambled to rebrand the company when their CEO was arrested for mass murder, but
so far, their efforts to keep the once mighty corporation from being nibbled to death wasn’t working. WayneTech was currently in a bidding war with at least three other companies to gobble up another arm of the once mighty LexCorp, and that was just the beginning.

“Good evening,” Lois said as Diana sat up. The Amazon blinked the sleep out of her eyes and looked around, momentary confusion vanishing behind sheepish embarrassment. Lois gave her a grin. “Feeling better?”

“A bit,” Diana replied. She rose and Lois couldn’t help but to notice with poorly hidden envy that the Amazon didn’t even have bed hair. How unfair was that? It was bad enough she still looked young enough to pass as Lois’ daughter despite being older than Grandma Lane. “I apologize for the inconvenience,” Diana began, but Lois waved it off.

“You tangled with Parasite this morning,” she said. “And then Schott showed up.” Diana’s face briefly contorted with fury, but she looked away, inhaled deeply and smoothed her expression out. That was interesting – evidently, the anger toward Toyman had not abated like Lois thought it had – and the journalist inside her filed the observation away. “He’ll live, by the way,” Lois remarked.

“How fortuitous for him.” Diana’s voice was cold and hard.

“Wow,” Lois murmured, eying the Amazon in a new light. “He really got under your skin, didn’t he?”

“Those children were blameless,” Diana said tightly. “They were innocent and that monster … he deserves to die for what he did.”

“So why didn’t you kill him?” Too late, Lois heard the reporter in her voice and not the friend. From the sidelong look Diana gave her, she wasn’t the only one.

“Am I being interviewed, Ms. Lane?” Diana asked wryly. She continued before Lois could respond. “I did not kill him because I do not have that right. He violated Metropolis’ laws and should answer to Metropolis’ courts.” Her eyes hardened. “I can only hope they will judge him harshly for his crimes.” Lois leaned back in her seat as Diana began doing stretching exercises.

“You sound like Clark,” she said, the words causing the other woman to smile softly.

“I shall take that as a compliment,” Diana replied. She shook her head. “I must admit,” she continued, “he did influence my thinking in that regard.” Lois nodded her understanding – she couldn’t remember how many times she’d heard him say something similar in public when questioned why he did not take the law into his own hands. And then later, in private, he would go into greater detail.

“Society doesn’t tolerate rogue cops who routinely kill the people they take into custody,” he would say. “No matter how badly I want to rip someone apart for what they’ve done or find a way to throw them into the Phantom Zone for the rest of eternity, I know that I can’t, not if I’m going to set the right example, not if I’m going to hold onto Mankind’s trust.”

“Is he ever coming back?” Lois asked softly. Diana tensed immediately – she always did in the rare times their discussions turned toward him, though Lois did not know why. Oh, she had a few theories, but wasn’t sure if vocalizing them was wise. It had been hard enough on the both of them when they were forced to seek out J’onn to help “dispose” of Clark Kent for the time being. Once he got back – if he got back – there were a hundred different ways the intrepid Mister Kent could be resurrected, but right now, with Luthor once more free, they couldn’t afford any loose ends.
“The Lanterns are still searching for him when they can spare the resources,” she replied, her eyes distant. “They are stretched thin, though,” Diana added, “trying to contain this senseless war.”

“A war,” Lois interjected in an irritated tone, “that no one has really bothered to explain.” Diana glanced at her. “The official line I keep hearing from the UN is that the Rimbor Accords broke down and that some of the signatories are at war, but no one has explained which ones or…”

“All of them are at war,” Diana said. “That compact was the only thing keeping them from each other’s throats and now that Rimbor is an irradiated wasteland, all of them are trying to obliterate their rivals.” She took a carefully measured step, placing herself in the center of the room. As she glanced to the floor on either side of her, Lois suddenly realized the arrangement of her panoply was clearly intentional. “The Khunds are trying to kill the Vuldarians,” Diana said with a frown. “The Almeracians hate the Tamaraneans who hate the Czarnians, and the Dominators hate everyone. With no one to check them, they attack.” With another quick visual check, she floated up off the floor, clashed her bracers together and quickly threw her arms out. Instantly, the armor sprang up from the floor, untouched, and flew into place upon Diana’s body. Metal flowed like liquid in some places, molding together until there was a seamless union. Barely a second passed before she was once more ready for battle.

“That is so neat,” Lois said with a delighted smile.

“Kal hates it,” Diana replied. “Eight years I have known him,” she said with a shake of her head, “and still he refuses to admit magic can and does exist.” Lois smirked.

“He has a pretty hard head,” she said before grinning. “You got dressed in front of him a lot, then?” She saw the instant Diana recognized the implication.

“You are not as amusing as you think,” Diana said flatly. “Again, I apologize for abusing your hospitality,” she started to say. Lois interrupted her.

“Just bring me some of that alien beer the next time,” she said. Diana chuckled as she strode toward the bay window.

“An entire case,” the Amazon promised. She paused. “If you wish to quote me about Schott,” Diana said, her voice once more the unyielding tone of a royal born, “you may do so. Had this happened on Themyscira, I would have taken his head and lost no sleep over it.” She turned her unblinking gaze upon Lois. “There are times,” she said, “when allowing monsters to continue living ceases being a civilized act and instead becomes madness.” Lois nodded – as a staunch opponent of capital punishment, she did not entirely agree with that assertion, but then, she was not the one who had discovered the bodies of those poor victims. Would she had shown Schott even a hint of the mercy that Diana had?

A moment later, she was alone in the apartment once more.

The crisp January air did more to revive her than the hours on Lois’ couch.

Diana soared quietly through the darkness, content to simply let the peaceful night wash away all of her troubles. When she’d agreed to watch over Metropolis, she’d thought it would be a simple task, one that she could fit in alongside the rest of her duties, both as de facto leader of the League and as Princess of Themyscira, but instead, Overwatch of the city was becoming her primary job. Just being able to glide through the sky without a destination in mind or a driving goal was unbelievably calming. It was both amusing and frustrating that these too infrequent moments where she could simply enjoy the gift of flight always brought Kal to mind.
And just like that, her good mood vanished.

Eight months. It hardly seemed that long, but eight long, miserable months had passed since he disappeared and still, no one knew where he’d gone or who was responsible for the destruction of Rimbor. There were remarkably few clues – the Khundish champion had admitted Kal easily defeated him before getting into a pitched battle with a monster straight out of nightmares, but the Khund had wisely sought shelter as the two titans leveled an entire mountain range. By the time the Khund was dragged out of his hole, it was over and the Lanterns were in-system. None of the destroyed starships had been destroyed by conventional weapons and the evidence pointed toward them working together against an unknown foe, which made the current shooting wars between those vessels’ mother races even more senseless. The only person who might be able to shed some light on what happened was John Stewart and he remained in a coma thanks to the crippling injuries he’d sustained. A temporary replacement had been appointed by the Guardians – Guy Gardner was a thoroughly repulsive human being about whom Diana had very few positive thoughts – until Stewart woke. If he woke.

Glancing around, Diana suddenly realized where she was and heaved a heavy sigh. Despite her best efforts, her subconscious clearly knew she could not shirk the duties resting upon her shoulders. She’d intended to have Donna do this, but with her cousin spending so much time in Seattle with the rest of Richard’s team of Titans, the opportunity had simply not arisen. With Kara watching over Metropolis at the moment – Diana reminded herself to thank Lois again the next time she saw her – now was a perfect time to do this.

Gotham was almost eerily silent as she dropped down through the clouds, but given Bruce’s recent behavior, that wasn’t too terrible a surprise. His new … apprentice (for lack of a better word) was much harsher than Richard ever was, which Diana actually thought to be a bad thing. There was so much darkness in Bruce’s life, especially now that he and Ms. Kyle appeared to have ended their relationship once again, and he needed the light and enjoyment of life that Richard had brought. This new Robin … Diana had her doubts about the boy. He was strong but not tough, and with so much anger…

She orbited the city twice, whispering her need to the birds and beasts, until finally, she had a trail. It almost made her laugh that the birds knew not where he was, but the bats did. Curling down through the air, she landed lightly on the building he stood atop. He scowled at her but offered no greeting. So she waited.

Patience was easy for an immortal, but she had to admit, Bruce excelled at it as well. He stood silently, staring down at the city in utter silence, though Diana was certain she could hear the muted buzz of soft radio intercepts, likely between police officers, from his cowl. Finally, he shifted his attention briefly in her direction.

“Why are you in Gotham?” he demanded. The modulator built into his suit turned his voice into something barely human-sounding but still completely understandable. Out here, under the open sky, it worked much better than on the Watchtower. Diana frowned at him.

“You need to work on your manners,” she said as she extracted a flash-drive from her belt. “Here are the technical specs you wanted.” For the first time, he showed interest as he reached for it. “Kelor was certain you should be able to replicate most of them with human technology.”

“Of course I will.” Bruce slid the drive into one of the numerous storage cylinders on his belt. Diana crossed her arms.

“Dare I guess what you intend to use it for?”
“Lighter but stronger ceramics,” Bruce said. “More durable fibers. Tougher armor.” He flashed a very brief smile that looked odd on his face. “If Clark and I hadn’t wasted so much time trying to retrofit a Kryptonian hard-suit to accept a human genetic code, I would have done this years ago.” Diana almost rolled her eyes.

“Have you considered my offer?” she asked. “Hephaestus could forge you a suit—”

“No.” Bruce returned his eyes to the city. “I’ve read enough mythology to know that gifts from Olympians always come with a very heavy price.” Abruptly, he tensed and crouched; without thinking, Diana followed suit. She gave him a questioning glance that he ignored. “As I suspected,” he murmured. Glancing over the lip of the building, Diana saw nothing out of place for a moment, but a heartbeat later, a purple-clad figure vanished over a rooftop. Smirking, she glanced at him.

“I think even in Gotham this classifies as stalking,” she remarked. When he glowered, her smile deepened. “Have you considered simply knocking on Ms. Kyle’s door and talking to her?”

“That isn’t Selina,” Bruce growled. He rose slowly and Diana straightened alongside him. “She calls herself Huntress.”

“And no one operates in your city but you,” Diana mocked, intentionally deepening her voice into a very poor imitation of him. Once again, Bruce scowled.

“You’re in an odd mood,” he grumbled. Diana’s smile faded.

“I am exhausted,” she admitted. “My mother always accuses me of becoming giddy when I am tired.” She exhaled deeply. “I am concerned that I may have made a mistake in assuming watch over Kal’s city,” she said after a moment. Bruce glanced at her. “In addition to dealing with his enemies, I’ve drawn my own to Metropolis.” Diana grimaced at the memory of how much trouble Circe had caused last week when the witch decided it would be amusing to transform every police officer into swine; by the time she’d been stopped, half of the League was needed to help contain the riots.

“You’re the new sheriff in town,” Bruce growled. “They’ll keep testing you for a while, but things will get better.” As if to mock him, the Bat-Signal suddenly lit up, reflecting off the surface of the WayneTech building and casting a strange light over the city. Diana gave it a brief glance before looking at him. His lips tightened – as smart as Bruce was, she knew he had to see the irony of this moment – and he remained silent for moments. Finally, he spoke. “Go home, Diana,” he said. “Get some sleep.” Taking a step closer to the edge of the building, he manipulated something under his cape, likely a concealed remote control of some sort. How he loved his toys. “Things will look better when you’ve rested.”

And, without another word, he dove over the side of the tower.

Had she looked, Diana suspected she would have seen his cape stiffen which would allow him to glide toward a waiting vehicle, but she did not. Instead, she turned away and climbed up into the sky herself, accelerating quickly but not quite breaking the sound barrier until she was high enough that it would not cause damage. With Hephaestus’ invisible shield wreathing her, she flew northward – Gotham was almost equidistant between Kal’s Fortress and Themyscira, and right now, Diana was in no mood to be lectured to by her mother about how Kal’s possible death was the best thing for all parties involved.

She reached the Fortress long minutes later, touching down and pausing to study the landscape. The sheer stark beauty took her breath away and Diana stared at it for a long moment. It was not her preferred place of solitude – that would likely always be Themyscira, with its sandy beaches and soothing fields – but in these moments, when she wanted to be completely and utterly alone, when
the pressures of the world seemed especially unrelenting, she could understand why Kal came here so often. A soft hiss of a door opening warned her that she was no longer alone, but the muted hum following the sound identified the newcomer as one of the servitor robots. It would be Kelor – for some reason, she was always greeted or assisted by the more feminine-sounding robot rather than Kelex. This fact amused Kara, though the young girl refused to explain why and Diana was mildly afraid to insist. She had a niggling suspicion the artificial intelligence controlling the servitors had decided she was the mistress of the Fortress and was treating her accordingly. Given Kara’s steadfast refusal to spend any more time here than was absolutely necessary – “it is just enough like home to remind me of Krypton yet different enough to be jarring,” the young woman said when asked – and Diana’s tendency to retreat here in the all too frequent times she was arguing with her mother, that would make perfect sense.

“Greetings, Mistress,” Kelor said calmly. “May I be of assistance?”

“Not tonight,” Diana replied. She floated through the open doorway, followed by the humming robot. “I am retiring,” she added. “Alert me if the Watchtower requires assistance or Kara makes contact.” She offered her League communicator to the servitor and it accepted it.

“Compliance, Mistress.” Recognizing a dismissal, the astounding device pulled away from her and Diana continued her familiar route to what was originally the captain’s quarters. Once, this had been Kal’s room and, in fact, there were still numerous indications of his personality – the framed football jersey signed by every member of the 2016 Metropolis Spartans; a half dozen photographs of his parents; his personal guitar, which he constructed himself and used infrequently to maintain his dexterity – but ever since she’d started sleeping here after his departure to Rimbor, more and more pieces of her life had crept in. There was a pair of straight-swords, forged by Hephaestus himself, propped up in the far corner; the small well-carved idols of her patron gods; the absurdly over-priced but astoundingly comfortable robe Bruce had given to her as a gift last month; and, of course, the armor stand. Yawning softly, Diana paused before the stand, and then clashed her bracers together. Instantly, her panoply slid off the black undersuit, but rather than clattering to the ground, instead secured itself in its proper place. Already, the stains from Schott’s madness was vanishing and would be gone by tomorrow.

“Bless me, my patrons,” Diana murmured automatically as she paused before the icons. “Watch over me as I surrender myself to the realm of Morpheus.” She pulled the under-garment free – it came loose from her body without difficulty and reformed into a shapeless mess. Frowning, she studied it for a moment; it was a gift from Hephaestus intended to provide even greater protection – Donna possessed one as well, though she refused the accompanying armor – and Diana had donned it without thinking. Wearing the black was not meant to represent mourning, but Patriarch’s World took it as such. Should she replace it with something more suitable? It was a question for a later time. “Guide me back to the land of the living when I wake.” She discarded the formless undersuit and floated toward the bed. Sliding under the covers, she closed her eyes.

She was asleep before her head hit the pillow.

The clone hit her so hard that Kara almost blacked out.

She hit Metropolis Bay at somewhere around two hundred miles per hour, bouncing and skipping along the surface for at least fifty meters before she could snap out of the daze and finally assert some control over her uncontrolled tumble. Pushing hard against Earth’s gravity, she skidded to a stop and then rose up into the sky, her enhanced senses already straining to locate the thing that wore Kal-El’s face but wasn’t her cousin. She found it instantly – face contorted in rage, it sprang toward her, jumping and bouncing but somehow, unable to actually fly. Dressed entirely in white, it wore a
crimson House of El seal upon its chest but the fury, the hatred, the insanity on its face was out of place on its face.

Helicopters circled overhead – Kara could hear the rapid conversations taking place between the police officers and the reporters as they questioned whether their ‘Superman’ had returned – but she ignored them as she scanned the environs for something that could be used as a weapon against this creature. To her eyes, there was no hiding that this was a clone – its exposed skin was too slick, too new to be older than a year, maybe two – but she recognized Kal-El’s enemy, Luthor, as the puppet master here. Twice before he’d unleashed monsters crafted from Kryptonian genetic material, and each time, it had required a Kryptonian to stop them. She grimaced, balled up her fist and focused on the heat behind her eyes.

The twin beams lanced across the bay, stabbing into the clone with minimal results, though that was actually intentional on her part and Kara grinned tightly when the white-garbed creature howled. It bounded forward once more, arcing up and over one of the helicopters as he sought her out. Kara watched it streak toward her and then, in the last instant, blurred to the side. The clone flashed by and tumbled down.

Into the bay.

It struck the water with a loud splash – over the din, she heard the shouts of approval from both the police chopper and the WGBS crew – and Kara tilted her head slightly, tensing certain muscles at the same time. Instantly, the solar visor built into her personal hard-suit deployed and she paused only a heartbeat before plunging downward, knifing through the water in pursuit of the potential threat. The princess was relying on her to protect Kal-El’s city and Rao help her, she would not let her down.

To her great surprise, she found the clone at the bottom of the bay and its rage seemed to have faltered. If anything, it looked … confused. No, not confused. Relieved. As Kara drew closer, it turned to look at her and visibly tensed.

But it did not attack.

Instead, it tried to inhale, then appeared to panic when it swallowed water. Muscles flexed and the clone shot up, returning to the surface before she could do more than reach out for him. Cursing softly under her breath, Kara threw herself back up as well.

She was just in time to see the clone smash through the tail boom of the WGBS helicopter.

Kara blurred toward the suddenly out of control aerial vehicle, wincing at the tremendous weight as she tried to stop it from tumbling into the bay. For the first time, she regretted not spending more time testing her physical limits – Kal-El had insisted that was the only way to truly comprehend how strong they could be, but Kara had resisted for reasons she did not want to consider too deeply – and she struggled, grimacing as she felt metal buckle and humans scream. One of the crew flew from the helicopter, shrieking, but a blur of white and red streaked over the bay, stopping just in time to catch the whimpering photographer.

“Need a hand?” a strangely familiar voice called out and a moment later, the weight eased significantly as the other flying woman slid into place on the other side of the chopper, gripping it quickly with her free hand. “We need to get them to safety and contain that … thing immediately.”

“It’s a clone,” Kara gasped. Rao, this thing was heavy! The other woman grunted.

“Get into the helicopter, sir,” she said to someone Kara couldn’t see at the moment. “Let’s set her down on that barge,” she added. When she spoke again, she’d raised her voice. “Please turn off the
rots, sir!” They floated down toward the barge and Kara lowered her side of the helicopter a shade more quickly than she should have. Her muscles shrieked in protest and, though she knew it was her imagination, she could almost imagine Kal-El chuckling. He would say that he told her so, the princess would scowl in dismay, and … the clone!

The other woman was already gone by the time Kara caught her breath, but it was easy to tell where she’d gone simply following the noise. Hurling herself upward, Kara streaked toward the origin point of the distinctive sounds of battle, freezing in shock the instant she saw the woman wrestling with the enraged clone.

It was … it was her.

There were unmistakable differences – this woman was taller, a little older, with larger breasts and an easy confidence that Kara still struggled with – but there were other things that instantly leaped out at her. Those dermal imperfections on her nose the humans called freckles were identical to the ones on Kara’s face and the way the woman smirked when she caught her staring … that expression was way too familiar. It drove Donna nuts – Kara knew because the younger girl had told her. Several times. A quick scan of the woman in red and white revealed nothing that seemed out of place. She wasn’t a clone. How in Rao’s name was this possible?

“A little help, please,” the woman hissed. Her hold on the clone had slipped somewhat and, striking with blurring speed, he twisted free and struck the woman with his free hand. The force of the impact shattered windows and sent the stranger tumbling, but Kara streaked forward. Rather than hit the clone, though, she came to a sudden stop just out of his reach and clapped both of her hands together – it was a trick she’d seen Kal-El do once before, and the resulting thunder caused the clone to scream out in pain. It threw both hands up to cover its ears. Comprehension came suddenly – its apparent lack of rage under the water where sounds were so muted, its reaction to this …

“Grab him!” she cried out as the white and red woman flashed back into sight. Reaching up, Kara deactivated her solar visor – it retracted into the simple collar – and floated toward the clone. It had recovered from her shockwave, but the … other her had already seized its arms in an unmistakably Amazon wrestling move. Hanging on the clone’s back, she’d even slide one of her legs between his and then hooked her foot around his so he could not kick Kara. The solar visor slid into place easy enough and clicked shut. Instantly, it deployed.

And the clone abruptly ceased struggling.

He sagged limply in the other woman’s hands and then looked around with confused, exhausted eyes. A moment later, he slumped forward, completely unconscious, and the woman in red and white frowned. She glanced away, narrowing her eyes slightly, and then shoved the clone into Kara’s arms. With a grin, she flexed her leg muscles and shot up into the sky, shattering the sound barrier almost before she was out of sight. Kara was just about to pursue – she had questions, by Rao! – but the sound of approaching sirens and helicopters prevented her from doing so.

“Appreciate the assistance,” Captain Sawyer said once she arrived. Dressed in body armor, the older woman frowned at the unconscious figure in Kara’s arms before glancing up. “Another clone?” she asked tightly.

“It would appear so,” Kara replied. “Are your facilities capable of containing him?”

“Not a chance,” Sawyer said. “I’m not even sure if Stryker’s could hold him if he wanted out.” Kara grimaced.

“I will consult the League,” she said. The clone stirred, but did nothing apart from looking around.
As one, the police officers present took a step or two back at his movement, and Kara could hear their heartbeats begin thundering. They were a step away from doing something very foolish. “Once he is secured,” she said to Sawyer, “I will report back to you.”

“Sounds like a plan.” The captain turned away. “Turpin! I want a two block perimeter now!”

The clone only started to struggle when Kara carried them into the clouds, but at a glance, she could tell he was barely awake, so she simply poured on more acceleration. Inhaling deeply, she held her breath as they breached the atmosphere and raced toward the Watchtower. The main airlock curled open as they touched down, but something caused Kara to glance back, over her shoulder.

The woman in red and white floated there.

She drifted closer once she recognized that Kara had seen her and landed lightly inside the airlock. It cycled quickly, allowing Kara to inhale deeply. Her eyes never left the taller woman who smirked.

“I guess we need to talk,” the stranger said in perfect High Kryptonian. “Let’s get Connor here situated and then-”

“Connor?” Kara glanced at the clone and then back at the other woman.

“Right. You just met him.” The woman exhaled. “Let’s get him secured and then we can talk.” She offered a wan smile. “And we’ve got a lot to discuss, don’t we?” Kara glowered.

“Who are you?” she demanded. The woman in red and white smiled.

“That,” she said simply, “is a very long story.”

Barbara Gordon hated Metropolis.

She couldn’t quite put her finger on why – viewed dispassionately, Metropolis was undeniably a beautiful city, with ultra-modern skyscrapers and clean streets. They’d done an amazing job at rebuilding the wake of the Kryptonian attack and it was quite clear that the citizens of this city took great pride in their home. Everyone she met was polite and helpful – though whether that was because she was attractive, female or stuck in this stupid wheelchair remained up in the air – and all of her professors were pleasant enough, but still, she hated this place.

Today had been a perfect example. Despite only just turning nineteen, she was already beginning her final semester for her undergraduate degree – a product of her skipping two grades before college and taking a heavier than normal course load over the last two years – and all of her professors were eagerly recommending Masters’ programs they thought she should consider, but the only thing Barbara could think of was how badly she wanted to go home. There wasn’t a chance of her resuscitating her career as Batgirl, not with her legs utterly useless and the chances of her ever walking again dwindling with each day that passed – there was already some significant muscle loss despite her various attempts to prevent complete atrophy – but she was convinced she could still help Bruce in other ways, even if it was just as a high tech equivalent of a dispatch operator. He’d been less than enthusiastic the one time she floated the idea by him, but since then, he’d started relying on her for computer work more and more. In fact, her current rig was a gift from him and she was pretty sure she had more processing power at her fingertips than the entire U.S. military combined.

And man, World of Warcraft looked awesome on this machine.

At the moment, though, as she leaned back in her chair and stared at the monitors for the state of the art computer, Barbara had to admit the thing she missed the most was Gotham pizza. None of the
places she’d tried here in Metropolis came close to Rizzoli’s, even the three or four places that claimed to be ‘Gotham-style.’

“My kingdom for a good pizza,” Barbara murmured as she un-muted her television.

“-coming to you live from downtown Metropolis where the Maid of Steel just shut down another crazed clone of her cousin,” the reporter was breathlessly announcing. Barbara grimaced – she’d monitored the entire fight from a hijacked WayneTech satellite and had observed the arrival of the other Kryptonian; the mystery woman had successfully managed to avoid being captured on any of the news cameras, but she’d clearly not anticipated the presence of an orbital camera pointed directly at the city – and quickly killed the power to the television. That was another reason she hated this city – WGBS splashed Catherine Grant all over Metropolis and Barbara couldn’t stand her.

“Online,” a raspy but familiar voice growled across her dedicated audio chat line. Barbara smirked and wheeled around to her desk.

“Hey, B,” she said into her headset as she tapped a quick command. “Uploading some data to your system – looks like the mystery girl just showed up to help Kara.”

“I know,” Bruce rumbled. “They’re on the Watchtower now.” Barbara’s eyes widened at that. “I have some data I need decrypted.” Her computer pinged. “This is time sensitive.” His connection ended abruptly, once more reminding her of what she didn’t miss about working with him.

Glowering at her screen, she navigated to the FTP server he’d uploaded the data to and went to work.

An hour into it, Barbara had identified it as being linked to the League of Shadows – there were more than a few familiar markers in the data encryption that identified the source – and she sighed heavily. Any time Ra’s al Ghul re-entered Bruce’s life, things got wildly out of control, especially if he brought that monster, Talia, with him.

“You online?” Richard’s voice crackled over the voice chat moments after she’d successfully broken through the first layers. Barbara grinned.

“Hey there, Boy Wonder,” she replied. “How are things out in Seattle?”

“Cold and frustrating.” Richard chuckled. “I think I would kill someone for a real pizza.” Barbara laughed out loud.

“I was thinking the same thing earlier,” she admitted. Leaning back in her chair, she glanced at the wall clock – two-thirty in the morning; that would put it at half past eleven in Washington – and shook her head. “What’s up?”

“Checking in,” Richard replied. “You wanted me to call when we knew what was up…“

“With Wally!” Barbara minimized her work area. “How is he?”

“Recovering.” Richard was silent for a moment and Barbara exhaled in relief. Wally West – Kid Flash – was the former Robin’s best friend and, for the last week, had been in a coma, ever since he took an energy blast meant for one of his team members. According to Richard, the person Wally had leaped to defend – Artemis – was alternately apoplectic with rage over his action and shivering with terror that he would die. “He opened his eyes for a minute or two today and the doctors are pretty sure he’ll be running around like a lunatic pretty soon.” A pang of envy shot through her – Barbara would love to be able to run again – but it was washed away by an overwhelming sense of relief. She liked Wally too.
“Did you guys nail Beldon?” she asked. Once again, Richard chuckled.

“Artemis did,” he said. “She tracked him down and beat the living crap out of him.” He snickered. “I think he’ll get out of traction sometime next year – honestly, if Kaldur hadn’t pulled her off him, I think she might have done some permanent damage.”

“But she doesn’t like Wally,” Barbara said with a grin.

“Not at all.” They laughed; the continuing will-they-won’t-they dance between the two Titans remained a constant source of amusement for Richard and the rest of his team, even if they did not quite understand the nature of human courtships as was the case with the statuesque Starfire. Barbara grimaced.

“How’s Kory?” she asked after a moment. It took every bit of her self control to keep the emotion out of her voice – she wasn’t sure how the acrobatic jerk who used to tease her at every chance he could became so damned essential to her mental health, but by the time she’d realized it, the little punk had started dating a super-powered alien princess.

“Doing okay,” came the quick response. “Still having trouble fitting in, but that’s not a big surprise, right?” He laughed suddenly. “To be honest,” Richard said, “I’m not sure whether it’s her or Donna who is struggling the most.”

“That’s … nice.” Barbara almost winced at the hesitation in her voice – as someone who’d lived with Bruce for four years, there was almost no way Richard would miss it, even on this crappy connection.

“Enough about me,” he said quickly, the humor in his voice dwindling. “How are you?” Barbara was silent for several long seconds as she struggled with how to answer it – the truth? A lie? Some combination of the two? “That bad, huh?” Richard asked before she could figure out her angle. “Is it the chair?” He asked it so simply, accepted her disability without any beating around the bush or trying to pretend it wasn’t there, and it just made Barbara love him even more. Bruce couldn’t even look at her without getting angry at himself all over again – as if it was his fault; Joker had come after her dad, not Batgirl – and all of her other friends automatically apologized the instant they made a joke about ‘running out to the store’ or ‘standing up to the man.’ Not Richard, though.

“Not today,” she admitted. Inhaling deeply, she shook her head. Truth it was. She’d never been able to lie to him. “I hate Metropolis,” she said. “After I graduate, I’m heading back to Gotham.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” There was a frown in his voice – she could hear it – and Barbara knew he was thinking about her nightmares. The last time she’d visited Gotham, sense memories – the taste of gunpowder, the sound of Joker’s laugh, his foul breath, the sound of him smacking his lips in that absurd way – had nearly destroyed her. Every day, she thanked God he hadn’t raped her physically, but seeing the haunted look in Dad’s eyes or hearing the barely contained rage in Bruce’s … those were bad enough.

“I think so, yeah,” Barbara murmured. “This city … I can’t stand it, Dick,” she said, intentionally using Wally’s friendly nickname as an attempt to change the subject. He hated that name.

“You know he’ll treat you like dirt again,” Richard said, anger and frustration simmering in his voice. “He does it to everybody.” He continued before she could respond. “Have you met my replacement?” he asked sourly. Barbara sighed.

“No,” It wasn’t entirely a lie – she’d spoken to this new Robin over the headset twice, but they’d been short conversations that consisted solely of her relaying some information. She glanced at the
minimized work window. “He’s looking into something involving the League of Shadows,” she said carefully. The noise of disgust she heard made her smile.


“This holding back of your real feelings about her concerns me,” Barbara said with smirk even though she pretty much agreed with him. As far as she was concerned, Bruce had unbelievably bad taste in women, in between the crazy cat lady and the even crazier terrorist lady. And that didn’t even take into account the other freaks he tended to attract.

“That woman is insane, Babs,” Richard added. “She’s stabbed him in the back – literally – at least twice that I know of.” His next comment, spoken under his breath, was clearly not intended for her. “Idiot needs to stop thinking with his little head.” He was silent for long moments. “Have you considered where you’re going to live?” he asked. “Your dad’s place isn’t exactly big and the bedrooms are all on the second floor.”

“The Clocktower, I think.” Barbara blew out an annoyed breath. “Bruce made sure I have tons of money,” she said, “so I was thinking about buying a loft in those apartments and then renovating them.”

“Oh, awesome idea! Vic can record it for me!” Richard paused. “I’ll call you tomorrow,” he promised. “You can sell me on the Gotham thing.”

“Or you could just ask the owner,” the former acrobat said. “Mister Dark and Broody owns that building.” Barbara blinked – she hadn’t known that. Bruce must have purchased them under a shell company because his name definitely wasn’t in the lease. “He doesn’t use it much,” Richard continued, “but I know he used to have a satellite cave on the top floor.” The sound of a muted conversation filtered across the line. “I’ve got to go,” Richard said. “Wally’s waking up and I want to embarrass Artemis in front of him.”

“Okay.” Barbara smiled. “Try to get some video of it for future blackmail.”

“Sell you?” Barbara smirked. “I’m the one thinking of moving, Dicky boy.”

“Yeah, but it means when I visit you, I have to be in his city.” The last two words were spoken in a raspy, deepened voice that was, in her opinion, an amazingly accurate imitation of Bruce when he was in Bat-mode. “Catch you later, Babs!” His line disconnected, but not before she heard him call out to Vic. She smiled.

And then, maximized her work window so she could finish decrypting this mess. After all, she still had classes in the morning.

The man screamed.

He burned, and melted, and was remade, only for the entire process to start over. His veins were filled with acid, he inhaled flame, and unbelievable agony was his constant companion. He could not rest, could not see, could not move. The only thing that existed was pain.

Pain and Darkseid.

He fought without knowing why. The pain wanted him to submit, to yield, to surrender, but he could not, would not do that. Surrender meant oblivion. Surrender meant the loss of identity. He clung to fragments of memory – a sigil or symbol that meant hope, a dark-haired woman of unspeakable
beauty, a glittering orb of blue and green, a girl with hair of gold – and struggled. He would not falter. He would burn and be seared to ash and smashed to atoms, but he would not yield.

The pain came anew.

An eternity later – it could have been seconds, it could have been decades – he heard voices and the agony abated ever so slightly. He recalled gasping heavily as he desperately sought to rebuild his mental walls. His tortured brain labored to translate the words in comprehension.

“He continues to resist, Master,” one of the voices declared. It was a black sound, filled with hate and malice and petty cruelty. There was fear and despair in that voice too, and the man held onto that realization.

“I grow weary of excuses, Desaad.” This voice made the man shiver and tremble. There was no weakness in this voice, no fear or any emotion but hate and rage, both tightly controlled. “You broke Kalibak in a tenth of the time,” the voice rumbled like ice cracking.

“Kalibak was weak, Master,” the first voice whimpered. “This Kryptonian, he is strong.”

“My patience is not limitless, Desaad.” A chill colder than the deepest winter fell upon the man as the monster continued. “My wrath, however, is without limit. Fail me and you shall know this intimately.” The cold withdrew, leaving behind only the man and the first voice.

“Let us resume, my slave,” it whispered.

And the pain began again.
Kahndaq Civil War Enters Seventh Year

Published August 28, 2022 / Ronald Troupe

SHIRUTA, KAHNDAQ – Large protests marking the seventh-year anniversary of the Kahndaq uprising were held across the country Saturday as the opposition vowed to continue its fight to topple President Asim Muhunnad.

As the fighting entered a seventh year, there were scant signs of a political solution that some world leaders have been pushing. More than 70,000 people have been killed, many of them women and children, according to the United Nations.

Concern over the possibility of biological and chemical weapons being used have kept the United Nations from requesting Justice League intervention. The League’s charter officially forbids it from intervening in civil conflicts such as the one going on in Kahndaq, despite building international pressure for them to do so.

Click for more from Daily Planet Online

THE SOUND OF BATTLE DREW HIM CLOSER.

Downtown Metropolis was a mess, with overturned cars, smoking wrecks that had once been police vehicles, and a thick haze of smoke from out of control fires. There were still police officers present and, as Billy streaked over the street, more than a few pointed in the direction they needed him to take. Laboring alongside the cops were EMTs and firemen. At another time, he would have paused and given them a hand, but there was no time. There was never any time.

He curled around a still burning military helicopter – at a glance, it appeared the crew had not died with it – and paused ever so briefly to take in the scene. Robots, cyborgs, and hideous-looking monsters that were likely failed Kryptonian clones were everywhere, standing guard around a shattered building or engaging the heroes who had answered the call. Billy saw members of the League, the entire group of Titans out of Seattle, even a couple who were unaffiliated with any team, and all of them showed signs of fierce combat: Nightwing, the current leader of the Titans, had his left arm in a jury-rigged cast but was somehow still in the fight; Black Canary was bleeding profusely from a scalp wound but was ignoring it as she treated a barely conscious Zatanna; there was even a strange-looking green guy wearing a trench coat with red suspenders and armed with a pair of pistols who seemed to be capable of phasing through the attacks directed against him. Dozens of non-powered soldiers, all wearing advanced body armor, were scattered around the heroes, engaging the robots and clones from positions of cover even as the current Lantern – the jerk, Gardner, who really needed to be punched in the face, stood in the open, his legs set as he generated a semi-translucent energy barrier protecting them from incoming fire. Energy beams, high-bore cannons, even chunks of masonry torn free and thrown smashed into the Lantern’s wall, but Gardner held fast.

“We’ve got an entire squadron of Blackhawks en route,” one of the military men was telling Wonder Woman. He wore general rank – just one star – and the style of his uniform identified him as Air Force. “I’m not sure how good they’ll be, though,” the general continued. “As long as he has that force field protecting him, we might as well be using sticks.”
Defeating the barrier is our first objective,” Princess Diana said. For a moment, the Wisdom of Solomon abandoned him and Billy stared. Covered in dirt and sweat, her face creased in a fierce frown, the princess was … glorious. There was a presence about her, an aura of effortless command that made Billy almost want to go to one knee in front of her and swear eternal obedience. He blinked suddenly at the strange sense of familiarity radiating from her before suddenly understanding.

Her entire being was suffused with magic. It was a subtle effect, one that enhanced her natural beauty and made her even more appealing. Though he could not be sure, Billy couldn’t help but to wonder if different people saw different things when they looked at her, as if the elements that a person found most desirable in a mate were enhanced. It did not seem to be an artifice of any sort, but rather something innate, something that called to him on an elemental level. Now that he thought about it, though, that made sense; her gods were the Olympians and weren’t his powers linked to them as well? No wonder she seemed so familiar to him even though he’d barely exchanged a dozen words with her over the years.

He shook the moment off as he made a quick half-floating, half jump to where she stood. She continued addressing the general, but her eyes drifted briefly toward Billy and she gave him a nod. “Advise your troops, Steve,” she said. “We will move in five minutes.” The general—his nametag read TREVOR and Billy vaguely remembered him now; he was the pilot who’d been linked to the princess when she first came to America, right?—offered her a quick salute and darted off. “You are just in time, Captain,” Wonder Woman said as her former beau left. “We have need of your strength.”

“I’m here to help, ma’am,” Billy said with a grin. Automatically, his eyes turned to the broken building that dominated the combat zone. Once, it had been the city’s tallest skyscraper. All but the lower ten or fifteen floors were gone now, having exploded outward hours ago when the onslaught began. Hundreds were dead, thousands injured, and millions of dollars of damage was already done. Through great holes in the wall, a flickering field of energy could be seen and within that sphere was a man, dressed in what looked to be a green battlesuit, though the distortions of the force field made it hard to confirm that. Whatever he man was doing, it couldn’t be good.

Nothing Lex Luthor did these days was good.

“Still not able to breach that field,” a man declared, seeming to almost pop out of nowhere. Dressed entirely in red, he somehow managed to look completely bored. “Pretty sure Luthor has it set up with some oscillating molecular frequencies— I can get about halfway through, then it adapts and spits me out.” He glanced at Billy and bit his lip. “I’ve got an idea, though,” he said. “I think I can hyper-accelerate a flier’s velocity for short bursts.”

“I’m game to give it a try,” Billy said brightly. The princess nodded but kept staring at the robots with such intensity that Billy and the Flash followed the line of her gaze in an attempt to figure out what was bothering her. It came to him a moment later—those looked like the ones that guy who called himself the Toymaker used. How could Luthor get his hands on that kind of tech? And the clones? There were just too many of them for this to be a spur of the moment thing. “This is a trap,” he murmured with a frown. The princess glanced at him—he saw agreement in her eyes, along with the same confusion he felt. Who was it for? What was the endgame?

A sonic boom announced the arrival of two other figures, both feminine though one was much larger than the other, and both garbed in red and white. Billy grinned again—he’d wondered when Kara and Karen would show up. These days, where you found one, you found the other. It made hanging with Kara hard to do at times—Karen teased him mercilessly and seemed to derive an unhealthy amount of glee from his difficulty in meeting her eyes at times; it wasn’t really his fault … her breasts
were always *right there* and that ridiculous costume she wore only enhanced them. Sure, he might have the Wisdom of Solomon at his disposal, but that guy had a thousand wives or something, and Billy just turned seventeen last month. Super-powers meant super-hormones. At least Kara usually dressed like a normal person usually and that made it easier to concentrate on ignoring the fact she was pretty hot herself, providing he managed to forget that Karen *was* Kara, just a couple years older. And one of these days, Billy promised himself for the hundredth time today, he fully intended to work up the courage to ask her out on a real date, not a stupid team-up against Black Adam or Dominus or some other super-powered clown.

Glancing away from the incoming Kryptonians, the hairs on the back of neck stood up the moment he realized each and every one of the defending robots oriented their heads at the two. Comprehension came instantly.

*Luthor* was waiting for them!

A sudden explosion of emerald energy erupted from the LexCorp building – it streaked outward at impossible speeds, tearing up concrete and smashing aside anything in its way. Cyborgs and robots alike were sent tumbling into the shattered city streets. The instant it flashed by the clones, they began shrieking …

And disintegrating.

Kara must have recognized the threat before her timelost sister as she threw herself at Karen in what was clearly a desperate attempt to shield her, but the energy wave struck them both at the same and hurled them back into the side of another building. Billy tensed at the sound of their screams, calling upon the Speed of Mercury. Instantly, the world around him slowed to a crawl and time seemed to stand still. He could only do this in short spurts – in was beyond exhausting and burned so much energy he always ended up so hungry afterward that he could eat out an entire store – but man, it was useful at times!

“Whoa,” Flash said, the normal sounding remark causing Billy to jerk in surprise. Alone in the world, Flash moved at regular speed and his eyes were wide with surprise underneath his mask at Billy’s unexpected capability. He shook the moment off quickly. “Get Superboy clear!” he shouted before blurring in the building that Kara and Karen had just struck. Grimacing, Billy obeyed even though he desperately wanted to check on the two Kara Zor-El.

He reached Connor – Kon-El as Kara had christened him – a subjective second later and seized the half-Kryptonian, half-Something Else in a body tackle. With barely fifty percent Kryptonian genes, Connor was reacting much faster than a normal human, but still, he was too slow, and Billy carried him high into the sky and as far away from Metropolis as he could manage. Tossing the only decent clone to come out Luthor’s lab toward an empty field, he then arced back toward the city, climbing higher and higher so he could manage more acceleration upon descent. He fell like a burning star, arrowing down toward the force barrier. And, at the last moment before impact, he cried out.

“Shazam!”

Lightning boomed down and Billy rolled in mid-flight to avoid it so the mystical bolt would splash across Luthor’s force field with incalculable power. He wasn’t entirely sure what had encouraged him to do that – the Wisdom of Solomon, perhaps; even at the best of times, he barely understood the powers bequeathed to him by that crazy old wizard – but the effect was instantaneous. The whole of the energy barrier blazed up as it tried to absorb the lightning, but explosions all around the building signified its failure. Billy hit the ground floor with both feet and then blurred toward Luthor.

But something smashed him to his face.
He struggled to stand – the Strength of Heracles and the Stamina of Atlas swelled within his body – but the force holding him down was beyond anything he’d ever felt before. It hurt to breathe. The crack of crumbling masonry warned him that this was not natural. He thought he could hear a soft hum somewhere.

“You’re experiencing fifty gravities,” Luthor said from where he stood. His armor was green, but there was something wrong with it. The chest seemed to be missing and there, where his torso should have been, was a swirling mass of spinning energy. “I’d hoped you would be the Amazon,” Luthor continued. Billy could sense the protective energy barrier spring back up. “But I suppose you shall do.”

“Stop,” Billy hissed, and Luthor replied with a boot to his jaw.

“Be silent before your betters, boy,” the madman snarled. “Are you even capable of comprehending what I have accomplished here? I have harnessed four different alien technologies and I am using them to kill you would-be overlords with your unnatural abilities.” The implacable pressure crushed down even harder. “One hundred gravities!” Luthor shouted. “They will build monuments to my name!” he exclaimed. “Statues will be erected!” He turned his maddened eyes to Billy. “Churches even,” he hissed. “I will be worshipped as a god for what I do today!”

“Not today,” Billy hissed. “Not any day.”

And ignoring the impossible pressure crushing down upon him, ignoring the crippling agonу, ignoring the ominous creak of masonry and steel crumbling underneath the pressure, he stood up.

“Impossible,” Luthor hissed, backing away from him. He manipulated something on his arm and Billy felt an even greater weight slam into him, driving him to one knee. He groaned but forced himself to his feet once more. Heracles was said to have held the weight of the world upon his shoulders and, according to the wizard, Billy had his strength. He forced a grin on his face and took a single, ponderous step forward. His foot sank into the ground, powdering concrete and marble.

“This is not possible!” Luthor roared.

“Sure it is,” Billy said through clenched teeth. Once more summoning the Speed of Mercury, he covered the distance to Luthor in an eyеblink and seized the madman by the arms. Armor crumpled under his fingers, and the impossible weight fell away as sparks and tiny explosions wreathed his fingers. “Shut it down, Luthor,” he ordered. Even as he spoke, he could see the strange energy vortex in Luthor’s chest begin spinning faster and faster. An ominous noise began building in pitch in direct correlation to the speed of the vortex. Luthor began to laugh then, a madman’s cackle that showed how far gone he was, and rage filled Billy’s chest. This monster … he was no better than scum like Sivana!

Spinning Luthor around, he seized him in a full Nelson hold and then threw them both up into the air. At the last instant, immediately before they struck the barrier, Billy slowed their rapid ascent despite the overwhelming urge to see what would happen if they struck it at full speed. He was fairly certain he could take the impact, but Luthor? Probably not. Fury beat at his soul … but that wasn’t really a surprise, was it? He had the Strength of Heracles and the Courage of Achilles, but neither of them was especially renowned for their calm demeanors. It only made sense that he possessed at least some of their anger as well. The Wisdom of Solomon urged him to show mercy, to consider his actions, but the fears of William Batson washed it away. He could still hear her screams.

“You shouldn’t have hurt Kara,” he growled. And then, he drew in air and shouted. “Shazam!”

And thunder answered him.
Sweat trickled down his face, but Bruce ignored it as he studied the lithe woman standing in front of him. This was exactly what he’d wanted to avoid when he followed Jason to Kahndaq.

She was dressed in a black form-fitting bodysuit and, from the way she glided over the rocky terrain, Bruce knew he was looking squarely at trouble. There was no hesitation in her step, no concern about the imperfect footing, and her balance was absolutely perfect. Her features marked her as foreign – there weren’t many Chinese women here in this part of the world – but the distinctive scalloped gauntlets – identical to the ones he’d incorporated into his suit – she wore confirmed his worst fears.

“So,” Bruce said as he knelt to check Jason’s pulse and confirm the boy was only unconscious. He kept his eyes on the woman before him. “The League of Shadows is in Kahndaq.”

“Oh,当然,” the woman – Shiva Woosan, according to Jason’s research though now that he was looking at her, Bruce suspect she was also the League of Shadows agent known as Jade Canary. “We are everywhere.” Her smirk deepened as he rose and slid a half step away from Jason. “And I see the rumors about you are correct,” she stated. “You have had League instruction.” She grinned then, a dark and deadly expression. “This has the potential to be an excellent day after all.”

Without another word, she sprang forward, her hands blurring as she went for a disabling strike. Bruce countered, backing away from her equally fast follow-up. Damn, she was fast. He caught her next strike on his gauntlet and whirled, flowing into what would have been a crippling knee strike, but she danced away, twisting and rolling away to assume a perfect ready stance. Her eyes lit up as they circled.

“You are not entirely incompetent,” she remarked with a wicked smile. Her form changed – from Leopard to Dragon – and Bruce countered with Tiger. He half-stepped forward, then threw himself back at her sudden and unexpected snap-kick. His head spun – he hadn’t even seen that kick coming! – and he blinked the dizziness away just in time to counter another strike. Shiva’s follow-up kick caught him in the side: his armor held, but even so, the force of the blow staggered him just enough for her to attack again, this time with a blindingly fast elbow strike to his jaw.

They danced back and forth for long moments, neither speaking nor making much noise, and Bruce’s estimation of the woman’s skills rapidly climbed. He had strength and size, but she was unbelievably fast and dodged nearly all of his counter-strikes. His armor was his biggest edge – it held firm against her most lethal strikes and he could see her frustration mounting when even the weak points refused to buckle.

Once again, they circled.

“You trained with the Sensei, did you not?”

“I did.” Bruce side-stepped, watching her eyes. He saw something then that she did not and leaped forward, abandoning defense in favor of an all out assault that clearly caught her by surprise. She backpedaled furiously, batting aside his kicks and strikes, and was thus completely unprepared for Jason’s arrival. He struck low, his punch aimed at her left kidney, and it staggered her just enough for Bruce to seize the upper hand. He almost felt bad for the damage he handed out – though he couldn’t be sure, he was fairly certain she’d broken several of her ribs and she wasn’t able to fully evade the roundhouse kick he delivered to her jaw. Robin struck again, wisely staying low, and his rabbit punch fouled her footing enough to allow Bruce to deliver a punishing blow to her face.

Shiva crumpled.

Rather than trust she was beaten, Bruce seized her left arm and locked it in a disabling hold while
wrapping his legs around her neck. She struggled – a distant part of him congratulated him on not falling for her trick – but by then, it was already too late. Her body slackened as she slipped into unconsciousness.

“Cuff her,” he ordered Jason tersely. The boy hesitated – this might be his mother, after all – but pulled zip ties from his utility belt and obeyed. “Legs too,” Bruce added as he let her go. “Double … no, triple strength.” He wobbled as he stood. “Damn, she’s good,” he muttered before glancing back in the direction of the rebel camp. He briefly contemplated blowing the ammo dump, but just as quickly discarded the thought – they could not afford to be noticed and the explosion that would be necessary to take out the weapons would be seen for miles.

With Jason’s assistance, he carried the unconscious Shiva to their jeep where he allowed the younger man to drive while he focused on his breathing. Not for the first time, Bruce was glad of the cowl – it allowed him to conceal how wobbly he was. He nodded toward an outcropping.

“Pull over here,” he instructed.

Shiva snapped awake the instant he held the tiny smelling salt packet underneath her nose, but to her credit, she did not both trying to free herself. Instead, she glanced around in what was likely an attempt to identify their location or perhaps find something to turn to her advantage. When she returned her gaze to Bruce’s, he could see the rage in her eyes.

“You are far from Gotham, Detective,” she hissed through swelled lips.

“I have questions for you,” Bruce replied. Jason wisely held back, out of sight of Shiva. Had the woman been able to see him, Bruce doubted she would have been able to miss his conflicted eagerness.

“And if I choose not to answer them?” Shiva asked. “I know your reputation, Detective,” she added with a sneer. Bruce said nothing as he pulled a small device off his utility belt. From it, he extracted a patch, almost identical in appearance to the smoking cessation patches so prevalent in the United States. “Drugs?” Shiva asked with a laugh. “You know as well as I that the League trains you to resist this sort of thing.”

“I could lie to you,” Bruce hissed as he slapped the patch onto her exposed neck, “and tell you that this compound is sodium pentothal, but both of us know there is no such thing as truth serum.” He leaned closer and lowered his voice. “On Earth, that is.” Instantly, he saw her understanding. Everyone knew that the Batman was a member of the Justice League and there were several members of that august organization who were extraterrestrial. This particular compound was actually a derivative of the more traditional sodium pentothal, enhanced by chemicals Clark had developed during his research into Kryptonian medical databases. It was an amazing discovery.

And Bruce hoped to God his friend, wherever he was, never learned how this gift to mankind had been perverted.

The serum took effect quickly – Shiva fought it, but he could see how her eyes swam out of focus. Her muscles slackened. Bruce leaned forward, though he made sure that he was just out of reach should she be responsive enough to try anything.

“What is your name?” he asked softly.

“Sandra,” she murmured. “Sandra Wu-San.” Bruce tightened his lips and made a mental note. He paused briefly before continuing.
“Have you ever had children?”

“Yes,” Shiva replied. Jason froze in place, his breath faltering slightly. “A daughter,” she added with a sleepy, dream-like smile. “The League took my little Cassandra from me,” she said, but Bruce was watching Jason. The boy was clearly torn between relief and despair – they’d come so far and once again found only disappointment. Catching Bruce’s look, Robin nodded and turned away.

Bruce watched him walk away.

“Why are you in Kahndaq, Sandra?” he asked once Jason was back at the jeep. “What does the League want here?” Ra’s having a hand in this war made no sense – Kahndaq had been a mess for decades even before this civil war broke out and there was no way they could considered economic powerhouses. Was this part of a new gambit, one that Bruce had not predicted?

“Recruiting,” Shiva replied. The short-lived drug was beginning to wear off and Bruce could see coherence returning to her eyes. She was fighting the effects now and he respected her capabilities enough to doubt anything else she said. He pulled the patch free.

“You should be fully recovered in a few minutes,” Bruce told her simply. “With your abilities, I expect you’ll be free in no time.”

“Our paths will cross again, Detective,” Shiva snarled. Bruce didn’t bother responding as he walked the short distance to the jeep. Jason was already waiting, once more in the driver’s seat.

“Let’s get out of here,” he muttered as Bruce slid into the vehicle.

“Would she have been the type of mother you’d want to have?” he asked once they were on the road again. Bruce pulled off his armored cowl and winced at the hot air that blasted him in the face. Damn, she’d been good. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d faced someone that fast, that skilled, that dangerous.

“Of course not,” Jason muttered. “She’s insane.” He glanced toward Bruce. “League of Shadows,” he said slowly. “She reminds me of Talia.”

“Hardly.” Bruce leaned back in his seat. “You can actually trust some of what Shiva says.” He tried not to sound too bitter, but it was hard. His head ached, both from the fierce fight and what felt like inadequate water. It was too damned hot here and he didn’t want to even think about Ra’s al Ghul’s daughter or the overly complicated relationship he had with her, not right now.

God, he missed Selina.

“This leaves just Sheila Haywood,” he said. Instantly, Jason brightened. In that moment, he looked more like Richard than he ever had, and it sent a pang through Bruce. Why hadn’t he introduced them? Yes, he’d overreacted when Richard was shot, but since then, he’d made no effort to bury the hatchet or take back any of the words fear had caused him to say. Richard was thriving in Seattle with that group of his, but Bruce had intentionally avoided doing more than keeping track of his adopted son’s activities.

“Yeah,” Jason said with a grin. “Ethiopia, here we come!”

Her back straight, Diana of Themyscira stared silently at the wall and prayed.

To her great dismay, she realized she had not done so for many weeks. Events had flowed so quickly into one another that she had staggered from one crisis to another, sleeping when she could, eating
when she had to, but always struggling on. Before, when she was still on Themyscira, rarely did a
day pass without her paying homage to the gods upon Olympus. Perhaps her mother was not entirely
inaccurate. Perhaps she had lost something of herself to Patriarch’s World.

She was not sure exactly how long she knelt there, staring at the icons in what she already knew to
be a vain attempt for guidance. The two Kryptonians were not Amazons, nor were they even of this
world, so the Olympians had no reason to respond to her request for intervention. Once, an eternity
ago, before Ares descended upon Themyscira in his madness, she could have petitioned the queen
for use of the Purple Ray, but like so much, it was lost to them, shattered by Phobos himself. Now,
all they had at their disposal was Kryptonian science and brilliant men and women like Doctors Holt
and Spence.

Her prayers complete, Diana knelt quietly, her thoughts drifting like so much flotsam in the sea.
Inevitably, they turned to Kal – where was he? The Lanterns had uncovered nothing during the
course of their investigation, though she knew Hal suspected the Guardians were keeping key truths
from him.

“The lack of evidence is too perfect,” he’d complained to her the last time he was on Earth so many
months ago. “I’ve been doing this for a while now and I have never seen something wiped this
clean.” His expression had darkened. “Those little pricks know something but they’re not telling the
rest of us what it is.”

He’d vanished after that, departing Sector 2814 to conduct his own, unofficial investigation. Shortly
thereafter, Shayera Hol had returned to the stars herself to do the same; her husband, Katar, had not
been pleased at being separated from his mate for such an extended amount of time – Diana did not
know the particulars, but evidently, once wed, Thanagarian couples were genetically incapable of
extended separation – but seeing as how Kal had saved both of their lives numerous times, he’d not
complained too loudly. According to Katar, Shayera had contacts Hal did not and she meant to burn
every bridge, call in every favor, shake down every informant until she found something.

Were her own duties not so overwhelming, Diana would have accompanied Shayera, but the League
needed her, Themyscira required her, and the United Nations expected her to play nursemaid. Today
aside, Metropolis had calmed down considerably, though that might be due to her more aggressive
policing policy. There were quite a few of would-be conquerors or villains who required extensive
recovery times thanks to her temper. It was exactly as Bruce had promised so many months ago …

Bruce. Diana frowned at thoughts about him. He’d taken Kal’s disappearance almost as hard as she,
one more withdrawing into his angry shell and reducing his presence in the League to a bare
minimum. She knew he’d coordinated a few times with Hal regarding the Lantern’s investigation,
but as was his wont, he did not bother informing anyone else about it. She shook her head.

A subtle chime echoed through the sealed off room and Diana rose to her feet, pausing briefly
acknowledge the other icons scattered around the makeshift chapel. There were several different
crosses, a crescent not intended to represent anything in Muslim theology but rather to point the way
to Mecca, a Magen David, a small statue of Buddha, and several other symbols she was not entirely
familiar with. While she was not an adherent to any of these other religions, she saw no reason to be
offensive toward them – the world was more wondrous and terrible than she could have ever
imagined; who was she to determine what was Absolute Truth?

She wasn’t entirely sure who had decided to convert this room to a chapel – for the most part, the
members of the League were surprisingly non-religious – but in her position as chairman of the
always growing team, she’d insisted on equal representation. Anyone was free to visit the chamber,
but disrespect for any of the other denominations would be grounds for immediate expulsion. Thus
far, there had been no issues apart from a number of heated debates between various League members. As an avowed (and quite vocal) atheist, Green Arrow somehow managed to be at the center of nearly every one of the conflicts and managed to earn the universal dislike of Christian, Jewish and Muslim alike, creating a form of unity between the three religions that thousands of years had failed to accomplish.

He was quite proud of this feat.

Doctor Holt was waiting outside the chapel and, from his expression, Diana knew the news was not good. She steeled herself and gave him a nod.

“I’m afraid I don’t have good news,” he said. “We attempted an application of solar radiation per the Watchtower’s A.I., but it has only accelerated the deterioration.” He offered Diana a data-slate, but she refused it – her knowledge of medicine was limited to the more traditional applications taught by Epione who had already looked over the two Kryptonians and simply shook her head. “To be frank, I’ve never seen anything like this before.” Holt frowned. “Hell, I didn’t even think this was possible,” he added. “Based on the debris we recovered at the scene, I’m guessing Luthor reverse-engineered a Kryptonian birthing matrix obtained during Zod’s invasion and then used it to develop this … effect.”

“Is there nothing you can do?” Diana asked softly. Hera help her, she hated feeling this helpless.

“What I need is time,” Holt replied. “If we can find some way to slow down the process so I can study it and the lab equipment from the scene, I might be able to counter this.” Diana nodded.

“Who do you need?”

“The Flashes,” came the quick reply. “Theoretically, they should be able to focus their special abilities and form a sort of stasis field by…”

“I will have them join you in the medical facility at once,” Diana interrupted to prevent a lengthy, complicated and ultimately incomprehensible explanation. What was it about geniuses that required so many of them to use ten words to describe something within their field of expertise when three would do? Diana was, by no means, an unintelligent woman – she was actually quite brilliant, thanks to the blessings of her gods – but there were times, when she spoke to a true expert that she felt like a babbling fool and few things were more uncomfortable. At her remarks, Holt nodded and turned away, sparing only a single, disinterested glance at the chapel entrance.

Tracking down the two Flashes – Barry and his nephew, Wallace – was easy enough: she found them in the small dining facility, replenishing the energy of their bodies through the consumption of vast quantities of sugar. A young man she did not know sat with them, though there was a strangely familiar presence about him. It took Diana less than a heartbeat to recognize it as the same feeling she’d had each time she was speaking with Captain Marvel. For the first time, she felt less concerned about the amount of time Kara had been spending with him – if this was his natural form, he was not a greatly older man taking advantage of a young, inexperienced girl.

“I’m willing to give it a try,” Barry said once she explained the rudiments of Doctor Holt’s idea. He glanced at his nephew who nodded and both simply vanished, leaving her alone with the young man staring listlessly at his own bowl of food. Diana studied him for a moment and the feel of her eyes caused him to look up.

“Captain Marvel, I presume?” she asked. He half-nodded, half-shrugged in a thoroughly adolescent gesture.
“My name’s Billy,” he replied. “Billy Batson.” Rage and fear warred in his eyes as he looked up. “Is she … are they going to die?”

“I do not know,” Diana answered honestly. She took the seat previously occupied by Barry which was directly across from the young man. “You and Kara are close,” she said. It was not a question, but he took it as one.

“Yeah, kinda,” he said. “We hang out a lot and she helped me figure out what I wanted to do with my life.” He gave that curious nod-shrug again. “You know, when I’m not fighting super-villains or battling monsters.”

“Would that she had applied the same diligence for herself,” Diana said with a wry smile.

“I know, right?” Billy gestured wildly. “She’s like this super-genius who can do all this amazing crap and all she complains about is how badly her life sucks.” He rolled his eyes. “Because being able to fly, or bench-press a tank, or shrug off bullets is so terrible.” Despite herself, Diana smiled – she had heard much the same thing from Donna … and speaking of her own cousin, where had the little pest gone? Diana hoped the girl wasn’t mooning over the Atlantean boy again.

“So, Mister Batson,” Diana said slowly. “What great awakening did Kara lead you to?” The boy hesitated, but then slowly began to speak, growing more emphatic as he described the role he envisioned for himself. Diana listened carefully, silently making a note to consult with Lois later about possibly mentoring the boy. She had done wonders with her previous two apprentices and having him work with someone who knew he was more than human at times would go a long way in avoiding the usual sorts of secret identity hijinks so many of her fellow Leaguers complained about.

What she carefully did not address was Batson’s direct hand in Lex Luthor’s death. There would be investigations later and, if she were honest, Diana would not put it past that madman to have found a way to survive, particularly given his recent propensity for cloning. As a warrior, she recognized the occasional necessity to put down an enemy, but there were always metahuman detractors who would point at this incident and claim it was representative of the whole, no matter that the Metropolis mayor had already publicly thanked the League (and the Titans, it had to be admitted) for helping stop a terrorist madman.

“May I have a word?” Katar Hol asked some time later. He looked strangely smaller without his wings, but the fierceness in his eyes reminded her that he was not of Earth either. Diana nodded to the Thanagarian, noting instantly how Billy managed to seemingly vanish without actually moving. Was it a talent of his that came with his special abilities or something he had learned over the years? To Diana’s eyes, he clearly had lived a difficult life but she was leery of pressing too hard. Men, it seemed, were proud creatures who would insist they were fine even when their lifeblood was seeping out. She had seen it a dozen times before with men of the League. “General Trevor has requested you make contact with him,” Katar said. “There have been some new developments, I think.”

“Thank you.” Diana rose. “We shall speak again, Mister Batson,” she said with a friendly smile. To her surprise, Katar took her place and quickly engaged the boy in conversation. Before she was even out of the small dining facility, they were already arguing over some trivial sporting event. It was very hard not to roll her eyes.

She passed no one else in the corridors as she strode toward the communications room, though that was not an especially great surprise as many of the League were still in Metropolis, assisting with disaster relief or crowd control whenever necessary, while the rest currently on active duty were busy with other tasks. One of the first changes she’d implemented upon officially assuming chairman-status
— and what a ridiculous, paternal name that was; she was rarely hung up on gender specific terms, but could they not have come up with something better? — was to establish a shift rotation for these sorts of events. Yes, the entire League could be on hand to assist emergency workers, but in most cases, some mad fool would choose the moment they were all occupied to launch a senseless assault upon civilization. Having at least half the team on stand-by was simply common sense.

The moment she saw Steve’s face on the monitor, she knew it was not good news. Still, her mother had always taught her that the niceties must always be observed, even in the face of impending calamity.

“Hello, Steve,” she said with a slight smile. “I did not have the chance earlier to offer my congratulations on your promotion,” she added. He grinned.

“Yes,” he remarked with a shake of his head. “Not sure what they were thinking.” His amusement faltered slightly. “I like the extra pay,” he said, “but the only thing they let me fly these days is a desk.” Diana smiled.

“I understand that you are also engaged to be wed,” she added. Steve’s face lit up, stripping him of a decade or more.

“Candy’s been blabbing again, I see,” he said. His eyes danced. “I knew she couldn’t keep it under wraps like she promised.” It was curious, Diana mused, that he still referred to his future wife by her last name — was this solely a military thing or was it something about Trevor himself? “Did she already invite you?” Diana nodded.

“She did.”

“Damn it, I wanted to invite you.” The smile he gave her was a self-deprecating one. “Well, we know whose going to be wearing the pants in this marriage already, don’t we?” Diana returned his smile, even though she did not wholly comprehend his meaning.

“That is not why you made contact, however,” she said. Steve’s good humor fell away.

“No, it isn’t.” He grimaced. “The State Department asked me to check with you,” he began. “There’s been an … incident in Kahndaq and we’re fairly certain that Batman fellow is involved.” Diana narrowed her eyes.

“What sort of incident?” she demanded quickly. Bruce’s absence from the Metropolis skirmish had not escaped her notice, but she’d been so distracted by the aftermath that it had slipped her mind. “Tell me everything.”

If it was Thursday, Hal reflected grimly, he must be in Sector One-Two-One-Five and Cadmendoh.

He hated this planet even when he wasn’t hiding the fact that he was a Green Lantern — back on his first real mission, he’d visited this festering hellhole with Sinestro, shortly after obtaining the ring in the first place and back before he knew his butt from a hole in the ground, and every time he’d returned since, the planet seemed to get worse. Even more discouraging was how he could look back on his first visit here with something like fondness which said a lot about how his life had played out the last couple of years. That had been before he realized how corrupt Sinestro already was …

Sadly, it had also been before he knew just how less than perfect the Guardians were as well.

Muted rage swam in his stomach as he picked his way through the crowded slums. The Guardians were hiding something directly linked to Superman’s disappearance and not a day passed that Hal
didn’t start to wonder if perhaps Sinestro didn’t have a point. He understood the chain-of-command well enough but not telling your troops something they didn’t need to know and intentionally hiding pertinent details were two wildly different things. The Guardians knew something…

And whatever it was, it terrified them.

From what he’d learned over the past nine years of ring-slinging – and dear Lord, had it really been that long? God, he was getting old – there weren’t very many things that freaked the Guardians out. That Parallax entity he’d heard about was one, and that Atrocitus clown, and then, they’d all looked like they crapped themselves when Hal reported about the Darkseid incursion on Earth back in ’15, so he whatever they were hiding had to be big.

And that led him here, to this disgusting blister of a planet.

No one apart from the absurdly large bouncer even gave him a second look when he entered the bar and Hal paused in the doorway. He was dressed in dirty rags over a ragged bodysuit that (correctly) looked like it had been pulled out of someone’s trash. His ring was hidden underneath torn but still functional (and mismatched, just for effect) gloves, and his features were obscured behind a scarf thing. There were enough humanoid-shaped aliens throughout the universe to not attract too much attention, but still, he intentionally limped as he walked. The ring pulsed slightly, drawing his attention to a corner table where a trio of other figures were huddled. One he quickly recognized despite her disguise, but the other two that sat with her weren’t familiar to him.

“I’m surprised to see you here,” Shayera remarked when he approached. She looked weird without the wings and the freaky bird-mask.

“That makes two of us,” Hal replied. He took a seat and placed his hands on the table. Glancing briefly at Shayera’s two companions, he frowned. Both appeared humanoid, with the woman significantly taller and broader than the male. There was a strangeness to them that he could not quite put his finger on. Shayera gestured toward them.

“This is,” she began, but the male spoke quickly.

“You may call me Shilo,” he said with a slight smile that did not touch his wary eyes. His remark caused Shayera to give him a questioning glance and Hal felt his very finely honed sense of danger begin going crazy “This is my wife, Barda.”

“Hal,” he said simply. He sent a quick command to his ring but strangely, it could not classify either of the two beings sitting in front of him. In fact, this was the same kind of non-reading he’d noted at Rimbor with the weapons signatures – the ring acknowledged that they were physically present and had active biological functions, but beyond that, it informed him that there were no additional records on file. He narrowed his eyes slightly.

“If you try to assault us, Lantern,” the woman – Barda – announced calmly in a voice pitched only for his ears, “I will break you in half.” It was nothing more than a statement of fact and his ring informed him that her biological functions had not deviated in the slightest. The males’ and Shayera’s showed hints of stress, but this woman? She might as well be a statue.

“Does the name Metron mean anything to you?” Hal asked in place of a reply. The two non-entities froze in place even as Shayera gave him an uncomprehending look. “Yeah,” Hal said with a nod, “I thought it might.”

“You must not say that name,” the man who was clearly not named Shilo said in a hushed whisper. “He might hear you!” Hal glowered and leaned forward.
“I’m really not in the mood for this crap,” he hissed. “I don’t know why any of you are even here,” he said, including Shayera in this, “and I honestly don’t care. If you can’t help me find my friend, then you’re useless.” He made to stand but the giantess seized his arm. Hal looked at her. “If you want to keep your hand,” he said softly, “you’ll want to let go.”

She laughed.

“Stop it,” the man said. He met the woman’s eyes and they stared at one another for a long moment. Finally, she nodded and released Hal.

“I’m here because I’m following a lead,” Shayera said. “One of my contacts said I should come here and ask for Barda.” She gestured to the large woman. “I asked some questions and found out that she doesn’t know anything.” This time, she gestured to Hal. “And then you walked in.”

“Dammit.” Hal glanced around the bar but nothing leaped out at him as being out of place. “I met with one of Abin Sur’s old contacts who pointed me here and said I should ask for Metron.” Again, the other man winced. He opened his mouth to speak.

But time froze around them.

Hal was glancing away from the table – one of the barflies was setting off all of his freak radar – and he saw the instant when everyone in the bar ceased moving. His ring instantly began pumping alerts directly into his brain – along with equally useless ‘unable to quantify’ errors – and he sprang out of his chair, allowing his distinctive Lantern armor to burn away the disguise. He heard Shayera slide into place next to him and, with a curious sound of rustling feathers, her wings reappeared as she freed that heavy mace from where it had hung off her belt.

Something **boomed** – it was an all too familiar sound that caused Hal’s stomach to lurch – and a humanoid male suddenly appeared. Dressed in blue and white, he was seated upon an absolutely bizarre-looking chair, but the power in his gaze … it made the oldest of the Guardians seem like an infant by comparison. Hal heard two strangled gasps before Shilo and Barda dropped to their knees in front of the seated figure.

“You seek understanding and wisdom, Hal Jordan, Shayera Hol,” the figure said, his voice hinting at even more power. “I am your guide in this if you have the courage to witness.”

“What the hell are you?” Hal demanded. His head spun from the ring’s constant ‘unable to quantify’ alerts.

“I am Metron.” The figure’s eyes shifted to the kneeling aliens. “Too long have you toiled in obscurity in your efforts to evade Uxas’ eyes,” Metron said. “Izaya will require your strengths in the war to come.” Back to Hal and Shayera his eyes turned. “I cannot direct you to the Kryptonian,” he said, but I am willing to take you to one who can if you have the courage.” Hal glanced at Shayera.

“I fear nothing,” she retorted.

“Lead on, MacDuff,” Hal replied.

“We transit to New Genesis,” Metron announced. Another ground-shaking boom echoed around them and one of those bizarre tube portals appeared. On the other side, Hal could see …

He saw Paradise.

“Come,” Metron ordered. His chair floated through the portal. Shilo and Barda followed him without hesitation. Hal glanced at Shayera, then shrugged.
“What do we have to lose?” he asked before willing himself toward the wormhole his ring was still unable to quantify.

“Katar is going to kill me,” Hal heard Shayera murmur as she followed.

A moment later, the portal collapsed and time restarted.

Helena was desperate.

She’d barely budged from her television as the talking heads breathlessly reported nothing new regarding Karen or Supergirl. The League had issued only a simple statement, declaring their conditions grave, but had said nothing more. And then, that Joker-related mess in Kahdaq briefly knocked the Kryptonians off the top headlines left Helena scrambling to get more information about her friend.

Tentatively, she’d reached out to Oracle, the mysterious super hacker who had somehow hacked her private system to deliver dad … Batman’s warning about operating in his city before then offering Helena a job as a special operative. At the time, Helena had hesitated – she had no idea who this Oracle person was; there wasn’t any equivalent on her world – but the hacker proved to be quite useful on several occasions and, before she knew it, Helena was working for the woman. Today, there was no answer, but that didn’t actually mean anything as Helena rarely tried to make contact this early in the day. Heck, during the weekdays, she usually didn’t even leave school until four, even later if any of her students had issues they needed her help with.

She briefly considered contacting Bruce Wayne, but discarded that idea almost immediately. According to local media, the ‘Prince of Gotham’ was abroad for a vacation or something – Helena wondered at the real reason; she hadn’t seen any sign of him on the Metropolis reports. None of her normal contacts had any kind of link to the League, so they were right out.

Which left Selina Kyle.

Their paths had crossed several times over the last year, especially during missions for Oracle, and, against her better judgment, Helena had kept in touch with the sometime thief, sometime vigilante who looked so much like her mom. For her part, Selina was absolutely nothing like her mother, even though Helena saw flashes of similarity from time to time. This Selina was less polished, more independent, and a whole lot angrier (even if she hid it behind smiles and forced laughter.) Strangely, she was also a whole lot funnier – Mom might have joked and teased on occasion, but her humor was the sort you reserved for your children, whereas this Selina was like a naughty older sister.

“If you don’t have a really good reason for getting me up at this God-awful hour,” Selina said when Helena banged on her door sometime later, “I might very well have to kill you.”

“I need to get to the Watchtower,” Helena replied as she pushed past Selina. Glancing around, she was once again astounded at how tacky the décor was – her mother had, frankly, been something of an art snob who had an opinion on every piece she was quite willing to share, where Selina hung pictures and portraits almost at random, with no eye toward aesthetics or style. There was a big recreation of that stylized Kyle Rayner portrait of Superman crafted by a gajillion little photographs of the Man of Steel hanging next to a framed Rembrandt fake which was next to a generic oil painting of a bowl of fruit. Just looking at that mess …

Helena frowned as she returned her attention to the Rembrandt. She studied it for a moment, before slowly looking toward Selina. The smirk on the older woman’s face answered her unspoken
question. Yes, it was a real Rembrandt.

“This is supposed to be in London,” Helena murmured. She suddenly realized the point of the tackiness – pieces like this could be hidden in plain sight and no one would give it a second look! – and mentally re-evaluated this version of Selina. Had her own mother done this sort of thing too? As Selina Wayne, she’d been free to be as much of an art snob as she wanted...

“It still would be if the Gallery director hadn’t been a complete jerk,” Selina remarked. She pushed her front door closed and had taken two steps from it when a buzz sounded through the upper floor penthouse. At Helena’s glance, she smirked. “It’s my Bat buzzer,” she said. “I’ve got a program running that flags me when he’s mentioned.” Her expression darkened when Helena bit back a smirk. “Don’t start with me,” Selina warned. “I stole the idea from him. He does the same thing to me.”

“And that makes it all better,” Helena muttered under her breath as she followed Selina into another poorly decorated room, though this one had an impressive-looking computer system at one side and an even bigger television on the far wall. It took her a long minute to identify the most likely real works of art – a Monet and a vase that sincerely looked like a Ming – but Selina ignored her as she dug through the mess on her computer desk for a remote control. The television snapped on.

“-reporting live in Ethiopia. Karen, what do we know?”

“Not much at the moment, Jim. We know that Bruce Wayne was visiting Ethiopia with his ward, Jason Todd, in an attempt to track down Mister Todd’s mother but it appears Gotham followed them in the form of the notorious mass murderer known as Joker.” The pretty blonde anchor continued with a sad look. “Wayne was uninjured, but experts report that Todd and his mother, an American physician who was a member of Doctors Without Borders, were both killed.”

“Oh, Bruce,” Selina said softly, her eyes watering. She stared quietly at the television, but Helena doubted she heard anything else so intent was her focus on the video of Bruce Wayne now airing. He looked torn between despair and rage, with the latter barely controlled. Stepping lightly, Helena backed away, fully intent on making a discreet exit, but Selina turned to face her. “Here,” she said, offering a slim phone. “Speed Dial Number Six,” she added. “Tell him I cleared you.”

Helena ducked out of Selina’s penthouse minutes later, unsure how to respond to the implication that Robin was dead. On her world, there had only been one Robin. She knew Jason Todd, though. He’d been one of the less successful punks in Gotham who kept ending up in various gangs or as a tough for one of the city’s rogues. There was almost something ironic about Joker killing him since Helena recalled the clown prince was the most common rogue that Todd henched for.

“I’m really busy, Selina,” a male voice announced when she dialed the number. “Can this wait?”

“I’m sorry,” Helena said. “This isn’t Selina. She lent me her phone and said I should call.” The voice on the other line remained silent for a long moment so she continued. “My friend is on the Watchtower,” she said hesitantly. “The media says she’s in grave condition but…”

“Ah.” The simple remark was so unbelievably familiar that Helena almost dropped the phone. This was Dick Grayson she was talking to! They’d grown up together … or rather, she’d grown up with his alternate. “I can’t promise anything, Miss Bertinelli,” he continued, “but I’ll check with some people. Keep the phone handy.” He hung up before she say anything else.

And before she realized what he had called her. With a sigh, she slipped the phone into her pocket. Of course this version of Dick knew who she was claiming to be. Her dad … this world’s Batman had probably staked out her apartment and broken in a couple times while she was at school.
An hour later, the phone buzzed – an incoming text – and she read the address with a frown. Her building. Of course. Mister Grayson was showing off which was exactly the sort of thing Dick would do. On reflex, she’d donned her Huntress outfit. As she had no idea who she was going to meet, it seemed a safe precaution. Time slipped by – she kept track of various developments involving Metropolis and Kahdak through the headset integrated into her cowl – but with nothing to actually do, Helena soon began fighting off boredom. This wasn’t a stakeout which always gave her something to focus on so all she could do was worry about Karen. She was moments away from redialing the number when an unexpected voice called out.

“Hello.” The young woman who dropped out of the sky looked so much like Wonder Woman that Helena almost thought it was the princess herself, but a moment later, she recognized Diana’s cousin. There was a hardness to this girl’s eyes that looked out of place on her face. “You are not who I expected,” Donna Troy declared with a frown.

“That makes two of us,” Helena replied. She offered a wan smile. “I’m sorry to inconvenience you,” she started, but the tall girl – she couldn’t be more than sixteen or seventeen – interrupted.

“It is no matter,” she declared. “Richard asked that this be done and I owe him my allegiance.” It was a weird statement that must have meant something else in Themysciran, but by the time Helena had deciphered it, the Amazon had stepped forward and offered her arm. “Come,” she ordered. “We will need to be in close physical proximity for me to extend my shield around you.”

“Oh, man,” Helena muttered. “This is going to suck, isn’t it?” Donna flashed an almost malicious smile.

“Very likely,” she said.

It did suck and lots. The Amazon took them higher and higher into the sky, an invisible barrier enveloping them both, and Helena made the mistake – once – of looking down. For the rest of the trip, she kept her eyes tightly closed and her hold on Donna firm. God, why couldn’t Dick have sent someone like that magician girl or the new guy with the gold helmet who could teleport?

“You may relax now,” Donna announced an eternity later. Helena opened her eyes and realized they were inside some sort of structure. She unclenched her muscles, releasing her death grip on the smirking Amazon, and inhaled slowly, unsteadily. “My cousin is this way,” Donna stated, gesturing.

Wonder Woman stood outside the infirmary, speaking with a man Helena recognized at once. Michael Holt looked exhausted and not entirely happy, but he said something and turned away. As soon as he did, the Amazon princess frowned slightly but she cleared her expression at their approach and stepped forward to intercept them. The two Amazon women exchanged rapid words in a language Helena did not know and Donna bowed her head slightly before departing.

“Nightwing informs me you are close to Power Girl,” Diana said calmly.

“She’s my friend,” Helena replied. “Is she okay? Can I see her?”

“In a moment.” Wonder Woman pulled her lariat off her belt and held it out. “Even with Nightwing’s assurances that you are not a threat,” she said, “I must verify this fact myself.” Helena sighed but held out her arm. The rope burned without actually damaging flesh as it slithered around her outstretched limb. “Are you a threat to the League or any members of it?” Wonder Woman asked in a stern voice.

“I am not,” came Helena’s instant, reflexive reply. “I just want to see Karen and make sure she’s okay.”
“She is not,” Wonder Woman said softly. She gave the lariat a quick jerk and it released Helena. “The weapon that Luthor used appeared tailored intentionally toward Kryptonians.” There was a hint of accusation in her voice as she glanced down at Helena. “Further,” she said, “genetic analysis indicates your friend Karen is actually Kara Zor-El.” Helena’s shoulders slumped.

“It’s … it’s a long story.” She glanced toward the infirmary door. “Can I see my friend please?”

With a slight pursing of her lips, Wonder Woman gestured toward the door. Helena strode forward, her cape flaring out slightly. At the window, she paused and frowned.

Karen was stretched out on a large hospital bed – it actually looked like two, welded together for some reason - seemingly asleep but twitching and jerking at random intervals. An isolation tent was also erected around her, but looked to have been mostly rolled up. Relief started to set in – Karen looked fine – but then, Helena suddenly remembered the princess’ statement that she wasn’t okay. She glanced at the Amazon, a question in her eyes.

“Look at her left hand,” Diana instructed. Helena did so and nearly recoiled.

Karen had seven fingers!

Two of them were seemingly merging together, becoming a single finger, and with each twitch, the process seemed to leap forward. With a sheet covering most of Karen’s body, Helena could not see if there were similar instances happening with other parts of her anatomy but … wait. Where was Kara?

“Where is Supergirl?” she asked, dread in her voice. “Is she in another infirmary?”

“We only have the one,” Diana stated. “Luthor’s weapon evidently caused massive cellular decay in Kryptonians but something about your friend caused … this.” She sighed heavily. “You asked about Supergirl,” she said. “You are looking at her. They are merging into a single entity.”
WayneTech Closes on Acquisition of DTS, Inc.

Published September 18, 2023 / Vicky Vale

GOTHAM CITY, IL – WayneTech today announced it has completed the acquisition of DTC, Inc., a privately held company headquartered in Gotham City. Financial terms were not disclosed.

DTC, Inc., widely regarded as a leader in software quality and testing solutions, has struggled in the last two years following the car accident that left company founder, Jack Drake, hospitalized. Industry experts have predicted the collapse of the company for months.

“For employees of DTC,” WayneTech CEO Lucius Fox declared, “nothing will change. There are no plans to clean house or restructure. We just wanted them because no one is better and WayneTech prides itself on having the best.”

Click for more from Gotham Post Online

TOMORROW WAS HER WEDDING DAY.

Try as she might, Lois could keep from feeling wildly giddy at the realization. Richard – it was smarter to think of him by that name so she didn’t slip up around certain people; neither of them could afford her making that kind of mistake – admittedly wasn’t as enthusiastic about a wedding, but he’d agreed to one when he saw how much she was looking forward to it, provided they kept it small. Naturally, their respective definitions of small weren’t the same. Richard wanted ten or maybe twenty at the most, while she wanted a hundred or so. They compromised with … a hundred or so.

Tonight, her surprisingly modest bachelorette party had taken place at absolutely amazing outdoor café she recently discovered in the noveau riche quarter of Metropolis where they enjoyed fine food, better wine and a positively staggering view of the city. A couple of her girlfriends were disappointed that she’d avoided taking the male stripper route, but if she was honest, Lois would have been just as happy staying home and watching television; she’d lost interest in hard drinking and loud music ten years ago, especially when her career started taking off and a good night’s sleep was sometimes better than sex. The café was absolutely perfect – the uptight wait-staff were nearly Nazi-like in their zeal to ensure their expensive clientele were satisfied, the wine flowed freely, and laughter was plentiful – and the view was divine. By the time the party split up, Lois was almost floating on good cheer. Today had been a good day.

She just wished Clark was here to see it.

Now, as she leaned out over her apartment balcony and stared at Metropolis, her thoughts turned once more toward her missing friend. God, she wished she could see him again, or hear him laugh, or watch him play a joke on Lombard. She missed him – not in the romantic sense as that boat sailed long ago – but just as her friend.

“You have been quiet for some time.” The speaker, Diana, was in her civilian disguise, with the glasses that somehow diverted most attention away from her. Most, but not all; she still drew eyes tonight, being so damned tall and statuesque, but it was only interest from men (and women) who found her attractive. For a change, Diana hadn’t needed to use one of the many little magical tokens she sometimes carried with her to further cloak herself or redirect attention elsewhere.
If she was honest, Lois would admit to being surprised that Diana had been able to make it at all. In between a rash of superhuman criminals sweeping the planet, over the last several months, the Amazon princess had also been instrumental in uncovering and finally shutting down an extraterrestrial incursion that, unlike the previous attacks on Earth, relied more on stealth and guile than open force. This was probably the first time in five or six months that she’d seen Diana when the princess wasn’t wearing her full battle regalia. It almost seemed as though a new crisis exploded even before the previous one had been fully resolved.

“Just thinking,” Lois replied. She smiled languidly – thanks to many glasses of wine, she was pleasantly buzzed; not quite enough to lose her focus, but her inhibitions were certainly loosened somewhat – and gestured with her glass. “You didn’t drink much tonight,” she remarked. None of Lois’ other girlfriends seemed to notice – except maybe Amy who was probably too busy still trying to pretend she was straight, even though she watched Diana with as much lust in her eyes as any man – but that was one of her talents, noticing things, and she’d observed how distracted her super-powered friend was.

“Mortal alcohol has little effect on me,” Diana said simply. Lois blinked.

“That … that must really suck,” she said, her words causing Diana to smile.

“It does.” The Amazon pushed her glasses up onto her head. “There are days I long for an intoxicant strong enough to make dealing with disagreeable individuals easier.”

“Like Bruce?” Lois asked with a snicker.

“Especially Bruce,” Diana replied. She did not relax, even as she returned Lois’ smile, and it was the tension in the larger woman’s body that finally clued Lois in that her friend was on edge. Frowning, Lois glared at the wineglass – evidently she was a little more inebret evidently she was a bit drunker than she would like to admit. With wobbly fingers, she set the glass aside.

“Is something wrong?” she asked softly. From the way the Amazon winced, it wasn’t soft enough.

“I don’t know,” Diana replied. “I have not been off duty for … seven months? Yes, I think it is seven.” She shook her head. “The League is spread too thin,” she continued, “and too many of this world seem to be embracing madness.” Diana sighed. “I am tired, Lois. Pay no attention to my complaints.”

“Didn’t I just bitch about Perry for like an hour?” Lois retorted. “I think you’re entitled to a little bit of complaining.” She was about to comment further when she noticed how little of Diana’s attention she had. Following the line of the Amazon’s gaze, Lois frowned at the television. The red-headed Green Lantern – Gardner, wasn’t it? – was once again on the news as he battled some metahuman in Dallas. As usual, he seemed disdainful of property damage and, from the way Diana was glowering at the report, she was not the only one who disapproved of his tactics. Unlike his two predecessors, he’d never been formally invited to join the League which only fueled his antics … and that begged the question: where were the other two Lanterns? The last Lois had heard, one of them – Stewart, the former Marine – was still recovering from injuries, but she honestly couldn’t recall when she’d last seen or heard of the other one, the first Lantern.

“I do not know,” Diana said when Lois vocalized her question. Her off-duty apparel was gone, replaced by the gleaming silver and gold armor she was so well known for. The black undersuit was gone, though from what Lois understood, it was actually still there and simply couldn’t be seen by mortal eyes. Diana sighed. “We occasionally receive reports from him – he is still searching for Kal and insists he is getting closer – but I do not know where he actually is.” Guilt was stamped on the Amazon’s face at mention of Clark as well as something that almost looked like … longing? Lois
was silent for a moment as she tried to wrestle her thoughts into submission. Stupid wine. Stupid cute waiter who kept her equally stupid glass full.

“So, what happens if he finds Clark?” she asked slowly. Diana squared her shoulders.

“The moment Hal locates him,” she said in a strong voice, “I will rally the entire might of the League to retrieve him.” There was no doubt in her voice, no hesitation, and an implied threat of wholesale destruction against those that might dare to keep her away from Clark. “I have been setting the groundwork for such an offensive,” Diana continued. “We are gathering our strength.” She looked skyward. “But knowing where to point the sword is as important as being able wield it.”

“Do you love him?” The question tumbled out of Lois’ mouth before she could really stop it. The wine was to blame, of course, and Lois’ own maudlin thoughts about how disconnected from everyone Clark had been before the United Nations asked him to visit Rimbor. Even now, she did not think it was because they’d ended their relationship, but just the memory of how alone he seemed to be filled her with sadness.


“And you never told him?”

“There was never the time.” Diana abruptly smirked. “You expected me to dissemble.”

“I did,” Lois admitted.

“I cannot tell a purposeful mistruth, Lois,” Diana said, her hand dropping to the softly glowing lariat at her side. “Even to myself.” Lois frowned in confusion. She didn’t understand and there was nothing she hated more than not getting it. Her expression must had reflected her inner turmoil because Diana pulled the lariat free and offered it to her. On instinct, Lois accepted.

It was like holding pure sunlight in her hands, or a rope made of air and dreams. There was a hint of a much greater presence looming just out of sight but Lois couldn’t find the person. The lariat rapidly grew warmer, like it was a pot of water on a slow-cooking stove. God, she would love to be able to borrow this thing and wrap up the president or maybe that jerk of a Speaker. Demand they answer her questions. Anymore, they barely looked at her … though that was probably because she was forty-four now, with hair rapidly going gray, and had a well-earned reputation as a shrew. Anger chased the despair when she caught Diana watching her – it wasn’t fair. She was getting older but Diana just stayed the same, eternally young and beautiful. A part of Lois hated her for that, loathed her because she could soar through the clouds like Clark, and wanted to wrap this stupid rope around her neck and squeeze.

On the heels of that, though, she realized how much she didn’t envy Diana. The weight of the world seemed to be on her shoulders as each day made it seem even more unlikely that Clark would return. Diana was the face of the Justice League now, and she was, for all intents and purposes, the leader of a sovereign nation. She had to deal with trolls like the American Secretary of State, or the U.N. General Secretary on a daily basis. Even so, the world would always remember her, Diana, the Wonder Woman from Themyscira. Would anyone remember Lois Lane? She had two Pulitzers to her name but no one not a reporter could name a winner from five years ago and why should they? The media was a joke. Everyone hated them. The career she’d spent so much time building up and focusing on for her entire life was dying around her. Would there even be a Daily Planet in five years? Circulation was down everywhere, venerable papers like the L.A. Times were on the verge of
closing their doors permanently and where would she be then? A washed up reporter who could only point to the old days.

“Gah,” Lois hissed as she released the lariat and let it fall to the floor. Instantly, the fog of self-doubt in and inner recriminations faded away.

“The Lariat is a powerful tool in the right hands,” Diana said as she knelt to gather the lasso up. It slithered back onto her belt like a snake. “But it forces you to face your doubts and fears.” She smiled sadly as she stood. “The wielder of this Lariat may never lie, even to themselves.” She looked to the sky.

“God,” Lois murmured. She realized her buzz was completely gone and her hand ached. “I don’t know how you can live like that.”

“One adapts.” Diana smiled. “There are times that it is quite liberating to be unburdened by falsehood,” she said, though something in her expression caused Lois to doubt that statement. “It has also allowed me to see through most lies and deception.” This was said almost innocently, as if it was simply an off-hand remark.

Instinctively, Lois tensed.

To her surprise, Diana simply nodded. There were no accusations or threats, only a simple acceptance that Lois was concealing something from her. Guilt curled and twisted inside Lois’ stomach – she hated secrets herself, and despised having to keep this one but something kept her from speaking. They stood there, silently, for a long moment before the buzzing of Diana’s communicator.

“I am here,” Diana said into the air. A moment later, she nodded. “Understood. I am on my way.” She floated up off the balcony and glanced to Lois. “Circe is causing trouble,” she began.

“Go.” Lois smirked. “Try not to get punched in the face. I still need you for tomorrow.” Diana nodded and then arrowed up into the sky.

Sober again and more troubled than she wanted to admit, Lois re-entered her apartment and pushed the door shut. She padded silently to her desk, pausing to pick up her phone and dial a number. It rang only twice.

“It’s me,” she said into the open line. “We might have a problem. Diana suspects something.” There was a pause.

“I will look into it,” came the response of the man whose name was not Richard White. “Get some sleep, Lois. Tomorrow is a big day.”

Dark thoughts pursued Diana well into the next day.

Circe was long gone by the time she reached the reported site, but the chaos left in the witch’s wake needed to be set right – metamorphosis of people into animals mostly; capturing them was the most difficult part as her lariat easily shattered the spell when wrapped around the target – and that dragged on into the very early morning. By dawn, Diana was exhausted and still had Lois’ wedding to look forward to.

She sleepwalked through much of the ceremony, excusing herself twice to deal with issues that popped up – Cheetah causing trouble first, and then a bank robbery in downtown by thugs with advanced technology leftover from LexCorp’s collapse – but no one noticed her discreet exits and
reappearances. No one but Bruce, of course.

He pretended that he didn’t, of course, but then, he was playing the Fop today with an extra dash of annoying and a large heaping of idiot-savant. His date was far from amused – Ms. Kyle glared rather darkly each time Bruce acted the fool and had some rather choice words for him when they were distant enough from other attendees to not be overheard – but Diana was happy enough just seeing a flicker of his old self through the shell of rage and grief that had been his ever-present companion since Jason Todd died. There were even rumors that the Batman was running around in Gotham with Robin once more.

Once the ceremony ended and relocated to a reception area with a wide dance floor, Diana excused herself a third time, though there was no emergency to handle. Once outside, she breathed in the air and stared at the sky, once again wishing for things that could not be. She was so tired. Hera help her, she was so damned tired.

“You are strangely ill at ease in these surroundings, sister.” Diana froze at Circe’s all too familiar voice and slowly turned her head toward the witch. If she had wanted to, Circe could have struck without Diana even knowing she was there and the thought sent a chill through her veins. To her great surprise, though, she observed the witch step forward and lean on the railing, a wine glass in hand. For a change, Circe was wearing clothes that did not look out of place in the modern world, and even her hair was subdued – normally, it was a blazing purple color, but at the moment, it was dark brown bordering on black with purple highlights. “You should try this wine,” Circe said with a pleased smile as she sipped. “I have lived for thirty centuries,” the witch remarked, “and never have I tasted such a wondrous wine.” She inhaled deeply.

“I am in no mood to fight today, Circe,” Diana said in a low voice. She stared at the woman with the same expression she would reserve for a feral beast or a deadly viper, but Circe laughed lightly.

“Nor am I,” the witch said. She gestured with her wineglass. “I came here fully intending on visiting chaos and heartache to your friend.” The last word was heaped with scorn. “But then I tasted this wine,” Circe continued, “and I changed my mind.” She sipped again, closing her eyes in delight. “Any woman who drinks this is a woman I cannot hate,” she declared. Diana wet her lips – her innate sense of truth, an ability that had grown considerably more precise of late, told her that Circe was being completely honest for a change – but finally decided to let the moment pass. Yes, this woman was a monster but a fight here would endanger far too many people. The smirk that twisted the witch’s lips indicated she knew quite well the direction of Diana’s thoughts, but Circe made no attempt to mock. Instead, she returned her attention to the wide expanse of Metropolis Bay. “Darkness stirs,” she said abruptly. “Things move in the shadows that are not of this world.” She inhaled deeply. “Something dark and powerful seeks to command those that hear chaos’ song.”

“And you of all people tell me this out of the goodness of your heart?” Diana asked, her tone as carefully neutral as she could manage. There was no accusation in her words, merely the acknowledgement that Circe was not the most trustworthy of sources. The witch laughed.

“I tell you this,” Circe said, “in the certain knowledge that you will rally your fellow champions and seek out the hand in the dark.” Again, she drank, though this time it was no sip. “I will kneel before no master,” she added, “be it god or mortal or eldritch horror.” With a flick of her wrist, she cast the empty wineglass away – in mid-flight, it transformed into a tiny bird and climbed into the sky. “Ares is cast from his throne of blood and fire,” Circe said, “and there are many who scramble to seize his place. Yet others seek to supplant the whole of the Olympians from their mighty fortresses in the sky.” A dark frown marred her otherwise flawless features. “There are whispers in the dark that even I cannot ignore and all of creation trembles upon a terrible precipice.” She cast her ageless eyes upon
Diana. “You and yours would be wise to prepare for a night so black, even the stars cannot burn.”

And then, she was gone.

The acrid stench of brimstone and fire curled up into the night from where the witch had once stood though a warm breeze promptly carried it away. Diana blinked. This was not the first time Circe had shown unexpected depths but the barely controlled fear in the witch’s body language only deepened her concern. There had been no deception here that she could discern, no lies or carefully chosen words intended to hide a deeper gambit, but rather, an honest warning of danger if phrased in the obscure manner all Magi seemed to love. She made a mental note to speak with Zatanna and Fate upon the morrow.

“You’ve gotten quite good at stealth,” Bruce commented as he approached a short time later. “I didn’t even see you leave that time.”

“I've have a great deal of practice,” Diana replied automatically. She eyed him, noting the almost goofy smile on his face that did not touch his eyes. So, it was more of the Fop, then? Hera, she hated dealing with that particular mask. “Lois is going to kill you soon if you keep up this act.”

“If Selina doesn’t beat her to it.” Bruce smirked. To her silent relief, his fake smile fell away and he once again became the trusted friend. “Is there something I need to be aware of?” he asked flatly. “You’ve been more distracted than normal today.”

“I have my reasons.” For a moment, she considered explaining, considered letting slip her temper and venting her frustrations. Her task, her sacred charge was to wage peace, but the world of late seemed to have fallen even deeper into chaos and if Circe’s warnings were true, there was a hand hidden in the shadows directing it. Was this an unseen foe she knew nothing about or was this the actions of an old Enemy? She felt like Sisyphus himself, struggling with his impossible task, and there was no one else who could shoulder the burden with her. Who could she turn to? Bruce?

Hardly. Gotham was his whole world and the rest of the planet could burn as long as his cruel city limped on. Donna? They could barely speak these days without rancor, though Hippolyta claimed that was because they were too alike in every way. Kara was still trying to find her center following the … incident with Luthor; Billy was still a boy; Hal was too often a fool, especially if a woman was nearby. The list could go on for eternity and none were acceptable.

And the lies! Hera help her, but the lies were the hardest to stomach. Little and small, they seemed to be the unsteady foundation of each mortal’s life. Bruce told himself that he could turn that middens of a city into something worthwhile without stepping over certain lines; Hal thought himself better than every other man in every facet, but especially in terms of will because he wielded a mighty power; Oliver claimed he could finally reign in his wandering eye, as if a tiger could alter its stripes; Dinah convinced herself that this time, the broken man she loved truly meant what he said; Barry insisted he was beyond anger and that nothing – nothing – could enrage him enough to take a life; Lois …

Lois. Her lies were both more frustrating and dangerous. The secret she kept – and Diana’s gaze drifted toward Richard White, now dancing with his new wife – was one that she feared others knowing, but so clearly wanted to advertise at the same time. The lies, the deceit, they made Diana burn.

She knew that it was silly of her – they all had every right to keep certain parts of their lives secret – but the taste of lies, both large and small, sat poorly with her. It had for a very long time, in truth, but of late, as she became more attuned to her Lariat and it to her, every part of Diana revolted against falsehood. These days, it was almost physically painful for her to tell even a half-truth which had led to more than a few … interesting conversations. When Bruce scowled and acted like a child because
he did not get his way, she would no longer massage his ego, and when Oliver played the cad or said something sexist, she now called him upon it. The media adored her newfound bluntness and the public seemed to appreciate it even more, which frankly said everything that needed to be said about the state of their elected representatives or rulers, but the truthsense she seemed to have developed was damning. Now, when Barry claimed he was late to a League meeting because of his wife, she knew that he was not dissembling, but the exceptional liars within the League – Bruce, Dinah, Oliver, and Zatanna – could no longer deceive her. No one could lie to her anymore.

Not even her mother.

Diana frowned as she once more turned her attention toward the night. She did not want to think about what her mother might be hiding, but it was becoming more and more obvious each time they spoke. Whatever it was, it troubled Hippolyta each time they spoke. Oh, the queen insisted that Diana was imagining things whenever she brought it up, or found some way to change the subject, but there was something Mother did not want her to know, something that terrified her in a way that Diana could hardly fathom.

“From your silence,” Bruce remarked, “I’m guessing there is something I need to know.” He watched her carefully, from a carefully poised stance, and Diana almost smiled. They both knew she could break him with a single blow, but she was not fool enough to think he did not have some trick up his sleeve. Hermes claimed Bruce was descended from wily Odysseus himself and that line had bred true.

“Perhaps another time,” Diana said. She glanced back at the wedding party. “Please inform Lois that … tell her I had to leave.” That was the most honest truth Diana could manage – if she had to stay here, basking in the reflected light of these happy couples who lied to themselves and each other, she feared what might happen. Without waiting for Bruce’s reply, she swam upward, coursing through the sky at a speed just below supersonic.

Long minutes later, she slowed to a hovering halt and looked down at the wide ocean spread out below her. Something wasn’t right. Rarely was she in this foul a mood. Could Circe have done something to her that she did not notice? Or was it something else, something deeper that she was not yet fully conscious of? Twice before in recent years, the gods had visited upon her cryptic dreams and visions … this might be the same. Surely they would have to be concerned about the rise of a shadow lord. Further reflection was necessary. And with a simple nod, she wrapped Hephaestus’ shield around her body and dove toward the clouds, her heart lighter than it had been in a long time.

She was going home.

Hidden from sight by a cloak of clouds, Athena watched her charge race home. She exhaled softly in quiet relief – it had required immense concentration and every one of her secret talents learned from centuries of bonding with Nabu to direct Diana’s mind toward Themyscira. Damn the girl and her hard head. She was more attuned than Athena had wagered and clearly sensed the growing darkness which, at the moment, would not do. If Apollo’s predictions were true – and they always were – Diana would soon been too distracted to concentrate on Circe’s warning and that was essential if the grand scheme was to play out as desired.

“Hermes,” she murmured softly and instantly, the Messenger was at her side. He too wore a cloak fashioned by Hephaestus that would divert eyes from him, but the danger of his current mission made it necessary. “How fares your charge?” she asked.

“Poorly,” Hermes replied. “One of the Dark One’s acolytes – an Amazon from an alternate Earth, I regret – wishes Kal-El to sire a child upon her.” The god of boundaries scowled. “He is in no shape,
physically or mentally, to resist, so she takes by force what he would not give her at any other time.”

“He resists?”

“Yes.” Again, Hermes frowned. “Though I fear he nears the end of his strength,” he said darkly. “This foul woman looks too much like Diana for anything good to come of it.” Hermes glowered. “I whisper courage and resilience into his ear when there are none to hear, but they suspect someone aids him,” he said. “I must admit, if only to you, that I am of a mind to present Kal-El with an opportunity for escape should one present itself and to Oblivion with Father’s plan.” To her utter lack of surprise, Athena noted Hermes’ hopeful, pleading look. She considered – of all the Olympians, he alone had seen the terror and madness wielded by the Dark One on that black and shattered world, and if he feared for Kal-El’s sanity … their grand scheme could not succeed without him. Without both of them, she corrected as she glanced in the direction of Diana, now disappearing over the horizon. Finally, she nodded.

“Act as you see fit,” she instructed. “I will support your decision.” Hermes smiled broadly and then, before she could stop him, leaned forward and quickly kissed her on the lips. He faded from this dimension before she could push him away, leaving behind only his mocking laughter. Shaking her head, Athena pulled her cloak of clouds tighter and turned her eye toward another of her very distant kin.

There was absolutely nothing better in the world than flying.

Streaking over the ocean, barely a half meter above it, Kara grinned and simply enjoyed living. Behind her, a curtain of water thrown up by the speed of her passage almost appeared to be pursuing her and, with a sharp flex of her abdominal muscles, she arced up, streaking straight into the sky at such a prodigious rate that the air boomed at her passage. She hit the upper atmosphere mere seconds later, but then concentrated on her abilities and came to an abrupt halt. There was no sound here, nor any oxygen, but her lungs were strong and she did not need to breathe for a bit.

God, it was good to be alive!

Her scarlet cape floated leisurely in the absence of gravity as she stared down on the little blue world that had come to mean so much to her. Memories flooded her awareness – too many, too conflicting – but she closed her eyes and concentrated on incorporating them into her mental landscape. It was odd having two sets of memories to draw upon, but she’d grown accustomed to them. It certainly hadn’t been any harder than acquainting herself with the muscles of her new body.

With a grin, she let herself fall Earthward, accelerating toward the expanse of blue that was the Pacific Ocean. Angling her body downward, she knifed through the water, then twisted up and out of the sea, moving so quickly that she was wet for only a heartbeat. Spinning in mid-air, she laughed out loud.

*Enough play,* she told herself as she aimed her body east and poured on the speed. She was already late for dinner and Billy had promised they could do whatever she wanted after. Again, she laughed – they would likely end up having sex again if she had her way. Kara, being so new to Earth and still unsure of herself, had never realized the extent of Billy’s interest in her, but Karen had seen it straight away. Now that she was both, she saw clearly and loved him even more – he was growing into a fine man, looking more like his Captain Marvel self every day. Soon, he would be able to interact with his friends as Billy in his Marvel self and no one would be able to tell the difference.

She’d just flashed over the Hawaiian Islands when her suit’s integrated comlink chirped. Slowing her transit to no faster than a commercial aircraft, she lifted her left arm up and spoke into it.
“Receive,” she ordered. A heartbeat later, the line crackled open.

“Are you available for Metropolis patrol?” the gravelly but instantly recognizable voice of The Batman asked. He was evidently not wearing the voice modulator and, by concentrating, she could hear the sound of merriment in the background. She frowned – today was Lois Lane’s wedding day (and how weird was it that she wasn’t marrying Clark? On her world, the Lois she knew was madly in love with Kal-El and he with her, whereas in this one, that clearly wasn’t the case.) Princess Diana was supposed to be attending. “Kara?” The Bat asked when she remained silent for a moment longer than he would like.

“I can be,” she replied. “Do you want just a flyby or a ‘loiter and be noticed by the citizens’ type of appearance?”

“The latter,” Wayne said. “And try not to make a scene this time.” He disconnected the line before she could respond and point out that the incident he was obliquely referring to had not been her fault. If that moron with the Lantern ring had been paying attention to his job instead of her exposed cleavage, he wouldn’t have caused so much property damage. And speaking of exposing herself…

“Call Billy,” she ordered. The tiny but durable transmitter in her decorative but ultimately useless wrist guards trilled softly. “It’s me,” she said as soon as he answered. “I’ve got to swing by Metropolis and wave the flag for some reason.”

“Need some company?” Billy asked. “It shouldn’t take me but a couple of minutes to get there.” Kara considered it for a moment, then shook her head even though he couldn’t see her.

“Probably a bad idea,” she replied with a grin. “I might get the spontaneous urge to throw you to the ground and have my wicked way with you. This new mayor is leery enough about us metas; I doubt he’d like it if we had sex on Byrne Avenue.” He laughed.

“Understood. Give me a shout when you’re done and we can do a late dinner.”

She deviated briefly to Fawcett City anyway, not to drop in on Billy, but to check on something at Starrware Labs, her burgeoning tech company. Right now, there were only a handful of employees – Billy sucked at all things technical so she couldn’t in good conscience offer him employment; fortunately, his adopted sister, Mary, was frankly kind of awesome and had eagerly accepted the job of quality control – but they were growing. It was ironic that so many of the jerks in her field seemed to think that a tall, busty, blonde couldn’t have functioning brain cells, but that had worked out rather nicely for her as they constantly underestimated her. Having an in with the industry leader probably didn’t hurt, but the work that WayneTech subcontracted out to her was only a step forward.

What was even more amazing, though, was how much she enjoyed the work. Before the Incident, Karen had liked the work well enough – the marriage of Kryptonian knowledge and Earth technology was challenging but utterly fascinating – but afterward, she just couldn’t get enough of it. She could lose entire days on a project and this newfound dedication was paying strong dividends. By week’s end, they were scheduled to present a new solar panel that would more than quadruple the efficiency of the best photovoltaic module on the market.

“Greetings, Kara,” a disembodied voice declared as she dropped through her skylight and landed lightly in her office. “How may I be of assistance?”

“Is Diana at the Fortress?” she asked as she flipped quickly through the mail on her desk. Nothing was especially important, so she tossed the stack back into the inbox.

“No, madam.” Kelor’s voice did not change even though the servitor was not truly present. The
decision to allow the Fortress A.I. to link up with her own computer systems was one she’d struggled with but ultimately, having access to its database was just too great an advantage to pass up. “The Mistress has not been present for two solar rotations.” As always, Kara grinned at the title assigned to Diana – she very much wanted to see Kal-El’s face when he realized the A.I. had classified the princess as his mate. Just the thought of her cousin, still missing for just over three years now, caused her good humor to falter. She made a mental note to ask the princess if she could assist in the hunt – before, when she was two separate beings, neither one of them had felt they had the right to get involved, but now, she simply didn’t care what other people thought.

Glancing to her left, she paused very briefly at her reflection in the door-sized mirror. Physically, she looked almost exactly like she had when she and Helena crossed over into this world. Her eyes were a little bluer, her face just a little younger, and her skin less tanned, but apart from that, she looked mostly the same. When she spoke, though, it was her voice as this world’s Kara that emerged – higher pitched, a tiny bit less mature sounding, and still with the Kryptonian accent she’d long since learned to hide on her other world. She was still addicted to cheesecake like Kara, but now lusted after a good coffee like Karen. She shook her head. That wasn’t right. She couldn’t think of Kara and Karen as separate individuals – they were her and she was them. She could remember waking up in the cryo-pod with Kal-El looking down at her and she could remember it happening in a field, with a different (but strangely the same) Kal-El staring at her.

The uniform she’d donned was a combination of the two. Her love of the white over the blue had won out and she just felt weird not having the boob window – okay, she might be a little vain about her assets, but she remembered more than a few times back on the other Earth where her exposed cleavage caused just enough of a distraction to allow her to seize the upper hand. Unwilling to completely discard the House of El connection, though, she’d altered this suit’s cleavage window to the diamond-shape so prevalent on Krypton and bore the House of El sigil on her scarlet cape. All in all, it was a quite adequate look – she didn’t want to be thought of as Superman’s cousin, after all, but wanted to have her own identity. The media was still struggling whether to call her Supergirl or Power Girl, and a couple had even taken to calling her Superwoman … which she had to admit was much better, even if all of the codenames were still just a little goofy sounding. Honestly, was ‘Kara’ really that hard to say?

She soared up into the night, out of her office, and arced toward Metropolis almost leisurely. Her path almost took her toward Gotham and she was very tempted to drop in on Helena, though in the end, she decided against it. They hadn’t talked much in the last year or so, not since the Incident and her decision to begin asking that people call her Kara Starr. Like pretty much everyone else but Billy, Helena was more than a little freaked out by the merge and seemed completely unsure how to talk to her. Why was it so hard for people to understand that she was both women now? That she had successfully integrated two sets of memories? Kara shook her head and flew on.

There was a plane in trouble over Pennsylvania that needed some help, so by the time she reached Metropolis, the city’s night shift had come to life. Exactly as Bruce requested, she made sure that she was seen as she slowly cruised over the city. There was always someone who needed some assistance – an amorous couple were being followed by a would-be hold-up artist, a domestic was in progress over on Siegel Street, a police officer was calling for backup as he pursued a murder suspect – and Kara had to really push herself to help them all. The couple in danger never saw her appear between them and the thug about to jump them – he panicked at her scowl, dropped his knife and fled – and the cop tackled his suspect when she dropped down in front of them, allowing the criminal to literally run into her back and bounce backward. As usual, the domestic was the most difficult thing to resolve and she was forced to simply call it into 9-1-1 without actually getting involved. She floated just above the Daily Planet building, senses intent on the building argument between the husband and wife, and muscles poised to spring into action if either of them turned their loud disagreement into something physical. For all of her abilities, these were the times she felt the most
powerless – if she intervened, this couple would automatically unite against her, but if she did nothing, someone might get hurt. They were arguing over money, but that wasn’t a surprise really since most of these sorts of things seemed rooted in finances.

“You’ve been busy tonight,” Captain Sawyer said an hour or so later when she dropped off an idiot who’d thought he could break into a building through the thirtieth floor. “I’ve got reports of you all over the city.”

“Just trying to help,” Kara replied with a smile. Her smile almost turned into a grin at the less than discreet way Captain Sawyer glanced at her cleavage. Well, that confirmed that theory. “Anything else I can help with?”

“If you could knock some sense into this new mayor,” the captain muttered, “I’d be immensely grateful.” Kara chuckled as she climbed back into the sky.

“I’ll see you around, Captain,” she called out. There were photographers waiting – she thought she recognized Olsen of the Planet who had graduated to actual reporter but generally handled his own camera – and she slowed her ascent just enough to be seen. Throwing them a jaunty wave, she kept climbing. If that wasn’t enough waving the flag for that Bat, then she didn’t know what else was necessary. Besides, Billy was waiting and she was looking forward to seeing him again. There was a new … trick she wanted to try.

Grinning, Kara soared into the night.

The first day of the new school year was always the hardest.

As this was her first official year of solo teaching, Helena was more than a little nervous, but she’d trained under the harshest of taskmasters imaginable and was able to hide any hesitation from all but the sharpest of observers. There were twenty-seven in this period – Ninth Grade English – and she surveyed them quickly, easily isolating the ones that would be trouble, the ones who couldn’t be bothered, the ones who would excel and the ones who shouldn’t be here in the first place but had been passed anyway. Most of the troublemakers were boys and she realized her looks would not be an asset here – with them swimming in hormones and her an attractive authority figure … yeah. That wasn’t an option. So she would have to be the cruel, heartless Nazi.

She introduced herself, laid out the ground rules for expected behavior – one of the troublemakers very quickly found himself on his way to the dean for his runaway tongue and offensive language, but from his behavior, she suspected he was pretty much a lost cause anyway – and then began calling roll, mentally tagging the names with the faces. At the same time, she tried to get a feel for the student in question and how he or she fit into the school’s social hierarchy. It was a simple game her dad had taught her that was wildly useful.

“Timothy Drake.”

“Here.” The young man in question was a little younger than the others, which tracked since he’d evidently skipped a grade. He was one of the ones who would probably excel if his grades and physical appearance were any indication – despite being a little smaller than the other boys, his long sleeves did not conceal well developed arms, though Helena doubted any of the other kids were aware of that. Based on his noticeable isolation from his peers, she guessed that he was resented for being smarter than the others and he’d focused his problems into physical fitness. One day, Helena mused with an inward smile, he would be seen without his shirt by some of the girls and Mister Drake would become very popular, very quickly.
“Ariana Dzerchenko,” she called out. From the surprised look on the dark-haired girl’s face, her correct pronunciation was not a common event.

“Here.” The girl had a subtle but noticeable accent herself, which definitely explained why she was in the same sort of isolated bubble that Drake sat in. If this world was anything like her’s, Helena suspected Ms. Dzerchenko was bullied and harassed because she was different.

“Did I pronounce that correctly?” Helena asked, more out of reflex than anything else.

“You did, ma’am,” Ariana replied with a hesitant smile. “Спасибо,” the girl said a moment later, a testing glint in her eyes. Helena smirked.

“Пожалуйста,” she answered before moving on to the next name.

By the end of the day, she was exhausted, even more than normal. Good God, dealing with fourteen and fifteen year olds was hard work. Their attention spans seemed to vacillate between non-existent and indifferent, and hardly any of them seemed to care about being able to properly speak English. This being Gotham, she’d been utterly unsurprised to realize that at least fifty percent of the students were carrying weapons – in her admittedly brief examination, it seemed like a hundred percent of the faculty were packing and that included the eighty year old librarian – even though this particular school was obviously more affluent than many others, but what did give her pause was how little bullying she noticed.

Once the sun went down, she took to the rooftops as Huntress, more to burn off all of her nervous energy than anything else. Something – she chalked it up to that brief exchange she had with Ms. Dzerchenko earlier in the day – directed her toward the tiny Little Moscow district of Gotham and it was there that she saw the new Robin.

He was crouched in the shadows of a large water tank atop one of the many apartment buildings and was using binoculars to watch what looked like a drug deal going down. Helena hesitated – right now, she really didn’t want to attract too much attention to herself, not from the Bats – but was unable to tear her eyes from him. Gotham seemed oblivious to the fact that this was the third Robin, though most everyone seemed at least peripherally aware that Nightwing of the Titans was the first Robin. Whoever this kid was, though, he wasn’t anyone Helena knew.

She glided closer, hugging the shadows and creeping into place so she could get a better look at him. Unlike the previous Robins, he wore a dark hood that was incorporated into his cape and that kept much of his face from being exposed, which made him more difficult to identify. He was no fool, though, and must have sensed her approach based on how he started looking around. Helena inwardly sighed – her mom had always warned her she wasn’t patient enough and this was further proof of that.

“Hello,” she softly said as stalked forward. Robin tensed at her approach before giving her a slow nod. “Hope I’m not interrupting something,” Helena said as she crouched alongside him and glanced down into the street. The thugs were pushing around a terrified-looking man and waving batons at his cowering family. Not a drug deal after all.

“Russian mafia shakedown,” Robin replied. His voice was weird-sounding, which she took to be the result of a hidden modulator. He glanced toward the WayneTech building which was reflecting the Bat signal over the city. “And it looks like my back-up is going to be late,” he said with a twist of one lip. Helena grinned at the implicit invitation.

“Fortunately, my dance card is clear,” she replied. “Can I have Tiny there?” she asked, pointing toward the larger of the three thugs.
“Go for it,” Robin said. He secured the small binoculars to his belt and then nodded at her. They dove off the building at the same time, throwing out their respective capes to very briefly slow their descents as well as cast the all-too familiar shadows. Helena hit Tiny with both feet as he was half-turning and the force of her impact threw him back into his open car door. She used his meaty body as a springboard, landed in a crouch, then spun with her leg scything out to take his feet from him. Tiny bounced his head off the unyielding metal of his car on his way down and was obviously seeing stars when he tried very hard to stand. With a *snick*, Helena drew her Asp baton, flicked it out so it would lock into the ready position, and smashed him over the head with just enough power to knock him out without doing permanent damage. He slumped forward, his entire body going limp, and she spun to face the other two.

Both were down already – one looked to have absorbed the full brunt of Robin’s tumble and had slammed into the wall where he wisely passed out, but the other was one his knees, clearly unsure which hurt more, his groin or his broken nose. Robin loomed over him, a collapsible *bo* staff in one hand. Helena nodded her approval when she realized that kid was discreetly taking photos and securing wallets.

“Pass the word,” Robin hissed, his modulator turning his words into something positively eerie, “we’re watching.” He sprayed something into the thug’s face which caused the whimpering man to simply slump forward, unconscious.

“Thank you,” the shopkeeper’s wife said in heavily accented English. She was hovering over her battered husband. Helena gave her a smile.

“Пожалуйста,” she said, causing both the woman and Robin to give her a sidelong look.

“Appreciate the assistance,” Robin said once they were back on the rooftop. His grapper was of much higher quality than hers, but that wasn’t a surprise given who his mentor was. Helena had high hopes that Karen ... that *Kara* would be able to upgrade her tech in the near future though, now that her company was starting to really take off.

“Not a problem.” Helena flashed him a smile that he returned after a second. “If you need my help again,” she said, “you can contact me through Oracle.” She discreetly checked the time by glancing toward the distant Clocktower – not quite midnight.

“I’ll remember that,” Robin said. “She can get in touch with me too.” He aimed his grapper at a distant building. “Don’t stay up too late, Huntress,” he said with a smirk. “It’s a school night.”

Terror threatened to turn her bowels to water.

The Green Lanterns in hot pursuit of her were drawing closer and Carol knew that they had no intention of taking her alive. She did not know either of them – they were Enforcers for that scarred Guardian Hal once admitted to not really trusting – but their identities were frankly less important to her than their intent. She’d just gotten her life back on track, dammit!

With her ring warning her that power levels were reaching critical, Carol wrapped another thoughtform around her body and dove toward a distant planetary system. Her initial hopes had been for assistance – her ring told her that an event of great love had taken place here – but the instant she slowed from superluminal speeds, she felt her hopes sink. This was a dead world, shattered and broken, endlessly orbiting an ominous red giant that seemed to glare at the wreckage of this system like the baleful, angry eye of God. Carol wanted to scream.

A flash of emerald light in the far distance warned her that her pursuers were now in-system and she
dove toward the largest piece of intact planet, hoping against hope that there would be enough debris to hid her from scans. She reached it mere seconds later, glanced around with her ring enhancing her senses, and then oriented toward a gaping hole in the planetary detritus. As she drew closer, her ring began issuing silent warnings about radiation levels and other dangers. She ignored them and, a moment later, those alerts ceased.

Something large and heavy tumbled into Carol, and she very nearly panicked before realizing it was simply an immense slab of refined metal. The fact it survived planetary destruction was amazing – could anything short of casting this … thing into a sun destroy it? – but the damage it absorbed had warped it beyond recognition. On instinct, Carol slid closer to the hunk of distorted alloys. She placed her hands atop its surface and began feeling for something, for anything that might identify it.

The two Lanterns swept slowly toward her, an implacable, unyielding force that possessed nothing resembling pity or remorse. They were zealots, devoted and obedient servants of a Guardian Carol now knew to be a corrupt monster in the service of some greater power. Barely a week earlier, she’d observed firsthand how this scarred Guardian met with some cloaked, hunch-backed figure. For her part, she’d once more been trying to find Hal. The messages that she’d received from him were crap – no one alive knew Jordan better than her and those missives sounded like he was reading off a script. She’d never intended on stumbling onto a galactic conspiracy…

“Alert, Sapphire Ferris,” her ring silently informed her. “Energy build-up in quadrant three by nineteen by seventy detected.” From the way the two Lanterns oriented on that quadrant, they had noted the energy spike and were investigating the far distant moon, still mostly intact but obviously battered by the destruction of the homeworld. Carol considered making a break for it then – the Lanterns were distracted, after all, and might not see her departure, but she suddenly realized she was not alone. There was a … presence somewhere around her, but she could not detect anything with her ring. Panic almost started to set in once again.

And the sky suddenly turned white.

She regained consciousness an eternity later, still surrounded by what honestly smelled like salt water and fire. Blinking the spots out of her vision, she automatically consulted her ring.

“Power levels at thirty percent and rising, Sapphire Ferris,” the ring silently informed her. Carol blinked in surprise and lifted her hand to investigate – the ring was pulsing exactly like it did when she recharged it, which made absolutely no sense. She frowned and looked in the direction of the Lanterns.

The moon they had been investigating was gone.

She stared at the empty space, trying to comprehend what had just happened. Recognizing a query, the ring answered: the moon had exploded and, based on the admittedly limited scans the ring was capable of at low power, both Lanterns were instantly killed. The ring had no explanation for what might have caused the explosion and, for a second, Carol was convinced she heard a light trilling laugh.

“Right,” she said aloud. “That isn’t creepy at all.” She reviewed her few options – the Sapphires were still too scattered to really pose a threat, but Hal’s team on Earth … they might be able to help. She nodded, glancing around once more at the ruin of a planet. With her ring back over fifty percent – what the hell was charging it? And why did she have a sudden urge for pomegranates and apples? – she cast around with her senses, finally zeroing in on a distinctive diamond-shaped glyph stamped upon the slab of metal she was floating in front of. “Oh, God.” She knew where she was.

Krypton. This was Krypton.
Run home to Earth, Daughter, a disembodied voice whispered in her ear. Carol was already accelerating away from the dead system, the weird events she’d just experienced slipping away from her memory like smoke in a breeze. By the time she broke the light barrier, all she remembered was tricking the two corrupt Lanterns into investigating an active weapons platform. Their aggressiveness did the work for her.

She slowed to sublight once she entered the Sol system and, her mind set, she streaked toward the Justice League Watchtower. Her ring advised her that the stand-in Lantern was moving to intercept, alongside a woman who appeared to be Kryptonian. Carol came to a complete stop and waited for them to arrive. The Lantern was an offensive brute who would likely fit in better with the Reds and had none of the instinctive beauty she’d seen with Hal, but the woman in white and red flatly ignored the odious little troll and directed Carol toward the Watchtower.

“I need to speak with whoever is in charge,” Carol said once they were aboard and had oxygen.

“She’s a Star Sapphire,” the Lantern announced. “You can’t trust them.”

“Princess Diana is this way,” the woman said, shouldering past the Lantern. She was taller than him by at least several inches and, as she passed him, Carol heard her mutter, “Shazam.” Whatever the word meant, it caused the Lantern to recoil, then glower.

The entire League appeared to be assembled, along with several faces Carol did not recognize, and all of them looked to be prepared for the worst. Wonder Woman wore a grim expression that looked odd on her face, but she gestured for Carol to approach.

“A War of Light has begun,” Carol said without preamble. She glanced at the Lantern and frowned. “Greens, Reds and Yellows … they’re all trying to destroy each other.”

“That’s the first I’ve heard of it, Lady,” the Lantern began. He took a belligerent step forward, opening his mouth to no doubt accuse her of further deception, when the entire Watchtower trembled. Alarms began shrieking.

And an emerald portal exploded open right there, in the middle of this conference room.

Chaos erupted as the members of the League automatically sprang into defensive formations and positions, with the various fliers darting up into the air where they hovered. Only Wonder Woman did not move as she stared at the portal, though the tension in her body betrayed her readiness. A heartbeat later, sizzling streams of emerald light flashed outward, splashing against an invisible shield around the princess. At the same time, a small figure tumbled through the hole, slamming into the table and sliding a full foot or two before throwing up a tiny hand. Wind howled as the portal narrowed, then vanished entirely. The figure staggered to its feet and Carol’s eyes widened.

It was a Guardian!

He was badly burned, with one of his arms ending in a smoking stump, but a tangible sense of power still radiated off him. With a frown, he looked around, his eyes narrowing at sight of Carol.

“Lantern,” he called out. “Attend me.”

“Ganthet?” The Lantern floated closer, then was abruptly jerked forward by unseen force. His ring flared brightly and some of the Guardian’s injuries faded.

“This is Sector 2814, yes?” The Guardian held up its undamaged hand. “Of course it is. I am seeking the Justice League that Lanterns Jordan and Stewart are members of.”
“And Lantern Gardner,” the stand-in Lantern muttered, but Ganthet ignored him as Wonder Woman rose from her seat.

“We are the League,” she said simply. “You appear to be in some distress,” she added.

“We are all in distress,” Ganthet said. “The Corps has shattered,” he said flatly, the words causing both Carol and Gardner to inhale in surprise. “We are betrayed by one of our own and now the Corps … the Corps wages war against itself.”

“The scarred Guardian? She’s the one who betrayed you, right?” Carol interjected. Ganthet’s head snapped around and he narrowed his eyes. “It’s worse than you think,” she said, raising her ring – more than half the League visibly tensed – and projecting the memory she’d nearly been killed over. It played out quickly, complete with audio, and the League heard this scarred Guardian accept assistance from the hunch-backed figure in black.

“Desaad.” The Batman glided forward to stand alongside Wonder Woman. His eyes were locked on Ganthet. “You know who he is.”

“He is a master torturer and manipulator,” the Guardian declared ominously, “who serves a dark and terrible master.”

“Darkseid.” Again, the Batman spoke, though this was obviously an educated guess.

“There is more,” Ganthet said. He did not look to be enthusiastic about admitting this. “We have strong evidence indicating that this Darkseid is responsible for Rimbor.”

“Kal-El!” The Kryptonian woman surged forward, anger and fear warring on her face. She exchanged a look with Wonder Woman who nodded. When the Amazon spoke, all eyes were on her.

“Then the League shall go to war.”
WASHINGTON, D.C. – Three days after the earthquake that stunned the world, both houses of the United States Congress passed an emergency resolution condemning the terrorist strike that has claimed more than fifteen thousand lives. The attack, caused by extraterrestrial technology seized from STAR Labs, was initially believed to be a natural occurrence.

In a statement released to the public, the terrorist leader known only as ‘Bane’ warned the American government against attempting to reclaim Gotham on threat of detonating a high-yield thermonuclear weapon confirmed to exist. President Alexander’s office refused to comment on the federal government’s hesitation and anonymous sources hinted that the administration is reviewing all available options.

With the majority of Earth’s most powerful superhuman champions off-world to defeat a threatened extraterrestrial invasion force and the rest struggling to contain an explosion of metahuman violence across the globe, this event has stranded hundreds of thousands of Gothamites in a city no longer capable of supporting them.

OF ALL THE THINGS HE EXPECTED TO SEE TODAY, NINJAS WERE PRETTY LOW ON HIS LIST.

There were four of them, dressed entirely in the traditional costume one expected to see on a ninja which made them strikingly easy to see against the snowy backdrop of Gotham’s streets as they pursued what looked like a young girl in a bright green kimono. Timothy Drake frowned as he watched them for a moment – it figured that this would happen now, just as he was about to head in for the night to get some much needed sleep. He shifted his position on the rooftop, calculated the best intercept point, and prepared himself.

“You cannot escape us, Cassandra!” one of the ninjas called out. Even as he shouted, the rest of his fellows produced guns of some sort and fired – Tim recognized LexCorp tasers at once and, as he sprang toward the edge of the roof, he noted that the girl dodged all but one of the weapons. Wreathed in sudden electricity, she made no sound as she collapsed to the chortles and laughs of the ninjas. Tim glowered and threw himself off the roof.

His cape stiffened under the mild charge generated by his gloves and he glided downward, tightening and relaxing various muscles to change his flight path in minute ways. At the last moment, he flexed his right hand, killing the charge coursing through his cape, and slammed into the rearmost ninja with both feet, feeling ribs buckle under the impact. Even as the ninja toppled with a shriek of agony, Tim was pushing off the man and diving away. He rolled and came up in a readied crouch.

With a smooth, practiced motion, he reached for and drew his collapsible bo staff from where it was secured at his back, flicking it out so it locked into position. The ninja on his right lunged forward, but Tim thrust his staff into the man’s stomach before twirling away and swinging at the one now at his back. With a loud crack, the staff bounced off the wannabe ninja’s head, driving him into the snow.
Darting back, Tim promptly assumed a defensive ready position, the staff at the ready. The ninja he’d first landed on was trying to climb to his feet but was having extreme difficulty – broken ribs did that sort of thing to a person – while the two he’d hit were recovering. Tim glanced in the direction of the fourth ninja, the one that had charged forward after the girl, but found him already face-down in the snow.

There was no sign of the girl in the kimono.

“You’ve got exactly one chance to walk away from this,” Tim said harshly. He stepped closer to the first ninja and delivered a perfect snap-kick to the man’s face. The other two men slipped on the ice as they scrambled to their feet. With his left hand, Tim reached for one of the Batarangs secured to his belt. At the last instant, he changed his mind and pulled a gas pellet instead. He armed the tiny grenade with his thumb, and then flicked it at the left-hand ninja who foolishly caught the hurled projectile. Gas sprayed the man in the face – he dropped the grenade pellet but not quickly enough as, within a half step, he dropped to his knees. “Last warning,” Tim said to the last of the upright ninjas. With a growl, the damned fool leaped forward.

Tim slid forward, catching the ninja’s attack with the staff and redirecting it away. He kicked out, but the black-clad man danced back and away from the strike before lunging forward with a brutal punch. Tim twisted away, rolling away from the strike, before lashing out with his staff, aiming for the ninja’s legs. Exactly as he expected, the man skipped up to avoid being tripped, which left him wide open to Tim’s left-hand jab. It was little more than a glancing blow but knocked the man off balance long enough for a second staff thrust to stomach. The ninja folded with an explosive gasp and Tim struck again, this time with his knee.

His heart pounding like a runaway train, he surveyed the four fallen ninjas cautiously, but none of them appeared conscious enough to be a threat. Of the girl in the kimono, there was no sign which caused Tim to tense up slightly, especially when he toed over the fourth man and saw the blood wetting the mask. Whoever she was, she’d dropped a hostile so quickly that Tim never even heard it happen despite having just been tased and then managed to disappear faster than Bruce. He glanced at the mostly empty alleyways, then to the nearby rooftops, but found nothing. And the ninjas knew her by name. No, that wasn’t worrisome at all.

He bound the four ninjas together, then secured them to a dumpster before using his grapple gun to return to the rooftop where he spent several long moments just trying to force his body to relax. There were times when being Robin was awesome – he got to wear a cool cape, work alongside the Batman, hell, he’d even met Wonder Woman once! – and then there were moments like this, when his body reminded him that he was only fourteen and help was a very long way off. Tim gulped air, concentrated on equalizing his breathing, and finally straightened, once more in command of himself. Satisfied that his hand wasn’t going to shake any more than it usually did, he armed a beacon transmitter and tossed it into the snow next to the unconscious thugs before settling in to wait for the police meat wagon.

“Something up?” Oracle’s voice crackled in his earpiece. Tim grimaced as he glanced upward. As usual, he couldn’t find any of the ultralight drones she had orbiting Gotham, but he suspected she was looking at him through at least two cameras.

“Ninjas,” he replied softly.

“Seriously?” Tim smirked at Barbara’s incredulity.

“Seriously.” He glanced around, once more trying to find the girl. “They were chasing a girl in a green kimono and I dropped in on them.” He yawned.
"Meat wagon en route," Oracle said a moment later. "I've got eyes on if you want to go ahead and head in for the night."

"Roger that." Tim reset his grapple-gun and began the long, circuitous route to 'home.'

This had been his life for the last two weeks, ever since the massive earthquake came out of nowhere and toppled a half dozen buildings in downtown. All routes in and out of Gotham were cut off because of the quake, and then, thanks to that nut, Bane who was threatening to blow up the city if anyone tried to help, relief efforts were being turned away. His manifesto was a hodgepodge of anarchist, neo-socialist nonsense completely devoid of deeper thought, but a lot of the really poverty-stricken in Gotham ate it up which turned a relatively normal city into a nightmare. Tim still wasn’t sure if there was a bomb or not – the government definitely thought so if their inaction was any indication – and he really didn’t care; someone needed to patrol Gotham and protect those stuck inside from the mad dogs who seemed to have crawled out from under every rock in the city.

Richard alternated his time as either Nightwing or in the Batsuit, covering for a still recovering Bruce who remained in Washington during his recuperation, trying desperately to convince the Congress and the president to act. There were a couple others in Gotham who helped out, of course – Catwoman had staked out the East End and treated that as her territory, Ms. Bertinelli was pretty focused on the Burnley district though, like Tim, she ranged far and wide when necessary, and Black Canary rotated among the districts, lending a hand where she was needed – but the bulk of the work fell squarely on the shoulders of the two active members of the Bat-clan.

And the pressure, the stress, the sheer unadulterated terror was becoming too much for Tim to handle.

Crimson and yellow and green, the walls of light splashed against one another in the silent void, carving great furrows in the hulls of warring starships. Beings who had nothing in common with humanity screamed their rage and fear, lashing out with streams of living light. There would be no mercy. One side was too furious, the other too fearful. They unleashed their unspeakable power against one another, burning entire worlds.

And into this maelstrom came the Justice League.

Their numbers were not many – compared to the Lanterns, they were but a handful – yet their power was considerable. Among their ranks was an immortal Amazon, a woman who had once been two Kryptonians but was now a single entity, the universe’s mightiest mortal, a living lightning bolt who could outrun light itself, a walking fusion reactor, the whole of the Star Sapphire Corps … and every Green Lantern who had not been seduced to the Black. They struck with fierceness and precision and power.

But still, the war raged on.

Home was one of the five or six satellite caves that Bruce had seeded throughout the city years earlier, though Tim altered his path away from it the moment he realized he was being shadowed. At first, he thought it might be Richard playing one of his goofy games that Tim normally loved for the acceptance into the family it implied, or perhaps Ms. Bertinelli once again trying to follow him in order to uncover his identity since he cracked hers, but he quickly realized that wasn’t the case at all. Richard was investigating an Arkham break-out – not the Joker, thank God, but Zsasz wasn’t someone to just ignore – and Huntress was in her apartment, still recovering from a fight with that whackjob, Firefly. Canary also confirmed she was in the East End with Selina when Tim contacted her, and from the sounds he heard over the comm-line, the two women were probably beating the
snot out of some gang members.

Actually identifying his tail was harder than he expected it to be. Tim doubled back through the Diamond District – he ambushed a pair of gang-members threatening to beat a man to death for his shoes of all things – then cut through Chinatown where he paused long enough to stop a would-be rapist. From there, he darted straight into Old Gotham, using darkened buildings and powerless apartments to try and shake off his unseen shadow. He even passed the GCPD building, one of the only structures in the immediate vicinity that had power, but still, he sensed he was being followed. Finally, exhausted and frustrated, he retraced his path to the GCPD and ducked into one of the sealed off rooms that had a pair of cots and blankets. Commissioner Gordon had set this up the day after the bridges came down and Bane made his insane, rambling declaration, and Tim had already used it at least twice. He dropped down onto a cot, wrapped his cape around his body and, despite his efforts to remain awake, was asleep in seconds.

The sun was peeking over the horizon when he opened his eyes again, and he froze the instant he realized the girl in the green kimono was curled up on the other cot, several blankets pulled tightly around her. She was deeply asleep, but the gauntness of her cheekbones indicated she hadn’t eaten much in a long time. From her features, Tim guessed she was no older than he was and, in this light, she looked a little like a young Lady Shiva. Just the thought of that woman made him shiver and he hoped to God he never ran into her again.

As soon as he stirred, the girl’s eyes snapped open and Tim was surprised at the almost instant lucidity he saw there. Her entire body tensed and she rolled off the cot even before he was able to put one foot on the ground. The kimono was gone, he noticed, and she was dressed in something that looked strikingly like the ninja outfit of the four guys he’d seen chasing her. Crap. That probably meant she was one of them. He hoped this wasn’t a mistake.

“Hi, there,” he said simply. “Cassandra, right?” He climbed slowly off his cot, wincing slightly at the sharp pains stabbing through his torso. Even with all the nifty Kryptonian enhancements, the armor had never been intended to be slept in and Tim was certain he would have a bruise where his collapsible bo was secured at his back. Even worse was how filthy he felt – the Under Armour suit he wore under the Robin gear soaked up sweat wonderfully but it had never been intended to be worn for days at a time. He would kill for a hot shower right now. “I have some food in here,” Tim added, half-turning to point at the box of MREs. There was a flicker of movement and he instantly snapped his head around, automatically assuming a defensive stance.

But the girl was gone.

Tim darted to the now open window and glanced outside, but she was nowhere to be seen. He glanced around the small room, checking all of the places he would have used to hide behind first, but she wasn’t in any of those spots. One of the blankets that had been on her cot was missing, but apart from that, there was nothing to prove she’d even been here. Tim shook his head.

“So that’s what that feels like.” He chuckled softly as he retraced his steps to the case of MREs and, on instinct, grabbed a handful. Once they were secured, he exited the safe room (but intentionally left the window unlocked in case the mystery girl needed some place to crash again) and ascended to the roof. The MREs he hid on the other side of the roof access door – he wasn’t sure if the girl was still watching, but if she was like he suspected, he hoped she got the hint and took the food.

He didn’t see her again for almost two weeks, but Tim was almost certain she was following him at least most of the time.

At first, when he made private stops like his midnight visits to Gotham General, barely operating due
to having virtually no power, where he could sit with his dad for an hour or so, he’d been afraid she would follow. Each time he slid into his dad’s private room, though, all thoughts about the mystery girl fled and he stared at the silent form stretched out in his bed. They’d been forced to remove the ventilator when the power initially failed, but he’d started breathing on his own which was a big step forward. Now if only he would wake up…

As time crept by, though, Tim stopped caring that the mystery girl who may or may not be named Cassandra was shadowing him, especially as things grew even more chaotic than normal. January crept into February, and a late winter storm dumped another four or five inches of snow and ice on Gotham, which only seemed to intensify the aggression of the city’s gangs. Even worse, though, was an airdrop of firearms and ammunition by an unregistered aircraft very probably in the employ of Bane. Richard, in his guise as the stand-in Bat, tried to prevent the delivery but found out about it too late and, within a day, the streets of Gotham were once more erupting in senseless gang warfare.

In the end, though, the mystery girl saved his life.

Entire civilizations were wiped away as the War of Light turned into the Blackest Night. A new power rose, one wielding a terrible power drawn from a dark god long believed to be little more than a legend. Oblivion, he was called by some. Entropy by others. His true name was lost to time but the Black Lanterns who coursed through the void and, by their horrific acts, united the others who wielded rings of power knew him by another name.

The Justice League alone of the galaxy did not cower, for Earth had escaped much of his sinister influence thanks to the actions of those that called themselves Olympians. And so, these brave, doomed, foolish humans led the great crusade against the Black Lantern Corps, convinced they could emerge victorious, no matter the terrible odds. They would not kneel before a tyrant or a monster who sought to undo the very fabric of reality so he could remake the universe in his image. They fought.

And some of them died.

The gang-bangers had already pinned down a pair of police officers when Tim reached the site.

He landed on the building overlooking them and, the moment they paused to reload, hurled two grenades into their midst. One was smoke to conceal his approach, the other was a tiny CS gas pellet intended to incapacitate at least a couple of them before he reached them. Even as they exploded, Tim was diving off the building, his cape flaring out and automatically stiffening to slow his fall. He landed on one of the choking shooters with both feet and the impact threw the man forward and into the hood of their car. Tim rode the man to the ground, then sprang toward one of the other men.

Too late he realized the man was not choking from the CS.

The burst of gunfire caught Tim squarely in the chest. His armor held but still, the sheer force of the bullets staggered him – he fell back, slipping on the ice. Panic and terror fueling his muscles, he scrambled to find cover against the sudden hail of gunshots that tore into the car and the snow. Pain blossomed across his chest as he gulped air and his muscles felt like they had turned to water. With thick fingers that barely obeyed his commands, he fumbled at his utility belt, palming several tiny flashbangs and miniature gas pellets. Arming them quickly, he tossed them over the car with a hiss of pain as his chest muscles shrieked in protest. They detonated with sharp cracks but the onslaught of gunfire did not ease in the slightest.

“Come on, Little Bird!” one of the shooters exclaimed. “I was a goddamned Navy SEAL! I’m not
afraid of a kid in tights and a cape!” Tim winced as he slid a boomerang free from his utility belt. It clicked into place and he flipped it in the direction of the shooters. With a shriek, the tiny transmitter secured in the weapon activated, sending out shockingly loud sonic pulses. He heard the surprised cries of the shooters and, despite the stabbing pain in his chest, Tim darted around the car and into the billowing clouds of smoke.

Fear gave him strength as he hit the cluster of hostiles. The first he encountered was bent over and choking on the smoke and gas, so he could not defend against Tim’s knee strike, but taking him out slowed Tim down long enough for the other men to recover. Their ammo appeared to be depleted so the remaining four men backpedaled out of the smoke, fumbling for replacement magazines for their assault rifles. The two cops chose that moment to resume shooting themselves, which caused just enough additional confusion for Tim to step closer to one of the shooters. He thrust his quarterstaff at the man, but to his surprise, the gang member batted it away with expert skill. Dropping his empty firearm, the man grinned darkly and attacked, his hands a blur. Tim knocked aside several of the blows but quickly found himself on the defensive – his chest burned from the bullets from earlier and this man had both reach and strength on him. Worse, he had training … he was fast and good and … then Tim’s staff went spinning away. He took a right cross upon the jaw that sent him reeling, then a pair of rapid punches to the midriff that tore the breath from him. The thug barked a laugh as he pressed his attack – he dodged Tim’s attempt to trip him and then smashed Tim bodily into the car. Something cracked and blinding pain shot through his chest.

And then, into that moment, the mystery girl dropped out of the sky.

She hit the man kicking Tim’s ass with a series of blinding strikes that stunned him, then flowed around his counter-attack in a move that Tim couldn’t have possibly replicated. Twisting around the man’s next punch, she did something with her feet causing him to stumble and then, with an almost casual swipe of her hands, she redirected his face squarely into the car door. The man slid to the ground, barely conscious, but the girl wasn’t done yet. She sprang toward the other men, all unloading their weapons at the police officers with none of the military precision they’d shown earlier. Tim staggered to his feet as she danced from one man to the next, disabling them with wicked jabs and kicks. By the time he’d managed to steady himself, all four were down, either too injured to continue the fight or so thoroughly unconscious they wouldn’t be waking any time soon.

“Thank you,” Tim said through swelling lips. His vision swam as he let her help him into a nearby alley. The two cops were just now beginning to advance on the unmoving shooters and, as far as Tim could tell, they weren’t aware of where he and the mystery girl hid. With shaking fingers, he pulled out his grapple gun fully intending on using it to make good his escape, but the girl easily took it away from him. She shook her head – he blinked and wondered when her twin had arrived – and tugged him deeper into the alley.

Tim wasn’t sure how much time it took them to reach his satellite cave – they stayed on the snow-filled streets, but with her directing them, they managed to evade any hostiles – and in his current state of mind, he didn’t think twice about the fact she knew where it was. He couldn’t do the combination right and on his third failed attempt, he heard a gasp in his earpiece.

“Oh, God, Tim!” It was Oracle. He glanced up in the direction of where he knew the camera was. A moment later, the door clicked open. “Nightwing is on his way!” Oracle said quickly, but Tim barely heard her as he staggered into the cave, mostly supported by the girl he didn’t actually know anything about. She directed him toward the nearest cot and he collapsed on it, almost screaming at the agonizing lance of fire stabbing through his chest.

Mercifully, he slipped into unconsciousness.
“Wake up, kiddo.” The familiar voice dragged Tim out of the gray nothingness that he’d slipped into and, as he pried his eyes open, he instantly realized he felt a dozen times better. Richard was kneeling beside the cot, still wearing his distinctive Nightwing garb. A medical kit was resting on the floor next to him. “Hey there.” Richard grinned as he dropped a hypodermic needle into a bio-waste bag and sealed it. “You should be feeling the kick here in a couple of minutes or so,” he continued, “courtesy of WayneTech’s super-juice.”

“Super-juice?” Tim blinked – his thoughts were clearer now and the pain significantly lessened, but even still, he couldn’t quite push the mental fog away.

“Yup.” Richard brandished a bottle. “Some chemical cocktail Superman cooked up before he left Earth that really accelerates human healing.” He grinned again. “The Bat lives on this stuff, man. You should be up and about in a day or so but expect to be starving.” Richard glanced around. “So, Oracle said you had a girlfriend helping you into the cave,” he said, “but I didn’t see anyone.”

“It’s the girl I saw with the ninjas,” Tim said. His eyes widened slightly when he saw Huntress lurking just inside the cave entrance. She was glancing around with vague interest, but otherwise looked perfectly at ease. The same could not be said about Richard – he kept glancing back at the woman who leaned against the wall with the same kind of casual grace Tim had seen Catwoman exhibit. Now that he thought about it, she kind of looked a little bit like Ms. Kyle too.

“Honestly,” Richard said as he straightened, “if Oracle hadn’t seen her, we’d all think she was a figment of your imagination.” His smile fell away. “As field commander,” he declared calmly, “I’m taking you off duty until you’ve recovered.” Tim started to argue but Richard crossed his arms. “No arguments, Robin,” he said, the subtle emphasis on Tim’s costumed identity a reminder about the chain of command. “I’ll check back in on you tomorrow.” He patted Tim’s shoulder. “Get some sleep, buddy.”

As soon as they were gone, Tim slid his legs off the cot and stood up. His armor was already gone – a glance to the left confirmed that Richard must have pulled it off and secured it on the stand – so he shivered slightly at the coolness of the satellite cave. Limping slightly, he made his way to the entrance and opened it. Cold air washed in.

“I know you’re out there,” he called out. “There’s another cot in here and it’s a whole lot warmer than streets or an abandoned building.” He stood there for a moment, shivering, and then backed away from the door. Stomach rumbling, he grimaced slightly and walked the short distance to the large crate of MRE’s. Behind him, he heard the door click shut and he extracted one of the Army meals. “Are you hungry?” he asked as he glanced over his shoulder. The girl was standing there, her eyes darting as if she expected a trap. At his words, she stared at him before finally nodding.

“Good,” Tim said. “Because I’m freaking starving.”

---

_The living lightning bolt was the first of the League to fall. He was acclaimed the fastest man alive and, on a dark and terrible day, as the Blackest Night raged over a nameless world, he outran entropy itself, destroying the Black Lanterns’ central power battery through sheer force of will alone. Against its lethal, killing energy, he ran, faster than he’d ever ran, so fast that he became one with the very speed force that gave him his abilities, and in doing so, he split open reality around the battery. No one, not his friends or his allies in the League saw him pass, but he died fighting for what he believed in._

_And thus, he died without regret._

---

Over the next three weeks, as February turned into March, a strange pattern emerged.
At first, Tim did not really notice it – with the thawing of the unseasonably cold winter, the streets of Gotham were once more filled with people; some were certifiably crazy, others just scum, but most simply wanted to find food or a way out of the nightmare their city had become – but as the days passed, it became increasingly impossible to ignore. He would wake to find the girl – Cassandra, based on what the ninjas called her, but she never spoke to confirm the name – already conscious. They’d raid the rations box (which was beginning to get dangerously low) and, sometime between then and when he finished eating, she would vanish. He would patrol his section of Gotham, sometimes sensing her, sometimes not, but unless the situation got completely out of hand like it did twice – more of Bane’s thugs who were too well-trained for him to tackle alone – Tim didn’t see her until he returned to the satellite cave to sleep. Again, they would eat, then turn in to their respective cots. It was strangely comforting knowing that he wasn’t alone.

On the sixteenth day, though, she changed the pattern.

Tim was half-heartedly going through his early morning katas when she scowled and shook her head. With sharp gestures, she pointed to his footing, and then assumed the proper stance. From her expression, she clearly expected him to follow suit. When Tim hesitated, she gave him another fierce look, one he’d seen before on both Bruce’s and Lady Shiva’s face when he did not immediately display absolute perfection. Grimacing, he set his feet in their correct places.

For the next hour, Cassandra walked him through the proper katas and, within minutes, he could feel certain muscles protesting which was further proof that he had not been doing them correctly for a while now. Once she was satisfied that he did have some idea what he was doing, she promptly jumped to the next level and they sparred. At half speed, of course, but it was still an eye-opening experience. Almost at once, as if he needed any more proof, Tim realized how much better she was than him – God, she was fast. He didn’t think Bruce was this quick! Cassandra started slow but incrementally increased her pace until it was all he could do to keep from getting knocked on his ass.

“Enough!” he gasped an hour or so later. He was drenched in sweat and his entire body felt like one big bruise, while she seemed to barely be breathing hard. Cassandra nodded slightly and accepted the bottle of water he handed her but did not guzzle it like Tim did. He studied her as he drank. “Not that I don’t appreciate getting the snot kicked out of me,” he said, “but what brought this on?” She made no response as she simply looked back at him. “Can you even understand me?” Tim asked a moment later. The girl blinked before very slowly nodding. “So can you talk?” No response. Tim sighed, especially when she set down the water, retook her place in the small training area, and made a distinctive ‘come here’ gesture. “This is going to hurt,” he muttered.

But he obeyed. And more importantly, he improved.

Against his better judgment, Tim began to trust the girl who alternately seemed both helpless and the most dangerous person he’d ever met.

He knew that this was a mistake on his part – he knew nothing about her up to and including why the ninjas had been chasing her in the first place – but the constant isolation and general loneliness made it impossible for him to turn her out. Richard was too busy trying to fill Bruce’s shoes, Oracle was juggling a billion things at once, and it wasn’t like he could call up any of his non-costumed friends to vent, not with Bane’s control of the city slipping and more signs of an impending break-out. Cassandra was the perfect listener and at least feigned attentiveness when he spoke, though as a conversationalist, she frankly sucked. Her only talents seemed to lie in the direction of physical mayhem.

With so few options at his disposal, Tim began relying on her to act as his back-up when he went into hostile situations and, without bothering to inform the rest of the Bat-clan, he started equipping
her with their standard gear. Much of it she seemed indifferent to – the gas pellets, for example, or the various high tech gadgets – but the grapple gun actually appeared to delight her and one of his spare capes gave her as much trouble as it had him when he first donned it. She wore nothing else that identified her as a Bat – the ninja mask she wore concealed her face and her clothes were a simple training gi – but her presence at Tim’s side did not go unnoticed.

“We need to talk,” Oracle told him the day after he and Cass had jointly shut down one of Bane’s terror cells. “Bring your friend.” Automatically, Tim looked up, trying to find the drone that was no doubt circling overhead. “Yes, I can see you.” Her tone brooked no dissent. “Both of you, Clocktower. Now.”

When they arrived, Tim honestly wasn’t sure what he would find. He’d imagined everything from a furious Bruce Wayne, fully healed from his back injury, to a crapload of ninjas who had suborned Barbara. Instead, the only person present was Ms. Gordon herself. With her glasses and her hair done up in a bun (complete with what looked like a pencil in her hair), she looked every inch the librarian, but her scowl was dark and her voice could crack paint.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she demanded. “Do you have any idea what B … what the Boss will do if he finds out you’ve been recruiting?”

“Fire me?” Tim shrugged. “Might be for the best,” he added sourly. Barbara looked at him, pushing her glasses up with one finger in a reflexive action that Tim doubted she even realized she’d done. Ives did that too … and just the thought of his friend sent a pang of homesickness through him. He was so tired. His shoulders slumped.

“Go sit down,” Barbara ordered, pointing toward a chair. She looked Cassandra up and down. “I’ve been watching you,” she said calmly. “And you’ve been watching him.” She jerked a thumb over her shoulder at Tim. “More than that,” Barbara added, “you’ve been protecting him.” She leaned forward in her chair. “Why?”

“She can’t talk,” Tim said before quickly correcting himself. “Or she won’t talk.” Barbara gave him a sour look.

“Sit down,” she repeated. She looked back to Cassandra and leaned back in her chair. “I looked into the four guys you and Robin put down,” she told the mute, dark-haired girl. “Three of them have Interpol records.” Tim’s heart sank. “They were suspected of being members of the League of Shadows.” Cassandra flinched and looked down, but otherwise, made no response. “So with that in mind,” Barbara continued, “I did a little more digging. It was hard to find – most things about the League of Shadows are – but I found a couple references to someone matching your description.”

“No kill.” Cassandra’s reply was so soft that Tim almost thought he’d imagined it but she looked up, met Barbara’s eyes and repeated her previous comment. “No kill.”

“Tim,” Barbara said after a moment of silence. “I need you to leave us alone for a little while.” He opened his mouth to reply, but Barbara held up one hand. “No arguments, please.” There was a hint of steel in her voice as well as a smile – he had no idea how she did it. Tim considered refusing, but Barbara had always been nice to him. Even more than Alfred and Richard, she’d really been the first person to completely accept him into the Bat-clan, so he nodded.

Casualties mounted and others fell as well. The nuclear man and the atomic captain died together, sacrificing themselves during the last great battle between the League and the Black Lanterns to absorb and convert the energy of a massive weapon that could eradicate entire solar systems. Countless lives were saved by this heroic action and the Black Lanterns, now unable to tap their
central battery to recharge their rings and unable to threaten wholesale destruction, became even more desperate.

The law enforcement officer from Thanagar was lost along with his entire team, also from his homeworld; his wife felt his passing even though she was not even in this reality but no others knew he had been slain until many days later. Unlike the others of the League who had fallen, his death was no great heroic sacrifice. He was simply one more casualty of this terrible conflict.

No one knew what came of the one they called Atom. He simply disappeared and was believed lost. But the hardest loss, the one that caused the most consternation, came as a complete surprise. The timelost cousin of the League’s leader, a girl barely twenty, died in glorious combat, taking with her a veritable army of foes. When the immortal Amazon found her cousin whom she loved like a sister surrounded by a carpet of enemies, her grief was terrible to behold.

And still, the war raged on.

His patrol was uneventful – he watched from the shadows as Detectives Bullock and Montoya met up with an Army Special Forces unit inserted into Gotham the night before, then observed Canary, Huntress, and Nightwing neutralize half a dozen of Bane’s scouts who might be able to warn the terrorist that the U.S. government was finally getting involved; one got away, but Ms. Kyle pounced on him before he took three steps into the East End and beat the living crap out of him. A pair of would-be gang-bangers ran into a former professional boxer who took them apart without breaking a sweat when they tried to mug him, and then stripped them to their underwear before tying them together on a lamppost. Tim recognized the man – before the accident, his dad had loved boxing and was convinced that Ted Grant was the best boxer to have ever lived. Thoughts of Jack Drake drove Tim back to the hospital in a haze of guilt. It had been almost a week since he’d snuck in to sit with his father, and he’d been so busy in between patrols and sparring with Cass that he’d simply forgotten.

Nothing had changed – his dad continued to breathe on his own, brain activity was still being registered, but he just would not wake up. Tim sat there in the silence for an hour or so, ducking out only when the on-staff nurse checked in on his dad. He couldn’t help but to be wildly thankful that the hospital continued to operate, even if he suspected it was only because Bruce was paying them ungodly amounts of money to stay. It was so damned weird how parts of Gotham continued to operate like nothing had changed, despite the fact that it was effectively under the control of a madman. Oh, there were certainly sections he wouldn’t go into unless he had a tank, and there were rumors that Doctor Crane had set up a kangaroo court over on Arkham Island, but the neighborhoods Tim patrolled almost seemed normal.

Almost, but not quite.

He caught sight of Nightwing and Huntress again later that evening – they didn’t see him and he hoped to God that Richard wasn’t thinking with his little head again; Tim liked Ms. Bertinelli well enough, but anyone with eyes and functioning brain cells could tell that Barbara loved Richard – and once thought he saw Canary with an guy in green carrying a compound bow, but he steered clear of intercepting any of them as he continued his wide circuit. After two loops, he ended up at the GCPD yet again. Commissioner Gordon was on the roof, pointing out various buildings to one of the SF guys who was checking things on his computer, so Tim settled in to eavesdrop, his cape pulled tightly around his body and his hood pulled up. Nothing they discussed was anything he didn’t already know but he had to admit, there was something really amusing about getting this close to one of the country’s most highly trained soldiers without the man realizing it. After years of Bruce’s stealth appearances, Gordon must have developed a sixth sense, though, and he started glancing
around with that knowing frown of his.

“Since you’re in the vicinity,” Oracle whispered across Tim’s earpiece, “let my dad know we just confirmed site alpha.” The tiny computer embedded in his left gauntlet vibrated, indicated she’d just forwarded him a file. “When you’re done,” she continued, “come back to the Clocktower.” Tim grunted very softly in acknowledgement and it was enough for the commissioner to hone in on him. He nodded as Tim advanced slowly, but the solder was caught completely by surprise and instantly went for his gun. Gordon’s hand flashed out and caught the man’s arm before he could clear his sidearm from its holster.

“Relax,” Gordon snapped. “He’s a friendly.”

“He’s a kid,” the Army captain said in a surprised voice.

“Checking in, sir,” Tim said, glad for the voice modulator built into his suit. It made him sound older and he experimented with various settings from time to time. “Site alpha is confirmed.”

“Well we need eyes on ourselves,” the captain said as he abandoned his attempt to draw his gun and, in response, Tim stepped closer and lifted his left arm. He flipped open the protective shield on the integrated computer and, with a casual swipe of a finger, shot the recording that Barbara had sent to him to the captain’s Toughbook. Defeating the computer’s security for someone with his skills was almost child’s play, even if they weren’t using WayneTech’s Oracle OS. He glanced at the filename and recognized Barbara’s naming sequence.

“That’s the recommended entry point,” he said softly. He almost smiled at the surprise on the soldier’s face – Gordon was smirking as well and with a grunt, the commissioner peeked over the captain’s shoulder to look at the screen. He crowded close enough to the soldier that neither of them were able to observe Tim’s discreet exit, though Tim suspected the commissioner had done so intentionally. According to Barbara, he knew that Bruce was the Bat and the one time Tim had met him out of costume, Mr. Gordon had given him a knowing look.

“What the –?” the Army captain’s voice followed Tim into the shadows.

“They do that,” Gordon replied. “You get used to it.”

Tim skirted around two more soldiers – their alertness was not an issue; he simply had the advantage of knowing the terrain intimately as well as being geared more for stealth than they were – and dove off the GCPD building at first opportunity. His cape flared out and stiffened, allowing him to glide to his next jump off point where he brought the grapple gun into play. Another ten minutes passed before he reached the Clocktower, mostly because he wanted to avoid too much notice and there were a surprising number of people out and about tonight. Perhaps they sensed the coming conflict as well. Gotham was the Bat’s city and despite the (all too true) rumors that Bane had injured the Dark Knight in their last meeting, no one had any doubts that a reckoning was on the horizon.

Cassandra wasn’t present when Tim entered Oracle’s den and he drew up short the moment he caught sight of Barbara’s expression. She looked … giddy. Yeah, that was the proper definition. Her eyes danced as Tim hesitantly approached.

“Oh, Cassandra,” she called out. Grinning, Barbara watched a closed door and Tim’s eyes turned in that direction. The door opened and Cassandra stepped out.


It was obviously one of Barbara’s suits, complete with the hardened cuirass and the pointy-eared
cowl, but they’d done something to the mask so Cass’ features were completely hidden. From the almost awkward way she moved, it seemed likely that the suit did not fit perfectly, but still, Batgirl glided across the room with lethal grace.

“Pretty awesome, isn’t it?” Barbara asked. Tim blinked – he didn’t know what to say. “We chatted … well, mostly I chatted; she didn’t say much. It was like the strangest game of charades I’ve ever played.” Barbara shook her head. “I did some more hacking and found a couple of things – evidently, there’s a million dollar bounty on her head.”

“Why?”

“No kill.” Through the Batgirl suit’s modulator, Cassandra’s voice sounded feral and dangerous. Barbara nodded.

“She wouldn’t kill a man,” she said. “So Cassandra has been running ever since.” Barbara’s expression tightened slightly. “That also allowed me to confirm that Bane and company are League of Shadows.” She nodded toward Cassandra. “She smuggled herself into Gotham alongside them, then tried to warn someone. Unfortunately, her speech disability…”

“No kill.”

“…made it difficult for anyone to understand what she was trying to tell them.” Barbara sighed. “And then, it was too late.”

“Yeah.” Tim shook his head to clear away the shock, once more surreptitiously glancing at Barbara. He knew for a fact she was dangerously protective of the Batgirl identity – a year or so ago, right after Tim had become Robin, a local girl had donned homemade tights and a cape, and then tried to become the new Batgirl (since the old one had vanished), but Barbara had enlisted Bruce and Richard to shut the girl down. Hard. Now, though, she beamed like a proud parent. He shrugged and then faced Cassandra. A grin crossed his face. “All right, Batgirl,” he said brightly, nodding toward the wide training floor that hadn’t been properly used in a long time. “Let’s get you acclimated to the new gear.”

Without warning, without explanation, the Black Lanterns vanished.

In the wake of their mysterious disappearance, they left a fractured universe and thousands of planets seared of life. The Green Lanterns, once the protectors of order, were a hollow shell of their former selves and even the Guardians had irrevocably split, with some under the leadership of Ganthet deciding to form a new Lantern Corps, this one devoted to Hope. The first of these Blue Lanterns appeared without warning and promptly devoted themselves to helping the universe to rebuild. Under Wonder Woman’s leadership, the Justice League of Earth promptly joined with them to lend assistance.

The Green Lanterns were faced with a long and arduous task – that of reconstructing themselves – and far too many of their former ring-bearers were dead or had cast off the green for yellow or, as was the case with Guy Gardner of Earth, the red of Rage. With so few willing or capable of wielding the green of Will, the Green Lantern Corps looked to be on the verge of extinction. Their best and brightest were dead or missing, and the Guardians who remained were unsure of their paths.

And then, things got worse.

Barbara sat quietly behind her computer monitors and watched without expression as Batgirl and
Robin dove off a building and landed in the midst of a group of heavily armed men. The two kids – and at their ages, what else could they be called? – moved like a single entity, with Cassandra expertly compensating for any of Tim’s missteps. They kicked and punched and dodged and, in mere seconds, the seven would-be terrorists they’d tackled were unconscious. Naturally, Cassandra had dropped more than her partner, though Barbara couldn’t help but to notice how well Tim moved. He’d been fairly competent before but in the two weeks since the new Batgirl hit Gotham, his skills had increased exponentially.

“You gave her a suit.” Bruce’s unexpected voice at her back caused Barbara to jump and she twisted around to stare in open shock at him. He was standing there, dressed in one of his newer combat suits. A pang of envy shot through her then – the last time she’d seen him, he’d been confined to a chair like her – but she pushed it aside and nodded. “I’m not sure that was a good idea.”

Barbara frowned. Following his first encounter with Bane immediately prior to the earthquake that savaged Gotham, Bruce had retreated from the city to recover – according to Alfred, the modified suit with the Kryptonian fabrics was the only reason Bruce wasn’t permanently paralyzed – and, in his absence, she’d been effectively running the Bat-clan. Certainly, Richard thought he was in charge, but that was only because she’d let him think he was calling the shots, and most of his plans and ideas tracked with hers. The moment Cassandra fell into Tim’s life, Barbara had informed Bruce but, strangely, he’d offered no advice beyond following her instincts. So she’d tasked one of the thirteen drones at her disposal to keep an eye on the girl who appeared to have League of Shadows training. At first, Cassandra had simply shadowed Tim, observing as he patrolled the city and tried too damned hard to live up to the impossible standard he set for himself, but she gradually expanded her silent observations to Nightwing and then that Bertinelli woman. Cassandra even spent an entire day following Selina.

And then, she started following their examples.

Cassandra kept her contributions small – a would-be rapist here, a pair of murderers whose legs she broke and left for the police, and a wannabe pyromaniac – but each time she acted, she would quickly return to her shadowing of the latest Bat-person, as if to determine whether she was doing the right thing. It was the strangest thing.

“She didn’t need encouragement, Bruce,” Barbara said. “She needed guidance.” He grunted – it was the only way he would acknowledge that a point had been made he could not refute – and Barbara wheeled around to face him. “Do you want to know the real reason I gave her the suit?” she asked. “Because of Tim.” It was hard to tell how he reacted to that – his cowl concealed most of his face – but she thought he might have stiffened slightly. “He’s been scared out of his mind, Bruce,” she said. “He needed someone out there to watch his back.”

“He’s been Robin for two years,” Bruce began but Barbara interrupted.

“And he had you there during most of that time,” she pointed out. “When you were injured,” she said, noting how he almost glared at that statement, “Richard kept an eye on him as much as he could but right now, Tim has hundreds of thousands of people’s lives on his shoulders.” She glared. “He’s fourteen, Bruce. Fourteen.” That sunk in a little if the way Bruce looked away was any indication.

“He’s the same age Richard was when he became Robin.”

“Yeah,” Dick said from the dark shadow he lurked in. Barbara jumped again – she hadn’t heard him come in! – and shot him a scowl. “Big difference is that I grew up staring danger in the face,” Grayson continued. It was weird, seeing two Batmen at the same time and Richard removed his cowl. “We’ve kept our eye on this girl,” he said, “and Babs is right. Tim needed someone to watch his back.”
“Do you have any idea who she is?” Bruce demanded. From the set of his shoulders, he was being particularly uncompromising tonight and Barbara gave Dick a knowing look. That was a mistake, as Bruce noticed it and his scowl darkened. “Cassandra Cain,” he said darkly. “Daughter of David Cain and, if I’m not mistaken, Sandra Wu-San. That girl is a trained assassin.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Richard said laconically, “but aren’t you as well?” The barb struck home and Barbara was treated to a sight she’d never seen before: Bruce Wayne, the Dark Knight himself, struck speechless.

“She wants to be better than that,” Barbara said. “You’ve seen the data I pulled,” she added. “You know how much extra danger her refusal to kill has put her in.”

“Stop trying to judge her,” Richard added darkly, “and teach her instead.” He stormed away, vanishing into the big closet where he kept his spare Nightwing suits. To Barbara’s surprise, Bruce watched him slam the door and then, removed his cowl. He looked tired.

“You really believe this girl is worthy of your legacy?” he asked. Barbara winced. One of the reasons she hated visiting his Cave these days (in addition to the poor wheelchair access) was the glassed up uniform she’d worn, right next to Jason’s – Bruce claimed it was there simply as a reminder, a warning of what this endless war could cost, but she thought it was just one more layer of guilt he could use to flog himself. Once, not long ago, Selina Kyle had complained that the primary reason her relationship with Bruce so often fell apart was that she didn’t give him things to hate himself for and Barbara had to admit that she was probably right. After a moment, Barbara smiled.

“She’s trying,” she said. “You can’t ask for more than that.” Bruce exhaled, then shook his head.

“No,” he murmured. “I guess you can’t.” He remained silent as she turned to other subjects, filling him in on the status of the planned strike against Bane’s compound. They had finally located where it was and assets were being put into place. Bruce nodded when she described her dad’s plan to augment the SF A-Teams with SWAT personnel. When Richard rejoined them, now wearing his Nightwing garb, she did not bother recapping since he knew all of this. “What assets do we have available?” Bruce finally asked.

“Canary has been mostly operating in the East End with Selina,” Dick said, smirking at how Bruce almost unconsciously straightened. “Tim also confirmed that Green Arrow is in Gotham.” He gave Bruce a questioning look.

“Dinah requested his presence,” he said. His eyes shifted to Barbara.

“Huntress?”

“Available and standing by.” She hesitated. “Plus Robin and Batgirl, of course.” Almost immediately, Bruce frowned.

“We’re going to need them,” Dick said. “I’ve scouted this compound and there’s no way only five of us can cover all the exits.” He didn’t even blink under Bruce’s hard stare which made Barbara smile – she still remembered the little boy that almost had a heart attack each time his adopted father frowned in his direction. Finally, Bruce nodded.

“Assemble the team,” he ordered as he pulled his cowl back on. “We strike at dusk.”
With no unifying force to fight against, the various Lantern Corps fell to open conflict once more. Oa was lost to the Reds, retaken by the Greens, and then seized by those who followed Sinestro. With the Justice League’s aid, the homeworld of the Guardians was reclaimed once again and held against the combined might of those who would sweep the Green Lanterns from history. To everyone’s great surprise, the Star Sapphire Corps, led by an Earthwoman named Carol, stood alongside the Greens and then, so did the Blues.

And into this moment of chaos, Hal Jordan of Earth, Green Lantern of Sector 2814, returned to the fight, wielding even greater power than ever before and bringing with him New Gods who helped bring order to the chaos. Finally, after months of brutal warfare, peace was established.

But it was not over yet.

The recall alert caught them while they were waiting for the police meat wagon.

The terrorist squad they’d neutralized was thoroughly secured, stripped of all communications gear and weapons, and then handcuffed in such a way that should they attempt to free themselves, it would require some considerable contortions. Lurking on an overlooking rooftop, Tim had then very quickly split into three piles the intelligence taken from the battered and bruised men. There was the irrelevant stuff – packs of cigarettes mostly, though two of them had been carrying enough marijuana on their persons to be eligible for possession with intent to distribute if a cop arrested them – the likely irrelevant but potentially useful pile – wallets, cell phones, and watches – and the far smaller actionable intel group. With this particular group, there were only three things in the latter group that drew his attention: a city map with various places circled in red ink but with no indication what was there, and two small electronic devices he took as trackers. The two trackers he dropped into a lead capsule that he planned to leave on the roof for the time being. According to specs, the capsule should prevent any signals from being transmitted, but he had no plans to lead Bane to the Clocktower. After marking the location in the small computer embedded in his left gauntlet, he made a note to come back later with some specialized equipment to examine it further. The map he took a photograph of and promptly forwarded it to Oracle for analysis.

Throughout his entire sorting process, Cassandra watched in complete silence. It was a little weird being unable to see her eyes, though he’d long since grown accustomed to her not making a sound. He glanced up.

“Do you know what I’m doing?” he asked. She shook her head so, in a quiet voice, he explained the concept behind an evidence trail and how it might lead them to new information. He tried very hard to not sound condescending mostly because nothing annoyed him more than learning from someone who did that.

The moment he received Oracle’s calm instruction for all personnel to make all available haste back to the Clocktower, Tim knew that the time had finally come. He took great effort not to hurry through his cataloguing of evidence – even worse than being late would be screwing something up – and, then, decided to wait until the police patrol actually did show up. Once he saw the meat wagon round the corner in reply to the small pulsing beacon, he gave Batgirl a nod and pulled his grapple gun off his belt, grinning at the eagerness with which she did the same.

They reached the Clocktower ten or fifteen minutes later and, as they entered through the number three access hatch, Tim realized they were the last ones in. He refused to wilt under the quick glances Huntress, Green Arrow, and Canary shot his way, though he very quickly realized it wasn’t him they were looking at. It was Batgirl.
And then the bigger surprise: Bruce entered the room, dressed in what looked to be a new Batsuit.

“We have the green light,” he said without preamble. “Special Forces and Gotham SWAT will be assaulting all four of the alternate locations simultaneously.”

“Which means we’ve got the primary,” Arrow guessed.

“The compound is here, just inside the Gotham Rail Yards,” Bruce continued. “Bane is to be considered an alpha level threat.” His eyes zeroed in on Tim. “Do not engage,” he ordered. “I will handle Bane.”

“We will handle him,” Ms. Kyle interjected. Bruce grunted slightly, which made Arrow and Canary smirk, while Richard and Barbara shared a glance. Curiously, Huntress rolled her eyes and shook her head, but just as quickly schooled herself to stillness. Without further interruption, instructions were handed out – Tim wasn’t remotely surprised that he and Cass were basically given reserve duties; they were to patrol the outlying regions, intercept stragglers, and otherwise play a support role – and the meeting broke apart.

In no time at all, Tim found himself crouching in the dark, staring down at an ominous-looking building with Cassandra at his side. For a change, she seemed almost jumpy – he couldn’t see her face, but from her body language, he was almost certain that she was frowning – so he quietly touched her arm. When she glanced at him, he removed his hand before giving her a thumbs up and a grin.

In that moment, chaos erupted.

Copious amounts of gunfire exploded across the compound and their comm-line was suddenly filled with shouted warnings. An explosion in the distance briefly drew Tim’s attention – it was one of the alternate sites, on the other side of the bay going up in the flames – but he quickly returned his eyes to his assigned area of influence. There were men running around, some armed, others not.

And then, he saw Bane.

The terrorist towered over the rest of his men and strode through the compound without any hint of hurry, but it was unmistakably him based on the ridiculous-looking contraption he wore on his face. They were too far away to make out his commands, but men scurried to obey. Tim tensed the moment he realized Bane’s destination: a rail car. The bomb. It had to have the bomb in it. He glanced toward Batgirl.

Cassandra was gone.

He found her a moment later, cutting a swath through armed terrorists just inside their area of influence but there was no doubt she was trying to reach Bane himself. Tim acted without thinking.

“I have eyes on the primary,” he said into his comm-line. “Will need backup immediately – he’s going for the bomb.”

A second later, he was airborne.

Urgent orders not to engage filled the comm-line, but he ignored them. His cape billowed softly behind him as he glided down toward the next jump-off point. He could see Cassandra had broken through the line of hostiles and was now facing down Bane – the terrorist said something to her, something that very obviously infuriated her as she danced forward, fists and feet blurring. Bane met each and every one of her attacks and countered them with brutal, ferocious strikes of his own. He relied more on strength and Tim guessed that that he only needed to connect with one punch to take
Focus on the mission, he reminded himself as he landed lightly on top of the rail car, rolling to more evenly distribute his weight. He fast-walked toward the hatch in the roof and peeked in. There it was. His heart started pounding like a triphammer.

“Oracle,” he whispered into his microphone, “do you have me on visual?”

“I do,” she said tightly. Fury was in her voice, and terror, but she had it under control.

“I have eyes on the package,” Tim murmured. “I could really use a signal jammer right about now.”

“Delivering package,” Green Arrow suddenly announced over the line. “Don’t move, kid.” Tim looked around – Cassandra was still engaged with Bane, though it was clear to Tim she was stalling; from the now hesitant way he was attacking her, it looked to be obvious to Bane as well – and almost jumped when an arrow streaked out of the darkness, embedding itself into the metal of the rail car. The cacophony of the armor-piercing impact was such that no could not hear it and Bane’s head snapped around. He saw Tim and reached for something on his vest.

Bruce fell out of the sky and attacked the man at that very instant.

The arrow’s shaft was wider than normal and, with a slight whir, unfolded. Tim almost laughed out loud when he a tiny signal jammer dropped free into his hand. He didn’t recognize the model – it definitely wasn’t WayneTech – but the principle was the same so he pulled the roof hatch open and dropped in, thumbing the activation button on his device even before he started to fall. The digital display on the bomb flashed abruptly … and then, kept flashing.

“No boom,” Tim gasped. Very carefully, he secured the jammer to the control keypad of the bomb and then leaned back. “Package secure,” he murmured into the comm-line.

And then, he threw up.

With Bane’s fall, the rest of his terror cell collapsed relatively easily. There were a few diehard holdouts, but the rest of the team shut them down without taking any additional casualties and, by the time Commissioner Gordon stormed the compound with his police officers, everything was well in hand. Long before they arrived, Bruce was able to disarm the bomb – Tim watched with absolute fascination the entire time, making notes on his gauntlet computer for future research – and the entire team was out of sight when the cops smashed through the door in response to the jury-rigged Bat signal someone had set up.

Arrow and Canary were the first to head out – it was pretty apparent to Tim that they intended to do some private celebrating elsewhere – and Huntress managed to sneak away before anyone noticed. Ms. Kyle hung back a little longer, though she kept some distance between them and her so it almost appeared that they all just happened to be on the same rooftop without being together. Richard chatted briefly with her, then vanished as well, though whether he chasing after Ms. Bertinelli or going home to Barbara, Tim didn’t know.

“You engaged against my instructions,” Bruce said slowly. His gaze encompassed both Tim and Batgirl.

“If we hadn’t,” Tim replied, “he might have set off that nuke.” Bruce grunted.
“Don’t do it again,” he ordered before looking squared at Cassandra. “*Either* of you.” Tim looked at Batgirl and she looked at him. He shrugged and she returned the gesture (though he wasn’t sure if she was imitating him or agreeing with him.)

“Sure thing,” he said, earning another grunt. This one sounded almost approving, though.

“Get some rest,” Bruce instructed. “Tomorrow, we begin rebuilding Gotham.” He strode away from them and toward Ms. Kyle. Tim grinned.

“Let’s go get something to eat,” he told Cass as he pulled out his grapple gun. “You’ve got to meet Alfred.”

*Hal Jordan brought more than just the New Gods. He brought word of Kal-El, the Superman feared lost forever.*

“He isn’t on Apokalips,” Jordan said. “He’s gone.”

And with those words, he broke the heart of an immortal Amazon.
WASHINGTON, D.C. – Before a crowd of nearly twenty thousand, President Alexander and assembled world leaders officially welcomed the Justice League back to Earth following their extended absence. According to League representatives, the conflict that threatened this planet has been resolved and future extraterrestrial invasions are unlikely to happen.

Attacks by rogue states remains a concern, however, and the League has opened negotiations with the United Nations to install a second space-based facility to increase the Watchtower’s defensive capability. This new station is expected to be placed in Jupiter orbit.

According to LeagueWatch.com, the leading monitor of the superhuman group, it appears that the interstellar conflict has claimed the lives of at least seven members of the League, including Flash, one of the team’s founders. Memorial services for the lost heroes are being scheduled.

No word on Superman’s whereabouts has been released.

Click for more from Daily Planet Online

ALL HE KNEW WAS PAIN.

It was his constant companion, the only thing in his miserable existence that never changed. Hate surrounded him at all times and, in those rare moments when he was alone, he tried so very hard to remember who he had been before the darkness took him. A growing part of him just wanted to give up, to let the pain and misery finally overwhelm him – he harbored no illusions that the agony would stop, but if he allowed himself to embrace it, perhaps it would not be as bad. Perhaps he could even grow to long for it like so many of these other wretches.

“Hello, Kal-El.” The voice was honey-smooth, pleasant enough to listen to, but dripping with malice and self-loathing. She only came here when knew his strength was ebbing, when he was seriously thinking of surrender. It aroused her, though he suspected scratching a carnal itch was not the real reason she came. She desired a child from him, a child she could raise in the dark to cry glory to her terrible master, and somehow, someway, he managed to avoid giving it to her. Perhaps their species were not truly compatible or perhaps – and this thought filled him with terror – she succeeded each time and he knew not. “Oh, my lovely fool,” the woman crooned, tracing her fingers across his scars. “It was not a good day for you, was it?” Kal-El shivered – it had not been a good day. Desaad had been unamused at his continued intransigence, and turned especially creative in his tortures. Though it gave him no relief, Kal-El clung to his self-control in those moments: Desaad’s failing and the resulting punishment the master torturer received were among the only things that kept Kal going.

Another sensation joined the woman’s touch – it was her filthy whips that burned and froze and moved as if alive – and she almost laughed at how hard he tried avoid them. Her lips touched his. And she took what she wanted.

Later, when she was done, she beat him with her vile lashes and left him hanging bloody over the bottomless Pit. She whispered what she considered blasphemies to him, about how he could throw
down her dark master and claim his rightful place as her new lord if only he would accept the power being offered him. Kal-El – if that was his name; he’d forgotten so much since the endless cycle began – refused her each time, stoking her wrath and receiving yet more pain. He hoped it would end soon.

Hope. That was the feeble word he clung to. It meant something though he could not quite recall what. An end to suffering, perhaps? The dissolution of bonds and freedom to fly away from this wretched place? Or perhaps simply oblivion, where his pains were no longer experienced.

“You are a fool, Kryptonian,” the woman hissed. “I offer you this universe, all universes, and you spit in my face. Rot and burn.” She turned away in a fury like she always did, her whips coiling and twisting like angry serpents. Kal-El heard something then, and felt something … a warm wind and the smell of dates. It had come before, when he was alone, and his strength was renewed by the unseen visitor, but this time, something was different. A line of solid light appeared before him, as if someone were cutting a knife through reality itself. He had the vaguest impression of a man with a wide-brimmed hat and cloaked from mortal sight behind the tear, and then …

Sunlight. Pure, golden, absolute. Power and might coursed through him – his mind was still in tatters, but he had the strength to act. He strained against his shackles and they came apart with a squeal of protesting metal. The man was gone, if he’d ever truly been there, but the woman with the whips was turning, surprise and disbelief stamped on her face. She was lightning quick as she raised the computer on her arm that he knew to be his salvation up so she could command it while lashing out with one of her vile weapons. Yes, she was fast.

But in that moment, he was oh so much faster.

He blurred forward, heat boiling from his eyes to sever her arm at the elbow and cauterize the wound in the same instant. The pain he’d returned to her had not yet reached her brain when he flashed to within arm’s reach, backhanding her with one hand while catching the smoking limb with the other. She struck a pillar of the blackest onyx, shattering it with her impact, but Kal-El had already put her from his mind. With two fingers, he tore the living computer from her severed limb and promptly stuck the device to his own arm.

Mother Box. That was what it was called. Its purpose was to serve its master and, though it recognized he was not the woman assigned to it, still, the device obeyed his plea. He felt a flood of empathy from the living computer – it too was abused by these monsters and upon sensing a like mind, it came alive with the same hope that burned through him. A hundred million calculations flickered through his mind in a picosecond, causing him to wince. Away. That was all he wanted. Away from this terrible place forever and there were so many different options…

*Here*, a voice whispered from an eternity away. *Go here.* Mother Box pinged in obedience and accepted the coordinates.

With a titanic boom, a transdimensional portal exploded into existence and Kal-El threw himself forward without care or fear where it would take him. Anywhere but here. He glanced back once, in the moment before the tube collapsed, and he saw the one-armed woman staggering to her feet and staring at him with open horror.

He fell from the sky, suddenly heavy and awkward, and struck a tall column of rock with great force, disintegrating it upon impact. His lungs labored for oxygen as he slammed into the ground, throwing up an immense plume of dirt and shattered stone. Overhead, a strangely colored sun glared down at him, alternating between red and yellow in color. Kal-El rolled onto his back and stared at the sky, still struggling for air. Consciousness flickered and faded.
When it returned, he was elsewhere. A cool breeze washed over his body and, upon opening his eyes, he could see an artificial roof. He wanted to reach up and touch it but his strength abandoned him and he slumped back, exhausted. Movement drew his attention and he jolted in slight surprise at the sight of a young humanoid man, with dark hair and a long face he’d not yet grown into. At his movement, the boy – he could not be more than twenty and even with his fractured memories, Kal-El knew he had not seen that age in a very long time – hurried forward with an elaborate-looking container of something liquid. His words were so much gibberish to Kal-El, even if a word or two seemed strangely familiar, but his thirst overwhelmed his caution and he slurped down the glorious, cool liquid. It was not water … if anything, it tasted like wine, though he did not know exactly what wine was. When he’d drank his fill, he fell back and just breathed. There was no pain.

Tears of joy leaked from his eyes. He wanted to laugh and dance and cry out his defiance to the heavens, but his body was so weak.

“Can you understand me?” The gibberish that fell from the man’s lips suddenly became language and Kal-El jolted in surprise. He turned his eyes on the boy and wet his lips.

“How…?” he croaked out, pausing when he realized he was answering in the same language.

“Merciful Rao, it worked.” The boy stared at the container with wide eyes and then set it reverently aside before turning his attention back to Kal-El. “You are recovering quickly,” he said, “but the wastes were no place to be.”

“Where … where am I?” Kal-El asked. He lifted his hands up and stared at them.

“I forget myself. You are on Daxam, of course, just outside the Broken Wastes on the Eastern continent,” came the prompt reply. The boy smiled. “When the Lady told me I would find you there,” he continued, “I thought her a fool, perhaps even sunblind.” He shook his head. “But there you were, just as she said …” Kal-El frowned.

“Lady?” he repeated, suddenly afraid that he’d been pursued.

“She called herself Minerva,” the young man said before frowning. “It is not a name I’ve heard before, but she claimed she was simply foreign, and she was kind to me.” He shook his head again. “But no matter. You are here, her spirits cleared your mind, and we can attend to other matters as needed.” The boy’s good humor faded. “Your injuries … they were severe. Were you in the hands of the Black Lanterns?” Kal-El gave him a confused look. “They came here once,” the young man said. “And they broke our world. One of our own, an exile if you can believe it, came back and changed the sun so it would burn yellow so we would have power to throw off the Lanterns.” He looked away. “Most of us could not handle it – the noise, the strength, the speed. I fear we all went a little mad.”

“I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about,” Kal-El told him simply. None of it made any sense. Changing a sun so it would burn yellow? Who could even do that? And what were Black Lanterns? Was this boy simply insane?

“Then it is as I feared,” the boy said. “The Lanterns damaged your mind.” He cheered up suddenly. “But tomorrow, the sun will dawn yellow and you will regain your strength.” He started to turn away but Kal-El reached out for him.

“Wait,” he said softly. “Who are you?”
“Lar,” the boy said with a grin. “Lar Gand. Now rest. The sun will dawn yellow tomorrow and you will need your strength.”

Of all the buildings to have survived the great Quake, Selina Kyle hated Blackgate Prison the most.

Her heels clicked loudly upon the tiled floor, drawing all eyes as she followed the guard to the prisoner reception area. She hated this place, hated the oppressive feeling of the walls or the dark, subdued paint, or the coldly cynical expressions she saw on everyone’s faces. Prisoners on work details leered at her or whistled or, in some rare instances, frowned in almost recognition, but it was the guards who creeped her out the most. They watched everyone suspiciously, waiting for any reason to impose their will on them.

She nodded her thanks to her escort as he pushed open the door to the reception area and strode past him. Once inside, she paused for a moment, removing her large sunglasses and letting her eyes flicker across the entire room, instinctively noting potential escape routes and weak points. The moment she realized what she was doing, Selina snapped her attention to the handcuffed man in orange sitting at the solitary table.

“Hello, Bruce,” she said as she took the seat across from him. His face was expressionless but his eyes appeared to be precariously balanced between despair and rage. She secured her sunglasses to her blazer, activating the concealed signal jammer that was disguised as a button in a smooth motion that appeared intentionally innocuous.

“Selina.” He glanced down as she took his hand, momentarily tensing before frowning in confusion when she did not slip him the lockpicks he’d discreetly asked for when she visited him yesterday.

“How are you doing?” she asked with a smile. Bruce’s eyes darted – it was so strange, seeing him in full Bat-mode while not wearing the suit – and he forced himself to relax.

“The warden threatened to put me into solitary again,” he said tightly. “For protection.” His eyes danced with black humor.

“You don’t need protection from these people,” Selina said slowly. His lips quirked upward in a smile.

“Protection for them,” he said. Selina sighed.

“Who did you fight with?” she asked softly.

“Tommy Mangles,” Bruce replied. “He ran the Meatman Crew. Harvey put him away on eighty counts of murder one almost ten years ago.” He frowned at her look. “I defended myself, Selina,” he said tightly. “Mangles came at me with a knife so I put him down.”

“This doesn’t help your case, Bruce,” she pointed out. “Until we find the person who framed you for Ms. Fairchild’s death,” Selina said in a flat voice, “you need to do a better job at maintaining a low profile.” She made no attempt to conceal her disgust at being forced to name the dead reporter – it was bad enough knowing that Bruce had been romantically involved with her at all, even though Selina knew he’d been completely free to do so. Hadn’t she been the one who told him to get lost the last time? She’d walked away from Bruce even before the Quake…

“I need to get out of here,” he started again. She shook her head, glancing slightly at her watch before she spoke. A tiny green light pulsed on the face, informing her that the jammer was activate.

“No.” Selina tightened her hold on his hand. “Richard is ensuring a certain friend of ours is seen
enough in town so no one ties you to him.” Bruce glowered. “The team, the family, is on this, Bruce. Do you trust them to have your back?”

“That isn’t fair,” Bruce growled. Selina smiled at him.

“When have you ever played fair?" He grunted in response, acknowledging her point, and her smile brightened. “Besides,” she said calmly, “half of Gotham thinks I’m Catwoman. If you break out of here, I’m the first person they come after.”

“Emotional blackmail?” Bruce’s mouth twitched again. “I didn’t know you had it in you.”

They chatted about other things for a little while longer until the guards approached, informing them that his time was up. To her amusement, they frisked Bruce again before marching him out and the guard who escorted her out eyed her very cautiously the entire time. Selina hoped that she’d managed to talk at least a little sense into the man.

Alfred was waiting outside Blackgate and he opened the door of the Rolls as she approached, smirking in that way he did every time he managed to one up her. He knew perfectly well how much she hated the trappings of the very rich, so he made a point of becoming even more aristocratic and British when he could. Shooting him a half-hearted glare, she climbed in.

“Home, Madam?” he asked as he took the wheel.


“Master Bruce does have certain inexplicable idiosyncrasies, Madam,” Pennyworth replied. “What has he done now?”

“He wants to break out of Blackgate.” Selina met Alfred’s eyes in the mirror. “I think I may have talked him out of it for the moment, but you know how he is when he gets a stupid idea in his head.”

“I do indeed.” Alfred’s tone was wry and affectionate, which made Selina smile.

“Change of plans,” she said abruptly. “Let’s go visit Barbara.”

Selina was only partially surprised to discover that Babs wasn’t alone, but finding Helena inside Oracle’s lair was a lovely surprise. She still didn’t know what it was about the woman who was not Helena Bertinelli that was so familiar, but Selina had long since given up trying to figure it out. Instead, she simply enjoyed having the younger woman around. Ever since Holly fell out of her life – a husband and new baby were evidently more important than the friends of her misspent youth – Selina had a dearth of female friends who weren’t completely insane and Helena fit in nicely. They even had a lot of the same tastes! How the young woman had discovered Bruce’s secret and inserted herself into the inner circle was still something of a mystery, though from some of his comments, Selina suspected Bruce knew something about Bertinelli that made him want to keep an eye on her. She knew a few things as well, having met the real Helena Bertinelli years before her death, but if Selina let a simple matter like lying about one’s name interfere with friendships, she would have never made it through high school.

“Bruce is going to do something stupid,” she opened with, and that very quickly segued into the actual investigation. Barbara made a few calls and, within thirty minutes, the entire Bat-clan was assembled in the Clocktower to discuss tactics. With the school year over and summer vacation in full swing, Tim was readily available, even though his father had recently woken up from his coma and was now going through rehab.
“You don’t have plans with Ariana?” Helena asked when Tim volunteered to take on something he’d previously tried to shove off onto someone else. In these gatherings, she tended to fade into the background and remain silent, but if Robin was present, she watched him curiously. Selina had noted it and was certain that others had as well, but there was no weird sexual interest in her silent observations. For his part, Tim seemed to think she was still upset at him for piercing her secret identity and then, spending an entire year in her class without once revealing his. He was still quite proud of that.

“We broke up.” Tim scowled briefly, then promptly redirected the conversation to the Wayne investigation. It took several minutes before Selina realized that Richard and Barbara weren’t just humoring him in regards to the detective work, but were, in fact, letting him take the lead. At first, this horrified her – what the hell were they thinking, letting a fifteen year old boy handle something like this? District Attorney Beaudreau was obviously thinking about higher office and sending Bruce Wayne, the Prince of Gotham, to life in prison for murder would go a long way to selling her credentials as hard on crime – but as Tim spoke and pointed out lines of evidence and suggested courses of action, Selina realized something unexpected: he was really good at this.

“I have a friend in the M.E.’s office,” Richard said in response to a question Tim had asked. “Pretty sure I can get a copy of the autopsy report.”

“Or I could just hack their server,” Barbara said coolly. So they were at odds again. That wasn’t a surprise, not with how Richard was hanging around with Helena. Selina shook her head – what happened to the cute little boy she remembered? And wasn’t he dating that alien in the Titans?

“Unnecessary,” Tim said. “I broke in last night and already made a copy.” Cassandra looked up from her primary reader and gave him a frown. “Okay,” he said with a smirk. “Cass and I broke in, and I made a copy.” The still mostly mute Batgirl nodded and went back to laboriously working her way through the book in her lap. It still caused Selina to wince every time she realized how much difficulty the young girl had with speech and reading, but she was amazed at how hard Cassandra drove herself. “There was some bruising on the victim’s neck that was unaccounted for,” Tim continued with a slow frown.

“A nerve strike, maybe?” Richard leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “That doesn’t exonerate Bruce, though. I’ve seen him use a nerve strike before to incapacitate mooks.”

“No, but it does narrow our list of suspects.” Tim chewed at his lip. “I mean, who do we know that can do that sort of thing?” A hand went up. “Besides Cass, of course.”

“I’ve tried,” Richard admitted, “but I never got the hang of it.”

“Me either,” Tim said glancing toward Barbara and Helena, both of whom shook their heads.

“I’d just have used my whip,” Selina remarked. “Thank you, Alfred,” she added as the butler discreetly refilled her coffee cup and then tried to make a stealthy exit.

“We’re missing something,” Tim added darkly. His phone buzzed and he glanced at it, frowning slightly before standing. “My dad has PT and wants me to go with him,” he said. “I’ll check back in with you later,” he added, directing his comments to Richard.

“It’s a little eerie how good he is at this detective stuff, isn’t it?” Richard said several moments after the front door clicked shut. “I’m good and know it but Tim is like …”

“Bruce.” Richard nodded in Selina’s direction, then grinned.
“Well, he did figure out the secret identities of at least three people in this room.” Helena scowled at him but then laughed out loud when Barbara hit him with a pillow.

“He’s not wrong, though,” Selina said. “We’re missing something.”

Cassandra followed her and Alfred out of the Clocktower sometime later and crawled into the back seat of the Rolls where she almost instantly fell asleep. This made Selina smile and, even better, gave her a legitimate excuse to sit up front with Alfred. As he approached Wayne Manor, she turned to him.

“How exactly did this happen?” she wondered with a smile. “I don’t even recall Bruce asking me to move in.”

“His is a devious mind,” Alfred replied. Her phone buzzed before she could reply and she glanced at the ID: Timothy Drake.

“The nerve strike,” he said by way of greeting. “That’s what we were missing.” Selina frowned into the phone.

“I’m sorry?”

“Can you have Cass meet me at Blackgate tonight?” Tim continued in a rush. “I need to talk to Bruce without anyone knowing it.”

“You have a suspect?” Selina felt her hopes climbing.

“I have a theory,” Tim corrected her. “Got to go.” He disconnected without any further comment and Selina gave her phone a sour look. Evidently, young Mister Drake had learned more things from Bruce than just detective work. She felt Alfred’s eyes.

“Tim’s on to something,” she said. “Cass, he needs you at Blackgate tonight.”

“Hokay,” the silent girl said. She sat up.

Unfortunately, it was the exact moment that the paparazzi decided to ambush Bruce Wayne’s car with their cameras.

He felt so much better.

Months had passed since Kal-El made his escape from that dark and terrible world, and with each day that passed, the fear that he would be recaptured fell away. Mother Box was always searching for signs of pursuit, as fearful as he was of being forced to return to that horrible place, and that assuaged a lot of his concerns.

The red pants and trousers that Lar had provided him was identical to the one Gand also wore – it was the uniform of the now mostly defunct Explorer’s Guild – and fit well enough. Kal-El was especially fond of the high boots and was surprised at how easily he adapted to the cape. It was all so familiar yet his memory remained fractured: he could remember faces sometimes, or names, but the pieces just refused to fit together.

Overhead, the sun had entered the evening phase, where it shifted slowly towards red once more. From what Lar had told him, the Daxam star was once a red giant, but an exile from their world named Sodam Yat who had become a mighty Green Lantern did something to it, causing it to fluctuate from a bright yellow to the angry crimson it had been before. During the yellow phase,
most of the locals hid themselves away, unable to adapt to the uncanny abilities and enhanced senses they suddenly found at their fingertips.

“Are you ready, Kal?” Lar called out. He stood straight and ready, looking up into the sky with a longing smile. Kal smirked at his eagerness – they had been out here, in the wilds, for nearly two weeks now, searching for other survivors of the Black Lanterns’ assault so long ago, and Lar was terribly eager to get back to civilization. There was a black-haired young girl there he wanted to woo named Diana …

No. That wasn’t right. Lar’s friend’s name was Dena. Who was Diana? Kal shook his head.

“As ready as I can be,” he replied. He followed Lar to their small airship and climbed in. Like so much else on this planet, it was strangely familiar, as if he had seen its like before, but Kal ignored the strange sensation. “There will be more questions,” he said calmly to his friend.

“And we will answer as we always have.” Lar smiled. “You are Kel Gand, my brother. You were the reason I wanted to join the Explorer Guild.” Kal forced a smile – he owed Lar so much and it was not that great a stretch to almost let himself think their cover story might be true. He and Lar looked just enough alike that they could be brothers and there was no denying that his body reacted to the yellow sunlight just like a Daxamite. Something in him refused to accept it though, knew it wasn’t the truth. Every night, he was haunted by dreams of people he did not know or faces that were so achingly familiar that it pained him. The dark-haired beauty with the fierce countenance and ready smile. The grim man, also with dark hair, and a tiny hint of madness lurking in his eyes. The blonde girl who looked ill at ease. So many people, yet he couldn’t put a single name to a face. He didn’t know any of them … even as he thought he might.

He wanted to scream.

“I sought out Lady Minerva when I was last in the city,” Lar said as their destination came into view. His smile was gone and in its place was a look of concern. “No one knew who I was speaking of. It is as if she never existed.”

“Maybe she didn’t.” Lar gave Kal a frown.

“Then explain the disappearing wine container,” he said. Abruptly, he frowned. “What is that?” he asked, nodding toward a strange shape descending from the sky over the small city that was their destination. Kal focused and inhaled sharply.

“It’s a ship,” he said.

And a moment later, the sky erupted in fire.

Shockwaves from immense explosions slammed into their tiny vessel and threw it hard against the unyielding rock, but Kal reacted entirely on reflex. With one hand, he struck the canopy release button while he reached out and seized Lar with the other. Concentrating, he pushed and they rocketed up and out of the tumbling airship. This was not entirely a surprise – Lar himself had made some fairly prodigious leaps in the past – but Kal’s sudden halt in the sky caused them both to glance around with momentary surprise. There was no time to give it greater consideration, not with the sun already transitioning to the red phase of its strange cycle and the attacking vessel still a threat.

“Throw me!” Lar shouted as he pointed toward the ship. Kal considered for a moment, then obeyed, hurling his friend at the hostile vessel with all his might. He pursued a moment later, streaking up and around the vessel’s defensive fire. Exactly as he hoped, his strange ability to maneuver through the sky attracted notice and he spent long seconds twisting around scarlet streams of fire. Lar struck the
vessel at immense speed and punched through its hull with a boom that echoed across the horizon. Kal laughed out loud before abruptly altering his flight path and accelerating back toward the starship. Heat boiled out of his eyes and he smashed through what he guessed to be the hull. Splinters of jagged metal went spinning through the air as he landed.

“Kryptonian!” one of the occupants screamed. He was tall, with pale yellow skin, over-sized teeth and a curious red circle tattooed upon his tall forehead. From his placement on the bridge, he was likely the commander or at least a leader of some sort. Kal blurred toward him and snatched a double handful of green robe.

“Land now and surrender,” he ordered, his eyes burning and making it difficult to see. “Now!” he roared.

“Obey him!” the leader shrieked and the two other yellow-skinned aliens sprang into action. The ship banked hard, then landed onto the ground just outside the city with a jarring thud.

Lar joined him long minutes later, his explorer guild uniform as ragged and torn as Kal’s. He was dragging another pair of the aliens, though they were thoroughly unconscious. With a casual gesture, he tossed the two into a senseless heap on the ground. The smile he flashed at Kal was a bright one.

“You’ll have to teach me that flying trick,” he said. “I scanned the rest of the ship – I don’t think there are any more of them aboard.”

“Forgive us, Great One,” the leader said in a simpering tone. “We knew not that the Kryptonians claimed this world as their own!”

“This world isn’t mine,” Kal said slowly, hesitantly. Kryptonian? “But you will face their justice.”

The justice of the Daxamites was harsh indeed. Once Kal and Lar turned over the five aliens to the local authorities, a trial was hastily convened. Very little could be gleaned from the aliens – their species appeared to have no name for themselves nor did they call their planet anything but Homeworld; even more frustrating, their culture had somehow evolved without a need for personal names. They were rigidly hierarchal, with the higher castes simply calling those below them Lesser. What little they did learn was not good: the ruling caste of this culture was intending on using the chaos of the recent wars to expand their territory and carve out a new empire. Satisfied that these creatures were guilty of multiple counts of murder for over a thousand had died during the bombardment before he and Lar stopped them, the Daxamite tribunal ordered execution. Sentence was carried out immediately.

And through it all, Kal-El struggled to keep his mouth shut. This was their way, their culture, their laws. What right did he have to interfere?

“And what of you, Kel Gand?” the Tribunal Master asked even before the echo of gunfire had fully faded. “That creature accused you of not being of this world, of being a Kryptonian.” All eyes turned on him and Kal-El tensed. “Is this true?” Kal opened his mouth to lie, to fall back on the cover story that he and Lar had concocted.

But the truth fell from his lips.

“I do not know,” he said simply. “I have no memory of who I am or where I’m from.” He glanced toward Lar, fully intending on claiming that he had deceived the young man and pretended to be his brother, but Gand beat him to the punch.

“It was my idea that he claim to be my brother,” Lar said quickly. “Knowing the atmosphere of fear
“and paranoia as I do.” He held his head high. “And even though it is untrue,” Lar announced in a ringing voice, “I would be honored to call this man ‘Brother.’”

“There is no place for you here,” the Tribunal Master intoned after consulting briefly with his fellows. “Either of you. Henceforth, you are to be considered Exiled and Nameless.”

“What of the alien ship?” Kal asked before the tribunal could be officially ended. “It has no place here either.” The Tribunal Master hesitated, then nodded.

“In gratitude for the service you did for us this day,” he said, “we declare the vessel yours to do with as you will.”

“Now what?” Lar asked as they were urged out of the tribunal hall. The guards gave them solemn nods – there was no anger or fear in them, only appreciation from one warrior to another – and Kal glanced at his friend.

“You didn’t need to speak up like you did,” he said. “You could have stayed here.”

“No.” Lar looked up to the sky. “My place is out there, I think. I’ve never fit in here.”

“Then let’s go to the stars, Brother,” Kal said with a smile. “Let’s see what’s out there waiting for us.”

A cool breeze blew across the grass of Themyscira, carrying with it the smell of the ocean, and Diana breathed it in.

This had been a difficult day. Laying Donna to rest in the proper manner, listening to her mother praise the timelost girl for her lack of flaws (which was a blatant lie), and then speaking herself, telling her sisters how Donna fell. She did not exaggerate the numbers of slain around Donna’s body, or hide how the young girl had been acting on her orders to hold a strategic choke point that, ultimately, proved to be unnecessary. When she was done, the other Amazons nodded and let her pass from the burial grounds.

And here she was, sitting on a warm rock, staring at the marvelous ocean and not caring a whit about the beauty before her.

“Your words were powerful,” her mother said as she drew closer. Hippolyta stared down at her, a grave expression on her face. “No one blames you, Diana. In war, soldiers die.”

“They don’t need to blame me,” Diana replied crossly. “I can do that myself.” She glared at the sun. “I ordered her to take that spaceport and defend the civilians knowing she did not have enough warriors to hold it.” Anger coursed through her and she struggled to keep it contained.

“Was it necessary?” Diana started to reply, but Hippolyta spoke on. “Not in retrospect. At the time. Was taking that site and holding it necessary at the time?”

“Yes.” Diana hung her head. “It was our only line of retreat had the battle turned poorly for us.” She closed her eyes. “And there were children and other noncombatants there.”

“If you were faced with the same situation again,” her mother asked as she inched closer, “would you make the same decision?” Diana was silent for a long moment. She stared quietly at the sea, turning over the scenario in her mind.

“Yes,” she murmured. “Yes, I would.”
“Then you are blameless.” Hippolyta took a seat next to her. “War is never an easy thing,” she said. “When we bury our friends and family and loved ones, we must always ask if the price was too great. Donna believed in this great cause of yours, believed in the necessity of this war.” She reached to tilt Diana’s head up so their eyes could meet. “But more importantly,” her mother said, “she believed in you.”

The tears came slowly and Diana let them fall, even though she knew she would never be able to forgive herself. There had to have been a different way, a better way, to hold that planet and push those vile Lanterns off it. Why was the path to peace so thoroughly paved with blood?

Her mother left shortly before the sun completely vanished, but Diana did not stir from her silent vigil. She sensed others watching over her – Artemis was there, of course, but Phillipus also and Euboea and several others she could not immediately identify – but they did not interrupt her musings so she gave them no thought. Over and over, her mind toyed with the battle that had claimed Donna’s death, and without fail, she could see no way to do anything differently.

“Your cousin is at peace.” The speaker was not someone she immediately recognized and Diana reacted without thinking, throwing herself back and into the air where she instantly summoned her battle harness. On reflex, she’d snatched the Lariat free from where it hung at her side, but the moment her eyes fell on the woman standing there, Diana released it and dropped to one knee.

“Lady Hera,” she greeted, biting back her instinctive demand for information. In all these years, why had the gods not answered her pleas before? When Kal was taken from her … from them, the Olympians had been silent. When she begged for direction or inspiration in those moments she felt so terribly low, they said nothing. And now, because she grieved for a lost sister, they finally deigned to answer.

“I visited her in Elysium,” the mother of the gods said before frowning at Diana. “Stand up, girl. You are no worm to crawl upon your belly.” Diana stood, noting instantly that none of the other Amazons appeared to take notice of her action. The ground underfoot felt wrong as well, like she was standing upon a cloud of air. Her body lacked the weight it normally would.

“This is a dream,” she said. Hera smiled.

“You see through my illusions,” the goddess remarked. “Good. Now tell me the sky is green.” Something caressed Diana’s mind, forced her to speak, and she could no more stop the words tumbling from her lips than she could rip a star from the heavens.

“The sky is not green,” she said. “It is blue.” To her surprise, Hera’s smile widened.

“Most excellent, Child,” she said. “I am well pleased with your progress, no matter the circumstances of your birth.” Diana blinked – what did that mean? – but Hera continued. “You must learn to master the Lariat, Child, not be its slave.” The goddess’ smile dropped away as she held out a hand. With a shimmering flicker, a pair of bracers appeared in her palm. “Despoina wished you to have these,” Hera said and, in that moment, Diana recognized them as Donna’s. But they had been burned with her body and melted to slag. How…? “Hephaestus assures me that you may use them as you use those already in your possession.”

“Thank you, Mistress,” Diana said. She reached for the bracers and felt something cold crawl up her arm. An instant later, Donna’s bracers had merged with her own, extending in length and somehow, incorporating all of the different glyphs and tiny carvings. The strange gold of Donna’s bracers had melded with the silver of Diana’s to form something new entirely and she stared at them with surprise. At the same time, a warm feeling of approval filled her soul and a tangible sense of Donna hovered at the very periphery of her senses. Had she turned her head, Diana would not have been
surprised to see her cousin standing there, grinning at some terrible mischief she’d just accomplished.

“I daresay Hephaestus did not expect that,” Hera said with a soft smile.

“Princess!” Artemis’ voice broke the moment and, with an unexpected jerk, Diana fell back into her body. She sensed Hera fade away and, upon opening her eyes, she found the whole of the tribe arrayed around her. Glancing down, Diana realized she was floating several yards from the edge of the cliff. Light flickered from her bracers and, as she raised them up to examine them, she once again sensed Donna’s presence. Here, in the real world, they had changed as in the dream.

“I am well,” she announced as she slowly drifted back to the ground. “It would seem,” she said with a smile, “that Donna tasked Lady Hera with messenger duties.” Laughter answered the statement – her cousin had been rather imperious at times and already, the remembrances and jokes were resuming. Artemis stepped forward and reached forward to brush aside the tears crawling down Diana’s face.

“She would not want you to grieve thus,” the flame-haired woman said. Diana nodded and accepted her affection without thinking. In their own ways, they had both loved that silly brat. Before the grand celebration of Donna’s life could resume, a distant horn sounded. It rolled up and around the island, but was a familiar sound.

Atlantis had sent an envoy.

“I shall go and meet them, Mother,” Diana said. Hippolyta nodded slightly and Diana tensed to throw herself upward, but Artemis held onto her hand.

“Not alone, Princess,” the Bana-Mighdall warrior said. Diana grinned.

“I hope you have a head for heights,” she replied before seizing her friend’s hand and carrying them both up. Artemis’ grip was tight, possibly tighter than it normally would have been, but in that moment, Diana did not mind.

They touched down on the beach where they found a waiting undersea craft, surfaced but tethered to the small dock. A party waited on the deck of the vessel, encased in ceremonial armor. Each bore a black standard secured to their backs by way of short poles. Diana recognized the leader.

“You are well met, Kaldur’ahm,” she said in fluent Atlantean, “but this is a poor time to come.”

“I do so out of duty to my king and loyalty to my lost friend, Despoina,” Kaldur replied in equally flawless Themyscirian. “Though we are barred from setting foot upon your soil by law,” he continued, “we would greatly wish to lend our voices to Donna’s dirge.” Diana took note of his solemn expression and the obvious grief in his face, and then glanced at the Atlantean craft. It was substantial in size, with a wide, flat surface that could hold all of the crew. A thought occurred to her.

“Artemis,” she said calmly. “Run to my mother and ask her to relocate our celebration of Donna’s life to the beach.” She smiled to Kaldur. “Honored guests have come to pay their respects and it would be a poor thing to refuse them.” Artemis turned and raced away. Normally, Diana would have watched go – she had always enjoyed watching Artemis fly over the ground – but today, she kept her eyes on Kaldur. “There will be dancing and feasting,” she said. “As you say, the law cannot allow you or any of your men to set foot on Themyscira…” Kaldur was, she realized, the only male present. His entire crew appeared to be made up of women. He nodded to her the instant he saw she recognized his tactful action and her heart went out to him once more. It would be a lonely vigil for him, standing there on the deck of his ship while his crew were free to mingle. She made a mental note to spend time here with him and would encourage the more open-minded of her tribe to include
him as much as possible.

“Captain,” he said, shifting his head only slightly, “assemble the crew to render honors.”

“Thank you,” Diana said.

“The queen attends,” Artemis announced when she reappeared a little bit later. More Amazons followed – soldiers mostly at first, though there were more than enough potters and farmers to make it clear that this was no attack force – and then, Hippolyta herself, flanked by Phillipus as always. At a whispered command from the ship’s captain, the Atlanteans rendered their salute.

“We come in peace to honor a valued warrior,” the captain declared before going to one knee and offering her ceremonial weapon, hilt first. Her entire crew did the same – Kaldur too, from where he stood on the deck of the ship – and they waited in silence.

“You are well met this day,” Hippolyta declared, “and I greet you … all of you as allies.” Diana’s eyebrows climbed at the singling out of Kaldur, but she held her tongue. “Sheathe your blades and join us as we celebrate a most worthy life taken too early.”

“So that is the one Donna was mooning over,” Artemis murmured a short time later as they reclined on the beach, eating and sipping wine. She was eying Kaldur as he stood on the deck of the Atlantean ship, arms locked at his back and his spine erect. Even with the coral armor, he could have been a statue carved from obsidian, but Diana was pleased to see at least a few of her sisters had approached and engaged him in conversation. She recalled him as an unfailingly polite young man utterly conscious of how his actions reflected upon Atlantis. Donna had regaled her with many stories about how wonderful the young Atlantean was, and how unfortunate it was that he could never be Arthur’s heir. Grief once more threatened to push her down and Diana scrambled to her feet.

“Dance with me,” she ordered. It came out more as a plea but Artemis smiled and nodded.

And for a little while, Diana was able to forget how heavy her heart was.

Prison camp Alba loomed large before them.

Kal-El glanced toward Lar – his Daxamite friend flashed a tight smile in response – and together, they streaked ahead, accelerating well past the speed of sound and leaving the rebel gunships behind. As the better flier of the two, Kal took point and let the heat bubbling out of his eyes rake across the defensive perimeter of the Dominator prison. He struck the invisible force barrier less than a heartbeat later and the force of this collision ruptured thousands of projection nodes. Lar struck almost a full second later, collapsing the entire network with his impact.

“Go for the guns!” he bellowed before diving toward the central compound of the prison camp. Kal let himself consider the wisdom of letting his friend smash ahead – thanks to a month-long visit to a planet orbiting a yellow star (mostly to conduct unexpected repairs on their captured starship), his power levels was quite substantial and he’d taken to flying a lot better than Kal expected – and then obeyed. He arced downward, then quickly leveled out as he flashed over the camp’s defensive wall, blasting through the massive cannon emplacements or frying their focusing lenses so they could not fire.

He heard the assault ships land and the commando teams deploy – Lustig was leading a pretty effective attack, but the Dominator defenders weren’t giving ground easily – and, the moment he tore through the last of the guns, he blurred toward the hottest fighting. Energy blasts peppered the
crimson tunic he wore, but Kal ignored the sharp stings as he darted forward, smashing a fist through one of the heavier weapons emplacements and turning another to ash with his heat vision. A shout went up – Shamarr and her team of genetically modified humans had arrived like the proverbial cavalry – and Kal pushed against the planetary gravity, soaring up once more into the sky. He hovered there for a second, straining his senses for further danger, and then dove toward the hole Lar had already made.

As before, when he and Lar stumbled upon the first of these horrific camps, he fought back a terrible rage at the sight before him. A vast tank dominated the massive room, connected to the various computers and medical equipment by things that looked more like branches than cables. A viscous green liquid filled the tank, making it hard to see exactly it was that was inside, but a sweep of the contents with his enhanced vision confirmed his worst thoughts.

Humans. These monsters were experimenting on humans.

Shamarr was one of their more successful subjects and she’d used her cryokinesis to make an escape. She’d long since given up on going back to her homeworld – Earth, it was called, and the name was tantalizingly familiar to Kal-El for some reason – and had joined up with the rebels to dish out as much pain to her former captors as she could manage. Thus far, Kal hadn’t interacted with her much – Lar did most of the talking principally because he already knew this Interlac language that everybody seemed to use; sadly, the wine that had allowed Kal to communicate with the Daxamites hadn’t seemed to help much with other languages – but she looked at him funny from time to time, as if she wanted to ask him something.

“How’s the extraction coming?” Kal asked as he touched down next to Lar. The younger man grimaced – neither of them had shaved in the last several weeks and the beard growing in on Lar lent him an ominous aspect.

“Difficult,” came his tight response. Kal nodded – each of the subjects who could be extracted from the tank without threatening their lives was, but Lar had to operate slowly. Each subject required individual attention and more than a few could not be removed from this mutagenic compound without instantly dying. One of the Dominator rebels, a scientist who they’d rescued from a different prison camp weeks earlier, had instructed them to terminate any of those poor unfortunates and Lar stared at the screen with a conflicted expression.

“Follow your gut,” Kal told him. From the look he received, the intent behind the expression had not translated to Daxamite well. “Do what your instincts tell you, Brother,” Kal said. Lar nodded.

And moved on to the next subject without terminating this one.

The freed subjects had a wide range of enhanced abilities and every single one of them pledged to stand with the rebels against the Dominators’ rule. As before, more than a few looked at Kal oddly, whispering among themselves about how much he looked like some hero they called Superman. To his surprise, he could understand these newly empowered humans perfectly while Lar looked on in confusion and, for a change, the circumstances were turned on their head.

“I was captured by the Khunds when they hit Earth,” was the most common explanation for how these shell-shocked men and women found themselves here, on the homeworld of these damned Dominators.

“We need to accelerate our time table,” Kal told Lar a little while later. They were alone in the large conference room for the moment. “Their ruling caste isn’t going to let us keep liberating these camps without throwing something really heavy at us.”
“Agreed.” Lar smirked. “I’ve been wondering when I should mention it, but I think we need to hit someplace really big. Maybe even their capital.” His smile dropped away. “Have you noticed how the humans look at you, Kal?”

“I have.” Kal-El slumped back against the wall. “And I understand their language too.”

“So, Superman.” Lar snickered. “It’s a little pretentious, isn’t it?” Kal smirked.

“Coming from the guy that Shamarra is calling Valor,” he said, “that means exactly nothing.” He laughed at the sheepish expression that flashed across his friend’s face. “It doesn’t matter if I’m who they think I am,” he said. “I’m not budging from this rock until we stop these lunatics from experimenting on more helpless people.”

“That could take a while,” Lar said. “556 thinks the ruling caste are working with someone or something else called the Construct.” He crossed his arms. “Strange name, though. I think it’s an organization or guild, not a single entity.”

“A matter for another time,” Kal said. He flashed a smile. “I’m going into orbit to get a recharge.”

“Hold on,” Lar said as he grabbed his cape. “I could do with one myself.”

Once in orbit, Kal-El instantly felt the effect of the solar radiation on his body. The exhaustion that had been riding his shoulders for the last several days vanished in an instant and he felt his muscles quiver with newfound strength. It wasn’t all good, though. The old scars on his back and torso ached like he was bathing in acid. He grimaced and concentrated instead on the warmth of the sun.

And when his lungs burned from lack of oxygen, he let himself fall back toward the ugly planet below.

There was still much work to do.
Year Fourteen: Scions

Announcement of Wayne Daughter Sends Stocks Tumbling

Published March 29, 2026 / Vicky Vale

GOTHAM CITY, IL – Ending rumors and speculation that has been going on for months, Bruce Wayne confirmed the existence of a previously unknown daughter, Cassandra, and asked that she be left alone until she is ready to meet with the public.

Wayne, 38, only recently returned to the public spotlight following his arrest for the murder of Vesper Fairchild last year. All charges were dropped and the district attorney offered a formal apology when evidence was uncovered by investigators that Wayne was being framed by the terrorist group the United States government says was responsible for the artificially generated earthquake two years ago. In the wake of the destruction, Wayne became the public face for reconstruction efforts.

The identity of Cassandra Wayne’s mother remains unclear.

Stocks for WayneTech closed sharply down.

Click for more from Gotham Post Online

DODGING AN INTENT MEDIA WAS ALMOST BEYOND EVEN HIS TALENTS.

Rather than brave the front entrance or even the employee parking, Bruce ducked out of the WayneTech building by way of a little used side entrance that could only be accessed by cutting through one of the break rooms on the ground floor. He was greeted by a cloud of noxious fumes as he opened the door and the five or six smokers clustered around the door stared at him with wide, stunned eyes. Giving them all a cheery grin and a nod, he set off on foot through the alleyway, flipping up his coat’s collar to ward off the slight chill in the air.

“I should have just bought that damned helicopter,” he muttered to himself when caught sight of a pair of especially industrious paparazzi lurking at the end of the alley, clearly hoping to ambush anyone who might be trying to sneak out. Jamming his hands into his pockets, he felt around for the pulse disruptor – it was a new toy that would, according to Lucius, completely short out cameras within a range of five meters – and continued his steady stride toward the alley mouth.

“Mister Wayne!” one of the photographers shouted as the two rushed forward, raising their very expensive cameras up to snap a picture, and with a feral smile, Bruce flicked the disruptor’s power switch.

With a sharp crack, both men’s cameras malfunctioned in a fierce spray of sparks. Crying out in surprise, they thrust the smoking electronic paperweights away – one of the men even appeared to have been burned a little. It wasn’t anything serious and would probably be healed by the end of the week, but the fierce scowl on his face caused Bruce to silently hope he hadn’t just created another stupid rogue. His expression darkened at the thought; surely the Photographer was no worse than that idiot Ventriloquist, right?

He found an idling cab several steps beyond the alley and he slid into the back before the two paparazzi were able to flag down more of their ilk. The driver glanced up with a frown – from the
looks of it, he’d been Off Duty – but Bruce thrust a pair of bills at the man.

“I’ll pay you two hundred dollars on top of the fare if you avoid those damned photographers,” he said.

“You got it, Mister Wayne,” the driver said. Tires squealed as the cab lunged forward, darting into traffic amidst a cacophony of horns and curses. With expert precision, the driver merged into another lane, then took a hard left even before the paparazzi could point him out. He accelerated through a yellow light, narrowly missed a bike messenger (who didn’t even react to the near collision beyond throwing a rude gesture) and took another left. Bruce glanced back and, in admiration of the man’s skill, peeled another hundred out of his wallet.

“Clocktower Apartments, please,” he said as he handed the money, all three hundred dollars of it, to the man. Leaning back, he watched with considerable approval how the driver – Moses Shrevnitz, according to the license secured to the passenger sun visor – avoided the mostly densely congested streets while, at the same time, ensuring he wasn’t taking a route that would add time (and thus, money) to the trip. When they pulled up to the Clocktower Apartments, Bruce slid a business card out of his wallet. “If you’re interested in a job as a driver,” he said, “give me a call.” He offered the card. “I’ll triple your current salary.” The man blinked.

“So are you serious?” he asked. Bruce nodded.

“I’m always on the look for talent,” he replied. “You know the streets of Gotham, you got us here in record time, and you avoided an easy payday from those punks.” He opened the door. “Give me a call if you’re interested, Mister Shrevnitz.”

The decision to offer the man a job wasn’t entirely spontaneous – he’d had been discreetly scouting replacement drivers for a while now, ever since Alfred broke his foot last month. As much as he hated to admit it, Alfred was getting on in years – he’d turn seventy next year – and more than anything else, Bruce wanted his old friend to be able to enjoy his twilight years, not spend them catering to a bunch of maladjusted vigilantes who beat up criminals for kicks. Admittedly, Alfred had made no noises about retirement and probably wouldn’t, but with Selina moving into the manor and now Cassandra, his workload was increasing. Having someone to ferry Bruce around during work hours would free up some of Alfred’s time. Hell, maybe he could even convince the old man to take a damned vacation.

His phone buzzed as he stepped into the elevator that would take him to the penthouse and Barbara’s loft. Glancing at it, Bruce sighed the moment he saw it was from Ollie. Without bothering to read the message, he crammed the phone back into his pocket and scowled. Ever since the carefully arranged leak regarding Cassandra’s parentage, Queen had been deluging him with joke texts, ranging from guessing the name of the mother to asking what he wanted for Father’s Day. Despite his decidedly less than friendly thoughts toward Queen, Bruce’s lip curled up slightly: if Oliver bought the story about Cassandra, then maybe this hurriedly cobbled together plan would work after all. They’d needed a cover story for why she was so often on Manor grounds – he made a mental note to review the security measures again when he got home – and having her be a newly discovered daughter went over a lot better with the public than a maid or something. Plus, it killed the darker rumors, that she was an underage lover.

Barbara wasn’t home when he knocked on the door, so he let himself in with his key, disarmed the security system, and made his way to her computer system. He knew her well enough to suspect there was a secondary alarm system active that warned her someone had breached her sanctum and was probably sending her video even now.

After minimizing her active windows – he didn’t want to interrupt anything she might be working on
he opened up a connection to the Cave computers and quickly scanned through the compiled police reports for the day in an attempt to see if anything was out of the ordinary. Once that was complete, he checked the various camera feeds he had active – Joker’s cell, Harvey’s, Bane’s and then finally, David Cain’s cell in Blackgate. Bruce scowled at the image of the man who was, at the moment, reading. This sonovabitch had murdered Vesper and then tried to frame Bruce for it. If Cain had not already been excommunicated from the League of Shadows, it would have been logical to think they were responsible (which the Gotham DA had done), but the evidence Bruce possessed told a different story.

It pointed to the White House.

With a flick of his wrist, Bruce killed the active camera connection and brought up another screen, this one detailing everything he knew about President Kevin Gene Alexander. A populist Democrat who had seriously toyed with changing parties during his time in the Senate, he’d been tapped a VP candidate for the late Rebecca Scott in order to appease an electorate who thought her too liberal, and then, when she died of an unexpected coronary in her final year of her first term, he’d assumed the office. When he ran the following year, his mishandling of the entire ‘no man’s land’ fiasco had been expertly blamed on circumstances out of his control. America bought it and he’d swept back into power with the largest landslide since Ronald Reagan. Even though he was only midway through his first term, his soaring popularity and the bipartisan support for most of his policies almost seemed to make him a shoo-in for re-election.

And though he had little proof at the moment, Bruce believed that he was none other than Lex Luthor, now inhabiting a cloned body of the real Kevin G. Alexander.

At the moment, there was very little he could do against the man and he’d kept his suspicions to himself, especially in the wake of Alexander’s quite public embracing of the Justice League. He was still investigating, of course, and Bruce knew that if this was Luthor like he feared, the man’s ego would eventually force him to start making missteps. Hiring Cain to frame him was the first of these … unless the money originated from someone else in the White House. Bruce wasn’t sure which scenario bothered him the most.

He was still reviewing some of his active case files – Riddler was still toeing the line and acting like he actually was reformed, but Cobblepot was once again trying to discreetly take over the prostitution racket in the East End; someone would need to have a word or two with him over that – when he heard Barbara return. Bruce said nothing as she navigated her chair around the obstacle course that her apartment had turned into since Richard moved in but he felt the intensity of her glare.

“Is there a reason you’re screwing around with my system?” she demanded.

“Couldn’t get to the manor,” Bruce replied. “There’s a small army of photographers camped outside the front gate.”

“You should turn a firehouse on them,” Barbara muttered. He wasn’t sure why she disliked paparazzi as much as she did, but the disgust in her voice drew his eyes. “Or get a dog.”

“Selina would murder me in my sleep if I got a dog,” he pointed out. He stared at her for a moment, taking in all of the little tics and expressions. “Something wrong?”

“Richard was accepted into the police academy,” she said. “He starts in two weeks.” Bruce grunted. He still wasn’t sure what to think about this sudden desire to entire law enforcement on his adopted son’s part, but, at Alfred’s insistence (and muttered threats of cold oatmeal and dry pickleloaf if he didn’t obey), he’d supported Richard every step of the way. That had been his intent all along, but still, it was always better to keep Alfred happy.
“I’m sure he will excel,” Bruce stated in what he hoped was a diplomatic, non-confrontational tone.

“Of course he will,” Barbara snapped. “That’s not the point!” She wheeled away, leaving him alone in front of the computer. He sighed and made a mental note to ask Selina if she could talk to Barbara. Maybe she would have some idea what was going on here.

It took a considerable amount of subterfuge to reach the manor without being noticed – he briefly considered waiting until nightfall and then using one of the motorcycles he had stored around the city to enter via the Cave, but discarded the notion when he realized it would raise more questions – and by the time he closed the front door, he was exhausted. Glancing at his watch, he grimaced at the time and strode through the main living area, frowning at one of the damned cats Selina had brought with her into the house. There was no sign of her or Alfred, but he thought he heard them talking in the kitchen. That was just as well – he had an appointment to keep in the Cave.

By the time he’d donned his suit, everyone was present except Selina who still insisted she was not part of his ‘Bat-Cult,’ even though pretty much everyone in Gotham knew Catwoman was on the side of the angels these days. Tim and Cass were on the training mats, with the latter showing the former a particularly tricky throw, and Bruce frowned slightly at the latest modifications Tim had made to the Robin suit. Gone was the hood and in its place was a cowl virtually identical to the one that Bruce used, only without the horns. He understood the reasoning behind it – Tim had been sidelined for nearly two weeks thanks to a cold back in December and he very properly blamed the lack of proper headgear – but it was a little disconcerting to be see Robin’s strange similarity to Batman.

Richard was at the computer for a change and, at a glance, Bruce could tell he was instant-messaging with West, who had formally adopted the Flash uniform and name following Barry’s death. Shaking his head in frustration, Bruce wondered if he should remotely kill the connection – how many times had he told Richard not to use the computers in the Cave for this sort of thing? Yes, his servers could (and did) fool the NSA into thinking that he was typing from the manor, but it was stupid to tempt fate like this.

As was usual, Helena hung back from everyone, watching them with those eyes that were unmistakably Selina’s. She still didn’t know that he was aware of her secret and he sincerely didn’t know whether he would ever tell her. If he was honest, her very existence had terribly complicated his relationship with Selina for a very long time and it was only after he came close to losing everything thanks to Bane that he was able to get over that psychological hurdle.

“Now that everyone’s here,” he said loudly, drawing all eyes, “we can get started.”

Boston had become a nightmare.

The great skyscrapers were now monuments of solid rock that climbed into the night, looming over the denizens that crawled through the merciless underbrush that had torn through the concrete roads. Great winged beasts shrieked their rage as they hunted, fought and mated there in the sky. The air was filled with screams – of terror, of fury, of madness – as those people who were not instantly transformed into some legendary creature responded to the transformative spells in other ways.

And through it all, a woman stood on air, looking down upon her work and laughing with malicious glee.

Once, she had been Circe, the immortal sorceress of Colchis who had been born under a different name, but that woman was dead now, having been slain unexpectedly in a fierce battle with her most hated rival, Diana, princess of Themyscira. It had not been Diana’s intent to slay her but rather, the
well-aimed missile of a highly trained police sniper that stole Circe’s life. In her desperation to avoid losing her soul to Hecate upon her death, Circe had made other, darker bargains, and in doing so, sealed her fate.

The demon that had taken her form laughed again, a terrible, malicious sound that sounded even worse coming from such a beautiful face, and it capered in the sky, dancing in delight over having been freed from its eternal captivity. Flexing Circe’s fingers, it burned away yet more of her power, transforming another building into a great, black edifice of onyx. It turned away, intent on finding more mischief to invoke, and in that moment, Diana struck.

She arrowed up, through the tangled mess of trees and vines. Hephaestus’ shield shimmered around her body, knocking aside grasping claws and poisoned thorns, and she accelerated sharply, curling around one of the flying beasts that had once been a man. She made no sound, raised no alarm, shouted no battle cry, and her rapid approach caught the demon entirely off guard. It barely had time to throw up a defensive magical shield before she reached it, and the impact of their collision threw them both spinning through the clouds.

“Kara!” Diana shouted as she righted herself and darted back toward the demon. “Stand clear of Circe!” She had no concerns about Kara not hearing her even though the Kryptonian girl was on the other side of Boston, but she worried at her complete lack of resistance to magic. Kal, rest his soul, had been the same, no matter his great strengths. “Send the Captain!” Diana added as she bashed away at the magical shield, her blows sending sparks dancing through the night.

“You cannot have her!” the demon snarled through Circe’s lips. “She is mine now!”

Diana did not bother responding as she reached for her Lariat. It slithered into her hand, the sharp stab of pure Truth so familiar now that she barely noticed it, and to her silent delight, the demon looking through Circe’s eyes panicked. It sent a blizzard of burning ice at her, and then a torrent of freezing fire, but Diana caught the spells upon Hephaestus’ shield and batted them away. Doing so caused just enough of a delay that the demon managed to put a bit of distance between them, but it was so focused on her, so intent on avoiding the pure Truth of the Lariat that it failed to notice the streak of crimson and gold approaching from behind.

Captain Marvel hit the demon wearing Circe’s body with a titanic boom, his sheer speed and bulk shattering her protective weaves. Before it could react, he grabbed her, wrapping both arms and legs around her in an unexpectedly intimate-looking hold. The demon twisted and struggled. Billy smiled.

“Hi, there,” he said brightly before rolling onto his back so they were both looking up but with the captain underneath her. “Shazam!”

Lightning streaked downward, stabbing into Circe’s body with agonizing force. The demon screamed – its howl was high-pitched, more of a squeal than anything else – and the flying beasts that had been men did the same before plunging toward the ground at killing velocities. Diana ignored them as she advanced toward the smoking form of Circe, now mostly limp in Captain Marvel’s grasp, but she was aware of a white and red blur behind her as Kara rescued the falling victims. The Lariat coiled forward, wrapping around Circe’s wrists and binding them together. Almost instantly, the demon wearing her skin began convulsing.

“Release her, demon,” Diana ordered. “Release her and undo the damage you have wrought.”

Lightning danced around Circe’s body as the creature looking through her eyes struggled against Diana’s command and Captain Marvel tightened his grip. Gone was his ready smile and in its place was a cautious awareness of how much danger faced them at that moment – should the demon resist the Lariat’s magicks beyond Circe’s ability to withstand them, there existed the possibility of a
violent expulsion of all available energy at the witch’s disposal. He floated higher, still clutching the
woman with muscles that could rend steel without difficulty, and Diana followed suit.

“You have no power here,” she said sharply, mentally commanding the Lariat to tighten its coils. Her
words had a sharp edge to them, as if they were a weapon unto themselves, and with each utterance,
she could see the demon recoil. “Release her,” Diana ordered, “and return all as it was!”

“Never,” the beast wearing the witch’s body hissed, dark smoke curling out of her nostrils and
mouth. “She made the bargain…”

“Begone, beast,” Diana snapped. Her eyes met Captain Marvel’s and she gave him nod. “I command
it!”

“Shazam!” the Captain bellowed at the same time. Again, lightning flashed down out of the dark
sky, piercing Circe’s body and sending electricity crawling up the Lariat to flicker around Diana’s
hands. She had braced herself for a mighty shock, but the Lariat must have grounded most of the
charge because she felt only a wash of mild warmth that did little more than tickle. For the demon
wearing Circe, though, the dual effect of the Lariat’s power and the Captain’s lightning proved to be
too much. A solid column of black smoke tore from the witch’s mouth as the creature abandoned the
meat. It tried to escape, tried to race away into the night, but somehow, impossibly, the Lariat
released Circe and darted up to coil around the insubstantial mass of shadow. Diana felt power pulse
through the golden strands of rope.

“This world is not for you,” she murmured. “Begone.”

As if in response, the Lariat’s endless coils tightened – an inhuman wail echoed over the transformed
city as the demon’s very essence was wreathed in pure Truth – and, with a fierce flash, the creature
was utterly destroyed. Light flared out, burning away the clouds and washing away the magical
changes to Boston. Buildings returned to their previous state, beasts that had once been men or
women returned to their natural shape once more, and the sinister foliage that had torn through the
concrete fell away. Shattered stone melded back together, stitching itself together once more.

“Wow,” Captain Marvel murmured. He relaxed his grip on Circe’s limp body and began to slowly
float earthward.

“Wow indeed,” Kara said as she joined them in a flash of white. She glanced very briefly at the
witch in Marvel’s arms and frowned. Diana followed the line of her gaze and instantly realized what
concerned the young woman.

Circe was breathing.

It was a ragged, labored sound, but when the purple-haired witch dragged her eyes open, Diana
realized that she was not surprised. Of course Circe had managed to find another loophole. She was
about to comment on this very thing when the witch hacked out a wet cough.

“Thank you,” she whispered, blood leaking from her lips. Diana’s eyes widened – Circe wasn’t
healing! They touched down in the middle of the Boston Commons and Marvel lowered the witch to
the grass; his hands came away bloody and he gave both Diana and Kara a surprised look.

“I’ll get a med-kit,” Kara said, blurring away almost before the words left her mouth. Circe tried to
laugh but it turned into a cough.

“So this is how it ends,” the witch said with a pained hiss. “I don’t want to die,” she whined.

“Hold on,” Diana ordered. She put pressure on the wound steadily pumping out the witch’s
lifeblood. It stained the earth around her black.

“I can’t.” Circe’s eyes swam out of focus. “Oh,” she said in a surprised voice. “I see…”

And thus, the woman who had claimed the name Circe from another and had been immortal sorceress of Colchis who long ago abandoned her family and slew her brother to aid a man seeking a golden fleece, passed from this world for the last time. None would grieve her passing.

“I will attend to her body,” Diana said, straightening from the crouch. She glanced around. “See to the city and assist however you can.”

“On it, ma’am,” the Captain said. He sprang up into the sky and vanished. Less than a heartbeat later, Kara returned in a blur, an EMT crash kit slung over her shoulder. She glanced down at the corpse, then at Diana before grimacing slightly.

“We’ll call for League backup if we need it,” Kara said before she too vanished into the city. It had been most fortunate that the two had been in Boston when a less than fully in control Circe went on her rampage – had she been completely alone, Diana was unsure whether she would have been capable of resolving the crisis on her own.

She hesitated only for a moment before kneeling and scooping up the body of her most hated foe. As Diana climbed into the night, she wondered at the strange sense of loss and failure that swam in her stomach. Circe had been a murderer and monster, a slayer of children and innocents whose passing was long overdue. And yet, in her last years, Circe had been helpful more often than she had not, warning Diana of events in the arcane world that even Fate and Zatanna remained oblivious to. It truly seemed as though she had seen something so dark and terrible that it had shifted her entire worldview, though she remained tight-lipped about whatever had so terrified her. Tonight had not truly been her fault – even before the police sniper’s round struck home, Diana had seen the struggle against madness in the witch’s eyes. So with that in mind, she called upon Hephaestus’ gift once more, and accelerated into the darkness to do her duty.

She touched down almost an hour later on a rocky deserted coast in Georgia. Once, centuries ago, this place had been called Colchis, and it seemed only right to return the dead princess to her ancestral home.

“Great Hecate,” Diana whispered once she placed the corpse on the ground. “I come to you as a supplicant bearing the body of one of your chosen heralds.” Wind twisted around them, and fire, and smoke. Diana could sense a watchful presence. “In madness, she died, but in your wisdom, perchance you might see her home one final time.” The fire flared up and, to Diana’s slight surprise, the rocky soil crawled up and around the body of the dead witch. It vanished beneath the dirt and Diana bowed her head. “Thank you, great mistress,” she murmured.

She was airborne once again in moments, with Boston as her destination. There would no doubt still be much work to be done.

It was a strange feeling, standing in her father’s Cave and watching him as he spoke, and Helena could not help but feel an immense rush of homesickness.

She wasn’t sure when she’d last thought of her world – between the chaos of her recent life, she’d just been too damned busy – and in moments like this, when the similarities between this dimension and her own were nearly as striking as the differences, she found herself wondering if she would go back if given the opportunity. Here, on this world, she’d created a new life for herself, one that was not immediately judged by the identity of her parents, and God help her, she loved it. Teaching kids
wasn’t just a hobby to her, it was a calling almost as intense as her need to don the cape and cowl. One day, she knew that she would be forced to decide between the two – hopefully not soon – but, right now, she’d somehow managed to find a nice equilibrium.

“I’ve been reviewing current patrol patterns,” Bruce said as he walked toward where Dick sat. At his sharp gesture, Richard rose and let him take the chair. “What I’ve noticed is quite interesting.” He pulled up a city map on the big monitor. “Cassandra and Tim have concentrated their attention on Chinatown, the Diamond District and Old Gotham for the last two months and there has been a substantial decline in low-level street crime in all three neighborhoods.”

“Teacher’s pet,” Richard said with a smirk as he nudged Tim with his elbow.

The two youngest members of the Bat-clan automatically shifted closer together apparently without even realizing it, and for the thousandth time, Helena found herself watching them. She wasn’t able to help herself – they fascinated her in every way imaginable. On her world, she’d never even heard of either one of them … though in retrospect, that dimension’s Cass might very well be the League of Shadow’s premier assassin who was known only as the Ghost. Here, though, they were simply an amazing team. Tim almost always paired up with Cass when he patrolled these days and, in the rare instances when one of them was with Bruce, it was generally the case that the other was too. In the two years since Cass had joined them, she and Tim had even developed their own kind of shorthand allowing them communicate in single words or just looks, and their respective fighting styles had further evolved into something simply beautiful to behold when they combined efforts. Helena wasn’t remotely surprised that the crime rates had dropped in their patrol sector; she’d even put money that the thugs in those neighborhoods were more afraid of Robin and Batgirl than they were the big Bat himself.

“There’s still a lot of work to do,” Tim said as he elbowed Dick right back. “Reconstruction is bringing in a lot of new troublemakers.”

“Drugs,” Cass said with a frown and Tim nodded.

“We’ve also been looking into a new gang of dealers operating out of Chinatown,” he said. “It’s something new, something really addictive and-”

“That’s not what I wanted to discuss,” Bruce interrupted. “I’m considering making these neighborhood assignments permanent.” That definitely caught Richard by surprise, though he wiped it off his face before Tim could look his way. Helena met his gaze and, by mutual decision, they broke eye contact and pretended it had never happened. They were good at that, had been for a while, and as far as she was concerned, they would stay like that. She still wasn’t sure why the hell she’d thought it was a good idea to sleep with him back during that post-Quake mess and wondered if she could plead temporary insanity. After all, he was still hung up on Barbara and that alien princess, and she could finally admit, if only to herself, that she’d been nursing a serious thing for the Dick Grayson of her world long before she crossed over into this world with Karen. He’d been a little older than her and so unbelievably hot that when she met this version, she almost forgotten that she wasn’t in her world.

“Nightwing and Huntress will take Burnley and Otisburg,” Bruce continued, the suggestion causing Helena to wince at the thought of working around Dick for extended periods of time, “while I handle the East End and rotate around the city as needed.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Dick asked. Again, he glanced in Helena’s direction and she thought she saw the same trepidation about working together in his eyes. “I’ll be starting the police academy in a couple of weeks and Helena has school…”
“By concentrating our efforts over a smaller area,” Bruce said, “I believe that we’ll be more effective in the long run.” He glanced around to gauge everyone’s reactions and Helena gave him a very slight nod. “If this doesn’t work, we’ll return to the old methods.”

“Okay.” Richard grinned. “Think maybe we can recruit Mrs. Wayne?” Bruce gave him a scowl – the subject of marriage constantly came up these days, almost always by Dick, and every time it did, the answer the same: mind your own damned business. For her part, Helena actually agreed with him, though she’d be the first to admit that she wasn’t exactly an unbiased party.

“You do realize that Selina is going to kill you, right?” Tim asked with a head shake.

“With her whip!” Dick laughed. “Oh, don’t give me that look, Bruce. You’re the nut who shackled up with the dominatrix with the cat fetish.”

“Tim, Cassandra,” Bruce said, totally ignored Grayson who snickered at the intentional snub, “I’d like to discuss this drug operation you mentioned.” Effectively dismissed, Helena backed away and ghosted toward the exercise mats. She could still hear the conversation going on – mostly between Bruce and Tim with Cass interjecting on occasion with a one or two word remark – but paid only partial attention to it as she began stretching. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Dick head upstairs; knowing him, he was going to track down Selina and repeat every one of his comments to her, which would either result in her laughing at him or throwing something large and heavy. They had a wonderfully strange relationship here, so different from the strained step-mother and adopted son one she knew.

As she warmed up, she found herself watching Bruce, Cass and Tim once again. All three were remarkably intent on their discussion, and Helena wondered how long it would be before the three of them realized that this Robin and Batgirl were the future of the Bat-Clan. Despite being brought into the inner circle, she harbored no illusions that she could replace Bruce when he ultimately retired (or was forced into it due to injury.) Dick didn’t bother hiding the fact that he loathed wearing a cape anymore and actively hated having to don Bruce’s cowl for any length of time, but more to the point, his decision to join the Gotham PD was another indication he was still trying to figure out his direction in life. He’d toyed with being a full-time vigilante – hell, he was a member of the League, now that they had absorbed the old Titans into their ranks – but that had been inadequate. When Bruce did step down, there was absolutely no way that Dick would become the Bat full-time.

Which left Tim. Mister Drake was being groomed to take over and didn’t even realize it.

More importantly, though, Helena marveled that all three of them seemed blissfully unaware that Cass and Tim were, for all intents and purposes, a couple – Tim’s last two girlfriends had certainly noticed and his current single status was clear evidence of that. He and Cass didn’t do traditional very well – their idea of a good time was beating the snot out of a pedophile or scaring the hell out of a drug dealer – but they were together more often than they weren’t. Seeing as they were both barely sixteen, it wasn’t really a surprise that they didn’t recognize how abnormally attached to one another they were, but Bruce? The man could tell you what you had for breakfast by looking at you for ten seconds, spoke a dozen languages fluently, could sneak into the White House without ever being seen, and was almost a walking truth detector, but somehow, he didn’t see this.

“An undercover sting is probably our best option,” Tim was saying in response to a question Bruce had posed to him, “but Cass’ English still sucks-”

“Trying,” the normally mute girl muttered sourly.

“-and that … I know you’re trying. You’re doing a lot better than those speech therapists thought was possible.” Tim chewed the inside of his lip. “But since she has difficulty with the language, that
means I’ve got to go in and I kind of stick out in Chinatown.”

“Have you considered approaching it from the perspective of a fellow dealer instead of a buyer?” Bruce asked calmly. Tim brightened.

“I hadn’t, actually.” He glanced at Cass who did not, as far as Helena could tell, react. “That’s not a bad idea at all.”

“Good evening, madam.” Alfred’s unexpected voice from behind her caused Helena to jump in surprise. She half-spun, automatically falling into a defensive stance before her brain identified the butler’s voice and classified him as non-hostile. Letting her hands fall to her side, she gave him a sheepish smile.

“I guess you’re the one who taught Bruce how to be sneaky,” she said hesitantly. Her memories of Mister Pennyworth in her world were few – he’d passed away several years after her birth, so she hadn’t gotten to know him very well even though, from the fond way her parents spoke of him, he was greatly missed – but here, she’d quickly discerned that he was at least as perceptive as his employer. And the way he was looking at her in this moment, as if he was trying to place a face made her heart rate speed up.

“I am preparing a late snack for Master Wayne,” he said in the crisp accent of his, “and wished to inquire if you had any requests.”

“No, I’m fine,” Helena replied quickly. She glanced around for anything resembling a clock, hoping that she could use it as an excuse to get away. “Thank you, though.”

“Richard informs me that you are partial toward grilled cheese sandwiches,” Alfred added with a slight smile.

“Just roll with it,” Tim said as he and Cass entered approached. “Alfred will just badger you until you agree. Resistance is futile.” Three pairs of eyes gave Drake a flat, uncomprehending look and he exhaled deeply. “Not the crowd for geek humor,” he muttered as he visibly deflated.

“Grilled cheese will be fine, Mister Pennyworth,” Helena said quickly. Once again, he gave her a curious, weighing look.

“Barbara would have gotten it,” Tim continued under his breath as he followed Cass toward the treadmills.

“I’ll have the same, Alfred,” Bruce said as he stalked by.

“Very good, sir.” The butler limped away, his foot still encased in a cast, and Helena caught her father … caught Bruce watching him go with a hint of worry on his face. It vanished the instant he noticed her observing him.

“Come,” he said flatly, nodding toward the tumbling mats. “I’d like to see what you’re capable of, Miss Bertinelli.” The influence on her name was subtle but rather obvious to someone trained to notice. She swallowed the sudden lump in her throat.

And then followed the man who looked so much like her dad to the mats.

They were attacked before they even reached Colu’s upper atmosphere.

The hostile fighter craft screamed upward, out of the planetary cloud cover, energy weapons already
spitting sizzling streams of fire, and Kal felt the hard press of the ship’s artificial gravity shove him down as Lar banked hard. Impacts nevertheless rocked the ship, and he blurred toward the airlock, triggering the solar visor obtained from a derelict Kryptonian wreck over a month ago. Like Lar, he was still dressed in the red and blue of the Daxam Explorer’s Guild, but he’d incorporated a Kryptonian sigil upon his left breast. According to what they’d gleaned from the ancient starship, it was the symbol worn by the House of El and, for reasons Kal still did not understand, the seal meant something to him. The feeling would not go away, no matter how hard he tried to ignore it, and in the end, he decided to embrace the persistent tickling of almost-memory.

He flashed out of the hyperlight-capable starship that he and Lar had been using to travel the stars ever since they had helped overthrow the Dominator high caste. It had been a gift from the genetically enhanced humans who had refused to return to their homeworld – none of them had wanted to go home and Lar’s suggestion, that they spearhead colonization of a series of buffer worlds around the Sol system had been eagerly accepted by nearly all, with a small minority that wanted to explore much like he and Lar. Almost the instant he hit hard vacuum, Kal could see that there was something … strange about the fighters coursing toward them. Even worse, it was familiar. Accelerating hard, he curled around the incoming fire as he darted toward the first of the machines. Free from any wind resistance, he was able to reach a speed that was nothing short of astounding, and with heat bubbling from his eyes, he knifed through the hull of the first craft. There was no crew aboard, so he hit hard and kept moving, leaving behind him a rapidly expanding cloud of debris and frozen fire. The other ship oriented toward him and Kal cried out in sudden agony as energy pulses slammed into him body, sending him tumbling in an uncontrolled spin. By the time he righted himself that craft was also gone and Lar approached, his own solar visor deployed. Kal glanced toward the planetary moon, his enhanced senses quickly allowing him to locate their flier, now parked in a low orbit. For the moment, it was safe.

“Not very welcoming, are they?” Lar asked with a smirk.

“They probably have a good idea why we’re here,” Kal replied, frowning in the direction of the planet. Toppling the corrupt regime of the Dominators had not been enough, especially once they discovered that the ruling caste had been greatly assisted by the computer-tyrants of Colu who seemed particularly interested in the results of human experimentation. So naturally, they had made the decision to pay Colu a visit.

Together, they dove toward the planet, dropping through the clouds at several dozen times the speed of sound. As usual, Lar seemed to be fractionally faster – the injuries on Kal’s body that still refused to heal fully continued to give him trouble and hamper the upper limit of his abilities, where his friend had no such handicap – but the difference in this instance was barely negligible. As one, they came to an abrupt halt in mid-flight at what transpired below.

Colu was at war with itself.

Skyships of different size unleashed salvo after salvo at one another, with explosions wreathing the sky and sending debris tumbling to the planet. Kal could see millions of robotic war machines on the surface of the world, blasting away at one another with energy blasts that burned through the strongest of alloys. He scanned the cities he could make out from this distance and found biological soldiers and civilians as well, all of whom seemed alternately confused or enraged. A pair of high-frequency signals dueled in intensity, the pitch of their noise causing him to flinch. And then, just like that, one of the signals completely ceased transmission.

Instantly, the shooting stopped. Warships that had been on attack vectors slowed or radically altered their velocity, and the robots all simply turned to other tasks, as if they had not just been trying very
hard to destroy each other. The biologicals hesitantly poked their heads out of their places of concealment, then, as one, froze in place. Kal winced again at the sudden, sharp increase of transmission strength of the victorious signal.

“What just happened?” Lar asked.


“Let’s go meet Mister Dox, then,” Kal said.

They touched down on a skyship landing platform set into the side of a towering skyscraper. There was a smoking wreck parked their and, as they floated toward an opening door, Kal could see other signs of combat. Soldiers advanced to greet them – bidepal, they were green of skin but otherwise looked pretty much like a Daxamite or Human. Their uniform was striking – an armored black undersuit with a gold symbol of what appeared to be a hand inside a circle, over which a white utility jacket – and their weapons appeared quite lethal. Only one of them did not wear a helmet and it was he who the others appeared to treat with great respect.

“Two Daxamites wearing explorer’s guild uniforms,” the Coluan said before frowning at Kal. “And one of them wears the Kryptonian House of El symbol. How curious.”

“Vril Dox, I presume?” Kal said. There was something … familiar about the man’s voice and mannerisms, though he could not quite put his finger on it. At his words, though, the Coluan froze and stepped closer to examine his face.

“Kal-El,” Dox said with open surprise on his face. “Your presence here is quite unexpected.”

“How the hell do you know me?” Kal demanded, his muscles tensing with surprise and confusion. He sensed rather than saw Lar react similarly, and all of the soldiers raised their weapons.

“We have met previously,” the Coluan stated before frowning. “No,” he said quickly. “That is not accurate. The consciousness that became my biological host interacted with you on Earth during an unfortunate incident.” Kal blinked and exchanged a baffled look with Lar.

“I have no idea what you just said,” Kal said.

“How the hell do you know me?” Kal demanded, his muscles tensing with surprise and confusion. He sensed rather than saw Lar react similarly, and all of the soldiers raised their weapons.

“We have met previously,” the Coluan stated before frowning. “No,” he said quickly. “That is not accurate. The consciousness that became my biological host interacted with you on Earth during an unfortunate incident.” Kal blinked and exchanged a baffled look with Lar.

“I have no idea what you just said,” Kal said.

“Of course.” Dox gestured to his men. “Lower your weapons and return to your duties.” Incredibly, they all moved away to obey. “I am a clone,” Dox said as he crossed his arms behind him. “My donor was the original Vril Dox who made what he believed to be an extraordinary extraterrestrial discovery when he detected Kryptonian computer code being beamed into our thinking matrix.” The Coluan turned and began walking away, clearly expecting Kal and Lar to follow which they did. “Unfortunately, this code turned out to be quite malicious. It infected my donor’s implants, rewired his consciousness to better suit its directives, and then directed him to establish what can only be described as a totalitarian state.”


“Just so,” he said. “You arrived at the end of what has been a lengthy struggle to unseat them and my genetic donor.” An immense door slid apart, revealing an equally massive room, filled to the ceiling with banks of advanced computer systems. Floating in the very center of the room, enveloped by a shimmering force-screen that looked to be a stasis field of some sort, was another Coluan. What little of his natural appearance remained looked very much like Dox, though older, but there the
comparison stopped. This being appeared only half biological, with glossy metal in places that should have been exposed bone. Large cables fed into the creature’s body, though they appeared to have been severed from whatever they were connected to by the force-field. Kal stared at the Coluan, flashes of something he vaguely recalled seeing flickering across his mind’s eye.

“Ah, Kal-El,” a half-remembered voice whispered in his memory. “I had not anticipated this engagement to occur so soon. You are aware of my identity?”

“The Brain InterActive Construct,” Kal murmured. Dox froze in mid-step and turned his cool, calculating eyes in his direction.

“Yes.” He frowned. “You fought him previously, did you not?”

Memories flooded into his mind then, all at once and with such overwhelming intensity that Kal … that Clark cried out and dropped to his knees, both hands coming up to grip the skull that felt like it was going to explode. He heard Lar shout something, felt his friend’s hand on his arm, could feel the vibrations through the floor as Dox’s soldiers rushed to surround him, but none of that was important as he struggled with the implacable tide of images and events. He remembered Diana, and Bruce, and Lois, and Kara and …

How long he knelt there, struggling to control the terrifying flood of awareness, he wasn’t entirely sure, but when he clawed his way back to something resembling normalcy, Clark could tell that the room was mostly empty. Lar was still present, speaking quietly with a dark-haired woman who seemed vaguely familiar. The moment he stood, Lar abandoned the conversation and floated forward while the woman fell through the floor much like Clark remembered seeing J’onn do so long ago. God, had it really been that long ago?

“Are you all right?” Lar asked. He was using his native language and Clark nodded.

“Better than all right,” he replied in Interlac. Something in his bearing must have been apparent because Lar’s eyes widened slightly and he started to grin. “I remember now, Lar,” Clark said. He smiled. “I remember who I was.”

Later that evening, after they’d dug a little deeper to ensure that this Vril Dox fellow was at least mostly on the level, they retreated back to their little space yacht to discuss what Clark now remembered. He told most of the story to his friend, skipping over the parts that weren’t relevant or things he was especially interested in talking about, and Lar listened with quiet fascination. A wave of homesickness hit Clark midway through the tale and, when he finished, he stared at the starfield beyond the viewport. God, but he wanted to go home.

“They’ll need help rebuilding here,” Lar said after a long silence. “I think I’d like to help … I don’t entirely trust this Dox character to keep his word.” Clark turned his eyes to the younger man. “The ship is yours, Kal,” Lar said with a smile. “Maybe I’ll stop by this Earth when I’m done here.” Clark returned the smile.

“I think you’ll like it,” he said. His heart was lighter than it had been for a very long time.

He was going home.
CENTRAL CITY, MO. – The Flash Museum, part of a $185 million development in Central City, opened its doors on Monday with an exhibition of works dedicated to the late Barry Allen who died nearly three years ago.

The museum, designed by local architect Martina Vargas, is the centerpiece of a larger plan to renovate downtown Central City.

Wallace West, the current Flash and Allen’s nephew, was on hand for the ribbon-cutting ceremony, though an incident involving the Justice League forced him to depart early.

Click for more from Central City Star

THE SHRILL ALARM JOLTED HER OUT OF A DEEP SLEEP.

Diana sprang out of her bed, casting aside her sheets, and clashed her bracers together even before her feet touched the ground. Her panoply was in place and she was accoutered for war within two steps, but still, she paused very briefly to glance in the wall mirror she’d intentionally placed alongside the room’s exit for this very reason. Satisfied none of her armor was out of place, she hit the door release button and darted into the corridor beyond, automatically taking flight the moment she had additional space to maneuver.

“What is the situation, Kelor?” she demanded as she touched down on the observation platform of the Watchtower. A flicker of red warned her of Wally’s arrival, but she paid him no mind as the Kryptonian servitor floated toward her.

“Hyper-jump transit point detected,” the robot announced. “Unidentified starship on apparent uncontrolled high velocity approach. It is not responding to automated communication buoys.” Diana turned to Flash but, before she could speak, Kelor continued. “Alert. Orbital defense networks online and acquiring.”

“Son of a sire,” Diana hissed. Despite the League’s assurances that the majority of the extra-solar threats were neutralized, obliterated, or turned into an ally now, key members of the United Nations had insisted on deploying space-based weapons for planetary defense. President Alexander, strangely enough, had been one of the most vocal supporters of the network, despite his previous stance opposing any militarization of space. Under his direction, the United States had spearheaded the rush to arm the skies with money it did not have, and their old rival, Russia, had once more nearly bankrupted their nation trying to keep up. “Issue the stand-down order!” Diana snapped. “Wally!”

Flash was already gone, vanishing in the span of a single eye-blink, and Diana leaped up and flew toward the nearest airlock. She cursed her earlier decision to allow Kara and Billy to accompany John to Oa and mentally reviewed the roster of available League members who could survive the hard vacuum of space. There was the new Firestorm, of course, but she was still too new to her abilities to be trusted for a high stress mission. The same held true of Gardner – his skill as a Red Lantern was considerable, but his short temper was too volatile for anything like this. Starfire was
off-world again, Carol and Hal were on their honeymoon and no one even had a clue where they were, which left … well, it left only her.

With Hephaestus’ protective shield wrapped around her, Diana streaked out of the airlock, instantly orienting toward the incoming starship. Before she could clear the Watchtower’s gravity silhouette, orbital weapons began opening up with fierce salvos of energy and missiles. Wreathed in sudden flame, the unknown vessel spun wildly out of control, tumbling faster and faster toward the planet than before, with large slabs of the starship simply blown off. Diana snarled a curse as she accelerated toward the craft – not only had these foolish space weapons failed completely in the task they were meant for, they had turned the starship into a potentially lethal fusion bomb aimed directly at Earth.

The vessel had already entered Earth’s upper atmosphere by the time she reached it and its hull was beginning to heat up with re-entry. Ignoring the discomfort, Diana braced herself against the ship and tried to slow its descent. Her muscles strained – Hera, this thing was heavy … and moving fast! – and she could feel the hull begin to crumple under her hands. This close, she noticed dozens of impact craters and jagged scars. Whoever this was, they’d come under heavy fire and recently. As the thought occurred to her, something boomed and an explosion threw her spinning away.

“Gotcha!” A giant crimson baseball mitt materialized behind her and Diana smacked into it with a grunt. She threw herself back at the falling craft, now in dozens of large pieces, all trailing smoke and fire.

“Secure those pieces!” she bellowed at Gardner, her tone brisk. To her relief, he turned to obey without question. They were spread out over a great distance and he would have to act quickly to get them all, but his handling of them allowed her to focus on the larger central piece. It was still tumbling, end over end, and appeared completely out of control. She dove toward it, her hand instinctively reaching for the golden rope at her side. There might be a way…

The Lariat flashed out, looping around the target a dozen times but at sufficient distance to not actually touch its hull yet. Diana still had not discovered the maximum length of the magical rope – she wondered if it did have a maximum length or if instead it was infinite – and in this moment, she blatantly abused the Lariat’s nature. Once satisfied that there were enough loops, she inhaled rapidly, curled her end of the Lariat around her arm, and commanded it to tighten.

As it turned out, that was probably a mistake.

The tumbling vessel had both mass and velocity on her, despite her great strength, and the moment the Lariat grew taut, Diana found herself spinning wildly through the air, dragged by the out of control starcraft. She strained against the rope, pushing against gravity’s implacable pull, but succeeded only in slowing the starship’s descent so it would not crater when it struck. With an immense boom, the starship slammed into the ground, still dragging her with it. Diana hit the dirt, rolled, and then firmly planted both feet and strained once more, pulling hard against the shattered wreck. It slowed, finally grinding to a halt some minutes later.

Breathing rapidly, Diana gave the Lariat a jerk and it slithered free of the downed and smoking vessel. She glanced around, realizing with sudden surprise that she was on the outskirts of what appeared to be a major city. None of the landmarks were immediately recognizable – the signs looked to be in Spanish, so she suspected that she was somewhere in South America – but a moment later, she placed herself: Belo Horizonte, one of the largest cities of Brazil. Diana shuddered at the thought the damage that would have occurred should this vessel crash into the middle of the city.

“Fragments secured,” Gardner announced over the commline. Her speakers and microphone were integrated into her armor through some means that Hephaestus had been quite pleased to explain in
great length – the marriage of science and magic was of great interest to him – but Diana had followed only part of what he said.

“Hone in on my transmission,” she instructed as she floated toward the craft. “We will need to secure…” Her voice trailed off as she peered through a darkened porthole in what seemed to be an airlock. There, in the center of the flight deck, pinned to a chair was a humanoid figure. She growled a soft curse as she punched her hands through the metal and tore the door off. Smoke greeted her and she waved a hand to clear the air, coughing slightly at the unexpected stench. Now, with the door gone and the way clear, she could see the man clearly. Her heart skipped a beat.

KAL!

She reached his side a thudding heartbeat later – it was him! – and she threw aside the girder trapping him. The clothes he wore were shredded almost beyond repair – a dark crimson in color, the shirt and pants almost looked to be constructed of the same Kryptonian material she’d seen him wear before – but as she felt for a pulse, she could see the cloth slowly reknitting itself together. There was a strange device attached to his left arm, but it sparked and smoked from damage. His heartbeat was weak but steady and she could see him breathing, so Diana crouched and slid her arms underneath him. She stood, cradling him in her arms and turned toward the door.

“Sonuvabitch,” Gardner said. The Red Lantern was standing in the open hatchway, eyes wide. “Is that…”

“Get out of the way,” Diana ordered, her tone hard. He nearly fell over himself obeying and Diana floated through the open hatch, already gathering her strength to carry her and Kal into the sky. Dozens flashes – from cell phones and traditional cameras alike carried by the citizens who had rushed to see the wreck – greeted her, and she frowned, but ignored them all. Into the sky she streaked, wrapping Hephaestus’ shield around them and straining for more speed. She considered options – the Watchtower or the Fortress? – and then decided. The sky boomed with her passing.

Kelor was waiting when she landed outside the Fortress and a floating trauma bed was already standing by. Diana carefully placed him upon it.

“Scanning now,” Kelor announced as she glided alongside the floating stretcher. “Confirmed, Mistress. This is Kal-El.”

Relief blasted through her, so intense that her knees nearly buckled, and she almost missed the servitor’s announcement that the master’s life signs were weak. Without a word, she stepped back, out of the way of the sudden swarm of servitors – when had Kelor and Kelex constructed new ones? She filed it away for future consideration – and watched as they escorted Kal into the medical facility where they transferred him to a Kryptonian stasis tube that rotated into a vertical position. Force screens abruptly snapped into existence, sealing off the room but allowing Diana to still see what was going on. The robots went to work immediately, stripping away his clothes and attending his wounds. Diana could not tear her eyes away as she noticed the scars crisscrossing his torso and back. She frowned. This was a lifetime of abuse, not a handful of years.

“Incoming transmission from the Batcave,” Kelor’s disembodied voice announced.

“Accept,” Diana said with a tight grimace.

“Is it true?” Bruce’s voice echoed out of the hidden speakers and, at any other time, she might have smiled at the hope she could hear in it.

“Yes,” Diana replied sharply. Her emotions were all over the place at the moment and she could not
handle speaking to Bruce right now. “I will contact you as soon as he is stable. End transmission, Kelor.” There was a noticeable crackle as the servitor killed the feed, but Diana ignored it. “Reject all further transmissions, Kelor,” she instructed. “Total communication silence.” She frowned as a thought occurred to her. “No, amend that. Priority One alerts only. And send a message to the Watchtower – Canary is in charge until I make contact.”

“Compliance.” Diana frowned again as the lights inside the med-bay dimmed to a dull red.

“Kelor?”

“Red solar lamp application is necessary to remove foreign objects from the master’s body,” the robot said promptly. Diana winced as she saw the first sliver be extracted – it was crystalline, green in color, and very likely radioactive from the way it seemed to pulse angrily in the strange light. The servitor responsible for removal examined the sliver – she thought it was Kelex, but could not tell due to the dimness of the medical bay – before depositing it into a container.

“Object is of unknown composition,” Kelex announced, confirming her guess as to his identity. “Recommend full atomic scan before disposal once the master is safe.”

“Permission granted,” Diana said.

She paced around the medical bay in silence for hours, watching as hundreds of tiny slivers of the strange material were removed from Kal’s body. Many of the fragments splintered and broke up when subjected to even the tiniest amount of force, which hampered extraction. Since they were robots, the servitors did not grow frustrated or angry at these setbacks and simply continued working. Diana was not so fortunate. She could do nothing but watch and never before had she felt this helpless.

“Initiating solar pulse,” Kelex announced an eternity later. A quartet of long columns rose up out of the floor so they surrounded the stasis tube that Kal floated in. Flash! The sudden flare of bright light turned the room into a bright sunny day, but faded a moment later. Diana held her breath. “Subject’s life signs stabilizing,” the servitor stated. With a whir, the stasis tube rotated to a horizontal position and then flattened out into a bed that floated several feet above the floor. The four solar pulse columns climbed higher, until they reached from the floor the ceiling, and slowly, they began emitting a soft, pleasant glow.

“The danger has passed,” Kelor announced as she floated toward Diana. With a flicker, the force-screens sealing off the medical bay vanished. “We will continue to monitor the master’s progress.”

“Inform me the instant there is any change,” Diana ordered, trying desperately to cling to her self-control. Hera help her, but she wanted to touch him, to look at him, to just see him.

Instead, she turned away and walked toward the captain’s quarters.

She stripped off her panoply slowly, not using Hephaestus’ transformative magicks for a change, and wiped down each piece carefully before placing it in its proper place on her armor stand. Once she was nude, she ducked into the shower and let the sonic pulses dance upon her skin and hair, washing away the sweat and grime from earlier. It was not enough to distract her, though, and she stepped out of the shower to quickly don the first available undersuit at hand. Dressed, she retraced her steps to the medical bay – only one of the servitors was present and it continued its tasks without addressing her as she drew closer.

Kal was still sleeping and she thought he looked more relaxed than before. Against her better judgment, she took a seat on the floating bed – it did not even shift under her weight, despite
appearing to have no visible means of support – and reached over to brush Kal’s hair out of his eyes. Sight of her caused her to glance down at the clothes she wore and Diana smirked at the rather prominent Kryptonian sigil embossed upon her chest. Without a word, she stood, retraced her steps to the captain’s cabin and donned more suitable garments … which was to say clothes without any Kryptonian symbols on them. Once back in the med-bay, she reclaimed her seat next to the slumbering Kal and, with trembling fingers, took his hand. Her heart pounded as she watched him.

And then, she waited.

His hands ached from where he’d punched Croc, but apart from that, Bruce felt fine.

No, not fine. Better than fine. The chemical cocktail that Clark had created so long ago was already doing its work, pushing his body’s natural healing ability into overdrive. As usual, Bruce experienced a rush of energy worse than any sugar high, but he knew better than to abuse it; the two or three times (maybe four) that he had, the crash afterward was so hard that it almost took an entire week to recover. With that in mind, he was already planning on retiring to the Cave once the police arrived to carry Croc to Blackgate’s specialized cell.

“Oracle,” he whispered into his throat mike. “What’s the ETA on the SWAT units?”

“Two minutes out,” came her instant response. “Looks like they’re diverting a black and white to secure … oh.” Bruce frowned at the police cruiser that rounded the corner, lights flashing. It slid to a stop half a dozen yards from where he’d bound the unconscious Jones to a telephone pole and the two officers scrambled out. The driver was portly, already breathing hard, and even from this distance, Bruce could see sweat on the man’s forehead. His partner …

His partner was Richard Grayson.

Officer Grayson slid across the hood of his black and white in that ridiculous maneuver that Bruce had seen him do so often on the hood of the Batmobile and, despite his hefty partner’s urgings against doing so, advanced slowly toward Croc, one hand on his holstered sidearm. To Bruce’s silent approval, Richard kept something thick and sturdy between his body and Jones as he made his approach – in this case, it was a mostly overturned car. He stayed put, crouching and watching Croc for several long seconds before reaching up to trigger the radio on his shoulder.

“Fourteen Seventy-One,” Richard said, and Bruce frowned at the subtle echo in his headset as Barbara piped the transmission to him. “Suspect is down and secured.” He glanced up, eyes automatically searching the places he would normally lurk if he was acting as Nightwing, and Bruce made a snap decision. He’d overheard Richard complaining to Tim (and Cassandra, but that was only because she was usually with Robin) about the hazing his fellow officers were putting him through. It was not the stupid tricks and low-level abuse that annoyed Richard, but rather, the fact that he was so much better trained than they were and had to pretend otherwise.

So with that in mind, Bruce stood up.

Richard zeroed in on him immediately, which caused his overweight partner to do the same, and with a carefully rehearsed maneuver that no longer required conscious thought, Bruce drew his grapple gun, aimed, fired and let it carry him away into the night. Barbara was still pumping audio into his cowl – and he’d been wrong earlier; she must have been beaming it from one of the drones circling overhead, not from the police scanner – and he almost grinned at the explosive curse torn from Richard’s partner.
“Did you see that?” he asked loudly. “That was the goddamned Batman!”

“Shouldn’t we set up a road barrier to keep the street clear, Sergeant?” Richard sounded bored and jaded, as if he saw the Bat every single day. “I’d really like to avoid feeding this guy some Girl Scouts if wakes up.”

Bruce landed lightly on his targeted building, pausing very briefly to get his bearings in order to locate the car. By the time he reached where it was parked in an especially darkened alley, the energy rush was fading fast and it was a struggle to keep from yawning. His stomach growled nonstop, which frustrated him even more, and he scowled the instant he saw Tim and Cassandra lurking near the Batmobile.

“How many CCs did you have to use?” Robin asked once Bruce glided to the ground. It was a legitimate question and one he’d insisted the team ask whenever one of them was forced to use the healing agent that Richard alternately called ‘super-juice’ or ‘kal-elium,’ but Bruce frowned nonetheless. He hated being reminded of his limitations, especially when it was due to rules he developed in the first place.

“Thirty,” he growled.

“A week of light duty,” Tim reminded him, which only darkened Bruce’s mood even more. After an incident very early with the kal-elium – and damn Richard for coming up with that ridiculous name; it would probably stick just like ‘batmobile’ had stuck – when Bruce very nearly been forced to overdose on it (thanks to Croc, ironically enough), he had made it official policy to ensure the chemical was completely flushed out of the system before returning to active duty. According to Clark’s remarkably in depth test, it was as safe as water, but there was no point in tempting addiction. Low blood sugar was already playing havoc with his coordination and Bruce’s hands trembled slightly.

“Congratulations,” he rumbled. “You get to drive.” Despite himself, he nearly smiled at the suddenly excited reaction Tim tried to hide. Thus far, he’d not let Robin do anything more than sit behind the wheel of this Batmobile, though he had every confidence that Drake was more than capable of handling the obscene power the car was capable of.

“I could drive,” Cass piped up suddenly, eagerly.

“No,” Bruce and Tim said at the same time and with equal fervor. They’d both been in a vehicle when she was behind the wheel before and it had resulted in an upside down Humvee, three broken bones, and a five digit repair bill. A motorcycle she handled marvelously, as if it were an extension of herself – Bruce had once seen her take a bike up the side of a bridge, somehow balancing the 20” tires on a 10” wide beam at speeds in excess of seventy miles per hour without the slightest wobble or slip, and then braking in such a way that she was able to hop off the thin surface and onto another one, just as narrow, before racing down the side – but if you added another wheel or even two, she completely and utterly lost her mind. He wasn’t sure if it was the power or some element linked to her strange understanding of body language, but he didn’t even trust her in a go-cart – the memory of that day, when Richard decided to combine Tim’s birthday party with another impromptu driving lesson caused him to shudder. Bruce knew that Tim was still trying to teach her how to drive properly on the grounds of Wayne Manor with a spare car purchased for that exact purpose, but in this, Robin clearly was braver than he was. There wasn’t a chance in hell he’d willingly get into a vehicle with her behind the wheel unless … no, he couldn’t come up any scenario dire enough.

“Will meet you at Cave,” Cassandra said as she sprinted toward the shadows, very likely going for her concealed bike, and Bruce silently groaned. He said nothing as he slid into the passenger seat of the heavily modified Lamborghini Veneno and waited for Tim to get comfortable behind the wheel.
The previous Batmobiles had been less ostentatious than this one, but then, they had also been actual purchases instead of seizures; this particular car had once belonged to Roman Sionis, aka Black Mask, and Bruce had been forced to steal the Veneno during a case. Rather than return it, he had it repainted and altered for his purposes, and then introduced the new Batmobile to Sionis in style by using it to shut down Black Mask’s attempts to muscle in on the drug trade. The mobster, who had paid over seven million dollars for the car, was not amused. Attempts had been made to recapture it or, failing that, to destroy it, but thanks to certain connections of Bruce’s – a Kryptonian who delighted in advertising her ample assets, several other geniuses who had turned their considerable intellects toward crime-fighting, and, possibly most importantly, an Israeli combat veteran who could manipulate matter on an atomic level – this Batmobile was as heavily armored as a tank while remaining even lighter than before.

“If you scratch the paint because you’re trying to race Batgirl,” Bruce said darkly as Tim pulled into the street, “we will have words.” Tim gave him a sour look and Bruce felt his lip twitch. “And if you lose this race,” he continued, still speaking in the gravelly tone he normally reserved for criminals, “I might have to look into replacing you.”

The race, as it was, turned out to be a nightmare for a passenger and Bruce quite suddenly understood why Selina never let him drive when they went out on dates. With winter rapidly approaching, the temperature was low enough that there was actually the threat of ice, so each time Tim flashed through traffic or narrowly dodged an obstacle like a slow-moving bus or poorly parked car, Bruce tensed and discreetly looked for something to hold onto. The lead changed a dozen times – on her bike, Cassandra had a serious advantage with maneuverability, even though the Batmobile was strikingly nimble, but the car overpowered her on the straighter roads – and by the time they went dark on the outskirts of Gotham near the hidden access road that led to the Cave, it was impossible to tell who would be victorious.

It was Cassandra, by a nose, as she actually deployed a smoke bomb at the last instant which caused Tim to let up off the gas in reflex even though the Batmobile’s built-in HUD compensated. She was leaning on her bike, waiting, as they pulled in.

“I won,” Cassandra announced before they had even climbed out of the car. She’d removed both her helmet and her cowl, and was grinning brightly. It was an expression Bruce rarely saw on her face and he automatically shelved the dressing down for abuse of supplies.

“By cheating,” Tim replied crossly. He glanced toward Bruce who opened his mouth to tell Robin that he would need to do better next time, but Drake’s gaze fell on someone behind Bruce. Tim’s eyes widened.

“Hello, Bruce.” The voice was strong and such a surprise that Bruce almost fell in his haste to turn around. His breath caught at sight of the man standing there, dressed in that absurd hard-suit of his in stealth mode. Clark hadn’t changed in the slightest. His hair was still midnight black, his posture straight, his eyes …

No. His eyes were different. They were older, harder, more alien, like he had seen or experienced things that no human could possibly comprehend. Clark’s smile was the same and when he offered it, Bruce suddenly found himself wrapping the Kryptonian in a back-slapping hug. His friend was alive!

*His friend was alive!*

“A new Robin, a new Batgirl, and Catwoman living with you,” Clark said sometime later, after Bruce had devoured some sort of dish Alfred had whipped up and things had settled down. They were alone in the cave for the moment, and Bruce felt under dressed when he compared his sweats to
Clark’s armor. “Things have certainly changed.” He was looking at the glassed up mannequin that wore a Robin uniform.

“That was Jason,” Bruce said softly. “The Joker killed him in Africa.” Clark nodded, his jaw tight.

“Diana told me.” He said nothing else about the Amazon and Bruce wondered if he should ask about her before deciding against it. They were both adults – hell, she was over a hundred if what she’d told him many years ago wasn’t some sort of joke – and they could deal with their relationship themselves. “I would have liked to have met him.” Now, five years after Jason’s death, Bruce could view the young man’s flaws without them being tempered by the immediacy of grief.

“He was a good soldier,” he said before looking away. “But he was troubled and I didn’t do a very good job at guiding him.” Bruce shook the moment away. “We’d heard that Darkseid had you,” he began. Clark’s jaw tightened and this time, he was the one who looked away.

“He did.” The Kryptonian inhaled. “Now he doesn’t.” Apart from the subtle tension in his eyes, Clark appeared unmoved and frankly, a little detached. There was a story there, but Bruce could tell that his friend wasn’t interested in telling it. “So tell me what I’ve missed in Gotham,” he told Bruce. “I understand you actually went to prison?”

“That is a long story,” Bruce replied, wincing slightly at the memory of Vesper. He considered continuing, then made a different call. “Clark, about Lois,” he began, but to his surprise, the Kryptonian smiled.

“I know,” he said. “Diana told me that too.”

“Did she tell you everything?” Bruce crossed his arms and voiced his suspicions. Again, Clark surprised him with a nod.

“That tracks with her theory as well,” he stated before cocking his head. A flash of the old Clark flickered upon his face. “Have the two of you even considered comparing notes?”

“I’ve been busy,” Bruce replied. “What will you do?” he asked.

“What I must,” was the simple but cryptic answer.

Her call once again went straight to voicemail.

Barely suppressing a curse, Lois threw her cell down on the table and wheeled away from it to resume her long pacing transit around the living room. She had not smoked in fifteen years, not since her dad’s medical scare, but right now, she wanted a cigarette so badly that her hands were almost shaking. With no nicotine available, she resorted to another bad habit of hers and promptly began chewing at her fingernails, no matter that she’d spent almost a hundred dollars at the beauty salon last week. Automatically, her eyes once more went to the muted television screen on the far wall and the pictures the twenty-four hour news channels were showing at every opportunity.

Diana was instantly recognizable, despite the blackened scoring of her armor and a splash of filth on her face, but Lois’ eyes immediately went to the figure in the Amazon’s arms. The red pants and shirt weren’t familiar, but the distinctive House of El crest over his left breast was proof enough if there were any questions about his face.

Clark. Clark was alive!
She’d reached out to the League, to Bruce, to the Themysciran embassy, to everyone she could possibly imagine in a desperate attempt to get in touch with Diana to verify her fervent hope that this actually was Clark and not some horrible imposter. So far, all of her attempts had failed. The League had made a simple announcement – no comment at this time – while Bruce simply hadn’t bothered answering which was his normal reaction whenever something hero related came up and she called him. She’d chatted briefly with Selina and the former thief (providing she had given up the life of crime) had promised to pass on the message, but again, Bruce tended to completely ignore things he had no interest in dealing with so Lois wasn’t holding out hope that she’d receive a callback. The embassy phone lines were jammed, which she took to mean that every other person in the media was trying the same thing. You couldn’t look at any of the pictures of Diana holding Clark and not see the fear and hope in the Amazon’s face.

“You should relax,” Richard advised her. He was leaning on the couch, watching her with a very slight smile, and she fought the urge to throw something large and heavy at him.

“I can’t,” she retorted. “The first major story since I took over for Perry and I can’t get anyone on the damned phone!” That wasn’t the real reason for her interest and Richard knew it, but as always, he did not call her on the implied deceit. Instead, he smiled fondly at her from the couch and, once again, she almost winced at how weak he looked. He was still recovering from certain necessary actions, but both of them were quite concerned he would never be quite what he had been. Worrying about him kept her up at night but she couldn’t handle that, not right now.

Scowling fiercely, Lois stomped back to the table, snatched up her cell and sent another text to Olsen demanding an update. Honestly, if he wasn’t the Planet’s best reporter these days – and when the hell had that happened? She kind of missed the annoying kid who asked the craziest questions and followed her around like an overeager puppy – she’d can his ass for the annoying ‘still working leave me alone’ response he promptly sent.

“I’m surrounded by idiots and morons,” she muttered when Troupe didn’t bother responding to her message and Lombard told her to stop pestering him. A soft tapping on the balcony window caused her head to snap around, fully expecting to see Diana standing there.

But it was not Diana.

Clark looked exactly the same as she remembered him, tall and broad and strong, though the hard-suit he was wearing was solid black instead of the usual blue and red. There wasn’t a single line on his face, no sign that seven hard years had passed since he vanished, or that he was, by her calculations, just a couple years away from fifty. Very much aware of the streaks of silver threading her own hair and the thickness of the glasses she now had to wear, Lois rushed to the glass door, flung it open and wrapped her arms around him. She could feel tears trickling down her face but didn’t try to hide them.

“Is this some new kind of Earth greeting?” Clark asked. He didn’t return her embrace but, when she glanced up to look at him in the face, he was smiling. Understanding came at once – those robots he had at the Fortress had probably rigged up some sort of solar thing that gave him a super boost and he was still unsure of his current level of strength. She’d seen that before, when one of Luthor’s stupid death machines came close to killing him, and he hadn’t been able to pick up anything without breaking it for a week or two.

“God, it’s good to see you again,” she said through her tears of joy. Clark smiled as she hugged him again.

“Hello, Lois.” And then, he turned his head, looked at Richard and spoke again. “Hello, J’onn.”
Icy shock washed through her and, from the way Richard froze on the couch – it was so much easier to think of him that way these days as opposed to his other name – he was as stunned as she was. A dozen false explanations tumbled through her head, but she ignored them all as she slowly released Clark and took a step toward her husband. Clark didn’t move from where he stood, did not appear to be angry or surprised.


“Diana told me first,” he replied, “and then Bruce, but even if you had fooled them, you wouldn’t have fooled me.” His eyes narrowed and, this close to him, Lois could see them change slightly as he used his enhanced senses. She couldn’t quite explain what she saw – the blue of his eyes became more intense, brighter even, and the black pupil elongated so that it was more of a square-like shape than a circle “Your body temperature is twenty degrees cooler than a human’s and Perry White doesn’t have and never had a nephew.” He glanced between the two and Lois noticed a new hardness to his face, a distance or detachment that she did not recall seeing before. This was not the same man who left Earth so many years ago.

“There was no coercion involved, if that is what you fear,” Richard said quickly. He started to force himself to his feet, but Lois took another step closer to him and placed a restraining hand on his shoulder. He glanced at her, likely seeing the worry in her face, and relaxed back into the couch. “Lois and I … we worked together in the weeks where I was needed for Clark Kent to tragically vanish.”

“It just happened,” Lois said.

“Then congratulations are in order,” Clark said. “But I did not come here for that,” he added before looking at Lois. “I need to know what’s happening from a different perspective. Diana and Bruce have briefed me, but they look at the world differently than you do.” He frowned. “I need to know the world through the eyes of …”

“The little people?” Lois finished sourly. Instantly, Clark’s expression tightened.

“In all the years you’ve known me,” he asked in a low rumble, “when have I ever even hinted at thinking like that?” He started to turn away and Lois quickly grabbed his arm to keep him from leaving.

“I’m sorry,” she said in a hurry. “You know how I am.” When he hesitated, she gave him another hopeful smile and then, because she could not help herself, another hug. “Please, stay,” she said. “I’m not thinking straight right now – we thought you were dead! We grieved! Some of us even had a little memorial!”

“You did?” Clark sounded surprised but allowed her to maneuver him toward one of their chairs. He frowned. “Why? I thought everyone knew I was on Apokalips.”

“It was after,” Richard said. “One of the Lanterns returned with news that you had vanished from that world and the spies there believed you were dead.” Clark nodded slightly.

“How did you escape?” Lois asked while taking a seat next to Richard, but Clark’s expression closed off. In the space of a single heartbeat, he became a complete cypher.

“A story for another time,” he replied in a tone that said he had no plans to ever discuss it. “I’ve skimmed over the news,” Clark said as he leaned forward slightly, resting his elbows on his knees, “but it doesn’t give me the whole picture.” Lois inhaled, donning her editor-in-chief expression, and gave him a nod.
“What do you want to know?”

He wanted to ask about everything as it turned out. Clark inquired about the current president and the United States’ involvement in various overseas operations, then segued into the UN’s growing power and new authority. They touched on the continuing civil strife in Kahndaq and how a succession of coups had still left that country a destabilized mess. Russia and China’s latest border skirmish was discussed, and how that could potentially spill into a larger war. Global economies, political disputes both new and old, environmental issues, technological advances made during his absence, they were all subjects of interest, and Lois could not remember the last time she’d been so challenged to answer such wide-ranging questions. She could not answer them all, of course, but was able to point him toward sources that could satisfy his interest.

“The whole world is wondering what happens next,” she told him once he had finished. “You’re back … so what now?”

“I’m still trying to figure that out,” Clark replied as he stood. He frowned slightly at Richard who had dropped off several hours earlier. “What’s wrong with him?” he asked softly.

“He’s old,” Lois replied. She stroked her husband’s arm and he barely reacted. “Did you know that he came to Earth before we even had writing?” There was more to the story than just age but none of that, especially the nature of J’onn’s war against Vandal Savage throughout the centuries, was any of Clark’s business.

“I see.”

“What about you?” Lois asked. “How will you bring Clark back?” She smiled. “If you come back to the Planet,” she said, “I’ll be your boss now.”

“I am … still considering my next step.” Clark glanced toward the bay window. “Does that mean you no longer write?” he asked.

“I’m generally too busy trying to beat some sense into my reporters,” she admitted. “Not to mention, transitioning the Planet to a pure digital format and finding a way to embrace the future instead of clinging to the old ways.” Lois frowned – that was a politician’s answer, dammit, and Clark deserved better. “The media business is still changing,” she said slowly. “The old, traditional ways are so obsolete now that they’re barely worth thinking about and my job these days is finding a way to keep the Planet relevant without going under like so many of the other newspapers.” Clark smiled tightly. “You’ll find a way,” he said. He took a step toward the balcony window. “I’ll need to make a statement to the press once I’ve figured out my next step and … Clark can’t write it this time.” His expression was remote.

“We’ll be here,” Lois said. Clark smiled again – it was the slightest curve of his lips – and quietly exited the apartment. He paused there, on her balcony, his back to her as he looked up, and then, with a hiss of displaced air, he shot up into the dark sky.

Lois watched him vanish and wondered at the pain she’d sensed in him.

She had never been this nervous.

Kara coursed through the sky, wind tearing at her cape, and wondered if there was even the slightest chance of getting out of this duty. Ever since she and Bill returned to Earth, she’d been asked the
same damned question by any and everyone who knew the truth about her. Helena had asked it during their weekly get-together, Mary was pestering her about it every time she turned around, the entire League seemed to have their own recommendations about how to proceed, and, worst of all, Bill had started asking as well. The jerk couched it in stupid phrases like family and closure and fear of rejection, but the sentiment was the same: when are you going to talk to Superman? None of them seemed to understand her crippling fear – for that matter, neither could she really. Sure, things were strange for her, but she lived in a world where gods and aliens existed simultaneously.

So here she was, cruising at an altitude of ten thousand feet, destined for the North Pole.

She saw Kal-El a hundred miles before she reached him and immediately began angling down toward her cousin. He stood silently in the air, dressed once more in that hard-suit he’d taken to wearing before he left, but was facing away from her with his face turned toward the sun. Even at this great distance, she could make out his scarlet cape as it danced in the wind.

“Hello, Kara,” she heard him say. His Kryptonian was, as always, strange to hear. It had been that way on two worlds, actually, and she doubted he would ever dedicate enough time to the dead language to rid himself of that atrocious accent. “Are you going to hug me too?”

“I had not planned on it,” she replied as she showed to a hover alongside him. “Why?” This near to him, she could see his eyes were closed as he soaked in the sun’s light.

“That seems to be how everyone says hello these days,” Kal-El replied. “I was wondering if perhaps it was a new Earth custom I missed while I was away.” He opened his eyes and looked at her. Kara was able to see the instant surprise hit him. “You’ve grown,” he said hesitantly. “Did your outfit get torn?” he added with a brief glance to her cleavage. “You can borrow my cape if you need to cover up.”

“It’s supposed to look like that,” Kara pointed out. She shifted self-consciously, then forced herself to stop fidgeting. There was nothing wrong with her costume and she was proud of her body, dammit.

“I’m sure you have a lot of … admirers,” Kal-El said with a smirk that was gone almost before she saw it. “You and I don’t even feel the cold, Kal,” she said. On instinct, she reached out to touch his arm. He jerked away instinctively, then ground his teeth together and gave her an apologetic look. Kara wondered at her surprise – if even half of the things she’d heard about this Darkseid were true, then it was a miracle that her cousin was even able to walk upright. “I’m not here to talk about my clothes,” she began slowly, carefully. “Did Diana tell you about my … accident?” Kal-El squared his shoulders and looked at her.

“It doesn’t matter what Luthor did to you,” he said. “You’re my cousin.”

“Twice over now,” Kara murmured. It elicited another quick smile.

“They’re calling you Superwoman now,” Kal-El said. Even though it wasn’t a question, she nodded nonetheless. “And I understand that you’re running your own company as well.” He looked away. “All I managed to do was get a job as a reporter.” For a moment, his expression was so distraught, so dismayed, that he resembled a little boy and, abandoning propriety, Kara floated forward and wrapped both arms around him.

“Welcome home, Kal-El,” she said, relaxing when he returned the quick embrace.

“What is it about people hugging me?” he asked when she drifted back several feet. Kara grinned.
“It’s our genes,” she replied. “These humans have no resistance against our awesomeness.” The last word had to be in English as Kryptonian possessed no equivalent.

“Speaking of humans,” Kal-El began with a very slight frown, “what’s this I hear about you and Captain Marvel?” Kara felt her face heat up and very quickly looked away. Her cousin chuckled. “He must care for you a great deal,” he said in a knowing voice. When she looked back at him, he was staring over her shoulder and Kara followed the line of his gaze. In the very far distance, there was a figure floating in the sky just on the border between Earth and space. Her vision zoomed – it was less uncomfortable than the heat vision but just as disorienting – and she almost sighed at the sight of Bill standing at what she knew to be the very edge of his sensory abilities.

“Don’t even try to lecture me on romantic decisions, Kal,” she ordered. Almost at once, his amusement fell away and he nodded.

“Introduce us,” he instructed. “I’d like to meet him.”

“No fighting,” she hissed before pushing up and rapidly accelerating toward Bill. He must have seen her approaching because he followed suit and they met at the halfway point. Glancing over her shoulder, Kara was pleased that her cousin had not followed and instead, simply stood there, waiting. He could probably still hear them, but that was okay. “Kal wants to meet you,” she said and was delighted at the sight of Captain Marvel, quite frequently called the world’s mightiest mortal, blanch.

“Me?” he almost squeaked, which in that body was quite a feat. “Why?”

“You’re sleeping with his cousin, Bill,” Kara said with a smirk. “Rather frequently. That almost makes you family.”

“But … but … he’s Superman!” Kara rolled her eyes and shook her head before grabbing his hand and pulling him with her. He didn’t really resist – she still wasn’t sure which of them was stronger, though odds were it was him – but neither did he really help much so by the time they came to a floating hover just a few feet from Kal, she was a little bit annoyed. What was the big deal? “Kal, this is Bill, the world’s biggest chicken,” she said with a sour look. Her cousin’s face turned bemused as he drifted closer and offered his hand.

“Hello, Bill,” he said. “It’s good to meet you.”

“Thank you, sir,” came the quick but soft response. “I’m glad you’re back, sir,” he continued, still in that strangely diffident voice which made Kara give him another look and a frown. He was never diffident, even when he was facing down monsters from the lower planes or would-be god-kings. What the hell was this? And then, like the proverbial bolt of lightning – a phrase that had new meaning for Mister Batson – it struck her: to Bill, Kal was the first real ‘super-hero.’ He’d mentioned once how much he admired ‘Superman,’ and how he’d always modeled his own heroic career after the Kryptonian who stood against Zod and Brainiac and Darkseid. It was so easy to succumb to brutality with their abilities and powers, Bill had once said when he was feeling frustrated, but Superman would never do that, so why should he? A snicker very nearly escaped her lips as she beheld the strange sight before her. In his Captain Marvel form (and his unpowered form as well, she had to admit), Bill was at least four inches taller than Kal-El and considerably more muscular, but he might as well have been a teenage girl meeting a famous singer from the way he grinned and generally acted the fool.

“So, Bill,” Kal-El said a few moments later, “I understand you are a reporter.”

“Yes, sir,” Bill replied. “I’m only an intern at the moment, “but I will be graduating from journalism school in May and hope to land a job at one of the stations or papers in Fawcett City.”
“I was a reporter once,” Kal said.

“You still can be,” Kara pointed out, frowning tightly at his expression.

“Perhaps.” Kal-El promptly redirected the conversation back to Bill and his plans, but Kara could not quite shake the strange weight she’d sensed in that statement. When she came to Earth, in either life, she’d not understood his strange desire to be a journalist, but over time, the purpose it served to give him a closer connection to these short-lived and far too fragile Earthlings became quite apparent. He’d needed the anonymity, the ability to walk among the humans without any of them realizing who he was, and he’d thrived on it. Had things changed so much for him? Was it because that Lois woman had married the non-human who play-acted at being a man? Surely he’d paid her a visit in the week that he’d back.

Despite her fears and concerns, though, Kara said nothing. She would watch him, help him when she could, intervene when she thought was appropriate for a family member, but there was little else she was able to do.

And then, she wondered: where was Diana?

He looked down on Washington and wondered if this was wise.

Clark knew that his presence had been logged – in the last five minutes alone, six drones had swept him with radar and at least three heavily armed Blackhawk strike fighters were orbiting the city while operating on complete radio silence. The right people were aware that he was here but still, he waited. To do otherwise would be impolite and, if Bruce’s theories were correct, he was treading very dangerous waters.

“He’s still standing there,” someone in the room he was mostly concentrating on said. “What do we do, sir?”

“Clear the room.” That was the voice Clark was most attuned to at the moment, and he clenched his fists so tightly that he could hear the muscles and tendons creak. “Now!” There was a sharp edge to that voice now, one accustomed to instant obedience, and the noise these humans made as they filed out of the room was almost deafening. It was enough, though, and Clark relaxed his constant push against gravity.

He fell slowly, the wind billowing his cape behind him, and the various observers instantly took notice of his steady descent. There was some concern, some lingering fear of the metahuman, but orders quickly raced down the chain-of-command to stay out of this, to remain on stand-by until further orders were received. According to the phrasing of those commands, there would be no mercy for anyone foolish enough to violate those directives.

The man he’d come to see stood calmly on the balcony of the White House, a glass of what smelled like scotch in one hand. He looked nothing like the man Clark knew him to be, but the amazing brilliance in the man’s gaze was the same, even if the eyes themselves weren’t.

“Superman,” President Alexander greeted with a smile. “To what do I owe the honor of your visit?”

“Hello, Lex.” Clark crossed his arms over the House of El symbol, noting how easily the president concealed his physical reaction to the remark. To the ears of a Kryptonian under a yellow sun, though, it was not enough. Alexander’s heart thudded incrementally faster and his breathing patterns altered just a tiny step. “I can hear your heart,” Clark said, “and see the electrical signals in your
brain. To me, they’re as distinctive as a fingerprint.” That wasn’t entirely true – he suspected he might have that level of fine control in another fifty years if he really worked on it – but the extent of his abilities were already so wildly overrated that yet another exaggeration wouldn’t hurt.

“Well, then,” Lex Luthor said through the clone’s lips, “I guess there’s no point in me lying about it anymore, is there?” He sipped from his glass. “A pity, really,” he added. “I was beginning to enjoy this job.”

“Then keep doing it,” Clark said. “You don’t have to go back to the way you were. The way we were.” He exhaled deeply. “History will record that President Alexander was a great man who did wonders for his country and for the world.”

“But I am not Alexander,” Lex said. “My name will go down in the dustbin of history alongside other great failures.” He scowled. “It will top the list, actually.” He finished his brandy. “Before you ask,” Lex continued, “I didn’t kill Alexander. That damned fool killed himself.”

“How?”

“A prostitute he’d been seeing on the side tried to blackmail him,” Lex said with a disgusted shake of his head. “He shot her, then shot himself.”

“And you just happened to be there when it happened.” Clark’s disbelief dripped off his words and, to his surprise, Lex smirked.

“The two fools arranged to meet at an abandoned LexCorp laboratory that I was hiding out at.” He shrugged. “It wasn’t difficult to see the advantages of assuming another man’s life, especially one so prominent and powerful.”

“What about his family?” Clark asked with a scowl of his own. “His wife, his two children. They would have noticed the difference.”

“Can you believe,” Lex asked with a sour expression, “that they didn’t notice something was strange about me until I actually started paying them attention?” He glanced in the direction of the sleeping quarters. “I admitted the affair Alexander was having to Madeline and then begged forgiveness.” His heartbeat did something strange – Clark almost frowned; he’d heard that same sound before, when Bruce mentioned Selina, or Lois looked at Richard, or Bill laughed at something Kara said – and he offered a wry smile. “We worked through those problems and since then, we’ve been deliriously happy.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “I shall miss that as well, I think.”

“You don’t have to.” Clark floated closer to the balcony, observing how Lex tensed. “You’ve done amazing things as Alexander, Lex,” he said. “You can keep doing amazing things.”

“As Alexander.” Lex glowered. “Not as myself.” Again, his eyes turned in the direction of the family quarters.

“People won’t remember me by the name I call myself either,” Clark said with an annoyed expression. “When the legend becomes fact,” he added without thinking, “print the legend.”

“Of course a reporter would say something like that,” Lex mumbled. He laughed out loud at the look Clark gave him. “Yes, Mister Kent,” he said. “I know who you are. Or were. I am no fool, after all.” His smile slid away as he glanced away for a third time. “Or perhaps I am,” he murmured. “This would have been easier had you never come back.”

“I had to,” Clark said. “This is my home. I love this planet.”
“As do I.” Lex placed his empty glass down on the railing. “I have hated you for so very long,” he said, “that I cannot imagine a time when I did not.” His eyes flickered away, then turned inward. “And yet, Alexander, for all of his faults and hypocrisy, was a very great admirer of yours. Even when he was doing things that he knew were wrong, he wanted to be more like you.” His expression darkened. “Perhaps that is why he was a better man than I.” Clark blinked – thanks to his enhanced senses, he detected absolutely no deception in Luthor’s words. Perhaps … perhaps this would not end in blood and fire after all. Bruce had warned him that the man in front of him could never be trusted while Diana urged him to follow his instincts even as she hinted at agreeing with their Gotham friend. Before he left, before Rimbor and his firsthand observation of true evil, he would have agreed with them both, but now, he wondered. Surely no man was so far gone that he could not be saved?

“No,” Clark said in response to Luthor’s last words, “he wasn’t.” Lex’s eyes snapped back to him. “I have a friend who dug into Mister Alexander’s life before you … assumed it…”

“Wayne, I presume.” Lex smirked again. “You must congratulate him for me – until I had the power of the federal government, I never once suspected he was the Batman. Oh, I thought he bankrolled the Bat, of course, because that seemed to be the most logical action for a man of his breeding and means to take, but actually being the Bat? That never occurred to me.” He reached for his glass, then frowned when he saw that it was empty. “As far as I know,” Lex continued, “no one else has put those pieces together.” He flashed Clark a grin. “But then,” he said, “most of them have never faced the Bat’s formidable abilities either.”

“Before you assumed Alexander’s life,” Clark repeated, hoping he didn’t look startled at the revelation about Bruce’s identity being penetrated, “he was not a good man. Since you became him, however, he has become a paragon of virtue, drive and the American spirit.” He lowered his arms. “There is absolutely no way he would have become this,” he said, gesturing toward the man standing in front of him. “This is all you.” Lex frowned again. “I’m going to have a press conference tomorrow,” Clark said, “where I confirm to the world that I’m actually back and I’d like your approval to resume my duties as Earth’s champion, Mister President.”

For a long moment, Lex was silent. He stared at Clark with no expression at all on his face. When he spoke, his voice was low and hard.

“I will not be blackmailed, Kryptonian,” he began, but Clark quickly interrupted him.

“This isn’t a blackmail attempt, Lex,” he said. “This is two men who have the unlikely chance to actually start over, to pretend the past didn’t happen and forge a brand new relationship based on things like mutual trust and hope for the future.” When Lex did not respond, Clark continued. “You’re afraid that the world will forget you, that history won’t remember your name, but I am living proof that we are what we make ourselves to be.” He drifted another inch or so closer. “My parents – my Kryptonian parents – wondered why a child could not aspire to something greater than what society had intended or thought them worthy of. Now, I wonder why grown men can’t do the same.”

“This is why you are so dangerous, Mister Kent,” Lex said with a wry smile. “You make people want to be better.” He held up a hand when Clark was about to speak. “I promise you nothing. Tomorrow, I might choose to sink another billion dollars into some absurd project meant to kill you.”

“Or, you might not.” Clark gave him a slight smile. “Think about it, Lex. Together, you and I, we can accomplish wonders.” He pushed against the planetary gravity and floated into the sky. “Good night, Mister President,” he called out as he climbed higher. Behind him, he heard Lex sigh and mutter something under his breath about being an idiot before returning inside to order a stand-down from the alert status. Clark could still see him and he almost held his breath when he saw Luthor
reach for one of the photographs he kept on his desk.

“You damned fool,” Lex murmured as he stared at the photograph of Madeline Alexander.

“Do you think he can be trusted?” Diana asked as she became visible once more. Had he not been aware of her heartbeat the entire time, Clark would never have known she was there. It was an ability of her curious new gauntlets that she was still honing, though she admitted to finding it ironic that she, who was incapable of telling a lie, could conceal herself from sight by manipulation of Hephaestus’ shield. Clark glanced at her, once more marveling at the beauty he saw. Of all the people he’d spoken to since returning to Earth, only she was completely unchanged from how he remembered her. Silver threaded Bruce’s hair now, though he was still in astounding physical shape, and Lois had visibly aged. Even Kara looked so different from how he recalled but Diana? She was exactly the same.

“I don’t know,” he replied as they swam through the air. He felt her shield push across his body and the wind died away. They continued their leisurely flight, but no longer were his words lost to the wind. He had no difficulty understanding what she said when they flew together, but she did not have his senses. “I think he genuinely cares for the Alexanders … love does strange things to people.” At this, Diana looked away and Clark heard her heartbeat change slightly, but he did not mention it. Not yet, anyway. There would be time for that later. “What do you think?” he asked.

“I think this is a fool’s mission,” Diana replied before giving him a smile, “but you have forced me to rethink many things over the years, Kal.” She returned her eyes to the sky in front of them. “If he has changed as you think—”

“As I hope,” Clark quickly corrected her. She gave him a nod.

“As you hope, then. If he has changed, then he will be a powerful ally.” Diana was silent for a long moment. “It is possible,” she mused, “that I may have misjudged his reasons for deployment of the orbital weapons.” She shook her head. “But I will require proof before I make any decisions.” When she glanced at him again, he tensed at her expression. “Do you mean to tell the rest of the League about this? That Luthor is president?”

“No.” Clark frowned. “I can trust you and Bruce to not say anything, but no one else.”

“I will not lie should someone ask me about him.” Clark rolled so he was facing her while still traveling in the same direction they had been heading.

“So do you think I’m wrong?” he asked. “Should we tell the League?” Once again, Diana was silent. He noted how her hand fell to the lasso at her side. Finally, she shook her head.

“No, I think you are correct.” She made a sour face. “There are many in the League I would trust in battle but would not trust to hold onto a secret were it given to them in a cloth bag.” Once, Clark would have laughed out loud, but pain had accompanied laughter for such a long time that he simply smiled instead.

They dropped down out of the sky mere minutes later, and Clark let her take the lead as they angled toward the Fortress. It struck him then that this was more her home now than it was his. For all of his talk earlier to Luthor about this world being his home, the truth of the matter was that he no longer had one. Kara had taken over the Kent farm following his ‘death,’ his apartment in Metropolis was long ago taken over by someone else, and even the Watchtower was more of a League possession than a personal one.

“Are you well?” Diana asked when he hesitated at the open doorway leading into the Fortress. She
was looking at him with open concern in her eyes. There was another emotion there as well, one that Clark loved seeing but was afraid to act upon. If he closed his eyes, he could still feel that woman’s whips crawling across his skin…

“We need to talk,” he said, firmly burying those memories under a layer of ice. The Fortress A.I. had been quite helpful when he queried it about Kryptonian methods of memory suppression. Those techniques tended to dull emotional reactions, but right now, they were the only thing that let him stay upright. “About us.” Diana glanced away, then returned her eyes to him and nodded.

“Do you wish me to start?” she asked simply. When Clark blinked, she pulled her Lariat free and wrapped one arm up in its coils before offering the rest to him. “I love you with all of my being, Kal,” Diana said hopefully. “I make no claims on you,” she began, but Clark spoke over her.

“When Darkseid held me,” he said through clenched teeth, “there was a woman who looked like you.” Her expression started to freeze up, but the words continued to tumble from his lips. “I understand now why your mother is so afraid of men.” The implication in his statement struck her like a bus.

“And seeing me reminds you of her,” she whispered before closing her eyes. “I shall retire to Themyscira then,” she began but Clark took a single blurring step closer to her.

“Please, don’t,” he said. “You – memory of you – was the only thing that kept me sane. She was sent to cause pain because they knew I saw her and thought of you.” He lifted a hand and touched her face with his fingers. “I want to heal,” he said softly, “so that I can love you the way you deserve.” Her eyes softened. “I don’t want that … that woman to be a shadow between us.” Diana smiled.

“She will not be.” Her whispered words sounded like a cross between a prayer and a promise. Diana looked down and took his hand. “When you died,” she said before correcting herself. “When we thought you had died, I felt that a part of myself was lost forever.” Her eyes welled. “I too am injured.” She pulled his captured hands to her chest, right over her heart. “Here,” she said. “Aphrodite visited upon me a most grievous wound that I feared I would never recover from.” Clark swallowed as he became aware of exactly where his hands were. “But you are here,” Diana said, “and I would not lose you again.”

And so saying, she led him deeper into the Fortress where together, they could begin to heal.
Heat Wave Blamed For Crime Spree

Published July 15, 2028 / Vicky Vale

GOTHAM CITY, IL – A surge in street-gang violence during the heat wave of the past several weeks has left at least thirteen people dead and more than two dozen injured throughout Gotham.

In the East End on Saturday morning, a 20-year old man was killed and five people wounded during a gang-related shooting and traffic collision after a birthday party, police said.

“I would definitely say that the heat is a fact,” said Corporal Richard Grayson. “Crime picks up when gangsters start having parties.”

LIVE UPDATE: Gotham entrepreneur, Jack Drake, was shot in an attempted carjacking at approximately 9:17 a.m. His current condition is listed as critical. More as it becomes available.

IF THERE WAS A PLACE ANYWHERE IN CREATION WORSE THAN A HOSPITAL TO WAIT FOR BAD NEWS, BRUCE DIDN’T KNOW WHERE IT COULD BE.

He and Selina had rushed here the instant they heard the news about Jack where they found Tim and Cassandra already present, with the former sitting next to his step-mother of barely a year, Dana, and holding her hand tightly while Cass sat on the other side of Tim, doing the same for him. The moment Bruce saw the young man, his step faltered. There was no expression on Tim’s face, no rage or fear or grief. He looked to be completely disconnected from everything and a terrible sense of déjà vu coursed through Bruce. It was liking looking in a mirror – he had seen that same blankness stare back at him in mirrors for years after his parents were taken from him.

“He’s in surgery at the moment,” Tim said calmly, emotionlessly, in response to Selina’s opening question about his father’s status. He looked at her as he spoke, but Bruce honestly wasn’t sure if the young man actually saw her. “He was shot four times,” the young man continued in that eerie, flat voice of his. A door opened and Tim’s head snapped around toward the sound, but it was only a nurse carrying out her duties.

“The doctors haven’t told us anything,” Dana murmured, her eyes distant. Tim pulled his stepmother closer and let her sag against him.

“I’ll check around,” Bruce said abruptly. “And get coffee.” Tim barely acknowledged the statement and Dana appeared to not have even heard it, but Selina nodded as she took the seat on the other side of the new Mrs. Drake and draped her arm over the woman.

“Don’t need coffee,” Cassandra declared. She didn’t budge from where she sat, still holding onto Tim’s hand, but looked up and met Bruce’s eyes. “Bring food instead,” she instructed. Bruce nodded and silently backed away.

None of the doctors he cornered could (or would) tell him what he needed to know, but he was familiar enough to them that they did not dare simply blowing him off. Selina texted him as he bludgeoned his way through the hospital bureaucracy, advising him that Helena was bringing Barbara with her, and Bruce decided to postpone his plan to find one of the more useless
administrators and beat a status update out of the man in favor of getting the coffee and food. He wasn’t remotely surprised to find Alfred already in the cafeteria, a rather significant treasure trove of coffee-flavored water and things that looked vaguely edible arrayed on a table awaiting transport.

“Beat me to it, old man,” he said as he approached. Alfred gave him that wry half-smirk of his.

“Anticipating you is part of my job description, sir.” Bruce smiled as he secured the heavier and more awkward of the parcels.

“Remind me to give you a raise, then,” he said.

“Of course, sir.” Alfred smiled again. “It shall be on the top of my list.”

They were halfway back to the waiting room when a feral pack of vulture reporters swarmed toward them, shouting their stupid questions at him and thrusting microphones into his face. Bruce blinked against the blinding lights of their cameras and scowled fiercely. He recognized most of them – local television station field reporters, none of whom were well known for their subtlety or tact.

“You want a sound bite, do you?” Rage swam in his stomach and he barely controlled the urge to smash some of these punks into the wall. A broken jaw would definitely make them think twice about ambushing the family members of victims, wouldn’t it? “The Drakes are very close friends of mine,” he said through clenched teeth. “I consider them family.” He pinned one of the more aggressive reporters with the type of glare he usually reserved for criminals and psychopaths. “And because of that,” he continued with a grin that did not come close to touching his eyes, “I will personally make it my mission to utterly and completely destroy the first person who invades their privacy with these kinds of senseless questions.” His expression darkened. “Don’t even think about pushing me on this,” he almost snarled, his gaze sweeping through the crowd.

As one, the reporters fell away from him, some very clearly unsure what to do next, and Bruce stormed through the hallway, Alfred several steps behind him. He caught sight of several nurses eyeing him with newfound approval – strange that; he hadn’t been able to get them to even tell him a damned thing about Jack earlier – but he ignored them as he and Alfred crowded into an elevator.

“I probably shouldn’t have said that,” he murmured once the door slid shut. “Lucius is going to be freaking out.”

“On the contrary, sir,” Alfred replied, “you told them what every person in a similar situation has wanted to say.” He flashed his teeth in a wide smile. “Most of them, however, do not have the wealth to back up such a threat.”

Selina gave him a tight, amused nod when they entered the waiting room – on the far wall, he could see the television was tuned to the local news which looked to be running his brief statement from earlier but the set was muted, so he couldn’t tell how they were responding to the explicit threat – and jerked her head. From where she sat, Helena shot up from the chair and stepped forward to begin handing out the drinks to those who needed them. That should not have amused Bruce as much as it did, especially since, as far as he knew, Selina remained unaware of Ms. Bertinelli’s parentage.

“Any word?” he asked. Both Selina and Cassandra shook their heads, but Tim barely reacted. He was still staring at the far wall, his expression distant and unfocused. For her part, Dana Drake was slumped toward him, her head resting on his shoulder and her eyes closed. She looked much older than her actual age. “You need to eat something,” Bruce said softly as he offered Tim one of the things that almost looked like a sandwich.

“Yes,” Cassandra said quickly. She released her hold on Tim’s hand and took the sandwich from
him before peeling off the crusts – which reminded Bruce after the fact that Tim never ate bread without doing that himself – and forcing the dry bread and meat into the hand she’d just let go of. Tim stared at the sandwich as if he didn’t recognize it, but Cass touched his arm, drawing his eyes to her. “Eat,” she instructed and Tim silently obeyed. She retook his hand the moment the sandwich was gone and Bruce could not help but to notice how tightly Tim held onto her. Had the nature of their relationship changed? He knew that the rest of the family believed him oblivious to how close Tim and Cassandra had become over the years, but that was mostly due to his intentional decision to not acknowledge the rather significant elephant in the room. They weren’t sleeping together as far as he knew, but honestly, that seemed to be the only thing they didn’t do together.

Time seemed to have no meaning in this room. Bruce sat in the stiff, uncomfortable chair next to Helena for what felt like ten hours only to discover that barely five minutes had actually elapsed. He briefly consulted his phone, shooting a pair of messages to Lucius apologizing for being unable to make their planned meeting this afternoon, and then another message to the person on monitor duty at the Watchtower – Cyborg as it turned out, though that wasn’t a big surprise as Victor almost lived at the orbital space platform since his father’s death – but received such a foul look from Selina that he pocketed the phone once more. Helena ducked out of the waiting room twice to take calls, and the second time, when she returned, she brought with her a handful of young people that Bruce almost did not recognize since none of them were wearing their more familiar garb. Impulse crowded next to Cass, and Superboy lounged in a nearby corner while Star Girl and Mary Marvel dragged a pair of chairs across the room to sit within arm’s reach of Tim. From her confused expression, the newly awakened Dana obviously did not know who any of these people were – and Impulse’s constant use of ‘Rob’ as Tim’s name certainly did not help her comprehension – which confirmed Bruce’s theory that she was not yet clued in on the secret. Frowning darkly at the sheer number of people present who did know, Bruce wondered if he shouldn’t just have a press release drafted.

“We cornered the suspect on Breyfogle,” Richard announced when he joined them some time later. He was still wearing his police uniform and looked utterly exhausted. “He drew on the arresting officers,” he continued as he scrubbed his fingers through his hair. “By the time I got to the scene, the EMTs had already called it.” He crouched before Tim and dropped a hand on his shoulder. “I can’t stay, Tim.”

“Go.” There still wasn’t even the slightest spark of light in his eyes when Tim spoke. “Dad would understand.” Richard gave Cassandra a look that Bruce wasn’t able to make out and she nodded.

“Keep me updated,” Richard said, mostly directing his words in the direction of where Barbara and Helena sat, but Bruce didn’t know which of the two he was addressing. From the frosty glares both women shot him before returning to their quiet conversation, he was evidently in the doghouse again, but as to why, well, that was anyone’s guess and frankly none of Bruce’s business.

Another sixty or seventy hours passed in the time it took Bruce’s watch to advance thirty minutes, and the tense atmosphere in the tiny room grew steadily more oppressive. Dana had roused from her shell-shocked stupor enough to actually start paying attention to the discussions taking place around her and from where he sat, Bruce was able to identify the exact moment everything clicked for her. It was Impulse’s fault, of course, as he made an offhand remark to Kon-El and indiscreetly called him ‘Supes.’ To her credit, she did not panic or scream or even say anything out loud. Instead, her eyes widened slightly, she gave the people piled into the room another subtle once-over, and then, she subsided into thoughtful if confused silence. Bruce glanced to Selina – she looked at him in the very same instant – and he shot her a question with his eyes. She nodded.

“Dana,” Bruce called out as he stood. Her eyes snapped to him and he offered a smile. “Would you like to get some air?”
“I would.” She rose, extricated her fingers from Tim’s and gave her stepson a quick kiss to the top of his head before abandoning her seat. Before she’d even made it to the door, Mary Marvel had taken her place and clasped Tim’s hand, but Bruce wasn’t sure he’d even noticed the change.

“Are you going to threaten me?” Dana asked quietly as they walked down the halls. Bruce gave a fierce scowl to a pair of young women he recognized as reporters and they blanched before very quickly retreating.

“No,” he replied. “You’re family.” He winced slightly. “Tim wanted to tell you after you married Jack, but I insisted he wait.” Until we were certain you would actually last was the unstated completion of that sentenced, but she was smart enough to recognize it, especially since she’d made more than a few jokes herself about being a trophy wife even though it became progressively clear that she did love Jack, despite their age difference.

“Does Jack know?” Dana shoulders slumped slightly as they entered the stairwell and began climbing. As a physical therapist, she was in excellent shape so neither of them would have any difficulty with the walk. “Of course he does,” she said before Bruce could answer. “That’s what they were always arguing about.”

“He is concerned about Tim’s safety,” Bruce admitted. Dana shook her head in self-disgust.

“And to think,” she muttered angrily, “I thought he was just afraid Tim was going to get Cass pregnant or something.” Bruce winced – those were the sorts of things he intentionally tried to avoid learning about the family. He still didn’t think that was actually happening since none of the normal signs of a sexual relationship were present, but he’d been surprised before. “Is this why Jack was shot?” she demanded in a tight voice.

“No.” Bruce’s voice was firm. “You were in the wrong place at the wrong time.” He scowled angrily. “This is Gotham, after all.” Dana stared at him for a long moment and Bruce simply stood there, meeting her gaze with a level stare. She must have seen whatever she was looking for because she nodded.

“God, what am I going to do if he dies?” she moaned.

Bruce managed to get her back to the waiting room once she stopped crying. Nothing had changed and Mary gave up her seat without having to be prompted, allowing Dana to reclaim her place at Tim’s side. Selina gave him a questioning look and he nodded. The situation with Tim’s stepmother was not resolved just yet – right now, she was in shock and not thinking clearly, but once this crisis abated, she would start asking questions again. She would have to be handled carefully, but that was a matter for another time.

Time continued its impossibly slow crawl forward. Bruce took to pacing, but there wasn’t enough room for him to really stretch out his legs so he retook a seat next to Selina who almost instantly took his hand, as if to restrain him from once more standing.

The door opened.

And even before the doctor opened his mouth, Bruce knew.

The shrill alarm sounded long before the sun had risen, but Clark was already up and dressed.

He streaked out of the Fortress, gaining altitude and speed with each passing second, even as the Watchtower computer feed advised him of the situation. A typhoon off the coast of Japan was threatening mass destruction and even the most conservative simulations placed the expected death
toll in the low hundreds. So it didn’t matter that he had been dealing with Amazo only three hours ago or that right now, he felt unbelievably old and slow. There was work to do.

By the time he reached the outskirts of the storm system, it had reached a critical stage. Wind wailed and lightning danced across the entire horizon. With his enhanced vision, he was quickly able to scan the scope of the system, wincing as he took in just how large this was. Focusing on the center of the storm, he dove toward it, opening his eyes as wide as he could manage while concentrating on the heat lurking behind them. He needed to heat the air in the eye – if his calculations were correct, this would cause that air to condense into clouds which would cut off the inflow of energy fueling the storm. Japan would still get some heavy rain and high winds, but that would be it. At the last instant, he decided to try something else at the same time – most of this was guesswork on his part, but he remembered Barry telling him so long ago how he’d shut down a category five tornado by providing a counter-rotation. Clark wasn’t sure this would even help since he didn’t exactly displace that much air, but it certainly wouldn’t hurt.

He was exhausted and wrung out when he finally saw his efforts paying off, but Clark kept at it for another hour or so until he was satisfied that the typhoon was indeed collapsing. The Watchtower computer feed continued to send him updates – meteorologists around the globe were alternately fuming that he’d ruined such a beautiful natural event and giddily anticipating the strange new weather patterns that might emerge – but he was just too damned tired to really care.

“Alert,” the Watchtower A.I. advised him through the comm-line secured within the solar visor. “Separatist rebels in Georgia have announced intent to detonate nuclear device if demands are not met.”

Clark didn’t even bother sighing as he let himself fall back toward Earth. They’d been monitoring this particular group of terrorists for a while, but had held off acting because the Georgian government kept insisting that they had everything under control. Evidently, they had not.

The heat of re-entry was pleasant against his skin, but didn’t last long enough as he banked sharply toward the former Russian state. He easily located the terrorists in question – identifying the trigger man was one of the most important elements of a strike like this and he hated that he’d been forced by events to even memorize how such weapons functioned. There was no time to waste, not if the leader’s rhetoric was any indication, and he fell like a blazing meteor, smashing through the roof of the abandoned factory. The shockwave of his landing threw most of the separatist flying and Clark turned his heat vision on the weapon’s arming trigger before tearing the entire thing free of its housing. He found a solid grasp on the device and hurled them both into the sky at supersonic speeds. This time, when he entered space and faced the far distant sun, he had another reason other than a recharge. Twirling in place to gather momentum, he sent the bomb spinning toward the sun.

Back to Earth he raced, and he slammed through another section of the roof of that same Georgian factory with a shower of splintered concrete and metal. Most of the terrorists were still getting up from his first landing and they scrambled to their feet when they saw him rise from his crouch. A small few opened fire with their small arms, but a quick pulse of his heat vision quickly convinced them to drop their smoking weapons. He ignored most of them, honing in on their leader – this man was wanted by at least nine different countries for acts of terror and Clark had no intention of letting the man disappear in another hole.

“Stand down,” he ordered in flawless Georgian. He caught a hurled grenade and quickly cupped it with both hands so when it detonated, none of the terrorists were hit with flying shrapnel. Shooting a warning look at the man who had thrown it, Clark blurred toward the terrorist leader and grabbed
him by the shirt. “Order them to stand down,” he instructed. “This will be your only warning.”

“Kill him!” the man cried out and Clark could hear the distinct sounds of automatic weapons being charged. He sighed then, before casually tossing this man into a wall with just enough force to stun him. Turning back to the shooters, he shook his head in annoyance. They opened fire a moment later, but by then, he’d already blurred forward, batting weapons away and stiff-arming the terrorists with barely a fraction of his full strength so they were sent tumbling away. Flashes of heat vision turned the weapons into piles of slag, and he was back to looming over the terror leader before the man had even cleared his head.

“Let’s go,” Clark said as he grabbed the man and carried him into the sky. He located the approaching military convoy an instant later and quickly descended toward it. “Package for you, Captain,” he said as the Georgian commander leaped out of his truck to greet him. The terror leader groaned when Clark dumped him in the dirt from ten feet up.

“Sir, thank you,” the Georgian officer began, but Clark was already climbing back into the heavens, flying fast enough to break the sound barrier.

God, he was tired.

The rest of the day was more of the same: he helped Arthur deal with a conflict between illegal whalers in the Pacific Ocean and some of the more radical Greenpeace activists, then helped the newly formed International Aeronautics and Space Administration with an out of control satellite, before finally diving toward Metropolis to help Captain Sawyer’s special crimes unit shut down the new Toyman’s latest rampage. And that was all before lunch. As usual, the media tried very hard to corner him with questions about his recent activities, his strongly suspected relationship with Wonder Woman (since, more often than not, he was seen to be in her company ever since he returned to Earth) and even inanities like whether Metropolis had any chance of getting to the Super Bowl this year – they didn’t, not with their current third string quarterback who couldn’t throw a decent pass to save his life and a decimated offensive line, but Clark didn’t think it was his place to make comments about that sort of thing while he wore the suit – but he simply nodded at them, smiled, and took to the air as soon as his work was done.

He had a breather for about an hour and he ducked into the Watchtower to clean up and down a couple of sandwiches. Vic had Monitor Duty but, like most of the former Titans, Cyborg still treated him like he was some sort of Old Testament figure from legend which Clark normally hated. With his mood so scattered, though, and the previous night’s nightmares still fresh on his mind, he appreciated the solitude, ate his food, and then climbed into a shower just a degree or two shy of scalding.

There were three messages waiting for him when he re-emerged. Two were from Lois – she had five new ideas about how to resurrect Clark Kent, intrepid reporter long believed to have died in Kahndaq, and all of them were quite imaginative, his favorite involving amnesia, a friendly tribe of Africans, complete with a sob story about an arranged marriage – and the third from Kara, demanding to know when he was going come to visit so she could show him her company. He didn’t bother answering any of the messages but instead forwarded them to the Fortress where Kelex would no doubt pester him the moment he got home.

His head still ached from the earlier exertion with the typhoon – he checked on that as well, relaxing only slightly when saw that it did appear to be collapsing rather harmlessly – so he did not immediately return to Earth when he left the Watchtower. The feel of the sun’s rays was pleasant, almost as soothing as one of Diana’s caresses, but another alarm chirped inside his solar visor and he turned back to the insane, chaotic planet below him. Barely ten seconds later, he slowed to a hover
over the streets of Buenos Aires, just outside one of the larger banks, and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Please return the money, gentlemen,” he said in Spanish to the robbers. They stared at him for a moment longer before tossing aside their guns and turning to obey. The local police arrived within seconds and he climbed upward, wishing that Diana had not been forced to go home for some religious holiday that she could not get out of. Right now, he really needed her and her magic fingers and warm presence. The ever-present rage swimming in his belly was so very hard to contain – everywhere he looked, he saw Desaad or that miserable crone who sometimes worked beside him or, God help him, that damned Apokaliptian woman with the whips who the very thought of made his skin crawl, and he just wanted to unleash the full might of his power against them, to wipe them from the very face of the cosmos. Diana helped him work through that rage, through that sense of helplessness and impotent fury, and when the pain and misery and self-loathing was almost too much, she would hold him until the moment passed.

A riot in Kahndaq occupied the rest of the day, though there really wasn’t much he could do but show up and try to help contain the enraged populace as they vented their rage over the previous government’s abuses. His promise to ensure that food and medical attention was not diverted to the military was viewed with some skepticism, so Clark made an instant decision to prove this and airlifted one of the large cargo containers to the capital. There was a nice empty park to set it down and he blatantly threatened the current ruling junta with a removal by force when some of their soldiers tried to seize the foodstuffs, but the situation was no more secure when he left than it had been before he arrived.

“You have been very busy lately,” Lex said later that evening. The White House was hosting a dinner celebrating the Justice League and Clark had been strongly urged to attend. Under normal circumstances, he would have worn the ceremonial House of El battle armor to show the world that he and the League were grateful for the trust bestowed upon them, but with his schedule of late, he thought it wiser to stay in the hard-suit in case of emergencies. He wasn’t the only member of the League present – Kara was here (though she was wearing a formal Kryptonian suit), as well as Bill, Flash and the new Firestorm – but he was the only one that the president singled out for discreet conversations.

Thus far, Luthor in his guise as President Alexander had not resorted to his old habits and continued to gain accolades as the leader that the United States so desperately needed following a succession of less than competent politicians, each seemingly more corrupt than the one before. Bruce continued to believe that this was all part of some master scheme they were incapable of comprehending, while Diana, who had spoken to Lex several times in the past year or so thought the man changed. After so many years of dealing with this man’s hate – and returning it, if he was honest – Clark wasn’t sure what to think.

“I’ve had a lot of time on my hands,” Clark replied. He tilted his head to eavesdrop on the Secret Service radio frequency as they reported various statuses in case there was something he could help with, then turned his full attention back to Lex who was watching him with that so very familiar half-smirk that hinted at greater knowledge. It looked odd on this stranger’s face.

“The UN Secretary General called me this afternoon,” Luthor said. “You threatened to remove the entire Kahndaq ruling government.” Clark winced – he had, hadn’t he? – and Lex’s smirk fell away. “This sort of behavior worries quite a number of people, Kal-El.” He strode away, intercepting the Speaker of the House and her morbidly obese husband. Clark listened very briefly to the first part of their conversation – it was tax policy; the president supported a reduction of certain rates, an increase for others, and the Speaker felt exactly the opposite – and then tuned it out. He hated that Luthor was right. There were quite a number of people in positions of power still convinced that the League was
a means to controlling the planet. He was almost relieved when the Watchtower alert chirped.

By the time the California wildfire was put out, it was almost five in the morning. Clark contemplated returning to the Fortress for a few hours of sleep, but he couldn’t delude himself into thinking that he would do more than toss and turn or, even worse, have another one of those nightmares where he was hanging over the Pit with Diana holding the burning knife that was slicing through his skin, so instead, he climbed higher and higher, leaving the atmosphere and darting toward the sun. Even before he reached Venus, he could feel his fatigue falling away, like dirt being washed away in a shower. He slowed and then came to a stop, hanging there in the darkness and letting the sun do its work.

“Alert,” the Watchtower A.I. informed him. “Riot in progress at Stryker’s Island, Metropolis.”

Clark sighed.

And then, he went back to work.

Never before had Diana been as unenthusiastic over celebrating the Synoikia as she was today.

It was a relatively new festival, revived after centuries of disuse when the Bana-Mighdall joined them upon Themyscira some years ago and intended to remind both tribes of their respective history and origins. Diana had proposed the festival shortly after escorting her lost sisters out of the wilderness and back home where they belonged, and she still found it rather amusing that she alone of Amazons seemed aware that Hippolyta had modified an identical such ceremony from King Theseus, following his unification of Attica so very long ago. It was enough that Pallas Athena was to be honored for the queen, though at the request of the Bana-Mighdall, they had agreed also to honor the Egyptian goddesses, Bast and Sekhmet, who had protected the wandering tribe during their long exile. The more traditional of Hippolyta’s tribe continued to complain of the perversion of a festival meant to praise the gray-eyed lady, but Diana doubted Athena would have minded. From what Artemis had told her about Bast and Sekhmet – who might be two different aspects of the same goddess, though none of Artemis’ tribe could answer that question in anything resembling a concise manner – Diana suspected they would get along quite well with Lady Athena.

In recent years, the festival had become something of a major event for the two tribes – weddings occurred under the eyes of the patron goddesses, and troths were pledged; disputes were resolved peacefully and, in the event they could not be, the antipathy was set aside for a later time. The two queens – or rather, Hippolyta and whoever the Bana-Mighdall put forth to sit in their queen’s stead that particular year – sat in judgment over transgressions made against either tribe a member of the other or, in very rare cases, against both tribes. There would be feasting and dancing, laughter and merriment hand in hand with solemn religious observation and prayer. Because of its success and popularity, the two queens had even agreed to abandon it occurring only on alternate years and made it an annual thing. This year marked a change as it was the first that the Bana-Mighdall had the same queen they had offered the year before. Their internal politics were harsh, merciless and barely made any sense, but Queen Akila holding onto her title for an entire year without any actual challenges was certainly something worth celebrating.

Though she knew that she should be enjoying herself, Diana could not help to wish she was elsewhere, preferably in the Fortress with Kal. Just the thought of him made her smile – for all of her mother’s constant warnings about the dangers of men and their appetites, she could not think of a time when she’d been happier. And, she had to admit, her appetite for their lovemaking appeared to be even greater than his, though in his defense, he yet struggled with the trauma of his torture. Apart from that first night, he had not spoken to her of what he’d endured, though she’d tried to draw the tale from him. It would come in its own time, she acknowledged, but seeing him in pain, seeing him
hide his rage and fury by throwing himself so fully into his role as Earth’s champion made her ache.

Still, just the thought of feeling his body alongside hers once more turned her impatient and more short-tempered than she should have been. Had she been able to do so without offending her mother or any member of either tribe, she would have skipped this Synoika, but better than most, she understood the necessity of duty. But Hera help her, if any of her sisters brought before her another senseless feud over pomegranates or dates, she might very well lose her temper.

“You are in an odd mood this day, Princess,” Phillipus said after Diana ordered two such Amazons a harsh penance for disrupting the peace because of an argument over a pet dog. “Might I guess as to the reason? A desire to be away from here and back in a lover’s arms, perhaps?” She offered a knowing smile which stripped years from her still ageless face and Diana felt her face flame.

“Is it that obvious?” she asked. Phillipus laughed.

“To those of us who with eyes, it is,” the dark-skinned woman said. Her gaze flickered briefly to the queen who was seated next to Akila and deep in discussion. “I do not think your mother will be pleased to know you have taken a man to your bed,” she added very softly. “Especially not a superman.”

“Is that not my decision?” Diana forced the scowl from her face and watched her mother for a moment. “Will Akila last, do you think?” she asked. To her great credit, Phillipus immediately recognized the change of subject as a sign that Diana was done discussing her relationship with Kal.

“Your mother believes she might,” Phillipus replied. “She is young, but understands rule better than any the Bana-Mighdall have put forward in recent years.”

“She is iron in a pleasing shell,” Artemis announced as she drew closer. “We looked to your queen in this,” she added with a flash of teeth that was almost a smile. “It was hoped that when two such women clashed, great sport could be had by those observing, though Akila’s temper and quickness to bare steel may cause difficulties.” Diana blinked and then realized her friend was trying to be humorous. From her expression, Phillipus did not recognize the joke and automatically glanced toward the two queens, her hand dropping to the sheathed blade at her side. Artemis’ eyes danced – she gave Diana a fleeting grin before schooling her face once more to calm so when the captain of the guard looked at her, there was no sign that she was making light of the situation.

“If you will excuse me, Princess,” Phillipus said with a very slight bow of her head. She fast-walked to Hippolyta’s side where she assumed the position of bodyguard.

“And how is Akila?” Diana asked. “Truly?”

“Iron in a pleasing shell,” Artemis replied, flashing that smile once again. They walked slowly away from the two queens. “We truly did look to Hippolyta in this,” she added, “though I fear that I may have exaggerated certain things to your captain.”

“Such as your queen’s temper?”

“And her fighting aptitude.” Artemis shook her head. “Akila is a diplomat at heart though she has a spine of steel and eyes like a hawk.” Diana smirked.

“You sound as though are enamored of her,” she said with a wry smile. “Should I expect to see you pledging your troth to her soon?” To her mild surprise, Artemis’ good humor fell away.

“She has my allegiance,” the flame-haired woman said, “but nothing more.” She looked away. “There was one who I thought to woo, but her heart belongs to another.” With a forced smile, she
bowed her head. “Princess,” she said before walking away, angling toward a cluster of bickering Bana-Mighdall Amazons as if she meant to join them in their argument. At the last moment, though, Artemis’ body language changed and she intervened in the role of peacekeeper.

For her part, Diana watched her go and then strode toward the temples. She was no fool and had known perfectly well of whom Artemis spoke, but as the flame-haired woman said, her heart belonged to Kal. It stung knowing that she had hurt her friend in this way, but their’s had always been a casual dalliance, two friends providing one another comfort and affection in dark times. Artemis had never had issue with that until Kal re-entered the picture. Diana shook her head.

“Here you are.” Her mother’s voice pulled her from her prayers many hours later and Diana looked up from where she knelt before the icons. Hippolyta’s expression appeared torn between amusement and frustration, then flickered straight into disappointment and fear when she glanced at the idol of Aphrodite. “And again,” she said in a soft voice that somehow carried with it the ring of steel, “you pay homage to the goddess of love.” She pinned Diana with a look. “Is there something you wish to tell me?”

“There is,” Diana said as she rose to her feet, “but I will not because it is a matter of my heart and involves truths you do not wish to hear.” Hippolyta closed her eyes.

“He is a man, Daughter, no matter his world of origin,” she said. “He will betray you in the end. They always do.”

“And yet,” Diana retorted calmly, “you have agreed to let Men walk upon Themyscira.” Her mother recoiled at that – it was an act taken in response to the many heroic actions by the men of the Justice League over the years but had been most heavily influenced by the honorable actions of a single Atlantean boy who came to pay respects to a fallen friend. Even the Bana-Mighdall had been impressed by Kaldur’s actions and his obvious grief over Donna’s death, and Hippolyta had moved to rescind the law forbidding men on the island. Thus far, there had only been a handful, mostly artists and grizzled old historians, but it had given Diana hope she might someday be able to show Kal her home.

“Not him,” Hippolyta said flatly. “I will not have another Herakles on this soil.”

Fury flashed through Diana then, so hot and powerful that she actually took a step closer to her mother, the rage at the baseless accusation stamped on her face, but she caught herself before she did something particularly stupid and instead, bowed her head. She could sense eyes on them – there were sisters from both tribes watching, including Queen Akila who studied her with unblinking eyes – and swallowed the anger.

“Fear suits you ill, Mother,” she said before hurling herself into the sky. She heard the queen call out to her but ignored it as she accelerated higher into the sky, shattering the sound barrier as Hephaestus’ shield wreathed her. The moment she broke through the concealing magicks that enveloped Themyscira, she heard the communication feed integrated into her armor crackle and pop.

“Alert,” the Watchtower A.I. advised whoever was monitoring this channel. “Superhuman riot in progress at Stryker’s Island, Metropolis. Superman requesting backup.”

“This is Wonder Woman,” Diana said into the commlink. The ridiculous name so many on Earth used for her fell easily from her lips. “I am en route.” An attempted escape from prison by superhuman criminals was exactly what she needed. She could not wait to hit something.

And the sky boomed with her passing.
A week after he died on the operating table, Jack Drake was laid to rest.

Though she would go to her grave insisting that she was not part of Bruce’s Bat-cult, Selina found herself falling into the role of the team mom so easily that it frankly terrified her. Bruce slid back into his old habits, venting his rage on the criminals of Gotham with such fury that the emergency rooms saw a major uptick of broken bones and concussions. As would be expected, Tim was utterly useless at the moment, alternating between bouts of near murderous rage and moments where he seemed almost catatonic, which meant that Cass was also out of the equation since she was young Mister Drake’s silent shadow, there to keep him putting one foot in front of the other or to avoid doing something he would later regret. With the crime rate skyrocketing thanks to this stupid heat wave, Richard was too busy to do more than drop in and say hi before he was once more out there, on the street. His uniform was definitely different than the one he’d spent so many years in and he carried a gun now, but for all intents and purposes, his job was still the same. Helena seemed the sanest out of the bunch – which said nothing, actually, since she dressed up like a flying rodent and beat up thugs too – but she was spreading herself thin, trying to watch over parts of the city normally patrolled by Robin and Batgirl. And while Barbara helped as much as she could, she had far too much on her plate to do more than lend the occasional hand. Dumping this on Alfred wasn’t an option, especially with him struggling to get over a stubborn cold that had lingered on through most of the year.

Which left Selina.

With Bruce’s checkbook at her disposal, she’d taken over the funeral arrangements for Jack. His wife – widow, now – Dana tried to help, but like Tim, she wasn’t quite able to think straight and there were enough swindlers in this city to make something simple like this into a dangerous proposition at best. Unlike Tim, Dana did not have gang members to beat up on when she was especially frustrated, so Selina kindly but forcefully told her to stop worrying about the funeral. She threatened and cajoled those that needed it, hinted at terrible reprisals by the prince of Gotham himself when an especially slimy funeral director tried to talk her into paying four times the actual price for Jack’s coffin – having met Tim’s dad a couple of times, she consoled herself by thinking that he would approve of her steadfast refusal to pay more than she should, regardless of whether she had the money or not – and then finally signed the paperwork necessary. And when the harried funeral home’s accountant accidentally called her ‘Mrs. Wayne,’ she did not even notice.

The day of the funeral dawned hot and muggy, but clouds rolled in before the service moved to the actual gravesite and rain began to fall midway through the ceremony. Selina had been surprised to discover that the Drakes were Catholic – Tim was definitely not a believer, even if he had grown up with it – but the priest who conducted the Mass had known Jack all his life and that made the entire funeral feel more real. Most of the funerals she’d attended had seemed impersonal affairs, with clergy who had never even seen the dead person before they were called in.

“May his soul and the souls of all the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace,” the priest intoned, signifying the end of the graveside ceremony. Selina murmured a soft ‘Amen’ and held onto Bruce’s hand. He had been dangerously silent the entire time, still and seemingly calm, but she knew him well enough to see the conflicted emotions twisting around in his belly. They had not been forced to attend many since they began dating, but in the few that they had, she’d quickly learned how much he hated funerals.

Tim thanked the priest with the same sort of cold detachment that Bruce so often affected and then silently took his place next to Dana where he shook the hands of those who had come to pay their respects. At no time did his expression crack or change, even though his step-mother was barely able to speak without more tears trickling down her face. He even seemed oblivious to Cass’ steady, silent presence on his other side even if everyone and their brother noticed and whispered about what it
might mean. She was, after all, ‘Cassandra Wayne.’ Selina watched him for a moment, then glanced to Bruce who was doing the same. The expression on his face was one she could not begin to decipher, but he sensed her gaze.

“I thought he’d escaped the curse,” Bruce murmured. “He was the one who was going to go on and do something else with his life, something great.” He glanced toward Richard and Barbara, both of whom Selina realized were watching Tim with the same look in their eyes that Bruce had. “But this goddamned city wouldn’t let him.”

She wasn’t able to respond as a number of attendees chose that moment to join them, commenting on the loveliness of the ceremony and how wonderfully Jack’s son had grown up. Almost inevitably, some of these strangers – they were almost all Jack’s friends, not hers or Bruce’s – would make a leading remark about how lovely Tim and Cassandra looked together or how thankful they were that the local media was still steering clear after Mister Wayne’s furious interview went viral, and something in his face would change which the strangers would wisely take as dismissal.

“I spoke with Dana,” Helena announced when she joined them a short time later. As always, Selina marveled at the strange sense of familiarity she experienced whenever she was around the young woman, but she ignored it since she had a very good idea where it came from and focused on Helena’s words instead. “She’s going to move back to Fawcett City after this,” she said. “She doesn’t think she can stay in Gotham any longer.”

“I don’t blame her,” Bruce muttered. He scowled briefly before starting to pull his hand free from Selina’s. Recognizing his need, she let him go and watched silently as he walked to Tim where they began to speak softly.

“And Tim?” Selina asked in a low voice. Helena sighed.

“There’s no way he’s leaving after this,” she said before giving Selina a heavy look. “It’s the cowl for him,” Helena murmured.

The damned cowl. Selina scowled for a moment, recognizing the truth in those words. Richard was becoming more and more involved with the police department – he still operated as Nightwing from time to time, but anymore, he spent more hours out of costume than in – so Tim was very obviously Bruce’s heir in the unlikely event he would ever decide to retire. She watched the two for a moment, noting how close in height they were now. Bruce still had more muscle mass, though he’d just turned forty and was already complaining in that subtle way of his how hard it was to maintain his level of fitness, while Tim was barely seventeen.

Dana cornered Bruce to discuss some things moments later, and Selina watched as Cass followed Tim away from the gravesite. He said something soft to her and she nodded before stopping as he walked slowly away, seemingly without any real direction. On instinct, Selina crossed the short distance to where Cassandra stood, Helena a couple of steps behind her.

“He wanted to be alone,” Cass said in response to the questioning look Selina gave her.

“Right now,” Selina replied, “being alone is the worst thing imaginable for someone like him.”

“And I doubt he meant you,” Helena added. Cassandra gave them both that wide-eyed look of uncertainty of hers that could make someone forget how unbelievably lethal she could be, and then nodded. She jogged after Tim and took his hand. Selina smiled sadly at the young man’s refusal to push her away. She only hoped it would be enough. Whirling around, she walked toward Bruce who now stood alongside Lucius.
“Have the jet standing by,” he was saying. “We’ve still got that ski lodge in Switzerland, don’t we?”

“We do.” Lucius gave Selina a nod, then frowned slightly at Helena, almost unconsciously. A lot of people did that, actually, and it always made Selina smile and wonder what it was this person was responding to. Was it because Helena could pass as her sister? Or because she had some of Bruce’s facial tics? Or might Lucius have also known the real Helena Bertinelli before she was killed and recognize that this young woman didn’t look like her? A detective would have investigated that, perhaps even obtained a genetic sample to test against if said detective was especially paranoid, but Selina absolutely refused to do that. She was of the mind that, if Helena wanted her to know something, then she would tell her.

“Good. Have it readied for Tim.” Bruce started to speak again but Selina interrupted.

“And Cassandra,” she said. “She’ll be going too.” Bruce gave him a sidelong look.

“That was pretty much a given,” he replied flatly, which made her blink in surprise. Every time the question about whether Cass and Tim were a couple came up before, he pled ignorance or pretended not to be aware of how close the two had become over the years, so what had changed? Or had nothing actually changed and he was simply dropping an act? “I don’t know how long they will want to stay,” Bruce continued, “but let’s make sure they have access to a jet if they need it.”

“The foreign media won’t be as accommodating as Gotham’s,” Lucius said. “If some of the tabloids catch wind that they’re vacationing together…” He almost winced at the thought.

“Then let’s give them something else to focus on,” Bruce retorted before glancing at Selina. “How do you feel about a wild spending spree in Paris?” he asked. She smiled softly.

“We should have a very loud, very angry argument at a public place first,” she said. “Not here, of course,” she added when Lucius started to frown. “But otherwise, I will very gladly go to France and spend a large sum of your money for this very noble purpose.” Not long ago, they would have all laughed at such an absurd remark, and even Bruce would have smiled.

Once, but not today.
Kahndaq deputy industry minister shot dead

Published April 19, 2029 / Ronald Troupe

SHIRUTA, KAHNDAQ – Kandaq’s deputy industry minister has been assassinated by an unidentified gunman, Kahndaq’s official news agency has reported.

Mahmoud Quaraishii was shot twice in the head and chest on Sunday in an eastern neighborhood of the capital, Shiruta. Police believe the deputy minister was shot by someone traveling with him in his car, who spoke with him before opening fire.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack.

THE BEST PART ABOUT BEING A WATCH SERGEANT WAS THE AUTONOMY.

At the moment, with his endless paperwork shoved off to look at later, Richard was behind the wheel of a black and white with one of his new rookies in the passenger seat. Their district – the 19th – was perpetually short-handed thanks to a high turnover rate due to transfers and casualties, so no one thought twice about seeing him jump into a car with one of his junior officers for a ridealong even though official Gotham PD rules frowned upon the watch sergeant doing so. In any other district, he’d still be a patrolman himself with just over three years active service, but here in the 19th, he was a grizzled veteran of twenty-five. It was strange and more than a little depressing realizing that absolutely none of the officers who had manned District 19 when he joined the force were here anymore. Most were scattered to other, less violent stations, a lot were dead or medically retired, and far too many of them were behind bars themselves. The 19th didn’t have a lick of mercy.

Which led him to his district’s newest rookie, now sitting eagerly at his side. Hank Hall was only just out of the Academy but he had all the trademark bravado and anger that made the best cops here in the 19th. Unfortunately, it also led to the most burnouts and the biggest bullies, which was why Richard wanted to keep an eye on him. These streets were unforgiving and a good policeman had to learn when to admit that he’d done all that he could. Some of these people didn’t want to be helped and almost seemed to actually like their craptastic lives. Abused wives went back to their husbands, knowing the jackass would hit them again. Addicts who had cleaned themselves up relapsed and fell back into the bottle, or the needle, or the pipe. Paroled thieves turned around and stole something they knew they shouldn’t. And so on. Without learning that terrible lesson about human nature, without realizing that they couldn’t save them all, a good cop would likely turn into a bad one.

It was a lesson Richard still struggled with himself.

He turned onto Breyfogle, his eyes automatically going to the rundown apartment complex where Jack Drake’s killer had been shot last year, and he winced at how useless he’d been when Tim needed him. He thought of the young man as the brother he’d always wanted, but when Tim was at his lowest, he’d been too damned busy to do more than offer empty condolences. Naturally, that led to thoughts of his other life. When was the last time he’d donned the Nightwing suit anyway? He was pretty sure it was a team-up with Huntress to shut down a drug-running operation that was trying to spread out, but the only real memories he had of that was after, when Helena invited him
back to her place so she could patch up his injuries and they ended up in bed together again. It had been a mistake, one he kept making … no. One they kept making, and God help him, one he actually enjoyed making. Helena was so much damned fun, even when their clothes were on, and if he let himself, Richard knew he could fall really hard for her.

And that led him straight to Barbara and his desperate need to figure out what he was going to do. He loved her, he really did, but he didn’t think that he was in love with her, and he was fairly certain she felt the same way even though they kept refusing to admit the obvious. They’d tried out the cohabitation thing briefly, but she’d kicked him out after barely a month, and now they argued more often than they didn’t. He had to admit that this whole friends-with-benefit thing he had going on with Helena wasn’t exactly helping, but dammit, it wasn’t like he and Barbara were actually dating anymore. She was seeing that Kord guy these days and he just liked hanging with Helena with her terrible taste in movies and even worse taste in food…

He sighed.

“So tell me about yourself, Hall,” he ordered as they cruised through the neighborhood in response to an 11-54, suspicious vehicle. As Richard suspected, it was a Bat-cycle … no, two cycles, both partially concealed under an all too familiar tarp. Which meant that Tim and Cass were back in town. They’d been in Seattle for the last week, along with that team of New Titans, but this was the first he’d heard that they were in Gotham again. Knowing those two, they’d just got into town and donned the capes as soon as the sun went down.

“But much to tell,” Hall said. “Grew up in D.C., moved to Gotham to become a cop.” Richard gave him a baffled look.

“Hold that thought,” he said as he reached for the radio. “Fourteen seventy-one. I’m looking at those suspicious vehicles now. Looks like the Bats are out and about. Somebody’s going to be having a bad night.”

“Fourteen seventy-one, ten-four,” the dispatcher told him and Richard looked at Hall.

“Why the hell would you move here?” he asked. “Nobody wants to come to Gotham.” Hall shrugged.

“I did.” He looked out his window. “My brother died,” he said, “and I needed a change of scenery.”

“I know that feeling.” Richard said with a roll of his eyes. He had very fond memories of his years in Seattle, but this city had sucked him right back. It was like a black hole of pain and misery. “So, married? Girlfriend? Boyfriend? What?” Hall glowered.

“Was seeing this girl,” he said, “but she stayed in D.C. to finish school.” His expression went weird for a minute. “Strangest thing, though,” he said. “The girl who moved in across from me used to date my brother.” He smirked. “I used to tease them ‘cause their names sounded the same. Don and Dawn.” He went on for a bit longer, mostly complaining about this girl Dawn, and Richard wondered if Hall realized how he sounded. It didn’t take an expert in human relations to realize Hank was seriously stuck on this girl, so the guilt in his voice every time he mentioned her made sense.

“Have you considered asking her out?” Richard interjected when Hall trailed off after mentioning (for the fifth time in as many minutes) how brilliant this girl was.

“She was Don’s girlfriend, dude,” Hall replied crossly. “And it’s not like that.” Richard gave him a disbelieving grunt. “Well, it isn’t.” The radio crackled before Richard could point out all the ways
that it was like that.

“All units, we have an alarm sounding at Arkham.” Richard was already reaching for the radio when the words sank in. Arkham. Oh, hell.

“Fourteen seventy-one, responding,” he snapped into the radio handset before flipping the sirens on and punching the accelerator. He heard the other officers on this watch respond as well, and as he glanced out his window toward the far distant Wayne Tower, he felt his stomach squirm the instant the signal lit up the night. One of the crazies was loose.

They were the first to reach Arkham and Richard sprang out of the car, drawing his sidearm and gesturing for Hall to fall in behind him. The front door of the asylum was open and, even before he stepped through it, he could smell blood. There were three people down in the lobby and, at a glance, he could tell they were already dead.

“Fourteen seventy-one,” he said into his radio. “I am at Arkham. I have three eleven forty-fours. Officer needs assistance.” He glanced over his shoulder to Hall. “Stay close,” he ordered.

A flicker of movement in his peripheral vision caused him to look toward the source, which caused Hall to do the same. Tim stepped silently out of the shadows, his face hidden completely by the almost Bat-like cowl he’d adopted. He gave Hall a frown – the rookie almost lost it when Cass seemed to materialize out of the darkness next to him, but to his credit, he didn’t pull the trigger or otherwise do something stupid. For his part, Richard simply gave the two a quick nod and then ignored them as they raced ahead on silent feet. He could sense Hall’s eyes on him, but ignored it, even though his familiarity with the Bats was becoming something of a legend inside the 19th. Both his lieutenant and the captain tended to defer to him whenever one of the Bats were involved, which was something he had unsuccessfully tried to stamp out since it could conceivably threaten various identities. His concerns turned out to be unfounded: evidently, his district commander had been a beat cop when Richard’s parents were murdered and he remembered the Bat taking an interest in the case. With that fact and the public knowledge that Bruce had adopted him, it seemed almost a fait accompli to the officers of the 19th that Wayne was bankrolling the Bat-clan out of his own pockets. One or two posited the theory that Bruce was actually the Bat, but Richard’s own time in the suit and now, Tim’s ability to stand in for the boss when necessary, seemed to nuke that belief.

Richard still wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry at how close they all were to truth …

“Are we waiting for back-up?” Hall asked. His eyes were wide but he seemed in control of himself. It was a good question – official policy was to never enter Arkham after an alarm was triggered without less than four officers – but Richard nodded in the direction that Robin and Batgirl had just disappeared.

“Pretty sure we can count them as back-up,” he said. Hall nodded grimly.

“Then lead the way, Sarge,” the rookie declared. “I’ve got your six.”

They advanced deeper into the asylum – two more bodies were propped up against a wall, both apparently victims of a bladed weapon of some sort – but Richard paused only briefly to check that they were already gone before moving on. He checked the usual doors to ensure they were still secured – Two Face, Crane, Hatter – and he finally came to an open door. His heart began to pound heavily.

Inside, there was a single body, stretched out on the floor and stripped to his underwear. The man’s neck was torn open and his face was frozen in an expression of surprise. Richard’s breath caught when he recognized him. It was the lawyer who had appointed himself as Joker’s defense attorney
and had been lobbying the city to change how they handled him. Nothing ever changed – no matter how many people that monster killed, there would always be some idiot convinced that he could rehabilitated or was being treated unfairly by a corrupt system. That lawyer would inevitably find some legal loophole that would give Joker just the tiniest opportunity for escape and the sonuvabitch would take it. He exchanged a dark look with Hall.

“Fourteen seventy-one,” he said into his handset. “Joker is free. I repeat, Joker is free.”

None of this made any damned sense.

Clark floated in the air, staring at the insane topography around him. There were floating islands that bristled with trees, pink clouds, bright blue grass, and a bright yellow sun that did not actually feel like a sun to him. Three-winged birds darted through the air and he couldn’t quite figure out how they were able to remain aloft. Lizards and snakes and other reptile-looking things crawled upon the surface of the floating islands or, in some cases, dove off to land on a different isle. Thunder rang like a bell each time the insane pink clouds butted up against one another and streaks of golden lightning flashed in all directions before going quiet.

“So this is what going mad feels like,” he announced to his companions. Kara nodded quickly in agreement – she was watching the ridiculous landscape with as much confusion as he was – while Diana simply smirked. The fourth member of their small company was hovering in front of one of the three-winged birds – Clark’s head ached just trying to figure out the aerodynamics of that thing – with a goofy smile on his face.

“This place is fantastic,” Bill Batson exclaimed. He inched closer to the nearest of the floating islands and ran his hand through the blue grass. It sang in response, which made him do it again and again. Unfortunately, for all of his gifts, he appeared to possess no musical talent whatsoever.

“We have no time to waste,” Diana said. She consulted the strange object on her wrist and pointed. “Crius went that way,” she added before rushing off in the direction she’d indicated. Clark did not hesitate to follow and barely bit back a smile at Kara's muttered order for Billy to stop goofing off.

“What do we have a plan?” he asked as he drew abreast of Diana. She gave him a sidelong look that allowed him to see the frustration swimming in her eyes. Hermes had been decidedly unclear about how this Crius had escaped from Tartarus or how they could possibly stop him, but in his admittedly limited experience, the Olympians weren’t especially known for their helpfulness.

“If he reaches the Reality Forge,” Diana said, “he will be able to unmake the shackles holding his brothers prisoner. We have to stop him before he can do that.” Clark smiled tightly.

“That part I understood,” he said, even if it was only partially true. In all of his research into Greek legend, he’d never even heard of a ‘Reality Forge’ and Crius wasn’t exactly one of the better known Titans. He’d fought against the Olympians, had a few children of his own, but was mostly known for being the suspected grandfather of Hekate. Apart from that, there wasn’t much on him, not even what kind of abilities he might bring to the table in a fight. “Mostly I was thinking about the rest. How do we stop him? Or send him back to Tartarus?”

“We don’t even know what he’s capable of,” Kara added.

“He’s probably a super magic-user type or warlock,” Bill offered. “I mean, look at this place. Only a magic-user would think about retreating to a pocket dimension like this.” Clark exchanged a baffled look with Kara and then pinned her boyfriend with a look.
“What do you mean?” he asked with a frown. Billy looked at him with confusion on his face and then gestured.

“You don’t feel that?” he asked. “It’s raw magic at its purest form.” He pointed toward to a pair of those insane clouds. “That’s a magestorm right there – some idiot back on Earth is probably trying to build up enough power to become a god or something equally stupid.” The clouds slammed into one another, before violently imploding. Bill winced. “And right now, that would-be wizard just blew himself into tiny little chunks.” He shook his head. “Man,” he muttered, “I’d hate to be the guy who has to clean that mess up.”

Clark quite suddenly found himself viewing Bill in a brand new light. Until now, he’d never really understood what it was that Kara saw in the boy apart from her stated preference for very muscular men, but this was clear proof that Mister Batson was far more than just a flying strongman. He’d never really shown this side of himself around Clark – usually, the good captain was more of a fanboy, gushing over some of the more famous Superman fights – but it was good to know that at least someone had a clue about this place. He glanced at Kara.

“I guess we’re just the muscle,” he remarked. She flashed him a grin.

“If this Crius guy is Hekate’s grandfather,” Bill added, “it would make sense that he’s a super-mage too, right?” He glanced between them. “Right?”

“That was my theory as well,” Diana said. She glanced down at the glowing compass thing secured to her gauntlet and muttered a curse in her native language that was not the sort of thing one expected to hear from her. “He has realized we are coming,” she said.

“Then we go in hard and fast,” Clark said. Diana gave him an amused look which he completely ignored. Naturally, Kara had to ruin it.

“Just how I like it,” she murmured. Bill coughed – he almost sounded scandalized – but Clark tried very hard not to think about that as he scanned the ridiculous landscape with his enhanced vision. Were those … floating mountains? And waterfalls flowing up? His head ached more than normal.

*My kingdom for some physics that make sense,* he mused.

“That way,” Diana said as she floated closer to him. He felt her invisible shield wash over his body and, a moment later, she wrapped an arm around him. “Go,” she ordered. “As fast as you can.” Clark nodded as he made sure he had a secure grip on her as well.

“Try to keep up, you two,” he said before hurling himself forward, as fast as he could fly.

The sky did not boom as he passed.

It bled.

Bruce looked down upon Gotham and glared.

Barely three hours had elapsed since Joker’s escape and already, the city was entering the first stages of a mass panic. There were the usual recriminations on Arkham security, the furious calls for the resignations of everyone remotely involved in his incarceration up to and including the mayor (who had, according all reports, barricaded himself in his home), the police commissioner, and even the governor of Illinois. And that didn’t even include the race to get out of the city which had caused a
dozen pile-ups, twelve accident related fatalities and even more panic. It wasn’t even midnight and that monster was responsible for almost twenty deaths already.

His team was spread out over the city, hitting every known associate or potential ally for Joker with maximum pressure. Richard couldn’t join them as Nightwing thanks to the commissioner’s activation of all police personnel, but Canary was flying in on Ollie’s plane and there was a better than fifty percent chance Queen would join her along with Arsenal and Artemis. Bruce had even heard rumors that Flash and Impulse were both in Gotham as well, and he wouldn’t be surprised if Tim had called in the entire Titans team for back-up. Robin didn’t have the instinctive fear of metas that still troubled Bruce. He would make a good Batman someday.

“No good on East End hideout,” Oracle declared over his cowl’s headset. “Catwoman reports all clear.” Under any other circumstance, Bruce might have smiled at the comment. For all of her talk about not being a part of his ‘Bat-cult,’ Selina hadn’t hesitated for even a second to suit up and join this particular hunt. She’d even enlisted Nighma, who remained semi-rehabilitated (even if Bruce didn’t believe it for a second). Her reasoning was simple.

“This is the Joker,” she said, as if that explained everything. And it did.

“Status on Robin?” Bruce growled. Tim had gone into Chinatown alone since Batgirl was needed in the Diamond District to assist quelling a potential riot. In these types of crises, just the appearance of someone with a cape could calm some things down.

“This is Robin,” came the sudden reply. He sounded nearly as frustrated as Bruce was. “Dragons have completely abandoned their normal hideouts,” he said. “The whole district is locked down – I think if he shows up here, Joker will get shot in the face.”

“Good,” Barbara murmured, her comment probably not intended to go out across the airwaves. Bruce scowled again – like her, he knew damned well that Joker needed to be put down but no matter how much he wanted that maniac dead, he couldn’t be the person to do it. The instant he killed him was the instant he took his first step toward becoming just as bad. Already, he questioned the wisdom of letting animals like Joker or Crane or Dent to continue breathing. Everyone would be better off with them dead and more than a few ghosts would rest easier. He balled up his fist.

“Riot in progress at Blackgate,” Richard’s voice crackled over the line. “All available units respond immediately!”

Bruce was off the roof and gliding down toward the street even before he heard his adopted son requesting back-up. Knowing how much effort Richard put into keeping his police job separate from his night life, the riot in question would have to be a bad one for him to risk making this call.

“This is Batman,” he said into his throat mike. “En route.” Even as he spoke, he could hear the rest of the team responding.

“Robin en route.”

“Huntress, on my way.”

“Batgirl mobile.”

“This is Oracle,” Barbara said. “Redeploying aerial assets.” Her gasp was audible across the line. “Confirmed riot in progress.”

Bruce touched down a moment later and even before he had his bearings, the Batmobile skidded around a corner and screeched to a halt beside him. The passenger door opened and he spared Selina
only the briefest of glares before climbing in.

“You stole my car,” he growled as she punched the accelerator. Tires squealed and he was pushed back into his seat.

“Old habits and all that,” she replied. “Eddie’s looking into something – don’t give me that look – and I thought you might want this beast along with you.”

Bruce grunted and, with nothing else to do until they reached their destination, he flipped open the small computer station in front of him and scanned the feed from the drone now orbiting Blackgate. It was worse than he thought – someone, probably Joker himself, had blown a hole in the wall and the prisoners were running wild. Based on the thermal imaging, there was already a double-digit body count. He typed in a fast command, which changed the screen to a map with various dots representing the location of the assets at his disposal.

“Robin,” he said into his throat mike, “change of plans. We’re going to need a Tumbler.”

“Copy,” came the immediate response. Instantly, the dot representing Tim began heading away from Blackgate. Bruce went back to reviewing the drone camera footage.

“Oracle, have you confirmed Joker’s presence at Blackgate?”

“Facial recognition is running,” she replied. “Multiple hits, but he’s dropped out of sight since then.” Bruce scowled before looking up.

“Take Lobdell Street,” he instructed. “It’s faster.”

“No tonight it isn’t.” Selina replied. She flashed him a bright grin. “You make a terrible passenger,” she said as the Batmobile screamed through an intersection at ninety miles per hour. There was nothing else he could do but wait.

He only hoped they would get there in time.

---

The escaped Titan was every bit as terrifying in person as Bill had imagined.

A hundred feet tall, Crius was alternately horrifying to look at while possessing an amazing beauty in that stark way one could appreciate in natural disasters or storms. His skin was chalk white but rocky, with strands of equally pale hair falling away from his scalp. Both eyes gleamed like twin stars. To Bill’s eyes, the Titan was an arcane singularity, sucking in raw magical power with each breath, growing ever more solid. Lightning stabbed down into him, but he absorbed it, grew stronger, thicker, angrier.

This was not going to end well.

“Daughter of Olympus,” Crius rumbled, his voice thundering like a hundred thousand storms. “I shall not yield to you or your warriors this day.”

“We do not have to battle, Lord Crius,” Diana replied, her own voice crisp and solid. The magic around her swirled and danced as well, though it seemed to pull at Superman the most. He stood at her side, every inch the hero that Bill had grown up idolizing, but Kara insisted there was something wrong, that he had not healed from whatever nightmares he’d experienced while in space. She would definitely know better, but so far, Bill hadn’t seen anything.

“This was foretold eons before you were born, Child of Olympus.” Crius’ eyes flashed. “Ah. I see.”
The Titan turned to face them. “The moon has found her voice,” he said. “The time of tribulation is upon us.”

And without further warning, he attacked.

Raw magical force slammed into Diana, hurling her backward through the strange sky and into one of the floating islands that Bill knew to be the bedrock of all arcane arts. On Earth, those practiced with magic would be able to feel this blow – some, if they were very unlucky and were trying to tap into that particular conduit at that exact moment might even experience some terrible blowback.

With a roar of rage that shook the sky, Superman flashed toward Crius, smashing into the Titan with a blow that rocked the giant back a step. Heat boiled off the two – it had to be Superman’s heat vision but if Bill could feel it at this distance, he’d hate to be on the receiving end of that – and the horizon erupted in flames. Kara hesitated only a fraction of a second before blurring forward herself, her own heat vision erupting. Bill was about to spring forward, to join them, but something made him hesitate. Kara and her cousin were Kryptonians, and thus unaccustomed to dealing with things that operated in the mystic realm but he’d had to deal with this sort of craziness from the first day he called out the wizard’s name, and right now, the Wisdom of Solomon was telling him that things weren’t as they appeared. He looked again, this time focusing not on what he could see, but on what he couldn’t.

Veins of gold and silver coursed down from the sky, merging together into a river of light that swirled around a wisp of a shadow that did not seem to truly be there. With each earth-shaking blow delivered by one of the Kryptonians, the light pulsed brighter. It pressed in together, forming what looked to be a perfect sphere that had no substance, no mass or density. Bill reached out a hand, very briefly interrupting one of the tiny columns of gold. It was heat and life, rage and fear, and a dozen different emotions all at once, but most importantly, it was Truth. He glanced around, finding Wonder Woman immediately.

She was secured in place by bands of the silvery-golden light, though she struggled against her restraints. At his touch, the illusion hiding her from sight fell away and then, the ropes of light did the same. She gave him a look.


“You bring powerful allies to this place, Daughter of Olympus.” The speaker was there but he wasn’t. He stood before the swirling mass of pure magic but Bill could not make him out. Something blocked Crius from sight and Bill’s eyes kept sliding away from the wisp of a shadow of a god.

“Two children of the stars and one bearing the mark of a power as old as time itself.”

“I cannot allow you to unmake this world, Lord Crius,” Wonder Woman said as she floated down toward the swirling mass of light.

“And I will not return to Tartarus’ icy grip.” The Titan’s shadow solidified slightly, though his features remained out of focus. “Thus, we stand at an impasse, here on the verge of this age of tribulation. Will you slay me to save this world?”

“If I must.” Wonder Woman flipped her glowing lasso around left arm as she drew a gleaming silver sword seemingly out of the air. “I do not wish to take your life, Lord Crius,” she said. She stood there, floating in the air, the golden lariat coiling around her as if it had a life of its own and the blade of her small sword glinting so brightly one would think it was on fire. Automatically, Bill recoiled from that terrible weapon as the innate magics within him sensed its power. It was a weapon forged for one purpose: to kill a god. “Please, Lord Crius,” the princess said. “Let us find a peaceful solution
to this matter.”

The Titan was silent. Bill could sense the return of Kara and her cousin, and they took up silent positions around Wonder Woman.

“No,” Crius declared. “I fear this is beyond that.” He began to solidify once more. “I shall not return to that place so I must make war upon Olympus.” For a moment, Bill could see an impossibly beautiful face, shining from an internal light, but it vanished as the cloak of despair and rage settled over the Titan. “I shall regret this, Daughter of Olympus, for you have been forthright and honorable to me.”

“And I as well, Lord Crius,” Wonder Woman said. They both bowed their heads to one another. And then, the Titan Crius, who had been imprisoned for time immemorial, tried very hard to kill the world.

By the time he reached WayneTech, Tim could tell that the riot was in full swing.

He’d listened to as much of it as he could over the headset integrated into his cowl, but had killed the feed after the fourth urgent status report by Huntress, each slightly more desperate than the previous. Far too many of the police were tied up with various issues across the city, but it sounded as though the commissioner was directing all available SWAT units to Blackgate. Tim had even heard Gordon issue an unprecedented open-air shoot to kill order should any police officer see Joker. Later, when this latest madness died down, it was entirely possible that radio transmission might kill Jim Gordon’s career.

But then, this was Gotham. It might also catapult him into the mayor’s office.

He parked his bike in a shadowy section of the underground parking lot and then sprinted toward the access door. To his surprise, he found it unlocked and propped open. Glancing around, Tim saw no sign of a potential night worker sneaking a smoke break or, as had been the case at least twice, a pair of employees rendezvousing for a late night hook-up, but he proceeded in with caution anyway, just in case this was a trap. The coast looked to be perfectly clear, so he darted into the stairwell that led down to Applied Sciences and pushed open the door.

The entire level was lit up brightly, which shouldn’t have been the case, so he thumbed a pair of gas pellets from his utility belt and sprinted toward where the Tumbler was supposed to be parked. There were three present, two of which were painted black while the third was still the tan desert color, and as he approached, a familiar figure rose from a crouch behind the middle one. Tim blinked as he saw Lucius Fox nod at something before reaching for a cloth to wipe his hands. He looked satisfied but he visibly jumped the moment he realized he wasn’t alone. Tim’s heart sank – he really didn’t want to gas Mister Fox. It would almost be as bad as gassing Alfred.

“Oh,” Lucius said, glancing around as if he was looking for someone else. “I was expecting Bruce.” Tim’s step faltered at the implication that Fox knew how Bruce spent his nights but the older man kept talking. “You’ll want to take this one,” he said. “It’s geared more for riot suppression than that old piece of junk.” He jerked his thumb toward the other black Tumbler. “This one has tear gas canisters, onboard tasers, and I even got the LRAD working.” Fox stepped aside, triggered the Tumbler’s canopy to slide forward, and then tossed the control key to Tim. “Now, for plausible deniability,” he said, “I’m going to need you to destroy a wall when you leave so it looks like you stole this thing.” He pointed toward a bit of electrical tape stuck on a far wall in the shape of an X. “I’ve been wanting to knock that section out for months now so I can put in a garage door.” Fox grinned.
“I can do that,” Tim said as he approached the Tumbler. Very discreetly, he returned the gas pellets to their proper places on his belt. “Any other tricks I should know about?” he asked. Lucius smiled again.

“There’s a crate of CS grenades on the seat,” he said before turning away and reaching for a pair of sound dampening headphones. “Good luck!” Mister Fox called out as Tim dropped into the driver’s seat and started the engine. The Tumbler growled agreeably and he quickly checked all of the readouts. Everything read green and his seat slid down as the canopy sealed. Under his cowl, Tim grinned as he activated the ordnance.

The wall exploded outward in a shower of debris and masonry, but Tim paid it no mind as he gunned the engine and aimed the Tumbler toward the gaping hole. He flashed through it, then tore through the chain-link fence that blocked the path to the main road. The Tumbler’s tires squealed as he fish-tailed slightly, and then the whole vehicle sprang forward with an angry roar.

“Robin, en route,” he said into his headset as he weaved the Tumbler through the Gotham streets. He caught sight of at least one police officer noticing the vehicle’s passage and reacting with what was very clearly an aggressive ‘go kick ass’ series of gestures, but it was the similar reactions he saw by the civilians who dared the night streets that made him shake his head. Only in Gotham would they greet the sight of something as heavily armored as this thing with approval. He wondered if Bruce had ever thought of selling them to the GCPD.

Sirens were wailing nonstop as he approached Blackgate and, as the prison came into sight, he was slightly surprised to see the SWAT teams arrayed in such a way that there was a huge gap in their center. All eyes turned toward him.

“Really?” Tim shook his head. “Okay, fine.” He gunned the engine again and then, as he flashed into the gap they’d provided, he triggered the boost for the rampless jump. The Tumbler hit the ground hard, then slid across the pavement as he hit the deploy button for the riot control canisters. In a matter of seconds, the entire courtyard was wreathed in tear gas. “This is Robin, on-station,” Tim said into the radio line. He heard the sound of bullets ricocheting off the vehicle’s armor – so, some of the guards had gotten guns. That was just lovely.

“Loiter and provide support as necessary,” Bruce ordered from wherever he was. Tim grimaced before flipping a pair of switches that would bring the LRAD online. A sonic weapon, it would allow him to disperse some of the more aggressive prisoners without resorting to more offensive actions.

“Throw down your weapons and surrender,” he ordered via the loudspeaker. A cluster of prisoners responded with gunfire and offensive gestures, so Tim manipulated the controls to aim the LRAD at them and then gave them a pulse of sound.

Their resulting reaction was … satisfying.

Crius’ blow sent Kal spinning into the sky.

Diana’s first instinct was to spring toward his aid, but she suppressed that urge and instead twisted up and around the Titan’s blast of eldritch energy aimed at her. She caught some of it on her shield, but dodged as much of it as she could. A second and third pulse of light flashed toward her, and to her disgust, they curled down after her as she dove toward cover.

“Shazam!” The Captain’s bellow shook the entire landscape and Diana glanced up to where he hung, suspended within one of the pink clouds of raw magic. His lightning bolt coursed down,
sizzling and brighter than ever before, but splashed upon Crius’ shadowy form and broke apart like rain upon rock. With an almost casual gesture, the Titan hurled dirt in the air toward Bill; it transformed into immense slabs of rock that grew in size with each passing moment even as the strange cloud he was within hardened into a prison of amber.

A streak of white and red tore through the giant boulders, shattering them into a billion spinning fragments, and Kara’s heat vision exploded across Crius’s shadowy form – he cried out in pain and recoiled, then struck her with impossible speed and power a microsecond before she could land her own punch. She tumbled away, bouncing across the blue grass and where she touched it, the grass turned burnt orange.

In that moment, Kal returned, streaking down out of the strange sky at such speed that the air itself seemed to catch fire. Diana saw him smash into an invisible barrier protecting Crius and then go spinning away. He almost instantly righted himself and blurred back toward the Titan, but his momentum and the surprise of his return was lost, and Crius was ready.

But it gave Diana an idea.

She crossed her arm and focused on Hephaestus’ shield, feeling the curious magics stir at her command. Before her bracers joined with Donna’s, this would never have been possible, but now, she faded from sight, vanishing as if she had never even been present. Crius’ arcane energy bolts fell away from her before splashing against rock, and the Titan’s head – such as it was – turned toward their impact points. He sent a ribbon of fire in that direction, and when that didn’t work, a horde of butterflies made of ice descended upon the area. By that point, Diana had shifted well out range, but she chose against angling toward his back. The most likely position an ambusher would seek was there, so she faced him front on.

“Yield!” Kal shouted as spiraled through the icy butterflies and slammed into Crius’ shield once more. His heat vision stabbed through it, carving a brilliant furrow through the Titan’s indistinct shape.

With an almost inarticulate cry of rage, Crius batted Kal and spun toward the spinning sphere of light. It was brighter than before, so bright that it hurt to even look at, and the Titan’s hand stretched for it.

And with a heavy heart but strength of purpose, Diana struck.

The blade Hephaestus had forged to kill a Titan sliced through the air, carving through the very atoms in the air and pierced Crius’ shield as if it were not even present. It sank into his chest, severing muscle and sinew and heart alike, and the Titan staggered in surprise. He dropped to one knee, fingers still reaching for the sphere of light, and in that moment, Captain Marvel fell from the sky to land upon the Reality Forge. He was shouting as he fell, crying out that magical word that summoned lightning from the heavens, and the bolt from the sky stabbed through him and into the sphere of light.

It shattered with a fierce explosion, throwing Diana back. Her sword slipped out of her grasp and she felt her shield splinter, but familiar hands caught her, steadied her, and she gave Kal a thankful look before throwing herself back toward the smoking crater. Kara was already there, cradling an unmoving Bill Batson in her arms. Smoke drifted up off him but he was still breathing, and, as Diana and Kal reached them, he opened his eyes.

“Ow,” he murmured before slipping back into unconsciousness. Diana glanced at Kal.

“No internal damage that I can see,” he remarked. “I think he should be okay.”
They found Crius a dozen feet away, Hephaestus’ blade still protruding from his side. His lower body had solidified, as if it was pure rock, and he looked up at their approach with that angelic face no longer hidden beneath his cloak of shadows.

“I am undone,” he murmured. Already, his arms were hardening. “You fought well, Daughter of Olympus,” he said before turning ageless eyes briefly to Kal. “I salute the Moon and her Voice as the victors on this day,” the Titan added. “Long may you…”

And then, Crius, father of Astraïos, Pallas and of Perses, grandfather of Hecate, passed from the universe.

As senior officer on site, Richard found himself in charge of the mop-up operation.

He wasn’t sure if all of the lieutenants or captains were afraid of the inevitable blowback from this catastrophe or if they were legitimately held up because of other crises, but he definitely wished there had been someone else to take over. The SWAT detachment had been commanded by a lieutenant, but he’d been killed during the retaking of Blackgate, and his two sergeants, both senior to Richard, were so heavily doped up on painkillers that they weren’t even aware of what day it was. Fortunately for him, most of the patrolmen he had at his disposal were veterans themselves and didn’t need much in the way of direction or instruction.

The floodlights of the prison were still on, even after the last of the inmates were secured and relocated to intact holding cells. They didn’t have a count of how many had died or escaped, but Richard knew it would be ugly. Even before the first of the Bat-clan arrived – Cassandra, as it turned out, and if any of the cops doubted her capabilities before, seeing her cut a swath through men twice her size without breaking stride had radically changed that opinion – far too many of those freed had vanished into the night. Heads would roll over this.

But not the Warden’s. He was already dead, a victim of what looked like a self-inflicted gunshot wound, though nobody was ruling out foul play and a staged suicide yet.

“God,” Commissioner Gordon said as he surveyed the wreckage. He’d arrived soon after the last of the inmates were apprehended, but from what Richard had heard over the police channel, Barbara’s dad had been handling a crisis of his own thanks to a panicking mayor who had locked them in his mansion and then held his guests at gunpoint. The minute that the media heard about that, Gotham would probably be short one mayor. “What a damned nightmare.” He glanced around. “Who’s in charge here?”

“I guess that would be me, sir,” Richard said. Gordon recognized him instantly and frowned, but let it slide and easily fell into the expected role. To the rest of the police officers, Richard could be nothing more than just another cop, and Gordon knew that.

“Grayson, right?” Richard nodded. “Okay, show me what you’ve got.” Richard gestured in the direction they needed to go and the commissioner began walking.

“As far as we can tell,” Richard began, nodding as a bloodied but otherwise intact Hall fell in step behind them, “Joker blew a hole in the south wall with what we think was a RPG.” They skirted around a pile of inmate corpses that had not yet been covered up. “He then shot his way into the prison itself-“

“By himself?”

“No, sir. He had a few guys with him. They look like local muscle – I’m pretty sure I’ve arrested at
least one of them before.” They paused when they came to the bashed in main entrance to the administration building. Blood was everywhere, along with bullet holes. And bodies. Lots and lots of bodies.

By the time they reached the cell blocks, Gordon was openly furious. For all of its reputation as a prison that could not be escaped, Blackgate had evidently not been designed with an external attack in mind. The men who had died here did what they could, but it simply hadn’t been enough.

“And this is where it gets weird, sir,” Richard said. There, in the middle of the room, was a corpse. His killers had been brutally efficient, using whatever weapons were on hand – fists, shivs, boots, even a wooden chair that had been broken over the body and then turned into a makeshift club. Blood was everywhere, staining the white sheet slung over the corpse almost like an ancient Roman toga. Old smartass habits tended to die hard and Richard heard himself speaking even before he consciously registered the words. “Et tu, Brute?”

There was no mistaking the body, despite the broken bones and massive bruising on his face; it was Joker.

“What happened?” Gordon demanded. He could not quite hide his relief at seeing the body, but given what had happened to Barbara, Richard couldn’t blame him. Still, the commissioner at least made the effort to appear professional.

“The inmates did, sir,” Richard said. He suddenly found himself on the receiving end of Gordon’s demanding glare. “Joker freed them, promised them absurd amounts of money if they helped him kill the Bat, and then, they beat him to death.”

“Bet he didn’t find that funny,” one of the cops muttered.

“We’ve got it on tape,” Richard added as he quickly pointed out the cameras. “After they were sure he was dead, the perps involved went back to their cells.” He offered a list. “I interviewed three of them, sir, and…” He glanced toward the shadows where he expected Bruce to be lurking. “I got nothing, sir.” He shifted awkwardly then. “I tried everything, sir, but none of them were talking. They just … grinned.” Gordon frowned.

“Dear God.” The commissioner shook his head. “All right, Grayson,” he said, “let’s get this all squared away.” He frowned suddenly. “Are you telling me that you, a sergeant, are the ranking officer on the scene?” Shaking his head again, he walked away, muttering something about demotions and dead weight.

The instant he left, Richard let his curiosity get the better of him and he glanced toward the darkened ceiling. There was the barest hint of movement in the shadows and he wondered if it was Bruce, Tim, Cass, or all three. He’d already seen Huntress leave and then Selina drove the Tumbler out (pancaking Vicky Vale’s car in the process which, based on some of Vale’s more salacious reporting about Catwoman over the years, was most definitely not an accident), which left the big three. And why didn’t it bother him more to no longer consider himself one of the big names in Gotham’s masked adventurer club? He shook his head and glanced at the two cops watching over the body.

“Did the crime scene boys already come through here?” Richard asked. Both of the two men shook their heads. “As soon as they do, let’s get this clown on ice.” They snickered, prompting him to realize the unintended joke. “Stay frosty, guys. There’s a lot of freaks in this city that would like to have a piece of that jerk.” He turned away. “Hall, with me. Night’s not over yet.” He walked away, pausing only once to give the corpse another look.

Just in case the body moved.
Year Eighteen: Interventions

Superman Honored With Peace Prize

Published October 30, 2030 / James Olsen

OSLO, NORWAY – Kal-El, the Kryptonian known more commonly by his nom de guerre, Superman, won the Nobel Peace Prize on Tuesday in a powerful endorsement of the superhuman’s ongoing global humanitarian actions. His efforts to resolve the Kahndaq crisis in recent weeks was singled out, despite the ongoing political firestorm he inadvertently caused.

In honoring the Kryptonian, the Norwegian Nobel Committee said “recent events in Kahndaq, where weapons of mass destruction would have again been put to use had it not been for Kal-El’s efforts, have underlined the need to enhance the efforts to do away with such weapons.”

The prize came 10 days after Kal-El interceded on the behalf of peaceful protestors in the war-torn capital city, Shiruta, and was instrumental in preventing further bloodshed. President Rumaan Harjavti, who agreed in June to abdicate following the discovery that he had been funding radical terror groups in the region, has since resisted all efforts to unseat him until Kal-El’s intervention.

The United Nations Security Council refused to comment on Superman’s actions but sources inside the Council have confirmed they are meeting to discuss options.

Click for images and video from Daily Planet Online

CLOAKED IN SHADOW AND SILENCE, THE BATMAN OBSERVED THE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE LEAGUE.

Gatherings like this one, where the entire active roster was present, happened only rarely and usually involved some planet-shaking calamity, though Bruce was fairly sure Clark’s recent actions and the resulting global response counted, no matter that there weren’t any would-be super-villains or extraterrestrial conquerors involved. Certainly it felt like that, if one was to judge by the politicians and journalists who seemed incapable of discussing anything else these days, and based on the muted fear and concern in the room right now, they weren’t the only ones. For the first time since superhumans began appearing on the public stage, one of them had removed a head of state from power. And because of that, the same question was on everyone’s lips: what now? Already, the fearmongers of the world were screaming their warnings about how this was the first step toward a metahuman headed tyranny and there were certainly enough fools out there to buy that.

For his part, Bruce was conflicted. He acknowledged that nothing Clark had done was wrong or immoral – in fact, the only thing that would have been immoral was if he had not acted when Harjavti’s weapons build-up continued – but at the same time, he couldn’t shake the tiny sliver of doubt that wouldn’t quite go away. Clark had not been the same since his return, in between his continued disinterest in resurrecting his previous identity or even creating a new one, and his constant activity in his Superman guise. As something of an expert on emotional trauma, Bruce was more than a little bit worried.

Sinking back into the shadows, he tried to force thoughts of Clark out of his head by instead observing the social dynamics playing out before him. He was no stranger to this sort of thing – the various parties he had to attend as Bruce Wayne almost always turned into something of a thought experiment on his part as he watched cliques and undeclared alliances materialize out of shared
experiences or backgrounds. With the League, it was even more apparent than normal. Those who had previously served in the military, for example – John Stewart, who should have been in bed instead of reclining in his translucent wheelchair following his most recent misadventure, Hal and his wife, Carol, and even the new Firestorm – always clustered together, while the former Titans stood slightly apart from everyone else with Richard at their center as their undeniable leader. It was a little strange seeing his adopted son in the familiar red and black – Bruce had gotten so accustomed to seeing Grayson in his police uniform that it was almost odd finding him out of it. The time was coming, it seemed, when Richard would hang up one uniform or the other full-time and Bruce honestly couldn’t say which he would prefer his son to choose.

The Arrow clan – Ollie, who was semi-retired these days, his replacement and son, Connor, plus Canary, Arsenal and Artemis – weren’t exactly standing with the Titan group, but with Artemis bridging the gap between the two groups, they were essentially viewed as one entire faction. Kon-El was absent as usual, but he so rarely attended these gatherings that it would have been even more unusual if he were present. Bruce only hoped he wasn’t getting into trouble – Clark’s clone was on one of his ‘I want to be normal’ kicks again and had ostensibly retired so he could focus on art or writing or sculpture or whatever it was this time.

Almost directly across from the Arrows, on the far side of the room, were two of the real powerhouses of the League, Captain Marvel and Superwoman. Both were so engrossed in their private conversation – it sounded like Kryptonian, though Bruce had only a passing familiarity with that language – that they had effectively tuned the rest of the League out. They laughed and smiled with the casualness that accompanied true intimacy, and neither of them seemed to care or even notice that most of the League were still uncomfortable around Kara. Even now, eight years later – and that made Bruce frown; had it really been that long? God, he was getting old – no one quite understood what Luthor had done to her and barely a handful of people even knew that Power Girl had been from an alternate universe.

Unsurprisingly, the other non-human members of the team – Shayera who still seemed a pale imitation of herself as she had since Katar died, Miracle and Barda – stood together in their own little group. If they mingled with anyone, it was the Lanterns or Carol, but almost never with the Arrows and Titans unless Starfire approached them first. Only Arthur stood completely apart, though that appeared to be something of a conscious decision on his part which probably meant he was in one of his darker moods again.

And holding court with them all was Diana.

Her official title with the Amazons might be Princess, but there was no denying she was effectively the Queen of the Justice League as the various sub-groups orbited around where she stood near the center of the room. Most of the Leaguers appeared completely oblivious to this fact and the ones that were aware simply accepted it as the norm. Despite her apparent youth – she still looked barely twenty-five, even though Bruce had known her for the better part of two decades – Diana’s place in the hierarchy could not be ignored and her offered suggestions were treated as orders. For a change, she was not wearing her battle armor – the new outfit seemed a more streamlined outfit, with long dark pants and a red not-quite cuirass constructed from an unfamiliar fabric. Her Lariat still hung from her belt, twisting and shifting almost as if it were alive, and she carried a small, wide-bladed sword strapped to her leg that she seemed to take great effort in not touching for some reason. Only the bracers Bruce never saw her without remained the same; covering most of her forearms, they looked to be crafted of gold and silver bore raised repoussage on their surface that, if one watched, actually moved. She’d offered no explanation for the change in wardrobe.

But at least she hadn’t donned a red cape. That almost made him smile and he made a mental note to suggest it to her, just to see her reaction.
There was only one member of the League whose absence could not be ignored, particularly since he was the entire point of this gathering. Clark was late. Again. It was not a surprise, especially with the far wall monitor displaying a live news report from Hong Kong as Superman dealt with some unfamiliar metahumans causing trouble. Bruce watched for a long heartbeat, nodding slightly in approval at how quickly and efficiently Clark dealt with the threat. The news camera could not keep up with the action and Kent was little more than a blur of red and blue.

Bruce’s eyes automatically flickered first to Diana – she was currently conversing with Canary but had positioned herself so she could see the door whenever it opened while keeping an eye on the monitor – and then back to the monitor. The Amazon’s relationship with Kent remained a mystery, even to Bruce, no matter their living arrangements. He was almost certain the two were sleeping together with how frequently they could be found in each other’s company, but neither of them had volunteered that information and Bruce wasn’t crass enough to ask, not with how notoriously close-lipped both of them were about their private lives. Publicly, they remained very good friends and co-workers, without even a hint of any deeper relationship. Even to someone actively looking for it like him, there were remarkably few tells.

“He just left Hong Kong,” Barbara abruptly whispered through his earpiece. “He should be arriving at the Watchtower in … ten seconds.” Bruce grunted, which naturally drew the attention of both Diana and Kara (who had probably been able to hear Oracle’s comment anyway.) The Amazon raised a single questioning eyebrow and Bruce turned his head fractionally toward the door, knowing that both women would comprehend his meaning. Diana crossed her arms, which everyone else finally noticed.

Less than a minute later, the door opened with a hiss and Kent entered. His Kryptonian hard-suit was more scuffed than usual and the scarlet cloak was torn in several places, but otherwise, he appeared fine. Bruce frowned slightly then as he silently studied his old friend. No, he looked better than just ‘fine.’ If one didn’t know the man was only a few months shy of fifty, one would think he was barely half that. Clark’s hair was as dark as ever and his face free of any lines. In fact, just like Diana, he looked no different than he had when Bruce first met him all those years ago.

“Sorry I’m late,” Clark said as he floated through the door. That was a recent habit of his, one he’d adopted since returning to Earth. It seemed almost intentional, as if he was trying to purposely remind people that he wasn’t human, and Bruce filed the thought away for further reflection later. “There was an incident in Hong Kong…”

“You could have called for assistance,” Diana said with a frown.

“Wasn’t necessary.” Kent said. He glanced around the room quickly before letting his eyes alight on Bruce. “I see we’re all here.”

“Indeed,” Bruce rumbled. The voice modulator attached to his neckpiece altered his voice ever so slightly, turning it into the dangerous hiss that intimidated so many. He scowled – it still sounded ridiculous here on the Watchtower.

“The purpose of this League,” Diana continued as if no one else had spoken, “is to foster cooperation among our ranks, Kal-El.” Her voice was sharp and Bruce bit back a smirk when he noticed how most of the other Leaguers were reacting. It was never fun to watch the King and Queen bicker.

“I had it under control, Diana,” Clark retorted. He started to turn away but, to Bruce’s surprise, Diana stepped closer to the Kryptonian and grabbed his arm to force him to face her.

“The next time you will call for aid, Kal-El,” she said in a hard voice. “The example you are setting
is a dangerous one. We are stronger together than individually.”

“Understood, Madame Chairman,” Clark said wryly in acknowledgment of Diana’s position of authority. He glanced once at the wall monitor still displaying the news and his expression tightened. The screen had changed to a recording of his acceptance of the Nobel and Bruce could see how uncomfortable it made him.

“Now can we get started?” Arthur demanded. “Some of us have things to do.” Diana gave him a flat, unamused look and the King of Atlantis threw up his arms as he smirked.

“There are some … concerns regarding recent actions taken by League members and we have been asked to make an official statement,” Diana began.

“You mean by me,” Clark interrupted. He crossed his arms. “I made sure the United Nations knew I was acting on my own and my actions were not sanctioned by the League.”

“And you expected that to appease them?” Diana shook her head. “Whether you want to be or not, Kal, you are still the face of the League. Your actions reflect upon us.”

“They were killing civilians, Diana.” His expression and tone did not change in the slightest, but for some reason, Clark suddenly seemed more solid, less tractable. He was an immovable object facing the proverbial irresistible force. “What would you have me do? Look away? Let them keep killing each other?” She started to respond, but Clark kept talking. “I saw people who needed my help and acted.”

“The United Nations is convening a hearing about whether to revoke our charter,” Diana said softly. “I salute you on your decision to act – morally, it was the correct thing to do – but this organization must act as a team if we are to truly seek justice.” They stared at one another – it was impossible to tell if they were furious with each other, frustrated or just tired.

“Ahem.” All eyes turned to Arthur. “Atlantis is a sovereign nation. The UN has recognized us as such.” Diana nodded. “As ruler of Atlantis, I wholeheartedly support Kal-El’s actions. Kahndaq is … was a rogue state that needed to be dealt with sooner rather than later.”

“So who do we depose next, huh?” Ollie scowled. “Why not suspend elections and freedom of the press everywhere while we’re at it? I mean, if we’re going to start handing out marching orders…”

“No.” Clark’s single word caused immediate silence. “We will not be tyrants.” His eyes swept the room, meeting the gaze of every member of the League. “I will address the United Nations and ensure they are aware that this will not happen again.”

“But it might.” Captain Marvel straightened under the sudden attention. “Look,” he said carefully, “not to invoke Godwin’s Law or anything, but if we had a chance to stop Hitler and the Nazis but didn’t take it, wouldn’t we be as guilty as they were for the people they killed?”

“The only people responsible, kid,” John Stewart said flatly, “are the ones who gave the orders and the ones who pulled the trigger.”

“This is getting us nowhere,” Bruce said before the debate could hit critical mass. They’d had this stupid argument a hundred times over the years and if it wasn’t cut off quickly, it could go in circles for hours. “The League has a mandate, but no authority.” He scowled. “We need that authority.”

“To do what?” Queen’s disgust was stamped on his face. “Take over? Start telling people what to do?”
“To act as a global peacekeeping force,” Bruce replied sharply. “Harjavti was in flagrant violation of at least thirty different UN resolutions and without the actual threat of force, he was never going to surrender his hold on Kahndaq.” He glared at Oliver before the man could respond. “You know that as well as I do. He was a monster and would have only gotten worse.”

“So we should have just kicked down the door and threw him out then?” Queen snorted. “Because that worked out so well in Iraq.”

“Enough.” Diana blew out a frustrated breath. “Clearly there are many sides to this debate but the question still stands: how does the League officially respond to Kal’s actions?”

“We’ve got to support it,” Oliver said before anyone else could comment. “I’ll be the first to say that you should have consulted us first, big guy, but if we’re going to call ourselves the Justice League, then we really need to stand for actual justice.” More than a few people gave him surprised looks, Bruce among them, so Queen continued. “I don’t have any powers,” he said simply. “I’m not faster than a speeding bullet and I can’t leap buildings in a single bound, but I can tell you straight away that the thing most of the civilians are afraid of is us deciding to start telling them what to do.”

“I would never do that,” Clark began, but Ollie spoke over him.

“You already did, Supes. When you threw Harjavti out of office, you did exactly that.” Queen ran his hands through his hair. “I’m not saying you were wrong – the guy was a piece of shit who frankly deserved worse – but it set a precedent.”

“And now the whole world is watching,” Dinah offered softly.

“I … agree,” Arthur said hesitantly. He was looking at Queen with a musing expression on his face. “The League should announce its support of Kal-El, but phrase this support such a way that reminds everyone he was merely defending the innocent.”

“No, that won’t work.” Again, Batson almost winced when eyes turned toward him. “The word innocents is too obviously an emotional argument. Everyone knows what Superman stands for so reminding them like that is … it’s using a stick of dynamite to go fishing.”

“Kid’s got a point,” John murmured under his breath.

“Wisdom of Solomon and all that,” Hal replied, equally low but in an almost teasing tone.

“Instead, we should check with the Security Council discreetly,” Batson continued. “Let them know we intend to support him. Like Batman said, Harjavti was completely ignoring the UN, not to mention the US and Russia. They might be okay with us pointing that out.” Clark stirred at the remark, but kept silent as he half-turned so he could see Earth through the transparent viewport. From his expression, Bruce suspected he was only half-listening, which was more than could be said for most of the League. Of the former Titans, only Kaldur was paying attention (which wasn’t a surprise) and none of the Lanterns were at all. To her credit, Firestorm was listening closely, but then, as a native Israeli, she had to be quite aware of world sentiment and what could happen should the League become authorized to depose governments unpopular with many nations.

For his part, Bruce couldn’t help to shiver at the implied power at their disposal. It was a dangerous but tempting thought – with the combined might in this room, they could easily and permanently change the world. War could truly be outlawed, governments could be forced to actually resolve the corruption festering within their hearts, the people could be given direction and purpose, crime … crime could be shut down hard. In such a system, elections would by necessity need to be suspended, at least in the interim, until the transition period was over. And all it would require was
the small cost of their souls. Their good intentions would not be relevant, only their actions. Because humans were involved, some would resist this new world and the League would be forced to put them down, thereby becoming the very thing they had fought against in the first place. No, Bruce reflected, that would not do.

He was just about to open his mouth and interject himself into the policy discussion still taking place before him – Arthur was rapidly warming to Marvel although Oliver remained as obtuse and as wildly inconsistent as ever – when he noticed Clark suddenly stiffen. Kent’s eyes were locked on the planet through the massive window and Bruce followed the direction of his eyes, frowning when he saw nothing. The Watchtower’s orbit was currently over the Middle-East and Africa, and Bruce could just make out the Sinai Peninsula through the cloud cover. Automatically, his eyes jumped to Clark – surely he couldn’t see Kahndaq from this distance. Could he?

“Dammit,” Clark’s murmured remark drew attention, but he was already blurring toward the window. Even as Bruce registered how quickly his friend was moving and where he was moving, Clark hit the viewport.

And passed through it.

His speed faltered only slightly – it was like he was a bullet moving through jello – but he was already outside the Watchtower and streaking planetside before it sank in that the window had shifted and molded around his passage, allowing him access to the hard vacuum outside without the internal atmosphere changing in the slightest. From the expressions Bruce could see, he wasn’t the only one who was surprised that it could do that.

“It’s Kahndaq,” Kara announced. She was squinting at the planet and was already floating half a foot above the deck. “Rao,” she hissed. “Bialya is making a major offensive.” Exactly like her cousin, she flashed toward the window and exited.

“Lanterns, Marvel, Firestorm,” Diana ordered sharply, “go!” The named individuals darted toward the planet. “All others, stand by,” Diana continued as she followed Marvel, pausing briefly to give Bruce quick nod, effectively delegating command to him in her absence.

“Looks like someone took the decision out of our hands,” Flash – West, even though he looked so much like Barry right now – stated.

“No,” Bruce replied coolly. “They simply postponed it.”

“Well, I’m not planning on throwing myself out into space,” Arthur declared. He leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms as he looked at Bruce. “Tell me more about this global peacekeeping force idea of yours,” he said.

He fell like a burning star.

Wreathed in fire from the speed of his re-entry, Clark slammed into the ground with a titanic boom, throwing up a geyser of rock and dirt that could be seen for dozens of miles. Once, so long ago, before he discovered how truly naïve he was, he would have let the dust settle before springing into action in the vain hopes that the simple sight of his Kryptonian crest would be enough to quell the impending violence, but no longer. Now, he was blurring toward the armored convoy with fury singing in his veins. The tanks were not of Kahndaq, but of neighboring Bialya and their intent was obvious.

He should not have been surprised – the current dictator of that country was Harjavti’s brother,
though the two men went to great lengths to hide their blood relationship — but the fact Bialya even thought they could get away with such a blatant violation of international law infuriated him. Thunder boomed as he sliced through great cannons or tore guns free of their housings and hurled them into the dirt. At no time did Clark damage the mobility of any of the vehicles since he wanted these would-be conquerors to retreat. Bullets criss-crossed the sky, peppering his body like a soft rain, and massive explosives from heavy ordnance hurled great gouts of rock into the sky, but he stayed on the attack.

The League arrived heartbeats later, just as the Bialyans were ramping up their counter-attack, and suddenly, the entire desert was filled with emerald and sapphire and scarlet flashes, with blurs of white and red and gold, with sand turning suddenly to frictionless glass in flares of the purest light imaginable. Clark saw Marvel and Kara back-to-back, her eyes burning as she blasted incoming artillery rounds from the sky while he used a tank cannon torn free to bat the ones she missed higher. Hal and Carol combined their ring abilities and simply plucked pilots out of their aircraft, which left the jets and helicopters open for John or Gardner to blast them into scrap. Firestorm — Clark realized then that he’d never actually been formally introduced to the young woman and didn’t have a clue what her real name was — floated calmly in a sphere of impenetrable energy that vaporized bullets, shells and missiles long before they could be a danger to her, even as she slowly walked a wall of fire toward the Bialyans.

“They’re retreating,” Diana announced, her voice ringing over the desert. She floated closer to him and Clark winced at the worried look she shot him. “This will complicate matters,” she admitted, her voice low enough that only he and Kara could hear her. “Those that fear us will have further reason to do so.”

“This was an invasion force,” he replied harshly. “You know damned well that they were going to kill and rape and pillage.” The next words fell from his lips before he even realized what he was saying. “It’s what humans are apparently best at.” Even through the hard-suit, he could feel the warmth of her arm when she touched him, worry in her eyes.

“Kal?” He shook his head.

“I’m all right,” Clark said through clenched teeth. “I’m just fuc … I’m just angry.” He caught sight of a Bialyan officer scrambling to join a damaged but functional armored personnel carrier. Without thinking, he blurred toward the man, seizing him with both hands. “Why?” he demanded coldly. “Why the hell would you attack Kahndaq?” The answer was gibberish — a smattering of hyper-partisan nationalism backed by centuries of tribal conflicts and religious disagreements, which was pretty much what Clark had come to expect from stupidity like this. This was why he had endured so much torture and agony and terror? Disgust dripped off his words. “Return to Bialya,” he ordered in his slightly accented Arabic. “Tell them what you saw. Tell them that this ends now.” With a casual toss of his hands, he hurled the officer back ten yards, closer to the APC but aimed at a mound of sand that would prevent serious injury.

“Stop this,” Diana ordered. She hovered in front of him, placing both hands on his shoulders and looking him in the eyes. “You’re angry,” she said. “I understand that. But this path you are looking at … I cannot follow you down it, Kal.” He wanted to argue, wanted to shout and break things or unleash the ever-present fury he struggled to contain. “Go to the Fortress, beloved,” Diana murmured in her perfect, flawless Kryptonian. She still spoke it better than he did. “I will be there shortly.” And ignoring their agreement to never advertise the depth of their relationship in public, she leaned forward and kissed him softly.

It was exactly what he needed. He felt the rage in his gut flicker and falter. He looked away, suddenly aware of immense shame spiraling up out of his stomach. This … this was unworthy of his
parents. Both of them. He was supposed to be setting an example, dammit! Nodding in agreement, he rocketed upward, curving sharply toward the north.

Behind him, he heard some of the murmurs – Hal and Carol were arguing whether that had been a properly chaste kiss, while Kara was trying to calm Bill’s sudden fanboy gushing over the fact he now had firsthand proof that Wonder Woman and his sainted and exalted Superman, an impossibly perfect being who had never existed despite Batson’s childish hopes otherwise, were romantically involved – but he ignored them and instead focused on maintaining control until he reached the Fortress. The world had to see a man fully in control of himself, totally calm and reasoned and sane, not an alien with strange abilities who was desperately afraid that he teetered on the verge of a breakdown.

“Red solar arrays online,” he ordered the moment he stepped through the Fortress’ hatch. Kelex obeyed without question and Clark felt his body become heavier, slower, more human. He staggered to the room set aside for sparring – Diana had begun work on it while he was gone, but he’d expanded it since returning – and promptly began smashing away at the heavy bag set aside for this very use. His hands ached, his muscles burned, and his breath came in ragged gasps, but it let him cope, let him focus on something other than the madness he feared was creeping up on him.

“Let us resume, my slave.” Desaad’s chilling whisper floated through his memory and Clark intensified the force with which he struck the bag. The feel of that woman’s whips, the pain, the fear … they all merged together in a single swirling ball of unresolved agony and despair. He punched and punched and punched. And still, the memories lurked there, just out of sight, waiting for him to slip again and crumble. For all of his strength, he felt so goddamned weak…

“I am here if you need me,” Diana murmured an eternity later as he slumped heavily against the bag, his body limp and exhausted. He glanced back and found her watching him with so much emotion in her eyes that it almost hurt to even see it. God, she was beautiful. He tore his eyes away and concentrated on his breathing.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly. Diana stepped closer and touched his face with her warm hands.

“For what?” she asked.

“For being so much damned trouble.” Clark closed his eyes and sagged back against the heavy bag. “I keep making things worse,” he started, but Diana interrupted.

“No,” she said sharply. “You were right, earlier. The Bialyans did plan on wholesale slaughter.” Clark opened his eyes to look at her. “We were not watching them before so we did not see this, but it would appear that they have been building up this invasion for several weeks.” She frowned. “It was the usual propaganda – Israel is pulling Kahndaq’s strings and they are Zionist puppets, the Kahndaqi’s were planning a massive sneak attack so they had to attack first, that sort of nonsense – but the whole world is learning about this now and condemning Bialya for an unprovoked act of aggression.” She took his hand and pulled him toward the wide chair that was almost a love-seat.

“So we dodged a bullet.” Clark collapsed onto the chair.

“For the moment.” Diana took a seat next to him – it really wasn’t big enough for two, but when she was the other person, Clark didn’t mind. “But I am worried about you,” she said softly. “I have not pushed because I did not want you to think ill of me…”

“I could never do that,” Clark interjected.

“…but the expression I saw on your face today, the expression all of us saw … that was not the man
you are.” She stroked the side of his face. “If you will not talk to me,” she said sadly, “then I beg you, find someone else that you trust enough to tell of your pain.”

“There’s no one I trust more than you, Diana,” Clark replied slowly. “But … I just … I can’t.” Flashes of memory fought and struggled with his control, and his jaw muscles ached at the strain required to keep from screaming. Every time he tried to tell someone … no. Every time he tried to talk to Diana about what he’d gone through, the pain and misery came back tenfold and threatened to bury him in terror and agony. “Please, I just need … I just need some more time.” Diana leaned forward and rested her forehead against his.

“As much as you need,” she whispered. “I am always here for you.”

She hated Gotham.

Diana would never tell Bruce how much she loathed this rotting cesspool of a city, not because she feared it would anger him, but because she had her suspicions that at least part of him shared the sentiment. His was a complicated relationship with Gotham – the sheer amount of pain and misery that he’d suffered over the years in this place warred with obsessive need to see it returned to some idyllic vision of a city that had never existed.

The moon was high overhead as she coursed through the air currents, listening to the whispers of the birds and beasts as she sought out the Batman. His desire to speak had not come as a surprise to her, not with how the entire Middle-East was threatening to explode in the wake of the aborted Bialya-Kahndaq war. Somehow, a recording had been made and released to the public of Kal’s cold threat to the Bialyan officer; Bruce suspected Luthor even though there was no evidence pointing in that direction, but she had her doubts. Regardless, the results were unlike anything Diana would have expected – the capital of Bialya had erupted into absolute chaos almost overnight, as soldiers, intellectuals, students and politicians struggled for dominance. The previous ruling government was torn down and at least seven different factions fought over the right to take its place. No one, not the League, not the UN, not even Bialya, had been ready for this and it showed. The entire world was watching this conflict with bated breath, and it was all because one man had lost his temper.

She’d left Kal at the Fortress following a marathon sparring session that naturally turned to more carnal pursuits. For a change, Kal had been the aggressor and her body still ached pleasurably from the results. They’d slept – or more likely, she slept and he did not – and then, Kal had hid himself away in that ugly box of a room that housed most of his Kryptonian relics. She suspected he was investigating methods of treatment for his severe case of post-traumatic stress syndrome and, because of his upbringing, thought it to be unmanly to speak of emotional difficulty. It was not unique to his gender – she’d seen the same thing with certain of her sisters – but Hera help her, it was frustrating. She was far from an expert in PTSD treatment, but in her guise as leader of the Justice League and the Themysciran ambassador alike, she’d visited quite a number of military hospitals and made discreet inquiries about modern techniques ever since he returned in a desperate attempt to find something, anything, that could help Kal.

When she found him, Bruce was on the roof of the Clocktower. As usual with him, he was staring down at his city with a black scowl on his face and his expression only darkened even further as she descended from the sky. A cool wind flicked her hair out of her face and she heard a very faint sound from behind her that almost made her smile.

“We need to talk about Kent,” Bruce growled, his voice distracting her from the noise. He glanced at her.

“Do we?” She gave him a flat, unemotional smile before glancing away. Bruce’s scowl darkened.
“This is no time to be flippant,” he snapped. “The entire Middle East is about to explode because he lost his temper.”

“With respect,” Diana replied coolly, “that part of the world was in chaos when my mother was in diapers.” Bruce started to comment, but she spoke over him. “Bialya has been on the brink of exploding for years – blaming this on Kal is—”

“Exactly what the rest of the world will do,” Bruce interrupted. He didn’t look away from the city stretched out below them, and Diana idly wondered if he could actually see anything. As a baseline human (if admittedly a highly trained and exceptionally skilled one), Bruce’s eyes were unable to pick out things from this great a distance … unless, of course, he’d added some kind of binocular capability to his cowl. “It doesn’t matter that the entire region is a powder keg – everyone is going to blame Clark for this.” Diana crossed her arms.

“And the League,” she corrected. Since accepted the new Firestorm into their ranks, the League had come under fire by the more virulent anti-Semitic voices for selecting an Israeli but having no Muslims on the team. It didn’t matter that there weren’t very many Islamic metahumans operating or that the majority of the ones who did exist were sadly under the sway of extreme fundamentalists and were thus unwilling to even entertain the idea of working alongside non-Muslims. Hera, these mortals were fools.

“And the League,” Bruce conceded. “I’m worried that he’s letting the super become more important than the man,” he said. “How long until he does decide that dictating policy is the best option?”

“How dare you.” Diana’s voice was cold, but her eyes burned with fury. “I saw your face on the Watchtower, Bruce. Kal was the only man or woman in that room who did not consider seizing control for even a moment.” To his credit, Bruce glanced away. “He has devoted his life to making this world better, to being the very best person he can be because no one else will, and because he had a bad day, because he lost his temper at the stupidity and folly of mankind, you immediately rush to join the chorus of those convinced he is but one step away from becoming a tyrant.” Her eyes flashed and she took a step closer to him, barely noticing how quickly he retreated. “Take a look at your city,” she ordered. “How many illegal drones do you have circling it right now, monitoring its citizens without their consent or the consent of this government? How many laws do you break on a nightly basis?” Diana glared at him. “Do not dare to presume that you are better than he is,” she hissed through clenched teeth. “Not on your best day ever.”

“Wait,” Bruce called out softly as she turned away. “You’re right,” he said. “I overreacted.” He exhaled loudly and allowed his shoulders to slump slightly. It was such an unusual sight, the Batman showing weakness, and it cooled her temper just enough for him to speak again, this time with that almost smirk of his. “How close was I to having my jaw broken?” he asked.

“Closer than you wish to be,” Diana replied. She breathed in through her nose, but that was not quite enough for her to completely relax.

“I’m not entirely wrong, though,” Bruce said. “There are a lot of people who are going to blame Clark for this.” He frowned. “We need to find a way to prevent that from happening.” Finally, he looked at her. “And to prevent it from happening again.” Diana’s eyes narrowed. “Look,” Bruce said flatly, “those of us who actually know him can tell that Clark is still struggling.” He caught her expression and almost grimaced. “And yes,” he said wryly, “the irony of me commenting on his mental health is not lost.”

For a long moment, Diana held her tongue. She knew he was right – Kal was very far from being well – but openly agreeing with him felt too much like a betrayal, no matter how small. According to the literature she had read, one of the most effective type of counseling was something called
cognitive behavior therapy, but who could Kal actually speak to about what he had experienced? And for that matter, would it even work for a Kryptonian? Yes, in most ways, he looked identical to a human, but there were noticeable differences above and beyond his special abilities. Epione had declared a willingness to speak with him should Diana manage to convince her stubborn ass of a mother to lift the senseless ban on Kal – thankfully, Epione had only just completed her decennial refresher course with modern medicine and had been especially interested in the treatment of mental trauma.

In the silence, she heard a soft crackle of radio static and noticed how Bruce straightened fractionally, his hand automatically reaching toward his ear. Seconds later, he grunted.

“Clocktower,” he said with a sidelong glance toward Diana. “Understood.” He frowned. “Robin is en route,” he said. “I’d rather he and Cassandra remained unaware that we’re discussing Kent.” Diana cocked her head at him, then shrugged. Why he would want to hide the truth from his heirs, she had no idea, but that was his business.

“I do not think you have seen this particular trick before,” Diana replied as she crossed her arms so that the two bracers touched. Willing the magics inside them to come alive, she felt Hephaestus’ shield slide over her as she pushed back and up off the roof. To Bruce’s eyes, she simply faded from sight, even though she was able to see her entire body perfectly fine. The only drawback to this unexpected joining of her and Donna’s bracers was the necessity of keeping the metal on either arm touching, which certainly made actual combat difficult. She laughed softly as Bruce glanced around, trying very hard to find some flaw in the cloak of invisibility that concealed her from sight. He grunted in both approval and envy.

Several long minutes later, Batgirl and Robin arrived. At once, Diana noted how well the two moved, how fluid their motions were, and how they both had made even more alterations to their respective garb. Gone were the strange stitches in Cassandra’s cowl and in its stead was a dark but completely featureless visor that covered her entire face. Her suit also had been upgraded somewhat, with a number of new hardpoints – the elbows, the knees, the hardened shin boots – all likely to better improve her combat ability. For Timothy, the change was more apparent. His cowl was virtually indistinguishable from Bruce’s though he did not have the horns, and the rest of his suit looked to be designed along similar lines. He no longer bore the prominent R on his breast, but now had a black and gold emblem that could be a stylized bird’s head or that letter. It struck Diana then that these two children, these soldiers in Bruce’s endless war, had not even been born when Kal was first hailed as Superman. They were not even walking when she came to Man’s World. And now look at them.

She quite suddenly felt very old.

“We confirmed that Paolo Falcone was responsible for the hit on Mario,” Robin began, his voice harsh and raspy. Batgirl glanced at him and then reached out, touching something at his throat. In mid-sentence, his voice once more became that of a young man. “There’s more,” he said as he offered Bruce a memory stick, “but I thought you would want to see this yourself.” Again, Bruce grunted. He accepted the storage device, then pulled a small device off his belt. It unfolded once, twice, a third time, revealing a handheld computer that he plugged the memory stick into.

Not especially interested in whatever they were discussing, Diana was just about to push against gravity and make a silent departure when she noticed something unexpected. Both Batgirl and Robin were tense, glancing around with the unmistakable body language of people who were aware they weren’t alone but could not see the hidden party. Both were oriented in her general direction but it was clear that they could not see her. Diana marveled at that – what was it that gave her away? Was it sound? Smell? A simple highly trained sense of perception or perhaps even an untapped sixth
“I see.” Every line in Bruce’s body betrayed his tension as he did something to the handheld that caused it to fold up again. “Good job,” he said, which caused Diana to look at him with something approximately surprise. Had she ever heard him pay someone a compliment before? From the quick glance Batgirl and Robin exchanged, it gave them pause as well.

“Robin,” Tim suddenly declared, one hand coming up to touch the side of his cowl. “Acknowledged. En route.” He did not even pause before he sprang to the edge of the roof and threw himself off, his cape stiffening almost at once. Batgirl shook her head but made no sound as she followed suit.

“Is something amiss?” Diana asked as she let her hands drop to her sides. She faded back into sight.

“The new Spoiler,” Bruce grumbled. “Robin has a … special dislike for him, no matter the family ties the boy has with Stephanie.” He scowled. “Had with Stephanie,” he corrected himself darkly. Diana did not recognize either name, but from the angry way Bruce stood, the girl was probably another casualty in his war.

“I must congratulate you on their training,” she said instead of asking for clarity. “Both of them knew someone else was here.”

“Cassandra has never needed training,” he replied, “so I can only take credit for Tim.” He glared in the direction the two had disappeared. “He’ll be Batman when I retire,” Bruce said softly. Diana gave him another look – that was, in her memory, the first time he’d ever implied he would not be doing this forever – and barely bit back another reply. Her earlier rage at him was gone and in its place was a fond sadness. Evidently, she was not the only one feeling old today.

“Not Richard?” she asked. Bruce shook his head.

“That’s Lieutenant Grayson now,” he said, an instinctive smile of pride curving his lips upward for a moment. “He’s considering retiring Nightwing for good since he’s got so much on his plate these days.” The smile fell away. “We still need to resolve this issue with Clark,” he started, but she shook her head.

“I will press him,” Diana said. She paused for a moment, wondering if revealing certain things about Kal truly was a betrayal. Finally, she mentally shrugged – Bruce considered the man a brother and she had seen him more than willing to lay down his life for Kal. “I have already spoken to Epione,” she admitted, “but if you have any recommendations, forward them to me.” She floated higher, glancing toward the darkened shadows. “Good evening, Selina,” she called out, smiling at how the barely noticeable shape lurking in the recesses of the massive clock tensed. “You know how to get into contact with me, Bruce,” Diana finished as she climbed.

A moment later, she was soaring through the clouds.

The Watchtower alert caught him in the middle of a shower.

Blurring toward the exit, Clark donned the hard-suit in hardly any time at all, aided by the speed with which certain parts of it clicked into place, and he was airborne barely ten seconds after the signal had first sounded. Being so far north and away from civilization, he broke the sound barrier almost at once and streaked toward escape velocity, his solar visor already deploying.

“This is Superman responding,” he said into the integrated communication system. “What do we have?”
“Unknown starship just transited from hyperspace at the edge of the system,” Cyborg announced. “I’m transmitting a request for identification.” Clark broke orbit, then quickly oriented himself in the direction indicated by the HUD built into his solar visor and accelerated toward it. He strained his eyes to find the target, but the distance was too great, even for his eyes.

“Moving to intercept,” Clark said. “ETA to contact: thirty minutes.”

“Acknowledged.” Cyborg was silent for a moment. “I’m scrambling reinforcements, sir.” The automatic urge to tell Victor not to call him ‘sir’ flashed through him, but Clark suppressed his urge to say something as he concentrated on finding more speed. Flying in space was always strange – there was no wind resistance to slow him down but he also had no planetary gravity to push against. He was still fifteen minutes away from his intercept point when he could finally start making out the hull of the unidentified vessel.

It was an ugly thing and small, not well armed which meant it was most probably a private vessel, with a likely crew of three or maybe four. From the way it tumbled end over end, Clark guessed it was damaged and as he drew closer, he was able to confirm that. Large gashes in the hull indicated the tiny ship had escaped a fierce battle. Debris was orbiting the vessel’s aft engine pod and there was something that looked almost like an unexploded missile lodged amidships. From this distance, Clark couldn’t detect any signs of power.

He reached the vessel long minutes later and the damage was even worse this close. There were three undetonated warheads, not just one, and all of them were barely a half foot from what was most likely the fuel cell. Clark tried to peer through the hull but its composition resisted his enhanced senses, so he drifted toward the airlock. As expected, he found the access panel flashing red, indicating that multiple systems were offline and emergency services were required.

“Superman to Watchtower,” he said into his communication link. “I need a Lantern at my location as soon as possible.”

“Lantern Stewart, en route,” came an almost instant response which Clark took to mean that John was already halfway there. “ETA: Thirty seconds.”

Stewart was a solid ten seconds ahead of his estimate, and he wrapped a bubble of emerald energy around the damaged vessel before somehow adding an Earth-like atmosphere within it. Giving him a nod, Clark retracted the hard-suit’s vacuum sealed glove on his right hand and placed his fingers in the appropriate place on the access panel. It chirped immediately, recognizing that it was now safe to depressurize and allow entry. The airlock slid open and Clark gave thanks that this was not a military craft; with most of those, burning through the hull was almost the only way to gain entrance if the proper code wasn’t known. He floated forward, noting that Stewart was right behind him, and then angled toward the bridge. There was only a single body present and he was slumped over the pilot’s station. Clark concentrated on his senses.

“He’s alive,” he said at almost the exact same instant Stewart made the same comment. Drawing closer, Clark couldn’t shake the sense that the heat signature of this humanoid figure was familiar and the instant he saw the man’s face, he recognized him.

“Lar!” he exclaimed with some surprise, ducking closer to check for injuries. There were quite a number – and what exactly was strong enough to penetrate a Daxamite’s skin like that? – but Lar Gand groaned slightly at Clark’s touch, his eyes fluttering as if he were trying to open them.

“You know this guy?” Stewart asked. Clark was about to reply with Lar’s eyes opened.

“He’s escaped,” he murmured. “Dox has escaped.” His eyes closed as he promptly slid back into
unconsciousness and Clark frowned. Dox? That was the Coluan’s name who had helped them out. How could he … oh. Oh, God.

“Get us to the Watchtower now,” he ordered sharply. Stewart offered no verbal reply, but his ring flashed and he darted back toward the airlock. “Superman to Watchtower,” Clark said into his comm-line. “We’re on approach. Get Kara to meet us – I need another solar visor as soon as possible.” He glanced back at Lar and his jaw tightened. Brainiac. That was just what the universe needed.

The next two days flashed by. Once Clark flew him to Mercury’s orbit where their cells could soak up the solar radiation, Lar recovered quickly, but his explanation for how he and his ship had ended up in such dire straits was troubling which was why Clark then requested a League meeting. Some of the people present – Hal and John, for example – had firsthand knowledge of the danger Brainiac represented, and their grim demeanor did a lot to help sell the danger.

“I do not know how he escaped,” Lar said. He was wearing a solar visor which translated back and forth between Interlac and English. Lar had not changed much in the four years since he’d last seen him – his hair was a little longer, his face a little more mature – but the way he carried himself and the hard-won confidence in his eyes was certainly new. He spoke to Clark not like a younger brother to his elder as he had before, but like an equal, and it almost made Clark smile to see how much his friend had grown. “Dox – the clone, not the original – claimed he did not know either, but that coluan lies easier than he breathes, so this might just be his fault.”

“This Dox,” Diana said, her expression tight. “He is the one who … merged with the Brain InterActive Construct?”

“Yes,” Clark said. Hadn’t he explained that?

“No,” Lar said at the same time. Diana glanced between the two and Gand continued. “Dox is generally how the clone is referred to.” He grimaced. “The original, the one that merged with the Construct, we just call him Brainiac now.”

“Didn’t you coin that stupid name, John?” Clark heard Hal whisper. The former Marine grunted.

“After he escaped, Brainiac murdered Dox and fled,” Lar continued. “Once Dox was revived, I gave pursuit.”

“Wait.” Zatanna had been trying very hard to get Lar’s attention during the last few days, even though it was difficult to communicate with him. Gand’s eyes seemed drawn instead to Raven almost from the moment he first set eyes on her, which flustered the young woman enough to send her fleeing back into the shadows. “You said Dox was murdered. How could he be revived?”

“Evidently,” Lar replied, “Dox was sufficiently paranoid to make a back-up of his brain patterns. When his first clone body died, this backup was uploaded to a second clone body.” He shrugged. “Or so I have been told. I don’t exactly understand the science behind it.”

“That’s freaking bizarre,” Flash muttered.

“Brainiac’s return reignited the civil war on Colu,” Lar continued, “but he fled before we could stop him. I spent at least a year chasing him throughout civilized space.” He frowned. “Wait … how long is your sidereal year?”

“You caught up with him, I’m taking it,” Clark said. Lar nodded.

“He ambushed me inside an empty system with a red giant.” He shook his head. “He had a half
dozen Kryptonian warships under his control,” Lar said, “and they hit hard.” Clark exchanged a grim look with Kara before exhaling bitterly. So, once again, his species’ baggage was responsible for more galactic chaos. Would it ever end? “I managed to escape and came here as quickly as I could.” Lar looked up to Clark. “I need your help,” he said.

“And you’ll have it,” Clark replied automatically. He did not anticipate a great deal of resistance to a brief leave of absence, especially as it would give the entire mess of a situation he’d caused in Bialya to cool off without him putting his foot in his mouth again. As depressing a notion as it was, he suspected that certain members of the League would be relieved to see him disappear for a while. What he had not expected, though, was Diana’s reaction.

“You are set on this?” she asked calmly. Clark nodded. “Then I shall accompany you.” She turned to Arthur before Clark could respond. “I will need you to assume a more active role while we are away,” she said. “The United Nations cannot see the League without leadership.” Her eyes flicked back to Lar and she addressed him in perfect Interlac. “Will twelve hours be adequate?” she asked. “There are certain arrangements I must make prior to departure and Kelor informs me that it will take at least that long to finish repairs to your ship.” Lar glanced quickly toward Clark before nodding. “That should be fine, Mistress,” he replied. He smiled. “I could use the rest.”

“A word, Diana,” Clark murmured. He wasn’t surprised that she nodded but the speed with which the conference room that cleared did manage to give him pause. The whispers began almost before everyone was out of the chamber, and Clark grimaced only slightly at the insane rumors making the rounds once more. It occurred to him then that only a handful of people had known she’d made the Fortress her home while he was away and perhaps one or two more knew that she still slept there. And naturally, Kara had to throw gasoline on the fire.

“Why aren’t you going?” he heard Firestorm ask his cousin. She laughed. “Mom and Dad can take care of it,” Kara said with a chuckle.

“Three of us will have a better chance of stopping this Brainiac than just two,” Diana said the moment the hatch sealed behind Arthur.

“You have duties here,” Clark began, but she shook her head. “Nothing that cannot be set aside for the moment.” Her eyes flickered to the closed door and she lowered her voice. “The last time you left,” she murmured, “I lost you for eight years. I will not allow that to happen again.” There was pain in her voice, and sadness, and Clark sighed, especially when he heard Kara’s soft, almost girly ‘aw’ from the other side of the Watchtower.

“That isn’t fair, you know,” he complained before glancing away from Diana and glaring in Kara’s direction. “And do you mind?” he asked. “This is supposed to be a private conversation.”

“I don’t mind at all,” Kara replied from four rooms away. She ignored the confused looks that Zatanna and Firestorm gave her. “By all means,” she said, “carry on.”

“Kara?” Diana asked as she stepped closer to Clark. He gave a nod and she flashed a particularly cruel smile at the wall that he had been looking through. “Shall we give her a show, then?” Diana asked, reaching out with one hand to stroke Clark’s shoulder. “I am feeling a bit randy at the moment.” It was enough of a threat to send Kara scrambling toward the airlock.

“I’m not planning on getting captured again,” Clark said as he listened to his cousin order people out of the way. “You don’t need to come.”
“I want to,” Diana replied. “And I do not intend to lose you again.” There was steel in her voice and she held herself upright, back straight, with her head high, every inch the royal. Clark exhaled carefully – there was no reasoning with her when she was like this. And she dared to call him stubborn.

“Welcome aboard then,” he said.

Diana smiled. And Clark knew that he was lost.
Year Nineteen: Sunsets

LEAGUEWATCH BLOGPOST: New Titans to be Absorbed Into JL, Supes and Wondy
Back on Earth

Posted by TheCaptain at 10:31 PM on 4/20/31

So, the League confirmed just now that it’s formally absorbing those New Titans which means the
sidekicks just got called up the Big Show. With the number of members they’ve got now, should we
rename the Justice League to the Justice Legion?

More importantly, Superman and Wonder Woman are back after spending the last six months in
space with that Valor guy. JL Watchers confirm that they weren’t carrying a super-wonderful baby
with them so we here at LeagueWatch pretty much consider that rumor put to bed. So to speak.

Still no word on Superboy’s condition following yesterday’s rumble with that German guy, Von
Bach. As soon as we know something, we here at LeagueWatch will let you know.

Click to Receive Updates

IF ONE MORE PERSON ASKED HER HOW KAL WAS DOING, DIANA WAS
CONCERNED THAT SHE MIGHT LOSE HER TEMPER.

They had been back on Earth barely an hour before the usual parties began cornering her, ostensibly
to inquire about the results of the six month Brainiac hunt, but in truth, to ask her about Kal. Bruce
was first, though only just, and his line of questioning was far more subtle than Kara’s later queries
but nowhere near as devious as Lois’ angle of attack. Even Arthur joined in, though his style was
more suited for interrogation than friendly discussion. And in each instance, the underlying query was the same: how was Kal and when was he going to resurrect Clark Kent?

Diana did not deny that she was still worried about Kal, nor did she disagree that he needed to re-
establish a civilian identity so he could walk among humanity once more, but thus far, he had
expressed a clear disinterest in doing so for reasons he did not (or could not) explain. At first, she’d
been worried that she was at the source of this decision – it would most certainly be difficult to
explain how Clark Kent and Princess Diana of Themyscira became as close as they were – but over
the last six months, with no League or Amazon crisis to interfere and only a remarkably solitary Lar
Gand as company, Diana had become convinced that it was an intentional decision on Kal’s part.

Her research into Kryptonian culture (and discreet conversations with Kara) had further convinced
her that he was intentionally emulating older members of his species, those entering the end of their
third century which generally marked the twilight of their life. Emotional distance from all things was
a hallmark of elder Kryptonians, which tended to strip joy from the entire culture. Kal no longer
smiled as much as he used to, nor did he laugh and joke, and it stung her to her very core seeing how
much pain he was in.

Even before they cornered Brainiac in that dead system, long before Kal hurled his robotic shell into
the black hole that had once been a star, Diana had decided upon a course of action. She loved him
whenever they had the chance, glorying in the flashes of passion that erupted within him in those
times, and spoke softly about her own dark times at the hands of Ares. At no time did she ever
compare their suffering – Ares held her for a mere handful of days, while Kal had experienced
Darkseid’s less than tender mercies for years – but she’d hoped it would prove to him how much she
trusted him and perhaps convince him to open him himself. For the most part, as they made the slow
journey back to Earth, now without Lar as they parted company following Brainiac's defeat – the young man needed to return to Colu to tell them of this Vril Dox's fate, though he promised to visit Earth again once he could – her plan worked. Kal admitted to some things she hated to hear, like how that foul monster Desaad tortured him, and hinted at other equally dark secrets, but he continued to hold many things back. And whatever it was that he kept secret, it was eating him alive.

He was back to acting as Superman mere hours after they docked with the Watchtower, and then, of course, Diana had to deal with well-meaning but extremely frustrating inquiries about his mental health, but finally, she was free to implement the second part of her plan. Which was how she found herself standing in her mother's throne room.

Hippolyta had listened to her request with a face of stone, though there were hints of her disapproval if one knew how to look. Seated on an identical throne, Akila of the Bana-Mighdall was even more difficult to read, though she clearly suspected this was a matter of some contention between Diana and her mother. Finally, Diana fell silent, her words exhausted and her heart thumping. Both queens opened their mouths to speak, but Hippolyta nodded to her co-ruler graciously (even if her eyes glinted dangerously.)

"Have you taken this man as your lover?" Akila asked flatly. Even Hippolyta winced at the bluntness of the question.

"I have," Diana replied, her voice calm, "though I do not know why that is of importance."

"It is a matter of curiosity to me," the Bana-Mighdall queen declared. "As Champion of Olympus, you are, of course, within your rights to bring whomever you please to the Synoika." Hippolyta did not react to that remark, though Diana could see how much her mother burned to respond. "Thus do I ask, why bring this matter before us when you know the law on bringing a man to such a ceremony?"

"I do this out of respect for the queens of Themyscira," Diana replied. She was suddenly glad that she had donned her panoply for this meeting as it gave her an even greater presence and firmly reminded everyone present of her position as Champion. "Kal-El was instrumental in saving our sisters from Ares many years ago," Diana continued, "but never has he asked for a reward."

"Her spreading her legs for him wasn't reward enough?" someone whispered, clearly unaware of how sharp her hearing was.

"I have been tasked to wage peace," Diana said, turning her head to seek out the woman who had made the insulting remark. She was only vaguely surprised to see a scowling Artemis standing next to one of her Bana-Mighdall sisters and applying some form of wrist lock on the woman. "Kal-El has fought for the same thing for nigh on twenty years nonstop, never asking for reward or for fealty or obedience." She gave Artemis a slight nod before turning her eyes back to Akila and to her mother. "He is tired," she said calmly. "He has been a warrior for peace but has not known it himself for far too long." There were more than a few understanding expressions, especially the older women who could still recall a time when they were faced endless days of struggle and hardship. Diana raised her hands, the gesture meant to reference all of Themyscira. "We call this Paradise Island," she said, "and I would bring him here so that he might rest."

"Men have walked these grounds in recent years," Hippolyta offered slowly. "But never during the Synoika. That is a sacred time for us." She frowned. "Should we make an exception for this ... Kryptonian simply because you have taken him to your bed?" Diana fought the urge to scowl at her mother.

"My relationship with Kal is not at question here," she said slowly. "What is at question is whether
we truly stand for peace. Before he is anything else to me, Kal is my friend and all I want for him is the same peace that he has stood for, that we have known here on this island, even if it is only for a day.” She paused and then locked eyes with her mother. “We owe Kal a debt of honor,” she said carefully. “So again, I make this request, not as Champion of Olympus, but as a Daughter of Themyscira.”

Hippolyta’s expression did not change – Diana had not expected her words to sway the queen; the old woman was too set in her ways – but Akila leaned back in her throne, a conflicted expression on her face. As Bana-Mighdall, her misandry normally ran much deeper than those of Themysciran ancestry, though she had shown flashes of open-mindedness over the years that gave Diana hope. She glanced once at Hippolyta, then back to Diana.

“I would like to meet this … Superman,” Akila declared, glancing briefly at Hippolyta. “Have you thoughts, Queen Hippolyta?” For a long moment, there was no answer. Hippolyta sat silently in her throne, her face so cold it might as well have been carved from stone. She stared at Diana, and Diana returned her unblinking gaze.

“As the Champion has stated,” the Themysciran queen finally stated, her voice hard, “we owe this … Kryptonian male a debt of honor.” She did not quite grimace. “We shall formally invite him to the Synoika.”

“Thank you, my queen,” Diana said in as grave a voice as she could manage. She knew her mother well enough to recognize that she was furious. Furious and terrified.

She ducked out of the throne room at earliest opportunity, and made a quick trip to the Healing Isle where she plotted with Epione regarding Kal’s treatment. One day would certainly be inadequate, but hopefully, it would be a start. She left Epione, her heart lighter than it had been for a long time, but found Artemis waiting.

“Your mother is not pleased, Princess,” the flame-haired woman said. “I suggest you tell your man to be on his very best behavior.” She offered a slight smile. “The guards are being issued mage-tempered steel and warned to use it if he steps even a foot out of bounds.”

“Wonderful.” Diana shook her head and was about to thank Artemis when she noted the woman was glancing back and forth between Diana and Epione’s healing hall, a considering expression on her face.

“There are questions about this … Kal-El,” Artemis said slowly, hesitantly. “I have been asked to relay them by my sisters because they know we were … we are close.” Again, her eyes jumped toward Epione for a moment. “You wish to bring him to Themyscira during the festival where many of our sisters pledge their troth or join in union under the eyes of the gods.” She wet her lips. “And now you visit our healer, telling no one why.” She met Diana’s steady gaze. “Are you with child, Diana?”

“No.” Diana smiled softly. “I do not know if such a thing is even possible – Kal is not of Earth and I …” She glanced away, swallowing the theory that had been building for many years now. “I am not with child, sister.”

“Then do you mean to pledge to him before your mother?” Artemis abruptly flashed a grin. “Because, truly, if you wish the throne that badly, I can think of no quicker way to hurry Hippolyta into Hades’ embrace than that.” Diana laughed before shaking her head.

“Nothing I said was untrue, Artemis,” she said. Her smile faltered slightly. “Time dwindles,” she stated softly. “I shall see you upon the morrow.” As Artemis nodded, Diana rose into the air,
climbing faster and faster with each second. In seconds, she was high over the Atlantic.
“Watchtower,” she said into her communication gear.

“Oh, Cyborg replied. “How can I help, ma’am?”

“I need a location for Superman,” she replied with a soft smile. He would no doubt try to plead out of attending with excuses that ranged from effective to pathetic, but Diana would persevere. Abruptly, she brightened. This would give her a chance to see him in that ceremonial battle armor he hated so much.

The day was looking up.

As captain of the royal guard and principal protector of the queen, Phillipus never allowed herself to relax.

Today was no different, despite the atmosphere of celebration and gaiety, so she consumed only the bare minimum to satisfy protocol before resuming her duties. Her tension level was admittedly higher than she recalled it being in many a Synoika, though that was easily explained by the presence of the Kryptonian, no matter how well-behaved and polite he might be.

And he was. From the moment Diana descended from the sky with this Kal-El, Phillipus had been consistently and repeatedly impressed by the man’s poise and caution. He was certainly attractive enough to look upon if one’s tastes ran toward his gender, but it was more his presence that impressed. Taller than any of the women present, and with wide shoulders and arms, he looked every cubit the mighty warrior that first Diana and then later Donna spoke of. Today, he also dressed to impress – rather than the hardened blue armor, he wore a quilted brown oversuit that looked almost to be a surcoat of some sort, though the material itself was unlike anything Phillipus had seen. Upon his chest, a stylized and almost certainly ceremonial version of his sigil gleamed in the sunlight, constructed of the same not-quite metal that also decorated his shoulders. His scarlet cape lent him even greater stature, though on most people, Phillipus thought it would have looked odd or out of place.

From his tight expression through, this Kal-El was even more uncomfortable in the presence of wary Amazons than they were with him walking among them. Or rather, floating, for he hovered a bare finger’s width above the ground, claiming that he wished to honor their ancient laws by not setting foot upon Themysciran soil on such a sacred day. That was said in slow but firm tones, in the language of Phillipus’ youth, and Diana beamed at him when he addressed the queen with such respect. It went a long way in appeasing many of the youths, though Phillipus noted that all of the elders, those who remembered Herakles’ politeness in the beginning, continued to watch him carefully.

To her great surprise, as the day’s festivities drew toward night, Phillipus realized that she had lost track of the Princess and her non-human lover. This more than anything else astounded her as always before when a man was allowed upon the island, she’d been constantly aware of his location, no matter that most of them had been elderly or not inclined toward lusting after women. Panic very nearly set in, but Phillipus quickly suppressed it and turned her mind toward logic – if anyone could contain this Kryptonian, it was Diana, particularly given the nature of her birth. Glancing toward Hippolyta, she frowned slightly. If the queen realized that her daughter had absconded from the festival with her lover, there would be hell to pay.

She made her own discreet exit after ensuring the queen was well protected by her two finest, and then turned her mind toward likely places she might find Diana. There was the beach, of course, but during a Synoika, it was often covered by the old sailors who wished to pay homage to Lord
Poseidon. Her personal quarters were out of the question – even Diana would not be so crass as that – and all of the princess’ other secret places from her youth were too easily reached. Phillipus nodded. Of course. There could really be only one place they went.

The climb to the cliff ledge was every bit as grueling as she recalled, but her old instincts kicked in the moment she heard a masculine voice, and she crept forward, hugging the trees and other places of concealment. It was not yet dusk, though the sun was beginning its slow fall into the ocean, so she had no difficulty in finding her footing, which was certainly better than the last time she’d had to venture her in the dark.

The princess and Kal-El sat on the cliff side together, legs hanging over the side as they watched the sun begin to set, and Phillipus came to an abrupt halt, unsure why she did not keep on walking and demand that Diana return to her duties. Instead, a flash of curiosity turned her legs to stone and she found herself watching, listening, wondering.

“There,” Diana said as the sun cast its final light over the ocean. “Did I not tell you this was the most perfect sunset you could ever see?” The princess handed him a skin of wine and Kal-El drank from it. “Have you ever seen its like?”

“Once.” The Kryptonian exhaled. “There was a planet … Hal and I were stuck there a month a couple of years ago, trying to repair our ship.” Kal-El smiled and handed the skin back. “His ring was out of juice so we couldn’t just warp home. I was exploring, looking for food, and there were these mountains … it was like they were made of crystal. When the sun set behind them, it was like the entire sky danced.” He inhaled deeply, contently. “I think I like it here better, though. The air, the grass … everything is so … peaceful.”

“I would like to see your crystal planet someday,” Diana said. She glanced at him. “Perhaps you can take me there.”

“No.” Kal-El shook his head. “It’s gone now. Darkseid destroyed it.” The princess gave him a questioning look. “When they held me, Desaad … Desaad dug that memory out of my mind and saw how much pleasure it gave me so they burned the entire world into ash and made me watch.” He shuddered. The two sat in silence for a moment, though Phillipus could see that Diana was struggling with the urge to speak. “Why did you invite me here, Diana?” Kal-El finally asked.

“My mother invited you,” she replied.

“Would she have if you hadn’t pressured her?” The princess laughed.

“No. I think not.” She set the skin aside. “I spoke with Epione. About you.” Phillipus perked up – what was this? “She has agreed to talk to you if you are willing.” Abruptly, Diana looked down. “I thought that if you spoke with someone who truly understood your pain because they had experienced it as well…”

Kal-El was silent. He stared at the vanishing sun and, from her angle, Phillipus could see only his back. At long last, he shook his head and his shoulders slumped.

“Thank you,” he said softly. “I don’t deserve you.” He offered a slight smile. “You keep standing by me, even when I retreat into my Kryptonian heritage…”

“So Kara was right.” Diana reached out and brushed his hair out of his eyes. “She said older members of your race do that when memories are too painful.” Again, they sat in silence.

“She was right,” Kal-El said. “The memories … they are too painful.” He shivered. “And there are a
lot of them. More than anyone else can even understand.” Diana tilted her head as she looked at him. Kal-El exhaled bitterly. “Time runs differently in that dimension. How long was I gone here? Eight years?”

“Seven years, six months, five days,” Diana replied in a hollow voice. From her expression, Phillipus suspected she had realized something terrible. “How long was it for you?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” Kal-El held up his hands and stared at them for a moment. “As best as I can calculate, it was around thirty-five or thirty-six years.”

“Oh, Kal…”

“Something kept helping me – I’m not positive, but I’m pretty sure it was Hermes.” Kal-El barely reacted as Diana took his hand and, for her part, Phillipus did not either. Pieces of a puzzle were starting to fall into place and a terrible theory began gnawing at her soul. “Every time I was about to break or just give up to make the pain stop, he would visit me and bring me some small fraction of my strength back. I don’t remember much beyond some food, something to drink, and then I healed enough to keep resisting.” The Kryptonian shook his head even as the words kept tumbling out of his mouth, a racing torrent that sounded like a confession. “Desaad thought it was one of his underlings, one of the Furies or one of his rivals, and I think his desperation to find out who it was kept him from devoting his full attention to me.” Kal-El lowered his head. “I don’t think I would have lasted a day if he did that.”

“That explains your scars,” Diana whispered. Her voice carried perfectly to Phillipus’ ears, despite the distance. “I had thought … I did not think they were recent enough.” She leaned forward to touch her head to Kal-El’s. “And this is why you embrace your Kryptonian heritage.”

“I’m afraid I’d go mad if I didn’t,” he replied. “You keep me sane,” he added, closing his eyes as he spoke. “After … after that woman and her whips…”

“Shhh,” Diana placed a finger upon his lips. “She’s far from here,” the princess said. “And I will not let her touch you again.”

Phillipus rocked back on her heels as comprehension flooded through her and she quite suddenly found herself looking at Diana’s man with new eyes. Never before had she considered that a man might be placed into the same position she and her sisters had been when Herakles betrayed them, but now … now, she stared at a man of immense power and strength who had been put into that very position. Even worse, from the sound of these tiny fragments she had heard, his abuse had lasted for so much longer than hers.

Now you understand, a woman’s soft voice that was not truly there murmured in her ear. Darkness comes. The princess must be a beacon of light and her Voice must be strong to withstand the trials yet to come.

“So that means you are in your eighties then,” Diana said an eternity later, her voice and the smile that could be heard in it pulled Phillipus back to the present. The presence she’d felt withdrew with another warm mindtouch and she felt feeling return to her legs. Out of the corner of her eye, she realized that there was another here. The flame-haired Bana-Mighdall girl wore an expression that Phillipus took to mean she’d had a similar experience. Rare did the Olympians intervene in the world these days, but if they did … Phillipus glanced back at Diana and her man and felt her heart tighten. What terrible doom was before these two?

“Eighty-eight or eighty-nine.” Diana grinned.
“Good,” she said. “I was not entirely comfortable being a … what do you call it? A cradle-robber?” Kal-El laughed, a pure, beautiful sound, and from the delight that flashed across the princess’ face, it was something he did not do much of.

“You’re still about thirty years my elder,” he replied, still smiling. “But I suppose no one will think twice about an octogenarian dating a centenarian in this day and age.” They continued to banter in a familiar, loving way, but Phillipus’ thoughts were racing. The Olympians – and who else could that have been, whispering in her ear without being seen – had directed her to this place so she could hear this, but they never did anything without a reason. Did they mean for her to become Kal-El’s advocate with Hippolyta? Or was this simply a warning so she could prepare her Amazons for the coming darkness? She glanced to Artemis and found the flame-haired woman watching her with identical questions dancing in her eyes. Phillipus nodded, Artemis returned it, and understanding was reached.

“Highness.” Phillipus’ statement caused an immediate if vaguely amusing response. Without hesitation, the princess and her consort threw themselves off the cliff and hung there in the air, both clearly prepared to defend the other if their stances were any indication. Their faces were both red with embarrassment at having been caught – another few moments and Phillipus suspected certain pieces of their clothing might have been lost; she remembered the early days of young love all too well – which made it quite difficult to keep a straight face. Artemis did not bother trying to do so and smirked broadly. “Your absence has been noted, Highness,” Phillipus announced. “Do you need an escort back to the festival? The footing is quite treacherous in the dark.”

“No,” Diana said as she floated back to the ledge, Kal-El behind her. “We can manage.”

“Then we should return,” Phillipus said. She allowed Artemis and Diana to take the lead, and then offered Kal-El a solemn nod that quite clearly baffled him before falling step behind her princess. Her thoughts continued to race. Darkness was coming. What could it mean? What was she meant to do?

The thoughts troubled her for a very long time.

Clark could not recall the last time he was this uncomfortable.

It wasn’t just the ridiculous ceremonial Kryptonian garments that felt like he was wearing a freaking dress, or the fact that he was quite obviously the only man on the island, or even the unfamiliarity with this side of Diana’s culture. No, it was all of those things. Even when he’d been on Rimbor, in the days before Darkseid’s forces showed up, he’d not been quite this self-conscious about his every single action. There, he’d need to project an aura of cocky bravado and competence, not to mention overwhelming power, whereas here, on Themyscira, he had to straddle a very fine line between strength and meekness. Too much one way, and they would think he was an arrogant piece of crap well on his way toward becoming Herakles; too much the other way and he wasn’t worthy of the princess (or pretending to not be the before-mentioned piece of crap and thus untrustworthy.) Not that he really thought he was worthy in the first place.

Strangely, he’d appeared to have obtained some unlikely supporters. The black woman who Diana called Phillipus treated him no differently than the rest of her sisters, and her almost casual acceptance of his presence seemed to result in a number of the other women to relax. On the other end of the spectrum, the red-head with the impossibly long pony tail – how long did it take her to wash that? A week? – alternated between indifference and friendship, sometimes speaking with him as if they had long been friends. Diana addressed her as Artemis and, from the way the two spoke, he guessed there was some kind of past there. Being a red-blooded male with a perfectly healthy sex drive and an excellent imagination, Clark had to work very hard to keep from imagining the two
women together. He loved Diana more than life itself, but he’d be a liar if he said that his thoughts did not at least wander in a certain direction before he quickly reigned them in. God help him if any of these women thought he was thinking about that.

So he struggled through the open-air feast, listening intently to the stories and songs, watching with delight as the dancers and musicians brought the night alive, and clapping along with everyone else. The food he enjoyed quite a bit – they did not skimp when it came to meat and he was very happy with their potatoes and bread – and the wine was strong enough (or maybe magical enough … if one believed in that sort of thing) to give him a slight buzz.

If only the queen was as pleasant.

Oh, Diana’s mother was never openly unfriendly toward him, but her cool disdain and icy politeness in even the simplest things quickly began to grate, especially as everyone present took note the longer the festival ran. A space began to open up around him as curious Amazons interested in stories about the outside world or about their princess’ many adventures instead elected to curtail their curiosity in the face of their sovereign’s obvious displeasure. Soon, only Diana continued to engage him in conversation, but Clark knew her well enough to see the rage in her eyes. She was on the verge of doing something very rash, something that could likely permanently damage her relationship with her family, and Clark didn’t have a clue how to prevent it.

He thought that he’d obtained a breather when Hippolyta excused herself briefly from this feast to make her expected appearance at the Bana-Mighdall table, but Queen Akila took Diana’s mother’s place and she was almost as frosty. To his relief, however, she at least made the effort to be a good host.

“Tell me, Kal-El,” the Bana-Mighdall queen instructed, “how did you come to this world? Diana tells us that you from another world entirely.”

“I was born on a planet called Krypton,” Clark replied politely and in his best Themysciran. It wasn’t anywhere near as good as Diana’s Kryptonian, but it at least showed the Amazons that he was making an effort. He still wasn’t entirely sure how this dual queens thing worked – supposedly, they wielded equal authority on the island, so the actions of one could not overrule the other, which was fairly similar to how the Spartan kings ruled if Clark remembered his Ancient Greek History correctly, but Diana had told him that Hippolyta remained more powerful. In another hundred years, if Akila continued to rule the Bana-Mighdall, she might have enough political authority to openly oppose Diana’s mother, but right now, their equality was a very polite fiction. “My mother was Lara Lor-Van and my father Jor-El.”

He spoke for a while, telling the queen about his history and how his Kryptonian parents risked so much to ensure that he survived, before segueing into his adopted parents’ lives. Akila was sharp enough to note how he emphasized his mothers’ roles in his life, but she did not call him on the slight pandering to the audience and, indeed, seemed to almost approve. Somehow, she also managed to get him on the subject of his role as Earth’s champion and he gave her the brief outlines of that as well, skipping over the darker parts that simply weren’t any of her damned business. His capture and torture was covered by a simple ‘I was a prisoner for a time’ but he suspected that she noted how rough his voice turned and how Diana touched his hand.

“A most stirring tale,” Akila stated. Her eyes flickered away and Clark suddenly felt Hippolyta’s eyes on him. Instantly, his shoulders tensed once more, especially when he noted that Diana’s mother had imbibed more than a little wine. “Would you not say so, Queen Hippolyta?”

“How much of it is true, I wonder?” Diana’s mother wondered aloud. She offered a smile that did not touch the cold emeralds that were her eyes. “You tell the tale well enough,” she added. “You
were once a bard, is that not the case?’”

“In a manner of speaking,” Clark replied slowly. “I was a journalist.”

“Yet you do not follow this profession anymore?” Hippolyta finished her wine. “Were your talents inadequate?”

“Mother,” Diana began, her eyes narrowing, but Clark responded, still speaking his measured, even tone.

“Circumstances forced the League to falsify my death,” he said. “Resurrection of that identity would be as difficult as explaining why I still look thirty when to the world, I’ve passed fifty.”

“Ah.” Hippolyta strode toward her throne, taking it casually though Clark noticed the slight unsteadiness in her gait. She was far from the only one who had consumed too much alcohol, but at the moment, he really wished she was stone cold sober. At least then he knew she would not be tossing out the veiled insults. “Is the wine not to your liking, Kryptonian?” the queen asked, nodding toward the untouched glass in front of him. Clark glanced at it – he’d stopped drinking when Akila began her line of questioning, suspecting he would need all of his wits about him, and now, even the thought of drinking more caused his stomach to twist and curl.

“It was, Highness, but I do not have the head for alcohol as strong as you make.” Hippolyta’s smile almost looked like a sneer.

“Herakles did not have the head for it either,” she said. Clark’s face froze at the implication and he could hear Diana’s sharp inhalation of surprise. She was far from the only one – even Akila looked askance at Hippolyta and Phillipus appeared positively mortified. Anger coursed through him and Clark felt the heat bubbling behind his eyes as that old familiar rage bubbled in his belly.

He rose.

“I believe,” he intoned slowly, his voice nearly as taut as his muscles, “that it is time for me to go.” Hippolyta frowned.

“There is no need for you to depart, Kryptonian,” she said. The way she spoke his race’s name sounded like it was meant to be an insult. “You were invited.” For the first time since he’d arrived at Themyscira, Clark spoke without thinking.

“Invited, Amazon,” he retorted, “is not the same as wanted.” He swallowed his anger and half-turned toward Diana. “Thank you, Princess, for your hospitality. Your home is as lovely as you claimed.” She opened her mouth to respond, but Clark kept speaking. “I apologize for the discontent my presence has caused and pray ask you to forgive me.” Before Diana could reply, he swung away from her and started climbing into the sky. “Please convey my appreciation to all who deserve it,” he called out before accelerating into the darkness.

“How dare you?” he heard Diana hiss to her mother. Hippolyta called out her daughter’s name, but from the tone, it sounded like she was shouting into the air. Clark grimaced as he slowed his rapid ascent and, a moment later, Diana reached him. “I’m sorry,” she began, but he shook his head.

“Wine loosened her tongue,” he replied through clenched teeth. “I frighten her and she reacted instinctively.”

“By lashing out.” Diana cast a quick look earthward before scowling. “Come,” she ordered as she took his hand. “Let’s go home. I have had enough of paradise for one day.”
She retired to her quarters in a rage.

By the time she calmed down, Hippolyta had destroyed at least one priceless heirloom, damaged three others and very likely broken a finger by punching the wall. Her anger had faded only slightly, though now it had shifted away from that miserable man and in the direction of her daughter, particularly in the wake of Diana’s disrespectful departure. Those who saw the princess hurl the contents of her wine into her mother’s face before leaping into the sky after that damnable man very quickly spread the tale, and by dawn, it would likely have become actual blows.

Eventually, as her temper cooled and her mind cleared from the wine-induced fog, anger turned to shame. Had she truly said those spiteful things? By all accounts, this Kal-El had been completely polite and every bit the wonderful person he would have to be in order to capture Diana’s heart, yet she had been so lost in misery, so buried by bitter memories and misplaced rage, that she had been unable to look at him without seeing Herakles. As a host, she should have behaved better, but as a queen … Hera help her.

“That was an appalling performance,” Phillipus announced long hours later when she entered their sleeping quarters. The dark-skinned woman glared at her with disgust in her eyes. “Have you any notion of the damage you have wrought on this night?”

“I do.” Hippolyta collapsed upon their bed and buried her head in her hands. “Hera, what a fool I let myself become.”

“What were you thinking? You know better than to forbid something to Diana!” Phillipus shook her head. “I will need to take steps to ensure she does not turn her back on us.” Hippolyta’s eyes widened.

“Surely you do not think it that bad,” she began, but Phillipus gave her a scowl.

“She loves that man. And by all the gods, it is clear to all who have eyes that he loves her.” She shook her head. “What were you thinking?” she repeated.

“I was thinking of the past,” Hippolyta replied tightly. She observed that Phillipus was not undressing, which likely meant they would sleep apart tonight. It was probably for the best. “I looked at that man and could not see anyone but Herakles.”

“Herakles?” Phillipus scoffed. “That boy is thrice the man Herakles ever was.” Her tone was too knowing and Hippolyta gave her a long questioning look. Phillipus resisted longer than Hippolyta recalled her ever doing in the past, but finally exhaled. “An Olympian visited me this night,” she said. “I don’t know who but …” She shook her head before dragging one of the wicker chairs out of place and taking a seat in it. “Diana and Kal-El disappeared so I sought them out,” Phillipus said, “and when I found them, the Olympian rooted my feet to the earth and silenced my tongue.” She looked away. “I heard that boy hint at a tale that would chill your soul.” When she looked up, her expression was grim. “How long did Herakles’ men have us?” she asked. “Seven days? Eight?”

“Nine,” Hippolyta replied, shuddering at the black memories. Nine days and night of constant pain and misery, of being passed around like a beast to be used, of expecting death at any moment but it never coming. She still had nightmares from time to time, though they were infrequent and generally only after stressful days. Knowing that Herakles still suffered for his crimes by holding Themyscira aloft by Zeus’ command sometimes made it better, and at others, left her shivering in terror because he was so close.

“Imagine that it happened for nine years.” Phillipus’ expression was dark and she nodded when Hippolyta gave her a horrified look. “Now imagine thirty years.” She looked away, shuddering. “I
know not what the gods have in mind for Diana and Kal-El,” she said, “but I cannot stand by you when you act the fool because you are afraid of losing your daughter to the one man in this world who I think is truly worthy of her.” She started to turn away.

“Wait.” Hippolyta frowned. “What do you mean that the gods have something in mind for them?” Phillipus looked back, studied her face and must have seen whatever it was she was looking for because she grunted.

“The Olympian who rooted me in place whispered in my ear,” she said. “Something about Diana needing to be a beacon of light and her voice needing to be strong.” She paused. “I think she meant Kal-El.”

“The Voice of God,” Hippolyta murmured. “In Hebrew, his name means the Voice of God.” She looked away. “Hera visited me when Diana first went into Man’s World.” Hippolyta hugged her arms around her body. “She said that darkness was coming and Diana’s trials would make Herakles’ seem soft.” She looked up. “I fear that I have made a terrible mistake, Phillipus,” she said.

“You have.” Phillipus shook her head. “As is my duty, I will try to make it right.” She frowned. “I will need a royal writ, releasing Epione and Artemis of the Bana-Mighdall to go to Patriarch’s World. They will carry your groveling apology to Diana and her man.”

“Epione I can give you at once. Artemis … that must be done by Akila.” She groaned at the look upon Phillipus’ face. “You want me to speak to her.”

“I do.” Phillipus smiled. “You made this mess, Lyta,” she said. “Now you must help me clean it up.” She rose and leaned forward to kiss Hippolyta lightly upon the forehead like a child. “Sleep, my queen,” she ordered. “We have much work to do and you will need your wits about you upon the morrow.”

And so saying, Phillipus walked quickly from their private chambers, leaving Hippolyta in a bitter silence. She stripped off her clothes, tossing them more or less in the direction of the wide basket intended for them and briefly contemplated her bed. Phillipus was right – she would need to be thinking straight tomorrow when she spoke with Akila; the woman had the mind sharper than any razor – but her heart was troubled. Donning a robe, she strode from her bedchamber, ignoring the two guards that quickly noticed her departure and fell into step behind her.

Hera’s temple was still brightly lit from the day’s festivities, but there was no one present which was a boon. Dropping to her knees before the icon, Hippolyta closed her eyes. There was so much she had done wrong this day, but it was not to the gods that she needed to apologize. No, from them, she needed guidance and, if she were very lucky, assurance that the steps she was taking were the correct ones.

“Mistress, I beseech thee,” she whispered softly. “Aid me in my time of trouble. Grant me the wisdom I so sorely lack but desperately need.”

But there was no answer.
Year Twenty: Thunder

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Forecast Discussion

HAZARDOUS WEATHER OUTLOOK
NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE CENTRAL CITY/PLEASANT HILL MO
534 AM CST MON AUG 16 2032 KSZ025-057-060-102>105-MOZ001>008-011>017-020>025-028>033-037>040-043>046-053-054-201900-
ATCHISON KS-MIAMI-LINN KS-DONIPHAN-LEAVENWORTH-WYANDOTTE-
JOHNSON KS-
ATCHISON MO-NODAWAY-WORTH-GENTRY-HARRISON-MERCER-PUTNAM-
SCHUYLER-
HOLT-ANDREW-DE KALB-DAVIESS-GRUNDY-SULLIVAN-ADAIR-BUCHANAN-
CLINTON-
CALDWELL-LIVINGSTON-LINN MO-MACON-PLATTE-CLAY-RAY-CARROLL-
CHARITON-
RANDOLPH-JACKSON-LAFAYETTE-SALINE-HOWARD-CASS-JOHNSON MO-PETTIS-
COOPER-BATES-HENRY-
534 AM CST MON AUG 16 2032

THIS HAZARDOUS WEATHER OUTLOOK IS FOR NORTHWEST...NORTH CENTRAL
AND WEST CENTRAL MISSOURI...AS WELL AS EXTREME EASTERN KANSAS.

.DAY ONE...TODAY AND TONIGHT

THUNDERSTORMS ARE EXPECTED ACROSS MUCH OF NORTHWEST AND WEST CENTRAL
MISSOURI INTO ADJACENT EASTERN KANSAS THIS MORNING. FREQUENT
LIGHTNING...DOWNPOURS AND SMALL HAIL ARE EXPECTED WITH THE
STRONGEST STORMS. SEVERE WEATHER IS EXPECTED.

Local weather forecast by “City, St” or zip code: _____

BLACK CLOUDS BLOCKED OUT THE MOON AS RAIN FELL IN HEAVY SHEETS AND
THUNDER ROCKED THE SKY, BUT CASSANDRA IGNORED IT.

For the last three hours, she’d been stuck in the same awkward position, kneeling on a not especially stable rafter of this condemned but somehow still standing warehouse while looking down at an assembly of thugs, lunatics and thrill-seeking morons. With so many people in the area, she’d been unable to move more than a few inches at a time and both of her legs felt like they had gone to sleep. If it had not been for her waterproof cape and cowl, she suspected that the constant rain would have long since soaked her to the bone – Cassandra wasn’t sure why this building even had a roof, because it certainly wasn’t doing its job.

She watched with poorly suppressed worry as Tim weaved his way through the cluster of mostly
men on his way to the center where he was expected to fight. They had been investigating this underground fight club for several weeks now, ever since seven bodies had turned up with signs of having been beaten to death, but finally, ‘Alvin Draper,’ Tim’s first and favorite undercover identity, was on the verge of engaging the actual murderer.

At first, they’d considered her being the person to make the infiltration attempt but Sensei Bruce pointed out two major flaws with that: first, every member of the city’s underworld either knew from firsthand experience or had heard the rumors about how Batgirl was one of the most competent fighters in Gotham, and second, thanks to those rats at the Post, most everyone in the city knew who Cassandra Wayne was. Richard was still recovering from a slight knee injury – he kept insisting that he was fine, but no one believed him, especially when they saw him walk; if they were able to see things the way Cassandra was, they’d definitely not trust what he said – and Helena had a minor back sprain that she insisted was, in no way, related to Richard’s knee. No one believed her either.

Thanks to the electronics in her new cowl, Tim was surrounded by a soft blue glow that only she could see. He was tagged with a tiny subcutaneous beacon that emitted a difficult to detect transmission pulse – it was, according to Sensei Bruce, extraterrestrial technology he was quite confident none of these lowlifes could possibly intercept – so Cassandra amused herself by watching Tim’s body language. He was as annoyed and frustrated as she was, but at the same time, he was dangerously eager, probably because he could sense the end of this hunt. The others around him fed off his eagerness and it drew the attention of those who were really dangerous.

The blond man who stood in the center of the warehouse was tall and even at this distance, Cassandra could see that he was exceptionally well-trained. His chest was bare, revealing an elaborate Japanese-style snake tattoo that coiled around his back and torso, and it was from that distinctive feature that he derived his street name of King Snake. Cassandra shifted slowly, triggering the zoom feature in her cowl and she confirmed the murkiness of the man’s eyes. So, the rumors were true. He was either blind or wore contact lenses to foster that illusion.

She was too far away to hear what was said when Tim stepped into the makeshift ring, but it was very apparent that this King Snake person realized he was facing an actual challenger capable of defeating him from the way his entire body tensed up. Cassandra grinned underneath her cowl – she’d spent a long time getting Tim up to his current level of ability and it was always pleasant to see someone acknowledge her efforts, even if they did not know that was what they were doing. He still wasn’t as good as she was or even Sensei Bruce in his prime, but that was okay since there was plenty of time to train and almost an unlimited amount of fools and criminals to practice upon. If she got her way, no one alive would be able to beat her Tim in a fight.

Except her, of course.

Her heart started to beat rapidly when King Snake and Tim began to fight. There was no ceremonial bow, no rules, and from the abrupt silence that descended upon the attendees, the speed and brutality of their strikes was something that had never been seen here. Cassandra took the opportunity to shift her position – outside, thunder continued to boom and flickers of lightning cast ominous shadows everywhere so she was unconcerned that she might be noticed – and almost instantly, the sharp tingle of restored blood flow to her cramped limbs forced her to bite down on her tongue. It would be soon now and she very much wanted to put a boot into this King Snake’s face.

“Execute.” Sensei Bruce’s whispered order sent her diving off the rafter. She was vaguely aware of Huntress (who should not have even been here, not with that back injury) do the same and Sensei Bruce as well, but her attention was locked on Tim. He was bloodied and hurt, but his own strikes had seriously slowed King Snake. She threw out her arms, triggering the charge that stiffened her cape and arrested her fall.
Her timing could not have been better. Lightning flashed in that very moment, and the winged, horned shadow she cast upon the crowd caused an immediate panic. At the same moment, Sensei Bruce and Huntress sent a handful of smoke and gas pellets into their midst, and they detonated with sharp cracks that, for a change, could not be heard over the booming of thunder and cries of surprise. Men and women started to scatter, some already coughing and hacking, and the abrupt chaos diverted King Snake’s attention just long enough for Tim to take advantage. He came in low, his balance utterly perfect, and ducked the other man’s desperate knee strike before landing a beautiful palm strike in King Snake’s diaphragm that caused the older man to fold over. Tim followed that up with a knee strike of his own, and the blond murderer fell back, his nose gushing red. He was barely conscious when he hit the ground and thus, offered no defense at all to Tim’s coup de grace.

Grinning under her cowl, Cassandra landed on top of one of the would-be fighters, her velocity and weight throwing him into another man, and then used his body as a springboard, automatically orienting toward Tim. It was only logical – Batgirl always sought out the best fighters, after all, and with King Snake unconscious, Mister Draper was the obvious target. She saw his body language change the instant he realized her intent and if they weren’t surrounded by hostiles, she might have actually laughed at how quickly pride transformed to resignation. Didn’t he realize the compliment she was paying him?

They danced for a few seconds, holding nothing back, and Cassandra’s glee only intensified at how skilled he had become. They so rarely were able to really test one another these days thanks to their all too busy lives. She was still faster and better, but he had reach and strength on her, so it might have been an exciting match if Alvin Draper did not need to take a fall so Batgirl could move on to other targets. He took a glancing blow to the chin but allowed it to spin him into an awkward position so he had no counter to her rapid follow-ups that she only partially pulled. Crumpling into a pile, Tim groaned and she gave him a light kick to the head that actually only grazed his hair. It certainly looked real though, and poor Mister Draper ‘joined’ King Snake in unconsciousness.

None of the other criminals presented much challenge as most of them were more interested in escape than testing themselves against the Bats, so she decided to play with some of the toys and gadgets that she so rarely used. Sonic grenades that Tim called screamers (and Richard jokingly called Helenas once, intending it to be a reference to her absolute inability to sit through a horror movie without losing her composure, but the accidental innuendo resulted in her giving him a black eye), and tangler lines, and the batarangs she was no good with for some reason, they were all put to good use against the gang members. There was even a new grenade that, upon exposure to oxygen, erupted in a foam that almost instantly hardened yet remained porous enough for those trapped in it to breathe. Flashbangs and smoke bombs and taser lines … Cassandra used them all, enjoying herself immensely even though she knew that this was Very Serious Business, and Not Something To Be Taken Lighly.

By the time the police arrived, the entire gang had been neutralized in some fashion and Sensei Bruce had already ordered them to vanish. The new commissioner, elected after Barbara’s father’s retirement earlier this year, did not like the Bats at all and Sensei Bruce was not enthusiastic about getting into a fight with her at the moment. He was convinced that eventually, Commissioner Yindel would be forced to acknowledge their necessity, but as long as she didn’t, he wanted them to stay out of her way.

“You could have pulled some of your punches,” Tim muttered when they reached the rally point. He’d made a discreet escape from the warehouse long before the fight was over, and was now wearing his Robin suit. His lips were still a little bloodied, but he’d obviously had enough time to deal with most of the bruises.

“Couldn’t,” Cassandra replied. “Too many eyes.” She grinned, though he couldn’t see it because of
“It will improve Alvin’s street rep,” she pointed out.

“Yeah,” Huntress said. She was moving stiffly – her back was obviously still hurting – but she was nearly as wired with adrenaline as Cassandra was. “Those bangers saw him take down King Snake and nearly hold his own with Batgirl.”

“Which might have been a mistake,” Tim muttered. Sensei Bruce, whose body was screaming exhaustion and pain to Cassandra though she doubted anyone else noticed, half-turned his head to study Tim as he continued. “If he’s that good, why doesn’t he make a play for leadership?” Tim scowled. “I may have to retire Alvin.”

“Send him to prison,” Sensei Bruce said. “Oracle can set something up that takes him out of state.”

“An extradition to Arizona or Texas maybe,” he said before nodding.

“Good work,” Sensei Bruce said as he produced his grapple gun and launched himself into the air.

“I hate it when he says that,” Helena said. She rolled her shoulders, grimacing slightly, before reaching for her own grappler.

“Take some time off,” Tim instructed. “Let your back heal.” He aimed his own grappler.

“Might take nine months,” Cassandra said as she triggered her gun and let it yank her away from Helena’s suddenly horrified body language. Tim was mere seconds behind her and he gave her a questioning look when they landed. “Did you see her face?” Cassandra asked, knowing he could hear her smile.

“So, she’s not…”

“Doesn’t move like it.” Cassandra laughed lightly as she leaped off the building and glided down to where they had concealed their bikes. “But it was funny to see her panic.” Tim snickered.

“We need to mess with Dick that way too,” he said. Cassandra nodded as she started her cycle.

“Race you home,” she said before gunning the engine and squealing out of the alley.

Home was a penthouse apartment in the Diamond District of the city. The building itself was owned by Sensei Bruce through WayneTech and was primarily used as temporary lodging for employees who were in Gotham for any length of time but normally lived out of state. Because of that, it had some of the best security arrangements in all of Gotham. The various cameras were all accessible (and monitored) by Oracle, armed security prevented too nosy photographers from trying to sneak in to take pictures of Bruce Wayne’s illegitimate daughter and her live-in boyfriend, and they even had a dog (although technically, that was against building policy.) Most of their neighbors weren’t around long enough for them to notice what odd hours Cassandra and Tim came and went, and the five or six who were more or less permanent residents were all too busy with their own lives to care. The building’s close proximity to the WayneTech building allowed Tim to be a frequent sight there, which had started even more rumblings among the paparazzi that the son of the late Jack Drake, founder of DTS, Inc., was apparently the heir designate to Mister Wayne.

They were more right than they knew.

Several weeks earlier, right before Richard nearly blew out his knee trying to chase down Deadshot, Cassandra had overheard him speaking with Tim about the future and she had not been surprised to learn that Dick had zero interest in becoming the Bat should Miss Selina finally convince Sensei
Bruce to retire. When that happened – and it would be sooner than later; Cassandra could see how much of a toll the last twenty years had been on her adopted father – Tim would be the man who donned the cowl, even if it scared him silly when he thought about it.

“Beat you,” Cassandra said when Tim finally pulled into their satellite cave. It was quite close to the apartment and, in fact, accessible from the building itself by way of the elevator, but they only used that on emergencies. She’d already stripped out of her Batsuit, wiped it down, inspected it for any damage and put it away. In fact, she’d been getting bored, even though she knew full well where he’d been. Tim gave her a sour look.

“Barbara wanted to talk about Yindel,” he muttered. “Ted was there and you know how those two go on and on when they’re together.”


“Well, they look like they’re back together now.” He began removing his equipment and stowing it, which gave Cassandra an excellent opportunity to watch him. She had liked watching him years before she realized why she enjoyed it. Long before their first time together in Switzerland, before his pain and misery became her pain and misery, she’d found herself wondering why her eyes were always drawn to him, or why he always gravitated toward her, and it was not until after her very first kiss – with Kon-El, though that had been a horrible mistake and misunderstanding on both of their parts – that she finally began to realize how much of an integral part of her Tim had become. He was patient with her when she struggled, laughed when she made jokes, and understood her utter disinterest in a life outside of the cowl. Someday, that might change, but for the moment, as long as he was there, she was content with her life.

No. That wasn’t right. She was not content. She was happy.

“Did you remember to feed Ace?” Tim asked as he pulled on a pair of sweats. Cassandra considered.

“Thought it was your turn,” she replied. He shook his head.

“Nope.” Suddenly grinning, he slid his feet into his shoes. “Maybe he’ll have eaten that hideous cake that Helena gave us.” Cassandra shook her head.

“Threw it out,” she said. “Told her she should have asked Alfred for help.”

“I told her it was great,” Tim said. He stomped his feet to settle the shoes. “And then,” he added with another grin, “I told her that she should make one for Richard.” Cassandra chuckled.

It was still raining when they ducked out of the concealed satellite cave and they were soaked when they reached the apartment lobby. The gray-haired security man – William, she read off his nametag though it took several long seconds to connect the letters she saw to the sound of his name – let them in with a friendly smile. He and Tim spoke about the day’s incident log and the latest attempt at intrusion by the rats with their cameras, and Cassandra waited impatiently beside the elevator. When Tim finally approached, his body language was all the apology she needed.

There was a woman waiting inside their apartment.

She was reclining on Cassandra’s favorite chair, sipping from a glass and smiling as they ghosted into the apartment. Ace was asleep at her feet but he did not stir when they approached, so he was probably drugged. Tim scowled darkly and Cassandra recognized her at once.

Frowning, she stared at her mother.
“Hello, children,” Lady Shiva said. “It is good to see you again.” She smiled. “I need your help.”

The sky over Los Angeles was dark and foreboding, but Clark didn’t mind.

He was standing quietly in a crowd of well-wishers and hopeful voters, all here to watch as Lex worked his way through the greeting line and departed after a campaign stop. This was an election year, after all, and even though President ‘Alexander’ could not run again, he was doing his part to help the shaky campaign of his party’s nominee. Few expected the vice president to actually succeed him, regardless of how successful the Alexander administration had been – the VP was too vulgar, too unprofessional, and had made far too many mistakes over the last eight years to warrant serious consideration for the highest office in the land – but Luthor was at least making the attempt.

Clark wasn’t sure what had made him decide to dig out the old glasses and blazer so he could listen to Lex’s speech from within the crowd, but he was glad that did. He still didn’t trust Luthor, even if the man had thus far lived up to his part of their unspoken détente, but he had to admit, as president, he’d done a pretty good job. Unemployment was down, the GNP was up, taxes were stable, and the citizens of the nation were happy.

Overhead, thunder boomed again, once more threatening to dump another deluge of rain on top of them. The massive storm system that still covered a considerable portion of the continental United States with amazingly foul weather was completely unprecedented with its scale, and so far, no one had a reasonable explanation for it. There were the expected concerns, that this was the precursor of another extraterrestrial invasion or that some weather-based villains were responsible, but so far, none of those had panned out. Not willing to chance it, Diana kept the League on high alert, standing ready to spring into action the very moment a threat manifested itself which also had the unexpected benefit of resolving a lot of the crisis events that Clark would have normally handled. So here he was, hiding in the sea of humanity, watching the man he’d once considered his mortal enemy and wondering if that man had changed as much as Clark himself had changed.

“Remember to vote this November!” Lex shouted to an accompanying roar of approving cheers. He took his wife’s hand – Alexander’s wife, Clark reminded himself with a grimace, not Luthor’s; his enhanced senses told him that the two appeared to genuinely love one another, but it still bothered him that Lex would use someone like this. Once, a long time ago, Clark would have barely hesitated to let the world know about this, but now, having seen firsthand the face of real evil and witnessed the good Luthor was accomplishing, he questioned whether he had the right. And that didn’t even take into account how some of her words made him wonder if what he thought he knew was wrong as well.

“I swear to God,” Madeline Alexander said through a smile, “if that jerk tries to look down my shirt one more time, I’m going to kick him in the balls.” No one but Lex would have normally been able to hear her, but Clark wasn’t exactly normal.

“Say the word,” Luthor replied, “and I’ll have him killed and replaced with a robot duplicate.” He was smiling and waving as well. The two were slowly backing toward the ladder leading up into Air Force One.

“Don’t even joke about something like that, Lex,” Madeline hissed. “You don’t know who might be listening!” They boarded the plane without making any further comments that might hint at Mrs. Alexander’s knowledge about her husband’s true identity, and as Clark let the swell of humanity carry him away from where the impromptu gathering had taken place, he once again wondered at the strangeness of life. The Earth that he’d left so long ago had actually made sense, but this brave new world kept throwing him curve balls. Not only was Lex Luthor evidently a good guy, but he’d settled down and seemed genuinely in love with someone. He shook his head, let his shoulders sag,
and tried to avoid notice.

It didn’t work.

“I thought that was you, Clark.” The speaker was a portly redheaded man in his mid or late-thirties, but Clark recognized Jimmy instantly. His old friend stared at him with a conflicted expression, as if he could not figure out whether to be happy or furious. “You’ve been back for five years,” Olsen accused, “and it never occurred to you to drop in and say hi?” Clark hesitated – Jimmy’s remark implied deeper knowledge – and then he sighed.

“Did anyone at the Planet not know about me?” he said as he offered his hand.

“Maybe Lombard,” Jimmy replied before lunging forward and capturing Clark in a hug. “God, it’s good to see you again, C.K.,” he said with a broad grin. “Come on – let’s go get a beer. You can tell me how you’ve been. I can tell you all about my life and we can both pretend that I didn’t get fat.”

One beer turned into many, and Clark was quickly able to divert Jimmy’s questions about where he had been to the Olsen family instead. He listened in rapt awe at the tales about the new Olsens – Lois had mentioned that her sister was dating Jimmy before he left for Rimbor, but he hadn’t thought to ask her about them when he finally returned to Earth – marveled at the photographs Jimmy had on his phone, but somehow managed to weasel out of a promise to visit in Metropolis. It was not that he did not enjoy Jimmy’s company, far from it actually, but Lucy had driven him insane back when he still interacted with her through Lois. And then, of course, there were the explanations that would be needed – Clark wasn’t terribly upset over Jimmy knowing the truth about him, but Lucy? Dear God, no.

He ended up having to call a cab for his old friend to ensure he made it back to his hotel room even though it was barely six before making his escape and rushing through the rain toward a conveniently darkened alley. The hard-light hologram that gave him the illusion of a suit fell away, revealing the distinctive Kryptonian suit and he pushed up into the dark sky. Angry black clouds still dominated the horizon and Clark frowned at them for a moment.

“Watchtower,” he said into his suit’s integrated commlink, “this is Superman. Anything I should be aware of?”

“Negative,” Cyborg replied. “I read you on the west coast. Is that correct, sir?”

“You can quit with the sir, Victor,” Clark replied. “And yes. I’m in L.A., heading north to the Fortress.”

“Copy that.” There was a noticeable pause before Victor spoke again. “Sir.” Clark shook his head again, but he smiled at the young man’s response.

He did not return home directly, instead touching down in Oregon and visiting an apple orchard he’d encountered years ago during one his many rumbles with those Cadmus clowns. The original owner was long since retired and his daughter was now running things. It was difficult meeting her eyes, as every time he looked at her, Clark recalled giving a little girl piggy back rides into the clouds, and that girl was now a very self-assured, confident young woman. Seeing Jimmy tonight had been hard enough, but looking at her … it made him feel very old.

“Watchtower alert,” Cyborg announced over his comlink. Clark froze in mid-sentence, automatically tensing his muscles, and the girl – God, what was her name? – took a step back. “Air Force One has declared an emergency just outside Seattle!”
Clark sprang up into the sky, the air booming as he accelerated toward the alert. He remembered hearing some of the reporters at Lex’s event mention something about a campaign stop in Washington state before the president continued on to Japan for next week’s Pacific summit, but he’d barely been paying attention.

“On approach,” he said into his commlink. “I have visual now.” The plane was struggling – one of the engines was on fire and it looked like another one wasn’t working correctly. Clark dove toward the plane. “Command: open transmission on aircraft band,” he said in Kryptonian. His hard-suit chirped. “Air Force One, this is Superman. I am here to render assistance.”

“Copy that, Superman,” came an immediate and relived voice. “We’ve suffered a crippling lightning strike and need to make an immediate landing.” Clark dropped down underneath the plane, then rose up to secure a hold. There were designated locations on the airframe, clearly marked, for emergency lifts by metahumans, and Clark would have laughed at the forward thinking of the United States Air Force if the situation were not so dire.

“I have hard contact,” Clark said as he settled into place at the belly of the highly modified Boeing 747-8 and began to lift. The sudden weight pressed down upon him and he grunted with the strain. The weight was not what bothered him, but rather, the precarious balancing act necessary to support the plane, maintain his push against gravity while simultaneously scanning the horizon with his enhanced senses. Hold together, he prayed.

They reached Spokane International long minutes later and Clark gratefully stopped fighting against gravity once the wheels were down and they were taxiing to a stop. Fire engines were already waiting for them and they converged upon the airplane with a zealousness that was almost intimidating. The Secret Service detachment were the first out – Clark wasn’t certain, but he strongly suspected most if not all of them were metahumans themselves – followed by several of the support staff. The lead Secret Service agent made a beeline for Clark.

“Is the area secure, sir?” he asked. Clark blinked – he couldn’t remember ever being asked that by a member of any presidential protection detail – and floated several feet off the ground. Rotating slowly in place, he strained his enhanced senses to find any potential threat, but found only weary travelers or excited journalists.

“Looks clear,” Clark replied after he’d completed two full rotations and found nothing.

“Sir, Icon believes location secure,” the agent said into his secured radio. “We are ready to move Warlock.” Clark felt his lips twitch, partially at the idea he had his own Secret Service codename but mostly because of Luthor’s. The man of science referred to as a dark magician – he wondered if it bothered Lex at all.

Preceded by armed agents, the president exited the plane along with his … with Alexander’s family. They all appeared shaken, but the youngest boy’s eyes lit up when he saw Clark. He said something to the man he thought was his father and Lex slowly turned his head. His eyes met Clark’s.

And then, he walked toward him.

“I never thought I would ever be saying this,” Luthor said as he offered his hand, “but thank you.” Clark accepted the gesture and offered slight nod.

“You don’t need to thank me, Mister President,” he replied. “This is why I’m here.” There were helicopters in the air and he could hear the excited reporting from the on-air personalities. “Is everyone okay?” he asked as he swept his x-ray vision down the length of the plane.
“No casualties, sir,” a Secret Service agent reported. Clark nodded and the man glanced to Lex. “Mister President, we need to get you inside.”

“Watchtower alert!” Cyborg’s voice crackled out of the communications link loudly enough for both Luthor and the Secret Service agent to hear. “Wonder Woman requesting Superman’s assistance in D.C.!”

Clark was airborne even before Victor finished speaking.

He hated this.

Standing silently in the shadow of an especially ugly billboard resting atop one of the older buildings in this district, Bruce looked down upon the city and watched as his heirs waged a silent war. At any other time, he would have been there with them, directing their actions with terse commands or sharp gestures, but tonight, that was Tim’s job. Bruce wasn’t even supposed to know that this unsanctioned action was even taking place. They had scouted the target, planned the assault, and then tried very hard to prevent him from ever learning that it was happening. He scowled.

This was all Shiva’s fault.

She’d appeared without warning, dropping into Tim and Cass’ lives with a bombshell warning, that the League of Shadows was planning a major offensive directed against their primary foe, Bruce Wayne. Somehow, the two had gotten it into their damned heads that he needed to be kept out of loop for this op, and then, they’d promptly recruited Richard, Barbara, and Helena. The five had combined their efforts, charting out a plan of attack against this previously undiscovered League compound, and were executing it with flawless precision. With Shiva assisting – under Cass’ watchful eye, of course; no one else on the team could stand against her should she decide to betray them – they’d encircled the old printing press, crept into position, and were now neutralizing the lookouts in complete and utter silence. At least two of Barbara’s ultra-light drones circled overhead and Oracle relayed instructions or updates across the private channel at regular intervals. All in all, there was only one way to describe this action.

Beautiful.

Once, not too long ago, he would have bulldozed his way into this operation, demanded that they obey his every command, and then browbeat them into submission when they balked, but over the years, something had changed. He couldn’t put his finger on what it was that was so different, but the sense of anxiety, the overwhelming urge to force control onto something that had none wasn’t there. This was their operation, not his, and they had every right to conduct it as they saw fit. But still, it rankled that they chose to exclude him. Maybe Selina was right. Maybe it was time for him to start thinking about retirement.

“I have eyes on the primary,” Tim whispered across their commline. “Confirmed: it’s Bane.” Bruce tensed and prepared to throw himself off the roof to join them. “Intel looks good,” Robin continued. “He’s still in the cryo-tube.”

The decision to secure some of the alpha-level threats in the city by means of cryogenically freezing them – technology made possible by more than a dozen alien technologies that had made their way to Earth in the last ten years – had been the focal point for the last mayoral election and was still being hotly contested in courts throughout the state. Gotham’s official stance was simple: maximum security had been unable to keep some of these criminals off the streets as the assault on Blackgate three years ago had shown, so more extreme methods of incarceration were deemed necessary. Strangely, one of Bruce’s old rogues had been instrumental in ensuring the cryo-freeze worked
flawlessly and he had Selina to thank for that when she pointed out that everything Victor Fries did was in an attempt to cure his terminally ill wife. That had led Bruce to visiting the man in prison and making him an offer.

“I have access to ten different types of alien technology,” he’d told Fries, “as well as some of the greatest minds this planet has to offer. I will put it all at your disposal for your wife if you will cooperate.” So far, it had worked. Nora Fries wasn’t cured, but the progress Doctor Fries had made with the assistance of men like Michael Holt was astounding.

“In position,” Tim said a moment later.

“Ready,” Bruce heard Cassandra reply.

“In position,” Helena and Richard said at almost the same moment.

“Execute.”

“The little bird has grown up, hasn’t he?” Bruce instinctively tensed at Shiva’s remark – he had not heard her approach – and slowly turned his head in her direction, giving her a dark frown. She still moved gracefully, but his expert eye noted that she’d lost as much of a step as he had. Once, this woman was quite possibly the deadliest human being on the planet without metahuman abilities, but as with him, age had taken its toll. Certainly, she was still lethal beyond any measure, but now, he was almost certain Batgirl could take her in a fight. “I was opposed to this pairing of his with my Cassandra when I learned of it,” Shiva continued, “but I must admit, he has impressed me considerably.”

“If this is a trap,” Bruce growled softly, “you will regret it.”

“Calm yourself, Detective,” Shiva replied. “She is my legacy just as he is yours.” Her good humor slid away. “She is a better person than I ever was,” Cassandra’s mother said softly. “I have you to thank for that.” If that was intended to make Bruce relax, it accomplished the opposite. He narrowed his eyes, tensed his muscles, and very discreetly palmed a smoke pellet from his utility belt.

“Not just me,” he said, glancing around in an attempt to identify any potential threats. The low rumble of distant thunder would give anyone conducting a stealth approach some cover and the intense cloud cover blocked out the moon entirely, leaving only the ambient light of the immediate area as illumination. Shiva’s lips quirked at his body language – she was very nearly as capable of reading it as Cassandra was – but she kept her eyes on the compound below.

“Change is coming, Detective,” she said. “Word has not yet reached you but … the demon’s head did not survive his daughter’s most recent coup attempt.” Under his cowl, Bruce’s face twitched. He’d heard a rumor to that affect, but this was probably the first semi-official confirmation. “She will not hold the throne long, I think. Already, her sister wagers war against her to seize control of the League.” Now that, he had not heard but it did not surprise him in the slightest. Nyssa Raatko was every bit as conniving and as lethal as her half-sister, Talia, and Bruce had to admit that the world would be better off if the two killed each other. Shiva nodded toward the compound below. “This was to have been her masterpiece,” she stated calmly. “She went so far as to even hire me to oversee the operation, knowing I would be able to contain you while her forces revived Talia’s favorite soldier.” Back to Bruce she looked. “You and I have old business to settle, Detective,” she remarked as she glided away from the rooftop ledge, “and even though I am grateful that you have given my daughter the home I never could, I mean to see the score settled.”

With blindingly fast speed, she lunged forward, her palm strike only grazing his jaw as he spun away, flowing into a side kick that was just shy of a roundhouse. At the same time, he flicked the gas
pellet toward her feet and it erupted with a hiss, the acrid cloud of smoke concealing them both. They danced back and forth across the rooftop, each strike and parry a fraction slower than it had been the previous times they’d dueled. Shiva was still graceful and lithe, but Bruce could see that his glancing blows had done more damage than they would have five years ago, and from the way she concentrated on attacking his right knee, he knew she’d seen how weak it was. She remained faster and more agile than him, he was still stronger and with greater reach, but neither of them were able to find the opening they sought.

Over the communication line, Bruce could hear the team below suddenly encounter unexpected resistance – it sounded like Bane was awake after all – but he tuned the noise out so he could focus entirely upon the lethal woman trying very hard to kill him. He tasted blood from one of her earlier strikes but she was almost blind in her left eye from one of his trick moves. Bruce’s muscles burned, his back ached and he knew this could not last much longer.

“This is how it should end,” Shiva said with a raspy hiss. Her breathing was as labored as his. “In battle, before one’s edge is completely lost.” She gave him a black smile that looked even worse in the sudden flash of lightning. “Tonight, one of us dies.”

“No.” Cassandra’s sudden announcement and equally surprising appearance caught them both by surprise, but Batgirl did not waste even a second as she darted across the wet roof, twisted around an open palm strike aimed at her throat, and drove her fist into her mother’s midsection. It was a strike completely bereft of grace or style, but it folded Shiva over and allowed Cassandra to smash the older woman’s face into the hardened plates covering Batgirl’s knee. A hook of her foot against the dazed Shiva’s ankle and Cassandra dropped her mother to the roof. “Never trusted you,” Batgirl said as she produced a medical patch from her utility belt and slapped it onto Shiva’s exposed neck. A moment later, the woman once hailed as the greatest martial artist to have lived was unconscious.

Bruce took a step back, allowing the roof ledge behind him to support his weight as he watched Cassandra secure her mother with zip ties and handcuffs. He glanced toward the compound, frowning the moment he caught sight of an all too familiar red and yellow blur.

“You called in Impulse,” he said with disapproval in his voice. Batgirl glanced at him and he could briefly see his face reflected in her faceless cowl.

“My idea,” she said. “Robin agreed.” She shrugged. “Worked too.” She produced another of the knockout patches and applied it to the other side of Shiva’s neck. “Knew her well enough to expect trap,” Cassandra said before rising smoothly to her feet. “Knew you well enough to know you’d be here too.” Bruce started to reply, but Batgirl sprinted toward the edge of the rooftop and threw herself off, throwing both arms out and triggering the charge in her gloves that stiffened the cape. He watched her glide back toward the compound, and then glanced back at the unmoving Shiva.


“Online.” Barbara almost sounded amused, despite the electronic distortion of her voice. “You okay, Boss?” she asked quickly. “I caught the tail end of your fight and it looked brutal.”

“I’m fine,” he lied. His entire body felt like one big bruise and his damned knee felt like it was on fire. Not for the first time, Bruce felt a wave of self-pity curdle in his stomach. He was only forty-five, dammit. He wasn’t yet ready for the pasture, no matter how slow and old and miserable he felt right now. For the first time, he understood why some professional athletes had so much trouble leaving their sport of choice. “Status?” he demanded.

“Situation secure,” Tim responded over the communication line. “Bane is neutralized, no casualties.”
"Except you," Helena retorted. "You need to get off that leg now before you do some permanent damage."

"I'm fine," Robin growled. The tone was so unbelievably familiar that Bruce almost smiled. How many times over the years had he said something similar?

"Nightwing," he called out. "Assume command. Robin, get off that leg."

"I'm…" Tim began, but Bruce continued speaking.

"Batgirl, ensure Robin obeys." He limped to an old rooftop heating unit that didn't look to have been used in twenty years and took a seat on it with a barley suppressed groan. Perhaps it was time to dust off those old contingency plans developed after Bane had nearly crippled him. The powered exo-suit might extend his operational capacity for another few years …

"Huntress, take over," Bruce heard Richard say. "Oracle, route the call through the proper precinct and task one of the drones for delivery." His sigh was audible. "Looks like it’s going to be a long night for Lieutenant Grayson," he muttered.

Helena began issuing further instructions, most of which were directed toward Tim and seemed focused on him staying off his feet, but Bruce barely listened. He reached for a specific capsule on his belt and pulled out the Compound KL-336 – kal-elium as most of the team called it now; he wondered if Clark was aware of that and, if he was, what he thought about it. After glancing at it for a long moment, he shook his head and pressed the needle-free injector against his skin where it triggered painlessly. In a few minutes, he would be able to move around without his body simply refusing to cooperate, but right now, all he wanted to do was sit here and let the medicine do its job. His eyes fell on Shiva’s unconscious form and he frowned.

"This is how it should end," she’d said. "In battle, before one’s edge is completely lost."

Right now, as he sat atop a filthy rooftop with aching muscles, a torrent of fire seemingly burning within his bad knee and his spine feeling like it had fused into a single slab of metal, Bruce Wayne wondered if his edge was already gone.

Even with the terrible weather, the turnout for her hosted dinner was considerable.

The idea of the dinner party to launch the new charity had not been her idea, but Diana had been unable to come up with a way for Kal to attend without certain questions being asked neither of them were especially willing to answer. There were already theories that she was romantically involved with Superman, so him showing up in that guise would only intensify those rumors, not to mention overshadow the entire point of this charity. Nor was he comfortable enough in his recently established identity as blogger Clark Kent Junior, son of the late reporter from the Daily Planet and an unidentified mother, to let himself be noticed in a setting such as this, which left Diana alone for the night.

Most of the attendees to this particular dinner were wealthy donors, many of whom were less interested in the charity itself than they were with actually being noticed donating, but a considerable portion were women directly afflicted by the madness that had gripped Kahndaq for decades. With Themysciran backing and her mother’s open approval (though that might be another of Hippolyta’s attempts to buy back her goodwill), Diana had established this new charity – the Sisters of the World – with an eye toward helping the victims of war, whatever their gender, though naturally, being of Amazonian origin, it focused most heavily on women. Tonight, as she looked out over the crowd, she saw sisters of all ages, some badly scarred from fire, others missing limbs, and even a couple in
wheelchairs. They had struggled to persevere despite their hardships and their strength of character, their courage in the face of overwhelming scorn or hatred or even indifference never ceased to amaze her. Many in journalism hailed her as a hero because she possessed gods-given gifts and fought against monsters and tyranny, but to Diana, these were the true heroes.

This was far from her first charity. In fact, the Sisters of the World would be, by her count, the eighteenth such organization she’d helped establish, each with varying levels of success or, in two cases, failure. Thus, she knew the procedure quite well and thanked each of the donors present personally, all the while ensuring that she spent exactly the same amount of time with each of them. The women who were the focus of this charity she spent more time with, listening to their stories with awe and respect. When it came time for her to step forward and speak, she did so with the poise of over a century of royal upbringing.

Later, she would not be able to quite recall what she’d said, though that was hardly a surprise as her skill as a speaker was only when it was extemporaneous. The few times she’d tried to give a prepared speech had been complete disasters. She would remember speaking about the hardships of war, sprinkling in bits and pieces from the stories she’d been told as well as talking about the actual horrors she’d seen firsthand, whether it was on Earth or off-world, fighting the Black Lanterns. And then, midway, through her discussion about her hopes for this charity and its intended goals, thunder cracked the sky.

It boomed impossibly loud, setting off thousands if not hundreds of thousands of car alarms throughout Washington, and echoed through the artificial canyon of the city, shaking the very earth. Lightning crawled across the sky, stabbing downward in brilliant ribbons that were too bright to gaze upon. Wind howled.

At the sound, many of the women who had come to listen to Diana speak reacted with the speed of those long accustomed to the sound of conflict and dove for cover. Being from Kahndaq or even neighboring Bialya, they acted as if they were under fire. It was a logical assumption given the explosive force of the sound.

Even before the shockwave had abated, Diana was in motion. She threw herself forward and up, launching into the air and racing toward the door. By the time she reached the street and angled toward the sky to seek out the origin of the sound, her Justice League communicator began squawking.

“Massive energy event near the Washington Monument!” Cyborg’s voice announced. Diana nodded even though he could not see her and pushed herself to greater speeds. So fast was her acceleration that her white chiton burned away, leaving her clad only in the simple undersuit she wore underneath. She clashed her bracers together and felt the transformative magics wash over her, and with seconds, she was once more garbed as a warrior. “I’ve never seen readings like this,” Cyborg said. “They’re boom tube-like … but more localized, more powerful … and a lot more unstable.” He grunted. “Standing by to recall all League personnel for deployment.”

“Hold,” Diana ordered. From her vantage point, she could now see her target and it did not look good. An immense bluish-purple vortex swirled several inches from the ground - wind continued to wail, though it seemed as if the hole in the air was sucking air in, not blowing it out. “I am on site now. I will relay further instructions.”

She landed lightly upon the ground, noting almost at once the presence of two people standing at the very event horizon of the vortex. Both were large – the man was Kal’s size, both in height and breadth of shoulders, and the woman stood as tall as Diana – and their garments were unmistakably non-terrestrial. They wore armor that looked intentionally archaic, as if that were a stylistic decision,
yet bore traits that could only have originated from high technology. A metallic patch covered the man’s left eye, but the intricate patterns carved upon it were beyond the talents of even the most skilled metalsmith without the aid of a laser. Their weapons too looked to be both antiquated and advanced - the woman’s exposed longsword shimmered and danced with the same colors as the energy ribbon surrounding them, and lightning crawled across the man’s short-hafted hammer with what appeared to be a leather sling secured to it. At her approach, both half-turned and Diana frowned at the desperation and exhaustion stamped upon their faces.

“I know you not,” the man announced in a voice that rumbled like a distant storm, “yet the skies obey your command.” Diana opened her mouth to respond, to identify herself, but the man continued in a tone that hinted at an expectation of obedience. “We have sojourned across distances too great to fathom to seek aid against an Enemy that e’en now threatens the golden walls of Asgard, only to find hope dwindles. Tell me, woman, why do not the Avengers heed my call?” In his left hand, he held a device bearing upon it a stylized A.

“I warned you of this, Husband,” the dark-haired woman said through clenched teeth. “I think this is not the Midgard we know.”

“I suspect it is not,” Diana interjected. “I am Diana, Princess of Themyscira and known to Patriarch’s World as Wonder Woman,” she continued. “I know of no organization known as the Avengers.”

“Have we come so far only to fail?” the man murmured, his shoulders slumping. “Have we sacrificed so much, so many for naught?”

“If you come in peace,” Diana said calmly, “then aid may be found here. I am part of a group – a Justice League – and we stand against tyranny and chaos.” The man looked up, a sudden flicker of hope reappearing in his eye.

“Justice League,” he repeated, as if tasting the words. “A strong name,” he added with a nod of approval. “I am Thor, son of Odin, Lord of Storm and God of Thunder.” He nodded toward his raven-haired companion. “And this is my lady-wife, Sif, Mistress of the Sky and Goddess of Travelers.” The woman opened her mouth to speak.

“Energy spike!” Cyborg exclaimed through the comm unit at the same time the woman groaned and dropped to one knee. The vortex trembled and shuddered.

“Sif!” the bearded man cried out in surprise. He dropped his hammer – it sank into the dirt with a resounding thud – and knelt alongside her.

“Too far,” Sif murmured. “The portal is not stable. We must not tarry here, Thor,” she said through clenched teeth.

“Tell me of this Enemy,” Diana said as she stepped closer. Her instinctive truthsense told her that these two were not a threat but she dropped a hand to the lariat at her side just in case. “We may be able to assist in some way.”

“They number in the countless millions,” Thor rumbled. “They hew to no codes of war and bear implements of murder even we of Asgard know not.” He pointed to Sif’s sword arm. “We sought to turn their strength against them and it led us to this place.” Diana recognized the device strapped to the dark-haired woman instantly.

It was a Mother Box.

Her first real encounter with them had been when the New Gods accompanied Hal Jordan and
Shayera Hol to Oa in the wake of the war against the Black Lanterns, but it was not until Kal returned to Earth carrying with him a badly damaged one that she learned about them. Organic computers, they were native to only two worlds, New Genesis and Apokalips. She wet her lips.

“Their master is a rock giant of no great stature,” Thor was saying, a black expression on his face, “and he wields terrible might. He slew … he slew my brother, Baldur, when the whole of the Nine Realms had sworn to never injure him.”

“Darkseid,” Diana murmured. Both of these … Asgardians reacted to that, but she ignored their looks as she triggered her communication line. “Watchtower.”

“Online,” Cyborg said instantly.

“Is Superman available?” she asked.

“He’s just landed in Spokane,” Victor replied. “Air Force One was hit by lightning and…”

“I need him here, Victor.” Diana inhaled. “Immediately. This is a priority alpha alert.”

“Copy.” The line went silent and she looked up to meet Thor’s eyes. He was frowning.

“Spokane,” he said. “I know this place. Is this … Superman capable of teleportation?” He was about to ask another question when both he and his wife reacted to something Diana did not see or hear. The two looked up – they were facing west, Diana realized with a smile – and bare seconds later, Kal fell from the sky, heat boiling off his armor. Even that nearly indestructible cape of his smoked and she gave him a look.

“We have visitors,” she said. “Visitors who sound like they are waging a war with Darkseid.”

Kal froze.

His expression barely changed, but Diana knew him well enough to see the flash of white-hot rage and hatred flicker through his eyes. He balled his hands up into fists and for a moment, struggled with control. To these strangers, he appeared only to frown, but she could see he had already made the decision. Their eyes met and he nodded.

“Watchtower, this is Wonder Woman,” she said, drawing in a deep breath. “Have you been monitoring my communications?”

“I have.” Cyborg was silent for only a heartbeat. “Good luck, ma’am,” he said. “I will pass on relevant details to the appropriate parties.”

“Kelex,” Kal said at the same time. His suit chirped. “Relate Watchtower data to Kara. She has full admin clearance and authority to the Fortress.” He floated forward, eyeing the portal. “This doesn’t look stable,” he said, directing his remarks to Thor and Sif. “We should go before it gets worse.”

“Two warriors,” the one-eyed blonde man growled. “I sought an army…”

“We threw Darkseid off this world once,” Kal replied before nodding toward Diana. “And she’s the one who took his eye.”

“There is no time,” Sif murmured. “We must go. Now!” she staggered toward the fluctuating hole in reality and Thor stepped closer to her, wrapping one arm around her shoulders as he began twirling the hammer that had leaped up into his hand. Power rolled off it and Diana could feel immensely potent magics as he threw it forward, allowing the sling to drag him and his wife through the tear
the fabric of space-time. She pushed off the ground herself and drifted closer to Kal. Their eyes met once again.

And together, they hurled themselves into infinity.

The maelstrom roared around them, buffeting them with incredible force. Automatically, Diana moved closer to Kal and summoned Hephaestus’ shield, wrapping it around them both as they fell sideways. Thor was laughing, she realized, though it was not a madman’s laugh but rather the explosion of joy she’d heard some of her sisters make when they were racing toward a battle. She ground her teeth together and realized that her hand had fallen to the sheathed xiphos strapped to her side. It had slain a Titan once, though she had not drawn it since, and she wondered if it could kill a New God as well.

How long they fell through the cracks of the universe, she did not know. It might have been a minute, or an hour, or even a century. Ribbons of impossible light coursed around them and against them, bathing their passage in an unreal incandescence that dazzled the eyes and baffled the mind. Diana thought she saw humanoid figures passing across in front of them once, but a second look revealed nothing and they were too far beyond that point for a third look to accomplish anything. Planets and entire galaxies flashed around them, appearing briefly before falling away. At her side, Kal quivered with barely contained emotion – his muscles were rigid, his jaw set, and she saw death in his eyes. Her heart broke a tiny bit then as she saw the most noble man she’d ever met thinking about murder. She placed her hand over his and he allowed her to entwine their fingers. Trembling, he closed his eyes for a moment, then gave her a thankful half-smile. Wherever they were going, they would go together.

With an explosion of violet fire, they boomed back into reality. Light and sound and touch returned with an almost visceral impact, and Diana staggered, realizing that Kal had fallen to his knees. He shook his head, as if to clear it, and she pulled him back to his feet. Of course he’d had a difficult passage. This was magic of the highest order and he still struggled to comprehend it.

Sif cried out and collapsed, but Thor caught her and cradled her to his chest with concern in his sole remaining eye. His short-hafted hammer boomed as it fell to the ground when he released it, but his attention was completely upon his wife.

“Rest,” he said. “Smell the air, my lady. We are upon Asgard’s shores once again.” He started walking away.

Beyond him, a marvelous city stretched out, with gleaming towers of gold reaching high into the night sky. There were domes of glass or what looked like pools of liquid silver, and turrets that appeared wrought from dragonscales, and great flying longships that patrolled the air around the high walls. Stars twinkled brilliantly overhead, dancing and flickering with a strange intensity that Diana had never seen before, even when she’d been on Olympus. The air was sharp and biting, with an unfamiliar smell that was far from unpleasant.

“So this is Asgard,” she said. Kal snapped out of his moment of wonder and glanced between Thor’s receding form and the hammer he’d so casually left behind. He gave her a shrug, then hefted the strange weapon and took to the air alongside her to catch up. As they drew abreast of him, Thor came to a complete stop and stared at Kal with wide eyes.

“Mayhap I misjudged you,” he said as he set Sif onto her feet. She already looked better, steadier, and the smile on her face as she looked at Kal was brilliant. “Lady Diana I have met,” Thor said, “but you I know not. I am Thor, son of Odin.”

“The God of Thunder,” Kal mused. He glanced down at the hammer. “This must be Mjolnir, then,”
he added as he offered it back. “My name is Kal-El.”

“You know of me?” Thor seemed quite pleased.

“In the myths,” Kal replied, “you had red hair.” He glanced around, frowning at something that Diana did not see. “There’s a battle going on over there, by that far wall,” he said flatly, narrowing his eyes. “Parademons.” He scowled.

“You can see that far?” Thor gave Sif a look. “We sought an army and bring back a man with eyes as sharp as your brother’s.”

“And he can lift Mjolnir,” she said before letting her gaze slide sideways to Diana. Thor nodded.

“A test,” he said as he held out the hammer. Exchanging a quick glance with Kal, Diana accepted the weapon, wincing at the sheer amount of unfamiliar magic she could feel coursing through it. Lightning crawled down the hammer’s haft and up her arm, which made Thor bellow out a laugh. “By the Norns!” he exclaimed. “This is a good day!” He held up a hand and Diana felt his summons in the instant before Mjolnir leaped toward him. “Come then!” He began twirling the hammer. “Let us test our might against these demons!” With the hammer carrying him, he shot up into the sky, leaving them behind.

“Fool,” Sif murmured affectionately as she drew her own blade and slashed the air in front of her. The blade cut a tiny hole in reality and she leaped through it, already laughing herself. Kal glanced at Diana and was about to speak when his eyes narrowed and he nodded in the opposite direction.

“A boomtube just opened,” he said. “This is a distraction.”

“Then let us go and show them the folly of their decision,” Diana said. Kal nodded.

And together, side by side, they went to war with Apokalips.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, there are definitely crossover elements at the end. I'm using the Marvel version of Thor & Co. as opposed to the more mythological version.
Starrware Labs Profit Up Sharply

Bill Batson
Business Reporter-Fawcett City Business Journal

Email | Twitter | LinkedIn | Google+ | OraCom

Starrware Labs edged out earnings estimates as sales of solar panel arrays grew more stable.

The Wall Street Journal reports on the solar-based tech company's fiscal second-quarter earnings, which were $92 million, or 89 cents a share, on sales of $419 million. That compares to earnings of $64 million, or 63 cents a share, on sales of $409 million in the same period a year ago.

Related: Read Starrware's full earnings announcement here. The company's conference call with analysts began at 7 a.m.; a recording is generally available later.

Excluding one-time items, Fawcett City-based Starrware earned 91 cents per share, ahead of the 90 cents per share analysts estimated.

CEO Kara Starr, in a statement, said, "We are performing at or better than the market in almost every one of our business lines."

KNEELING IN THE SMOKING CRATER, BILL TRIED VERY HARD TO KEEP FROM THROWING UP.

His ears were still ringing, blood dripped from his nose and eyes, and all he really wanted to do was stop struggling against the nausea roiling around in his stomach, but he didn’t have the time. Black Adam was still loose, Kahndaq’s still unstable government was in danger, and, far more importantly, he was already late for his night out with Kara.

Despite his complete lack of balance, he shot up into the sky, faster than the human eye could follow, and aimed himself in the direction of the smoke climbing up from the sky near the former presidential palace. He could hear gunfire and screams, not to mention a furious and far too familiar voice bellowing orders in an archaic dialect of Arabic. Tracer fire screamed up toward him – evidently, the Kandaqi Army either couldn’t tell the difference between him and Adam or they simply didn’t care; Billy was betting on the latter – but he was flying too quickly for them to line up a shot. Hovering to get his bearings was how he ended up in that crater in the first place. He’d always wondered if his skin was tough enough to take a direct shot from a tank and now he knew.

He streaked in fast and low, smashing through a marble wall and tackling Adam from behind. The speed of his passage carried them both out of the palace and into the sky before Adam half-twisted and slammed his elbow into Billy’s face with such power that it sent him spinning away. He righted himself almost immediately and darted back, ducking under a lightning fast punch to retaliate with a blow of his own. It struck hard, knocking Adam even higher into the sky and further away from Shiruta, but like Billy had before, he arrested his out of control fall very nearly instantly and turned furious eyes upon his attacker.
“Get out of my way, boy,” Adam snarled. “This is not your fight.”

“It became my fight the instant you put innocents in danger,” Billy replied. “Kahndaq was your home!” he remarked, keeping his senses peeled for threats. If Adam didn’t attack right away, there was always the threat of military jets. “They don’t deserve this!”

“You have no idea what they deserve,” Adam hissed. He blurred forward and they exchanged blows, each impact so powerful that it could be heard for hundreds of miles. Back and forth they dueled in the sky, trading punches, kicks, head butts, and even judo throws. With each second that passed, they put more distance between themselves and the Kahndaqi city, and within moments, they were near the coast. Adam’s rage was terrible to behold – he kept screaming something about his long-dead wife, Isis, but none of it made any sense – and Billy was on the verge of calling in for reinforcements when something unexpected happened.

The sky turned red.

There was no warning – between one moment and the next, the cloudless, clear blue sky turned scarlet – and the change was so abrupt, so jarring, that it caused both of them to hesitate in sudden surprise. Something fundamental … shifted around them and a wave of crippling nausea sent Billy tumbling from the sky. He struck the rocky coast with a hollow boom that sent a geyser of sand and broken rocks into the air, and a half second later, he heard a second explosion as Adam slammed into the ground a hundred feet away. Billy’s head spun as he forced himself to his feet and looked around. What the hell was that? He looked up – the sky was still the color of blood – and tried to blink the dizziness away. For the first time in a very long time, he felt … slow and weak and heavy.

Adam came at him a heartbeat later, screaming something unintelligible, and struck Billy with just enough force to knock him back to the ground.

“What did you do?!” Adam roared as he tackled Billy. They grappled for a moment, but Bill’s head was still spinning and he quickly found himself locked in a tight hold, with Adam behind him. He was looking at the sky, Billy realized with sudden fear. He heard Adam draw breath. “Shazam!”

But nothing happened.

There was no thunder, no lightning, no searing flash of light that heralded the transformation between a magically-endowed superhuman and a mere mortal. The sky remained devoid of clouds, even if it was still this strange color. Billy heard Adam’s surprised noise, felt the hold slip, and struggled against it, lashing out with his elbow in an almost identical manner to the way Adam had struck him earlier. It staggered his opponent and gave him just enough leverage to break free. He rolled away, leaping to his feet and bracing himself for the next onslaught.

“What did you do?” Adam demanded. He touched the blood dripping from his smashed nose and glanced quickly to the sky. Tensing his muscles, he very obviously tried to throw himself into the sky, but succeeded only in pitching face first into the sand. “My power,” Adam whispered, eyes wide in shock. “You stole my power…”

Bill didn’t bother correcting him and instead, lunged forward. He hit Adam once, twice, a third time, each punch rocking the other man back. Stripped of their superhuman abilities as they appeared to be, the advantage was his – he was bigger, stronger, younger – and he pummeled Adam with meaty fists until the other man toppled into the sand, unconscious. Breath coming in ragged spurts, Billy looked up at the sky once more.

It was still red, though the strange hue was fading away as the normal blue reclaimed its rightful place. Within seconds, the atmosphere looked to be no different than normal, with no sign of the
strange atmospheric anomaly that had been there only moments earlier. Bill tested himself – his powers were still gone, it seemed, though he frowned at the large crater he’d made in the Kahndaqi beach. If they’d been completely gone, there was no way he’d have survived that fall. He gave Adam a quick glance to confirm the man was unconscious and not just faking it, then looked skyward.

“Shazam,” he murmured.

And still, nothing happened.

Kara showed up several minutes after he made the call to the Watchtower and her expression was both grim and relieved. Ever since Superman and Wonder Woman vanished through that portal with those two strangers last year, she’d worked extremely hard to take her cousin’s place and, in fact, had emerged as the almost de facto leader of the League when Aquaman announced his intention to resign from active membership so he could concentrate on rulership of Atlantis. Thus far, she’d done fairly well, even if some members of the League and more than a few world leaders had difficulty meeting her eyes thanks to that ridiculous boob window of her costume. Billy had tried to talk her into adopting the House of El crest there – every time he saw someone checking out his girlfriend, he wanted to break them in half or perhaps thirds – but she continued to refuse.

“It happened around the world,” Kara said when he mentioned the red skies. She finished securing Adam with one of those power inhibitors her company had developed alongside WayneTech. “Zatanna and Fate are both unconscious,” she added sourly, “and no one can find Constantine.” Billy winced.

“What about Themyscira?” he asked. At this, her expression darkened even further.

“The Embassy is closed,” she replied. “No one’s there and we can’t get in touch with any of the Amazons.” Billy frowned as he looked skyward.

“Now what do we do?” he asked. Kara scowled.

“Until we know what this was,” she said, “there isn’t anything to do.” Her eyes softened as she looked him over. “And if you’re powerless,” she started.

“Awesome,” Bill said with a black look of his own. “I’m the damsel in distress.” Kara laughed.

Later, after they had relocated Adam to Belle Reve and he’d suffered through a remarkably in depth medical exam, Bill found himself back in Fawcett City, alone for the moment and filled with worry. His sister had already checked in – like him, she was stuck in her depowered form, but unlike Bill, it didn’t bother her too terribly since she’d been focusing more and more on her civilian life – and he stood on the roof of his apartment building, staring quietly at the twinkling stars. No one had any answers. Zatanna was awake and functional if confused, but Fate remained comatose … or at least his human body did.

“What the hell do I do now?” Billy wondered aloud. He considered himself a decent enough reporter, but so much of his life had been centered on the Captain Marvel identity that he felt bereft without it. Would he ever be able to rejoin Kara in the clouds? They’d never had to hold back before when they kissed or made love, but now, she could break him without even realizing it.

billy...

The soft voice echoed through the darkness, across an ocean of night, and Billy looked around, his body tensing as he half expected one of his old enemies to spring out of the darkness. There was no
one there, no one to see, and he started to turn away before a flicker of light coalesced into the old wizard. He was barely there, semi-transparent at best, and his voice sounded so far away…

*rock of eternity adrift*, the wizard said across distances so vast they could not be calculated. *strength enough only for one more transformation so to the most worthy I turn.* The wizard’s image stretched out his hand and Billy reached forward to take it.

Lightning exploded through him. The pain … dear God, the pain. It had never hurt like this. He felt energy course through his body, a hundred times greater than ever before. Strength like he'd never felt before made his muscles quiver. He could break the world with this kind of power. Someone was screaming and he suddenly realized it was him. Images flashed across his mind’s eye but they were so fast, so utterly foreign that he could not comprehend what he was seeing. Lightning splashed against shadow. Blood turned the sky red. Rage and fire and death waged war against one another. None of it made any damned sense.

When the pain passed, Bill found himself floating in the clouds, high above Fawcett City. Of the wizard, there was no sign, though that was not a surprise if his words had been any indication. The power, the strength, they were still there and considerably more potent than before. Comprehension came at once. Before, the power had been spread between two, sometimes three people, but now, there was only one. Things were as they should be. Or rather, they weren’t.

“Captain Marvel to Watchtower,” he called out, knowing that Victor would be able to hone in on his voice through his technical wizardry. “I’m en route to the station. Inform Superwoman that I have new information.”

And without another word, he shot up, into the sky. Worry flew with him.

A harsh blue sun glared down at him, but through the fuzzy haze of agony and exhaustion, Kon-El barely noticed.

He was vaguely aware of the taste of sand as he crawled away from the smoking wreck that had been the starship he’d been using for the last three weeks, but the burns across so much of his body stripped away coherence and left him barely aware of what his name was, let alone where he was. Time had no meaning to him – he was aware only of the waves of pain that coursed through his body in time with his pulse, of the stabbing flames in his legs that hinted at broken bones, of the harsh torture that was sand and wind against his seared flesh, of the taste of fire each time he inhaled. Fear drove him forward, an inch at a time. He had to get away from the Enemy. He had to …

His head swam. And suddenly, he was back home, reclining in the warm sand of the Hawaiian beach and simply trying to enjoy life. There was no horrible black smoke here, no crippling injuries, no threats, only gorgeous babes in bikinis and … and …

“I need your help,” the stranger in red and blue had gasped before collapsing to his knees. He looked familiar and it took Kon long minutes to recognize that Lar Gand fellow that Kal-El had introduced him to once a couple of years ago, right before Superman disappeared with Wonder Woman. The alien looked terrible – his skin was an off-color, his eyes were visibly having trouble focusing, and his entire body twitched. “I need…” Gand never finished his statement as he slumped forward into unconsciousness.

The sound of metal tearing behind him pulled Kon-El back to the present. He had to crawl faster. He had to get away. There was something behind him, something …

“Kryptonian.” The raspy, pained voice echoed over the landscape. Memory flared – there had been
four of them: a humanoid of living metal, a woman who seemed as strong and as capable as any Kryptonian, an armored figure whose gender and race could not be determined, and a creature of rock and stone, all wearing uniforms of black and red. They had appeared out of nowhere, an impossible boom echoing through the hard vacuum of space and heralding their arrival. The stolen ship hadn’t stood a chance against their onslaught.

Is this it? Kon-El demanded of himself, through the fog of pain. Is this how you’re going to die? Weak and crawling away like an insect?

Grimacing at the effort, he forced himself to his knees and then to feet. He swayed briefly as his body struggled to stay upright and he once more wished that his Kryptonian genes had been even more dominant. Oh, he was strong and durable and fast, but he couldn’t fly and right now, that was the one thing he needed the most as he turned to face the wrecked hulk of the starship. Kara was not going to be pleased.

“No,” she’d said when he presented his plan. She’d already been pissed off that he’d broken into the Fortress to use the Phantom Zone projector in order to save Gand’s life. As long as he was there, the poison tearing apart his body would be arrested. When Kon-El asked for further help, the only person he truly considered family had glared at him. “This Vril Dox is bad news, Kon,” she’d said. “The League will investigate Lar’s claim.”

Kon-El shook his head to clear it. He had to concentrate on the now, not the past. There were still three of the hostiles to deal with – the armored one was gone, having been right in front of the starship’s core when it went critical – but the other three were still here, even if they looked as bad off as he did. The metal man especially appeared to be having difficulty moving – it looked like half of his body had melted under the intense heat and then frozen once more in the cold of space.

“Kryptonian,” the rocky creature repeated in Interlac. Kon-El balled up his fists, ignoring the sharp pain it caused.

“Half,” he replied. “Which is more than enough to kick your ugly ass.”

He never saw the woman move.

She blurred forward, as fast as Kara was, and struck him with a punch that sent him tumbling backward. Kon hit the ground, rolled, and forced himself to one knee, barely biting back the scream of agony at the pain that coursed through that ruined leg. Fury thudded through him, a rage that wiped away everything but the desire to destroy his enemies. His scream became a roar and he met her in the air, his fists a blur as he struck again and again and again. Bone splintered, blood flew, and the woman tumbled into the sand, twitching once before going still. He didn’t know if she was dead or merely unconscious – in the red haze that was always his greatest foe, he didn’t care either – but she was down and there were others. Kon-El blurred forward, ignoring the bone-crushing blow he took to the chest from the creature of stone. His counter-strikes boomed across the horizon, each blow rocking the monster back, but he kept attacking, even as the bones in his hands fractured and collapsed. He would not surrender. He would not give up. He would not …

“You just don’t give up, do you?” Kara asked him so many weeks ago. She’d caught him trying to steal one of the small hyper-warp capable skiffs on the Watchtower and once again, shown him how much greater a pure Kryptonian was when compared to him. It hadn’t even been a contest – when his rage started to take over, she’d contained him in less than a heartbeat. “You don’t even know this guy and you’re throwing everything away to help him.”

“Kal-El would have helped him,” Kon retorted. It was an almost rote answer – so much of what he did these days was because Kal-El would have done it and he never felt right standing aside when he
knew that.

The sound of metal upon metal drew him back to the present once more. Before him, unmoving but breathing, the stone monster was stretched out on the sand, his rocky exterior cracked and shattered. Kon-El gave him another kick – he felt the impact and his body shivered with pain – before turning to face the half-melted man of metal who was lumbering toward him. There was a strange boxy device on the metal-man’s arm – it was on all three of their arms, Kon-El realized – and it was flashing brightly, repeatedly. Through the fog of exhaustion, pain and rage, he realized the danger and sprang away without thinking.

He was airborne when the boom tube exploded open. The shockwave of displaced air slammed into him and Kon-El was sent spinning. He struck the sand a moment later and slid several yards into an immense dune that almost instantly spilled down upon him. Fury dwindled as pain thudded once more through his abused body. Consciousness flickered…

A second boom followed the first and Kon-El could see a new creature appear. This one floated above the ground, his body wreathed in the same dark crimson and black colors as his fellows. His skin also was the strange grayish-blue, but otherwise, he appeared human. A sinister helmet protected the being’s head as it glanced around the wreckage before gesturing. With a groan, the wrecked starship rose from where it had struck and vanished through the shimmering portal. The two fallen figures – there was no sign of the metal-man – lifted up off the ground as well and floated behind the helmeted man as he disappeared through his tube. It hissed once and then vanished.

“Do you even have a plan?” Kara demanded from the past. Kon-El glared at the memory.

“I’m going to find that Coluan and beat a cure out of him,” he told her angrily. He hated that about himself – everything he did was angry. The quicksilver rage was always there, always waiting for his self-control to slip so it could overwhelm him. In the span of a single second, he could go from sane to rampaging lunatic … and people dared to wonder why he chose seclusion, why he so often sought out the most remote places he could find to hide from this curse of fury. Even as he spoke, though, he had to admit, it was a pretty crappy plan, but right now, it was the best he had. Gand needed his help, dammit, and Kal-El wouldn’t have even hesitated a second.

“That’s a crappy plan,” Kara told him. She’d taken his shoulder then and looked in his eyes. “Lar is safe in the Phantom Zone. Let the League look into this and we’ll find a way to help him.” Anger came once more – he knew what she saw when she looked at him, knew how hard it was for people to get over the fact that he still looked like a teenager and would probably stay this way forever … or at least until he was killed – and he’d left without agreeing.

And then, when the sky turned red and world-wide panic forced the League into action, he used one of the new transporters and snuck back onto the Watchtower where he stole the hyper-warp capable skiff.

He faded in and out of consciousness, trapped under the sand dune and so badly injured that he couldn’t work up the strength to move. The air on this planet tasted strange – he’d been damned lucky it even had oxygen at all, what with that blue star and no apparent vegetation in sight – but as the day dragged on, the temperature around him increased dramatically. He tried to remember what he knew about blue supergiants, but it was so hard to focus, so hard to concentrate. Much easier to just let it come…

“Are you sure about this?” The comment was spoken in a strange dialect of Interlac and, for a moment, Kon-El thought he was hallucinating. “A rock like this?”

“My simulations indicate there is a greater than ninety percent chance of locating the Kryptonian...
hybrid on this planet at this point in history,” a second voice stated. It too sounded strange, as if the
man speaking were not accustomed to the words. “Scans indicate a life form in the near vicinity…”

“It’s more than that,” a third voice stated. “The magnetic fields in this area are all distorted.
Something seriously disrupted them…”

“A boom-tube, I would theorize,” the second man said. “These readings match with what we have
encountered previously.”

Kon-El. This was an unspoken voice, a warm, soothing wind that eased his pain and misery. She
was a warm sun on a chilly day, a cool breeze after hours in a desert. Be at ease, Kon-El, the mind-
voice whispered. We are here to assist.

Something unseen wrapped around his body and pushed aside the sand. Even that motion was too
much and he instinctively groaned in pain as his fractured body shifted. Broken bones scrapped
against one another, torn muscles strained again, and agony flooded through his entire body. The
blue light from the massive star was too bright.

“His condition is critical,” the second voice announced. Through narrowed eyes, Kon-El could see a
humanoid with green skin and a shock of blond hair. Coluan, his tortured mind whispered.

“Dox,” he murmured, the name causing the green-skinned man to look up sharply.

“I am Dox,” the stranger admitted, “but not the one you were seeking.” He looked away from Kon-
El. “Imra, I need him sedated.”

Sleep, the silent voice instructed.

And Kon-El obeyed.

When he opened his eyes again, the pain was gone. It was not just suppressed, but rather, completely
absent which indicated some sort of medical attention. He was not alone, of course. The green-
skinned man was there, along with a dark-haired human male and an attractive blonde woman whom
Kon-El instinctively knew to be the source of the soundless voice. A fourth person joined them –
another young man with red-hair and golden lightning bolts emblazoned upon his strange blue shirt.
As one, all four turned to face him. They were all wearing sleek, streamlined outfits just similar
enough to make him think they were uniforms and with identical belts bearing a prominent, stylized
L upon the round buckle.

“Hello, Kon-El,” the dark-haired young man said. He approached and, this close, it was more
apparent that he was younger than Kon-El originally thought. “My name is Rokk. And we need your
help.”

Bruce had been in his office for little over an hour when it was invaded by men in suits.

He was in middle of reviewing the various memos and reports that Lucius insisted he keep up with
when the four men stepped out of the executive elevator and swarmed over his office. Caroline, his
ever-harried secretary briefly tried to run interference, but she froze up completely at the sign of
badges which Bruce noted without much surprise. It was to be expected, of course, given her
checkered past, but he made a mental note to have Tim and Cass dig deeper. Her recent appointment
as his secretary had Greg Falstaff’s fingerprints all over it and if that man was involved, it was
entirely possible that Ms. Crown’s life was in danger.

The four Secret Service agents were very competent – one flashed his badge at Bruce and engaged
him in a conversation that ultimately answered nothing but wasted enough time for the other three to
go to work. It was a good tactic, one Bruce himself had used numerous times in the past, though
generally, he’d let others do the stalling while he poked around. The sweep uncovered the two bugs
Bruce was already aware of – he noticed Caroline blanch, which confirmed his worst suspicions –
but when the agents placed several devices on his windows, devices that would send discreet sonic
vibrations through the glass which would thus spoil any attempts at using a laser microphone to
eavesdrop, and then pulled the heavy curtains shut, Bruce frowned.

“Clear, sir,” one of the agents announced. They filed toward the door.

“We’re clear, sir,” the delaying agent stated into a microphone secured to his left cufflink and, a
moment later, another agent exited the elevator along with a man Bruce immediately recognized.

Lex Luthor.

He was still wearing former President Alexander’s face, but his eyes carried that dangerous intensity
that Bruce had seen only in a few other men. He was a little heavier than before and his hair …
Alexander’s hair was almost completely white now, but still, there was no mistaking the man’s
identity. Reflex kicked in and Bruce tensed, automatically shifting into combat mode as he eyed the
five Secret Service agents. They weren’t the most dangerous threat, of course, but he’d have to
neutralize them quickly as he went for Luthor or one of them might get in a lucky shot.

“I would like a few moments alone with Mister Wayne, Robert,” Luthor said as he strode down the
hall. The senior Secret Service agent’s face darkened, but he bit back whatever it was that he wanted
to say. Instead, he pinned Bruce with a fierce glare, as if that were meant to intimidate him.

Bruce ignored him.

“I was not aware that we had a meeting,” he said stiffly as Luthor approached.

“It was a spur of the moment thing, I must admit,” the former president replied with a wry smile. “I
was hoping to have a few moments of your time, Mister Wayne.” He stepped past Bruce, lowering
his voice so no one else could hear him. “I’m not a threat,” he said.

“No,” Bruce growled, his own reply pitched so low that only Luthor could make it out. “You’re
not.” He gave the man his most insincere smile and offered his hand. “Reschedule my ten o’clock,
Caroline,” he added as he gestured for the former president to precede him. Again, the senior Secret
Service agent – Robert, was it? – glowered at him, but Bruce simply offered the man a
condescending smile and pulled the door to his office shut. “You have five minutes,” he declared
grimly. “At the end of that five minutes, you are leaving, either through the door or through the
window.”

“Still your charming self, I see.” To Bruce’s absolute surprise, Lex collapsed in one of the chairs
arranged in front of the desk. “I need your help.” Luthor frowned. “No, that’s not right. I need you to
give me access to the Kryptonian database that Kal-El possessed.” Reclaiming his own chair, Bruce
frowned.

“Under what circumstances do you think I would ever-“

“My wife has brain cancer,” Luthor interrupted. He slumped back into the chair and began rubbing
his temples in what looked like an unconscious habit. “I’ve had the best specialists in the world look
at her and even then, they’ve given her less than a fifteen percent chance of survival.” Luthor
grimaced. “I know that Kal-El dove into cancer research before his mother passed away.” He
abruptly shook his head. “I already owe him one for that – some of the drugs he developed then are
“Why Madeline can still walk.” His fingers once more returned to his temples. “But I need more. I need to dig into that database myself and find a cure.”

“He needs cloning her?” Bruce asked flatly. Luthor offered a bleak smile.

“I did, actually,” he admitted, “but the cancer … it would make the transfer of consciousness less than perfect.” He exhaled heavily. “I know we’ve had our differences—“ That was an understatement if ever there was one. How many times had this man tried to kill him? Admittedly, he’d been wearing a different face then, but still, the point stood. “—but I need access to Kent’s database.”

Bruce’s scowl darkened ever so slightly at mention of Clark and he struggled to hold back the urge to go over the table.

“Why did you come to me?” he asked instead. Luthor frowned in mild surprise.

“You’re the logical choice, Bruce. I thought that, if Kent left it to anyone when he went away, it would be you.” Abruptly, he looked away. “Of course,” he murmured. “His cousin. I didn’t factor her into the equation.” The expression that flashed across his face was a strange one that seemed to combine rage and fear and disgust and confusion all at the same time. It was, Bruce thought, the look of a man on the very brink of losing control. “Damn,” Luthor muttered. “Damn.” He shook his head. “She isn’t going to want to work with me, not after what I did to her … did to both of them.”

“Say that I do help you,” Bruce said after a long moment of silence, steepling his fingers and tapping his chin with them. “What guarantees do I have that this isn’t another one of your insane schemes? You don’t exactly have a good track record for trustworthiness.” Luthor exhaled bitterly.

“I deserve that,” he admitted softly. “Kent and I … we had an agreement. Regardless of how it came to be, I’m a different man now.” He gestured to his face and offered a wan smile. “Literally, in fact. And I’m trying a different path.” He glanced at his watch, winced, and then reached into his jacket to extract a jumpdrive. Bruce tried very hard not to smile when he recognized that it was a WayneTech model – that had to burn, especially given how much of LexCorp that had been absorbed into Wayne Enterprises. “That has everything I have on Madeline’s condition,” Luthor said. He stood. “I know you don’t trust me, Bruce,” he continued, “but please, help her.” He started to turn away, but then hesitated. “Are they coming back?” he asked. There was no need to identify who they were, but Bruce offered no response. Grunting softly, Luthor exited.

“Sir?” Caroline asked a few minutes later. She’d poked her head into his office and was watching him from behind those immense glasses of hers.

“Cancel my appointments for the rest of the day,” Bruce ordered. He pocketed the flash-drive. “And let Lucius know that something’s come up.”

He left the office soon after and snuck into the nearby satellite cave that Tim and Cass usually used, which was unoccupied at the moment. Heading back to the Manor wasn’t really an option right now, not with how many people were so often in and out these days. With Alfred effectively forced into partial retirement due to age and persistent sickness – something that Bruce hated even thinking about – they’d been forced to hire a maid service to maintain the manor. Selina ruled them all with an iron fist, jokingly (he hoped) referring to them as her minions and henchwomen, and coordinated with Alfred to ensure that the small army was where it should be, especially as they geared up to host a major party to launch Jim Gordon’s mayoral run. Unfortunately, this meant using the Cave was problematic – suddenly emerging from a room which a maid had just observed to be empty would inevitably cause some snooping they couldn’t afford.

The computers were active when he ducked in – by the look of things, Robin had been reviewing the latest on the Jokerz, a gang of lowlifes who intentionally modeled themselves after the late and
unlamented clown prince of crime himself – but no one else was present. That made sense, though, in between their plans to go to Central City this weekend to attend the Crock-West wedding and Cassandra’s recent brush with death at the hands of Gotham’s newest rogue, a metahuman who went by the name of Totentanz (which was a name that frankly made no sense in this connotation, but Bruce had long ago given up on criminals, metahuman or not, using anything like logic or reason.) The official story they’d released to the papers was that she’d been mugged and the tabloids had splashed pictures of her and Tim all over their headlines, one or two even hinting that he’d been the one to hit her while the more responsible ones reported how he’d flown back from Metropolis the moment he learned about the incident.

Bruce spent a few hours reviewing the information on the jumpdrive, trying very hard to find something that would reveal Luthor as a liar but instead, all he found was medical records indicating that Madeline Alexander was extraordinarily sick. He tapped into Oracle’s network – Barbara was at the Manor helping with the party setup so he did not have to worry about her screaming at him for doing this, at least until she reviewed the logs later – and spent another thirty minutes reviewing the Alexanders’ recent flight records. Bruce frowned at the rather compelling evidence before him, that Luthor was telling the truth. Everywhere they went was known for having prominent cancer clinics. He leaned back in the chair.

“It’s me,” he said into the phone when Kara answered it. “Can you come to Gotham? I have something I need to discuss with you.”

“No emergency?” She sounded distracted. “I’m in the middle of something at the moment.”

“I’m not an emergency, but still potentially urgent,” he replied. “At your earliest convenience, please.”

The politeness of his tone shocked even him – once, he would have been terse and demanding, but having witnessed firsthand how capable Kara had become in the last few years, he constantly found himself inclined toward giving her the benefit of the doubt. With Clark and Diana gone, someone had needed to step up and assume the role of League leader and the woman that the entire world now called Superwoman had done so admirably. It had been her idea, after all, to split the League up into regions to better maximize their response times – these regional teams drew the names of their assigned continents, so there was a Justice League of America, a Justice League of Europe, two Justice Leagues in Asia, one in Africa and another two that covered Central and South America. This division of efforts had assuaged some of the concerns regarding the League’s raw power, but those convinced that they were only a bad day away from establishing a totalitarian state insisted this was but one more step in that direction.

“Give me an hour,” Kara said. “I’ll check in with you before I arrive.”

The sun had already begun to disappear behind the horizon when Bruce hung up the phone and he rose, wincing at the cacophony of pops and snaps his abused body made. After spending a few moments stretching out, he opened the costume safe and quickly donned one of his spare Batsuits. This one was several years out of date – the kevlar material was worn and the boots were remarkably uncomfortable – but it served for Tim when he needed to make a stand-in appearance … which was honestly becoming more frequent than Bruce wanted to admit. Just last month, for example, Tim had logged more time in the Batsuit than he had, a fact that caused no small amount of consternation…

Kara arrived exactly on schedule, which was far better than her cousin had ever managed as he’d always been perpetually late. She touched down on the rooftop where he stood and glanced around briefly before frowning in the direction of Gotham General Hospital. To Bruce’s relief, her normally white Kryptonian suit was charcoal gray at the moment which led him to suspect it was some sort of
smart-cloth not too dissimilar to how Clark’s hard-suit functioned. He wondered if he could get a sample to test.

“Is there a reason why you’re lurking here, outside the Alexanders’ room?” Kara asked without preamble. Bruce gave her a glance and she smirked. “There are three Secret Service snipers watching at the moment … and one of them just freaked out a little bit because I announced that out loud.” She turned her head to face a distant building. “Hello, Agent Smith,” she said with a smile. “How is your daughter?” She paused, and then nodded. “That’s great news. I knew she could do it.”

“Do you know how disconcerting that is?” Bruce asked sourly. He’d been aware of the snipers already – Oracle’s drones orbited silently overhead and had identified their nests – but had not bothered revealing his knowledge to them. Kara flashed a smile.

“It’s not my fault you have wussy ears,” she said as she pulled a small disc off her belt buckle. “Agent Smith,” she said calmly, “my associate and I have some things to discuss. Please don’t freak out … yes, it’s exactly like Albuquerque.” Kara placed her thumb on the disc and an energy wave pulsed off of it. Bruce glanced around – the shimmering field stopped a half foot away from him but enclosed them both – and then looked at Kara. She grinned again. “Distortion field,” she said. “It’s an application of Phantom Zone technology – we’re slightly out of phase with the rest of the world, so they can’t eavesdrop.” Bruce grunted. He wanted one very, very badly and knew it had to show.

“I had an interesting visitor today,” he began instead of asking if she could provide him with the specs for this device. Knowing her, she’d gladly do so … but they’d be written in Ancient Kryptonian and engraved on some chunk of metal he’d need an industrial-sized forklift to even budge. Kara gave him a look, then glanced in the direction of the hospital with a very slight frown.

“President Alexander,” she guessed. “And what exactly does Mister Luthor want?”

Bruce blinked.

Until now, he’d been positive that the only people in the League who were aware of the situation with the president were himself, Clark and Diana. In fact, they’d intentionally tried to keep it from reaching Kara’s ears out of concern over what she might do in retaliation. Yet here she was, completely professional and totally unmoved by her proximity to the madman who had so thoroughly changed her life. At his silence – and probably some other clues only a Kryptonian could decipher – Kara’s frown vanished and was quickly replaced by a smirk.

“I have ears, B,” she said wryly. “Very, very good ears. You and Diana talked about it on the Watchtower once though I don’t think either of you knew I was there at the time.” Bruce grunted. “Kal’s database,” Kara abruptly guessed. She was still staring at the hospital. “His wife is sick and he wants to look over Kal’s research into cancer.”

“Correct,” Bruce rasped. These damned Kryptonians … they never failed to knock him off his stride. Just when he was certain that he’d figured out how they would react to certain stimuli, they turned around and did something completely different. It was so frustratingly easy to forget that they weren’t humans with amazing powers – if it had been him that had been affected like Kara, Bruce had little doubt he’d have long since paid Alexander a visit and knocked the clone’s teeth out. And that was only after he broken a few dozen bones.

“I will have conditions that must be followed,” Kara announced in a coldly analytical voice. “If I get the feeling – even once – that he’s trying to access something other than cancer research, I will throw him in the Phantom Zone without hesitation or warning.” She turned her cool gaze onto him and, for a moment, Bruce had no trouble at all remembering that she wasn’t human. “Trust me on this: he will not like that in the slightest.”
“I’ll let him know,” Bruce said. Kara nodded and manipulated the tiny device that generated the distortion field. With a whoosh, the shimmering field vanished.

“Agent Smith,” Kara called out, “please say hello to your daughter for me.” She climbed into the sky. “Have a pleasant evening, gentlemen.” With a flicker of motion, she vanished into the night. Bruce was silent for a long moment.

“I hate it when she does that,” he announced to the empty air before he too turned away from the hospital.

War had come to paradise.

Overhead, the sky was bleeding as gods and monsters, native and alien alike, fell, their lives spilling out from gruesome wounds. Thunder shook the ground. Lightning flashed like quicksilver – here, there, there again – and where it struck, creatures not of this world died. Fire scorched the air and burned even the hardiest of heroes to ash. There were bodies everywhere.

And in the very center of this maelstrom, in the heart of the chaos, surrounded by a carpet of fallen enemies was a single woman.

Her name was Artemis.

And she was dead.

Or rather, she should have been dead. Her wounds were beyond terrible – one arm was simply gone, seared away by an impossible heat that had also been responsible for the horrific burns that ravaged her once lovely face; both legs were shattered, as if she had tumbled off a mighty cliff; smoke still curled up from a handful of bleeding injuries and there were at least three spear shafts of alien design standing up from where she’d been pinned to the ground. She should have been dead. She wished she were dead.

The Presence drew nearer, observing dispassionately as the girl labored to free herself from the spears. Even now, as wounded as she was, Artemis continued to struggle, to fight, to seek once more to hurl herself at the Enemy and sell her life dearly. It mattered not – the Presence knew that only a handful of Amazons yet breathed, the rest having fallen in brutal combat or, in a few terrible instances, been captured. Time was running out and the Presence needed to act.

“Artemis.” The name whispered across the wind and the girl with the flame-colored hair responded instantly, tensing and looking around for someone she could not see.

“Lady Athena?” she rasped through bloody lips and the Presence felt the impact of her Name.

Athena. Yes. That was what she had been called. It was not the name she was born with on a planet now long gone, but it was the name that Father Zeus gave to her when he nursed her back from the brink of oblivion. She could recall leaving Krypton, the crash that stranded her here, the fight with the other explorer whose name she could no longer remember and then … light and peace. The magicks Zeus used to restore her had fundamentally altered her in some fashion – so many of the abilities that were the hallmark of her species under a yellow sun faded – and two millennia of living and breathing and eating as an Olympian had completed the process. Had it not, had she still been a full Kryptonian, the power she might have possessed after living for so long on Earth might very well have been enough to throw down the Enemy…

The Presence shook away those thoughts. There was no time to waste.
“I have need of you, Child,” she told Artemis. “I am dying and there are things that must be done before my time ends.” She saw the raw confusion on the girl’s face – after all, how could an Olympian die? – but it vanished an instant later when she grimaced in agony.

“Mistress,” Artemis hissed through clenched teeth, “I regret I am unable to aid you.”

In response, the Presence, the whisper of a ghost that was already fading, reached out and Touched her.

The world vanished in a flare of muted light. Artemis screamed in surprise and pain – the Presence that had been Athena screamed with her – as a torrent of images flashed across her mind’s eye, most too fast to be truly recognized. She saw Apollo in a smoking crater, dead and broken. She witnessed Hermes locked in mortal combat with a foe wielding an impossible-looking spear. The god of messengers was already direly injured and would not long survive, not as reinforcements flooded toward the battle. Hephaestus stood over his fallen wife, surrounded by the Enemy and wielding his blood-soaked weapons with a fury never before seen. He too would soon be overwhelmed – the Enemy’s numbers seemed limitless and their commander thought little of hurling a legion or three at an entrenched position. She saw Zeus and Hera, back to back, fighting together in a way that they never had before, but even it would not be enough.

Is this happening? Artemis wondered and the Presence would have smiled if she could.

It is, she stated. The Olympians will fall. We have known this was coming for millennia. Despair shot through them as Artemis reacted to that revelation and her thoughts automatically turned to her sisters. They were all gone, of course. The Presence had observed how gloriously the Bana-Mighdall held against overwhelming numbers. For each of them who had fallen, dozens of the Enemy had joined them. Even as the shadow felt a reciprocal sense of loss, Artemis’ emotions hardened.

Show me the queen, she ordered and the Presence relented, already knowing what they would see. Once proud and strong, Hippolyta’s body had been desecrated in the Enemy’s rage at her refusal to yield. Alone and unarmed, she had bested many of their greatest and then, wielding captured weapons, she bore the screaming monster who had commanded this invasion to the dirt, ignoring the killing blows his guards rained down upon her. She had died, triumphant and victorious, content in knowing that the monster known as Desaad would never again torture a living soul. In her final moments, as the excruciating pain fell away for the last time, the queen had even hoped this act would someday reach the ears of her daughter’s consort. Would he find it within him to forgive her for her myopic hatred of him? Would her soul be able to rest easy? She who had once been Athena did not know if he would; all that mattered was that the two were not here. It had taken every bit of Hermes’ considerable ability to draw the Asgardians to this world, at that exact moment, and all in the slim hopes that Kal-El and Diana would survive long enough to accomplish a miracle. The Moon had found her Voice and if Apollo – lovely, beautiful Apollo – had been correct, only together did they stand a chance to throw down the tyrant who even now waged war against Olympus. Zeus would fall, but the effort required to accomplish this would cripple the old monster for a very long time.

But Artemis knew none of that. Instead, all she saw was Diana’s mother in the mud, dozens of fierce wounds upon her body but her face at peace and a glorious smile on her lips. The Bana-Mighdall girl inhaled.

How can I assist, Mistress? she asked. There was no hesitation, no concern about what it might mean for her, only a desire to be of some further use. She had resigned herself to death. The Presence that had once been Athena paused only for a heartbeat, momentarily awed by this girl’s faith. There was no time, though, and she flooded forward, merging her fading essence with that of the Bana-
Mighdall girl’s. In the span of a single picosecond they became one.

Artemis opened her eyes.

And she knew what had to be done.

Her wounds were still crippling but she was able to push the agony away long enough to focus on what needed to be done. There was a tiny kernel of power deep within her soul – a fragment of Athena’s divine abilities that could not long survive outside of a body incapable of containing it – and she reached for it, gripping it tightly as she cast one last look at Themyscira. Seeing it in flames caused her breath to catch – once, years ago, when Despoina tumbled into this world, she had seen another Themyscira burning through a portal, and now, it had come to this.

Away, the ghost of Athena whispered and Artemis obeyed. With an implosion of silver light, she vanished.

Her exile had begun.
Year Two Hundred: Epiphanies

And now the armies closed, and soon the battle waxed fierce. Hoenir pressed eagerly forward, causing his standard to be borne onwards along the woodside; he thought to go so far forward as to turn upon the Enemy's division behind their shields. His own men held their shields before them; they trusted to the wood which was on their right to cover that side. So far in advance went Hoenir that few of his men were before him. But just when he was least on his guard, out leapt from the wood the foul Kanto and his followers. They thrust at Hoenir at once with many halberds, and there by the wood he fell. But Sjofin, who bore the standard, drew back to where the men stood thicker. Kanto now attacked them, and a fierce contest was there. The Enemy shouted a shout of victory, as having slain the enemy's chieftain.

This shout when Kal-El heard, and saw Hoenir's standard going back, he felt sure that Hoenir himself would not be with it. So he bounded thither over the space between the two divisions. Full soon learnt he the tidings of what was done, when he came to his men. Then did he keenly spur them on to the charge, himself foremost in the van. No sword in hand had he for he was not of Asgard. Forward Kal-El pressed, and hewed on either hand of him, felling many foes. Sjofin bore the standard close after him, behind the standard followed the rest. Right sharp was the conflict there. Kal-El went forward till he met Kanto. Few blows did they exchange ere earl Kanto fell, and many men around him. But after the earl's death his followers fled. Kal-El and his force pursued, and slew all whom they overtook; no need there to beg quarter.

- Excerpt from The Battle of Bloody Snow

OVER THE DIN OF BATTLE, DESPITE THE GREAT DISTANCE BETWEEN THEM, DIANA HEARD HIM CRY OUT.

Not for an instant did she hesitate – in their two hundred plus years of fighting here, alongside the Asgardians against Darkseid’s innumerable legions, she had never heard Kal in pain, even when facing things that haunted the nightmares of demons, and the thought of what could make him scream chilled her blood – and she threw herself up into the sky so quickly that her foes had no time react. The air shook as she accelerated up and over the battlefield. A quartet of parademons angled toward her, but her speed was such that she blew through their formation almost before they fully registered her presence. All that mattered was Kal.

She found his Redcloaks easily enough: as always, they were on the van of the Asgardian host, but this time, they were hard-pressed by enhanced parademons, each towering over the warriors though none of the soldiers who refused to march under anyone but Kal showed even a hint of fear in the face of their terrible enemy. They were fearless, facing death with ready grins and eager laughs, and they held the line. Had the creatures wanted to overwhelm them, it would have been a hard fight. That did not seem to be the parademons’ intent, however – they were a wall of flesh and steel, holding the Redcloaks back from their captain.

Kal was in the dirt twenty or thirty yards away from the nearest of his men, writhing in agony as a slender woman stood above him. She carried what Diana initially took to be lariats and both were wrapped around his arms. Even from this great distance, Diana could see coruscating waves of electricity racing down the whips and across his body. Fury sang through her veins – she recognized this foul creature from Kal’s nightmares – and she dove downward, gathering more speed as she fell toward the ground. The woman must have sensed her approach in some way because she sprang back from where Kal was sprawled out, her whips releasing him so she could assume a defensive
posture.

At the last moment, Diana arrested her dive, coming to a complete stop just over Kal. The wind from her arrival blew a column of dirt into the other woman’s face, momentarily concealing the battlefield. A part of Diana – the warrior and the enraged lover – desperately wanted to take advantage of this moment of confusion, to shatter bone and tear flesh from this creature who dared to even touch him, but instead, she glanced down at Kal, her eyes darting over him to determine his condition. Smoke curled up from his shattered hard-suit – some of it had melted while other pieces yet burned or sparked – but overall, he appeared intact. Without the direct application of the woman’s electricity, he was already beginning to recover. She looked back up, just as the dust cleared.

“You,” the woman before her snarled, the word so laced with hate and rage that they nearly froze the air. Their eyes met for the span of a single heartbeat and Diana found herself staring into a cracked mirror. They were of a height and had the same build, with the same dark hair and deeply tanned complexion, but that was where the similarities ended. In this woman’s eyes, Diana saw only cruelty and malice – if this stranger had truly been an Amazon from an alternate reality as Kal once theorized, then her centuries on Apokalips had shattered any of the lessons learned. She had embraced the darkness, eagerly perhaps, and become the very monster her new master desired. There would be no coming back from that and Diana knew … they both knew that only one of them would survive this meeting.

Without another word, the woman’s right arm flashed out and one of her whips shrieked toward Diana. She reacted instinctively, throwing up her left arm and calling upon Hephaestus’ gift to form a shield. It had once absorbed a direct hit from a pair of surface-to-air missiles; a bit of electricity, no matter how well focused or honed, should be no problem.

But the shield … the shield did not form.

Her bracer sparked slightly – for the briefest of moments, a semi-transparent outline of a hoplon materialized, but it fell away like smoke in wind as the whip slashed through it. The woman barked out a malicious laugh as the metallic cable wrapped twice around Diana’s arm, and almost instantly, a killing surge of electricity coursed through it. As with Kal, large segments of Diana’s armor simply exploded under the onslaught of such raw power. It was as if a hundred thousand lightning bolts had been focused and channeled into a single stream and Diana realized with some surprise that it should have killed her instantly.

Instead, it … tickled.

She glanced briefly at the coil wrapped around her arm and then looked up to meet the other woman’s startled eyes. Another pulse of energy shattered even more of her armor and Diana saw her enemy lift her other arm. There was no time.

So Diana killed her.

It was a simple thing really. A sharp tug, a quick thrust, and they stood, face-to-face, connected by the straight sword gripped in Diana’s hand. The nameless woman looked down slowly, staring at the blade piercing her heart with stunned disbelief and rapidly swelling pain. She struggled for a moment but Diana held on.

“Rest now, sister,” she whispered in Themysciran. The flash of recognition and startled comprehension that flickered in the dying woman’s eyes made Diana wince. “Be at peace.” She released her hold and the woman fell away.

To Diana’s disgust, the god-slaying sword fought against pulling free and when the dead woman
finally toppled to the dirt, her eyes blank and empty of life, the blade was a dark crimson. The weapon throbbed eagerly in her hand – it thirsted for more blood, more death, more carnage – and she angrily returned it to the scabbard at her side before tearing the dead woman’s whip free from her arm. Half-turning, she was unsurprised to see Kal clambering back to his feet but just seeing him still breathing, still alive sent a rush of relief through her body. The nanites in his hard-suit were already trying to repair the damage – as long as he was in physical contact with dirt, they could absorb the necessary raw materials and then convert them to replacement parts – but it would be hours if not days before he was once more fully clothed.

“Are you all right?” they both asked at the same time. Kal flashed his crooked smile before pulling his torn cape free. “You might want to cover up a little,” he said as he glanced around. The Enemy was retreating as they always did when one of their captains fell, back toward their boom tubes, and Diana frowned at the dead woman at her feet. She knelt and quickly tore the Mother Box free from the corpse’s arm, crushing it into scrap before it would self-destruct or, even worse, summon a tube. Darkseid possessed no qualms about repurposing his dead to send them back into the field once more and she had no desire to face this woman again. She glanced up and found Kal staring at the corpse.

“Are you well?” she asked softly in Kryptonian. He jerked back, as if struck.

“I’m sorry,” Kal replied a moment later. “I just … it’s hard to believe she’s dead.” Diana glanced briefly at the woman – she had not seemed an especially dangerous foe … but then, to Kal, this monster had represented something far worse than just another enemy. “I froze up completely when I saw her,” he admitted, anger sharp in his voice. “She called my name and I … I just froze.” Diana reached out and took his hand, noting how his Redcloaks spread out around them, as if to provide them a moment of privacy here in the middle of a battlefield. Sjofin, Kal’s standard-bearer, gave her a solemn nod.

“It matters not,” she said with a smile. He returned it almost instantly before stepping closer. With deft fingers, he secured his cape to the shattered fragments of her armor and tying it off so that it almost reminded her of a chiton. It was not quite long enough, of course, and she was less concerned about her modesty than he was, but Diana said nothing and simply smiled as he worked.

Horns sounded as he tied off the cape, and then thunder and lightning boomed overhead, heralding Thor’s arrival. The Asgardian king soared out of the sky, landing heavily in the dirt nearby. He straightened, glanced briefly at them before looking at the corpse at Diana’s feet.

“So,” he rumbled, “this is why they are retreating.” He let his hammer thud into the ground as he drew closer.

“They will come again,” Diana stated calmly. “Unless this is a diversionary retreat…”

“Heimdall?” Kal asked the air. He was looking away, back toward the Bifrost. “No, I don’t see them either. What about the north?” He nodded. “This looks to be a legitimate retreat,” he said, “though Magni and Fandral could use some assistance.”

“Do you speak to us now,” Thor asked with a grin, “or are you still speaking with my wife’s brother?” Kal gave him a flat look before turning his eyes once more to Diana.

“Go,” she ordered before he could voice his intent. Kal hesitated very briefly before rocketing up into the sky. Thor laughed as he held out his hand – Mjolnir leaped up to his hand – and shook his head.

“For a man who claims to hate conflict,” he said as he began spinning the hammer, “your man is exceptionally fast to hurl himself into it!” Before she could respond, he hurtled up in the air, clearly
intent on pursuing Kal. Diana shook her head.

“Sjofin!” she called out. Kal’s standard-bearer darted forward, followed quickly by a handful of the Redcloaks. “Let us see to wounded and dead,” she instructed. Officially, she held no place in Kal’s band but they generally obeyed her as if the commands were coming from his mouth. She glanced up, noting without surprise that the Valkryies were approaching, Sif and Þrúðr at their forefront.

“What of this one?” Sjofin asked, looking down at the Apokalyptian woman stretched out in the dirt. Diana exhaled.

“Once,” she said softly, “she was of my tribe in a fashion.” Sjofin tensed with surprise at that but made no comment. “I do not know her story,” Diana continued, “but she fell into darkness and was consumed by it.”

“Then we shall honor the woman she could have been,” Sif announced as she drew closer, “and not the one she was.” At her gesture, Sjofin and the Redcloaks bent to pick up the body. “A strange look upon you, Sister,” Sif said with a smile. “Has Kal-El so tired of Móði seeking your charms that he seeks to mark you as his own?” Diana glanced up.

“No one owns me,” she replied with a smile of her own, even if it was a little forced. In truth, Thor’s son, Móði, annoyed her far more than he did Kal with his constant attempts to woo her, even though she’d made it perfectly clear that she had no interest in a dalliance with him. “It would seem, however, that I have need of new armor.” She held out her arm and concentrated on Hephaestus’ gift but, as before, nothing happened. Diana swallowed the concern swimming in her stomach.

“There are dwarves in Asgard,” Þrúðr stated as she drew closer. She was every inch her parents’ daughter, with Thor’s blonde locks and thirst for battle but Sif’s collected temperament. The silvered armor she wore was marred by dozens of battle-scars, but as always, Diana’s eyes were drawn to the multi-colored wings of the purest energy that hung off Þrúðr’s back, symbolizing her role as a Valkryie. It was as if a rainbow was given form, or a bird’s wings had been formed from the purest of light.

“They fled Niðavellir when the Enemy took it,” Sif remarked with a nod. “Seek out Eitri … though I warn you, he is a cunning one.” She tugged on her raven-black hair with a frown before turning once more to face the battlefield. “Come, daughter,” she ordered. “Let us see to the honored dead.”

Locating the dwarves of Niðavellir would be no easy task, so Diana turned to Heimdall.

He stood calmly, resolutely, on the edge of the Bifrost, his hands wrapped around the greatsword he seemed to recline upon. At her approach, his head tilted very slightly toward her before returning to his constant scan of the cosmos. Even at this distance, she could see how his eyes glittered underneath his full face helm. According to rumor, he had once been a handsome enough man, but when the forces of Apokalips struck, he gave up his face to better enhance his senses.

“You seek Eitri of Niðavellir,” he intoned as Diana touched down on the glittering bridge of light. She smiled.

“‘You’re worse than Kal,’” she said lightly. Sif’s brother chuckled softly.

“It has been said,” he replied. “The Dvergar take great pains to remain hidden, Princess,” he continued. “They cloak themselves from my sight as frequently as possible.”

“So you do not know where they are?” By way of reply, Heimdall lifted his sword slightly and then tapped the Bifrost with its blade. A tiny flicker of light sparked off the impact and then raced back
“Follow,” he ordered, “and it shall take you to your destination.” There was no time for Diana to do more than shout a quick thank you – already the tiny spark was vanishing – before hurling herself into the sky to pursue. Without the benefit of Hephaestus’ gift, she was unable to accelerate quite as fast as before, but she was still swift enough to keep Heimdall’s spark in sight. It led her through dozens of back alleys and side streets, showing her places she had never before seen, before finally stopping before a small, unmarked door of roughly hewn stone. Diana touched down before the door as the spark fizzled away into nothing and then raised a hand to knock.

“What do you want?” a sour voice asked before she could touch her knuckles to the stone.

“My name is Diana,” she replied, “and I am seeking Eitri of Niðavellir.” The door creaked out.

“Heimdall sent you, did he not?” The ugly creature that stood in the doorway was squat and wide, with hair that looked to be in dire need of washing. He reeked of dirt and mud, but Diana saw through his illusions and could feel the power rolling off him. It tasted of magic. “You have need of armor, Olympian,” the dwarf said with a glower. Diana opened her mouth, both to correct him in his identification of her and to acknowledge that he was correct about her need, but the dwarf stumped forward, still talking as he circled her. “The bracers I can salvage,” he muttered, “but the rest is scrap.” He leaned forward and sniffed loudly at her gauntlets. “This is Hephaestus’ work, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Good work, that.” Eitri continued his circle, pausing to finger Kal’s cape with a frown. “Give me the bracers,” he instructed, “and return in nine days, Olympian.”

“Master Smith,” Diana said as she pulled the decorative bracers free, “you have said nothing of payment.” The ugly dwarf gave her a smile.

“You and your man ask for none each time you face the Enemy that burned my world,” he said through filthy-looking teeth. “I shall ask for none to arm you.” Without another word, he took the bracers, stomped through his doorway and then slammed the door shut, leaving her standing there, bemused. Shaking her head, Diana took once more to the sky.

She reached the apartments set aside for her and Kal moments later, noting at once how empty they seemed. It was rare that they spent more than a few days here as Darkseid’s forces would inevitably reform and attack once more. Usually, it was within a week, though sometimes even less time passed and once, they’d gone an entire year without a new onslaught. That had been a surprisingly pleasant time, with Kal so tense at the prospect of another attack that she’d been forced to find alternate means to distract him.

Tossing aside Kal’s cape, she removed the shattered panoply and tried very, very hard not to imagine why it might have failed. The obvious answer – that Hephaestus’ himself was slain – was a terrible thing to contemplate, and Diana pushed it aside even as she fingered the Lariat. Truth still pulsed through it, which she took as Gaea’s continued survival. Could it be as simple as distance? In the two hundred years since she and Kal had come to Asgard, Sif had been unable to find a way back to their world.

“You look lovely today.” The voice was Kal’s but Diana frowned as she looked up and studied the god wearing her lover’s face. Were she anyone else, she suspected that she would be fooled, but Truth … Truth was her weapon.

“Take off his face, Loki,” she ordered coldly, dropping her hand to the still sheathed sword strapped
to her thigh. A flash of surprise crossed his face before he shook his head and shifted back to his more natural appearance.

“As always,” the god of mischief said with a smirk, “you ever surprise me, Princess.” He glided forward. “Tell me,” he said, “how did you know? My illusion was perfect. Even Kal-El’s mother would have been fooled.”

“I am not his mother,” Diana replied sharply. “Now get out. You are not welcome here.” Loki straightened, his expression darkening once more. He drew breath to reply but whatever he meant to say died stillborn in his mouth as Kal touched down on the balcony outside.

“I believe she told you to leave,” he said in a voice that rumbled like distant thunder. With a shake of his head and a flash, Loki transformed into a bird and darted toward the nearest window.

Kal was waiting. He blurred forward, catching the transformed Loki by the wing.

“The next time,” he said darkly, “I’m going to let Diana throw you out.” He lowered his voice. “And trust me, she’s not as forgiving as I am.”

“That was unfair,” Diana said once Kal had let Loki depart, “casting me as the villain.” She flashed him a grin. “Though it was rather pleasant to see him at a loss for words.”

“I don’t know why Thor trusts him,” Kal muttered. He drew closer and began massaging her shoulders. Diana moaned softly in relief.

“He doesn’t,” she replied. “Yes. Right there. Oh!” Under Kal’s expert touch, her muscles relaxed. “Loki is smart enough to know siding with Darkseid will only end with him becoming a slave.” She leaned back against Kal and gave him a soft smile. “It is good you came when you did,” she murmured. “I have need of someone to wash my back.”

“And as always,” Kal said with a grin, “I am more than up to that task.” He scooped her up – Diana almost cried out in surprise before changing it to a laugh – and floated them toward the bath.

“Besides,” Kal added as he rained soft kisses up her throat, “I owe you for saving my life today.”

Diana meant to reply, meant to tease him, but he turned his considerable abilities toward providing her pleasure and, for a time, she was lost to the world.

Later, when they were sprawled together atop their bed, sated and utterly relaxed, she felt him caressing her bare forearm. It was, Diana realized, the first time in a very long time that her skin underneath those bracers had been exposed to the air. There should have been a tan-line there, with pale skin underneath, but there was not.

“I gave them to a dwarf,” she said in response to his unspoken question. “He’s repairing them for me.”

“A real dwarf?” Kal stroked her arms. “Did he have a beard?”

“Not that I saw.” Diana was silent for a moment. “How much did you witness?” she asked.

“Enough.” Though she could not see it, Diana could hear his frown. “Her lightning didn’t affect you at all,” she said quickly. “He simply missed his target.” She shrugged. “It didn’t do more than tickle.”
“That was a hundred years ago,” Kal said before suddenly shaking his head. “Listen to me,” he muttered. “A hundred years. I’m saying that like it’s nothing.” He tightened his hold on her. “Immunity to lightning, then,” he said. “That’s new.” From his tone, he clearly wanted to say more, to ask if she had any theories, but fully intended on letting her set the pace. That was one of the things she loved so much about him: he did not push. Oh, some of the more foolish Asgardians thought it was sign of weakness, that he let her rule over him, but she knew the truth. He saw that she was not ready to discuss it and simply shelved his own thoughts until she was ready. Normally, this was when she would change the subject … or kiss him so thoroughly that he forgot his name, but she was tired of never voicing her fears.

“My mother lied to me, I think,” she said. Kal froze briefly but very quickly went back to his caresses. “She told me that she had crafted me from clay and the gods breathed life into me … but I think … I think she bore Zeus’ daughter.”

“It would explain some things,” Kal remarked softly. He chuckled suddenly. “No wonder you’re so comfortable here in Asgard,” he said, “being a goddess and all.” Diana elbowed him sharply, but he continued to laugh softly. It was a lovely sound, something she loved hearing, and despite her conflicted thoughts about her mother’s deception, she found herself smiling with him.

And then, later, when he insisted on ‘worshipping’ her and showing her the extent of his devotion, Diana made no attempt to stop him.

Two days later, the whole of Asgard assembled to see their fallen laid to rest.

It was an impressive ceremony, with the dead burned atop small pyre-ships that carried them on to their final reward. None of the Asgardians had good answers for where their immortal fallen would go, and Diana was wise enough to not question them too deeply in this time of mourning. Along with the Valkryies, she stood in the sky, watching for threats to their charges. Officially, she was not one of their number, though the offer had been made, but in this moment, she thought it appropriate that she wear the borrowed armor and offer what aid she could.

As a captain, Kal stood in front of his warband, looking nearly as uncomfortable as he had when he’d faced off against her sisters on Themyscira so many years ago. His hard-suit had regenerated itself, but he’d shifted it to the black to denote mourning, though strangely, his crest appeared locked in the more traditional red and gold. He had said little during the funeral procession, but Diana knew his moods well enough to recognize that he was thinking of Earth and all of the people he’d known. Bruce and Lois were both long dead by now, which left only Kara who would be entering middle age, even without the replenishing energy of a yellow sun.

The funeral ceremony lasted most of the day as the numbers of dead were considerable. According to Sif, fewer had fallen in the last two centuries than before she and Kal arrived, which Diana took to be a good omen. Still, it was more than a little troubling to look upon this many dead. How many more losses could Asgard withstand? How long until Apokolips overwhelmed them with sheer numbers? Even gods needed time to replenish their numbers…

Those dark thoughts stuck with her for the rest of the day and she found herself staring at Kal instead of attending to her duties. He had never hidden his desire for children and, in truth, she shared that sentiment, but his distinctly alien nature had always been perceived as the principle problem. According to every medical test she’d tried, she was human, admittedly augmented by powerful magicks but still, human, and he was Kryptonian. He might look as though he was from Earth, but he wasn’t, and genes never lied. Kryptonians could not breed with humans. It was a simple as that.

But … but … if she was not human, but rather half-Olympian, would that mean she could bear Kal’s
children? And was this the time and place to do so? Diana shook her head – this was not a decision she could make alone. She needed to discuss this with the man who was, for all intents and purposes, her husband. They had not exchanged any vows, but both of them were bound to one another by unspoken promises and ties of loyalty and love.

By the time the funeral rites drew to a close, her mind was still racing down tangents she had only rarely allowed her imagination to venture. How would her mother react to such a child, she wondered, or the rest of the Amazons? Would Zeus and the other Olympians perceive their children as threats? Would a child born and raised among Asgardians even desire to leave this reality? Kal noticed her distraction when they returned to their apartments, but did not press her for answers, even when she clung to him more tightly than she had in years. His steady (if confused) presence warmed her and allowed her to finally relax enough for sleep to come.

The following day, Apokolips attacked once more.

Thoughts of children fled from her mind as she threw herself back into the war, wearing the borrowed arms of a fallen Valkyrie and fighting alongside Kal and his Redcloaks. The parademons appeared to be endless, pouring out of their boomtubes day and night until the ground was black with their numbers. Weapons of incalculable power belched forth streams of living fire and scorching light, burning through the defenders and turning far too many of them to ash. Together, she and Kal smashed a hundred of those foul things, and Thor, armed with Mjolnir and the Odin-Force, threw down nearly as many by himself.

And still, the Enemy kept coming.

When finally the forces of Apokolips once more withdrew, ten years had passed.

Great stretches of territory had been lost to the Enemy, with the hosts of Asgard forced to retreat again and again in the face of overwhelming numbers. Dozens of mighty heroes and gods had fallen, from Volstagg to fierce Móði himself. Twice in that time, Thor, king of Asgard, had been badly wounded near unto death, and in both instances, Kal had been directly responsible for the Thunder God’s survival.

The hosts no longer returned to Asgard when the Enemy pulled back, knowing that they could not waste precious time racing back to their positions, but warriors were granted leave to return to their families for a time. Some returned angry or sad, others were even more set in their determination, and more than a few brought with them brothers and sons, daughters and sisters and wives, all armed and prepared to sell their lives dearly to hold Asgard. The slain were given burial rites where they fell and then, by necessity, were forgotten.

Diana rotated among the various formations, sometimes joining the Valkryies, other times standing on the front lines along with Kal and his Redcloaks. The new armor that Eitri forged for her was as strong as the old and fit just as well, though it was heavier and did not transform as Hephaestus’ panoply had. It turned aside energy blasts better and as time passed, Diana soon forgot her old gear. All that mattered was putting down as many parademons as possible.

“Did you see their captain fall?” Kal asked as the Enemy withdrew. His hard-suit was long gone, shattered two years into this engagement, and he looked strange in the Asgardian armor. The House of El crest was still there, though, and it flew on a dozen different standards alongside her own Themysciran eagle and Thor’s hammer. When she looked at him, Diana could no longer see the man she’d first met. He was gone, burned away by the fires of battle and the forge that was war, and the man who now stood at her side was so much harder, so much stronger, so much older. A thick beard hid much of his face from sight – he’d stopped trying to stay clean-shaven years ago – and his blue
eyes were as cold as diamonds.

“I killed her myself,” Diana said, gesturing briefly toward the fallen soldier of Apokalips. The woman had been as wide as any dwarf, but as tall as Kal and almost as strong. Where her feet struck, earthquakes had erupted. It had been a hard fight.

“Magni fell,” Kal said softly as he floated down to join her on the wrecked war machine she was using as a seat. Diana winced.

“Does Thor know?” she asked, glancing back toward the far distant palace.

“He does.” Kal shook his head. “I heard him …” He exhaled bitterly and closed his eyes.

“My lord,” Sjofin called out as he approached with a handful of prisoners. Kal tensed – this was the part he hated the most and Diana did not blame for a moment – but nodded for his standard-bearer to approach. “As commanded, my lord,” Sjofin said, “we have captured those we could.” Dark blood was trickling down the faces of these parademons, but it was necessary to prevent them from destroying themselves. Kal narrowed his eyes as he looked them over and then glanced to Diana. She shook her head – none of them were anything but what they appeared to be.

“Send for Loki,” Kal ordered through clenched teeth. He’d never been able to hide his dislike of Thor’s half-brother and the sentiment was returned tenfold by the trickster himself. “Give the prisoners over to him. Maybe he can learn a thing or two from them.”

“Yes, my lord.” Sjofin gave a sharp nod and his warriors began herding the shackled parademons away.

“The Redcloaks fought well today, Sjofin,” Kal added. “I will see to it personally that we get some damned beer out of the city.” Sjofin flashed a bright smile that stripped years from face and the men arrayed around him laughed out loud with pleasure. To Diana’s surprise, they began singing – it was a drinking song, of course, with utterly profane lyrics, but still, it made her chuckle.

A whisper of soft wings warned them of Þrúðr’s arrival and the Valkryie stopped alongside them, staring at the carnage with those inscrutable eyes of hers. Despite having fought alongside her, Diana still did not know Sif’s daughter very well and doubted she ever would as the girl troubled her more than would wanted to admit. It was the way she looked at people, as if sensing those closest to death. All of the Choosers were thus, which was the primary reason Diana resisted officially joining their ranks.

“You are tired,” Þrúðr said softly, her glance taking them both in. “Return to Asgard to rest. I shall stand the watch.”

“Thor would kill me if I left his daughter out here alone,” Kal said simply and, to Diana’s surprise, the girl smiled.

“I am not alone,” she said sadly. “My brothers are with me.” Ghostly half-images of what looked to be Magni and Móði appeared to coalesce out of the smoke around her but vanished a moment later. Diana blinked, but accepted the strangeness without pause. Theirs had been a wondrously strange family that Diana sometimes still struggled to understand – Þrúðr was the only child of Thor’s that Sif had borne him, but she had another son – Ullr – whose sire had evidently been a mortal named Erik, and Thor’s other sons both had different mothers. Magni, the Thunderer had fathered upon a jotun named Járnsaxa, and Móði had been borne from a dalliance from another Asgardian, now long dead, named Amora. And yet, Sif harbored no ill will toward her husband’s wandering eye, and he treated Ullr exactly as he did his own children. Diana did not know if it was a product of their
Asgardian upbringing or something special to them, but she did not think she could so easily accept Kal acting in such a manner.

“Husband your strength, my lord, my lady,” Þrúðr said. “I fear we shall yet need it.”

“Don’t tell Sif,” Kal said softly when Þrúðr walked away, “but her daughter really creeps me out sometimes.” He tilted his head and frowned. “I know you heard that, Heimdall,” he said. “It doesn’t make it any less true.” He rose and then offered Diana his hand. “Shall we?”

“Will you scrub my back?” she asked with a smirk as she allowed him to pull her to her feet.

“Only if you scrub mine.”

Twenty-one days later, the endless hordes of Apokolips once more arrived on Asgard’s shores and the war resumed.

And on that very day, Diana discovered she was with child.
BREAKING NEWS: Hostage Situation at Italian Restaurant, Police

This is a rush transcript from ‘Gotham by Night,’ May 15, 2035. This copy may not be in its final form and may be updated.

MAXINE GIBSON, WGN HOST: We’re taking you live to downtown Gotham where a hostage situation is now brewing. WGN’s Alex Crews has more.

ALEX CREWS: Thank you, Maxine. Police have surrounded Gambino’s, a popular Italian restaurant here in downtown Gotham after reports that the costumed vigilante and rumored jewel thief, Catwoman, barricaded herself inside along with twenty-four hostages. Wait … Maxine, I’ve just been informed that one of the hostages has been confirmed to be none other than Selina Kyle herself.

POLICE OFFICER: Ma’am, you’re going to have to move back. We’ve got – shots fired! Shots fired!

Screen blanks out.

ALL THINGS CONSIDERED, SELINA WAS HAVING A WONDERFUL EVENING.

The same could not be said for most of the other guests and employees of the restaurant as most were too busy to even glance toward her table, so intent were they on watching one of Gotham’s most notorious Rogues prowling around the tables with a dangerous, feline grace, all the while somehow keeping an eye on everyone and the entry-points at the same time. There were only a handful of children present, but to Selina’s relief, none of them showed any sign of fear as the woman slinked by. In fact, one of them, a little girl of about eight or nine, even asked for an autograph. Helena handled it marvelously.

Not too long ago, Selina mused, that would have been her.

In truth, Helena wore the catsuit remarkably well. She glided across the floor with an easy poise, strutting and sashaying rather than simply walking, and when she addressed the more aggressive men present who were obviously considering taking action, she positively oozed sexual charm. Her casual comfort with the bullwhip indicated long hours of study and training, which was curious as she never used a weapon like it in her Huntress guise. Somehow, she even had Selina’s speaking patterns down pat, though that was actually more disturbing than the physical mannerisms. Did she really look and sound that much like a sex vixen when she was in the suit, Selina wondered? From the delighted expression on Cassandra’s face (and her discreet recording of this event with her phone), it probably was a really good imitation.

“Now, don’t worry your pretty little heads,” Helena said with a smirk that promised a whole lot more than it should have. “This will soon be over and you can go back to your boring little lives.” Abruptly, she tapped the head waiter on the nose with the butt end of her bullwhip. “Except you. I know all about the crazy things you get up to on the weekends.” Helena slid closer and lowered her voice to a sultry purr. “You naughty, naughty boy.” The waiter stammered something in return, but Catwoman – and how weird was that, Selina wondered, to be looking at someone else and thinking of them by the identity she’d forged for herself? No wonder she had to drag Bruce kicking and screaming into retirement – had moved on. She paused, staring down at Selina, and then, a wicked
smile flashed across her face. “I know you,” she said, the words causing Selina’s stomach to lurch. This was not part of the plan.

“Do you?” she asked with as much aplomb as she could manage.

“Selina Kyle.” Helena took a seat on the table and crossed her legs. “You’re the art dealer, right? The one who landed the scrumptious Bruce Wayne?” Selina forced a smile on her lips even as she made plans for a violent murder. This was most certainly not what they had discussed. It was supposed to be simple – Helena would show up, cause a little trouble, and then make a very public escape. A simple bit of sleight of hand. There were already too many people who were suspicious about Selina’s past to begin with and she’d wanted to divert some attention away; this way, there would be a large number of witnesses who saw Catwoman and Selina Kyle in the same room, at the same time. As long as people weren’t looking at her, they wouldn’t be looking at Bruce or any of his associations…

“Is there a point to this?” Selina asked coolly, fully intending for the question to have a double meaning. Underneath her cowl, Helena’s eyes sparkled.

“You know me and curiosity,” she replied brightly. “And I will admit to tiny bit of jealousy.” This was said with one gloved hand held up, her pointing finger and thumb an inch or so apart. “You landed your mouse,” Helena added, “and I’m still chasing mine.” Before Selina could reply, Helena pointed her whip in the direction of a cluster of waiters behind her. “It’ll hurt if you do,” she said before ever so slowly turning her head to look at the group of young men. Whatever they were planning clearly relied on surprise as they recoiled back and then quickly looked away. “Now, where were we?”

“Getting to the point, I hope,” Selina replied. She saw the reaction the other people had to the sharpness of her words – everyone except Cass, of course, but then, she would find this whole thing amusing, wouldn’t she? – and hoped they would later chalk it up to fear.

“Oh, feisty.” Helena grinned. “I see why Brucie likes you!” She glanced toward the front window – the pulsing blue and red lights of the Gotham PD cast some very interesting shadows – and everyone, including Selina, followed the line of her gaze.

“Are you waiting for someone?” Cassandra asked. She was the only person attending this so-called bachelorette party that Selina really liked since Barbara had to attend a last minute function with her dad and Holly couldn’t make it thanks to her sick mother – the rest were acquaintances at best, frenemies at worst; the duties of status and position required her to invite these social leeches and she had to pretend there was no desire on her part to use their smug, overly Botoxed and unnaturally tanned faces as punching bags – and, while she had not been filled in on this particular gambit, it was clear from her expression that Cass had guessed the reasons behind it. On the bright side, she had looked unbelievably bored until ‘Catwoman’ sauntered in and a bored Batgirl was a very, very dangerous thing to behold…

“I am, actually.” Helena offered a smile. “He’s late, as usual … but then, he can be something of a dick at times.”

And, as if he had been waiting for that moment (which, in retrospect, he probably was), The Batman smashed through the skylight.

Glass showered down onto the floor – it was a toss-up what was louder, his explosive entrance through the absurdly expensive roof window or the screams of surprise from most of the women in Selina’s party – and he hit the ground in an all-too familiar three-point landing that, to Selina, perfectly identified who was wearing the suit tonight. His cape billowed out, concealing the tiny
smoke pellets he dropped to further augment his dramatic arrival. He rose, mostly cloaked in shadow.

“Catwoman,” Richard Grayson rasped, his voice modulator turning him into something barely recognizable as human.

“Hey there, stud,” Helena replied with a grin. “I’ve been waiting for hours and hours. Didn’t you get my invitation?”

“This ends tonight,” the Batman declared. He sprang forward at the exact moment Helena did as well.

And then, they began to dance.

Oh, it didn’t look like a dance, not to most people, but Selina could tell that this was something they’d done before and a strange, sinking feeling pulled her stomach down to her feet. There was no way to look at them jump and dive and leap over tables without getting the idea that this was some sort of weird foreplay for them. Yes, it kind of had been that way when she and Bruce tangled … but this was just a little too creepy for her. It was like they were dressing up as their parents and then … no. She wasn’t going to think about that. She absolutely was not going to think about what they might do later, when the adrenaline was still pumping and the excitement was still…

Chaos reigned in Gambino’s – Selina wasn’t looking forward to getting this bill, which she would insist on paying, both to keep her favorite restaurant operational and, more importantly, to assuage her guilt over the damage incurred by two people who should have known better – as most of the dinner crowd made a beeline for the exits, unwilling to remain at ground zero while the Bat and the Cat went at it. There was plenty of shoving and screaming … and then, one of the children – it was the brave one, the one who’d asked Catwoman for her autograph – was knocked down in the mad dash for escape.

Cass was reacting before Selina had fully registered what was going on and the culprit – an overweight, middle-age man wearing a suit a size too small and glasses far too trendy for a man of his age – toppled to the ground, his nose gushing red from where a heavy glass mug had ‘unexpectedly’ flown across the room to connect squarely with his face. At Selina’s glance, Cass shrugged and offered an innocent smile before going back to watching Helena and Richard. The little girl scrambled to her feet and then, to Selina’s delight, reared back her left foot and kicked the man squarely in the groin before rushing forward to rejoin her shouting mother.

The police swarmed into Gambino’s a moment later, just in time to see Catwoman disappear through the shattered skylight with Batman in hot pursuit. There were four uniformed cops, three men and a woman, and they were back in the street barely a minute later to secure the site. From their grumbled complaints, it sounded like they had mistaken the crack of Helena’s whip for gunshots and overreacted in a standard Gotham manner, but at least no one was hurt. Well, no one but the fat jerk who liked to shove little girls around and he didn’t count. This being Gotham, they were lucky the building was still standing.

Exactly as Selina had hoped, a WGN news crew was outside and it looked like they were rolling. Yes, this would work nicely.

“You always throw the best parties,” Cass said with a grin as she joined her at the door. The rest of Selina’s guests were gone, either to the nearby ambulance or fighting to ensure they were the first one interviewed by the news crew.

“I didn’t expect them to cause this much of a mess,” Selina muttered darkly as she glanced back into the restaurant. There were knocked over tables, smashed chairs, ruined carpeting … and that didn’t
even take into account all of the smashed glass. This was probably the first time she’d been an actual spectator when the Bat blew through – or at least, the first time she hadn’t been involved in at least a peripheral manner, and Selina was amazed at just how much destruction they’d caused. She caught sight of the owner and waved the old man over. “I’m sorry for this,” she said in her rusty Italian as she offered him her card. She didn’t get the chance to practice it as often as she would like, which was one of the reasons she loved Gambino’s as much as she did. “Have your insurance company contact me and we’ll see that this gets fixed quickly.” Marco Gambino prevaricated, of course, but he was no fool and recognized that tomorrow, she would be married to the prince of Gotham so he ultimately agreed. He had his pride, however, and insisted on repaying her, so Selina said the first thing that came to mind. “My wedding is tomorrow,” she said, marveling ever so briefly at the ease with which those words come to her, “and it would not be a proper Gotham wedding without your tiramisu.”

By the time Bruce pulled up in his new Bugatti – he insisted that he’d purchased it simply to maintain his Fop cover, but Selina knew that he was just another boy who loved toys when it came to fast cars – Selina had given at least three interviews with different news outlets and was mentally taking wagers on how this entire incident would be spun, depending upon the network. Cassandra was already long gone, having vanished shortly after Selina began arguing with Marco, but that wasn’t a surprise given the young woman’s well-founded loathing toward Gotham’s paparazzi. She would put in a token appearance at any Wayne function she had to attend, but would then vanish as soon as physically possible which had prompted the frustrated local media to dub her the ‘elusive’ Ms. Wayne.

“You could have cleared this with me,” Bruce grumbled as they weaved through traffic. Selina snickered.

“And how long have you known me again?” she asked with a smirk. He grunted which she took as victory. She leaned back in the less than entirely comfortable seat – what was it about very high end sports cars and a complete lack of physical comfort? – and sighed.

“I’m surprised you let Helena wear the suit,” Bruce stated. There wasn’t an accusation in his voice, only simple curiosity. Selina grinned.

“Well, she’s got the genes for it,” she said wryly. Bruce’s reaction – another grunt followed promptly by a quick sidelong glance – almost made her laugh out loud.

“She’s talked to you about … that?” he asked.

“Nope,” Selina replied with another smile. “But I’m not exactly a terrible detective myself.” She smirked again. “Which is why I can’t help but notice that you turned all weird about us right about the time she showed up.”

“That’s not … I didn’t …” Bruce glowered which made Selina grin once more. It was not often that she got to see him at a loss of words. “Is there any way I can get out of this conversation with my dignity intact?” he asked. Selina snickered.

“Not likely.” She glanced away. “She’s good people. I don’t understand why …” She trailed off and realized that she was cradling her stomach.

“I was worried,” Bruce admitted. “You and I … we’re not exactly good role models when it comes to parenting and I don’t want this life for …” This time, it was he who trailed off. Selina glanced away and they sat in silence, unable to vocalize their fears.

This was all Ivy’s fault. A little more than a month ago, Pamela had decided to finally go out with a
bang, which had required the entire Batclan – and Selina had had to grudgingly admit that she’d somehow been dragged into Bruce’s little cult, despite her best efforts – to rally against her. With Robin and Batgirl focused on shutting down Ivy’s enthralled (and very heavily armed) thugs, and Nightwing and Huntress coming out of their pseudo-retirement to rescue the hostages, it had fallen to Batman and Catwoman to stop Ivy herself. In the process, they’d been blasted with her latest spores which clearly hadn’t done what Pamela had expected – evidently, she was as past her prime as Selina often felt, and she could still remember Ivy’s confused expression when the spores didn’t drop either them. After shutting her down and turning her over to the police, Bruce had then chased Selina to their downtown penthouse (just like old times) and they’d spent the rest of the night in bed. They also spent much of the next day there too, though that had a little more to do with horribly abused muscles, painfully bad sprains and a couple of deep tissue bruises that made moving too terrible a thing to contemplate.

As it turned out, their impromptu mini-vacation turned out to be something of a mistake, especially since they had ignored one of Bruce’s protocols about ensuring a full medical checkup after any encounter with Ivy (or Crane.) Not being a doctor, most of the results made little sense to her, but the thing that had sunk in was how the spores supercharged her fertility. And Bruce’s. And probably everyone else’s within a five mile radius. All because Ivy had lost her damned mind. What was intended to be just a very pleasant evening had turned into a life-altering event.

So here they were.

“You’re an idiot,” Selina muttered affectionately in response to his earlier comment.

“And yet,” Bruce said with that smirk of his that always made her want to do naughty things to him, “you still love me.” Selina rolled her eyes.

“In my defense,” she pointed out, “I’ve been hit in the head a lot over the years.” Bruce snorted.

“I’m still going to yell at Richard,” he remarked. “He at least should have cleared this with me.”

“Just don’t punch each other in the face,” Selina ordered. “We’ve still got a wedding to get through, remember?”

“Should have just eloped,” Bruce muttered.

Selina laughed.

On the day of his wedding, Bruce Wayne visited a graveyard.

He had been putting this off for almost six weeks now, since the dark days right before Selina discovered she was pregnant. Had he wished, he could have made excuses – he’d been busy, his and Selina’s sudden decision to get married had necessitated a lot of work, Tim needed to be talked down from the ledge when he’d been offered the cowl on a permanent basis – but that’s all they really were: excuses. No, the honest truth was that he was a coward. He’d always been one, even though no one on the planet would ever accuse the Batman of being scared of anything. How else could he explain his utter inability to move on from his parents’ deaths? He’d been afraid of dealing with their loss, of growing up and doing what was necessary, of letting go of his senseless rage and anger.

Which led him here.

His parents’ headstones he gave only a slight nod – now, so many years after the fact, he couldn’t even remember their faces anymore, not really, and they’d become just another abstraction, a faded
memory lost by time – and he paused briefly in front of Jason’s. Regret swam up then as it always
did and he desperately wished he could do so much of that time over. He’d failed Jason so very
badly. Shaking his head, he moved on. That wasn’t why he was here, who he wanted to address.

“Well, old man,” Bruce said softly to the fourth tombstone. “The day’s finally here.” He brushed a
handful of leaves off the top before leaning back and letting his eyes trace over the words inscribed
there.

ALFRED PENNYWORTH – LOYAL FRIEND AND FATHER.

The sharp stab of grief still had not abated and, if the loss of his parents was any indication, it
wouldn’t for a very long time. Bruce knew that he should take comfort in knowing that Alfred had
passed peacefully, in his sleep, but not seeing the old man in the Manor or hearing his dry voice
impacting some bit of sarcastic wisdom … well, it was hard. He’d been as much of a father to Bruce
as Thomas Wayne ever had and now, he was gone too.

“You should be there,” he whispered softly to the headstone. And indeed, it seemed strange not
having Alfred there. In his subtle way, the old man had been pushing Bruce and Selina toward this
day for years, whether by deferring all household matters to the ‘mistress of the manor,’ or by
‘accidentally’ subscribing her to the Brides dot com mailing list. He’d been worse than Richard …
who was supposed to be here already…

“Calm down,” came the all-too familiar voice of his adopted son and Bruce half turned to observe
Richard’s approach. He gave Grayson a quick once-over – there were no visible bruises or cuts,
which was good as he suspected that Selina would murder him if there had been; Dick was limping
ever so slightly, but that wasn’t a terrible surprise. He’d never fully recovered from that knee injury
Deadshot had caused a couple of years ago. It didn’t slow him up much and he was generally just as
capable of the acrobatics that had been the hallmark of his career first as Robin and then later as
Nightwing, but to someone trained in the art of observation like Bruce, it was undeniable.

“You’re late,” Bruce said before returning his attention to the headstone.

“A wizard is never late, Frodo Baggins,” Richard replied flippantly. His smile fell away as he came
to stand next to Bruce. “Hard to believe he’s gone,” he murmured softly.

“It is.” Bruce frowned. “He should be here,” he said. And so should Clark, and Diana, and Jason,
and Stephanie, and his parents, and …

“Come on, Dad,” Richard said as he threw an arm around Bruce’s shoulders. “Selina has already
threatened to murder me in my sleep for last night … so let’s not be late, okay?”

The actual ceremony was a blur that flashed by so quickly that Bruce almost wondered if time had
actually sped up. It had been Selina’s idea to have the wedding on the Manor grounds so they could
immediately move to the reception on the same spot, which had suited him fine. The priest she’d
conned into conducting the ceremony was the same one who had presided over Jack Drake’s funeral
(which Bruce hoped wasn’t an ominous sign) and Selina had actually been forced to talk the man
into doing it since the father knew this particular wedding was going to be a media circus. It also did
not help that Bruce wasn’t exactly Catholic – Selina was, but only by upbringing since she’d long
ago lapsed and then there was her issue with that Eight Commandment – but eventually, he’d agreed
if only out of respect for the Drakes (and Tim’s well-publicized relationship with Cassandra.)

If he was honest, Bruce would admit to thinking the entire wedding was a spectacular waste of time
– Selina already knew he wasn’t going to stray and they’d been doing a pretty passable job of acting
like a married couple for the last nine or ten years anyway, so why was this rigmarole even
necessary? – but he kept his mouth shut, smiled when he was supposed to and tried very hard to pretend that he didn’t want to be anywhere else. From her amused expression throughout the entire ceremony, Selina had read his expression and somehow, Bruce knew she was going to harass him about it later.

The reception would have been better than the actual wedding if they hadn’t been forced to smile even more and shake everyone’s hand that had come to offer their well wishes. There was the governor of Illinois (whom Bruce hadn’t voted for and had actively tried to see defeated), and Mayor Gordon (and how weird was that to say even though it was great to see Jim again?), and the new police commissioner (who still looked like she was chewing on a lemon, even when she tried to smile), and the district attorney, and Lucius, and all of Bruce Wayne’s socialite ‘friends’ who were here more to get noticed by the paparazzi than out of any genuine good thoughts. A handful of fit and athletic people passed through the line – Hal and Carol, Wally and Artemis, Oliver and Dinah – but Bruce was relieved when none of them (especially Wally or Oliver) made any oblique references to his and Selina’s costumed identities. There were the WayneTech board members to greet, the four or five local politicians who had finagled their ways into getting invitations in an attempt to court Wayne backing for their next elections, the handful of business leaders that had tied their company’s fortunes to his, the cluster of Selina’s friends and employees of her gallery, Lois and ‘Richard,’ and …

“You look exhausted,” Tim remarked sometime later, once the ridiculous meet and greet was done and Selina suggested they split up to do some mingling. Bruce had made a beeline for the food table – none of it was as good as what Alfred had made … although the tiramisu was superb – and was now trying to figure out how quickly they could end this nonsense so they could all get back to their own lives.

“I’ll take Croc over this any day of the week,” Bruce muttered, his voice pitched low enough that only Tim would hear it. He glanced around, frowning. “I don’t see Cassandra,” he said. Tim smirked.

“She snuck … downstairs,” he replied. “Said something about wanting to watch the rats, but I figure she was talking about the paparazzi.” Bruce grunted – he wished he was downstairs right now too – and Tim’s grin grew. “You should have just eloped,” he said.

“Suggested that,” Bruce admitted sourly. “Selina rejected the idea – said it wouldn’t look right if billionaire Bruce Wayne didn’t have some stupidly large and lavish wedding.” He scowled briefly – the ease with which she’d used his own arguments against him then, specifically in regards to how he’d molded Bruce’s flamboyant and over-the-top personality for the public, still irked a little bit; God, but she was good at manipulating him – but the look Selina shot him from across the reception reminded him that people were watching so he donned his faux ‘I’m very happy to be here’ smile. Bruce wasn’t sure how she’d even been aware of his less than enthusiastic expression since her back had been to him, and he was rapidly leaning toward the ‘undiscovered metahuman abilities’ to explain her uncanny awareness of his mood. “On the bright side,” he said with genuine pleasure, “you and Cass could have this to look forward to.”

“Not necessary,” Tim replied. At Bruce’s glance, he grinned. “Remember when we went to Vegas last year?” Bruce was silent for a moment, waiting for the inevitable punch line, but Tim continued to sip from his glass with an unconcerned look on his face and sudden comprehension sank in. It wasn’t a joke.

“And you did this under Richard and Helena’s noses?” Bruce looked around for his two grown children and quickly found them – the adopted one was chatting with Wally and Artemis, while the one from the alternate reality was laughing at something with Barbara.
“Nah,” Tim said. “They were our witnesses since we didn’t want to have multiple Elvii on the certificate.” He smiled at Bruce’s glare. “It was Cass’ idea,” he said before nodding to someone behind Bruce. “Hello, Mister Fox,” he greeted. Bruce pushed away his urge to throttle Tim – maybe retirement was in order if they’d managed to keep this under wraps for a year and he’d never noticed – and turned.

“Hello, Lucius,” he said with his forced smile. God, his jaw hurt.

“Lovely ceremony,” Lucius said, though Bruce had to wonder if that was just something people had to say. They shook hands. “I’ll hold down the fort while you and Ms. Kyle … sorry. You and Mrs. Wayne enjoy yourselves in … where are you going again?”

“They’re keeping it a secret,” Tim interjected. He also shook Lucius’ hand. “Knowing them, they’re probably going to hide in the Manor for the entire time.”

“If something comes up,” Bruce said, smiling a malicious smile as he nodded toward Tim, “check with Mister Drake here.” Seeing the grimace flash across Tim’s face was almost worth it. “And while you’re at it, Lucius,” he said, “could you see that the gossip-mongers get the latest on him and Cass?”

“Bruce…” Tim had the look of a man staring at his own executioner.

“Evidently,” Bruce continued, raising his voice ever so slightly so the nearby eavesdroppers would catch his next words, “they decided to elope in Vegas. Without telling me.” Sliding into the Fop role had never been so enjoyable. “Can you imagine that? The nerve.”

“Especially when you wanted to throw them both a wedding even bigger than this one, right?” Lucius was grinning now, enjoying the game almost as much as Bruce, but Tim looked horrified.

“You might have to rectify that,” Jim Gordon said as he approached.

“When vengeance comes,” Tim said softly, his voice very low, “it will be shaped like Cass.” He wheeled away. Bruce watched him as he tried – unsuccessfully – to escape before the whispers reached Selina. She and Tim’s step-mom, Dana, converged upon him before he could make it. For some reason, a wounded gazelle being brought down by ferocious lions came to mind. Bruce gave Lucius and Jim conspiratorial grins.

“Now I’m having fun,” he said.

Helena was in a spectacularly good mood.

She’d almost floated through the entire wedding, fighting a sense of giddiness that didn’t quite make much sense to her but was too intoxicating to ignore entirely. A part of her chalked her great mood up to the fact that her parents were finally married like they should be, but she knew that wasn’t the real reason. Even the fact that Selina had asked her to be the maid-of-honor and admitted that Helena was probably her best friend didn’t explain this either. Hell, spending the night playing Catwoman and learning just how much of a blast that could be wasn’t the reason, and she couldn’t quite recall the last time she’d had that much fun. No, this mood was all Dick’s fault.

After their mock fight at Gambino’s, they’d decided that, since Selina was officially retiring her suit, Catwoman needed to have one unbelievably awesome last hurrah, which had led to six hours of nonstop goofiness and delight. Dick had pursued her over all over Gotham, making sure they were seen by hundreds if not thousands of people as Catwoman led the Bat on a merry chase across
rooftops, and over bridges, and even through that high end shopping center in the Diamond District (which had been more fun than it should have been.) To Helena’s utter surprise, Cass had even joined in briefly, though Batgirl had quickly peeled off the moment Tim commed her for assistance in shutting down another one of those absurd theme gangs that were popping up all over the city these days in lieu of new Rogues. It was the thought that counted, though, and by the time she and Dick made it back to her apartment, Helena was almost bursting with glee.

And then, there was the post-chase sex. Oh, God, the sex. If it had been anything like that for Selina, then Helena suddenly understood why her parents had been such bedroom fiends.

She glanced around for a moment, trying to locate Dick with the intent of suggesting they find an abandoned room in the Manor and live up to the age-old tradition of the best man and maid-of-honor having wild sex, but he was nowhere to be seen. Knowing him, he was stressing out over the speech he was supposed to give later (even though he’d probably just toss his notes away and wing it when it came time.) Helena shrugged. She’d find him later. And then, she’d probably tear his clothes off and do unspeakably naughty things to him.

“Hey, you.” Kara drew alongside her and, for a moment, Helena didn’t recognize her old friend. It wasn’t the glasses, or the hair, but rather, the fact that the normally six foot plus statuesque blond only looked to be around five-seven or eight with a much smaller bust. She narrowed her eyes. “Hard-light hologram,” Kara murmured.

“Not the magic glasses?”

“Sadly, no.” Kara shook her head. “They stopped working a couple of years ago for some reason so I went back to things I do understand.” She glanced at Helena. “You look good. Happier. Less …”

“Crazy?” Helena snickered. “Things are finally getting back to where they should be.” Her smile faltered slightly. “For the most part anyway.” She lowered her voice. “Any word on Connor?”

“Still missing.” Kara frowned, glanced away and her eyes swam out of focus for a moment in that way they always did when she was using her super-hearing. “The new Lantern … Simon? He’s checking out some leads but …” Kara exhaled deeply. “I can’t shake the feeling that Connor’s gone. Just like …” She looked away.

“Hey, now.” Helena touched her friend on the arm. “No bad vibes at my … at this wedding.” She glanced toward Selina, watched for a moment, and then smiled. “Check it out,” she said, nodding toward the woman who looked so much like her mom. “Instant karma.” Kara blinked.

“Is she…?”

She was. To someone who knew Selina’s body language as well as Helena did, it was obvious that the new Mrs. Wayne couldn’t stand the group of socialites that had swarmed her and was acting appropriately. For all the grief she gave Bruce about his ‘Fop identity,’ she was just as capable of appearing to be little more than a mindless bit of fluff and, using that to cover her actions, she was robbing the women blind. It was mostly wedding rings – if they came off that easily, Helena mused, then it kind of said a lot about the person in question, didn’t it? – and those were then expertly (and stealthfully) flicked toward the nearest garbage can. From what Helena could tell, the new Mrs. Wayne had missed her WNBA calling.

“That … I don’t know how to react to that,” Kara murmured.

“React to what?” Dick seemed to appear out of nowhere and wrapped an arm around Helena. She almost – almost – jumped. “Whoa. Kara.” He blinked. “You’re … you’re not …” He trailed off,
clearly unsure how to phrase what he wanted to ask, but then powered through the moment. “How lovely to see you, Ms. Starr,” he said with that grin of his that seemed to make women’s panties spontaneously disappear at thirty yards.

“You snuck up on me,” Kara said flatly. “Me. How the hell did you do that?” Dick flashed her a grin.

“Family secret,” he replied. “From what I hear, Bruce did that to Clark all the time and it drove your cousin insane.” He turned his eyes to Helena. “Wanted to give you a heads’ up,” he said. “Bruce found out about Vegas.” Kara’s eyes widened – it didn’t take a genius to guess what she was thinking – but Helena ignored her.

“Ugh,” she muttered. “How did he take it?”

“Full on Fop meltdown,” Dick said with a smile. “Cass had already pulled her vanishing act and Tim tried to follow suit but Bruce unleashed the hounds.” He nodded toward where Dana Drake was quietly chewing her stepson out; looking at Tim’s hangdog expression, it was hard to believe that he could cause grown men to wet themselves from fear. More amusing were the three or four friends of his and Cass from the former Titans who glowered at him and seemed almost assembled to provide Dana moral support. Bart especially looked annoyed, though Helena wasn’t sure if he was jealous (of which one, she didn’t know) or just pretending. “So stay frosty,” Dick added. “God only knows what Bruce has in mind for us.” He kissed her – it wasn’t more than a quick peck on the lips but was definitely not something ‘friends’ did – and then headed straight for Barbara to warn her as well.

Oracle hadn’t been physically present in Vegas, but she’d watched the whole thing via webcam and then helped make the electronic paper trail disappear so the paparazzi (and Bruce) wouldn’t find out.

“If I didn’t know better,” Kara mused with a growing smile, “I’d have to say that looked suspiciously couplely.” Helena felt her face flame up but she made no attempts to deny the implication, especially not after last night.

“So?” Dick had said when she had told him everything. They’d been sprawled out on her bed, naked and still trying to catch their breath, and the whole story had just tumbled out of her mouth. How she and Kara came to this universe, who her parents were, how she’d grown up with a different Dick Grayson. He’d listened quietly but intently and when she was done, he’d shrugged. “None of that changes a thing about us,” he’d said before smirking. “And I’d figured out most of it on my own, to be honest.”

“I told him everything last night,” Helena murmured before quickly correcting herself. “This morning.” She shook her head. “Whatever.”

“Everything?” Helena nodded.


“Did you know that nearly everyone here is carrying a weapon of some sort?” she asked in what was clearly a change of subject. For a heartbeat, Helena almost asked about Bill, but just as quickly opted to follow her friend’s lead. The entire world knew about the very violent spat between Captain Marvel and Superwoman last year, even if most of them remained unaware that Kara had been under the influence of some very dark magic at the time.

“Welcome to Gotham,” Helena said wryly, shifting very slightly to ensure that her own weapons – a brace of well-balanced throwing knives was strapped to her left bicep and she had a fold-up Asp baton secured to her leg – were still being concealed by her stupid dress.
They chatted for a bit longer, mostly about trivialities regarding their respective civilian lives, and in the process, Helena realized just how far they had drifted apart. She and Kara still met about once a month, but these days, it was sadly to just compare notes about the state of their respective cities. From her expression, Kara realized it as well, and Helena made a note to change that starting now. She wasn’t going to lose her best friend, dammit.

And then, Dick began ringing his spoon against a champagne glass. Bruce and Selina had already returned to their seats (although both Tim and Cass were conspicuous in their absences.)

“So,” Dick began, as he glanced at the handful of cards in his hand. “I had this speech prepared and now, as I’m looking at my notes, it kind of sucks.” There was a titter of laughter, especially when he tossed the cards to the table. Bruce’s expression shifted fractionally, from the resigned ‘can we get on with this’ one to true trepidation while delight danced in Selina’s eyes. Helena wanted to laugh herself – every time Dick spoke extemporaneously, it was always fun. “So I’m going to just wing it,” Dick said and this time, Helena did laugh along with more than a handful of other people. Tellingly, the ones most amused were those aware of the former Robin’s costumed identity.

“Should we have the fire trucks standing by this time?” Bruce asked and Dick’s eyes lit up.

“That was one time, man,” he retorted with a grin. “And aren’t you supposed to be sitting there, being quiet while I gush over your finer qualities so Selina doesn’t realize what a horrible, horrible mistake she’s made?”

“Yes,” Bruce said dryly. “You’re doing an excellent job thus far in extolling my virtues.”

By now, everyone was laughing along with them and Helena silently admired the team they made. Bruce was the ideal straight man, with perfect delivery and a sense of timing that made absolute sense when one factored in his training. Theatricality and deception were some of his favorite tools, after all, and Dick complimented him in every way, with his glib tongue and quick mind. Was this what they had been like in their early years together, when Batman and Robin were first cutting a swath through Gotham’s underworld?

“When I was thirteen,” Dick said once the chuckles had eased, “my parents were murdered in front of me.” It seemed like such a non sequitur that the audience’s previous jovial mood faltered. “I was a circus acrobat as some of you may remember,” he continued, “and the only family I had known was comprised of freaks and weirdos.” His smile reappeared. “Which probably explains why I fit in so well with the freaks and weirdos in the 19th.” The handful of police officers attending laughed and clapped. “Child Protection – which had already been giving the circus crap about me – snatched me up so fast that my head spun and there was no one looking out for me.” He pointed to Bruce. “Until this man stepped in and took me into his home.” Helena blinked away a suspicious tear – it was her allergies, she decided quickly. “See, he’d been in the same place I was in when he was about the same age so he knew what I was going through.” Dick was silent for a moment. “And then, he let me in on a secret.”

You could have heard a pin drop. Helena realized that she was as rapt with attention as everyone else, even though she already knew this entire story. Beside her, Kara was a silent statue, utterly and completely intent on the young man she’d only ever known as a trickster or goof-off. This was, Helena realized, probably the first time her Kryptonian friend had seen the real Richard Grayson, the one that he hid so well from everyone else.

“He told me that the pain never really went away,” Dick said. “You could learn to move past it or try to forget about it or let it eat you up, but no matter what I did, that sense of loss would be with me for the rest of my life.” He offered a wobbly smile. “Now, as a thirteen year old kid, I thought that kind
of sucked in terms of making me feel better.” This resulted in a soft laugh. “But the thing is,” he continued, “it was exactly what I needed to hear. He wasn’t offering me those stupid platitudes like time heals all wounds or they’re in a better place now, but was, instead, treating me like a real person and telling me what I needed to hear, not what I wanted to hear.” His smile reappeared. “So, fair warning, Selina,” he said. “He can kind of be a blunt jerk who won’t lie to you when you ask him if a dress makes your butt look fat. Which, I might add, it does not.”

“Noted.” Selina’s deadpan reply resulted in more laughter.

“On top of that,” Richard added, “he can also be overbearing, obnoxious, arrogant and a little condescending at times.”

“Virtues,” Bruce said sharply, his expression one of feigned dismay. “Extol my virtues.”

“Right.” Again, Dick grinned. “Did I mention controlling?” He paused for a moment to let the responding chuckles dwindle. “I thought about stealing some of the Boy Scouts’ lines and saying he would be trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly and all that, but I figured Mister Photographic Memory there would call me on that.” Bruce’s expression turned legitimately irritated for a moment and Helena noticed how several of the attending guests took notice of Dick’s remarks, which almost made her laugh again. Lucius Fox especially was giving Bruce a weighing look and Helena suspected that WayneTech’s CEO wouldn’t be allowing his boss to skip out on as many meetings as before. As to the others who reacted, half of them looked uncomfortable – likely they had said or done something in front of Bruce that could come back and bite them – while the other half looked eager, as if they were expecting him to start penning a tell-all.

And from the look in his eyes, Helena realized that Dick had not made a mistake in choosing his words. He’d intentionally let people know about Bruce’s eidetic memory … which didn’t make sense unless he was trying to accomplish something else. Comprehension came at once – with Bruce stepping down as The Batman and turning the cowl over to Tim, he would need something to keep his mind sharp, something that would let him deal with all of the sudden free time he was looking at, and with one little sentence, Richard had opened the floodgates. Lucius would probably start hounding Bruce to take a much greater role with his company, and the politicos who desired power above all else would start trying to pressure Mr. Wayne into seeking public office since he was already photogenic, wealthy, powerful and very well known. No, Bruce wasn’t going to be allowed to wither away in retirement at all. For all of the grief he gave his adopted father about being a master manipulator and puppet master, Dick Grayson clearly had learned his lessons well.

He cleared his throat and the murmurs fell away.

“Selina,” he said with that dangerous smile of his. “I don’t need to tell you any of Bruce’s faults. You already know them.”

“Intimately,” she replied wryly which caused Dick to grin.

“For that matter,” he added, “we all know them too. I think the Post has done a good job of plastering each and every one of his missteps on the front page.” Another round of chuckles. “But you also know all of his good qualities.”

“Like the size of my bank account,” Bruce interjected. Selina elbowed him and murmured something softly in his ear. Kara snickered and for the first time, Helena wished she couldn’t read lips.

“So you don’t need me to talk him up,” Dick continued. Selina flashed another naughty grin at Bruce. “Save it for the honeymoon, you two.” Richard raised his glass and everyone followed suit.

“I only have one last thing to say: you two absolutely and totally deserve each other.” The double
meaning in that made Helena snicker. “To Mister and Missus … Kyle!” Laughter answered him.

From across the reception tent, Helena’s eyes met Richard’s. He grinned, winked and drained his glass.

Yes, Helena decided. Today was a very good day.

________________________

He stared at himself in the mirror, unable to look away.

Tim knew it was ridiculous – he’d worn the Batsuit before, after all, but everything felt different now. For the first time, he wasn’t just a stand-in. This was now his job, his duty, his responsibility. Gotham City was no longer Bruce’s to protect. It was his.

And he was terrified.

The current suit fit perfectly and was the latest in the continuing evolution of the Bat-armor. It was lighter but even tougher than all previous incarnations, had a new array of tricks and gadgets he’d personally field tested, and had even incorporated smart ceramics adapted from Kryptonian hard-suits that would allow him to alter the surface color of the armor to further enhance his camouflage capabilities. The cowl itself was also different and, in fact, was more properly called a full face mask now. Gone was his exposed jaw and in its place was an integrated rebreather. New HUD elements had somehow been crammed into the thing – he had low-light vision, infrared, video capture, and even wireless access to the orbiting stealth drones under Oracle’s direction, which would let him connect to the very powerful computers at her disposal. Even the Bat symbol upon his chest was slightly different now, both in terms of shape and design, which Tim suspected was intentional on the designer’s part as a psychological ploy to remind the current Batman that he wasn’t just a stand-in now.

“What do you think?” Bruce asked from where he sat. He’d been behind most of the suit enhancements and upgrades, and Tim could see the older man’s pride in the result. From what he could tell, it was well-earned.

“It feels good,” Tim replied. His voice sounded exactly like Bruce’s had which he chalked up to a new voice modulator. “Lighter than I expected.”

“Kara made some last minute adjustments to the ceramics,” Bruce said. “According to her specs, that suit can take a direct shot from a fifty caliber machine gun … though I don’t recommend trying to test it. The armor might hold, but I’m not so sure about your body.”

“Gotcha.” Tim flipped open the protective shield covering the tiny computer on his left gauntlet. He noted without much surprise that it looked almost identical to the one he’d had on his most recent Robin suit. Glancing up, he tensed at the strange expression on Bruce’s face. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes.” Bruce smiled, though it didn’t touch his eyes. He stood. “Let me know if you want to make further adjustments.” When he smiled this time, he meant it. “And I’d especially like to know how the camouflage mode works.”

“Will do,” Tim replied. Bruce nodded sharply and turned away, walking quickly toward the exit that would allow him to make a discreet return to WayneTech. Tim watched him go, a bundle of emotions swirling in his stomach. If he were honest, Bruce looked to be more relaxed about this than he was. He shoved the thoughts and feelings down. It was time to go to work.

Cass met up with him midway through his first patrol. Like him, she’d was wearing a completely
new suit built along identical lines to his, though clearly intended for her far more feminine shape. Where his Bat symbol glowed an electric blue (when that feature was activated), though, she’d opted for a fierce scarlet color, replacing her more traditional yellow. Only her gauntlets were the same and Tim glanced at them briefly, wondering why she hadn’t swapped the old League of Assassins versions out with something newer.

“Looking good, boss,” Oracle’s voice declared over his headset as they looked down upon the East End. Tim grunted – it was more than a passable imitation of Bruce and Barbara laughed lightly; from her body language, it seemed that Cass was grinning as well. “Getting reports of a gang shoot-out between the Jokerz and the Facez,” Oracle announced and Tim grimaced.

With so few of Bruce’s old Rogues still alive or active, a new threat had started to appear in Gotham. Thugs, raised in the shadow of the old villains, began running in what was referred to as theme gangs where they adopted some tiny facet of an old Rogue and incorporated it throughout the entire gang. The Jokerz had been the first – originally, they just donned white face paint and used lurid lipstick, but the more aggressive members of the gang had started insisting on facial scars to permanently mar their faces – but they’d quickly been followed by others. There were the Facez, influenced by the late Harvey Dent, and the Riddlerz (who, according to Selina, righteously pissed off their namesake who had claimed to reform), and the Banez, and a half dozen other smaller, less noteworthy groups. As the big fish, the Jokerz and the Facez were constantly at war.

“Where?” Tim asked. He glanced at Cass and she looked back at him but made no other move. It always struck him as strange that he could translate her body language so easily when her silence baffled everyone else. She was as eager to mix it up as he was.

They reached the site of the skirmish quickly enough, ditching their bikes two blocks away and taking to the rooftops. The police were already moving into position, but they were holding back, just outside the engagement zone. Underneath his mask, Tim frowned. The new commissioner’s tactic of containment rather than engagement was understandable in light of how horribly underfunded, understaffed, and outgunned the Gotham PD was, but it still bothered him more than he wanted to admit. He couldn’t even accuse her of being a coward, especially not since she was right here, on the front lines.

On instinct, Tim gave Cass a quick hand signal – she didn’t verbally acknowledge the instruction, but peeled off without hesitation and vanished into the shadows as she made her way to the building rooftop he’d indicated – and then tossed himself off the building overlooking the firefight. The cops noted his arrival at once as he glided down toward them on the stiffened cape and Commissioner Yindel half turned to face him, her face still stuck in that perpetual glower of hers.

“I don’t need you here,” she snapped out as he approached. Several of the other cops exchanged looks and, to his mild surprise, Tim realized that Richard was here. He mentally kicked himself – of course. This was the 19th District.

“I’m not asking for permission,” Tim replied, his modulator making his voice harsher and angrier than he intended it. “There are civilians in there that need our help.” Yindel’s expression faltered – it flickered between frustration, rage, and despair – before firming up once more. Tim continued before she could speak and talk herself out of cooperating. “We’ll engage from north and south,” he said. “That should give you adequate distraction to move in without being detected.” Surprise flashed across the commissioner’s face, probably at the fact Tim was volunteering to act as a decoy element; she was likely expecting the opposite with the police used as red shirts or something. Without waiting for her to respond, he raised his right arm and triggered the integrated grappler. That was new as well – no longer did he need to carry an actual gun for that purpose and the new armor also better distributed the stress of being jerked through the air, although Bruce was still talking about
trying to find a way to integrate an actual jetpack in future designs.

He touched down on the next rooftop, noting without surprise a pair of police snipers expertly hidden underneath a tarp. Neither shifted from their spots – they were aware of his passage, but were too intent on their targets to react – and Tim kept moving, allowing Oracle to mark their locations on the virtual map she was spinning up on the fly. Within minutes, he was in position.

“Ready,” he said into the communication line. Below him, the exchange of gunfire between the two gangs had increased rapidly. Cass simply clicked her radio to indicate her own status.


Tim … no. Batman didn’t hesitate.

“Execute,” he hissed before throwing himself over the side of the building and into the fire.
Year Five Hundred: Stormbreaker

The Justice League: Twenty Years Later

By Michael J. Carter (Author)

Even as the world was recovering from the failed Kryptonian invasion and the sudden appearance of metahumans that was throwing the planet into chaos, an even greater threat loomed on the horizon. Extraterrestrial empires, intent on conquering Earth, were poised to unleash terrifying onslaughts that would forever change how humankind viewed the stars.

Focusing on the six metahumans who first joined forces to hold the line against the alien invaders, this fascinating account follows the exploits of the most famous heroes of all in the early years of the League’s formation, with a special focus on Superman and Wonder Woman, the Kryptonian refugee who came to Earth as a child and the Amazon princess who, according to the legends of her people, was crafted from clay and given life by the gods.

ON THE MORN OF HIS SIX HUNDREDTH BIRTHDAY, KAL-EL OF KRYPTON SOUGHT OUT A PLACE OF REFUGE.

He fled to Hlidskjalf, Odin’s high seat, knowing that no one would look for him here since it overlooked the Nine Realms and would greatly enhance the senses of any who sat here. Everyone in Asgard knew about how he was second only to Heimdall in terms of perceptive capability and Clark had never done an especially good job at hiding how much he did not envy the queen’s brother for his greater capabilities. So to come here seemed the most unlikely of places for him to hide.

Hlidskjalf hid a great secret, however, one that Clark did not think even Thor knew. Here, his senses were greatly enhanced, yes, but the magics that the former All-Father had put into place somehow let him find an absolutely perfect balance. He could hear everything … but it was not overwhelming or crippling as he would fear. With a modicum of effort, he could look out into the stars and see where Oa should have been at the heart of the universe, or the shattered debris that had been Krypton a millennium ago, or even the darkened, misty nothingness that was Niflheim. Why, Clark could even close his eyes and concentrate on Diana’s scent and it would miraculously reach his nose, no matter where she was or what she was doing.

“You are up early, my friend.” Heimdall’s voice whispered across the length of Asgard and Clark glanced toward the Bifrost where he instantly saw Sif’s brother standing, watching and waiting for the next of Darkseid’s incursions. “And may I be the second to wish you a good birthing day, Kal-El.” Even at this distance, Clark could hear the smile in Heimdall’s voice and he returned it. Once, an eternity ago, he would have stammered or even blushed in embarrassment at the realization that someone had overhead this morning’s activities, but those days were long since gone.

“Thank you,” Clark replied, “though Diana would take it badly if she knew you were eavesdropping upon us.”
“Mine is a lonely watch, Kal-El,” Heimdall replied with a dry chuckle. “I seek distraction where I can.” This time, he did turn his head slightly so they could lock eyes from twenty leagues – sixty miles, give or take a few inches here and there – away. “I meant no disrespect, Kal-El,” the Watchman said. The smile he offered was a sad one. “You of all people understand the curse that comes with this gift.”

“I do.” Clark glanced away, allowing his enhanced vision to sweep across the whole of Asgard. There was so much destruction, even now, ten years since the last of Darkseid’s forces had retreated. Great stretches of territory, once lush and green, had been turned into smoking wastelands. Deep craters were all that remained of the outer walls and the entire reach from there to the middle walls were littered with shattered debris of broken homes, shops and fortresses. Along the middle, warriors kept watch from behind high fortifications. It was a scene straight out of the First World War, with trenches, and massive guns, and entire armies of men, all waiting for the inevitable to resume. Overhead, the skiffs patrolled their routes, waiting and fearing for the killing to begin once more.

And this was how it had been for ten short years. This was the longest stretch of … Clark hesitated to call it peace because that was not an accurate term. It was an absence of war, not peace, and all of Asgard knew it could not last. So they had thrown themselves into preparation, readying once more for conflict. The Einherjar drove their students hard, turning young recruits into hardened warriors. Asking for no coin or favors in return, the Dvergar of Niðavellir worked all night and all day, driving themselves to exhaustion in order to fashion arms and armor that would withstand the weapons of Apokalips for those who fought. Giants lent their considerable strength to augmenting the walls, working alongside the very Asgardians who had once tried to exterminate them, though they had no other choice, not since Jotunheim was smashed out of existence by Darkseid a century earlier. There were even elves, both of dark and of light, who lent their respective talents to fight the Enemy. All of them, whether Asgardian or jotun or alfar, watched for the coming of Darkseid.

Because they knew his forces would return.

Leaning back against the crude stone seat, Clark closed his eyes and tried to focus on improving his state of mind. If he showed this black mood to the children, Diana would have his hide and the last thing that he wanted to do was upset her, the woman he loved more than life, the woman who had given him the one thing he never thought he would have. The thought of his children brought an automatic smile to his face and he opened his eyes and glanced around for them. Lara he found instantly, already up and training with the Einherjar, but her older sister, Lyta, at first eluded his sight. When she did reappear, Clark instantly jerked his head away and closed his eyes.

“Dammit, girl,” he rumbled. Heimdall’s distant chuckle told him that Sif’s brother knew well what Lyta was up to with his nephew and did not mind, but Clark wasn’t sure how Thor would react. Ullr was his heir, after all, since Magni and Móði were both dead, and Þrúðr had renounced her claim. Still, it was not pleasant seeing that – there were some things a father was not supposed to see, no matter that the daughter in question was over three hundred years old herself.

Clark grimaced as his thoughts once more started to turn toward dark places. He was six hundred years old and barely looked a day older than he had when he first faced Zod so very long ago. Growing up in Kansas, he’d just assumed that he would live the same amount of time as a regular human, and then, when he discovered his Kryptonian heritage, he thought that he might see three hundred or even four, but six? Was it Idunn’s apples that granted the Asgardians their long lives or the result of living so long under a yellow star? A combination of the two? It hardly seemed possible for it to be solely the former, not when Thor and Sif alike were showing signs of age. Clark shook his head.

“There you are.” Diana’s voice, more familiar to him than his own, caused him to look up and Clark
realized that he was smiling. She was dressed simply today, wearing only the strange silver dress that Eitri of Niðavellir gave her over a century ago when she passed her five hundredth year – it was not simply silver-colored, but rather was silver, molded together and formed into something so astonishingly beautiful that Clark loved seeing her in it. Her long raven-dark hair was pulled back today, clasped first at the neck and falling past her waist where again it was bound together.

And in her arms was their son.

He was still small for his age, but if his sisters were any indication, Gabriel would grow fast. Barely seven, he had the same black hair and bright blue eyes of his parents, but Clark was pleased that he favored Diana in terms of coloring. At the sight of his father, young Gabriel squirmed out of his mother’s arms and sprang forward – it was an awkward sort of falling hover, though Clark was delighted that the boy was already able to fly. Neither of his daughters could manage it, though sometimes he wondered if they did not really try very hard. It had been a mistake to name them after his and Diana’s mothers since both had grown up hearing the stories and thus believed they had certain expectations to meet. For Lyta, it was less of an issue but Lara, strange girl that she was, never seemed to think that what she did was enough, even when he and Diana were astounded by her accolades. That was one of the reasons they chose to give their son a different name, one not tied to the past so he could forge his own destiny, whatever that might be. Still, they had not completely severed ties with the old: Gabriel could easily be spelled Gabri-El, after all.

“Daddy!” he exclaimed as Clark snatched him up. Diana gave them both a fond smile before giving their surroundings a quick look. Before she could speak, before Clark could even apologize for sneaking away so early, Gabriel inhaled sharply. “What is this place?” he asked softly, almost reverently. His eyes were darting, though it wasn’t panic or fear.

“The High Seat,” Heimdall announced from the Bifrost. Gabriel’s head snapped toward the watchman and he grinned. “Good morning, young sir,” the Watchman said.

“Heimdall! Hi!” Gabriel’s grin grew wider. “I can see you from here and my eyes don’t even hurt!”

“A strange place to seek refuge,” Diana murmured as their son carried on a loud conversation with the far distant Heimdall. She floated closer and placed her hand upon Clark’s face. “Are you well, beloved?” she asked. Clark smiled.

“I’m certainly doing better than I was a few minutes ago.” He shifted his hold on Gabriel and then pulled Diana closer, intending only to kiss her. She had other ideas, though, and promptly used his lap as a seat, smirking as she did.

“He’s been hopeless this morning, Clark,” she said with a nod toward their son who was still chattering away with Heimdall. Her use of his human name was still a surprise, though he suspected it should not have been, not with how much he loathed hearing Thor call him Kal. Just the thought of the Asgardian king fired his temper, though the feel of Diana’s body against his – and how was it, he wondered, that Eitri could make silver feel like silk? – and her fingers carding through his hair soothed any dark thoughts. “Did you really promise to fly him to the moon?”

“I … might have said something along those lines.” Diana shook her head in amused exasperation before kissing him softly.

“I’m returning to our apartments,” she said as she ruffled Gabriel’s hair. He gave her a toothy smile. “The girls will be coming over tonight so be home before seventeen bells.”

“Yes, dear,” Clark said.
“Yes, dear,” Gabriel repeated, still grinning that silly smile of his. Diana chuckled before pushing off and flying away. “We don’t have to fly to the moon, daddy,” Gabriel said as he leaned back against Clark. For a change, the boy was calm, relaxed, and even closed his eyes. Clark gave his son a quick look.

“Are you sure?” he asked. There were a handful of ways to protect his son should they make the lunar jaunt and he didn’t want to let the boy down.

“I like it here.” Gabriel inhaled. “It’s … quiet.”

Clark frowned. He was silent for a moment, tallying up things Gabriel had said or done over the last few months before shaking his head. Damn, but he was an idiot.

“You know,” he said softly, “I was only a few years older than you are when my special abilities started appearing.” Gabriel opened his eyes and looked at him. “I could hear things no one else could. See farther than anyone else. I could even look through walls.” He smiled. “And it was noisy.” Gabriel returned the grin. “It’s pretty noisy to you, isn’t it?”

“It hurts my head,” Gabriel admitted. “I try not to listen but … Asgard is too big, Daddy.” Déjà vu hit Clark then and he drew a deep breath.

“Then make it small,” Clark said with another smile. Almost six centuries had passed since Martha Kent told him these words, but he could still hear her voice. “Focus on your heartbeat when it’s too big. Pretend it’s an island out in the ocean … or better yet, pretend it’s the moon. There’s nothing around you but vacuum and silence.”

“I’ll try, Daddy.” Gabriel looked around. “Can we stay here for a while?”

“For a while, yes.” Clark leaned back against the Hlidskjalf and let his son relax. For a time, the war could wait.

Dinner was, predictably, a minor catastrophe.

The girls were as well behaved as usual … which was to say not at all, and Gabriel was his usual overly energetic self. In between trying to eat too much, too fast, the youngest member of their family also tried very hard to regale both of his siblings with his exciting day atop Hlidskjalf with Kal. Naturally, he did not make much sense – what was this moon-island nonsense? Neither of the girls had been so frenetic when they were this age – but Lyta pretended he was bequeathing upon her the secrets of the universe (which was beautiful to see, no matter the three century age difference between them) and Lara at least pretended she was paying attention in between arguing with her sister or teasing Kal about his age. There was too much noise, too much play and laughter at the table set aside for their meal.

Diana would not have it any other way.

Kal gave her The Look midway through their meal, the one that told her he was as happy and content as she was, no matter the dark days that were behind them and the even blacker ones yet to come, and Diana offered him her warmest smile. Hera, had it truly been over five hundred years since they came to Asgard? The time seemed to have flashed by … it seemed only yesterday that Lyta came into this world, screaming and so very, very small. An eyeblink later, and she was welcoming her sister, and Diana was sobbing like an infant herself, overwhelmed by hormones and unspoken fears about becoming a brood mare, popping out half-Kryptonian children every nine moons. As with the Asgardians, though, she’d learned that her Olympian heritage served her well in
that regard – if she did not truly want to be pregnant, then no matter how often she took Kal to her bed, he could not get her with child. In those moments when she lost that focus however…

“Stop waving that spoon around, Gabriel,” she ordered. Her son – and how would Hippolyta react to such a thing? – sheepishly obeyed, but within moments, was once more gesticulating wildly with his utensil as he chattered away at Lyta. Diana gave Kal a look and he smirked slightly before reaching out and plucking the spoon out their son’s hands. Gabriel gave his father a foul look and opened his mouth to speak.

Three things happened in rapid succession.

First, Gabriel tensed and looked away, turning his head so he was staring straight at the wall. Less than a heartbeat later, as Diana’s brain was registering how strange the action was, Kal’s head snapped around to look at the exact same spot. His entire body tensed.

And then, Heimdall sounded the *Gjallerhorn*.

Darkseid had returned.

Kal was out of his seat and gone before anyone else could react. He blurred toward the balcony overlooking Asgard and then was airborne a fraction of a second later, the air booming with the speed of his passage. Other alarms were beginning to sound and Diana grimaced at the sheer number – a large-scale incursion, then, rather than the smaller probing offensives that had happened over the last thirty years. She rose.

“Attend to your brother,” she ordered sharply. It would take too long for either of the girls to reach the walls since neither of them seemed capable of flight. Lyta started to argue but Gabriel’s terrified expression … no. It was a pained one, not frightened. Diana wanted to curse at the confirmation of her worst fears – he’d inherited his father’s senses and a battle like this? It was no place to discover that you could hear *everything*. “Take him to the Keep,” Diana instructed quickly. As Heimdall’s sister, Sif would know how to help. Without waiting for either of her daughters to reply, she sprang toward the balcony herself, snatching up her sword and Lariat. “I love you all,” she said before throwing herself into the air after Kal.

She arced up, reaching the apex of her flight just in time to see Kal smash into the front ranks of the attackers. There were more engines of war this time, great behemoths of metal and stone that spat out gouts of fire and lightning as they lumbered across the shattered wasteland that had once been the outskirts of Asgard. Legions of airborne parademons emerged from the boomtubes that seemed to have no limit, but hundreds if not thousands reeled back in shock and pain as Kal approached, his heat vision scorching them out of the sky. He struck the side of the nearest siege engine with such force that the whole of Asgard seemed to rock.

In mid-flight, Diana faltered as she took in the formations arrayed against the walls. Something wasn’t right. The weapon systems on the patrolling Asgardian sky skiffs were already booming, spitting out terajoules of energy at the attackers while the gun emplacements upon the wall began firing as she came to a floating stop. Within seconds, the entire section was a killing field.

And still, the forces of Apokalips came on, hurling themselves into the line of fire seemingly without care for the number of casualties they were absorbing.

Kal struck again, arrowing down from the sky and slicing through another of the great engines, and the fact that he did not seem to be concentrating on any one spot on the battlefield gave her pause. Over the centuries of conflict, he and Heimdall had developed a technique to blunt most of the offensives before they could gather much steam. From where he stood upon Bifrost, Asgard’s
Watchman would use his superior senses to identify the Enemy’s general whereupon he would then call out their location to Kal and then, Kal would kill them. That Kal was simply striking where he thought to be most helpful, crippling the war machines or blunting overwhelming charges, indicated that he was still waiting for Heimdall’s word. And that might mean…

The air cracked as Diana accelerated sharply and she could feel the speed of her passing tearing away her clothes. She bit back a curse at her foolishness as she clashed her bracers together and instantly, the comforting weight of her armor settled around her body. It had taken many years for Eitri to deduce how to emulate the transformative magics of her old panoply, but she was grateful for his success. Bifrost was drawing near and it was so very quiet that she suddenly knew her worst fears were realized. Narrowing her eyes, she reached deep within her and demanded more speed.

She struck an invisible barrier enclosing Heimdall’s Observatory while travelling at somewhere in excess of six times the speed of sound; the field collapsed upon her impact, shattering with an explosive boom that sent Diana tumbling to the ground. For a heartbeat, she was stunned – that had not been an illusion but something else entirely – but the sound of fierce fighting nearby cleared her mind. Barely a second later, she reached the Observatory where she found a ring of bodies surrounding Heimdall. Blood was everywhere and Diana flicked out her Lariat at the first hint of motion. It wrapped around the neck of a female figure wearing the scarlet and black of Darkseid. Even as the Lariat tightened its grip, something unseen smashed into Diana’s chest, throwing her back into the wall with crushing force. Had she been anyone else, even an Asgardian or Kryptonian, Diana would have instinctively released her hold upon the Lariat.

Unfortunately for the woman, she was not anyone else. The sharp crack of breaking bone was loud, even over the echoing boom of Diana’s impact against the wall.

Instantly, a half dozen other figures snapped into view as the originator of the invisibility field slid toward Diana, the Lariat still wrapped around her misshapen neck. Five of them were simply parademons, augmented perhaps but far from especially dangerous to an Amazon, but the sixth towered over them all, gray of skin and encased in thick armor and bony protrusions. It held a lethal-looking mace in one hand and, with a soundless roar, sprang toward her. Her head still spinning, Diana threw herself at the monster, snatching up a fallen Apokalyptian spear as she did.

They traded tremendous blows – she crippled one of its arms with the energy spear but the monster’s counter-strike slammed into her shield with so much force that she was once again hurled into another wall. This time, though, she punched through the Asgardian metal – the sharp agony of broken ribs caused her to grunt – and slid a dozen yards across the Bifrost before she could arrest her fall. Hera, this thing was strong! It battered its way through the hole without a word, fierce red eyes burning with hate, and lumbered forward in a long, loping run that allowed it to cover half of the distance between them before she managed to reclaim her footing. Her spear was gone, Eitri’s shield was splintered … her hand fell upon the hilt of the god-slaying sword.

And her stomach nearly revolted at the sudden rush of raw hatred and fury she felt contained within that blade. It had grown only stronger with each life it took and now … now she feared that would soon be uncontrollable. One day, she would draw it and it would never let go. She’d go on killing and killing and killing until she was stopped.

Not today.

The sword was still sheathed when she met the monster and she relied instead on superior mobility and speed. It could not fly, so she waited until the last moment and took to the air, ducking the dangerously fast swing of the energy mace. She slid around the beast and kicked out, her strike shattering bone as she went for its knees. The beast seemed to shudder – it almost appeared to be
howling in pain, but there was no sound – and twisted around so quickly that it was startling. Diana just managed to evade the bulk of its blow, but even the grazing impact was sufficient to send her tumbling back into the Observatory once more.

“Come on, monster,” she snarled as she flicked the Lariat out. “I’m getting bored!”

They met midway, with her again twisting around its attack, though this time, she went airborne. The Lariat wrapped around the beast’s leg and she pulled – hard – which overbalanced it just enough for her to drop down like a rock, both feet crashing into its back as she drove it down onto Bifrost. With lightning speed, it struck again … but not at her. Instead, it drove the base of its mace into the bridge. An explosion of light picked Diana up and threw her through the Observatory wall yet again. Dwarf-forged armor held, but the body underneath yielded and this time, she did scream out in pain. Her shoulder was broken, her dominant arm, more ribs, even her spine felt as though it had been split in two. With time, she knew she could recover … but time was the one thing she did not have. The monster limped forward, dragging its useless leg while its crippled arm hung limply. It opened its mouth…

And a blur of silver and blue flashed by her, smashing into the beast with bone-shattering force. The monster flew back, a flickering energy spear thrust through its chest. Even before it landed, Kal was blurring forward, his eyes burning. Each impact was like a thunderclap and they came so quickly together that it seemed to be one long, cacophonous boom. Armor and bone alike shattered, and with an inarticulate cry of rage and fury, Kal punched his fist through the monster’s chest. It started to topple but he didn’t let it. Instead, he heaved the thing up and hurled it off Bifrost’s edge so it could fall into the abyss for an eternity.

“You’re hurt,” he said a moment later when he blurred back to her side. His armor already hung off him in smoking tatters and he had a livid burn across the side of his face.

“Heimdall,” Diana began to whisper but Kal’s bleak expression told her everything she needed to know. “That beast …”

“Kalibak.” Kal’s expression was a dark one. “He’s the one I fought on Rimbor,” he said. It took Diana a moment to recognize the name of the planet where she’d lost him once before. He looked up. “Good. Get her to the Healing Room,” he ordered, his words rumbling like thunder.

“I am a Chooser of the Dead, Kal-El,” Þrúðr said tightly, her eyes locked upon her uncle’s unmoving form, “not a soldier to be ordered about by you.”

“Today, you are both.” Kal glowered. “Do not push me today, Thorsdotter,” he said in a very low, very dangerous voice. “Get her to the Healing Room.” Diana started to push herself up but a wave of agony coursed through her body, washing away coherence in a river of pain. Mercifully, darkness claimed her.

When she opened her eyes next, she was in the Healing Room along with hundreds of other warriors. Some were burned, some were simply mangled, and more than a few were comatose, their faces frozen in expression of terror. To her relief, Diana could feel that most of her injuries had already healed, though she was still light-headed and ached all over. She would have moved, would have gotten up and made herself useful save for one thing: her son was curled up next to her. He was asleep, but from the way he twitched in response to the distant thunder of explosions and the tear tracks on his face, it was not a comfortable rest. Reaching down with her right hand – the arm itself still throbbed mercilessly, but at least it was functional – she stroked his dark hair and wished for something better.
“I see you are awake.” Queen Sif approached, her face drawn and her hair streaked with white.

“I am.” Diana sat up slowly, carefully, so as to not disturb Gabriel. “I am sorry I could not reach Heimdall sooner,” she said softly. Sif nodded, glancing away as tears filled her eyes. She set aside a blood-stained rag with trembling fingers and Diana silently marveled at her strength. A century before, the whole of Asgard feared that they had lost another queen when Sif took a blow meant for her husband – had she been mortal, the strike would have killed her instantly – and then lingered in a coma for almost ten years. It had taken another decade before she was fully mobile again, and even now, years later, the cost of her survival was obvious. Gone were her lethal precision and her perfect balance, and in its place was a delicate strength that marked her as a survivor. In the years since, she’d discovered a talent for mending wounds second to none and, to Diana’s surprise, had delighted in this new skill.

“We Asgardians often experience this,” Sif had explained. “As we progress through different stages in our lives, our talents shift.” She’d smiled then. “Thor is no longer the brash fool he was in his youth,” she’d said with a laugh. “In fact, he is more like his father now than ever before and that troubles him more than you can possibly fathom.”

“When the Norns fashion one’s fate,” she said now in reply, “one must hurry to meet it.” She looked down at the sleeping Gabriel and smiled sadly. “Heimdall knew his duty.” Distant rumbles echoed through the Healing Room.

“They have not retreated?” Diana asked with surprise. Sif shook her head.

“Not this time.” She frowned. “Kal-El commands the wall and holds, but they have not fallen back.” At mention of Kal, Diana frowned – was not command rightfully Thor’s? Should he not be there leading the defense? Her thoughts must have shown upon her face as Sif smiled. “My husband maintains the barrier that protects the inner city,” she said, glancing away. “The Odin-Force … it is a difficult thing to master and he fights to contain it.” At Diana’s look, Sif almost grimaced. “Of course,” she murmured. “You would not know of it.” She shook her head, as if chastising herself. “I do not know how to describe the Odin-Force to you – Thor has tried to explain it to me, but has ne’er succeeded. You wonder why he does not take the field as oft as he once did, do you not?”

“I do.” It had been a subject of much interest to her and Kal over the years.

“It is because he fears what might happen should he fall. Without a master to contain it, the Odin-Force might run wild.” Sif frowned. “It could tear open reality and let spill in … things that exist outside of this universe.” She straightened. “Thus, the Realm Eternal must endure. The master of the Odin-Force stands guard to prevent those beings from clawing their way into this realm.” Diana nodded – that she understood.

“The Amazons – my tribe – were charged with a similar task on Themyscira,” she said. Another distant explosion rocked the Healing Room and Diana inhaled deeply before sliding her legs off the table. Her muscles protested, but they obeyed without too much effort. “My armor?” she asked. Sif nodded to where Eitri’s work had been stacked. Diana stepped closer, then winced when her hand brushed the sheathed sword.

“You do not draw that blade,” Sif remarked in a low voice.

“No,” Diana replied. “I do not.” She frowned. “We already fight a terrible Evil … I will not compound my many errors by creating a new Enemy with this terrible weapon.” Sif was silent. “Had I a bottomless void,” Diana said, “I would cast this wretched thing into it and sleep more soundly.” She dressed quickly, aware of Sif’s eyes upon her … and of Gabriel’s. He was watching with that sad expression she saw too often on Kal’s face.
“Come with me,” Sif ordered in a voice that demanded obedience the moment Diana was once more attired in her armor. The queen spun away, leaving Diana and her son to follow.

They ventured deep into the heart of the palace, down stairs guarded by men and women either too young or too old to be holding this duty. A steady hum vibrated through the floor of the fortress and there was the familiar smell of a gathering storm in the air, which Diana took to mean that Thor was utilizing this … Odin-Force of his. She made a mental note to consult Sif for further information later but for now, she simply held onto Gabriel’s hand and walked slow enough that he was able to keep up. By the time they reached a set of golden doors guarded by a quartet of warriors who did _not_ look untested or infirm, though, Diana’s back felt like it was on fire. Perhaps it would be wise to wait for a bit longer before returning to the fight? No. Kal was out there and might need her…

Without a word, Sif pushed the doors open, revealing a grand chamber. It was a trophy room of some sort, Diana realized, as she took in the various objects on display. There was an armored gauntlet with several gleaming gems adorned atop it (but visibly missing two of them), an immense black sword taller than many buildings that should not have been able to be held in such a small room but somehow was, several dozen Asgardian weapons or implements of war, and numerous other relics she did not recognize. Heimdall’s sword and horn were already here, placed in positions of honor upon a stand that almost seemed crafted solely for them, and Gabriel’s eyes automatically drifted toward them. Diana winced at the expression on his face – of course. If his senses were as acute as she feared, he had likely heard and possibly even seen Heimdall fall.

“This is Stormbreaker,” Sif said as she stopped before a golden hammer resting within a shimmering energy field. “It belonged to a very old friend of mine,” she said with a soft smile as she slid her hand through the protective barrier. It fell away with a mild whine, which allowed Sif to caress the weapon within fondly. “Odin, Thor’s father, had it forged for him … and when he finally passed of old age, Stormbreaker returned to Asgard.” Sif turned to look at Diana. “I would have you take up this weapon, Sister,” she said. “It will serve you well.”

Diana hesitated. Even at this distance, she could feel the potent magicks pulsing from the artifact and, if she had to guess, she would say that it was possibly the equal to Mjolnir. The head of the hammer was shaped differently, with a flat face and an almost pointed end, and the handle was the same golden metal. With hesitant hands, she stepped forward and lifted the hammer up.

It hummed in her hand and warmth almost instantly spread through her body, as if she were standing underneath a bright sun on a cloudless day. Her every sense felt sharper, crisper, and the taste of the Vault’s stale air was foul on her lips. To her surprise, there was no eagerness for battle in this hammer, no thirst for conflict and blood, but rather, a sense of resoluteness, of unyielding valor that sought only protection. This hammer was meant to defend.

“This is Stormbreaker,” she murmured, and the head of the weapon crackled and buzzed. Lightning crawled up her arm, washing away her weariness. She looked up and found Sif watching with a smile. “I will wield this in your friend’s name,” Diana said as she tore the sheathed god-slaying sword free of her belt, “but only if you will secure this foul thing in a place where none will find it.”

“It shall be as you ask,” Sif said as she accepted the sword with a wince herself. “Go, Sister,” she said. “Break this storm. I shall attend to Gabriel.”

“Listen to the queen,” Diana ordered as she knelt and hugged her son. He sniffed slightly but nodded as he clung to her. “I love you,” she said.

“I love you too, Mommy.”

And without another word, Diana of Themyscira returned to war.
The day after her sister was laid to rest, Lyta Kal-El paid a visit to her brother.

He was where he had been for the last forty years, standing watch in the Observatory that overlooked Bifrost, and even now, as Lyta drew closer to Gabriel’s self-appointed post, she still struggled to understand the stranger that her brother had become. He’d always been an odd child, but she’d thought that perhaps her difficulty in connecting with him was due to the vast difference in ages between them. That belief changed when he surprised them all.

“My queen,” he’d said to Sif four decades earlier, “Heimdall’s watch stands empty. I would ask for permission to stand in his place.”

In retrospect, it had made perfect sense. His senses had always been more sensitive than even Father’s and as he grew older, they only became sharper. He could see and hear things from hundreds of miles away, could count the number of hairs on a gnat’s ass at a thousand yards, and functioned in the absolute absence of darkness as easily as in the bright daylight. It made sleeping difficult – the slightest of noises could wake him – but somehow, he’d found a balance that allowed him to retain his sanity. No one else was better suited to assume Heimdall’s post…

“You are thinking especially loud today, Sister,” Gabriel said as she drew closer. He was facing away from her, garbed in armor specially crafted for him by Eitri of Niðavellir, with his hands wrapped around the pommel of Heimdall’s greatsword upon which he seemed to recline. Today, he wore no helmet and his black hair fell to his waist in a single, tightly-woven braid. When he was like this, garbed as a simple warrior and without the faceless helm that augmented his keen senses even further, it was easy to tell that they were siblings – they both had Mother’s complexion and her nose, but the smile was all Father’s. At her approach, Gabriel glanced at her briefly and Lyta almost flinched at the way his inhumanly blue eyes seemed to peel away all of her secrets. That was different – her own eyes were the same shade as her parents’, but Gabriel’s … they glowed like witchlight, too bright by half and so distinctly overworldly that he could not be ignored. He had certainly attracted Freyja’s attention if rumor could be believed…

“I came to see you,” she said flatly as she offered the wineskin she’d brought. His eyes crinkled slightly in amusement and he accepted with a very slight nod. “And what do you see today?” she wondered aloud, looking at the endless void that stretched out from his post. Her own senses were keen – moreso than most Asgardians – but even so, she saw only the night sky. He smiled.

“Everything,” Gabriel said. He sipped from the skin and then passed it back. “The Kree and the Shi’ar war with one another once more, ignorant of our plight.” His gaze flickered to her left. “The Eater-of-Worlds has chosen a new Herald.” Back to the right he looked. “The resistance on Midgard seeks to topple the potentate placed there by Darkseid to rule them.” His lips curved ever so slightly. “And Ullr is arguing with Thor once again. Something about the heir’s choice in women, I expect.”

“You’re not funny, little brother,” Lyta said with a mock glare. She looked over her shoulder. “And the Enemy?”

“They pause, regroup, plan.” Gabriel’s expression turned remote and distant as his eyes fell upon the broken wasteland that had once been the middle walls. Father and Mother had warred there for five decades, ever since the Enemy attacked and Heimdall fell, but only now, after the events of the last twenty days did the forces of Apokolips falter. Lyta shivered.

“I do not understand them,” she murmured. It was not of the Enemy that she spoke and she knew Gabriel would recognize this. “Lara died, yes, but the war goes on. Why …”

“Why do they still grieve?” Gabriel frowned. “Because they are not like us, Sister. They were raised
in a different world, a world where the loss of a child is more than simply one more fallen soldier in an endless war.” He turned those sad eyes upon her. “They blame themselves for Lara’s death and cling to us more tightly because of it.”

“Apokalips killed her,” Lyta snapped, “not them.” She tried to push down the memories, tried not to relive that battle all over again, but her perfect recall – a gift from one of her parents, though she did not know which one – could not be ignored. Lyta fell into her memory…

The north wall was buckling – aerial bombardments and directed energy blasts from both weapons and brainwashed post-mortal alike had systematically reduced the defensive fortifications to almost non-existent – and Father was on the south, handling a major incursion of augmented parademons and weaponized slaves. Mother was unavailable as well, having rallied the east wall defenders to hold against a withering barrage from heavy gun emplacements. The very sky was thick with ozone as Mother summoned the storm with that hammer bequeathed to her by the queen and with each crack of lightning that stabbed earthward, Lyta could feel the great forcefield that King Thor maintained dance with approval.

“With me, you rutting dogs!” Lara bellowed from where she stood at the wall. Gleaming sword in hand, she charged forward to plug the fractured hole in the wall and Father’s Redcloaks streamed after her, bellowing their battle cries and laughing their defiance in the face of Hel’s wrath. From where she stood in the sky, Lyta could see everything and every part of her ached to hurl herself into the fight, to wet her own sword with the blood of their Enemy, but Þrúðr’s orders were clear: the Choosers were to remain in reserve until she gave the word to attack. There was so much territory to watch and so few defenders remaining…

Lara’s counter-attack was furious. She batted aside monsters and post-mortals with ease and power, killing dozens before they realized how great a threat she was by herself. By the time the Enemy realized their danger, she had crippled their offensive, smashing against the parademon advance so hard that it crumpled around itself. Its commander she reached with two prodigious leaps and he – if it was a he; from this distance, even with her eyesight, Lyta could not be sure – fell in two pieces as she smote him with her sword. A great cheer went up as the defenders upon the wall witnessed this, but Lara wasn’t done yet. She blurred through the Enemy, nearly as fast as Father could move, and sent another dozen tumbling to the dirt before she reached their artillery pieces. Metal crumpled under her grip and she sent the fractured pieces spinning through the parademon ranks at killing velocities. Another Enemy captain fell, this one decapitated by his own implements of war, and Lara threw up her blade in triumph.

And then, she died.

Her killer appeared out of nowhere – one moment, there was nothing around her for a hundred yards, not even allies, and the next, the monster in black and red was behind her, his gleaming energy blade punched through her armor in what Lyta’s warrior instincts instinctively recognized as a killing blow. Someone screamed – Lyta realized it was her – and a blur of silver and red streaked out of the sky so quickly that the dark-skinned monster in red and black did not even have time to react.

Father. It could only be him.

His cry of anguish and rage tore the heavens and even as he reached Lara’s crumpling body, he began unleashing his fury from his eyes. Heat tore across the Enemy’s ranks, first against Lara’s killer and then moving on to other targets, melting flesh and bone and sinew alike. Explosions rocked the landscape as stored munitions detonated under his killing vision, and a moment later, massive sheets of lightning flashed down, tearing immense gouts of ground free and reducing entire platoons
of parademons to ash. Mother streaked out of the sky, staggering to where Father knelt. She dropped
to her knees before him before throwing back her head and screaming.

“Lyta.” Þrúðr stepped forward. “Go. Your sister has been chosen.”

There was no hesitation. Lyta fell toward the scene with a speed she did not know she possessed –
had her mind not been reeling in grief, she might have wondered if her swiftness was due solely to
her armor or if the gift of unaided flight, long something she had thought herself incapable of, was
truly within her grasp – and she touched down lightly just behind her parents. They were slumped
together, tears coursing down their faces, with Father still rocking Lara’s corpse. At her approach,
they barely stirred.

“Let me take her from this place, Father,” Lyta said softly as she touched his shoulder. The red-eyed
look he gave her was so dark, so terrible, so filled with rage and hate and despair that she took a step
back.

“Clark.” Mother touched his face and he closed his eyes before nodding. Rising to his feet, he kissed
Lara’s forehead – Mother stepped forward and did the same – and then gave her to Lyta. Her sister
seemed to weigh nothing in her arms and when she looked up, she could see her pain reflected in
their eyes.

“Go,” Father ordered before exchanging a fierce look with Mother. She nodded, and began twirling
that golden hammer in one hand while the Lariat coiled and twisted around her, as if it were a
serpent. Lyta floated up, into the sky, cradling her sister.

And behind her, her parents – Kal-El of Krypton and Diana of Themyscira, the Superman and
Wonder Woman of a far distant Earth – let free a wrath that would cower all of the gods of old. The
sky trembled. The earth danced. Thunder and lightning and fire swept the ranks of Apokalips, killing
all who beheld it. Monsters and demons and post-mortals alike were smashed aside in their rage, cast
to the earth with killing force or simply incinerated where they stood. Hurricane-force winds battered
against their entrenchments, tearing their defensive fortifications free and slicing exposed flesh to
ribbons. There should have been screams – there probably were screams, but none could be heard
above the maelstrom wrought by two grieving warriors and champions. They would not be able to
sustain their fury long – it would burn out and leave them bereft – but for a time, Lyta knew that her
parents would not falter, would not yield, would not quit.

All of Asgard watched. All of Asgard witnessed. And all of Asgard grieved with them.

Later, when she saw her parents again, after they vented their rage and threw back the Enemy long
enough for the Asgardian warriors on the broken walls to retreat to the inner gates were they could
once more regroup, they both looked … different. Older, perhaps, though their faces remained
smooth of lines and their hair as dark as ever. Father held her for longer than he had in a century and
then Mother … Mother wept like she never had. At first, Lyta understood – Lara had been her sister,
after all – but her parents continued to grieve long after that first day. It was baffling. Did they not
realize that the Enemy would return, that Asgard still stood on the brink of collapse?

“I do not understand them,” she repeated, once more aware of the present. Gabriel frowned.

“I know,” he said simply before frowning and glancing to his right. “But it matters not,” he declared.
“There is no time.”

And then, Gabriel, the Watchman of Bifrost, sounded the Gjallerhorn.

The war had resumed.
Bruce Wayne to Celebrate 50th with Moon Trip?

This is a rush transcript from ‘Gotham by Night,’ August 15, 2037. This copy may not be in its final form and may be updated.

MAXINE GIBSON, WGN HOST: Thank you for joining Gotham by Night. We have a very special guest tonight, Lucius Fox, the former chief executive officer for WayneTech and close personal friend of Bruce Wayne himself. Lucius, thank you for joining us.

LUCIUS FOX: It’s my pleasure Maxine.

MAXINE GIBSON, WGN HOST: The hot topic that’s causing so much buzz in Gotham right now is the rumor that Mister Wayne is planning on being aboard next year’s inaugural flight of the Slingshot service to the moon. What can you tell us about that?

LUCIUS FOX: That it’s true? Look, Maxine, the Slingshot program is using some really solid technology and Bruce fully supports the space program.

MAXINE GIBSON, WGN HOST: But isn’t it dangerous for him to go up there? IASA’s moon base has only been operational for six months…

LUCIUS FOX: Is it any more dangerous than walking down a Gotham street at night?

MAXINE GIBSON, WGN HOST: (laughs) Well, you’ve got me there. Any comment on the other rumors, that Mister Wayne is considering a run for governor?

LUCIUS FOX: (smiling) No. No comment, Maxine.

MAXINE GIBSON, WGN HOST: (smiling) And, on that note, we’ll be right back.

EVEN BEFORE THE OIL TANKER BLEW UP AROUND HER, IT HAD BEEN A PRETTY LOUSY DAY.

The unexpected explosion threw her back – she struck the ocean surface, bounced a dozen times but finally righted herself just in time for a secondary detonation to smash into her. Oil was everywhere, with so much of it on fire, and Kara barely bit back the scream of rage that was lodged in her throat. She narrowed her eyes as she tried to reacquire her target and pushed against Earth’s gravity once more.

“I need containment backup at my location now!” she shouted, hoping that her integrated commlink hadn’t been damaged in the fight.

There was no sign of the strange-looking Acurian responsible for the explosion – a careful scan of her surroundings revealed no life forms that should not be there out to the twenty mile point – and Kara bit back the urge to growl a very dark curse as she went to work trying to save as many lives as possible. Why such a rare alien was even on Earth remained a mystery for now, though if the last couple of years was any indication, she had a feeling it would come up again. For such an isolated planet in a fairly uninteresting part of this galaxy, Earth sure seemed to draw a lot of attention.
Her chest still ached from where the creature had struck her with its fiery TK blast and she paused in her rescue attempts long enough to rearrange her cape to better conceal the rather large gash in the uniform itself. Another two centimeters higher and she would be ready for Mardi Gras. The League was already dealing with low favorability numbers right now – a string of metahuman rumbles that hadn’t been shut down quickly enough had caused the dip along with a few off the cuff comments made by the less polished members of the team – and the moral crusader hypocrites would just love the chance to add public indecency on top of the usual accusations of immorality.

The new Lantern arrived a couple of minutes after she made her transmission and, to his credit, did not bother asking what had happened. Instead, he went straight to work, using that Oan power ring of his to sift out the oil and debris from the ocean. Firestorm was, unsurprisingly, right there with him; they’d been working together a lot of late, which had ignited a media frenzy about the nature of their relationship. As far as Kara knew, Rivka and Simon weren’t sleeping together, but from their body language (and the other nonverbal clues someone with Kryptonian senses could easily pick up), it almost seemed like it was only a matter of time before they were. And when that happened, there were enough fanatical lunatics on both sides of their respective religious cultures – she was a Jew from Israel, he was a Muslim from Michigan – to turn what should have been a beautiful thing into a bloodbath. Kara’s head was already starting to pound from the headache that would cause.

“I read Firestorm and Lantern at your location,” Victor said, his voice crackling out of her comm-array. “Do you need additional assets?” Kara frowned – Mister Stone was sounding especially cyborg-like today – as she paused briefly and did another scan.

“Negative,” she replied quickly. “What’s the nearest port we can secure this ship in?”

“From your current location … Port Louis in Mauritius is the closest.” Kara grunted.

“Did you get that, Lantern?” she called out.

“Bounce me the coordinates, Vic,” Earth’s current Green Lantern instructed. He hovered in the sky, emerald constructs wrapped around the broken hull of the tanker. The survivors were crawling around the shattered ship, several pointing and talking at the swirls of green light. “I’ve got it from here,” he said, his head facing Kara. A moment later, he and the ship started westward.

“And I’ll keep an eye on him,” Rivka said before flashing away to fly alongside Lantern. Kara shook her head momentarily and then pushed hard against Earth’s gravitational pull. She shot upward, accelerating to escape velocity in seconds.

She reached the Watchtower quickly enough and, thanks to her admin access, entered via a normally shut down section of the orbital facility. It hadn’t been used since Kal-El first cracked open her stasis pod and she stripped out of her filthy uniform before stepping into the decon shower. The temperature of the water was a degree or two shy of gold’s melting point, but even then, it wasn’t hot enough to wash away the soreness of her muscles. Rao, but she was exhausted.

Kara stepped out of the scalding shower long minutes later and floated to where she kept her spare uniforms. For a long moment, she simply stared at the familiar-looking red and white before shaking her head once more. Even now, nearly an hour after the fact, her chest still hurt. It was long past the time to make a change, especially with her newly discovered condition. She pushed the uniform locker shut, drifted closer to another one and slowly donned the hostile environment hard-suit she’d modified for her purposes. It was still mostly white, with scarlet high boots and a cape. The House of El symbol was present upon her chest for the first time since part of her had been called Supergirl, and, as she studied the stranger looking back at her in the mirror, Kara wondered what her cousin would think.
Her new appearance caused more than a couple of second looks as she made her way to the Watchtower command center, but for the most part, Kara ignored them. The whispers were the hardest to ignore, though somehow, she managed. As she touched down next to the monitor womb, the machine that had once been a man barely moved.

“What’s our status?” she asked calmly. Her eyes automatically darted to the icon on the viewscreen that represented Bill. He was still listed as Temporarily Unavailable … but then, all of the magic-based members of the League were marked the same way and had been for the last three months, ever since Fate gathered them together and led them through some sort of energy vortex to stop a group of entities he called the Lords of Chaos. His explanation had been utterly nonsensical, but Bill had appeared worried so she’d not contested the decision, even if it meant she was sleeping alone these days.

“Nominal,” Victor replied emotionlessly. “I have already logged the tanker incident with the United Nations and they have requested additional briefings as soon as possible.” Kara grimaced.

“Put it off as long as possible,” she instructed. “Is there anything on the board that I’m needed for?”

“No, ma’am.” Victor finally turned to face her and she could see the momentarily flicker of human curiosity that appeared in his eyes. It was gone almost instantly and Kara grieved anew for the loss. In the years since his father passed away, Victor had stopped resisting his cybernetic side and had, instead, embraced it wholeheartedly. He was more machine now than man. “I will contact you if assistance is required, Superwoman.” Again, Kara winced.

Superwoman. Rao, but she hated that name.

She made a discreet exit from the Watchtower and then darted closer to the sun, stopping just over Venus as she let Sol’s energy revitalize her. The warmth caused her exhaustion to seep away, though she knew it was only a temporary measure, especially in the wake of what she had to do next. Already, her head was beginning to pound.

“Kelor,” she said into her solar visor. The soft chirp of the communication line going active buzzed against her ear. “Status of our guest?”

“Mister Alexander is still working, Mistress,” came the smooth reply several seconds later. “Per instructions, I have been monitoring his progress and noted no anomalous attempts to access restricted data.” Kara opened her eyes and slowly pivoted in place so she was once more oriented toward Earth. The instant she had her bearings, she was accelerating back toward the planet.

“Status on Madeline?” she didn’t want to hear this, didn’t want to know how little time was remaining for a woman who deserved so much more.

“Unchanged.” Kelor’s calm tone belied the grim tidings the servitor was relaying. “Based on a predictive model of humans in similar conditions, it is unlikely she will continue to function for longer than thirty solar days.” Kara wanted to scream.

Over four years had elapsed since Luthor first reached out to Bruce, three since Madeline passed the original deadline of six months to a year, and everyone who saw her could tell how close she was to the end. The whole of the United States was already grieving for the loss of a much beloved First Lady, even though the Alexanders had not been in office for almost six years, but none of that mattered to Kara. Her primary concerns had to be with Luthor and what he would do when his wife, the woman he seemed to genuinely love and adore, was gone. Would he fall back onto his old habits? Would his anger and grief warp the man he’d become into something dark and horrible? She, better than anyone alive, knew how terrible his madness could be. Sometimes, she still woke

By the time she reached the specialized cancer lab just inside the Gotham City limits (where he could be monitored by the Bats who evidently didn’t already have enough to do), it was halfway to dawn. As she descended toward the concealed tunnel entrance, Kara could see that Luthor was still at work. His work ethic was admirable, she had to admit, but the desperation on his face didn’t exactly inspire her with confidence.

“What do you want?” he snapped as she entered the lab. From the smell, he hadn’t bathed in some time and Kara paused as she gave the monitor a quick look. Her expertise was not in human medicine, though she knew enough about biology to recognize that his experiments here were so far beyond anyone else on the planet that it was revolutionary. Once again, she gave him a calculating look. “I don’t have time for this,” Luthor growled. He started to turn and, in his unsteadiness, in his exhaustion and emotional state, he knocked over an array of test tubes.

Kara blurred.

Luthor had just enough time to register the damage he’d nearly caused when she righted the samples, placed them back on the large desk and then pushed him away from it with one finger. He stumbled back a handful of steps, eyes blinking blearily. By the look of it, he was trying to determine if he should be thankful or furious.

“There’s a couch over there,” Kara said, pointing to the sectional in question. “Go get some sleep.”

“I don’t have time to sleep!” Luthor’s eyes were feverish. “Maddie doesn’t have time for me to sleep!”

“You’ll think better when you’ve rested,” Kara replied. She floated closer, wincing at his smell, and pushed against his chest. “I will carry you if I must.” Luthor’s face contorted briefly into a snarl.

“You don’t get to tell me what to do, Kryptonian,” he hissed. He took a step closer.

So Kara hit him.

It was barely a flick of her middle finger, with less than a fraction of her innate strength behind it, but still, it knocked Luthor back. He stumbled, slipped, and collapsed onto the floor. If the situation were not so bleak for Madeline, if Kara wasn’t fighting the urge to kick him into next week just to make herself feel better, the confused expression on his face might have made her laugh. Instead, it did something far, far worse: it made her feel sorry for him.

“Get up,” she snapped angrily. How dare this piece of crap make her empathize with him! It was his damned fault that she was in the condition she was! “Get onto that couch and go to sleep! You’re not doing Madeline any good like this!” Luthor blinked – whether it was at her fierce tone, her unmistakable body language or her use of his wife’s name, Kara didn’t know – and finally forced himself up. It was obvious that he wasn’t thinking straight as he limped to the couch without further argument, collapsed onto it. He was asleep in seconds.

Kara spent a few more minutes cleaning up – she made a mental note to reprogram the servitors assigned to this lab to do a better job of housekeeping – and then, after using her enhanced senses to ensure that Luthor wasn’t playacting, made a quiet exit. She took to the air as soon as possible, enjoying the cool North American air to revive her sense of smell.
“Is there a reason you’re in Gotham?” The raspy, almost inhuman voice that crackled through her communicator instantly caused her to glower and she cast around for the inevitable Bat-drone tracking her. She found it almost instantly and, for a moment, seriously considered frying it with her heat vision. It would serve him right.

“I was checking up on the package,” she retorted coldly. For reasons that she still did not quite understand, she and Timothy Drake could not seem to get along even a little bit. Oh, they’d tried, especially given the nature of the close friendship between their respective predecessors, but dealing with the Bat-jerk without losing her temper was something Kara could barely do on the best of days. Helena thought it was alternately baffling and hilarious, but then, she had nothing but great things to say about Drake. Even Bill got along tremendously with Drake, but as far as Kara was concerned, the current Batman was a dick, and his girlfriend-wife-partner-whatever the hell her official title might be was even worse. At least the new Robin didn’t treat her like she was one step away from turning into a murderous alien intent on world subjugation and he was the creepiest little bastard she’d ever met. “Your precious city is safe for another day,” she added before killing the transmission and pushing against gravity once more. She rocketed up, into the clouds, faster than any human eye could see.

“Is everything okay?” Helena asked her the following day when they met for their weekly coffee catch-up session. “Babs told me that you nearly bit Tim’s head off last night.”

“I’m fine,” Kara replied, though even she could hear the lie in her words. She looked away, wondering how to explain what had been preying on her mind for the last several months. As much as she loved Helena, her friend was still just a human and … and…

No, dammit. That wasn’t right. Helena had fought monsters and aliens and gods. She could handle a little existential crisis easily enough.

“Bill’s sister, Mary, has started asking me if he and I are going to have children,” she said after a few moments of silence.

“Oh, boy.”

“Exactly.” Kara carefully pushed her coffee cup away. In the mood she was in, she didn’t want to crush it in frustration. “I’ve tried to explain it to her – Kryptonians and humans can’t interbreed, and even though he’s …”

“Marvelous?” Helena offered with a wry smile.

“Sure. I can go with that.” She blew out another frustrated breath. “He’s still human.” She grimaced. “This led to another discussion, about how we reproduced on Krypton …” Kara looked away then, struggling to find the correct words for what she had just recently learned. At her expression, Helena frowned and gave her a questioning look. “I discovered a recording at the Fortress a while back,” Kara said after a few moments of silence. “It was just a fragment of something longer but …” Helena nodded her understanding. “When my uncle sent Kal-El to Earth, he sent a … a copy of his neural patterns, I guess you would call it. An electronic ghost, if you will.”

“Okay.” Helena sounded about as skeptical as Kara expected, but then, she didn’t have the same frame of references. Rao, she still had trouble changing the ringtone on her stupid phone!

“Kal-El asked why Jor-El and Lara did not come with him.” Kara exhaled. “And my uncle stated clearly that he and Lara were … a product of the failures of Krypton.” She grimaced. “That means I’m a product of those failures as well.” Helena reached out and placed her hand on top of Kara’s. “I
didn’t think that really mattered,” Kara continued slowly, “but now, I can’t help but to wonder if he was right, if I am part of what was wrong with Krypton…”

“Stop.” Helena’s grip on her hand was tight for a human, but Kara barely felt it. “I don’t know where this came from, but you are not a failure.” She tilted her head and frowned. “That’s not what’s bothering you, is it? There’s something else.” Kara looked away. “Is it Bill?”

“No, it’s not him,” Kara replied softly. She shook her head. “Kelor detected some anomalies with my bio-scan when I was researching Jor-El’s recording and …” Unsure how to phrase this, she trailed off.

“Are you sick?” Helena’s expression was horrified, worried, confused with even a touch of anger in there that Kara hoped wasn’t aimed at her.

“Not exactly,” she said. “How old are you now, Helena?” It was a rhetorical question – they were the same age, after all – and her friend frowned at the reminder of her mortality. At forty-one, there wasn’t much time remaining for Helena in the cape and cowl. She might have a good five years left before injury and a body that could no longer continue operating at the level necessary would force her to permanently retire. When Helena did not reply, Kara exhaled bitterly. “I discovered that I am aging like a human being,” she said bitterly. There was no comprehension on her friend’s face and Kara glowered. “On average, Kryptonians lived well into their three or four hundreds,” she said. “And that was on our own planet, underneath our sun. Here? Under a yellow star? I should live for eight or nine centuries without a problem. I should be aging at an unbelievably slow pace.”

“But you’re not.” Helena was silent for a moment. “Because of the merge?” she offered, her body language betraying her discomfort. They had not talked much about Kara’s merge or the difficulties that she’d faced getting used to two sets of memories, and for the most part, Kara was fine with that. It was in the past and she’d integrated everything – normally, she didn’t even think about it anymore.

“That’s my best guess,” Kara admitted. “Genetically, I’m still a hundred percent Kryptonian … I’m just not aging like one.” She saw another flash of confusion cross her friend’s face and sighed. “Humans live, on average, into their seventies or eighties,” she said. “Now imagine dying at twenty-five or thirty … but looking like you’re eighty when you die.” Kara glowered. “That’s roughly what I’m looking at.”

“Is there a cure?” Helena asked. She glanced around, noting the arrival of the early morning rush, and visibly winced – they would not be able to finish this conversation here, not with so many people now within earshot.

“Working on it,” Kara said as she stood. “Look,” she said quickly, “I’ve got to head out. I’ll give you a call later.” The urge to find something large and strong to use as a punching bag was intense, but sadly, she had to meet with Starrware Labs’ development team and try to keep them on track.

“You better,” Helena said.

A minute and twenty-three seconds later, Kara was airborne once more.

The month blurred by, almost as if the universe was aware of her sudden sense of mortality and accelerated the pace of time to mock her. Bill and his supernatural squad returned a week into it, but then promptly had to vanish again as the situation they’d just contained almost instantly began unraveling. Kara hadn’t had time to tell him what was wrong – they had a few hours at best before he returned to this magical fight, and they spent most of that time in bed – so she buried her fear and rage underneath a layer of icy control.
Madeline Alexander’s condition took a sharp turn for the worse and then, on the day that Luthor’s research actually began paying dividends, she died. At the time, Kara was on the Watchtower, dealing with a League matter involving several new members, including another extraterrestrial who called himself Mister Majestic. He was an arrogant jerk who was more proactive in his activities than he had any right to be and it was principally his actions of late that had caused the League to suffer such a precipitous nose dive in approval.

“If you continue in this behavior,” Kara had told him coldly, “not only will the League terminate any association with you, but we will turn you over to the proper authorities for imprisonment and trial.”

“Because I choose to act before the monsters unleash their carnage?” Majestic’s expression had been dark, which wasn’t a surprise really. For someone who wore as much white as he did, his actions and general mindset was astoundingly gray.

“Because you have acted outside the bounds of our authority,” Kara replied. “You have violated the sovereignty of at least five nations to apprehend individuals that you claim were these Daemonites in disguise while offering no proof whatsoever.” She met his angry glare with one of her own and was suddenly aware of every Leaguer present orienting toward Majestic. As a Kherubim with senses nearly rivaling her own, he had to be aware of the sheer amount of hostility aimed at him, but Kara didn’t care. She just wanted this smug, sanctimonious asshole off her Watchtower. “This is your only warning,” she’d said flatly. “If you want to remain here, on my planet, then you will follow the fucking rules or the League will put you down so hard and so fast that you’ll regret ever hearing about Earth.” The heat and pressure behind her eyes intensified, and she just barely held it back.

“Now get the hell out of my sight,” she added through clenched teeth, “before I decide to forget all of the good you’ve done in the last two years.”

Majestic left, visibly furious, and Kara could hear the whispers begin almost at once. Most were positive – Majestic had not done an especially good job at making friends and his innate arrogance was more than a little off-putting – but a handful of the newer recruits were concerned about her state of mind. Bill’s extended absence was naturally brought up, along with theories (from the less mature members of the League) about her lack of sexual activity being the reason for her foul temper. She tried to tune it out, tried to focus on the surprising amount of paperwork related to her job as acting chairman of the League, but the whispers wouldn’t stop. And then, of course, Drake had to speak up and make things worse.

“Your planet,” he asked from where he stood near the exit, a shadow with human form that stared at her with judging eyes from beneath that faceless mask of his. “Did I miss a memo?”

“Go blow yourself out of the airlock,” Kara snapped. She was about to make another biting remark when she heard the announcement about Madeline’s death on a news broadcast three rooms away. Biting back a curse, she pushed the desk away and blurred toward the wide viewport, trusting Kryptonian tech to allow her passage without de-pressurizing the room. And hey, if it did, the only person in that room at the moment was the Batjerk. Surely he had some sort of trick on that stupid utility belt of his.

She reached the cancer hospice twenty-nine seconds later and slowed to a hover just atop a nearby building so she could scan the perimeter. Locating Luthor was not difficult – he was sitting in one of the waiting rooms, the two Alexander children (though really, they couldn’t exactly be called that anymore, not with both attending college now) flanking him. All three were crying and Luthor himself looked … lost or broken or …

Kara suddenly wanted to hit something. Hard. He was Lex freaking Luthor, the monster from her nightmares. She wasn’t supposed to feel sorry for him.
“She passed almost an hour ago,” Agent Smith said as he approached. Kara slowly dropped to the roof of the building and half turned to face the approaching lead of Luthor’s Secret Service detail. The agent’s expression appeared to be torn between rage and sadness. “The press wasn’t supposed to be informed yet,” he said tightly which certainly explained the anger. “When I find out who leaked this,” he added, “I’m going to crucify them.”

“I’ll bring the nails,” Kara replied. She glanced around, locating the rest of the security detail with relative ease. To a man, they appeared saddened, but that was no surprise – Madeline Alexander had been a lovely woman. Still, she could not help but to notice how many of them were paying more attention to her than their surroundings, almost as if they considered her a threat… “Is there something I’m missing here, Agent Smith?” she asked, tensing very slightly in preparation for any potential attack.

“That remains to be seen, Ms. Starr,” the Secret Service agent replied. His use of her assumed name was not especially surprising – if Luthor had deduced who Kal-El was as Bruce once said, then piercing her cover identity would be child’s play – but it still caused her to frown. “I hand-picked this detail,” Smith continued. “Every member of it knows about the president, Ms. Starr.” Kara’s frown deepened. “We’re not the only ones who know, either,” Smith added. “ARGUS knows. The CIA knows. Homeland Security. Even the idiots at the DoJ must have some idea. People know who he was before.” He narrowed his eyes. “And we don’t care.” Kara’s surprise must have shown on her face because Smith smiled slightly – it was the most emotion she’d ever seen on his face and his white teeth were bright against his dark skin. “As long as he doesn’t break the law or act against the interests of the United States, we’re going to continue doing our jobs to the best of our ability. Who he was doesn’t matter. All that matters is who he is now.”

“You’d take a bullet for him?” Kara asked softly.

“I would.” Smith flashed that smile of his again. “I’d take a bullet for you as well, ma’am. It would be stupid of me, of course, given that bullets bounce off you anyway, but it’s the thought that counts, right?” He turned his attention back to the hospital. There was no way he could see Luthor, not without some very specific gene-mods or cybernetic enhancements, neither of which he possessed, so Kara suspected he was simply looking away from her. “Our biggest concern at the moment,” Smith said, “is containment.” He sighed. “We don’t know what happens next. I’d like to say that life goes on and he doesn’t fall back onto bad habits but …”

“I don’t know either,” Kara said. “Disseminate my contact information among your team,” she instructed softly. “Day or night. If you need me, I’m here.” She pushed against gravity and began climbing. “Remember, Agent Smith,” she said. “Day or night.”

At ten thousand feet, she stopped and let herself float. The noise of humanity was a little muted up here which gave her a chance to think. If Smith and his team were unsure about how Luthor would react, could she really take the chance and not just preemptively throw him into the Phantom Zone? He could be a ticking time bomb, just waiting to go off. The blood of thousands was already on his hands, even if his later actions had been as a peacemaker and had resulted in millions of lives saved. Was it really that simple? Human lives, boiled down to simple numbers? This many killed versus this many saved? She could act now, move against Alexander before he recovered, but how would that make her any better than militant aggressors like Majestic or Dru-Zod and his merry band of psychopaths? If she acted that way, how could she look at the House of El sigil she now wore upon her chest again and not agree with Jor-El that she was a failure, just like every Kryptonian who didn’t make it off their world? How could she face Kal-El or the princess should they ever return and not feel like she’d failed them and dishonored their memories?

Kara grimaced. Rao, she was tired.
Metropolis was always beautiful at night.

Oh, Kara would never say that it was even close to Kandor, especially during the Autumn Equinox when the float-lamps were swimming around the city like living things and the sky turned azure as the sun sank below the horizon, but this Earth city had its own attractions. The great statue in the bay that greeted the tired, huddled masses to American shores always drew her eye, and all of the new buildings that seemed intent on racing one another to see which one could touch space first. There were the smells and the sounds and the sheer energy of the city that never seemed to sleep. As much as she loved Fawcett City and its retro-constructions, there was something that always drew her back to Metropolis. Perhaps it was because this was once Kal-El’s city, and then later, when he was first gone, the princess had watched over it, and now that they were both gone, it fell to her. Or perhaps it was because so many of her friends were here. Mary Batson had moved here once the red skies stripped her of her abilities and now headed the Metropolis-based Starrware Labs subsidiaries, and both Courtney and Jesse lived here these days, the former relocating recently and the latter having never moved.

Or, and this was sadly the mostly likely, it was due to a tiny pastry shop buried deep in the heart of the city that made the best damned cheesecake on the planet.

The sun had already disappeared behind the horizon, vanishing below the artificial canyon of building that was the city, when Kara touched down inside the alley next to the shop. As expected, no one appeared to notice her arrival, so she activated the hard-light hologram integrated in her suit. Her cape quivered slightly and then retracted, securing itself to her back in an almost solid square as the tiny holo-emitters activated. With a flicker of light, she suddenly looked like every other professional in the city, admittedly taller and more buxom than most, but these things could not be helped.

“I thought you might have stood me up,” Lois said by way of greeting as Kara joined her at the small table.

“Busy day,” Kara replied. She smiled tightly at the presence of a second cup of steaming coffee already waiting – Mrs. White might claim to be a cynic, but over the years, as Kara go to know her better, Kal-El’s former girlfriend had displayed a steady faith in those of the House of El that never wavered.

“And a new suit,” Lois said, nodding to one of the television monitors secured against the wall. There, Kara saw herself standing on a rooftop, speaking with Agent Smith. She almost frowned – why hadn’t she noticed the cameraman? – before realizing that Smith had probably leaked this himself for reasons that made sense only to him. The graphic on the right of the picture was a tiny bit misleading: Superwoman Offers Condolences to Grieving Alexanders. How exactly had she offered condolences since she’d never even spoken to them? “I like the new look,” Lois added when the moment of silence stretched out. “It’s especially nice to see that crest again.” This was said with more than a hint of sadness and Kara nodded her agreement of what was left unspoken.

They chatted for a short time, comparing notes about the League’s PR problem while avoiding certain subjects – Lois’ health after last year’s heart scare; ‘Richard’ and his own health issues; Kara’s own recent (and distressingly public) spats with Bill over the usual kinds of things couples argued over. Unofficially, Lois was still the executive editor for the Planet, but she’d turned over most of the day-to-day operations to others, mostly at the urging of her doctors who were convinced she was working herself to death. Even still, this unofficial meeting could potentially be perceived to be unethical by Lois’ more aggressive detractors, which was why she made sure not to offer any suggestions or recommendations. Instead, she simply let herself be a sounding board for Kara’s
complaints … and Kara simply listened to the older woman’s heartbeat in order to gauge what she thought.

The soft chirp of her suit’s comm-device nearly an hour later caused Kara to break off in mid-sentence and glance away. Outside of another Kryptonian, there were few people on this planet who could even detect the low range utilized for Kelor’s pulse beacon and even fewer who could hear the servitor’s communication.

“Alert,” Kelor announced. “Unknown energy signature detected. Unable to quantify signature origin.”

“You’ve got to go,” Lois guessed with a knowing smile. She jerked her head. “Get out of here,” she ordered. “I’ll check in with you later.”

“Thank you.” Kara paused at the register on her way out. “Put it all on my bill,” she said to the matronly woman behind the counter.

“Of course, Ms. Starr,” the pastry genius said with a grin. Her register beeped, automatically deducting the price of the food from Kara’s account. Yet another wonderful WayneTech invention, Kara reflected almost bitterly as she exited the shop and headed for the convenient alleyway.

She reached the Fortress within minutes, noting at once the shimmering distortion just outside the main entrance. It resolved into a humanoid form as she came to a hovering halt two meters away, though the outline was fuzzy and indistinct, as if it was a poor transmission. The form appeared to be wearing some kind of armor and face enclosing helmet that hid everything but the startling blue eyes that looked out.

“I seek the master of this Fortress,” the figure stated, a very slight accent flavoring his words.

“This is my Fortress,” Kara replied as she crossed her arms. She studied the flickering almost hologram, noting how it appeared to originate from something in the snow. A perfectly-shaped diamond, it appeared, though it was barely a centimeter in total diameter.

“And Kal-El?” the vision asked. “Did he depart from this world? With a woman and two others?” Kara tensed.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

“My name is Gabriel,” the blue-eyed figure announced. “I have spent the last four centuries scouring realities to find this world.”

“You’ll find it’s defended,” Kara said tersely, focusing on the heat behind her eyes.

“You misunderstand, Kara Zor-El,” the stranger said. He saluted her in the old way of her people – left arm crossed against his chest with his clenched fist almost touching his right shoulder – and the armored bracer he wore began to glow. An instant later, a semi-transparent shield materialized.

It was the crest of her House. The House of El.

“My time dwindles,” the blue-eyed stranger said. Already, his voice was growing weaker and the image was beginning to fade. “Please secure the transmission construct in a safe location. It will be necessary for…” His voice dwindled to nothing, though Kara suspected he was still talking. In the last instant before the image vanished completely, the armored man pushed the visor of his helmet up, granting her the briefest of glimpses at his face. She recognized Kal-El’s smile and much of her cousin’s facial structure, but the nose and coloring? They were Diana’s. Kara realized she was
grinning. He was alive. Kal-El was alive!

“Kelor!” she called out as she knelt in the snow to scoop up the pulsing diamond. Even through the thickness of her hard-suit, she could feel how warm it was. “I need a containment unit prepped now!”

Her cousin was alive!

All of the dark thoughts, and fear, and worry that had been hounding her for years fell away before that single, beautiful realization and she almost laughed giddily.

She was half a step away when the blue-eyed stranger’s words fully sank in.

“I have spent the last four centuries scouring realities to find this world,” he’d said. But how could that be? Kal-El and the princess had only been gone for five years!

Five days later, America laid to rest one of its most beloved First Ladies.

All of the surviving presidents attended, along with an international delegation rivaling that of many heads of state. It was to be expected given Mrs. Alexander’s unmistakable contribution to youth education across the world. Kara led the League delegation which included the two publicly known surviving founding members of the team, King Arthur of Atlantis and Hal Jordan. She’d meant for her presence to be a sign of the genuine respect she’d harbored for Madeline, but if she’d known just how many publicity whores would be here, she seriously would have reconsidered. Did these creatures not understand the point of a grieving ceremony? On Krypton, it was a solemn time for even the most prominent members of society, not a media circus.

The ceremony lasted a short eternity, dragging on as various individuals stepped up to eulogize or, as was sadly all too frequent with many of the politicians and VIPs present, to be seen eulogizing the late Mrs. Alexander. By hour number two, the mood of those genuinely present to say their last goodbye to a beloved figure had grown restless and the attending priest, recognizing the shift, hurried through his sermon. Kara barely heard him speak as she was eavesdropping on the security patrols and keeping an eye on the cloudless sky, just in case someone tried to do something stupid.

No one did, though, and she took to the sky the moment it was no longer impolite for her to do so. In mid-air, she adjusted the hard-light hologram on her suit, changing it from the appearance of a formal Kryptonian gown to the now more comfortable white and red, before heading back to Fawcett City where she intended to get some long overdue work done at the office.

“Alert,” Kelor informed her softly some two hours later. “Breach detected at secure lab alpha.” Kara was airborne and streaking into the darkening sky even before the servitor finished the report. She reached Gotham less than a minute later, heat from her harsh re-entry rolling off her hard-suit. Her feet barely touched the concrete before she was blurring forward, darting through the doors cycling open upon her arrival. Muscles tensed, she flashed to a stop just inside the lab, fully expecting a half dozen possible threats.

Instead, she found Luthor.

He was still dressed in the suit she’d seen him in earlier, though his tie was undone and his thinning hair looked unkempt, as if he’d run his fingers through it a dozen times. His eyes were red, though it was almost impossible to tell if that was due to tears or simple fatigue. At her sudden arrival, he visibly jumped, but made no furtive moves that might hint at a darker plan. Instead, he simply looked at her with a frown and then turned back to his work.
Kara blinked.

“What are you doing here?” she asked after assuring herself that there was no one else present. There wasn’t even a killbot lurking in the shadows.

“Finishing what I started,” Luthor replied. “I promised Maddie I would.” His voice was dull and flat, devoid of any discernible human emotion, but Kara could hear his heartbeat alter slightly at the pronouncement of his late wife’s name. “I’m going to obliterate this damned disease once and for all,” he said. Finally, Luthor looked up. “And after I’m done,” he said tonelessly, “you can throw me into the Phantom Zone for all I care.” Their eyes met.

Kara looked away first.

She retreated from the lab once she was sure that Luthor was working on his cancer cure as he claimed and fled to space where she instantly oriented toward the sun. Within minutes, she reached Mercury’s orbit and she matched its velocity. Hanging there, suspended in the void before the brilliant life-giving star named Sol, she tried very, very hard to understand humans. With her senses, she would have been able to tell if Luthor was lying … and he hadn’t been. He truly did not care if she threw him into the Zone. Was this how humans grieved? Was this why Bruce and the members of his bizarre family were so maladjusted? Perhaps the Mystics of ancient Krypton had chosen the correct path when they urged Rao’s children to cast aside emotion and embrace pure logic and mathematics. Should she do the same? Should she push aside those who cared for her, those who loved her? Long buried memories of her mother, now dead for so very long, surfaced. Faith, Alura In-Ze would have urged. Rao would give her the sign she needed if she simply had faith.

“Incoming message,” Kelor’s voice announced through her solar visor. “Cyborg reports Captain Marvel is on-station. Requesting your presence.”

Kara smiled. As signs went, she could not ask for one better.

“Advise Cyborg that I am en route,” Kara stated as she slowly rotated in place, using her enhanced senses to locate Earth.

She was going home.
Lo, there do I see my Father
Lo, there do I see my Mother and
Lo there do I see my My Brothers and My Sisters
Lo, there do I see the line of my people back to the beginning
Lo, they do call to me
They bid me take my place among them in the halls of Valhalla
Where thine enemies have been vanquished
Where the brave shall live Forever
Nor shall we mourn but rejoice for those that have died the glorious death.

FROM THE APARTMENTS SHE SHARED WITH KAL, DIANA HEADED STRAIGHT FOR THE OBSERVATORY.

Her hair was still wet from the long overdue bath, and the smell of blood and death had not yet faded from memory, but she did not think that Gabriel would mind terribly, not with how long it had been since they’d last spoken. Today was the first day in two hundred and fifty years that the sky was not dark with parademons or war-barges or sky sleds manned by monsters birthed in the darkest pits of Apokalips, and Diana knew it was only temporary. By the looks of things, no one in Asgard thought it would last long, not with how she could not see a single person, not even a child, who was not wearing armor and carrying a weapon of some sort.

Kal was sitting alongside Lyta as Diana passed over them, with a scowling Ullr several yards distant and looking unbelievably childish for one so old as he sulked at being excluded from the father-daughter bonding discussion. Diana sighed. Sif’s son was so difficult to fathom at times – he could be recklessly heroic, both willing and eager to charge headlong into a nightmare that rational beings would flee from to rescue a frightened puppy, and then promptly transform into an immature brute who needed his step-father to smite him across the skull with Mjolnir so as to knock some sense into him – but for reasons she did not quite understand, her daughter was thoroughly besotted with the fool. He was pleasant enough to look at, Diana supposed, but honestly seemed to have the personality of an especially dull rock.

“Your disapproval is at least half of why she loves him,” Kal had once said, as if he did not share every one of her grievances with Thor’s step-son (in addition to a couple of his own), and Diana had felt the Truth in his remark. Had she been so different, she wondered, with her own desire to step out of her mother’s shadow? Yes, she’d grown to love Kal independently, away from Themyscira, as she watched him strive to be the greatest he could be, but she had to admit that her mother’s open dislike of him had certainly accelerated her interest.

At her passage, Kal glanced up, offering her a tired smile that she returned without hesitation, and then, belatedly, Lyta looked skyward as well, squinting slightly. Her senses were not as keen as her father’s and she was not quite as fast as either of them, but there were few in Asgard as mighty or as capable in battle. Based on firsthand observation, Diana knew that, without Stormbreaker’s magicks enhancing her own strength as it did, she was far, far weaker than her eldest child. In a few years, Lyta might even surpass Kal’s astounding strength and though Diana hated to admit it, the girl was more suited to Asgard than she ever would have been on Earth.

“My time dwindles,” Gabriel was saying as Diana drew close to the Observatory. He was facing deep space, with the odd visor of Heimdall’s helmet concealing his face. “Please secure the
transmission construct in a safe location. It will be necessary for me to relocate you when the time comes for their return.” Abruptly, his body language shifted – he was annoyed at something, Diana guessed, or at least frustrated – and he pushed up the visor with a touch more force than was entirely necessary before turning slightly to face her. “Good day, Mother,” he said, offering her Kal’s smile on a face that was a perfect blend of their features. She did not reply at first, instead drifting closer to him and embracing him tightly.

“How do you fare today?” she asked softly as her strange son resettled himself atop the dais that dominated the Observatory.

“I am quite well,” Gabriel replied. “I have finally found what I have sought for centuries.” His lips curled up. “Both things, in truth,” he added before nodding toward an otherwise unremarkable stretch of space before him. It was not the direction he had been facing only moments before, curiously enough. “Yonder is the means of our victory in this war,” his said. Diana looked – she saw nothing but an endless blanket of stars, glittering and dancing in the darkness – and then returned her eyes to him. He smiled as he held out one hand. Instantly, a small device detached itself from a wall and floated toward him. “Commend my respects to the king,” he informed the recording drone. “Request an immediate assembly of the war council on the behest of the Watchman.”

“State the purpose of this assembly, Watchman,” the drone instructed in a toneless voice.

“Victory,” Gabriel replied. “Advise the king I have located victory.” With a soft whine, the device floated away.

“You enjoy being vague, do you not?” Diana asked with a smile. She laughed at the momentary flash of sheepish acknowledgement that flickered across her son’s face. “You remind me of Bruce,” she said brightly. “He always delighted in being the cleverest man in the room as well.”

“From Father’s description of him,” Gabriel said, “I shall accept that as a compliment.”

In the far distance, bells began ringing and Diana glanced toward the remains of Asgard. Thor’s protective barrier now extended to the inner wall and covered the remains of the city proper, but beyond those fortifications, all was ruin. None of Asgard ventured beyond their king’s shield save in battle, as the landscape was littered with lurking dangers, whether they might be unexploded but primed ordnance, or killing machines in stand-by mode and waiting for a target, or even simple traps intended to maim but not kill. The soil itself was blackened and charred, stripped of the nutrients that would allow life to flourish, and Diana wondered if it could ever be reclaimed.

“Will you escort me to the council, Mother?” Gabriel asked with a hint of a smile. At a glance, Diana could tell he was up to something – her comparison to Bruce had not been entirely incorrect as her son so often kept his own council, waiting to spring his unexpected wisdom upon those who were least prepared for it. To Kal’s continued (but unstated) disgust, Loki adored Gabriel for this very reason, even if he had nothing but scorn for the rest of her family.

“Is Freyja not available?” Diana asked wryly, delighting at her son’s momentary frown. Rumor whispered that the widowed goddess of beauty and love was a frequent visitor to the Observatory, though no one was ever able to confirm the veracity of such tales. Diana herself knew more than most – decades earlier, she had cornered Freyja and threatened bloody retribution should harm befall her son, and that did not even take into account Kal’s proud and knowing smirk anytime the subject came up – but even she did not know the exact specifics regarding the nature of Gabriel’s relationship with the woman. Her ignorance in this matter irritated her more than she wanted to admit, though she suspected a lingering dislike of Freyja might be at least partially responsible for her mood. Why couldn’t her children choose better mates, she wondered briefly.
“Your presence is necessary,” Gabriel replied cryptically. He flipped the visor of Heimdall’s helmet down, cradled his greatsword blade up against his shoulder, and then offered his right arm. Diana could not help but to smile as she took it.

And together, they took to the sky.

By the time they reached the council chamber, it was already in session and, unsurprisingly, Kal and Thor were arguing again.

It was the usual debate – the king remained convinced that they could hold the line against incursions by Apokalips while Kal wanted to press the attack, to take the war to Darkseid and stop simply defending, no matter that their every attempt to use captured Mother Boxes for that purpose had failed, sometimes in spectacularly lethal and explosive ways – and the court was sharply divided along those lines. The youngsters supported an attack, no matter how useless or unwise, while those much older backed Thor. Even sly Loki, who stood at his brother’s side, argued against an aggressive stance. Apokalips was not of this reality, he argued, and somehow, reaching it was currently beyond Asgardian magicks. For once, Diana’s truthsense told her that he was not dissembling or outright lying, and the grimace on his face as he revealed these facts betrayed how much discomfort he was in. She wondered if honesty burned his tongue.

“Every time they attack,” Kal was saying as Diana and Gabriel entered, “we lose more ground, more soldiers, more lives!” His eyes glinted red as he scowled at Thor and the king returned the angry look with one of his own.

“Let them come!” the Thunderer retorted harshly. “They will break upon us like the surf upon rock! Asgard will endure!” Kal’s eyes narrowed and from his body language alone, Diana knew exactly what he was about to say. It was an insult regarding Thor’s courage and strategic planning that the king could not let stand, no matter how powerful an ally Kal was.

“Clark, enough!” she whispered quickly, knowing only he and their son could hear her words. Kal’s head snapped around to pin her with a fierce look that faded the instant she gave him a fierce, knowing look. It was not as if she disagreed with him – this defensive war was bleeding lives away for no gain and if Apokalips was out of sync with this reality as it was with theirs, they could breed replacements for eternity while the Asgardian numbers remained finite – but letting his anger and rage at what had been done to him an eternity ago cloud his judgment in the now was something she could not allow. Their eyes locked and somehow, someway, she managed to relate her fears and concerns with only her gaze. He inhaled deeply, then released it slowly, visibly making the effort to avoid losing his temper in front of Thor. When Diana drew alongside him and touched his hand, he gave her a quick, thankful nod.

“What news, Watchman?” Loki asked with that sly smile of his. Diana felt Kal bristle – she had to admit that she did as well – but neither of them spoke as Gabriel took his place at the great table. It was not their place to fight his battles, not anymore, and no matter that Loki had once been, according to rumor and innuendo, his brother’s most hated foe, Darkseid’s invasion had mended that tattered relationship. Only Sif was more stalwart in support of the king and Diana had witnessed firsthand how harshly Loki dealt with traitors to the crown.

“I have located the last of the missing Infinity Gems,” Gabriel said in response. Instantly, the Asgardians present tensed and began whispering to one another, but Diana did not know why. She glanced at Kal – he offered a shake of his head in response to her unspoken question about the Gems – before returning her eyes to her son.

“Are you sure?” the king asked, his voice rumbling like thunder. Thor’s once golden tresses were
now almost entirely white and the strain on his face made him appear even older than Diana suspected he actually was. According to Sif, the king had put off entering something called the Odinsleep for far too long, though no one seemed able to tell Diana exactly what that was or why it was even necessary. It was simply accepted as something the king had to do periodically. “Even Heimdall could not find them.”

“In truth, Heimdall knew where one of them was,” Gabriel retorted calmly. “But its location made it impossible to retrieve without the other.” Another murmur of discussion raced around the chamber.

“But you are certain?” Loki asked. He was frowning. “Absolutely certain that they are Gems?”

“I am.” Gabriel crossed his arms. “And in finding this Gem, I have confirmed certain theories: Asgard is besieged because Darkseid desires the Gauntlet.”

At this, the chamber erupted. Again, Diana glanced at Kal and again, he shook his head, though now, he was frowning himself. Whatever this item was, it terrified the Asgardians. She looked to Thor and found him staring at Mjolnir, which rested head down upon the golden table. He was scratching the metallic patch that covered his left eye as Loki whispered urgently in his ear. With casual ease, Thor lifted his hammer slightly and then released it to drop back down. The boom that resulted silenced everyone.

“I shall hurl the next person who interrupts into Niflheim myself,” he threatened.

“Forgive me, my lord,” Diana said into the stillness, “but what is this … Gauntlet you speak of?” Thor frowned.

“A relic of the previous universe,” came the immediate if cryptic reply. “A weapon of incalculable power if assembled and used by one with sufficient will.”

“And you have part of it here,” Kal guessed. He looked vaguely annoyed, though Diana doubted anyone but her (and likely Gabriel) recognized his expression.

“Stored in my father’s Vault,” Thor replied. “Sealed away so no arrogant fool with more power than sense might be tempted to attempt to assemble it once again.” At that, Kal grunted slightly and Diana tried very hard to hide her smile. After all, had he not done much the same with his Fortress? Had he not tried to keep Kryptonian weapons from falling into the hands of other such fools? “Learning why the Enemy seeks to overwhelm us is one thing, boy,” Thor said, this time directing his words to Gabriel, “but why would you seek out the missing Gems? No one knew where they were secreted for a reason.”

“I had a threefold reason for seeking them, my king,” Gabriel replied. “First, the reassembled Gauntlet will allow us to end this war by erecting barriers no weapon of Apokalips can breach. Second, it could allow us to force Darkseid from this reality forever if I understand its capabilities accurately.”

“And the third?” Thor leaned forward in his throne-like chair. Gabriel squared his shoulders.

“I seek a means to return my parents to the reality of their births,” he declared.

Diana’s breath caught.

Her son, with his senses, could not help but to notice her reaction or Kal’s, but to his credit, he did not pause in the slightest as he continued speaking. His logic was perfect – if they could not hurl Darkseid’s from this reality with this Gauntlet he kept referencing, then a stable portal to the Earth that she and Kal grew up on could augment their offensive capability. It was an impressive notion
and, for a moment, Diana let herself envision the whole of the Justice League standing here. With a legion of Lanterns available … the Enemy would be pushed back and Asgard could finally take the offensive.

“Enough.” Thor’s sharp command instantly stilled the flutter of excitement coursing through the chamber and he nodded once to Gabriel. “The Gem,” he said flatly. “Where is it?”

“On a dying world,” Gabriel said. “The sun has grown cool, the air is toxic, and the planetary core itself has grown unstable.” Kal tensed – Diana did not need to be a mind reader to know what he was thinking – and Gabriel shook his head in his father’s direction. “It is not Krypton,” he said. “Nor do I think we can spare you from the front for this, Father.”

“I’m probably the best suited,” Kal began, but again, Gabriel shook his head.

“Not for this,” He inhaled. “For this, only Mother will do.” And once more, the chamber erupted with noise as various Asgardians argued for or against this. Ullr foolishly bragged that anything Diana could accomplish, so too could he, while grim Fandral insisted that it should not even be tried, his once beautiful face still difficult to behold thanks to the multitudes of scars that crisscrossed it. Loki and Sif were arguing as well, their expressions passionate as they debated their respective points, and Thor listened to them, interjecting only occasionally. Kal barely reacted apart from interlacing the fingers of his left hand with those of her right. She squeezed tightly before glancing toward her son.

He stood, mute, surrounded by loudly bickering men and women who thought his plan foolhardy or reckless, and his face might as well have been carved from granite. To his right stood lovely Freyja, with her white-blonde hair falling to her mid-back in a braid identical to his and her body language defensive but poised, as if she meant to defend the Watchman of Bifrost, and to his left was Lyta who did not bother trying to hide the fact that she was ready to bare steel in defense of her brother.

“Enough,” Thor said, lifting and dropping Mjolnir to the table once more when not enough attendees heeded his instruction. Once silence descended, he frowned at Gabriel. “I do not deny Lady Diana’s valor or abilities,” he said, nodding briefly in her direction, “but why would you send your Mother to such a desolate place?”

“Because she is best equipped for this, my king,” Gabriel replied. “Once she gains the Space Gem, she can use its abilities to translocate to where the Reality Gem is secreted.” He offered a fleeting smile. “And that place is why she is necessary.” He paused, as if for dramatic effect, and beside her, Kal sighed softly.

“Just like Bruce,” he muttered. Diana elbowed him.

“And pray tell,” Thor instructed, “where is this second Gem?” Gabriel turned his too blue eyes to look at Diana.

“Olympus,” he said. “It is in the possession of Lord Zeus himself.”

Traveling via the Bifrost was like falling through a waterfall of light.

Her velocity was incredible as she raced headlong through the cosmos, accelerating to a speed even Kal was incapable of unassisted. Stars and nebulas flashed by, were there and gone in the blink of an eye, and Diana wondered if this was how the Flashes had perceived reality. It was both similar to yet different than the transit to Asgard the first time – there was not the turbulence this time, nor the sensation that she was but a fraction of a moment from utter obliteration. There was only speed.
With an explosion of crimson and violet light, she reached her destination. Smoke and steam curled up from the arrival point, and Diana rose to her feet, glancing only briefly at the elaborate glyph-like pattern that appeared to have been burned into the stone around her. She inhaled slightly, relaxing her taut muscles when she tasted no sign of the tainted atmosphere of this broken world. Automatically, she touched the slender torc wrapped around her throat – according to Eitri, it had fashioned a mostly invisible air pocket that would even allow her to survive in a vacuum.

Overhead, a fiercely angry sun glared down at the hellish landscape that she found herself, flickering and flashing as the ancient red star slowly consumed itself in a paroxysm of deadly storms. The ground here was blackened, scorched, and molten rock bubbled and crawled across the fractured stones. What looked to have once been skyscrapers dominated the horizon, though even at this distance, they looked to be shattered and gutted.

As she gathered her bearings, Diana pushed herself up off the ground so she floated several yards above the surface. Gripping Stormbreaker in her right hand, she opened her left and a tiny spark sprang away from her gloves. It pulsed twice and then darted away to her right. Diana shook her head and glanced skyward.

“I see Heimdall taught you some things when I was not looking,” she murmured, knowing that Gabriel could hear her despite the vast distance between them. As if in response, the tiny spark flashed rapidly. Diana smiled and pursued.

The spark led her over the tortured landscape of this world, through a great city reduced to slag and debris by way of brutal violence centuries earlier, over a great plain that had been turned to glass by means she did not comprehend, and through an immense valley torn apart long, long ago. An even larger metropolis than before stretched out on the other side of this vale, and it was in worse shape than the first. Buildings that should have scraped the edge of space had been toppled, some still precariously balanced against one another and waiting for the slightest bit of pressure to fall. Vehicles – starships, airships, groundcars – were everywhere, as if the inhabitants of the city had tried to flee but were struck down by whatever had destroyed this world. And in the very center of the city was an immense crater more than a kilometer wide.

On the edge of this crater, the spark paused, just in front of a strange-looking sculpture seemingly wrought out of pure silver. Diana drew closer, frowning as she took in the bizarre statue. It was of a humanoid male, of a height with Kal though not nearly as muscular, that was kneeling and facing the massive crater, as if in prayer or reflection. Once, this sculpture would have been impressive to behold, but now, it was gouged and pitted, with entire chunks torn free. The spark orbited the statue twice, pulsed brightly, before slowly fading away.

And then, the statue moved.

Diana sprang back a yard, automatically bringing up her shield arm and readying Stormbreaker. The semi-transparent hoplon that snapped into existence was more than familiar to her, though she was still slightly irritated that Eitri had intentionally crafted this latest version to form Kal’s family crest rather than a more traditional shape.

“Asgardian,” the silver creature rumbled in Thor’s native tongue, his voice creaky with disuse. “And bearing a Kryptonian sigil.” The being tilted its head. “You are not of this reality, woman.”

“I am not,” Diana replied calmly. “Nor am I of Asgard, though I fight in its name.” She lowered her shield slightly and made a conscious effort to relax her body language. “My name is Diana and I am come on a mission—“

“Thor sent you,” the silver being interrupted, a scowl on his face. “What do you want?”
“Asgard is besieged,” Diana began. “The Enemy is neither of this reality nor of mine.”

“I know.” The strange being turned his bizarre eyes upon her. “You seek that which I possess to assemble a power that is not understood to defeat a being who seeks it for much the same reason.” Again, he scowled. “This is a power no being should possess. Thor knows this. He fought with us against Thanos so very long ago…” He shook his head.

“We have a plan.”

“Then it is worse than I feared. Knowing what the Gauntlet is capable of and continuing to assemble it … that is not a plan. That is arrogance, pride and rank stupidity together.” The being narrowed its eyes. “Have you any idea what the Gauntlet can do? A millennium ago, a madman assembled it and half of the universe simply died. Half.” He shook his head. “He willed it so and untold centillions simply ceased to exist.” He glowered. “I will not allow such a thing to happen again.”

Diana was silent for a long moment. Her sense of Truth told her that this being spoke honestly, without guile or deception, and that he truly did fear what could be done with this Gauntlet. And yet, the scheme laid out by Gabriel seemed to be their best option for success and survival. She could try to seize the Space Gem, though there was no guarantee that this being had not simply concealed it far, far away, but the notion of trying to take something by force caused her stomach to turn. Even Stormbreaker felt heavier when her thoughts turned in that direction for the tiniest of moments, and Diana chose to see that as a sign.

“May I tell you my tale?” she asked as she mentally dismissed her shield. It faded away with a slight hiss and, from his body language, the silver being appeared momentarily surprised. Diana smiled as she sat on the warm stone, resting Stormbreaker upon the rocks beside her before folding her hands in her lap. “In my reality,” she began, taking the silver creature’s silence as a yes, “the Enemy attacked once in force, but we rallied against him.” She spoke carefully, only briefly outlining that first conflict with Darkseid before moving onto to the other, more important elements, like Kal’s capture and decades of torture and the corruption of the various Lantern Corps. The War of Light needed no exaggeration – she well remembered the dead worlds and extinguished stars wrought by the Black Lanterns – and she faltered only slightly when her tale naturally came to Donna.

“Enough,” the silver being said when she began speaking of the New Gods and the dark tales they spoke of the creature known as Darkseid. “I do not deny that your need is great, Diana of Asgard,” he said, “but I question the folly of trusting one I do not know.” He gestured to the wreckage of the great city. “This world was once called Zenn-La,” he stated. “I sold myself into slavery to a power even greater than your Enemy to prevent its destruction yet death found my home nonetheless.” He frowned. “Death comes for us all, even gods. Perhaps this … Darkseid is simply the embodiment of that.”

“No,” Diana replied. “He is not death. He is entropy and destruction. Death is natural. What he brings is not.” She exhaled deeply. “I will make no attempt to take the Gem from you by force,” she said. He tilted his head, offered a wry, almost challenging smile, and Diana bowed her head slightly in acknowledgment of how difficult (if not impossible) such a task would be. “But I do ask … has not the Enemy already won if you do nothing? If you simply hide or lose yourself in grief, have you not defeated yourself before the Enemy even draws near?”

The stranger was silent. He stared at her for a long time, studying her with eyes that appeared to be nothing more than pools of silver, with no pupils or irises to focus upon. One of his hands glowed ever so slightly and Diana forced herself to remain calm, to not instinctively tense or reach for her weapon. A warm wind washed over her and it tasted of power she could barely comprehend, let alone match. Oh, but to have an ally like this!
“I have been too long without companionship,” the silver being mused. “Your words have merit, though still, I have doubts.” He shook his head. “You meant to use the Gem to seek out its brother in Olympus, did you not?”

“I did.” Even if she were capable of it, there seemed to be no reason to dissemble.

“Then I shall set before you a task. I will send you to Olympus. If you can wrest the Gem from its holder, you will be worthy of my trust and I shall bequeath to you my Charge.” The silver being lifted its hand – there, buried in the middle of his palm, was a purple stone, gleaming with an inner light. It pulsed brightly and Diana barely had time to snatch up Stormbreaker before the dying world vanished around her.

Diana was falling.

She tumbled through clouds of white and gray, buffeted by hurricane-force winds and speared by jagged bolts of lightning that knifed through the sky with lethal intent. Consciousness and comprehension came instantly, and she tightened her grip on Stormbreaker as she reached inside for her gift of flight. It obeyed sluggishly, as if there was an outside force resisting, and Diana grimaced at the effort necessary to arrest her fall even slightly. She struck the ground a heartbeat later, landing with a titanic boom that threw up dirt and rock for a hundred feet all around her. A cacophony of screams and wails slammed into her as she straightened from her crouch. She was in the middle of a battle, it seemed, and in less than a heartbeat, she chose a side. Summoning her shield, she sprang forward, leaping high into the sky and coming down hard.

Upon a parademon.

There were an endless horde of the creatures, augmented by the usual bio-mechanical monstrosities that Darkseid had thrown against Asgard for centuries. Stormbreaker buzzed and crackled as she laid into the beasts, and the weather-sense that came with the weapon warned her of a coming storm. Acting on instinct, she thrust the uru hammer up, demanding that the lightning overhead obey her. It arced down, spilling onto Stormbreaker, and she used the energy to super-charge her muscles. What remained coursed through the hammer and, as she struck, a lethal wave flashed out, exploding across the ranks of parademons and detonating their cybernetics.

A cheer rose up from behind her, from the wall of shields behind which she had recognized humans and minotaurs, Amazons and Spartans, all fighting under banners that were both tantalizing familiar yet completely foreign. She paid it little mind as she took the battle to the Enemy – where was the bloody captain? She had to find him! – but a moment later, reinforcements smashed into the parademons all around her, spears and swords and shields flashing.

“Hippolyta!” someone bellowed and Diana’s head automatically snapped around, seeking out the woman who was not her mother. “Flank right!” the man roared, gesturing with an immense club dripping with ichor and blood. He was an immense brute, towering over all of the warriors around him, and wore little armor apart from the bizarre lion head that acted like a helmet. Diana’s blood ran cold.

There was no time to react as an armored figure shouted out a battle cry as she led a formation of men and women alike in the direction Heracles pointed. A pair of fierce centaurs galloped alongside them, hurling massive spears that pinned parademons to the ground before magically vanishing, only to reappear inside the thrower’s quiver. Boom! The ground erupted around the attacking formation, slinging corpses and body parts into the air. Diana oriented toward the siege machine without hesitation, spinning Stormbreaker by the sling upon its haft before letting it fly. It smashed through an entire platoon of parademons, slammed into the mobile gun, and released the last of the stored
electricity from the previous lightning strike. With an eruption of fire and metal, the siege machine violently blew apart, the munitions within detonating with another thunderclap. Stormbreaker arced up and then black, the haft smacking squarely into Diana’s hand less than a second later.

She took to the air a moment later and located the battle captain almost at once. Surrounded by augmented parademons deep within the heart of the Enemy formation, he was screaming panicked orders while pointing at her. Diana did not bother smiling as she pulled another lightning bolt from the heavens – this one almost seemed to reflect off of Stormbreaker’s head before stabbing downward and reducing the Apokalips captain to ash.

“Press them, you bitches!” a familiar voice roared. Her mother … no, not her mother. This universe’s Hippolyta thundered forward, batting aside counter-attacks with casual skill while laying waste with a spear that glowed and belched flame.

“Young assistance was timely, Asgardian,” another familiar voice stated. Standing quietly in the air next to her, Hermes cocked his head and frowned, his eyes locked on the twisting Lariat at her side. Without warning, the golden rope coiled tightly around her arm, flooding her awareness with pure Truth. To her sight, a handful of powerful illusions simply fell away – there, just behind this universe’s Hippolyta was Ares himself, and he was laughing as he batted away attacks meant to kill the woman he seemed intent on protecting; over there, a helmeted woman who could only be Athena stepped in front of a great engine of war, her Aegis blocking a killing blast of raw energy and thus allowing the squad of men behind her to survive long enough to hurl explosive charges at the mobile gun. Hades was here as well, walking through the charnel field and doing something to the wounded that kept them from bleeding out.

“I am no Asgardian,” Diana replied. Her instincts drew her eyes up and she found herself staring into the eyes of a furious Zeus. Lightning danced around him and she abruptly realized the depth of her mistake with her summoning of the storm earlier. The time for making good first appearances was clearly gone.

“Nor are you of this reality,” Hermes mused. He offered a very slight if cautious smile. “Father Zeus wishes to address you.”

“And I him,” Diana replied. She floated higher, shifting her grip on Stormbreaker so her fingers also grazed the golden head. The Lariat did not budge from where it wrapped around her – it had coiled around her torso and then down her arm, somehow still allowing perfect freedom of movement – and Diana glanced once more at the battlefield: Olympus had won the day, it seemed, as the forces of Apokalips were fleeing or dead. Her stomach clenched tightly when she saw Heracles and her mother … and Hippolyta embracing in jubilation. She tore her eyes away.

“By what name are you known?” Zeus demanded as she came to within several yards, his voice cracking like thunder. Diana slowed to a halt.

“I was named Diana, by my mother,” she replied.

“And I him,” Diana replied. She floated higher, shifting her grip on Stormbreaker so her fingers also grazed the golden head. The Lariat did not budge from where it wrapped around her – it had coiled around her torso and then down her arm, somehow still allowing perfect freedom of movement – and Diana glanced once more at the battlefield: Olympus had won the day, it seemed, as the forces of Apokalips were fleeing or dead. Her stomach clenched tightly when she saw Heracles and her mother … and Hippolyta embracing in jubilation. She tore her eyes away.

“How did you come to Olympus?” he demanded before holding up his hand to forestall her answer.
“A Gem brought you here,” he said suddenly, his expression darkening even further. “I can smell it on you.” He sent a flicker of lightning toward her, but it merely tickled as it crawled across her body, finally draining away into Stormbreaker. “The Surfer. He sent you.”

“The silver creature?” Diana asked. From Zeus’ reaction, she took her guess to be accurate. “He did send me here, Lord Zeus, but I came from Asgard.” She nodded toward the ravaged battlefield, noting that all of the Olympians had now assembled in a wide circle around her. Apollo studied her with open interest, as did Ares, but Hephaestus was frowning, his eyes locked on her gauntlets as he stroked his beard. Athena’s face was still hidden behind her helmet but the way she stood hinted at confusion and concern; her eyes were also on Diana’s gauntlets … or more accurately, the one on her left arm. Diana almost frowned at that – she had summoned her shield, hadn’t she? Yes, of course she had. It was battle and she did so without conscious thought these days. If Kal’s suspicion about their universe’s Athena were true, could this reality’s version also be Kryptonian? “We too at Asgard face these monsters and have for nine centuries.” Her words caused the Olympians to exchange looks. “King Thor believes the walls will hold but-”

“Thor?” Zeus interrupted sharply. “Odin does not rule?”

“He does not, my lord,” Diana replied. “Thor was king when I and my husband came to this reality to aid in this war.”

“And he sent you to retrieve this.” Zeus brushed aside his beard, revealing a brilliant yellow gem embedded in his sternum. As with the purple one that the silver being had possessed, it burned with an inner light and, to Diana’s surprise, she realized that they were no longer hovering above the battlefield. Instead, they were in the grand throne room of Olympus, with each of the gods seated in their rightful places, while she stood in their center. To her consternation, this room was identical to the one where foul Ares had kept her so very long ago and her eyes instinctively darted to where she had been chained. It was Athena’s seat – that was a change; in Diana’s reality, that had been where Aphrodite reclined – and the helmeted woman tensed slightly.

“He did, my lord,” Diana said, returning her eyes to Zeus. “We mean to reassemble the Gauntlet and push Darkseid’s forces out of this universe forever.”

“Darkseid.” Hades glowered from where he sat. “So,” he said, “our Enemy has a name.” He exchanged a look with Poseidon. “We must discuss this, Brother,” he added, addressing his remarks once more to Zeus.

“This woman must stay in Olympus,” Ares announced. Diana tensed, gripping Stormbreaker tighter, and gave him a cold stare. “You have valuable intelligence on our Enemy,” the god of war said. “We need to know how to beat them.”

“You can’t,” Diana said simply. “Asgard has fought them for nine hundred years and they’re losing. They attack, we defend, and they come again.”

“Then press the attack!” Ares retorted. “I never thought Thor a coward!”

“We’ve tried,” Diana said through clenched teeth. “Their Mother Boxes – the living computers on their arms – cannot be forced to reveal Apokalips’ location and anytime we try to use them to get there, they self-destruct or open a boom-tube to a black hole or somewhere equally dire.” Ares started to speak again, but Diana continued. “It was not always so – the Mother Boxes were once different, less rigid or intensely dangerous. Queen Sif used one to seek out my universe, but now, it is too dangerous to even try.”

“Mother Boxes. Boom-tubes. Apokalips.” Hera shook her head. “You use words unfamiliar to us.”
She frowned at her husband. “Because no one with heads of stone will do so, I will ask you to stay in Olympus for a time. Teach our warriors what you can. Perhaps with your aid, we and Asgard can defeat this Enemy together.”

Diana hesitated. She knew that time was short – even now, Asgard could be overrun by Darkseid’s forces and her family could be slain – but at the same time, she recognized the amazing opportunity now before her. Perhaps she could convince Zeus to work with Thor instead of the Asgardians and Olympians ignoring one another to their respective dooms. Was this any different – apart from scale – than convincing the fools of her Earth to acknowledge the League as a power in and of itself? Gabriel had been insistent that she was necessary for this task … perhaps this was why.

“I accept, my lady,” she said, bowing her head to Hera. “With permission,” Diana continued, “I would ask of Lord Hermes to carry a message to Asgard and the Watchman who guards Bifrost.”

“It shall be so,” Hera said. “Ares,” she said sharply, “see to the defenses. The Enemy will come again and we have no time for dawdling.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Hephaestus, prepare rooms for our guest.” Hera rose from her throne and continued issuing orders, never once glancing toward Zeus. Diana considered that for a moment, then very carefully pretended that she did not notice, even as a theory began worming its way through her thoughts.

“I shall write it out,” she said when Hermes approached some time later. On impulse, she chose Kryptonian as the language of her missive and bit back a slight smile at the look on Hermes’ face when she presented it to him. Like his sisters, Gabriel had never learned to write using the language of his father, so Kal would have to translate and he would be able to discern what she had not put into words. Over the centuries, they had developed a kind of shorthand between them, a personal language that could relate entire volumes of information with a single word or phrase. He would know that she was here of her own volition, that no ill-conceived rescue expedition was necessary. “Now,” she began, turning to face Ares and Athena (who had yet to remove her helmet), “to begin, your formations are too static. You rely too much on infantry weapons and have inadequate air support.” Ares’ face darkened at her implied slight to his planning, but she ignored it. “The parademons generally utilize one of three types of assault formation…”

Days turned into weeks, which became many, many months without warning.

Diana’s presence and knowledge proved absolutely essential to Olympus’ continued survival, and she was never unoccupied. If she was not training with the soldiers and showing them the best (and fastest) ways to kill parademons, she was arguing with the captains who resisted change more intensely than the men and women who did the dying. She worked closely with Hephaestus as well, pointing him in the direction of the weapons that Eitri had developed so very long ago. The god of the forge was fascinated with her armor and, before Diana knew it, was exchanging missives with the dwarves of Niðavellir through Hermes who had become little more than a messenger service. As far as the Olympians were aware, Hermes was also the only source of contact she had with Asgard, but on her first night here, Diana had been woken by a tiny spark of light that she recognized from Zenn-La. She laughed lightly when it reformed into a semi-transparent image of her son and, from that day on, she would brief Gabriel on her daily activities. He was unable to speak through the spark without immense effort or let Kal communicate through it, but just knowing that her son was watching over her was an immense relief.

Still, as the months dragged into a year, and then two, and then five, and then ten, all the while her
negotiations with Zeus and Hera continued meeting dead ends, Diana found herself struggling with intense homesickness. She should not have been surprised – this was, barring recovery time from injuries which did not count, the longest time she’d been away from Kal in over eight centuries. It was astoundingly difficult for her to get to sleep without his presence in her bed and when she did drift off, she quite often snapped awake the moment her subconscious once more recognized that he was not there. The Olympians were distant and aloof – when they weren’t trying to get her into bed, as was the case with both Apollo and, disgustingly enough, Ares – and due to her unusual place in their hierarchy, she was unable to make any friends among the war captains or common soldiers. Oh, everyone was quite pleased to see her when Apokalips was attacking as she easily bested their mightiest warriors in sheer numbers of foes slain, but beyond that, they were uncomfortable around her.

Which was how she found herself here, on the edge of the training grounds, watching the Amazons train.

This universe’s Hippolyta was startlingly different than the one she’d grown up calling Mother – she was fiercer, angrier, more prone to bloodshed but strangely less reticent around men – but there were enough similarities to cause Diana’s heart to ache with loneliness. The laugh was the same, the sense of humor (if admittedly tinged with a bit more malice, a bit more bloodthirstiness), even her leadership style. Hippolyta’s warriors were devoted to her, utterly loyal, and in more than few instances, a little bit in love with her.

The biggest difference, however, was this Hippolyta’s relationship with Heracles (who inexplicably called himself Hercules here, though the reason for his Romanizing the name escaped Diana’s comprehension.) To her surprise, the two were occasional lovers, fiercely competitive, and so frustratingly comfortable with one another that it made her stomach turn. According to what little she’d managed to glean, the Heracles in this universe had not raped and abused Hippolyta, but rather, narrowly escaped a far more predatory Amazon queen intent on keeping him as a brood mare.

“The shield you summon,” Athena announced as she drew abreast of Diana, still wearing that helmet. “Why is it shaped thus?” Intensely blue eyes studied her and Diana smiled.

“Eitri thought it amusing,” she replied. “This is my husband’s crest,” she added as she concentrated slightly. The House of El symbol was one she loved seeing, but she still wished this barrier materialized in the form of a simple hoplon. “And since it was Kal’s, Eitri thought I should wear it as well.”

“Kal.” Athena glanced away very briefly. “Kal-El,” she murmured under her breath. “Your husband is of Krypton.”

“One of the last survivors,” Diana said simply. “In our universe, it was destroyed when he was an infant. His biological parents sent him to Earth so he would survive.” She paused. “His cousin, Kara, came later, and they are, as far as we can tell, the last of their kind.”

“In this reality,” Athena said coolly, “the Devourer of Worlds consumed Krypton thousands of years ago.” She turned away. “There are no Kryptonians left in this universe.”

“Except you,” Diana guessed. Athena froze, visibly inhaled, and then shook her helmeted head.

“No,” she replied softly. “I am of Olympus.” She tilted her head toward the field. “You bear her countenance,” Athena declared. Diana followed the line of the goddess’ gaze and found Hippolyta, standing alone and watching her warriors drill. “She is your mother?”

“My mother was named Hippolyta, yes,” Diana replied. “But she is far different than this universe’s
Hippolyta.” Athena nodded.

“My Father will never give up the Reality Gem,” she said suddenly. “You will be forced to take it from him by force.” Diana gave the other woman a level look.

“I am no thief,” she said sharply. “This is a war we cannot win unless we fight it together.” Diana shook her head. One hundred and twenty-seven months here, countless battles, and now this? Better than ruining the lives of mortals, the Olympians were best at scheming against one another and once again, they tried to bring her into their senseless, wasteful game. She was sick of it, both here and on her Earth with her gods who did the same. She wanted to go home. She wanted to feel Kal’s body next to hers when she slept.

Diana stood.

“Please relay my apologies to Lord Zeus,” she said stiffly. “It has come to my attention that he has no interest in winning this war, so I must retire to Asgard where my family resides.” Athena looked at her through that faceless mask, her eyes wide. “I ask only for Lord Hermes to carry me there – my aid in these last months is certainly worth so small a boon.”

“You do not understand,” Hera murmured as she faded into existence beside Athena. The helmeted goddess bowed her head and backed away, leaving them alone. “The Reality Gem is too potent a weapon to be given to a blunt instrument,” the Queen of Olympus declared. “We have met this Thor and my husband would no sooner let the Gem fall into his hands than he would allow that buffoon of a son who calls himself Hercules to pick it up.” She looked at Diana. “You are keen-witted enough to recognize that, I think.”

“Especially since the Gem that Lord Zeus has in his possession is a fake,” Diana said. The edges of Hera’s lips curved up very slightly. “Forgive me, Lady,” Diana added, “but why the deception?”

“Because if Zeus knew he possessed a fake,” Hera replied as she plucked a yellow Gem from her elaborate headdress, “he would have tried to take it from me.” She examined the stone in her fingers. “I have considered your arguments and find them worthy. This Darkseid is interested not in Olympus, but in this.” Hera frowned. “And if it is elsewhere, then he will seek it there.”

And, without warning, she dropped the Gem into Diana’s hand.

The universe tilted around her. It was as if she had been blind for all of her life and could suddenly see. A subtle whisper echoed in her ear, telling her of the marvelous wonders she could accomplish with this tiny fragment of power from a previous universe. Diana suddenly understood why so many people feared the Gauntlet – with this single Gem, she could reshape reality around her, bend it to her will and force things that should not be to come into being. What could she do if she possessed all six? Diana shivered.

“You can hear it already,” Hera said with a nod. “It grows more difficult to ignore.” She touched Diana softly on the cheek and, thanks to Gem, Diana could feel every atom in the queen’s body. “Be strong, Child,” Hera instructed. “End this war.”

She turned and faded into mist as she walked away.

The Gem pulsed in Diana’s hand and, on instinct, she called Stormbreaker to hand. Instantly, the Gem fixed itself to the hammer’s head, melding into the uru as if it had always been there. Once again, Diana shivered, but she forced her discomfort down. How many lives would be saved when they forced Darkseid from this universe for good?
“You have the look of a woman who means to depart,” Hippolyta said when Diana approached. It was so strange, looking at this woman. The face was the same but the eyes were so very, very different.

“I am.” She paused for a moment, then gave in to the desire that had been building since she first came to Olympus. Before Hippolyta could react, Diana had stepped closer and wrapped her arms around the other woman. “Goodbye, Mother,” she whispered, smiling at how suddenly and completely Hippolyta stiffened at the remark. Releasing the shell-shocked Amazon, Diana began twirling Stormbreaker. Reality instantly began to obey her wishes, twisting and curling around her to form a strange vortex.

Diana stepped through the tear in the universe.

An explosion of energy greeted her as she appeared on Zenn-La.

Overhead, the silver creature was standing atop what sincerely looked to be a board of the same composition as his skin – Zeus’ reference to him as the ‘Surfer’ suddenly made sense – but he simply blinked out of existence a half second after Diana stepped through the rip in reality. When she appeared, he was being pursued by a group of humanoids wearing the black and red denoting their allegiance to Darkseid. There were four of them, two males and two females, though in one of the latter, it was difficult to tell as her entire body appeared comprised of pure energy. Flickering distortions that Diana took to be forcefields of some sort surrounded one of the males, while the other female raced through the sky, leaving behind a curious trail of light that almost looked like a rainbow. The very instant she appeared, the quartet oriented on her.

Without thinking, Diana hefted Stormbreaker, automatically seeking out the best way to end this potential fight quickly and with the least amount of effort. Her earlier disgust with the manipulations of the Olympians resurfaced suddenly along with her exhaustion and she silently lamented the utter inability to actually negotiate with the forces of Darkseid. If only there was some way to sever their connections to him without killing the hosts…

And suddenly, just like that, she saw that there was.

Dark, angry light burned around the four, though that wasn’t an entirely accurate description. It was not light, but rather a complete absence of it, a tiny singularity that absorbed and devoured all forms of light, including the very faint illumination that emanated from within each of the four. Diana did not know if she was seeing their souls or some kind of intrinsic energy that all living creatures possessed, but she knew without understanding how she knew that this singularity was the key.

“Come, Stormbreaker,” she murmured. “Let us speak in the tongue of storms.” Addressing the hammer as if it was alive was something that came naturally to her, though Diana still did not entirely understand why. Perhaps, as she suspected, it was because Stormbreaker was alive in a very real sense. It manifested its opinion in strange ways – with Kal in the rare moments when he lifted it, the hammer tended to pull and tug at him, like a loving hound eager to be set loose in the forest, or how cold the metal grew when around Loki.

Or perhaps she was simply going mad.

Lightning boomed overhead as black clouds swarmed in over them, plunging the entire city into darkness. The quartet visibly hesitated at the swiftness of the storm and Diana could see the singularities pulse. They were receiving instructions, she realized, but it did not make her hesitate. She pulled lightning from the sky, and great sheets of it stabbed down, each striking with unerring accuracy. The singularities flared, tried to absorb the sudden overload of raw energy, and then
exploded soundlessly.

In that instant, the four humanoids screamed.

Diana darted forward, the Lariat obediently flickering out like an immense boa constrictor. It coiled once, twice, three times around each of the screaming figures before going taut. The moment the strands of golden rope touched their bodies, the quartet froze. Two of them twitched before crumpling, while the other pair simply collapsed onto the rough stone. Diana drifted closer, not trusting them enough to dismiss the clouds overhead. She toed one of the bound figures over and frowned.

The girl was human.

Physically, she looked to be only in her twenties, but as someone who also looked that young, Diana knew appearances could be deceiving. The flesh of the girl’s skin was dark, but it was an unnatural color, almost gray as if all color had been leeched away, which looked strange on a young woman who bore a Caucasian facial structure. Curiosity overcame her better instincts and she examined each of the four, noting sufficient similarities to wager that they were siblings. How strange…

She waited for nearly a day for the Surfer to return, ignoring her growing thirst and the building urge to just use the Gem to create water. Her four captives she kept bound by the Lariat, but they did not stir even once from their deep coma-like slumber, which left her plenty of time to consider their fate. The safest thing to do would be to simply execute them – they were clearly post-mortal, with undefined superhuman abilities and a link to Darkseid that may or may not have been permanently severed – but her sense of compassion revolted against the thought. If there was a way to save these mortals and perhaps use what was learned to free others from Darkseid’s control, could she risk not trying to find it? Could the universe?

“Gabriel,” she called out once her decision was made. “I will need you to open the Bifrost and bring me home.” She rolled the four prisoners together and then used more of the Lariat to further bind them all together. Once satisfied they were secure, she carefully lifted them up. It was awkward, but manageable for someone who could tear steel in half. “Advise the king that I am returning with one Gem and four prisoners.”

A moment later, a torrent of light splashed down around her as her son obeyed, and long minutes later, she was stepping through the gateway into the Observatory. Kal was there in an instant, tugging the prisoners out of her arms and passing them off to someone else before enveloping her in a tight hug. As an Amazon, Diana knew she should have been strong and resolute, but instead, she found herself clinging to him just as tightly and fighting a strange urge to weep. Then, Lyta was there, laughing at her and Kal before they pulled her into the embrace, and then Gabriel who somehow managed to extricate himself first and reclaim his place in the center of his Observatory.

“What news, Princess?” Thor rumbled later, when she and Kal entered the throne room together. The Asgardian king looked even more exhausted than before and, from the worried looks he was receiving from Sif and Loki alike, Diana suspected he’d postponed that Odinsleep thing again.

“Partial success,” Diana replied. She lifted Stormbreaker and touched the Reality Gem. It fell into her hand where it shimmered and glowed. “The possessor of the Space Gem departed right after I returned from Olympus.”

“Norrin Radd.” Thor grimaced. “A strange one he is.” He glanced at Sif. “Advise the Watchman to find him.”

“He’s already looking,” Kal said.
“Good.” Thor grimaced as he placed Mjolnir head down upon the table. “I fear I have put the Odinsleep off for too long,” he said suddenly. “It overtakes me now and I know not if the shield will hold whilst I slumber.”

“I can maintain a smaller one for a time,” Loki announced. “We will have to relocate the Observatory again – bring it in even closer than before – but I believe I can protect the Palace.”

“Which leaves the walls unguarded,” Kal said. Thor nodded slowly.

“I leave you a difficult task, Kal-El,” he said.

“We’ll manage.” Both Sif and Loki smiled at Kal’s simple statement. “Who rules in your stead?”

“My queen,” Thor began, but Sif shook her head.

“You will need me, Husband,” she said. “I remember well how your mother had to aid Odin All-Father when he slumbered.”

“And the throne suits me ill,” Loki offered with a smile that Thor returned. A private joke, then. Diana did not care, nor was she especially interested in who would sit on the throne. All she wanted was some time alone with her husband.

“Ullr is far from ready,” Sif remarked sadly. Thor grunted.

“What of you, Kal-El?” he asked suddenly. “Will you and the princess hold my throne whilst I languish in the Odinsleep?”

“Are you out of your damned mind?” Kal asked automatically, his expression aghast.

Diana laughed.
Year Twenty-Seven: Noblesse

Record-Breaking Cold Grips Gotham

-17 recorded at O’Hare at 7 a.m. breaks record Jan. 6 low set in 2014

Friday, Jan 7, 2039 | Updated 9:12 AM CDT

The warnings from government officials were stern: stay inside if you can, limit your time outside and don’t drive unless absolutely necessary.

Gotham’s O’Hare International Airport recorded -17 degrees at 7 a.m. Thursday, breaking existing Jan. 6 low set in 2014. By 8:30 a.m., the official Gotham temperature had dipped another degree, to -18.

With the wind chill factored in, Thursday’s temperatures were in the -40 to -50 degree range and even lower across the Fox Valley. By midday, the lowest recorded wind chill was in Aurora, at -47 degrees. DuPage and Porter recorded -46 degrees and O’Hare reported -43.

Click for more from Gotham Post Online

SHE HATED WINTER IN GOTHAM.

Her back ached miserably as she levered herself out from under her blankets and crawled into the far too cold chair parked next to the bed, but Barbara was too accustomed to the discomfort and pain for it to really register. She hit the bathroom first, then made a beeline to the wall panel to confirm that Sam hadn’t screwed with the thermostat settings – he had, dammit, so she increased the heat by another five degrees – and finally rolled herself to the small but well equipped mini-gym. The specialized automated bicycle was actually her favorite piece, even if it did all of the work for her … or perhaps because it did all of the work for her. Once she was strapped in, she would program it and let the pedals begin turning for however long she had it set to. Twenty years without the use of her legs had led to considerable loss of muscle definition below her waist, but she made every effort to minimize that loss.

While the bike worked her legs, she powered up her integrated laptop and scanned her planned schedule. There was the usual ‘day job’ stuff at the mayor’s office, but there wasn’t anything time sensitive on the docket and she could telecommute from the apartment if necessary. Dad wanted to meet for lunch, which worked out nicely since that was two hours before her three-thirty appointment with Doctor Hoshi. Knowing her dad’s eating habits, they would probably be out of the restaurant in thirty minutes or less, so she might even be able to squeeze in a quick visit to the D.A.’s office to wish Sam luck in person. Providing the weather cooperated, of course.

From there, she turned her attention to her e-mail inbox. As usual, it was already overflowing, and she scanned the virtual messages quickly, marking the ones that were important for further examination while tossing the others. It was frustrating – for all of the amazing spam filters and blocks she had running, a surprising amount of junk still got through – and took longer than she would have liked. There were the usual information requests from the latest incarnation of the Birds of Prey which Dinah was essentially running these days, a couple of messages from Victor in terms of data she’d asked him to obtain for her, and two quick (and short) notes from Tim that were both amazingly terse and wholly useless. Barbara frowned – was it the cowl and cape that turned Batmen into monosyllabic jerks or was something going on that she needed to know about? Gotham had
been oddly silent ever since Christmas, when Batman, Batwoman – it was still hard to think of Cass like that – and Robin ruined a planned terrorist attack.

“Main monitor, on,” Barbara called out and her widescreen television came to life. If Sam had been inside the room, it would have tuned to the Weather Channel, but since she was the only one home, her Oracle desktop was displayed. She clicked through Tim’s nightly logging reports – while making a mental note to once again congratulate Bruce on this new optical tracking software; once she’d gotten used to not needing a mouse and being able to use just her eyes to navigate, it was amazingly easy to use – and began to frown at what she saw. So, it looked like the Jokerz had indeed split into multiple factions and the long-rumored Court of Owls was involved in some way. Interesting. She suspected there would be a dramatic uptick in emergency room visits for gang-members in the coming weeks.

She finished the rest of her workout while responding to her virtual mail and getting as much Oracle work done as she could manage. So much of it was automated these days – the Oracle system was running off code she’d designed herself, with considerable assistance from Kara and Tim, both of whom were borderline computer geniuses themselves. To keep the peace, she’d ensured that they were both ignorant of their respective contributions given their utterly bizarre inability to carry on a conversation without it turning into an argument or snark off; as a result, it was very nearly an A.I. itself, though the thing certainly wasn’t self-aware – which gave her plenty of time to focus on other things. She then hit the bathroom to clean up and get dressed in very thick clothes before finally heading out for the apartment elevator that carried her down to the parking garage.

“If I’d known the roads were going to be so bad,” her father said almost two hours later when they met at his favorite restaurant, “I would have told you to stay in bed.” Barbara grinned.

“And I would have stayed there too,” she replied. “Sam screwed around with the thermostat the other day and it was freezing.”

“Try not to murder him,” her dad remarked with a chuckle. “Don’t tell me he went into work this morning.” Barbara shrugged and her father shook his head. “Half of Gotham is shut down because of this stupid snow and he treks in to dig through old case files? There’s something not right with that boy.” Barbara laughed mostly because she had memories of her dad doing exactly the same thing years and years ago.

She’d met Sam at one of the interminable social functions the daughter of the mayor was expected to attend and they’d hit it off almost instantly. As the assistant district attorney, Sam Young very obviously had plans on succeeding his boss some day and it showed in his work ethic. Their two year relationship was littered with a string of broken promises and cancelled dates … yet Barbara couldn’t hold it against him, not when at least fifty percent of those abrupt cancellations were her fault. Sam was smart enough to know that she was more than just the admin clerk that ostensibly paid her bills, but he still hadn’t tumbled onto her alternate identity as Oracle yet.

“If this is serious,” Tim had told her just last month, “he needs to know.” It was disconcerting being unable to see his mouth thanks to the Batsuit but she knew his body language well enough to recognize that he was at least partially troubled. “He’s making a lot of enemies,” Tim had added in what was unmistakably an approving tone.

“So what did you want to talk about?” Barbara asked once her dad had ordered. She glanced at the wall clock. “It sounded important.”

“It is.” Her father sipped his coffee. “I’m not going to run for re-election,” he said unexpectedly. When Barbara looked at him with shock on her face, he winced. “The stress … my doctor told me that I needed to cut back on it and there frankly isn’t anything much more stressful than running this
stupid city.” They were both silent when the waitress arrived with their meals, but she retreated quickly; that was one of the reasons her dad loved this place. It was a tiny mom and pop diner, but he’d been coming here since before Barbara was even born and the proprietors (who were currently now third generation) understood the value of discretion.

“Is everything okay?” Barbara asked quickly. Her heart was pounding louder than it should have been and she studied him for any sign of weakness. There wasn’t any she noted, though it hit her pretty hard then that he was pushing seventy and had smoked two packs a day for nearly thirty years.

“You’d know better than I would,” he replied wryly, waggling his bushy eyebrows underneath those absurdly old-fashioned glasses he insisted on wearing despite the common availability of corrective surgery. “I’m fine, Babs,” he said when she frowned. “I just … the job isn’t what I thought it would be. All I seem to do is make speeches and try to shake down rich folks for contributions.” He shook his head. “Not being a Democrat didn’t help,” he added in a frustrated tone. That was to be expected – for a considerable portion of its history, Gotham had been a bastion of the Democrat party and the entire political infrastructure had naturally become friendlier toward those of that party. Jim Gordon’s rather vocal stance on aggressive punishment of crimes and less lenience toward offenders put him at odds with the more rehabilitative mindset that Democrats favored, so naturally, he ran as a Republican.

“I bet that’s not going to make the party bosses happy,” Barbara said. Her dad shrugged. “Haven’t told anyone but you yet,” he said. He glanced at his watch and wet his lips. “I’ve got one more stop to make before I drop this bomb on them,” he added and Barbara rolled her eyes.

Bruce. He was going to try and talk Bruce into running again.

“Good luck with that,” she murmured with a smirk. Getting the former Batman to do something that didn’t revolve around his wife or the twins was nearly impossible these days, and Barbara still couldn’t get over how weird it was to see Bruce smile. He no longer seemed to be carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders and even though he just turned fifty last year, he looked a decade younger. Oh, he was still fairly active in the heroing business – Tim routinely picked his brain regarding techniques and methodology, not to mention the hands-on training Damien was receiving – but he never seemed even slightly tempted to relive the glory days. No, her dad had his work cut off for him if he thought he was going to get Bruce to subject himself to the media anal exam that came with running for office…

They chatted a little bit longer, mostly about trivial things, but her father was up and heading out at the thirty minute mark, which made Barbara grin. She still wasn’t sure if it was his military training, his lifetime as a police officer, or his old smoking habit, but she’d honestly never seen him sit through a meal that lasted longer than forty-five minutes. It certainly made official functions interesting.

With time to kill, she drove her van downtown, glad that the streets here were at least easy to navigate. Sam’s car was in its usual place so she parked and wheeled in, smiling when the bored-looking cop on metal detector duty braved the cold to open the door for her. She recognized him – he was a lot older and grayer now, but Barbara remembered him from the days when her dad was the commissioner – and he grinned back her, waving her through without bothering to wand her. Technically, it was against regs for him to do that, but the D.A.’s office seemed to be virtually abandoned.

“You need to stop screwing with the thermostat,” Barbara said by way of greeting when she wheeled into Sam’s office. He visibly jumped in surprise which made her giggle, and then pushed back from his desk.
“I didn’t know you were coming over,” he said as he leaned down to give her a quick kiss before maneuvering her chair so she was almost underneath the heater vent. Barbara hummed with pleasure at the blissful warmth that poured down over her face.

“I’ve got an appointment with Doctor Hoshi,” she said. “Had lunch with Dad and you know how he eats…”

“I do,” Sam said with a grin. He took her gloved hands in his and started rubbing them. “So after he inhaled his food, you figured you’d swing by to harass me about your apartment heater?”

“It was freezing when I woke up this morning!” Barbara gave him a scowl that he blithely ignored as he glanced quickly at the clock on the far wall. Behind him, she could see dozens of old folders and files scattered atop his desk and, from the look of it, all three of his monitors had different files open. “Anything I can do to help?” she asked when he caught her looking.

“I wish,” he replied sourly. “This crap was dumped on me at the last minute and the D.A. expects me to pull a miracle out of this mess…” Sam shook his head. “We’ve got motive, the murder weapon and even a couple of solid eyewitnesses but the Bat was involved in obtaining the confession and you know how the ACLU loves that.” Barbara tried very hard not to frown, but Sam sighed heavily. “And even worse,” he muttered, “I get to argue it in front of Judge de la Vega.” At that, Barbara winced. A relatively recent transplant from Star City, de la Vega was considered the most lenient judge in the entire city, possibly even the state. According to Richard, the GCPD even called her the ‘Walking Judge’ for her tendency to throw out police cases on silly technicalities that she almost delighted in noting.

“Who did you piss off?” Barbara asked. She knew the answer to that already – District Attorney Kitch was facing a difficult re-election and was quite aware that Sam wanted his job – but it made her boyfriend smile so it was worth it. “I was going to see if you wanted to get out of the office for a little bit,” she said, “but it sounds like you’re pretty busy.”

“I am,” Sam said mournfully. He shook the moment off and gave her a much longer kiss. “Though I appreciate the sentiment,” he added with a smile. His good humor became strained. “Doctor Hoshi, huh?” He visibly tried to avoid frowning. “Everything okay?”

“As far as I know,” Barbara replied lightly, though inside, her stomach was beginning to twist and turn. She ducked out of his office minutes later after promising to call him if something big came up and retraced her path to the front desk. To her utter surprise, she found Helena waiting for her.

“Was afraid you’d duck out through a different door,” the woman from an alternate reality said as Barbara approached. Now that the secret about Helena’s otherworldly origins was common knowledge within the Bat-clan, it was impossible to not notice how much she resembled her parents. Barely a month after Bruce and Selina’s wedding, she’d cornered each of the team members and admitted to what some of them evidently already knew. As it turned out, Barbara was actually the last person to find out. Both Bruce and Selina already knew, though neither would admit as to how they learned it, and Tim had figured it out himself which meant Cass knew too. She’d told Richard the night before the wedding, though he’d evidently suspected it for a while himself. Barbara still wasn’t sure why it had come as such a shock to her.

“What are you doing here?” she asked as she braked her chair in front of the woman who had, strangely, turned into one of her closest friends over the last couple of years. Helena smirked as she flipped out her phone – it was not of WayneTech design, which in this family was almost heresy – and pulled up a schedule.

“Doctor Hoshi,” she read. “Three-thirty.” She slid the phone back into her jacket pocket. “I
remember the last time you saw her and how … distressed you were afterward so I figured I’d tag along for moral support.”

“Thanks,” Barbara said, meaning it with every fiber of her being. She didn’t think she could handle being alone today if the news was bad and, for the last six years, every time she visited the doctor, it was bad news. With Helena pushing the chair, they exited the office. Glancing around, Barbara frowned. “How did you get here?” she asked.

“Dragged a certain little bird out of bed and made him drive me here,” Helena said with a grin that Barbara had to share. Richard’s activity logs from the previous night as he put in a patrol as Nightwing had ended at just before dawn, so he’d very likely groaned and complained the entire trip. Of course, by the time he got back to his and Helena’s place, he’d probably be wide awake and irritated at that very fact.

“You’re very cruel,” she remarked approvingly.

They reached the Ability Institute a good hour before her appointment, but Barbara was ushered into an exam room almost at once while Helena vanished, probably to go in search for coffee. According to the nurses, the snow had resulted in a rash of appointment reschedules so there wasn’t anyone else ahead of her and, in minutes, Barbara was suffering through another exhausting round of x-rays and other tests. So much of the equipment had changed over the years and yet, it all still seemed to be the same.

“Good afternoon, Barbara,” Doctor Hoshi said with a smile almost half an hour later. She was accompanied by a handsome woman with dark skin and graying hair. “This is Doctor Shondra Kinsolving.”

“You helped Bruce Wayne recover from his back injury,” Barbara said as she shook Kinsolving’s hand. Her knowledge clearly caused some surprise, but the doctor nodded.

“I did,” she admitted as she nodded to Doctor Hoshi. “Kimiyo asked me to consult on your case.” Barbara’s heart started to race. A consultation? Why? What was wrong? Her panic must have shown on her face because Kinsolving offered a quick, friendly smile. “Relax,” she instructed. “Everything is okay.”

“I brought in Shondra because I think we have an opportunity here, Barbara,” Doctor Hoshi said. “She’s developed a new procedure that we wanted to speak to you about.”

“Surgery,” Barbara guessed. She glanced away, wincing at half-remembered pain and bitter memories.

“Yes and no,” Kinsolving said. “Do you know why you can’t walk?”

“Bullet fragments lodged in my spine,” Barbara answered dully. “Any attempt to remove them will likely damage my spinal cord.”

“Correct.” Kinsolving smiled again. “Which is why I don’t want to remove them. I want to dissolve them.” At that, Barbara glanced up. “Have you ever heard of Extracorporeal Shock Wave Lithotripsy?” Barbara shook her head. “It’s a technique using high-energy sound waves to break up kidney stones.”

“And you think that this … what did you call it?”

“ESWL is easier to say,” Hoshi said.
“You want to use sound waves to dissolve the bullet fragments?” Barbara frowned. “Won’t the vibrations cause the fragments to shift?”

“I told you she would think of that,” Doctor Hoshi said with a grin.

“This procedure isn’t exactly using sound waves,” Kinsolving said, “but there is a risk, yes.”

“But if it works, I might be able to walk again?” Barbara asked slowly, her breath coming rapidly as hope burned in her stomach.

“You’ve spent twenty years in that chair,” Doctor Kinsolving said, “and I expect you’ll still need a cane or crutches from time to time, but if we’re successful, then yes, I think we might be able to get you back on your feet.” She held up her hand when tears started to trickle down Barbara’s face.

“There are still risks, Ms. Gordon,” she said, “and I want you to be absolutely certain that you understand them before we move forward.” She pulled a tablet computer from her jacket. “Kimiyo tells me that you’re brilliant,” she said, “but this is extremely technical so feel free to stop me with any questions you may have.”

“Doctor,” Barbara said with a brilliant smile, “you have my undivided attention.”

As it turned out, the North Atlantic in January was freaking cold.

Under normal circumstances, Bill wouldn’t have noticed – he could survive in outer space after all and had once pursued Ibac all the way to the elemental plane of Ice which, as it turned out, was absolutely nothing like D&D rulebooks described it – but today was as far from normal as he could imagine. For starters, he was thoroughly encased in what felt like an actual glacier that somehow defied his attempts to break free. His head was free and he could breathe, but with each second that passed, he could feel more of his strength leeching away from him and into the ice. Why was it, he wondered, that he had to keep running into sorcerers who actually knew what they were doing? Was it too much to ask for an idiot who explained their plan beforehand?

“There is still time for you to give this up, Tula,” Kaldur’ahm called out from where he was imprisoned next to Bill. He was speaking in his native Atlantean, which was to be understandable considering their opponent. “You can still turn back from this path.”

“Turn back?” The woman who had adopted the title Ocean Master glared at Kaldur and Bill winced at the seething rage in her eyes. Her scarlet hair was shorn close to her skull, and the paleness of her skin stood out against the deep purple and black of the Atlantean armor she wore. “You of all people know I cannot!”

“Please, my love,” Kaldur murmured. “Please.” The emotion in his voice caused the woman to hesitate. She locked eyes with him and, for a moment, Bill thought that the second Aquaman’s heartfelt plea had worked. The moment passed, though, as regret once more filled her face.

“I am sorry, Kaldur,” she replied as she leaped back. The glyphs underneath her armor flared to life as she summoned her magicks. With barely a splash, she knifed into the water and vanished, leaving them behind.

“Well,” Bill said with smile, “this isn’t exactly how I expected to spend my day.”

He’d been the closest flyer on-hand when Kaldur commed for assistance in shutting down a team of Atlantean separatists intent on igniting a war with the surface. Inspired by the late Orm Marius, who had gotten himself killed trying to unseat his brother, King Arthur of Atlantis, they were now led by a dangerously addled young woman named Tula who had, for many years, actually operated under
the identity of Aquagirl herself. Something had happened some years earlier, however, and quite
suddenly, she’d abandoned her previous identity before adopting that of the dead man. Handling
most of the would-be revolutionaries hadn’t been difficult at all – sure, they were quite a bit stronger
and tougher than normal humans, but all that meant is that he didn’t need to pull his punches as much
as he normally did – but then, Tula or Ocean Master or whatever she was called blindsided them
with some serious mojo.

Once more, Bill turned his attention to breaking free. He strained against the ice, hearing it creak and
groan as it resisted his best efforts. If Kaldur wasn’t here, he’d try flying straight up and maybe
locating a conveniently located deserted island to drop down on. Lifting this mess couldn’t be that
hard, could it?

“I apologize for getting you into this, Captain,” Kaldur said. His sad eyes were still turned toward the
spot where Tula had dove into the ocean. “I did not anticipate encountering … her.”

“Well,” Bill said with a grin, “it’s a good thing I don’t understand Atlantean. It would really suck if I
overheard a private conversation that might give someone who didn’t actually know you a reason to
be suspicious.” Kaldur frowned and finally looked away.

“I see,” he said calmly. The magickal glyphs upon his skin were bright, but he obviously wasn’t
having any luck at getting free either. “She is confused,” Kaldur began softly long moments later.
“When Garth died … there was some sort of psychic connection between the two and it negatively
affected her mind.” He closed his eyes and inhaled slowly. “I tried to help her but … after Donna …
I had duties that kept me away from Atlantis and Prince Orm took advantage of my absence.”

“I guess that’s why she’s wearing his old armor, then.” Bill strained again – this time, he heard a
distinct crack. “Doesn’t explain what she was doing here.”

“No,” Kaldur replied softly. “It does not.”

They worked against the ice for several long minutes – it mostly held, though the bright sun
overhead helped loosen their arms. Once, Bill would have simply called down the transformative
lightning, trusting that if it did not shatter their icy prison with the initial strike, he could summon it
again and again until it did, but that time was long past. The Rock of Eternity remained untethered
from this reality and no one, not even Fate or the entity known as the Spectre, seem capable of
locating it.

“Hold on,” Bill instructed once he’d worked his right arm free. He lifted his fist to the sky and then
brought it down hard. With an immense boom, the entire floating prison cracked, sending shards of
ice spinning away and skipping across the ocean. Bill glance at Kaldur, relaxing fractionally when he
saw that the Wisdom of Solomon had correctly located the optimal location to strike. None of the icy
shrapnel had come near the Atlantean who now bore the Aquaman title and Kaldur was already
wiggling free.

“I will give pursuit,” Kaldur announced grimly, nodding in the direction of the wrecked Atlantean
warship containing the hopefully still unconscious separatists. “Can you…”

“Got it.” Bill pushed himself out of the ice and took to the air. He’d covered only a few yards when
he heard Kaldur splash into the Atlantic. Shaking his head, Bill summoned the Speed of Mercury
and flashed through the ship, ensuring that the would-be terrorists were all secured or bound.

Locating someone to take the separatists off his hands was not difficult thanks to Cyborg. Using an
immense anchor as a towline, he dragged the ship to where a joint U.S.-U.K. naval training exercise
was taking place and very quickly turned the terrorists over to the senior commanders. The two men
had already been prepped for this – Victor again – so it was just a matter of signing some paperwork, which was a whole lot easier these days, now that his identity was publicly known.

“Thank you for your assistance, Mister Batson,” the American admiral said before sheepishly asking if he could autograph something for the man’s grandson. Bill was all too happy to do that, but it opened up a floodgate of other requests – the British senior commander, most of the admin officers, then the deck crew – and before he knew it, an entire hour had passed. Thankfully, Cyborg saved his butt from another hour of signing.

“League alert,” Victor’s voice announced through the communicator. “All airborne assets needed at Kahndaqi border.”

“On my way,” Bill said as he shook the admiral’s hand once more. “Duty calls,” he said and, to a man (and woman), the sailors present nodded in understanding. After all, duty was a way of life for them as well.

He reached Kahndaq long minutes later, joining Kara, Majestic, Firestorm, the active Lanterns, and those Russian guys in the power suits. A solid column of cerulean light climbed up from the capital city, vanishing into the sky. Bill’s skin crawled – this was magick. He shook his head in disgust.

“Watchtower, this is Marvel,” he said as he drifted closer. His words drew the attention of the assembled personnel. “We’re going to need Fate and Zatanna.”

“Magic,” Kara said bitterly, unaware of an identical expression on Majestic’s face. The Kherubim might insist his species wasn’t remotely related to Kryptonians, but they certainly had the same lack of defenses against arcane arts. “How can we help?” Kara asked a moment later.

“Dunno.” Bill frowned. “We’ll need containment,” he said. “Until we know what this is, though, none of you should get any closer to it.”

“Containment!” Majestic scowled but Kara gave him a flat look that caused him to back down. They’d duked it out a year or so ago, when Majestic had been briefly under the influence of a pretty powerful alien telepath, and Kara had thoroughly demolished him. It had been both illuminating and intimidating for the arrogant Kherubim, not to mention more than a little humiliating, but it still made Bill laugh. He likened it to them being wolves and Kara establishing exactly which one of them was the alpha.

“Stay safe,” Kara instructed as Bill turned back toward the column of light. He shot her a grin. “Where would be the fun in that?” he asked before letting himself fall toward Shiruta.

It turned out to be an attempted dimensional incursion by djinn, which wasn’t nearly as fun to handle as it sounded, and within seconds of arriving, Bill was forced to call in reinforcements. That turned out to be something of a minor disaster, especially when both Kara and Majestic were transformed into bizarre-looking dog-like creatures. Naturally, the two turned on each other and to Bill’s disgust, they somehow still retained their natural abilities. Even worse was how the Majestic dog kept trying to mount the Kara one and she kept trying to tear his throat out. Thankfully, Fate chose that moment to arrive, bringing with him Zatanna who almost casually broke the spell of transformation.

They finally sealed off the portal shortly before dawn but matters still weren’t completely resolved as there was at least two rogue djinn still running around, not to mention the damage that needed to be repaired and the culprit identified. An entire day was lost chasing down one of the djinn, and then another finding a way to permanently contain it – Bill wanted to use an indestructible lamp, just for symmetry, but Fate refused to cooperate and Zatanna was too exhausted. The second djinn they
couldn’t find, but they did finally track down the moron who had caused this entire problem. He wouldn’t be an issue, though, not with how his body had been utterly incapable of containing the amount of raw magick that coursed through him when he opened the dimensional gateway – Bill guessed that they’d never find all of the pieces of the would-be god, although the larger chunks were easy enough to locate.

Kara vanished the moment he turned his back, wordlessly turning over the entire operation to him without telling anyone where she was going. Thankfully, the League did not question his authority – not even Majestic, who seemed more intent on pretending he hadn’t just been a flying dog than arguing – and they finally finished rescue efforts on noon of the following day.

“No one ever told me about this part of the job,” Firestorm muttered as she and Simon took to the air, and Bill gave her a chuckle.

“You thought it would be super-villains and planetary crises all the time, didn’t you?” he asked. She shrugged, which was always weird to see in her body of flame appearance. “Get some rest, you two,” Bill ordered as he accelerated toward the stars.

He arced down, bleeding off as much of his velocity as he could before he breached North American airspace. The communicator attached to his belt buzzed slightly, though it was a different type of vibration than the usual League alert, and Bill smiled slightly in recognition. He’d been wearing the transponder for several years now, ever since he helped NORAD out with a rogue cyber-war robot thing and learned how often his airborne jaunts caused trouble with world-wide air traffic control. Now, every airport in the world would know where he was (except when he turned off the transponder), which made it easier for enemies to locate him but was, in general, safer for everyone else.

“Another wellness check?” Luthor asked when Bill ducked into the cancer lab that had become the man’s home. For a former president, he looked rough, with thinning hair that needed to be cut and a four-day beard, but compared to how he’d appeared right before his wife died, Bill had to admit it was an improvement.

“Just checking in,” he said in response. Luthor grunted but did not budge from where he sat behind a wall of monitors. “How are things?” Bill asked.

“Progressing rapidly,” came the instant reply. “Kindly inform Ms. Starr that I will need to meet with a number of oncologists as soon as possible.” He gestured toward one of the monitors and a number of pictures and files started appearing. “This is my preferred list, but I understand that not all will be available.”

“I'll check with her,” Bill said. He started to frown when Luthor did not reply, but forced the expression away. “Is there anything else I can get you?” he asked, fully expecting a brusque no. To his surprise, Luthor half-turned to face him.

“An explanation, if you please.” Luthor’s eyes were narrowed. “Ms. Starr’s antipathy toward me is easily understood – I was, after all, responsible for her current physical condition. You, however, have shown no sign of that.” Now, it was confusion the former president’s face. “And I don’t understand why not.”

“You’re trying to be a good guy,” Bill replied. “Superman trusted you-“

“He did no such thing,” Luthor interrupted with a very slight smile.

“All right.” Bill shrugged. “He wanted to trust you. He wanted you to be the man you could be, not
the one you were. So he gave you the benefit of the doubt.”

“And you’re doing the same.” Luthor frowned. “Why?”

“Why not?” Bill grinned. “You’ve earned a little trust, Mister Alexander.” Luthor grunted and then turned back to his work.

Bill ducked out of the clinic soon after, pausing briefly to chat with one of the ten or fifteen Secret Service agents scattered through the building. After confirming that the former president was, in fact, eating regularly and getting adequate rest – apparently, the protection detail had sicced the Alexander children on Luthor and they had bullied their father into taking care of himself – he took to the air once more, this time angling toward one of the more prominent Gotham landmarks. A moment later, he was floating just outside Tim’s office in the Wayne Enterprises building.

“Unlike you,” the current Batman growled when he let Bill in, “I actually have an identity to protect.”

“We’re on the thirtieth floor,” Bill replied. “And it’s too damned cold out there for normal people.” He glanced around the office, noting the almost complete lack of personal effects. Officially, Tim Drake was in charge of WayneTech’s Applied Sciences department, although most business magazines were convinced this was just a clever bit of misdirection to cover his real job as Bruce Wayne’s heir designate.

“Of which I am one,” Tim said. He pulled a remote control out of his pocket, aimed it at his office door, and pushed a button that instantly triggered the lock. “Make it fast.”

“Does the grumpy come out when the sun sets?” Bill asked as he crossed his arms over the lightning bolt emblazoned upon his tunic. “Or is that just something you have to work on?” Tim sighed.

“What do you want, Bill?” he asked in a tired voice.

“I checked on … the package like I promised.” Bill shook his head. “He’s still doing okay.” At that, Tim offered a trademark Bat-grunt which made Bill smile again. “Mostly, though,” he continued, “I’m here to see if I can get you to stop being an utter ass to Kara.” This time, Tim scowled. “I don’t get it, man. You and Kon were friends. It isn’t metas you don’t like…”

“Personality conflict,” Tim replied. He stalked back to his chair. “Kara doesn’t like me. I don’t like her. Simple as that.”

“The two of you are a lot alike,” Bill pressed. “Driven, computer nuts, brilliant…” He trailed off when Tim’s phone rang.

“Go home, Bill,” the Batman said as he picked up his phone. “Tim Drake,” he said. Shaking his head, Bill backed out of the window and climbed into the sky once more. He slowed to a stop several thousand feet up, looking down at the world that stretched out before him.

He found Kara at the Fortress, buried in the holo-library. By the look of it, she was once more digging into the Kryptonian medical database in an attempt to arrest her rapid (for a member of her species) aging. Thus far, she’d been unable to even isolate an explanation for why it was happening, let alone develop a way to arrest it, and Bill still wasn’t sure how to best help. He barely understood the science behind this sort of thing and extending one’s life by use of magic almost always had dangerous ramifications.

“Have you eaten?” he asked when she glanced up at his approach. From the guilty look that flashed across her face, he guessed she hadn’t. “Come on,” he said as he offered his hand. “Let’s go get
“Keep running those simulations, Kelor,” Kara said as she let him pull her to her feet. “I’m sorry I’m being so … flaky of late.”

“Have you?” Bill smiled. “I hadn’t noticed.” He winced when she punched him in the arm. In the main hall, they paused, both of their eyes automatically going to the elevated stand that contained the strange diamond Kara was convinced came from the future. It had defied conventional scans – Kelor could not identify several elements of its composition – and the one time Bill had touched it, he’d been convinced it was magical. At the moment, it floated within a containment field, pulsing briefly every thirty-six hours. “Any news?” Bill asked. Kara shook her head.


“Sounds great,” he replied. They were airborne moments later.

Of all the people Bruce expected to see at the door of the manor, Jim Gordon was pretty low on the list.

He ushered the mayor in quickly, hanging up the older man’s coat and instructing one of Selina’s minions to get them some coffee before leading Jim to the sitting room. The mayor’s slight frown in the direction of the maid almost caused Bruce to smile.

“I swear,” Gordon said the moment they were alone, “I think I arrested her once.”

“You probably did,” Bruce admitted. He shook his head when Jim looked at him. “Selina recognized her name when we were looking for help a couple of years ago.” Bruce sighed. “I was distracted and didn’t recognize her until much later.”

“So let me get this straight,” Jim said with a growing smile. “She hired one of her old henchwomen?”

“Not just one,” Bruce replied. At that, Gordon laughed out loud. Bruce let him, smiling himself even as a deeply buried part of him squirmed in discomfort. Even now, years after the fact, he still couldn’t figure out why he hadn’t immediately recognized the names that Selina picked out of the list of potential help – she later admitted that she’d actually expected him to reject the names outright and had incorrectly presumed that his sign off on their employment was a symbol of trust. The former henchwomen were excellent domestic help (and frankly making more money with better benefits than probably sixty or seventy percent of Gotham citizens) who were fully cognizant of Selina’s former identity, but were thankfully ignorant of his.

He hoped.

“So tell me,” Bruce said later, once they both had coffee and the door to the sitting room was closed, “why the visit?” He nodded to bay window and the blanket of white that was the lawn. “It’s pretty dangerous out there right now.”

“It is,” Jim replied. He inhaled. “I’ve decided against seeking re-election.” Bruce frowned at that, but Gordon continued. “I’ve spoken with Barbara about this already, so you’re not the first person to know.” Bruce leaned back slightly, his thoughts racing.

“Is everything okay?” he asked. “I’m guessing this is medical-related.”
“It is.” Jim smiled. “My doctors told me to lay off the stress.” The former commissioner sipped from his coffee. “But the reason I’m here…”

“You want me to run,” Bruce guessed. He returned his cup to the table. “Why?”

“Because I think you’d do a fantastic job, Bruce.” Jim offered a slight smile. “I know that a lot of people have been after you to run…”

“Like you wouldn’t believe.” Bruce glanced away. Since before even the wedding, he’d been fending off political operatives from both of the major parties. To the Republicans, he was almost ideal – his positions on taxes, aggressive policing, harsh penalties for repeat offenders, and even state rights matched the GOP’s official policy – but his unyielding stance on gun control drew Democrat interest. In his youth when all that mattered was The Mission, he’d officially registered as an Independent mostly because he’d needed to be able to move among both parties without drawing too much attention. It had just been easier to appear as little more than an indecisive buffoon. These days, he had not bothered changing party affiliation for simple reason that he agreed with positions on both sides.

“You’ve got the name recognition,” Jim said after a moment, “and we both know that there isn’t any way the party bosses can intimidate you into doing something you don’t agree with.” This was said with a smirk that Bruce had to return. “Gotham needs you again, Bruce,” Gordon said.

Bruce grunted.

As arguments went, that was probably the most compelling he’d heard and he agreed to give it some thought. Jim was a smart man – he changed the subject almost instantly, asking about the twins and the other two ‘official’ Wayne children, Cassandra and Damien. Bruce gladly shifted gears and they discussed kids for a little while, steering clear of the oddities that revolved around Talia’s son. Having Damien appear in his life had been an utter shock – as usual, Selina handled it with more poise and grace than Bruce – and the media circus that had descended was even worse than when they officially revealed Cass’ false parentage.

Jim left shortly thereafter and Bruce retreated to his study where he sat quietly to think. As much as he hated to admit it, his instincts were telling him to throw his hat in the ring and go for it. He’d not worn the cowl for almost four years now and, thanks to Selina, he’d only rarely regretted being unable to suit up. Still, he could not help but to feel like he was letting Gotham down. Bruce found himself staring at the painting of his parents and wondered.

“Is there a reason you’re hiding in here?” Selina asked when she found him sometime later. Outside, the sun had dropped behind the horizon and his entire study was dark. He glanced up and found her watching him from where she leaned against the doorway, smirking as she watched him. “You missed dinner.”

“Sorry,” Bruce muttered as he forced himself to his feet, ignoring the pops and crackles that resulted.

“I already put the twins to bed,” Selina said as she tilted her head. “You missed seeing them play with Damien in the snow,” she added with a bright smile. “I’ve never heard him laugh before.”

“He laughed?” Bruce mentally kicked himself for missing that.

“Kitty told me that Jim Gordon was here,” Selina remarked as he drew closer. She laughed at the automatic wince that the maid’s name caused. “He asked you to run for mayor, didn’t he? And you’re going to say yes.” Bruce blinked, then shook his head.
“This is why I had so much trouble catching you,” he muttered with a soft smile. Selina’s eyes lit up for a moment and she looked to be on the verge of laughter.

“You’re not that hard to read, Bruce,” she said. When he kissed her, she purred in approval, knowing full well how that turned him on. Bruce pulled back and Selina gave him a searching look. “I’ve always known I’m your second love,” she added with another smile. “You’ve always had this terribly dysfunctional relationship with this city and she needs you again…”

“It isn’t like that,” Bruce started, but Selina snickered.

“It’s exactly like that,” she replied. Her eyes danced. “Which party?” she asked abruptly.

“Neither,” Bruce said. “They both have too much baggage for me to really make a difference.”

“And just imagine,” Selina said with another laugh. “The mayor will have the Bat in his pocket!” She meant it as a joke, but Bruce glanced away with a frown. That was something else he would have to consider – the urge to use Tim, Cass and Damien as his personal operatives would be very tempting, especially since he could so easily rationalize it as for the common good. Power corrupted so easily … he would have to speak with the team before he moved forward with this plan. “Stop thinking, Mister Mayor,” Selina ordered. She kissed him again. “Come to bed.”

With a smile, Bruce obeyed.
Brothers shall strive | and slaughter each other;
Own sisters’ children | shall sin together;
Ill days among men, | many a whoredom;
An axe-age, a sword-age, | shields shall be cloven;
A wind-age, a wolf-age, ere the world totters.

The sun shall be darkened, | earth sinks in the sea,--
Glide from the heaven | the glittering stars;
Smoke-reek rages | and reddening fire:
The high heat licks | against heaven itself.

Excerpt from *Gylfaginning (The Fooling of Gylfe)*, of the *Prose Edda* by Snorri Sturluson

---

**THE SKY WAS BLACK WITH BOOM-TUBES.**

Horns wailed. Thunder rumbled. The darkened sky was crisscrossed with energy blasts as they flashed over the battlefield, exploding against walls of energy or shattering flesh. Lightning stabbed earthward, exploding upon impact and hurling debris and broken bodies into the air. Screams of rage and of pain mixed with the cacophony, but neither could be heard over the explosions that rocked the whole of Asgard. Crimson and golden flashes streaked overhead, tearing through floating sky-barges and battalions of skyborne parademons as wind shrieked at hurricane intensity. No quarter was given. None was sought. There could be only victory or death.

The air trembled with her passing, but Diana of Themyscira – late of Asgard – gave it no thought as she hurtled toward her target. Looming high over the charnel field below, the immense skyship relentlessly pounded away at the entrenched defenders, unleashing salvo after salvo of high explosive ordnance, and with each detonation, another chunk of the wall was shattered. The Valkries stood at the gaps, led as always by Þrúðr, and they held the line, unmoving, unyielding, resolute, their brilliant energy shields trembling as they absorbed each new directed strike. In another time, at another place, great sagas would have been sung about their stand, about how they refused to falter even though their technology hovered on the brink of failure, but today, it was simply one more act of heroism among millions. Arrayed around and behind them, the Einherjar laid down a withering barrage of defensive fire, tearing apart entire formations of aerial parademons or sending smaller skyships tumbling to a fiery death below, but their guns were too small to damage the monstrosity Diana angled for.

With a titanic *boom* that was heard across the entire battlefield, she struck the battleship, Stormbreaker leading the way. Armor that could withstand the heat of an exploding star yielded only slightly upon impact, but penetration had never been her goal. Instead, she pushed back off the warship like a swimmer kicking off a wall and climbed even higher, dipping up and around before letting herself fall to the deck of the vessel. It was still trembling from her initial impact when she landed, but Diana easily found her balance and began spinning Stormbreaker by the unbreakable sling attached to its haft. Faster and faster she twirled the uru hammer, so fast in fact that the air around the hammer caught fire, but still, it was not enough. Her shield sparked and hissed as the parademons manning the warship turned their weapons upon her, but Eitri’s work held.

And then, she struck.

She brought Stormbreaker down upon the warship’s deck, only barely aware of how her Lariat had
already coiled itself around her and darted out to wrap around the ship, securing her in place. Enchanted uru, forged in the heart of a dying star, struck against metal cast upon black Apokalips. With a scream, the deck of the skyship shattered, exploding around her as if she had detonated an immense warhead at her feet. The heat bloom washed over her, splattering against the invisible shield protecting her. Screaming parademons were thrown into the sky, their entire bodies aflame, and the shockwave itself would have sent her tumbling had it not been for the Lariat.

But Diana was not done.

Hanging there, suspended over the damaged warship, she spun Stormbreaker again, grimacing at the heat rolling off the weapon, before releasing it. Down it streaked, tearing through metal and flesh and guns, smashing through vacuum sealed doors and burning a terrible path toward its destination, the great engine of this beast. Even as it sailed toward the heart of the monster, Diana was gripping the twin strands of the Lariat that stretched out to either side of her and pulling.

Metal squealed and crumpled as Diana strove against the unyielding hull – had it been anything else, any other rope in the universe, the Lariat would have burst, but she’d discovered that it was fueled by the one thing that drove her: Truth. Darkseid did not belong here. He had no place in this universe. She knew this as Truth in her very cells and because she did, the Lariat held. The warship was not so fortunate.

Stormbreaker reached the power core at the same moment the vessel’s stern broke, and the resulting explosion simply disintegrated the lower half of the battleship. Diana sprang up, the Lariat instinctively obeying her desires and releasing its implacable hold upon the dying skyship, and a moment later, Stormbreaker streaked up to join her, tearing a gaping hole through a much smaller Apokalips vessel as it did. The instant the hammer smacked into her hand, Diana began spinning it once more, this time summoning wind and storm to buffet the dying skyship. It rolled as the beyond hurricane-strength gales slammed into it, and then fell, trailing fire and debris to smash into and roll over parademon formations.

A solid column of crimson light smashed into Diana even as she was turning to take stock of the battle, hurling her back and into the ground where her impact dug a deep furrow through the blood-soaked earth. Another immense warship, the twin of the one she had just sent to its death, lumbered closer, followed by a third and a fourth and a fifth. Throwing herself up and out of the new-carved trench, she prepared to throw herself once more into the fire.

Thus it had been for over a century. Since her return from this universe’s Olympus, there had been no respite, no pause in the hostilities, no time to catch their breath or replenish their numbers. Apokalips came day and night, hurling untold millions at the defenders of Asgard with the sole intent of battering down the walls. Diana could not recall the last time she had slept – there was no time and by her mother’s name, she would not yield.

Had it not been for the arrival of Olympus nigh on fifty years back, Asgard would have fallen decades ago. There had been no warning, only a flare of light and then, Amazons and Spartans and monsters of legend were there, hurling themselves into the war with an exuberance the Asgardians had long ago lost. Ares and Athena brought their lethal talents to the conflict, both so terrifying in their awesome glory that most enemies would have fled rather than face them. Zeus brought his own lightning to the war, and Hephaestus labored alongside Eitri to craft even more deadly weapons and armor. Heracles, wielding a club that shimmered like a star, was ever in the vanguard, laughing and killing like an Asgardian born. But none of them, not even Zeus himself, made as much difference as one other god.

Apollo burned like a brilliant star, his splendor supercharging Kal to the point that Diana’s husband
seemed unstoppable and so powerful that he could break a world with his bare hands. Their children too experienced the sudden increase of power – Lyta was abruptly stronger than anyone on the field, even Kal, and in the rare moments when Gabriel was forced to take the field to defend the Bifrost, Asgard’s last chance for flight should the worst scenario occur, he was a blur, a flash of light that struck faster than any eye could see and left only smoking corpses.

But still, it was not enough.

On and on the forces of Apokalips came. Where one fell, fifty took its place. Even the most advanced Asgardian or Olympian technology had little defense against weapons that tore open holes in reality or violated every natural law known to men or gods. Darkseid was infinite, the maddened prisoners would rave before they sought a means to destroy themselves, but it seemed his patience was not. After a thousand years, he had tired of the game and now threw numbers that were beyond belief at them.

“Citizens of Asgard,” a dark and terrible voice boomed, seemingly coming from everywhere. “I am Darkseid and I come to claim what is mine.”

Locating the source of the voice was not difficult. He stood atop a floating war-barge, his arms clasped together at the small of his back. A giant, he was exactly as she remembered him, with the cruel and sinister face seemingly chiseled from rock. Diana’s hand ached in half-remembered pain the instant her gaze shifted to the hideous scar that had taken his left eye, but there was something else … something … different about the monster.

Kal streaked down out of the sky, heat bubbling off him as he tore into the monster without warning or hesitation. Barely a fraction of a second later, Thor and Heracles were there as well, screaming their defiance and battle cries. Visible shock waves from the blows being traded erupted outward, tearing apart entire battalions and shattering the earth for miles around. Diana had just enough time to throw up her shield before the wave slammed into her, driving her back. She grimaced and began spinning Stormbreaker, eying the wild melee as she tried to pick the most effective angle of attack – somehow, despite the immense power being direct at him, Darkseid was unmoved. He caught Heracles’ arm and hurled the demigod away, batting aside Thor’s planet-cracking attack with Mjolnir as if it was little more than an insect bite, all the while ignoring the mighty blows Kal was raining down upon him. It was as if they were beneath him, as if he was so much more powerful than they that he could pay them little attention. Something was terribly, terribly wrong.

“Enough.” Darkseid backhanded Kal with sufficient force to drive her husband back into the dirt. Energy danced around the master of Apokalips as Kal sprang up, blurring back toward the Enemy, and Diana suddenly felt a frisson of fear crawl up her spine. She and Kal were so much stronger now than when they’d first faced him but he seemed even greater than before. What sources of power had he found to augment his abilities thus? She thrust aside the worries as she prepared to hurl herself into a battle they could not win. If she was to die this day, then she would do so at Kal’s side, warring with gods and fighting to preserve life against a creature that was the antithesis to everything she stood for.

In that moment, the Bifrost opened.

The flare indicating activity lasted for but a moment – it flashed so quickly that hardly anyone noticed – but Diana was ever attuned to where her children were and her head snapped around just in time to witness a streak of silver coursing through the sky toward her. She had only seconds to recognize the Surfer before he was upon her. Gone was the damage she recalled – he was intact and terrifying in that moment, with pitiless eyes and a face just familiar enough to be utterly alien. Something glittered in his gleaming hand.
“Do what must be done,” he ordered as he touched Stormbreaker. The universe tilted wildly around her – Diana could feel *everything* around her. She saw the quickest way to *everywhere* – there was the path to Midgard, to Earth, and there, with a slight Touch was the path back to Norrin Radd’s homeworld. Yet another unseen road beckoned to her; with but a thought, she could reach the end of the universe or perhaps it’s very heart. All routes were open to her. She could go anywhere in an instant. In less than an instant.

The Surfer was already gone, racing toward the fight with Darkseid at speeds just shy of lightspeed, but to Diana’s eyes, he might as well have been crawling. She glanced down to Stormbreaker where she found the pulsing violet Gem embedded in the uru hammer and then looked up. Despite the distance, she felt Darkseid’s gaze instantly hone in on her. He could feel the Gem, could feel its sisters hidden away in the Vault.

And he lusted for them.

Diana vanished from the battlefield even before she fully realized that it was her desire and when she opened her eyes, she was once more within the Vault. The Gauntlet floated before her, suspended in the Void-Lock that Thor had erected around it, but the Gems burned brighter than ever before. They had tried to use it without this, the Space Gem, while the Surfer remained hidden from sight, but it had resisted cooperation, had struggled and fought and rejected their efforts. Now, they were out of time.

She did not even have to reach for the Gauntlet or deactivate the Void-Lock; one moment, it was within, the next it was upon her shield hand, the Space Gem already fitted to the appropriate slot. Comprehension flooded her awareness – with this weapon, there was nothing she could not do. Time and space and reality itself were toys for her to mold, to reshape, to sculpt into what she desired. Thought became reality in a microsecond and she was suddenly back upon the battlefield.

Time had frozen around her. Her beautiful Kal was there, reeling back from a blow delivered by Darkseid who yet struggled with Thor and the Surfer and even brilliant Apollo himself. For miles – five, in fact, though the knowledge of the exact distance was an abstract she did not comprehend until she bent her mind toward it – there was no other combatant. Instead, the earth itself was blackened and dead, pulsing with the same evil that dripped from the monster at the heart of this battle. Darkseid himself was hazy, indistinct, and she instantly comprehended why. He was not fully anchored in this reality, which meant she could not kill him, could not render him into so much nothingness. Diana’s eyes flashed as she calculated the many other things that could be done.

And then, Darkseid began to move.

He was slow, ponderous, but still, he shifted in place, his ghostly after-image always a half-moment too slow. The Time Gem pulsed – this should not be possible. Here, in this universe, at this moment, she had absolute control over Time. He should have been as frozen as the rest. And yet, he was not, which hinted at even more power than anyone had anticipated. With a black scowl, the monster spoke.

“Give me the Gauntlet,” he rumbled.

“No,” Diana replied as she sank deeper into the Gems. She gathered all of the power available, swam through the tide of eternity in a picosecond, and focused her will. Darkseid and his forces had no place in this reality. She felt the Lariat tighten around her arm, felt the Absolute Truth in that thought, and realized how to make it come into being. Yes. That was what needed to be done.

She spoke. One word only, but a Word backed up by the power of Infinity. And with that single, solitary Word, she changed reality.
“Begone,” Diana of Themyscira ordered.

Space and Time and Reality warped around Darkseid, wrapping him in a cocoon of nothingness that could not be resisted, could not be fought, could not be escaped. His single eye flared and crimson light erupted from it, but it was Power of a sort and Diana simply turned it back upon him. He screamed as his body exploded – Time flowed backward and the eruption of fire and death suddenly became an implosion that tore this fragment of his Mind and Soul free from the part of him that remained hidden away in his own reality. The shell that had been Darkseid fell away and Uxas, the slayer of the old gods, the mad tyrant who sought only power and entropy, fell into oblivion. He was not dead, of course – given time, he would be able to regenerate himself – but she knew he was badly damaged, perhaps more injured than ever before. It was a good beginning.

The Gauntlet whispered other things to her, reminding her of her duty, and Diana nodded. She allowed Time to restart around her and then, with a wave of her Gauntleted hand, sealed off the boom-tubes forever, cutting this entire reality away from Darkseid’s access. Some of the gateways slammed shut instantly even as great engines of war were emerging, and the abrupt termination of these extra-dimensional portals sheered those weapons in half. They tumbled to the ground and vanished as she folded Space around them before hurling the broken fragments into the empty Nothing that existed (or did not exist; it was difficult to determine) between realities.

Satisfied at that, she turned her attention to the forces of Darkseid. Far too many of them were of this universe, tortured and brainwashed into loyal obedience to him, and she scoured away all traces of his influence with but a thought. Others were not of this reality and their very presence was an open, bleeding sore to the universe. She momentarily contemplated simply erasing them from existence, but Kal floated into her sight and she recoiled from what her eyes beheld. He too was an abomination in this reality – she lifted up her right arm and saw how her presence here twisted and tore the fabric of what was. No, she would not obliterate those entities but instead, she altered them, twisted their very essence down to the tiniest particle so that they were now a part of this reality. In a way, she realized that she had killed and rebuilt them, quark by quark, lepton by lepton. It would have to be enough, for returning to Apokalips was no longer an option for these creatures.

“Diana?” Kal was staring at her, his eyes wide, and beyond him, she could see the whole of Asgard looking to the heavens where she stood. Was she glowing? Oh. That was unexpected. Her eyes burned with the intensity of a nova and her skin felt too tight, too small, too … mortal. She wanted to smile, wanted to exult over the end of the war, but the Gauntlet pushed at her, whispering of the other things she could yet accomplish. There was so much death and destruction wrought in Darkseid’s wake – she could undo it! She could make it right once more! Her eyes cast across the field of the dead – there were so many…

“Diana of Themyscira.” The voice thundered all around her and Diana found herself staring at a sight she could barely comprehend even with the Gauntlet in hand. A giant of the purest gold faced her, silver light radiating from its eyes, and with a start, she realized that its head floated above its body. It had three faces – one fully covered, another partially so, and the final one uncovered completely. A star burned within the giant’s chest and Diana could feel the Power coursing from this being.

“You have come for the Gauntlet,” she guessed. The giant offered no reply as it stared at her with its glowing eyes. What right does this creature have to take what is rightfully mine? Diana’s eyes narrowed. With this Gauntlet, she could defeat this entity and make right what was wrong with this reality. She could undo the mistakes of Time and remake everything. There would be no war or hate or violence, only love and compassion. She could undo Death itself and bring about a Paradise worthy of the name! If this entity wished to prevent that, then this entity was the Enemy.
The Lariat of Truth tightened around her body once more.

Her anger fell away as she quickly as it came and Diana abruptly felt a fool. She had been warned – Thor, the Surfer, even Lady Hera herself had warned how the Gauntlet wished to be used. Power corrupts, she had once heard, and she knew it better than most. Glancing away, she looked up her beautiful Kal once more, peering past the wound in reality his passing wrought and into his very soul. It burned, brilliant and pure. Tarnished, perhaps, by the wages of war and his hatred for all things Apokalips, but the man she’d fallen in love with, the Superman she’d taken to her bed and whose children she’d happily bore, was still there. She glanced toward her children - Lyta was standing amongst a carpet of corpses while Gabriel watched from Heimdall’s Observatory – and almost wished she had not. They were of Asgard. They belonged here.

“I yield the Gauntlet to you, Tribunal,” she announced softly, only vaguely surprised that she knew this being. The giant’s eyes flashed and, in rapid succession, the Gems flared brightly before vanishing. Diana opened her mouth to speak, to ask the Living Tribunal if it could send her and Kal back to their own reality or if it had already chosen good stewards for the Gems, but no words emerged. Her consciousness, connected to all of reality only moments ago – shuddered as it contracted back to the oh so limited shell that was her body of meat and blood. Diana blinked as spots danced in her eyes. Thunder roared in her ears.

And then, she fell from the sky.

Bells of celebration were ringing throughout Asgard and the sounds of merriment and joy still echoed loudly across the city, but Clark couldn’t care less.

For seventeen days, he’d watched over Diana as she remained in the coma-like slumber, fear building in tiny, incremental steps as the minutes flowed by and she refused to wake. He still didn’t quite understand what had happened – he remembered fighting Darkseid, and then Diana was there and Darkseid wasn’t. The Gauntlet on her arm had burned with the light of a thousand suns and all around them, the forces of Apokalips simply fell. Some vanished back through the collapsing boom-tubes, as if they were on wires that had been suddenly pulled. Others simply disappeared without warning or indication as to where they were going. Those that remained rose, disoriented and sometimes openly terrified as cybernetic implants fell away and physical alterations vanished. And then, the bizarre golden giant with the floating three heads that were really just one appeared, exchanged words with Diana that no one else could hear … no, that wasn’t true. Everyone heard the words, but no one, not Thor or Hercules or even Zeus, could understand them. There had been thunder without sound. Diana had looked at him, her eyes aflame. And then, the giant was gone and she was falling.

He’d caught her, of course, but no medicine of Asgard or of Olympus could revive her. Not even the strange silver entity with the surfboard – which made no sense. A surfboard? Really? Was there also someone out there with rollerskates? Or maybe a cosmic skateboarder? – could do anything.

“She will wake or she will not,” the silver being said. “What transpired between her and the Living Tribunal is not for us to know.” Naturally, he did not bother explaining who exactly this ‘Tribunal’ thing was before vanishing once more.

“What kind of idiot flies through space on a surfboard?” Clark muttered sourly under his breath as he pushed Diana’s hair back once more. He heard Gabriel’s soft chuckle from so far away and almost turned to give the boy an annoyed glare. They still had to talk, about the things Gabriel was hiding from them and the secrets he was keeping with Freyja.
“Father.” It was Lyta, though thankfully she’d left that dunderhead of a boyfriend somewhere else. Clark glanced up and gave his daughter a smile. Right now, she looked so much like her mother, with her hair worn the same way and a resolute expression he had seen on Diana’s face so many times before. He knew what was coming long before she even opened her mouth. “You need to eat, Father,” Lyta said sternly, using the exact tone that Diana used whenever she thought he was being an idiot. He wondered if she was even aware of how she sounded – how many times over the centuries had he heard her complain about Diana speaking to her in this very tone?

“I’m not hungry,” he replied calmly before going back to stroking Diana’s hair. She looked so peaceful like this, so much like the young woman he’d first met so very, very long ago.

“Eat,” Lyta ordered crossly as she thrust a bowl of something that smelled almost like food under his nose. Clark sighed – for all her talents, his daughter was a terrible cook, something she’d inherited from her mother who could burn water while boiling it – and finally accepted the mush. It was undercooked, as was the norm with his carnivore daughter, and he waited until Lyta’s back was turned before flashing it with his heat vision. Once again, he heard Gabriel laugh. This time, he did glance in his son’s direction and frown, though it did not stop the boy from chuckling once more. Of course he would find this amusing – Freyja routinely brought meals to the Observatory that were culinary works of art.

There was nothing but mead to drink, so Clark downed the tankard his daughter forced into his hands in a single gulp – it was not that he disliked the taste, really, but it had never been to his liking; he missed that beer Hal Jordan used to bring back to Earth so bad it hurt. Lyta continued to watch him, her eyes hard but worried – more over him, he realized, than Diana – and once again, Clark realized how little he understood his children. She loved her mother, but if Diana did not wake, Lyta would mourn briefly before moving on without ever once looking back in sadness. The living interested her, not the dead. Clark wished he could blame the strange disconnect between them on the war, or on Asgard and its citizens, but the truth was that he’d simply failed to instill the same set of morals he’d grown up with. It made him a little sick inside, but he’d long ago admitted that his children would not find Earth to their liking.

For that matter, Clark wondered if he would. A thousand years had passed – even if they managed to return, if only for a visit, would he fit in now? He was so much more powerful than he had been when he was hailed as Superman and he’d spent ten centuries not holding back or hiding what he was capable of. Asgardians were tougher than humans – a firm handshake here would shatter Bruce’s bones beyond repair.

Lyta finally departed an hour or so after she’d showed up and, with a deep sigh, Clark crawled into bed alongside Diana. He was not tired, did not think he could sleep even if he wanted to, so he watched her breathe and wished she would wake up. Dear God, what would he do if she didn’t? She’d been a part of him for so long that he could barely comprehend or even recall a time when she wasn’t there.

He drifted into a light slumber despite himself, one hand resting on her stomach while the other clutched her hand. His senses narrowed while he slept as his subconscious strained to perceive even the slightest change in her heartbeat or breathing. Twice, he jolted awake when the throb of her heart shifted fractionally, but both times, it turned out to be nothing.

The rising sun woke him – it always did, even before he knew about his Kryptonian heritage – and he opened his eyes to find Diana already awake. She was staring at the ceiling, a frown on her face and her eyes distant. His breath caught and she half turned to face him.

“I did not mean to wake you,” she said before pulling herself closer and wrapping both arms around
him. Embracing Diana had always been both difficult and exhilarating at the same time – difficult because she was almost as tall as he was but always seemed to seek a way to tuck her head under his chin, and exhilarating because, even now, almost eleven hundred years after he’d first met her, she was still the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. He pulled her tight.

“You didn’t,” he replied. “Are you okay?”

“The war is ended,” Diana said in response. “This reality is safe from Darkseid.” She leaned back. “He’s not dead,” she added.

“I didn’t think he was.” Clark frowned. “You’re afraid he’s going to seek revenge against our universe.”

“I am.” Diana glanced to the open window, frowning, but made no effort to pull away from his embrace. “An Olympian blade took his eye,” she said, “and now an Amazon has barred him from something he sought.” She swallowed. “I fear his retribution will be terrible to behold.”

“Then we’ll find a way to stop him,” Clark said.

“I may have a solution to that, Father,” Gabriel declared from a league and a half away. Clark glanced in that direction and Diana sighed in comprehension.

“What have I told you about eavesdropping, Gabriel?” she asked the air, even though she could not hear his response. Clark smiled.

“I was concerned about you, Mother,” their son said which Clark related. It brought a brief smile to Diana’s lips, but her gaze grew sharper, more intense. He could hear her heart rate increase as she stared at him and Clark felt his own body responding. How long had it been since they shared a bed because of the war? Months? Years? Far, far too long…

“We’ll discuss that later,” he told his son.

“Gabriel,” Diana said thickly, “avert thine eyes.”

Clark didn’t bother checking to see if his son obeyed.

Time passed. They spent the next several weeks helping Asgard rebuild and the freed servants of Darkseid recover. Some struggled more than others, and Clark’s presence was necessary to contain their confused rage – he was happy to set aside the combat armor in place of the garments Eitri and Hephaestus crafted that was so close to his old hard-suit and bore the House of El crest proudly once more upon his chest. Diana also gladly retired her battle armor, though he knew it was always just a clash of her bracers away. Still, he approved of the change though he wisely did not offer his opinion – her legs were beyond simply beautiful and it was a sin to hide them from sight.

Satisfied that the war was over, most of the gods of Olympus departed. A small number stayed behind – Hephaestus had found kindred spirits among the dwarves of Niðavellir, and together, they forged implements of such wondrous beauty that it was nearly impossible to gaze upon them without weeping; Athena offered no explanation for why she remained, although she was often in Lyta’s presence or Sif’s – and a nearly equal number of Asgardians joined Zeus at their lonely mountain. Clark did not know if this was some sort of jointly agreed upon exchange or it was simple serendipity, nor did he think to ask.

Thirteen days after Diana woke – exactly one month after the war ended – Diana discovered that she was to be a grandmother when Freyja came to her with the news and Clark watched as his wife tore into Gabriel for keeping this from her with a calm fury that was almost terrifying to see. Wisely,
Clark wore a fierce scowl the entire time, glaring at their son with what he hoped was an adequate amount of anger even if he had already known since just after Darkseid was thrown from this reality. From the moment he discovered that Freyja was pregnant, he’d been after Gabriel to tell his mother and it was only this that saved him from Diana’s wrath. He did not escape it entirely, of course.

“You should have told me,” she hissed later when they were alone.

“It wasn’t my place,” he replied. When she glowered, he locked eyes with her. “There are times that my senses are a curse,” he said calmly. “I knew because of what I am. You should have been told immediately because of who you are.” Clark looked away. “He knew I disapproved of the secret but kept it anyway.” Pain stabbed through him, though it was purely emotional. “Neither of them will leave with us now,” he murmured.

“They are of this reality,” Diana said with a distant, unfocused look in her eyes. “They were not going to come with us even before this.” There was nothing else to say about that and Clark held her tighter than normal that evening, wishing for things that could not be. As much as they wished it were not so, both of them knew that they could not stay here in Asgard, not when their own reality could be under threat of siege by the monster who had caused so much damage. Duty was a weight that dragged down even a Superman or a Wonder Woman.

Months flashed by in the blink of an eye. Asgard clawed its way out of the wreckage, rebuilding even taller, even higher. The gods of this realm resumed their bickering and endless games – Loki, once the king’s most trusted ally, fell into disfavor thanks to his mischief; the frost giants returned to Jotunheim where they once more threatened to unseat their hated enemies; the elves simply vanished without warning.

And then, exactly six months to the day of Darkseid’s fall, Gabriel called them both to the Observatory.

Lyta was here already, though no one else was present, including the very heavily pregnant Freyja, but the moment Clark touched down alongside his wife, he could feel something different about the Bifrost. From the way she tensed, Diana noticed it as well and Gabriel smiled.

“Mother. Father.” He drove his massive two-handed sword into the control receptacle and instantly the whole contraption began to hum. “I have found a way to return you to your world.” Diana frowned.

“You have the Reality Gem,” she said softly, her eyes locked on the yellow stone secured to the pommel of his weapon.

“I am its Caretaker, yes.” Gabriel stepped closer. “You fear for your world, Mother,” he said softly. “I have the means to aid you in this.”

“Thor forbade it,” Lyta announced with a scowl. “He’s afraid of what might happen if Gabriel does this.”

“So am I,” Clark interjected. His son smirked.

“The Tribunal chose me as the Gem’s guardian for a reason,” he said. “This is not goodbye,” he added when both Clark and Diana frowned. “It will take time, but I will perfect this method of travel. I will be able to reopen the Bifrost again.” There was a very minor hiccup in Gabriel’s heartbeat, something only a Kryptonian would have been able to hear, and Clark bit back a grimace the instant he realized his son was hiding something once more. It was always a surprise that the boy got along with Diana as well as he did – secrets were something she despised, yet he thrived upon them. “Do
you trust me, Mother?” Gabriel asked.

“Only sometimes,” Diana replied with a sad smile that made their son laugh. She stepped forward, embracing him tightly and Clark did the same, pulling Lyta into the hug as he did. “Be well, my children,” Diana whispered as she held onto both of them. “I love you both.”

“We both do,” Clark murmured. *This is not goodbye,* he repeated Gabriel’s words over and over in his head as that implacable mountain of duty pressed down upon them.

With a silent *boom,* the Bifrost came alive, though the energy signature around it was like nothing Clark had seen before. He watched as Diana slowly lowered Stormbreaker to the Observatory floor – the hammer almost seemed to moan mournfully, as if it were weeping itself – but the sound of approaching figures caused him to glance away. Thor was coming, along with Ullr and Sif and a dozen guards. Time was up.

“We need to hurry,” he whispered. Diana nodded as she kissed their children once more. Tears fell from four sets of eyes – even Lyta, who had not wept since her sister died so very long ago, was sobbing – and Diana seized Clark’s hand. He nodded at her look. They would once more face this together.

And without looking back – neither had the strength to look back and go through with this – they stepped into the vortex.

A maelstrom roared around them as they hurtled through the cracks of two universes. How long they fell through the cracks of the universe, Clark did not know. It might have been a minute, or an hour, or even a century. Ribbons of impossible light coursed around them and against them, bathing their passage in an unreal incandescence that dazzled the eyes and baffled the mind. At his side, her hand clenched tightly in his, Diana trembled, her eyes liquid with the same pain he felt but her gaze strong, her intent clear. They would find a way to stop Darkseid. They would make this loss worth it.

With an explosion of violet fire, they boomed back into reality. Light and sound and touch returned with an almost visceral impact, and Clark cried out, his hands automatically going to his ears as a solid wall of sound slammed against him. He fell to his knees, vaguely aware of Diana next to him, her hands upon his back and her voice a soothing whisper. He concentrated on her heartbeat, pushing away everything else until control could be reasserted. Dear God, what the hell was that noise?

Steam curled up from the scorched ice and the distinctive glyph burned into its surface. Clark forced himself to his feet, still wincing at the pounding agony in his skull. He shook his head in an attempt to clear it and glanced around. The landmarks were not immediately familiar – all he could really see was ice, though the chatter of human voices indicated that there was life in the immediate vicinity.

“This … is not what I was expecting,” Diana murmured. She was about to say more when another sudden flash of light coursed down around them for the span of a single heartbeat. Heat rolling off of it, Stormbreaker streaked straight toward her and Diana automatically lifted her hand to catch it. She glanced at Clark and he shrugged. Perhaps Thor had reconsidered? Or perhaps the hammer had decided to pursue its mistress. He’d long since given up trying to understand Asgardian magic.

Looking up, he focused on his enhanced senses and peered through the cloud cover. The sheer number of satellites in orbit was staggering and he found the Moon a moment later. Shock coursed through him – Luna was covered with domed cities connected together like an ant hive! He shifted his gaze, concentrating on the constellations. They weren’t in the right place … Oh.

“We’re on Earth,” he said as he slowly pushed up into the sky, Diana following without question.
The pain in his skull lessened as certain memories were abruptly unlocked. Dammit. Gabriel had to have known that this was going to happen. When he got his hands on that boy, Clark was going to strangle him. He scanned the horizon, locating several thousand habitats, and then looked skyward once more, this time with the intent of gauging the best place to make the signal. There. Yes, that would do nicely.

“It looks like Antarctica,” Diana said. Clark nodded.

“Good guess,” he murmured. Facing away from her and ensuring his body would block as much of this as possible, Clark drew a deep breath and then slammed his hands together as hard as he could manage. The resulting boom was like an explosion and the noise shook the entire landscape. He’d aimed for a relatively clear space in the sky so as to avoid doing any damage to the ice itself. “Come on,” he whispered as he slowly rotated in place, his senses straining to find … there! “Hello, Lar,” he said as he stopped. Diana gave him a quick look before turning her own eyes in the same direction he faced.

“Kal-El?” Lar Gand’s voice drifted across the vast distance as the speaker drew closer. There was no mistaking the surprise in Lar’s words.

“And Diana as well.” Clark tilted his head. “I like the new outfit,” he said as Lar streaked ever closer. His old friend was still wearing red and blue – colors that Clark heartily approved of – but the design was vastly different. The red almost appeared placed atop a band of stars, forming a ‘M:. Sunlight glinted off his golden boots and the stylized belt buckle that was definitely a L.

“Hello, Lar,” Diana said as the Daxamite slowed to a hover several yards away.

“Highness,” Gand said with a quick nod. He frowned deeply as he stared at them, taking in their strange garments and the even more unusual hammer in Diana’s hand. “You’ve been gone a long time,” Lar said.

“And now we’re back.” Clark inhaled. “This is the Legion’s era, isn’t it?” Both Lar and Diana gave him surprised looks, though hers was more confused than anything else. “It’s the 31st Century,” he told her. “I visited this time when I was a kid.”

“You never mentioned it.”

“I never remembered it.” Clark smirked. “Imra must have done something to my memory.” His smile fell away. “How do you want to do this?” he asked. “I’m guessing that the Legion wants us to avoid attracting any undue attention while Brainy gets a time bubble operational and sends us home.”

“Grife.” Lar shook his head. “This is M’Onel,” he said, the strange name causing Clark to blink. “We need a Threshold here.”

The Legion was in an uproar.

It was to be expected, Lar guessed. Not since the core members pulled him out of the Phantom Zone and cured the genetically engineered disease that had been killing him for a century had they faced something this momentous or potentially earth-shattering. After a thousand years, Kal-El and Princess Diana, the fabled Superman and Wonder Woman who had vanished from history, were back. Literally billions of theories had been spawned by their mysterious disappearance. Cults and various splinter religions had even incorporated them into their dogmas, some hinting that their return signified the End Times. Kal would hate it.
And as someone around whom just such a ridiculous religion had grown, Lar knew exactly why.

Currently, he was in the command center of Legion HQ, hovering several inches above the floor while trying extremely hard to avoid getting sucked into the discussion taking place among his teammates. Cos was excited and almost giddy, but the Braalian had always been obsessed with Earth history and was, to coin one of Kon’s favorite phrases, something of a fanboy when it came to old 21st century relics. As a telepath, Imra was already convinced that they were who they claimed to be, but she had been fooled before and several of the others had their doubts – Brin and Jo were the loudest, which was almost amusing given how rarely they agreed with anything. What Lar found most curious was how quickly the Earth natives who had grown up with the stories about Superman and Wonder Woman fell on Cos and Imra’s side.

“I have no data on that,” Dox said when asked if their new guests’ genetic structure matched that of the founding members of the Justice League, but that was hardly a surprise, not with what had happened to the League and their various headquarters during the wars of the twenty-fourth century. He went on to explain the inconsistencies with their bio-signatures – both of them appeared slightly out of phase with this universe, but that was simply another check in the Yes column with regards to their identities. Hadn’t he been out of phase after almost ten centuries in the Phantom Zone?

“We’ve encountered alternates and dupes before,” Jo began. It was the same argument as before and Lar tuned it out. He liked Jo most of the time, but young man had a terrible tendency to repeat his points over and over and over, even when others agreed with him.

You are certain they are who they claim. Imra’s mindtouch almost caused him to jump and Lar gave her an annoyed look that she pretended not to notice. She took no offense at his discomfort with telepathy, even as he once more chastised himself. Why did he struggle so much with that? There were so many different kinds of post-mortal abilities in the Legion, yet it was her psionic talents that always gave him pause.

I do, he told her via their momentary mindlink. Together, they looked toward the subjects of debate and Lar almost laughed at how quickly Imra tore her attention away from the two. She blushed, severing the mindlink almost at once, but not before Lar had caught a glimpse of how seeing Kal and the princess together like that ignited her own passions. Live Wire – Garth, he reminded himself – was a lucky man.

He ducked out of the meeting sometime later, managing to avoid getting drawn more deeply into the debate, though, to be honest, it was rather easy for him to adopt a distracted, dispassionate role in these sorts of things. After all, after almost ten centuries of solitary confinement in the Phantom Zone where he could see this world but not touch it, he’d grown exceptionally skilled at doing nothing. Even now, years after being freed, Lar sometimes struggled with his tendency toward inaction. Sometimes, he had to remind himself that he wasn’t a ghost any longer, that he could reach out and affect the reality around him.

Haunted by the memories of a thousand years where he couldn’t touch anything, he made his way to the memorial hall. Here, he could find at least a modicum of peace since so few of the Legion liked visiting this reminder of their mortality. The handful of statues were taller than life, cast from unbreakable inertron, and as always, his eyes fell on the monument to Kon-El. Decked in the stylized Legion uniform of red and blue with the House of El symbol prominently displayed upon his chest, the statue stood proudly, arms crossed as he seemed to stare into the distance, always looking forward. Rao, but Lar missed his friend in moments like this. Kon had somehow managed to keep him anchored in the now when all he wanted to do was fly away forever.

“How did he die?” Kal asked in the language of Lar’s youth as he drifted into the Memorial Hall.
Gone were his House of El symbol and the strange garments, and in their place was a common, ordinary trans-suit bereft of any symbology.

“There was a wizard named Modru,” Lar replied softly. “Kon took a blast meant for me.” Grimacing, he shook his head. “It killed him instantly – Dox said he was dead before he even realized it.”

“And the wizard?” Kal-El stared up at the statue, frowning slightly. Their features were almost identical, though Kon had always appeared even younger whereas there was a solidity, an implacability and sense of untapped danger on Kal’s face.

“We spread his ashes across the galaxy.” Lar smiled tightly. “Laurel – she’s a distant relative through my brother – spent the better part of a sidereal year finding the most inhospitable sections of space she could to bury the parts of him that wouldn’t burn.” Kal-El was silent, which Lar took as a question. “We didn’t kill him – the Legion doesn’t kill unless it absolutely has to – but his acolytes turned on him when he was distracted by us.”

“That sounds about right.” Kal inhaled slowly. “Was he at peace here? Kon … he always had so much trouble fitting in …”

“He was.” Lar gave his old friend another smile. “As Superboy, he was always one of the most popular Legionnaires, even if he and Cos were always arguing over what you would do. You would have been proud to have seen him wearing that symbol, I think.”

“I was proud,” Kal-El replied. “Even when he first donned it.” They stood in silence for a moment. “M’Onel. An interesting name.”

“Translates to ‘the Wanderer’ from Martian,” Lar said. He grimaced. “I sure as hell can’t use Valor anymore.” At that, Kal gave him a questioning look, so Lar told him the whole sordid story, about how he’d been elevated to the status of a god throughout the galaxy while he lingered in the Phantom Zone, about how so many of the exploits they’d shared together when Kal first fell into his life centuries ago had been warped out of perspective and even how all of the events that had involved the two of them had somehow been morphed into just his actions. He mentioned how difficult it was to interact with people who actually knew the truth – the newer members of the Legion were not in on the secret, though Triad still referred to him as the ‘most blessed and holy Valor’ when she was alone with her three selves, and Laurel, who had once been the most xenophobic woman alive, was even worse with her tendency to automatically defer to him, regardless of the situation or their respective areas of expertise. Kal-El listened to the story of how Dox managed to extract him from the Phantom Zone with a grave expression, especially when Lar pointed out the handful of splinter religions that centered around him and the princess. The moment they donned traditional symbols and ventured out into the world, he and Diana would be facing the exact same thing.

“We’re not going to be able to go back to the 21st Century, are we?” Kal-El finally asked, once Lar had finished. He was looking away, staring at a wall, and Lar peered through it as well. Dressed almost identically as Kal-El, though in Lar’s opinion, she wore the unisex bodysuit far better, Princess Diana stood among several of the female Legionnaires – Triad, Imra, Violet and even Xs – and was questioning them intently on a wide range of topics. Beyond the group of women, Lar could see Brin and Jo trying to budge the unusual golden hammer that Diana had been holding when he first saw them over Antarctica. Neither was successful, which only encouraged others to try. It took only a few moments for Lar to realize that the princess was asking about someplace called Themyscira, a name that was vaguely familiar to him … of course. The history books had always referred to her as ‘Diana of Themyscira.’ Weren’t the Amazons all supposed to be immortal? Why
hadn't he heard about them since being freed from the Zone? He shook his head.

“History records that the two of you left Earth, Kal,” Lar said in response to his old friend’s question. “A considerable amount of Earth records were lost during the world wars of the … twenty-fourth century, I think. Forgive me: human history is not something I focused on.” Kal nodded his understanding. “But what is left agrees on one thing: you never came back.” His old friend grimaced. “So no, I don’t think you can go back.”

“Then I guess we’ll have to make this our home,” Kal said with a forced smile. He looked away.

“What about you?” Lar asked. “I was trapped in the Zone for a thousand years. Where were you?”

“Asgard.” This time, Kal did smile. “The writer in me wants to say that there was a war in Heaven.” His good humor faded quickly. “It was … not a good time for us.” Abruptly, he straightened. “I need to speak with Diana,” he said. “And then, I think we’ll need to speak with Cos and Dox.” He frowned. “We need to know if the Enemy is moving in this timeline and if so, what he’s doing.”

“What enemy?” Lar asked with a slight frown. His blood ran cold at the response.

“Darkseid.” Kal-El’s expression was tight but fierce.

“It is probable,” Dox announced as he entered the Memorial Hall, “that the entity you know as Darkseid is involved.” He was flanked by the two deputy leaders of the team, the so-called ‘Cosmic Boy’ and ‘Kid Quantum.’ Lar still did not quite comprehend why the two continued to use the ridiculous names as both were well into their mid-twenties now. In Rokk’s case, he had at least been known by the ‘Cos’ nickname during his youth when he played magnoball, but Jazmin was far from being a ‘kid.’ “Lyle and I have been investigating a series of recent temporal anomalies that seem to be originating from some kind of event ten years in our past,” the Coluan continued. As the fifth Dox to bear the Brainiac title, he was every bit as absurdly irritating as his ancestor, Vril, and Lar always tensed when he heard the green-skinned humanoid speak.

“What kind of anomalies?” Kal-El asked.

“Put simply,” Dox said, “the universe seems to shrinking.” Everyone present, Lar included, gave him a confused look. Brainiac-5 sighed. “The quantifiable mass of reality is significantly less than the last it time it was assayed. By a factor of twenty-seven percent.”

“The instruments must be wrong,” Cos muttered.

“I hope they are,” Dox replied. “Because that would also explain the super-massive gravitational distortion that’s appeared on the edge of the Milky Way.” Once again, all eyes turned to him. “It is the size of an infant galaxy.” He paused. “If I had to conjecture,” he began.

“Please do,” Jazmin instructed wryly. Dox continued without even acknowledging her remark.

“I would theorize – based on my readings, of course – that someone has customized a disused stargate and is utilizing it as a massive conduit to drain colossal amounts of mass out of our universe.” He paused. “I cannot fathom what the purpose of this could be.”

“It can’t be good, whatever it is,” Kal-El said grimly. “If Darkseid is involved, then this going to get ugly fast.” He scowled. “You’re going to need my help to stop him.”

“Our help,” Princess Diana corrected as she floated through the doorway, her expression resolute. Lightning danced around the head of the curious-looking hammer she held lightly in her left hand and, without another word, she touched down next to Kal-El, invading his personal space with
casual familiarity. They exchanged a heavy look filled with indecipherable meaning. Cos watched them for a heartbeat before giving Jazmin a glance. She nodded.

“Well, then,” Rokk said with a smile directed at the two other survivors from the twenty-first century. “Welcome to the Legion.”
Excerpt from THE WAYNE LEGACY (published: 2736 BCE)

By the midway point of the twenty-second century, however, the internal conflict within the Batclan had erupted into open conflict. As of 2153 BCE, three factions had evolved. The first, generally considered the Conservative element, was descended from the Drake line and were long considered to be the true heir to the Cowl given that their progenitor, Timothy Drake, was Bruce Wayne’s chosen successor. In 2099, however, the Drake claim experienced a significant setback when genetic testing confirmed what had long been suspected: Cassandra Drake was not the first Batman’s daughter as had been claimed.

Two other factions remained: the Radicals, directly descended from Damien Wayne via his relationship with the third Catwoman (identity unknown; click here to review most likely suspects), pressed for a far more aggressive and proactive response against crime, while the Liberals, who traced their descent from Richard Grayson, the first Robin and the second man to wear the Cowl, were more focused on rehabilitation and infrastructure. Interestingly, the same genetic testing that hampered the Conservative argument also revealed an unexpected familial connection to Wayne through the Liberals, and careful examination of that family tree indicated Helena Bertinelli, the mother of Grayson’s son, to be the logical blood relative to Bruce, though no explanation for this connection could be found. It would later be theorized that she was Wayne’s half-sister through his father and an unknown mother, although discrepancies in the research ensured that questions continued to persist to this day.

In 2154 BCE, in the very middle of the global economic depression that would later result in the first round of hostilities between the United Nations and the Global Caliphate, the conflict between the three factions became open warfare, forcing the Gotham SecForce to shut them all down. There were a number of casualties in the five week police action and it seemed that the legacy of the Batman had finally been stamped out. This belief would change three years later, however, when Thomas Kyle, the SecForce captain responsible for crushing the erstwhile ‘Battle for the Cowl’ entered the scene as the latest Batman. Although few were aware of his identity until decades after his tragic death, Kyle was a direct descendant of the first Batman. On his mother’s side, he could also trace his ancestry to both Drake-Wayne and Grayson-Bertinelli, which made him nearly a perfect union of all three factions. For the majority of his twelve years as The Batman, Kyle would also be in charge of the SecForce unit officially assigned to apprehend his alternate identity, and it was this other job that resulted in his staggering successes.

SUDDENLY, THERE WAS A KNOCKING AT HIS WINDOW.

At first, Bruce ignored it – he simply had too much work to do at the moment to even notice what was probably another stupid bird trapped in the grill covering the study window. The mesh was necessary – they were on the twenty-ninth floor, after all, and no one wanted adventurous children to fall from such a height – but the noise repeated again and again and again. His temper, already short thanks to this afternoon’s excessively long meeting with the CFL who were fighting him tooth and nail over the reforms necessary to keep Gotham competitive in the national arena not to mention yesterday’s bitter argument with the NRA over his continued push for tightening certain gun laws,
flared brightly and he pushed away from his desk, intent on finding something long and pointy to push the trapped avian free. He even briefly considered grabbing his nearest taser and simply stunning the damned thing into silence, but that seemed unnecessarily cruel so it was only a momentary thought borne of frustration. One of Selina’s umbrellas was close at hand and he snatched it up, noting only after the fact that it bore the unmistakable signs of having once belonged to Cobblepot – yes, this was the old smoke delivery model; when had she stolen it? It wasn’t from his trophy room. When he turned toward the window, though, he dropped the umbrella to the floor.

Because there, floating just outside his window, were Clark and Diana.

They appeared to have not aged a day – both still looked to be in the absolute prime of their youth and Bruce was all too aware of the gray in his hair, the lines on his face, even the hitch in his step and the way his spine would just lock up at times – but it was unmistakably them. For a moment, he thought that he might be imagining things as they were hazy and indistinct, but Clark gave him an all too familiar ‘hurry up’ gesture and Bruce finally realized that Diana’s arms were crossed. He suddenly remembered how she could vanish from sight by touching her bracers together and stumbled quickly to the window.

“Do you have a spare bed?” Clark asked as he floated through the open window. He was, Bruce realized, almost carrying Diana and she had a strained look to her face. Even more curious were the flickers of electricity that seemed to crawl up and down her body. Bruce nodded, still not quite able to form coherent sentences, and threw open the door to the guest room. He watched in something quite close to actual shock as Clark drifted to the bed and lowered Diana to it. The Amazon murmured something under her breath and Clark nodded before replying. It was in a language Bruce did not know, but his stunned brain finally kicked back into gear and he began noticing things that had, until now, escaped him.

The two were wearing strange clothes crafted of an unusual-looking material. Diana’s was the most different, though in many ways, it was similar to what she’d worn before – the Themysciran eagle that so closely resembled twin stylized W’s was upon her chest and red was still the dominant color – but the outfit itself utilized the same aesthetics as that of those children who had aided the League some years ago during the Sun-Eater crisis. Her outfit almost resembled a sleeved leotard, with extra strips of clothing in the front and back fashioned like loincloths. A solid bar of black decorated with a starfield that somehow shifted slightly ran down the center and split up the dark crimson of the rest. Her legs were mostly bare, and he recalled hearing her once admitted to preferring that for simple economy of motion, but she wore gloves now, though they were almost hidden by her bracers. She also wore a wide belt with a stylized L upon the buckle – that too was identical to what those children had worn.

Clark’s uniform rather closely resembled his old hard-suit, but was more streamlined than before. Blue continued to dominate but now, the red was brighter and bolder. The House of El crest upon his chest was directly connected to the flowing cape – how he removed the thing, Bruce couldn’t tell – but it had been altered ever so slightly. Like Diana, Clark also wore a belt with the stylized L.

“Thanks,” Clark started once he rejoined Bruce in the study, pulling the door shut behind him. This close, Bruce could tell that, regardless of how little his old friend appeared to have changed, things had not been easy. Clark’s eyes were so very different than before…

“Nine years, Clark,” Bruce said. He pulled the door leading to the rest of the penthouse shut after giving the room beyond a quick glance. “And look at you,” he continued. “You haven’t aged a day.”

“Only nine?” Clark shook his head. “A bit longer for us,” he said in a tone that clearly indicated no interest in continuing that line of discussion. There was a hardness to him that was new, an economy
of motion that Bruce had to admire. Wherever he’d been, it looked as though Clark had finally
learned to really fight. “We’re not even supposed to be here,” Kent admitted as he ran his fingers
through his hair. “But the Fortress wasn’t where it was supposed to be and …”

“Kara moved it,” Bruce interjected. He stepped closer and offered his hand. “It’s damned good to see
you, Clark.”

“And you.” Kent’s smile was genuine, but he didn’t move from where he stood. “I’m having trouble
readjusting to human norm strength,” he said almost sheepishly as he glanced down to the offered
hand. Bruce grinned and then, without thinking about it, embraced his friend. He could feel the
inhuman heat boiling off Clark, but it was so good to see him!

“You’re making a habit of this,” Bruce said a few moments later. “Disappearing for years on end and
then appearing out of nowhere.”

“This will be the last time,” Clark said softly. He glanced toward the closed door separating them
from Diana. “We here to investigate some things but …”

“You’re not coming back.” Bruce almost scowled. “Why not?”

“Nine years, you said?” Bruce nodded. “For us, it was closer to a thousand.” His disbelief must have
shown on his face because Clark sighed. “It’s … complicated,” he began.

“Then start with something simple,” Bruce instructed. “What’s wrong with Diana?” To his surprise,
Clark smiled slightly.

“I thought you wanted to start with simple,” he muttered wryly. Shaking his head once again, he
slowly took a seat on the leather couch. “We came back to visit Themyscira,” Clark said, “but we
instead found something else.” His expression hardened. “And her father left something for her.”

“Her father?” Bruce frowned. “I thought she was molded from clay.” Clark sighed once more and
opened his mouth to reply. Bruce spoke quickly. “Start from the beginning,” he ordered. He took his
own chair.

Wind howled like thunder. Snow and ice swirled in the raging torrent, reducing visibility to virtually
nonexistent. The temperature dove – it had been cold before, but now, it became simply intolerable.
Humans could not survive here, not without considerable protection and even then, they would
barely be able to function. But then, the two who stepped out of the spherical device could hardly be
called human.

“Retrieval in thirty-six hours,” a mildly disembodied voice announced and a moment later, the Time
Bubble dematerialized with barely a sound, leaving the two standing atop the hardened ice.
Together, they kicked up from the surface.

“No sign of the diamond here,” Clark announced as he looked up from the ground, blinking rapidly
like he always did when shifting between his enhanced vision and normal sight. He gave Diana a
look. “Which first? The Fortress or Themyscira?”

“We can do both,” she replied. “You take the Fortress.” Kal gave her a long, concerned look – she
 appeared troubled, which was understandable given what they’d found in the Legion’s time, and did
not even try to conceal this fact from him – before finally nodding his agreement.

“I shouldn’t be long,” he said. “As soon as I’m done, I’ll catch up with you.” Diana nodded as she
sprang up into the sky.
He poured on the acceleration, arcing up and over the planet below. The Legion flight ring vibrated against his ring finger as it sent a concealing energy pulse that would confuse all but the very most advanced sensor suites—few things in this time period would be capable of penetrating the cloak, though Clark suspected his passage would be noted by at least a few. He reached the North Pole long minutes later, but to his surprise, could not locate the Fortress. Pausing for a moment, he strained his senses but could find nothing.

*The Fortress was gone!*

“Kara moved it,” Bruce repeated. At Clark’s questioning look, he continued. “There were a couple of breach attempts by the Daemonites and then later, by Majestic when he thought she was working with them, so she relocated it to the moon.” He scowled. “And then, they tried to break in there, so she moved it again. It was in orbit around Mercury briefly, but now, I don’t know where she moved it.”

*The sky over Themyscira was clear as he descended toward the island, but Kal-El could tell that things were every bit as dire as they’d feared.*

He located Diana quickly enough—she was kneeling in the remains of the palace, her head bowed—and he carefully touched down alongside her. Apart from them, there was nothing alive on the island, not even the tiniest grub, and Clark could see the remnants of parademon legions, now buried under years of overgrowth. Very few of the buildings remained fully intact and of those that yet stood, all were heavily damaged.


“I’m sorry,” Kal whispered. He reached for her and Diana fell into his arms, the tears coming harder and faster now. It was Lara all over again, he reflected though Clark wasn’t falling apart himself. For the first time in a very long time, he could be strong for her. It was not as if they had truly expected a miracle—in the 31st Century, the island was just as abandoned and as desolate as it was now—but they’d both hoped to at least discover that the Amazons had fled.

“Darkseid destroyed them?” Bruce stared his old friend with barely hidden horror in his eyes. “Why didn’t we know about this?”

“Hermes.” Clark was staring at the door leading to the guest bedroom and Bruce suspected he was watching Diana through the wall. “When he died, he sealed off the island and this world from Apokalips and New Genesis.” Bruce frowned—he hadn’t given them much thought, but now that Clark mentioned it, Orion and Miracle and Barda had not been seen on Earth for a very long time. “But I’m getting ahead of myself,” Clark added.

*They were still kneeling there when the Exile appeared before them.*

Centuries of bloody combat had honed their reflexes to lethal sharpness, and both of them were airborne almost the very instant that the figure appeared, automatically assuming defensive postures. Diana was the first to let her muscles relax—Stormbreaker fell from her grip, slamming into the dirt with a loud boom—and she flashed forward to embrace the woman standing before
her.

It took Clark a moment longer to recognize Artemis. Her hair, once the color of flame, was now pure white and her face had been badly burned at some point. Much of her body was hidden by a deep scarlet cloak, though it did not conceal well and Kal noted dozens of vicious but long-healed scars upon the woman’s body. Her left arm was gone, missing from just above her elbow, but the clear silver light that glowed from her eyes hinted at some unknown power.

“Diana of Themyscira,” Artemis intoned in a voice that was not her own. His wife pulled back from the woman and Clark could see how quickly her body language transformed. Stormbreaker quivered, but did not leap to her hand as the entity within Artemis continued. “You have returned,” she said. Her silver eyes flickered briefly to Clark. “As was foretold.” Artemis bowed her head. “You are now the Last of Us,” she said. “Father Zeus’ Mantle falls to you.”

“Lady Athena,” Diana breathed, dropping to her knees before the woman who had once been her friend. Kal floated closer, not quite relaxing. To his surprise, Athena-Artemis offered him a very tiny smile, nodding as she acknowledged both his presence and his protective posture.

“I present to you the gift of your Father’s Mantle,” she said as she stretched out her intact hand. The cloak parted, revealing her unclad body beneath, and Clark’s breath caught at just how badly maimed she was. There was no way a human being, even an augmented one, could have taken such injuries and lived! Lightning coursed up from the earth as he realized this fact, crawled across Artemis’ body and down her outstretched arm, before exploding outward, enveloping Diana in a solid sheet of electricity. She screamed.

And thunderbolts erupted from her.

“Zeus?” Bruce leaned back. “Zeus is her father?”

“We’d suspected it for a while now,” Clark admitted, “but this was the first time we had confirmation.” He exhaled deeply. “The lightning … it threw me across the island. By the time I recovered and got back …” Again, he looked away. “I found Diana holding Artemis’ body.” He was silent for a long moment. “I guess she would have died years ago if it hadn’t been for Athena, but still …”

Bruce nodded his understanding and the two men sat silently for several minutes. There were a million questions racing through his mind, but Bruce didn’t know where to start. Finally, he chose the obvious.

“Why aren’t you coming back?” he asked. “The world needs Superman and Wonder Woman.” Clark sighed. In that moment, he looked so much older than before.

“I shouldn’t be telling you this,” the Kryptonian said hesitantly before shrugging. “Keep this out of your memoirs, Mister President,” he added with a very tiny smirk. Before the title could fully sink in, Clark was continuing. “When we returned from Asgard, a thousand years had passed. The world had changed, but the problems were still the same, just on a larger scale. A much larger scale.” He hunched his shoulders. “And Earth history had already recorded that we never came back.”

“Oh.” Bruce looked down. “I see,” he said softly. “You’d screw up the timeline if you came back.” Clark nodded.

“It’ll be rough going for a while – it always is – but I’ve seen the future, Bruce.” He smiled. “It’s worth it.” He started to speak again, but his attention shifted to the door leading to the rest of the
penthouse. A moment later, Selina pushed the door open.

“I didn’t hear you come in …” she began before trailing off abruptly the moment she noticed Clark sitting on the sofa. Her eyes widened and she quickly glanced back the way she came.

“Don’t worry,” Clark said before tapping the strange ring he wore. In the blink of an eye, he suddenly appeared to be dressed in slightly unusual-looking clothes that did not look completely out of place. He smiled a half second before the twins came barreling through the door.

“Daddy!” the two five year olds shouted as they sprang up and onto his lap. Bruce almost winced – they were getting too big for this and his body had already withstood several lifetimes of abuse – but he bit the instinctive groan back and caught them before they went tumbling onto the floor.

“Behave,” he ordered sternly. “We have a guest.” As one, they squirmed around on his lap and stared at the dark-haired stranger sitting on the couch.

“Hello,” Kent said with a smile. “My name is Clark.” Bruce exchanged a quick glance with Selina even as their son wiggled off his lap and advanced toward the stranger sitting on the sofa.

“My name is Clark too!” the boy said brightly. “Mommy said I was named after a real super-hero! Were you named after him too?”

For a long moment, silence reigned and Bruce had the unexpected pleasure of seeing Kal-El of Krypton, the Superman himself, sit speechless in the face of a question from a child. He smiled.

“And this is Diana,” he said before nudging his daughter slightly. “Say hello, Diana.”

“Hullo.” Normally the more adventurous of the two, she was invariably the shiest around strangers. Once that wore off, though, she was a demon on two feet.

“Children.” Selina’s voice didn’t sound any different to Bruce, but the twins reacted to it as if they’d been hit with tasers. Together, they turned to face her, hangdog expressions already appearing on their faces. “Say goodnight. It is long past your bed-time.” There were the usual whines and complaints, but all Selina had to do was frown and the twins were in motion, darting through her legs and racing toward their bedroom.

Bruce wondered if he could get her to teach him that look.

“It’s good to see you again, Mister Kent,” she said as she started to back out. She froze the moment she realized that Diana was now standing in the other doorway.

“You children are beautiful, Selina,” the Amazon said. Her eyes were moist and Bruce realized that she must have heard them.

“Thank you.” Selina hesitated – she’d always had a little bit of difficulty interacting with these two; it was as if she didn’t know where she stood in their eyes, which was always amusing given how poised she was with absolutely everyone else – but the sound of shouting rescued her from the momentary awkwardness. “I’d better make sure that they haven’t killed each other,” she said before ducking out and pulling the door shut behind her.

“Clark and Diana?” The almost strangled question coming from one of if not the most powerful man on the planet at the moment made Bruce smile.

“It was Selina’s idea,” he admitted. He stood as Diana floated across the room and stepped forward to embrace her tightly. Like Clark, she barely touched him, but even that caused him to grunt. “I’m
sorry about your mother and your sisters,” he said as she released him and carefully took the seat next to Clark.

“And you have our condolences on Alfred’s passing,” she replied. Kent grimaced – it was the look of a man who had just realized that he’d forgotten something, but considering his still rather visible concern over the woman next to him, Bruce did not take it personally. “We originally sought you out at the manor...”

“We relocated after I won the election,” Bruce said. “It was too much trouble traveling back and forth … wait. You called me Mister President.” He pinned Clark with a look.

“Did I?” Kent shrugged. “Perhaps I misspoke.” His eyes danced, though, and Bruce felt a solid ball of lead settle in his stomach. He didn’t need to know that. God help him, he was just getting used to dealing with Gotham politics! If he hadn’t tapped Barbara as the Deputy Mayor, he doubted he’d be able to keep his head above water! Sure, most of the pundits were convinced her selection was simply a political move, both to shore up support with the people who had backed Jim and to reach out to skeptical women voters (which he had to admit was necessary; his dating exploits from his youth were a matter of public record), but in truth, he was afraid he’d be lost without her.

“Yes, ma’am.” It was such a familiar scene that, for a heartbeat, Bruce was momentarily transported back to the old days, when he still wore the cowl and these two were always around. They’d always had such an easy rapport, even before they became aware of one another in a romantic sense. He desperately did not want this moment to end.

But, as with all things, it did.

“I need to make contact with Kara,” Clark said. “No one else can know we’re here, Bruce.”

“Why?” Bruce leaned forward once more. “I recognize those belts of yours,” he said. “A couple of years ago, shortly after the two of you vanished, there were a handful of kids running around with powers and they were wearing those.” Clark and Diana exchanged a quick look. “They called themselves the Legion and, from what Tim told me, he didn’t think they were from this time.”

“Dammit, Bruce,” Clark scowled. “We don’t have time for your games.” Diana touched him lightly on the hand and Kent sighed heavily.

“The situation is dire,” she said. “Darkseid is moving once more – we are still investigating, but whatever he is doing involves temporal manipulation.”

“Time travel,” Bruce spat out. He hated the idea on principle alone. If people could travel through time, then why couldn’t they prevent disasters from happening? Why couldn’t they prevent good people from being murdered for senseless reasons?

“The team you interacted with was one of a half dozen we’ve got investigating key junction points,” Diana continued. “For the most part, they have explicit instructions to avoid direct interference.” Bruce’s eyebrows rose. “Preventing the Sun-Eater from destroying Earth was a special case,” she said.

“Particularly since it’s still around in the 31st Century,” Clark muttered. He abruptly cocked his head
and his eyes swam out of focus. “Kara’s in Gotham,” he said before rising. He looked at Diana and she nodded. “I’ll be as quick as I can.”

“The clock is ticking,” Diana said before adding another word in that language Bruce didn’t know. It had the sound of an endearment, and from the lop-sided smile Kent gave her in return, that was probably a safe bet. He nodded and then blurred through the open window. Bruce glanced in the direction that Kent had just exited before shaking his head.

“I see some things haven’t changed,” he remarked. Diana smiled.

“While he is gone,” she said, “you may ask the questions I can tell you want to ask.” Despite himself, Bruce had to return her smile – this had always been their relationship: blunt and open, without any deception. He’d never been able to lie to her.

“Is there anything you can tell me that won’t violate your … temporal prime directive?” he asked. Diana cocked her head, a slightly confused expression flashing across her face for a moment. It vanished quickly enough as she pieced together his meaning.

“Very little,” she admitted. Bruce realized that he was staring at her eyes – he could see tiny sparks and flashes occurring within and … were his lights flickering? They were. “I apologize,” Diana said as she closed her eyes and breathed deeply. “I am finding this … transition difficult.”

“I’ll bet.” Bruce started to speak again, but Diana inhaled sharply and glanced away, her eyes still closed. She must have sensed his questioning look because she smiled.

“It is Kal,” she said. “He just made contact with Kara.” Bruce blinked. When exactly had she developed super-senses like that?

“And you know this how?” When she opened her eyes again, they were glowing.

“My father was the god of the sky, Bruce,” she said sadly. “I can feel it.”

All he had to do was whisper her name.

From where he stood in the sky, once more wearing his Legion uniform, Clark could see Kara react. She had been descending toward a clinic of some sort – thanks to his senses, he knew Luthor was within, but he had no interest in speaking with that man, not with all of the unresolved emotions that centered around him and his foreknowledge about what Luthor was up to – but she froze at once, scanned her immediate surroundings and finally oriented on him. Less than a second later, she was streaking up toward him, moving at just shy of Mach One.

His combat reflexes almost kicked in – she was coming in fast and in his experience, things that moved that quickly toward him were never good – but he squashed his instincts and forced himself to stay put. A bare half second later, Kara hit him, her arms coming around him in a tight embrace that he actually felt. Tears splashed down her face and he found himself returning her joyful smile. Still, he applied only a fraction of his strength when he hugged her back – the last year working alongside the Legion had confirmed just how much greater his abilities were, which made sense given how long the war in Asgard had raged, not to mention the last days of it, as Apollo burned so brightly that he could break the world without too much difficulty.

“Rao!” Kara exclaimed as she floated back slightly, never once releasing her hold on him. “You’re back!” Her face glowed with joy and Kal felt something tear inside him. God, he wanted to warn her, wanted to tell her of what was coming, but he knew he couldn’t. Hinting to Bruce about his political future was one thing, but telling Kara that she and Bill only had fifteen or so years left? In
the Legion’s time, Superwoman and Captain Marvel were regarded as two of the greatest heroes of all time because of how they would sell their lives to save Earth and stop Imperiex from rampaging across the galaxy. Before they’d come back to this time, he and Diana had even visited the statues erected in their honor, christened a decade later by another President Alexander. The irony that one of Lex Luthor’s descendants dedicated a memorial to a Kryptonian had not been lost on either of them.

“It’s good to see you, Kara,” Clark said and it was. The white hard-suit and red cape went remarkably well together, and seeing someone else wearing the House of El sigil was wonderful. He could not ignore how much older she looked, of course – that too was in the historical texts and her rapid aging (for a Kryptonian) would be a factor in her decision to retire in a few years, which made her and Bill’s return even more dramatic. They would in their sixties when they fell, and that was no age to die, not even for a human. Kal pushed the stray thoughts away and hardened himself for what was to come. “But I’m not back,” he said. “Not for good.”

“Two,” Diana said in response to Bruce’s question, though her expression was sad. “We had a third,” she continued softly, “but Lara died during the war.”

“I’m sorry,” Bruce murmured. Diana smiled softly.

“Thank you,” she replied. “We have no time to speak of the past, Bruce,” she continued, leaning forward slightly. “Kal hinted at your future.” Bruce almost winced at that. “I would tell you more but … safeguards were put into place before we came to this time to ensure that we would not inadvertently reveal certain things and thus alter the timeline.”


“Just so,” Diana said with a nod. “I will tell you this: Earth … not the United States, but Earth will need you in the White House to help shepherd this world through a terrible calamity.”

“I do not understand,” Kara said tightly. Her voice was clipped, sharp, and Clark grimaced at her anger.

“You’re a scientist, Kara,” he replied. “You understand temporal theory better than I ever will.” At that, she scowled, looking away as her entire body language shifted to one of defeat.

“So this is goodbye, then,” she said. “I will be the last Kryptonian alive in this time period.” Clark … no. Kal-El floated closer and pulled her into a hug, taking care not to hurt her.

“But you won’t be alone,” he replied. “I’ve seen the future, Kara. I’ve seen your life … and Bill’s.” It wasn’t a lie – the romance of Kara Starr and William Batson was one of the most popular stories in the 31st Century; he’d seen at least three different holovids about it – but neither was it entirely true. God, he wanted to tell her!

“You don’t leave me much choice,” Bruce muttered. Unless she’d radically changed – and somehow, he doubted it, not with her Lariat coiled around her left arm – Diana was being truthful. “I thought I’d retired,” he grumbled. “Being the mayor of Gotham … I ran because Jim Gordon guilt-tripped me into it.” He blew out a frustrated breath. “I sure as hell didn’t actually expect to win.”

“Liar.” Diana’s remark came with a smile to soften it. “You are the Batman,” she said. “You never do things halfway.”
“I was the Batman,” Bruce replied. “That’s Tim’s job now.”

“I stand corrected, Mayor Wayne,” Diana retorted. She glanced down at the ring on her finger – Clark had worn one like it as well, complete with that stylized L embossed upon it. Were he any other man, Bruce might have made a wry comment about this Legion’s fetish for their symbols, but his hypocrisy only went so far. How many items did he still own that had a bat stamped upon them? “Our time dwindles,” she said as she rose to her feet.

“Where exactly on Antarctica?” Kara asked. Her anger and sadness was gone, replaced by the expression of steadfast determination he knew so well.

“Someplace it won’t be noticed,” Kal-El replied. “When Diana and I arrived, the diamond was about nine meters below the surface.” He frowned. “I didn’t even know it was there until later ...” Kara nodded.

“That tracks with my study of it,” she said. “None of the instrumentation in the Fortress can even detect it and Bill can’t even touch it without getting a headache.” She frowned the moment she noticed he had glanced away. “What?”

“Diana has called Stormbreaker back,” he replied before turning his eyes back to her. “It’s time for us to go.” Kara nodded silently and followed him as he drifted down toward the Wayne penthouse.

Bruce struggled against the flood of emotions spilling through him as he watched Clark and Kara drop down out of the sky. He was standing on the small balcony of the penthouse that he so rarely used, gripping the rail tightly as Diana lifted up slowly, taking to the air and giving Kent room to touch down.

“Goodbye, Bruce,” Clark side. “I’m sorry I won’t be able to hear you give your first state of the union speech.” Over Kent’s shoulder, Bruce saw Kara react to that.

“Make sure you watch a recording,” he replied through a suddenly thick throat. Abandoning his normal sense of decorum, Bruce stepped closer to his friend and wrapped both arms around him. “Kick his ass for me,” he said. “Kick it so hard that he tastes your boot.” Clark grinned.

“That’s the plan,” he said. “I’ll make sure he knows the Batman sends his regards.”

Overhead, a low boom drew Bruce’s eyes and he watched as a golden hammer streaked down out of the clouds. Without looking, Diana held up her right hand and the bizarre weapon slapped into her palm. She glanced down at her ring – Clark did the same thing – and they both frowned.

“Look after those kids, Bruce,” Clark ordered. He lifted up off the balcony and slid into place next to Diana. The two clasped hands before shooting up, higher and higher, moving so quickly the air trembled in their wake. Bruce swallowed and exchanged a long, knowing look with Kara Zor-El. Without a word, she floated down and followed him into his study where she accepted the glass of brandy he poured. They drank in silence.

It was the last time either of them would see Clark or Diana.
Mr. Speaker, Madame President Pro Tempore, members of Congress, fellow Americans ... and fellow citizens of Earth.

In sane times, presidents come to this chamber to report on the state of the Union. Tonight, no such report is needed. We, all of us, American and citizens of this great world alike, know what has happened. Tonight, we are gathered to celebrate a hard-won victory and to mourn our losses.

We come together to rejoice that the guns have finally stopped, that no longer are our men and women selling their lives dearly to slow the advance of a terrible enemy. And we come together so we may grieve over those who cannot be with us tonight because they made the ultimate sacrifice.

We have already begun to tally our losses and the cost was high. There are no estimates yet about exactly how many we have lost, nor will there be for a very long time. All that we know is that each person will be mourned. Brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, friends and lovers and neighbors ... so many of us have lost someone that we knew, someone that we loved, someone that we went to church with or worked alongside or watched sports with. Even someone we may have just seen or met in passing.

We grieve for the Marines who lost their lives retaking California from the enemy and for the airmen who defended our skies, for the sailors who died in the blood-soaked oceans of this world and for the soldiers who stood firm in our cities and would not yield. We mourn for the police officers who stood alongside the military when the forces of Imperiex stormed them, and for the firemen who charged into burning buildings to rescue trapped civilians even as our great enemy was still shooting. We acknowledge the great price our doctors and nurses and paramedics paid in this bloody onslaught, and yes, we honor the heroes who stood and gave all. Heroes like Kara Zor-El of Krypton and William Batson of Earth who came back when we needed them the most and sacrificed everything they were to stop Imperiex for good.
been officially labeled a terrorist organization following a string of illegal activities aimed at ‘overthrowing the patriarchy.’ It did not seem to matter to the New Amazons that the current United Planets president was a woman or that females, at the moment, held a majority of UP Senate seats, but then, the so-called Sons of El seemed utterly uninterested in adhering to any of the precepts Kal had stood for most of his life.

Not for the first time, he wondered if staying in the 31st Century had been the correct choice. He missed being Clark.

It was still difficult to believe that ten years had elapsed since he and Diana left Asgard, eight since they visited the 21st Century to say their goodbyes to Bruce and Kara, and in that time, it seemed like they had done nothing but rush from one crisis to another. First, key planets had started vanishing – Daxam, Thanagar, Rann, even the desolate wasteland that was Trom – and then, like clockwork, immensely powerful Servants of Darkseid began appearing throughout the galaxy. They struck hard and fast, targeting planets like Talok VIII and Avalon, but vanishing without any sign of what they were after.

And then, the wider attacks began.

Colonies on the outskirts of the United Planets were hit first and by the time anyone was able to reach them, all that was left were smoking craters and shattered bodies. Commerce planets were next, though the Legion was not entirely unprepared by that point and warded off several of the attacks, learning very quickly that these new Servants were exactly as everyone feared: Daxamites bent to Darkseid’s will.

As one of the Legion’s most powerful, Kal had spearheaded their counter-attacks, blunting the Daxamite offensive and saving as many lives as he could manage. Diana was there when she could, but more often than not, she was on the other side of the quadrant, handling an identical assault on a different world by the same kind of monsters. The whole of the remaining Green Lantern Corps – the last of the surviving ring wielders, in fact, as the centuries had not been kind to the Red Lanterns or the Yellows or even the Star Sapphires – lent their assistance, but even then, it was becoming more and more clear that this was just a holding action. *You don’t win a game by playing defense,* the old football fan in him murmured and Kal knew this to be true, even though he also knew they had no choice. No one could find Apokolips.

So this asymmetrical, low intensity war dragged on and on and on. It was completely different than the constant onslaught he’d witnessed at Asgard, which indicated that Darkseid had some other plan in action, something they remained ignorant of at the moment. The entire galaxy seemed to be holding its breath, waiting in silent terror for the next shoe to drop.

“Here you are.” Diana floated down to join him, her own invisibility field active. Stormbreaker hung off her belt and her hair was drawn back in the braided style she’d adopted in recent years. Today, her brilliant, beautiful eyes weren’t swimming with electricity – which he took to mean that she had the lightning under control at the moment – but they were definitely concerned. It had been a very long time since they’d been on the same planet but the crushing emotional exhaustion riding on his shoulders kept him from doing more than giving her a sad smile.

“Here I am,” he said softly, returning his attention to the city below. Even as he spoke, he realized that they were using Asgardian – it was a difficult habit to break after a thousand years or so of it being the only language they used. “Where did we go wrong?” he asked. She gave him a questioning look. “These people. How did they distort what we stood for so easily?”

Utterly mad but somehow gloriously sane, all at the same time.” She smiled. “Human,” she repeated. Kal chuckled softly at her description. He wondered how she always managed to cheer him with just a few words.

“I spoke with Dox today,” he said after a moment of silence. “He has no explanation for why I am no longer getting any older.”

“You are not simply aging slowly as one would expect with your biology,” the Coluan had told him in that terse manner of his. “Instead, your aging process appears to have been completely suspended. You are, Kal-El, functionally immortal and I have insufficient data to explain why.”

“It is likely my fault,” Diana murmured. She held up her other hand and Kal watched as lightning danced across her fingers. “The Olympians were immortal,” she said, “and if I am the last of them … then …” She exhaled. “I did not mean to do this without your permission…”

“Stop.” Diana’s fumbling explanation was making him smile. “Were our places reversed,” he said, “I would not want to face eternity without you either.” Diana flashed a grin.

“Such a smooth tongue,” she said brightly. “Have you been taking lessons?”

They stood there in silence, staring down at Metropolis as it stretched out below them. Once, Kal would have presumed that his senses were superior – with a bit of concentration, he could make out individual faces and hear specific conversations taking place, even at this vast distance – but, as Diana grew more comfortable with her father’s mantle as the master of the Olympian thunderbolt, her abilities increased exponentially. Now, she was a goddess of the sky and possessed capabilities even he could not comprehend, let alone fathom.

Of course, he’d thought she was a goddess the first time he set eyes on her, even if he’d held his tongue at the time.

“Legion recall,” a soft, disembodied voice announced, emerging from the flight rings they both wore. It was too low a frequency for most to hear, but to Kal (and likely to Diana), it was as loud as a shout. “This is a priority alpha Legion recall.” Kal sighed heavily before half turning his attention to Diana. She nodded.

And together, they climbed back toward space.

By the time they reached the orbital facility that was the Legion’s headquarters, everyone else had arrived.

Diana could not help but to note how so many eyes automatically turned toward her and Kal upon their approach or how Kal’s body language instinctively altered. He had doubts and questions and fears just like the rest of them, but because these children – and no matter that most of them were now in their thirties, to her, to both of them, they were children – looked to him, he buried those thoughts and feelings under a layer of casual confidence. It did not matter that he was so emotionally strung out from century after century of constant conflict. For these children, he would force himself to be strong. To those who he considered friends – Lar, of course, but also Val Armorr, the young man they called ‘Karate Kid’ who, as it turned out, was descended from Bruce – he gave quick nods of greeting. To those who did not know him as well as she did, he was every inch the hero of their legend, the semi-mythical Superman who routinely faced impossible odds with a smile on his face. He buried his angst … for them.

Diana did not think she could love him more than she did in this very instant.
For her part, she completely understood how he felt. She too was utterly exhausted, more mentally than physically. It was so very, very hard to keep on struggling in the face of something like this. What was the old Earth saying? One step forward, two steps back? She felt like that only increased a thousandfold.

“Good.” Jazmin Cullen, the so-called ‘Kid Quantum’ who was the current team leader, looked up from where she and Rokk Krinn – ‘Cosmic Boy’ though most everyone called him Cos – were huddled together over a holo-table. “We’re all here.” She turned to where Brainiac Five, the Coluan genius who was the fifth Dox of his line to bear the Brainiac title. “Go.”

“We have confirmed that Darkseid has been extracting significant individuals from their own timelines to serve Apokolips,” Dox stated calmly. “The Apokoliptians clearly require an army of powerful Servants to accomplish their plan and as we now know, it’s monumental in scope. They are using mass boom-tube technology to drain matter from our galaxy, greatly reducing its mass.” He frowned. “The matter is being siphoned away to a point about ten years in our past, creating a temporal dam.”

“A what?” Kal was frowning.

“Increase mass, you increase gravity. Gravity distorts and bends time.” Dox appeared annoyed at having to explain this, but the expressions on the faces of many Legion members indicated it was necessary.

“Someone’s damming the timestream ten years ago?” Jazmin asked in a clear attempt to clarify.

“Dam. Breakwater.” Lyle Norg, the ‘Invisible Kid’ and Dox’s most common co-conspirator in all things technical, shrugged. “It’s a loose analogy.”

“Apokolips is building vast defenses against some mammoth upheaval in the time stream that’s going to come from our past.” Dox frowned ever so slightly before nodding in the direction of Earth’s Green Lantern who stood apart from the Legion slightly, his emerald uniform pulsing. “More importantly, with Lantern Vidar’s assistance,” the Coluan announced, “we have finally identified the dimensional frequency necessary for us to threshold to Apokolips.”

In that instant, alarms began sounding.

Before anyone could react, a horizontal line suddenly appeared in the air in the very center of the conference hall. Light burned from the tear in reality as the members of the Legion scrambled to put some distance between themselves and the sudden slice, automatically falling into combat postures. A second cut appeared, this one originating from the first but angling sharply down to just above the deck, and then, a third tear in the fabric of spacetime rose up to connect to the first in the form of a triangle with the point down. Everyone present recognized the shape – the threshold gates they used looked much the same once established – and the tear opened.

“Stand clear, please,” a familiar voice declared. Diana was moving forward instantly – Kal was already there, his eyes wide.

“Gabriel?” he asked, exchanging a sudden, hopeful look with Diana.

“Hello, Father, Mother.” Dressed in his familiar armor, complete with the face-concealing helmet, their son stepped through the shimmering triangle, though strangely, he looked to be almost translucent, as if he was not fully here. He glanced around, zeroing in on the Legion’s tracker, Shikari Lonestar, the Kwai who originated from a different galaxy and was said to be capable of following a scent across a galactic sector. “I need your pathfinding capabilities, girl,” he said. He
offered his hand. The humanoid insect glanced toward Diana, but stepped forward at the nod Diana gave.

“Wait!” Dox exclaimed, but Shikari was already touching Gabriel’s outstretched hand.

Light flared, so brilliant that it blinded. Diana threw up a hand to protect her eyes, but the flash was already fading. She could hear cries of surprise … and Shikari’s delighted laughter. Spots danced in her vision, but Diana blinked them away as her innate sense of the sky told her that another body was now displacing air.

“Threshold is anchored and stable,” Gabriel announced. He held up his hands – his solid, no-longer semi-transparent hands – and nodded before removing his helmet. “Hello, Mother, Father.”

Men and women began spilling out from the threshold, some wearing the distinctive armor of the Einherjar while others wore uniforms and clothes Diana did not immediately recognize. She pushed them out of her mind the moment she saw Lyta – with a laugh, Diana sprang forward and seized her daughter in a tight embrace even as Kal did the same with Gabriel. There was chaos, of course, as the heavily armed warriors continued to spill into the conference hall and the Legion tried to run herd on them. Diana and Kal switched children and she kissed her son upon his brow, aware of but not caring about the tears trickling down her face. For a change, they were of happiness.

“You are preparing an attack upon Apokolips,” Lyta said to the Legion once the noise had eased somewhat. She was speaking Asgardian, but the translators built into the flight rings turned her words into Interlac for those who could not understand that language. Dressed in the unmistakable armor of a Valkyrie, she had added a stylized combination of the Themysciran eagle and the House of El sigil upon her breastplate and stood at the forefront of the Einherjar who were arrayed around her like a bodyguard detachment.

“We are,” Jazmin replied, her eyes darting to the warriors even now still emerging from the glittering threshold.

“Then Asgard stands with you!” Lyta announced loudly. The Einherjar roared their approval, rapping their energy spears and monofilament swords against shields that would not melt even if they were plunged in the corona of a star. There were others who held aloft great, heavy guns, and yet others who carried weapons that shimmered and glittered with raw power. More than a handful of the Asgardian refugees were not native to that realm – Diana saw all four of the children she’d rescued from Apokolips when she faced them on Zenn-La, and there were dozens of others she knew to have been freed from Darkseid’s control when she wielded the Gauntlet – but all of them had the same simmering anger and rage in their eyes. They wanted vengeance. They wanted justice.

“Gaining access to Apokolips will not be easy even with your knowledge of the dimensional frequency,” Gabriel declared, mostly addressing his remarks to Jazmin and Dox. He gave Shikari another appraising look. “With this girl’s assistance,” he said calmly, “I believe we can aid you in finding the path to that world.”

“And all who march with me,” Lyta stated, “have faced Apokolips before.” She scowled. “This is an Enemy we know.”

“I like her,” Jo Nah, the erstwhile ‘Ultra Boy,’ murmured. He was across the conference hall, leaning against a wall, and his companion, the energy entity who called himself Wildfire, chuckled, the sound coming strange from the environment suit he was bound within.

“Almost as pretty as her mom,” he said, just as softly. “Sculpted from clay, do you think, or made the old-fashioned way?”
“I know which one I’d choose,” Jo replied with a lecherous grin in his voice.

Diana turned cold, unblinking eyes toward the two, vaguely aware that Kal and Gabriel had done the same (though theirs were a bit harder and angrier.) Jo blanched slightly and looked down almost sheepishly, even as Wildfire shrugged apologetically. She heard the air shift as Lar shook his head and murmur something under his breath about fools and reckless tongues. It had the sound of a proverb, perhaps something he’d grown up hearing on Daxam so very long ago.

“Then let’s get to work,” Jazmin said.
– but an entire planet of men and women with his powers? A mere handful of Kryptonians had nearly destroyed Earth when Zod invaded so very long ago. Dear God, this could be a massacre.

He felt Stormbreaker streak past him, striking one of the Daxamites square in the chest with sufficient force to send him spinning back into a larger group. Less than a heartbeat later, great sheets of lightning stabbed downward, tearing into the Servants with near perfect precision. Hundreds tumbled to the ground, smoke curling up from their dead or (far more likely) unconscious bodies, but by then, Kal was among them.

This close, he could see that not all of them were Daxamites – there were Thanagarians and Khundish warriors augmented by the parademon virus, not to mention a dozen other species he did not immediately recognize – but Kal did not allow the realization to slow his attack in the slightest. All thoughts of mercy and compassion were pushed aside – he hated that these poor fools were being used as pawns, but there was no time to pause or even try to find a better way. More than just this world was at stake. If Dox’s calculations were correct – and they always were; he was even worse than Bruce had ever been – whatever it was Darkseid was doing here had the potential to undo the whole of reality. He could not risk pulling any punches, could not risk trying to simply subdue or incapacitate, not when everything was at stake.

So he struck hard and, when absolutely necessary, he killed.

And as always, he hated himself for it.

The sky over Daxam came suddenly alive with explosions and energy. Asgardian battle skiffs maneuvered into position and their guns erupted with fierce salvos of crimson and violet fire. Barely visible energy fields flickered and sizzled as the Servants of Apokolips retaliated, often with their heat vision but also with their bodies. One skiff vanished in a fiery burst of flame, and then another and another. Columns of emerald light swept across the battlefield, battering the Servants aside and hurling hundreds into the blackened soil below. A flicker of green announced the departure of an Oan power ring, which meant its bearer was dead.

At the same time, the Legion hurled their own talents against this Enemy. XS, one of Barry Allen’s descendants, was a solid blur of white and blue as she crisscrossed the landscape, vibrating through hostiles and buildings alike, though she intentionally did not do so perfectly and inanimate objects exploded at her passage, peppering the Servants with deadly shrapnel; the Servants she flashed through fell, screaming at the sudden, violent readjustment of their molecular bonds. Ultra Boy and M’Onel carried the fight straight to the Daxamite horde, their mighty blows and ‘flash’ vision scorching flesh; Lar especially was roaring in rage, but then, these were his people, turned into weapons by a dark and terrible god. Thom Kallor, aka Star Boy, altered the density of the Servants, suddenly multiplying their weight by factors of ten. Cosmic Boy wielded his magnetic abilities as only one born to them could. And on and on and on. There were so many in action, so many of these talented children using their gifts to hold the line…

And at the very center of the maelstrom was Diana.

Unlike the others, she was not a blur of motion. Instead, she stood firmly in the sky, a bastion of Absolute Truth. Her Lariat coiled around her, flashing out without warning and wrapping around any of the Servants who came too close. They would shriek with agony and surprise, but then, the light of reason once more burned in their eyes, searing away the madness. Rage would follow then, a terrible earth-shaking fury that they had been turned into weapons of mass destruction by an unspeakable evil, and in that very instant, the Lariat would release its captive so he or she could join the fight against Darkseid. Thus freed, the former Servants hurled themselves against their brothers and sisters, fighting to contain them or, in many cases, to get them within striking distance of the
Lariat. Stormbreaker never once ceased moving, slamming into other Servants to drive them into the dirt before springing back to her hand and, on occasion, she even sent jagged bolts of lightning at those who needed it.

A sudden *boom* echoed across the sky and Kal instantly oriented toward it, almost immediately locating the massive form of Darkseid seated upon a broken throne. He looked nothing like Kal recalled, instead appearing to be nothing more than a millennium old stone statue losing its eternal battle with the elements. Weathered cracks and fractures were everywhere upon his body, and as he moved toward the new boom-tube now before him, Kal could hear rock grinding against stone.

Stormbreaker was suddenly there, in his hand, and Kal gave no thought to how it had come to him as he spun it, faster than ever before. Lightning erupted from the hammer as the air around the Asgardian weapon burst into flames, but he spun it quicker and quicker. Darkseid was lumbering toward the boom-tube before him and Kal had no intentions of letting him escape.

But escape was not his intent.

Because then, without warning, the sky turned white.

---

Reality was shattering around her.

Diana could feel the sky revolting against Darkseid’s actions, could feel all of existence shudder as the foul monster braced himself before the swirling boom-tube and spread his fractured arms. Ribbons of dark energy coursed from the transdimensional vortex, bathing Darkseid in its terrible glory. He was absorbing the galactic mass leeched from their universe, Diana realized suddenly, in an attempt to regain the lost vitality that was missing from him, sucking the very life from reality like a vampire. She had done this to him. When she cast him out of Asgard with the Infinity Gauntlet, she had apparently damaged him more badly than she’d anticipated or even hoped. Hera, but it was unfortunate that Gabriel’s Reality Gem did nothing in this universe – they might have been able to simply eradicate the monster with just that!

Her eyes flickered to Kal – he was in the midst of an immense formation of the Daxamite Servants, laying about with Stormbreaker and his own considerable abilities as he tried to win free to take the battle to Darkseid so far below, but there were so many of them and they kept coming, kept attacking whether with fist or with heat vision. It was a delaying tactic, but as those went, she had to admit that it was an exceptional one. Stall the Kryptonian by hurling foes at him with similar powers if admittedly far less powerful. Her perfect recall allowed her to instantly call to mind the memory of his battle against Zod and the other Kryptonians – these Servants were much more powerful, yet would slow him for only moments. Multiple those moments a hundredfold, though, then a thousandfold…

Back to Darkseid she looked, and a flood of comprehension washed through her as she observed him growing stronger, more capable. Was this her father’s mantle? How else could she know that he was rebuilding his power like a vampire, draining the very essence of life from the past? This was the purpose of his temporal dam, to buffer this isolated point in reality from the resulting backlash that would inevitably come as he killed worlds in the past. And here, in this dimension, he would be at his strongest.

Father Zeus’ plan unfolded before her and Diana Knew. Everything in her life was meant to lead to this very point, this very place. The Olympians had sacrificed their lives so she and Kal would be elsewhere, away from Earth and Themyscira when Darkseid assaulted. They were the key to stopping him … but how? What was it that they were intended to do?
Her mind raced as she claimed her rightful place at Kal’s side. Instinct took over and had Diana known how … terrifying the two of them suddenly became to all who could see, even the Servants of Apokolips, she might have laughed. It was more than just that they knew how the other thought or acted and had been partners for over a thousand years – no, in this moment, they were a single entity comprised of two separate bodies. The Lariat and Stormbreaker belonged to both of them and nothing, not a billion brainwashed Daxamites or even a dark god from an earlier era, could stop them.

Kal struck out with Stormbreaker, then almost casually tossed it in her direction just as she was twirling around to dash one of the Servants into the ground. The hammer fell into her hand just in time for her to angle it up to intercept a flash of heat vision from yet another Servant. She casually backhanded the woman away, allowing the momentum of the strike to carry her into another spin. This time, though, she released her hold on Stormbreaker at the apex of her twist and it streaked away, battering a quartet of Daxamites into the ground. Simultaneously, the Lariat struck like a serpent, coiling briefly around Kal’s right arm before yanking him hard in the opposite direction. He barreled into another thick formation of Servants, Daxamite and Thanagarian alike, kicking out with both legs and driving another ten of the Enemy into their insane cousins. The Lariat released him, just as Stormbreaker screamed back to his hand, and Kal almost perfectly recreated her earlier spin. Diana was dropping down as he did and the hammer’s passage missed her head by barely a centimeter … exactly as she knew it would. She hit the ground hard a fraction of a second later, and shards of splintered ferrocrete spun up into the air – it would not injure or even seriously slow the Daxamites, not with their Kryptonian-like powers, but she was more interested in the shock value. They were still relatively new to their abilities and most beings reacted with surprise when billions of tiny fragments were streaking toward their face. Back into the sky she climbed.

On and on they fought, creeping closer and closer to where Darkseid stood. She was partially aware of the rest of the battlefield, of how the Asgardians were pushing against the ground-based Servants, Lyta in the vanguard as ever, or how the Legion and the Lanterns continued their attempts to batter aside the aerial slaves of Apokolips. There were casualties, but Diana could not let her thoughts turn to the fallen, not with more and more of the Daxamite Servants hurtling toward her and Kal. She was aware that none of the Oan power rings were now wielded by their original masters – all but one had been drawn to Legionnaires, and that one did not because it was shattered and broken – and knew that their new wielders might be inadequate.

This was not enough. They could not hold.

As if in answer to her prayers, the Bifrost opened with a brilliant flash of light. A column of dazzling light stabbed down out of the dark sky and when it was gone, more Asgardians spilled out into the battle. Ullr was at their forefront, bellowing a war-cry that rattled the ground as he charged. Again and again, the Bifrost flashed, each time depositing more troops, more warriors, more guns. It was madness: Gabriel was threading an impossibly narrow needle, hurling men and materiel through the cracks between universes and then, bouncing them through the threshold gate still hanging in the sky. Diana could not even begin to comprehend how difficult that had to be. The Servants of Apokolips wavered in surprise – they had the numbers, but this sudden arrival had momentarily disrupted their attack. Even Darkseid reacted, turning his head and frowning.

Now. They had to strike now. She looked at Kal.

But he was already gone.

The air screamed as he dove toward Darkseid.

His cape was long gone, torn free by a Daxamite Servant who was, even now, fighting alongside the
Legion after the Lariat’s caress, but Kal gave it no thought as he reached deep inside him and demanded more speed. Time had run out. Darkseid was but moments away from recovering his full power and then? He had not been able to stop the monster at Asgard and that had been when he was fighting alongside Thor and Hercules.

Fire boiled off him as he unleashed his heat vision to its full effect. The air around Darkseid exploded as the molecules around him were flash-fried and the giant rocked back with surprise. He reacted with blinding speed, twisting in place and springing toward Kal, his single good eye burning.

The resulting shockwave smashed apart the nearby throne that Darkseid had been sitting on earlier, tore apart the ferrocrete and durasteel fragments of buildings, hammered into Daxamite Servants and threw them dozens of kilometers away. Dust and debris exploded outward, enveloping the entire battlefield and hurling up a mushroom-shaped cloud of condensed water vapor and debris. Kal felt reality shiver around them – the blowback from the collision had fractured the boom-tube and it flickered, twisted, and sparked.

“Impressive.” Darkseid rose from where he’d been thrown. His armor hung off his dark gray skin in tattered fragments. “You continually impress me, Kal-El.”

“Oh, I’m just getting started,” Kal replied through clenched teeth and a dark smile. “By the way, the Batman sends his regards.”

He blurred forward, ducking under Darkseid’s lightning fast counterstrike, and struck hard. Again, Darkseid rocked back – from the startled expression on his face, the old monster had not expected the level of power behind the blow – but Kal struck again and again. He caught nearly as many strikes as he handed out and each one of them hurt. Hephaestus’ belt did its job, though, and his injuries vanished almost as soon as they appeared.

But then, without warning, time slowed to a crawl.

Darkseid was unaffected – in fact, he was likely responsible as he easily caught Kal’s punch and hurled him into the fragments of the throne that still remained. It shattered on his impact, not quite exploding but coming pretty close, and Kal pushed against the planetary gravity, freezing in the air as he instantly reoriented on Darkseid. Heat bubbled out of his eyes – he carved a wicked furrow across the monster’s chest, so whatever was slowing him down wasn’t affecting the physics of lightspeed – and he hurled himself back, straining for every bit of speed.

He did not blur.

“Fool,” Darkseid snarled as he battered Kal into the ground once more. “This is my seat of power, Kryptonian. What did you expect would happen when you came here?” Kal caught the monster’s blurring blow with one hand, twisting it hard while kicking up with his left leg. His boot slammed into Darkseid’s chest with enough power to shatter a moon. Darkseid grunted.

And then, he screamed.

Tongues of white fire lanced down, out of the sky, piercing through the monster’s body. Fragments of stone and armor exploded outward as the lightning moved like something alive, actively seeking him out while intentionally avoiding Kal. A bare heartbeat later, Diana’s feet smashed into the small of Darkseid’s back, knocking him to one knee. Stormbreaker was in her hand, but she almost leisurely released her grip on the haft, allowing it to fall squarely into Kal’s waiting hand. They struck at the same time, him with the uru hammer forged in a different universe, her with a gloved fist that could tear through the hardest metals known to exist, and the twin blows picked Darkseid up and hurled him a dozen yards away. His impact carved a ten meter long trench before he could arrest his
tumble, and when he rose, his face was contorted with fury.

“In another time,” the monster snarled, his eye gleaming crimson, “I would have admired your persistence.” He straightened. “But I grow weary of this game.”

“Well that makes two of us,” Kal-El hissed. He began to twirl Stormbreaker as Diana floated to one side, lightning flickering down the length of the Lariat. His wife’s presence was more than just a balm – he could feel his speed return, could sense some unseen … power pulsing off her and brushing aside whatever it was that Darkseid had done to slow him down. She was studying the giant intently – Kal recognized her expression; she had a plan and was attempting to formulate the best way to accomplish it – so he kept talking, fully intent on drawing Darkseid’s attention. “This ends only one way,” he said coldly.

“Indeed it does, Kal-El,” the tyrant replied. “It is appropriate that we three should stand here. The Last Kryptonian. The Last Olympian. And the Last of the Fourth World.” He gave them a malicious smile. “The two of you have interfered with my plans for the last time.” Darkseid gestured. “Come Kryptonian. Come Olympian. Let us end this.”

For the span of a single heartbeat, all was silent.

As she expected, Kal struck first, blurring forward with Stormbreaker screaming as he attacked, but Diana was less than a nanosecond behind him, the Lariat coiling around her fingers as she dove to flank the monster. She pulled lightning from the sky, arcing it around Kal, where it exploded almost harmlessly against Darkseid’s defensive wards, but she had never intended for the blasts to be more than a distraction to cover her husband’s strike. Great plumes of heat rolled off him, so intense that it turned the sand underfoot to glass which promptly burst into flames. At the same time, Darkseid’s own eye blast streaked out, slamming into Kal’s chest and ripping apart what was left of his Legion uniform. It didn’t slow him, though, and another hundredth of a second later, Stormbreaker struck home.

The resulting explosion rocked the entire continent. Diana could feel the shockwave rip through the air, hurling the entire Legion attack force back – the new wielders of the Oan power rings reacted just in time, throwing up protective barriers around their allies as they desperately tried to ride out this storm – and they were dozens of kilometers away. Apokoliptian Servants were smashed out of the sky with terrific force. The Daxamites were the fortunate ones – their enhanced durability under the blue sun allowed many of them to survive the impact – but the others, the Khunds and Thanagararians and Ranns, were swept aside before they even realized their danger.

She twisted around Kal, completing an aerial somersault over Darkseid’s violent counterstrike, and then hit the ground just long enough to be ready for Stormbreaker as the smoking hammer tumbled end over end to her hand. Kal’s punches were blurs – each impact caused another ground-rattling shockwave – and the star in his belt was growing brighter with each blow, but he was absorbing just as much punishment from Darkseid who seemed to moving fractionally faster. The Lariat coiled around the tyrant’s leg and then, without warning, grew taut – the intent was simply to overbalance him, especially as she slammed the hammer into his other leg, but instead, Darkseid cried out in shocked pain. He flickered, vanishing and reappearing meters away, but smoke still curled up from his leg and Diana barely had time to intercept his eye blast with her bracers. She reflected the beam right back at him, though he casually batted it aside as Kal reached him in another blurring half run, half jump.

Diana’s eyes flickered ever so quickly to the Lariat and then up, to the sky where even now she could sense the Daxamite Servants. They were staggered, frozen … of course! She smiled then, fiercely and dangerously, meeting the monster’s good eye with her own hard gaze. Darkseid must
have seen something in her face, something that told him things were about to change from the way his expression shifted. It was to be expected, of course.

Because she had a plan.

Lightning poured through her once more and she threw herself up into the air, as if she meant to seek a much higher altitude. Barely twenty yards up, she rolled and fell, the Lariat shimmering and dancing around her. She sent her lightning ahead along with Stormbreaker and both struck at the same instant, blinding Darkseid’s good eye for the mere fraction of a second she needed. With a whisper, the Lariat moved.

And in that moment, as he recognized her intent, Kal lunged forward to wrap both arms around Darkseid in an unmistakable Amazon wrestling move.

The Lariat drew taut around them both and the light of Absolute Truth burned away Darkseid’s deceptions. A being like him? How many lies had blackened whatever was left of his soul? How much deception had he drenched himself in over the millennia? He strained – his power was immense, greater than any of the Olympians, and Diana knew that if the Lariat could be burst, he was the one who could do it – but Kal responded by squeezing as well. Muscles that could shatter planets fought against each other, but her husband was not waging a three-pronged war, was not facing the Truth about himself while struggling to break free from a man who hated him with the passion to ignite stars. Again and again, the Lariat coiled around Kal and Darkseid and the monster suddenly howled with agony as Diana slammed Stormbreaker into his good eye with every bit of her strength.

“You are the last of the Fourth World,” she hissed, feeling his hold on his Servants falter and fail. The Lariat was only as strong as her will, as her belief in Truth, and right now, there was nothing in the whole of creation stronger. She released her grip upon Stormbreaker and the hammer dropped onto the ground with a loud boom, splintering the flash-fried glass. Stepping closer, she joined Kal in the hold – it was a perverted embrace, and just touching this creature made her flesh crawl. “You have no place here!” Kal met her eyes and he nodded.

And then, together, without hesitation or regret, they hurled themselves into the open boom-tube.

Reality splintered around them. Time and space warped as they fell sideways, tumbling and spinning and sliding. Darkseid was still struggling, still fighting, still roaring with rage, and Kal was screaming his defiance. His voice … she focused on his beautiful, beautiful voice and joined hers with his.

She had no destination in mind, no plan beyond ensuring that this monster could harm no one else. Anger coursed through her then and Diana gave Kal a horrified look – she could not release her touch on the Lariat and he could not let go of Darkseid. Regret came, thick and bitter. He deserved so much better. They would fall through the cracks of existence forever, locked in this timeless struggle.

Not so. A distant, halfway familiar voice whispered across time. Athena. When she had Touched Diana on Themyscira, she must have left something behind. The tiniest of splinters of her mind, set aside should this moment come to pass. There was a place, the ghost of a memory murmured. It was far away, at the very edge of the last frontier, where all roads ended…

The Source Wall.

Diana smiled. She knew the way, knew how to transit through this dimensional vortex to that place of eternal torment. There was a path already trod by her brother Hermes centuries ago in preparation for this very instant. He had come here, Diana suddenly knew, to strengthen Kal when her husband
was a prisoner of Darkseid, but always – *always* – visited the Wall when he left. Father Zeus had wanted this road ready for her, ready for them. Centuries of planning, centuries of hope … could she not honor their sacrifice? Kal did not believe in fate, argued that only individuals crafted their own destiny, but Diana had grown up paying careful homage to the Moirai, the three white-robed women who spun out the thread of a person’s life. Father Zeus had chosen this path for her. Could she not see it through to the end even if it claimed her life?

No. She could not.

The ground was still shaking.

From where she crouched, sheltered behind the fractured emerald construct wrought by the boy with the magic ring, Lyta Kal-El could see nothing. Clouds of dust and debris yet filled the air but the titanic thunder that had rocked the very world was finally gone. Kneeling at her side, his shield still held aloft, Sjofin gave her a wide-eyed look. He was the last of her father’s Redcloaks still serving – the others were long dead or retired from the field due to injury.

“*In Thor’s name,*” he murmured, seemingly unable to determine whether he should be elated, horrified and ecstatic at how powerful her parents had become. Though she had struggled to hide it, Lyta herself had been stunned when she watched them fight together. Had they always been so deadly together? During the Asgard War, they were rarely on the same side of the battle …

In the far distance, Lyta heard a muted *boom* and recognized the sound instantly. A tube had opened or closed somewhere. She sprang up from the dirt and threw herself into the sky.

The ringbearer wisely let her pass – it was the dark-haired Legionnaire who possessed Father’s powers; the M’Onel, she thought they had called him – and Lyta landed roughly in the dirt a kilometer distant, jumping back into the sky the instant her feet touched the ground. Gabriel insisted she was capable of unassisted flight like him – that little brat of his could already fly too but then, it might be magic given who the mother was – but she’d never been able to do more than these awkward jumps without the use of her armor’s energy wings and those were long since torn away.

She touched down long seconds later, landing in an immense crater that had not been here before. The ground crunched underfoot – glass, she realized – and heat was still rising, causing sweat to instantly begin trickling down her face. Lyta could taste the smell of a recently collapsed boom-tube and cast around for a moment, intent on trying to find it. Gabriel had said the Kwai girl was an exceptional tracker. If she survived, perhaps she could …

Her eyes fell on Stormbreaker a moment later.

It was resting there, head down in the glassed dirt, and Lyta felt her entire world lurch out of balance. Mother loved that hammer and it loved her. King Thor had been furious when Gabriel returned their parents to their own reality, and then astounded when Stormbreaker sprang up of its own volition and pursued them through the closing Bifrost. Mother would not part with Stormbreaker unless … unless … no. That was not possible. Not them. Anyone but them. They were invincible. She dropped to her knees before the hammer, her mind frozen upon the impossibility before her.

“I’m not seeing any trace of them or of Darkseid,” the M’Onel told her softly. He hovered a half foot above the ground and was slowly rotating in place, his eyes narrowed in that strange way Father had when he was using his enhanced vision. “I heard their battle but …”

Whispers of movement warned Lyta that the Servants were approaching, but her mind was stuck on the hammer and she could not make her body move. Voices erupted in a senseless babble around her
– the Servants were freed, it appeared, and terribly confused – and she was aware that the M’Onel was addressing them in a language that was so much gibberish to her. Such a strange name, that. Was it a title? Or some other bizarre tradition of his reality that made no sense? He had pretty eyes, though. Like Father’s.

She was still kneeling there, in the dirt and glass, when Ullr reached her side. With barely a grunt, Sif’s son took in the hammer and promptly dropped to his knees beside her, wrapping one of his meaty hands around her shoulder. Lyta wanted to let him comfort her, desperately wanted to just let her body go limp, but dammit, she could not tear her eyes from the unmoving hammer. It taunted her, scoffed at her, laughed at her pain.

“Lyta.” It was her brother’s voice, whispering across distances so unbelievably vast that her mind shied away from even trying to fathom them. With great effort, she ripped her eyes away from the hammer and glanced up – it probably wasn’t accurate, especially here since he had opened the Bifrost through the threshold gate, but in the times she’d traveled via the Rainbow Bridge, she’d always envisioned him as floating in the heavens above her. “Lyta.”

“I hear you, dammit,” she muttered. Ullr gave her a sidelong look, his thick eyebrows climbing up before he too glanced skyward.

“I need you to listen to me,” Gabriel said before continuing on. His words were garbled nonsense that did not make sense to her mind and Lyta realized with some surprise shock was setting in. She blinked as she tried to turn her brother’s patient words into something that made sense. What did he mean? What wall? There was no wall here. There was nothing here but death and destruction.

Stormbreaker quivered.

It was barely noticeable, but Lyta was still intently aware of the mystical hammer, and her eyes instantly locked on the weapon. Her muscles tensed – she felt Ullr’s arm fall away as he went into combat mode as well, even though he obviously did not know her mind; that was one of the reasons she loved this silly, stupid man. He trusted her so completely, so utterly, that if she suggested they march to Niflheim and punch Loki’s daughter, Hela, in the face, he would be a hundred leagues away from Asgard before asking her why they were challenging the goddess of death.

Lyta held her breath, wondering if she had imagined the movement – no! There it was again! It was trembling. That could only mean…

Stormbreaker shot up from the ground, streaking higher and higher, vanishing into the cloudless, blue sky with a boom that rattled the air. The fierce red sun – when had it changed? Lyta did not know nor did she care – stared down balefully. She could no longer see her Mother’s hammer but somehow, she knew where it was going. Suddenly, impossibly, her brother’s words made sense. The fog of shock lifted from her mind, leaving her once more in charge of her faculties.

Lyta laughed. She turned to Ullr and seized him in an embrace that caused him to groan, especially when she sprang up to her feet and whirled him around as if he weighed nothing. The ring of eyes upon her – filthy, wounded Legionnaires, shocked and confused Daxamites, hopeful Asgardians – did nothing to foul her mood.

This had been a glorious day!

“Sjofin!” she bellowed, pushing Ullr back with just enough force that he stumbled. His scowl made her giggle like a girl but Lyta thrust it away. “Where in the Nine Realms is Sjofin?!” She looked around. “Damn your eyes, man! We have work to do!”
In the wreckage of the dead world that had once been Daxam but had become Apokolips, the Legion found ... nothing. No trace of Diana or Kal-El could be found, no matter the amount of effort put into finding even the slightest hint of their survival. The abilities at the Legion’s disposal were beyond just considerable and when neither magic, nor science, nor post-mortal ability uncovered anything, concern set in. Eventually, concern turned to worry, and then became sadness and grief as the days turned into weeks. Surely if they had survived, was the refrain from the realists amongst their numbers, they would have revealed themselves. If they had survived, that was. As much as the dreamers and the optimists might hope otherwise, this seemed the most probable fate.

The Asgardians returned to their own reality soon after, transiting once more through the cracks between universes via the boom-tube threshold the Watchman of Bifrost had wrought. They left behind none of their number, not even the dead. Lyta Kal-El, the daughter of Superman and Wonder Woman shed no tears for her lost parents, which some took as confidence that her parents yet lived, while yet others insisted she was physically incapable of weeping, that she was sculpted from iron much as her mother had been borne of clay.

Afterward, as the galaxy was recovering from the sudden and unexpected reappearance of the missing planets, Querl Dox, the Brainiac Five of the Legion, made a very rare error, voicing a possible theory about the fate of their lost allies based on his firsthand knowledge about the capabilities of the two. Though he was merely making a wild guess, as such things are wont to do, it grew in the telling until it became the agreed upon truth. The M’Onel, he who would centuries later be discovered to have been the Most Holy Valor, returned to bring justice to the galaxy he’d birthed, would scoff at these new tales, claiming they were mere fairy tales and wild supposition, but in time, even his words were discounted as the tale grew.

To truly destroy Darkseid, this new legend claimed, was beyond even the powers of the Superman or of the Wonder Woman, and only together could they accomplish it. The Last of the Olympians, it was said, embraced her father’s mantle wholly and became a star, burning so brightly and so powerfully that she amplified her husband’s powers to beyond even her own godly level, but in doing so, she was lost forever. Grief stricken and so enraged he could not be controlled at the death of his wife, the Last Kryptonian unleashed a wrath that shattered the foundations of time itself and obliterated Darkseid for all of eternity before he too was lost, though the various tellings invariably differed as to the specifics of his fate. It was this myth that would unite the Sons of El and the New Amazons in the decades to come, and the faith of this new unified organization would become the centerpiece of a new religion, a religion of Light that taught how two gods of Hope and Truth stood against darkness without yielding. These gods, the Prophets of the Chosen claimed, were why all of reality yet stood.

There were other rumors, of course, whispered stories of the two vanishing in the timestream to be reborn in a time when they would be most needed, or of them becoming one with the Source itself. Still others claimed that the Source had tasked them to watch over His Wall, to defend reality from the billions of unnamed monsters and tyrants who had sought out power to remake all of existence and, as penance, were forever imprisoned within that Wall. As time passed, these tales were told and retold, changing and evolving as all stories do, until finally, the Prophets of the Chosen adopted them as official dogma for their Church: She Who Was Diana and He Who Was Kal, it was prophesied, were the Gods of Truth and of Hope, mortals reborn as deities, who faced a terrible entity of evil and hate. They were lost to time, but the Source meant to send them back when they were most needed.

And indeed, through the centuries that passed, rumor and myth spread throughout the two universes of a man and a woman appearing at moments of terrible crises, to lend aid against the forces of entropy and hate only to vanish once more, disappearing without even the slightest indication that
they had been there. The Prophets of the Chosen grew in authority and in prestige in two universes, but something unseen always kept them from abusing their power. Naturally, the Prophets would claim that this was due to their inner strength, their moral certainty, and even the Hopeful Truth underlying their teachings, but it was whispered by those outside their clergy that they were touched by the Gods themselves, watched by the Superman and the Wonder Woman for any signs of abuse. Stories of direct intervention by one or both of the mortals become gods abounded within the Universal Church of the Chosen, and in every instance, those Touched insisted that their patrons desired not to be worshipped, but rather emulated in deed and in action. Faith was all well and good, but it was by deeds alone that they were judged.

The most devout Seekers of Truth crossed universes in their desires to discover what truly happened that day and most would eventually find their way to the golden halls of Asgard. There, Lyta Kal-El, the daughter of the Superman and the Wonder Woman, would rise to great prominence amongst the Aesir, eventually wedding Prince Ullr a century after Darkseid fell, and there, the Silent Watchman stood a vigil before the Bifrost, his eyes seeing all. He knew the Truth about his parents and whether they yet roamed the cosmos, it was said, but he was not revealing the secrets that lurked deep within his heart and when petitioners sought him out, asking him what had happened to his mother and father, Gabriel the All-Seeing simply smiled.

As with all things, the stories about the Last Kryptonian and the Last Amazon became yet another myth. Arguments and disputes arose – all Amazons were sculpted from clay, not just She Who Was Diana, while others claimed she was unique or that none of them, even she, had been made thus; He Who Was Kal had never walked among mortals as one of them, some insisted, or perhaps he had been a mortal raised to godhood, or he was a mortal who spoke a Word to become a God – and the myths slowly became legend. Centuries marched on as the press of time unfolded. The stars grew dim and cool as both universes aged. All was forgotten …

But one truth remained: a man of steel loved a woman of clay, and she him, and their union changed two universes. Forever.

FINIS

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!