The Shape of Hope

by susiecarter

Summary

Post-BvS AU: In the aftermath of Superman's death and Lex Luthor's imprisonment, the best Bruce can do is belatedly conduct the investigation into Luthor's "scientific" endeavors that he should have undertaken months ago. He thinks he knows what to expect, going through Luthor's secret labs one at a time, picking through the logs and research notes Luthor left behind.

He's wrong.

Notes

First off, this story exists solely thanks to and was 100% inspired by androbeaurepaire and the absolutely stunning original prompt (and then EVEN MOAR ART HAPPENED). Andro murdered me with feelings in a single image, and I needed almost 40k to even attempt to do the same in return. orz Thank you a million times over for being so amazing and encouraging, and for not minding when I piled EVEN MORE ANGST on top of your heartwrenching prompt; it was such an incredible treat to have the chance to partner up with you at last, and I had a blast! ♥

And of course, as always, I'm compelled to thank everybody who participated in this round, for the amazing initial selection of prompts, for making this event so much fun to participate in, and for creating and sharing so much awesome Superbat work for everybody to enjoy. And the mods, for making it all possible! \o/ YOU GUYS ARE GREAT AND I
This fic picks up between BvS and JL, as indicated by the tags; the canonical character death tag is for Clark. He is dead for the entirety of this story. SORRY, CLARK. However, Bruce has sufficiently intense feelings about that, and about him, that I feel the pairing tag is warranted. I relied on the DCEU Wiki to inform me that the girl Bruce finds in the street during the opening of BvS is, by word of god and/or some additional media material somewhere, named Sage. The "human experimentation" and "implied/referenced child abuse" tags are interrelated—the events involved are in the past and only inexplicitly discussed in the fic. Basically, this was an excuse to noodle about grief and people's responses to it for almost forty thousand words, and then make everybody hug. NO REGRETS
Luthor's fourth secret lab has several extra security features set up.

Bruce frowns, absent, deactivating the additional alarm systems. There's something else, too. It appears to be an interlinked group of digitally controlled locks on one sublevel—operated on a separate control circuit from the interior and exterior locks he cracked to get in here in the first place.

Interesting.

And unsettling. Bruce still hasn't worked out the precise sequence of events that resulted in General Zod's corpse winding up in Luthor's personal lab; the idea that he may have secured one or more additional specimens—and specimens that require active restraint, at that—is not a comfortable one to entertain. One of Zod's followers, still alive? Now, when

(—Superman has—Superman is—)

the most effective countermeasure Bruce can think of is no longer in play.

Except Bruce can, at a glance, spot nothing about this system that suggests the kind of intensive measures necessary to hold a fully-grown Kryptonian warrior against their will. So: either additional limiting agents are already in place—even more kryptonite; altered light wavelengths; something else Luthor's tests had revealed to him—or there is no need for them, and whatever is in there, it's something else.

And if worst comes to worst, Bruce hadn't left that spear sticking out of Doomsday's charred remains. There are options, if he needs them.

It's bittersweet, vaguely sickening, to find himself

(—now, at last: much, much too late to do the least fucking good, goddamn you—)

hoping he doesn't.

He takes a calculated risk, and deactivates the locks.

The odds are on his side, after all. By the look of this lab, it's been abandoned just as long as the rest. Deserted by Luthor's erstwhile staff, rats fleeing a sinking ship, somewhere between Doomsday's rise and Luthor's arrest. Whatever they left behind, whatever it is that's been shut up in here since they went, it hasn't been fed or cared for; it may be in greater need of medical attention than it is of any of the other varieties of treatment Batman is usually prepared to dish out.

And he finds he'd rather face a potential attack than be trapped on the wrong side of a lock he could have chosen to open, useless when his help is needed most.

He crosses the upper floor swiftly, silently. Luthor may have been deluded, but he did demonstrate strategic consistency in certain respects—which is almost more unsettling than if he'd just been a thoroughly irrational maniac. His labs have all employed approximately the same general layout
and organizational scheme: presumably a practical measure, allowing him to transfer personnel between them with minimal disruption.

Which means there will be nothing of any meaningful value to Bruce on this level, the uppermost and most easily accessed. If he wants lab reports, data, external hard drives, whatever piece of the puzzle is hidden here, he'll have to go two levels down at a minimum.

And, as it happens, two levels down is also the sublevel where the specimen is—was—being held. Convenient.

Bruce slows, coming down the stairs toward it, and listens. If whatever is in there has worked out that it's free, he'd expect it to make full use of the knowledge.

But he hears nothing. No steps, no movement.

He enters the sublevel by climbing, clinging to the ceiling, tucked into the shadows over the door. Even people who are looking for things often default to their own eye level and below; they don't always remember to look up.

Abandoned workstations. Equipment—medical, some of it. But then with a live specimen, it's no wonder.

He continues along the ceiling to a corner, and then allows himself to drop, the soles of his boots meeting industrial tile with the barest scuff.

Half a test, permitting that sound to escape.

But nothing moves.

From this side of the room, he can see what appears to be some sort of observation area, a darkened but likely transparent stretch of wall. Presumably, he assumes, adjacent to the enclosure containing the specimen; and yes, there. More of a hatch than a doorway, with bolts designed to sink into the frame when the lock is engaged. But it seems the lab staff did interact with the specimen deliberately after all, which increases the odds that an encounter with whatever is in there is by default survivable.

And, of course, the lock is no longer engaged.

He reaches out, touches the hatch. Turns the hand wheel—a quarter turn, that's all—and feels it release.

A clear perimeter; that's the first thing he perceives. Airgapped, he thinks, absently amused by the idea that all this is set up to contain some kind of Kryptonian LAN server.

Walls—and another door. A fascinatingly ordinary one, the sort of door you might see in any old civilian home. Brass knob. Wood grain, the texture of it visible through a solid coat of pale yellow paint. Stenciled neatly in white, perfectly symmetrical: a flower. A daisy.

Disconcerting, in its sheer incongruity.

Bruce ignores the clench of apprehension in his chest, and reaches for the knob; turns it, and the door opens with the barest push.

The interior, he registers immediately, is just like the door. Except for one wall—dark, smooth,
clearly the one-way material corresponding to the observation area outside. But the rest, it's all—

It's a kid's room. Eerie at first on the merits of its location, in the middle of one of Lex Luthor's secret labs; and then, after a moment's observation, on the merits of its own peculiar blandness. There's nothing immediately wrong with it. The remaining walls are all pale yellow, to match the exterior of the door. The interior of the door, too, is stenciled with a daisy, Bruce discovers. There's a bed, a reasonably sized twin: pale yellow bedspread, white accents. A bedside table, a beanbag chair. A bureau, a door sized and positioned as if to plausibly lead to a small closet.

But the bed is so neatly made. The bedside table shows no wear, no scuffed corners; it's never been toppled over and then set to rights, never had anyone's initials painstakingly scratched into the underside with a ballpoint pen. The beanbag chair looks new. Nothing has been left on the floor. Everything is so pale—it shouldn't all be clean.

But it is.

He takes a step in, drawn almost despite himself to understand what the hell all of this is doing here.

Someone makes a small frightened sound. Hardly even that: an intake of breath, unsteady.

And Bruce looks, and sees. Crouched on the far side of the bed, pressed against the wall, curled up tight beneath that pretty little bedside table. A girl.

The girl.

Bruce's breath catches in his throat. It shouldn't be. It can't be.

But those round dark eyes, that frightened face—even that breathing; no tears, no sobbing, only quiet uneven breathing—

She's unmistakable. It's the girl.

There are no surveillance devices active in the immediate area. Bruce knows that already. But even if there were, there could be no question as to the next necessary action. He'd have considered it in any case. No child is prepared to look up and see Batman looming over them. But with this child in particular, it's doubly justified. She has no reason to recognize or trust Batman; but she'll know Bruce Wayne.

He reaches for the releases, tugs the cowl free—hopes, dimly, that it will ruffle his hair up into a ludicrous mess the way it so often does, because that, too, will potentially put her at ease.

"Hey," he says, quiet, and crouches down. "Hey, hi. Remember me?"

And it's nothing like that day at all, except in every way it is. They're almost on a level with each other, like this, when she crawls out from beneath the bedside table, a flurry of arms and legs, a hiccupped little gasp. She stumbles in, hasty, uncertain, arms up to close around his neck; and he spreads a hand across her back, half-assed comfort, and is almost surprised that there's a glove on it.

He's in uniform. He's in uniform, not a dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up; there isn't dust and smoke and death in the air.

She's taller, he thinks distantly.
But then of course she is. It's been almost two years. And Christ, who knows what the fuck Luthor's been doing to her?

"Mr. Wayne," she gasps against his cheek, on a shuddering little exhale. "Mr. Wayne—"

"Sage," he says, and closes his eyes. "It's okay, I've got you. You're going to be okay."

The same words he'd used then.

Lies, at the time. But he hadn't known what the fuck else to tell her.

There had been no one to hand her off to. Not right away. Her mother—Bruce had looked at what was left of the tower the girl had pointed out, and had known better than to hope. The police had much bigger problems. And he could take care of a child

(—no, he fucking couldn't. What a sick fucking—joke: HA HA HA—)

for a few hours. He could keep her safe, until city services was able to take her.

Half a day. Less. He'd held onto her, hadn't let go. Had picked her up and carried her, hadn't made her talk to him or lift her face away from where she'd buried it in his shoulder. He didn't want her looking. He didn't want her seeing any of this.

He'd walked like that for a while. It had been fine. She hadn't weighed that much—sixty pounds, tops. His armor and equipment probably added up to at least two-thirds of that, depending on what he had with him any given night. It wasn't more than he could manage.

He'd talked to a dozen more people, perhaps. Gotten the Wayne employees coordinated, searching through the smoke and the lighter debris, attempting a rough headcount of everyone who'd been in the building that day.

Jack would have known. Jack would have been able to reel off the list without even looking at the check-in records from the lobby. But Jack was—

Bruce Wayne wasn't supposed to be able to set up the beginnings of a triage station at the corner of the block, shouldn't have known enough to instruct anyone in how to tell when it was worth applying a tourniquet. Bruce did it anyway.

And he wasn't stupid. He knew the horrors of half-collapsed buildings, knew the dangers it posed to have anyone who wasn't qualified, who hadn't prepared for this, who didn't fucking have any of their fucking equipment with them, dashing in to shove rubble around, trying to be a hero.

He wasn't stupid. But he'd wanted to be, because the alternative had been standing there, knowing people were dying and not doing anything about it.

Sage had helped.

That was her name—she'd told him, two hours in, shyly asking for his too, which was the only reason he even remembered he hadn't actually given it to her. He couldn't stop thinking about it afterward: the way she'd looked right then, murmuring such a quiet ordinary question, still clutching his shoulder, wet-faced and dirty, hair gray with settling ash. And she'd helped him not
be stupid; because he'd throw himself under a building that was about to fall down, but not her, and she didn't have anybody else.

Once he'd found someone else who could take care of her—then he could do any idiot thing he wanted. But not before.

She'd been asleep by the time he'd actually been able to turn her over to Metropolis CPS. Which was for the best, because he didn't want to have to figure out what to say to her. He didn't want to have to figure out how to tell her she was a million times better off with them; because it might not seem like that to her, when he was the one who'd pulled her out of danger, but that didn't mean it wasn't true.

He didn't want her to cry over it. He didn't want her to even notice. He wanted her to wake up safe, far away, and not think about him for a second.

They'd find—her father, maybe, if he was in the picture. Her father, or whichever other parent or parents she might have had, or a relative of her mother's. Someone. Someone who knew her, someone who could look after her. Someone who'd care about her, and do it better than Bruce Wayne ever could.

Or at least that's what he'd thought. Except apparently somewhere down the line Lex Luthor had gotten his hands on her instead, had gotten his hands on her and shut her away in here, and Bruce has absolutely no idea why.

Almost two years. And Luthor's had her for most of it, possibly even all of it—as if it matters, as if an hour in Luthor's grasp weren't far too long.

And Bruce had had no idea. He'd been much too busy chasing after Superman to spare a thought for anything else Luthor might have been up to. He could have had her out of here months ago, if he'd been paying some goddamn attention. He could have made sure none of this happened to her at all.

But he hadn't.

Always, always, he's too late. Too late to do anyone any good; and somehow he's never the one who pays the price for it.

He picks her up. Almost two years: she's bigger, heavier, older. But he can still manage it.

He needs answers. Needs whatever files there are to scrounge from this place, needs every last bit of information about whatever was being done to her—whatever it was Luthor's cronies were looking for, while they watched her through that observation window.

But he needs to get her out of here, out of here and somewhere safe; somewhere he can make sure he hasn't just lied to her all over again.
Mr. Wayne looks weird like this.

He's kind of uncomfortable, too. The black armor he's wearing is hard in some places, squishy in others. Sage shifts a little against it, trying to make it stop poking her.

And—okay, maybe to see if he minds. To find out what the rules are. Sometimes she's supposed to hold still and not move a muscle, no matter what happens. Even if it hurts. But sometimes she's allowed to do what she wants, as long as she doesn't make trouble or touch anything.

He doesn't mind. He doesn't look at her at all, not really—he's glancing up the stairs instead. He moves his arm, adjusts his grip a little. He doesn't say anything.

He's good at carrying her. Sage remembers that from before.

So—it isn't one of the times she needs to hold still, then. That's good. She relaxes, blows out a relieved little breath, and that makes the armor less uncomfortable, too. She turns her face into his shoulder. And like that, for a second, she can pretend there's no armor. She can pretend it's before.

That day hadn't been so bad. Not really. Not once Mr. Wayne found her, anyway. He'd held her, carried her, way longer than she could ever remember Mom doing it—

He'd been there, and back then, before, that had meant everything was okay. An adult, and not a stranger—at least not once he'd told her his name. Adults took care of things and made them turn out okay, back then. And while she'd been with him, it had still felt like that could be true.

Nobody had told her about Mom. Not until the day after. Not until Mr. Wayne was already gone, and she hadn't known where, and nobody would tell her how to find him.

And after that it was all strangers, all the time. Strangers, and the lab, and the ship, and more and more times she had to hold still even when it hurt, too many to count.

But now Mr. Wayne is here, even if he looks weird, even if he's dressed funny. He's here, and he's—

He's taking her outside?

She hasn't looked up. She can feel the air change, that's all. The air, and the sounds. Out of the lab. To the ship, then, she thinks, and shivers a little.

But it's okay. It's going to be okay. Mr. Wayne said so. And Sage doesn't like having to go and hold still in the ship, she never has, but—she's a good girl. Lex is the one who said that. She's a good girl, and she'll hold still for Mr. Wayne if he asks her to, even if she doesn't want to.

There's a car. Not the same car that's usually there. This one is smaller, lower to the ground. Black. Mr. Wayne puts her in it and then gets in the other side, and when he starts it up, it *growls*, which is kind of awesome.

Sage is a good girl: she doesn't touch anything. She knows better. She sits with her feet on the floor and her hands in her lap, and no matter how interesting all the lights and switches look, or how cool and smooth the gleaming curve of the car door is, she doesn't move.
Hands to ourselves. If these test results are invalidated, we'll have to do all of this over again from the beginning. You don't want that, do you?

"Okay, hang on," Mr. Wayne says, and smiles at her.

He's doing it on purpose, to make her feel better. She can tell. But that doesn't mean it doesn't work, and she lets herself settle a little deeper into the seat.

There isn't much space in here. But that's okay. It's like being tucked under her bedside table again: like being small, and safe, and knowing no one can get to you without you seeing them coming.

Mr. Wayne doesn't take her to the ship.

She doesn't know why. Maybe this is just a stop on the way—but she looks out of the car and doesn't recognize anything. They aren't even in the city anymore. There's a house she's never seen before, trees, a lake. It isn't anything like the lab at all. It isn't anything like anywhere she's ever been.

She doesn't know what to do. She'd have known what to do in the lab, and she'd have known what to do in the ship. There are rules for those things already. But not for this.

Lex had explained everything to her. Where she was, what she was for, why it was important. He'd explained it, and she'd understood it, and everything that had happened after that had made sense.

But now—

She doesn't know what to do. She doesn't know the rules, or how to follow them. She doesn't know how to be a good girl.

Mr. Wayne gets out of the car. He's muttering something, talking to someone. Sage can hear them talking back whenever he pauses, even if she can't tell what they're saying.

Maybe they're trying to decide what to do with her. Maybe they don't know what Lex knew, what he was working on. Maybe they don't know what she's good for.

She swallows, and stays where she is. Sits in the car, and keeps still. Hands to ourselves.

"Okay, here we go," Mr. Wayne says, and it's to her and not whoever he was talking to. He smiles again, that smile that's on purpose, but she doesn't mind. She's glad—she's relieved. If he's trying to make her feel better, then maybe he's not about to get rid of her after all.

She's extra careful climbing out of the car, trying not to bump anything. He helps her, lifts her, hands steady just under her armpits, and she's expecting to be put down, but he pauses for a second and then sets her on—on his boots. One foot on each.

"No bare feet in the driveway," he says.

A new rule. Sage decides that she likes this one more than most of the ones she knows, because it makes it sound like maybe she gets to be outside. There wouldn't be a rule for the driveway if she wasn't ever going to be in the driveway again.

Plus—shoes. She used to like shoes. She hasn't had any in a while, though. They said she didn't
need them anymore. Shoes were for going places, and she never went anywhere except where they took her.

Mr. Wayne makes a quiet sound, not exactly a laugh but not not one, and sets his hands on her shoulders. "Alfred is never going to let me forget this," he says, soft, not really to her—and then, "Ready?"

"Yes," Sage says, because that's an easy one. That question only has one answer, she's learned. Whatever she's supposed to be ready for never stops, when she says no. No just means whoever's doing it is going to be unhappy with her instead of happy.

Except apparently all she has to be ready for this time is—walking to the house.

Walking to the house, on the toes of Mr. Wayne's big black boots.

He keeps her steady so she can't fall. They take little steps, at first. And then he starts lifting his feet up higher, goose-stepping, and it's so silly she can't help but laugh. She isn't a little kid anymore—she's ten, that's double digits, which everybody knows means you're basically grown up. But she was alone for such a long time, and she didn't think anybody would come for her. She especially didn't think there was any way it would be Mr. Wayne. But it is, and he came and got her, and she's so happy just thinking that to herself that she's almost dizzy.

She tips her head back to look up at Mr. Wayne, upside down and backwards. He's smiling, too, just a little—and this time she doesn't think it's just to make her feel better.

He opens the door, once they get to the house, and lifts her up then, swings her in over the threshold. The floors are cool and smooth, but not the same as the floor in the lab, so she doesn't mind.

"I'm sorry about this," Mr. Wayne says gently, once he's closed the door behind them.

The bottom drops out of Sage's stomach all at once. She was dizzy in a good way a minute ago, but now she just feels sick. Sick, and cold. She swallows, and clasps her hands together, and holds very still. No. No, she was—she was good for the whole ride, she didn't have bare feet in the driveway. He made sure she didn't have bare feet in the driveway. Is there another rule she's already broken? She wouldn't have if he'd just told her—

"You shouldn't have to stay here for very long," Mr. Wayne is adding. And then he stops, rubs a hand across his mouth and looks away. There isn't anything where he's looking, just one big glass wall and the dark outside, but it's like he thinks there's something there anyway.

And then he clears his throat and looks at her again, crouches down with his knees up so they're not staring up or down anymore, so they're even.

"I just need to make sure you're okay," he says. "And then—"

Sage doesn't want to hear it. She doesn't. She's shaking a little, and she can't stop. She doesn't want to have to go somewhere else new, she doesn't want anybody else—Mr. Wayne is from before, and she wants before more than anything.

"Wait," she says quickly. She almost forgot, but it's possible, isn't it? Maybe Mr. Wayne really doesn't know anything, really doesn't understand what makes her useful. Maybe he'd keep her if he did. "Wait, Mr. Wayne. Please."

And it's harder to do when she's scared, but—scared is better than angry. Angry would work, but
she doesn't want to break Mr. Wayne's house.

She only means to come up off the floor. But she's concentrating on it so hard, breath coming fast, stomach churning. It probably shouldn't be a surprise that all the sounds get louder, Mr. Wayne's startled inhale and the birds in the trees outside, the tick of the car's engine cooling. It probably shouldn't be a surprise that the air gets cold around her, that frost is settling out of it and into a circle on the floor.

Lex hadn't expected that one. But she can do it anyway.

She can do a lot of things.

And surely once Mr. Wayne knows that, he won't get rid of her again.

She stops when she's high enough to touch the ceiling. It's harder to do it this way, slow and careful, instead of just—flying. But she's good at it. She's practiced so much, and she's good at it.

Mr. Wayne is staring at her.

"Oh, Christ," he says.

Of course.

Of course Luthor hadn't just dragged Zod's body into the genesis chamber on a whim, without the least idea what the ship would be able to do with it. He'd gone to all that effort, leading Bruce down the garden path one step at a time, securing both Martha Kent and Lois Lane in order to pull Superman's strings in exactly the sequence he wanted—he'd planned ahead. He'd known he'd be able to create something in there, whether or not he'd known precisely what he was going to get.

Because he'd done tests. He'd done tests, and he'd needed a subject for them: someone who couldn't get away, who wouldn't know how. Someone who had slipped through the cracks in the system, who wouldn't be missed—

God. Sage might not even have been the only one. Just the latest, the most successful. Just the one who'd survived.

Bruce takes a slow breath and keeps his face still, reaches up for her with an open hand. She takes it, and lets him draw her down; bites her lip and lets another little huff of frigid breath escape her, and all at once it's—he was holding onto her, touching her, but there was no weight in it, no sense of mass or pressure, her power wholly supporting her. But in an instant, that's changed, and she slides out of the air and into his arms, all seventy pounds of her abruptly subject to gravity again.

(—that was how it had worked for Superman, too. That fight, slamming each other into walls and floors and plumbing fixtures: half a dozen moments where Bruce had gripped and had felt that sudden strange lack, that absence.

And it had—it had only made him want to drag Superman down the harder for it; to prove that he
could, to make him feel even a fraction of the weight Bruce was always, always carrying—)

"Mr. Wayne?" she says, uncertain.

"It's okay," he says. Thankfully it comes out calm, steady, as though he's articulating a fact and not a desperate wish. "It's all right. I'm glad you showed me that, I needed to know about it—I wasn't expecting it, that's all."

It feels strange, to say such a thing so baldly. He doesn't waste time explaining his emotional state to anyone, let alone attempting to—to make it sound reassuring when he does.

But she relaxes a little against him, and lets him set her down without protest. And without starting to fly again.

At a bare minimum, his priorities have to rearrange themselves. He'd been concerned for her, trapped in that lab and abandoned for who knew how long—what had she eaten? What had she drunk? What kind of condition was she in? But now: there had been no natural light to speak of, not on that sublevel, but they must have tested her, must have soaked her with wavelengths of all kinds. If she'd absorbed enough of the right ones, it's no wonder she survived being locked in there alone. She might not even have started to feel any meaningful deprivation yet.

He'd intended to take her to the Cave, to perform a rudimentary medical checkup to the best of his ability. He'd wanted to be able to turn her over to CPS with a basic workup of information on her physical condition.

And he'd ruthlessly shouted down the part of him that was inclined to shy away from the idea—that was all too aware that last time he'd done that, she'd ended up as Lex Luthor's lab rat.

He'd pay attention this time, that was all. He'd pay attention, he'd take steps. But he'd take them at a distance, because whatever flaw or weakness in Metropolis city services Luthor had managed to take advantage of—it could not possibly prove as dangerous to a child's wellbeing as Bruce.

(—whatever else it is Luthor might have done to her, she is at least alive—)

Except now—how can he possibly surrender her to the authorities? Authorities with no context whatsoever for understanding what it is Luthor did to her, and with no conceivable capability to undo it.

Bruce is going to have every scrap of information he can scour from that lab, every set of notes and charts and timestamped observations. He's going to have the ship, which will even at a minimum be able to perform scans that are entirely beyond the reach of Bruce's own equipment; and which might, at best, be able to tell him exactly what Luthor used it to do and how it was done, if Luthor didn't think to force it to delete or lock away the answers.

Which means there's no one else on the planet with better odds of dealing with this, fixing it, than Bruce.

This is his fault. All of this is his fault.

(—always, always, too goddamn late—)
He'll be quick. Efficient. He'll do what needs to be done, what nobody else can do for her. And then, as soon as it's feasible, he'll figure out how to get her somewhere safe. How to get her someone safe, someone fit to care for her over the long term. That's all there is to it.

Together, they descend to the Cave. The risk that she'll be able to describe the equipment or setup to anyone in sufficient detail to convince them Bruce Wayne has the equivalent of an entire scientific and medical laboratory in his basement is minute. She's more likely to be assessed as telling herself a comforting story than revealing a meaningful secret, if she asserts to anyone outside this building that he's Batman.

He shouldn't have taken the cowl off in front of her. But—he couldn't have done anything else.

Alfred is at the monitors, as usual, but he turns at Bruce's first audible footstep. He's prepared, in the sense that Bruce radioed down from the driveway to apprise him of the facts of the situation. And yet there is still something unaccountable, indefinable, that crosses his face, to turn away from all those screens and find himself confronted with Bruce holding a child.

"Well," Alfred says gently, and smiles. "Hello there."

"Hello," Sage says—only a little unsteadily, but her grip on Bruce's shoulder tightens.

And he probably shouldn't be able to feel that through the armor as well as he can. Just how many Kryptonian powers had Luthor grafted into her?

He gives Alfred a glance, holds it just long enough for Alfred's brow to start to furrow—grasping, readily as ever, that there's something here that will require greater care or attention than Bruce had implied by his message in the driveway, though of course Alfred won't have guessed what it might be.

And then Bruce clears his throat, and says, "Sage, this is Alfred. He's going to help me make sure you're all right."

He'd like to add a qualifier, give her a chance to agree or disagree to the presence of a stranger. But the fact of the matter is that there's an easy division of labor here: the familiar face close to Sage, helping her hold still and keep her concentration, and another pair of hands to adjust equipment, assess results, determine whether a clearer set of scans or another angle is required. Alfred has to stay.

Sage breathes in, and then out. Her grasp on Bruce eases. "Okay," she says, quiet.

She's far less trouble than Bruce had expected.

On the one hand: she'd been perfectly well-behaved on the drive here. Aside from that first explosive expression of relief, when he'd first removed the cowl and she'd recognized him, she'd shown barely any signs of distress at all.

On the other hand: on the rare occasion she had shown a sign of distress, she had done so by breathing ice into the air around her and then floating up to the ceiling. And Bruce—

Bruce can lay claim to some baseline familiarity with ten-year-olds.
He's ready for anything from fidgeting, antsiness, endless relentless questions, to bursting into tears, a storm of sudden furious temper with no apparent proximal cause. A kick in the shins. Even, in this particular case, another display pulled from the seemingly endless grab-bag of Kryptonian abilities.

But Sage sits quietly.

Bruce decides against tests that will require samples; it may not even be possible to take any without specialized kryptonite-edged equipment, and sticking Sage with a needle right now seems blatantly—unkind. It can wait.

He settles for scans, readings, that are non-invasive: just to establish a baseline for bodily structure and function, any radiation or emissions she may be giving off, anything else detectable that he may be able to match up to notes or observations from the lab once he's returned and retrieved them.

Alfred stands clear and runs each one from the lab control station. Bruce remains by the table, occasionally repositioning equipment as required to obtain more detail or a better angle.

And Sage—sits quietly.

She moves, when Bruce asks her carefully to do so. Holds her arms up, or out straight from her sides. Lies down readily, for about five minutes, even though the metal surface of the lab table must be cold. Submits to a bog-standard assessment of heart rate, lung function, blood pressure.

She gives him a puzzled look, once he removes the blood pressure cuff. "No needles?" she says, sounding more curious than anything.

"No," Bruce says, very evenly. "Not tonight." He pauses, looking away, and only then asks, as if it's of no particular urgency or import to him: "Are there usually needles?"

"Yep," Sage says, and then scrunches up her nose. "They keep getting bigger. The green ones, I mean. I don't like the green ones."

It doesn't seem to occur to her that he doesn't—that he shouldn't, that is, for all she knows—have the context to guess what "green" might mean.

But he does.

"Well," he says aloud, and offers up a carefully calibrated smile. Bruce Wayne's casual, self-satisfied warmth can be useful in the most unexpected situations. "No needles. And when there are going to be needles, I'll tell you beforehand. Okay?"

"Okay," Sage agrees, placid, untroubled.

Bruce steps away to set the cuff down. He'll sanitize everything and put it away properly later. Right now—that's enough for tonight.

"All right, come on," he says, and gestures, encouraging. She's tall enough to get down off the lab table comfortably on her own, even without being able to defy gravity by choice. And he's got to—they've got to feed her something. God, he should have done that first, whether she technically needs it to live or not; he'd wanted to be sure there was nothing else urgently wrong with her, but a single full-body CT scan would have covered most eventualities. He shouldn't have made her sit down here—
He stops, a stride and a half away.

Sage hasn't moved. She's sitting there on the table, and only the way her narrow hands have closed tight around the edge of it serves to suggest she's not happy to let Bruce walk away and leave her there.

"Something wrong?" he says, deliberately mild.

"Are you—is that all?" she says, biting her lip. "I can get down?"

Bruce draws a slow breath, lets it out. There's something about that question he doesn't like the sound of; but it's just a question. "Is there usually something else that has to happen before you can get down?"

He asks it like he's just curious, like it isn't a big deal. And she looks away, and then back at him, and then says, "I, um. There's always a Jolly Rancher, when it's over. That's how I know they're done and I can get down."

Christ.

It's almost hilarious, in retrospect, that Bruce wasted even one single goddamn second convinced that Superman was the villain of the piece, when Alexander Luthor, Jr., was right in front of him all along.

Almost hilarious, except in all the ways Bruce has never felt so little like laughing.

Master Wayne must urgently return to the lab he was in the midst of investigating, his unexpected discovery having cut short his usual exceptionally thorough scrutiny of all that Luthor left behind.

That is the reasoning he gives aloud, at least, after reassuring the girl—Sage—that she is safe in the lake house.

But Alfred knows better than to believe him. It is certainly a reason, and not even a bad one. But it is also not alone.

Having been examined with sufficient care to please Master Wayne, Sage no longer requires Batman's aid, at least in the short term. Her needs are far simpler and more mundane: she needs something to eat, something to drink. She needs to be made comfortable, and she needs somewhere to sleep.

And Master Wayne, as always, is ever-ready to hurl himself directly into the maw of the bizarre, the terrifying, the exceptional—the wildly physically dangerous. And prefers to do so, in fact, when the other option is one he finds so much more threatening to his carefully constructed equilibrium.

"Understood, sir," Alfred says aloud, and if Master Wayne perceives that Alfred means the words in more than one way, he chooses not to acknowledge it.
Master Wayne never stripped the rest of the way out of the suit; with the cowl back on and the Batmobile lurking in the shadows of the driveway, it's mere moments before Batman is on his way.

Alfred looks out into the night, and bites down on a sigh. He can't even be properly frustrated. Because it's a pleasure, bittersweet though it may be, to discover that Master Wayne hasn't managed to train himself out of bringing home children who need his help.

He certainly must have tried. But Alfred has known for a long time that now and then there are certain things at which it's best for Master Wayne to fail.

"Mr. Alfred?"

"Miss Sage," Alfred says, and turns to smile at her. "Beg pardon, I was woolgathering. Are you hungry? Thirsty? I imagine I can turn up nearly anything—though if you require such rare delicacies as gummybears, you may have to be patient with me."

He exaggerates the accent a little, plummier than it ever gets on its own, and adds an extra flourish to his best butler's bow.

It has the desired effect: Sage grins back at him, and laughs.

And then she pauses, uncertain, briefly shy, and chews on the tip of one finger for a moment.

"I, um. I don't really get hungry anymore," she admits. "Not the same way I used to."

Alfred considers this for a moment, and decides it is best allowed to pass without particular comment. "Do you still like to eat?"

She looks surprised by the question. As if it hadn't occurred to her that that should matter; as if no one has, in recent memory, treated it as anything but a matter of necessity or the lack thereof.

"I—would that be okay?" she says.

"Absolutely," Alfred says warmly, in lieu of quite a handful of vile imprecations not fit for the ears of a ten-year-old. Good God, who has been looking after this girl? And what on earth had Luthor considered reasonable ethical protocols, if the thought had even crossed his mind at all? Alfred shudders to imagine.

Sage looks at him and bites her lip. "Lucky Charms," she blurts.

Happily, revolting children's cereals are among those items Master Wayne sometimes insists on purchasing—ostensibly in order to appear appropriately puerile and irresponsible, of course, but Alfred has long suspected Master Wayne also derives a certain satisfaction from imagining the look on Alfred's face every time he comes across the stuff in the pantry.

Lucky Charms can thus be arranged for promptly, and within short order Alfred has seated Sage at the table in the most comfortable chair in the house, with a bowl filled with milk and marshmallows in all shades of the rainbow, and a cup of orange juice besides. More a breakfast, if a nutritionally questionable one, than a bedtime snack, but Alfred is nothing if not adaptable under unusual circumstances.

Sage eats the first few spoonfuls slowly—clearly letting the tiny marshmallows melt on her tongue, rather than chewing them or swallowing them whole. Savoring the flavor, after having apparently not eaten at all for a time; and perhaps, Alfred supposes, it's not out of the question that she has also developed Kryptonian sensory apparatuses, and can taste in worlds more detail than she used
to. Pity that it hadn't occurred to Luthor to test that, except apparently by means of the occasional Jolly Rancher.

"I used to ask for this," Sage says quietly.

Alfred blinks, and looks across the table at her.

"On special occasions," she adds. "When it was—when I knew I'd be allowed to, even though I wouldn't usually." She turns the spoon around in her fingers once, twice, staring down at the bowl.

And she isn't talking about Luthor's laboratory, Alfred realizes. She's talking about somewhere else; her parents, perhaps, or whoever it was who used to care for her. Whoever it was who lost her, one way or another, not knowing it would be Luthor who found her—

Or at least Alfred dearly hopes that they hadn't. That it had been involuntary. That whoever had bought this girl Lucky Charms when she asked for them, they'd never have given her up to Luthor on purpose.

"I can understand why," Alfred says aloud, mild, and then reaches out and steals a marshmallow from the near edge of the bowl before she can stop him. The marshmallow tastes unmistakably artificial, thick too-sweet colored sugar dissolving with unseemly haste, coating his mouth.

But Sage narrows her eyes at him, trying to hide a grin, and draws her bowl closer to her, arm around it like a shield.

A small price to pay, to give her even a handful of moments to eat with the childish greed and glee she ought.

Despite the hour, she doesn't seem to be any more tired than she is hungry. But when she's drunk the last soupy cereal-milk from her bowl, she seems willing enough to be taken by the hand and led through the house.

There isn't a room made up for a child—not here, not now. But there is a guest room at the far end of the house, one level down, that should serve for the moment.

Alfred takes stock mentally. Toothbrush: attached bathroom should have one, though of course it's entirely possible she doesn't need it. Pajamas: she'd swim in anything of Master Wayne's, and presumably would prefer to pick out clothes of her own at a later juncture; but what she's wearing now, light solid-colored clothing uncomfortably reminiscent of hospital scrubs, should at the very least be reasonably fit to sleep in.

The sheets are clean, the bed essentially made. Alfred busies himself with small mundanities, tweaking and smoothing the odd rebellious corner, fluffing the pillows even though they arguably do not need it, while she's busy in the bathroom.

And then she comes out, and stops barely a stride from the bathroom doorway.

"Something you need, Miss Sage?" Alfred says, endeavoring to suggest by his tone that if there were, he would be only too glad to provide.

And Sage shifts from foot to foot and ducks her head. "I, um," she says, and then pauses, and then blurs all at once, "Will you tuck me in?"

Alfred feels his heart contract itself in his chest, unbidden and unignorable. Of course—she's balanced over that cusp in age whereupon it becomes embarrassing to be doted on too tenderly, and
yet it must be the first time in some while that she has felt it possible to ask for such a thing. Alfred struggles to imagine that Luthor's lab staff could have or would have bothered to make her feel welcome to seek ordinary comforts from them.

"Of course," he says aloud. "I would be honored."

She doesn't smile this time, too anxious for it. But she hurries to the bed readily, as if he might at any moment change his mind, and gets in; watches his face solemnly, cautiously, as he leans in and smooths the sheets and blankets down around her, for any sign that she has overstepped.

So he doesn't give her one. He doesn't meet her eyes, either—allows himself to be observed, as if he hasn't noticed her looking; keeps his face calm, untroubled, treating what he wishes her to perceive as an unexceptional request unexceptionally.

And only after she has relaxed fractionally back into her pillow does he look at her and smile. 
"There we are. All right?"

"Yes, Mr. Alfred," she says, and then turns hesitant again. "Do you—do you know what Mr. Wayne is looking for?"

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean," Alfred says gently, after a moment.

"In me. I know what lab tests are for. But I don't know what he wants to find. I don't know what he wants me to be able to do." She winds her fingers together above the covers, rubs them against each other; not wringing her hands, not quite. Less disruptive.

Less likely to tangle wires or tubing attached to her forearms, it occurs to Alfred in a wave of disquiet.

"Don't you worry about that," he tells her, patting her elbow. "Everything's going to be all right. You'll see."

Sage furrows up her brow just a little. "Am I going to stay?"

Such a simple question. Such an endlessly complicated morass of answers. Alfred smiles at her, and decides the most salient point requires a question of his own. "Would you like to?"

"Yes," she says instantly, and then pauses. "Is Mr. Wayne coming back?"

"Yes, of course."

Sage glances at him, and then away. "Even if I go to sleep."

"Yes," Alfred repeats, trying not to look as puzzled as he feels.

"He took good care of me, before," Sage says. "He's always taken good care of me. I don't want to go anywhere else. Please, Mr. Alfred," and it's almost eerier, more upsetting, for how calmly, how steadily, she says it—as if she's learned that to be upset, to cry or sob or shout, will only be ignored. Or worse.

"Hush," Alfred says, and then wishes immediately that he hadn't; he meant it as soothing nonsense, not an order, but she goes silent instantly, eyes down, still, hands flattened deliberately against the coverlet rather than twisted round each other anymore. "Don't worry, Miss Sage. Don't worry about anything. Master Wayne will be back, I promise you. And no one will be taking you anywhere you don't wish to go."
And that seems to reassure her at least a little, because she meets his eyes again, settling back more easily against her pillow.

Alfred smiles at her, and then draws a slow breath and clears his throat. "And I hope you will forgive my asking so indelicately, but I'm afraid I must know: what did you mean when you said 'before'? That Master Wayne had taken care of you—"

He stops short. She's done it again, gone still and quiet, as though trying not to be noticed or draw attention.

"It was just once," she says, very softly. "I was alone and I didn't know what to do. But Mr. Wayne found me. He picked me up and took me with him, and he didn't go until I was safe. But I wish he hadn't gone at all." She closes her eyes, and turns her face away against the pillow. "I wish nobody ever went away, Mr. Alfred."

Alfred lets his eyes fall shut, too, and swallows, throat aching. "Sometimes I wish that too, Miss Sage," he murmurs.

He wants badly to lay a hand against her hair, to smooth his fingers through it until she falls asleep. But he suspects that it would be more comforting to him than to her—that she has had more than enough of silently bearing the touch of strangers.

So he doesn't do it. He stays where he is, and dims the light by the bed, and waits, savoring the ache in his heart.

What a bittersweet, stinging pleasure it is, he thinks, to sit once more and watch a child fall asleep in a house that belongs to Master Wayne.

Returning to the lab to strip it of every possible piece of information regarding the work carried on within it is relatively straightforward, as these things go. Bruce has had considerable practice, and his familiarity with Luthor's systems is increasing by leaps and bounds.

But once he's collected all he can—there's nothing to be done but return to the lake house.

He doesn't want to. He's uncomfortably aware of it, a childish and futile reluctance he can neither indulge nor eliminate. Returning to the lab was necessary, required; the next obvious step. But in its way it also constituted an escape—a reprieve, however temporary, from circumstances he's well aware he isn't fit to deal with.

But he has to go back, and he will. There can be no question of it. This situation is his fault, on so many more levels than the most immediately obvious. His failure to grasp that there was more to Luthor's scheming than simply recovering a piece of kryptonite; his failure to realize where General Zod's corpse had wound up; his failure to prevent Luthor from accessing the crashed Kryptonian ship. His failure to keep unbelievably powerful weapons out of hands that could not be trusted with them.
His fault, and therefore his responsibility.

And he has taken responsibility for it, at last. He can't evade that responsibility, and he would never allow himself to try. Sage is safe, at the lake house with Alfred. Armed with the data from the lab, Bruce is now uniquely well-equipped to understand exactly how Luthor went about—modifying her. And Alfred—Alfred will care for her, in all the ways Bruce can't.

Bruce has already vowed to undertake the work that lies ahead of him as quickly as possible. Solve this, fix it.

Though perhaps that's the wrong choice of words. The underlying damage can never be undone, after all. Even if Bruce were able to turn her over to city services within twelve hours—to ensure that she finds herself in a loving home, surrounded by adults she likes and trusts, optimally cared for and wanting for nothing—even then, she would still have been held in captivity by Lex Luthor for months, potentially a year or more. She would still have been subjected to unprecedented human experimentation, altered on an almost unimaginable and frankly fucking terrifying level, and all this in the immediate aftermath of her mother's tragic and untimely death.

Bruce can't fix that.

Some mistakes are irreparable.

But he can at least take steps to mitigate the fallout. This once, if he's careful, he can at least prevent himself from making this particular mistake any worse.

He comes in through the Cave, this time.

Even better odds than usual that Alfred will be upstairs, and may remain there for a little while. Bruce can get to work cataloguing what he's taken from the lab, integrating it with the rest of the data he's collected from Luthor. Analyzing it, compiling it—and Luthor's personal notes, never particularly consistent in their storage location or their content, always need to be reviewed a line at a time. They're often bewildering, sometimes downright incoherent, and occasionally illustrated with haphazard and incomprehensible sketches. Shapes, figures, that look almost like demons. Flame. And, over and over and over again, cubes. But the more of the notes Bruce has found, the more clearly they've begun to add up into something he's starting to think may prove important.

Most of the lab data is contained on external drives, backup systems Bruce was able to extract with relative ease. He'd also taken the time to boot up a workstation and leave himself a back door to re-enter the system remotely if he needs to. With the other labs, he'd settled for taking what he thought he could take without leaving too many traces; someone would be coming around sooner or later, whether it was the police or associates of Luthor's, and he'd prioritized leaving them with no leads pointing in new directions, nothing to chase. But now—

He needs everything he can get, the logs of every single procedure they might have tried, what was done to Sage and how. The increased risk is acceptable, given the circumstances.

The first step is to ensure that the drives are clean—that no traps have been left behind, that it's safe to access the lab backups contained on them. He has one of his own workstations ready, airgapped; he plugs in the drives and begins running the first of a dozen different levels of detailed
"Any more surprises in store this evening, Master Wayne?"

"I'll keep you apprised," Bruce says, without turning around.

Alfred, of course, is undaunted. "I appreciate it, sir," he says, mild, and steps up to the edge of the desk. "I must also express my appreciation for your taking the time to radio ahead about our guest."

Bruce bites down on the inside of his cheek. He has never in his life to date been equal to the task of talking about these things; but it's the least Alfred deserves from him—

"Thank you," he makes himself say, voice harsh, throat tight. "Thank you for taking care of her."

"Of course, sir," Alfred says, much too gently. "And, if you'll forgive the question—dare I ask what exactly it was Luthor seems to have been doing to her?"

Bruce clears his throat. "You saw the preliminary scans."

"Indeed I did, but I confess I was not entirely sure what to make of them," Alfred says.

Which is fair enough. Alfred is better informed than nearly anyone else on the planet when it comes to the exact numbers and individual fates of Kryptonians on Earth. He was right there watching Bruce painstakingly account for every single one of the main participants in the Black Zero event; he learned just as Bruce did, well after the fact, how General Zod's remains had been used to create Doomsday.

And he knows precisely what happened to Superman.

But the readings the Batwing had collected on Superman during that battle were unreliable at best; and Sage isn't Kryptonian, not exactly. There is no precise match to point to, nothing that would have made it obvious to him what they're dealing with: Sage had sat quietly in the lab in the Cave, hadn't floated or breathed frost. She hadn't even crumpled the edge of the lab table, closing her hands tight around it.

There had been a few clues, certainly. Very slight elevation in body temperature—not outside the normal range for humans, but there if you were looking for it, a hint as to the decidedly unusual energy processing occurring somewhere within. Subtle anomalies on several different emissions scans, infrared and ultraviolet readings.

But nothing Alfred would have felt comfortable drawing conclusions about. And he certainly wouldn't have leap directly to Bruce's current working hypothesis.

"Luthor altered her," Bruce says aloud. "I believe he may have used the ship to do it."

"The—Kryptonian ship?" Alfred says, and draws a sharp breath. "The genesis chamber. You think that he—but why?"

"Impossible to say. Perhaps there are certain systems or sub-systems, ship's protocols, that only respond to living Kryptonian individuals. Perhaps he was trying to turn her into something of a control interface, so to speak. Perhaps—" and it is an unpleasant, uncomfortable thought, but it would be foolish not to look it head-on—"perhaps he was simply testing the genesis chamber's capabilities. Attempting to determine how much it could do, and how quickly, and whether it would do it for him."
"Good lord," Alfred murmurs. "And to a child?"

Bruce closes his eyes. "Healthy, young, in good condition. Convenient: easy to restrain, easy to erase." An adult would have offered considerably more resistance, probably; would have been less easy to placate. A subject no one would miss—possible to attain by other means Luthor wouldn't have shrunk from, but less likely to be in good health. And children had no income, no taxes; no driver's licenses, no rent to pay, no employment records. Relatively speaking, hardly any meaningful paper trail left behind to clean up. Easy to pluck from the system, if you had the means and the opportunity.

And after Black Zero—Luthor would have had his pick. The chaos, the disruption, city services overloaded and overworked. And hundreds, even thousands, of children separated from or suddenly stripped entirely of their parents or guardians, relatives missing or distant, slipping through the cracks.

"Good lord," Alfred says again, soft and sickened. "What are we going to do?"

"Figure out what he did," Bruce says. "Try to understand it. Figure out whether there's any way to undo it—"

Alfred makes a sound in his throat; Bruce looks up, and is met with raised eyebrows.

"And if she'd like to stay as she is?"

Bruce pauses.

Hardly likely, surely. After everything—but then how much could she have understood about what Luthor was doing to her? To a ten-year-old, a few needles, a trip to a pool of weird goo now and then, might not have seemed like much of a price to pay in exchange for the ability to fly, to never be hurt by ordinary means, to never go hungry.

But she can't be given over to anyone who doesn't know, who might not be able to handle her. Or, worse, might discover what she's capable of and decide to use her for their own ends.

And that means there may be no other option.

"Not the most pressing concern at the moment," he says aloud, avoiding Alfred's gaze. "We'll deal with that when it becomes relevant."

"Mm," Alfred says. "Reassuring as always to know you have a plan, sir."

Bruce bites the inside of his cheek again, harder, and curls a hand tight around the edge of the desk. He knows what Alfred is sidling around, the question he must want to ask; but surely Alfred of all people is well aware of the only possible answer—

"She won't be staying here long," he forces out. "We'll do what we can for her. We have to. And that includes finding her a—stable situation."

Silence.

And then, unexpected, nearly startling, Bruce feels the touch of a warm, steadying hand against the blade of one shoulder.

"Of course, Master Wayne," Alfred says, very quietly. "Forgive me, I didn't intend—"
"Nothing to forgive," Bruce hears himself say, because it's true. Their respective errors in judgment are only comparable if one set is assessed on a logarithmic scale, and that set does not belong to Alfred.

Alfred goes quiet again, for a moment. "I know you won't believe this, sir," he murmurs at last, "but nevertheless I can't tolerate allowing it to go unsaid. It's one of the things that has always been best in you, to be there when you are needed, when no one else can be—and to do so even when it causes you pain, because you nevertheless refuse to do otherwise. You were right to bring her here, and it was kind of you, it was good of you, to do it."

He falls silent again but doesn't move, doesn't take his hand away, until there's nothing Bruce can do but look at him.

And when Bruce does it, Alfred smiles at him, just a little.

"I suspect there are times when you've wondered why I'm still here, Master Wayne, after everything," he says. "But the answer to that question, too, is one you wouldn't believe if I told it to you."

Bruce swallows, and looks away again. "I—should get back to work, Alfred."

"Of course, sir," Alfred says, merciful, and leaves him to it.

Martha always knows it's going to be an interesting day, when Lois visits.

Not a bad day. She can't rightly call it that, not when it's always so good to see Lois. Not when it's always such a relief not to be alone.

The house is so empty and so full at the same time. So—so full of emptiness, so full of all the spaces left behind. Of absence, of memory: she hates the absences, clings to the memories, is caught in the middle between them. Sometimes she thinks if she just sat down and let herself, she'd cry and cry and never stop; sometimes that's all she wants to do.

She doesn't know whether it's going to be better or worse, once she has to leave.

But never mind that. Point is, Lois is the same way. It's easy enough to tell. And some days are dull, gray and quiet even when the sun is shining, drifting by with nothing to mark one apart from the next. But not when Lois comes to see her. When Lois comes to see her, no matter what it is they do—sit quietly together, or tell each other stories, hold each other up, or talk about nothing that matters at all—it means something. Gives the day a color, a flavor. Makes it worth remembering, worth savoring, something new to hold onto in the midst of all that emptiness, all the things that have already slipped through Martha's fingers.

Today's going to be one of the quiet days, seems like. Lois showed up around lunchtime; Martha had been standing in the kitchen, telling herself she ought to be hungry but not feeling it in the least. But she's always found it easier feeding other people—and a guest meant she had to pull something
together, so she had.

And now they've been sitting on the porch, the remains of lunch on a tray on the table between them, for at least an hour, and hardly a word out of either of them.

But that's all right. Lois just likes being here, Martha knows that already. Likes being anywhere Clark had been; likes to see where he was, likes to get to know it. To come even a little closer to the memory of him, in standing in a place that surely must feel the lack of him the same way she does.

And Martha is happy to sit with her while she does it—to think of Clark, knowing that Lois is too, that they may have been left behind but that doesn't mean they're alone. It hurts less than it used to, now, softened to a dull bittersweet ache, to look out at the fields and remember the way Clark ran through them shouting when he was a boy; to look at the barn and think of him lying on the roof, stretched out like the barn cats in the sunshine.

The breeze rises, falls, grasses rippling. A quick scudding sweep of clouds passes, the sunlight strong and then dimmed and then strong again.

And then Lois leans back in her chair and rubs a hand across her face, bites her lip and says quietly, "Thank you, Martha."

Martha smiles at her, and shakes her head. "Oh, don't be silly, I didn't put myself out for you—I'd have been eating lunch and sitting on the porch today anyway, nice day like this." Or at least—she'd have thought about it. She'd have wanted to. She doesn't mean to lie, even if she can't help but be aware she might not quite have gotten around to it, without Lois there to make it feel doable.

"No, I didn't mean for lunch," Lois says, and then stops. "Well, I guess I should've, actually, because it was wonderful," she adds, wry, huff of a laugh through her nose at herself. "But I really wanted to say—thank you for putting up with this. I know it isn't anything you were probably planning on, having me showing up on your doorstep all the time taking up half your day—"

"All right," Martha says, "I think I'll just stop you right there, before you carry on far enough to make us both feel foolish."

And Lois lets herself be stopped, blinking, mouth half open.

"Lois, honey, you think I'm putting up with you? You think I'm some kind of saint, setting aside my packed schedule, all the fun I was going to have today, just for you?" Martha can't help but smile, even if there's something bittersweet in it. "Sweet of you to decide I'm that generous, but I'm afraid you couldn't be more wrong."

Lois looks across the table at her and smiles back, and it looks the same on her face as it feels on Martha's: small, lopsided, but real enough anyway.

And then the smile fades away, slow, and Lois narrows her eyes a little and reaches out to put a hand to Martha's elbow.

"Clark isn't the only reason I come here, Martha. I hope you know that."

Martha looks away. "I know you miss him," she hears herself say. "I do, too. It's all right—"

"Martha," Lois says again, gentle. "It's not the only reason. Okay?"

Martha closes her eyes, reaches for Lois's hand around her elbow and closes her own over it, and
They sit like that a little while longer.

And then Martha clears her throat, and makes herself stand up. The lunch tray, the dishes, are still set out between them; she ought to have cleared them away earlier, but she—she just hadn't.

"Here," Lois says, "let me help you with that."

Between the two of them, not ten seconds later, a dish is fumbled to the porch. Lois tries to catch it, misses; Martha grabs for it, and misses, too; and it strikes the wood on its edge with a ridiculous too-loud *thonk*, flips twice and lands on the other edge, and rolls away like it's making a break for the fields before toppling down flat on its side at the top of the porch steps. Martha and Lois look at it, and then at each other, and then all at once can't stop laughing.

They're lucky they hadn't struck heads grabbing after it, Martha thinks, like something out of the Stooges.

Lois goes after the fugitive, grinning so wide her cheeks must ache, and then beats Martha to the door, and together they go in, still chuckling to each other in helpless little bursts.

"Okay," Lois says, "and I know I just told you out there it wasn't all about Clark, but I have to ask."

She gestures with the runaway plate toward—

Oh. Damn.

Martha draws a slow breath, and sets the lunch tray down by the sink. She'd meant to get all the boxes put away again before they came back inside; come up with some excuse, the bathroom or powdering her nose or—or the dishes, if only she'd remembered sooner, thought to tell Lois she was a guest and to stay in her seat. She hadn't wanted Lois to see.

But maybe she'll get off easy. Because Lois isn't gesturing toward the whole box. Just the photo sticking out of the top: Clark as a boy, eyes crinkled up, clearly screaming with laughter—and popped up halfway out of a tractor tire tipped on its side, bare-chested, with a too-large bright pink cowboy hat tipping forward across his brow, and a broom held wrong end up in his hands.

"Going through the basement?" Lois adds easily.

Martha offers her a half-smile without meeting her eyes—reaches out and twists the tap open, and watches clear water splash down into the sink.

Truth is, she's started packing up. Truth is, she knows what's coming. She knows it's only a matter of time until she loses the house officially; she hasn't been able to make her payments in months, and there's no way she could hope to clear the debt fast enough to settle things with the bank, no matter how many jobs she took.

But she can't tell Lois that. She won't. Lois would want to do something about it, would decide it was her problem to solve—she and Clark were alike that way, never able to leave anyone wanting for anything if they could help it, always right in the middle of everybody's business.
Lois has enough to deal with. She doesn't need Martha piling any more on her, and that's twice as true now, when she's just let on she doesn't come out here only for her own sake but for Martha's, too.

And all it'll take is the barest hint. Tiniest crack in the wall, and Lois will be on it, poking and prying until she's got all the answers.

So Martha doesn't flinch or falter, doesn't waver. She just starts moving the dishes off the tray, stacking them up under the flow of water to fill up and soak, and says, "Yep. Figured it was about time I went through some of those old boxes."

It's even the truth. Just not the whole of it, that's all.

"And that right there," she adds, gesturing with her chin toward the photo, "would be just about the only evidence remaining of Clark's Lone Ranger phase."

"Well, that explains the hat," Lois allows with a grin. "And the broom?"

"Can't be the Lone Ranger without a horse," Martha says, straight-faced, and watches Lois tilt her head back and laugh.

Lois doesn't stay for dinner.

Martha wouldn't have minded if she had—but she does have a job to get back to in Metropolis, and technically speaking, she's only in Smallville thanks to a conveniently long gap between flights, coming back from an interview on the other side of the country. Martha's got no doubt that there were earlier flights available, that Lois could have flown straight back without any layover at all; but if Perry White isn't going to argue with whatever excuse she gave him for taking the time to rent a car and drive here from Wichita and back, then why should Martha? She's glad for it. Grateful. She's not going to talk Lois out of taking the time to stop by if she can help it.

But she's not going to drag it out, either. She's not going to make this more trouble for Lois than Lois is willing to let it be.

So she doesn't keep Lois too long. She doesn't keep Lois too long, and she makes sure she's smiling when she waves goodbye, and for as long as she can still see Lois's car on its way down the drive. And then—

Well. Then she's alone again.

She looks at the box on the counter, and then away again. The wet dishes are in the drainer, but now that Lois won't feel obliged to help her, she might as well dry them. Give herself something else to do besides deal with that box, with all the other boxes that'll come after it.

She should have been prepared for this. It always happens, after Lois leaves—or after the neighbors come over, or whenever she comes back from a trip into town. The silence of the house, the weight of it, settles in around her, and all she can think about is everyone who isn't there, every good moment that'll never come again, everything she can't ever get back, and it makes her feel so goddamn tired every time.

Maybe she ought to be glad her time in this house is almost through.
She squeezes the dishtowel tight between her fingers, and closes her eyes, and makes herself breathe.

And then, sudden and startling, breaking through all that silence like it's nothing, the phone rings. Martha blinks, and sets the dishtowel down, and hurries over to answer it.

"Hello?"

"My apologies for disturbing you, Mrs. Kent."

Martha feels her eyebrows jump. "Bruce?"

It's a surprise to hear from him. Not as much of one as it would have been once, admittedly. She'd been bewildered to learn that the friend of Clark's who'd rescued her from Lex Luthor was Bruce Wayne—but in a dim, far-off way, given everything else that had happened that day. And he'd helped her again, again; because she'd been kidnapped off the street half a dozen states away, because she had no way home. Because her son—her son's body—He'd helped her. He'd claimed it was the least he could do. And then he'd vanished again, so thoroughly that sometimes she'd half-convinced herself it had been a dream, that there was no way Bruce Wayne had pulled the strings to get Clark back to Kansas for her.

But hearing his voice across the phone line brings it all back to her so clearly. That day. His steady hands, his voice lowered, softened, even while he was still in that whole—Batman suit of his. His house, the lake. Lois, silent, wet-faced; holding her, shaking, and not even sure which of them it was who sobbed aloud first. That woman, Diana, once she'd changed out of all her armor again, except it didn't matter: there was still something about her, something that made it almost strange to watch her do small simple things like bring them mugs of tea.

It's like it was yesterday, just like that; and suddenly it's easy to smile a little into the phone, and to say it again, readily, warmly: "Bruce. Please, don't make me ask you again—call me Martha."

Because she remembers that, too. She hadn't wanted to have to push him on it, not that day. She'd let it lie, when he'd kept on the whole time with his Mrs. Kent, no matter what she did. But she hasn't forgotten about it; and she has a sneaking sense that he's the sort of person who thinks he can get away with anything if he's just stubborn enough about it—if he's always made it so much work, trying to insist, that he's used to outlasting everybody.

Tough luck. She used to make an invulnerable alien with superspeed go to bed on time. She's got stubborn to spare.

The line is silent for a moment.

"Martha," he repeats, more softly, and then clears his throat. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything?"

Martha almost wants to laugh, even though it shouldn't be funny. First Lois, now Bruce—what is it that makes people think she's got so much on her plate, so much filling up her time? As if her life's bursting at the seams these days, her and her empty silent house, her savings draining themselves away, lingering here alone in the ashes where everything she loves used to be—

She squeezes her eyes shut, recognizes all at once that the thing in her throat she's swallowing down wasn't going to be a laugh after all. She grips the handset a little tighter, and makes herself breathe.
"No, no," she says, once she can, and it comes out level enough. "Not at all. You timed things just fine. Lois was here visiting, she only left about fifteen minutes ago."

A moment's pause. "How is she?"

He must know, Martha thinks. Even if it weren't that there's only one real answer to that question with Clark in the ground, not even a year gone—if Bruce hasn't been keeping tabs on Lois himself, Martha will eat her shoes.

Funny, what a difference it makes knowing he's Batman. Martha had never spent much time thinking about Bruce Wayne before; she'd heard of him, sure, and if by some chance she'd ended up making small talk with him at some—Daily Planet fundraiser or something, in another world, she probably wouldn't have thought twice about any ordinary thing he'd said. But now, like this—because it isn't Bruce Wayne calling her up this way, not really—it feels so deliberate, so self-consciously conspicuous.

He's trying to talk like normal people talk. He's trying to be considerate; he's trying to be kind.

And he lost something too, that day, didn't he? A friend of your son's, that's what he'd said, and it must have been at least a little bit true. Clark must have trusted him at least enough to send him for her.

No matter what else he'd done, everything he'd confessed to her afterward, she knows that much.

"Oh, you know," Martha says aloud, gentle. "She's all right. She's managing." And it feels silly, transparent, to say it all about Lois as though it doesn't apply equally to Martha herself, but—good, too, to be able to come at it sideways, to not have to face it head-on all the time. "She misses him," Martha adds, and lets her eyes fall shut. "It's nice to have someone to talk to about him. Someone to tell all the little stories to. We went through a few photos today," because they had—there had been more than one in that box, a whole stack of frames plus a glossy slippery pile left loose at the bottom. Martha had been able to place most of them, the small silly moments from which a childhood is made; but she'd found herself even more attached to the ones she couldn't place. Grateful, terribly, painfully, that someone had thought to capture them—that they had happened and that some evidence of them remained, even when her own mind had let them pass by without grabbing hold of them.

"You must have some—interesting ones," Bruce says carefully, after a moment.

Martha smiles into the middle distance. "Well, we did try not to accumulate too many we couldn't explain," she tells him. "But back then, it wasn't so hard, really. Overexposures, smudges, that sort of thing. Jonathan had a good camera, but when we took pictures of Clark, we used the cheap plastic ones, or we took Polaroids."

Jonathan had always worried about Clark so much. Jonathan had always tried so hard to make sure they were all being careful.

But he'd have been proud, Martha feels sure, if he could have seen Superman. He'd have kept on worrying, of course, and he'd probably have said all the wrong things, because he usually had when he'd needed to talk to Clark. But he'd have been proud, too.

Sometimes she envies him. Sometimes she wishes she weren't the one who's had to outlive her son—her son, her little boy, gone first, the cruelest trick the world could ever play on a parent.

But sometimes she's glad. She had so much more time, so many more years of Clark. She'd gotten
to see who he was, who he had become; she'd gotten to be there for him, and she'd gotten to watch him save the world, the way she'd always known he could. Even now, she can't imagine giving that up.

"Still," Bruce is saying, low, a little scratched, "I—he must have been a handful."

Martha laughs. "Well, he didn't have all the powers right from the beginning. Or at least he wasn't using them. We'd have had a lot more trouble keeping the house in one piece if he'd been shooting lasers everywhere whenever I tried to put him down for a nap. And when he got older—" She shrugs, sheer habit, even though Bruce can't see her. "It was easier. He could talk about it, tell us what was happening to him, how it felt or what he thought he might have done to make it happen."

"He couldn't control his abilities?"

"Not always," Martha says. "It depended. Some of them were easy for him. The strength—that was about effort, like it would be for anyone, except it took less effort for him. He just had to figure out where the line was, where it stopped for everybody else. The senses were hard on him, but not so visible. When he couldn't control that, it looked like a meltdown, a panic attack." She stops, and bites her lip. "I shouldn't be grateful, he hated it, but—at least it was easy to cover it up, call it something else."

"Understandable," Bruce offers evenly.

"The laser vision, now," Martha says with half a laugh, "that would have been trickier, except that one didn't start up until he was at least ten."

"That must have been—a surprise."

"You're telling me," Martha agrees. "Lord, he was just as scared as we were. No idea what he'd done or how to make it stop, and of course the more upset he got the worse it was. Thank goodness he couldn't hurt himself with it—all he had to do was close his eyes."

"And that took care of it?"

"Couldn't stop it completely," Martha allows, "not until he'd calmed down. But it was easy to tell, with half his face glowing red-hot and all. He kept his eyes shut, and he—he couldn't cry. His eyes were too hot, the tears were gone before they could come out. And I—" She stops, and draws a slow breath. She hasn't thought about this in years; and it had been terrifying then, not knowing how to stop it, whether it wouldn't stop, whether this was finally the thing they wouldn't be able to hide. "I brought him ice."

"Ice?" Bruce repeats.

"Ice. I don't know, I wasn't really thinking, I just—it seemed like it might help, if I could cool him off again one way or another. It gave him something else to focus on. Something besides how upset he was. First batch melted pretty fast, but we had more. Just kept piling it on, and telling him to think about how it felt, to try to make himself cool down to match."

"Don't tell me," Bruce says wryly. "That's how you discovered he could freeze things with his breath, next."

Martha laughs. "Actually—yes," she admits; and then she shakes her head, and scrubs a little at her eyes with her free hand, and clears her throat. "But never mind that, I—you didn't call to listen to me carry on about Clark like this. What's the matter, Bruce?"
"Nothing's the matter, Martha," Bruce says steadily. "I just thought I ought to check in. I'm glad you're all right. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, no, don't you worry," Martha says, automatic. "I'm doing just fine."

It's true. Or—it's as much of the truth as she's going to lay on him, anyway.

"In that case, I'm afraid I'd better go," Bruce says. "It was good to talk to you."

And, just that fast, he's saying his goodbyes, only barely enough time to Martha to reply in kind before he tells her to call if she needs anything, and then the line goes dead with a click.

Martha frowns at the sink, listening to the dial tone in her ear for a long moment before she finally moves to set the handset back in its cradle.

She'd meant what she'd said. She'd thought it herself, back at the beginning of the call: Bruce, the Bruce who's turned out to be Batman, isn't a small-talk kind of man—he didn't call just to listen to her carry on about Clark, no matter how much she'd been grateful for the chance to. He must have called her for a reason, surely.

And if he had, well, there are only two ways to explain why he'd have hung up without telling her what that reason was, from where she's standing. Maybe he'd decided not to trouble her with it, when she'd just spent five minutes getting maudlin all over him about Clark; maybe he didn't want to seem cruel, callous, pushing that aside to ask her for whatever he was really looking to hear. Or —

Or, somehow, that conversation gave him what he'd been calling for.

But why on earth would he want to know how to help a Kryptonian deal with a superpower manifesting on a bad day?

Martha bites her lip again, and looks down at the phone. She reaches out and sets her hand against it, and pauses—and then, in a rush, before she can second-guess herself, she picks up the handset and dials.

She hadn't left Bruce's house, that long-ago terrible day, entirely empty-handed. And Bruce isn't the only one who's told her to call if there's ever anything she might need.

"Hello—Mr. Pennyworth?"

"Speaking," Pennyworth says, precisely as warm and wry as she remembers. "And you must call me Alfred, please."

Martha smiles. "Alfred," she agrees. "Alfred, I'm sorry to bother you, but I just had a rather strange conversation with Bruce, and I thought perhaps you might be able to shed some light on it for me."

Alfred is quiet for a moment. "I shall do my best," he says at last, and then she starts to explain.
The material from the lab confirms Bruce's suspicions. Luthor had indeed been making use of the ship—had been experimenting with it, trying to map the extent of its capabilities. Trying to understand what it could do, how far it would go, given the genesis fluid and an organic sample.

So the next step he needs to take is obvious. They have to go to the ship.

Luthor's notes are muddled. The logs taken in the lab are potentially useful, but incomplete; they cover examinations made and tests performed on the premises, but can tell him nothing about what Luthor made the ship do to Sage—they catalogue the results after the fact, but not the mechanisms of action. But the ship must have logs of its own, and even if Luthor hid them or made it delete them, it must still be able to scan Sage with its own instruments, and even potentially extrapolate for Bruce how such results might have been obtained.

They have to go to the ship.

Alfred has, unasked, taken charge of Sage's daily routine. Bruce—is busy with the lab data. Sage is woken, allowed to choose from among and then dress herself in the brand-new clothing Alfred acquired on an emergency shopping run first thing in the morning; fed, entertained. And Bruce has no hand in any of it, shut away below them in the Cave, at an appropriately safe distance.

The Cave is soundproofed. But he left the entryway to the stairs open today, just in case something should happen; just in case she flies through the ceiling or sets something on fire, just in case Alfred can't handle it alone.

Children's voices carry. Sometimes, now and then, he can hear her laugh.

It's a good sound.

As he's finishing up in the mid-afternoon, it occurs to him that perhaps he should have a few specific strategies on hand for dealing with the—the human element, so to speak. Together, he and Alfred can put out a fire, even a fire caused by Kryptonian laser-eyes; but that's no use if she just turns around and starts five more. And he does in fact have a direct line on the lone remaining first-hand source of information in the world regarding the care and feeding of children with Kryptonian powers.

Sage needs his help. He wouldn't impose himself on Martha Kent for anything less.

The conversation goes well; but he knows better than to take up too much of her time with this. He should be leaving her in peace, not forcing her to dredge up old memories that must only cause her pain. It's hard to listen to

(—and he isn't even sure why, doesn't know which is worse: picturing her and—and Clark, a Clark who was still a child; who didn't know what he was or where he'd come from, who didn't know what was going to happen to him. Or—

—or remembering. Being reminded, a word at a time, what it's like to have—)

Chapter 2
for more than one reason. He doesn't press.

A few hints, that's all; more than enough for now, he decides.

And then it's time to take Sage to the ship.

He doesn't suit up. It's still daylight, and of the personae available to him, Bruce Wayne is actually one of the least conspicuous to send on a jaunt through a Metropolis city park in the late afternoon.

All he has to do is pick out slacks, a jacket; smooth out a few of the worst creases in his shirt. And then—there's nothing for it but to go upstairs.

Sage is at the table with Alfred, with—of course—a mug of tea to hand, frowning down in concentration at a jigsaw puzzle Alfred must have dug out from somewhere, now almost half-finished. To all appearances, hardly even the same girl who'd been curled up beneath a bedside table, shaking; except that the moment she looks up and sees Bruce, the same flood of uncertain, desperate relief crosses her face.

"Mr. Wayne," she says, quick, too-loud, and comes up out of her chair. Out of her chair, and into the air. Not far, just a foot or two; just high enough to throw her arms around his neck on a level, without needing to wait for him to bend down.

*I told you to come upstairs and say good morning,* Alfred mouths over her shoulder, impeccably precise and all too easy to lipread.

"Alfred said you would come back," she says, half-muffled by the collar of Bruce's shirt.

"Well, here's something you should know, if you hadn't figured it out already," Bruce says gently, warmly; Bruce Wayne in a good mood, a simple enough mask to put on. "Alfred is always right."

He meets Alfred's eyes for the barest instant before looking away again—saying it not just to Sage, but to him. A tacit apology, or at minimum an acknowledgment that perhaps Bruce should have heeded him, that Alfred will surely understand.

Sage laughs, and her weight settles more steadily against Bruce, such that he can successfully set her down rather than simply releasing her back into flight again. He continues the motion even after her feet have met the floor, down into an easy crouch, putting them on a level with each other.

"There was somewhere else Luthor used to take you, wasn't there? Besides the lab?"

"Yes," she says steadily, unhesitating. "The ship. Are we going there today?"

Christ. "Would that be okay?" Bruce says. This time, after all, it's technically possible to offer the option—delay, if not avoidance. It'll have to happen sooner or later. But if she wants a day, one day, to sit with Alfred drinking tea and doing puzzles, not having to think about what Luthor's done to her—

"Sure," Sage says, and then pauses.

"What is it?"

"Can I bring my tea?"
Gaining entry to the ship is fairly straightforward, relatively speaking. After discovering what Luthor had been doing with it—some of what Luthor had been doing with it, at least—Bruce had taken steps to guarantee himself access. City maintenance tunnels extend beneath the park where the ship came to rest; he and Sage are able to descend without incident, and climb up through what Bruce designed so as to appear to be just another auxiliary shaft in order to reach the hull from below.

Bruce grits his teeth, and makes himself reach up to touch the smooth, gleaming metal surface overhead.

"Welcome," the ship says quietly, and the hull melts away, opening itself up for them.

It must have done as much for Luthor a dozen times or more. Lucky, Bruce supposes, that its internal security standards are so lax—or perhaps the government research team, or Luthor himself, managed to disable whatever subroutines might normally have prevented unauthorized entry, in order to let themselves in.

But it doesn't feel like luck. Bruce has to swallow down a sour, venomous resentment. It could have stopped all this before it started. It could have made sure Luthor's worst plans would never have progressed half as far as they had. It should have known better.

(—he should have known better, goddammit—)

Still, the point is: it's as willing to let him in now as it ever was to do the same for Luthor.

He draws a slow breath, and then smiles carefully down at Sage—who's cradled between him and the maintenance ladder, feet two rungs above his own.

"Shall we?" he says, as gentle as he can make it.

"Okay," Sage says, and climbs up; climbs up, and then simply keeps going, darting up through the air, easy as anything.

Of course.

Bruce has to settle for hauling himself up, gripping the interior edge of the deck—the ship helps him, reshaping itself, the hull draping itself down to make additional footholds, and he struggles not to snap at it. That would be petty, foolish, inefficient.

He needs it. He has to reconcile himself to that fact, and he has to do it sooner rather than later.

Once he's up and in, the hull seals itself closed again behind him. He stands, and clears his throat, offering Sage a hand; she takes it readily, and together they walk to the genesis chamber.

It looks a little different now. He's been here since Luthor, since Doomsday, but only once, and when he had it had still been—strange, wrecked, sticky and oozing and claustrophobic. Perhaps that's attributable to the exertion of Luthor's will upon it, or to the remains of whatever process had birthed Doomsday. Bruce is already aware that the ship has drones of some kind, independently mobile. But it's undeniably odd to imagine the ship lying here in the aftermath, carefully cleaning itself up, disposing of the mess Luthor made within it a bit at a time.
"Ship," he says aloud. "Do you recognize us?"

"You do not wish to be identified aloud," the ship says calmly, because apparently it remembers the sharp order he'd barked at it the last time it called him by name. "And you are Specimen 014-B," it adds, to Sage.

Christ. The ship's intonation is even, bloodless; and the implications are all the worse for it. The ship hadn't come up with that designation out of nowhere. Had Luthor called Sage that in front of it? Had there been thirteen others—or twenty-seven, if "B" meant what Bruce dreaded it might? Or had the ship independently registered every individual Luthor had brought to it, whether Luthor had bothered to name them in its presence or not? "Sage—"

Sage is looking up at him, frowning, puzzled. He realizes distantly, belatedly, that his grip on her hand has tightened; but of course he can't harm her by it.

"It's all right," she says steadily. "She's always called me that." And then she looks away from him, toward the wall. "Ship—there's holes in you." There are: Doomsday tore his way through the side of the vessel not far from where they're standing, and late afternoon sunlight is filtering in, stippling the inner hull, through lingering half-patched rents and one much larger opening that faces up toward the sky. "Are you okay?"

"Self-repair procedures cannot be independently initiated unless hull integrity poses a direct danger to the crew, or to the continued function of this ship," the ship says. "Current status: non-optimal but acceptable."

"Sure," Sage murmurs, and reaches out to spread a hand out against the nearest section of wall.

And then she takes a deep breath, lets it out, and turns to Bruce.

"Should I get in now, Mr. Wayne?"

Oh, god. She thinks—but then why shouldn't she? What else has she ever been brought here for? And the way he'd said it, confirming that Luthor had used the ship on her right before telling her he was about to take her there too; what other conclusion could she have drawn, except the most obvious?

"No, that's okay," he says aloud, very even. "You don't have to get in today. I just want to ask you some questions. And the ship, too. Is that all right?"

She doesn't look relieved to hear it. She looks confused.

"I, um. Sure," she says, a bit too quickly for comfort.

He sits down, folds his legs comfortably beneath him, just at the edge of the corridor—looking down into the chamber, the pool of genesis fluid. After a moment's hesitation, Sage does the same, and Bruce smiles at her, deliberate, as warm as he can make it, and watches her shoulders ease a little.

"So you usually got in," he says, "when Luthor brought you here."

"Yeah," Sage says, shifting in place, glancing at him and then away. "That was why we came. For the pool. So I could get in, and the ship could do what he wanted it to do."

Bruce bites down on the inside of his cheek. "Aren't there regulations governing your functions?" he says to the ship, when he's reasonably sure it won't come out as a shout.
"There are no regulations that prohibit voluntarily undergoing personal modification," the ship says softly, and if Bruce is tempted to attribute a note of apology to that voice, it can't be anything but wishful thinking. It's a goddamn ship; it had no idea what it was doing, no idea what Luthor was making it do.

"She asked," Sage says. "I said yes."

"You said yes," Bruce repeats.

Sage looks away again, and shrugs one shoulder. "Lex wanted me to," she says.

Christ. But—what could the ship have done about it? As long as Luthor wasn't literally twisting Sage's arm right in front of it, how could it possibly hope to determine that her consent had been coerced? Sage had wanted Luthor to be pleased with her, because of course she had; in a certain sense, she'd offered up that yes and meant it, and lesser minds than an alien AI would have struggled to identify objective grounds for refusing to accept it.

"What was it like?" Bruce says, forcing his voice to steadiness. "Do you remember any of the things he asked it to do?"

"Not really," Sage admits. "He was—he talked a lot," and Bruce has to bite his cheek again to avoid snorting derisively. Of course he did. Fucking Luthor. "And once she got started—" She trails off, and moves a little: pressing her hands together, swallowing hard, convulsive. "It was hard to listen. I felt too sick to pay attention. It was—it burned."

"Okay," Bruce hears himself say, and carefully lets the farther hand from Sage drop from his thigh—knuckles to the floor of the corridor, behind it, so that she can't see the way he's clenching it up, so tightly all the bones in his fingers ache.

Or at least she probably can't, unless she happens to be utilizing her Kryptonian vision at exactly the right angle to look right through him.

He clears his throat, and looks out into the genesis chamber. "Ship, do you retain records of the procedures Luthor had you perform on—" and god, he can't say it; there's no way he can say it. "—this specimen?" he manages instead, and even that makes his chest tight, makes his skin crawl, but at least he doesn't have to give the goddamn number.

"Yes," the ship says.

He supposes he should have guessed. He'd been thinking of it—well. He'd been thinking of the way he would have done it. Deliberate, cautious. Cleaning up after himself; leaving no traces to follow, except where he could justify it to himself as worth the risk.

But that was never the way Luthor had operated. Even that day, with Doomsday: he'd stood here, right here in this chamber, and let the police find him. He'd only been content to work behind the scenes until the grand finale—one it had arrived, he'd relished drawing back the curtain at last, stepping out from among the shadows. Bruce hadn't known it then, but once he'd learned about Martha Kent, he could imagine how it had gone. Luthor had probably enjoyed coming face-to-face with Superman, revealing exactly how he'd manipulated each of the pieces on the board, knowing there was nothing Superman could do about it. Knowing that if Superman went to Bruce trying to explain what Luthor had told him, that Luthor was behind it all, that they'd both been used, it wouldn't matter. Bruce wouldn't listen to a word of it.

It would be too late.
And with this, with the ship, undoubtedly the same logic—insofar as it can be called that—applies. By the time anyone else came to be in a position to inquire about Luthor's experiments with the ship, it would be because Luthor was finished with them, because he'd accomplished what he wished to accomplish and there was nothing that could be done to stop him. And, if anything, it would appeal to him to leave irrefutable evidence, to claim sole attribution. To have the last word, the indelible mark of his touch there to confront whoever came looking.

Bruce closes his eyes. "Summarize," he says aloud.

"Specimen 014-B underwent thorough examination and assessment. Non-coding, non-functional DNA was altered in accordance with supplied directives."

Which should have killed Sage outright, except that somehow the ship had the ability to ensure otherwise. Nausea, a burning sensation—horrifying, in context, but non-fatal. And Luthor had probably at least had the sense to begin with Kryptonian physical hardiness, insofar as that could be isolated; he had probably wanted his specimens to last as long as possible.

"Quantify the degree of alteration."

"Kryptonian genetic sequences now account for thirty-eight percent of Specimen 014-B's functional, actively coding genetic material."

Jesus Christ.

Bruce draws a slow breath, and looks at Sage again. She's watching him; her eyes seem huge, dark, her face small and pale, and her shoulders have tied themselves up tight again.

He ought to smile at her. He ought to make sure she understands that everything is all right now, that he's going to fix this.

But—god.

"Sage," he says quietly. "The things that you can do, Luthor—saw them. Tested them."

"Yeah."

"Tell me."

"I can fly," she says, and then bites her lip, as if she thinks she'll be scolded for telling him what he already knows. "I—sometimes I can freeze things when I breathe on them. I can see things that are far away, and hear them, too. Not taste or smell, though. He didn't think that was important. I'm not very strong yet, or very fast; we weren't going to rush it, that's what he said. I had to prove I was a good girl."

Because of course he'd be wary, giving her unrestricted access to the two powers that would make it the easiest for her to escape from him. With superspeed, superstrength—she could have punched through the door to her enclosure, torn right out the wall of the lab, and she could have done it so fast no one would have been able to stop her. Just enough strength to run tests on her, to start to understand the biological mechanisms behind it; a little speed, to see how it worked, but not too much.

"I don't get hurt," Sage is adding, "except by the green needles. Not anymore."

Christ. How must Luthor have tested that particular ability?
"And my eyes, they get all—everything looks red, and I can burn holes if I look at it too hard. But it gets so hot. That still hurts sometimes, a little bit." She hesitates. "I, um. I made a hole in the ship one time. But I didn't mean to."

"Apologies remain unnecessary," the ship says calmly, "but were nevertheless—accepted."

Bruce wonders distantly how long it had taken Sage to explain to it what apologies were, never mind what it was supposed to do with them.

Luthor couldn't have needed to give her all of that, just to figure out what he could and couldn't do with General Zod's corpse and his own demented imagination. There must have been more to it.

Thirty-eight percent.

Bruce turns over a couple of the alternate hypotheses he'd already been considering. "Ship," he says aloud, "does—does command of your systems and functions require Kryptonian genetic material?"

"Yes," the ship says.

"What percentage?"

"Percentage is irrelevant. The ability to interface with and assert full command over Kryptonian technology is determined by the presence or absence of a specific genetic sequence, otherwise non-functional. All citizens of Kryptonian space, regardless of originating homeworld or species, were coded with this sequence." The ship is quiet for a moment. "Specimen 014-B possesses this sequence, and thereby also possesses the right to grant permission even to non-sequenced individuals to assume command temporarily."

So that was how Luthor had done it. An obvious loophole: who created a genetic command sequence to secure their empire's technology, but left the door open for people without it to give it to each other? Surely there had to be a mechanism in place to close that loophole; but somehow Luthor had made it happen anyway. Maybe he'd tricked the ship somehow. Maybe Zod had left the ship with instructions Luthor had been able to take advantage of, or—

Or, somehow, Luthor had used Zod's corpse to do it. But surely the ship had been able to determine for itself that Zod was dead?

Unless—

"Do you want permission?" Sage says.

"Not right now," Bruce says, warm, and offers her another of Bruce Wayne's easy smiles. "But I might take you up on that later."

Sage smiles back—cautious, at first, eyes searching his face for something, and then more readily. "Okay."

And the next question is obvious; as obvious as its answer. But confirmation is valuable, and it will lay the groundwork for the other questions he's going to need to ask, and he's never despised himself so much for approaching every single goddamn conversation like it's a fight, like he needs ten thousand tactical angles to talk like a human being to a nervous ten-year-old girl. "Did you give Luthor permission?" Bruce says, and he says it carefully, gently, suggestive in every inflection and intonation that he's only looking for an answer, that no answer will be wrong.
"Yeah," Sage says. "He needed it. He needed me. He made me useful. He wasn't going to be able to do it alone, and he needed my help."

"He wasn't going to be able to do what alone?"

And she looks up at him, dark eyes wide, innocent round face, soft shining hair spilling over those narrow shoulders; and he knows, he knows even before she says it: "Kill Superman."

"That's what I'm for," Sage adds, and then swallows, biting her lip.

Mr. Wayne doesn't look happy to hear it. He doesn't look anything at all, mostly. He's just staring at her. He doesn't seem mad, but—

That must mean it's true. Right? That must mean it's true, and she's not good for anything anymore.

She blurts it out anyway, like there's still a chance it could be a question. Like there's still a chance for another answer. "But he's already dead, isn't he?"

"Yes," Mr. Wayne says, very softly. "Yes, he is."

Sage digs her teeth into her lip even harder. Her eyes hurt; but nothing looks red yet, so she isn't sure why.

She'd heard bits and pieces, the last day—the last day there had been anyone but her, the last day before she was alone all over again. They'd all been so afraid, even Dr. Happersen, and Dr. Happersen had never been afraid of anything before. They'd been hurrying around the lab, murmuring to each other, sharp strained voices. She'd been able to hear them easily, even from inside her room. But none of them had known for sure what was going on outside. Whether Superman was dead, or Lex was, or both—whether the police were coming, or weren't. What to do with the lab, where to go.

None of them had told her anything, though. And then they'd left. They'd run away, and left her.

But if Mr. Wayne says it, then it's true. It must be.

Superman's already dead. Superman's already dead, and there's no reason for anyone to keep Sage anymore.

She doesn't say it. She doesn't want to. Mr. Wayne isn't stupid, he—he'll figure it out, sooner or later. He'll figure out she isn't good for anything, not now. But maybe if she doesn't say so, it'll take him a while. He's busy; he has a lot of things to think about. That's what Mr. Alfred had told her, when he was gone. And Mr. Alfred's always right.

"Sage," Mr. Wayne says quietly.

Sage squeezes her eyes shut.
She thought she knew what this was going to be like. She's been to the ship so many times. She thought she knew what was going to happen. And she'd been kind of happy about it, in a weird way. Because she had been in the lab, but she'd been alone, which hadn't ever happened before. And then Mr. Wayne had come and taken her out of the lab, taken her to the house by the lake, which hadn't ever happened before either. And Mr. Alfred had given her food to eat, and had let her go to sleep, which also hadn't happened in a long time. And then tea, and puzzles—and she'd been a good girl, she'd been polite to Mr. Alfred and she'd done what she was told, but she hadn't understood any of it. It didn't make sense, it was—

It had been like before.

Except things weren't like before anymore. They never could be again.

So she'd been relieved, she'd been grateful, when Mr. Wayne had appeared and said they were going to the ship. Because at least that was something she knew, something she understood. At least that was something predictable.

Or at least she'd thought it would be. But she'd been wrong.

Mr. Wayne hadn't made her get in the pool. He hadn't made her show him what she could do, he hadn't made her do it harder and harder until it hurt, until she was dizzy and cold, until she thought she would fall down. He hadn't made her hold still, and he hadn't told the ship to do anything to her, to recode any sequences or add new ones. Nothing's happened to her, and there's nothing she's supposed to be doing, and she doesn't understand any of it—

"Sage," Mr. Wayne says again.

"Just stop it," she shouts at him.

He was reaching out for her, and she hits him—hits his hand, pushes at his arm, harder than she's supposed to do unless somebody tells her to. She comes up off the floor, because she has to, because it's all boiling up out of her at once.

And he's going to be mad. Of course he is. She's not being good anymore.

(But at least now, if he doesn't keep her, there's a reason. There's a reason he won't like her, won't want her. This way, it can't happen even though she was good, as good as she could possibly be, and he still wouldn't keep her anyway.

There's a reason that isn't because Superman's dead, and nobody needs her anymore—)

"Stop it," Sage cries again, "just stop it—"

He reaches for her again, more deliberate this time: catches her wrist, just restraining. Not tight enough to hurt—but then it wouldn't be. It can't be, not when it's her, not the way she is now.

"Please," he says, but it's—it doesn't sound like anything. His face is doing that thing again, where it doesn't look like anything, either. Calm, blank. Like it doesn't matter. Like he doesn't care at all.

She's not a baby, she's practically grown up. But she screws her face up like one, wild and scrunched, teeth showing, and something's clawing its way up her throat, forcing itself out, a sharp wet sound that isn't half as angry as she wanted it to be.

"Stop it," she shouts, "let go," and he does it instantly, hand opening around her wrist even before she can finish moving to wrench it from his grip. "Just leave me alone," and then she's up in the air
without even thinking about it—like she isn't even flying, not really, like it's just that everything she's feeling is pouring out of her hard enough to lift her off the deck.

She reaches out for the ship, the way it taught her she could—in her head, silent, she can ask it for things and it'll listen to her. Which is good, right now, because that means she doesn't have to say anything. That means Mr. Wayne won't hear.

She throws herself down the corridor, away from the pool and the room and Mr. Wayne, and she can hear that it's working. The ship is doing what she wanted, closing the corridor up behind her, metal shifting with a soft noise like sand.

Sage keeps going. She doesn't know how far—she doesn't know her way through the ship at all, not really. Lex never took her anywhere but the pool.

But it doesn't matter. The ship opens itself up for her, reshapes itself around her. Like she's welcome. Like there's still at least one place she belongs.

She finds herself in a big round room, gleaming and empty—slows in the air and then lets herself get heavy again a little bit at a time, so when she reaches the wall she slides down it, curls in on herself on the floor. Her chest feels tight, her throat hurts; her eyes are hot, but it's only a little bit red behind her eyelids. She wants to be angry some more, but now that she's alone and it's quiet, she's—it's hard to be. There's nothing to be angry at, and she's just tired.

Stupid, she thinks. She isn't really tired. She can't be, not anymore. That's one of the things that was supposed to make her useful.

She swallows, and rubs her knuckles hard against her eyes, wipes her face. "You still like me, right?" she says unevenly to the wall, leaning her head against it, letting her eyes fall shut.

"You are cooperative and intelligent," the ship says, kind of slowly. "You have endured in the face of unpredictable outcomes. On your world, this behavior commonly earns the designation—very brave. Analysis indicates that you are highly likely to develop into an exemplary commander."

Sage laughs a little against the wall, wet and quiet. Coming from the ship, that pretty much means yes.

"Thanks," she says aloud, hot cheek pressed to the cool smooth hull. "Thank you."

The ship is silent for a moment. "Your queries will never go unanswered," it says at last. "This is protocol."

"Thanks anyway," Sage says.

"You are—welcome."

It takes a little while for Mr. Wayne to come find her.

She isn't expecting it. She isn't really expecting anything. She's just sitting there, curled up against the wall, waiting dully for whatever comes next.

There's always something that comes next, and it's never up to her.
But the sound of a cautious footstep is a surprise.

Sage blinks and rubs at her eyes, and then looks over her shoulder. And there isn't anybody else in here, but it's still—somehow she still didn't think it was going to be Mr. Wayne.

But it is.

"Hey," he says quietly, and doesn't come any closer.

For a second she's not sure how he even got here. Except she only told the ship to close up the corridor behind her. She didn't say not to open it again.

She twists back toward the wall, and scrubs at her face again. She feels—she doesn't know how she feels. Cold, a little sick. Afraid.

"Hi, Mr. Wayne," she tells the wall. It comes out shakier than she wanted, and she bites her lip.

She should—she should be polite, right? She should be polite. She's always supposed to be polite. She's supposed to be polite and quiet, she's supposed to be a good girl. Maybe he'll still change his mind if she's just—

"I'm sorry," Mr. Wayne says.

Sage goes still.

Lex never said anything like that to her. Not even as a trick.

She doesn't know what to expect next. She doesn't know what she's supposed to do. She sits there, staring at the wall, and wraps her hands around each other.

"I shouldn't have made you come here," Mr. Wayne adds, even softer. "I should have given you more time. I thought it would be better this way, but I was wrong."

Sage swallows, and turns around again—all the way, shifting on her butt against the scaly little metal bits that make up the floor, so she can look at Mr. Wayne for real.

"I didn't mean to yell at you," she says.

Mr. Wayne was already watching her, and for a second his face looks like she feels: tired, and sad, and sorry. And then he clears his throat, and suddenly all of that is gone, and he's smiling.

Which would make her nervous—Lex did that sometimes, too, started smiling out of nowhere like it was just that easy, like he'd never been doing anything else, and it never meant he was actually happy with her.

But Mr. Wayne's smile is smaller, lopsided and warm. And his eyes look serious, but not—not angry.

"That's okay," he says. "I understand why. You didn't do anything wrong."

And that isn't true, it can't possibly be true. But she doesn't mind pretending it is for a while, if he wants her to.

"Okay," she agrees.

"Would it be all right to go back to the lake house now? Or do you want to do something else?"
She blinks at him. "You aren't going to leave me here?"

She didn't exactly mean to ask. It's just that that's one of the things she's been trying not to think about. It would be better than if he found somewhere else to leave her; the ship is nice, Sage likes her, and the ship would take care of her. She had decided maybe she could tell him so, if the idea hadn't occurred to him already. And then she had decided she wouldn't say a word about it if he didn't.

(—not that it mattered last time. Last time, she fell asleep, and he left, and she didn't even know he had until he was already gone—)

And then her mouth went and shouted it out anyhow.

Mr. Wayne's face goes very still. The smile is stuck there for a second, left over, and then it goes away and he's just looking at her.

"No," he says softly. "No, I'm not going to leave you here. I promise."

"And we can go back to the lake house?"

"Yeah," Mr. Wayne says. "We can go back to the lake house."

He holds out his hand. And Sage levers herself up off the floor, and takes it.

So he really hasn't decided she isn't useful anymore. At least not yet. She'd hoped, earlier, when he'd—when he'd said I might take you up on that later, when he hadn't asked for the one thing she knew for sure she could still give him. And he isn't stupid. He'll get permission to assume command from her before he sends her away, so he can still use the ship without her.

If that's the only thing he needs her for—there isn't really any good reason why he shouldn't get it now, is there? But if he hasn't realized that, she decides, she isn't going to be the one to tell him.

"Do you think Mr. Alfred finished the puzzle?" she says.

"No," Mr. Wayne says, and smiles again. "No, I think he'd have waited for you."

"Okay," Sage says, and tries to smile back; and her eyes are sore and tired, her cheeks kind of cold, but she's pretty sure it looks okay.

Sage falls asleep in the car on the way back to the house.

Bruce finds himself uncomfortably grateful for it, relieved and guilty at the same time. Just one more way in which he isn't in the least fit to be doing this; he shouldn't be glad that she's out, that he's temporarily discharged of responsibility, that for at least a little while he simply won't be able to fuck this up—

He should have realized. He'd been so desperate to figure it all out, to solve this, to make it possible
for Sage to go somewhere that would be genuinely safe for her; exquisite, bitter irony, that in doing so he should have hurt her anyway. A fundamental truth that he has no excuse for ignoring: he's damned if he does and damned if he doesn't, and there is never a third option until someone else has already paid the price for his mistakes.

If only he could trust himself to be what she needs right now. If only he thought it possible that he could find it in him to do better.

But he knows himself too well to hope for any such thing.

He takes her back to the house. She wakes as they pull in, no doubt feeling the car slow, and yawns, stretching and blinking in the rearview mirror—and then pressing herself to one of the back windows, and waving eagerly at Alfred.

She hasn't moved, though, by the time Bruce has parked the car and opened his door. Waiting for permission, perhaps; she is, intermittently, heartbreakingly conscious of potential lines, activities she's not sure she's allowed to undertake without supervision.

He gets out and opens the nearer rear door for her, and is mindful to smile again, so she'll be aware that waiting wasn't the wrong choice either. He's never been so grateful for all Bruce Wayne's practice at presenting himself as toothless, harmless, genial.

But she doesn't step out right away. She scoots to the edge of the back seat, and looks down at her feet and then up at him.

"I forgot to tell you," she says, almost shyly. "Thank you for the shoes."

Right. Of course. *No bare feet in the driveway.* Bruce swallows the carefully strangled ghost of a laugh, and shakes his head.

"Don't thank me," he tells her. "Thank Alfred. He's the one who went shopping today."

He'd kept it simple, comfortable; Alfred had a natural talent for that sort of thing. Sage is in a loose pair of jeans, a blue shirt with patterned embroidery at the waist and cuffs.

(Bruce had forgotten to mention the yellow, the daisies, in Sage's lab enclosure. But perhaps Alfred reviewed the footage from the cameras in the cowl. Perhaps he'd realized it might be wise to avoid pale shades, white, flowers.)


Sage is looking down at them again, rotating her ankles, tilting the shoes back and forth; and then she follows up with a muffled little motion, as if she's wiggling her toes inside them.

"I like having shoes," she says, as if to herself. And then she hops easily out of the car and crosses the driveway, half-running, half-skipping—turning her face briefly into the breeze off the lake and shaking her hair back over her shoulders.

She leaves the thermos in which she had brought the remains of her lunchtime tea toppled, abandoned, in the back seat. Bruce leans in and picks it up.
By the time he looks up again, she's halfway across the driveway, and he experiences a spasm of wariness: on the one hand, he does want her to feel as comfortable as possible, and to no longer consider herself subject to the arbitrary limits of distant and uncaring overseers. On the other hand, if she takes off right now and flies away, he's going to have to find a way to stop her before she can leave the grounds; for her own safety, that kind of freedom isn't on the table, not right now, and never mind that he hardly has the right to insist—

But she doesn't lift off. She's looking out at the sky, the sun dropping low near the edge of the lake, but moving steadily toward the main doors, and a moment later they're opening for her, and he can hear her say happily, "Mr. Alfred!"

"Miss Sage," Alfred says, quiet but perfectly audible, and Bruce looks up already knowing what he'll see—Alfred smiling down at Sage, warm, and then glancing up over her shoulder to pin Bruce with a steady soft gaze.

Bruce bites the inside of his cheek, and looks away.

"I'm afraid I made very little progress on our puzzle without you," he hears Alfred say. "And I took the liberty of preparing myself a sandwich and some more tea—would you like some, too?"

Bruce slows his pace, so that Sage has already agreed and passed Alfred, heading for the puzzle table, by the time he's reached the threshold.

"You would be welcome to join us as well, sir," Alfred murmurs, once he has.

But his tone—resigned, for all its gentleness—says he knows better than to think Bruce will take him up on the invitation.

"No," Bruce says anyway, and hands over the empty thermos. "No, I have to return to the ship. Sage—needed a break. I was right. Luthor's taken her there before, multiple times; he was using her to interact with the ship, once he'd made her Kryptonian enough for it to recognize her as such."

"Good lord," Alfred murmurs, rubbing a hand across his mouth. And then he looks at Bruce again, in that way that says he knows there's much more Bruce isn't saying. "And you left before you'd learned what you went there to find out, because Sage needed a break."

His intonation, his inflection, are without judgment or doubt. Neutral. And yet Bruce has to brace himself against the words anyway, feeling the relentless weight of remorse settle heavily across his shoulders.

There was a time not so long ago, after all, when Alfred couldn't have been blamed for healthy skepticism that anyone's welfare or emotional comfort mattered to Bruce, put across the scales from a task he'd set himself.

"I pushed her too hard," Bruce hears himself say. "I shouldn't have made her go there, not this soon."

"Master Wayne—"

"Look after her," Bruce adds, brusque—as if there were any danger Alfred would fail to do so unless told to, for Christ's sake. "I have to go back to the ship, to see what else I can find out without her."

"All right, sir," Alfred says, after a moment, and Bruce turns on his heel and goes.
The ship does its best to be helpful to him, even without Sage there—even without any command credentials whatsoever. Maybe the simple fact that he came here with Sage earlier, that it recognized her and acknowledged his presence at the same time, has granted him a certain implicit set of permissions. Maybe it's aware that he is, however clumsily and hamhandedly, trying to help Sage.

Maybe it doesn't know that he is in part responsible for the death of the last true Kryptonian on the planet—that he wouldn't have settled for "in part" if it had been up to him.

(—surely, surely, if it did, it would never have let him inside of it at all—)

Whatever the reason, it proves cooperative.

He spends hours carefully working his way back through every log and sensor record he can access, every command Luthor ever gave it, every single thing it did to—to Specimen 014-B. He has to keep stopping it to make it explain untranslatable Kryptonian terminology to him; Kryptonian genetic engineering had been wildly advanced even during the ship's time, which, he learns, was nevertheless thousands and thousands of years ago. A full understanding of the exact nature of the genesis fluid, and of the full range of operations the ship is capable of using it for, never mind the scientific mechanisms behind them, is definitely beyond him. At least over the course of a single night's work, however painstakingly thorough.

By the time it occurs to him that it must be very late, it's already crossed the line into very early—and he has to blink twice, rub his eyes and blink again, to force the numbers on his watch to come into focus.

Christ, he's tired.

And that he's acknowledging that at all means he's probably approaching the limit of what he'll be able to accomplish tonight. Despite his best efforts, he remains subject to the law of diminishing returns.

He sighs through his nose, and leans against the wall, the back of his hand pressed to his forehead. With scientific inquiry set aside for the moment, he finds an idle curiosity taking hold, dim and soft-edged by comparison. It won't help him figure this out any faster—and yet it's difficult not to think about it. Thousands of years, thousands. A vessel this technologically advanced, sent by aliens, sleeping in the ice since—since who knows when. Since the dawn of human civilization? Earlier still?

Bruce has at times been inclined toward a certain feeling of existential apathy: nothing new under the sun. There are always villains, and there are always victims. There is always Gotham. There is always more Bruce should have done, the endless task to which he will never be equal; and there can be no rest, no respite. There can be no surrender.

So it is, in a way, a pleasure to be reminded of the vast unknowable mystery of the universe—that there is so much more out there, and there always has been, and even were he to try, he could never take its full measure.

He'd been a fool to assume that he had. A fool to assume that he understood what he faced, that there was nothing left that could surprise him; that he knew every road to its end.
—that he knew *Superman's* road to its end, and that he had the right to act on that knowledge; that there was no chance of error, no chance of revelation, and that even if there were it wouldn't matter —

"Ship," he says aloud. "You were sent to evaluate this world for potential habitation."

"Yes," the ship says. "Preliminary reports, analysis, and first-level assessments were logged in archives and sent back to Homeworld."

So General Zod might well have been aware of Earth before he'd ever come here—and that second ship, the Black Zero, those gravity pulses they'd sent through the planet: equipment sent in advance, left behind? Bruce lets out a sharp breath through his nose, half-amused at the idea of Earth as some kind of—Chia Pet, kit unopened. Just add water. And maybe tweak the density, sand down the ragged edges; get rid of those loud squabbling pests taking up most of the room. Piece of cake.

"And then you waited," Bruce says. "In standby?"

"Auxiliary functions that were not required were temporarily deactivated," the ship agrees. "Primary functions ran in low-power mode. Sensor data was processed, and assessments and analyses were revised on an ongoing basis." The ship pauses, and then says a little more quietly, "And—where it did not conflict with system protocols and requirements, projections were run."

"You dreamed," Bruce paraphrases. "You—daydreamed. About what the Kryptonian colony that was supposed to be here might have looked like."

"It did not conflict with system protocols and requirements," the ship repeats, kind of stiffly.

Bruce finds himself smiling at the wall. "I'm not going to tell on you," he says, and then clears his throat. "And then General Zod woke you up?"

It makes sense. If Zod had learned about Earth from whatever database the ship's reports had filed themselves in, he'd probably also known where that information came from; he'd have known there was a ship, and that it might well still be here. So he'd gone and gotten it, and he'd started the planet-altering process his people had had planned for Earth ten thousand years ago.

It makes sense. But the ship says, "No."

Bruce looks up at the ceiling with raised eyebrows. "No?"

"Dru-Zod was not responsible for reactivation."

"Who was?"

"Kal-El," the ship says.

Maybe this is a line of inquiry Bruce should have pursued while he was still in decent form after all. He feels slow, dull, impossibly stupid. "Kal-El," he repeats, inane. "You mean—one of Zod's soldiers?"

"Kal-El did not travel to this world with Dru-Zod."

Another Kryptonian, running around on Earth in secret? Bruce's chest can't quite decide whether to loosen in relief. He still hasn't forgotten Alfred's words, that Sage might want to keep her powers after all; and if she does, she can't be handed over to any old civilian agency. But another
Kryptonian—

An unknown Kryptonian, a Kryptonian Bruce may or may not be able to trust; forged in Zod's image, or in Superman's?

Or—

"Ship," Bruce says slowly, "what other identifiers have been applied to the individual you refer to as Kal-El?"

If it is another Kryptonian, hidden so well even Zod hadn't known about them, perhaps the ship is aware of aliases Bruce can track down. But perhaps there's a much, much simpler answer that he's nearly managed to overlook.

"Kal-El of Krypton," the ship lists off. "Kal-El of Earth," and something about that combination is striking, makes Bruce's breath draw itself in sharply even before the ship adds, "Superman," and then—of course—"Clark Kent."

Bruce closes his eyes. "Show me," he hears himself say, hardly more than a murmur.

A moment of perfect silence, utter stillness. And then a soft shimmering sound, and Bruce knows what must be happening, and opens his eyes: watches the form of Clark Kent take shape in front of him, the same smooth gray-bronze as the rest of the ship, the floor of the room shifting and resettling around his feet.

Kent, not Superman. The suit isn't in evidence; Kent is wearing what looks like an ordinary henley, unbuttoned, a little stretched at the collar. And the ship has rendered him in—unnecessary detail. Kent's jaw is stippled with stubble. Superman was always clean-shaven, as far as Bruce can recall.

Bruce feels a strange shudder trying to work its way through him, and bites the inside of his cheek hard to quell it, drags his eyes away from Kent's fucking jawline and then tenses in surprise.

Kent's looking at him.

Looking at him, moving, breathing. A live render, Bruce realizes distantly, heart nevertheless pounding in his chest. A recording from the ship's internal sensors, brought to life in three dimensions. And of course the ship had standard settings; it wouldn't have rendered Kent with his back to Bruce unless asked.

Still, it's disconcerting. Whatever it was Kent had been looking at, it must have been in approximately the same position relative to him as Bruce is now—the intricate debossing that delineates Kent's pupils even in monochrome gives the impression that his gaze is genuinely focused on Bruce, neither directed short of him nor past and into the middle distance.

Kent's brow is furrowed just the barest degree. He stands there quietly for a moment. And then he shakes his head a little, and says, very low, "Who are you?"

His voice is played back in the same relentless detail as the rest of him: softer than Superman's ever was, when he'd spoken to Bruce. Calm, mostly neutral; a little wary, perhaps. A little uncertain. But the look in his eyes is intent, intrigued—

Bruce swallows, and makes himself look away. "Stop," he says, too sharply.

Silence again. But when he risks a glance, Kent is still there.
Still there, but frozen in place.

The ship interpreted Bruce's order as an instruction to pause rather than terminate playback. He should have chosen a less ambiguous word. He should—

He should correct the error right now. He should explain what he meant, and allow the ship to disassemble Kent's figure as neatly as it was assembled, and then go home.

He stands there, and doesn't move.

He shouldn't be doing this. He shouldn't be looking at Kent like this—when Kent doesn't know he's doing it, can't ever become aware of the trespass, can't even take him to task for it. He shouldn't be looking at Kent when Kent is dead, and it's Bruce's fault.

Not entirely, obviously. The bulk of the blame can be laid at Luthor's door. Bruce isn't the one who stole Zod's corpse and ran experiments on it, remade it and reanimated it into an extraterrestrial monster. And Kent is the one who decided to pick up the spear—who knew he'd be weakened by it and did it anyway, who went and ran himself through just to save a world Luthor had half-tricked into hating him.

Bruce didn't create the situation that caused Superman's death.

He just failed utterly to prevent it. He just let himself be so thoroughly distracted by the threat he perceived Superman to be that he hadn't put the pieces together, for all that half of them had been right in front of him; for all that he's spent half his fucking life playing detective with criminals a lot subtler than Alexander Luthor, Jr.

Kent's expression is as frozen as the rest of him, that gentle intent look—nothing he'd ever have directed at Bruce if he were actually here. Grotesque self-indulgence, to stand here and soak it in anyway, as if it's for him; as if it's something he's earned. As if it's something he deserves.

He barely even knew Kent. He doesn't have the right to—to wallow like this, obscene and greedy and pointless. Kent's death hasn't devastated him. How could it?

It just feels like it has. He doesn't understand why; he can't make sense of it. It all happened so fast, in the moment. And yet now that it's long since over, he can't let it go.

The instant, the instant, he'd heard Superman—Kent—say his mother's name, everything had upended itself. He'd known already that he couldn't afford even the slightest hesitation, and he'd told himself that it was because that was all Superman would need to crack his skull open like a walnut. But that had only been part of the reason. The truth was, he couldn't afford to hesitate because that was all it would take for everything he'd been running from, everything he'd been dedicatedly ignoring, to catch up to him. He'd known he would falter, if he gave himself half a chance; the doubt, the uncertainty, would creep in through the cracks the way they always did.

It had felt so good to be certain. It had felt like strength. He'd known what needed to be done—what he'd decided needed to be done—and he would do it, and nothing would sway him. There had been a grim kind of pleasure in the confidence of it, in the understanding he had reached with himself.

But then—

Then all the things he'd thought he'd known had turned themselves inside out, and the bedrock to which he'd anchored himself had crumbled away. An appropriate metaphor: the sensation hadn't been dissimilar to falling. The lurch of his gut, the startled prickling across the back of his neck;
the clench in his chest, and the sudden inescapable awareness that circumstances had changed, and that he needed to act on that change immediately.

And even now, standing here looking at Kent's face, he feels an echo of it. Of it, and of what had come after. Because of all that had been unexpected about the end of that fight, the end of that fight and the beginning of the next, the most surprising had been an undeniable perception of the future opening up in front of him.

He would have died fighting Superman. He'd known that going in. Whether Superman killed him or he killed Superman—he was dead either way, whether literally or simply in every other way that mattered. At the time, it had only seemed fitting. He would have done anything to save the rest of humanity, and that included sacrificing his own: turning himself into the murderer he'd sworn never to be, becoming his own worst nightmare, and doing it deliberately, eyes open, no excuses.

After he had let himself break that rule once, after he had figured out how to justify it to himself in a way he could accept, it was inevitable that he would let himself break it again.

He'd known his own road to its end, too.

And then Superman—Kent—had stopped him. Kent had saved him, without even knowing that was what he was doing.

Bruce had barely known Kent at all. And yet in another sense he'd known Kent perfectly. Kent loved his mother, Martha. Kent wanted to help people, much more than he cared whether they hated him while he did it. Kent would kill to save the world, or die trying. Kent had, abruptly, made more sense to Bruce than anyone else he had ever met.

And there was no denying that with that understanding had come a sudden wealth of tentative potential. Not only to know Kent, to keep knowing him, but to—to be known by him, if he had found himself perceiving the fundamental elements of Bruce's nature in the same moment Bruce had perceived his. To be known, and not to be alone.

Bruce had given up on any such thing a long time ago. It was safer that way.

(—if only he'd figured that out sooner; always, always, too late—)

But it was hard to argue he'd have been safer facing Doomsday without Superman at his shoulder. Superman, and Wonder Woman, as Diana has since chosen to allow herself to be named by the media.

And where there had been nothing, the inevitability of murder and of death, the long slow decay of ruin—worlds had opened up before him, blooming possibilities unfurling themselves readily.

He's carried on since well enough. He hasn't forgotten that feeling, that multiplicative unfolding of futures, the sudden scintillating awareness that so much more lay ahead of him than he'd thought. He's started, gradually, to relearn what it's like to maneuver in such sprawling boundlessness, to navigate anything other than a single shadowed path. He hasn't mastered it. He's stiff, unpracticed, limbs half-asleep. But he can't give in—not after what it cost to get here. He's maintained contact with Diana, and his dossiers on the individuals captured in Luthor's files have been steadily expanding. He can do better. He has to.

And yet there remains, indelible, the memory of the moment Superman fell. The moment Bruce understood that he was gone—the moment all that sense of tender uncertain dawn ahead of him had been lost, dulled back to darkness, and Bruce had been left reaching for a corpse instead.
Objectively, nothing had been taken from him. Kent hadn't been taken from him; couldn't have been, because Kent had never been—given—to him in the first place. Bruce has no excuse to feel deprived, bereft, in pain.

If Kent had lived, he'd probably have hated Bruce. Bruce shouldn't delude himself into thinking otherwise.

Except looking at Kent like this is only making that delusion easier to swallow. Kent in civilian clothes; Kent before he became Superman at all, given that the ship asserts that Kent activated it before it was brought to Metropolis. Kent stubbled and mild-faced, soft-voiced.

Kent the way Bruce might have first met him in another world—a stranger, a mystery, an answer, instead of a distant embodiment of destruction streaking overhead. Everything Bruce had never thought to look for in him; everything Bruce had lost the opportunity to discover, with such excruciating finality that it's almost unbearable.

*I'm sorry*, he doesn't say. *God, I am so fucking sorry.*

(—I was wrong, I was wrong, I know that now, I never should have—)

(—you didn't deserve that; if anyone should have died that day, it was—)

"I won't fail you again," he says instead, to Kent's perfect motionless face. Pointless, of course, to repeat the promise he'd made at Kent's graveside to this thing, this empty shell of a recording; but true, and there's a grim pleasure in the reminder, the sense of purpose it brings with it.

Only one reason among many. Surprising, in a way, that it should nevertheless find itself lodged as deeply beneath his skin as any of the others.

He has to help Sage for her own sake. That would be enough in and of itself. But he can't keep himself from perceiving the ghost of Kent at his shoulder in doing it. He can't help but be aware that in a strange way this almost constitutes a second chance.

A second chance on multiple levels: to face a person who is at least in part Kryptonian, and reach out to them with an open hand instead of fear, anger, suspicion. To treat them the way he should have treated Kent but hadn't. And—

He's a man who loves his mother. Who persists. Who would kill to save a world, if he had to; who would have died trying, if he had had the chance.

But he also knows what it's like to want to kill Superman—to define himself by it, to forge it into a driving sense of purpose. To feel lost, disoriented, with that purpose stripped away.

Sage doesn't understand what it would really mean, to kill someone. All she knows is what she remembers of Black Zero, being hurt and terrified and alone, everything coming apart around her and Superman in the middle of it one way or another; all she knows is whatever Luthor told her, however he chose to explain it to her. Of course she'd latched onto it—of course she'd wanted it to be that simple, that she could do what Luthor had made her to do and feel good, useful, in control.

Certain.

She has much better reasons than Bruce ever did.

"I won't," he repeats.
He allows himself to pretend for an instant that Kent is looking at him after all—looking at him, listening to him. Accepting the words: willing to grant him that second chance, whether he deserves it or not.

And then he clears his throat, and says to the ship, "How comprehensive are your archives?" and the ship takes the cue: Kent melts away into nothing, and Bruce watches him go and ruthlessly ignores the ache in his chest at the sight.

For all that he allowed himself to be temporarily distracted, he hasn't forgotten what the ship said—it mentioned having archived its original assessment of Earth's suitability as a colony world, which presumably occurred when it first arrived. And yet clearly it also stored sensor records of Kent, which can't be from more than about two years ago.

Depending on which systems it defines as "primary functions", it may have been monitoring portions of the world for thousands of years, which constitutes impossibly valuable historical data.

"Every ship of this class is equipped with a duplicate of Homeworld Archive," the ship says—and sure, of course, Bruce thinks; because they'd want one on-site whenever they had started a new colony, so no knowledge could be lost even in the event of a communications breakdown. Or—well. Or the exact kind of planetary catastrophe that had destroyed Krypton, according to the ship. "Data can be added to on-board archives at any time, but may only be deleted with a commander's authorization."

And Bruce doesn't know quite what it is that makes him ask, right then. Pure curiosity; a hunch. The memory, still haunting, of the last conversation Bruce had had with Luthor before he went to Arkham. The bell's already been rung. They've heard it. Out in the dark, among the stars—

"What is the last information you were asked to retrieve from your archives, before today?"

The ship says nothing, for a long moment.

And then the floor shifts again; and this time, the figure that forms out of it isn't Kent.

It's a—a giant, huge. Bruce has to tilt his head back as it rises toward the ceiling, catching the curve of horns. Or maybe that's just the helmet, shaped to match the massive spiked armor.

A figure. Like a demon. And between its huge clawed hands, spread, three perfect cubes hang in the air.

Martha has to stop in the driveway and just look at the house for a long moment.

Even that day, she'd had the dim thought that it was a stupid house. Striking, maybe, in the kind of deliberately ridiculous way that made it even more ostentatious—practically the whole thing, glass? Really? She could almost imagine what some incredibly expensive realtor's catalogue might have to say about it: how the glass reflected the waters of the lake, that sort of thing.
It hadn't taken long for it to occur to her that Bruce had probably tried pretty hard to find a stupid house. A Bruce Wayne kind of house, pointlessly expensive and inconvenient—the kind of house nobody could picture Batman living in.

But it's only right now, standing here looking at it again for the first time in months, that she's thought about what else it might mean. Because sure, there's an irony to it: Bruce, with all his secrets, all his lies, all his mistakes, living in a literal glass house—spending his life throwing stones anyway. And she'd be tempted to laugh, except—

Except there's something about it—about the house, looking at it like this, all its clean precise angles; looking through it to the lake beyond it, as if it isn't really there at all—that makes her throat ache.

It's like the ghost of a house. Semblance without substance, somehow left standing anyway, impossible to mistake for all the things it isn't.

(—is that how he thinks of himself?)

She draws a slow breath, and wonders whether she shouldn't have come back a little sooner.

Well. Better late than never, she tells herself firmly, and crosses the drive.

Alfred hadn't precisely answered most of her questions. But he had very deliberately and very generously extended her an invitation, in a way that had said he was doing it on his own initiative—that Bruce wouldn't have, and that Alfred probably wasn't going to tell him it had happened until she'd already arrived.

But there's no way she made it up Bruce Wayne's driveway without him knowing about it. And, sure enough, she can see him waiting for her at the door, hands in his pockets, perfectly composed.

"Good morning, Martha," he says softly, when she slows to a stop in front of him.

"Good morning, Bruce," she says, and smiles at him. "Sorry to drop by on such short notice," she adds blandly, and watches his mouth purse, his gaze turning wry.

"Mm," he agrees, clearly perfectly well aware that she's not sorry in the least, and certainly not to have done this in a way that made her impossible to evade.

She smiles wider, and then leans in and puts her arms around his shoulders; and he goes still against her, briefly unresponsive, startled. As if it's somehow a surprise—for such a smart man, she thinks, he can be awfully stupid.

"It's good to see you," she says against his shoulder, before she takes pity and lets him go again.

"Surely that's my line," he says, mouth tilting lopsidedly, before he clears his throat. "Martha—"

"Oh, please," she says, before he can get any further. "You called me up, after months, just to have a little chat? You think I don't know you better than that?"

Something passes across Bruce's face, quick and shadowed; but then his expression smooths itself out. "Martha," he says again, more cautiously.

But she isn't here looking for apologies. She isn't holding it against him. How can she? She understands why he didn't keep in touch—and it isn't like she called him, either.
"You kept me talking for a reason," she says firmly, because she knows she's right. "You wanted to hear all that." She stops, and swallows, and wraps her hands around each other. "Is it—does it have something to do with—"

—Clark, but her throat closes on her without warning, and she has to blink once, twice. It shouldn't be so hard to say.

But lucky for her that it's Bruce she can't say it to: he can be trusted to hear it anyway.

He moves, takes a quick half-step toward her and closes his hands around hers before she can really start to wring them. "No," he says gently, and she bites her lip and lets her eyes fall shut. She should have known. She should have known, but she couldn't help but hope. "No," he repeats, and it's easier to hear the second time around. And then he pauses, and adds, "Not exactly."

She breathes in deep, and withdraws one hand to brush the backs of her knuckles briskly against her eyes, before she looks at him again. "Not exactly?"

And then from somewhere behind him comes a shout—"I don't want to!"—and a girl runs past them.

On the ceiling.

Dressed, but fleeing from the prospect of holding still to let her hair be brushed, Martha diagnoses distantly. Probably refused to do it herself, and isn't about to let anybody else get away with doing it for her, either.

"She's Kryptonian," she hears herself say, not entirely steadily.

"She's part-Kryptonian," Bruce clarifies, "in a sense. It's—complicated."

More complicated than General Zod having accidentally left a Kryptonian baby behind, or Clark having a secret daughter? Perfect, Martha thinks, and has to put a hand to her mouth before she can accidentally laugh.

"I can just imagine," she manages after a moment, and Bruce quirks his mouth at her ruefully and then takes a single long stride away—back through the open door.

"Please, come in," he says.

Because he'd never have asked her here himself; but now that she's on his doorstep, she thinks, he sure as hell isn't going to send her away.

For all the secrets he keeps, everything he's hiding, he can be awfully predictable in his own way.

"Thank you," she murmurs, half a tacit apology for pulling his strings like this, and steps inside.

Bruce tells her the story, a piece at a time, over tea.

Alfred passes through on the trail of his escaped charge, looking only mildly perturbed—and all dismay vanishes at once when he sees Martha, replaced with a warm smile and thoroughly dignified disregard for the flat look Bruce is aiming at him. He greets her readily, as if he hadn't invited her here behind his employer's back at all, and kisses her on the cheek. "I don't suppose the
young miss has been through?” he tacks on, eyebrows raised, when the courtesies are through.

"That way," Martha says, and angles a nod diagonally toward the ceiling, leading away toward the other side of the house.

Alfred sighs through his nose. "Naturally," he says, and insists on staying to make them both tea before he sweeps out again in pursuit.

And then it's just her and Bruce: her, and Bruce, and a warm mug, and this house. Martha closes her eyes. Just like that day; she could almost believe that it is that day, all over again, except for the memory of all the dull gray months since. Cold comfort, she thinks, and almost smiles.

Bruce clears his throat, and takes a sip of tea, and starts to talk.

His tone is even, calm. Factual. The things he's saying are all the more frightening for it.

"You mean—all that time?" Martha says, hushed, when he's done.

Bruce looks away. "Yes," he says.

It comes out steady, unflinching. Confessional, she thinks. Because Bruce never met a hurt he couldn't blame himself for failing to prevent.

Back then she'd taken it all at face value, at first. Bruce had called himself a friend of her son's; it had sure seemed true enough. He'd saved her. It was that—that fifty-foot-tall roaring monster who'd killed Clark. Bruce and Diana had been fighting it, too. That was as much as Martha had known about it, when it happened.

She still remembers the look on Bruce's face later, when he'd realized how it all looked to her. And then he'd wiped it away, cool as a statue, and told her everything: bitten it out a word at a time, brutally efficient, sparing her nothing.

She'd wanted to scream at him. She'd wanted to slap him. And then, dimly, as if from a long way away, it had occurred to her that he wanted that, too.

He'd tried to kill Clark. So had Luthor. The difference was, he'd stopped himself. He'd found a reason not to do it, and he'd stopped himself; and Luthor would've gone on and taken out half of Metropolis at the same time if Bruce hadn't helped Clark stop him.

And Clark must have realized it, too, or he'd never have sent Bruce for Martha, not in a million years.

She hadn't found the right way to explain it to him, then. He'd stared at her like she was speaking Greek—except he'd probably have understood Greek better than he understood being told that he wasn't at fault, and that she wasn't going to treat him as though he was.

And she isn't any better at it now; because she reaches across the table and puts a hand over the back of his, says mildly, "Should've known Luthor had found all kinds of depths to sink to," and watches his gaze snap up.

"Martha—"

"You shut her in there?" she inquires, as if she doesn't already know the answer to that.

His mouth presses itself flat.
"And once you found out where she was," she adds, "you left her there?"

"That doesn't—"

"Then it sounds to me," she cuts in, before he can really get rolling, "like you did as much as anybody could have, and more than most."

His jaw works, disagreements clearly piling themselves up in a logjam back there—but at the same time, of course, he doesn't want to just spit out how wrong he thinks she is right to her face.

She smiles at him placidly, and takes advantage of the quiet for a nice long swallow of tea.

"And she's doing all right?" she says.

"She's—adjusting," Bruce says quietly, after a moment. "She can't be turned over to the authorities when she's—"

"Running upside down across the ceilings?" Martha suggests.

Bruce concedes the accuracy of her phrasing with a dip of the head. "And Luthor may be in Arkham, but he still has connections on the outside. Her capabilities make her a target for anyone who might be able to manipulate her into following orders." He hesitates, and then adds, very low, "Even Superman—when Luthor took you—"

Martha swallows. Bruce isn't wrong. Even adults—even super-strong, super-fast adults who can't be hurt directly—can still be coerced. That girl's twelve at the most, if Martha had to guess. It doesn't bear thinking about.

"So," she summarizes aloud, "she's staying with you."

Bruce goes still, and doesn't answer.

Martha feels a swell of sudden affection, warmth, gentle pity. Ridiculous, difficult man; poor dear. Trying to deal with this mess all on his own—thank goodness he's got Alfred, at least. No doubt he's had to help children before, had to rescue them and get them somewhere safe; but that isn't the same as living with one, even if it'll be as temporary as he seems to be hoping. He takes comfort in preparedness, control. She'd figured that much out just watching him make the arrangements, working his way through one step at a time to make it possible for her to get Clark's body back to Kansas.

But kids are nothing if not an exercise in learning you can't be prepared for everything—and it isn't so much about control as it is about hanging on for the ride as best you can.

"Not exactly something you can train yourself for," she offers, after a moment.

Bruce doesn't look up. "No," he says at last, very softly. "No, it isn't."

She watches him, narrowing her eyes. There's something she's missing—

"Success," Alfred proclaims, from behind her, and then crosses the room to pour himself a mug of his own. "The young miss has had her hair brushed, however reluctantly."

"When's the parade?" Bruce asks, bland and easy; he meets Alfred's eyes and allows the barest hint of a smile to tug at one corner of his mouth.

He looks fine, now.
"Amusing as always, sir," Alfred says dryly. "And if you haven't progressed to the point of having this argument just yet, allow me to preempt it: Mrs. Kent is my guest, here at my invitation, and welcome to come and go as she pleases. So if you thought you'd convince her all was well and then hurry her out the door within the hour, Master Wayne, I must advise you to think again."

"Alfred—"

"How kind of you, Alfred," Martha says, as if Bruce hadn't opened his mouth. "I'm honored."

"The young miss has also recovered her equanimity," Alfred adds. "So it's safe to go say hello, if you feel so inclined. She's out on the dock at the moment."

Martha beams at him, and rises. She'd just about finished her tea anyway.

"Wait," Bruce says, sharply enough that Alfred turns to look at him with almost as much surprise as Martha. "Wait, Martha. Before you talk to her, there's—there's one other thing you should know."

"Hello," Martha says, and smiles. "My name is Martha. Can I sit with you?"

The girl looks up. There isn't anything in particular about her that ought to make Martha think of Clark: her eyes are darker, her hair lighter and straighter. She isn't using any of her powers; she's just sitting on the dock in the sunshine, leaning out over the water, legs folded up underneath her.

But there's something there anyway. Maybe it's just her face, that bright look, those clear eyes. A kid's face, and Martha only ever raised the one—nearly all her memories of children are inevitably memories of Clark. Maybe it shouldn't surprise her at all.

"I'm Sage," the girl says. "And sure, I guess."

Martha remembers what it was like to be young, how easy it was to drop down or jump up again. When did it start taking her so long to lower herself down to the ground and sit on it? Lord, she is old.

She settles back on her ass with a sigh, arms clasped around her bent knees, and for a moment they just sit there together. It's a lovely morning; the lake is smooth, shining, stretching away like a mirror, disturbed only where striders are darting across its surface. Somehow, with the mix of everything Martha is reminded of when she comes to this house, all the things she can't stop thinking about, it gets easy to forget what a beautiful place this is.

"Are you here to take me away?"

Martha blinks, startled—but of course, it's hardly an unreasonable thing to think. She should have realized how it might look to Sage. "No, honey," she says aloud, quick, and smiles again. "No, I'm not. I'm a friend of Mr. Wayne's, and I came for a visit. I hope that's okay."

Sage was staring out across the lake, mouth tight; but, hearing this, the tension bleeds out of her face, her shoulders, and she turns and glances at Martha, and then bites her lip. "Oh," she says. "Um, sure."

"You like it here, huh?" Martha says mildly.
Sage fidgets a little, and darts another quick sideways look at Martha. "Mr. Wayne's nice. He's looked after me before, when there wasn't anybody else to do it. But I don't think he wants to anymore. Mr. Alfred does a good job, too," she adds hurriedly. "But he doesn't do things Mr. Wayne doesn't want him to do, even when he thinks Mr. Wayne is being stupid."

Martha bites down on a laugh, because it seems unkind when Sage still looks worried, but—yeah, she thinks, sounds about right. "Why do you think he doesn't want to anymore?" she says aloud, as gently as she can.

Sage looks down at the water, lowers her fingertips into it. She leans further forward, and almost absently breathes on it: like it's just something to keep her attention occupied, freezing the surface just the barest degree, dark lacy patterns she can break apart with her hand, ice hardly thicker than a strand of hair.

So it is true, then. Martha's breath catches in her throat.

"Because I'm not good for anything anymore," Sage says quietly after a moment, cracking one edge off the film of ice with a quick press of her fingers, watching it melt from the warmth of her skin alone. "My job's done."

Martha swallows. "Your job," she hears herself say.

Bruce warned her. He told her everything. But still, still, it's a strange, terrible, reverberating shock, to have Sage meet her eyes and tip her chin up, half-defiant, and say, "I was supposed to kill Superman." Sage's mouth twists. "You probably liked him, right? Most people did. Most people still do."

Martha looks out across the still water, and makes herself breathe in, slow and even. "You didn't?" she asks, and her voice only shakes a little.

"Lex always said it was because they didn't know," Sage says, and oh, what a thing to hear, that sweet soft child's voice, steady and casual over Lex Luthor's name like he's the next-door neighbor. "They didn't understand. They couldn't see him clearly, not like Lex could. They didn't know what they were looking at." She pauses. "He said that was one of the things that made me special. I knew better. And he was going to make it so I could do something about it."

Martha rubs her fingertips against the wood of the dock, grounding. The light reflecting off the lake is blinding; the ghost of a headache is starting to press itself against her temples.

"Did you want to?" she hears herself say.

Sage is silent, for a long moment.

And then, barely over a whisper, she says, "He killed my mother."

Martha squeezes her eyes shut. Her throat is tight, her chest; it feels like there's no air left in the world. Oh, lord.

Black Zero. Clark hadn't meant for any of that to happen, and—and so many more people would have died if Zod had succeeded, if Clark hadn't managed to fight him to a standstill and kill him.

But what kind of comfort could that ever be to a ten-year-old girl who'd lost her mother? Who hadn't had anyone else; who had ended up in Lex Luthor's hands, Lex Luthor's poison pouring into her ears. Bruce had blamed Clark for the same thing.
Clark had blamed Clark for the same thing. It had taken months for him to stop ripping himself apart over it, over everything he should have done differently—or at least it had taken months for him to stop letting on that that was what he was doing where Martha could see him at it. Sometimes, after he was gone, Martha had caught herself wondering whether that was why: whether he'd let himself get drawn into that fight with Bruce because some part of him had wanted it, had wanted to be punished for his mistakes, had wanted to be called to account and couldn't find anybody else who seemed willing to do it. Whether—

Whether he'd been relieved, in even the smallest part, to feel himself split open, to know he wasn't going to survive it. To know he was going to die doing a good thing, and that there would never again be lives lost to lay at his doorstep.

Martha flinches from the thought, and puts a hand over her face, her hot stinging eyes.

"Martha?"

"I'm sorry, it's fine," she says, and thank goodness she's talking to a ten-year-old she has half a chance of fooling with that bullshit. "It's fine, I'm all right. I'm—I'm so sorry about your mother, Sage." She lets herself stay just like she is for a second; and then she scrubs at her eyes, rubs her face, and makes herself look at Sage, smile a smile that doesn't feel like it fits right on her mouth. At least she has a good excuse to keep it small, tired, sad.

Bruce had told her she didn't have to come out here, that it might be better if she didn't. Maybe he was right.

Sage is looking back at her uncertainly. And then she looks away, and bites her lip, wraps her wet hands around each other so tight her knuckles turn pale.

"I miss her," she says, very low. "I miss her and I hate him and I was going to be able to do something about it. It's not fair."

Lord.

"No," Martha murmurs. "No, it isn't." She breathes in, and shakes her hair back, and turns her face into the breeze off the lake. "It's all right that you're angry. I would be." She hesitates. "I—I am," she finds herself saying, and lets her eyes fall shut, and the rest spills out almost on its own: "He killed my son, too."

Because, in a way, it's true.

Isn't it? Her Clark, her little boy—no one wanted him dead. No one could hurt him. He was safe. And then General Zod had shown up, and Clark hadn't had a choice. He'd had to become Superman, whether he was ready for it or not, because there was no one else who could have done anything. There was no one else who could have saved the world.

Superman was the one Luthor had been obsessed with. Clark hadn't mattered to him at all, except that Clark cared about Lois, Martha, and Luthor could use that against him. Bruce—Bruce had been obsessed with Superman, too; and it had been discovering Clark that had made him change his mind. No one had wanted Clark dead.

And Martha does know that it was Clark as much as Superman who'd impaled himself on that thing, who had been willing to if it meant stopping Doomsday. But somewhere in her heart—

Somewhere in her heart, she's ten years old and looking for someone to blame, someone to hate for the way her world's fallen apart around her. It's not fair. Clark could never have turned his back on
people who needed him, and Martha loves him for that, is fiercely, terribly proud of him, even now. But being Superman killed Clark, and there's a part of Martha that's never quite going to forgive Superman for it.

"Oh," Sage is saying, soft, surprised. "I didn't know that."

"No," Martha says, "I'm sure you didn't."

She has to wipe at her eyes again before she can look up. Sage is still staring at her, clearly with no idea what to say or do to a crying adult she barely knows.

And Martha can't help but smile at her then, smile and reach out to touch the back of her hand gently. "It's all right. I'll be okay. I just wanted you to understand. You aren't alone."

"Okay," Sage says. And then, quiet, almost shy: "Thank you."

She falls silent. But she doesn't move her hand out from under Martha's.

She does shift position, after a minute. Her feet are bare, and she twists her legs around, unfolds them, so she can dunk them right into the lake.

Martha's shoes are flats, slip-ons. Martha considers her options for a second, and reaches down to hook the heel of one and then the other on the fingers of her free hand.

The water's still pretty cold. Her skin tingles, prickles itself up. But the sun's just warm enough to keep her from breaking out in goosebumps for real.

"I wish your son wasn't dead either," Sage says, after a little while.

"Thank you, honey," Martha says gently.

And Sage shifts her weight a little, and looks out across the lake. "I don't like Jolly Ranchers."

She says it with the air of a confession, a secret. Martha has no idea why.

But it's easy enough to decide what to say in reply. "Never cared for them much myself," Martha tells her, and for the first time, Sage offers her the quick, wobbly flicker of a smile.
Bruce struggles to meaningfully quantify the depth and intensity of his relief when Martha comes back inside ushering Sage in front of her, both of them smiling and barefoot.

There are so many ways that interaction could have gone wrong, and so few ways he could have intervened if it had; Martha had been determined to meet Sage, and Bruce was hardly in a position to forbid it. But—

But, after all, he has personal experience with Martha Kent’s capacity for inexplicable kindness toward individuals bent on murdering her son.

He waits until Sage is settled comfortably at the table over her jigsaw puzzle before he attempts to catch Martha’s eye. The moment she glances up, he tips his head very slightly toward the kitchen, and then looks away; consumes a moment collecting a stray dish left behind from breakfast, and then withdraws. He’s barely placed the dish in the sink when he hears footsteps, soft on the tile. She still hasn't put her shoes back on.

He can’t remember whether his mother ever went barefoot, indoors or out.

"Bruce," she says. "What is it?"

Asking her whether she’s all right isn’t on the table; it feels ridiculous, presumptuous, pointlessly cruel, to press on the bruise when this situation is entirely of his making. But there’s another question, one he can bear to ask, and if she needs a moment away from Sage, a moment to breathe, then having drawn her aside to ask it will give that to her. Two birds, one stone.

Bruce has always prized efficiency.

"I just wanted to amend Alfred’s invitation," he says aloud. "He’s entirely correct that as his guest, you should feel welcome to come and go as you please. But you should also feel welcome to stay."

She makes a face at him immediately. "Bruce—"

"Just consider it," Bruce says, before she can pick up too much momentum. "If you’re planning to stay for another day or two, there’s no good reason why you should go to the trouble of a hotel in the city when there are plenty of rooms here." He arranges his face into a picture of grave sincerity. "It’s going to be such an inconvenience to send a car back and forth for you all the time. You ought to be more considerate."

And Martha grins at him, shakes her head and laughs.

She’s still going to say no, Bruce is aware. If he wants her to agree, he’s going to have to dig in, spend a little while fortifying his position, siege her down. But at a bare minimum, perhaps she really is all right after all. Perhaps the forewarning was enough; perhaps she and Sage didn’t talk about Superman at all.

Perhaps he’s managed not to do her any more harm, this once.
Except just then, slow, the look on her face changes. A shadow of the smile lingers; but it doesn't reach her eyes, not anymore, and she clears her throat and glances away from him.

"All right," she says. "All right, I'll—consider it."

Bruce blinks, and by dint of no small effort manages to keep a frown off his face. That should have been much harder.

Maybe the travel tired her. Maybe she's ill—and hasn't told him? Doesn't even know it yet herself? Maybe—

Maybe she wants to be here for another reason entirely: to protect the nearest thing her dead son has to a living relative from the man who almost murdered him.

But—no, he decides distantly. That's his own mind talking, asserting its perspective where it doesn't belong. If Martha were worried about that, she'd already have taken the girl and told him exactly why she was doing it; she wouldn't be standing here in his kitchen, agreeing to think about staying in his house.

"That's all I ask," he says aloud.

But he stands there in the kitchen for a long moment after she turns away, and can't quite convince himself to let it go.

He works in the lab, reviewing Luthor's notes. Lunch is had. And then Alfred and Martha take Sage on an afternoon trip to the aquarium; and Bruce allows sufficient time for them to depart the property, five minutes' extra margin, and then starts digging.

Irrational, to wait. As if Martha might have exercised maternal superpowers in a class of their own, and sensed the trespass from all the way upstairs.

But, nevertheless, it feels like less of a risk, less of a crime, when she isn't standing under the same roof, unaware.

It takes perhaps half an hour, at the most. Bruce should probably make some adjustments to the digital security measures employed by Smallville Savings & Loan, once he's bought it. Not that Martha's problem, in and of itself, can't be solved by the straightforward application of a lump sum; but after examining their records in general in a little more depth, it's apparent to Bruce that that would constitute treatment of the symptom rather than the cause. Important, yes—symptoms can kill you just as well as causes, if you have no means to survive them. But an imperfect solution, where others are available.

No wonder Martha had been given pause at Bruce's mention of a hotel. The expense of travel in and of itself must have felt considerable.

She hadn't said anything, on the phone. Hadn't so much as hinted. But then she wouldn't have, would she? And he'd been too distracted by his own mess to notice anything amiss in her tone, or in the quality of her silences.

And, he thinks grimly, worst of all is that there's a part of him that's grateful. Glad, even, to be faced with a problem that will be so ludicrously easy to fix. No combing through ten thousand
pages of Luthor's bullshit, no extraterrestrial technology; no genetic modification of living subjects, no traumatized children with superpowers. Money, of all things.

He doesn't rush it. He reviews the details once more, fixes them clearly in his mind, and then closes the files, cleans up after himself—sets up an alert to let him know if anyone else tries to take a jaunt through Smallville Savings & Loan, though he's willing to concede that it's unlikely.

He switches back to reviewing Luthor's files, alongside his own notes on the background information the ship had provided to him. He even manages to make some measurable progress, despite an undeniable degree of distraction.

Alfred, Martha, and Sage return. It's unmistakable—voices, warmth, motion, where there had been only empty quiet. Bruce lets his eyes fall shut, just for a moment, and enjoys it.

And then he stands, and goes upstairs.

He doesn't just burst out with it. He chooses his moment with care. Sage is pleased to see him, but more restrained in her response: she doesn't throw herself at him, this time. Which is a reaction he's aware he ought to encourage, except—not like this. Not because she thinks he's still angry with her, after her outburst in the ship.

So Bruce sits with her, with her and with Martha, while Alfred whips up a plate of mid-afternoon snacks, and listens to a very thorough recounting of their adventures at the aquarium. Sage likes the really weird-looking fish, got Alfred to repeat several of the best specimens' Latin names for her until she had them memorized, and was allowed to touch a manta ray with her bare hand, which was, reportedly, so cool.

It's easy. It shouldn't be so easy. He barely even has to pull out Bruce Wayne, this time; he smiles at her enthusiasm without effort.

It's just that it's—it's good. It's good to see that for all that's happened to her, for all that's been done to her, it's still possible for her to be a ten-year-old who had a fun afternoon.

(He hadn't been able to appreciate that dichotomy, the potential for that gap to be successfully bridged, with Clark. He'd only seen the Kryptonian, the weapon. It hadn't occurred to him that there was a person there, too—or rather it had seemed hopelessly abstract, insubstantial, next to the concrete and relentless weight of the threat—

But he's going to do better. He has to do better.

He won't fail again.

He can't bear to.)

And then, at last, his moment arrives.

The snacks are brought out; and Martha rises to get herself a glass of water, shooing Alfred into a seat instead of letting him turn around to fetch that, too.

Sage is busy carefully choosing from among the selection of tiny neatly-quartered sandwiches in front of her. With a child's ready, charming self-absorption, she doesn't even look up when Bruce stands.

Alfred notices, of course—but he isn't going to leave Sage unattended.
Martha looks up and smiles, when she realizes Bruce has followed her into the kitchen. Generous. Always too generous.

But at last, perhaps he can begin in some small measure to pay her back.

"You weren't too bored without us, I hope," she's saying, with a wry undertone to her voice that suggests she's perfectly well aware he spent the entire time working in the Cave.

"I survived," Bruce agrees, offering her a slant of his mouth in return. And then he lets it slide away, and says more quietly, "Martha—I can take care of the house."

It's a reasonable opening gambit. He feels no urge whatsoever to ask her why she didn't tell him; even if he didn't empathize all too readily with the reflex to lock hurt and loss away in secret places, he'd be a fool not grasp that she has motivation enough not to alert the man who'd nearly murdered her son to a fresh vulnerability, if a far more ordinary one. And of course she has to be aware of his capacity to solve her problem—it's a statement of his willingness that had been missing, and that she apparently hadn't felt herself able to ask for.

Nor has she had any expectation that it would be offered, judging by the way her eyes widen.

But then Bruce can hardly blame her for that, considering how little reason she has to trust in his capacity for generosity—

"I'm guessing I shouldn't ask how you found out," she says after a moment.

"I plead the fifth," Bruce acknowledges evenly.

She looks at him, and then away, and blows out a breath; lets her eyes fall shut, and shakes her head.

"I—appreciate that you mean well. But it's too much. Bruce, surely you can see that that's too much. I can't let you—"

"Too much," Bruce repeats, flat.

"A house? Yes, Bruce," Martha says, sharp-edged now, eyes flinty. "A house is too much. That's not a gift between friends, and it's not a favor. It's charity, and charity I'll never be able to repay. I can't accept it."

Bruce stares at her.

And then, entirely by accident, taken by surprise and unprepared to prevent it, he laughs.

It comes out short, hard, barely more than a scoff. A helpless reaction to the sheer absurdity: he'd expected to be faced with an objection that carried weight, substance. That she didn't want Bruce's fingerprints all over a place she loved, didn't want to be reminded of him every time she looked at the house. That if he thought he could make up for what he'd tried to do to Clark with an offering as paltry as money, he had another think coming.

But that she would incur a debt by it—a debt to him, to which she feels unequal—

"Bruce," Martha says, very firmly. "I understand that you come from money, and you're used to it. I understand that this doesn't seem like much of anything to you. But I need you to understand that it does to me, and I'm not comfortable with it."
"But why?" Bruce says.

Too sharply, and he holds up a hand almost the moment the words are out in order to forestall her; because it sounded uncomprehending, and it is, but not in the way she's likely to assume.

Martha, generous as always, graciously cooperates, instead of asking him what the hell gives him the right to demand forbearance from her.

"I realize there are several excellent reasons why anyone would be hesitant to accept money from Bruce Wayne," he elaborates after a moment, carefully controlled, attempting to choose his words with care. "Let alone you. But I'm also reasonably sure that you would disavow most of them, and mean it."

And, sure enough, she's already started frowning at him—had, the moment he said *Bruce Wayne* like that.

"Given that," he adds, before she can take this conversation in a direction there's no need for it to go, "and given—" He stops. He only intends to articulate the facts. There's no reason it should be so hard to say. "Given all that you've done for me, all that you've—" Say it. *Say* it. "All that you've forgiven me," he forces out, low, strained. "All that you've forgiven me, all that you've permitted me, everything I owe you—"

"Bruce," she says gently, quietly. The frown is gone; her gaze has turned soft, unbearably, intolerably. He grits his teeth and turns away from it, unable to meet it head-on.

"Any relationship that exists between us," he makes himself say, as if she hadn't so casually, so recklessly, used the word *friends* less than a minute ago, "is founded entirely on charity that can never be repaid in kind. Yours." He shakes his head. "But you'd forbid me one of the few things I *can* do for you, a simple and unqualified good, with a cost measured in the least valuable currency there is?"

Surely she can't argue with that. Surely it's of a piece with her earnest, practical brand of wisdom—to acknowledge how little money amounts to in the true scheme of things, its meaning bestowed only in the abstract, on the whim of external authority. Compared to time, to effort, to guilt and pain and willing sacrifice, it's by far his least meaningful possession; and yet, by dint of luck and happenstance, he has enough of it to easily solve a problem she doesn't deserve to be facing alone.

He risks a glance. Martha's still watching him, with that same soft, thoughtful look. The purse of her mouth isn't promising. But she doesn't tell him to go fuck himself, doesn't tell him where he can stick his clumsy attempts at generosity.

After a moment, she sighs. "Oh, Bruce," she says, not unkindly, and reaches out—touches his shoulder, his upper arm, and squeezes gently. "I appreciate it, I do. I'll—" She pauses, and bites her lip. "I'll think about it," she allows at last.

"Thank you," Bruce says, and she shakes her head at him, but she doesn't take it back.
Overall, Alfred thinks, the day's gone far, far better than it had any right to.

He'd thought Mrs. Kent had the right to know—the right to be here. Master Wayne had called her seeking advice, but hadn't told her why. Alfred doesn't know her as well as he'd like, but nevertheless he'd felt sure, instantly and immediately, a gut response, that she would want to know. And that the simplest way to ensure that she would get to would be for her to come and see for herself.

Master Wayne might conceal facts from her, might twist and dodge, might recklessly distort the truth. But he wouldn't turn her away, not if she showed up on his doorstep.

And, in all honesty, Alfred had thought it would be best for Master Wayne, too. One among many instances where it had seemed all too clear that Master Wayne was enforcing avoidance, distance, to his own detriment—and this time, Alfred had been in a position to do something about it.

He might have thought twice about it, if he had known.

But he hadn't.

Perhaps he should have guessed. He had certainly grasped that there was more to it, that Master Wayne had undoubtedly and conspicuously failed to tell him everything that had happened in the ship. And in retrospect, pure scientific curiosity, or even endeavoring to gain control of the ship, do seem like rather watered-down motives for a man like Lex Luthor.

But—he hadn't known. He would have done a great deal to spare Martha Kent the explanation Master Wayne had given her, otherwise.

As it was, he had been standing there beside her, equally bewildered, almost unable to parse the words Master Wayne had been saying. And then he had parsed them, sickening comprehension squeezing his heart tight, and wished for an instant that he had never given Mrs. Kent his phone number in the first place.

He wouldn't have blamed her if she'd turned round and gotten right back in the car he'd sent for her, had it take her back to the airport and boarded the next flight to Kansas.

But she'd stayed instead. She'd stayed, and gone out to the dock to talk to Sage herself; and somehow, miraculously, disaster had been entirely averted. They'd had an improbably lovely time at the aquarium.

It's been so long since Alfred last had to work out how to keep a ten-year-old entertained for an afternoon.

He's missed it.

It went well. It was a good day. Which means Mrs. Kent will be staying after all—which means, of course, that another guest bedroom needs making up.

He decides on one of the downstairs rooms. Not immediately adjacent to Sage's, but on the same level—Master Wayne had wanted at least one underground floor, acknowledged and publicly accessible, to help disguise the additional levels that are not. And Alfred had certainly had no objections; it's a pleasure, at times like this, to be able to offer Master Wayne's guests a choice of
rooms with opaque walls.

He isn't quite finished with the bed linens, when she comes down with her bags in hand, and he drops everything where he stands to hurry over and take them from her, making a scandalized, chiding sound. "What on earth," he says. "I'd have been up to fetch them shortly, Mrs. Kent, there was no need. Please don't tell me Master Wayne let you—"

Mrs. Kent gives him an affronted look. "If he had, I'd hardly rat him out," she says, and then smiles. "But no, as it happens, he didn't. He wasn't looking; I got by him clean."

Alfred narrows his eyes. Master Wayne isn't the sort of person who can typically be caught "not looking".

Mrs. Kent's smile takes on a softer, sweeter cast. "He was busy," she says. "Sage wanted cheese and crackers."

Ah. That would certainly do it.

"Say no more," Alfred murmurs.

She allows him to take the bags and set them down in the corner near the closet, most likely because it is the bare minimum of effort remaining to be expended. When he turns round to face the bed again, preparing to tuck in the corners of the top sheet, she's still looking at him—watching him, smile gone, in a hesitant, contemplative way.

"Mrs. Kent?" he says.

"Martha, please," she says.

He pauses. It's a deeper wound by far for Master Wayne; of course it is. But there is nevertheless something peculiarly, sweetly painful about facing a woman named Martha in this house, in a way Alfred almost savors.

It's having a child running about again, no doubt, that has brought so many memories to the fore. Not only of Dick—of Master Wayne, the early years. When he had not been Master Wayne, but Master Bruce.

It's a comfort, almost. As though nothing is ever truly lost, only nearer or further off; past, yet present, and even future.

"Unless," Martha says softly, and then stops, looking rueful. "You don't have to, of course. I'm—I'm sorry, I—oh, I shouldn't have asked him either, I should have thought—"

"It would be my honor," Alfred tells her, before she can run off any further along entirely the wrong track. "Martha."

She blows out a breath, and then bites her lip. "Alfred," she says, "can you—can you tell me what it was like? When Bruce was—before Clark, I mean. I don't know anything, not really. He tried to explain afterward."

Of course he had, Alfred thinks. Of course he couldn't bear to let her mistakenly think the best of him.

"But I'd like to hear it from you," Martha's adding. "I'd like to understand. I don't think he wanted me to. Not really. Not in any way that counted."
Also likely true. Master Wayne would never have wished to present his decisions as though he were angling to have them validated, or forgiven. Not to anyone, and certainly not to her. Explaining his perspective, his thought processes—making her aware of the extent of his fear, his proportional determination—would be to tacitly ask her to take them under consideration, to attempt to sympathize with them. He wouldn't have allowed himself that.

Alfred sighs through his nose, and absently smooths his hands along the sheets. "He looked at your son," he says at last, "and he saw General Zod. He saw a power capable of destroying all he held dear, against which he possessed no defenses. He couldn't tolerate it. To approach Clark and simply ask for his forbearance was—inconceivable to him, then. He'd lost all faith, all trust; to him it was impossible, unimaginable, that Clark might not wish to cause harm, or could be taken at his word if he claimed as much."

He stops, and swallows. He has a confession of his own to make, and for all his sage assessments of Master Wayne's faults and foibles, he's been far slower to face that fact.

He makes himself look up, and he meets Martha's eyes.

"I knew better," he says softly. "Or—I believed so, at least. I thought he should have tried. But I didn't stop him."

"Alfred," Martha says, and touches his elbow.

"It wasn't going to end well," Alfred adds, and feels his mouth twist. "I knew that, too. He was mired in his own despair. He could find no generosity of spirit, no kindness, in himself; how could he believe in it even if he were to find it elsewhere? He went too far—he tried to, that is." He stops again, and rubs a hand across his face. "Perhaps I should have left. Perhaps I should have made it clear that I'd have no part of it, that what he meant to do was wrong and I knew it. I told myself it would be worse were he to think I'd given up on him. But perhaps I simply didn't want to believe it necessary.

"Your son did what I could not. He saved Master Wayne from himself. Not even deliberately, not even intending it—simply because he loved you so much he would beg even his enemy to help him save you. However slight the degree may have been, he extended faith, he extended trust, at precisely the moment it would have been most understandable for him to grant Master Wayne neither. He said your name, having no reason at all to believe it would stop Master Wayne in his tracks; and yet, thanks to sheer simple coincidence—" Alfred shrugs a shoulder.

"It did," Martha says for him, quiet.

"It did," Alfred agrees. "And Master Wayne was thereby prevented from performing an act he would have regretted bitterly, and from losing all hope for himself. Not a debt that can be readily repaid."

Martha looks at him with sudden close attention, searching, for a long moment. "No," she says at last. "No, when you put it like that, I suppose it wouldn't be."

Alfred arches an eyebrow quizzically. There's something here he's missing, some context he hasn't got.

Martha sighs through her nose. "Bruce wants to pay for my house."

"Oh," Alfred says. "I see."

"I told him I wasn't comfortable with it," Martha adds. "But he still wants to."
Alfred hesitates, and then turns round and seats himself lightly on the edge of the bed. "I realize money is a potentially delicate topic at the best of times," he murmurs. "But let us remove it, and consider the question in the abstract. If you found it within your power to help him, in a way he'd proven unable to help himself—you'd want to."

Martha makes a cross face at him, and then rubs her eyes with her hands. "I would," she admits. "Of course I would. It feels different when it's money, that's all." She shakes her head, and sighs, and then turns and sits down beside him. "Clark would have, if he could have. If he'd known. He'd have given me everything he had, and it wouldn't have mattered one whit if I'd tried to tell him not to."

Alfred clears his throat. "It—would be remiss of me not to point out at this juncture," he says, "that if you insist that Master Wayne refrain from intervening, you won't have prevented it. You'll simply have prevented his permitting you to remain aware of it when he does."

And Martha looks at him again, and laughs. "Oh, don't I know it," she says. "Superheroes! 

"Indubitably."

Martha's smile lingers, as they share a knowing glance. And then, a bit at a time, it fades.

"I just," she says, and then stops. "I just wish I knew how to make him understand that he doesn't need to do anything for me. If there was anything to forgive, I forgave it months ago. He thinks he owes a debt, all right—he owes it to Clark, not me. I don't—" She stops again, and swallows hard. "I don't want his guilt. If he's going to do this, I don't want him doing it out of some twisted sense of obligation."

"If it's any reassurance," Alfred says after a moment, "while I've no doubt that is a factor in play, I imagine his sentiments are far more complicated than that."

He pauses, and touches her shoulder.

"Sleep on it," he advises. "And if in the morning you still find yourself in doubt—I believe perhaps there's something you should see that will help you understand Master Wayne better."

Master Wayne won't like it, of course. But not everything is up to Master Wayne, however much he wishes it were otherwise.

Bruce doesn't realize it's morning until he hears footsteps on the stairs leading down into the Cave.

The rabbithole of what had seemed to be fantastical delusions of grandeur—not out of the question, for Luthor—goes far deeper than he'd expected. He's had to revisit and review all of Luthor's notes, even those he'd originally categorized as incomprehensible and set aside. They're no longer incomprehensible now, when he knows what the ship told Luthor, when he finally has the context to understand them. The endless sketches of cubes, cubes, cubes, varying in their dimensions and in
the complexity of the patterns traced across their surfaces; the notations written out beside them, gloat ing exultations, plans for experiments and hypothetical designs that had seemed to rely on a frankly impossible supply of energy, on capabilities Bruce had known Luthor didn't possess.

Capabilities, he's now coming to realize, Luthor hadn't possessed—yet. But Luthor had evidently intended to change that.

Bruce is, in a strange bittersweet way, grateful that Luthor had tipped his hand, had been sufficiently obsessed with Superman and had had judgment warped enough to somehow decide that releasing Doomsday was a good idea. If he hadn't been taken into custody that night, if he'd been left to his work long enough to actually track down a mother box, god knows what he would have done with it. God knows whether Bruce would have caught on soon enough to stop him.

And Luthor appears to have had sources of information not limited to the ship. Given the timing—that Luthor's last access to the ship's archives had been the same night as Doomsday, that that had been when it had showed him what it has now shown Bruce—Luthor must have only just begun to understand that the ship could tell him more about the boxes than he'd already learned. His notes reference mythohistory, obscure legends.

Bruce had been distantly entertaining the notion of getting a few hours' sleep, some time ago. And then he'd reached a set of files he remembered well; he'd read through them the first time with bemusement. He'd already known Luthor had collected a variety of information about Diana, so it hadn't been a surprise that Luthor should also have engaged in speculation regarding her origins. But he had, back then, been at a loss to guess what connection that speculation had to Luthor's persistent preoccupation with cubes.

But there are mother boxes on Earth. The ship had confirmed it for Bruce. And, knowing that, suddenly Luthor's ramblings about a hidden society of immortal warriors trusted with the secrets of the gods took on a great deal of significance.

Bruce couldn't have stopped then.

And now—footsteps on the stairs. It must be morning. Alfred will have opinions to share on the subject of Bruce's work habits, and also probably breakfast; and Bruce is now certain that no matter what else he learns, he needs to get in touch with Diana, but he supposes it won't hurt to take a moment to eat something first.

He pries himself out of his chair. Despite his own painstakingly engineered additions to what was already an ergonomic design, he probably should have made the time to do a set of stretches a few hours ago. He's teetering on the edge of too old to get away with not bothering, these days.

The footsteps slow, and then stop. Bruce frowns, absent. Alfred usually comes in without hesitating. What can have caught his eye? Bruce doesn't think he'd left anything out in the open that would give Alfred pause—but then he hasn't always proven particularly good at guessing what will give Alfred pause, in the past.

He huffs a rueful little breath through his nose at the thought, and shakes his head, and steps out of the computer room, crossing toward the stairs.

And then he comes to an abrupt and complete stop, throat closing itself up tight. The figure standing at the base of the stairs into the Cave isn't Alfred.

It's Martha.
He hadn't taken care to approach with caution. She must have heard him coming, and she turns to look at him—turns away from the case.

The case, and the suit in it.

Bruce is, briefly, stunned nearly senseless, functionally immobilized. Of all the trials, either physical or emotional, that he might have expected to face today, this was not one. The worst of the casualties left behind in the wake of two of his greatest and least forgivable mistakes, standing here and waiting for him quietly: the material of nightmare.

He's distantly and absurdly tempted to pinch himself, to see whether this is a dream.

(—only to test the theory. Not to wake himself; he's earned this. He's earned this—)

"Bruce," Martha says softly.

Her eyes fall shut; she lifts one hand, presses the back of her wrist almost absently to her forehead.

"The worst part is, I knew. I knew. I remember reading about it, years ago. That boy. Everybody throwing around wild guesses about the kind of guardian Bruce Wayne would make—that at least the kid would want for nothing, but good god, what sort of man would he grow up to be, in Bruce Wayne's house?"

Her mouth twists.

She's—angry, Bruce thinks dimly. Angry, on his behalf. Angry at the press; angry at herself.

"I knew," she repeats. "And I remember reading about—"

"Don't."

Bruce hardly registers saying it, only grasps that the word escaped once it's already gone, out, ringing in his ears.

Something crosses Martha's face that he can't make himself name. Her eyes are wet.

"Don't be angry with Alfred," she says, soft, hardly more than a whisper. "He wouldn't have had to let me down here, not if I'd been thinking. You just—you've never been the Bruce Wayne I used to read about. Not to me. That's not who you were when I met you, and I've seen that man on the TV, in the papers, but never standing in front of me. I knew. I knew, but I didn't, and this whole time I've been acting like—" She stops herself, bites her lip and shakes her head. "Bruce Wayne, and the boy he took in. And you're the Gotham Batman. There must have been a day when you couldn't hide it anymore, or—or he was old enough to be told. Of course he'd have wanted to help you."

She meets Bruce's eyes, and smiles just a little, a sad bittersweet thing. "Of course he couldn't have turned his back, when someone needed him."

"Don't—"

It comes out quieter, hoarser, this time. Strained. Pleading.

He lets his eyes fall shut.

"I made a mistake," he makes himself say. "He paid for it." He shakes his head. "I don't know why it wasn't me. It should have been."

He means it. He doesn't have to differentiate. The uncertain attribution, the wide-open
applicability, only strengthen the validity of the confession. Her son—his son. It is, in both cases, the simple and sickening truth.

"Alfred was right," he adds, almost steadily, after a moment. "Alfred was right to let you in. The opportunity to grasp the extent of this particular failing of mine is the least you deserve. I've—"

—I've been getting good sons murdered for years now, you see—

He can't say it. He doesn't know why he can't say it.

"Oh, Bruce," Martha says, hushed, and crosses the space between them; touches his hand, his arm. Hugs him.

He doesn't know what to do. Bruce Wayne's carefully cultivated muscle memory would allow him to hug back easily and smile—but playing out that script with her, at her, in this moment seems blatantly, stomach-turningly inappropriate.

"I'm sorry your son is dead," Martha murmurs in his ear. "Bruce—I'm so sorry."

That isn't her line, Bruce finds himself thinking. That isn't her line. Why is she saying that to him? It's been years. He's fine. She's the one who—she's the one—

His eyes are hot. His breaths sound strange in his ears. He should turn it around on her, repeat it back to her, make it clear that he understands who deserves whose sympathies here. But his throat is tight, his tongue thick in his mouth.

"I knew," she's saying now. "I knew but I didn't think. I'm sorry. And don't give me any of your shit, all right?"

Bruce sucks in a startled little breath, and almost wants to laugh.

"I mean it," she adds, threatening, and tightens her grip on him for a moment. "I know how hard it is. I know. So don't even try it, you hear?"

"Yes, ma'am," Bruce manages to say.

"Good man," Martha tells him, and doesn't let go.

It takes what must be at least ten minutes, uninterrupted, to satisfy her. Bruce finds at some point along the way that one of his hands has settled gingerly against her back.

It should be foolish. It should be something he's allowing merely in order to accommodate her, and no more. It's a goddamn hug.

But instead, when she finally releases him, squeezing his shoulders and smiling at him gently, he discovers that it was—not entirely a favor to her. He feels different. Off-balance; lighter. Exhausted, though surely that's only the conspicuous lack of sleep talking. Exhausted in a strange, weightless way that's almost pleasant. As if he's been freed from something that has had him in its grasp for so long he had no longer known it, or at least is starting to become so.

"I'm sorry," Martha says, with a damp little laugh. "Should have led with 'good morning' or something. Alfred didn't just send me down here for this, he was—he wanted me to ask you to
come up for breakfast. Figured the odds were better you wouldn't say no, I guess."

"He was right," Bruce admits.

Martha beams at him, and closes a hand around his elbow. "And I meant to say, about the house?"

Bruce braces himself.

"I appreciate it, Bruce," she says gently. "I appreciate it, and if it's still on offer, I'd like your help. You're invited to supper for the rest of your life, mind you. I won't take no for an answer."

"Oh, god," Bruce murmurs, deliberately light. "You're going to hold this over me forever."

"Too late. No take-backs," Martha insists. "Now—breakfast," and she tugs him toward the stairs. There's a certain intriguing novelty, he decides, in letting himself be moved.

Sage is at the table already, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Today the shirt's striped, Bruce observes, and he finds a smile tugging at his mouth.

"Good morning, Mr. Wayne!"

"Good morning," he tells her gently, and somehow it feels—easier, today, to reach out and rest a hand on her shoulder. It seemed dangerous to close that distance; but it's beginning to occur to him that it might also be dangerous not to: to leave her alone, unsure, held firmly at arm's length, when she's lost so much already.

Martha takes a seat. She's giving him an odd, knowing, soft-eyed look that he finds he wants to duck out from under. Luckily for him, Sage turns to her immediately and starts talking about—ah, about their trip to the aquarium. A perfect opening. Bruce takes it without delay, and makes for the shelter of the kitchen.

Alfred is there, naturally, just closing the waffle iron over generously pooled batter with a hiss. "A productive night's work, I hope, sir," he says, without turning.

"Yes, it was," Bruce says, and puts just enough weight in his tone to suggest he isn't interested in a lecture regarding his sleeping habits. Not that Alfred would have made the mistake of assuming otherwise, but a reminder never hurts.

"Mm." Alfred's answering hum is undeniably skeptical.

"I mentioned Luthor's seemingly inexplicable preoccupation with cubes to you."

"Once or twice, sir, yes, I believe you did."

"It isn't inexplicable anymore."

And that, at last, earns him an inquisitive glance. "I must admit I'm astonished that anything could render the twists and turns of that man's mind explicable," Alfred murmurs.

"The ship has records in its archives," Bruce says. "Artifacts. Ancient, alien. It called them mother boxes."
"Mother boxes—cubes." Alfred aims a brief wondering look at the ceiling, and shakes his head a little. "What a fascinating universe we live in. And what exactly did Mr. Luthor want with these boxes, then?"

"Difficult to be certain," Bruce admits, and then, at Alfred's raised eyebrow, "Too many options, not too few. Judging by the available data, they're—" He stops, struggling to decide on a word that can convey the combined effect of the ship's descriptions, the records it had displayed for him, the clues Luthor had gathered and the feats legend attributes to the boxes. "Almost incomprehensibly powerful," he says at last. "With even one of them, it might well be possible to reshape the face of a world. The raw energy they contain is comparable to—to a galaxy's worth of stars, at a minimum. A mother box could outshine the sun ten-thousandfold. You could—"

He doesn't know why it occurs to him then. The subconscious is complex, fathomless. A dozen different factors probably contribute to the spark of the thought in that moment: having spoken to Martha about undeserved death—and about being allowed to assist her, to redress pointless injustice; having looked down at Sage only moments ago, sitting at the table in the morning light; forming the word *sun*, which even now can't help but prime him with its relentless association to Clark Kent.

His breath catches in his throat. All fatigue is abruptly gone. He feels awake, alert, shocked to bright singing awareness.

It's possible. Isn't it? Superman's capacity for healing had been powerful—as long as he had access to enough energy to undertake the process. The demand involved had likely been proportional to the severity of the injury; he'd been killed by a very, very severe injury. And there had—there had been no sun to help him, not then. The sky had been dark, obscured, only the faintest slanting beams falling. If he were *flooded* with it, with more than enough to do the job, under the right circumstances——

Luthor. The ship. The puzzle Bruce hadn't quite been able to solve in the moment: that somehow Luthor had gained the authorization he needed to experiment on Sage, without a Kryptonian who possessed it to grant it to him. Except he'd *had* a Kryptonian who possessed it. A dead one.

A dead one—but what if Zod hadn't *stayed* dead? Not the entire time. If Luthor had experimented on him thoroughly enough, had discovered sufficient energy could affect what he had initially believed to be a corpse——

Luthor hadn't had a mother box. He couldn't make it stick. How far had he gotten? How much time had he been able to buy, pouring in as many megajoules as he could generate at once? Five minutes? Ten? Enough to explain to Zod that he could enact Zod's vengeance: murder the rebellious son of Krypton who'd killed him and his warriors, who'd ripped the rebirth of his lost home right out of his hands.

It's possible. It must be possible.

"Sir?"

"Christ, Alfred," Bruce whispers. "We buried him. We *buried* him."

"Sir—"

Alfred's looking at him with concern now, hastily switching off the waffle iron, flipping it open before the half-finished waffle can burn.
Bruce draws in air, rubs a hand across his face, and then Alfred closes a steadying hand around his elbow.

"With a mother box," he makes himself say, hoarse, "you could bring Superman back to life."

Alfred's eyes go wide.

And then, as if from a very long way away, Bruce hears Martha say, "Sage, honey, what's wrong?"

_I can see things that are far away, and hear them, too._

Fuck. He wasn't thinking, he'd just said it—quietly, but not quietly enough, not nearly quietly enough, not unless he'd been at least a goddamn mile away—

He jerks out of Alfred's grasp, twists around to face the table. He's still too slow. A wash of heated air, a fierce reddish glow; a cry, thin, wrenching. "No—no," and then half the ceiling falls in.

---

He can't. He _can't._

She wants to scream, she wants to hit something. She can't breathe. Everything's red, blazing, and for a second she just thinks that that's her—that that's because of how it feels.

She realizes it's her eyes in time to squeeze them shut, so she can't hurt Martha. But the heat is so much, it's like it's building up, pressing on her, trying to pry its way out. She sobs once, without meaning to, and cries out, and then she can't keep her eyes closed anymore.

The ceiling rips apart, explodes. Things start burning.

She closes her fists up tight, fingernails digging into her palms. It doesn't hurt any more than her eyes, any more than her chest. She has to get out. If Mr. Wayne didn't want her before—didn't want her, so much that he'd bring _Superman_ back—then he sure won't now that she's set his house on fire.

She bolts up into the air. It's easy, that first quick burst. It's easy like this, hot and angry and afraid. But she can't hold onto it, can't focus on it hard enough to stay up and keep going smoothly. She tumbles, crashes down, leaves a cratered pit of gravel in the driveway.

She shouldn't be in the driveway. She doesn't have her shoes on.

But Mr. Wayne's rules don't matter anymore, do they? Not if he's going to get rid of her anyway.

There's a loud sound, something big falling down—or loud she has to put her hands over her ears, curled up on her knees in the pit she made when she landed. Shouting, too. He's mad, they're all probably mad. But it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter, if they're only going to—

"Sage. Sage—"
"Don't touch me," she shrieks at him, twisting out from under it. Not that it hurt, because of course it didn't. He was just touching, palm spread wide, tentative. But even if he hadn't been, he can't hurt her at all, not really. Not like she can hurt him. Not like she can hurt everybody.

Maybe that's why. Maybe that's why he wants Superman—to stop her, to make her stop, the same way Lex wanted her to stop Superman.

Why shouldn't he? He doesn't need her. He doesn't need her for anything. Not even the ship, not if Superman's back to do it instead.

She sobbs again, thin, harsh, in a way that makes her chest hurt even more. She moves her hands from her ears to her eyes. She thought she was crying, but it's—they're just hot. So hot that there's nothing but red light, filling up the whole space behind the backs of her eyelids.

"Sage," Mr. Wayne says, carefully even. "Sage, are you hurt?"

That's not the question she was expecting.

She rubs at her face, sucks in a breath and lets it out. The light gets dimmer. Her hands are shaking. She squeezes them together tight, and breathes again: in, out.

The light goes away.

"I'm okay, Mr. Wayne," she makes herself say. It comes out weird, thin and wobbly. Funny, when so much of her is unbreakable now, that she can't figure out how to sound like it.

She sits back on her heels, but she can't turn around. She doesn't want to. She doesn't want to see what she did. She doesn't want to have to look at him.

"All right," Mr. Wayne says. "That's good." He goes quiet for a minute. "Sage—I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. I should have realized you'd be able to hear me. I wouldn't have said it if I'd—"

"You're sorry I heard you," Sage snaps. "You're not sorry you said it." She bites her lip, gulps in another breath. She just wanted not to burn things anymore, but it worked better than it was supposed to. Her eyes have cooled off now, and they're wet, stinging with it.

Mr. Wayne is silent.

"You're going to do it, aren't you? You're going to bring him back. Him, and not my mom—"

"It won't work on your mom," Mr. Wayne says softly.

"It won't work on anyone else. Just him. I wish—" Mr. Wayne stops, and clears his throat a little. "I wish that weren't true. But it is."

"No. No."

She wants to get angry again. She wishes she were, wishes she hadn't tried so hard to make it stop. But the red light won't come back, and her hands are shaking even though she's wrapped them around each other as hard as she can, and when she sucks in another shuddering breath, lets it out, and looks—the gravel's gone white in front of her. She tipped too far the other way. Without the anger, the heat, all that's left is the cold instead.
"Why are you—why would you—what do you want?"

She meant to shout it at him. But that isn't how it comes out.

"Sage—"

"Are you—is it a test?" She should've known there would be one. Maybe he's been just as annoyed as Lex would've been, having had the opportunity to see what she's good for taken away.

"Sage," Mr. Wayne says slowly. Gravel crunches a little. He's moving around, facing her. Reaching out, one-handed. It must be really cold, for him. His fingertips are red with it. "Sage, I'm not going to make you kill him."

She shivers, and bites down on the inside of her cheek. She's crying now, and she can't stop it.

"I don't want to," she whispers.

Mr. Wayne touches the back of her wrist.

"I don't want to," she says again. "I didn't ever want to. Lex said—Lex said—it was the only thing left that I could do for her. It was the only thing left that would make her happy, where she went. That's what he said." She shakes her head again, and there's a clatter of ice, tears freezing off her face when she breathes out past them. "I don't want her to be happy where she went. I want her to come back. Mr. Wayne, I want her to come back—"

"I know," Mr. Wayne says, soft. "I know you do."

"It's not fair," Sage says.

"It's not," Mr. Wayne agrees, and touches her shoulder, and she turns into the shelter of his arm and presses her wet snotty face to his jacket.

"I still hate him," she says.

"That's okay," Mr. Wayne says. "You can hate him. You can hate me. You don't have to kill him. You don't have to be good. You don't have to do anything; you don't have to earn anything." He stops, and touches her hair just a little, really gently. And then he adds, more quietly, "You can stay anyway, if you want to."

Now? After this? That doesn't make any sense at all. Sage shivers, dimly bewildered. Why would he ever want her now? When she can't even do anything for him—when she just admitted that even if she can, she won't. It must be a trick. A joke. He's going to take it back. Something.

Except—

Except Mr. Wayne's never tricked her, not once. He's always told her exactly what he's going to do, and then he's done it—even this time, with Superman. Even when he didn't mean to, didn't want to.

So maybe she can believe him after all.

She closes her hand around the edge of his jacket, and clings tight. "Okay," she says shakily, and swallows; and then she takes a deep breath, and lets it out, the one last thing she hasn't said: "I want my mom."

The words feel like they tore something out of her, like she's bleeding, even though she mostly doesn't do that anymore.
"I know," Mr. Wayne says quietly, and doesn't let go of her, and she cries and cries and cries.

It doesn't feel like it's going to stop.

But it does, after a while. You can't keep hurting that much, not all the time. Not forever.

Mr. Wayne holds her up, and doesn't move, even though the gravel must be poking right through his nice pants. And then, after a minute, he isn't the only one. Mr. Alfred's come out of the house, and Martha. Mr. Alfred puts a hand around Mr. Wayne's shoulders, and the other on Sage's head, and Martha leans in close on the other side and bumps her forehead against Sage's temple, and says, "Oh, honey."

That makes Sage cry harder, for a little bit.

But soon her breath isn't coming so fast anymore. Her head hurts, light and hollow-feeling. Her nose is all stuffed up.

Mr. Alfred put a handkerchief in her pocket, she remembers, and she pushes away from Mr. Wayne a little, makes the whole circle of them all loosen, to feel around her skirt and work her hand in there to get it.

She gasps in a breath, and rubs her eyes with one edge of it, and then blows, really loud.

"Your work, I assume," Mr. Wayne mutters at Mr. Alfred, when she's done.

"She embraced the concept of an immortal tissue wholeheartedly, sir," Mr. Alfred says. "Who was I to dissuade her?"

"Feeling better now, honey?" Martha says to her, smiling, sweeping bits of Sage's hair out of her face.

"A little," Sage says.

It's true, pretty much. She doesn't feel good, exactly. But she feels better, a little.

"I'm, um. I'm sorry about the house."

Half of it is okay. But the ceiling's not really there anymore, on the other part. It's still smoking, too.

Mr. Wayne looks at Mr. Alfred. "It's okay," he says, to her. "Don't worry about it."

"One overly powerful firework set off at an insufficiently exclusive party, at your service," Mr. Alfred says to Mr. Wayne, and then he looks down and smiles at her, and offers her a hand. "All right, up you get. We can manage just as well eating waffles out on the dock, can't we?"

Sage thinks about it. "With whipped cream?"

"Assuredly," Mr. Alfred says. "I shall fetch it straightaway; I believe the refrigerator remains intact."

"And it sounds like you've got a little something to explain to me," Martha says to Mr. Wayne
mildly, taking Sage by the hand.

"I—suppose I do," Mr. Wayne agrees, and takes the other.

And then they go have breakfast outside.

It's pretty there, looking out at the lake. Even with the house broken behind them. Which is nice, when Sage thinks about it. Things get broken—people break them. But they can be fixed, sometimes, and even when they can't, there's still waffles and whipped cream, and docks in the sunshine, and lakes.

You aren't going to keep hurting that much, not all the time. Not forever.

"The contractors will start work first thing tomorrow morning, sir."

"Thank you, Alfred," Bruce says, absently digging a thumb in just beside the bridge of his nose.

"I expect they'll want to perform their own assessment," Alfred adds. "But I shouldn't think their findings will differ from your own."

Sage had, as it turned out, done mostly superficial damage. To the ceiling, yes, and the upper level; Bruce is actually quite pleased with the transparent polymer he'd installed in place of the original glass, however shatter-proof said glass had purported to be. It held up very well. And the lower floors are perfectly intact.

Sage had been looking at him—at him, and then up. Given that she'd been upset enough to trigger the most destructive ability she has, she couldn't have minimized the impact any better if she'd been trying.

And he couldn't have blamed her if she hadn't been.

He clears his throat, and belatedly looks up. "And Sage?"

"Put safely to bed, sir." Alfred pauses, for a conspicuous and deliberate beat. "And, if I may ask—how did it go with Mrs. Kent?"

Bruce swallows a sigh. "Better than it should have," he says, and looks away again, rubbing at his mouth. "I think it's safe to say that was about the last thing she expected me to tell her. She cried, a little."

Sheer surprise, the sudden unexpected promise of a miracle where there had been none before. Not like Sage, this morning. And yet it had still been strangely hard to watch. Bruce had felt as liable for that promise as he ever had for the guilt, the devastation, of Clark Kent dying in the first place.

"I wish it hadn't happened this way," he allows himself to say, because Alfred must already have guessed as much. "After that—I had to tell her. But I wish I'd had more time. I wish I could have told her when I knew more, when I understood more."
"Of course, sir," Alfred says gently. "Then again, even if you had a mother box in your hands tomorrow, even if it worked the way you think it might, there would be no guarantees." His mouth quirks. "I can't help but suspect that you wouldn't have told her until the fait were accompli, if you had it your way."

Bruce acknowledges the hit with a sidelong glance, and then looks away again, and bites down on the inside of his cheek.

"I—don't want to disappoint her."

Alfred's hand settles on his shoulder, warm. "I'd tell you to do your best to ensure that you don't," Alfred murmurs, "but I imagine I'll have enough trouble keeping you fed and watered without encouraging you to achieve still greater heights of monomania."

Bruce should roll his eyes. It's only Alfred, teasing as he always does.

But instead, he finds his hands pressing themselves tightly against the desk in front of him. "It's important, Alfred."

"I know it is, sir," and this time there's no hint of mockery in the words, Alfred's tone low and steady and grave. "I know it is."

A stretch of silence, almost comforting.

And then Alfred clears his throat, and adds, "However, I must admit I find myself wondering whether you've an answer to Miss Sage's question, from this morning."

Bruce turns a little in his chair, and raises an inquiring eyebrow.

"What do you want? If you are indeed able to reach Miss Prince, and she possesses the insight you seek—if you locate one or more of these mother boxes, and you determine that they can in fact flood a Kryptonian's corpse with sufficient energy to permit a fatal wound to heal—what are you looking for? Is it Superman you mean to resurrect? Or will you settle for Clark Kent?"

Bruce can't help but frown. It seems like a strange question; there must be a point to it, coming from Alfred, and yet he can't work out what it might be. "It doesn't matter what he calls himself," Bruce says, "as long as he's alive."

And—all right, perhaps that's the point: the words come out intent, too-earnest, to Bruce's ears. He can feel heat threatening to crawl its way up his throat.

"You realize he may not thank you for it," Alfred prods.

"He doesn't have to," Bruce snaps. "Christ, Alfred, I'm not expecting him to like me. I don't want to bring him back so he'll forgive me." Ludicrous thought—as if Clark should. As if he would. As if he has any reason to. "I want to bring him back so he'll stop being dead. After that, it's up to him."

"Well," Alfred says. "Good."

Bruce looks up. Alfred is smiling.

"And I take it Miss Sage will be staying, then?"

"She—didn't seem disinclined," Bruce says, and allows himself to look away and then cut a too-eloquent sidelong glance back at Alfred.
Alfred adopts a considering expression. "In that case, I suggest the next step should be to offer her a choice of colors for her room."

Christ. Can it possibly be that simple? Surely she's going to realize, sooner or later, that he isn't fit for this, isn't built for it. That just because he found himself unable to choke back the offer, that didn't mean she had to accept it; that didn't mean she had to settle for it—

But she's ten. She's ten, and she needs help, and she likes it here. And until she's had the chance to figure out who she is and what she wants, who she wants to be, the least Bruce can do is his best.

Bruce clears his throat, and keeps his gaze on the desk. "Her mother's name is on the memorial wall in Heroes Park," he says, to the keyboard between his hands. "Do you—do you think she'd like to see it?"

Alfred is quiet for a moment. "Perhaps not right away, sir," he says. "But yes, I believe she would. To know that her mother's loss didn't go unnoticed, that she isn't the only one who cared—that she isn't alone. Yes, sir, I believe she'd like that very much."

"All right," Bruce says. "All right," and he reaches up and rubs a hand across his face. "That'll be all, Alfred," he adds, and it comes out more brusquely than he means it to, but if anyone knows better than to take offense, it's Alfred.

And, sure enough, all Alfred does is murmur, "As you say, sir," after a beat, in a warm wry tone.

Bruce listens to his footsteps, growing gradually distant. There's still the house to sort out for Martha, and Diana to call; and, potentially, mother boxes to find. And then, perhaps—Superman. Clark.

It's strange to think of it: seeing him again, whole, alive. It's strange to imagine what it will be like. What he'll do, what he'll say. The possibilities seem endless, innumerable. The dim, uncertain dawn of a new day.

Hope, Bruce thinks. That's the thing Clark had given him then, that bright unfamiliar blooming, that sense of sudden wide-open potential. He's been trying to understand it, trying to grasp the shape of it for himself, ever since—and now here it is again, when he hadn't even been looking for it, hadn't even expected it. Not just the boxes, Clark, the chance to fix what should have been irreparable; but Alfred, Martha. Sage.

Perhaps that's what it really means, not to fail Clark again. Whether this works or not, whether the boxes can do what Bruce is starting to believe they can, perhaps in a sense he's already succeeded. Perhaps at last, if Clark knew what Bruce has done, what he's trying to do, he'd be—glad.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!