The Long Hangover

by CoffioCake

Summary

Clark knows he should take a break: His powers are on the fritz, he feels like shit, and Batman’s treating him like a liability. But Gotham's villains seem to have it in for Metropolis' Big Blue Boy Scout and Clark won't just wait around for answers. Batman might be the world’s greatest detective, but Clark Kent is one of the Daily Planet's most tenacious reporters.

This is definitely a job for Superman.

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For the first time in a long time, Clark awoke with a migraine. The headache throbbed viciously behind his eyes, augmented by a queasy feeling in his stomach and a vile taste in his mouth, as though he had spent hours licking a brick composed of sour milk and asphalt.

Getting out of bed felt like wading through tar. Thinking was swimming through sludge. Brushing his teeth made him feel slightly more human, figuratively speaking; but, the man in the mirror had more in common with Bizarro than Superman.

“Been on a bender?” Lois asked when he stepped gingerly out of the Planet elevator wearing sunglasses and a grimace.

Clark pressed a clammy hand to his forehead. “Met an…old friend.”

“Might I suggest hair of the dog.”

“No thanks, Lois.” Clark sagged into his chair and dropped his face onto the blissfully cool desk. “I have vowed never to drink again.”

Lois snickered.

“KENT!”

Perry’s voice boomed gratingly over the bullpen. Clark flinched and raised a trembling hand. “Coming, Chief.”

Lois slipped him a chilled can of beer from the break room and Clark immediately pressed it to his forehead. “Good luck, Smallville.”

“Kent!” Perry barked as Clark staggered into his office. His voice was many decibels higher than Clark’s aching ears could handle. “You look like death warmed over!”

“Late night, Chief,” Clark muttered, now holding the cold can to his neck and uttering a pornographic moan.

Perry White’s tone was thick with mocking amusement. “I’m sorry, Mr. Wayne; I wanted you to meet one of our best reporters, but it seems the pod people have replaced him with me from thirty years ago.”

Only then did Clark realize there was someone else sitting in Perry’s office.

“Oh, crap.”

Perry rolled his eyes as the CEO of Wayne Enterprises stood, buttoned his excellently tailored suit jacket over an equally well-cut vest, and extended a manicured hand. “Bruce Wayne.”

Oh, boy, Cat Grant had not been lying. Wayne really was ridiculously handsome. “Clark Kent.” They shook while Clark tried to dispose of his incriminating beer can as discreetly as possible in Perry’s waste basket. Uncooperatively, it landed there with a resounding thunk. “Sorry for the late arrival. I ran into an old, um, friend. Things got a little out of hand.”
Wayne grinned boyishly while Clark’s stomach flip-flopped. “Have a few ‘friends’ like that myself. Women, mostly; but, not exclusively.”

Perry lit one of his noxious cigars and addressed Wayne while fixing Clark with a warning glare. “Kent will be the one interviewing you this afternoon.”

“I thought Lois wanted to cover the Planet’s buyout,” Clark blurted. Lois would murder him with salad tongs if he ever stole a story from her.

“Lane is busy typing up the Justice League report,” Perry replied. When both Clark and Wayne stared blankly, he elaborated. “Last Friday, Brainiac destroyed a power plant where someone had subterraneously stockpiled several tons of Kryptonite.” Three guesses who, Clark thought bitterly, remembering the tell-tale LexCorp stamp on the bright emerald bars. “All the meteor rocks vaporized in the explosion and, according to eyewitnesses, Superman got a face-full of glowing, green powdery stuff. He hasn’t been seen since.” With a particularly scathing glance at Clark, Perry added, “Honestly, Kent, how did you miss this? You work for us.”

“I—well—”

Perry exhaled and a cloud of noxious cigar smoke hit Clark in the face like a slap. “Take Mr. Wayne out to lunch. Pretend you’re a professional for the next eight hours and I’ll let you go home early.”

“Eight hours is a full work day, Chief.”

Perry’s smile was all teeth. “This is the Planet, Kent. A full work day is when you come home to find your fish died two weeks ago.”

A few minutes later, after splashing water on his face in the men’s room and letting Cat Grant fix his tie, Clark stood in the bull pen by his desk with a white knuckled grip on the back of his chair. The wave of nausea—staved off by a combination of Dr. Thompson’s pills and Clark’s meticulous hydration—had crashed over him once again, leaving a taste of bile so thick in his mouth he could barely breathe.

Thankfully, like adrenaline, professional pride took over basic motor function. Against his own expectations, Clark stood up straight, smoothed out the front of his cheap suit, and turned to his new assignment with a smile—albeit a shaky one.

“Let's do this at the diner.”

“Which one?”

Clark tried to find the address in his scrambled brain. “Bibbo's. Corner of Fifth and Row. Kind of a hole in the wall, but they make good coffee.”

“I'll tell Alfred to bring the car around.”

When they exited, Wayne's chauffeur was waiting for them in front of the Planet's offices next to a sleek, black limousine with tinted, curtained windows. Clark slid inside and immediately closed the tiny drapes while Wayne fetched him a chilled bottle of water from the minibar.

Clark immediately pressed it to his throat with a moan before realizing that Wayne was still watching
“Thanks.” The frigid bottle felt exquisite on his neck.

With a nod to Alfred, Wayne settled into his seat. They drove off.

Clark took a quick sip of water. “Sorry.” He cleared his throat self-consciously. “I didn’t realize I had drunk quite that much last night.”

“Sometimes it’s not how much but what you drink that makes the difference.”

“Lots of experience on that front?”

Bruce Wayne’s side-eye was sharp. “Is this part of the interview?”

Clark shook his head and flinched at the abrupt pain that shot up his neck. “I would never infringe on Cat’s—Miss Grant’s—territory,” he said seriously.

Wayne quirked a smile as he adjusted his cuffs. “I may have attended a few parties over the years,” he offered modestly.

Clark snorted. “I’ve always been a straight-laced kid. Well,” he amended with a sheepish expression, gesturing at his aching forehead, “mostly.” Interviews like this always went better if the information exchange didn’t seem one-sided. “Bit of a rebel in high school, but that was by Kansas standards.”

“You’ve watched too much ‘Footloose’,” Clark said, rolling his eyes. “I joined sports teams against my dad’s wishes: first Little League, then football.”

“Why was your father…?”

“He thought I’d get hurt.” Jonathan Kent had feared his son would lose control of his powers, reveal that he was not human, and spend the rest of his days strung up in a government lab until someone decided to stick his organs in jars of formaldehyde. “He had a bad knee from playing high school football. What about you?”

Wayne paused. “Lacrosse. Rugby, when I switched to a boarding school in Britain. Also fencing and horseback riding. I’m not bad at polo.”

Clark stared. “Mr. Wayne?”

“Yes?”

“I’m starting to think you grew up rich.”

That earned him a surprised laugh.

Smoothly, Alfred slid the limo to a stop outside Bibbo’s and Clark stepped out into the too-bright, mid-afternoon sunshine. Hunched over, he led Bruce inside to request a booth far away from the sun-drenched tables by the windows. While Wayne studied the lunch options, Clark ordered their coffee and pulled out notepad and pen.

Wayne glanced up. “Hungry?”

“I don’t think I could keep anything down. But if you—“
A head shake. Wayne neatly stacked their menus off to the side.

“So,” Clark began, “why did you buy The Daily Planet?”

“I like it.”

A pause.

“Why?”

A slight tilt of the head. “It’s having a hard time, like any paper in the internet age, and might need some reform—perhaps pick up more of an online presence—but I don’t want it to turn it into a tabloid rag either. I figured I’d save it.”

“Save it? How?”

“By doing absolutely nothing.”

Clark considered his new boss. “You don’t intend to start dictating the tone? Or the content?”

“Of course not!” Wayne’s grin was all glitz and charm. “What do I know about journalism? I would rather keep things as they are since, for the most part, that seems to be working.”

“Even if Cat Grant continues to post salacious articles about the, uh, ‘Prince of Gotham’—?”

“I’m not a fan of gossip columns, but I’ve been told it’s one of the big draws for readership.” Wayne studied his coffee. “Sometimes, you have to do things the ugly way to get them done at all. I’m not going to infringe on Ms. Grant’s… reporting, as long as it benefits the rest of the paper.”

Clark looked at him in surprise. “That’s very mature of you, Mr. Wayne.”

Wayne winked. “I’m not always just a pretty face; though, I admit, Perry gave me a crash course on newspaper economics this morning while we waited for you. You’re making money off of the sports and society sections. The only time that changes is when there’s a front page article on Superman.”

“He has his uses, sure,” Clark said modestly.

Wayne stared. “You don’t like him.”

Clark backtracked. “No! No, that’s not what I meant. I mean, he’s fine!”

“…He’s ‘fine’?”

“He does alright,” Clark offered weakly. “I’m sorry. This is supposed to be your interview.” He studied his notes. “…’a pretty face’… You’re not adjusting the circulation?”

“No.”

“The work force?”

“No.”

“The advertising?”

“It’s dominated mostly by Wayne Enterprises anyway, so there won’t be much of a change.”

Clark latched onto that. “Much of a change?”
Wayne’s expression turned cold. “LexCorp and its constituents will have to turn to other print media for ad space.”

Over a sip of coffee, Clark considered pursuing that line of inquiry; but, after another quick glance at Wayne’s hostile expression, he decided to take the easy route—for now.

“Are you thinking of buying other newspapers? Magazines? Journals?”

“I won’t know until another opportunity presents itself. This was a very spur of the moment decision, you understand, driven more by sentiment than longterm financial gain.”

Clark raised his eyebrows. “A newspaper is a very expensive impulse buy, Mr. Wayne.”

“Don’t worry about me, Mr. Kent.” Bruce dimpled, leaning over the table. "I grew up rich.”

There was a dangerous thump somewhere near his throbbing skull and it took Clark a moment to realize it was his pulse hammering through his skin. His pen hovered over the notebook, eyes boring into Wayne’s.

“You aren’t in it for financial gain,” he mused aloud. Wayne’s irises looked Jolly Rancher blue this close. Clark could count every single long, dark eyelash. “Nor is this a reputation boost or a power grab. What is your angle?”

Wayne leaned back against his seat.

“I want some vestige of my childhood to survive.” For a moment, Clark thought he saw the cool exterior fade. Wayne looked away, voice deepening. ‘When I was a child, my Father told me, ‘If you really want to know if something is true, you’ll need more than one source.’ He and my mother subscribed to a number of periodicals and journals, everything from *The Gotham Gazette* to *National Geographic*. They would read articles to me until I was old enough to read myself. I remember quite a few mornings spent with them, breakfast growing cold, too busy checking stocks on *Bloomberg* and perusing the *Planet* to bother with something as mundane as eating.” He glanced at Clark, eyes oddly bright. “I know when I open the *Planet* that I’m going to get the cold, hard truth, plain and simple, but eloquently told. And I’d like to keep it that way. I want honest things—truly, selflessly, deeply honest things—to exist for as long as they can.”

Clark fiddled with his pen. "If you really mean that, Mr. Wayne, it would make you a very rare beast.”

“Oh? What?”

"A good man."

Wayne laughed. "When you have the means, it's easy."

With a tight grimace, Clark returned to his notebook and muttered, “Not in my experience.”

Now Wayne really was looking at him curiously. Clark could feel the color rising in his face.

“Do you have any message for your new employees at the *Planet*?” he asked hurriedly.

Wayne didn’t hesitate. “Three raw eggs and a Virgin Mary.”

Clark stared at him.

“It’s an old hangover remedy.”
“It’s disgusting,” Clark countered, forgetting himself in the face of such terrible advice. “Tomato juice and raw eggs? Are you trying to give me salmonella? What is wrong with you?” With finality, he drained his mug.

“I’d write you a list,” Wayne replied delicately, “but Wayne Enterprises is trying to save the rainforests.”

Clark almost snorted coffee out his nose.

“Can I offer you a ride back to the office?” Wayne asked an hour later after Clark had capped his pen. “Spare your hangover?”

Clark, sticking his notebook back in his pocket, glanced nervously towards the entrance. Glaring sunlight still poured through the diner windows. “Yes, please. Thank you, Mr. Wayne.”

“Just Bruce. Please.”

“Call me Clark, then.”

After they had ducked into the dim limo interior and Bruce had pulled the curtains across the tinted windows, Clark removed his sunglasses to press another cold water bottle to the bridge of his nose. The pleased noise he made was utterly unfit for polite company.

“Would you like to go out for lunch tomorrow?” Bruce asked abruptly. His voice sounded slightly strangled. With a more seductive lilt he added, “I could swing by your office and kidnap you around noon.”

The current image of Bruce Wayne—cobalt-eyed, chiseled-jawed, broad-shouldered, devastating—overlapped briefly with “Mark of Zorro” reruns Clark had seen as a child. His heart gave an interested thump.

“I would like that.”

Clark was so distracted by Bruce’s dimpled smile that he forgot his shades in the back seat of the limo. It wasn’t until he sat down at his desk with his regular glasses on his nose that he realized his head didn’t ache anymore.

Clark was just finishing up his appointment with Dr. Leslie Thompkins when the comm call came in from the Watchtower.

“Joker rigged a blimp. It’s flying in over Gotham,” the Flash said. “Batman caught him and Harley, but Oracle thinks he might need someone who can fly and—”

“Everyone else is out.”

“Sorry, Supes.”

Clark pulled off his glasses and started on his tie, one handed. “That’s easy for you to say. You’re
not about to enter his territory.”

“Clark.” Leslie was watching him, arms folded resolutely over her white lab coat. “You only started flying again this afternoon. Your super speed is off and your strength is severely compromised.”

Superman swung himself up onto the windowsill. “I swear, right after this, I'll take the night off.”

“If something happens to you now, you’re not invulnerable! The Kryptonite still isn’t out of your system!”

“Sorry, Doc. Duty calls.” With a grin, Clark launched himself into the sky and flew (rather sluggishly, if he felt like admitting it, which he didn’t) over Metropolis’s skyline. “Flash, I’m going to need a Zeta-Beam to Gotham.”

“On it.”

Minutes later, after appearing in an alley behind Wayne Tower, Superman managed to push a burning blimp away from an apartment complex and divert its fiery decent away from the heart of the Gotham. As Clark considered his options, Batman dropped inside the airship's cab—here Clark switched to his X-ray vision—to diffuse the bomb strapped to its controls. That simplified things; all Superman would have to do was fly the whole flaming mess away from civilization, let Batman swing clear, and watch what was left of the airship drop into the bay. He shouldered the cab—searing hot against his Kryptonite-saturated skin—and slowly pushed his cargo out to sea.

God, the thing was heavy. Obviously—it was the size of a small building—but it was heavy for him. And could hear the skin on his shoulder sizzling.

“Are we there yet?” Batman growled over comms. He sounded extra charming tonight.

“Give us a minute, all right?” They were almost over the docks. “Is the bomb off?”

“It goes in thirty.”

“Minutes?”

“Seconds.”

“Son of a—”

Clark threw in a burst of reserve strength, the bit he had been saving for returning to shore in one piece, and flung himself into the fiery death trap.

Batman was elbow deep in wires and bomb guts, seemingly oblivious to the surrounding inferno. Without pretext, Clark slung him over his shoulder like a bale of hay and flung them both out into the open air.

With a final heave, he pushed the blimp out over open water.

"Flash! Containment field! Now!"

A flickering beam of wide, pale, multi-colored laser shot down from the Watchtower, engulfing the airship in a hollow pillar of impenetrable plasma. When the bomb exploded, it shot a column of fire up and down the inside of the barrier, destroying only a mercifully unoccupied boardwalk below. After the flames choked themselves out and the containment field retracted, Clark sank back to Earth to set Batman down on the beach.
“Are you okay?”

“Fine.” Batman didn’t sound fine. “Throw me around like a rag doll again, and I’ll shove Kryptonite down your throat.”

Clark felt a muscle going in his cheek. “I’ll remember that the next time you feel like dying bloody in a boobytrapped blimp.”

Batman stepped into his space. “It’s not what you did. It’s how you did it.”

“There wasn’t exactly time to explain—”

“Why do you think I gave you thirty seconds?”

“Thirty seconds is nothing without super speed!”

Batman shot a grapple hook into the nearest building and launched himself back into his city. Clark watched him, feeling like he had swallowed a meteor rock and it had just landed in the pit of his squirming stomach.

Chapter End Notes

Eternal thanks to cephalopodqueen for being a most helpful and tolerant friend and beta!!!

Zeta-Beams are borrowed from "Young Justice".

Concept for the containment field is based loosely (because I am not a scientist) on the force field chapter from "Physics of the Impossible" by Michio Kaku.
Lois seemed unusually restive the next day: she hammered viciously on her keyboard, glared for a solid half hour at her computer screen, studied her notes ad nauseam, and barked at anyone who came too close to her desk. When lunchtime rolled around, she latched onto Clark and attempted to drag him to the elevator.

"We're going to Bibbo's," she announced. "If I have to look at Lex Luthor's nonsensical accounts another minute, I'm dumping my files in the shredder."

Clark disentangled himself from her clutches. "Sorry, I have plans. You and Jimmy go without me."

"You snag a hot date, Clark?"

"Yes, actually." He stifled his goofy grin too late.

With forced calm, Lois returned Clark to his desk, pulled her chair over to his cubicle, and sat down, effectively blocking his only mode of egress.

"Who is it?"

"A friend."

"Is this the same friend that gave you the mother of all hangovers?"

"No."

"Does this friend come with a name?"

"Most do."

A long, dangerous pause.

"Clark Kent, are you deliberately refusing to tell me with whom you're having lunch?"

Clark adjusted his glasses. "Technically, 'deliberately refusing to do something' is a redundancy. By its very definition, 'refusing' is something one does through personal conviction, or, deliberately. So, saying I 'deliberately refused' is like saying I 'chose on purpose'—"

Lois' face loomed dangerously close. "Who. Is. It."

"Just me." Alarmed, both Lois and Clark leapt to their feet. Bruce was leaning casually against the neighboring cubicle with an amused expression. "Nice to meet you, Ms. Lane. Clark mentioned you quite a few times over lunch yesterday."

Lois raised her eyebrows as she shook his hand. "Funny," she said. "I thought he was supposed to be interviewing you."

"We should leave now," Clark suggested hurriedly, casting a wary glance at the society department two rows over. So far, no movement...

Cat Grant's head popped up from behind a stack of celebrity photographs. "Clark's dating someone?" she called out. Then she caught sight of Bruce Wayne. "Holy crap!"
“IF YOU HAVE TIME TO SWEAR, GRANT, YOU HAVE TIME TO TYPE! I WANT THAT LUTHOR PARTY PIECE ON MY DESK YESTERDAY!”

Perry White’s echoing roar provided Clark with the perfect opportunity to steer Bruce away from his terrible friends and into the elevator.

“I'm afraid Cat saw you after all.”

Bruce grinned. "I don't mind."

Looking at him up close, Clark realized Wayne was wearing a suit—a nice suit, not that he seemed to own any others. His hair was slicked back, he looked clean shaven, his skin seemed almost airbrushed and—was that cologne—?

Oh, crap. Weren't first dates supposed to be casual? You went to a small restaurant or a bar and ate fries and joked over beer—

Bruce was sizing him up too.

“I thought we’d be going somewhere more... relaxed,” Clark explained, rubbing his neck nervously. Had he even shaved? “It’s, ah, been a while.”

Bruce radiated schadenfreude. “How stressed are you right now?”

“What’s my scale?” Clark kept his voice carefully deadpan.

“How stressed are you right now?”

“Interview with a celebrity dog to acceptance speech for a Pulitzer.”

Clark laughed. “Nobel Prize in Literature,” he said.

Outside, Bruce held open the door to the limo with an actual bow. Alfred drove them uptown past restaurant after posh restaurant with lines wrapped around the corners. Eventually, they turned off to follow the scenic route through the park along the waterfront.

Clark realized his palms were clammy. “Is there anything above receiving a Nobel Prize?” he asked.

“Two of them,” Bruce replied grimly.

The restaurant’s tux-stuffed waiters offered their guests freshly baked rolls and specialty butter in handwoven baskets. The leather-bound menus’ select few, ‘so-expensive-the-prices-weren’t-even-listed’ options were printed on thick, textured paper, and the staff had folded the napkins on their gold-rimmed plates to resemble swans.

Clark just shook his head.

With a glance at him, Bruce unfolded his swan and placed it on his lap. "Bit much?"

Clark winced. "No, it's not that." He realized Bruce was watching him. "Really." When Bruce continued to stare, he hinted, "It's bad form to talk about exes on the first date.”

“Depends on the ex.”
Bruce did look genuinely interested. Clark braced himself.

“I used to date Lex Luthor.” Bruce replaced surprise with a polite, blank expression. “We were very young.”

"He brought you here," Bruce hedged.

"No, no, just... someplace similar. In Milan."

“What happened?”

Clark toyed with his napkin. “Let’s just say it’s hard to move forward with someone whose moral compass doesn’t exactly point in the same direction as your own.” Then he eyed his lunch date. “I didn’t ask earlier because, well, it didn’t seem relevant to the topic of our interview but—”

“Why don’t I support LexCorp.”

“Is it personal?”

Bruce’s lips twitched. “Lex and I were never involved, if that’s what you mean.”

But Clark just shrugged and started shredding a roll. “There’s more than one way to be ‘involved’ with someone.”

Clark was sure he’d be refused, but Bruce surprised him.

“We attended boarding school together.”

Clark quirked an eyebrow. “You were classmates?”

Bruce’s carefully arranged features betrayed little emotion. "We didn’t exactly move in the same circles or attend the same form; but, we were both excellent students from wealthy families. I was new, and getting a lot of sympathy and attention because my parents had died.” Bruce grimaced. "Luthor was older, taller, and bigger than me, and he did what most older, bigger boys are wont to do with smaller, bookish ones." Clark watched Bruce’s hands clench and then forcibly relax. “It was instructive, in the long run. I learned to defend myself, to fight dirty.” Bruce's gaze turned dark. "I'm not at all surprised by the choices he’s made for himself and for his company; it makes fatalistic sense. But that doesn't mean I condone his practices. And it doesn't mean I'll ever help him."

Clark’s voice was tight. "I know the feeling."

Bruce propped his chin up on his fists, expression open. In spite of himself, Clark laughed.

“Sorry!” he said. "We haven’t even had salad yet and I’ve—”

“—already introduced a meaty subject?” Bruce’s eyes lit up playfully.

Clark groaned. “How do your jokes keep getting worse?”

“I think you mispronounced ‘better’.”

Pulling apart another freshly baked roll, Clark fixed Bruce with a stern look. “You know, you don’t have to have the last word every time.”

"You could always try to shut me up."
As Bruce winked roguishly at him, Clark knew his face must have looked a bright red, blotchy mess; but, he had realized something on the way to this ostentatious restaurant with its complicated French name, real Turner oils, stamped leather menus, and pretty swan napkins.

Bruce had worn a three piece suit, slicked back his hair, probably manscaped, and booked every table in the building (if he hadn’t bought it outright) for a simple lunch date with a country bumpkin reporter. In conclusion, Bruce Wayne was at least three Nobel Prizes worth of terrified.

So, of course, Clark winked back. “I’ll think about it.”

The League’s post battle review, usually conducted after everyone was well-rested and sober enough to communicate in more than adrenaline-fueled expletives and high fives, featured a weary Superman partially slumped over the council table.

Unsurprisingly, Wonder Woman led the meeting in his stead.

“We’re resuming regular shifts this week,” she announced, “with one exception. Since Superman is still recovering, Batman has volunteered to take over most of his duties. We still have a few spaces —”

“I can—” Clark interrupted, then flinched. “Sorry.” He raised a hand and Wonder Woman nodded to him. “I can take a few of my watches, at least. I don't want to be a total burden.” He knew he looked pale and roughed up. There were still burn marks from the blimp debacle across his shoulder and dark, bruise-like patches under his eyes from lack of sleep. With effort, he summoned his sunniest smile. "Really, it looks worse than it feels."

“Well, that's comforting,” Batman drawled. Clark narrowed his eyes.

“Monitor duty is the easiest way to keep up with what’s going on in the world,” he said in a firmer tone. “I’ll know where the real problem areas are and where the safe spots can be. I don’t think keeping me out of the loop with zero access to those resources is the best idea for the team.”

“It is if we’re trying to keep you out of trouble,” Batman explained patiently. His calm demeanor put Clark on edge.

“By not even telling me where the danger is so I can avoid it? That sounds safe.” It was a pretty transparent move, but Wonder Woman seemed ready to concede his point until—

“We can set Superman up with a direct link to Oracle.” She looked at Batman. "Would she agree to it? She could feed Superman updates on an as-needed basis."

Batman nodded reluctantly.

“It would be better to receive any information first hand,” Clark tried. “There are some cases I’m still working on—leads I’m tracking—”

“You could track them through Oracle.”

“He shouldn’t be tracking them at all,” Batman ground out.

“Sorry,” Clark interjected, not sounding at all apologetic, “but maybe he doesn't see why he needs to
make someone else do work that he can do himself.”

“You can’t do it yourself,” Batman countered. “That’s the whole point of redistributing your monitoring responsibilities. You’re incapacitated, so we’re working around you.”

Clark bristled. “I’m not incapacitated,” he snapped.

“Once you get well, we’ll reinstate—”

“I’m sorry.” It was petty, but Clark didn’t care; he was pissed. “‘We’? You’re a part-timer.”

“Conveniently, in this case, since that means I have the least number of League responsibilities and am therefore in the best position to cover yours.”

“That doesn’t mean you get to come in here and make decisions about the things to which I can and should have access.”

“This isn’t about censorship, this is about keeping you away from temptation so you can heal properly.”

“‘Temptation’?” Because chasing Joker’s bomb-rigged blimp around Gotham had been so much fun! "Are you serious?"

“I’m not risking you incurring more injuries.”

"I can take care of myself!"

"Clearly, that's debatable."

Clark was practically levitating with rage. “Stop treating me like a child!”

“Then stop acting like one!”

Too late, Clark remembered that they were still in a room with other people. He glanced around the table: Green Lantern wore a long-suffering expression, Wonder Woman and Hawkgirl seemed engaged in a silent exchange of exasperated looks, and even Martian Manhunter was fiddling with his cape, incapable of hiding his irritation. Only the Flash was watching Batman’s and Superman’s sparring match with wide, gleeful eyes like a kid at the movies.

Embarrassed, Clark turned to fix Batman with his sternest expression.

“I appreciate what you’re doing,” he began calmly, “because I know how much guarding Gotham means to you. But understand that that’s exactly how I feel about Metropolis—about the rest of the planet. I need to know—”

“You have extensive burns across your shoulder and you can barely sit upright,” Batman condescended. “Do you really think I'm going to let you—”

“I want Superman hooked up to Oracle,” Wonder Woman ordered, drowning out both of them. “He can receive regular updates from her about goings-on from the Watchtower. That way, he'll know where not to go since he is not on active duty.” Her eyes locked challengingly on Clark. He nodded meekly under her unyielding gaze. Across the table, Batman let out a derisive snort.
Oracle contacted him the next day right in the middle of his shower. Clark nearly jumped through the roof.

“What have I missed?” he asked, turning off the water and fumbling for a towel.

“Nothing major,” Oracle reported. Clark had half-expected her to sound bored and/or resentful. He had never interacted with Oracle directly before, but he knew she was young, highly intelligent—certainly too intelligent to be maintaining sick Superman's newsfeed—and a former Batgirl. “Some crooks tried to collect Kryptonite dust from the site of Friday’s explosion. They’ve been caught and their samples were confiscated.”

“And destroyed?” Clark said, scavenging for sweatpants.

“Batman’s keeping the Kryptonite dust for research.”

“Right.” After a beat Clark added, “I’m sorry for making you do this.”


“You say that now,” Clark joked.

He heard the easy grin in her response. “There’s not much else to do, most of the time. Around nightfall, I start getting call-ins and requests.”

“From Batman?”

“The others, usually. Nightwing checks in a lot.” She said it with deliberate disinterest, but Clark heard the fond undercurrent.

“Has there been a spike of crime in Blüdhaven?” he ventured.

“Not really.”

“Well, shut me up whenever,” Clark said, grinning. “I wouldn’t want to get in the way of vigilante justice.” He heard a crackle of static and rapid typing. “What is it?”

“There’s been an earthquake.”

“Where?”

After a beat, Oracle said regretfully, “I’m not supposed to say. Just that there’s been another one and that the League is dealing with it.”

“What’s the status?”

“Several sections of the city have been roped off because of huge fissures running along main streets and highways. There’s a four-lane overpass that’s in danger of collapsing.”

“Huh.” Clark was already scouring the Planet’s webpage for information.

“Batman’s telling me to tell you to stay put. And that he is on monitor duty and will not provide you with Zeta-Beams in case you’re contemplating doing something—and I quote—’unbelievably stupid’.”

**BREAKING NEWS: Earthquake in Gateway City, California. Justice League on site. “Of course.”**
“Superman,” Oracle warned, but Clark was already shutting off comms. He had his suit half-on before he realized his hair was still wet.

The overpass was crumbling above him but Clark couldn’t move. If he shifted too much in any direction, the whole structure could tumble down and crush the school bus full of children trapped on the far side of the road. His super sped-up, cross-country flight had sapped him of energy and his migraine had returned full-force.

No solutions came to him. His usually sharp brain seemed sprawled between his ears, sluggishly dragging itself from suggestion to useless suggestion. With sweat dripping into his eyes and his whole body trembling with waning strength, Clark held up the beams of the overpass and waited helplessly for whomever Batman would dispatch to save him: hopefully Wonder Woman or Green Lantern or Martian Manhunter—

“I’m shocked to find you here. I really am.”

Oh, fuck.

“Batman. You need—” For a moment, his knees buckled and Clark felt his heart fly to his throat before he found his footing again. “You need to get the kids out of the bus.”

Batman looked remarkably calm for a man standing under a bridge propped up by a half-dead alien.

“Already done.”

“What?”

“I got the children to safety first. I’ve come back for you.”

“Oh. Okay. Great. Now, step back, please, so I can drop this.”

“No.” Batman folded his arms. “You’re setting the overpass down carefully.”

He spoke like a parent ordering a child to do their chores. Under normal circumstances, Clark would have balked at the condescension. As it was, he didn’t have the energy for articulate counterargument.

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can, because I’m not leaving. If you just drop the overpass now, you’ll kill both of us.” Clark looked mutinous; Batman, unimpressed. “I know you haven't fully recovered from last week's Kryptonite exposure. I'm not going to let you die on my watch just because you’re too stubborn to listen to someone with lots of personal experience with serious physical injuries.”

“You keep forgetting that I survived that power plant explosion in the first place.” Clark shifted his stance for better leverage. “I can handle a little bridge.”

“Then it should be easy to set it down gently by the roadside instead of dropping it on your face.”

Clark could feel rivers of sweat running down his arms and back and legs. It was impossible to ignore the agony in every straining fiber of muscle. His throat itched; he wanted to scream.
“Come on, Boy Scout.”

Superman let out a roar that would have sent most people sprinting for cover. Batman stayed. Slowly, inch by agonizing inch, Clark tipped the overpass on its side until the entire fractured structure landed with a soft thud parallel to the pavement. He could feel tears mingling with the sweat on his cheeks. His limbs would not stop shaking.

“Thank you,” he whispered; but, when he turned around, Batman was gone.

Of course, after the bridge incident, Superman was forbidden access to any and all League resources, including contact with Oracle. Clark would have complained; but, honestly, he was more annoyed that he had fallen for Batman's trap in the first place. At least, he reasoned, he would now have more time to spend at the Planet.

And, possibly, with Bruce.
Lex Luthor’s Benefit Ball always drowned out any other events within a two-month radius. It was infamous as the most debauched party of the year with the most sought-after invitations. If you weren’t upper crust enough to snag one, you could always wake up late on Saturday to watch society’s finest take staggering walks of shame back to their Metropolis penthouses or private jets parked at the MET Airport.

Clark arrived at work—shoulders and thighs still sore from the overpass incident—to find a dozen people milling around his desk.

“Hey—hey!” When no one moved, he added, “Did Bruno Mannheim send me a dead fish again?”

“Close enough,” Lois said. She was standing at the center of the crowd. “You have a letter, hand-delivered by Lex Luthor himself. If you weren’t pathologically late, you would have had to talk to him.”

Clark accepted the envelope numbly. It unfolded into the familiar, dreaded Benefit Invitation.

Cat Grant tugged impatiently on his sleeve. “Who’re you taking with you?”

“No one.”

While Clark settled into his chair with a thump, the assembly around his desk dispersed.

Lois was watching him cautiously. “The press never get invited to the Ball,” she mused.

Clark stuffed the invitation into a drawer and slammed it shut.

“You know whom you could take?” Lois asked. “Since Bruce probably has his own Golden Ticket, this would be the perfect opportunity for me to snoop around Luthor’s home office and get the scoop on these weird discrepancies in his books—”

“There’s no plus one on the invitation.”

Now Lois looked worried. “Clark,” she said, ”are you and Luthor—?”

”Text me if Perry yells for me.” He headed for the stairwell.

A few hours later, Bruce joined Clark on the roof where he was writing a report longhand on a notepad.

“Do you still want to have lunch?”

Clark squeezed out a small smile. “I do; but I don’t think I’ll be very good company.”

“As long as you don’t start cussing out the wait staff, I think we’ll be fine.” Bruce offered him a hand.

Clark took it and let Bruce pull him to his feet. “What did you have in mind?”

The Invincible Man
“This little hole in the wall on Fifth and Row. Very, very casual.” Bruce's grin was warm and teasing. "I've heard they make excellent coffee."

Clark kissed him before he could talk himself out of it and Bruce melted into his arms. They stayed wrapped together for a breathless age before Clark pulled away.

“Lunch.” He felt winded.

Bruce looked a little worse for wear and pleased about it. “Then coffee.”

“Well, yes, they do serve coffee.”

“No, I mean… and after we’ll get coffee…” He waggled his eyebrows.

Clark just stared at him.

“…at your place…”

Disbelievingly, Clark squinted at Gotham's 'suavest' playboy. “You know your jokes are getting worse, right?”

“Who's joking?”

But Clark slid a hand over Bruce’s mouth. “No more comebacks.” When Bruce started kissing his palm he yanked it away, face flushing crimson.

_Bibbo’s_ was almost dead. A few cops from the local precinct were eating sandwiches at the bar, but Bruce and Clark had their pick of the booths. Once the waitress wrote down their orders, Bruce took Clark’s hand and entwined their fingers.

“I thought we’d finally address the elephant in the room,” he said. Clark tensed. “You mentioned during the interview that Superman ‘has his uses’. Why don’t you like him?”

Exasperated, Clark took the bait. “I didn’t mean it like that! I think he—I mean—He’s part of a great team. The Justice League is fantastic and he’s a valued, contributing member. He does alright.”

“I can see why Perry doesn’t let you anywhere near the Superman articles,” Bruce said wonderingly.

“It’s not him, it’s Lois,” Clark grumbled. “And I don’t mean that Superman isn't—”

“Self-righteous.”

“No.”

“Arrogant.”

“No! He’s…” Well, okay, maybe he was a little self-righteous and arrogant; but, he wasn't as disgustingly full of himself as Batman. “It’s nothing. Forget it.”

“Clark.” Bruce ran a thumb over his knuckles. "Tell me."

After fiddling with his glass of water, Clark sighed. Bruce _had_ opened up about Lex. “I don't like
that Superman has to be something bigger than himself in order to make other people feel safe.” His parents had given him countless stern speeches on the responsibilities that came with his powers, even as they forgave him for the disproportionately large repercussions of his teenage-hormone-fueled mistakes. “Superman has to be—or, at least, seem to be—better, kinder, wiser, and more self-controlled than any human being because, if he isn’t beyond reproach, he’s just another all-powerful alien who could destroy mankind on a whim. By accident.”

Bruce was gauging something. “You don’t like him because of his act?”

“I don’t dislike him, okay? I just don’t want to treat him like he’s some amazing thing. People gush about him because he seems perfect, right? But, he's probably just a boring guy who happens to be able to fly.” He leaned across the table, willing Bruce to understand.

"Because people see him as this... paragon of virtue, he has to live up to their expectations. If he ever falls short, best case scenario he'll disappoint people who love him; worst case, he'll wind up hunted, captured, and killed by a mob because humanity would be too terrified to let someone that strong and fallible live."

Clark studied his free hand. "In a way, I can understand people's fear of metas. Power of any kind can, if abused, be dangerous; but, that doesn’t make it realistic to expect flawlessness from someone just because they can fly or shape shift. Metas are people too. Even the kindest have a dark side or a questionable past; that's part of living. To put anyone on a pedestal and force them to contort into an impossible shape just so you can feel safe about letting them live... ? It's preposterous."

Bruce leaned back. “So, even if Superman's poor self-control has had terrible consequences in the past, you still think we should spend more time making sure the superpowered alien is comfortable, rather than ensuring the safety of Earth's people?”

Clark full-body flinched.

Bruce’s mouth twitched. “You really had me going there for a while.”

“What do you mean?” Clark rasped.

Their lunch arrived. Clark found he wasn't hungry. Fastidiously, Bruce started picking the onions off his sandwich, his thumb still stroking Clark’s knuckles.

“You’re the first person I’ve met that didn’t fall all over themselves trying to convince me of the Boy in Blue's numerous virtues. At least at first.” Bruce grinned. "Now I find out you're as much of a fanboy as the rest of them."

Clark's rising temper was rapidly supplanting all other emotions.

“Is that why you asked me out?” he demanded. “Because you thought I’d enjoy trash-talking Superman?” He withdrew his hand from Bruce’s grasp. “Why do you hate him so much?” When Bruce said nothing he added, “Consider it off the record.”

The air between them chilled.

“Maybe you were right about this being a bad time,” Bruce said.

“Or maybe that was just an ill-conceived response to this conversation.”

“I was trying to objectively point out the other side of your argument.”
“Well, I find it difficult to distance myself from issues that affect me every day.”

“I thought Lois Lane wrote Superman's articles.”

Clark moved to stand.

“Are you in love with him?”

Clark couldn’t help but laugh, sinking back into the booth. “What?”

“Given how you seem to empathize with him so strongly when it clearly isn’t your job—“

The only other person that had ever made him this bone gratingly angry was Batman. It was like the blood in his veins had turned into high pressured steam.

“I don’t have to be in love with someone to care about their well-being.” It was amazing how the anger thrummed through his system like lava roiling in a volcano. “Conversely, not knowing someone personally doesn’t make me comfortable judging them for their decisions when I’m unfamiliar with the particulars of their situation.”

Bruce gritted his teeth. “I judge,” he said, voice ominous, “because, good intentions or no, Superman’s powers cause problems. He has a predisposition for flying into trouble without taking precautions for himself or those around him. Look at the destruction he wrought during the last Justice League battle: While fighting Brainiac, he crashed into a power plant and blew it up, injuring himself and nearly killing his opponent in the process. That’s not even taking into account the South Side of Metropolis: He dumped them back into the Dark Ages for seventy-five hours while the city scrambled to reroute electricity from another station.

"He gets into fights with supervillains and manages to wreck more buildings beating them up than they did coming in. How many people lose their homes, their businesses, and almost their lives because Superman decided long ago that he has better things to do than learn how to dodge a punch even though he has super speed?"

“So, he should simply sit out on fights?” Clark challenged. "Let the supervillain dictators roll right into town because Superman's not good enough at martial arts? This is my point right here—he’s trying to use his powers to help humanity survive some of the most powerful threats in the universe. Of course there are going to be accidents when your opponents have super strength too! Isn’t it still better to do something when you can than nothing and wish you had? Not even Batman’s plots are without their downsides—and he’s completely human! He’s living proof you don’t need powers to make dangerous mistakes!”

Bruce’s eyes were flinty. “At least Batman has a habit of planning before he acts. Superman has yet to start thinking before charging blindly into action, since he always assumes his super strength can get him out of trouble. He needs to learn control!"

“What makes you think he isn’t trying?"

The diner had gone deathly still. Clark and Bruce were poised halfway over their table, glowering at each other.

Unexpectedly, Clark’s shoulders sagged. He just wanted to go home, lie down, and sleep for a year. “This was definitely a bad idea.”

Bruce’s face was still tight with anger, but his voice remained level. “Would you like a ride back to work?”
“I think I’ll walk.” Clark rubbed his forehead. “I’m not having a very good week.” Then, because he didn’t want them to leave on bad terms, he added, “Other than meeting you, that is.”

Bruce’s eyes softened. “Likewise.”

“Well.” They set down money. Clark thought about offering his hand and Bruce seemed to be debating some action of his own, but in the end they walked out separately and left in opposite directions.

“Go home!”

Batman’s furious order-barking was normally difficult to ignore, but Clark had pulled some strings to set up a containment field around himself and this week’s Big Bad. With the two most destructive, dangerous participants in the battle locked inside a plasma cage, the damage to the city would hopefully be minimal.

(The fact that this plan had been inspired by Bruce's criticism was something Clark would rather not think about.)

Of course, the only person who had strenuously objected to his plan was Batman.

"You're still feeling the effects of the Kryptonite!” he had all but shouted at the tail end of the meeting. “You’re in no shape to go out there and fight an enemy of this caliber!”

It had already taken Clark the better part of an hour to convince the rest of the League that he was well enough to deal with the creepy space ship that had appeared over Star City. He hadn’t been about to watch Batman undo all his work in the final five minutes.

“I didn’t drop the bridge, did I?” he had reminded him coolly. “Or the Joker’s blimp. I think I can handle a little alien robot army.”

Everyone in the room had seemed to relax at his familiar bravado, even though the set of Batman’s jaw had indicated that he was not at all reassured. At the end of the meeting, he had stalked out like a sulking teenager while Wonder Woman gave Clark’s newly healed shoulder a friendly punch at the doorway. “It’s good to see you back in fighting shape.”

“We’re not quite as super without Superman,” the Flash had quipped, zipping past them to the hangar.

Clark’s fist connected with a metal solar plexus and the advancing line of androids toppled like dominoes. While outside the barrier Diana cheered and swooped low to decapitate a row of sentinels with her sword, Clark launched himself up to strike the main machine, a giant, flying octopus-like ship with titanium tentacles that coiled and uncoiled like snakes. As he angled his fist, aiming for the underside of the hard, metal body, one of its turrets hit him with an energy beam.

Normally, he would have expected to shrug off the blast; but, this burst of raw power shocked him right to his bones. His muscles spasmed, his eyes rolled back into his head, and he dropped out of the sky onto hard, unforgiving concrete. Smears of color swooped in and out of focus—voices echoed strangely as if he were underwater—pain shot up and down his spine, the back of his head, and along his limbs—
He closed his eyes.

Someone struck him hard across the face. All Clark could do was groan.

“Get him to Gotham General, Flash! Now!”

Someone lifted him with a grunt. “Jesus, he’s heavy.”

“I’ll make sure Leslie's there.”

The wind felt nice and cool, but it was only moderately more comfortable than lying in a sidewalk crater knowing your leg was not supposed to twist around like that and your shoulder was usually expected to stay in its socket...

A few minutes, hours, perhaps days of blissful unconsciousness. Loud voices. Darkness. Then beeping, and a slow, blurry blink that brought absolutely nothing into focus.

Just kill me, Clark thought flatly.

“Stop trying to die,” a voice ground out. Clark turned his head and managed to catch sight of an especially dark patch of shadow by the window.

“Batman…?”

“I told you to go home.”

Clark groaned. “I couldn’t let you face the octopus thing alone.”

Batman’s voice was all grit and sarcasm. “No; instead, you had to fling yourself into harm's way and take the Flash out of commission too while he carried you to safety.”

“I thought I could beat it.”

“That's because you're an idiot.”


The black cape shifted. “I just came to tell you that we won, everyone else is fine, we may have flattened a bakery and department store, but no one lost their home. Flash, Green Lantern, and Martian Manhunter are already on clean-up duty so you have nothing to worry about except resting and recovering. Dr. Thompkins’ orders.” He turned to go.

The thought of being alone in this hospital filled with dying people (he could hear them, their heartbeats, their last breaths, their sighs, their crying, their praying, they’re corpses decaying—) was far worse than being stuck in a room with a disapproving Batman.

“Stay.”

Silence.

“Please.”

He held out a hand and saw the IV tube taped to his arm. If something had actually punctured his skin… Clark started shaking.

“It’s a Kryptonite needle.” Batman took the seat next to his bed. “I made it a while back, just in
“case.” When Clark continued to stare wide-eyed at the bandage on his arm, Batman added, “There’s very little radioactive material in it; just enough to get the metal through your skin. The whole point is to help heal you, not cause additional injury. I’m working on a set of surgical tools in the event of... What is it?”

Clark swallowed. Searched for his voice. “You're stocking up on Kryptonite.”

“Of course.”

And not just for first aid equipment; Clark wasn’t that naïve. With a sigh, he sagged back into his pillows. “Never mind. You can go. I’m fine.” He dredged up what remained of his former bluster. “I’m just surprised by all this, I suppose. I’ve never lost a fight before.” That was the biggest lie of his life, but it was probably better if Batman thought this battle was an aberration rather than the new norm. “Thanks for making the needle.”

Batman’s expression was unreadable. Then, “I’ll stay with you till you fall back asleep. Then I have to get back to my kids.”

Clark blinked, distracted. “You’ve got kids?”

“Problem?”

“No, I… that actually explains a lot.” When Batman’s frown seemed to grow deeper, Clark quickly switched gears. “What are they like?”

“The oldest one hates me.” Batman’s tone was brusque, but Clark heard his heart stutter. “He doesn’t live with me anymore, but he calls sometimes when he needs something. The other one… he still listens. He’s a smart kid.”

“Because he listens?” Clark could almost see the eyes narrowing behind the cowl and backpedaled hard. “I'm sorry—”

“Sorry enough to stay off the field until the Kryptonite is out of your system?”

Well. “Sorry enough not to die right now.” He meant it as a joke, but his voice didn’t come out right and, honestly, neither did Batman’s. It didn’t matter, though; at least they weren’t yelling at each other.

“Promise?”

“Scout’s honor.”

Batman snorted. “Were you ever actually a boy scout?”

“Never made it past my first merit badge.”

Gently, Batman took Clark's hand—it was still extended, hanging out over the bed—and placed it back on the covers. “Go to sleep already. This chair is uncomfortable.”

“Well, maybe if you weren’t wearing so many layers of body armor…”

“I need body armor. Not all of us are invulnerable.”

Clark rolled his eyes. “Yes, please, tell me more about my invulnerability as I lie here with a broken invulnerable leg and an IV poking out of my invulnerable arm.” There was the slightest movement in the chair. “What are you doing?”
“Playing the world’s tiniest violin, hoping its music will lull you to sleep.”

Clark laughed so hard the whole room shook.
On Monday morning, after much bartering, Clark convinced Dr. Thompkins that he was fit for human (if not super human) work again. He left the hospital in a good mood around seven and, after a minor detour to his apartment to shower and change, arrived in front of the Planet a half-hour earlier than expected, well-caffeinated with a cappuccino and well-plied with donuts.

Inevitably (it had been that kind of weekend, after all), his pleasant morning was soured the moment the elevator opened and Clark caught sight of Lex Luthor leaning against his desk. He ducked back into the lift and hit the lobby button, silently hoping no one had seen him—

“C.K.! HEY, CLARK!” Jimmy rushed over, hands full of photographs, sliding his body between the elevator doors. They reopened for him. “I've got to show you—I took all these pictures from the robot fight on Friday. Supes got zapped really bad, but Wonder Woman took the tentacle thing down with this totally amazing move, like, she swooped in there, swung her lasso, and then Green Lantern was all wooooosh and—”

“Excuse me,” Lex interrupted coldly from over Jimmy's shoulder. “There is something I need to discuss with your colleague.”

“Oh.” With a terrified glance at Clark, Jimmy scuttled back to his desk.

Clark stepped out of the lift. The doors shut behind him.

“Stop being an ass to my coworkers.”

“Stop being evasive and RSVP to my party.”

Clark glared. “The Benefit Ball is just an excuse for you to start wild orgies in one room to distract from the shady business deals you conduct in the other. Since I am interested in neither, I don’t see any point in attending. Thank you for the invitation, but I am not interested.”

“Bruce Wayne is coming.”

Oh, fuck you, Lex.

“He’s bringing a date.”

Clark ground his teeth. “Yes. Fine. It’s me. I am going.”

“Is your name ‘Selina Kyle’?”

A blunt shock of pain. “Sure. Why not.”

Lex smiled. “Come on, Clark. It’s been years. We're both different men now. If you could only—”

“You hid several tons of improperly contained, undeclared Kryptonite under a power plant in Metropolis, thereby risking hundreds if not thousands of lives for the sake of your vendetta with Superman. A hundred years might pass, Lex, and you wouldn't change.” Clark folded his arms.

"Why are you here?"
Lex stepped closer, his voice and expression almost warm. “Why do you think?”

For a beat, they breathed the same air.

Clark stepped around him. “I have work to do.”

He didn’t look back, just sat down at his desk and booted up his computer.

“I’ll keep you on the guest list,” Lex said, “in case you change your mind.”

He left.

Clark’s fingers hovered over his keyboard uncertainly before he dove into his bag and fished out his cell.

Bruce picked up on the tenth ring.

“...Clark?” He sounded surprised.

“Hey; sorry about Friday. I wanted to make it up to you. Maybe we could meet up for lunch later this week? Consider any Superman-related topics strengstens verboten.”

Bruce hesitated. “I’m not going to be in Metropolis until the Benefit Ball. Booked solid.”

“Oh! Well, um, I actually… I scored an invite to that. It didn’t come with a plus one, though, and I wasn’t even going to consider attending because... Anyway, I thought you probably got one too so we could just go together and maybe it wouldn’t be so—”

“Clark, I’m going with someone else.”

This was junior prom all over again. “Ah. Okay.”

“I thought after Friday... And when you didn’t call this weekend—”

Clark propped his face up on a fist. “You know, I’ve had less of a weird weekend and more of a weird life, so, it’s probably for the best.” His voice sounded strange, very distant and alien. “Enjoy the Benefit. I hear the orgies are loads of fun.” He made to hang up, then panicked.

“I didn’t mean that passive-aggressively,” he added frantically. “Sorry. I’ve just… I’ve attended a few of Lex’s soirées in the past and I remember the food being edible, which is putting it kindly, and the music being audible, which is putting it mildly, but... mostly I just remember seeing way too many naked people. Everywhere. And bodily fluids— There was so much ruined upholstery. And so many drugs—I didn’t even know meth came in blue until—” Babbling. Babbling bad. Say goodbye. “Anyway, it was nice making your acquaintance. Hope you have a pleasant orgy. Day! Hope you have a pleasant day! Bye!”

Tap. Silence.

Sweet mother of murder mysteries. That had been the most horrible, embarrassing break-up call in the history of horrible, embarrassing break-up calls.

Someone needed to shoot him.

Someone needed to shoot him right now.

“I’m going to get some air,” he told Jimmy who was peering at him wide-eyed from his cubicle
Clark was out the door, on the roof, and off of the *Planet* terrace in a matter of seconds. He flew around Metropolis twice, rescued three kittens from a tree and one particularly dense golden retriever from a pool float, helped an old man cross the street, carried an old lady’s groceries to her car, and spent another hour sitting in a tree, staring into space.

Then he went back to work.

By then, word had gotten around the Clark Kent had been badly, brutally dumped. He spent the next three hours listening to Cat list all the movie stars, models, and hot, young trust fund babes Bruce Wayne had ever dated. Perry White even took him aside to give him the ‘plenty of fish in the sea’ speech. Thankfully, Lois rescued him around mid-afternoon with enough pork lo mein to feed the Flash. They ate at their desks.

“Check your fortune cookie,” she ordered after. “It might offer some sage break-up advice.”

“We were hardly even together,” Clark said, fiddling with the wrapper. “Two dates. There wasn’t anything to break up.”

“Just open the cookie.”

Clark did and ate the fragments. “‘Three can keep a secret if you get rid of two’,” he intoned. Sounded like something Batman would say.

Lois puckered her lips. “*Dark*. Okay, mine: ‘An alien of some sort will be appearing to you shortly.’ Gee, I hope so; I need to make up last month’s rent.”

“No interviews with Superman lately?” Clark asked innocently.

Lois shrugged. “Not since Brainiac. Usually after something that big, he’ll land on the *Planet* terrace to talk to me but…he’s hardly around anymore, you know?”

Clark cleared his throat. “Probably just going through some things. Emotionally. Physically, he’s probably fine.”

“So fine,” Cat purred, passing them. Lois glowered at her, then refocused on Clark.

“Emotional problems?” she scoffed. “*Superman*?”

“He could have… personal issues. A… a bad break-up, perhaps.”

“Oh, Clark.” Lois patted him on the head in a sisterly fashion. “Quit projecting. Anyway, why would Superman have relationship problems? He’s a tall, handsome, muscular, straight man with as many superpowers as he has fangirls. He’s a total sweetheart.” Her face fell. “Everyone loves him.”

Clark thought of Bruce. “Not everyone.”

“You’re in the minority.” Lois snapped, but her eyes shifted from annoyance to worry. “Ever since Brainiac, he’s been off his game. And last week’s battle with the squid thing didn't do him any favors.”

Clark winced.

“But he still rescued all those children trapped under that Gateway City bridge,” she mused.

“Underpass. And Batman did—”
“He even flew to Gotham to deal with the Joker's flaming zeppelin.”

Clark flinched. “Blimp. Again, Batman—”

“He's still determined to save people despite his injuries,” Lois concluded, sighing with a kind of dreamy reverence. “That's so cute.”

“Right,” Clark said weakly. Then, "Why do you think he’s straight?"

Lois’ expression flickered through several emotions including surprise, despair, and finally acceptance.

“He would be gay,” she grumbled, turning away. “All the good ones are. Or married.”

“I meant more…” Clark struggled for words. “I meant more that we don’t actually know? He could be straight. Or gay. Or bi. As far as we know, he has Schroedinger's sexuality.”

“He could be asexual,” Lois said, covering her face with her hands. “Oh my God. I am going to die alone in a house full of cats.”

“Nonsense,” Clark said, clapping her cheerfully on the back. “I see you more as a dog person.”

Lois punched him in the arm. Hard.

Oracle overrode Clark’s comms the next morning at the office. "Batman needs your help," she announced. She sounded worried.

Clark paused typing mid-word. “I thought I was supposed to sit on my keister and collect dust until I could benchpress trains again.”

“It’s sort of an emergency.”

“‘Sort of’?” He ducked out of the office and started up the roof-access staircase. “Talk. Now.”

“Batman is having trouble with the Penguin.”

“Most people do.”

“He called in Nightwing; but, Robin followed them and…”

“…got captured.” He locked the rooftop entrance behind him and unwound his tie. "I’ve read this script before.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Throw it out. Write a new one.”

“Superman!”

“Sorry, sorry.” Clark undid his cuffs. "Talking and changing. Can we still get through to them?”

“No one is responding over comms. I think they’re underground; it's hard to get a line open in anything lower than a basement. The moment they return to the surface, though, their equipment
should turn back on and link up with my network.”

“Did Batman give you a timeframe in which to call for backup?”

“No, but it’s been five hours.”

Clark stuffed his clothes under a potted plant. “I know I shouldn’t say this, but I hope to God he’s in mortal danger because otherwise, he’s going to kill me.”

"I know exactly what you mean."

Clark rocketed over the expressway down to Gotham. “What’s the address?”

“I just have a general area: the warehouses between Livingston and Stromwell, a few miles from the loading docks.”

“He’s not in the city?”

“…It’s a long story.”

A few minutes later, Clark pushed off of Wayne Towers, arms tired. His lower back was cramping and he was out of breath. “What's Penguin up to?”

“We don’t know; but last night, he received a large shipment of something that didn’t clear customs.”

Clark was silent for a moment. “Well, that’s helpfully vague.”

“Yeah, Bats said the same thing.”

Clark felt a slow grin spread across his face. “… ’Bats’?” he repeated gleefully.

The first three abandoned warehouses didn’t reveal anything, but the fourth one—second closest to the shore—showed fresh tire tracks leading to and from its supposedly unused loading station. Clark dropped down close to X-ray through the roof.

“What is it? What do you see?”

“A lot of lead,” Clark said dryly. “This is probably the point where ‘Bats’ would tell me to call for backup. Tell the League what’s going on and, if I don’t make it out in the next hour, send someone in after me.”

"I think Batman meant the 'bring people along' not 'call people after' kind of backup."

Clark ignored her. "I'm sneaking in.”

“You? Sneak?”

Grumbling, Clark landed lightly next to the skylight, opened it, and dropped down to the floor behind a pile of boxes. Peering around the corner, he saw a haphazard stack of criss-crossing metal beams. When he shoved them aside, he found a gaping hole in the floor with crude stairs leading down into a poorly lit tunnel. The dirt-packed walls had lead cores and the path forked off in multiple directions further down the way. Clark had a sinking feeling that this was a maze.

Busting through the walls might have caused a tunnel-wide collapse, something he could not risk with Batman and company somewhere inside. With a sigh, tucking his cape behind him, Clark stepped down into the dark.
He moved at super speed in fits and bursts, unable to maintain high velocity for long intervals, but determined to get to Batman and Robin as fast as he could. At every fork, he marked the path he took, then crossed it out if it led him in a circle or to a dead end. He occasionally saw similar markings made by Batman or Nightwing, but most of them had been wiped away.

After half an hour of wandering, he grew impatient. This was clearly meant as a trap for him. ‘Lead’ and ‘underground’ were buzzwords for ‘nullify Superman’s powers and exploit his weaknesses’; but, leaving was not an option. He had to make sure Batman, Nightwing, and Robin were alive and safe.

He rounded the corner and found himself facing the largest mound of Kryptonite he had ever seen in his life. There was more stockpiled here than had been vaporized at the power station a week and a half ago. Hanging from the ceiling, so that their bound, weighted feet barely grazed the top stack, were the kidnapped members of the Batfamily. Clark ducked back out into the dirt passageway and threw up.

He poked his head back in a minute later. “Sorry. Be right over.”

His super speed gave out completely in the face of so much radioactivity. Forget super strength; it took all of his energy just to drag himself up to Batman and pull off his gag. Woozily, draped over Batman’s front like an extra cape, Clark studied his handcuffs. Someone had welded the locks shut and the strands together.

“I don’t suppose you have a laser cutter of some kind?” Clark choked out after unsuccessfully trying to engage his heat vision. He was wheezing.

“Belt. Third pouch from the left.”

“My left or your left?”

Batman bared his teeth. “Mine.”

Clark was honestly impressed he hadn’t passed out yet. Maybe prolonged exposure to the Kryptonite in his bloodstream had made his body build up a tolerance. He made a mental note to ask Leslie if he ever made it out of Penguin’s warehouse alive.

With a final cut, Clark sliced through Batman’s chains and slid into an immobile heap at the foot of the Kryptonite mound. Hands untethered, Batman freed Robin and Nightwing, hauling them after him to the ground. Vaguely, Clark became aware of three people dragging him across the hall and around the lead-core corner of the tunnel wall. Once outside the Kryptonite chamber, Clark retched, his whole body seizing. He almost enjoyed the feeling in his stomach, a sickening white hot blankness that seemed to have turned his joints to jelly.

“So,” he gasped minutes later, feeling lightheaded, “who’s up for never doing that again?”


“I did,” Clark panted. “If I don’t reestablish contact with Oracle in about fifteen minutes, she’s going to send in the cavalry.” His stomach acid burned his throat. “How was I supposed to know your ‘mysterious shipment’ was Kryptonite? Oracle said you were dealing with the Penguin.”

Batman looked ready to pop. Nightwing peered over his shoulder at Clark. “What he means is, ‘Thank you.’”

“Oh, is that what ‘you're an idiot’ means?” Clark blinked blearily at Batman before offering him a
very flirtatious wink. “You’re welcome. Though, I suppose in ‘Batspeak’ that translates to, ‘You ungrateful bastard, next time I’ll just leave you chained up in the radioactive rock dungeon.’”

Both Robin and Nightwing gave Clark a thumbs up. Stiffly, Batman lifted him off of the floor and slung Superman’s arm over his shoulders. His protégés led him out of the maze using the tunnel wall markings, then helped him climb the dark stairs and stagger out of the warehouse into brilliant daylight. Once more exposed to fresh air, Clark stretched gratefully in the sunshine. Gradually, he felt the warmth of it flood his body, burning out the shaky weakness that had overtaken him in the tunnels. With a relieved laugh, he floated up into the air.

“Can I give anyone a lift?” he asked, sinking down again. He felt marvelous.

“No.” Batman glared. Both Robin and Nightwing looked crestfallen. “We’re going home to write essays on what we did that wrecked this mission.”

“Screw that.” Nightwing stepped up, clapping hands on Clark’s shoulders. “I’m going flying.”

Clark glanced over at Batman. “Uh, sure. Where to?”

“Blüdhaven.”

Batman twitched. “You’re heading back?”

“We’re done here, aren’t we?” Nightwing regarded Superman. “What should I hang onto? I mean, how does this work? Do you carry me bridal style, or do you need to swing back around to pick me up under the pits?”

Clark fidgeted. Batman had gone frighteningly still. “You sure you want to leave?” he tried. “I mean, maybe you and Robin should—”

“I’ve been in town too long already, if you catch my drift.”

Without another word, Batman fired his grapple hook at a crane and launched himself over the warehouse. After throwing Superman a rueful smile, Robin followed suit.

Clark gripped Nightwing under the arms and took off, curling out over the sea. After a few minutes of chasing seagulls and skating across waves, Nightwing’s whoops and yelps trailed off and they veered back toward Blüdhaven.

“He’s such a bossy asshole,” Nightwing burst out as they traveled along the beach. “I wouldn’t mind if he asked me to stay, but he just assumes I’ll bend over backwards for him all the time. Even when he’s being a jerkwad. Especially when he’s being a jerkwad.” When Clark opened his mouth, Nightwing added, “Don’t defend him. I know he drives you crazy too.”

“Well, yes,” Clark conceded.

They flew in more silence along the shoreline until Clark, thoughts suddenly cohering, blurted, “He’s Cassandra.”

Nightwing twisted around to give him a perplexed look. “Say what now?”

“I think I get him,” Clark said slowly, warming to his hypothesis. “He’s clever and a brilliant strategist, which means that he always knows how everything can go wrong. He can see most if not all possible, horrible outcomes to any single event or action; so, he warns people, usually by yelling at them, and comes up with fifty contingency plans that he expects us all to remember in order, to the
letter. But, of course, we don’t because a) he’s being a bossy asshole or b) we believe that in this one instance, he’s wrong and we know better.”

“Sometimes both.”

“Sure. But the thing is, when everything goes wrong, whether it’s our fault or not, he doesn’t blame us. He’ll yell at me and make Robin write essays, but mostly, Bats is petrified of any of us getting hurt. If he can’t completely protect us with his... foresight, he gets scared. And angry. And frustrated. And, surprise, surprise, he lashes out.” Clark grinned. “In a way, that makes ‘let's go home and talk about how stupid you are’ Batspeak for, ‘I care about you, please don't die.’”

Nightwing sounded pensive. “…You mean the sibyl, Cassandra. Whose prophecies were never believed because of Apollo’s curse.”

Clark grinned. “You know your classics.”

“I had a very thorough teacher.” There was grudging gratitude in his voice. "Made me study all the myths in ‘their original Greek’.”

Clark laughed at his tone. “Is there anything Batman didn’t teach you?”

“How to turn off your comms, apparently,” came the guttural snarl from their ear pieces. “Shut up already. You’re wasting power.”

There was a click followed by light buzzing as Batman severed his connection. Clark heard Oracle cackling something that sounded like, "A sibyl, oh my God" as he turned his comm off too.

“So, what is ‘shut up already’ Batspeak for?” Nightwing drawled once Clark had set him down in an alley behind a police station.

Clark sighed. "Sometimes a pipe is just a pipe," he concluded solemnly.

Nightwing snorted.

Chapter End Notes

The full Batspeak dictionary is not available to the public at this time.
"Partners come and go, Kent; but, Pulitzers are forever," Perry uttered later on Tuesday, gesturing to the myriad journalism awards adorning the walls of his office. He had pulled Clark aside to talk at length about his own impressive dating history and offer his mentee some sage relationship advice.

"Stay focused on your career and everything else will fall into place. And if it doesn't, honestly, once you earn a lifetime achievement award, the seven divorces will almost be worth it."

Perry was not the only person at the Planet still offering Clark counsel and sympathy the day after his break-up. Jimmy cornered him at the coffee machine to bemoan the upcoming marriage of his high school sweetheart to her college boyfriend.

"There's still hope for us, right?" he said tearfully while Clark patted him on the head. "I'm just in my twenties and you're still... young-ish." Clark tried very hard not to roll his eyes.

"You're going to be fine," he assured Jimmy. "You have loads of time to find someone."

Jimmy sneaked a sly glance up at him. "You know, Cat told me last week that, if you were into chicks, she'd climb you like a jungle gym."

"Unbelievable," Clark grumbled. "I openly date both men and women and somehow everyone just forgets about the 'women' part. Do not tell Cat," he added quickly.

When even Lois started offering break-up survival tips (including such gems as, "Krav Maga really helps work off sexual frustration" and "There's this phone app that stops you from drunk-dialing exes"), Clark opted to spend the next day out of the office and try to keep his mind off Bruce.

He was not having much success on that front.

Thursday evening rolled around and Clark forced himself out of his funk by taking the night train down to Gotham to investigate his only lead on the Kryptonite maze. The Iceberg, Oswald Cobblepot's one legitimate business, was where the Penguin conducted most of his deals. It was therefore his most likely hiding spot for records of illegal transactions. If Clark could find a way to snoop around his office, he might figure out how Penguin got his hands on so much Kryptonite.

Ladies' night was in full swing by the time Clark stepped into the restaurant. While the jazz band performed for a few swaying couples and the singles crowded around the bar, Clark mapped out the Iceberg's floor plan with his X-ray vision. His super speed was, as expected, uncooperative; but, he had devised a route through the restaurant that wouldn't require any of his superpowers at all.

Once he was sure Cobblepot and his bodyguard entourage had entered the VIP lounge to schmooze with the restaurant's wealthier clientele, Clark approached the maître d' under the pretext of meeting up with Bruce Wayne for a Planet interview.

Luckily for him, Bruce was on the guest list. The host let Clark wait for him at the bar. Feeling like a debonair spy in a suspense thriller, Superman ordered a martini, made a show of nearly choking on an olive, and headed across the hall to the men's room where, at the last second, he slipped through the service doors into the back-stage hallway. Tip-toeing past the break room and the kitchens, he sidled into the employee changing room and clambered out the window. After some rapid mental calculations, he leapt for the second story balcony and, by the skin of his teeth, managed to reach the ledge and grab hold of the metal guardrail.
After hauling himself up and over the railing, Clark jimmed open the sliding glass door and entered Cobblepot's office. With a cursory glance around the room, he realized there was nothing worth searching but the computer and a wide Baroque desk.

Moodily, he flicked through the paper pile in one of the top drawers. The computer was password protected and Clark had no Oracle to walk him through a hacking attempt. (If that was even possible; he understood next to nothing about computers.)

And then he spotted it, squatting inconspicuously in the corner, and thanked all of Diana's gods that Cobblepot was both old money and old school.

The Penguin owned a safe.

It was lead-lined, but X-ray vision wasn't the only tool at Clark's disposal. Recalling a brief fascination with lock picking during his misspent youth, Clark sat down, pressed his ear close to the safe's dial, turned the spindle, and concentrated all his super hearing on the quiet double clicks of the revolving tumblers. He had made significant progress by the time a familiar shadow fell across his face.

Clark would have yelped (it had been a long time since anyone had successfully sneaked up behind him) had a black gauntlet not been clapped over his mouth. His muffled exclamations were ignored as Batman hauled him to his feet and pinned him to the wall.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Clark rubbed his chin where Batman had grabbed it. "Investigating Penguin's Kryptonite shipment."

"And you thought breaking into a crime lord's place of business would be the most effective way to conduct your investigation?"

Clark shrugged, his thoughts still on calculating the safe combination.

"I just need a little more time with that," he whispered, gesturing. “Guard the door, keep it down, and maybe we can both have a look at Penguin’s files."

After a moment of tense deliberation, Batman released him. Clark dropped to his knees and continued fiddling with the dial. Finally, he heard the clank of the tumblers aligning and the door unlocking. He swung the safe open, scanned the shelves for anything interesting, and found only diamonds, diamonds, more diamonds, stacks of hundred dollar bills—

There. Underneath a heavy, black, velvet bag full of, presumably, even more diamonds, was a folder. Clark tugged it free and flipped it open. He caught one brief look at the top, formal-looking document, before Batman jerked the whole dossier out of his hands.

Only then did Clark hear what sounded like a mob traveling toward them from the restaurant below. While Clark got to his feet, closing the safe, Batman stuck the papers in a compartment of his suit.

As thundering footsteps and shouting voices approached, Clark assumed a fighting stance, wondering how much of his super strength he could pass off on weight lifting and how many punches he could take before his lack of unconsciousness drew suspicion. Batman put an end to his speculations by slinging an arm around Clark's waist, dragging him out onto the balcony, and throwing them both over the railing. Well before sidewalk impact, he fired his grapple gun and swung them onto the rooftop of the neighboring building. They crouched low, watching the light in Penguin's office flicker on as dark shadows moved back and forth across the curtains.
It occurred to Clark that Batman had never met Superman's alter ego. He stuck out his hand, unable to suppress a slightly cheeky grin.

"Clark Kent. I write for the *Daily Planet.*"

Batman's glare could have stripped varnish. "How do you know about the Kryptonite shipment?"

Clark dropped the hand. "I have my sources."

"Does one of those 'sources' perchance wear blue tights and a red cape?"

"Maybe." Clark regarded him coolly. "Is that a problem?"

Someone had turned off the lamps in Penguin's office, but the door to the hallway stood open, flooding part of the room with pale fluorescent light. Clark could make out half a hulking silhouette through a gap in the curtains; Penguin had increased the guard around his safe.

"I never thought Superman would send his friends to do his dirty work," Batman commented.

"Good point," acknowledged Clark. "Speaking of, where is your sidekick? Or is there no child endangerment allowed on school nights?"

Batman looked as if someone had jammed a lemon in his mouth.

Clark met his gaze squarely. "I want my file."

"It doesn't concern you."

Batman stood, moving to the other edge of the rooftop. Clark followed him. "If it involves a Kryptonite shipment—and I know it does, so don't even bother lying—it 'concerns me' very much."

Batman spun around to glower at him. "I don't know what Superman's told you, but I deal with criminal activity in Gotham. He needs to ask for permission before—"

"I don't need permission from anyone to do my fucking job." Clark stepped brashly into Batman's space. "Especially not from an entitled, territorial dick in a floor length cape with bat ears, for God's sake."

Batman opened his mouth, then closed it.

Clark crossed his arms. "I opened the safe. That file is mine."

"And how will you explain your sudden possession of incriminating evidence from the Penguin's private office so soon after it was broken into?"

"A little bird gave it to me."

"You'll have the mob tailing you."

"They can get in line."

Batman seemed to be chewing on something. Probably his tongue. "I'll drop off copies on your desk at the *Planet* tomorrow," he conceded. "It will be safer if they appear in front of witnesses. Penguin and his men will never suspect you broke into the *Iceberg*. They'll assume it was me, which means they'll leave you alone."
He’s trying to protect me, Clark realized, shoulders sagging. It wasn't fair that Batman could be so kind and so infuriating all at once. It took the fight right out of him. “Thank you,” he said.

He side-stepped Bats and leaned over the edge of the flat-top to get a view of the fire escape below. It looked rickety, but if Batman left, Clark could just float down into the alley and bypass stairs entirely. He turned to offer a polite goodbye.

An arm wrapped around his waist again; a warm, armored body pressed close; and Clark found himself lifted off the roof and launched into the cool evening air. They swooped across a four-lane road, swung through a street between a café and a bakery, then hung high in the air, momentarily suspended, before falling back down to earth. Clark let out a whoop as Batman shot out another line and they glided into a dark, deserted alley. With a flick, Batman disengaged the hook and dropped them the last few feet to the ground. He let go of Clark's waist; Clark, who hadn't realized he was gripping Batman's shoulders, dropped his hands immediately.

"Wow." Clark could feel his arms shaking. "That was... that was..."

Batman half-grinned.

"That was better than flying," Clark blurted giddily.

The half-grin vanished. “Tell Superman to warn me the next time you come to town.”

“So you can steal any additional leads I uncover?” Clark said tartly.

“So you don’t get shot during another half-baked B and E.”

Remembering his stealthy approach down the deserted service hall, Clark said indignantly, “I wasn't that bad.”

Batman folded his arms. “I had to knock out three guards, wipe ten minutes of security footage, disengage two window alarms, shut off all five cameras in Penguin's office, and then guard your six for the rest of this 'heist' because you were so out to lunch, you didn't even notice when I entered Cobblepot's sanctum sanctorum through the window right in front of you.”

Clark flushed. “Listen, you pompous windsock—”

He froze mid-sentence. Now that Bats had raised his arms, Clark could see the trail of blood running down the side of his Batsuit.

"You're bleeding."

"What?" Batman glanced down. "Oh. It's just a bullet graze. One of the guards got lucky and hit a seam. It's no big deal."

"No big... you've been SHOT!" Clark yelled. "You idiot!"

"It looks worse than it is."

Clark wanted to shake him. "I suppose it doesn't hurt at all either. Because pain is only in the mind."

Bats sighed. "I'll go see my doctor tonight. Happy?"

"No. Hold still." Clark reached under his jacket and tore off a large section of his undershirt, then bent down to wipe off the blood around Batman's wound. "You complete moron. You should have said something."
Batman didn't respond. Clark dabbed at the blood silently for a while, then sighed. "I'm sorry."

"I've been called worse."

"No, not... This is my fault. If I hadn't been so impulsive, if I had stopped to think or plan or consider—"

"You're only human."

There was no right way to answer that. Clark pulled back his shirt-rag and checked Batman's gunshot wound again. It was wide and ugly, but not deep and, at least now, reasonably clean. He ripped off another section of undershirt and wadded it up, tucked the corners under the ragged edges of the hole in Bats' body armor. The suit fit snug like a second skin, holding the cotton rag in place; the makeshift bandage held.

"That should work, for now. But please go see your doctor about—"

"I will. I promise." Batman stepped back, prepared to fire his grapple gun, then said, "Your work on the safe wasn't terrible."

Clark rolled his eyes. "Your George of the Concrete Jungle routine wasn't entirely ridiculous either."

Batman laughed outright. "Clark."

"Yup?"

"Stay out of Gotham."

One fired grapple gun later and Clark stood alone in the alley. Hands in pockets, he retraced his steps to the train station.

The next morning, there was a Bat-marked package perched conspicuously on Clark’s desk. Lois shot him a very suspicious look, but Cat was the one who approached him.

"Why is Batman sending you mail?"

Clark unpacked his parcel. As promised, Bats had given him hard and HD digital scanned copies of Cobblepot's files. "Just a case I'm working on. He's helping me."

"...Why?"

"I asked him nicely."

The official-looking document that had caught Clark's eye the night before was a non-disclosure agreement. It specified that a "product" provided by the "benefactor" was only to be used for an "experiment" the nature of which was not to be mentioned, recorded, communicated, or in any way conveyed to another party. The bottom of the document had been signed by both Oswald Cobblepot and Alexander Luthor.

He didn't realize Lois was poking around in the box until, eyebrows raised, she pulled out a clean, white undershirt from beneath the wadded packing paper.
"Anything you want to tell us, Smallville?"

Clark considered his options. "Not really. No." Then he saw the terrified look on Cat's face. "It's just a shirt. Not a big deal. It's a really embarrassing but ultimately boring story."

Cat twisted her fingers together. "Clark..." She hesitated. "Did you ever meet Vicky Vale?"

Clark stuffed the NDA back in its folder. "No. First year I started here, she was already gone. I know she used to work the society beat with you."

"Did you ever hear why she left?" Clark shook his head. "She took a job at the Gotham Gazette reporting on a scandal in the mayor's office. A few weeks later, she started seeing Batman. It was supposedly low key; but, next thing I know, the Joker's kidnapped her, she's been gone for three days; then, Batman's rescued her, she's in the hospital, and she's not speaking."

"Vicky eventually told me that she was tortured. Not that much physically, she said. Mostly it was just... the threat of it. And the things the Joker said." Cat's face had taken on a bitter twist. "She and Batman split soon after and Vicky's been in and out of therapy ever since. She's won't come back to Metropolis. Told me she can't stand how bright it is here. Hates how everyone's always smiling."

Clark stood, taking Cat's hand in both of his. Her fingers were cold.

"I'm not dating Batman," he said firmly. "The shirt is a replacement. It doesn't mean anything."

Without another word, Cat wrapped her arms tightly around his waist. Clark hugged her back. "And I'm never leaving Metropolis," he told her quietly.

While Cat and Lois reminisced about Vicky, Clark folded the undershirt away and contemplated his next move.

"...She lost to Gilbert Godfrey," Cat was saying.

Clark's eyebrows shot up. "Godfrey won something? How?"

"The patriarchy struck again," Lois muttered.

Clark grimaced. "Sorry. Working on it."

"It's such bullshit." Clark paused to clear a corner on Lois' desk so she could sit down. "I mean, Vicky's piece was on faked pollution test results from Blüdhaven's residential areas, yours concerned a pyramid scheme paying off Metropolis', Gotham's, and Star City's cops, and who wins?" Her voice sounded steadier now. "The guy who found out our state senator was cheating on his wife with the CEO of a major gun manufacturer. I'd known about that for years—I even wrote the original article Gilbert cited in his front page monstrosity. Did I get any credit? Of course not; because when a man writes about two greedy assholes banging each other for power, it's news; when I do, it's just gossip."

Lois angrily agreed, but Clark was only half-listening; Cat had given him an idea. Setting aside the Penguin's paperwork, he logged into the Planet's digital archives and started a search in the society section. If any record of Cobblepot and Luthor's previous interactions existed, it would be there.
Hours later, after Lois and Cat had departed for the pub across the street, Clark found himself sifting slowly through physical copies of *Planet* back issues, scanning every article on benefits, dinners, or other high brow events for information on his suspects. So far, he had found more mentions of Bruce Wayne with Selina Kyle than either Luthor with Cobblepot.

As far as Clark could tell, Lex and Penguin had only been in the same room together for one event: a fundraiser for Cobblepot’s misguided, onetime run for mayor. Luthor had attended the dinner but signed nothing. Clark knew this because he had covered the party and watched Lex stroll around the room with Lana Lang’s hand tucked tenderly into the crook of his elbow.

Clark spent the rest of the night scouring the Internet for photos or even rumors of more recent collaborations between Luthor and someone the Penguin might have known, or vice versa. He came back with nothing. A headache had started brewing behind his eyes when Oracle called him over comms.

"I need your help, Supes."

"Anything."

"Fly to Gotham and distract the Riddler. He has a bomb planted somewhere and we still need to find it before he kills his hostages."

Clark was already jogging up the stairs to the *Planet* roof. "Why me? Where’s Batman?"

"Batman’s...unavailable right now."

"Did he okay this plan?"

"Like I said, he's unavailable."

Clark felt a cold lump rise up in his chest. "Has he been captured again."

Oracle hesitated. "...I am not at liberty to say."

The lump settled uncomfortably in Clark's stomach. Impatiently, he fiddled with his cape; it was caught in his belt. "What can you tell me?"

"The Riddler is in Wayne Tower, in the penthouse suite. Bruce Wayne was throwing a small fundraiser and now he and all the guests are hostages.” She paused, then seemed to decide to rip off the proverbial bandaid. "Riddler asked for you. Specifically."

"Why?"

"We have no idea."

His clothes were finally tucked away under the potted plant. Clark jumped onto the railing. "Be there in a jiff. You find Batman."

Oracle's formal, professional tone was coded with relief. "I will. Thanks, Superman."

After she cut comms, Clark called J’onn on the Watchtower to secure a Zeta-Beam to Gotham (since his super speed was still a no-show) and to explain the situation with the Riddler.

"I don't know where or how big the bomb is,” Clark said, "but when we find it, I might need you to drop a containment field quickly."
"It will take fifteen seconds to deploy," J'onn said. "I will await your instructions."

After being Zeta'd to the alley behind Wayne Tower, Clark burst straight up the side of the building to hover disapprovingly outside the penthouse's floor-to-sixteen-foot-ceiling windows. The Riddler, with his wealthy, socialite hostages in front of him, was too busy swinging his question mark cane to notice Superman step onto the balcony and open the sliding glass door.

With a nervous jump, Riddler spun around and nearly tripped over his own feet. "You men in tights always have to make an entrance."

Clark put his hands on his hips. "Let the hostages go."

"Sorry." Riddler aimed his cane at Clark's heart. "That's not part of the plan."

Clark couldn't dodge bullets without super speed, but it turned out he didn't need to. The shots from the cane bounced ineffectually off his chest. He could feel bruises setting in, but that was a comparatively mild discomfort.

When Riddler's rigged cane ran out of ammunition, Superman simply raised an eyebrow. "No puzzles? No riddles? Not even a tongue twister?" His tolerant smile vanished. "Where's the bomb?"

Riddler paused for a moment. "What do you get when you punch a man but don't wax the moon?"

What?

Oh.

Oh no.

Clark scanned the faces of the fundraiser guests and recognized among them the arresting blue eyes of the party's host. While the Riddler made his escape down the emergency stairwell, Superman waded through the bound victims to haul zip-tied and gagged Bruce Wayne to his feet. The bomb strapped to his chest was set for thirty seconds.

Of fucking course.

"I apologize in advance for this," Clark said formally before throwing Bruce over his shoulder and jumping off the balcony. They landed on a neighboring rooftop where Clark ripped off the gag and studied the bomb's internal mechanisms with his X-ray vision. The whole goddamned mess of tubes, motherboards, and whatever the hell else made little sense to him.

"Where's Batman when you fucking need him," Clark muttered. He wondered if he could sever all the wires through the metal casing. He wondered if he should.

Twenty seconds.

"Just go," Wayne ordered. "This bomb is one of Joker's. It has neither an off-switch nor a built-in failsafe."

"And you would know this because...?"

Bruce Wayne gave him a very impatient look. "This isn't exactly my first rodeo."

Clark had spent the last six hours reading up on quite a few blue blood events that ended with Bruce Wayne tied up in someone's trunk.
"I'm not leaving you," he snapped.

Ten seconds.

Switching to infrared, Clark hoped to spot a power source he could disconnect when he realized that the outside panels of the bomb casing were heat sensitive. As long as someone with a measurable body temperature was connected to the casing, the bomb wouldn't explode for...

Five seconds.

Oh, Batman would hate this plan so much.

Clark hugged Bruce, pressing his stomach against the front panel, then severed the straps and pulled the chest-piece away from Wayne. He threw himself up as high and as quickly as he could and, with barely a second left, curled his body around the bomb as it exploded.

He didn't remember falling.

When he came to, his ears were ringing and his head felt fuzzy. Someone was bending over him, shouting. He tried to wave them off, but his arms hurt too much.

"Superman!"

Clark groaned and struggled up into a sitting position. "Ow."

Gently, Bruce's hands wrapped around his head. "Look at me. Superman."

Clark blinked. Bruce looked unhurt, at least. "Are you okay?"

"You're the one that crash-landed through the ceiling!"

Clark studied Bruce for a moment, trying to get his eyes to focus. "I should get you checked out anyway." He struggled to stand. "Just let me take care of the other hostages first."

Bruce tugged him back down. "They're fine. Nightwing and Robin have them."

"And Batman?"

Bruce slowly shook his head, eyes calculating.

Clark felt panic constrict his chest. He staggered upright and promptly fell to his knees. "I need to find him," he gasped. "He's been kidnapped again, probably by the Penguin. I need to save him..."

"He's Batman," Bruce said. "I'm sure he can take care of himself."

But Clark could feel that cold lump in his stomach combining with a slow burn of fear. He surged to his feet again, this time leaning less heavily against the wall. "That stupid... sunovabitch... all my fault..."

Abruptly, Bruce wrapped his arms around Clark's waist, breath warm against the nape of his neck, and it was probably the only thing in the world that could have made Superman stop cold. Bruce meant simply to hold him back, Clark knew; but he found himself swooning into that touch, nearly knocking them both backwards into the debris.

Someone called him over comms. He tapped them in.
"Batman?"

"He's safe." It was Oracle.

Clark slumped, resting his full weight against Bruce. He heard a grunt. "Thank God."

"Thanks for showing up, Supes."

"Always. Anytime."

She cut out and he turned and unthinkingly pulled Bruce closer to him. They leaned against each other, forehead to forehead, and he felt Bruce's warm hands against his sides, his lashes against his cheek, his breath against his mouth...

Clark reared away, horrified.

Bruce didn't know him—not as Superman. Heck, Bruce didn't even like Superman.

Clearing his throat awkwardly, Clark put his hands on his hips. "I'll fly you down, get you to the paramedics."

The calculated look returned. "Take me to Dr. Thompkins instead," Bruce ordered. "She's my primary physician."

Clark wasn’t about to argue with someone whom he had, essentially, manhandled. He picked Bruce up—bridal style, his brain provided helpfully—and flew out of the office building's new Superman-shaped skylight, past Wayne Tower, and across the city. Landing lightly in front of Leslie's Gotham City practice, he set Bruce down on the bottom step and, with a nod, turned to leave.

But Bruce caught the end of his cape as he took off. "You too."

Clark glanced back, surprised. "Oh, I'm fine." He offered his most photogenic Superman smile. "I'm always fine."

Bruce’s expression was first thoughtful, then resolute. As if in slow motion, he pulled Clark back down to the ground, curled one arm around his neck, and brought him forward for a kiss.

Clark couldn't tell if he was lightheaded from Bruce's champagne-sweet tongue or his own possible concussion.

"Superman!" Leslie burst out of the double doors, marching down the front steps with her lab coat billowing out behind her. "Don't you dare fly off!"

Clark groaned. Bruce gave him a wink and a slap on the ass, then strutted up the stairs into the clinic.

Leslie glowered as she checked Clark's torso.

"No head trauma, some bruising around your chest and back with burns on your abdomen; but, I'm sure you'll live to do something even more brainless tomorrow."

"Thanks, doc."
Leslie stepped back to glare at him properly. “You're going home to rest. At least eight hours of sleep, Clark! None of this cat-napping bullcrap.” She headed out, then paused at the door. "I'm going to get you some pills. Stay in the building."

While Clark was readjusting his cape in the waiting room, a mouth suddenly slotted over his, hands wrapped low around his back, and a warm body pressed close. Clark protested weakly and felt Bruce bite his lower lip before pulling away.

“What is it this time?” Clark demanded crossly. "I'm not about to try flying away again. Not when Dr. Thompkins already caught me."

A shrug. "I just thought I'd save her the trouble of inspecting your tonsils."

Clark's jaw dropped.

Bruce smiled at him.

Scowling, Clark fiddled with his collar. "Did Leslie clear you? Are you alright?" he asked gruffly.

"Yes. You?"

"Great."

"Good."

Clark finally fixed his cape, but kept glancing sideways at Wayne while pulling on his boots.

"You want me to check your tonsils again?" Bruce asked straight-faced.

"I was thinking of offering you a ride," Clark snapped.

Bruce leered. "Depends on what kind, Boy Scout."

Clark's mouth went dry.

With impeccable timing, Dr. Thompkins stomped into the room.

“Here are his pills,” she snapped, shoving a bottle into Bruce's hands. “Congratulations. You get to spend a night with Superman."

Bruce regarded the bottle dubiously.

Clark felt poleaxed. “What—?"

"You are going home with him," Dr. Thompkins told Clark as if speaking to an errant child. "You will not fly back to Metropolis and go on some harebrained mission with the League. You will accept a ride to the house, take your pills, and sleep. Got it?"

Clark raised his hand. "What if there's an emerge—?"

"No! Hero! Work!" She rounded on Bruce. "As for you, I have told Alfred to make sure you take the next twenty-four hours off. No parties. No workouts. And no..." She glanced warily at Clark, then said with particular emphasis, "... badminton. If I hear from Alfred that you went out for any reason and tore your stitches, I will force-feed you a pair of those." She pointed at the sleeping pills in his hand. "Are we clear?"
Bruce scowled ferociously.

"Stitches?" Clark said anxiously. "When did—?"

"I've already called Alfred," Leslie interrupted, checking her watch. "He'll be here in twenty to drive you home where he can ensure that all my orders are followed. Stringently."

Clark sighed. Leslie practically hissed at him. "What now?"

"You have just sentenced me to death," he said morosely, "Batman's going to dig up his stash of Kryptonite and kill me for daring to stay his city without first groveling for permission."

Bruce's mouth twitched. Leslie threw up her hands and left the room, disgusted with the pair of them.

Bruce's 'home' was a manor across the Gotham river surrounded by acres of forests, fields, and, on one side, a beach. Clark found himself grinning as they drove past a horse paddock and barn.

Bruce caught the smile. "What is it?"

"Just reminds me of my home."

"They had horses on Krypton?"

Clark grimaced.

They reached the end of the driveway just as the sun rose behind the Gotham skyline. Alfred pulled up to the front steps and opened the passenger door.

"Master Tim is spending the rest of the day with Master Dick, Miss Barbara, Miss Artemis, and Master Wallace in Blüdhaven," he told Bruce on the way to the front door.

"Good to know."

"So, despite our obvious high occupancy, I will endeavor to find enough room in our humble abode to accommodate a single guest." Alfred ushered them into the entry way. "May I take your cape, sir?" he asked Superman expressionlessly.

Clark blinked. "It's...kind of...attached."

"Perhaps not, then."

After Alfred left, Clark sagged against the wall. "I know it's not even seven a.m., but I think I need a drink."

Bruce jerked his head. "Come with me."

At the end of a hall lined with paintings, sculptures, and antique vases stood the library. While Bruce ducked behind the bar in the corner, Clark floated from shelf to shelf of the eighteen-foot-tall bookcases, gazing in wonder and envy at Wayne Manor's sweeping literary collection. There were volumes in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Hindi, Japanese, Russian, Spanish, Greek, Latin... He pulled out one volume at random and nearly dropped it in shock.
“This is a first edition.”

“That entire wall is,” Bruce said casually. “Would you like a maraschino cherry with your Shirley Temple?”

Clark floated back down to the floor. “I thought high alcohol content was implied in my drink request.”

“You’re about to take sleeping pills,” Bruce reminded him, dangling the bottle between them. “They are not to be consumed with alcohol. Says so right here, on the label.”

Clark sighed in defeat. “Let’s have it, then.” He picked up his glass and accepted the pills, then clapped eyes on Bruce’s tumbler of bourbon. “Oh, come on. That’s not fair.”

“Just because you can’t drink alcohol doesn’t mean I won’t.”

“Rude.”

“It’s my house.”

“That’s why it’s rude.”

Bruce just took a sip, then nodded to the book in Clark’s hand. “Would you like to borrow that?”

“What?” Clark had forgotten he was still holding ‘War and Peace’. “No, but thank you. I’ve read it already.”

“In Russian?”

Clark nodded absently, rose off the floor, and slid the book back on its shelf.

"Have you ever been to Russia? Outside of League business, that is.”

“I’ve stayed in St. Petersburg. And Moscow. Hiked through Siberia one winter. I’ve seen bits of China, France, Germany, India, Egypt, Hungary, South Africa, Nigeria, Iran, Turkmenistan… But there’s always more. And it’s always changing."

“What’s your favorite place?”

Clark glanced down at him. “Kansas.”

“Anywhere near Smallville?”

The moment froze; crystalized. Heart pounding, Clark sank to the floor.

"Is that where you met him?” Bruce asked quietly.

Confused, Clark merely blinked.

Bruce sighed. "On our second date, Clark Kent blew up at me when I teased him about being a Super-fanboy. Next, he infiltrated the Iceberg to gather information on your case for you. I know the two of you don't just know each other, you are close. So, I ask again—"

"You were an unbelievable ass on that date." Clark's eyes narrowed. "And how do you know about the Iceberg?"
"He used my name at the door the night the place was robbed," Bruce replied coolly. "How did you know about our date?"

Clark sighed.

"Do you know he's in love with you?"

"He's not in love with me," Clark countered automatically. "He's in—" The last words died in his throat. "It's not like that."

"Then what is it like?"

It would have been easy to tell Bruce the truth; to rearrange his hair, borrow a pair of glasses, and adopt Clark Kent's sheepish smile as proof. But it was also impossible because Clark had never revealed himself to anyone: not Lex, not Lana, not Chloe, not Pete, not Lois. After all that he had survived with them, and with his parents, he could never justify revealing his secret to a man he barely knew, regardless of his... feelings.

"I can't tell you. I'm sorry." Clark kept his gaze level. "I have people I need to protect. Friends. Family. Telling you would put them in jeopardy. You'll just have to take me at my word that Clark Kent and I have no romantic interest in each other whatsoever." The absurdity of that last statement almost made him smile, but he kept his face neutral.

Bruce studied him. "You're not in love, but you both go to great lengths to protect each other. And you used the word 'family' even though your home planet was..." He paused; tilted his head; and Clark watched with rising trepidation as Bruce set down his glass to study Superman like a beetle on a card.

"Smallville isn't just your favorite place, it's your home. You grew up on a farm with horses."

Bruce smacked himself on the forehead.

"You're Clark's brother."

Superman froze.

"No wonder he laughed at me." Bruce drained his glass bitterly and poured himself another. "You're family. Your space ship landed in Smallville?"

Numb, Clark could barely nod.

"The Kents found you. That explains why Luthor always manages to get his hands on Kryptonite; the bulk of it's practically in his back yard." When Clark continued to stare sightlessly, Bruce added, "I won't tell anyone. I too have family members that aren't my blood that I'd do anything to protect."

Clark thought that this was how it felt to get stuck on the tracks with a train coming at you, only to have someone flip the railroad switch at the last minute. He sank into a chair and put his face in his hands. He heard Bruce take another long draught of liquor and thought about telling him to slow down, but his lips wouldn't move.

"Himalayan foothills," Bruce said at length. He was studying what was left of his bourbon. "My favorite place. Well, actually I hated it but... There's a monastery there, surrounded by dense fog. Every morning as the sun rose I would watch the village appear slowly through the mist. At high noon, I could see everywhere for miles: the farms and huts in the valley below and the snow-capped mountaintops by the clouds."
“It sounds beautiful,” Clark rasped.

“It was freezing,” Bruce grouched. "I was perpetually cold and bored. There wasn’t anything to do except train with the monks in the morning, then run down to the village, help the people with their wells, babies, and ailments, and then jog back up to the monastery. In the evening, the monks would meditate for hours, and then we would sleep.

"I grew to loathe them and myself for what I perceived as a colossal waste of time. I had come to these people because I needed help: I felt useless. I wanted them—needed them—to give me a purpose. But, they wouldn't; so, one morning in a fit of teenage rebellion, I left. Went wandering up one of the mountains."

"And had a spiritual awakening at the top?"

"Close," Bruce said. "I got caught in a snow storm and rescued by a goatherd. He called me an idiot in at least eight languages, but he carried me back to the monastery. After I healed, I went back to my chores. A few months after that, I returned to Gotham."

Clark glanced at him warily. “Okay.”

Bruce drummed his fingers on the bar. "That monastery had stood in those mountains for hundreds of years," he explained. "It served many purposes, but its raison d'être was protecting the village. The monks fixed its wells, thatched its roofs, and trained in martial arts for a minimum of six hours every day just in case the valley ever came under attack.

"I had approached these warriors, whose lineages had served their people for centuries, like a spoiled child, demanding attentions I had not earned. I was a visitor; I should have come to adapt to their world, not to force them to fix me."

Clark tried not to let his confusion show, but Bruce let out a frustrated sigh.

"As a rule, I think humans are terrible. Sometimes we can be good; but, whenever any of us—any group or individual—is given power over another or thinks we are smarter or stronger that someone else, we never make the right decisions for anyone but ourselves. Back then I thought that I could see beyond my own selfishness; that somehow because of... what I had lost, I had a deeper understanding of the world around me. But I didn't realize until that goatherd carried me down the mountain that how I felt and thought about myself and my experiences didn't matter; it was how I treated others because of them that did."

Suddenly, everything clicked.

"You were ashamed," Clark summarized, "because you behaved like the selfish, entitled asshole that you were trying not to be. That you thought you had outgrown."

Bruce exhaled. "Yes."

"And you're apologizing to me now for putting your curiosity ahead of the safety of my family." Clark squinted at him. "Am I the goatherd or a warrior monk in this analogy?" he asked bluntly.

Bruce ducked his head, but Clark caught his smile.

He said after a minute, "I think you're being a little too hard on yourself."

"I'm not hard enough," Bruce countered. "After running away to the Himalayas, I came home to find a city facing the same problems it did when I was a child. My parents spent most of their adult lives
trying to save Gotham but, without anyone in the city to champion their causes..."

"That's why you started the Wayne Foundation," Clark deduced. He was starting to familiarize himself with Bruce's circuitous way of explaining things. Of course, it also helped that the articles on Bruce's charity balls were still fresh in his mind. "The orphanages. Foster homes. Homeless shelters. Halfway houses. Piece by piece, you're saving your city."

“I'm doing what I can.” Bruce raised his eyes to Clark's. There was something deep and riveting and painful in his gaze; fragile, but ferocious. “I can’t do everything, but I also won’t do nothing. The crime lords, the corrupt politicians, and the self-absorbed company boards will not tear my city down. I won't let them.”

Clark's heart hammered in his chest. He knew his face was flushed, could feel the tingling in his fingers. He forced himself to breathe slowly.

“You remind me of someone,” he said. “He’s a bit of an asshole, usually, but he would agree with you on all points.”

Deafening silence greeted this pronouncement.

“An asshole,” Bruce echoed a second later.

“He’s also the kindest man I know.”

“...Who is an asshole.”

“I meant more that his attitude toward his job reminds me of yours toward…life," Clark tried. "He's very dogged when it comes to solving his cases. Extremely protective of his city. He thinks the world is mostly made of idiots, but he fights like crazy for it anyway because I think, deep down, he actually likes us.”

Bruce expression was one of mounting horror.

“He’s a burnt marshmallow,” Clark explained, not understanding this reaction. “You know: hard and blackened on the outside, soft and gooey on the inside. Grouchy, bitter exterior; sweet, caring center.”

Now Bruce was staring at him as if Superman had started speaking in tongues.

“He’s reliable, okay?” Clark snapped. “Trustworthy. Honest. Sometimes, too honest, but I like that about him. I wish he liked me.”

He froze. I wish he liked me. His brain curled in on itself, trying to understand when this particular seed had taken root. I wish he liked me. Clark glanced over at the bar. At least Bruce appeared to be going through a similar emotional crisis.

Both men seemed to reach the same conclusion simultaneously: Drinking was the only way to deal with the turn this conversation had taken. While Bruce knocked back his bourbon, Clark swallowed two of the sleeping pills and downed the rest of his Shirley Temple.

"Dammit," he grumbled. "I need a beer. Something stout. Or a lager."

Bruce said, all gracious innocence, "Tim might have some root beer in the fridge."

Clark shot him a very unimpressed look.
By the time Alfred announced that the guest bedroom had been turned down, Clark was tipsy.

“I thought you said there wasn’t any alcohol in my drink,” he slurred, leaning heavily on Bruce as they ascended the stairs. Alfred had disappeared with Bruce’s half-full tumbler and Clark’s empty hurricane glass.

“There wasn’t. This must be due to the sleeping pills.”

“So, I’m not drunk?”

“No. Well, yes, obviously; but, only because you’ve had a unique reaction to your medication. At least, I don’t think ‘inebriated behavior’ was listed as a side-effect on the label.” Clark thought Bruce was speaking very coherently for someone who had drunk at least half a bottle of high proof liquor. He was suitably impressed. "I wonder if it has to do with the additional Kryptonite exposure from the explosion. Or if your Kryptonian physiology is just... like that. I might ask Leslie to run some... tests..."

Clark slumped against Bruce, nose squashed against throat. “You smell nice,” he murmured, lips just brushing his jawline. “What cologne are you wearing?”

Bruce made a strangled noise. “I... don't remember.”

Clark was rubbing his nose and his mouth up and down the pillar of white, exposed skin, inhaling deeply. He heard Bruce mutter, “Jesus H. Christ” as he tried to drag them both into Clark’s temporary suite.

The moment he reached his bed, Clark face-planted bonelessly onto the mattress. “Thank you,” he mumbled, voice sleep-thick, flopping heavily onto his side to tug on his boots. After some minor deliberation at the door, Bruce joined him, hands deftly pulling off the heels. He held Superman’s cape out the way, staring up at the ceiling while Clark shimmied out of the tight blue suit and pulled on the pajamas folded neatly on the side table.

Once Clark had been firmly ensconced in Wayne Manor bedding, Bruce made to leave; but, Clark caught his fingers in a warm, firm grip.

"You," he said, pulling Bruce down onto the covers and placing a hand on his cheek, "are a good man."

And then, sloppily, he went in for a kiss.

After a few minutes during which both of them made rather interesting sounds, Superman was pretty sure he heard Bruce murmur ‘Clark’ like a half-moan turned prayer. It lit something hollow and cold on fire, and the suddenness of the feeling made Clark lurch closer, cling harder, and crush his mouth to Bruce’s with fresh determination.

All of a sudden Bruce pulled away and Clark flopped back onto the plush mattress with a gasp.

"Very healthy tonsils,” he garbled.

Clark could just make out Bruce’s face, slightly flushed but very still in the darkness, before he passed out.
When he woke up early the next morning feeling physically better but absolutely mortified, Clark made his bed with hospital corners and left a note on the covers saying both, “Thank you!” and, on the other side, “Sorry!” He didn’t want to wait around and find out exactly what Bruce Wayne thought of Superman now.
Gotham's Children

When Clark woke up with a skull-splitting headache early on Monday, he felt drained. Forget superstrength; he barely managed to crawl out of bed. He tried shaving and found his laser vision sputtering half-way across his cheek. With a sense of déjà vu, he staggered into the Planet and poked his head into Perry's office.

"—which is why I want you on the train to Gotham to interview Riddler at Arkham." Perry was both mid-rant and mid-cigar; Lois, leaning against his desk, looked exasperated.

"Chief—"

"Interview the Riddler?" Clark stepped into the room and glanced between them. "You're giving her my story?"

Perry emitted a single sigh that drowned the room in heavy cigar smoke. "You did a good job on the initial report, Kent, but this would be a more in depth piece and—"

"—since I'm already familiar with the subject matter, I'd still be the best choice," Clark finished.

Perry remained adamant. "I think it would be in your best interest if—"

"Actually, Chief," Lois interrupted, "I'm heading down to Smallville today to get the skinny on Luthor's factory. Talk to some people who still work there. I've had the trip scheduled for a week now."

Perry seemed prepared to argue some more, but Clark objected.

"Mr. White, I have to go to Arkham," he implored. "There is something going on between the Riddler, the Penguin, and Lex Luthor; and somehow, Superman and Batman are in the middle of it. I need to know what's going on."

Perry considered Clark while he smoked his cigar. "Fine," he grouched. "Lane—"

"Already leaving."

At the door, Clark caught her elbow, looking apologetic. "Call my mom if you need a place to stay."

Lois smiled and winked at him. "Already ten steps ahead of you, Smallville."

"What else is new."

"Kent," Perry said after Lois shut the door behind her, "while you're in Gotham, I want you to talk to Bruce Wayne."

Clark's eye twitched. "Chief—"

"Nobody but the Planet has been able to get on Wayne's schedule and none of the other hostages are talking to the press. I need someone to go in and get the exclusive from the man who was actually strapped to the bomb."

"Technically, the bomb was strapped to him," Clark muttered. "Chief, he dumped me. I'm the last person he'll want to talk to."
"To whom he will want to talk," Perry corrected. He banged his fist on his desk. "See why I wanted to send Lane?"

"I assumed it was because she's the better reporter."

"She is," Perry admitted, "but you already have some inside knowledge on what went down in Gotham that morning so it sort of evens out." He sighed and flicked cigar ash into his waste paper basket. "Get Wayne to talk about the Wayne Tower takeover and I'll let you cover this case."

"Bruce'll never—"

"Do you want to go to Arkham or not?"

"Sir—"

"Choose, Kent. I can still send Jimmy to catch Lois in the lobby. Wayne or Lane?"

Clark let out a long, tense breath. "I'll talk to Bruce," he promised between clenched teeth.

Arkham security was tighter than Gotham airport's and Clark was worried the guards would strip-search him and discover his supersuit. But while he was scanned, wanded, and patted down, no one noticed he was wearing his cape. His bag was swabbed, searched, and left at the front gate; his shoes were X-rayed; finally, he sat down in a dim back room for a small briefing on interview etiquette at the asylum.

"No speaking or engaging with any of the other inmates except for Dr. Nygma," the director ordered. "You may take one pencil and up to five sheets of white, loose-leaf paper with you. Any suspicious activity from either party, and you will be removed—forcefully, if necessary—from the premises. The patient will stay behind glass at all times. Do not ask him any riddles or brain teasers. Any questions?"

The security dog sniffed Clark's pant leg and wagged its tail, so, after Clark traded in his driver's license for a red visitor's badge, he was led through three additional security checkpoints and down a long, cold hallway. It opened onto a too-brightly lit series of corridors with windows into single-room cells. Clark passed room after room of Gotham's criminally insane to stop in front of one bearing a familiar name on the plaque by the door:

Edward Nygma.

The Riddler was stretched out on his cot. His half-lidded eyes followed the reporter and his guard detail as they approached the cell and set up a folding chair. Clark took the seat and regarded his subject.

"I know, I know." Nygma sighed. "Orange isn't my color." He stretched and sat up. "What can I do you for, newsman?"

Playing games with the Riddler would have been pointless. What Cat and Lois called the 'Summer Gleeson approach' would have to do.

"Why did you try to kill Superman?"
Nygma heaved a huge, theatrical sigh. “‘Fraid I can't tell you much about that particular venture of mine. Very hush hush."

"Had to sign an NDA?"

"I was speaking figuratively."

"Of course." Clark made a note. Innocently, he added, "The gun addition to the cane is new."

The Riddler inclined his head. "Thank you for noticing."

"Did you and Penguin swap some tricks of the trade? Or conduct a straight up trade: You design an underground maze on his dock-side property, he builds you a bullet-firing cane?"

Riddler gave Clark a wide-eyed look. "Last I heard, Oswald Cobblepot was running a legitimate business."

Clark made another note.

"Shooting someone without even asking them a riddle doesn't seem like your style," he continued. "Neither does holding a bunch of socialites hostage, outfitting one of them with a bomb, and specifically requesting Superman come save them.” Clark tilted his head. “Aren't you, Penguin, and the others supposed to be obsessed with Batman? That wasn't my question,” he added when Nygma opened his mouth to offer a quick retort. “I want to know how long you’ve been working with Lex Luthor and Cobblepot. And why.”

Riddler smiled slightly. "She said you'd show up with more answers than questions."

She? Did Luthor use Mercy as the go-between? "Who's 'she'?"

Nygma crossed his arms. Clark was losing him.

"Why don’t you ask me a riddle, Dr. Nygma. Put some thought into this one, though; the one you gave Superman was far too easy. Punch someone and they bruise; when the moon won’t wax, it wanes. ‘Bruise Wane’? That's not a riddle; it's barely a pun."

Nygma threw up his hands. “It was off the cuff!”

“Why are you going after Superman?” Clark snapped.

After a thoughtful moment, the Riddler said, "I was offered a good deal."

Clark's eyes narrowed. "How good?"

"Too good to be criminal."

Something about that phrase made Clark write it down.

“Where did you get the explosives?"

“From a generous benefactor."

Another note. "And how did Luthor get his hands on a Joker bomb?"

"I didn't say 'Luthor'."
Clark tapped his pen against his knee. "Why is this generous benefactor supplying you? Doesn't he want to kill Superman himself?"

"Killing Superman would be too easy," Nygma said.

The rest of the exchange was similarly vague. Clark realized he would have to flesh out his story during his interview with... Bruce.

He was dragging his feet down the hall to the exit, reluctantly texting Wayne’s assistant to confirm his appointment, when he heard a cackle a few feet away.

From behind his wall of bulletproof glass, the Joker watched Clark with his right arm propped up against the window.

"Didn’t get your scoop, hot stuff?"

Clark glanced around; his chaperone had moved ahead of him to the checkpoint and was busy inputting a ten digit pass code and answering security questions.

After double-checking that the guard would be suitably engaged for the next few minutes, Clark folded his notes into his pocket and gave the Joker his full attention. "Not really, no."

The clown’s smile grew impossibly wider. "What would you like to know?"

"What could you tell me?"

Joker leaned in and stage whispered, “Apparently, Lexy’s made some new friends."

“Like Riddler and Penguin?"

"To name a few."

"You?"

“Ah.” The Joker sighed with exaggerated melancholy. “I’m not exactly a joiner, country boy. When my invitation arrived, I told the big kahuna where she could stick it.”

"With a stick of dynamite?"

"Don't insult me. With a couple at least; I'm no rank amateur."

Mercy was at least half-cyborg, Clark reasoned. She would have easily survived the explosion without Luthor breaking stride; all his schemes would still be in play, and he could have taken the Joker's bomb design and replicated it.

The guard was coming up behind him. “Mr. Kent—"

The Joker pressed both hands and his face against the glass. “Tell Batsy 'hi' for me, would you, sweetums? Be a pet. Be a doll."

“We're not that close,” Clark said, pocketing his pencil.

The dark eyes glittering at him were more animal than human. “Word in here is he likes you. A lot.”

Clark snorted. “...I doubt that.” He turned to leave.

Joker tapped his chin thoughtfully. “Clark Kent. Smallville, Kansas. Now, Metropolis. The cheap apartment on the border of the baaaad side of town.” Clark paused on his way down the
corridor, glancing over his shoulder. In front of him, the guard kept walking.

"You should be more careful," Joker continued. "Big Blue can't be everywhere and Batsy's only a man—breakable in ways I alone have had the deepest pleasure of uncovering." Watching Clark out of the corner of his eye he added, "And even if the World's Dimmest can watch you like a pair of mismatched hawks, doesn't your dear, sweet, old mother still live all alone in the middle of Nowheresville?"

Clark's face stayed neutral. "What do you want, Joker?"

The clown sprawled dramatically onto his bunk. "Want? Nothing. I'm just playing the long game, moving the pieces where I can. I like to see what they do when I start cracking them open. So does Batman, if he'd just own up to it." His voice had dropped into a dark mutter.

"'Long game'?

"Chaos, hayseed, chaos. Keep up!" When Clark just watched him warily, the Joker let out a cry. "You can't lose if you never stop playing, don't you see? Just ignore the rules until one of you dies. Probably Batman, since he just won't kill me." The Joker actually looked put out by this, but quickly recovered.

"Chaos works a lot like a mental illness, you see: You stave it off with poison pills and whining sessions with sentimental quacks; with the right foods that taste like sawdust; with proper, monotonous exercise; and with all manner of useless, pseudo-scientific hippyisms. 'Believe in yourself' and 'You're only as safe as you want to be'..." Another cackle. "But the sickness... It's always there, watching you in the gap by the door, under your bed, between the curtains, on the other side of the mirror, waiting for you to slip up so it can reach out, grasp you by the ankles, and drag you screaming back into the shadows..." He started howling with laughter. "And it's contagious, which very few people know. Infect one person and the whole team comes down like a house of cards."

The guard was pulling on his arm, but Clark was rooted to the floor.

"What are you saying?"

Joker made a deep frown-y face. "I'm disappointed, newsman; I expected Batman's main squeeze to have a little more on the ball. The last one certainly did; for the first few days, anyway, before she reverted to vegetable."

Clark hadn't realized how close he stood to the cell until his own breath misted across from the Joker's on the glass. "Get to the point."

"I've been in here almost three weeks," the clown hissed. "I've never been in Arkham longer than three days without a reason. Want to guess what this one is?"

"Extra beefy security guards," Clark said dryly.

The Joker's machine-gun laugh fired against the bulletproof glass. "The only reason I'm vacationing at Gotham's swankiest spa, sweetheart, is to avoid what's out there."

He looked Clark up and down. "You're so puny, you and Batboy and Superdork; so weak. There's nothing any of you can do but watch and wait and take it on your big, fat chins when the blow finally falls." Watching Clark's face, his expression filled with false compassion. "You think if you can just puzzle out Lexy's smarty-pants scheme, you can save everyone—'specially Superman, since he's not doing so hot these days—but, your opponent has an illness—my favorite kind, as it happens
—and this sickness learns. It probes your weaknesses, your secrets, your dumb little hopes... And it sticks a knife in them and twists. It’s always, always coming for you because it likes watching you bleed all over the floor.

"Next to that? You're just a man. Pathetic. Useless. And the best part," Joker crowed, "even if you do somehow take down Lexy and the She-Devil, another pair of pantsuits will just step in to take their place. Only this batch will be stronger. Smarter. Better. Or worse, depending on your point of view!"

Clark finally let the guards tow him out into the dusky Gotham air and drop him onto a bench far from the Arkham wall. He just wanted to sit on the outside and remember how it felt to breathe open air.

His phone dinged. Bruce Wayne’s assistant had confirmed his interview in an hour and a half. Clark dropped his face in his hands.

“You’re not useless,” he said out loud. Immediately, his mind reproduced in razor-sharp clarity the feeling of the Joker's bomb going off in his arms. Of dropping out of the sky through a roof, then onto the sidewalk beneath the octopus monster. He remembered the bitterness of bile in the back of his mouth and lying at the foot of the Kryptonite pile, gasping for air.

“You're not useless.”

When was the last time he had used super speed? Or lifted anything heavier than a car? This morning he hadn't been able to X-ray the Chief's office; hadn't seen Lois leaning across the desk...


He saw Batman sitting across from him at the League meeting: You're incapacitated, Superman. And then in the alley: Stay out of Gotham. He saw the blood dripping from the suit. Saw it on his hands when he tried to mop it up with his ripped shirt.

"I'm not..."

He picked up a rock by the side of the bench and squeezed. His fist unclenched slowly. The rock hadn't crumbled. His fingers were an angry red and they hurt.

"...Shit."

The interview with Bruce Wayne had Clark anxiously pacing outside Wayne Tower an hour before he was due to appear. When he stepped out of the elevator, steeling himself for his first encounter with Bruce after his extraordinarily embarrassing phone call, Wayne's assistant waved him inside immediately. As he entered, Bruce came around his desk to greet him before the door had even shut.

“Clark!”

“Mr. Wayne.”

“Bruce, Clark, please; and next time, just call me. You don't have to go through my assistant for anything.”
Clark winced. "I'll keep that in mind next time the Planet needs another interview with its owner. Shall we—?"

Bruce moved in close. "I'm all yours." His voice had dropped an extra octave and it was doing funny things to Clark's insides.

Ignoring the way his heart jackrabbited, Clark maneuvered around Bruce and took a seat on the large couch by the well-stocked coffee table; it was laden down with a steaming carafe and a tray of serving accoutrements.

Clark fiddled with his pencil and pulled a notebook from his bag. "I have a few questions concerning the events at the penthouse."

"Of course." Bruce took a seat practically on Clark's lap. "Café au lait?"

Blushing would be unprofessional. "Oh. Sure. Thanks."

Bruce poured him a cup. Their fingers brushed when he handed over the saucer and he gave Clark a long, suggestive look.

Flushing again, Clark cleared his throat audibly. "If you could just give me a rundown of the events that led up to Riddler's hostage taking..." He could feel Bruce's smoldering gaze on him. It was almost as distracting as his migraine. "It would be very helpful to create a timeline. Of events. For our readership."

He hated how there was the slightest uptick to his voice. And he hated that he couldn't stop staring at the way Bruce’s shoulders filled his shirts and his long legs fit his rather tight trousers.

Jesus Christ, why did Bruce have to own so many perfectly tailored, black suits.

"Tell me about the fundraiser," Clark croaked. "What time did it start?"

"Around eight, so, everyone showed up at ten."

"When did the Riddler arrive?"

"Around ten to four. The party was just starting to wind down."

"How did he get in?"

"He had a keycard." Bruce’s eyes were practically glowing. "Came in through the executive elevator."

Clark raised his eyebrows. "I thought your security was impregnable."

"It is now."

"You upgraded after only... a few days?"

"Security is important to me," Bruce said. "I want guests to feel safe when they come to my parties. It’s easier to ask for money for charities if there are actually people present."

Clark couldn’t hide a slight smile and saw a flicker of something on Bruce’s face that made his mouth water. Turning away, he took a sip of coffee.

"Why did Riddler strap the bomb to you? Because you were the host?"
Bruce shook his head. “He asked for a volunteer.”

Clark’s pen jerked on the page. “What? And you just--?”

“Better me than someone else.”

Clark dropped his head in his hands, giving up on note-taking entirely. “Jesus fucking Christ, Bruce.”

“Then Superman dropped in, saved me, and, by extension, helped raise five times the estimated amount for the half-way house. Celebrity appearances are huge money draws, after all.”

Clark grabbed Bruce by the collar. “Don’t. Joke.”

“I never joke about fundraisers.” Bruce was very close and his eyes looked very soft. His lips looked softer.

Clark could feel his outrage and fear sliding dangerously into something else; something burning and a little wild. “You fucking asshole,” he whispered, fingers sliding into Bruce’s hair to cup the back of his head, “you stupid, total moron—”

Bruce kissed him and Clark suddenly remembered what colors looked like, what scents were, how his head felt when it wasn’t full of cobwebs. The groan he uttered was completely involuntary, but the hands that came around Bruce’s waist were not.

“ Fucking finally,” Wayne hissed, starting to shed his shirt and jacket. “I’ve been thinking about this all day—”

“Really?” Clark gasped, giddy at the touch of bare skin under his fingers. “Perry only told me this morning. I had to wrestle the story away from Lois.”

“What the hell are you talking about.” Bruce was making quick work of Clark’s tie. “I only agreed to speak to the Planet because I knew they’d send you.”

And then Clark remembered he was wearing his Superman suit under his clothes.

He grabbed Bruce’s wrists. “Wait.”

“What? You want to make out some more?”

“I can’t…” Crap! Crap, crap, crap! “I have a job to do. This interview is important.” It was, actually. Now there were two reasons that made this a bad idea.

“Oh, come on.” Bruce sounded impatient. “You just told me you snatched this story from your best friend—”

“—to see the Riddler,” Clark said the same time Bruce said “—to see me.”

Clark’s eyebrows shot up. “Wow.”

He was still holding Bruce’s wrists away from his shirt; but with questionable super strength, he wasn’t going to risk Bruce getting loose and making short work of his buttons. He stood quickly.

Bruce stared at him in confusion. “I figured you got all the information you needed from Superman.”

“You mean like the part where you kissed him? Twice?” Three times, but that last one was a hazy
dream at best. Clark could barely remember anything beyond some light groping and a few gasped
expletives. From the look on Bruce's face, though, Clark might as well have slapped him. He
smacked himself on the forehead; his stubborn headache protested.

“I’m sorry. It’s none of my business, since we're not dating.”

Bruce glanced down at his hands.

Then Clark groaned. "Because you're dating Selina Kyle." Reason number three. "Why the fuck are
you trying to seduce me when you're dating Selina Kyle?"

“Clark—"

“No.”

“But—”

“No, Bruce.” It was surprising how firm that sounded. “I won’t do this with you. Not when you have
a girlfriend—”

“She's not my girlfriend.”

Clark threw up his hands. "You shot me down so you could go to the Benefit with her. And then
you made out with Superman..." His gut plummeted. "You're not actually interested in me, are you.
I'm just... available. I am such an idiot."

The realization hurt something fierce. He had thought Cat's articles had been exaggerated: Eternal
playboy Bruce Wayne, a scandal a week, a partner a day, had to be a lie because the man Clark had
come to know had seemed sincere; compassionate; smart; funny. And he cared viciously about his
city and its people. Someone that kind wouldn't play fast and loose with people's feelings without
specifying clearly that their intent was casual.

But what did it matter anyway: Clark was wearing his stupid, useless Superman suit; the
interview was a bust at this point; and Selina Kyle, Bruce's not-girlfriend, was still in the picture
somehow. He needed to extricate himself from the room before Wayne got handsy again and Clark
lost the ability to think with his few remaining brain cells.

Meanwhile, Bruce was standing, shrugging on his shirt. He caught Clark’s hand and tilted his chin
forward. They were about the same height, Clark realized dizzily, senses overwhelmed by Bruce's
fathomless blue eyes.

"Clark," Bruce murmured, "I am very interested in you."

Holy crap, that voice. Clark's brain could only grasp the meaning of the words by the way they made
him feel: weak and hot and breathless and so very, very desperate.

Oh, fuck it all.

Clark had his hands on Bruce's belt buckle when the handle on the door turned and a stunning blond
woman stepped into the room in a tight, black sheath dress. Clark froze; the woman stared.

“Bruce.”

“Selina.”

Bruce stepped away from Clark. Ms. Kyle took in their rumpled clothing and Wayne's state of
undress.

“I take it we’re not leaving for the party now?”

Fixing his belt buckle and buttoning up the rest of his shirt, Bruce said, “I need another hour, please. But, let me introduce you to Clark Kent.”

“Well, you know how much I love meeting your beaus of the week,” Selina drawled. Clark felt the quip like a punch in the gut.

Junior prom. Whitney had come back to Smallville unannounced and Lana had cancelled her date with Clark five minutes before he had gone to pick her up. He had never blamed her, of course; Lana had always loved Whitney and she had made it clear to Clark that they would never be more than friends.

As Clark had watched everyone else pair off for the last dance, he had recalled all the times he had abandoned his friends to save strangers across town; avert a minor Kryptonite disaster; stop someone from abusing their new, horrifying powers.

I deserve this, a cold part of him had said as he sat alone on the bleachers, watching his friends slow dance together.

The meteor shower had been his fault and therefore his responsibility. He had sworn to protect people from his identity, from his powers, and from the glowing green radioactive rocks from his home world. But that protection had always meant deceiving those closest to him; anytime he had failed to keep them at arm's length, someone had inevitably wound up wandering into the line of fire and getting injured or affected by Kryptonite.

At some point, Clark had started building a façade, laid brick by brick with lies explaining his tardiness (he was a lazy, late sleeper), his absences (he had poor health and a lot of sources to cross-check at odd hours), and his general unreliability (he was a space cadet; nice guy, but not very bright). He was mild-mannered, push-over Clark Kent. Wimpy, except when he put on a cape. Honest, except when he lied. A Boy Scout, except he had never earned the title. It was why he hadn't spoken to Chloe or Pete or Lana in years. It was why his relationship with Lex had... And it was why he had never asked out Lois all those years ago, before he had agreed that they made better friends. He had been safe, he thought, for years; until he met Bruce.

Now, really, engaging with Bruce would just put him in danger. Yes, Clark was wearing the Supersuit; yes, he had an important job to do; and yes, Selina was still in the picture somehow. But the real reason to stay away from Bruce should have always been that, if Clark really cared about him, he would do anything to keep Bruce safe. Including lying. Including leaving.

I deserve this.

Clark held out his hand. “Nice to meet you, Ms. Kyle.”

“And you, Mr. Kent,” she said, taking it.

Bruce was still talking, but Clark had already moved out the door, past Selina. She reached for him, but he side-stepped her, walking rapidly down the corridor past the assistant's desk toward the elevator. How stupid was it that he had found someone who liked him—not Superman with his powers, his mystery, and his exotic alienness, and not boring, plain Clark Kent either—but that secret identity that lived in between the two in eternal limbo, never quite appearing to anyone until, apparently, Bruce. (And sometimes Batman, now that he thought about it.) And he had still managed
to screw everything up.

Someone grabbed his elbow when he reached the elevator. Clark kept his eyes lowered. Bruce’s shirttails were untucked, his hair was mussed, and he looked endearingly bewildered. "What about the interview?"

Selina Kyle was watching them from the office doorway. Clark shook off Bruce's hand.

"I've got enough for my story," he said. "You should spend the evening with your girlfriend."

The elevator opened and Clark stepped inside, punching for the lobby.

"She's not my girlfriend," Bruce repeated, exasperated.

Clark met his eyes. "That's none of my business, Mr. Wayne."

The doors closed between them.

The next morning when the boss sat down to work, Clark's article, complete with quotes from the Riddler, Superman, and Bruce Wayne himself, lay primed and spell-checked on Perry's desk. Underneath the stapled pages was Cat Grant’s blurb on Bruce Wayne and Selina Kyle’s fashionable attendance at an Animal Aid fundraiser. The photograph Cat had chosen featured the couple dancing, bodies pressed close, with Bruce Wayne’s hand resting on the small of Miss Kyle’s bare back.

Clark skipped his check-up with Leslie so he wouldn’t see her purse her lips with worry when she found out he had grown even weaker, gotten even slower, and still sported obvious bruises under his uniform from his encounter with the Riddler. Instead, a few hours after he finished his work at the Planet, Clark decided to check on a lead from Metropolis to Gotham.

Nothing panned out. The truck suspected of shipping Kryptonite turned off the Gotham expressway heading for Central City instead. Superman wound up hunched over a gargoyle, sifting through his mental notes.

“Stumped?” Batman had crept up behind him.

Clark rubbed his aching forehead. “I followed a lead on a possible Kryptonite delivery from Metropolis, but it’s not going to Gotham.”

“Hm.”

“I still want the Flash to check it out, since it’s his city. Might be another Lex Luthor plot.” The idea was not a pleasant one. Clark ran his fingers through his hair. That one, stubborn curl flopped back out of place onto his forehead.

“Why Gotham?” he muttered. “And why are the Penguin and the Riddler in on this? Even Joker knows more about what’s going on than I do and he's another one of your villains—as much as any of us have proprietary claim over criminals in our cities—"
“Hm.”

“They’re coming after me through you. Why? And why is Luthor lending everyone Kryptonite and using Joker’s bombs? He’s always said he wants to kill me himself, alone. He prides himself on his cognitive superiority, his flawless strategy; accepting help like this would be beneath him in his eyes.”

Clark raked his fingers through his hair in frustration. After watching him for a beat, Batman asked, “Would you like to get coffee?”

Immediately Clark’s mind jumped to Bruce, mouth against his palm on the rooftop of the *Planet*. He cleared his throat noisily. “Know any good all-night cafés in Gotham that serve vigilantes?”

“A few.” Batman eyed his clingy, spandex outfit critically. “Do you have a wallet hidden in there somewhere?”

“…No.”

Bats muttered, “You couldn’t even smuggle *raisins* in that suit.”

“Why would I want to smuggle raisins?” Clark asked, genuinely perplexed.

He was ninety-nine percent sure Batman rolled his eyes. “I’ll buy this round. Next time we’re in Metropolis, it’s your turn.”

The thought of introducing Batman to *Bippo’s* was endlessly appealing. “Deal.”

Batman’s diner also served pie. Superman gleefully ordered a slice of the strawberry rhubarb while Batman grumbled, forking over another bill at the register.

Clark was unrepentant. “I saw your wallet; it’s straining at the seams.”

Batman tucked his money back into his belt. “Next time I’ll be sure to have my bat credit card on me. ...Oh, *wait. No*, because that would be *moronic*."

Clark laughed. Batman didn't smile, but he did look slightly less dour.

Under the bemused eyes of the late-night café regulars, Clark and Bats took seats at one of the booths near the back. Clark started mixing in creamer. Batman, unsurprisingly, took his coffee black with no sugar.

"How's your side-kick?" Bats asked after his first sip.


Batman gave him a look.

Clark grimaced. "Just boy trouble. Don't ask."

A short, pointed silence.
Setting down his mug, Clark scowled. "Do the words 'don't ask' not mean the same in Gotham?"

"Depends. Do 'stay out' and 'warn me next time you're in town' mean different things in Metropolis?"

"You are aware that those are two conflicting concepts, right?"

Batman simply sipped his coffee.

Clark conceded with a reluctant sigh. "Just the usual relationship conundrums," he said. "Does he like me or does he like her, what's the point of trying to make it work since we'll probably just break up anyway, rich boys are idiots—"

"Is that a significant negative factor? His wealth?"

"Not really," Clark said. "I'm just being facetious."

Batman seemed to have descended back into brooding mode. "But Clark is still interested in this... 'rich boy'...?"

For a second or two, Clark simply tried to not fall out of his chair. "Bats," he said wonderingly, "is this your way of asking me if Clark is available?"

Batman nearly dropped his coffee mug. "What?"

Clark threw up his hands. "I had to ask! Why else would you care?"

"It's called being polite."

"Joker implied during the interview that you were interested in Clark," Superman needled. "The phrase 'main squeeze' was used with minimal irony."

Batman scowled. "As revelatory as this might seem to you, inmates at Arkham Asylum are not the most reliable sources of information."

Clark couldn't stop the grin spreading across his face. "You may not want to date him," he said, "but you do like him. That rich boy comment... I just saw your wallet. You're nervous he won't like you."

"Don't be an idiot."

"Because you like him."

"He's untrained. Undisciplined."

"You want to be his friend."

"He's even more blindly reckless than you are—which is saying something."

"Don't worry," Clark said. "He thinks you're cool beans too."

Batman groaned. "'Cool beans'?"

Clark couldn't stop smiling. It was tearing his face in half. *Batman didn't hate him*—not all of him, at least. Clark took a gulp of coffee, made a face, and fished through the sugar packet tray. Batman, meanwhile, grumpily stirred his brew.
Clark opened another packet of Sweet ’n’ Low. "So, how are things between you and Nightwi—?"

“How’s your Kryptonite poisoning?” Batman interrupted.

Clark gave Bats the side-eye, but let the evasion slide. “It’s much better than it was,” he said, “but… It still affects my abilities. I can fly, but my speed’s skewed, my hearing and vision go from zero to a hundred for no reason, and sometimes I just get headaches or the shakes out of nowhere.”

“It sounds like you have a cold.”

“I don't think Kryptonite poisoning works like the flu.”

Batman stirred his mug absently. “Maybe, but you should still take a few sick days. Drink some soup. Watch some daytime television. Flush the Kryptonite out.”

“Sure.”

After a beat, Batman said, "Leslie mentioned you skipped an appointment this afternoon."

"I had to follow up on my lead."

"When you're still sick?"

Clark sighed. "I can't just sit on the sidelines, Bats. I need to keep up with this case. Being in the dark drives me crazy." He thought about what the Joker had said about getting dragged screaming into the shadows. “I’m much better than before. It just feels like I’m digging through cotton candy to summon a coherent thought sometimes.”

“Get some sleep tonight. Aim for ten hours. Then go see Leslie tomorrow and let me know if you have any new theories—”

“Stop coddling me,” Clark snapped.

Batman slipped back into his standard offensive rigidity and Clark felt his face flush with shame. He knew from the way the café had grown quiet that his voice had carried.

Smile, he thought.

Be Superman.

It was hard when his body ached and his head throbbed.

Clark stood. “Sorry,” he said quietly. “Thanks for the pie. I think I'd better—”

But Batman got up too. “We’ll take this to go,” he told the cashier pointing to Clark's untouched dessert. To Superman he said, “I’m coming with you.”

A few minutes later, leftovers in hand, Clark flew up to a rooftop. Batman followed via grapple gun. They regarded the Gotham skyline for a minute before Clark shrugged. “I'm sorry. I've been a pain lately and—”

“It’s fine.”

But Clark shook his head. “You’re worried about what’s best for the team. I shouldn't be blowing up at you for that.”

“I’m worried about what’s best for you too.”

Squinting, Clark said, “Because of how my attitude affects the League.”

Bats folded his arms. “No,” he enunciated, “I'm worried because of how the Kryptonite is still
affecting you."

Clark finally faced Batman. “You're taking me out to coffee and... treating me to pie. Asking questions about my 'side-kick' and my health...” Click, click, like the tumblers on Penguin's safe. “You're trying to be nice to me... because you want me to feel better. Because you like me.” He felt like a genius. “You're not being a condescending asshole, you're just terrible with feelings.”

Batman grumbled, but he didn’t leave and that was answer enough.

Clark wasn’t sure where to put his hands. He finally settled them on his hips, carry-out pie swinging from its plastic bag against his thigh.

“Back on my home planet, my name was Kal.” He cleared his throat. "I call you Bats, so, it seems fair..."

Batman’s voice was disbelieving. “‘Kal’?”


“Kal-El of Krypton,” Batman murmured thoughtfully.

“Not very alien sounding, I know.”

“Well, we can’t all be named ‘J’onn J’onzz’.”

Clark snorted, then burst into loud laughter. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Batman smirking at him.

Someone smashed a huge pane of glass ten blocks away. Like a hunting dog catching a scent, Clark's head jerked up at the sound of the crash.

Batman straightened. “What?”

“Bank robbery.”

“In progress?”

“Just getting in.”

“Probably the National. It's a new branch.”

“Not up to Gotham security standards yet?”

Batman was already checking his grapple lines. “Contact me if you find anything on Luthor.”

“You too.”

"Sure. And Kal—"

Sighing, Clark waved a hand at him. "I know, I know: 'Stay out of Gotham.'"

"I was going to say, 'Stay out of trouble.' And warn me before you show up in Gotham again—" He swung down onto the sidewalk below, "—since we're working this case together."

"Next time you're in Metropolis," Clark blurted, "I'll treat you to Bibbo's."

Reeling in his line, Bats tensed for some reason. "They do have nice coffee," he admitted fondly.
They both left in opposite directions but Clark paused over one of Gotham’s bridges to watch the Batmobile swerve rakishly around a corner and blast down the main road, cars and pedestrians skittering out of its way.
Batman was going to kill him.

As Clark felt the wind whip past, making his cape snap and his eyes water, he contemplated the mirror factory roof rapidly approaching from below. Off to the side, he could see the Justice League looking up at him from the street. He was still too far away to determine exact expressions, but there was no doubt in his mind that Batman's glare was currently drilling holes through his skull.

The roof of Reflections had a skylight. In a split second before impact, Clark reasoned that it would be easier to pick glass shards out of his skin later than try not to concuss smashing through a concrete wall.

"He is definitely going to kill me," Clark murmured right before he crash-landed through the ceiling.

Almost an hour previously, when Clark had arrived at the Planet, everyone had been crowded around the wall-mounted office wide screen television.

"Early this morning, Mirror Master abducted the Flash." Iris West, reporting from Central City, sounded unusually affected. "He has stated that if Superman doesn't show up at Reflections Ltd. within the hour, the Flash will die."

Clark immediately ducked into one of the office supply closets to call the League for a Zeta-Beam to Central City; he might have been able to fly, but super speed was still an iffy feature.

Batman answered comms first. "No," he said by way of greeting.

"I didn't say anything!"

"We're not sending you into Mirror Master's trap. End of story."

"I'm the one that told the Flash to check up on Luthor's suspicious shipment," Clark hissed. "What if Mirror Master has a Joker bomb?"

"You can't risk further Kryptonite exposure." Wonder Woman had joined the conversation.

Clark tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "What's a little more Kryptonite at this point?"

"You will never know," Batman said, shutting off his comm.

Wonder Woman followed suit after a quick, "We'll let you know how it goes, Kal." Choking on a moment of overwhelming rage, Clark pulled out his ear piece and crushed it between thumb and forefinger. He stood in the dark, plotting his next move while the door opened behind him.

"Clark?"

"Hey, Jimmy."
"...Why are you brooding in the supply closet with the lights off?"

"I'm figuring out how to get to Reflections within the hour."

Jimmy grimaced. "Well, good luck. Lois has been trying to book a flight all morning. No one's willing to travel in, not when everyone knows the Justice League's about to drop on Central City like a ton of bricks."

Clark turned. "Jimmy," he said, "you're a genius."

Superman could leap tall buildings in a single bound, as the saying went. So, Clark reasoned, What about cities? Yes, his super speed might have been down; but, his super strength, if he hit it at the right moment, might propel him fast and far enough to reach Central City all the way from Metropolis before his hour was up.

His take-off from Metropolis left Centennial Park with a sizable crater, but the fact that Clark had gotten off the ground at all was a source of great pride. Of course, that didn't change the fact that he had bellyflopped spectacularly on a stack of mirrors and made another Superman-shaped hole in someone's ceiling.

Groaning, Clark sat up amid the pile of rubble and shattered glass, both clear and mirrored, and brushed a rather thick layer of green dust off his chest. He sneezed, glancing around the grimy, dirty factory, and saw a motionless, red-suited figure curled up under a pile of mirror shards, more green dust, and debris. He had not been strapped to a bomb.

Clark scrambled over and felt the Flash's neck for a pulse. After he found one—faint and slow—Clark heaved his teammate over his shoulder and stumbled upright.

There was a light whirring and two man-sized industrial fans at the back of the room turned on. The green dust that had been hovering benignly in the air and coating every flat surface suddenly blew directly into Clark's face. He gasped, sputtered, and sank to his knees; the Flash slid to the floor. Around them, in the mirror shards, Clark saw distorted parodies of his blue-tinged face, his terrified, bloodshot eyes, and his hands scrabbling at his throat.

Fainting was almost a blessing.

When he woke up in the Watchtower sickbay, Clark cracked one eye open and saw Batman standing over him. With a groan, he tried to sit up.

"Flash, is he...?"

As if summoned, the Flash poked his head in the room and waved ecstatically. "I'm fine, Supes." He sounded cheerful, if a bit worried. "Wonder Woman busted in after you. Apparently, the bomb strapped to the door shut down the moment you dropped through the skylight."

"So, no one was injured?"

"You mean besides you?" Flash said, 'duh' heavily implied. "No."

Clark chanced a look at Bats and instantly regretted it. Batman looked like it was taking all his self-control not to wrap his hands around Superman's neck and squeeze.
Flash seemed to take in the tense atmosphere and started walking backwards toward the door. "Good to see you awake again, Supes."

"I'm glad you're okay," Clark said. "Thanks for, uh..." He glanced at Batman's stony face again.

"No problem." Flash beat a hasty retreat.

For a while, there was nothing but the quiet hum of the solar bed Clark was lying on. He waited warily for the yelling to start.

When Batman finally spoke, his voice was quiet. "Why do you never listen to me?" A sneer. "Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"Mirror Master had a bomb," Clark said. "During the Wayne Tower takeover, Bruce Wayne wound up with an non-diffusible explosive strapped to his chest. A human wouldn't have survived that blast, and I wasn't about to let anything like that happen to the Flash. And do you remember the blimp? Monday after the Brainiac fight? You couldn't diffuse that bomb either; and that was another one of the Joker's designs."

Batman's voice was still barely raised above a whisper. "You nearly died."

"Thanks, Dad. I heard that's part of the gig." His expression hardened. "Or do you think I've never noticed the cuts, bruises, and cracked ribs you regularly walk away with? I have X-ray vision."

Batman said nothing.

Clark fidgeted in the silence. "Honestly, I can't believe it actually worked," he joked.

"What?"

"My literal leap of faith."

"Let me get this straight." Batman's tone was dangerously flat. "Besides willingly hurtling into a Kryptonite-bomb combination trap, you jumped a distance of over two hundred miles without knowing if you would survive the terminal velocity landing?"

Clark flinched. "Well, when you put it like that..."

Batman definitely wanted to strangle him now.

Leslie poked her head in. "The Flash told me you were up."

Clark swung his legs over the side of his cot and stretched. "Am I cleared to go?"

"Are you serious?" Batman's incredulous rage made even Dr. Thompkins freeze in place. "You look like you've been through a wood chipper."

"I'll be fine in a bit," Clark said. "Remember last time? All I need is a weekend of R & R and I'll be up and at 'em again."

Bats hesitated. "You've been out all weekend. It's Monday afternoon."

Clark felt a sudden chill. "Probably just need some sun," he said.

"You've been on the solar bed for three days," Leslie said.
"Real sun."

"Superman—"

Clark stared sightlessly at his hands. Abruptly, he grabbed a steel scalpel off the side table and sliced it across his arm. He heard Leslie utter a gasp.

Blood pooled in the wound, dripped generously to the floor. The pain barely registered.

His laser vision wouldn't start. His X-ray vision fizzled. His super hearing faded in and out uncontrollably. Clark tried to hover, just lift himself up an inch; but, he couldn't.

“I can't fly,” he said hoarsely. “I can’t… I can’t…”

He squeezed the scalpel in his hand and felt it cut deep into his skin instead of crumbling into metal filings. Someone pried his fingers apart and extracted the knife, but Clark could only stare as more blood dripped to the floor.

He had been "normal" before. In a town saturated with Kryptonite and metahumans spawned in a radioactive meteor shower, there had been rare but unavoidable power drains in high school. But, it had been a long time since Clark's vulnerable teenage years. His invincibility and flight had become, in many ways, his defining features. It was comforting knowing he always had to measure his super strength and temper his super speed, that he seemed to possess indefatigable reserves, and that, on the rare occasions where he was low on energy, he could simply bask in sunlight and recharge.

His short breaths turned into gasps and his vision started to flicker. Batman was suddenly right in front of him, too close, always too close, and Clark reared away.

"Kal. Look at me. Kal."

Go away, he thought reflexively, attempting to stand on wobbly knees and numb feet. His legs wouldn't move.

Go away. Don't look at me. Please.

"In two minutes, this is going to be over." Batman knelt down next to him. "I'm not leaving you."

Clark reached out blindly and a bare hand—Batman's—took his. He stared at it with his narrow field of vision, felt the weight of it, the texture of the skin. He pressed it to his forehead. Batman’s palm was rough and warm and real, and Clark sobbed with relief.

His breathing eventually evened, shuddering into its usual rhythm, but he didn’t—couldn’t—let go of that hand.

“I didn’t expect you to have a panic attack,” Batman murmured sometime after Clark stopped having to gasp for air. Dr. Thompkins had left.

Feeling deeply ashamed, Clark said, “I didn’t either.” After a few more shaky breaths, he confessed quietly, “It’s been a while since I wasn't Superman.”

“You're always Superman.”

Clark smiled ruefully. “Superman isn't super without his superpowers.”

“This has never been about your abilities,” Batman said, grip tightening on his hand. Clark glanced down so Bats wouldn’t see him cringe. They stood simultaneously, and Clark wiped his face. There
were tears on his cheeks. He wished the ground would open up and suck him out into space.

“Kal.”

Clark wouldn’t look at him, but Batman reached out with his other hand and turned his head. They were about the same height, Clark realized. Neither had to slump or stretch to face the other; they met each other’s gazes as equals.

“If I’m more than my batarangs and John Stewart is more than his ring, then you are more than your super speed and flight and invulnerability.”

But Clark pulled back, mouth tight. “People need me to be more than just… me.”

“People are idiots. They don’t know what they need.”

Clark went to clean his cuts, but Batman brushed his hands away and did it for him.

Watching Batman fuss, Clark murmured, “After I step down, Wonder Woman will make a great permanent team leader.” He ignored the way his chest ached. Batman had taken off his other gauntlet and was pressing one of Leslie’s long sticky bandages across Clark’s forearm; his touch was surprisingly gentle. “I mean, she’s been great the last few weeks, she’s the second... well, now the most powerful in the group with the fewest weaknesses, she’s smart, decisive, compassionate... Plus, she doesn’t have a secret identity to protect, so, she’ll have more time to take charge of the—”

“Stop it.” Batman had finished dressing the cuts and pulled away. "Yes, Wonder Woman has been a great team leader, but so are you when you're not trying your damnedest to win a Darwin Award. The Justice League wasn't founded to be led by or composed of people with superpowers; otherwise, why would you keep trying to recruit me?"

“I’m not like you,” Clark said. “You're... a Bat-shaped ninja. Without my super strength, super speed, and invulnerability, I'm just...” Useless, Joker's voice said. "I’ve already dragged the team down twice. My 'insights' got the Flash kidnapped and you shot. X-ray vision and super hearing are the only powers I have left that still work half the time. As a bonus, my last relationship lasted barely a week. Even as a regular human, I’m not exactly thriving.”

Batman’s voice was firm. “You shouldn’t make decisions about leaving the League based off of this, Kal; first of all, it could be temporary—”

“I have Kryptonite in my lungs, in my blood, in my skin,” Clark whispered. "I can taste it in my mouth right now.” He swallowed; his throat stung. “I lied to you at the café. I’ve been getting worse since the explosion, not better.”

“That’s because you’ve been exposed two more times, refuse to take breaks, and still won’t listen to me when I tell you to stay put or at least call for backup—“

“I’m supposed to be your backup!” Clark shouted.

For a moment, he thought he was going to cry. Batman reached for him and Clark realized it would be so easy to lean in—

He fled. Batman didn’t follow.
Back at his apartment, Clark paced back and forth in front of the fridge.

“This insecurity isn’t doing anyone any good,” he muttered. “So, you can’t be in the Justice League anymore. And you can’t be Superman. You are still a reporter and you have to help your friends. You need to make yourself useful and investigate this case.”

But the League already had Oracle and Batman for that.

“Don’t think about them,” Clark ordered, eyes closed. “Think about what you can do. What specifically can you do to help?”

He still had the invitation to the Benefit Ball in his desk drawer at the Planet. During the years Clark had attended, Lex had always conducted his questionable business meetings in the back rooms where weapons, drugs, technology, money, and political power were traded like trifles. Clark had walked in on one of these get-togethers and it had been his last evening in Lex’s company.

By the time he went to bed, Clark had a plan of action: He would infiltrate the Benefit and find evidence of Lex’s designs on the Justice League while simultaneously avoiding Lex, Bruce Wayne, Selina Kyle, and the orgies.

He bought a very expensive, very smart, dark, tailored suit and finished all his due articles by Friday evening. The night of the Benefit, he made sure his new comm was turned off (for the fiftieth time), removed the bandages on his arm (the scalpel cuts were now thin, healing scabs), and took a cab to Lex’s extremely posh ‘country house’: a mansion on the outskirts of Metropolis with a breathtaking view of the skyline.

Clark held out his invitation and ID to the bouncer at the door, but the wall of muscle barely glanced at it. “Mr. Luthor’s waiting for you in the billiard room.”

So much for stealth. The rest of the guests were ushered into the ballroom (containing rows of free lube bottles and bowls of condoms) while Clark split off to follow a server through the dining room (condoms and lube), the sitting room (more condoms and lube), and the library (scrabble boards). Finally, he was bowed into the game room with the billiard table at its heart and the Luthor family hunting trophies mounted on its walls.

Lex was racking the balls for a game. “You’re just in time, Clark. Take a cue.”

Clark settled against the wall next to the taxidermied grizzly bear, arms folded. “I’m not really in the mood.”

Lex lined up his first shot. Something about this exchange felt off, and Clark had the distinct feeling he was being outmaneuvered already. Still, it would be better to go on the offensive with Lex anyway, even without a strategy. Any sign of weakness would lead to immediate, merciless defeat.

“Where are your arms dealers? Or are you meeting up with them later in the library to decide how much money it will cost to overthrow the Kaznian government?”

Lex shook his head. “I know you won’t believe me, but I’m no longer dealing in drugs or weapons. As of this year, everything I have done has been completely legal.”

Clark pretended to consider his point. “You’re right; I don’t believe you.”

Effortlessly, Lex shot a ball into the right corner pocket. His smirk was unnerving.

“Explain the deal with the Penguin, for instance,” Clark said. “You give him Kryptonite and he tries
to get rid of Superman. He fails, so you try the same thing with Mirror Master. What’s the story?”

“What do your reporter instincts tell you?” Lex asked, eyes on the game.

Clark watched him carefully. “You saw the effect the pulverized Kryptonite had on Superman during the android invasion. You decided to see if you could recreate the effect from the explosion. First, with the amount.”

“Yes.”

“And then, after a predetermined recovery period, with the consistency.”

“And there I found it—the easiest way to destroy Superman is to blow a handful of Kryptonian dust in his face, sit back, and watch.”

Clark felt sick. “Now that you’re done playing with him, are you going to kill him?”

“The point was never to kill him.” Another perfect shot in the right corner pocket; there was only the black eight ball left. “I just wanted to let him know that I can kill him. Whenever I want. Or, officially, the government can. Upper right corner.”

He made the shot, neatly.

“I doubt our government would openly sanction the torture and attempted murder of so public a figure, extraterrestrial immigration status notwithstanding,” Clark said dryly.

Luthor shrugged. “Maybe not all branches of government. But you can never be too paranoid in Homeland Security.”

Clark’s hands started to shake. “You have approval from the DHS to hire criminals and kidnap people… to kill Superman?”

“Vigilantes are criminals too,” Lex chided. “They’re hypocrites with superpowers. The U.S. government has grown tired of these free agents running around, redefining their rules; so, they asked for a kill switch. Just as a backup option, of course, and I was hired for the job. Now, I’ve got Superman’s number. The Martian’s will be next, then Hawkgirl, then Wonder Woman; and after that, I’ll tackle the Flash, Green Lantern, and Batman.” Lex racked up the balls. “Batman’s going to be easiest. No superpowers; just a nigh endless supply of batarangs, grappling hooks, and teenage cannon fodder.”

“You’re forgetting his sexy car.”

That got Lex to look right at him, finally, and Clark saw the leashed fury and something like hunger directed at him.

“Why are you telling me any of this?” he asked. “Am I supposed to be impressed that you’ve found a legal way to plot and execute multiple murders?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Lex was arranging the billiard balls in the rack. “I know you’re Superman.” The fire in his eyes was scalding, but Clark couldn’t look away. “Admittedly, Waller had to tell me; but, the moment she said it, I felt like this gut feeling had been confirmed. Now I finally know how you survived that car accident in Smallville.” He held out a cue. “So, Superman. Would you care to play me now?”

Clark swallowed but found his mouth was dry. Lex knowing his secret—plotting his death, standing
in the bullpen at the Planet with his breath warm against Clark’s face—it brought down the veil that had always hung between them. Clark’s head felt clearer than it had in weeks. He removed his glasses, squared his shoulders, and met Lex’s eyes in time to see the pupils blow wide. He felt in his bones the way Lex suddenly turned on. It made Clark feel naked, objectified, and generally uncomfortable.

Lex took a step toward him and Clark felt a thought rise from the dormant depths of his mind: Whatever the cost, he must protect his friends from this.

“Are you threatening me to stay out of your private affairs?”

“No. This is just an experiment conducted by the U.S. government. As long as you remain active, I will legally be allowed to seek out your weaknesses and, if necessary, exploit them.”

“If I disband the League, will you harm the others?”

Lex was close; his voice was a soft caress that made Clark flinch. “You have my word and the word of the United States government that, if the League disappears, the experiments will stop.”

Clark hesitated. “Lex,” he said, slipping out of his Superman persona, “I don’t have powers anymore.”

Surprise registered in Luthor’s eyes, fleetingly. “So, the dust didn’t just dampen them temporarily.” He sounded disappointed.

Clark opened his shirt. He wasn’t wearing the super suit underneath; it hadn't seemed worth it if he couldn’t even fly to anyone’s rescue anymore. The bruises from Riddler’s cane and the gashes from the bomb explosion were still visible on his chest.

Luthor looked defeated. “I’ll have to rate you on an even lower threat level, then.” A sigh. “Now you’re just a man. And without your secret, not even a particularly interesting one.”

Clark said nothing.

The tension, the anticipation, was gone from the room. Lex bent over to break his new billiard set. “Warn the other members of your club that unless they follow you into early retirement, I’m coming after them.”

Like with all other previous distractions, Lex had solved the mystery of Clark Kent, defeated Superman, and subsequently lost interest in both. It had always been his way, and Clark had seen it happen to others. Somehow, he had never envisioned Lex growing bored of him. And despite so many years of silence and bitterness, it made something old and forgotten ache in Clark’s chest.

Robotically, he put his glasses back on and left the dark room. The party was getting into full swing. People spilled onto the patio and into the gardens. Not for the first time, Clark found himself on the other side of an invisible wall: out there, blissful ignorance, artless lust, and privileged humanity danced and drank and laughed; and here he stood on the other side, watching them. Guarding them. In a way, he realized, also waiting for...

“Clark?”

And God had officially died. Clark turned, faced Bruce—no Selina Kyle on his arm, so she was probably waiting for him elsewhere—and took off in the opposite direction.

Bruce stepped in front of him. “Clark.” He was studying the dark, tailored pants and jacket,
impressed. “Nice suit.”

“Now’s not a good time.”

Sharp eyes met his. “Looking for Lex?”

“Just saw him, actually.”

Bruce’s mouth twitched. “Should I ask if he’s still breathing or would that make me an accessory?”

“He’ll live to ruin other lives,” Clark said, maneuvering around Bruce Wayne and his cloud of enticing cologne. “Excuse me.”

“Clark. Please.”

Clark hated that that ground him to a halt. “What?”

“It’s not like that, between Selina and me. We’re friends.” When there was no response, Bruce added, “The way you and Lois Lane are friends.”

Clark had nothing to say to that. He studied the carpet for lack of anything safer to stare at; the couples in the other room had already begun to congeal on the couches.

“I’m not… I’m not the playboy everyone thinks I am, but it’s a useful disguise,” Bruce explained. “Selina helps me maintain it, same as I maintain her façade as a well-to-do socialite. She’s not actually wealthy or a blue blood, but I make sure she’s invited to all the right parties. In exchange, she ensures that my status as a rake and a cad remains un tarnished. Or, unpolished, as it were.”

“And why would either of you need reputations in the first place?”

“We have our reasons.” Bruce sighed. “I won’t lie to you, Clark, but I can’t tell you the truth. I’m sorry.”

Clark closed his eyes.

Dammit.

How many times had he been on the opposite side of this conversation? And how many times had he wished someone would believe him?

“Alright,” he said quietly. “I trust you.”

He watched Bruce’s shoulders sag in relief and felt his own pulse pick up. “I have secrets too. Someday, I want to tell them to you.” And he would be able to, as well; with Superman dead, the League disbanded, and Lex Luthor disinterested, there would be limited danger to Clark Kent having a real, normal life with a real, exciting boyfriend. "But—”

“Not now,” Bruce said hoarsely. “Not yet.”

They were still standing a good few yards apart. Clark watched Bruce take a step forward, then hesitate.

“About Superman…” And here Bruce’s voice failed him for a minute. “I’m not… I’m sorry about what I said to you at the diner. Bibbo’s. He’s not arrogant.”

"Yes, he is," Clark said fondly. "But I appreciate the sentiment."
"I'm sorry I kissed him."

Clark shrugged. "I can't blame you," he said as lightheartedly as he could, "We weren't dating at the time, so it's not like you cheated on me. And everyone seems to be hot for Superman."

Their eyes met and Clark forgot how to breathe. "It felt like cheating," Bruce whispered and Clark heard the raw edges in his voice. "I wanted him to be you."

Clark didn’t remember moving, but suddenly he had Bruce in his arms, Bruce’s cologne in his lungs, Bruce’s hands on his waist, and Bruce’s lips moving furiously against his own. For a moment he thought he could fly again; there was that same swoop in his stomach and clenching of his heart, the same sense of falling without fear. He trembled, weak with the need of it, and heard Bruce’s thundering heartbeat pounding in his own blood.

He was free.

"Let’s get out of here," Clark gasped when they finally came up for air.

"We don’t really need to," Bruce said, jerking his chin over to the veranda. Already, six people were engaging in—

"I have a very strict no orgy policy."

Bruce looked mischievous. "You told me they were fun."

"You would bring up that stupid phone call," Clark growled, face heating. In response, Bruce tenderly kissed the furrow between his brows, the cleft on his chin, the corners of his mouth. After snagging one of the complementary bottles of lube and a handful of condoms, Clark led him down the hall, up the stairs, and into one of the guest bedrooms.

"I can’t believe we’re going to do this here," Clark griped, tugging off his tie. "I had standards, once."

Bruce’s smile was sweet but firm against his throat. "We could try to make it to your place."

"But I don’t think we’d make it very far up the driveway before—"

Clark slid one hand down the front of Bruce’s trousers and heard the words stutter to a stop. He started pulling down Bruce's suspenders and yanking out his shirt with the other hand.

Bruce pressed a half-moan, half kiss to his mouth. He had successfully stripped Clark to the waist.

"I’m sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry." His voice had taken on a ragged, guttural quality that sounded familiar, but Clark was too busy mouthing his way up Bruce’s neck and yanking down his pants to bother placing it. "I’m sorry I can’t tell you—"

Clark groaned and pushed Bruce onto the bed. He landed on his back with a thump, blinking and naked and very hard. Shedding his socks and his underwear, Clark moved to straddle him just as Bruce opened his mouth, presumably to apologize some more. Clark, looming over him, offered his fiercest glare.

"I trust you," he said. "Okay? Whatever it is, I trust you." He swallowed, pulling back a little. "Whatever your secret is, it can't be worse than mine..."

Bruce reached up, rested one warm hand against Clark’s cheek, thumb tracing the contours of his
lips. "I trust you too," he murmured before pulling Clark down for a kiss.

After scoring a ride to his apartment in the Wayne limo the next morning, Clark took a nice, long shower before Zeta'ing up to the Watchtower to update the League. Once assembled in the conference room, he told them about his encounter with Luthor.

Batman spoke first when Clark finished. “I’ve been hearing rumors that Amanda Waller is putting a team of life sentence criminals together to do her dirty work. Apparently, she’s expanding.”

“That’s not all,” Clark added. “Luthor... knows me.”

“Like, biblically?” Flash quipped.

Clark was facing Batman and merely heard a smack, Hawkgirl’s whispered half-threats, and the Flash’s muttered, “It was just a joke. Come on.”

“He knows my secret identity.” Clark clarified. “I told him I don’t have powers anymore.”

The Flash cackled. Even John Stewart’s shoulders relaxed minutely.

“And he believed you?” Hawkgirl said, grinning.

“Yes.” Clark took a breath. “Because it’s true.”

He still remembered that feeling in the billiard room, standing among the Luthor family hunting trophies faced with his own imminent destruction: He had to protect his friends. And if that meant swallowing his pride and bowing out of this game entirely, he would. Maybe Bruce had been right about Superman—the arrogance, certainly—but super-powerless, hard-working reporter Clark Kent couldn’t afford to be selfish or thoughtless; he didn’t have the powers to back up reckless plays. He would have to adapt, change into someone that didn't need Superman—to be Superman—anymore.

The team would adjust too. They looked shocked, now, a little scared, perhaps. But with someone as, well, wonderful as Wonder Woman at the helm with Bats and family as backup, the League would survive and thrive without him.

Clark took a slow, shallow breath. “I’m off Luthor's immediate list,” he continued. “He’s going after aliens first, metahumans second. Batman comes in dead last.”

“So...” Hawkgirl frowned. "He wants to take out the ones with the most powers first—"

“—to demoralize us,” Clark agreed; "but, it’s not going to work.”

“Seems to be working just fine so far,” the Flash muttered.

“He already made his first mistake,” Clark said, “and possibly his worst.” He couldn’t keep the smile out of his voice. “Can’t you guess?”

It was John who answered. “He underestimated Batman.”

Clark winked at him. “Bingo.”

“And what does that mean for us exactly?” Wonder Woman asked.
“It means,” Batman said, “that Superman and I will have time to come up with a plan while you bigger fish distract him.”

“Wait, me? Plan? I don’t know,” Clark said warily, taking a seat next to Hawkgirl. “My strategies haven’t exactly been working out lately.”

“Well, maybe if you told me about them beforehand…”

“We’ll leave it to you two,” Hawkgirl interrupted, sliding her face between Batman and Clark, cutting off their exchange. “Call us if you need anything.”

“Great. And Martian Manhunter.” J’onn glanced over at Clark, expectant. “Since Luthor said he was coming after you next, I want you on the Watchtower and out of danger until we find a way to solve this.”

“I will stay here, Superman,” J’onn promised. Everyone stood and, while the others left for the Zeta tubes, Manhunter headed for the monitoring station.

Now it was just Batman standing in the room with Superman.

“I have to ask,” Bats said once the others’ footsteps faded, “how exactly did you get Luthor to tell you all this?”

Shrugging Clark said, “He wanted to rub it in my face. That he beat me.”

He could practically hear the Batwheels turning. “And he told you this… last night?”

“Yes.”

“While you were at the Benefit?”

“Yes.” Clark tilted his head. “Is that relevant?”

“Did you see anyone else while… visiting Luthor?” Batman ventured.

Clark frowned. “No. Well, my boyfriend.”

"The one with whom you broke up?"

"Yeah. Yes," Clark said, trying to keep his face from spreading into an embarrassingly wide smile. "We got back together last night. I think we did, at least. We didn't really talk about it so much as…"

“As?”

Clark waggled his eyebrows.

“Ah.”

“Well, there was some talking,” Clark admitted, "but none of it was…”

“Relevant to this conversation.”

Clark couldn’t help himself. “You sure you don’t want me to give you a blow by blow, Bats?”

He had the satisfaction of watching Batman’s jaw slacken.

With Herculean effort, Clark resisted the urge to tease Bats further. "After I left Luthor's billiard
room of natural history, I ran into my boyfriend in the hallway," he recounted, "and, well, turns out his date for the evening wasn't actually a date so..."

Bats looked so immobile Clark thought he could have been carved out of black marble.

"I knew I was leaving the League; that I didn't have powers anymore," Clark explained, "Lex had just promised to leave me alone. I realized I could lead a normal life, be a man for the first time ever. And I could be with someone without worrying about how I was putting them in danger.

"But, running and hiding isn't going to protect the League long term. Won't even protect him. Pretending none of this is happening... It's not going to keep you safe. I need to stand with you against Waller and Lex and the U.S. government, too, if necessary." He sighed. "I can't stop being... I can't stop trying to help people. I might be limited in what I can do, but I've got to do what I can. So, I'm going to keep fighting. Helping you. Doing something. And when all this is over, once we've dealt with Lex and Waller, I'm going to tell him that I'm... that I was... Superman. And then he can decide whether I'm worth the risk." He fidgeted a little. Batman was still unresponsive. "And then I want to tell you who I am outside of the supersuit. If that's okay with you."

That seemed to jog something in Bats. "Me?"

"You," Clark said, grinning a little. "I'm sorry I haven't acted more like it, but I genuinely like you. You're extraordinary and grumpy and you care so much about everyone, especially your kids and your team mates. Even ungrateful, arrogant superheroes who call you names and ignore your advice and endanger... pretty much everything. Sorry. But, I'm grateful to you. And, I want to tell you who I am out of costume because when I retire as Superman, I want us to stay friends. Because I trust you."

Batman was looking at him as if he had never seen him before. "Clark Kent," he said suddenly, like it was a revelation.

Clark swallowed. "What about him?"

Batman said nothing; his mouth was still slightly open.

"He's already taken, I'm afraid," Clark said warily. "In case you're still interested."

"What are the odds?" Batman sounded neither surprised nor displeased. "Both of you scored boyfriends last night? That seems highly improbable."

"Well, the law of truly large numbers states that there is a sixty-three point two percent chance of one unlikely event occurring out of one thousand random events," Clark said, raising his hand to adjust glasses that weren't there. He quickly tried to disguise the motion by smoothing his unruly forehead curl out of the way and clearing his throat. "And given that, on average, the human brain encounters untold stimuli during a lifetime and has a tendency to selectively focus on the events that stand out while discarding those that don't, it's actually not..." He trailed off.

Bats was looking at him as if... Actually, his expression was hard to describe. Bewildered affection, perhaps, or fond disbelief. Regardless, Clark could feel his cheeks slowly warming.

"What?" he asked defensively.

Batman averted his gaze. "Nothing." Clark watched his throat working. Finally, Bats sighed and said, "What do you want to do about Luthor?"

Clark blinked rapidly. "Right." He leaned forward. "I want you to run a background check on Waller. Find out the precise depth of her involvement with the DHS. Something about this feels a
little too dark, even for the U.S. government.”

“You think Luthor’s lying?”

“No; but… I have a feeling…” Clark frowned.

“Picking through cotton candy again?”

“The only thing slower than my legs is my brain,” Clark complained. “I’m hoping that at least the reduced mental faculty is temporary.”

“You do sound better.”

“Cause I got laid,” Clark quipped. He watched with a certain amount of satisfaction as Bats twitched and scowled. It made Clark wonder if maybe the back alley chatter about Batman and Catwoman was just talk; Bats appeared easily startled by innuendo.

"I meant," Batman growled, "that you sound more grounded in spite of your current…issues.”

"I am terrified of disappointing people because I’m no longer Superman," Clark admitted. “But I would feel even worse if something happening to you—to the team—because I was too afraid to acknowledge my weaknesses.

"I will protect you all at any cost, whether that means retraining my body to fight like a bat-obsessed ninja, or stepping back from the front lines altogether." He sighed. “Sorry. Started monologuing again. We don't have time for this. I'll look at—"

“There's time.” Batman’s voice sounded slightly constricted. “I don’t mind listening.”

Clark shook his head. “You shouldn’t have to deal with my meltdowns; you’ve got your own problems.”

Batman said, a little more firmly. “I said I don’t mind.”

“…Oh?”

“It’ll be good for you to have someone with whom you can talk; by whom you can run ideas.”

“Oh.”

“Because then there's always someone who can stop you from doing anything too stupid.”

“Right.”

“Or there's someone to go with you when you go do the incredibly stupid thing. Because at least then you'll have someone with you who can help keep the side-effects of your horrible decisions to a minimum.”

That seemed to be the end of Batman’s speech.

Clark gaped at him. “Thank you, … buddy. That’s really… swell of you.”

There was a pregnant pause.

“‘Swell’? ‘Buddy’? Really?”
Clark threw up his arms. “I wasn’t expecting us to have a **moment.** One minute it’s, ‘You’re an idiot, Kal; get your shit together’ and the next it’s, ‘Oh, it’s fine, let your glorious hair down so it can flutter in the calming breeze of my sudden gusts of empathy—’”

“That is a gross exaggeration of both the nature of my offer and the length of your hair.”

“You’re a sap.”

“You’re an ass.”

“You’re **such a dad.**”

“You’re an idiot **Boy Scout.**”

Clark started cackling. After a moment, he said, "Same here, by the way. If you want to talk about a case or personal stuff… Which reminds me, how are things with you and Nightwi—?”

Batman stood. “I’m going to take a closer look at Waller and her affiliates. Robin can check the DHS.”

Clark rolled his eyes. “Right. You’re letting a ten-year old crack government encryptions?”

“He’s thirteen. It’ll be good practice for him.”

Clark snickered. **“Such a dad.”**

“Shut up, Boy Scout.”

Batman left while Clark rolled slowly to his feet, already making a mental checklist as he walked down the hangar: Stop Luthor. Find and destroy Kryptonite. Fist bump Batman.

And then take Bruce out for pie and coffee and, this time, hold his hand all through lunch.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you struggling to imagine Batman fist bumping anyone, I offer only this:
Lois was rifling through the paper piles on her desk when Clark strolled in on Monday. “Have you seen my Heidelberg notes?”

“No.” Clark joined her. “Notebook or loose leaf? If they're recent, they’ll be near the top.” It had taken him only two minutes on the job to master Lois’ sediment-based organizational system.


Abandoning his coat and bag on his desk, Clark started sifting through her papers. “What're they about?”

“The mysterious goings on at the Smallville plant,” Lois intoned, moving a pre-searched stack of notes to her chair. "The official story is that it’s being expanded to increase efficiency, but the factory hasn’t been producing farm equipment or fertilizer in almost a decade. All the present and former employees have had to sign NDAs; so, no one outside the fence actually knows what's going on in there. Heidelberg was my only source; he worked for LexCorp for decades and now he’s dying of cancer brought on by the experiments they were conducting. He's risking everything to come clean and I can’t find his statement.”

“Don’t you usually record your interviews on your phone?” Clark tried, moving his coat out of the way to make room for more of Lois' unsorted files on his own desk.

“My phone went missing last week. I had to buy a new one.”

Clark got a tingle in the back of his neck. “Lois,” he said, “cancel the interview.”

Shoulders sagging, Lois stopped pulling out the drawers in her desk. “It would be pointless now, anyway.”

“Let’s go visit Heidelberg.”

“‘Let's’?”

“Yes,” Clark said. “I’ve been on the fringes of a... conspiracy of sorts for weeks now and I think it may have something to do with your story.”

Lois scowled. “What did I tell you about stealing my bylines?”

“I won't; I promise. If you want to publish the article that ties the Flash's kidnapping to the Riddler at Wayne Tower, that's fine.”

"That's not..." Lois sighed. "I've just been tracing the Kryptonite from the power plant explosion back to Smallville in hopes of exposing Luthor for the corrupt businessman he is." With one last look at the papers on her desk, she whispered, "I'll take you to my source. But keep your lips buttoned; I’ve been referring to him by alias because I intend to keep him safe. He should be able to die in peace, at least.” Clark picked up his coat again and Lois slung her bag over her shoulder. "He's at the Smallville Medical Center.”

"I'll drive," Clark offered as they marched toward the elevator. "Call my mom en route; tell her we'll be spending the night at the farm."
Earl Jenkins—Heidelberg—was wide awake when they took their seats by his hospital bed. Lois took his hand; Clark gave him a nod.

“I’m sorry to come back here like this,” Lois said. “But I seem to have… misplaced your notes.”

Jenkins regarded Clark. “Who’s your friend?”

“This is Clark Kent, another reporter from the Daily Planet. He’s a local; you can trust him.”

“The Kent kid? From the Kent farm?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t you used to run around with Lex Luthor?”

“We all make mistakes,” Clark said lightly.

Jenkins gave him an introspective, bitter half-smile. “Some bigger than others.” He studied Clark’s face. “How can I help you, Mr. Kent?”

“Ms. Lane and I seem to have been working on the same case but from opposite ends,” Clark explained. “She mentioned that you know something about Luthor’s Kryptonite collection.”

Jenkins motioned for him to close the door, then adjusted the bedside remote so he could sit upright. Clark and Lois took out their phones and set them to record.

“I started working for LexCorp—back when it was named LuthorCorp—some thirty years ago,” Jenkins’ voice sounded tired but determined. “I was an engineer, mostly, but you don’t rise up the ranks of a multinational, billion-dollar business without some out-of-the-box thinking and initiative. I was brought to Lionel Luthor’s attention and recommended for a promotion. Lionel had another suggestion.” Jenkins’ brow furrowed. “He said I could run the plant in Smallville for twice the amount of money I was making if I moved immediately and didn’t ask questions. I had just gone through a nasty divorce and was ready for a change; Smallville seemed as good as any other place, so, I took the job.

“At first, it was just your regular parts plant. Harvest machinery, mostly; it’s farm country, after all. We built combines and tractors... Had a repair shop out back for customers who bought our brand. One day, we were told to build drills. Mining tools. Next, I was supposed to assign crews to find these glowing green rocks all over Kansas.

“We found tons of the stuff. Kept it stored in a warehouse on company grounds.

“Next, we were told to retrofit the factory floor into a lab. Teams of white coats poured in and started testing these green rocks; melting them, mixing them with other chemicals... They started using the resulting concoctions on animals. At that point, most people tried to quit; but, this wasn’t the sort of job you could just walk away from. Lionel Luthor made sure of that.

“Officially, LuthorCorp was expanding into fertilizers and the company couldn’t risk their top secret ingredients going public. Somehow, that justified turning a section of the plant into a prison: We workers and managers and scientists and security personnel lived on that new compound, ate the food in the cafeteria, and drank the water from the plant well. The fence along the perimeter grew
sentry towers with spotlights and guards with sniper rifles; and all the while, we were exposed to this mysterious meteor rock that, unbeknownst to us, emitted radiation through the walls of the storage sheds…

“When Lionel Luthor died, we assumed the nightmare was finally over. Turned out his son was even worse.

“The experiments graduated to human testing. Subjects had Kryptonite injected into their veins, filtered into their air, mixed in with their food and drink. The results were alarming. All subjects died, but enough developed... abilities to, in Luthor’s mind, justify further research.

“We witnessed phenomena that I cannot describe. You would have had to see them for yourself to believe half the things I could tell you.”

After a few deep breaths, Jenkins continued.

“The changes in the test subjects weren’t just superficial; the radiation from the meteor rock altered their very DNA. Often, their minds couldn’t adapt fast enough to process the extreme physical and psychological changes. People went mad or died almost immediately after showing any metahuman symptoms. The last one, a girl, died in my arms. By then, her hair had fallen out, her skin was bottle green and peeling, and she had lost her eyesight. She thanked me, in the end, for staying with her in that cold room. We had poisoned her,” he said, his voice breaking, “and she thanked. Me.

“Lex Luthor was furious with our inability to produce his desired results. He brought in a fresh team of specialists to start from scratch. He had acquired a unique DNA sequence which he wished to have analyzed, he said. It would change everything. This new batch of scientists worked around the clock; their results were apparently promising. Luthor sent them more samples, more human subjects. The research continued.

“As I mentioned, the warehouse where we kept the Kryptonite had never been properly insulated. A few years after the storage and experimentation started, plant workers and scientists alike started exhibiting symptoms of radiation poisoning. Bodies started dropping or, on occasion, busting out with new, terrifying powers. Unsurprisingly, we revolted and the gates came down. Even the guards joined us, since they too had been affected by the radiation.

“I was too sick to make it very far from the plant. As it turns out, my weakness was the key to my survival: Luthor had armed guards on the outskirts of town ordered to shoot anyone who made it to the river.”

After a shaky breath, Jenkins continued. “We did… awful things. Stood by and watched… We were afraid. But I’m dying now. What more is there to fear?”

Lois whispered, “Tell him about Cadmus, Earl.”

Jenkins closed his eyes briefly. “It’s the name of their latest project.” He blinked a few times, looking wan. “A few year ago, the plant got a new backer and supplier. She’s the one that secured DNA from several sources—”

“Seven in total.” Clark kept his voice steady while his heart raced.

“Yes.” Jenkins' brows knit. “How did you—”

“What’s her name?”

Jenkins wetted his lips, pale watery eyes bleak, but Clark already knew the name he would utter.
Martha Kent took one look at her two charges the moment they staggered into her kitchen and immediately herded them into the living room.

"I'm making tea," she announced. "Do you want green? Black? Oolong? I bought this Korean red blend that smells promising."

"Green tea would be marvelous," Lois ventured with a wary glance at Clark. "For both of us, I think."

Backing into the kitchen, Martha cast a wary eye on her son. Clark continued to sit in stony silence.

Simply holding the warm mug of tea was soothing. Clark took tiny sips under the watchful gazes of his mother and his best friend before Martha stood and picked up her purse.

"I'm going to buy groceries for dinner," she said. "Shouldn't take more than half an hour, but you never know. There's more tea in the kitchen if you want."

Lois smiled at her. "Thanks, Martha."

"Call me if you need anything." With one last worried glance at her son, she left.

Lois, who had been sitting in the chair across from the couch, reached over the coffee table to take the lukewarm cup of half-drunk tea out of Clark's hands. After a minute, she said, "Tell me about Lex."

The response was automatic. "He's a sadistic bastard." The insult lacked any emotional investment, sounding more like a flat statement than a condemnation.

"What happened between you two?"

Clark shrugged. "We were friends. Then we dated. It was a mistake, so we broke up."

"Who broke up with whom?"

"I would have thought this kind of interview was more up Cat's alley than yours," Clark snapped, finally meeting her eyes. He watched Lois' jaw tighten.

"You're my friend, Clark," she said quietly. "And you're hurting. I know because after I heard Earl's story for the first time, I sat right there on that couch just like you, letting my tea grow cold while Martha fussed over me." She paused. "Your Mom tried to distract me by talking about the farm. About the cows. About Jonathan. About you; but, I don't think that's going to help in your case. I barely know Luthor; to me, this whole thing was just further confirmation that he is a bona fide monster. But to you..." She grimaced. "To you this is personal."

Clark said nothing.

"You loved him," Lois egged.

"Fat lot of good it did," Clark blurted and instantly regretted saying anything.
Lois said gently, “This isn’t your fault, Smallville.”

“Yes, it is,” he hissed. His hands balled into fists and he resisted the urge to beat them against his knees. “Before he met me—”

*He bullied Bruce Wayne in school,* whispered an irritated voice that sounded like Batman’s. *That was well before he ever came to Smallville.*

“His father treated him like crap,” Lois argued. “Lionel Luthor acted like a boss with an employee he couldn’t fire rather than a father raising his only son. Everyone knew things were tense between them, but no one did anything because the Luthors were loaded. There’s this idea that abuse doesn’t count if you’re wealthy; like, who needs mental stability when you can buy a Jag and a degree from Yale?”

Clark twisted his hands in his lap and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Lex Luthor grew up aware that everyone knew and didn't care about his father’s abusive tendencies. So, he screwed around; crashed his fancy cars; dropped out of college so he could sleep his way through Europe. And when he got punished and assigned to this shitty position as plant manager in Nowheresville, Kansas, he ran into a teenager. Literally. With his car.”

That made Clark start. “How do you know—”

Lois bulldozed right over his sputtering. “This hick kid Lex nearly killed saved his life. Furthermore, he didn’t ask for any kind of reward; he didn’t make *any* demands. He was sweet and bright and he didn't care that Lex was a Luthor; he offered Lex everything he had ever wanted from another person: Affection. Acceptance. Kindness. So what if Clark Kent was just sixteen, still in high school, and a good nine years younger?”

Clark flinched. “We didn’t—”

“You probably thought he was *fascinating,* this worldly, well-educated, charming, handsome older man... And you were *his* favorite. What an ego boost that must have been.”

Clark looked away. “We were just friends. I was interested in someone else.”

“And how long after Lana dumped you at the prom did Lex wait before he pounced?”

The tense silence stretched until it became unbearable.

“We didn’t do anything... physical... until I was eighteen,” Clark whispered finally.

“That still would have have put you in high school. Half-way through senior year, to be precise.”

Dull-eyed, Clark just looked at her.

"Was it before or after your father died?”

There was a long, dangerous pause.

"After, ” Clark said quietly. “He was there for me.”

Lois gritted her teeth. “He *used* you, Smallville. You were a *child.*”

“Legal adult.”
“There’s a difference between an eighteen-year old and a late twenty-something,” Lois snapped. “He knew that. He took advantage of your inexperience and good nature to satisfy his own needs. How seriously did he let you consider a dorm room when you got into Metropolis University? How long did you commute every day between his country ‘house’ and the city campus? How many after-school clubs did you have time to join? How many friends could you make when he needed you every spare moment? What about your old friends from Smallville; how many of them did you see after high school graduation?” Clark moved to stand and she caught his arm. "He isolated you from everyone to make you as dependent on him as he was on you."

"I know," Clark whispered angrily. "I know, all right? I've had years to figure out that he didn't... that he never..." He sagged.

Lois let go. "You two took extended vacations to Europe and Asia. There were many weekends spent in Mexico, Brazil, Argentina... Canada, a few times; you flew up to Alaska at least twice."

"What's your point, Lois?"

"Lex was generous in ways that no one else in your life had the means to be," Lois said. "Do you feel you still owe him for the extravagance? Because he somehow bought your loyalty?"

It was hard to keep the tremor out of his voice. “I didn’t love him because he bought me gifts.”

There would never be a way of explaining his one-time, bone-deep affection for Lex without telling Lois about Superman. To everyone else during his high school years, Clark might as well have been invisible—kind, but not interesting. Lex alone had been intrigued: He had enjoyed being around this small-town farm boy, had thought Clark Kent on his own was special enough. The realization, years later, that Lex had only ever been interested in uncovering his secret—had never actually cared about Clark himself—had fractured something in his chest that made breathing difficult whenever he thought about it.

“Do you still love him?”

Clark shook his head.

“But you feel guilty for leaving him. Even after everything he did to you.”

Superman, once he had officially arrived, had provided Luthor with a magnified vision of everything he had ever desired. Instead of the love of one individual, Superman enjoyed the adoration of the masses. He had power—the kind Lex had been straining toward ever since he realized it existed—and he made being loved and needed look effortless.

“There was a U.N. bill,” Clark whispered. ”Lex was trying to gain favor among world leaders to get it passed. I walked in on one of his meetings with the ambassador of, among others, South Rhelasia. He was offering LexCorp weapons technology in exchange for votes.”

“The U.N.'s extraterrestrial citizenship scandal,” Lois murmured. “I remember the bill. If it had passed, Superman would have been captured and killed along with the Martian Manhunter, Hawkgirl, and quite a few members of the Green Lantern corps.”

“Studied first, probably,” Clark corrected hollowly. “Then killed. Then dissected.”

“The vote was shut down by the International Court of Justice on grounds of misconduct. You...” Lois smacked her forehead. “That’s how you got to work for the Planet so soon after college. You wrote the article that exposed LexCorp.” She looked impressed. "That was a smooth bit of writing, Smallville."
"Perry let me use a pen name." Clark’s expression was sardonic. “But, now do you understand? I didn't just betray Lex; I made him worse.”

“You saved a lot of people from execution," Lois said. "Including Superman. Not many capeless people can say that." With a softer tone, she added, "It was a brave, selfless thing."

Selfless. Clark flinched, recalling the rallies for the bill on the steps of the U.N. branch in Gotham. He remembered the rage in people’s eyes, the way they had looked at him as he walked up the steps to address their world leaders and beg for his life. He had felt fear like a festering wound in his rapidly beating heart. It had seemed as if every cell in his body had started screaming.

“He was already upset because I wasn't telling him... everything,” Clark said. "I'm very closed-lipped about my... private life."

"I hadn't noticed," Lois muttered.

Clark ignored that. "Superman winning over the hearts and minds of Metropolis and then not even using any of his power—at least not in ways Lex would respect—that simply compounded his problem. And then I dumped him and the article appeared and..." He picked up the cold mug of tea and drained it, then shuffled into the kitchen to brew some coffee. Lois followed him.

“You didn't make him do any of this, Clark,” she said. “You didn't force him to mistreat and kill those people at the lab. Yes, there were a lot of factors that contributed to his stress levels over the years, but I notice you left out his father, the gossipy press, and the hordes of people who befriended him for his money and influence, then sold him out at the first opportunity for their fifteen seconds of fame. I’ll bet you none of them feel as responsible for Lex's flaws as you do. And none of them tried as hard to make him genuinely happy.”

Clark grunted.

“He was a grown man when you met him,” Lois reasoned. "His father and his cronies had already molded Lex Luthor into something twisted and vindictive. Sometimes, there are people you just can't save.”

After a while, Clark turned around and took Lois' mug. He started rinsing it out in the sink.

“It doesn’t matter anyway. What he did.” He set about drying dishes; something to keep his hands busy and his guilt at bay. "It’s what he’s doing right now that we need to worry about.”

Lois eyed him suspiciously. “Which reminds me. You said you were following up on some leads on the Mirror Master incident in Central City. Any way you can share those since I've been so generous with my own sources?”

Clark offered her an apologetic half-smile and turned off the coffee machine. “Sorry, Lois. I... I've already got a partner on this case.”

"Batman again," Lois said, looking resigned. "Wonderful."

“Don’t worry.” Clark poured himself and Lois generous cups of warm coffee. "We won’t take any credit for your story.”

Lois regarded him sternly, then went back into the living room. "You should be careful."
"Yes, yes; I should stay out of Gotham." Clark brought out her coffee. "He told me the same thing. Everything's too dangerous for me, apparently."

"I meant you should be careful around him," Lois corrected, accepting her mug and giving the coffee an appreciative sniff. "Not just because of Vicky. Batman may be fighting crime, but he wears a mask. You can't have a relationship with someone if you only know half of who they are."

Clark tilted his head. "I got back together with Bruce. Did I not tell you that?"

"No," said Lois, "you didn't, but I'm not just talking about dating, here; I'm talking about friendships. About... being anything with someone who hides their identity. How can you be friends with people who don't even trust you with who they are?"

With his thumb, Clark absently stroked up and down the side of the mug. "That's not how the masks work," he said finally.

"What do you mean?"

"Having superhero personas isn't about hiding from other people," Clark said, "it's about protecting them."

Lois just looked tired. Clark held up a hand. "Hear me out. If nobody knows who you are, if you appear to be nothing but a friendless, anonymous mask, you have no weaknesses. Actually, no," Clark amended, "scratch that; you only have your own weaknesses: The limits of your physical abilities and mental faculties. Those are all you have to worry about, if you wear a mask; otherwise, you're a person with a family that can be exploited; with friends who can be kidnapped; with children who can be killed."

"But you're still lying to everyone you love," Lois said. "People who love you. That's an act of betrayal. You could tell them, at least. Keep them safe by letting them know, 'Hey, I lead a dangerous life. Maybe be aware of that in case something happens.'"

Clark closed his eyes. "What if they get in the line of fire because they're determined to help you, once they find out? What if they say something careless to someone while they're drunk or they lose their temper? What if, after dating for months or even years, they break up with you? Then they're saddled with the burden of knowing your identity forever. Should they, and their family, be in danger from super villains for the rest of their lives all because they dated... Booster Gold for a Metropolis minute?"

Lois pursed her lips. "So, why not just embrace the mask? Abandon the secret identity?"

"Because without people to relate to, you wouldn't care," Clark admitted. "You wouldn't protect people, you'd just fight bad guys; you wouldn't save your fellow man, you'd just win battles. They'd be like games; why would you care if you lost? What would you actually be losing? You need friends and family because they make the never-ending battle tangible and grounded. They remind you why it's necessary, even when you're tired and beaten up and scared, to try. All of that suffering and loneliness and guilt is bearable and survivable because you know, when the fight's over, that you get to take off the mask again and live."

Lois said, "Superman..." She tapped the rim of her mug with a nail. "Do you think he has a secret identity?"

Clark shrugged jerkily. "Probably. I mean, it's possible. Given that most other superheroes have jobs and families out of costume, it's very likely Superman does too."
"Do you..." Lois sighed. "Do you think he'll ever tell me? Who he is?"

"Someday, maybe," Clark said. "If he knows you'll still be safe."

"Hmm," Lois said.

"He's dating someone," Clark said in a rush. "I mean, that's what I've heard. I don't think you should while away—"

"Do I look like I'm whiling?" Lois quipped. "I'm actually..." She grinned. "I'm seeing someone. From a rival newspaper. *Don't* tell Perry."

Clark thought for a moment. "Is it Richard White?"

"How the hell—?"

"Don't tell Perry. If I were dating his son, I wouldn't want him to know either. The 'rival newspaper' bit was inspired, though."

Lois scowled. "Smart ass." Then, a sly look spreading slowly up her face, "So, what's your big secret?"

Clark offered his most disarming expression. "What makes you think I have one?"

Lois gave him a long indulgent stare. "Lex Luthor wouldn't have spent *years* chasing you if your big secret was that you like to read raunchy Japanese comic books or collect troll dolls. You must have something very, very juicy you are not sharing." She leaned forward. "Whatcha got, farmboy?"

Clark took an innocent sip of coffee, grimaced, and went back into the kitchen in search of sugar. "We don't have cream, but would you like some milk, Lois?"

“Clark fucking Kent,” she muttered. “You are an enigma wrapped in a riddle deep fried in a mystery.” She stole his seat on the couch and propped her feet up on the armrest. “I am so hungry. Pray your mom returns before I am forced to consider cannibalism.”

Clark ducked his head and found he could smile.

The next morning, back in Metropolis, Clark called in sick at work and requested a League meeting ASAP. He Zeta’d up to the Watchtower and paced impatiently in the conference room until everyone had assembled, then set his phone on the table and played the Heidelberg file. The team listened in silence.

At the end, Clark picked up his phone, took a seat, and addressed Batman. “What did you find out about Waller?”

“Amanda Blake Waller does work for Homeland Security,” Batman said, “but more specifically A.R.G.U.S. and Checkmate. She’s also the director of the Suicide Squad. What that means,” he added when everyone’s eyes seemed to glaze over, “is that she’s been watching us. She has a hand in every branch of government, in every agency, that deals with superpowered individuals and vigilantes.”
“Luthor is just one pawn in her scheme. She is the real power behind the throne, and the ultimate threat. She's the one we need to focus on.”

Clark made a face. “I disagree.”

Everyone turned to stare at Superman.

“Do you now.” Batman’s voice had sunk dangerously low.

“There are always going to be those who fear us,” Clark reasoned. “Moving against Waller would only ensure that her replacement would be even more ruthless.”

“More ruthless’ than giving supervillains carte blanche to kill us one by one?” Flash muttered. "I'd almost like to see that. Almost."

“By attacking a government official directly, we would be confirming the DHS's fears,” Superman said. “They think we're a law unto ourselves. We have to prove that we’re better than they assume we are by being smarter than Waller. So, we leave her alone and focus on Luthor.”

“And what do you suggest?” Batman still sounded skeptical.

“We take out Project Cadmus.”

Everyone waited for more.

“That’s it?” the Flash said finally.

“That’s it.”

“We destroy a tiny plant in Kansas and, what, problem solved?”

“For now,” Clark said. “It draws a line in the sand without directly going against the government. Waller can’t admit Cadmus exists—hasn’t—since it wasn’t in any of the files Bats dug up about her.”

“Homeland Security knows nothing of this particular project,” Batman confirmed. “Officially, that is.”

Clark eyed him. "And unofficially?”

"The Penguin's, the Riddler's, and Mirror Master's NDAs were all printed in the department head's office."

It took a moment. Then, groaning, Clark dropped his face into his hands. "You broke into their headquarters, didn't you."

"Homeland Security is located on a former naval base," Batman corrected blithely. "Hardly Fort Knox. That might have taken an additional three minutes."

"Seriously, Bats?" Clark snapped. "You can't just break into government-secure facilities!"

"Watch me," Batman challenged, the corner of his mouth quirking up. Clark could have sworn he saw him wink beneath the cowl. Of all the reckless, dangerous—

Hawkgirl cleared her throat.
Clark refocused. “Right. Well. Cadmus’ lab at LexCorp’s Smallville plant is Luthor’s primary research facility for the Justice League's weaknesses. We destroy his biological samples and lab results and make his plans public without involving or mentioning Waller, and we will be acknowledging the government's right to monitor us; but, not their tendency to take extreme measures against us without clear, justifiable cause and full disclosure to the public." He grinned. "When this is over, Waller and her bosses will think twice before taking such brutal steps against us again."

There was a brief surprised silence.

“You’re getting devious in your old age,” Green Lantern commented after a bit. The Flash just gawked.

“I will take that as a compliment.” Clark glanced around the room. “Any comments? Complaints?” His eyes strayed to Batman, who was looking at Superman with a combination of surprise, respect, and something else Clark couldn’t name. It made his pulse speed up. He swallowed, willing the hot color in his cheeks to die.

Now Wonder Woman cleared her throat.

Clark looked away. Batman steepled his hands over his chest. “We’ll have to move carefully and very quickly. Be in and out of Cadmus before Waller realizes we’re onto her.”

“She might already,” Clark hedged. “I only met with Heidelberg today because Lois Lane’s notes were stolen, along with her phone and the original recording of the interview.”

“Then we move tonight.” Batman thought for a moment. “I’ll need blueprints of the plant and aerial views of the surrounding terrain. Also, the more access codes and ID cards we have, the better. Do we have a Zeta-Beam set up for Smallville?”

“It will be done by nightfall,” J’onn promised.

“Good.”

Flash twitched excitedly in his chair. “So, when do we meet up?”

“‘We’ don’t,” Batman drawled. “I only need Superman and Hawkgirl for this. The rest of you will spread out and act as newsworthy distractions. We’ll call you if anything goes wrong.”

“What do you need me for?” Clark and Hawkgirl asked simultaneously, then grinned at each other.

“Superman and I will infiltrate the labs tonight and destroy the samples and research results.” Batman tilted his head. "Worse comes to worse, Hawkgirl can pulverize the whole facility with her mace.”

Shayera grinned. “I like this plan.”

“I… don’t exactly do stealth,” Clark muttered.

Batman didn’t seem worried. “I’ll lend you another suit.”

Clark glanced down at one of the uniforms his mom had lovingly sewn for him roughly ten years ago. "What’s wrong with this one?"

“It’s a bit loud,” the Flash opined.

Superman glared. “Yours is bright red. You don’t get a say.”
Flash threw up his hands in mock surrender. “I’m not the one going on a super-secret spy-date with Batman.” He gave Clark a bawdy wink. “You gotta dress right for your man.”

Scowling, Clark crossed his arms. “I am not wearing the Robin costume,” he announced.

To his dismay, Batman actually smiled at him. With teeth. And dimples.

Clark gulped.
“This is possibly the greatest day of my life,” Shayera snickered. She, Clark, and Batman were hiding behind the tree line outside the LexCorp fertilizer plant, waiting for Robin to infiltrate the guardhouse, knock out the first layer of security personnel, and loop the entryway surveillance footage. “I wish I had a camera. Do not change before we get back to the Watchtower; we have to record this for posterity.”

“Posterity can kiss my posterior,” Clark hissed, fiddling with his gauntlets. “This feels so weird!”

“What specifically?” Batman nudged his hands away to check the snap closures on Clark's arm pieces.

“All this padding. I feel like the Stay Puff’d Marshmallow Man.”

Batman half-grinned at him. “You don’t look it.”

Clark tried to bend and twist and raise his arms. "Maybe if the suit didn't feel so tight..."

"Oh? Where?"

"Around the shoulders, for one thing."

Batman's hands deftly fixed the buckles on the shoulder plates so Clark could lift his arms above his head. "Where else?"

"The chest area in general, but I don't think there's much you can do about that."

"Hm." It took Clark a moment to realize that Batman's hands had come to rest on his abdomen; they weren't, actually, adjusting anything. "Any other parts that might need my attention?"

"Um," said Clark cogently. Batman's hands were sliding around his hips.

"Could you two maybe do this later?" Shayera muttered. Clark could hear Robin making gagging noises over comms.

“I can't turn my head,” Clark squeaked desperately, grabbing Batman's wandering hands by the wrists. "Any way we can fix that?"

“Unfortunately, no.” Batman didn't fight his grip; in fact, he seemed to lean into it. "This is an old Batsuit from the early days when I cared more about protecting vital organs than increasing my mobility."

“You what now?!" Clark squawked.

Shayera shushed them and pointed. Batman swiftly pushed Clark behind the tree, pinning him against the trunk while a guard passed in front of the main gate and turned the corner. Clark, who
still couldn't turn his head, found himself pressed nose-to-nose with Batman.

His stomach seemed suddenly convinced it was in free-fall.

“We've got forty-five seconds before he comes back around,” Hawkgirl said, stepping out into the moonlight.

Batman pulled away from Clark to grab her arm. “Wait for—”

Robin came through on comms. “Security cameras for the west side are looped. Couldn’t get access to the rest.”

Batman let go of Hawkgirl. “We'll deal with the remaining surveillance on the inside. Meet us at the fence.”

They slunk to the gate. Shayera flew over first, blending into the shadows behind the armored delivery trucks and hunkering down for a good, long wait. Batman, Robin, and Clark scaled the fourteen-foot railing and cut across the parking lot to the compound backdoor by the loading station. Robin used the knocked-out security guard’s access card to let them in.

"Cut outside communication," Batman ordered, adjusting his earpiece. "Any signals should be localized; twenty yards at most."

"He doesn't want LexCorp's equipment to pick up anything outside of standard walky-talky communications," Robin explained, rolling his eyes. Clark resisted the urge to ruffle his hair.

Batman took the lead, directing them cautiously down a series of corridors, pausing at every corner to check for staff and security personnel. They finally turned in to the main security booth where the half-asleep man at the monitors glanced up, saw two Batmen, and fainted dead away.

“I take it all back," Clark whispered, adjusting his cowl. "I love this suit.”

They hauled the security guard out of his chair, hog tied him, and stuffed him under his desk. While Clark tested the knots, Batman watched Robin loop the footage on all the cameras across the compound.

“Kal.”

“Yeah?”

Batman pointed to one of the screens from the East side that had a cross-cut view of the West parking lot. He had rewound and frozen the footage from three minutes ago. “You see that?”


"Lucky the guard didn't notice." He let Robin loop that camera's feed too. “When this is over, we’re going to have a long talk about the importance of ‘hugging the shadows’.”

Clark’s mouth twisted into a scowl.

“We’ll head to this section here.” Batman pointed to another monitor showing a corner of the east-side basement. “Then, after we get to the lower levels, we’ll leave Robin to upload as much as he can from their servers to the web with the obvious exceptions of—”

“—any and all information pertaining to the Justice League members personally.” Robin rolled his eyes. "I know, Bats."
“Get as much information about Cadmus' ...experiments online as possible.” Robin nodded dutifully. “Then head back out to the parking lot. By the time I get out, I want you fifty feet behind the tree line; otherwise, you’re fired.”

“Sure thing, O Wise Sibyl—I mean, boss.”

While Clark tried very, very hard to keep a straight face, Batman led them out of the security station with only mild grumbling. (Behind his back, Clark offered Robin a sly high five.)

The basement of the East Building had been the only floor on the blueprints with any structural inconsistencies; therefore, as Batman had explained, it was the location most likely housing the bulk of Cadmus' testing facilities. Robin and Clark followed him quietly up a series of narrow stairs, down another maze of hallways, and through a giant auditorium. It opened onto a skybridge with floor-to-ceiling windows.

“We cross to the east side when the guard is directly below us,” Batman murmured, glancing over the railing. After a few moments during which Clark barely breathed, he hissed, “Now.”

Crouching low, Clark ran. Robin, light-footed as a gazelle, sprinted effortlessly past him. Even Batman was spritely despite his heavy suit. Clark struggled to keep his footing and wound up crawling the last few feet flat on his stomach just to be sure he stayed below the guard's line of sight.

Around the corner, he propped himself up against a wall. “That was just tragic.”

Batman carefully reset Superman's shoulder armor. “I've trained worse.” (Behind him, Robin pretended to vomit into a potted fern.)

With a grunt, Clark stood up. “Which way now?”

They snuck down another back staircase to the basement, Batman and Robin scanning opposite walls and alternating floors with devices from their belts which uttered low, rhythmic pulses when pressed against flat surfaces.

“Sonic,” Robin explained in a barely audible whisper. "We're looking for the entrance."

Catching onto their theme, Clark stepped back, closed his eyes, and simply listened. At first, there were just heartbeats: Robin’s, a little fast due to excitement; his own, elevated from overexertion; Batman’s, steady, slow, and measured. Clark listened further, deep into the walls, following the water ways, gas pipes, and electrical wiring throughout the building. On the fourth floor, someone was washing their hands. Two floors below them, he could hear the click of someone turning off a light. Further down…

“How many levels did you estimate lie beneath the basement?” Clark asked.

“Four,” Batman said, glancing at him. "Five, on the outside.”

Clark flinched. “I hear forty three.”

There was a brief pause during which Robin picked his jaw up off the floor and Batman puzzled out their next move.

“There’s no point calling in the rest of the League,” he murmured. “Maybe the Flash, if we could sneak him in…”

"We need him out there with the others distracting Waller and Luthor,” Clark countered. "We stick
to the plan."

Batman grimaced. "This is bigger and far worse than I expected."

"We'll just find someplace unoccupied and relatively safe to plug Robin into their system," Clark said. "It's barely past four a.m.; Luthor's not going to have very many people here, outside of patrolling security. The computer labs should be unsupervised."

After Robin gave him an encouraging nod, Batman sighed and faced Clark. "Where's the entrance to Cadmus?"

"There's an express elevator shaft behind some shelves in the room next to us."

They headed into the open hallway once more. Batman and Robin took out the two guards standing by the stock room while Clark pushed aside the rolling shelving and pried open the monstrously heavy, shoddily disguised elevator doors.

“I wouldn’t mind learning that spinning kick,” he admitted while Batman and Robin secured their drop lines to the far wall.

Batman hooked one of the ropes to Clark's belt, cinching it up to his own and Robin's. “When we get back to Gotham, I’ll teach you.”

"What, not on the Watchtower?" Batman had outfitted at least three of the satellite floors as training arenas with a ridiculously huge and well-stocked gym complete with Olympic-sized pool and sauna.

"The Batcave isn't on the Watchtower."

"Batcave’?" Clark repeated, sharing an amused glance with Robin. Then the full implications of that statement hit home. "Wait, you're going to show me the...?"

Batman looped an arm around his waist. "Only if you're very good."

Before Clark had time to come up with a reply—not that he had much faith in his brain's ability to process Batman flirting with him again, let alone produce a worthy response—they dropped down into darkness. Whatever Batropes were made of, they easily held the over five hundred pounds of two-bulky-men-in-heavy-armor-and-one-teenage-boy-in-tights without snapping. Clark’s harness merely jerked uncomfortably as they ground to a screeching halt.

“Jammed,” Batman grunted. "Robin, use the ventilation system to find the security room."

"It's the second grate after the left turn," Clark advised, listening to the hum of over two dozen monitors echoing through the duct work. "Only one man inside. Currently playing... some kind of cat game? On his phone."

"Log into the cameras, shut them off on floor—" Batman squinted at the wall, "—sixteen. Three floors above and below, too, if you can."

“Anything else while I’m out?” Robin was already done unscrewing the vent cover above them. “Some sandwiches perhaps? The Hope Diamond?”

“Save it for your report.”

Robin crawled swiftly out of sight, leaving Batman and Superman dangling together in the middle of the elevator shaft.
“You're really going to show me the Batcave?” Clark said after a while. “Does that mean...?” He couldn't finish that sentence without his pulse hammering in his throat.

"Does that mean what?"

"That you're going to tell me who you are?"

"Of course."

Of course? "Is this because I promised to tell you my identity...?"

"Yes."

"Oh." He couldn't help but frown. "So, it's just quid pro quo."

"Partially."

Groaning in frustration, Clark sagged and nearly flipped upside-down in his harness. Batman caught him by the small of his back and pulled him upright again. "Partially?" he snapped. "So, what's the other part?"

Batman sidled closer to Clark than was proper. "Maybe I just want to see the look on your face," he teased, dimpling, "when you see mine."

Clark's knees started shaking. He was extremely grateful that standing was neither required nor possible in their current position. Luckily, Robin came back in over comms and rescued him from continuing to gape in soundless confusion while Batman smoldered at him.

“Good news,” Robin said, sounding only slightly out of breath. The low groan behind him was cut off by a swift smack and a heavy thump. "The cameras on floor sixteen are down."

“And the bad news?”

“The express elevator is going to liquify you in thirty seconds.”

There was no time to panic. Clark and Batman used their combined weight to swing toward the elevator shaft door. It was a painfully gradual process.

“Twenty seconds.”

They could hear the elevator rumbling below them. Clark got a good grip on the doors and pushed. His fingers slipped.

“Ten seconds.”

He tried again, using every muscled square inch of his strength. The doors squealed open enough for Batman to latch onto one side. Clark pulled hard too; they fell through the narrow gap onto hard, cold tile as Bats disengaged the ropes from their belts. The elevator shot past them like a bullet.

Clark let out a long breath. “You were right,” he admitted.

“About what?” Batman was already standing and checking the state of his gear.

“Thirty seconds. It’s enough.”

“Don’t sound so surprised.” Batman’s voice was amused and condescending. "I'm always right.” He
offered Clark a hand and pulled him to his feet.

“Maybe ninety percent of the time,” Superman conceded.

Batman moved closer; he hadn't let go of Clark's hand. “Ninety-nine.”

“An overly generous ninety-eight.” Clark stepped away and peered around the corner. "Robin's this way."

They passed behind an armed patrol and crept into the tiny room where Robin had tied up the security guard.

“All right,” Batman said while Clark kept look-out, "what’s the full breakdown?"

Robin pulled up Cadmus' underground specs. “The top floors, one through twenty, are offices and storage. I've got the alarm systems to floors one through sixteen shut off; but if you venture below, you're liable to wake the dead.

"The middle section—floors twenty-one through thirty-nine—consist of labs. At least, they seem to be where the vast majority of the Kryptonite experiments took place. All further Superman tests have been cancelled, according to a station-wide memo. At the moment, the focus seems to be on magnesium carbonate. Floor twenty-seven is building some kind of flamethrower—"

"J'onn," Clark whispered.

"Beyond that, there are no specifically mentioned projects on official records; but, you need a top level security clearance to gain access to any floor below level forty."

Batman seemed to be completing some rapid mental calculations. “If we set all my charges on the twentieth floor after you finish your uploads, we can bury Cadmus in debris." He glanced down at the unconscious guard. "Think you can get him upstairs?"

"Sure."

"All right. After you're done here, we’ll set off an emergency alarm, evacuate the building, then collapse it, along with our DNA samples and whatever else Lex Luthor has on us."

“You two go ahead, but I'm going to find out what’s going on below level forty,” Clark announced, folding his arms across his chest.

Batman glared at him. “You'll only have half an hour."

"Thirty whole minutes," Clark said with a smile. "Whatever will I do with the extra one-thousand seven-hundred and seventy seconds?"

To his surprise, Batman's shoulders simply slumped. "That means I’m coming with you,” he said with a rueful smile.

“But how are you going to get in?” Robin whispered. "The alarms will go off if you try to take the stairs down; the Batropes aren't long enough for the elevator shaft; and the elevator itself requires a specific code..." He trailed off into thoughtful silence.

Clark shrugged. “There's always the old fashioned way.” He mimed punching through a wall.

Batman’s glower was edged with amusement. “Does ‘stealth mission’ not mean the same thing in Metropolis?”
"Does the phrase 'wake the dead' not exist in Gotham?" Clark countered. "Or did you just mishear the part about the sixteenth floor, anything below it, and alarms?"

"Gentlemen, please," Robin interrupted, suddenly giddy. "You can both be the prettiest." A few seconds of frenzied typing. "I can convince the elevator to take you down to the forty-first floor."

"How?" Batman asked suspiciously.

"You remember that thumb drive that I stole when we broke into the DHS headquarters?"

"I seem to remember you telling me I was seeing things," Batman said dryly. "Something about senility affecting my vision."

Robin winced. "Right. Um. Anyway, it was a decryption key. Something Waller'd been working on. If you use it, it unlocks whatever you're trying to access, but it sends a signal to the DHS home base. Of course, if Waller is out dealing with the League, she might not get around to seeing where the signal is coming from until... fifteen minutes from now?"

"So, we've got a quarter of an hour before reinforcements arrive," Clark mused. "Good enough for me."

"I don't have an extraction plan in place for you, though."

Clark winked at him, only belatedly remembering that Robin wouldn't be able to see it through the cowl. He opted for clapping him on the back instead. "We'll burn that bridge when we come to it."

"Bats?"

"Do it," Batman confirmed. "Upload their intel, set the charges, shut the elevator down, and get out of here with *this.*" He nudged the sleeping guard with his boot. "Meet up with Hawkgirl. We'll be right behind you."

"Okay, boss."

Clark called for the elevator and took in the damage done to its outer doors while he and Batman waited.

"It looks like your super strength is coming back," Bats mused, pointing out the finger indentations on the right side.

"Hm."

The elevator arrived.

"Press level forty-one," Robin ordered over comms. "Then, enter any ten numbers on the keypad."

Clark blinked. "*Any* ten?"

"The code's only good for five more seconds."

Clark typed out the first thing that came to mind, which happened to be Bruce’s phone number. The elevator started moving.

Casually, Batman leaned back against the wall. "You could do better."

"Better than what?" Clark countered warily, trying to look over his shoulder. He wound up having to
turn all the way around instead because of Batman's stupid back-up cowl.

"That's a very specific Gotham area code," Batman drawled. He seemed to be considering Clark. "How serious is it? Between you and Wayne?"

Clark put his hands on his hips. "What's it to you?"

Batman folded his arms across his chest and gave Clark a once-over. After a few lingering glances on select areas of his anatomy, Bats finally looked him right in the eyes.

And smiled like a fucking shark.

Clark was pretty sure his face was on fire. "I have a boyfriend," he reiterated icily.

"So, it's pretty serious, then."

Clark opened his mouth trying to think of something, anything, to say; but, his mind was a desperate, unhelpful blank.

"Do you love him?"

"Why do you care?" Clark snapped. "Aren't you...?" He hesitated.

"Aren't I what?"

"Kent," Clark bit out. "I thought..."

He hadn't realized Batman stood so close.

"Is it so strange," Bats murmured, "that I could want you both?"

The elevator jolted to a stop. Clark peered out into the hall.

"We're clear." His voice shook. He wished his heart wasn't pounding so hard.

Batman had snapped back into professional mode by the time they reached the end of the corridor. They darted down another hallway, glanced around the corners, and headed for the giant door with a red “Danger” sign screwed to it. Clark reached for his Batbelt.

"The second compartment on the right," Batman suggested. Clark pulled out two picks and set to work on the lock. “You are forcing me to reevaluate your Boy Scout status.”

Clark pushed the door open. “Didn’t we have this conversation already?” He peered down into the vast, high-domed hall and froze. Behind him, Batman was asking, “Clear?” but Clark couldn’t muster a coherent response. Below them, beyond the skeletal walkway, was a chamber filled wall to wall with cryogenic tubes—occupied cryogenic tubes.

“...No!”

Clark was running down the steps, jerking to a halt in front of the first capsule, wiping away the layer of frost on the outside...

His own face stared back at him; younger, sure, but unmistakably his. No heart beat. No respiration. The caption on the label read, “Test Subject Seventy-Six A. Unserviceable. Terminated. Stored for research.”
Batman came up behind him and put a hand on his shoulder.

They walked in silence past the cold caskets of Superman’s dead clones. Some were slightly altered; some looked like perfect copies. Most were babies or toddlers; none looked older than teenagers. By the time they reached the last row, Clark could feel his whole body vibrating with barely contained murderous rage.

“I want this place razed to the ground.”

Batman stepped back, taking in the size and scope of the cryochamber. “With this much tech, there's got to be a local power source. Find it and I'll set the charges; Luthor and Waller can clone and study a steaming pile of ash.”

Bypassing his fury, Clark listened to the sounds in the hall. His own heartbeat. Batman’s. The low frequency generated by the cryotubes. A low hum of something beyond the far wall.

“Behind that door.”

They retraced their steps to a room underneath the shoddy metal staircase. Out of sight of the rows of cryogenic tubes, Superman and Batman stared at their find through a thick, circular window embedded in a lead-lined wall.

“The word ‘over-kill’ comes to mind,” Bats said dryly, then went to check the computer readings on the energy levels by the sealed door. "I can rig the reactor to overload in twenty minutes. Once we get out, I'll tell J'onn to drop a containment field around the compound to suck all the radiation into space."

"Good." Clark tried to cool his temper. "The last thing he want is to turn Kansas into a hot zone."

With a nod, Batman set to work while Clark found himself leaning yearningly into the light emitted through the small window from the reactor core.

"Don't get too close," Batman advised as Clark pressed a hand against the glass. "We shouldn't even be in this room without full protective gear. In your current state, you're in as much danger from radiation poisoning as the rest of us."

"It..." Clark closed his eyes. "It feels..." It was like standing in a beam of pure sunlight on a summer's day. He hadn't seen a lot of that lately; Metropolis had been too overcast and Clark had spent the majority of the last few weeks holed up inside dim offices or lazing about on Dr. Thompkins' glorified tanning bed on the Watchtower. As he felt the palm of his hand and the skin on his face warm under the strength of the radiation, he caught something on the fringes of his senses—a weak series of thumps in a pattern he recognized—his own heartbeat, but slightly out of synch—

"Stop it, Kal," Batman ordered. "At best, you'll get a bad tan. It's more likely you'll—"

But Clark wasn't listening—he wasn't even in the reactor's ante-room anymore—he was flat out running toward the source of his pulse's twin, all else forgotten. He threw himself right through the sliding, reinforced door, feeling the thick sheet of metal crumple satisfyingly beneath his shoulder. Inside the smaller room, strapped on a gurney and hooked up to a bag of pale green liquid, lay a perfect copy of teenage Superman. As Clark undid the restrictive belts and slowly retracted the IV needle from his arm, the clone stirred.

“Hey,” Clark whispered soothingly.

The boy bolted off the stretcher, superstrength propelling him across the room to slam into the ceiling. He dropped back down heavily, gazing in fear at the Batman-like figure looming over him.
Clark quickly fumbled with the stiff neckpiece of his borrowed suit.

“It’s okay,” he said gently, peeling off the cowl and tossing it aside. “I’m Su—”

The clone rammed into him, hard enough to drive the breath from his lungs. Clark flew back thirty feet and cracked the back of his head against the wall. Seemingly also in pain, the clone staggered, cradling the fist that had connected with Clark’s body to his chest. After a second, he came after Superman again, punching him in the face with his uninjured hand, then falling to his knees. He let out a roar like a wounded animal; Clark reached out, but the boy recoiled, pushing himself out the door into the hall full of cryotubes, narrowly missing the real Batman crouching by the doorway.

Clark wheezed. “You have any Kryptonite on you?”

“Always,” Batman admitted, hand under Superman's elbow, propping him up. ”But—"

“Give it to me.” When Bats hesitated, Clark added, “I’m saturated with the stuff. It barely aches to be around it anymore, which is the only upside to having no powers. I think that’s also why my clone can’t touch me without hurting himself.”

Batman reluctantly opened one of the compartments on his belt and handed Clark a small box.

“It’s lead lined,” he explained.

Clark closed a fist around the container. “Finish setting the charges, get Robin out, get all the guards we knocked out into the forest, get yourself to the clearing, and prep a containment field to go around the plant perimeter. I’ll meet you at the tree line.”

“Kal—"

"Just do it!"

Clark stumbled away before Batman could tell him this was a stupid idea—of course it was—but he was Superman; making half-assed plans work had become his modus operandi of late.

His clone knocked him into one of the cryotubes. It shattered, spilling cold, silvery liquid across the floor and drenching Clark’s borrowed Batsuit in sticky fluid. He groaned, threw out a hand, lost hold of the Kryptonite, and felt something wet and fleshy under his fingers. He jerked away; three rows of tubes to his left, his clone slunk backwards, eyes sullen and fearful. Clark scrabbled about in the puddles for the lead-lined box, caught ahold of it, and snapped it open. He palmed the Kryptonite, barely flinching as his stomach flipped at its proximity, and approached his clone cautiously.

“I am sorry about this,” he said, leaping and punching down. His Superclone caught his hand and flipped him across the room, knocking over another row of cryotubes in the process. Their fractured bases spat sparks all over the floor; Clark hoped the silvery liquid was neither flammable nor conductive.

With a roar, the clone charged him again. This time, Clark stepped back and held out the Kryptonite, watching as the boy’s superspeed turned into faltering steps across the hall until, gasping, he collapsed at Superman’s feet. Clark himself felt half-dead too; he was panting and pale and sweaty, but he still bent over to tie up his clone with rope from Batman’s loaned grapple gun. Finally, he strapped the Kryptonite to the kid’s forehead—“I’m really, really sorry about this; you’ll thank me later”—and fireman-carried him up the staircase to the forty-first floor.

“I want my full strength back,” Clark complained. “You are way too heavy.”
The door swung open on a two guard patrol equipped with guns.

Clark dumped the heavy Superclone on both of them. They toppled straight to the floor, but one of them fired as he fell and Clark felt a bullet ping off the Batsuit’s chest armor. His ribs protested; he would have a large bruise there tomorrow. Without waiting for further provocation, he slammed the gun into a wall. The other guard pulled out his radio.

“We have Batma—I mean, Superman—on level forty-one—”

Clark decked him properly this time, made sure he stayed knocked out, and picked up his clone again. He was pondering his next move when he heard the hall sirens go off.

“That's either the intruder alert alarm or the evacuation order,” he mused to his unconscious passenger with a grin. “Either way, that means we get my kind of exit strategy.”

Four more knocked out guards later, Clark met Batman on the emergency stairwell between the sixteenth and seventeenth floors.

"I thought I told you to wait for me outside."

"You were taking too long." Batman paused to take in the sight of him. "Are you carrying seven people at once?"

"Well, I couldn't just leave them,” Clark countered grumpily. He was perspiring heavily and his lower back was killing him. "Can you take my clone? Maybe if the Kryptonite wasn't so close..."

Batman slung teenage Superman over his shoulders and led the way back up the stairs. Someone was shooting at them, but Clark couldn’t quite figure out if the bullets were coming from above or below. He peered over the railing only for Batman to yank him back with an angry snarl.

Heavy footsteps descended on them with more ascending from behind. Batman threw a smoke bomb just as Clark smashed the door to their nearest floor—the twelfth—and swung a mean left hook at the figure aiming a gun at him. The guard dropped like a tranquilized horse as Clark jump-kicked the other one in the chest.

While Batman fused the lock to the stairwell with a torch from his belt, Clark pushed open the outer doors of the elevator shaft. The Batrope was still dangling down to four floors below them.

"I only have two harnesses," Batman said, eyeing their extra passengers.

Clark sized up the rope. “You and the boy go first. Then drop the line back down for the rest of us.”

They maneuvered the Superclone into Clark’s harness and he and Batman shot up into the dark. After a minute, the rope eased back down and Clark attached two of the guards, watched them disappear; then another two; another pair. With the last couple, Clark had just enough time to strap in his passengers and jump for the loose rope as three sets of security teams broke down the emergency exit door and opened fire on him.

The line jerked, sputtered, and retracted. Clark zoomed up and swung into the first floor of the LexCorp plant's official basement, landing on all fours. Batman grabbed him under the arms and
hauled him to his feet before picking up the Superclone. Clark struggled to hoist his now ridiculously large pile of guards back on his shoulders before they set off for the exit.

They had to take a detour to the foyer; security from outside had converged on the entryway. Behind them, Clark could hear the armada of jackboots racing up the disguised stairwell behind the janitorial lounge. A veritable sea of armed LexCorp personnel had them boxed into a windowless supply closet on the first floor.

Clark looked at Batman. "I say we make a break for the main door. I'll take the ones in the front, you guard our backs."

Bats' expression was pure fond exasperation.

"What? You want the ones in front?"

"I want to kiss you," Batman said frankly.

Over comms, Clark heard Robin make a strangled gagging noise right before the North Wall disintegrated under Shayera’s mace. There was another crash followed by a volley of gunfire, loud smashes, and screams of terror concluding in abrupt, total silence. Clark peered into the foyer to find Hawkgirl, Wonder Woman, and Green Lantern hovering over what was left of the once impressive marble entryway, incapacitated guards strewn liberally among the wreckage. Batman pushed the closet door completely open.

Flash zipped over to them and took one of the heavily armored guards off of Clark's back. “Heya, Supes. Nice outfit.”

“Thanks,” Clark said, following him past the front desk and gently dumping the remaining guards on the flattest part of the smashed floor. His shoulders creaked as he stretched.

“You should have seen him with the mask on.” Shayera sighed. “It was uncanny.”

“It’s a cowl,” Batman corrected, setting the Superclone gently on the ground. Clark peeled the Kryptonite off his forehead, handing it to the Flash.

“I need you to take him to Dr. Thompkins,” Superman said. “See if she can do anything to help him. He’s been locked up in this facility for Lord knows how long and they were pumping some sort of Kryptonite mixture into his blood when I found him.”

“Leave it to me, Big Blue.” Flash hefted the clone and zipped off.

Clark turned to Batman. “When is the reactor supposed to go critical?”

“Seven minutes from now.”

Superman faced the rest of the League. “Has the compound been evacuated?”

“Except for these guys, yes,” Hawkgirl said. “We got the other buildings cleared five minutes after Batman contacted Robin, but J’onn’s going to set up the barrier at the last possible moment, just in case.”

Clark looked around at the small army of downed guards. “Carry them to the tree line and stay there. Don’t Zeta to the Watchtower until after—”

A shot rang out, and something sharp and hot hit him squarely between plates of armor on a seam of
his suit. Clark dropped to his knees.

There was a yell and another gunshot. Nobody moved; Clark tried not to faint.

“So nice to see you again, Superman.”

The scream of pain died unborn in his throat.

“I warned you, didn’t I? Interfere with me again and I’ll kill you.”

Clark gritted his teeth. “That would make this the first time you’ve ever told the truth, Lex.”

Another shot, this one straight through his right shoulder.

“Anyone make another move toward me and the next bullet goes through his brain.”

Slowly, Clark raised his left hand.

“Lex,” he gasped—don’t think about the pain, don’t think about the pain—“Lex, I’ll stay. You can do whatever you want with me. But let them take the guards and go.”

Luthor laughed. “You’re the bargaining chip? What’s so valuable about you?”

Without hesitation, Clark picked up a broken-off pillar fragment at his knees, raised his arm above his head, and crumbled the handful of marble into dust. He could almost feel the waves of Lex’s rekindled lust washing over him; the thought of them made him queasy.

“Your team may leave,” Luthor said, unable to keep the excitement out of his voice.

He could hear Wonder Woman grinding her teeth. “Superman—”

“Go, Diana.” Clark turned his head slightly; indescribable pain shot up his back to his neck. For a moment, he thought he would black out. ”Stick to the plan.”

Batman was standing only a few feet away from him, shielding Robin. Clark swallowed.

“Bats,” he said, “can you make sure my clone…”

"I will."

"And tell Bruce..." He swallowed. His throat hurt and his eyes stung, and he knew it had nothing to do with the pain from the bullet wounds.

He saw Batman reach for him; knew the moment Lex's gun shifted from Superman's head to Robin's chest; felt, more than saw, Bats pull away. After a moment, Batman simply nodded.

Like the professionals they were, the League lifted their enemies out of the piles of rubble. Clark listened to most of them fly over the parking lot, up the road past the forest; heard Batman pause, heart thundering for the first time that night, on the threshold. Clark wanted to call him back. He didn’t want to die like this, alone on his knees with Lex Luthor pointing a gun at his head...

“They’re gone,” Lex said unnecessarily. Clark could hear Batman’s footsteps fading across the gravel.

He listened to the floors below, down the corridors into the open cryochamber. All hired guns and scientists had been evacuated. There was no one alive on the compound except Lex with his gun and
Clark with his heart's blood pouring out of his bullet wounds.

"Finally." Luthor's voice was ecstatic. Clark could hear the pistol shaking in his hands. "Finally." In the stillness of the abandoned building, Lex's footsteps echoed eerily off the fragmented foyer, as if a host of Luthors had descended on Superman to revel in his painful defeat.

"Finally mine." Luthor's voice trembled in his ear. He tilted Clark's head around, and the look on his face was one part love and too many parts rage and wild, catastrophic victory. "She said I couldn’t beat you on my own; that one man can’t destroy a god. But here you are… cowering at my feet..."

Lex's lips were dryer and colder than Clark remembered. Bruce's kisses always tasted warm and sweet and soft; they made his head spin.

Lex's left him feeling pity for a lost friend.

As Luthor pulled away and aimed the cold barrel of the gun to the back of Superman's head, Clark felt unexpectedly calm.

"Now would be a good time to run, Lex."

Luthor's exhale sounded ragged. "And why on Earth should I do that?"

"Batman’s set Cadmus to blow up in... oh... roughly three minutes."

Luthor laughed. "I built this site to withstand a bit more than a few Batbombs. Otherwise I would have evacuated right along with my panicked staff."

"I'm not talking about gelignite; I'm talking about the reactor in the basement." Clark wished now that he could see Lex’s face. He would just have to be satisfied hearing his hitched breathing instead. "I like that you're going green. Nuclear fusion is one of the cleanest forms of energy out there and, under proper supervision, the safest; but..."

"You imbecilic—"

"You can stand here and insult me, Lex," Clark said, feeling faint; at least his voice sounded strong. "Or you can run now and maybe just make it beyond of the compound walls before the Watchtower drops the containment field and traps you here. With me. And the equivalent of a nuclear bomb."

Clark heard the gun clatter to the floor behind him and listened to feet pound across the foyer, over the parking lot, through the open gate, and across the wide field to the dense line of trees. Clark could see, in his mind's eye, the wild forest stretching all the way to the river over the rise; and a few miles over, past endless rows of corn, a farm house where he had grown up and discovered that he was not like other children. He had learned that he had a choice—or a duty—or a destiny, as people sometimes called it. All Clark knew—all he had ever understood—was that he had the opportunity to be useful in a way few others could be. Using his powers had never been a responsibility or a necessity: it was a privilege. A way to be more than a single, isolated creature in a strange world; a way to be a part of and to protect his new home.

Clark tried to rise, but his legs wouldn’t cooperate and he toppled painfully to the floor. Dragging himself by his good arm across the ruined marble tiles, he crawled outside into the morning air, leaving thick streaks of blood in his wake. The faint sunrise seemed especially beautiful and warm on his face until the Watchtower's shield dropped around the compound and dimmed the sky.

He thought of Bruce during their first interview, all suave, clever flirtation; of Lois clutching her mug of tea in the farmhouse living room, face marred with concern. Of Batman, forever a puzzle,
scowling at him over coffee in a diner; bandaging his arm in the infirmary; leaning toward him in the elevator. I want to kiss you. Clark suddenly understood that impulse; he too wanted to kiss his friend, to hug him, to thank him—in whatever way he could—for his hard-won friendship and respect.

He thought of his mother. Of Jimmy. Cat. Perry. Diana, Flash, J'onn, Shayera, John... Even Lex, for a moment; a younger, more familiar version, as he had stood in Clark's loft in the barn and said, "We are the future"; and then, years later, "You are my future." Clark weighed those moments tentatively and found he felt nothing but gratitude.

There was rumbling coming from the elevator shaft.

His thoughts turned, finally, to his dad: a smiling man in dirty overalls and a plaid shirt bending down so his young son could run into his arms. It didn't feel so much like a memory now; more like a promise.

There was blinding light and searing heat.

And then nothing but silence.
Clark awoke on a bed of pulverized concrete, naked but for a thin layer of ash caked over his body. He rose carefully, aware of all the ways his joints bent, his muscles contracted, and his skin folded. It occurred to him that the ash he was dusting off his body was probably all that remained of Batman’s retired armor.

“He’s going to kill me,” he said—and then burst out laughing. Tilting his face toward the sky, he spread his arms. The sun had risen high, hot and golden at its zenith. He soaked it into his skin, let it warm him to his marrow, stretched up to feel each beam against every inch of his body, and realized he was flying—hovering, really, if he wanted to get technical. His feet had risen off the ground—the air was warm—the wind was cool—fuck it all, fuck him, fuck everything—

He shot straight up, let himself fall; swooped low over the pitiful remains of the LexCorp plant and headed up the river. J’onn had retracted the containment field leaving Clark free to soar above the winding waters and skim the treetops with his toes. He arrived at the League’s rendezvous spot in time to watch Luthor’s bald head duck into a police car. A crowd consisting mostly of Smallville residents had gathered outside the police tape to ogle the League.

Someone spotted Clark flying overhead and shouted. There came a roar from beyond the police line, a horde of people cheering and screaming all at once. Clark covered himself with one hand and waved awkwardly with the other, praying no TV crews had their cameras angled at the sky.

The livid, shocked look on Luthor’s face as he was driven out of town was enough to brighten Clark’s week. Wonder Woman looked like she wanted to laugh; John and Shayera standing close together, grinned up at him. Even J’onn’s normally unreadable face was split into a smile. But it was Batman’s unfathomable gaze that left Clark feeling a rush of something warm and terrifying in the pit of his stomach. He remembered, suddenly, embarrassingly, that he was naked. In the sky. Surrounded by people.

“Um. Yeah. I should probably go find some pants.”

A sonic boom heralded his departure.

Clark made another appearance at the site of the explosion—in costume this time—to give his statement to the police. Afterwards, Wonder Woman, Shayera, Flash, and even John gave him long, tight hugs.

While Robin darted in too to wrap strong, skinny arms around Clark’s waist and press a cheek to his chest, the Flash wiped his eyes.

“I’m not crying,” he muttered at a grinning John. “You’re crying. Shut up.”

As Robin stepped back, everyone turned to look at Batman, who stood tense and still off to the side.
“You’re alive.”

Clark raised his eyebrows. “Don’t sound so disappointed.”

A gauntlet came up to grab him by the suit front. Batman hauled him close enough to roar deafeningly right in his face. “You don’t get to joke about this!”

“I don’t get to joke about my own near-death experience?”

“No when I was the one responsible for it!”

It took a second to follow Batman’s derailed train of logic, but when he did, Clark felt his stomach drop to his feet. “No,” he said quickly, “no, see, I told you to fiddle with the reactor—”

“And I reset it.”

“Luthor shot me.”

Batman looked away. “I should have just called in Hawkgirl after I made sure all of us were out—“

“Not even her mace could have destroyed all forty-three of those floors.” Clark placed a gentle hand over the fist bunching the collar of his suit. “You did nothing wrong.”

“I should never have listened to you.”

Clark threw up his hands and smiled. “See? It’s my fault after all. You’re completely off the hook.”

“Shut up, Kal!”

“Why do I always have to be the one to shut up?”

“Boys,” John Stewart said, the same time Wonder Woman hissed. “Please.”

“Look, Bats,” Clark said soothingly, still half-smiling, “one little explosion was never going to kill me—”

Batman actually snarled at him like some sort of angry, wounded beast. “Good! Because I’m going to kill you myself!”

“That would undermine your reason for being upset in the first place,” Clark said dryly.

“Would you two just get a room!” Shayera shouted. “Somewhere remote! Far away from innocent civilians!”

“And reporters,” John suggested.

Batman, still glaring at Superman, snorted. “Too late for that.”

Clark turned around in alarm, expecting a TV station van, and instead caught his mother’s eye from among the curious Smallville bystanders. Hurriedly, he shrugged off Batman’s grip on his cape. “I’ve got to go.”

“What?”

“I’ve got a thing.”

“We’ve got a ‘thing’ right now!”
“This is personal,” Clark snapped. “My… family will want to know I’m fine.”

Batman deflated. “Alright. But later—“

“Tomorrow, I want to go see the kid,” Clark interrupted easily, with a sideways glance at the Flash.

“Doc said Superboy is in stable condition, but he’s going to need a few days to purge the Kryptonite from his system. He should be awake tomorrow at the earliest,” the Flash rattled off.

“‘Superboy’?” John deadpanned.

“It sounds cooler than ‘the kid’.” The Flash shrugged, turning to Clark again. “When I left, Good Ol’ Leslie said she wanted to check-up on you tomorrow; but, given that she’s probably about to find out that you blew up and got your mojo back, she might prefer talking to you today—”

“Can’t. Family thing. But I’ll be there bright and early tomorrow. Gotham practice?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll come with you to see Superboy,” Batman said.

“That won’t be necessary,” Clark insisted automatically. “Now that I’ve got my strength back, I can handle any—” He stopped. Batman was already turning away.

“Never mind, then.”

And then Clark grabbed him by the wrist. “Wait!”

Batman barely turned.

“Sorry; old habits die about as hard as I do,” Clark joked. “I…Actually, I wouldn’t mind backup tomorrow.” A slight hesitation. “If you wouldn’t mind.”

After a tense moment, during which the Flash glanced between Supes and Bats like a spectator at a tennis match, Batman nodded. “Then I’ll see you soon.”

“I look forward to it,” Clark replied, letting go of his wrist and rising off the ground. Without a backward glance, he shot straight up into the clouds.

After a circuitous route to the farmhouse, Clark landed soundlessly on the floor in his old room. He took a prolonged time changing into civvies, running his hands over worn plaid shirts that smelled like his dad and faded jeans with holes in their knees. Once he had his old glasses on his nose, he finally felt like himself again.

Eventually, though, he did brave the downstairs where Martha Kent was viciously shelling peas at the kitchen table. At the sight of him on the last step, she went over to give him a silent, side-squeezing hug.

“Son,” Martha said after reclaiming her peas and handing Clark a bowl of potatoes to peel, “I know your father and I said we understood the tolls your job would take; but, getting yourself blown up
twice in one month was not something I was ever prepared to deal with.”

“Well, obviously I wasn’t actually blown up.”

Martha slammed her hands on the table. “Clark Kent,” she announced, “you are grounded.”

Clark laughed. “Ma, I’m thirty-three.”

“So, you’re thirty-three and grounded.”

“Mom,” Clark said, a cocky grin spreading across his face, “The explosion? It was part of the plan. I was always going to be fine!”

Martha’s shoulders slumped; but, to Clark’s great surprise, a second later she leaned across the kitchen table and gave him a long kiss on the forehead.

“I know you don’t want me to panic,” she whispered, “but Clark, I’m going to worry no matter what you say. You might as well tell me the truth so I know what’s going on. And can express the appropriate amount of distress.”

Clark snorted half-heartedly, staring down at the knife in his hands. Now, he could fold it into a bow; a few hours ago, it could have sliced his throat. He would have bled out in seconds. Under his flannel, he could still make out the faint scar on his forearm from the scalpel cut in the infirmary; could still feel the cold ghost of the barrel of Lex’s gun on the back of his head.

“Do you remember when Lex’s car hit me on the bridge?”

“Of course not,” Martha said dryly. “Why would a mother remember the time her son was nearly killed by a speeding Porsche?”

“Right,” said Clark, trying for a winning smile. “Well, you remember the talk we had afterwards?”

Martha smoothed his hair. “You said you were worried that you were a freak because of your powers. That you would give anything to be normal.”

“Yeah, well… that changed.”

“It usually does,” Martha said casually. “At some point, you realize you want to be different. Then you meet other people who are just as talented and realize that your abilities aren’t all that unique; that you will have to push yourself further in order to really stand out. You try that for a while, fail, of course, and then realize that being the most special to a bunch of strangers—even important, intelligent strangers—doesn’t mean anything.” Clark just stared at her. “What? I was thirty-three once.” She winked. “I have an Ivy League law degree. You think you have an ego? You should have seen me at the bar exam.”

Clark tried to smother his grin, then shook his head and said quietly, “It was different with the Porsche. There was no time to think. But before the explosion…”

“What did you think about?”


“And?”

“I’m pretty happy where I am,” said Clark. “You know, I have a lot going for me, even without the powers. And I think I have a lot to offer the world aside from being Superman. Maybe not as much
as, say, Lois Lane or Batman, but I have my own something. And it’s enough because, for someone out there or—if I’m lucky—for a handful of someones out there, it’s just what they need.”

They peeled potatoes and shelled peas peaceably for a while before Martha stood and hugged the still seated Clark. Gently, she smoothed his hair to the side, absently tugging on the wayward forehead curl. “I love you so much,” she murmured. “You have no idea how worried your father and I were when we got you—not just about the powers—but how were we going to raise a child that wasn’t human? What if you developed differently, in ways we couldn’t anticipate? What if your brain chemistry was fundamentally different?

“But you had—still have—these familiar struggles,” she continued. “Not exactly the same ones I did, obviously; but, close enough that I know what’s going through your head. I can raise you; I can help you.” Her smile faltered slightly. “And speaking of helping… Clark, my dearest, sweetest child, could you do you poor, senior citizen mother a favor?”

“Anything, Mom.”

“Please start taking martial arts classes.”

There was a brief but pointed pause.

“…Where is this coming from all of a sudden?” Clark demanded.

“I really should have enrolled you in self-defense courses when you were younger,” Martha muttered, pulling away. “But your father and I were so worried you might injure the instructor or your fellow students. And then you would have revealed your secrets and—”

“—would have wound up with my organs floating in jars of formaldehyde,” Clark concluded with the obligatory eye roll.

“You need to learn how to dodge bullets.”

“But I know how to dodge bullets.”

“Well, clearly you need more practice.”

Clark glared.

“Ask Batman to train you. He’s a ninja, right? And he trained all those Robins.”

“I thought you weren’t… overly fond of Batman,” Clark said, eyebrows raised.

“I’m not crazy about watching a bunch of steroid-infused super-apes fire laser beams at my favorite son either.”

“Oh, wow, I’m the favorite son? Really? I had no idea.”

Matha tweaked his nose. “I don’t care if you’re ‘almost always’ invulnerable; it’s that ‘almost’ bit that has me worried. Train for that ‘almost’, not the ‘always’.”

Clark felt a slow grin spreading across his face. “That does sound like something Batman would say.”

After a moment, Martha asked casually, “So, who’s ‘Bruce’?”

“Hm?” Clark blushed. “Oh. Um. Boyfriend.”
Martha poked him in the bicep. “Does he come with a last name?”

“Yes,” Clark said, bracing himself for inevitable onslaught. “It’s Wayne.”

Martha dropped her bowl of peas. “Wayne? Oh, Clark.” She buried her face in her arms. ”Not again.”

“Oh, Mom—”


“Bruce is not like Lex,” Clark insisted. Martha continued to look suspicious. “I’m serious. He has actual moral fibre, not just affected charm.”

“I grew up with people like the Waynes and Luthors,” Martha argued. “And I also know you aren’t very good at dealing with deviousness; yours is a very forgiving nature.”

“I can be devious,” Clark said defiantly. “And what’s this ‘forgiving nature’ business? You think I’m soft-headed?”

“Soft-hearted, my dear,” Martha corrected with a fond smile, patting him on the cheek. “You tend to trust people’s potential goodness so much you lose sight of how they actually behave.”

“Not all rich people are corrupt, greedy narcissists, Mom,” Clark argued. “You aren’t.”

“I am not wealthy,” Martha said loftily. Then, almost under her breath, “My parents are.” Loudly, “Why do you think I became a lawyer? Someone had to help defend the world against the corporate corruption of the Clarks.” Righting the bowl and scooping up the spilled peas, she added, “By the by, that’s also why I married your father: We shared the same values.” The look in her eyes was hard and pointed.

Clark stifled a grin. “That and, according to Lana’s aunt, he looked like Clint Eastwood and John Wayne had a stubbly, sun-tanned baby.”

“I said I was principled, Clark,” Martha said, pink-cheeked. “Not blind.” Watching him choke back a laugh, she frowned. “I almost wish you were dating Batman instead. I don’t approve of his methods, but at least I know he cares about you. I mean, Lord, he was practically climbing into your arms the moment you landed in the clearing—”

“Bruce cares about me too,” Clark asserted. Then, “I’m actually… I want to tell him about Superman.”

Martha raised her eyebrows. “Already?”

“Yes.”

She smiled. “You really like this one, don’t you.”

“There’s no ‘this one’,” Clark said bluntly. “There’s only Bruce.”

After a beat, Martha simply shook her head. “Fine. But promise me one more thing.”

“Sure, Mom.”

“Get a prenup.”
“Mom.”

After Clark superspeed-peeled the rest of the potatoes and chopped a handful of carrots, Martha shooed him out to the barn.

“I know that look,” she said. “This stew is going to take a few hours to simmer anyway so you might as well get your brooding done before dinner”

Obediently, Clark headed up to the driveway past the empty horse-stalls to the barn. Amid a wave of sentimental nostalgia (he was pretty sure they had kept the wood chipper he stuck his hand in over by the faded fair ribbons), Clark ascended the steps over the tack room to his old loft.

Only to stop dead on the landing. Batman, with his cowl pushed back, stood next to Clark’s high school telescope gazing out at the sun-drenched Smallville farmland. Clark couldn’t make out his profile, let alone his face; but, he could see the back of his head. Batman, it turned out, had black hair too.

Some very surreal things had happened to Clark in the past month: He had swallowed two lungfuls of Kryptonite; had hooked up with Bruce at Luthor's posh sex party; had infiltrated a LexCorp plant wearing a Batsuit and discovered his clone in the basement; had been kissed by Lex at gunpoint; and had woken up naked in a wasteland, a survivor of an explosion that had reduced several cubic miles of buildings and trees to ash. Yet, all those moments paled in comparison to the sight of Batman skulking around the Kent barn in broad daylight like a grumpy, armored jungle cat.

“Where’s Robin?”

“Sent him home.” Bat flicked a hand at the loft behind him: the faded couch with a crocheted Afghan draped over the back, the simple bookshelves stuffed with half-torn paperback sci fi novels, and the dusty coffee table with the wobbly leg. “This is…homey.”

Clark stuffed his hands in his pockets. "My dad set it up for me. Called it my, uh, ‘fortress of solitude’. Said everyone needs to have a place of their own—especially teenagers.”

He heard Batman’s smile in his voice. It made something in Clark’s chest ache. “Wise man.”

After a minute of just staring at Batman’s stiff back, Batman finally spoke again. “I came here to see you.”

“Well, here I am.” Clark eyed his guest warily. “You’ll have to turn around if you really want to see me, though.”

Batman didn’t move.

“You can put the cowl back on. I won’t—”

“Take off your glasses.”

Clark froze. Opened his mouth to ask something pointless; closed it again.

“Please, Kal.”
Clark seriously considered turning around and sprinting until he hit an ocean. Instead, with a sort of nervous, rueful smile, he reached up and smoothed back his hair, flipped the infamous curl over his forehead, and took off his glasses.

“How long have you known?”

“A while.”

Clark looked away. “I was going to tell you.”

“I know.”

Another brief, poignant pause.

“I guess you’re pretty mad about the whole, um, Penguin’s safe business, huh.”

“Not necessarily.”

Clark grimaced. “I’m sorry I called you…” He frowned. “What did I call you, again?”

“A pompous windsock,” Batman said with the hint of a laugh, “and a moron. And an idiot. In that order, too.”

Clark flinched.

“You know… when we landed in that alleyway after I swung you through the streets…” Batman’s stilted voice was soft; gentle. “I wanted to kiss you.”

Clark’s mouth went dry. “Why didn’t you?”

“I was… intimidated.”

Clark couldn’t help it. He snorted.

“You can be very formidable when you wish to be, Kal.”

“Oh, yeah; compared to you, I’m absolutely terrifying.”

“Perhaps I’m just biased, then,” Batman continued smoothly. “Seeing as I’m in… interested in you.”

Clark gulped. “I know.”

“But you love Bruce Wayne.”

It wasn’t a question.

Clark heard Batman swallow thickly. “If there were no Bruce Wayne… would you be interested in me?”

A hypothetical that Clark had honestly not considered. There had been too many strange occurrences and odd moments and misunderstandings to consider a world that might involve prosaic problems.

“I don’t know.”

“Are you attracted to me at all?”

A loaded question. “I haven’t thought about it.”
“You seemed like you were at Cadmus.”

“I was flattered,” Clark said, “and caught off guard, but I’m only interested in Bruce. I don’t know how to want anyone else while I’m with him.”

“Even though you barely know anything about him.”

“I know he’s kind,” said Clark. “I know that he cares deeply about Gotham and its people and he acts decisively to help them. I know enough about the basic foundation of his character to understand that whatever frills operate on the periphery, he’s a man I could love for… a long time. I even like his terrible jokes, sometimes.”

“Even if he has aspects of his life you don’t know about, you still love him?”

“Provided his secrets aren’t of the ‘I’m a member of the mafia’ or ‘I have another five boyfriends on the side’ variety… sure. Because they wouldn’t conflict with what I love about him: that he is, when all is said and done, a good man.”

Batman said nothing.

Eventually, Clark started laughing. “Are you ever going to turn around? Because the suspense is killing me.” They both flinched. “Sorry; poor choice of words.”

“I don’t want to lose you,” Batman whispered. “Not again. If I turn around and you don’t…” Something in his voice hardened. “I won’t lose you too.”

Oh. Oh, Lord, that hurt. “You won’t. I promise. No matter what, I won’t leave you.” Clark put his hand on his shoulder. “I know right now this may feel like the worst thing I could say, but to me… I’ve never had someone I admired and liked so much who knew me before; who liked me too; whom I could trust so completely. Maybe that isn’t enough for you, but to me…” He tried to keep the hand on that shoulder from shaking. “To me, our friendship means everything.”

If not for his superhearing, Clark might have missed Batman’s quiet, “It’s enough.”

With a final squeeze, Clark let go of Bats’ shoulder. “Still nervous?”

A shallow laugh. “At least three Nobel Prizes worth.”

They both froze.

As if in slow motion, several things became painfully clear: One, Clark was an idiot. Two, Batman was an even bigger idiot. And three…

“Bruce,” he said, “turn around.”

There was only a slight delay, and then Batman faced him. For a minute they simply stared at one another, Bruce Wayne in the Batsuit as if he had been poured into it, and Kal in plaid flannel and ratty jeans looking, he assumed, like some sort of super-lumberjack.

“I was half-expecting you to be sweaty and shirtless in dirty overalls,” Bruce said a little regretfully.

Clark blinked, stunned into slight outrage. “You—” a smile spread uncontrollably across his face “—have the weirdest kinks, I swear.”

Bruce kissed him.
It took Clark's brain a full ten seconds to grasp that this was, in fact, happening. Batman’s—Bruce’s—hands slid underneath Clark’s shirt, wrapping around his waist and pulling them chest to chest, hip to hip. Bruce was kissing him with more violence than finesse, making Clark's heart stutter frantically in his chest. More out of surprise than anything, he pulled back.

Bruce's lips were wet and swollen. At the look Clark gave him, he flinched away, but Clark grabbed a fistful of his cape and dragged him close. He found himself studying this face—one he had seen many times before—with fresh eyes. Every plane and feature seemed new and sharp and painfully sweet. This was Bruce. This was Batman.

“I can have you,” he heard himself say, as if from a great distance. His voice sounded weightless and ethereal even though he had never felt more present and powerfully aware of every weighted cell of his body. “All of you…”

“Yes,” Bruce breathed.

Clark let go of his shirt, opting instead to card his fingers through soft, familiar hair. Then he leaned forward and pressed a slow, chaste kiss to Bruce’s lips.

It stayed neither slow nor chaste for long.

“You have a lot to answer for,” Clark whispered sometime later, draped over Bruce's gloriously naked, sweat-streaked body. “Like that bit in the Cadmus elevator.”

Bruce started laughing at him. “The look on your face—”

Clark smacked his chest lightly. “How long have you known?”

"Since the League meeting after the party."  
"Oh," said Clark bashfully. "So, not until after the first time we—?"

Bruce grinned. “I should have guessed then, of course. The sex was pretty super.”

“Oh, wow,” said Clark blandly. “That was terrible, even for you.” Then he frowned. “But you kissed Superman way before that.”

“I wanted Leslie to check you for a concussion, so I took advantage of your painfully obvious attraction to me to make sure you didn’t fly away. Literally.” When Clark continued to glare at him in embarrassed outrage, he added, “You’re welcome.”

“And I suppose you really were checking my tonsils when you stuck your tongue down my throat the second time.”

“That was a get well kiss,” Bruce said innocently.

Clark gave him a superior look. “Can’t even admit that you found Superman attractive.”

“Of course I found you attractive.” Bruce’s voice was equally lofty. “You reminded me of my ex-boyfriend who had dumped me a week prior.”

Clark sputtered. “I dumped you? You dumped me!”
“I beg your pardon.” Bruce looked genuinely affronted. Clark gaped at him.

“You blew me off; told me you weren’t going to be in town until Luthor’s party,” Clark said.

“We broke up before then,” Bruce countered. “Remember the diner? I was having issues with… you, as it turned out, which I took out on… you.” His bewildered look was reassuring; at least Clark wasn’t alone in realizing the absurdity of their situation. “And then you dumped me again over the phone because I couldn’t make time for you due to all the extra shifts I had with the League—your. Former. Shifts.” Somewhat less irate, he added, “You have to appreciate the irony.”

Clark traced the scars along Bruce’s chest. “And what about Selina?”

“For the love of…” Bruce rolled out from under Clark to glower at him. It was interesting to finally see the top half of the infamous Batglare. Clark was—to his chagrin—charmed rather than intimidated. “She is not and has never been my girlfriend!”

“I know that,” Clark threw in hastily. “But why did you have to take her to the benefit instead of me? I mean, we wound up… together… anyway.”

Bruce gazed heavenward as if praying for patience. “Selina and I were going to gather information on Luthor for the League; but then I got sidetracked by you while Selina stole Luthor’s fifty-thousand dollar cat sculpture—”

“What?!” Then, “Cat sculpture? You aren’t saying that…?”

“Yes.” Bruce closed his eyes. “Selina Kyle is Catwoman. Occasionally, Bruce Wayne will help her gain entry to parties or fundraisers that will advance her animal rights initiatives. In exchange, she, as Catwoman, helps Batman with his spy work—when she’s not robbing crime bosses blind, that is.”

Clark could only stare at him open-mouthed.

“I would have stopped her, but by the time I heard about the theft, Selina’d already returned the statue to the former owner in Guatemala and left for Paris with the reward money.”

Clark gently pulled Bruce back to use his scarred chest as a pillow. “Taking your fake girlfriend to an orgy to uncover LexCorp secrets does make more sense than dragging your thirteen-year-old son along,” he said reasonably.

“Don’t even joke about that,” Bruce said with a shudder. “I wouldn’t have brought Dick—Nightwing—either. He may be a grownup and Tim may be very mature for his age, but I’m not taking any son of mine to an orgy, regardless of how useful he might be. It’s just… unthinkable.”

“You are the ultimate dad,” Clark said fondly. “I bet you asked them both for permission to tell me about Batman and family.”

“Of course. And I asked Alfred. And Barbara—Oracle, to you.” Bruce’s hands trailed lazily down the low curve of Clark’s spine. “I got permission from Selina as well; but, then, when I found out you were Superman and had to ask everyone all over again, I couldn’t get ahold of her. Still… I think she would understand.”

Clark mentally added up figures: Robin, Nightwing, Oracle, and Alfred. With Leslie and his mom and Luthor and Batman and Amanda Waller that made… “Nine people.” He felt a little overwhelmed. “I’ve never had more than two people know my identity at a time.”

“I put my family’s safety first,” Bruce said, defiantly but with a hint of apology. “I always will.”
“I would expect nothing less from Batman or Bruce Wayne.” Clark grimaced. “If I had found out you were Batman, I would have told my mother too. You’ve got to protect the people you love. And dating Superman… It’s not just going to affect you personally; Robin and Nightwing and Oracle and Catwoman could become targets for my enemies too. That’s not something you can just… compartmentalize.”

Bruce sagged against him. “Exactly.” He started mouthing his way up Clark’s neck when his stomach growled.

Clark croaked, “Dinner?”

An embarrassed grunt. “In a bit.”

“My mom’s making stew.” Clark sighed. “Oh, and for your own safety, try to downplay your whole ‘oodles of wealth’ schtick; she doesn’t like rich guys.”

“Wonderful,” Bruce deadpanned.

“And she’s not all that taken with Batman either.”

“I’m just the manifestation of your delayed teenage rebellious phase, aren’t I.”

Clark gave him his widest, most annoying grin. “On the plus side, she agrees with you that I need more martial arts training.”

“Does your mother have a preference for any particular form?” Bruce asked immediately.

Clark blinked.

“You realize that ‘martial arts’ is a broad term encompassing, among other things, various international forms of military offensive and defensive training.” Bruce scowled. “It’s not just a series of uniform kicks you memorize and intersperse with sloppy punching.”

“I’m not a total hick,” Clark defended. “Shucks, Bruce, I traveled all over the world in my twenties; I speak fifteen languages. I’ve spent every Chinese New Year for the past decade in Beijing. Forgive me if, when I’m there, I focus more on kung pao chicken than kung fu kickin’.”

There was a pause during which Bruce fought and failed to keep a straight face.

“Well, shucks, Clark when you put it like that—”

“Oh, shut up.”

The horrible southern accent got thicker. “We should get to that kung fu kickin’ right quick!”

“I hate you.”

“That was a euphemism for sex, by the way.”

“What isn’t with you?”

Bruce kissed him tenderly and Clark tried his damndest to stay mad before giving up and climbing on top of him.

Suddenly, he reared back.
Bruce sighed. “What now?”

“I just realized,” Clark said, grin splitting across his face, “that you didn’t bring any clothes with you. Besides the Batsuit.”

“So?”

“So, you’re going to have to borrow some of mine.”

“Unless you want me to meet your mother in the nude, that’s probably a good idea.”

“I was just thinking turnabout’s fair play.” Clark grinned. “I got to wear the Batsuit, now you get to embrace your inner farmboy.”

Bruce wrinkled his nose. “I will not wear plaid.”

“You’ll wear what I give you and like it,” Clark growled sternly in his best Batman voice. At the look on Bruce’s face, he cackled and dove in for another kiss.

“Kon—the Superboy—is awake,” was the first thing Dr. Thompkins said when Clark and Bruce arrived out of costume at her Gotham practice the next morning. “He’s asking for you,” she added to Clark, “but, before you see him, I want to check you out first.” While she ushered him into an examination room, Bruce made himself comfortable in the waiting area.

“You’re back to your normal levels,” Leslie concluded twenty minutes later. “Strength, invulnerability, speed, vision… Everything appears to be in order. Even your scars are all but faded. How do you feel?”

“Excellent.” Clark ran a hand through his hair. “It’s the first time in weeks that I haven’t had a headache—or felt like I was lugging a lodestone around my neck.”

“I still want you to take it easy for a while,” Leslie mused. “Monitor duty is fine, but don’t dive into the alien invasions immediately; let’s see how you hold up against a couple bank robberies first.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Leslie stared at him. “You’re not going to fight me on this?”

“After what happened at the Smallville plant?” Clark grinned. “No. See, I’m trying this radical new approach to health care where I actually listen to my doctor’s recommendations.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t trust me so blindly…” Leslie’s voice faded out. Angrily, she removed her reading glasses and rubbed her eyes. “Yellow sun! I should have realized the color was relevant. Haven’t you always told me that Krypton had a red sun? That that was the reason none of your people exhibited superpowers on their home world…?”

“That and Krypton’s higher mass,” Clark muttered.

“I was only thinking in terms of ultraviolet. Invisible light. I didn’t think the color—the visible spectrum—would have any influence…” She sighed. “And then there was the fusion reactor in the
basement—fusion, Clark! Like solar fusion!” She drummed her fingers on her clipboard. “I should have known or… at least guessed. I mean, if the tanning bed wasn’t working, there had to be a reason—”

“It’s not like there’s an abundance of information on Kryptonian physiology floating around in the ether.,” Clark said reasonably.

“Still.”

Clark rolled his eyes. “Fine; apology accepted, even though I think it’s unnecessary. Honestly, you and Bruce…” He glanced up, aiming his X-ray vision at the waiting area, but wound up focusing on the neighboring room instead where Kon sat on his cot, head bowed. “Is he… is the kid going to be alright?”

Leslie glanced at the wall as if she could see through it too, then flipped idly through some pages of her clipboard. “Physically, Kon’s fine,” she said. “His growth was artificially exacerbated, so, I can tell that his joints are likely to give him trouble later on. He also has stretch marks, but they’re already fading. He’s still suffering from Kryptonite poisoning, but it’s mostly out of his system now.” She gritted her teeth. “There are also signs of… physical trauma, but they are almost fully healed.”

“What kind?”

“I found a scarred over bullet wound in his abdomen,” Leslie said. “No permanent damage; but, there are also scabbed cuts along his arms and legs in regularly spaced intervals. They don’t look self-inflicted; the angles are wrong. My guess is Luthor was testing him for invulnerability once, maybe twice a week.”

A burning in Clark’s eyes made him look away. He couldn’t tell if he wanted to cry or shoot lasers through the floor. “Has he said anything? About Luthor? Cadmus? Waller?”

“The first thing he did after he woke up—once I coaxed out his name and assured him he was not in another one of Lex Luthor’s labs—was ask for Superman.”

Clark scratched the back of his neck. “I guess Clark Kent will have to do.”

Dr. Thompkins leaned against the door and folded her arms. “You know,” she said, “years ago, I took in a boy after his parents died. His father had been my best friend since med school. I’d never been the maternal sort and, I thought, after everything this kid had been through, the last thing he needed was some friend-of-family stepping into his life, trying to be his mom.” She pursed her lips. “But, somehow, I didn’t screw it up too badly—I don’t think. He may dress up like a bat and fight crime until five in the morning—” She flashed a grin at Clark’s bug-eyed stare “—but… I don’t think I did as poorly as I sometimes fear. He would have turned out much worse without someone there—someone else there, that is. On my bad days, I can always tell myself that at least I made things easier for Alfred.

“I’m still here for Bruce, of course, decades after he’s good and grown. I’ll patch him up when he comes in bleeding and broken, I’ll listen to his problems, if he’s willing to open up, and I’ll try to talk him out of some of his more foolhardy plans. But, even after decades of this, I still don’t know what I’m doing half the time.”

Clark quirked a weak smile. “Does this mean I have you to thank for the terrible puns?”

“I’m afraid those are genetic.” Leslie’s voice was desert dry. “Tom Wayne had a horrible sense of humor too. I sometimes think I graduated from med school just so I wouldn’t have to hear him
humming ‘Poisoning Pigeons in the Park’ during every library study session.”

Clark guffawed, quickly covered his mouth with a fist, and found himself staring through the wall again. Kon was looking out the window, idly swinging his legs.

With a sudden uptick in his pulse, Clark lowered his hand. “I think I’ll go talk to him now. If that’s alright.”

Leslie tucked her clipboard under her arm. “I’ll be in the waiting room with Bruce.”

She gave his shoulder a tight squeeze before leaving. A moment later, Clark followed, stopping in front of the Superboy’s door, taking an unnecessarily deep breath, and knocking.

There was a muffled thump and a yelp.

“It’s just Clark—Superman,” he said quickly. “Can I come in?”

“Yes!”

Bracing himself, Clark finally stepped inside, shutting the door behind him. For a while, he simply stared at his counterpart. Sure, he had very strong memories of what he had been like as a teenager; but, it was hard to believe he had ever looked that young.

“I thought you were Batman,” Kon said finally.

“Ah—no.” Clark tried very hard not to fidget. “I was just borrowing his old suit. Kryptonite poisoning took away my invulnerability, so, padding seemed like the wisest course of action.”

An uncomfortably long pause.

“It’s Kon, right?” A nod. “Well, out of costume, my name is Clark Kent.”

“Clark Kent,” the kid repeated, then frowned. “I thought it was ‘Kal’. That’s what the Flash said…”

“That’s my Kryptonian name,” Clark said hurriedly. “It’s really only used by my teammates and close friends.”

“Oh.” Kon stared furiously at the floor.

“You can use it too, of course.”

The glare became less pronounced. “Okay.”

An even longer, but slightly less awkward pause.

“How old are you, Kon?”

“Eighteen,” came he prompt reply.

Clark’s eyebrows shot up. “You look a little young to be eighteen years old.”

“I meant eighteen months.” Kon was still eyeing Clark warily. “The hypergrowth will stop in two weeks when I… look sixteen. From then on, I should age normally. Like a Kryptonian.”

“Good to know,” Clark found himself saying.

There was another drawn-out silence.
Clark tried to smile reassuringly. “This must be pretty weird for you. It’s pretty weird for me, at least.” When he saw the boy’s expression grow shuttered he added quickly, “But good weird! I’d always hoped—I didn’t know there would ever be someone else. Like me.”

This seemed the wrong thing to say. Superboy flushed an angry red and bit his lip. “I’m not like you,” he hissed. “I can’t fly.”

“Okay,” Clark said, shrugging.

“And I don’t have super speed. I mean, I can go pretty fast for a human… but I’m not… I don’t have laser vision. Or X-ray vision. Or ice-breath. Or invulnerability.” He swallowed. “My powers are superstrength and superhearing. That’s it.”

“That’s fine,” said Clark soothingly; but, the kid continued to glower at the floor. “It’s no big deal, really; most people don’t have any powers.”

“But,” the boy said tersely. “But… Lex said… I was a disappointment—”

“Lex is an idiot,” Clark snapped. Kon flinched. “Sorry. I mean, your powers—and Lex’s opinions on your powers—don’t matter. You are not only valuable if you… fulfill someone else’s arbitrary requirements.”

A look of furious disbelief. “But I’m your clone. I’m supposed to be a perfect copy of you. If I’m not, then—what—” Kon stood, restlessly pacing from wall to wall. “What’s my point?”

Clark looked at the hunched back, the bowed head; felt an internal echo of that pain like a raw scrape in his gut. How strange to stand on the other side of this conversation, to see a body curled in on itself in fear and shame; to know that this wound, too, could be salved. The only question was whether Clark was anywhere close to ready for this task.

Actually, scratch that; the question was, would he do it anyway?

“You know, Metropolis is a really nice place to live,” he blurted. “My apartment’s pretty small—cramped, one might say—” (Lois had. Several times.)”—but, the city itself has a lot to offer and, if you really can’t stand the noise or the crush of people after a while, the Kent family farm is only a day’s drive away. Wide open fields, lots of quiet space… and my mom would love you. And probably express that love through an impossible amount of pie-baking.” He paused; Kon was watching him, heavy lidded, from over his shoulder. “I know it’s a lot to throw at you—and maybe I’m reading too much in you wanting to talk to me. Perhaps you have someone else with whom you would rather stay—"

Kon turned all the way around, face slack. “You want me to live with you?”

“If you want,” Clark added hastily. “I mean, there are logical reasons for this being a good idea. For one thing, I could help you get a handle on the superstrength and superhearing. For another, if you do happen to develop any additional powers, I’d be the most qualified person on the planet to help you deal with them. Besides—” he winked “—we Kryptonians need to stick together, right?”

The face tilted toward him looked frighteningly fragile. “And what if I don’t get any more powers?”

Clark grinned sheepishly. “If all you ever have are superstrength and superhearing, you’ll be the luckier of the two of us; trust me.” When Kon just looked insulted—patronized, Clark realized—he leaned closer and dropped his voice conspiratorially. "Laser vision? You spend days after it manifests wondering if you're going to kill someone just by looking at them. Ice breath? Really only comes in handy when the fridge goes out. Superspeed? It's a good thing I'm virtually invulnerable or
I would have killed myself a million times over on all the things I’ve run into. And, honestly, the X-ray vision? It just freaks people out.”

“But what if I never fly,” Kon said, his voice hard.

Clark felt like his heart might break. “There’s always hiking,” he mused. “Horseback riding. And if we ever feel too earthbound, we could go snorkeling. I tried it once; it’s a lot like flying underwater, but without all the shouting pedestrians pointing up at you.”

Kon considered him with a small crease between his brows.

“If you ever want to go flying, though, I’d be happy to carry you,” Clark added. “I do that with everyone, actually. Most of my friends and family can’t fly; you’d be in good company.”

The next break in the conversation was slightly longer than seemed tolerable.

“Alright,” Kon said finally.

Clark sagged against the counter. “Great! Okay, then.” They stared at each other while Clark tried to keep the monumental combination of panic and joy from rising to his face. “I’ll just… I’d better go sort out your paperwork, then.” Calling his mom seemed like a good idea; after all, she must have gone through similar documentation issues when an alien baby landed in the Kent cornfield. Clark moved to leave, but Kon followed him.

“Aren’t you supposed to rest?”

“I’ll walk you out,” said Kon, as if reciting a line. “It’s what Dr. Thompkins did with everyone who came in here this morning.”

Clark was touched. “That’s very polite of you.” They made their way down the hall to the waiting room where Bruce was chatting with Robin over comms.

“Is something wrong?” Clark asked hurriedly.

Bruce tapped Robin out. “We’re discussing logistics.”

“What kind?”

“Connor Kent’s birth certificate, adoption papers, and medical history, for starters.”

Clark and Kon both said, “What?” and Bruce looked between the two of them with poorly disguised amusement.

“He’s going to need to be enrolled in school too, of course. I’ll be calling Gotham Academy this afternoon to secure a place for him in the fall.”

“Now, hang on.” Clark put his hands on his hips. “Who put you in charge of his education?”

“I figured you were going to ask me for help anyway; so, in anticipation of your needs, I went ahead and arranged everything.”

Clark folded his arms. “I’m not sending him to Gotham Academy!”

“Why not?”

“For one thing, I just got him,” said Clark. “I’m not dropping him off at some boarding school to be
“raised by a bunch of snooty, over-paid professor types when we’ve barely had time to bond. For another, he’s eighteen months old—he’s not ready!”

“He’s going to have to get out into the world at some point,” Bruce drawled. “And I was going to hire private tutors for him over the summer.”

“You’re hiring them?”

“Do you have the funds necessary to send a kid to Gotham Academy and pay for private tutoring?” Bruce’s calm, refined tone made Clark want to fling him into a mud pit.

“It doesn’t matter if I can because he’s not going to Gotham Academy!” Clark snapped. “And even if he were—not even you could cram ten years of schooling into a few months!”

“Watch me.”

Clark rounded on Leslie, who had put a reassuring hand on Kon’s shoulder. (“Don’t worry; they’re always like this.”) “Tell this idiot that I’m not sending my soon-to-be-newly-adopted first child to a far away boarding school with a bunch of spoiled trust fund babies!”

Bruce rolled his eyes. “Now you sound just like your mother.”

Everyone froze. Slowly, Clark pivoted back to Bruce. “And by that I assume you mean I sound well-educated, intelligent, wise, and insightful,” he said in a dangerously low voice.

“Of course,” Bruce said quickly, to which Leslie’s jaw dropped. “However, I would like to remind you that Gotham Academy is an internationally ranked institution that looks excellent on college applications. Also, while the Academy offers boarding for students, it is not required for attendance. Kon could live with you in Metropolis commute to Gotham.”

“It’s a four hour drive from Metropolis to Gotham and back, if I’m dropping him off and picking him up,” Clark said dryly.

“Only if you’re driving him,” said Bruce. “It’s forty-five minutes each way, if you know the right roads and don’t drive ten miles under the speed limit.” He eyed Kon speculatively. “You’re supposed to be almost sixteen, I’m guessing? Which means you can get your license. Would you like me to teach you how to drive?”

“You will do no such thing!” Clark snapped. “You drive like a bat out of hell! Pun not intended,” he added. “I won’t let him pick up any bad habits from you! I will teach him so the world doesn’t end up with another hooligan on the streets!”

“Marvelous,” said Bruce airily. “You can use the Batmobile to practice.”

Voice a dead croak in his throat, Clark stared at Bruce like he’d been smacked over the head with a Kryptonite baseball bat.

“You and Kon should stay at the manor over the summer,” Bruce continued, rising gracefully to his feet. “That way, he could practice socializing with Tim and Barbara and Dick, and I’d be able to ensure he receives all the tutoring he will require to be competitive at Gotham Academy in the fall. Furthermore, you two could spend as much time together as you want.” If Clark hadn’t still been staring at him dumbfounded, he might have missed the nervous twitch in Bruce’s fingers. “If you want, that is.”

There was that warm feeling again that left Clark a little breathless. “So much for ‘stay out of
Gotham’,” he muttered.

Bruce wasn’t looking at him; he was ‘adjusting’ his cufflinks. “Is that a ‘no’?”

“I have a job in Metropolis,” Clark reminded him. “Two jobs, in fact. Clark Kent and Superman can’t just vacation in Gotham for an entire summer.”

“On the weekends, then,” Bruce suggested.

There was a tug on Clark’s sleeve. Two large blue eyes stared up at him. “I want to go,” Kon said with a sort of nervous glance back at Leslie. She gave him a thumbs up. In a very small voice, Kon added, “Please… Dad?”

And just like that, Clark felt his insides melt into saccharine goo. “Oh… All right.”

Kon gave him a too-tight hug while Clark mumbled something incoherent, glaring over Kon’s shoulder at a revoltingly smug Bruce. After another tight squeeze, Dr. Thompkins tapped on Kon’s arm.

“Back to the solarium with you, young man.”

“I’ll be back tomorrow,” Clark promised him as Kon pulled away and followed Dr. Thompkins back toward the exam rooms.

“You can take him home in a week,” Leslie said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Clark said automatically on his way out the door. He almost crashed into Bruce, struggling to control a giggling fit in the middle of the sidewalk.

“Gloating is unbecoming,” Clark said with a sniff.

“You two,” Bruce practically purred, “are adorable.”

“I beg your pardon,” Clark said flatly.

Bruce’s voice, for all its teasing, had a soft edge to it. “He has you wrapped around his little finger.”

Clark crossed his arms. “I resent that. Strongly.”

Bruce put a hand on his chest, sliding it down to wrap his fingers around Clark’s. “You’re going to make a great father.”

It took Clark a minute to get his face back under control. He nodded silently, leaning in to give Bruce a quick peck on the cheek; but, Bruce stopped him.

“I meant it, earlier.” His eyes darted from Clark’s face to his feet. “If you want… to come live with me. I know you have responsibilities. But… you are welcome in Gotham—in my home—anytime. For anything.”

Clark sagged forward until their foreheads pressed together. “And you, Tim, Dick, Alfred, and Barbara are always welcome in Metropolis. And in my apartment, though it might be a bit of a squeeze.” He winced. “Maybe we should only have family get-togethers at the manor or on the farm.”

Bruce froze. “Family get-togethers?”
“Yeah, isn’t—?” Clark’s brain caught up with his mouth. His whole face felt like it was blistering. “I didn’t—I’m sorry—Oh, hell—”

But Bruce was smiling at him with so much honest, helpless liking, it became Clark’s turn to stare hot-cheeked at his shoes. Luckily, Alfred chose that moment to round and corner in the limo and herd a beaming Bruce and scarlet-faced Clark into the back seat.

“Such a dad,” Bruce quipped.

“Oh, shut up,” Clark retorted.

Two Months Later

Amanda Waller's apartment building seemed different than Clark had expected. It was the same high rise from which Clark had pushed away the Joker’s blimp, which, in hindsight, explained more than he really wanted to contemplate. The building’s lobby featured a wide, tiled entry-way leading to a small but clean elevator. On Waller’s floor, a narrow hall led to her innocuous front door. Next to it, stationed by the neighboring apartment’s welcome mat, were a couple tricycles and two pairs of tiny rain boots. Down the hall, someone was listening to Middle Eastern pop music; someone else was fixing either spaghetti or lasagna in an apartment near the emergency stairs.

Clark knocked. Waller answered promptly—and stared.

“It's good to put a face to a name, finally,” Clark said, extending a hand. “I'm Clark Kent.”

"I know who you are.” They shook; Clark stuck his hands back in his pockets.

"I don't mean to intrude,” he said apologetically, “but could I come in? There is something sensitive I wish to discuss with you.”

She stepped aside, leading him into a comfortably furnished living room and inviting him to take a seat on a very plush couch by the window.

"Tea?"

"Yes, please. Thank you.”

Waller poured and they sipped in silence until Clark set down his cup.

“I came here to tell you that I understand your fear,” he began.

“I doubt that very much.”

“I know what it’s like to fear annihilation,” Clark insisted firmly. “I’m one of the last of my kind because my home planet was destroyed. By Kryptonian hubris, no less.” When Waller said nothing, he continued. “I know why you are terrified.” He looked around the apartment. "I could level this building in the blink of an eye, and it doesn't matter if I tell you I never will. People can change; be manipulated; be taken advantage of. Press the right buttons and I could become very dangerous.”
Here his expression darkened. “But superstrength isn’t the only kind of danger this world faces. Abuse of power can also manifest itself through a particular mind set. Imagine, for instance, a brand of ruthlessness that doesn't allow compassion or basic human decency to influence its actions; a way of thinking that can justify murder, torture, and exploitation of minors all for some individually determined ‘greater good’.”

Waller's eyebrows rose. Clark glanced down at his hands and was proud to discover they were not shaking. "I would tell you that metas are people as well and deserve the same government protections any non-superpowered humans do, but I know that you don't care. I cannot appeal to your better nature because someone who would murder over sixty thinking, feeling children simply because they are alien clones is clearly not capable of guilt or remorse—at least not in ways that will help me make my point.” He paused for breath.

“And what exactly is your point?”

“Have you watched the news today?”

“Yes.”

“Then you saw the Justice League make an appearance at the U.N.”

Waller’s cold, calculating eyes reminded Clark of the Joker sizing him up behind a wall of Arkham glass. "You gave the Security Council Kryptonite."

Clark tilted his head this way and that. "Not all of it. Batman still has a good amount; and you and Luthor probably have more squirreled away somewhere. I’m assuming I won't find those stashes until you both try to kill me in some new, convoluted way; but, the point is that now, you won't have the legal authority to try anymore. Only the U.N. will; and only the International Court of Justice can decide whether and how to punish us.

"I can't stop you from attempting to kill me or any other metas anymore than you can stop me if I lose control; but, I can make sure that the next time you do, you and whomever helped you will spend the rest of your lives in prison.”

Waller’s expression turned thoughtful. She leaned back in her chair, propping her head up delicately on one hand. "As far as threats go," she mused, "that was actually pretty good, if a bit... naive." She stirred her tea absently. "Does the rest of the League know you're here?"

“I didn’t tell anyone.” He cocked his head to the side. “But I think Batman followed me.”

“Then, as this is an unofficial visit, I'm going to level with you.” Waller’s stern expression stood in sharp, dangerous contrast to her otherwise relaxed body language. "I'm just following orders. The reason I am here and am talking to you now is because I have been, as you said, ‘ruthless’ enough to take the measures necessary to fulfill those orders.” She leaned in close. "Kryptonite or no Kryptonite, official backing or no, if the president of the United States tells me to test your limits and take you out, I will. That's my job, Superman: I’m charged with protecting him and the American people from outside threats; and you and your super-powered club up in your Earth-orbiting treehouse are the greatest potential menace our world has ever seen.”

“We’re not even the most powerful people in our galaxy,” Clark argued.

"You threaten the authority of the government—of all governments."

"We uphold the spirit of the law."
"As vigilantes. With no outside supervision."

Clark smiled victoriously at her. "Until now."

Waller's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I spoke to the U.N. Security council privately after the public announcement and recommended you for the position of the Justice League Security Council Member, U.S. representative. The U.N.S.C. was in negotiation with the U.S. president all morning, hashing out your new contract."

Waller slowly lowered her tea cup.

"As of two p.m. this afternoon, you are no longer under the personal purview of the American president," Clark said. "All your programs have either been discontinued or handed over to other management. From now on, you will preside over a special council of international delegates answering only to the U.N. Security Council. Your team will have the power to question any League actions that affect the world on an international level; but, in order to sentence any Justice League member to life-imprisonment—since capital punishment is considered unconscionable—you will have to provide clear, just cause for their request for the sentence. Similarly, all actions on part of your committee for or against the Justice League will be scrutinized by the Security Council and the Court." He held out his hand. "Congratulations on your new appointment, Madam President."

Stonily, Waller shook, nails digging into his hand. "How much of this was Batman's idea?"

Clark easily extracting his hand from her grasp. "None. He was—still is—strongly opposed to giving you any more power than you've already accrued.

"But, I like you out in front, the public face of a notoriously transparent organization and soon-to-be popular program. So far, you have operated well because of your anonymity. Now, your decisions and actions will be monitored, documented, and judged by a separate, impartial committee; not to mention covered by the world-wide press." He smiled. "I know the Planet in particular will be excited by the establishment of this new sub-council. As popular as Superman and the League as a whole are, I can't imagine your new agency will escape our notice."

Waller's cold eyes remained steady. "What makes you think the U.N. bureaucracy will be any more tolerant of unsanctioned metahuman activity than the U.S. government?" She leaned in close. "What makes you think I can't sway them to my side of things too?"

Clark sighed. "This is where Batman and I disagree: He thinks, since you can't trust anyone to do the right thing unless there's a gun to their head or a trail of money leading to a larger pile of money, we should just leave you alone, collect dirt, and expose you to the public and the authorities."

"And how is that dirt gathering coming?"

There had been nothing incriminating about Amanda Waller in any of the files Robin had stolen from the LexCorp plant; in fact, there had been no mention of her at all. The same had been true of all projects to which Waller was assumed to be attached: Officially, she had never been more than another desk jockey at Homeland Security. Programs such as the 'Suicide Squad' were barely more than rumors. The fact that Batman had discovered anything about her at all was a testament to his diligence as an investigator.

She knew that too, from her smug smile.

"Your spotless record is the main reason I could get you this job in the first place," Clark said. "But I can't imagine it will be easy living up to those sparkling expectations when all the eyes of the world..."
are fixed on you. Nevertheless, I sincerely hope you try.”

Instead of responding, Waller took a long sip of tea. It felt, Clark thought, like the end of a long game of chess: a headache inducing battle that had involved outmaneuvering a far more canny opponent. For now, he had her trapped; but, how long could anyone hold Amanda Waller in check? How many years—months—weeks before she rallied enough of their enemies together to take on the League again?

At least, when the time inevitably came, Bruce would be there with him; after all, Batman would never miss a chance to tell Superman, ‘I told you so.’

Waller rose from her chair, momentarily towering over Clark. "Would you like some macaroons? I usually eat them after lunch, but something told me I should save them today."

Clark stood up as well. “No, ma’am, thank you.”

She showed him out, then watched him from her apartment doorway as he called the elevator. "If it helps you sleep at night," she said, "I didn't know about the clones."

Clark blinked at her, honestly surprised. "I have it on good authority that Cadmus was in charge of providing genetic samples for that particular branch of research."

But Waller shook her head. "We used your DNA, but only for analysis. Luthor must have taken advantage of unfettered access to further his own projects.” When Clark regarded her skeptically, she added, “Why do you think I left that decryption key—a key that just happened to grant access the lower levels of Cadmus—out in the open? I knew Luthor was up to something, but I couldn’t get the information I needed with the resources at my disposal. So, I decided to recruit outside help.”

“You knew we would break in.”

“I was hoping I would get a chance to interrogate one of you about the goings-on in Smallville; but, as it turned out, I never needed to: You uploaded the entire project to the web for the world to peruse.” She smiled wryly. “I usually find it’s very easy to manipulate people into doing what I want and I make a point of always knowing my opponents’ strengths and weaknesses. As you can imagine, I’m not often outgunned.” She looked right at him. “And never twice by the same person.”

Clark tilted his head. “Why do you hate the League so much? Is it because of the powers? Or is it a vigilante thing?”

Waller clenched her dark hand into a fist; in spite of this, her voice remained almost pleasant. “Let’s just say I know from personal experience what a group of self-righteous, privileged people can do when they know the law won’t or can’t stop them.”

Clark grimaced. “I can’t argue with that.”

“Who could?”

When the elevator arrived, Clark hesitated. “I hope you can use your position on the council for its intended purpose,” he said. “I think you’re right. We do need monitoring—especially if we expand, which I’m pretty sure we will. There are a lot of metas out there—a lot of people who want to do the right thing, if not through the traditional channels.”

Waller didn’t respond. Clark boarded; but, as the doors closed, he slid a hand between them and poked his head into the hall again.
“One more thing: If you had known about the clones,” he ventured, “would you have stopped Lex?”

Waller smiled; it was not a reassuring sight. "Good luck at the Planet, Mr. Kent. And tell your rich boy, 'Hi' for me. Maybe mention that I’m sorry about the Penguin and the Riddler business; I figured kidnapping your boyfriend would be the surest way to lure you out. And I was right.”

“But…” Clark frowned. “I didn’t know Bruce was Batman until after the plant explosion. And he didn’t know who I was until right before we hashed out our infiltration plan.”

Waller looked tolerant, but disbelieving. “Kent, your disguise is a pair of glasses.”

Clark threw up his hands. “What’s the saying? Love is blind?” Waller continued to look unimpressed. “We really didn’t know!”

To his horror, she started laughing. “I suppose I should have suspected,” Waller gasped during a pause for breath. “After all, you went after the Flash when Mirror Master put his vendetta ahead of the plan…”

“That was supposed to be Batman?”

“They were all supposed to be Batman.”

“Huh.” Clark frowned. “You know, I didn’t rescue Bruce just because I loved him, but because it was the right thing to do. Saving someone—no matter whom—is always the right choice.”

Waller’s face showed no reaction as, with a wave, Clark finally let the elevator doors close.

Bruce was waiting for him in the no-parking zone at the entrance of the apartment complex, leaning casually against a sleek, black convertible with the top down.

“Have you learned nothing from the last few weeks?” he demanded the moment Clark was within human hearing range. “I am your backup; you always call me before engaging with potential threats. Always.”

"I figured you would show up eventually,” Clark said offhand. “And I heard you park just as we sat down for tea.”

Bruce looked apoplectic. "Tea?! You drank her tea?!"

"I'm fine, I'm fine; she had some too."  

"There could have been something in or on your cup, not just in the tea itself.”

"Seriously, Bruce, you think I wouldn't have smelled Kryptonite and arsenic?" Clark nodded to the car. "Are you driving me home?"

“I figured you could use a rest from flying.”

Clark gave him a surprised look. “You don’t need to rush back to the mansion and handle a case?”
“Dick offered to cover for me. I took him up on it, this time.”

Beaming, Clark kissed Bruce sweetly before swinging himself into the passenger seat. "I left Tim and Kon at my apartment with pizza money before I headed out, so… Want to go out for dinner?"

“I do,” Bruce said, circling to the driver's side, “but, not Bibbo’s.”

“You like their Devil’s Food,” Clark chided. “But, I meant we should stop somewhere on the way to Metropolis; I’m far too hungry to wait until we arrive.”

“Well,” said Bruce, starting the engine, “there’s a wonderful seaside country club north of Gotham that serves fresh caught lobster—”

"I want someplace where the napkins aren’t folded into animals and the prices are listed on the menu.”

Bruce mock-scowled at him, peeling out onto the street so violently Clark almost brained himself on the dashboard. (Or, more accurately, left his face-print embedded in the glove box.)

"Spoil all my fun,” Bruce grumbled, smiling broadly as he tore down the road to the dulcet tunes of Clark hollering at him to slow down. The sun was out; the sky was clear. Summer, in all its golden glory, had barely begun.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who read, kudo'd, and/or commented on this! And--again and forever--a thousand points to cephalopodqueen for being an extremely excellent editor.

(BTW, if you feel the need, come shout at me on tumblr!!! I LIVE FOR THAT SHIT.)

Edit: I forgot to add this link to Poisoning Pigeons in the Park!

Edit 2.0: Selofain drew some awesome fanart!! (can also be found on tumblr)
THANKS, MAN!!!!

Works inspired by this one
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!