When a bioweapon attack leaves Superman in bad shape, Batman must race to find a way to fix things and figure out who is behind it. Complicating things is a promise he's made and his own responsibility in the initial event.

Disclaimer: I don't own Superman or Batman.

A/N: For those of you who have read Foreign Object, you might see some themes repeated, heh. This was written before FO, my first foray into writing in years. It is a mess, honestly, and I'm posting it because I want to move on to other stories.

It is a companion piece in theme but that's about it. I had started with the premise, what happens if Batman's mind is compromised? And what happens if Superman's body is?

This is set far earlier in the timeline, circa Tim's first few years as Robin.

I have also taken MASSIVE CREATIVE LIBERTIES. There were many things I tried to research and just said "screw it" and did what I wanted. So, I hope it's fun enough to make up for it. Thank you for reading!
Prologue

"This is Batman, coming in for emergency landing. I repeat, emergency landing. Can I get a manual override of the airlock speed? Do you copy? Over."

Silence.

"I repeat, this is Batman, coming in for an emergency landing, the Javelin-7 has been compromised. I need a manual override on the airlock door speed, over."

Silence.

A spiderweb of crackling bullet-proof glass fills Batman's field of vision. The two outer layers have already shattered, dispersed into the vacuum of space.

A beeping alarm sounds in the whole of the cockpit. The airlock door ahead creeps open with the patience of machinery suspended from time, from gravity, from the atmosphere and urgency of earth.

"I need a override on the airlock door speed." He forces his voice to remain level.

The cracks in the glass grow in length and depth; they crawl like a virus across the surface.

"This is Batman. I have an emergency situation."

Voice still measured, urgent but not panicked. Panic isn't going to help anyone. Breathing exercises for high stress situations are helpful.

He casts a look toward the spacesuit, the helmet and oxygen tank he should have been wearing but rarely does. The trip has been made often enough that he has gotten comfortable. The tank is in one place, hooked to the wall with spares-- the suit and helmet unattached and across the ship. Too far. Not enough time.

The breaking of the glass becomes audible now, a frightening splintering sound that shouts above even the alarm. Too much force could undo it in a breath, not enough force and it will outrun him to his death.

Batman pushes on the controls, edging the Javelin-7 to move just a bit faster. It still seems glacially slow as the Watchtower approaches. He repeats his call over the radio, even now carefully avoiding the use of the word "help." If he is going to die, he is going to die stubborn and proud.

And then he’s there, at the edge of the hangar with the airlock doors not quite open and in less time than a lightning strike takes, he is aware of his phenomenal speed, the persistent slowness of the doors, and the thundering final crack of the splintering glass.

And last, the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
Of things ill done and done to others' harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue."
-"Little Gidding”, T. S. Eliot
The Javelin-7 cockpit glass sucks inward like the skin of a balloon right before it inflates, then explodes outward into silence, just as the Javelin-7 itself scrapes the airlock doors and spins wildly.

At least there is a seatbelt.

The force rips his body against the restraint. It is freezing, empty, and unbearably strong. Even when he knows that going limp will prevent injury, going limp would also mean giving himself up to space without a fight.

No breath to take, no time to think, to fear, to hope. It is not at all like being underwater, with a sense that the surface is above you, near you-- that oxygen inhabits the liquid too, in some fashion.

Lungs compressing, head pounding, vaguely aware of the Javelin-7 still spinning languidly and furiously at the same time just inside the first airlock doors, he grips the pilot's chair as well as he can.

The restraints are giving. He can feel them shifting, failing on him under the strain.

No one answered the radio call. He is on his own. It is too late to call for help, now. He waited too long. His hands are already numb, but if by some sheer effort of will he could get to the oxygen tank, then maybe, just maybe...

A flash of memory fills his mind, of that Jack London story where the nameless lead can't even build a fire to save himself. Alfred making broad hints about analogous heroes.

He had blacked out for a second, he realizes, as another louder alarm sounds over the chaos. The airlock doors are sliding closed, still slow, scraping against the hull of the Javelin-7 and tilting it, setting it on another route of spinning.

This time it catches the ceiling and now he is in a trapped ping pong ball, the airlock closed enough to prevent the Javelin-7's escape but the atmosphere unbalanced. It ricochets off every surface it touches. Now the safety restraints are really giving up, and in his half-frozen, air-deprived state, real horror truly slams into his gut.

The airlock.

Too closed for the Javelin but not yet closed enough to prevent a body. A human body. Somehow almost making it to safety has exponentially increased the sense of terror.

Now, finally, in the face of his own impending death, Batman attempts to gasp, to suck in air that isn't there. The restraints let go and for a moment he is weightless. Then he is being dragged, away from the chair to the still closing airlock. And his cold hands will not grip and the chair is out of reach.

He is prepared. It took a second, but he is ready to drift out the airlock and never wake again. He had not, in his muddled state, accounted for the still moving Javelin, which now slams against his drifting body and into a wall. And now the airlock is closed.

The manual override for the interior airlock is eight feet below him. Emergency alarms still blare around him, and now he knows they are the Watchtower's own alarms, surely triggered by the Javelin's collision with the doors.

It is a matter of seconds before he blacks out again. The whole thing has taken place in the span of two minutes, maybe less, but even he has limits where oxygen is concerned.
The second airlock door slides open, pulling the Javelin on a diagonal down and in. This is faster than usual, much faster, with no proper time to pressurize the room.

Like the Javelin, he goes down and in, skidding across the floor as he takes in deep gulps of air. He is aware now of how cold he is, how much his lungs hurt, how his head aches.

It is against a far wall that his momentum is interrupted and he is unceremoniously on the floor, already conscious enough to regulate his gasping into even breathing. One sob, mainly to speed the delivery of oxygen into his system, is all that escapes and then he is motionless and breathing steadily.

After a moment, he lifts his head, aware that he is being watched. The entire JLA stands a mere two yards from him, faces stricken. If he had been unconscious, they would have rushed to help, to lift him, to administer aid.

But he is awake and they are not certain of the line between rendering assistance and trampling pride. He slowly climbs to his feet, making an effort not to stagger.

"We heard the alarm," Wonder Woman says quickly, "and overrode the interior airlock. What happened?"

"Space debris," he says, as if this is enough. He wants to demand to know who should have been in the control room. If anyone else's life had been at risk, he would have.

"Well, I'm glad you made it," Superman says with a warm grin. He clasps Batman's arm and the moment of worry that passes between them escapes the rest of them, held in Superman's eyes and deflected by Batman's stony stare.

"I'm fine," Batman says to no one in particular and everyone at once. "We have a crisis to deal with, don't we?"

Uncertain, but unwilling to protest, the rest of the team takes a step back and they leave the battered Javelin behind. More pressing concerns now fill their minds and they hurry, in continued silence, to the conference room. On the way there, Superman trails behind and notes that Batman's gloved hands are trembling, just slightly.

He says nothing.

Much like Batman, who sits mostly silent for the rest of the meeting about tackling an alien life form threatening to overrun the southern US coast and sprawl into Texas or Mexico depending on its whims. His few contributions are apt, intelligent and so nothing seems that much out of the ordinary aside from the broken Javelin that hangs on Superman's mind like a toothache.

They all staunchly avoid any mention of it throughout the meeting. No further apologies or acknowledgements are made. Superman senses, as the rest of them must, that this is Batman's preference, as if both his survival and their silence are brought about by a sheer act of his will. Maybe this, Superman muses, is Bruce's superpower.

A plan is made, roles assigned, as usual. Wonder Woman offers, in a moment that violates the unwritten agreement, to let Batman take J'onn's place at the command center, to sit this one out. Superman doesn't need super-vision to see the hurt in J'onn's face or the anger simmering on Batman's. Wonder Woman realizes, backpedals, with practiced grace and diplomacy.

"No," Batman says, no elaboration, just as she says, "I thought perhaps J'onn was missing the action."
And it is over, declined, relief on J’onn’s face that Batman at least still trusts him, Wonder Woman gracious in her show of masked concern.

They disperse, details to be sorted out individually before a rendezvous. That is, they make a pretense of dispersing. Minutes later, Superman is standing outside a door in a hallway while the Flash and Wonder Woman quietly argue.

"Someone should check on him," she insists.

"He's gonna ice you or yell at you," Flash warns, reluctant but clearly concerned enough to be having the conversation.

"He's fine. I'll talk to him," Superman says, from behind them. They whirl, neither exactly startled but leaning in an attempt to ease him into their conspiratorial tones.

"Of course he's fine. He's only ever fine." Wonder Woman exhales noisily. "And if you go talk to him, you'll both come out and be like, 'I'm fine, he's fine. It's fine.'" Her voice dropped an octave and a half for the imitation and Superman chuckles.

"Is that what we sound like to you? I'll check on him. Later. Give him some space. If he needs help, he'll ask."

The Flash and Wonder Woman both snort at this, not unkindly, but neither directly challenge it.

"I think I should check on him," she repeats after a moment.

"He's gonna bite your head off," the Flash cautions, "or I'd go myself."

"Don't," Superman encourages firmly. "Give him space. Think about how you'd feel."

"It's not exactly the same," she replies, but she stops insisting. "But you're probably right. Let me know if you change your mind. In the meantime, I have some warriors to contact."

They stride away and Superman goes the opposite direction, toward Batman's living quarters. Immediately. Those trembling hands are still bothering him, as is the cold that radiated from Batman's arm even through the suit earlier. Regardless of what he said to Wonder Woman to delay her, he's not wasting time.

He rounds the hallway in view of the door just as it hisses closed. Batman must have made really slow time after out of everyone's eyeshot. This is additionally worrying.

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Superman pauses for just a moment outside the door, knowing it is locked, not wanting to knock and be denied. After a second's thought, he shifts his demeanor, making a decision. He doesn't bother getting glasses, but he doesn't need a disguise, exactly. Just himself. He forces the door open and then quickly pulls it shut behind him.

The room is quiet, still, dim. He taps a command panel on the wall and raises the temperature about ten degrees. He steps further into the room. The bathroom door is ajar and through the narrow opening, he can see a dark form bent over and then he hears the sound of retching.

Clark is not an idiot. Kind, but not an idiot. He's not a concerned girlfriend or doting mother, come to hold hair back or offer water or a toothbrush, so he sits in a chair outside of the bathroom and he waits.

There are two possibilities here and they are that Bruce is aware he came in and is not protesting
for whatever reason, or his capacity for attention is so damaged at this moment that he is not aware and definitely needs some kind of supervision, no pun intended.

There's a pause, then more retching noises. Clark shifts uncomfortably in his seat, feeling both necessary and useless. The table next to him is empty except for one thing-- a cape and cowl, looking a bit like they were thrown and not set down with care. He stands, shakes out the cape gently, finds a hook on the wall across the room.

The bathroom is quiet. Clark returns to his seat, opting for a spring-into-action hardback chair rather than the couch in the middle of the room. It looks comfortable but has an air of decoration, as if it was put there because the room needed one rather than because it would be used. In the bathroom, the faucet runs for a moment.

Clark is aware of the room getting hotter, though it doesn't bother him much. He pushes his hair back out of habit, a gesture that has seen more use in the Daily Planet bullpen than the Watchtower.

The bathroom door swings open and Bruce, in his suit still from his neck down, makes the briefest of eye contact conveying some mix of gratitude and permission, before half-walking, half-dragging himself to the couch and dropping his whole weight onto it without much grace.

"I was afraid you were Diana," he mutters a bit woodenly, as he stretches out on his back, one arm bent beneath his head. He lifts his head a bit, looks around, "Did you change the thermostat? Of course you did."

They are both silent for a moment, Clark sitting with his elbows on his knees, in a slouch that would be at home in Greenwich Village, and Bruce lying still, not moving.

"Diana was going to come," Clark says. "I intervened."

"Of course she was," Bruce says. "Thank you."

"But then again, maybe she'd be useful right now," Clark says.

Bruce's entire body shudders, apparently involuntarily, and he claps a hand over his mouth. Clark tenses, ready to jump up, but then Bruce shivers once and drops his hand.

"Like, Diana would probably just get you a blanket without asking. She'd insist. Me, well. Do you need a blanket? You were like ice even through your gloves earlier."

"The suit has a heat shield," Bruce reminds him. "Gotham gets cold. Rooftop stakeouts get long. I turned it on right after."

Clark takes this as a refusal but doesn't relax yet.

"But it was damaged and it's not working very well. A blanket is a good idea."

Clark notices that this has been carefully worded as an acknowledgement and not a request or a plea. He doesn't bother looking for spares, he just drags one off the bed in the corner of the room and throws it at Bruce.

With the practiced motion of someone used to moving capes around, Bruce snaps it open and then lets it fall over him. He drags a hand across his eyes and then tucks both hands under his armpits beneath the blanket.

"What else do you need?" Clark asks.
Bruce is tugging gloves off his hands, dropping them to the floor, and says, "There’s scotch in that cabinet."

So it’s pretty bad. Clark stands and heads to the cabinet that is clearly a liquor cabinet, but only contains a small bottle of scotch mostly full and then mostly first aid supplies and packs of spearmint gum.

He pours a small scotch and carries it over to Bruce, gingerly as if it is a snake or a bomb. He doesn’t know what he expected to happen, but the reality is anticlimactic. Bruce takes it without sitting up and throws the whole shot back in one go, and then makes a face that assures Clark he hasn’t discovered a case of high-functioning alcoholism.

Because it would, actually, explain a lot.

They sit in silence a bit longer. Clark is just beginning to wonder if Bruce has fallen asleep when the other man stirs. He puts a hand over his eyes again and says so quietly Clark only hears because he's paying attention, and has better than average hearing,

"That was the most terrifying thing that has ever happened to me."

Clark is aware of the magnitude both of this admission and the scope of events that it claims to surpass.

"Then again, I think that after two or three things a year. It might take a while to top this one, though."

"Is that supposed to reassure me or you?" Clark asks.

"I'm not sure it's reassuring at all," Bruce answers.

"You know, I think the others would have felt better if you had yelled at them a bit. 'Eff you and the effing Watchtower and can't you do your effing jobs.'"

"Clark!" Bruce has raised his head for the first time since collapsing onto the couch. Clark grins at him. It has had the intended effect. Quickly, though, the grin fades.

"I'm so sorry, Bruce. I don't know what happened. We should have been paying more attention. Somebody should have noticed. Someone should have been manning the radio. You did attempt radio contact, didn't you?"

"Yes," Bruce says, wearily, dropping his head back. "I did. And I should be angry. But I'm not. I might be later."

"They all think you're furious. It's like waiting for a hurricane to hit."

"Let them think it," Bruce snaps, a bit bitterly.

Clark doesn't retract anything or try to soothe. His journalism skills sometimes pay off, in the mix of prodding and waiting he has learned.

"I'd rather them think I'm angry than start to consider that I might be a liability. The anger is a good distraction."

Clark wants to protest this, but he doesn't. He senses that they both recognize the truth of it and that right now, Bruce is not open to hearing about the things that outweigh that fact.
"Not that I'm trying to pawn you off, but do you think talking to Barry might help?"

Bruce begins shaking and Clark leaps to his feet, fearing an emergency-- a seizure or delayed shock. Then he realizes it is laughter. It is not loud and does not grow, but fades. Bruce exhales as if he'd just heard a good joke.

"No," he says, a mix of humor and regret in his tone. "No, Barry is so close to human that he doesn't realize how far away he is from it. You're a good friend, Clark. You're doing fine. Don't let anyone else know I told you."

"Is this what you're like after a single scotch?"

"This is what I'm like after almost dying. Ask Alfred."

"Sentimental and weepy after near death experiences. Never would have guessed."

Clark sits back down, feeling slightly at ease now. He thinks of his Ma, urging people to eat to make them feel comfortable, or welcome, and he's about to offer to make a sandwich or broth or something, when sudden movement makes him think Bruce is laughing again. He looks up just in time to see the other man stagger into the bathroom again and this time, slam the door.

There's a minute of retching that sounds more like dry heaving, that leaves Clark tapping his foot and shifting uncomfortably again. Then the bathroom faucet runs and shuts off.

"Clark, uh..."

The voice from the bathroom is the most hesitant Clark has ever in his life heard Bruce sound. He imagines Bruce literally physically dragging the words out of his own throat.

"I can't, uh." Clark is already at the door, tempted to use super vision but it seems a violation.

"I'm in shock and I can't move my legs." The tone is suddenly professional, almost as if it is a doctor speaking about a patient. "Mixed with the moderate hypothermia, which alone would be manageable, it's possible my heart might stop."

"What can I do?" Clark offers, hoping there is also a solution offered. Just guessing, he'd say the willingness to involve the rest of the JLA or medflight someone...from space...is a bit out of the question.

"There's a box of syringes in the cabinet labeled atropine."

Clark has the box and the bathroom door open before Bruce can blink. Bruce is sitting on the bathroom floor, leaning against the edge of a sink, which looks weirdly suburban and abnormal for a space station. Clark takes a syringe out of the box and is trying to decide what to do with it when Bruce pulls the top half of his suit over his head, tosses it in the corner, and takes the syringe. He pushes the needle into his own arm, depressing the plunger, and lets his head fall back and the needle clatter to the floor.

"Well, I've never felt more like an enabler than I do right this second," Clark says wryly, trying to hide his concern.

"I'm gonna take a shower," Bruce announces after few deep breaths. "It'll help the medicine work faster."

"Uh," now Clark is acutely aware of his own hesitance, "do you need help?"
Bruce drags himself to his feet, swaying slightly.

"Clark, thanks. Now get out."

The bathroom door closed behind him, Clark manages to find some broth and an electric kettle in a tiny kitchenette tucked into a corner. He ponders the power and vastness of space while warming the broth and feeling absolutely nothing like his Ma, despite trying to take cues from his memories of her care.

When the bathroom door opens a while later, Bruce emerges looking pale but steady, in lounge pants and a t-shirt he had somewhere. Clark wonders briefly if his own quarters are so carefully stocked.

He wordlessly accepts the offered broth and sits on the couch, drains the whole mug in thirty seconds.

"I'm fine," he says.

"You're not a liability," Clark replies. "You're just not invincible. And outer space is the least habitable place for you, but you make it here, every time, just like the rest of us."

"And any action is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat," Bruce replies, as if to himself, staring at the bottom of an empty mug.

"Call for me next time. I don't have to involve the others. And I'm sorry. It shouldn't have happened on home turf, so to speak."

"Let's go save the planet," Bruce says, standing. He sets the mug on the table. He stops there and turns to face him, and makes full eye contact, enough for Clark to know he's not brushing him off.

"I should have been wearing the helmet and tank. I should have yelled for you before the glass broke." Bruce says, in a voice Clark imagines Dick or Tim have probably heard more than anyone else, and even them only rarely. It is a kind of accepting responsibility that is not whining or seeking pity. "I'm a liability when I forget my limitations. It won't happen again."

"And don't forget you're allowed to need help," Clark replies levelly. He is not offended at the tone, but he is not Tim. He's a peer.

"I rarely get to forget." Bruce returns. "But thank you."

They stand regarding each other. Bruce is the first to move, to a closet he tugs open. Inside is another suit, complete with cape and cowl.

Reaching for the suit, his hand trembles just slightly and he pauses and clenches his fist. As he flexes his hand, steadying it and himself, accounting for his emotional state and the medicine speeding his heart, he feels a weight on his shoulder.

Clark says nothing more, but leaves his hand on Bruce's shoulder for a moment and then leaves the room, letting the door hiss shut behind him.

Twenty minutes later, the JLA has mostly reassembled in the hangar where the Javelin-7 is still tipped sideways and upside down, the glass over the cockpit gone and the restraint belts shredded. The Flash examines it and the deep scratches on the airlock door and whistles.

Superman picks the Javelin up and slides it out of the way, clearing access for some of the smaller
spaceworthy craft that resides in the hangar bay.

Wonder Woman jokes about him denting the Invisible Jet and there is some scattered laughter.

Batman walks into the hangar and all the laughter cuts out, as if muted. He looks around, makes a brief point to glance at the Javelin-7, and then says to the unspoken question,

"I'm fine."

Wonder Woman raises an eyebrow, and Green Lantern and J’onn exchange some look Superman cannot decode. The Flash is sitting in the Javelin-7's pilot seat and then standing next to Batman, and there is a moment's hesitation, then he barrels in.

"But Bats, you coulda died. At least have the decency to act like you're rattled. Be a little human. Throw the rest of us a bone. A little sobbing, you know, for our sake. The rest of us don't handle pressure like you."

He's back on the Javelin now, out of reach in case his prodding turns things physical.

"Are you sure?" Wonder Woman asks, well-intentioned but full of concern. It's clear she didn't expect him to make a reappearance so soon, was probably counting on checking in on him later.

"He's fine," Superman repeats, from across the hangar.

The withering look she gives him is from Diana, not Wonder Woman, and though her two personas may intersect more clearly than any other dual identities on the team, he can still tell.

"Ugh, MEN." She exclaims, throwing her hands in the air. "Did I not say they would do this? I said they would do exactly this."

But he thinks she maybe seems relieved.

Batman crosses the hangar and climbs into one of the smaller craft, tugging on a helmet and oxygen tank. He doesn't hesitate or slow. And then Superman knows he is fine, he actually will be as fine as any of them ever are. For now.

"Flash, you coming?" The radio crackles through the room, through the headset inside the helmet.

Flash glances at the Javelin-7, surveys the mood in the room, and is already behind Batman with a helmet on.

"I can't wait until we get those teleporters fixed," he complains loudly, pointedly, through the headset. The cockpit closes with a hydraulic whine and the engines roar to life.

"He's fine," Superman repeats to Wonder Woman, as they step back to clear the airlock.

"I know. When is he not?" she answers, watching quietly as the door closes. She slaps Superman hard, harder than she needs to, across the chest. "Come on, we have some invaders to vanquish."
Chapter One

Eight Months Later

The car rumbles through the cornfields, tearing down the Kansas county road just a tick or two above speed limit. It is now coated with the dust of a dozen farms, born on the dry winds of a hot rainless summer. There is little need for speed at this point, but it’s hard to slow down after a week like the one he’s had.

At the steering wheel of the mid-2000 Ford Taurus, a non-descript car in a land of family sedans and pickup trucks, is Batman. In the strange in-between he inhabits right now, his clothes are Bruce’s but his face is Batman’s. Every so often, he glances over at his sleeping passenger, garbed in a hospital gown. This trip is not the first time he has defied the U.S. Government and it probably won’t be the last.

This was not something he consulted the remainder of the Justice League about. They’d figure it out, he was sure, but he wasn’t that worried about them or their reactions. They were already varying levels of furious with him and he was not a stranger to the anger of others. It didn’t really matter.

They were on hour eighteen of an eighteen hour trip and his passenger had stirred for minutes, here and there, but never fully woke up. They stopped for gas when they had to and that was it. At some early point, he’d changed himself out of his suit and into clothes. But he hadn’t changed himself yet, not quite.

Noting a battered road sign, he slows on the county road and turns off onto a paved drive that fades into a gravel drive. He’s still tearing along the drive at 50mph, then it slows to 40, then 30...by the time he hits zero, he’s sitting in front of a big white farmhouse next to a huge red barn. Corn glistens, waving, all around them, shimmering in the heat.

An older woman has stepped out onto the front porch, shielding her eyes. Her face looks hard, suspicious-- a man of the same age comes out of the barn, wiping his hands on a towel. With the angle, he sees into the car before she can. The sun is bright here.

The man breaks into a jog, calling out,

“Martha, he's got Clark.”

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Five Days Earlier...

Batman is perched on the edge of a Washington, D.C. rooftop, watching the crowd below with night vision binoculars. The moon is full in the sky above him. There is one woman in particular
he is tracking, and he is tense, ready to spring and run to the next rooftop should she turn out of sight.

She avoids contact with other people as she walks, giving other pedestrians a wide berth on the nearly empty sidewalks. This is a business district and there is not much foot traffic at this hour. There is a case slung over her shoulder, dark brown leather with a wide, padded rubber strap.

He shifts on the balls of his feet, padded boots quiet on the cement roof lip. She’s going to turn. She’s going to turn soon.

“Superman,” he says, to the wind that blows his cape across the roof behind him. “Go home.”

“Someday I’m going to manage to sneak up on you,” Superman says, flying up to the edge of the roof, next to Batman. “I was told you were in DC tonight.”

“Get down,” Batman says, adjusting the binoculars. “If you aren’t going to leave, don’t hover there in the moonlight.”

Superman drops to the roof, at the low barrier wall, and sits on it facing away from the street.

“Your cape,” Batman says, glancing over, “is like a damn muleta.”

“I was also told you’d be in a bad mood,” Superman says cheerfully, turning to scan the street, tucking the cape behind him. “What are we watching?”

“Your informant was generous with his information,” Batman observes, tucking the binoculars into his belt. “And we aren’t watching anything. I am.”

“The generosity might have been prompted by the gift of fresh Earl Grey. From a little shop in London.”

“So, you’re stooping to bribery now?” Batman stands on the edge, balancing as he peers down the wide DC street.

“Actually, the tea was why I paid a visit in the first place. I didn’t go looking for you, initially.”

“Yet, here you are,” Batman says, annoyed.

“You are in a bad mood,” Superman says, as Batman takes a grappling hook off his belt.

Batman runs down the lip of the roof, as if on a balance beam. He leaps into the air and when the hook makes purchase on a taller building, he throws his weight into the swing around a corner and down the next street. When he has gathered enough momentum, he detaches the grappling hook and free soars through the air to the next roof top.

Superman flies beside him.

“It’s unusual for you to be out of Gotham,” Superman observes, as Batman pauses at the corner of the roof, watching the street below.

“Stop prying,” Batman replies. “I’m working on something.”

“I could help,” Superman offers. “Since I’m already here.”

“I don’t need help.”

“Maybe I’m bored. Humor me.”
Batman glances at him. He knows he’s been in a foul mood and it’s not Superman’s fault. This evening hasn’t been turning out the way he was expecting and it’s been putting him on edge. Four days of work, tracing rumors of an Asian designer drug deal, and he’s come up completely empty.

“I hit a dead end. Possibly.” Batman says finally, pulling out his binoculars again. This street is in deeper shadow and it’s harder to make out the details of the people below. “And picked up something strange instead. That woman with the leather case.”

“She seems nice.”

“Ten minutes ago, I was tapped into CDC security cameras and watched her steal something from the bio-hazard freezer in the infectious diseases lab.”

“But she’s not why you’re here?” Superman sounds suddenly serious. “Why were you here?”

“I’m less concerned about that right now,” Batman says. “And more concerned with what she took. And why.”

“You don’t know?”

“Do you know what government security cameras are like?” Batman asks. “She’s turning again.”

They work their way to the next building and peer down as the woman turns down an alley.

“I can’t quite make out what’s in the case,” Superman says, frowning.

“That’s not a good sign,” Batman replies, amplifying his binoculars. “Lead?”


The woman reaches a dead end in the alley. She hurriedly unlocks a door and enters the building they are crouched on.

“She’s going down a hallway,” Superman says. “South. Turning left. Down into a basement. Aren’t you glad I’m here?”

Batman doesn’t answer. He’s on the rooftop following the directions Superman calls out, approximating the woman’s location beneath them. He stops when Superman does.

“And?”

“The basement goes out from under the building.”

They look across the roof. The basement tunnel she is in goes beneath a broad roundabout, separating the business district from the more historic and tourist-minded parts of DC; the buildings are spaced further apart, the traffic livelier, the Tidal Basin on the far side.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Batman says, frowning.

“You have a bad feeling about everything,” Superman replies, but he also looks concerned.

“I hate this city,” Batman says, looking across the roundabout and six lanes of traffic at the Basin. “Can you still see her?”

“Mmhmm. She’s turning left again. Want a lift?”
“No,” Batman says, looking at the buildings to the left. “Not yet. She might double back.”

“Is that hope that I hear?” Superman grins, turning to Batman for a second. “The night is full of surprises.”

Batman does not want to think about the headache of crossing six lanes of traffic and a roundabout to open grassy fields, sloping down to waterfront, full of memorials. There’s a bridge he could use the concrete undersides of, but that wouldn’t get him very far. It’s not impossible; just a challenge. He should have brought the glider. There’s a decent breeze from the river.

“She’s not…” Superman hesitates. “She just left the basement tunnel.”

He looks at Batman.

“She’s in a metro station.”

“Damn it,” Batman says. “If I run, I can pick that lock and follow her through the tunnel. I should have done that to begin with. Can you keep her in sight?”

“You are stubborn to beat all,” Superman says. “Turn on your comm. What are you going to do if she gets on the metro?”

“Let me worry about that,” Batman says through the JLA commlink, already halfway back across the roof. He speaks into the comm. “This is Batman, requesting radio silence. Blue and I are...handling something.”

“Do you need backup?” Martian Manhunter asks, his voice sonorous and unhurried.

“Just silence,” Batman says gruffly, his boots crunching glass under him on the alleyway pavement.

“We’ll keep you updated,” Superman says. “It might be nothing.”

“It’s definitely something,” Batman says, picking the lock. “We just don’t know how big of a something.”

“J’onn is still listening. If you think it’s going to get bad, backup is a good idea.” Superman says. “And she’s lingering by the tracks. I’m above the station. The next stop on this platform is in six minutes.”

“Plenty of time. We don’t need backup.” Batman says, pulling the door shut behind him and flicking on a small flashlight. “Was there a door to the basement stairs?”

South, then left. There are two doors. Both are locked.

“Left or right?” He demands, not wanting to lose time.


“How are you even a reporter?” Batman asks. “How do you not notice details?”

“I’m a good reporter,” Superman defends. “But I don’t need to sneak through tunnels to get where I want to go. I save my attention for important details.”

“It’s all important,” Batman answers, making quick work of the lock. It’s a supply closet. He swears. “Until it isn’t. Wrong door.”
“Hey,” Superman says slowly, his tone shifting. “This platform is filling up pretty fast. It looks like a concert of some kind just let out. Lot of tourists.”

Batman is already running the tunnel.

“I’m going in,” Superman says. “I might be a good distraction.”

“Or you might lose her if you make her nervous,” Batman says. “Stay put.”

“And wait for what?” Superman exclaims. “Do you think you’ll be inconspicuous in a crowded metro?”

“Wait.” Batman says. “And if you recall, I’d said I wanted to do this alone. I can handle it.”

“I just want to say I have no idea what’s going on, but I am super enjoying this,” the Flash’s voice comes over the comm. “Do you guys argue like this all the time? Because you should sell tickets. It’s great.”

“I said radio silence,” Batman growls.

“Gee whiz,” the Flash says, sounding put out. “I thought this was a group line.”

“Quiet,” Superman says, his voice urgent. “Batman, she’s opening the case. I’m going in.”

“I’m at the door,” Batman says, still running. He can see it ahead of him. “Don’t go in. If I can get her down the tracks before she sees me, we might get some answers.”

“She’s putting a vial in the tranquilizer.”

“I see her,” Batman says. He’s slipped out of the maintenance door into the tunnel just down the platform, in the shadow of concrete walls. He drops into the track pit, pressed against the wall and avoiding the live electric track by mere inches. The woman is standing on the yellow safety line, her back to the metro tunnel. If he’s fast enough, he can pull her down and get her back to the maintenance door before anyone notices. “I’m almost there.”

There’s the sound of an warning alarm, flashing lights overhead, the distant rumble of air being forced through underground.

Clark had said six minutes. It’s been four and a half.

“How much time do I have on that metro?” He asks.

“It’s ahead of schedule by a minute.”

Batman doesn’t answer. He moves faster and slips a biohazard mask onto his face, from his belt, just in case. The rumbling grows louder. People mill about on the platform above his head, talking. It's getting more crowded.

“Are you in the tunnel?” Superman asks, alarmed. “Are you on the tracks?”

“I’m beside the tracks,” Batman replies.

“This is not the time to be a smartass! I'm coming in!”

Batman is immediately behind her now. She has the gun loaded with a clear tube but she’s shaking, not acting. Good, she's scared. That means she might not be insane, she might listen to
She raises the gun above her head and a few people notice immediately, falling silent. They're a nervous lot, this DC and tourist crowd. The tunnel fills with light from the approaching subway and Batman knows when enough is enough. He's not going to make it, not without that extra minute.

“You can come in now,” he says, grabbing the edge of the platform and vaulting up. He lands behind her, his cape fluttering in the rush of air behind him. The roar of the metro dulls his already-quiet landing, and the doors hiss open.

She is distracted. She doesn't notice him.

Everyone else does.

No one gets off the metro and no one gets on. The automated voice announces the next three destinations and the name of the line, but the entire platform has hushed, staring at him, behind her, the gun still raised in her hand.

She thinks they're looking at her.

Superman is above the steps and Batman holds one finger up, retracting his earlier permission.

Wait.

Superman doesn't stop, but he's drifting slowly.

At least he's thinking. Without knowing what is in the glass vial, they don't want to risk her deploying it or it dropping and shattering in the framework gun.

“Citizens of D.C.” She cries. “You are now my hostages. I am armed with anthrax and I will release it into the air if you do not cooperate.”

If she was expecting them to panic or cry, it doesn't happen.

Everyone is looking at him. The doors hiss shut and the metro is swept away without discharging any passengers.

“Within a few minutes, the metro behind me will have called this in. You should all sit down and not move. I have some demands. If they are met, you will be free to go.”

No one sits.

Superman is still advancing, on his feet now.

“I said sit down!” She screams, her hands white-knuckled around the gun. There is a chance she could pull the trigger in the time it takes for him to wrench it out of her hand. It is too risky.

He could knock her out, hope that her hand doesn't tighten reflexively.

But Superman was right-- he's not big on hope, not in situations like this one.

The crowd is slowly sitting, afraid to make any rapid movement, some of them uncertain they should move at all. It's a wonder she hasn't noticed him yet, but then again, he does have years of practice being unnoticed.

And then, with a jerk of her head, she notices Superman. He's only a few yards away. Batman
realizes he was walking like Clark, moving like the reporter he plays; his own bit of misdirection. But it's ended.

Batman considers the odds a final time, raises a gloved hand to snap against her neck, to drop her to the ground.

“Oh,” she says, sounding surprised. “You're already here.”

This catches him so off-guard, he freezes. He should be ready to adapt, prepared for anything, but he's not. It's only for a second, but it's a second too long.

She lowers the gun and squeezes the trigger.

Chaos erupts.

“J’onn,” Batman shouts over the noise. “End radio silence, tell DCPD to seal the Waterfront Metro Station!”

His hand is still raised and he follows through as he shouts on the comm. She drops to the platform without ever seeing him.

People are screaming, panicking, but he doesn't see anything in the air. There's no puff of white or cloud of dust. His brow furrows. That doesn't mean it's not there.

“Superman,” he calls over the comm, unable to see him through the crowd. He looks up, in case Superman went up toward the ceiling.

The crowd is quieting already, from the center outward. It's strange for a crowd of this size to settle so fast. Batman stays by the woman’s limp body for another moment. He picks up the case she dropped, making sure none of the other vials are broken. There's one more. It's tipped with a needle.

How did he not notice that on the other one? Was it the same way?

It's faintly green.

Oh no.

A dozen terrified faces turn to him, the crowd parts.

Superman is on his back on the concrete, felled like a tree.

Batman rips the biomask off his face, shoves it into the belt.

“Watch her,” Batman tells a nearby man. “If she moves at all you tell me.”

The man nods.

He drops to his knees by Superman. The vial was a dart. It is embedded in his neck. He pulls a lead-lined pouch out of his belt, firmly grips the dart and tugs. It comes out easily enough, but the vial is drained. Superman moans but does not wake. Whatever it is is fast acting. There's an actual trickle of blood from the needle site.

Whatever it is, he's never seen anything like it before.

“Blue is down,” he says to the comm. “To all points, I repeat, Blue is down. Requesting backup. Threat neutralized.”
“The DCPD is beginning to isolate the station,” J’onn says. “Shall we assist them?”

Batman looks around at the anxious crowd. Superman is beginning to seize.

“Cancel that,” Batman says. “False alarm. We need immediate extraction for Blue. Still down.”

“DC has a unit equipped for Kryptonite poisoning,” the Flash says over the comm. “A Superman specialist. I can get Blue there. On my way.”

“I am contacting him now,” J’onn says. “And police are enroute for suspect. Are there any details I can give the doctor to prepare him?”

“I don’t know,” Batman says. “I have no idea what this is.”

Superman was shaking violently but it stops, his eyes flutter open only to roll back in his head. His back arches and then goes limp.

Batman rips his gloves off, feels for a pulse. He knows enough of Superman’s anatomy from body scans and research to at least be sure he has a physical heart.

“Batman,” J’onn says, an edge of panic in his usually calm voice. “My biocomputers no longer read a heartbeat for Superman. Is this accurate?”

Batman starts CPR. He doesn’t even know if it will work. Superman’s sternum cracks beneath his fists. Not a good sign.

“J’onn, tell them to be ready for full life support. Flash,” he says, throwing his weight into the compressions, “Hurry.”
Chapter Two

Barry has the good sense to rush without talking, for once. One second, Batman is doing CPR and the next second, Superman is gone in a blur of red. In the chatter of the crowded platform and the shouting arrival of the police, Batman slips back down the track and back through the tunnel.

He backtracks to the building, turns off his commlink, and sits just inside the door for an hour straight, not moving, just thinking through what had happened, over and over again. Feeling the wet crack of bone giving way, the scraping sound of smooth concrete on his boots as he knelt, the moment he raised his hand and hesitated.

“J’onn,” he asks over the commlink after a full hour, “How is he?”

“Alive,” comes the answer. “But still unstable. Wonder Woman and the Flash are there now.”

And so he stands, summons the Batmobile, and makes his way across the city and into the boroughs of businesses and strip malls and suburbs. He hides the car, sneaks in through a staff door and through hallways, startling an occasional nurse, until he reaches the secured unit.

There is a guard who nods at him and lets him through without a word. Once inside, he hangs back in shadows outside a glass-windowed room. Wonder Woman, Flash, and Green Lantern are all talking quietly, standing at the window and looking in.

He waits until Hal Jordan leaves.

He waits until Diana puts a hand on Flash’s shoulder and leaves.

Then he steps forward, looking in. There are computers set up around a bed that hold Superman’s still body. There is a plastic bin half full of broken needles and bent scalpels, both encouraging signs. A tube trails out of Clark’s nostrils.

“How is he?” He asks, quietly. Flash jumps and turns to see him.

“Hey,” he says, “You snuck up on me there. He’s alright. They can’t get any blood samples to figure out what they’re dealing with. So I guess that’s good, right?”

“Possibly,” Batman says, watching the doctors through the glass.

“How are you doing?” Flash asks. “There are some images you just know you'll never get out of your head. You with him on that metro platform is gonna be one of mine.”

“I'm fine,” Batman says. “Who's the physician in charge?”

“Dr. Lloyd, a Metropolis native. Says Superman saved his son a few years ago. He's been working nonstop since he got here.”

“Hmm,” Batman says. “Never heard of him.”

“What happened?” Flash asks, leaning on the window ledge beneath the glass. “It sounded like it got bad really fast.”
We had no idea, Batman wants to say. I had no idea. We were blindsided. I still don’t know what happened. It seemed intentional. She couldn’t have known he’d be there. He was there because of me. I should have been alone. We should have called for backup sooner like he wanted.

This should not have happened.

Instead, he leaves. Flash calls out once but doesn’t follow.

When he’s outside the hospital, he contacts J’onn again.

“Where did they take her?”

“She’s in transit from DCPD to a federal holding block in Arlington. Wonder Woman is meeting them there to question her.”

It should be good news. Diana’s lasso means getting real answers without resistance or deceit. But he’s a little frustrated. His foul mood of earlier pales in comparison to this one, and he wouldn’t mind the chance to slam someone against a wall.

But it’s not good news for anyone. When he gets there, in the hour before dawn is due to break over the Potomac River, he pulls into the dappled shadows of tree branches and watches out the windshield as Wonder Woman yells at two guards until they cry.

EMTs are bundling the woman’s body into a body bag, white foam around her mouth. Someone had missed cyanide somewhere on her person when she had been searched, and she had taken it on the ride.

After that, he sets up on the roof of a hospital annex, with a laptop from the Batmobile. He tracks medical data, watches security cameras. He isn’t sure if she had accomplices, someone who might come back to try to finish the job and he doesn’t trust the meager guard stationed at the unit.

Four days go by this way. Four long days of waiting, watching basement security cameras from a laptop, camped on the roof of a nearby building. He is hacked into the hospital mainframe, watching the medical file update in real time.

When he leaves the roof, it is to sleep restlessly for a few broken hours, to conduct brief excursions that turn up fruitless again and again. The CDC has no record of any Kryptonite-based research, except for four vials in the triple-locked freezer with the other pathogens labeled Kryptonite S-4. Everything else is missing or scrubbed, no sign. He isn’t even completely certain the research was done in-house, though it seems likely.

No names are attached to the research except the arrested woman, Jeanine Kowalski. The record of research itself does not appear to exist. This is one of the reasons he does not, despite the temptation, take any of the vials to run his own tests. If he was closer to his own secure lab, it would be a consideration, but without any of the research to confirm or deny his suspicions, it is just as possible that those vials had been mixed with other things. As much as he wants to be running tests, he knows the last thing he or Clark would want is to inadvertently spread a contagion.

And Clark does seem to be improving, albeit slowly.

Diana and J’onn repeatedly attempt to contact him on the comm. He leaves it on but ignores them for those four days. Superman is stable, according to reports and Dr. Lloyd’s notes, but not waking.

“I don’t think she was working alone,” he says, when he finally uses the comm on the fourth day.
They must have been waiting for him because three voices start talking at once.

“Batman,” Diana says when the others stop, giving her the lead. “The CDC said she had recently been displaying emotional and mental imbalance. They were about to fire her. It wasn't authorized research. She was just one lonely, insane woman.”

It sounds like they’ve prepared for him, anticipated his resistance.

“I think you’re being dismissive,” he says, thinking of the shaking hands holding the gun. “I think it's convenient to accept their story.”

“Truth isn’t always hard to find,” Diana replies. “Unpleasant, but sometimes simple. I think you're being paranoid. It's been a difficult week.”

“What was the motive?”

“I don’t think, in cases of insanity, that it matters very much,” she insists. “Irrational hate is enough for some people.”

“There is always motive,” he says. “Do the others feel the same way as you?”

Flash and J’onn say they do, a bit reluctantly. Green Lantern chimes in at this point, and says he does as well.

Maybe guilt is clouding his judgment. Maybe, for once, they are right.

Or maybe not. Something doesn't add up. Something is sitting in his gut like poison, but he doesn't even know where to begin.

“Then you're all idiots,” he says.

“Or maybe you're blaming yourself,” Diana says. She is always willing to say things others won’t. And she is getting angry. “And you haven't exactly been around.”

He looks up from his laptop at this point, glancing across the twilight dimmed parking lot at the hospital. He looks back at the security camera feed on the screen.

“We shouldn’t let our guard down yet,” he says, finally. “This might not be over.”

“It isn't over, but not in the way you mean,” Diana answers. “Get some sleep. Come see him. That's what's important right now.”

Batman turns the comm off.

Superman is stable, but he isn't waking up.

Batman is feeling paranoid, but it feels like it is justified.

If he is completely honest with himself, he would acknowledge that he is a little jealous of their freedom, to move in daylight and in public. He has to be more careful.

Maybe they both need a change of scenery.

That night is when he makes his plans.
did I mention massive creative liberties.

because I should, haha.
Chapter Three

Present Day...

Martha Kent hurries down the steps to the car just as Bruce opens his door and stands. Jonathan Kent has the other door open and is kneeling next to his unconscious son.

“We saw he was in a government hospital on the news. We didn’t know any more or how bad it was,” Martha tells Bruce, leaning over to feel Clark’s forehead.

“How bad is it?” Jonathan asks, standing abruptly. “Have you brought him home to die?”

Martha cries out involuntarily, and swats him hard across the arm. “Don’t you speak such nonsense, Jonathan Kent.”

“No,” Bruce says, relaxing a little. “He’s out of danger, I think. Recovery might still take a while. They weren’t really making plans to move him, but I thought he’d probably do better here. The news might get a little alarming for a few days. It wasn’t an authorized decision.”

“Thanks, Obama,” Jonathan grumbles, leaning back into the car and jostling Clark’s shoulder. “Son, can you hear me?”

There is a mumble in reply.

“Martha, come help me, I don’t know how we’re going to get him in the house,” the old farmer scrubs at his own forehead. “If we can rouse him enough, maybe he’ll take some steps.”

Bruce admits now, to himself, in the shadow of the white farmhouse, how worried he still actually is for this man, his friend. He isn’t certain how long this state of stasis will last, this in-between well and death. And suddenly he knows he isn’t leaving just yet; all his prior plans involved him dropping Clark off to his parents, Clark managing a thanks and walking in, and Bruce peeling back out of the driveway to the nearest airport.

He walks around the car to where Martha and Jonathan are both leaning in, speaking quietly and softly to their only son and only getting mutters and heavily closed eyes in reply.

“Damn it,” Jonathan swears softly. “This was easier when he was four.”

“I’ll bring him in,” Bruce says. It’s not a question. They step back, letting him through. The distance from the hospital window to the car was shorter than the distance here, but it’s more the idea that gives him pause than the effort.

“I can help so we’re not dragging him,” Jonathan offers. “Maybe we might have that old wheelchair from when I busted my leg, out in the barn.”

Bruce pulls Clark toward him, grunts with the awkward angle, and then stands, and carries Clark into the house.

“Are you a cousin?” Jonathan calls after him, while Martha swats at him to get things from the car. She rushes ahead to open the door, swift even in her dress and apron when she wants to be.

There’s a bedroom he is led into, that is a mix of childhood and high school and storage-- trophies, posters, faded bedspread. Bruce sets Clark on the bed and lets Martha fuss over him as he continues to mumble, fluffing a pillow and adjusting blankets she’s pulled out of a closet.
Bruce leaves her, wanders slowly down the hallway, taking in family pictures and decor, until he reaches the front room again, where Jonathan has just dropped the two small duffels they’d traveled with.

“You’re not a cousin.” Jonathan says, studying his face. “You’re not a boyfriend, are you? I know he’s been with that Lois girl for years and years, but we haven’t heard much from him in a few months.”

“No,” Bruce says, with only a slight touch of humor. His worry is mounting now, and he’s realizing that for all his intelligence he expected their home to function as some sort of trigger; his own home is so cavernous and full of hollow memories that he anticipated the legendary Kent home to be a powerful opposite, reviving its inhabitants from illnesses and shielding them from harm. The fact that Clark is essentially still comatose nearly a full twenty four hours away from the hospital and within earshot of his own parents is concerning. He starts to wonder if he is wrong about Clark being on the mend, if he maybe moved too soon.

“Well, thanks for bringing him home, whatever your reasons. I don’t suppose I should ask how you knew where to--”

And in moving the duffel bags away from the front door, Jonathan snags the thin dollar store nylon on a screw in the wall and it tears, spilling out the only thing Bruce needed a bag for.

The suit.

It’s very dramatic, the cowl rolling out first.

“Oh. Well. That explains that,” Jonathan says without much surprise. “Sorry about your bag, though.”

Bruce doesn’t move for a moment and he knows, deep down, that he had known this was going to happen-- somehow his plans to drop Clark off, to speed off down the lane, were fueled by the understanding that spending more than a few minutes actually at the Kent house would unravel things. Just as it took Alfred only minutes of playing host to Superman in the Batcave to ask if Mr. Kent would like a refreshment. Somehow, parents just know.

“You know, I just realized why your face looks so familiar. Mr Wayne!” Martha exclaims, coming up from behind him in the hall. She stops at Bruce and Jonathan’s standstill, and their group focus leads her eyes to the mask sitting just inside the front door.

She sweeps it up as if to admire it, and squirrels it into the kitchen with her and is packing it into a bag before he can say anything.

“I’m going to get Clark some of that red powerade he likes so much,” she announces, handing the bag to him as she finishes zipping it. He takes it mutely in his hand, standing in the doorway with Jonathan now behind him. “Do you need anything after that long drive, Mr. Wayne?”

“A glass of water, maybe. But I can help myself if it’s okay. Please, call me Bruce.”

“Bruce, then.” She fills a glass with tap water and hands it to him.

“My mother’s name was Martha,” he says lamely.

“It seems to be the name for a certain kind of mother,” she answers with a smile. She calls out, “Jonathan, help me and make up the guest room. Bruce is going to stay with us a bit.”
“I am?” He asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Clark talks about you all the time. I mean, as Batman, of course,” she continues, as if he hadn’t spoken. “And knowing his crowd, I’m guessing you drove all the way here from the hospital in DC without so much as a wink of sleep. Get some rest. Jonathan will show you the room.”

***

Hours later-- it might be a full day, the light makes it hard to tell-- he startles awake to the sound of a commlink buzzing in the sleeve of his suit, rolled carefully into a new duffel on the floor near his bed. He slept in the clothes he wore in the car, and he climbs out of the bed now, sits on the floor and groggily tugs the bag toward himself. He puts the cowl on, grabs the sleeve and holds his finger against the ID pad.

“This is Batman, over,” he says, his voice sharp and alert even if his eyes are not.

“What the hell, Batman, did you take Blue?” the angry voice in his ear rings too loudly. He uselessly tips his head away but the cowl holds the earpiece close.

“Good morning to you, too, Wonder Woman.”

“Don’t good morning me. It’s afternoon. Did you take Superman? He’s gone but no one is saying where he went to, and he's not answering. And if you didn’t take him, you’d be the first one after him. So, did you take him and where the hell are you?”

Diana, usually stoic and authoritarian, says all this in a rapid staccato until the last question, where her voice breaks in just the smallest of ways.

“I have him,” he says. “He’s safe.”

“That’s all you’re going to say?”

“That’s all you need to know. He’s safe. Call off the hound dogs.” He ends the communication.

She’ll yell more at him later and he’ll deserve it, but for now, he peels off the cowl and shoves it and the sleeve back into the bag. He stands and stretches and drops to do some pushups, just out of habit.

There’s pattering around downstairs in the farmhouse and he ventures out, aware of his need for a shower and a change of clothes.

Martha is in the kitchen making what looks like dinner. So he slept almost a full day-- his longest stretch in months, maybe years. Maybe the house is powerful.

“How bad was it, really?” he asks, his mouth dry. He helps himself to a glass of water, and if she’s startled to see him there she doesn’t show it.

“A bit. He woke up for a little earlier and talked to me. Not much, but it was making sense.”

Relief was so overwhelming it was almost tangible. It hung in the air between them.

“How bad was it, really?” Martha asked, wiping her hands on a kitchen towel.

“Bad,” Bruce admitted. “It was really close. I would have gotten him here sooner if it had been either worse or better any earlier.”

“Thank you,” Martha says quietly, hanging up the towel on the oven door. “In all the years he’s
been doing this, this is the first time we weren't just...waiting for him to show up after. The waiting is the worst part. We don't get updates, there's no one we can call and ask.”

“I'll call. Next time. I will let you know everything I can find out,” Bruce promises.

The dinner things are spread out on the counter, at a standstill.

“These all need to sit and bathe or rise,” Martha says, untying her apron. “I just came out to get things started. I'm going to go back there with him again. Jonathan and I have been trying to make sure one of us is with him.”

“Is there somewhere I could get some clothes? Or maybe I should head out, give you some space,” he finds he is unnerved, in the presence of this rare creature-- a mother. They tend to not last long in his circles and he isn't sure if it is a sense of dread that makes him uneasy--as if his very nearness endangers her--or merely that he is most out of practice in this very basic of human interactions.

“Oh hush. You stay.” She insists, sizing him up.

It occurs to him that they, too, might be nervous, sensing the danger their son brings into their household.

“Clark was such a scrawny boy in high school,” she sighs.

“Was?” He raises an eyebrow. She swats at his arm.

“Don't tease. I made all his first suits and I know when I started needing extra fabric. Anyway, we had a farm hand a while back who left some stuff that might fit you. I'll dig it up.”

Bruce appreciates both the offer and the awareness that it might be incredibly weird for him to wear Clark’s old clothes.

“Just tell me where to look. You should sit with him. I'm fairly good at finding things.”

Armed with vague directions, he goes to hunt, enjoying the distraction and the excuse to explore Clark’s childhood home. He half hopes he will find clues that explain Clark’s innate goodness, his effortless kindness and care for strangers. Bruce realized some time ago that Clark cares primarily for the people he is saving; they are his end goal. Bruce cares primarily about the people he is stopping; the ones he is sparing are an afterthought if they are safe.

In the end, the clothes end up being in the back of a wide closet in the guest room he slept in, wrapped in a bag for giveaway and then forgotten until now. It is the most ubiquitous of left behind clothes-- jeans with worn knees, old t-shirts, a hoodie with a university sports team logo.

Without bothering Martha or Jonathan, he finds a towel and a bar of soap and showers, folds the clothes he slept in and puts on jeans and a faded tee.

The edge of a headache reminds him he hasn't eaten or had coffee for over a day. He walks into the guest room and slips a second, smaller commlink out of the sleeve of his suit and sits on the edge of the bed.

The call is picked up almost immediately.

“Master Bruce.”

“Alfred.”
There is relief in the older man’s voice.

“Is he alive? Are you well?” Alfred asks, avoiding specifics out of habit, even on this very secure line.

“He's alive.”

“Did things go according to plan?”

This is Alfred, politely fishing. Are you hurt, do you need help, are you being threatened, etc, etc.

“Yes,” Bruce answers, hedging a bit. “Except I think I'm staying a bit longer?”

It's not like Bruce to uptalk. Alfred notices immediately, as Bruce knew he would.

“Do you need assistance?”

“Only if you plan to save me from a very kind farm wife. I think…” Bruce drops his voice just a bit, “they’re nervous, having him here like this.”

“How noble of you to protect them,” Alfred remarks dryly. Then, he is serious: “Stay as long as they need you. We will handle things here.”

It is kindness and not idiocy that makes Alfred do this, and Bruce knows it; whatever this trip is turning into, framing it in terms of the needs of other people is something Alfred allows him to do. There is no insistence that he deserves a break, needs a break, might want or desire a few days of relief.

“Thanks, Alfred. I'll stay in touch.”

“Yes, you will,” Alfred scolds, and then the older man disconnects the call.

Bruce slips the commlink into the pocket of the jeans, in case there is some kind of emergency, and heads downstairs in search of food and maybe caffeine.

Martha is in the kitchen again dropping pieces of meat into a skillet. They sizzle and the smell of hot fat fills the kitchen. She takes one look at him and announces,

“Coffee. I'll make some. I just wanted a cup, too.”

Bruce is startled. Is this what mothers are like? Or just this one?

“Do I look that bad?” He asks, feeling his own unshaven face. The shadow of a beard is there but not deep yet.

“Not bad,” she says, “but you have that look about you. I can just tell. We coffee drinkers can. Jonathan's in with him now.”

“I'll sit with him tonight,” he offers, noting the circles under her eyes. “I understand if you'd rather.”

For a moment, he is certain she will refuse. But she sighs.

“I'd appreciate that. We're old. Jonathan still has a farm to run. And we're worn out from worrying.”

“I'm used to all nighters,” he says, watching as she measures coffee into a paper filter.
“Then I’ll skip this coffee or I’ll never sleep a wink. Drink all you want,” she says, pressing a button and then scooting to flip the pork chops in the skillet.

There’s a small pile of dishes in the sink already, leftover from marinating meat and mixing bread. Bruce steps up to the sink and turns on the water.

“Oh stop, don’t bother. I can get those,” Martha says, opening the oven to check something inside.

Bruce puts soap on a rag and ignores her. She doesn’t move to stop him.

They stand, side by side, in the kitchen, hands at work.

“I never could get that boy to hold still and help with dishes,” she says. “He whines and moans like I’m killing him. And just try to tan the hide of a Krypton boy.”

This is actually amusing to him, the mental picture, the idea of someone forcing Superman to do dishes. The idea of Superman resisting. But the smile doesn’t reach his face. He wonders, belatedly, if she’ll take this as a sign of offense.

Instead of huffing or giving up, she leans forward to catch his eye, while stirring green beans.

“He did say you were serious.”

“Usually,” he replies, rinsing the last bowl. She hands him a clean towel to dry with.

“Well, if you’ll do dishes, you’re hired. Clark gets all his resistance to household chores from his father.”

Bruce does smile this time, just a little, not wanting to disregard her efforts to be hospitable.

“He also said you were quiet. And stubborn. And driven.”

“Does he even like me?” Bruce asks, willing to play along a bit and driven by no small measure of curiosity. He knows that she, too, is testing the waters here of a strange relationship. They both need to determine what will be off limits, what will be allowed.

Martha is quiet for a moment, moving pork chops to a platter with a long-handled spatula. A bit of grease splatters them both as it pops, on her apron and on his hand.

“Aw, shoot,” she swears softly.

He pretends he hasn’t noticed the flecks on his skin.

“I don’t know that he always likes you,” she says honestly. “But he has enormous respect for you. And the times he doesn’t like you, it’s because he thinks you’re being foolish. And that bothers him because he cares so much for you.”

“He’s probably not always wrong,” Bruce counters, finding a coffee mug and pouring a cup of coffee.

“Sugar? Milk?” She offers while straining green beans.

He shakes his head. He sips the steaming, black coffee and closes his eyes. Another sip or two and the headache is fading.

“I think you’re both foolish, running yourselves to the ground like this,” she mutters without
malice. “But I suppose someone has to do it.”

Dinner is clearly ready, sitting on counter tops, steam drifting toward the ceiling. Martha makes no move to get plates or call for Jonathan.

“Did he ever tell you,” Bruce says suddenly, plunging into the story before he is certain he wants to tell it, “about the time I crashed the Javelin-7 showing up at the Watchtower?”

He senses her need to hear a good tale, a reminder of her son as a hero and not as a still form, murmuring and fevered on a bed just rooms away. It is a small sacrifice, this piece of his dignity, his self-regard.

“He doesn't tell us many details,” she confesses. “We get broad strokes. Edited accounts.”

“I took the spacecraft to the Watchtower and didn't wear a helmet or oxygen mask. I was ten minutes out and a broken satellite collided with the front windshield. One of those big, old heavy Soviet satellites. I lost two layers of reinforced polymer glass in a half second. The third and final one was cracked. No one at the Watchtower is answering my radio calls and I am dead if that glass breaks. By the time I think of the oxygen tank, the mask, it's too late-- I've wasted too much time just correcting course. I waited too long to shout for him, to get his attention without the radio.”

He pauses to pour more coffee, the final tendrils of headache sliding off of him.

“Did he save you?” She asks softly, anticipating formula.

“No,” he says without apology or rancor. “He didn't then. I crashed into the hangar bay before the glass broke. But it did break, and I was nearly sucked out the airlock. That's when they showed up, to open the interior airlock two minutes after the windshield gave. I caught my breath, I got up, went to a meeting-- this is the Texas incident, last year?-- and after I somehow made it to my room on the Tower.”

He sees the look on her face, the mild confusion, anticipating by his initial tone that this story somehow involved Clark.

“If I'd thought I was going to die in space, I was certain it was going to kill me now. I was going into shock, suffering hypothermia. If I made it through the next hour, I'd still have to climb into another spacecraft just to get home. I hadn't been in my room for more than a minute or two when I realized Clark was there, right behind me, just waiting.”

Thankfully, she is the sort that knows how to keep silent during a narrative-- there are no punctuating ‘oh dears’ or ‘my-mys’ that would surely throw him off, stop him in his tracks. He is aware that the pork chops are growing cold, that Jonathan is standing in the hallway, listening in.

“He didn't say a word about how stupid we both knew I had been. He got me a drink, got medicine, warmed up the room. I waited that whole time for him to criticize me, to let me know a break from the League would be a good idea. I even nearly dared him to do it. But he put a hand on my shoulder and gave me the company I was too headstrong to admit I needed or ask for. He saved my life and never spoke a word of it anyone else. I don't know what I would have done or how it would have changed me if he hadn't been there. And to be honest, I wouldn't have let any other member of the League even in the room at all. That's how much I trust and respect your son, Mrs. Kent.”

“So now we're even,” a hoarse voice calls from the hallway, from behind Jonathan.

Martha's eyes light up and she rushes past Bruce to embrace her son, who is standing there
looking haggard in athletic shorts and a tee, but standing.

Perhaps Bruce should feel a little embarrassed, the sentimentality of the story not false but definitely tailored for his intended audience. He doesn't though. What he feels is relief.

Clark hugs his mother and then leans heavily on the wall.

“Goodness,” she exclaims, “dinner is gone cold. And you need to sit.”

“Or lie down,” Jonathan ventures.

“No,” Clark shakes his head. “I don't want to eat anything, but I'll sit with you.”

The table is set around him, as he rests in one of the sturdy farm table chairs with a blanket around his shoulders.

“I didn't expect you to still be here,” Clark says to Bruce when Martha and Jonathan both step into the kitchen.

“I can go,” Bruce offers, his hand on a chair he hasn't pulled out yet. “I should go.”

“Don't. She'll beat me if she thinks I scared you off from dinner.”

He stays.

They eat together, no one speaking much, except for Jonathan updating Clark on the events and incidents of local families, prompting laughter and exclamations from his son.

“And that Rachel Connor who was sweet on you in high school,”

“She was not,” Clark protests, chuckling.

“She was moon-faced every time you walked by her. That Lana girl use to shoot daggers at her with her eyes every Sunday after church if she so much as got close to you,” Jonathan insisted. “Didn't she, Martha? Anyway, what's her name now?”

“Price. She married a Price boy.”

“Oh, that's right, the younger one. Liam?”

“Levi,” Martha supplies.

“Levi! They're going to have another baby, a fifth. Can you imagine? Rachel Connor with five babies?”

“Jonathan,” Martha scolds. “You're like an old hen. You know more town gossip than I do.”

After dinner, Bruce insists on doing the dishes again. He gives them space. Clark is clearly worn out, but sits in the living room anyway, drinking water and listening to his parents chatter and talk.

The chatter ebbs and flows under the sound of the running water. Bruce gets another cup of coffee, feeling a need to be vigilant even now.

After he has finished drying, putting away dishes, he leans against the counter and in the other room, conversation lulls and then stops. Suddenly, Jonathan's voice is gruff and contains an edge of fear.
“Bed, now. Let's go,” Bruce hears the order clearly.

He sets the mug in the sink and risks imposition to look into the living room; Clark has tried to stand and has caught himself from falling, but only just. Jonathan is at his side, holding him up but struggling. Without realizing that he is doing it, it is Batman’s face and voice that carry into the room.

“I've got him.” He loops Clark’s arm over his own shoulders, lifts him to his feet. Once he's steady, Bruce leads him to the bedroom.

“At least you're on your feet now,” Bruce says, to put Clark at ease. “I carried you in when we got here. Like a baby.”

“You didn't,” Clark moans, laughing. His steps pick up power though, his discomfort out of focus.

“I did. Right in front of your father.”

“They're never going to let me leave the house again,” Clark says, and there's an undercurrent of something like anger or ire in his tone. Bruce lets this slide for now.

They're almost to the bed when Clark passes out, Bruce staggering as it catches him off guard. When he's gotten him to the bed, he turns to see Martha in the doorway.

“Jonathan went out to check the livestock. He doesn't do well with this sort of thing. I'd hoped we were out of the woods, but I suppose I should still sit with him,” she says, her eyes never leaving Clark's face.

There is deep exhaustion hanging about her, in her posture and her voice.

“I'll still do it.” Bruce says. “Unless you feel like it really needs to be you.”

“Do you think it's okay?” She sounds torn.

“I'll get you if he wakes up at all,” he promises, taking her by the elbow and steering her down the hall. “You and Jonathan get some sleep.”

She nods wearily.

He finds a book on a small living room shelf and then sits in the hallway outside the bedroom, the door propped open. After a while, when darkness has completely fallen outside, Jonathan returns to the house. He acknowledges Bruce with a nod and then climbs the stairs.

The hours tick by, feeling not unlike a stakeout.
Chapter Four

The stakeout feeling persists through the night, except it is minus the wind, the skyscraper altitude chill, and plus a book.

It is a thick tome about surviving an Antarctic expedition, dreary and sad. It looks like the spine has never been creased; he imagines the Kents picking it up when Clark first mentions the Fortress, struggling to understand their strange son and the places that fill his days, never getting past the first chapters about stocking outdated ships and political exploration arguments.

He shifts occasionally, listening. An owl calls outside. The house is full of inhaling and exhaling, the quiet pace of slumber. He considers calling Alfred to check in, but decides against possibly interrupting a rare night of sleep.

Around three in the morning, he allows himself to sit upright and lightly doze, in a state between rest and readiness for action. The caffeine is wearing off. There is no obvious nearby danger to provide surges of adrenaline. Staying awake is a matter of habit and practice. Night watches are his strong suit, after all.

The sun rises after an uneventful night. Martha makes breakfast, Clark wakes late and joins his parents at the dining room table. Bruce heads outside to work out, feeling jittery after so much inactivity. He heads out deep into a disused field to move.

Bruce works on remembering a Krav Maga form he hasn't practiced in years, finding the challenge a good one mentally and physically, and when he finishes it flawlessly for the third time, he stops and wipes sweat off his brow. Even mid-morning, the Kansas sun is insane.

He begins the trek back to the farmhouse. A crow flies overhead, cawing. He's getting close when he hears a scream. He breaks into a run.

Bruce reaches the house just in time to see Clark stumble out the side door, a suspicious green glow emanating from inside. There are two strange cars in the driveway, flanking the Taurus.

He catches Clark under the arms, “Who’s inside?” He demands, hoping Clark can answer.

Before Clark speaks, two shots ring out. Bruce slams himself through the doorway as Clark shouts, and in the kitchen a chunk of kryptonite is on the counter.

He swears and continues, but stops short in the living room. Martha and Jonathan Kent are on the floor, bullet holes clean through the center of their foreheads.

Whoever shot them has left the house by the front door, apparently not anticipating that there is another person to worry about. They are talking in low voices, unhurried. He can hear them out on the porch but not make out what they are saying. Behind him, through the side door, he can hear Clark sobbing.

This is all his fault. The Taurus. They must have tracked it somehow.

He can't make his feet carry him forward, he’s stuck in quicksand. Clark has crawled back into the house, through the kitchen, and is kneeling by his mother, his sobs a litany,

“No no no no no.”

Thick red blood seeps from the wound in Martha’s head down around pearls on the floor, fallen
from her outstretched hand.

Bruce cannot think, cannot move, cannot breathe. This is not happening again.

“Bruce?” Clark's voice, weirdly calm and tired, drifts up from the living room floor near Martha’s lifeless body. “Bruce?”

Bruce startles awake in the hallway of the Kent house, disoriented. It is dark, Clark’s door ajar beside him. The book he was reading is on the floor. Dread hangs heavy over him and he shakes his head to clear it.

He stands, stretches, tucks the book under his arm and pushes the door open. For a moment he thinks he imagined Clark speaking– he is still, eyes closed, breathing even and slow.

“I need sunlight,” Clark mumbles, with a low moan. “I need to be outside.”

“What are you, a robot?” Bruce jabs gently, forcing his voice to sound light. He feels as if the nightmare is written on his face, obvious in his posture. He doesn't like feeling rattled. Clark doesn't respond except to sit up. He stands, stumbles, and leans stiffly on Bruce's offered arm.

They step out onto the front porch and Bruce slows, but Clark leans forward.

“No. The field.”

Bruce balks at the idea, the haunting memory of running through a field minutes before bright and sharp in his mind, but he doesn't let on. What has he done, bringing Clark here? It feels too possible to ignore.

But no, it was just a dream. A dream tainted by his own loss, his own worst fears.

So they go down the steps into the pre-dawn darkness, across the gravel and onto the mown lawn that borders the cornfield. Bruce supports Clark’s weight but lets him lead, and they push through a row of corn and keep going.

“I should tell your mother you're up,” Bruce says, two hundred feet into the corn. “I promised her I-”

“Don't,” Clark says sharply. “Stop talking.”

Bruce stops talking, a bit bewildered and irked.

Another hundred feet and they're out of corn stalks, into a field full of alfalfa, laying fallow for the season. The sky is deep navy with edges of black-- no clouds, a low sliver of moon. The eastern horizon is just changing to plum purple.

Clark stops, shoves Bruce away and sways for a minute and then crumples to the ground. He sits with his head hanging low, his wrists balanced on his knees and his breath ragged.

Bruce stands nearby, reluctant to speak or move. He senses a dark current of emotion rolling off Clark in waves but there is no voice to it yet. He wonders if he casts the same foul shadow; which one is influencing the other. They wait.

Once or twice, Bruce almost speaks, almost leaves to go back to the farmhouse and tell Martha, but in the end he doesn't do anything.

The sky turns dusky amber, then changes into spreading ripples of red, orange, pink, pale yellow.
The sun breaks over the horizon and inches upward, light spilling across the fields and bright against their faces, on their clothes.

Clark draws in a long, shaky breath. Bruce drops to the ground and sits in a pose meant for meditation. The posture helps him be patient, while he wants to dissect whatever is happening right now, to purge his mind of the image of bloodied pearls and stained apron. Another twenty minutes pass and now the sun fills the eastern sky.

“I am angry at you,” Clark says, his voice steady and dark.

Bruce looks sharply over at him; the other man sits with his face to the sun, eyes closed.

“Why the hell would you bring me here? You track the Justice League like a teen fangirl, you had to know I always wait days, weeks after disasters like this one. They need to see me walk through the door of that house on my own two feet or just knowing I'm out there will kill them.”

“Are you dense?” Bruce demands, matching Clark’s tone, reflexively defensive, feeling exposed. This is all his fault. But no, that was a dream— the reality was the Kents’ worry the day before, their relief at seeing their son. “Don't you think they worry, and not knowing, not having any idea is worse?”

“Don't you dare tell me how to handle my parents,” Clark spits out. “Don't think you know them better than I do after a day. Don't pretend you don't hide things.”

Both men sit in the field of alfalfa, simmering and furious now.

“I'm tempted to punch your damn face in but I don't know if I can yet,” Clark says vehemently.

Bruce wants to storm off, to go punch a few things himself. He forces himself by great effort to stay. He isn't sure if it's wise or needed or not, but he's not going to be run off.

He stands, stretches, starts moving through jujitsu forms at least twenty feet away from Clark. Maybe the best way to shake the nightmare is to imitate the circumstances, prove it false. He works until he's broken a sweat under the strong Kansas sun. At his best guess, an hour has passed. His mind is clearing.

The next form he runs with his eyes closed, intent on stripping every sour remnant of nightmare from his thoughts, prodding the recesses of his mind to chase each lingering wisp.

Then the rustle of grass, closer than anyone could have possibly managed to get without him noticing, tosses him off guard and all the work he has done to reassure himself slips away in an instant. The same instant in which he opens his eyes to see Clark’s fist slam into his face.

Bruce staggers back, clutching his jaw.

Clark glares at him and Bruce glowers, breathing hard.

“We are not doing this,” Bruce says. “You don't get to pick a fight.”

“You don't have to fight back,” Clark growls.

“I'm not fighting a man who's been in bed for six days,” Bruce says, his anger and guilt mounting, battling for dominance. He sort of hopes Clark will thrash him, get it out of both their systems. “Beat me to a pulp if it makes you feel better.”

All the color drains from Clark’s face. Bruce, who has been bracing himself for the next impact,
shifts his balance with both hands out, expecting Clark to crumple. Clark doesn't, but he sways like he still might at any second.

“Six days?” He asks hollowly.

“Six days.” Bruce repeats, anger fading fast. “Don't you remember the hospital?”

“What hospital?” Clark is still swaying, unbalanced. He looks thoroughly confused and Bruce ventures to put a hand on his shoulder.

“Sit down,” he says, gently but firmly. Clark sits and Bruce crouches across from him in the alfalfa. “Let's start slow. What's the last thing you remember?”

“Flying into a Metro Station. Walking in the crowd.”

There is a long pause and Bruce watches Clark’s face, the intense concentration clear.

“Then?” Bruce prompts.

“Waking up here.” Clark says, shrugging helplessly. “I guessed Kryptonite. It's had effects on short term memory before. I figured I'd lost a few hours, maybe a day.”

“Hm.” Bruce says. Something else is going on. He senses it in his gut.

“But six days?” Clark echoes. “What happened?”

Bruce stands and paces.

“You don't remember being shot?” He asks after a moment.

Clark's hand flies to his neck, and Clark nods slowly.

“Vaguely.”

“And after that? Barry taking you? The sub-basement of Walter Reed?” Bruce is scowling at the cornfields, massaging his sore jaw as he thinks.

“Nothing. You didn't bring me here?”

“I did,” Bruce says, meeting Clark's eyes. “After you spent five days in a hospital bed.”

“Whose idea was it?” Clark asks, his face stricken, “I'm so sorry. I thought…”

“It was mine,” Bruce gives him a wry smile. “You were right about that, at least.”

“Did they just give up? What…” Clark is floundering, trying to put the pieces together. “If I was in a sub-basement, then...I mean. I need sunlight after exposure to Kryptonite.”

“You weren't getting better.” Bruce says. “So I changed things.”

“You kidnapped me?” Clark bursts out, his eyes wide. “From a government hospital?”

“You weren't getting better,” Bruce repeats. “It was a long five days.”

“I can't believe this,” Clark says, clenching his fists. He stares at the ground between his feet and when he looks up again, it is not anger on his face, but fear. “Bruce, how did I lose six days?”
“It might have been the delivery method for the Kryptonite,” Bruce muses aloud. “But that wouldn't explain why you've been doing so much better in just a day.”

“Between that and the lack of sunlight,” Clark latches on to the idea. “It was just a deadly combination. A horrible mistake. I’m surprised the information about sunlight isn't in a file somewhere, after the scares I've had in the past.”

“There's a possibility,” Bruce warns, “that someone was not making a mistake.”

“No,” Clark says firmly, sounding more like himself. “Humans make mistakes. Not you, of course, but other humans. At least you had the sense to get me out of there.”

“I think you're being dismissive.”

“I think you're being paranoid,” Clark returns. They match glares and it is Bruce, uncharacteristically, who bends first. He remembers that his nightmare was a dream and he cannot let it discolor reality.

“You're probably right,” Bruce says, pressing a hand to his temple. “It's been a hell of a week. I'm sorry I brought you here.”

“It's alright,” Clark says with a sigh. “I hate worrying them but it's done already, and maybe for the best.”

Clark, now accepting the present circumstances, inhales deeply of the earthy air and stands. He smiles.

“You know, it's good to be home.”

But Bruce’s sense of unease does not fade. He reluctantly swallows the urge to protest. Clark’s health is improving, he’s no longer angry-- but Bruce is more certain than ever that he has made a terrible mistake.

“I'm going to go for a run,” Bruce says abruptly.

“I'll be fine,” Clark says, nodding, his face raised toward the sun.

Bruce runs.

He cuts through fields and eventually comes to the road. He turns onto it without slowing. He runs until his muscles adjust, his head clears, through the ache in his heart. He runs.

Whenever he considers stopping, turning around, the image of bloodied pearls settles in his mind. He keeps going. He runs in the blazing sun until his legs burn, until he has outpaced the memories of dreams and distant past, until he has regained the mental fortitude to carefully shut those things up in a deep corner of his conscious self.

And when he has managed this, he runs some more. Another mile, then another. Miles without thought of any shape, just mental silence.

When even this has gone on long enough, he slows and stops. He bends over, gasping. He swallows air like it is water and then he turns and begins the run back.

Mile after mile of golden cornfields fly by on the sides of the road. The clarity of a clear mind gives room to more suspicious thoughts, analytical and unhindered by emotion. But for every dark thought, there is a counterpoint.
Clark should have been getting better. But maybe they didn't know the basement was the last place to protect him.

Clark has power that frightens some. But America loves Superman.

Clark has lost six days. It is not an unknown risk.

No terror has risen in Superman’s absence. It was easy enough to take him from the hospital. The CDC cooperated. And what was the point? Why care for him if he was already out of commission? Why work tirelessly to save him if they desired his death or incapacitation?

It is this final point that mostly sways him. He saw them working, he saw the failures and the final success that counteracted the Kryptonite and left Clark, at the least, stable. The rest could be chalked up to ignorance, as frustrating as it is. He is being paranoid, fueled by a nightmare.

Bruce has covered the return distance and most of the Kent’s private lane by now. The sun is beating down mercilessly. He misses the night sky, the shelter of dark buildings and the cool of empty rooftops.

He reduces his pace to a slow jog and pulls the commlink out of his pocket. He presses a button and speaks into it.

“Oracle.”

“Bats. How’s life in Smallville?” Barbara Gordon’s voice rings clear and cheerful over the device.

“Slow,” he says, looking around him at the fields. “Small.”

“What a kidder you are. What's up?”

“I need you to access any government medical files on Superman,”

“Oh, Bats, he's not…”

“He's fine.”

“Good,” she sounds relieved. “Carry on.”

“I need you to update whatever you can find. Include exposure to sunlight as treatment for contact with any form of Kryptonite.”

“Got it. Anything else?”

“That's all.”

“See ya around, Boss.”

The commlink goes silent in his hand and he slips it back into his pocket.

The dread briefly surges in strength as the farmhouse comes into view, but it is soon clear that nothing is amiss and it vanishes in a sort of embarrassed relief.

Bruce slows by the car, considers looking it over for bugs. He shakes it off, out of his mind. He bought the car, in cash, from a suburban dealership in the DC area the night he took Clark from the hospital. There's no way anyone had time to bug it. And he's thought through this and Diana was possibly right-- everything is fine. The crisis was last week and now all that is before them is
the recovery and then waiting for the next crisis, a different one. He's just not used to peace, to not having something to worry about.

As his heart rate returns to a resting rhythm, he becomes aware of the throbbing pain in his jaw. Clark had thrown a really solid punch. At least the stubble he has will hide any bruise. He ignores it.

Martha is unclipping clothes from the laundry line. Bruce judges by the position of the sun that it is approaching noon.

“I'm sorry I didn't wake you,” he says as he nears her, remembering his failed promise from the night before.

“Don't trouble yourself about it,” she reassures him. “I'm just a worried old woman. Clark's a grown man. Did you boys have a good run?”

Bruce's blood turns to ice.

“What?”

“Did the two of you have a good run? I’m so glad he's feeling better. He always heals up so fast. If you didn’t plum wear yourselves out, I'm sure Jonathan would appreciate some help in the barn this afternoon.”

Martha's hands have been busy unclipping, shaking out, and folding laundry. It isn't until she finishes the last shirt that she looks at Bruce.

“Where'd he get himself to, anyway?”

“He wasn't with me,” Bruce says. “He didn't come back to the house?”

He's fine.

He's still in that field, soaking sunlight like a cat.

“No,” Martha says. “He wasn't with you? Jonathan saw you two go out together this morning from the window.”

“We did. But he didn't go running.”

Every reassurance he had bolstered himself with falls to pieces, like dust on the wind. But he sees Martha’s face, crumpling in worry, and he remembers how angry Clark was at the thought of causing his parents any stress.

Bruce has perfected the art of thinking one thing and acting another, honed on red carpets with celebrities and their fake tans and Instagram selfies, their hashtags and empty conversations and ridiculous cocktails. And he hates himself for using this against Clark's mother, but he makes his choice in a heartbeat.

And so he smiles, warmly, and touches her arm. This is how he acts at parties when he is not yet pretending to be completely drunk but merely tipsy, bright-eyed and amiable.

“I'm sure he's fine,” he says. “He was doing well this morning.”

There is suspicion in her gaze, but also hunger-- hunger to believe him, for everything to be okay. And because her son is Superman and is always okay, she does believe him. She looks relieved.
“I’ll go find him,” he says. “I’ll let him know you’re worried.”

Martha lifts the laundry basket to her hip and says, “Thank you, Bruce. I’ll go make lunch. I know he can take or leave food, but I'm sure you’re hungry.”

“Starving,” he says with another grin. And then he ambles off, to the narrow path he and Clark cut through the cornfield hours earlier.

As soon as he is sure Martha is inside and he is out of view, he runs.
It makes the most sense to start where he last saw Clark, to work from there out. He will track footprints if he can, but is out of luck if there was any flying involved.

But there is no need. When he gets to the fallow field, he spots Clark right away-- sitting hunched over, not far from where they stood together earlier. He had left Clark in good spirits, so his relief is tempered by the change.

“Clark!” He calls roughly.

Where the morning brought a current of anger, there is now nothing, a kind of blankness. Clark does not move.

Bruce approaches him as he would a wounded animal, sensing that something is not right. He crouches slowly in front of him and hates himself for being right, hates how wrong everything feels.

Clark's whole body looks slack, as if cut from puppet strings, but he is clearly conscious.

“What happened?” Bruce speaks softly, the way he would to a child.

“You were right,” Clark says quietly, his voice broken. “Something is wrong with me. I tried to fly.”

“Have you gotten to rest enough yet?” Bruce asks, knowing it is the wrong question, a false attempt at postponing the truth.

“Don't patronize me, Bruce,” Clark says wearily. “I tried to fly and it was like the effort itself was Kryptonite. It took me an hour to get back up. Last night, when I collapsed in the house, I had just tried to listen for Lois. And I tried again to use heat vision ten minutes ago and it knocked me down, too. It’s still hard to move.”

The amount of fear in Clark's eyes, when he finally lifts them to Bruce’s, is staggering.

“What the hell did they do to me that I can't even be Superman anymore? That I’m still sick?”

“I don't know,” Bruce answers honestly.

“I need your help,” Clark says, “I need to know how to fix this.”

“Of course,” Bruce says without hesitation. “We need to get you somewhere safe.”

“I want to stay here,” Clark says, sighing.

“I don't know if that's the best idea,” Bruce says. “But I'd be reluctant to leave you alone at the Fortress. And getting you to the Watchtower could be dangerous. We'd need help.”

“No, not the Watchtower,” Clark snaps. “You were the only one who got me out of that hospital. I don't know who else I can trust.”

Bruce sees the doubt, he understands it. But he also knows their team.

“You can trust them, Clark.”
“But you don't,” Clark retorts. “You don't want to seem like a liability.”

And Bruce cannot argue with this.

“Alright,” he says. “We don’t go to the League. We keep it quiet.”

“Let's talk to my parents, though,” Clark says finally. “I keep fighting to shield them, but maybe this time I'm in over my head.”

“Alright,” Bruce says quietly. “I'll head back to Gotham today. But first, let's get you to the house. Can you walk?”

“I think so,” Clark says, and Bruce stands and holds out a hand. He pulls Clark to his feet and waits for the other man to find his balance. “I'm okay.”

They begin the trek back to the house, Bruce leading the way. They've not gone more than a dozen steps when Bruce slows even more.

“Lean on my shoulder, Clark.”

Clark puts a hand on Bruce's shoulder and leans heavily.

The sun has tipped past the point of midday in the sky when they reach the farmhouse yard. Martha is waiting on the porch, shielding her eyes from the sun. When her eyes catch Bruce’s, he can see the anger there. She knows he lied to her.

“Jonathan,” she calls. “They're back.”

Jonathan joins her on the porch and then goes past her down the steps, where they stop. Clark takes his arm off of Bruce’s shoulder and steps forward and stands toe to toe with his dad, who gives him a long, hard look in the face.

Then Jonathan embraces him.

“It's gonna be okay, son,” Jonathan says quietly, and Clark buries his face in his dad's chest. Jonathan holds him, upright and clutched against his own old, strong, sun-worn body, for a long time.

Bruce stands nearby, staring out down the lane. He won't meet Martha’s questioning look.

“Bruce,” Martha says, her voice sharp. “Come in with me.”

The screen door slams behind her and he follows, letting it close more gently after him. Martha is in the kitchen.

She is rinsing a colander full of garden peas at the sink, flicking the water over them and shaking the bowl to get all the dirt off. He waits in the doorway until she sets the colander down and dries her hands on her apron.

It is clear that she's weighing carefully what she is about to say and when she turns to him, her words are iron and fire.

“Mr. Wayne, Clark sees the best in everyone. You have been a friend to him. But you are arrogant, too, to your own discredit. If you ever lie to me to make me feel better, if you ever again give me false hope with sweet words and fake smiles, you will have a long, long road to regaining my trust. Today I will forgive, because I think you meant well and wanted to spare suffering. But
next time, you be as honest with me as you would with your own mother.”

Bruce is rigid as if he’s been slapped. He thinks of caped nighttime visits to a tall tomb, how even in death his mother sees him for what he is, that his pretenses and masquerades would be an insult to her even six feet under the ground.

“My boy is sick,” Martha says. “Don't you think I see it? You don't help this family by pretending otherwise. We aren't children.”

“I know,” he says hoarsely, chastised. He imagines their worry, compared to his, and how his consumes him. “I'm sorry.” He cannot meet her gaze, but neither can he hang his head in defeat. He is stiff, his head bent at an angle, unseeing the cabinets in front of him.

Martha softens. She steps forward, puts a hand on his chin and tips his face down to her own.

“Bruce, we’re all worried. But this isn’t your fault. Don't try to carry it. Help him-- help us. But don’t do it by bearing burdens that aren’t yours.”

She pats his cheek in a motherly way and then goes bustling around the kitchen. Bruce still feels like he’s been slapped.

“Take this bowl and these bags,” she instructs, putting things in his hands. “We're going to sit outside, shell some peas, and talk about what to do next.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says. She looks sharply to see if he's mocking her but is satisfied by the expression on his face.

“Go on, then,” she says. “And don't let the door slam.”

Outside, Clark and Jonathan are sitting on the porch on rocking chairs. Clark looks asleep, but the chair keeps rocking. Jonathan tugs a trucker hat out of his back pocket and puts it on.

Martha comes out right behind Bruce, the dripping colander of peas in her hands. She sets it down on the top step and sits next to it. Bruce sits on the other side and sets the bowl next to the colander. She snaps a bag open and lays it on the porch at her elbow and begins.

He watches her hands as she snaps the woody end off a pea pod, peels it open by the green string of a stem, and rubs the peas off into the bowl. The empty shell is discarded in the bag. The whole process takes a second or two and she's on to the next one.

Bruce picks up a pea pod and imitates the motions.

“You're a fast learner,” she observes approvingly. His speed doesn't match hers but it's already close.

“So, what's going on here?” Jonathan asks when the peas are a quarter done. “We don't even rightly know what happened to start all of this mess.”

“Bruce likes to talk,” Clark says. “He can tell you.”

“I'd really like to hear it from you, Clark,” Jonathan says to him. “No offense, Bruce.”

“To be honest, Pa, I can't remember much.”

Martha’s hands falter. This is a surprise to her.

“Clark was attacked with a bioweapon, a form of Kryptonite,” Bruce says bluntly. “And he was
kept in a sub-basement of Walter Reed until I took him.”

“Kidnapped,” Clark corrects. “And thank you.”

“Exposure to sunlight and whatever they used at Walter Reed are not helping enough.”

“I feel like I’m dying,” Clark elaborates, “but I don’t think I am. I just can’t seem to do anything Superman would do. If I try, it’s like I’m being exposed all over again to Kryptonite.”

“So you’re...normal?” Jonathan asks, mildly.

“No,” Bruce says before Clark can. He says something he has been wondering, worrying about, but hasn’t given form until now. “We don’t know how much Clark’s abilities enable him to just exist on our planet. All the traditional powers are clearly decommissioned, but it’s hard to say how much just breathing our atmosphere, depending on carbon-based forms of food, are themselves powers. It is possible that just staying alive is taxing his system right now, which is why finding out how to fix this and prevent it from happening again are a main priority. And to do that, we have to find out who did this and why.”

“I’m not okay,” Clark says to his parents. “I don’t even know what okay feels like, but this isn’t it.”

“Right now, Clark needs to lay low and rest. Pushing himself to exhaustion,” here, Bruce gives Clark a warning look, “will not help. And it is dangerous, too, to just sit. The people who did this—”

“If it was more than one, which is a contested point,” Clark says.

“The people who did this,” Bruce insists, “might come looking for him. We don’t know if they intended to disable him or if they had other plans, but the fact that they were keeping him sedated in a basement make me suspect the latter.”

“Plus, there’s Clark Kent’s life to juggle,” Clark says. “And I’m not exactly feeling up to maintaining that, yet.”

“You’re going to stay here,” Martha says, firmly, shelling peas with a fierceness. “You’ll call Mr. White and tell him your mother is ill, you need to be home for a bit. If anyone in town asks, we’ll say you needed a break from city life and had vacation time.”

This is a simple solution. No middle man, no complicated explanations.

“This does put you in a lot of danger, Ma,” Clark says softly. It is clear he wants to stay, but is fighting the risk.

“Your father has a gun and he’ll use it if need be.” Martha says. “This is your home. You stay.”

“Don’t worry about us, Clark,” Jonathan says. “We’ve survived a good bit.”

“It does minimize the number of people who know,” Bruce says. “I don’t like it, but if you understand that it is a risk...I will be here as quickly as I can if anything goes wrong. If you’re unsettled, have a bad feeling, see something suspicious, think you’ve seen something suspicious, call me. Until this is dealt with, I’m at your disposal.”

The peas are shelled. Martha stands and takes the bowl. She carries it with her as she walks over to Clark, leans and kisses his head.

“You stay as long as you need to,” she tells him. “No hiding things from us.”
“When have I ever been able to?” He asks, smiling at her.

“I'm going to go make an early supper. Bruce, you stay and eat. I haven't fed you all day and you're a mortal man, unlike some of us.”

“I need to make some calls,” Bruce says, after she's gone inside. “Arrange some things.”

Even though there is little point in shielding his conversations from Clark or Jonathan, he walks around the back of the house and out of earshot driven by habit. Just as he starts to reach for his commlink, it buzzes.

“Bats,” Oracle says when he clicks a button. “Hey.”

“Was just about to call you. What's wrong?” Bruce asks, without preamble, his voice deeper and grating.

“It's just me,” she says. “This might be nothing, but I got to those files you asked about and something weird came up? Might be nothing but sometimes it's something, just thought you'd want to know.”

“I'm waiting,” he says impatiently.

“The files in use at the DC facility, well, they already had that note, the one you wanted added? But it was only in older versions. In the newest version, it was gone. Someone had removed it. It took some digging.”

“That's not great news, but it might clear some people,” he answers. “I'm going to need a ride today.”

“What's going on? Is everything okay?”

“No,” he answers. “And it might be bad for a while.”

“I'm activating the autopilot on the Batplane, unless you want something a bit more mundane. A Hertz rental? There's one in your area with two family sedans available and one Dodge Charger.”

“The jet. There’s a east field that isn't being used on the Kent property right now,”

“I've got it in satellite. You want me to tell Alfred or will you? Anyone else I should contact?”

“Let him know. And no, no one else. We need to keep this quiet.”

“How quiet?”

She's prying, politely, for what is happening. He respects that she doesn't demand, like Dick might. She might not even snoop if he explicitly tells her not to, unlike Tim.

“Superman is grounded kind of quiet,” he says, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “The JLA doesn't know kind of quiet.”

“The ‘I'll cut your tongue out of your mouth and break your hands if you breathe or type a word’ kind of quiet, I got it, I got it,” she jokes. “Seriously though, give him my love. Jet is en route, ETA 3:02 PM your time, flying at above-commercial altitude. Alfred's already buzzing me, should I keep you on?”

“No, take it. Thanks, O.”
"'You're the best' is what you meant to say after that. You're welcome. See you soon."

The commlink goes dead.

When he gets back to the porch, Jonathan is still sitting but Clark's chair is empty. Jonathan stands.

"Clark went inside to lie down," Jonathan looks as if he might say more but doesn't, and then he comes down the porch steps. "I'm just going to finish some stuff before supper. Walk with me."

They walk for a bit along a fence bordering the road. There's another barn out here, set back in the field along a dirt path. Jonathan's long strides take him toward it and Bruce follows. The older man slides the tall steel doors open and flicks a switch. High, hanging fluorescent lights snap on and warm to full brightness.

"When Clark was little, we kept the rocket that brought him here in this barn, in a tarp under the corner back there. He was such a good kid. He never looked once I told him to leave it alone."

"Is that the one he has at the Fortress now?" Bruce asks, looking around the barn full of tractors and machinery.

Jonathan twists his mouth up and nods.

"I haven't seen it since he took it. We almost lost him that first year he saw it. He wouldn't speak to me for weeks."

Knowing Clark now, how good natured he is, how quickly he gets over things and how deeply he cares for his parents, it is hard to imagine this younger Clark, silent and furious for days on end.

"Martha and I are so grateful that you brought him here, this time. She thinks he's changing, finally letting us in a bit more. But I don't think so. I think this isn't going to happen again. I think these are very unusual circumstances." Jonathan is tinkering with tools and he catches Bruce's eye to confirm his suspicions. Bruce nods.

"There is so much now that we are shut out from. I know some of this is age. He's a man. There were things I wouldn't share with my father. But this is different, too."

Jonathan hands Bruce a wrench.

"Come look at this broken combine with me. Clark says you're good with machines."

They work for several minutes, examining a jammed gear. Bruce doesn't notice when Jonathan steps back, letting him tap and turn and adjust, just watching him think.

"I think, Bruce, you're probably the smartest man I've ever met. And I think Clark sees that, he knows you're different, like him. You have access to parts of him that no one else ever does, not even Lois. I had a friend like that once, a long time ago. I still miss him. Losing him broke my heart."

Bruce is silent. He thinks of that hour after Barry rushed Clark to the hospital.

"Aw, damnit, I'm making this too mopey. All I'm trying to say is thank you for keeping an eye on him. Don't quit. We worry about him, about what life is gonna look like for him while the world gets old around him. There are parts of his life he's never gonna let us in on, and he's going to think he's protecting us. Us, ha! The couple that raised an alien. Try telling him that. But you have boys, he tells us. You know."
“I think it's fixed.” Bruce steps back.

“That part has been pestering me for three months,” Jonathan stares at it, hms over it.

“You raised him well,” Bruce says, wiping his greasy hands on a rag. “If Dick and Tim turn out half as good as Clark, I won't know where it came from. He makes all the rest of us look bad.”

Jonathan graumphs at this. “That's all Martha's doing,” he shrugs.

“I'll do everything I can to help him.” Bruce says, holding his hand out to Jonathan. The older man shakes it firmly.

“That's all we can ask of you.”
Despite his parents’ protests, Clark walks out to the field for a second time that day to see Batman off. The Batjet is nestled among the fields of corn, a faint distorted shimmer of grass with the cloaking device on.

When Batman nears the jet, sensors in his suit communicate with the computer inside and the cockpit swings open.

Clark stands off to the side, his hands jammed into the pockets of his gym shorts.

“Bruce,” he calls, as Batman swings up on the side of the jet. “Can you do me one more favor? I hate to ask, but…”

“Go on,” Batman says.

“Can you stop and tell Lois for me?” Clark rubs the back of his neck and grins sheepishly. “I kind of don’t want to tell her over the phone.”

“Sure,” Batman reaches inside the cockpit and grabs something, tosses it to Clark. The other man catches it and winces.

“Gonna be hard to get used to not doing some things,” he says. “Muscle memory.”

“I’ll get to the bottom of this,” Batman promises. “If you need anything, let’s keep it off JLA lines. Unless you’ve changed your mind.”

“No, not really. I know that puts a lot of pressure on you.”

“Do you think I dislike pressure?” Batman allows a small smile. “What gave you that idea? That device is a way to stay in touch. It's secure.”

“Uh, Bruce,” Clark looks the thing over in his hand. “What kind of phone is this?”

“WayneTech. With my number. I build my own when I can't find what I want. I'd stay away from Candy Crush, though.”

The cockpit is swinging shut and Clark calls, one more time, “Bruce!”

“What?” The cockpit freezes.


Batman guns the engine and watches Clark take a step back. Clark waves and then points to the phone just as the jet lifts off the ground.

A second later, there is a buzz and the dash lights up with a message:


Batman scowls and then sets the controls to autopilot. He leans back in the seat. He is thoroughly exhausted and wants to work as soon as he is home, so he closes his eyes and sleeps.

A low, soft beeping lets him know when he is approaching Gotham. It wakes him from a shallow slumber. By the time the Batjet has reached the Batcave hangar entrance, he is fully alert. He takes
over manual controls to land the jet.

The hangar is dim. No one else is home. It's not yet dark outside, but Batman doesn't ascend to the Manor. His work is down here.

The computer is on, as always, humming. The gentle whine of the cooling and dehydration fans is a background whisper. He pushes back his cowl and sits at the desk.

There is only one place to start and that is with the employee file of Jeanine Kowalski, the CDC scientist who had shot Superman with the Kryptonite-laced viral agent. A few taps and he’s into the database. He pulls up her file and swears.

The information is basic at best, minimal. Large portions of the record appear to have been expunged, fairly recently, too. The only detail other than a few family names, an address, and date of hire is her date of death-- but he knew that already.

This is not a dead end but it does make some things a bit more difficult.

His phone buzzes. It is almost six in the evening, the tail end of normal working hours for many. He slips the phone out of a pocket in the utility belt.

_Haven't seen you for a bit. You ok?_

The number is Commissioner Gordon’s.

_Business out of town._

If it's an emergency, Gordon will message again. He returns to the file.

Next, he hacks the digital file database for the detention center responsible for her care after arrest. The file there, written up by a coroner and a security detail, describes her ingestion of the cyanide. He notes that Wonder Woman yelling at the guards is absent from any report.

Bruce sits back and sighs explosively, growling. Something seems off about this, but it's hard to tell if it's just frustration clouding his judgment. He puts his fingers on the keyboard again, thinking.

A few more minutes of work and he has the locker location and shelf number for the evidence box containing Jeanine Kowalski's government laptop and all the files from her office. They're sitting in a federal building in DC, under armed guard with other evidence for high-profile federal cases. He downloads schematics for the building and studies them intently for several minutes, memorizing routes. The sooner he can get to that laptop the better.

“Welcome home, Master Bruce,” Alfred's voice carries across the platform. “Hard at work already, I see.”

“Alfred,” Bruce acknowledges.

“Miss Gordon has provided an update, however insufficient. How goes the search?” The butler has reached the desk now, and holds out a tray with a cup of tea.

“Not awful. But anything other than a solution would feel too slow right now.”

“I am certain Mr. Kent feels much the same.”

Bruce takes the tea and sips it, spinning the chair to face Alfred. He watches the bits of tea leaf
that escaped the infuser swirl around in the cup.

“What if I can’t find answers, Alfred?”

“I doubt you would ever stop looking,” Alfred says. “Even if you had to engineer the answer yourself. I think Mr. Kent is in good hands, and I’m sure he would agree with me.”

Bruce sips the tea again and turns to look at the schematic on the computer.

“I'm going to be doing a lot of traveling in the next few days,” he says. “Can you give my regards to the board? There's a meeting tomorrow but I don't want to take any time away from this until it's settled.”

“Of course,” Alfred says. “Should I pack the car?”

“No,” Bruce finishes the tea and sets it back on the silver tray Alfred holds out. “Bruce isn't coming along for this one. Yet.”

He’ll take the rest of the evening to prepare, then he has two stops: the building in DC holding Jeanine Kowalski's laptop and files, and then Metropolis.

Hours later, under deep cover of night, he slinks along the shadows of a DC rooftop. If he hates Metropolis for how bright it is, he hates DC for its squat buildings and wide highway-like roads. He doesn’t know these subway tunnels or schedules as well as the ones at home, and every street crossing is congested with confused tourist traffic stuck in broad roundabouts.

It took him a bit longer than he had planned, then, to just make it to the building. Off the back of the building, he uses a grappling hook to lower himself behind a dumpster and uses a narrow telescoping rod from his belt to lift a heavy manhole.

He drops to the sewer floor below and begins walking, keeping track of the map in his head. He keeps the cape wrapped around him as he moves along the wall. His senses are alert but he doesn’t anticipate much resistance.

Eventually, he comes to a locked door, tan under the beam of his small flashlight. He picks the lock quickly and lets himself into a utility room. It is like a closet with no clear exit other than the door he just came through, but there is a vent above a tank in the corner.

Removing the cover is simple work. He lifts himself into the vent, moving slowly as he tests the strength of the metal. It will hold him. It won't even make much noise as long as he is careful and not too fast.

He has a small packet of powdered sedative in his belt, separated from the activating liquid by a thin film of plastic. When he reaches the vent access nearest the evidence room, it will just be a matter of timing and the guards will not be a problem. If everything goes as planned, no one will even know he was here. On the other side of his belt, he has a USB key with a program installed on it that will autorun when inserted into an active port and copy an entire hard drive. He will worry about breaking through encryptions later. His phone will take pictures of the pages in the files and the entire job should take him less than twenty minutes; the sedative will give him an hour.

The hardest part is the steep slope of the vent to the basement level above him, one floor below ground. It is a chore of pressure and counterpressure on a surface with minimal traction, to climb without making noise.

Batman turns a corner in the tight space, the vent cover in view ahead of him. Then he hears the
unmistakable, quiet hiss of a silencer and the thud of a body hitting the floor. There is a terrified shout and another silenced shot.

There is a temptation to abandon his silence, but surprise might still come in handy. A sense of urgency drives him now and he leverages himself against the corner and gives a solid push with one leg. He slides down the vent, cocooned in his cape, and catches himself just before the grating.

A guard is on his knees outside in the hallway, both hands on his head. He is sniffling; he looks young. Two men with guns flank him, talking quietly to each other in accented Spanish.

As quickly and quietly as he can, Batman undoes the screwing on the grate and uses a magnetic wire to hold it in place. The vent is close to the ground, putting him at a bit of a disadvantage. He can see booted feet, see the guard trembling, but it is impossible to be certain which direction the two gunmen are looking.

He has no idea how they've gotten this far without setting off an alarm, but that's a puzzle to solve later.

To keep both himself and the guard alive, he's going to have to move fast.

When he comes out of the vent it is in an explosion of movement. He sweeps one gunman’s feet out from under him, snatches his silenced weapon and knocks the man out.

Now he can see down the hallway, to where the body of another guard is lying in a pool of blood. A door just beyond him has been forced open, the door knob broken on the floor.

The guard is now crying and fumbling for his weapon. The second gunman has collected himself and levels his gun at Batman, tracking his movement as the dark shape flies around him.

Taking the second gun is the matter of a quick kick and a grab in the air. Batman tosses both weapons down the vent and they clatter and scrape along the metal for so long, he realizes they must have ricocheted off the corner and slid down to the lower level.

But knocking the second man out isn't as easy. He's much faster and the element of surprise is gone. The man’s face is dark with anger and when he lightly jumps back to avoid a kick to the chest that should have put him down, he pulls a knife from his boot.

Then it is a matter of hand to hand combat, furious and fast. The blade glances off the chest of his suit the one time the man gets close enough to slice with it, but the man is smart and doesn't try against the thin-armored suit again. He starts going for the face, exposed beneath the mask.

Batman gets one window, at the end of an attempt to slash at his mouth where the other man’s arm is still outstretched and Batman is in just the right spot to flip him over a shoulder and slam him into the floor. He snatches the knife in the same motion, throwing it away from them. It sticks in the drywall down the hall.

Then there is a loud boom, close enough to hurt his ears, and the acrid smell of gunsmoke fills the air. He whips his head up and the young, shaking guard is standing with his gun held out in front of him.

The disarmed man at Batman’s feet curses in Spanish and shouts. Down the hall, a man in a hooded sweatshirt emerges from the evidence room with a messenger bag, looks to them, and takes off running.

“What did you do?” Batman demands of the kid. “He was disarmed!”
The kid is still shaking but his voice is angry.

“I was doing my job.”

Torn, Batman takes one step down the hall, then hesitates and turns back. He drops to his knees next to the gunman, who is now moaning in Spanish. Blood is pouring out of his gut.

“Call an ambulance,” Batman orders the kid. “Now! Get the police here!”

The kid is pulling his walkie-talkie out, talking rapidly, while Batman pulls a clotting powder out of his belt and pours it on the wound. He grabs the shirt on the other gunman and rips it off his unconscious body, bundles it and presses it against the oozing hole. When he pushes, the man cries out and then bites his words off into gritted teeth.

“You,” Batman tells the kid, “come hold this. You were alone, do you understand? I was never here.”

The kid nods quickly and takes the crumpled shirt, already soaked.

“I was doing my job,” the kid protests, against the gunman’s moans. But Batman is already gone, in the evidence room past the broken door.

The room has been ransacked but Batman memorized the inventory list earlier. He only has minutes, maybe even less time. Dread mounting, he realizes with only a few seconds of looking that what he feared is the truth:

The laptop and all Jeanine Kowalski’s files are gone.

It is a futile effort, but he attempts to track the third man through the building. He is long gone, however, and the building is filling with guards, police, emergency responders and alarms. He makes a quiet exit onto the roof and surveys the crowd below, hoping to see rapid movement surging against the crowd. But nothing. The man is gone.
Chapter Seven

Lois Lane is exhausted. She has not been sleeping or eating well. But she's pretty good at hiding it. Still, she's grateful the day is finally over. Another long, boring workday in the books. She slings her purse over her shoulder and checks her phone for messages.

It's late but there are still pockets of activity in the newsroom, reporters rushing to get stories in before their deadlines so the copy desk can get them to layout before their deadlines before layout sends them to the printer before their deadlines. It's a delicate domino chain.

She submitted her final story ten minutes ago, cleared it with copy. They'll call her if there are any questions but it's just a filler piece to pad the paper on a slow news day, nothing big.

All that is left to do is head home, maybe stop at Clark’s place and feed the fish first. Maybe get take-out on the way. Nothing really sounds good but she should at least try.

One of the interns hurries in with late night coffees, looking harried. Those kind of smell good. He whispers to someone at the copy desk and there's a small commotion there. No one hands out coffee. Lois stays.

On instinct, fearing the worst, she unlocks her phone again and scrolls through Twitter, the lifeblood of instant news. She sees it, retweeted by the AP, just as one of the reporters-- less timid than the intern-- calls out across the room.

“Shots fired in a federal building in DC. Four blocks from an Esteva concert.”

TV screens around the room are unmuted-- only one of the seven news channels on air has picked up the news, and it's a DC local. The room bursts to life. People are making phone calls, repeatedly refreshing AP and Reuters services, scrolling Twitter feeds with a DC or Esteva hashtag, calling out to each other across the desks.

“Concert parking is blockaded, no one’s getting out.”

“No hostages reported.”
“What's the building?”

“No hostages says who? What's your source?”

Perry White is standing in the doorway to his office, scowling. He's scanning the room as Lois alternates between her phone and the TVs, three of which are DC stories now. Her purse is still on her shoulder.

“Lane!” He barks across the room. “We have a guy in DC right now. Get him on the phone.”

Lois swallows hard, not looking up from her phone, making herself seem nonchalant or busy.

She is probably the only person in the entire room that felt relief at the news. It is the absence of more personal tragedy.

“I'll call him, Perry. He's probably asleep.”

“Like hell he is. In my office. I want him on speaker phone.”

The best intersection of Clark and Superman’s absences is his job. It's been a lot of mental juggling and calling in favors in exchange for on the ground information, but when Superman was loaded onto a stretcher in fuzzy cell phone video shared with national news, it made the most sense to just say Clark was already there. And then to keep saying it, to place him in the tide of reporters that swarmed the CDC offices every day begging for anything they could print or air.

Lois lingers for another minute, watching the TV and hoping against all her wiser judgment for the resolution everyone is holding their breath for: that the swarm of police cars and ambulances around a mundane, three-story government building will be dispersed, made unnecessary by a blur of red and blue.

If that happened, she could almost forgive him for not contacting, for not calling in all this time. Meanwhile, her anger gives her a shield against her worry. How dare he not show up.

“Lane!” Perry roars from the recesses of his office. She tears herself away from the TVs and pitying glances of other reporters and heads in.
“Door?” She asks.

“Close it. I don't wanna miss a word.”

Lois clicks Clark’s name in the phone contacts and switches it to speakerphone. She sets the phone on Perry’s desk. There's a pause while it connects, but then a click and no ring-- it goes straight to voicemail.

“Hey, you've reached Clark Kent. I'm not available right now but leave a message.”

She reaches to end the call but Perry holds a finger up. She freezes. When the voicemail service prompts with a beep, Perry White shouts into the phone so loudly that Lois is tempted to wince.

“CLARK KENT. ANSWER YOUR DAMN PHONE AND GET YOUR ASS TO VIRGINIA AVENUE. AND IF YOU TURN YOUR PHONE OFF EVER AGAIN I’M GOING TO FIRE YOU AND BLACKLIST YOU.”

Lois knows exactly where Clark's phone is. It is sitting in a bowl on his kitchen counter, near a charging cord and a lemon that is fading to bitter, moldy yellow.

“This is the biggest story in a week,” Perry grumbles, ending the call himself. “And we're having the news handed to us by some kids at a concert with their trust fund smartphones.”

“I'm sure not all of them have trust funds,” Lois says dryly, taking her phone back.

Perry shoots her a withering look. She changes tack.

“You know Clark,” she says. “He's always ending up in the right place at the right time. I'll bet you fifty dollars and a drink he left his phone at his hotel but was already taking a walk near Virginia.”

Perry looks skeptical and still mad. “You thought he was asleep,” he reminds her.
“So you'll hear it before anyone else: I bet I was wrong. He won't be stupid enough to leave a story just to go get his phone. But I bet he'll have a ready-to-print story while everyone else is still updating Twitter.” Lois is a little ashamed at how glibly she lies. Maybe it's that she wants to believe this version of events.

“Mm,” Perry says, looking a little appeased. “Well, it's saved his job more than once. Let's hope his luck holds out.”

Lois checks her phone again, risking Perry’s irritation, but in the absence of a reporter communicating he seems just as hungry for updates. He slams his fingers against his keyboard like he hates it. Lois knows he broke another phone last week.

“No hostages,” she confirms, showing him the DCPD Twitter feed. “Looks like one suspect down.”

The TV in Perry’s office is ancient. Everything in the newsroom has been updated through the years but he refuses to deal with another remote. He stands and manually changes the channel.

There is footage of parking garage traffic jams, cars for blocks around stuck in standstill.

“I hope he's on foot at least,” Perry grumbles.

Outside the federal building, a figure is being carried on a stretcher and police seem to be walking in and out of the building, milling around in the aftermath.

Perry's desk phone rings and he snaps the TV off and picks up the handset. Lois stands up to leave but freezes when Perry roars in the headset.

“KENT. Tell me you're downtown in DC right now.”

There is silence on Perry's end, the murmur of a voice in the earpiece, drifting across the room. Lois cannot make out what is being said. She fights her body's desire to throw up or cry.

Perry's face turns more and more red, until it reaches the point at which it crests and goes white hot with rage, no color left.
“HELL IN A HANDBASKET, KENT. DAMN YOU.” And Perry slams the receiver down on the base, rattling the plastic.

Lois is still halfway in and halfway out of her chair. She opts for perching on the armrest like it was her intention all along, and she raises an eyebrow at Perry. She is desperately counting on his need to vent to get the information most important to her. Let DC take care of itself.

“He left FOUR HOURS AGO. He's home in Kansas where literally NOTHING EVER HAPPENS. Because his mom doesn't feel well. What is he? Twelve??”

“Wait, Clark's mom is sick?” Lois blurts out, realizing a second too late that this is likely a cover story. Well, she's helping it at least, by being paranoid and on edge.

“DAMN IT. He's taking a sabbatical. I can't fire him on a sabbatical. It's like he knew I was about to. You didn't text him, did you?”

Lois shakes her head, holding up her phone.

“Scouts honor.”

“The biggest story in a week and we've got nothing. You didn't know he left DC?”

“Not a clue.” She says honestly.

“You guys, um...okay?” Perry asks, glancing at her. “Because I've been holding back. But if you're on the rocks, I'm gonna just let ‘im have it.”

“Who knows?” Lois shrugs, forcing herself to sound casual. “He was probably just worried about his mom. He gets pretty single-minded.”

“Yeah, and it might have cost us a story. We could have had someone there already!”
“I'll go right now,” Lois says, desperate to do something. She makes her voice soothing. “I can be there in no time.”

Perry, who has been pacing and chewing a toothpick to death, stops short and stares hard at her.

“No,” he says fiercely. “You stay.”

He walks past her to the door and throws it open. The newsroom, fading in frenzy as the DC situation is resolving itself on TV in front of them, quiets, sensing Perry's demand for attention. In a corner, an intern is crying.

“RODRIGUEZ,” Perry shouts. The gray-haired reporter stands up. “Get your shit together, you're going to DC. Kent isn't there.”

“I'll call,” Rodriguez yells back, taking a backpack from under his desk and breaking in a run toward the elevators.

When Perry turns back to his office, Lois can see it in his eyes: this is a punishment for her, on behalf of her incompetent boyfriend. Perry is going to be angry for a while.

She leaves his office without another word and heads to her desk, listlessly updating websites and scrolling for news. She's tempted to call Clark's phone again just to listen to the voicemail message again. And at the same time, she's too angry to try calling the Kent house. There’s also a chance, a high chance, that he was lying to Perry about his location.

The news gradually settles itself into stories that share the same major details. A guard dead, a guard in shock. Two men in custody, one of them in the hospital with a gunshot wound. A bit shakier is the unconfirmed rumor that DCPD is searching for a third suspect, that an evidence room in the building was ransacked. No one is admitting anything there yet, especially not the Feds, who were late to the game by all accounts.

“Print media is dead,” an intern three desks down grumbles under his breath and then casts a fearful glance toward Perry's office door. Lois sighs.

Eventually, the room clears out except for the core of the copy desk and layout. Lois eats a bag of almonds from her desk and then grabs her purse again. She scrolls through a subreddit about DC
as she walks, not feeling particularly in the mood to talk to anyone sharing the elevator with her.

Lois is exhausted, down to the bone. She figures the fish can survive a day without food and heads straight for her own apartment instead. Just the thought of standing in Clark's apartment staring at his abandoned phone makes her angry and sick all over again.

She should be relieved. He's not dead. Perry spoke to him.

But she's angry. He didn't ask for her, didn't call her, didn't bother.

The doorman lets her into the building and the customary exchange of greetings takes little to no energy or effort. She opts to climb the stairs rather than encounter anyone else, even though it is late and the possibility is slim.

Inside the apartment, she tosses her purse on a couch and heads to the kitchen to stare blankly in the fridge like she's actually going to eat something. She tugs the fridge door hard enough to get the suction to let go with a sucking click.

“You're home late,” a deep voice says from the living room.

She slams the fridge door shut and whirls around.

Her heart has just skipped about half a million beats, but she is careful to make her voice level and disinterested.

“Bruce,” she says. The cowled figure steps forward into the light of the kitchen doorway. He has the stubble of a beard, a purpling bruise beneath it on his cheek. There are flecks of blood on his neck. He starts to speak but she holds a hand up. “Take off the mask,” she orders him. “Don't do this shadow and flashbang game with me. I wanna know you aren't going to leap out the window mid-sentence.”

To her surprise, he obliges. He looks like his week has been at least as rough as hers, maybe more.

“What brings you to our fair city?” She asks, reopening the fridge and grabbing leftovers. She sniffs them and makes a face, and sets them on the counter to pitch. “And at such a reasonable
“Clark sent me,” he says. Now this is unusual. No cryptic message, mask off, bright kitchen. She closes the fridge, more carefully this time, and then really looks at him.

All her anger dissipates.

“How bad is it?” She asks, the little appetite she had totally gone.

“Pretty bad,” he says. “He's not going to be leaving Kansas for a while.”

Now she feels guilty for feeling angry. She tries to hold on to the anger.

“I should go see him,” she says, tugging her shoes back on.

“You should,” he agrees, trailing her into the front hall. “But first, I should explain some things.”

“And?” She says, sensing that there's more. There's definitely more.

“And I need help,” he says quietly. “And I don't want you to tell Clark that I asked.”

Now this is just getting weird. It's unsettling.

“I don't need permission.”

“It could be dangerous.”

“Does that change what I said?”

Bruce is quiet for a moment, standing in her hall with his bruised face and suit and cape and
pensive expression.

“He might have a hard time forgiving you. He might never forgive me. If he asks directly, you should probably say I forced you.”

“Cause that will help so much,” she says, unable to bite back the sarcasm. “I don't even know what you're asking yet.”

For a long minute, there is silence. Then she takes her shoes back off, leaves them by the door, goes into the living room and sits on the couch.

“I'm not standing in my own front hall while you brood at me,” she calls to him. He joins her, sitting in a chair by the window. The curtains have been pulled shut.

A moment of inspiration hits her.

“Were you in DC tonight?” She asks. “Was Clark still in the hospital?”

“Yes,” he says. Then, “no.”

At least they're back to cryptic, which is familiar territory.

“Am I going to have to forcibly drag every syllable out of you?”

This gets a small smile out of him, which she's often heard Clark complain about the difficulty of doing. It bolsters her even though it only lasts a second. He is a different creature, this Bruce, than the one who she sees out for dinner sometimes in Gotham or at a media event when something WayneTech related is happening.

“Listen, I'm exhausted. I want to go see my not-dead boyfriend, since the status of that boyfriend was very much uncertain until very recently. Start talking or I'm going to fall asleep or leave. Start from the beginning.”
So he does. He tells her everything, or close enough that she's sure the omissions are non-essential. And by the end, her head is spinning.

So she asks questions, rapid fire, and he answers every single one without dodging. By the time they are done, her exhaustion has given way to adrenaline.

“How can I help?” She demands, finally. “I'm assuming you meant more than just keeping him company.”

“The opposite, I'm afraid.” Bruce says. “Jeanine Kawolski’s parents have been through the worst week of their lives.”

“Daughter turns criminal turns suicide victim,” Lois summarizes, her heart aching. She can't imagine. “You absolutely cannot show up and terrorize them.”

“I need a lead,” Bruce says. “I have nothing to go on except a missing laptop. If I start poking around at the CDC after tonight, I could destroy everything. If they were edgy before…” He trails off.

“I can do a piece,” Lois says quickly. “About the stress of the job. Make it sound like I'm trying to understand her. I can talk to the parents, the coworkers, maybe a psychologist or two for good measure. Not my favorite kind of story, but it's emotional and people love that kind of thing, divisive stuff. And so Perry will love it, too.”

“And you might get the attention of the wrong people,” Bruce warns. He looks a bit put off by her sudden enthusiasm.

“Danger is my middle name,” Lois retorts. “And I don't need a cape for my superpower, unlike some people.”

If she thought Perry White’s withering glare was brutal before, it seemed like a warm smile in comparison to this. But Lois is unfazed, her heart racing. Finally something to do.

Then, a moment too late, she remembers why she has something to do. The huge information dump she just experienced and is still processing.
“Oh, shit.” She says, her adrenaline ebbing. “Sorry. Poor Clark. This must be the worst for him. I’m sorry if it throws a wrench in your timeline, but I’m going to go see him first. I need to.”

“I understand. But what he’s dealing with could actually be deadly,” Bruce reminds her. “Any false step could be deadly for any of us. We still have no idea who we’re dealing with. So, for his sake, keep it short.”


Once in her bedroom, she closes the door gently and cries.

Two minutes, she tells herself, weeping soundlessly. When she guesses the time is up, she takes a deep breath and then another and another. She wipes at her face with the heels of her hands, pressing them into her eyes.

Then she starts tossing stuff into a bag, not paying much attention to what she grabs. A professional outfit. Pajamas. Something casual. A pair of shoes. Her phone charger. The most basic of decisions, whatever option is closest for each choice.

She grabs her toothbrush from her tiny bathroom and dabs her red eyes with a cold washcloth, until she's satisfied, and then considers redoing her makeup but decides against it.

When she reenters the living room, she is caught off guard once again. She had extended the offer out of politeness, maybe habit, but had half-expected Batman to be gone by the time she finished packing. At best, she assumed he’d be in the same spot, like a statue.

He is standing in the kitchen eating a sandwich. There is another one on a plate on the counter.

“The night is full of surprises,” she says. “He eats.”

Bruce says nothing, looking at some pictures she has clipped to the fridge of her and Clark-- it's one of those stupid photo booth strips where they're making dumb faces in each frame.
She picks up the other sandwich and makes herself eat. “Thanks,” she says softly. “I haven’t really been eating this week.”

“I’m sorry,” he says. “Clark was unconscious. And I can be rather...single-minded. I’m sorry you had to worry.”

“You two are so much alike. Are you sure you aren't sick?” She asks with mock concern. “Because I thought you were basically allergic to apologies.”

“I’m taking new meds.” He says, chewing. Lois genuinely cannot tell if he's joking or not. She's reluctant to admit how much the apology is a balm on her awful, isolated week.

As long as they're standing and eating in her kitchen, which is still super weird to her (“what did you do this weekend? Oh, nothing, just 3am sandwiches with Batman while my boyfriend Superman is dying of the flu”), she's going to make conversation. She needs a distraction to combat her own helplessness.

She glances at the clock. She gives herself five minutes. If she can keep him talking until 3:34, she will buy a large blueberry cheesecake milkshake at the first Sheetz she drives by on the way to Kansas. If they don't make it five minutes, she'll only get a small.

“Everyone in the bullpen was really worried that the DC incident had something to do with the Esteva concert.”

“Traffic was awful,” he comments. “Good thing I didn't drive.”

“One of the interns was really upset. She had a little sister at the show.”

“I'm surprised anyone was there,” he says, a little bit of derision in his tone.

“Don't begrudge other people their small pleasures just because you don't have any,” she says airily.

It catches him so off-guard he stops mid-bite. After a second, he collects himself. Lois is caught between feeling awful-- she didn't really intend to be nasty-- and sort of smug.
“Are you this mean to Clark?” He asks. “Or is it just me?”

“I just miss him,” she sighs. “We go back and forth but he keeps me from getting too bitter.”

“So it's my fault for being bad at conversation.”

“I hear you don't practice much,” she retorts and then claps a hand over her mouth.

He turns, very slowly, and looks at her. She's tempted to glance at the clock but resists being the first to look away.

“I'll work on brushing up soon,” he says mildly, turning to the fridge again. “I can see why Clark loves you.”

“I'm so sorry,” she says. She sneaks a glance at the clock. 3:35. Inwardly, she's celebrating.

“I'm not so easily wounded,” he replies. “And I know we're both stressed.”

Lois recognizes this as tact, that he includes himself-- a lesser man might try to pawn all emotions off on her and spare themselves.

“Anyway, don't be so hard on Esteva fans. She's not so bad.”

“Are you one?” He asks, finishing his sandwich.

“Eh, not exactly. But I don't hate her. It helps that she's so sweet.”

She waits for him to ask, to dig for info. But he just starts taking his gloves off, hanging them over his shoulder.
“I mean, I shadowed her for a week for a piece.” Lois sets her plate down by the sink and then leans against the counter. “I don't usually do media or lifestyle work, but Perry was in one of his moods. The kind where he decides to take something actually interesting away from me and send me out to write something he thinks I'll hate.”

She massages her right temple with two fingers, feeling the day catch up to her.

“You know, most of those moods are because I'm covering for Clark. I guess I should be grateful tonight, though, or I'd be in DC right now still wondering what was going-- are you doing my dishes?”

Bruce has already washed all the utensils in the sink and is working on a plate. He doesn't stop.

“You really don't have to do the dishes,” she says, unconvincingly. “I'll do them later.”

“What does Clark say about that?”

“What are you, my therapist?” Lois laughs. Then she sighs again. “Not much, to be honest. I figure I can at least do my part in saving the world, even if that part is covering his ass while he’s gone and then making it up to Perry by writing about the Metropolitan Gardening Club’s tomato plants. It helps that when Clark does work, he’s a hell of a writer. Even Perry stops complaining when Clark actually gets pieces into the desk on time or close to it. But when Perry is mad, well...I get the fluff pieces because he knows I’ll actually be there. I think I have a job because I show up and Clark has a job because he can actually write well enough to get away with anything.”

“He thinks you’re going to win a Pulitzer someday.” Bruce is now putting away dishes, wiping off the counter. Lois slides out of the way.

“Yeah, but Clark is nice, and thinks that about everyone we work with,” she says with a shrug. “He’s not really around to see how much the rest of us bust our butts to do something he throws together in ten minutes.”

“Working harder doesn’t mean the quality suffers,” he says, leaning against the counter next to her. “Some would actually say the opposite is true.”

“He thinks your superpower is that you had some sort of lab accident and never realized it.”
Bruce laughs at this and Lois notices that he rubs his bruised cheek, wincing a little as he does so.

“No, my superpower is money, and taking five steps for every one of anyone else’s. I have no illusions.”

“How are we even talking about this?” Lois asks, yawning, and looking behind her at the clock. 3:58.

“I think you were defending your love of Esteva.”

“I didn’t say love!” she protests, “Just, she’s a nice girl. Weird family, though. Colombian and loaded. Maybe more than you. She can sing well enough, but I don’t think she’d be as big if her family hadn’t been footing the bill for a lot of her getting her career off the ground.”

Lois is about to say something else when she notices that Bruce has gone as white as a ghost.

“Bruce?”

“Colombian,” he replies, his voice a bit gravelly. “The gunmen had accents. It’s been bothering me ever since.”

Lois picks up her phone and starts scrolling feeds for news. “I wonder if they’ve released any more information. Wasn’t one of them hospitalized?”

Bruce’s whole countenance darkens. “It was completely unnecessary,” he says.

“Well, he made it,” Lois says, reading from the screen. “DCPD hasn’t released his name but it says he’s stable at Howard University Hospital. By the way, you still have some blood on your neck.”

“I guess I’m going back to DC,” he says, sighing. “I hate that city.”
“You hate anywhere that isn’t Gotham, by what I hear.”

“Tomorrow is going to be busy,” he says, sounding weary. “And we have a farm to get you to.”

“We?” Lois echoes, raising an eyebrow. “I can take Clark’s car. I’m not inept.”

“I doubt his jeep gets the kind of speed I do.”

“What are you in, a Porsche?”

“A jet.”

“Okay, yeah, let’s take the jet.”

“It’s on the roof,” Bruce says, stretching his fingers into his gloves again.

“You parked a jet on the roof of my apartment building?” Lois exclaims, while getting her duffel from the living room and slipping on a pair of casual flats.

“Why? Is there jet parking in the garage?” He’s pulled the cowl back over his face. He’d look more intimidating if she hadn’t watched him do her dishes, but even so, he is a little scary.

“I’m going to make you listen to Esteva while we fly,” Lois says, checking her phone.

“I’m going to put the auto-pilot on and sleep through it,” he warns. “Normally, I wouldn’t ignore a guest, but you did just threaten to play pop music.”

Lois yawns. “Sleep might not be a bad idea. Otherwise, I’m going to hug Clark and then sleep on the Kent’s couch for ten hours. Yay, road trip.”

“I’ll meet you up there,” Batman says, pulling a device from his utility belt and throwing open her
balcony window. He’s out of sight in half a second.

“Show off,” she mutters, hauling her bag behind her and locking her front door as she goes out. She takes the elevator up to the roof access and has to shove the stiff door open with her shoulder. Batman is standing on an edge of the roof looking down at the city, and when the roof access door slams behind her, he turns.

Lois looks around for the jet and then notices the distortion of the graveled roof not far from Batman. There’s a soft beep and a cockpit opens in midair, then the rest of the jet shimmers and comes into focus.

“I thought Wonder Woman had the invisible jet?” she says, walking over and throwing her bag up.

He doesn’t answer, and she wonders if maybe he didn’t hear her. The skies overhead are dark with clouds and there’s a distant crack of thunder, off to the east. The air smells sharp with approaching rain, thirsty for a downpour after the dry weather of the past month.

Lois settles into the back seat of the narrow jet cockpit, buckles in for good measure, and waits. Batman stands on the wing for another minute, watching the sky, the slips into the front seat and the cockpit closes over them with a hiss.

“Lois,” he says, and she is startled by how suddenly exhausted he sounds. “Go ahead and play that stupid music.”

She pulls out her phone and is surprised to find the Bluetooth has already connected with something in the jet. There is a crack of thunder right overhead and Lois pushes play on a playlist auto-generated by a music service app.

The cockpit fills with the sound of the music. Lois leans forward for a moment to see Batman flipping switches and gripping the half-wheel controls. The rain comes pouring down in sheets, the wind beating against the jet with a roar.

They’re off the roof before Lois is even certain they're moving.

And it is a sign of her level of exhaustion that she is asleep in the seat before they've even cleared the state line.
the state line.
Chapter Eight

The jet makes another lazy circle atop the cloud cover, the atmospheric light tinted navy at this altitude and hour. A rumble underneath jolts Batman into more full alertness.

A weather station feed is playing in the earpiece of his cowl, repeating tornado warnings for the vicinity directly beneath them. The jet is otherwise quiet; he let the music play as long as the initial irritation was useful, but when he found himself sliding into mute acceptance he killed the speakers.

Lois is still, presumably, sleeping. It's almost nine in the morning and the sky beneath is black as pitch. He had been hoping to already be back in DC by this point, but there were limits to both his control and his risk acceptance.

Then the clouds begin to lighten and break up, drifting into pieces still gray but less grim. More confident now of the cellular signal breaking through, he taps out a message.

_Above you with L. At house in twenty._

He studies the clouds for a few more minutes and watches a pressure gauge on the jet’s dash, half-listening to the continued weather service report. There have been two tornadoes sighted, one ten miles south and another eighteen miles west, but it's sounding like they’ve already dispersed. His phone buzzes.

_We've been in the cellar since 5. Will meet you with umbrella; it's raining hard now._

It figures that Clark would be the sort of person to use a semi-colon in a text message. Batman himself appreciates brevity in text. Tim often complains that it's impossible to determine tone. He wonders, idly, how Tim has been doing-- it feels like months since he's talked to anyone at home.

The jet drops through layers of atmosphere and through hazy clouds. Behind him, he hears Lois stirring.

He sets it down gently in the fallow field, the air dim with rain. From below, the cloud cover still seems dark and it looks like much earlier than half past nine.
Clark is at the edge of the field in a wind breaker, holding a black umbrella. When the cockpit opens, Lois jumps out without another word to Bruce and in half a breath she's reached Clark and is hugging him fiercely.

He wraps one arm around her, the other holding the umbrella over them both. Batman begins to shut the cockpit again when he sees Lois pull back from Clark and glance at him, then turn and speak to Clark.

“Hey,” Clark's voice carries across the field and the rain and the idling jet engine. “At least stay for breakfast!”

The cockpit windshield is stalled, almost completely closed, shielding him from rain. Batman taps on his phone and sends.

No.

Clark looks at his phone. Lois has her arms wrapped around him again.

“Then go home and sleep! It’s been what, forty hours?”

I’ve slept.

Batman sends the message, knowing that a thirty minute nightmare and a catnap here and there hardly count. He lets the cockpit close the rest of the way and guns the engine. Clark and Lois take a step back, still huddled under the umbrella.

He hates the idea of going back to Gotham only to leave again for DC, but with resignation he admits to himself that there isn’t much he could do during the day except sit and wait. And a slight ache in his back serves as a reminder that there’s no point in tackling such a sensitive case with depleted resources, no matter how eager he is to get to the end of things.

With a weary growl, he lets the jet carry him back up into the upper atmosphere.
Batman sends the text knowing it will make Clark feel better and if he’s not going to be working for a few hours, the least he can do is minimize worry.

The stormy skies are clearing and he feels more comfortable letting autopilot take over for a bit. Now that he’s relaxing a little bit, he desperately wants to sleep, but the idea of not multitasking and using the time in-air to handle a few things drives him crazy. There are some things that require maintenance and he’s been neglecting them.

*On my way*, he sends a message to Alfred.

*Long week. You okay?* He messages Tim, next.

He activates the commlink.

“O, you awake?”

“Mm,” comes the answer. “I can be. What’s up?”

“I need you to keep me updated on the status of the injured gunman in the DC incident from last night. I want to know the second something changes.”

“Setting up an alert now,” she mumbles. “He’s stable but no official name release. Even the federal buzz is weirdly quiet. I’ll call you if anything comes up.”

He can hear her yawning and he ends the transmission.

*Breakfast?* The phone buzzes with a query from Alfred.

*No. Just sleep.* Batman answers.
The jet glides along through the air and the computer estimates his arrival time in another hour and twenty minutes. If he was going to work again as soon as he got home, he might let himself sleep, but for now, he resists. He doesn’t want to rouse himself just to make it to bed upstairs.

SUPER BORED. History test at school=most exciting thing for days.

The message from Tim is a good distraction.

Spar tonight 6? Batman replies, fighting his heavy eyelids. He slides the mask off and cranks up the air in the cockpit.

Yes yes yes. Tim’s reply is almost immediate. There’s a delay and then, Supes?

Long story, Batman answers. For later. Don’t worry.

Ok now i’m worried, Tim shoots back. But whatevs. I’ll beat it out of you tonite. See you at 6. Bring ur game face, I’ve been working on some stuff. Did i mention i’ve been SUPER BORED?

Batman starts to text back but then turns off the phone screen, dials the air back down, and gives up on fighting sleep.

He doesn’t dream.

He doesn’t even stir until Alfred gently wakes him in the Batcave, and then he only gets up to drag himself to a cot. He hasn’t been upstairs for over a week and he misses his bed, but doesn’t have the energy or willpower to make it there.

When he does wake, Tim is in the cave on the mats working on a flip. He blinks sleep from his eyes and sits up on the cot.


Bruce looks up at the computer. It’s almost seven in the evening. He got out of the suit between
the jet and the cot and Alfred must have taken it to clean, because it’s nowhere in sight. He’s down to compression shorts and an undershirt. Next to the cot, there’s a small table with neatly folded workout clothes and a glass of water. He drains the water and dresses, stretching as he walks down a set of stairs to join Tim on the mats.

“C’mon,” Tim says, bouncing on the balls of his feet. When he jumps to kick, Bruce catches his ankle and swings him around; Tim breaks the grip mid-air and uses Bruce’s shoulder to gain momentum to spin away, landing on his feet.

They spar for a few minutes, taking it easy, warming up. It’s not until Bruce is pushing, making Tim work hard to land blows, that he starts talking.

“I know I’ve been gone for a bit,” he says, deflecting a punch. “But I’m going to be out of town for a while, on and off.”

“Need me to come?” Tim asks, flipping back out of Bruce’s reach.

“I promised Clark I wouldn’t involve too many people.”

Tim stops, dodges a kick. Bruce notices that Tim is wearing a worn tank-top with the Superman insignia. He doesn’t mention it.

“Is he going to be okay?”

“I don’t know.”

This news causes Tim to stagger and Bruce stops right before he lands a blow to the teen’s side.

“I’m going to work on this until we find a solution or run out of time for one,” Bruce says. “And I need to ask you to watch Gotham while I’m busy.”

“Sure,” Tim says, slowly getting back into the rhythm of their match. “Anything I can do. Should I let Dick know?”
“Only if you think you can’t handle something by yourself,” Bruce says, blocking two rapid-fire kicks and pushing Tim back. “And that isn’t a challenge to prove something. I need you to be smart in assessing your own limits right now.”

“Got it,” Tim says, twisting for another kick and somehow landing a punch to Bruce’s back in the process. Bruce raises an eyebrow. “I told you I was working on something.”

“And Tim,” Bruce starts driving more relentlessly, backing Tim into a corner of the mat. “If any major names show up, out of Arkham or otherwise, you call me. I’m not going to risk you or Gotham.”

Tim flips easily over Bruce’s head and lands behind him in a somersault.


An hour later, Bruce rides the elevator up to the manor for the first time in over a week. He showers and, looking at the mottled bruise on his cheek, opts to take Tim’s advice and not shave just yet. The stubble, turning into a proper beard, helps mask it quite a lot, and this next DC trip might require some time as Bruce Wayne.

He eats dinner with Tim and Alfred, silent throughout the meal as he thinks. They don’t try to engage him in much conversation, but spend the time talking to each other about a teacher Tim dislikes and Tim’s need for a new pair of sneakers.

When the dishes are cleared, he pulls out his phone and there’s a small backlog of messages.

What should we do with Taurus? From Clark.

Why is Clark lying to me? From Diana.

Tim said he’s the new Batman. WTF? From Dick.

Bruce’s head snaps up so fast in Tim’s direction that the teen freezes, his eyes wide. And then he looks down at the phone in Bruce’s hand and holds both hands up.
“Okay, okay, I’ll fix it. He’s so sensitive. He can’t take a joke. I wonder who he learned *that* from.”

No, he replies to Dick. *Call me soon.*

*What makes you think he’s lying?* He sends to Diana.

*Give keys to Lois. They’re in guest room.* He tells Clark. Then, after a moment’s thought, he also sends: *How are you feeling?*

“I’m going to get ready to leave,” he calls to Alfred, who is in the kitchen. “I’ll be downstairs. I need to talk to you before I go.”

“I’ll be down,” comes the answer.

As he heads to the elevator, his phone starts buzzing again.

*No, you call me*, from Dick. *Tell Tim I’m going to kick his ass.*

*Tell him yourself,* Bruce answers. *I don’t do your dirty work.*

This exchange doesn’t surprise him. What does surprise him, after all these years, is how much easier it is for them to talk without fighting when they do it through their phones, as if they both need the distance it provides. Still, some things shouldn’t be done through text. He decides to put off the call until he’s on the way to DC.

*He’s lying to everyone. He called Flash and Lantern and only texted me, from a phone number with YOUR data signature (according to J’onn). He said he’s ‘taking time off’ like HE even knows how. Something is wrong and u know what it is.*

Bruce has to read this twice to make sure he understands it. Diana is smart but texts fast when she’s angry and never rereads messages.
He’s taking time off. Bruce answers. A second later, he gets a message that is just a string of exclamation points. He knows she’s right to be upset.

Once down in the Batcave, he starts suiting up. He sends another message when it occurs to him, this one to Jim Gordon:

Still out of town. R on call.

Got it. Best of luck. Or vacation? God knows you deserve one. The answer comes a few minutes later, when he’s sitting at the computer, looking over the staffing schedule for Howard University.

He doesn’t bother replying to Gordon, though he seriously considers it. The line between working relationship and friendship is one he has to be much more careful to tread with the Commissioner than with Clark, where it is tempting to fall into a sort of camaraderie with either man. He and Clark have saved the world a few times, but he and Gordon have worked plenty of their own tough cases together. Still, Gordon is protected by a lack of information and Bruce forces himself to remember this whenever he is tempted to continue a conversation.

“You seem to be delegating better than times in the past,” Alfred notes, stepping up to the computer.

“I like to think I’ve learned something from the past,” Bruce says, acutely aware of every mistake he is attempting to avoid making again.

“How are you doing, Master Bruce?” Alfred asks gently.

“Focused.” Bruce replies, honestly. “Trying not to think too much about anything except my next steps.”

“If you are stressed,” Alfred says, a briskness re-entering his tone. “I might recommend the violin. I understand that at difficult times, it helped Sherlock Holmes think clearly.”

“Sherlock Holmes also did cocaine, Alfred,” Bruce says mirthlessly. “Not exactly an ideal role model.”
“Well, all great men have their flaws,” Alfred answers, putting a gentle hand on Bruce’s shoulder. His voice gentles once more. “I’m here if you ever need to talk.”

“Thanks,” Bruce says, looking over the schedules again. “I have news that will cheer you up.”

“Oh?” the older man asks mildly.

“I’m bringing you with me,” Bruce announces without turning. “I’m going to make DC my base for a few days, at least. Can you pack and take a car to the Jefferson hotel tonight? Something just a little flashy but dark. Maybe the Hennessey.”

“Very well, sir,” Alfred nods only slightly but Bruce can tell he’s pleased, or maybe relieved. “I’ll begin immediately. I assume by your directive that you will meet me there?”

“Assume I’ll show up sometime in the morning,” Bruce says. “If the front desk seems put out that I’m not with you at check-in, maybe drop some hints that I’m exploring DC nightlife. Otherwise, don’t say anything.”

“Understood. Do you require anything else before I go upstairs?”

“I’m good.”

Bruce turns the computer screens off and stands. His phone buzzes again, he looks at it.

_I’ve been better. Thanks for bringing Lois. Pain is consistent but minimal. I’m realizing now how much I rely on my powers for everyday tasks. Everything goes so slowly._

Bruce puts the cowl on and climbs into the jet once again. He might actually enjoy driving around DC in a normal car after all this flight time. It's starting to get old.

Relax. Treat it like time off, like you told JLA. Bruce knows this is far easier said than done.
Does the world always feel so big to you? Clark says, once the jet is in the air and headed for DC. It feels huge when I can't just take off.

Bruce looks at the dash of the jet, the ETA for DC only twenty minutes. With traffic, it will take Alfred almost two hours to cover the same distance.

Yes. He says. It does.

Clark doesn't text again.

But then, Batman is busy. Within an hour, he's crouched on the outside window ledge of an office in the Walter Reed hospital. It's fortunately tucked into a dim corner, overlooking a small patient garden that isn't well-lit at night.

He waits, studying the bent figure at the desk inside. Dr. Stephen Lloyd is a dark-skinned man with thin glasses perched on his nose. He's filling out paperwork while on-call for night shift. He was the lead doctor on Superman’s case the week before.

When Dr. Lloyd stands to make a cup of tea at a microwave in the corner of his office, Batman quickly forces the window lock from the outside and slips the window open. The doctor is still standing at the microwave, watching the mug inside circle as the timer runs.

Batman moves fast, through the window and up behind the doctor, and clamps one gloved hand over the doctor’s mouth, holding him tightly so he can't turn or cry out.

“Not a sound,” Batman hisses in his ear before the man can start to struggle. There is a brief moment of panic where Dr. Lloyd thrashes anyway but Batman tightens his grip. He kicks one leg out and nudges the light switch with his boot. The room is flooded in darkness, only pale moonlight coming through the window.

“You were the primary doctor for Superman last week. I want to know why you weren't doing your job. You're going to tell me.”

Batman takes his hand off Dr. Lloyd’s mouth.
“I was! We worked non-stop! I swear I don’t know what happened to him.”

“I didn’t ask what happened to him,” Batman says, giving the man a rough shake. “I asked why he was still dying.”

“He was getting better!” Dr. Lloyd protests, trying now to pull his arm away. “His fevers had stopped spiking, he wasn’t having seizures. I’d tell you to read the file, but I’m sure you already have.”

Batman tightens his grip and he can feel Dr. Lloyd wincing away. But he stops struggling. If this were Gotham, if this were a common thug, or a corrupt politician, this is the point in the interview where the other man would start crying. But Batman did read the files-- Dr. Lloyd grew up in one of the rougher parts of Metropolis, on the outskirts, and joined the military after high school. He’s served a tour overseas and treated hundreds of severe combat trauma victims, most of whom were also suffering PTSD. It was his background in Metropolis, though, that raised a red flag for Batman.

“Batman,” Dr. Lloyd is pleading now, but not out of terror or fear. “I swear I was doing my best. Is he alive?”

“He needed exposure to sunlight to eliminate the effects of the Krypton and you were keeping him in a basement. Why didn't your staff know? Who are you working for?”

Sometimes the best way to get a genuine reaction is to just flat out accuse someone. And it is Dr. Lloyd’s response to this that convinces Batman.

After being frightened and attacked in his own office, this information is what causes Stephen Lloyd to start weeping.

“Oh God how did we not know? Did we make it worse? I was trying so hard. Please, tell me he's alright now. I swear I had no idea.”

The words themselves don't mean much, but unless Dr. Lloyd is one of the best liars Batman has ever met, his body language says he's telling the truth.

“I begged and begged to be primary physician on this. He saved my wife and son, years ago when my son was a baby. There was a train wreck. Please, I don't even care if you believe me or not.
Just tell me if he's okay.”

“He's alive,” Batman says, letting go of the man. Dr. Lloyd drops to the floor, but is already picking himself back up.

“Oh thank God,” Stephen Lloyd says, but Batman is already gone.

Batman approaches Howard University Hospital under the noise of a helicopter. One has just lifted from the rooftop life flight helipad and Batman drops down to a ledge while the wind is still tearing across the roof.

He counts windows along the building façade, checking the number against the interior layout he memorized earlier and the room number where the nameless Colombian gunman is being held under guard.

When he swings across the wall by grappling hook, the earpiece in his cowl cuts through the night time silence.

“Bats,” Oracle says, her voice sounding urgent.

“Not now, O. Five minutes.”

He's reached another ledge and balances on it.

Two windows down is his target. Below, he can hear the squeal of sirens. Just inside the building, through the panes of glass, he can hear shouting and running footsteps.

“O?” He asks, a sinking dread in his gut. She has fallen silent, but at his prompting launches into why she contacted him.

“You said you wanted to know first thing about the gunman. Police scanner for DC says first gunman was killed in prison fifteen minutes ago. Responders heading to Howard U Hospital now.”
“They're here,” Batman says, pressing his body against the wall and listening. He sneaks a glance into the room, expecting to see a body in the bed and a flatlining machine.

But the body in the room belongs to a police guard and the bed is empty. Police and federal agents are filling the room, followed by a flustered looking nurse. They are all yelling at each other, then the nurse, who yells back at them and cries.

Batman looks up into the sky to see the receding dot of a helicopter, one without medical insignia on it, something he should have noticed right away but somehow didn't.

And then he swears. There's no way he will make it to the jet in time to offer any sort of real chase. Another dead end.

“Sorry,” Oracle says softly. “Anything I can do?”

“Keep an eye out for helicopters violating flight zones.”

“Sure thing,” she says, her voice lacking her usual cheer.

Batman decides against returning to the roof, guessing it will be swarming with law enforcement. He swings to the nearest taller building and slowly and painstakingly begins making his way across DC, in an absolutely foul mood.

Nothing to go on. Back to square one.
Chapter Nine

By the time he gets to the hotel rooftop, he has made a long list of all the ways he has wasted time in the past twenty-four hours and resolves to be more vigilant. It's sloppy and careless, how casual he's been approaching this-- and it's cost him his only leads.

If only he'd been thirty minutes earlier, if only he'd stopped at Howard U first, if only he'd gone after the laptop sooner…

He lets himself through the window into the hotel room Alfred texted him the number of half an hour ago. He rips the cowl off and throws it into a corner then drops into a chair and puts a hand to his forehead, sullen. This is all his fault. He's going to have to work harder, to push more than usual-- he doesn't have the limits of Gotham City as a boundary line. The dark corners of this are too far flung for him to shake out if he keeps missing opportunities and screwing things up with awful timing.

For a brief moment, he thinks about how much easier this would be, for once, if he was working with the resources of the JLA. But he doesn't let himself dwell on it. He made Clark a promise and it's not uncommon to feel like the puzzle is missing all the pieces in the initial stages.

He spends the next four hours on his laptop, left by Alfred in a bag on the desk. In the thirty minutes since Alfred texted the room number, he had managed to completely prepare the suite and clear out to his own room for the night. Bruce knows Alfred won't stop by again until morning unless he texts or calls for help, or Oracle does on his behalf.

All four of the hours are spent poring over mugshots taken by DC or Colombian police. He considers writing an algorithm to check names against flight manifests, decides that if the gunman was rescued by private helicopter it's likely he arrived in a similar way, and then writes the algorithm anyway. This isn't a time to leave stones unturned.

It is approaching dawn when he realizes he never called Dick. His eyes and mind need a break from the columns of mugshots, even though he's been alternating between Spanish and English databases so the translation work keeps him alert.

Dick answers the phone on the second ring.

“I did,” Bruce admits reluctantly. It's better to be as honest with Dick as he can right now or things are going to get tricky. “I've been preoccupied. Good night?”


“Something come up?” Bruce asks, catching a rueful note in Dick’s voice.

“Just some hopping mad Koreans getting into a fight with each other and some Spanish guys. It was a little weird. It didn't seem like they cared too much about translating for each other, but were fine beating each other senseless.”

“Hm,” Bruce says, mulling over this. He doesn't want to chase dead ends in hopes of finding an easy answer, but if years of crime fighting have taught him anything, it's that surges of criminal activity are rarely coincidences. “Spanish? Possibly Colombian?”

“How should I know?” Dick retorts, annoyed. “Not everyone speaks a dozen dialects of every living and dead language.”

Bruce waits.

Dick sighs, “Sorry, Bruce. One of them just put up more of a fight than I was expecting. I might have gotten shot a little. They could have been Colombian, sure.”

“Shot a little?” Bruce repeats, standing.

“Calm down!” Dick yells. “I said a little! Just grazed! It's not a big deal. I knew I shouldn't have told you. I wasn't planning to. You've put gauze and tape on worse and gone back to work. I'm just pissed, that's all.”

“Okay,” Bruce says, drawing a long breath in. He forces himself to trust Dick’s judgment. The kid isn't twelve anymore.

“Anyway, I don't know Spanish well enough. I do know one of them kept yelling ‘la paquete”
“Lost package,” Bruce says quickly, hoping against his better sense. It can't be so easy. There's no way. “You're sure? And they were fighting with Koreans? The kkangpae? Anyone you recognized?”

“No, that's what made it so weird,” Dick says. Bruce hears the unmistakable sound of the lean younger man flopping onto a bed. “I know most of the Blüdhaven Jopok and their lackeys. These guys were total strangers, and strange. No sense of fashion. All military haircuts, collared shirts. If I didn't know any better, I'd say North Korean, but maybe just a cultish Jopok trying to get a footing.”

“Dick,” Bruce closes his eyes for a moment, torn between the instinct of a good lead and the conviction that it cannot possibly, ever be this easy after an awful night. “Please tell me you could find one of them again. Any of them.”

“Well, I don't know about the Koreans; Blüdhaven tried to book them but they made some calls on a cell phone and walked, took off in a boat. But the other guys, sure. BPD has them in holding on a whole slew of charges. It was a big fight.”

“Do whatever you have to do to keep at least one of them in custody.”

“Sure,” Dick answers, responding to the urgency in Bruce's voice. “What was it you wanted to talk about, anyway? How's Superman recovering?”

“He's not,” Bruce says bluntly. “And you aren't going to tell anyone. And you aren't going to call or text him about it unless I tell you that you can. I promised him I wouldn't tell anyone, but I'm making an exception.”

He actually made varying levels of exception for Oracle, Tim, and Alfred, but he technically promised not to involve the JLA. And right now, sans flight and speed and strength, he needs the family to help fix this.

“Bruce! I'm going to call him!” Dick exclaims. “What the hell? What do you mean he's not getting better and I can't call him? Is he conscious? Where is he? Everyone knows you took him. He's not in the cave, is he?”
“He's not in the cave. Listen to me. If we don't act quickly, he might die. If it gets to that point, I will take you to see him myself before…” Bruce finds he cannot finish this sentence and abandons it. “Right now, I need you. I need you to tell me which guys to look for so I can talk to them tomorrow night.”

“I'm going right now,” Dick retorts. “If that's what you need, I'm there.”

Bruce casts a glance toward the window. The sky is just beginning to lighten to navy.

“The sun is coming up,” Bruce sighs, reluctant. He is reluctant to give the go-ahead, after years of insisting their outside work has deadlines synced to the cycles of light. He is reluctant to miss this opportunity after letting the past two slip by.

Dick has clearly put him on speaker phone, his voice distant. There are pockets of noise pollution, like whispers of static, scattered among his words.

“Blüdhaven PD is awful, you know it is. They might not have these guys by the end of the day. Who knows who will bail them? Or if they'll decide to drop charges? If I leave now, I can get there right before the shift change. Everyone's avoiding paperwork, they all take coffee and smoke breaks to leave booking for the next shift.”

“That doesn't give you time to talk.”

“So I take him!” Dick shouts.

Bruce wants so badly to say yes, he wants this to be it, the next step. But they haven't survived for so long by being impatient. This is bordering on criminal.

“Taking a criminal from police custody could be considered aiding and abetting a breakout. It's too risky.”

“Damn it, Bruce! I'll put him back tonight! I'll take whoever they haven't booked yet if it makes you feel better! I'm already suited, you can meet me in the North Wallace sewer maintenance in an hour!”
Clark might be dying. Two leads have slipped like sand through his fingers. Dick is fast and knows what he's doing.

Bruce grits his teeth and then gives up.

“Go!” He says, but there's no answer. Dick is already gone.

“Please hang up and try your call again,” the operator’s voice informs him reproachfully.

Bruce scribbles a note to Alfred and leaves it on the desk. The jet is out of city limits and he'll have to go plain clothes, at this hour in an unfamiliar city, but the subway will get him close enough to get to the jet on foot. There's an empty gray backpack and a hoodie in the closest, because Alfred always thinks of everything. Bruce grabs the cowl, for wearing in the jet just in case, and shoves it in the backpack.

He's going back to Gotham.

Once in town, he was only planning on stopping at the cave to change into a new suit, but mid-flight he got messages from Dick.

*Bring ice pack*

And then a few minutes later,

*And ibuprofen*

Before Bruce even replied to either of these, trying to figure out the most diplomatic way to ask without setting Dick further on edge, a third message arrives.

*Okay maybe concussion it's stupid don’t ask*

It is fully morning when he roars across the outskirts of Gotham in the Batmobile, preferring an indirect route of smaller coastal roads to the more direct path in the city.
Still, just driving across his own territory again makes him feel more in control and less like a wildly spinning top. He feels a little guilty for the small, interior joy of speeding along a partially abandoned ocean view road, but not too much.

He parks the Batmobile in a copse of trees near one of the massive Blüdhaven water treatment plants and sneaks to a sewer access shed. From there, it's a matter of slogging through nasty water and along perforated steel pathways under the waking city to the location Dick gave him.

When he gets there, Nightwing is sitting on a railing next to a shut and barred door. There's a thin trickle of blood running down the side of his face and along his neck, but it's deep brown, already dried.

Batman hands him the meds and the ice pack and asks,

“Do you need to go home? Let me see where you were shot.”

“I'm fine,” Nightwing growls, but he rolls his sleeve up. Batman takes his wrist and examines the shallow scrape beneath the gauze, the edges slightly burnt. “It’s nothing. Anyway, they're both in there.”

“Both?” Batman asks, letting go of Dick’s wrist, satisfied that it isn't serious.

“Yeah, turns out it was a package deal. They're tied up and hooded and terrified, but not terrified enough,” Nightwing says, and then he does a small double-take and gets up off the railing to lean close to Batman’s face. He steps back, smirking, holding the ice pack on the side of his own head.

“Robin said Supes really walloped you. He can't be that bad if he's still fast and strong enough to get you like that.”

Apparently the beard is not as helpful as Batman was anticipating. Then again, Dick is family.

“I just want you to know,” Batman says to Nightwing, “that if these guys aren't helpful, that I'm not mad at you. Because if the lost package was drugs or they just aren't talking, I'm going to be furious. But thank you for getting them here.”
“Thanks,” Nightwing says, sobering. “He really is bad off, isn't he?”

Batman doesn't answer. Nightwing sighs.

“I'll sit out here. Go knock some heads together before you explode.”

Batman goes into the room alone.

When he comes out, fifteen minutes later, he knows a few things.

One, that when the hoods were lifted off one at a time, the older man’s eyes widened in fury and in respect. So the older man knew of him from someone else.

Two, the “la paquete perdido” was supposed to come from them and go to the Koreans. No one had told them why it was missing or what it contained.

Three, and this had only come with extra encouragement that caused Nightwing to bang on the door from the other side as a warning, whoever had given them orders was not the top of the chain themselves but operated with someone in DC they both called “el Brazo del Sol.”

Batman is starting to genuinely hate Washington, D.C.

Outside of the maintenance room, Nightwing is waiting. He has stopped holding the ice pack to his head.

“Well?”

Batman closely shuts the door, makes sure it is barred. He leans against the railing next to Nightwing and crosses his arms across his chest. His elation is severely dampened by a growing, sickening certainty.
“A break like this is enough to make me believe in God,” he says, slowly. “And we might need divine intervention, because somehow, for some reason, I think someone is trying to sell Superman to the North Koreans.”

“What?” Nightwing explodes off the railing. He lets off a string of brutal cursing. “How would you even do that?”

“Very carefully. And with strange allies. I’m going to head back to DC. Do you need me to help you get them back? I should warn you, if I’m right about what’s happening, there might be attempts to retrieve them.”

“I’ll be fine,” Nightwing says. “I’ll probably booby trap the door and head home to sleep and eat, come back in the evening.

“Don’t sleep on that concussion,” Batman warns him.

“I’ll be fine,” Nightwing insists. “Thanks for keeping me in the loop.”

Batman puts a hand on Nightwing’s shoulder, lets it rest there for a moment.

They do not speak. Then Batman leaves, running through the sewers for the surface. After a few minutes, his phone buzzes. It’s from Dick.

Love you too.
Lois parks the car along the street and turns it off, then sits for a minute looking at the house. She takes a few deep breaths to prepare herself. She knows they are home, that they had a memorial service for their daughter yesterday and haven’t gone back to work yet.

It is hard to separate these people who raised Jeanine Kowalski from the fatal decisions she made, but Lois forces herself to do it. She's going to have to be, or at least seem, empathetic if she's going to get anywhere. And deep down, she can recognize the division between parents and the actions of their adult children. But given the circumstances, it is still pretty difficult.

She opted not to call ahead, choosing not to give them time to prepare themselves or decline an interview. The drive from Smallville to this suburb of North Dallas was spent mentally organizing the list of questions she would ask, the phrases she would use to put them as much at ease as she could, and distracting herself from both how sick Clark is and how weird he was acting.

Taking a deep breath, she climbs out of the car and approaches the green front door. She knocks firmly and after a moment, the door slowly opens, just a crack. But it is enough.

Linda Kowalski's face appears in the narrow space between the door and the outside, framed by the shadows of the interior of the house.

“Can I help you?” She asks.

Lois had, by chance, managed to pack a professional outfit that was just slacks and an often disused blouse-- it was likely because the shirt was so rarely worn and always clean, it would have been in the front of her closet when most of her other clothes were in the hamper on the floor. The blouse is turquoise with fluttered sleeves and scoop-neck. She remembers getting it on impulse because she liked the color and it was on sale, but then has always hated wearing it because it makes her look gentle, instead of sharp-- like her tailored skirts and arsenal of black or white button-ups do. But maybe right now, gentle is an asset.

“Hello, Mrs. Kowalski? I'm Lois Lane, with the Daily Planet out of Metropolis. I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions.”
“Get off my property!” A voice booms from behind Linda, making them both jump. Linda looks back and then at Lois and begins to close the door, but it is jerked open from behind.

Gerald Kowalski is shorter than Lois had expected him to be from pictures and his face is contorted with rage. Linda steps back and he stands in the doorway, shouting.

“I said get the fuck away from my house! We don't want to talk to anyone!”

“Gerald, please,” Linda pleads from inside. “Language. The neighbors.”

“Damn it, get off my porch! Walk back to your car, right now!”

He takes a step toward Lois and she backs up, trying her hardest to look and sound placating. She wonders if he's always been like this or if is the ravages of grief.

“I'm writing a piece examining if the government provides sufficient emotional support to employees in high-stress jobs,” Lois blurts out, sensing that she's losing time. Gerald’s eyes widen even more and he points with a shaking finger, screams,

“GO. I’m going to call the cops and sue you and your paper for harassment!”

Lois hurries down the walk, knowing there's nothing she can do here except clear out and regroup. Gerald, satisfied that she's leaving, disappears into the house and slams the door before she's even at the car. The boom of the door is a thunderclap across the quiet street.

She stops by the car, puts a hand to her throat, resisting the feeling of helplessness. She's gotten used to making people angry or unsettled but nobody really likes being yelled at. And so much is at stake.

For a moment, to clear her mind, she closes her eyes. She's never minded tackling stories on her own and even preferred it for a long time, but she would have a hard time admitting to anyone that she's come to prefer working with Clark at her side. There's a level of security in knowing he's there. She wonders if this is what grief will do to her, if she fails, if Bruce fails-- will she be a shrinking, muted creature like Linda Kowalski, or a storm on the cusp of rage like Gerald? Or something else entirely?
Lois forces herself not to think about her own very unstable mother, the way the woman lies through her too-white teeth, the way she stole money from Lois’ high school purse, the way she always blames it on losing her own mother when confronted, the way she derails confrontations by sobbing helplessly about how alone she is.

“Ms Lane?” A voice interrupts her, just as she decides she absolutely has to stop thinking this way.

Linda Kowalski is standing on the sidewalk on the other side of the car, wrapped in a shawl.

“I'm sorry about Gerald,” she says.

“I'm sure It's a difficult time for you.” Lois says, trying to move and speak carefully to not startle this chance away.

Linda wipes gingerly at the corner of one eye and asks,

“You're writing about my daughter?”

“Yes,” Lois says cautiously. “I think her employers failed to offer their employees resources for dealing with the stress. Or maybe there's a culture of shame for women in the workplace having a hard time emotionally and she felt like she couldn't ask for help. I've just started, so I'm not sure yet.”

“Let's go sit on the back patio,” Linda says, looking around at the neighbors’ houses. “Gerald won't bother us.”

Lois eagerly joins her, trying not to seem too eager.

“Jeanie was so bright,” Linda says after they sit at the patio table.

“I'm sorry,” Lois says, pulling out a small device. “Do you mind if I record this? I'd hate to misquote you about anything.”
“Yes, of course,” Linda says, nodding. “Like I said, Jeanie was a bright girl. She had a hard time fitting in sometimes, but I think that just made us closer. We had a very good, a very close relationship.”

Linda slows now on this point, staring at her hands.

“But something changed?” Lois asks.

“I was so happy for her,” Linda muses in a soft voice. “She'd been working in DC for three years and it was the first time she’d stopped coming home most weekends. I missed her, of course, but I knew it was good for her to move out of our lives a bit. She'd met someone. She had a big project at work they'd trusted her with.”

Linda wipes away a few tears, half-laughing at herself.

“This is making me sound so naïve,” she says, looking at Lois. Her eyes are intense, focused. “But what mother thinks her child is floundering because she gets a boyfriend and enjoys her job? It was her dream job and the research was her life. I was just elated after all those years of school, school, school and home that she'd found a boyfriend who didn't mind her first love-- science.”

“What was her boyfriend’s name?” Lois asks. “I might like to talk to him, too.”

“I don't even know,” Linda answers with a note of despair. “She wouldn't tell us. She said it might cause issues at work if it got out. Gerald thought she was just working all the time and was lying to make me feel better; I pestered her sometimes about finding someone, settling down.”

“But you don't think she was lying,” Lois says, watching Linda's face carefully.

“No. She might have lied if it was just saying she was dating. But she had gifts, just little pieces of expensive jewelry now and then. Even if she was trying to make me feel better, she wouldn't have gone so far as to spend money on herself like that. And the way her eyes lit up when she talked about him.”

“But you never met him? He didn't come to the funeral?” Lois persisted.
Linda sounds a little defensive. “No, he didn't come. But Jeanie had come home a few weekends ago and said that things had been confusing between them recently. I felt so bad for her. But I had no idea that a break-up would be…”

She falters, weeping. Lois swallows and puts a hand on the woman’s arm, tentatively.

“Mrs. Kowalski, I'm sure there's more to this than just relationship trouble. Your daughter sounds like she was a strong, determined person.”

“Yes, yes, she was,” Linda nods, looking at her gratefully. “Thank you so much. This week has been so hard. We weren't allowed to see her, at the end. They cremated her before they even called us and I never got to,” Linda breaks off abruptly, sobbing now. Lois is patient but reserved and after a moment Linda calms and apologizes.

“Please don't worry about it,” Lois says, “It's completely understandable.”

“You're the first reporter to show up,” Linda tells her. “No one else has come to the house, but the phone has been ringing off the hook. We had to change our cell numbers already. Everyone wants to demand answers but no one wants to look us in the face. And I had to stop getting online-- it's how I stay in touch with all our family, but my Facebook and email are full of death threats and the most vile, awful things, and then even worse, these messages that sound like support at first but then turn out to be Neonazi or anarchist creeps praising us for raising Jeanie, like we wanted her to...to fall apart the way she did.”

“I'm so sorry,” Lois says. “Journalists are the worst.”

Linda laughs at this, the tension giving just a little.

“So you can understand, maybe, why Gerald was so upset.”

“Of course,” Lois says. “Don't worry about it. Do you mind if I ask you a few things, about Jeanine?”

“Please,” Linda says, and Lois’ heart breaks a little. She thinks of Clark, how he wouldn't be able to hear this woman speak and hold any grudge or bitterness toward the parents, at how good he is
at compassion. The mysterious boyfriend is a lead she is hungry to follow, but she makes herself stay. This is hardly reporting; it's just an act of mercy. But she owes it to them, to Clark, to handle this like a decent person.

“Can you start by telling me about Jeanine, what she was like as a child?”

Linda nods and gives her a small smile, takes a deep breath, and begins.

It is almost two hours later when Lois returns to the car, emotionally and mentally worn out. She was going to abandon the Taurus in the Dallas-Fort Worth airport parking lot, figuring Bruce could shoulder the loss, and fly to DC, but after listening to Linda Kowalski talk about her daughter in the past tense, she wants to go see Clark one more time before she goes east. The mystery boyfriend can wait a day. Or she can hand it off.

“What have you found?” Bruce answers the phone without niceties. She actually appreciates it a little.

“She was dating someone, keeping it secret. She was afraid it would cause issues at work.”

“So a boss, maybe,” Bruce says, thoughtful. “I can work with that. Are you on your way back?”

“Not yet,” she says, changing lanes on the interstate. “I’m going to check on him first.”

“Don’t take your time,” he says, and he sounds distracted already. She can hear typing. “Call when you’re back.”

And he hangs up on her. She’s too tired and distracted to be upset.

It's evening when she pulls back onto the Kent’s lane. There is shouting around the side of the house when she pulls up, the sounds of a loud argument in progress. She hurries to see what is going on, and finds Martha and Jonathan by the side door. Jonathan is hunched over, drenched with sweat, and Martha is crying while she talks.

“Hey,” Lois interrupts lamely. They are both startled to find her standing there. Martha turns away and wipes at her eyes with her apron and Jonathan wordlessly stalks off toward the barn.
“Hello, dear,” Martha says, still facing away from Lois. “We didn't know you were coming back today.”

“It was a last minute decision,” Lois says slowly, coming up beside Martha. “Is everything okay?”

“It's fine,” the older woman says, forcing a smile. Then she drops her head and says, “I don't know why I'm lying to you. Clark collapsed in the barn today, trying to help Jonathan with farm work. He insisted he was alright to help as long as he didn't do anything really taxing, but I think he's a poor judge of that right now.”

“Is he okay?” Lois asks, alarmed. “Where is he now?”

“Jonathan got him inside but it took a while. I wanted to call Bruce but Jonathan is insisting we give it some time. I don't know who’s right. He's being stubborn but I want to be able to make a phone call and fix this.”

“Oh, Martha,” Lois says. “Me, too. Are you alright?”

“You go on inside and see him,” Martha says. “I should warn he's in a mood. But I'm glad you came back. You cheered him up so much when you came yesterday. Don't worry about me.”

Lois hurries inside, back to the bedroom. She pushes the door open gently. Clark is standing at the window, leaning on the sill, his back to her.

“Hey,” she says, slipping into the room and closing the door. “You must have heard all of that.”

“Yep,” he says.

“Wanna talk about it?”

“No.”
She sits on the edge of the bed.

“Come sit with me,” she says, patting the quilt next to her.

For a moment, she thinks he will refuse or ignore her. But he leaves the window and joins her, leans his head against her shoulder. It feels like a gift.

Clark’s hands are clenched into fists on his knees. She puts one hand on his and exclaims,

“Clark, you’re like ice!” His hand is colder than anyone’s hands should be. On instinct, she feels his forehead. It, too, is frigid to the touch.

“I’m so cold,” he says softly, not moving his head off her shoulder. “All the time. It's like the sun doesn't work anymore.”

For the first time since Bruce told her, for the first time since the attack, she feels more than just worry or concern-- it is a deep and voiceless terror that maybe this won't actually be okay. She is so used to thinking of him as essentially untouchable, even scares in the past being more a matter of temporary absences, of slowing down, of emotional damage.

“I didn't want to come here,” he says, when she doesn't speak. “I didn't want to worry them.”

“I'm sure they'll be fine,” Lois tries to reassure him. She attempts a distraction, for herself and for him. “Maybe after all this is over, we could get a place? Settle down. And the next time, Bruce will have something other than an empty apartment to take you home to.”

His whole body stiffens against her.

“Lois,” he says, and his voice is dark, scraping. “There isn't going to be a next time.”

“Don't do that,” she snaps at him, feeling awful for speaking so harshly as soon as she does. “Don't give up. You know Bruce won't quit until he finds an answer.”
“He's always going to think it's his fault,” Clark sighs, relaxing a little again, but it seems still reserved, as if it is against his own will.

“Well, fight a little,” she says peevishly. Her heart feels as cold in her chest as Clark’s hand does under her fingers.

“You don't think I'm fighting?” Clark demands. It sounds as if he meant to be angry but couldn't quite carry it into his voice. “I'm trying so hard, Lois, but there's only so much I can do.”

And now Lois is crying, despite repeatedly promising herself she absolutely would not.

“Aw, Lois,” Clark says, lifting his head and wrapping his arms around her. He holds her while she sobs and she feels like an idiot the whole time. But she also kind of doesn't care. When she manages to pull herself together, she sniffs and sits up.

“I'm sorry,” she says. “This shouldn't be about me.”

“I'm sorry,” he replies, and then: “I never should have started dating you.”

It's like a knife in her already shattering heart.

“Don't say that,” she hisses. “Don't even think it.”

“I shouldn't have,” he says, looking into her face. She sees how weary he is, how much he means what he's saying. “It's not fair to you.”

“Are you trying to break up with me?” Lois asks incredulously. “It's not going to work. You've never been able to tell me what to do and you're not going to start now just because you're dying.”

Part of her wants to burst into tears all over again at this, but there is a deeper, angrier, more terrified and defiant part that wins out-- she meets his gaze levelly and he sighs.

“I just want you to know I'll understand if you leave,” he says.
“We are not breaking up,” Lois says sternly. “Now shut up and tell me how you feel. I don't care if you're sick of your parents asking.”

“Is it okay if I lie down?” Clark asks with a yawn. “We can keep talking.”

“Of course!” Lois says, jumping up. “Don't even ask!”

Clark pulls the quilt back and climbs underneath, sinking against the pillow with a sigh.

“Do you want any extra blankets?” Lois asks, looking around the room.

“Nah,” Clark says.

Lois motions to him and he slides over just a little. She joins him under the covers, pressing her back against his chest and wrapping the quilt tightly around them both. He puts his face in her hair and inhales, then exhales, slowly.

They lie still for a long time, Lois willing herself to transfer body heat to him. She wishes this was a different time, a time they could joke about his parents catching them in his high school bedroom, feeling like embarrassed teenagers.

The light outside the window wanes and fades into late evening twilight and still Lois doesn't hear the Kents moving around the house. She isn't sure if they're just quiet or if they've stayed outside or left the farm. Clark is so still and quiet she's certain he's fallen asleep.

“You know, Bruce almost died at the Watchtower a few months ago,” he says just as she's getting sleepy. She's suddenly alert, listening. He keeps talking, the words pouring out of him like pen to paper, soft and steady.

“I remember thinking he seemed so fragile. No air, no heat, no ground. There was nothing he could do. Two minutes in open space and it wrecked his body. He just wasn't compatible with the universe outside earth and it rejected him, completely. It was a foreign environment.
“It feels like the same thing is happening to me. I don't belong here, Lois, and whenever remnants of Krypton find me they remind every cell of my body that I'm not meant to be here. I'm an anomaly. This isn't my ground, this isn't my air, this isn't my sun. I've thought it was for so long, I let myself believe it had adopted me, but it was an illusion. And my real home won't let me forget forever.

“You asked how I was feeling. My bones ache. My lungs hurt. I'm always cold. It doesn't matter where I stand, what I eat, how I breathe. I can't rest to recover because the clock is running, like those two minutes for Bruce. This is a vacuum for me and eventually the reserves will run out. It's an inhospitable planet for my kind. It's a wonder I've survived this long.”

Lois rolls over to face him, to hug him, to kiss his chilled skin.

“You will always belong with me,” she says. “With Jonathan and Martha. You say you're an anomaly but I'd say a miracle. You came to all of us at just the right time. We needed you and you came. And this isn't over until it's over.”

“I wish I could believe that,” he says, leaning his forehead into her kiss. “I really do.”

“Well, sometimes you're stupid, Clark Kent. Your two minutes aren't up yet.”

After a minute, he stirs again and asks, “Do you think you could start some music? I'm sick of my own head.”

“Sure!” She says, eager to do something to help. “I left my phone in the car, though.”

“Don't leave,” he says, “Just use the stereo.”

There's a tape deck on the dresser, old but clean. Martha still dusts regularly. A brown snap-case of tapes is next to it and she tugs it open, the case stiff with years of disuse.

“Any requests?” She asks.

“Anything,” he says. “Doesn't matter.”
The tapes are all unlabeled, mix tapes from friends or the radio. She pops the first one in and pushes play, and is mildly surprised when the stereo actually works.

“Mm. The Smiths,” he murmurs. “Good choice.”

“This is such a cliche,” she rolls her eyes but doesn't stop the music. She returns to bed and once next to him, says softly, “I wish I could have known you in high school.”

“You wouldn't have noticed me in high school,” he replies. “Or you would have written me off.”

“I wasn't cheer captain,” she retorts, laughing a little. “Don't act like you were the only kid to ever feel like a weirdo in school.”

Her heart aches for all the years she didn't get with him. For all the years she might not have. Coming here again was a mistake, a bittersweet error. She doesn't want to miss this moment for the world, but she should be in DC already, helping Bruce, making sure she and Clark have a thousand moments like this in their future.

“Chess club and school paper,” he says. Lois wants to look at him forever. “Until senior year.”

“What was senior year?” She asks, knowing the story but trying to get him to keep talking. Anything for more words. She wasted time, in her kitchen with Bruce. She should have been here.

“When my dad showed me that rocket in the barn, I was so mad that they'd kept it from me. But I don't know if they ever understood why. It was a missing piece of the puzzle for me. All those times I felt like an outsider, an alien, here was the reason: I was. I couldn't believe they'd kept it from me. I've told you this before, haven't I?”

“Keep going,” Lois says, putting a hand on his cheek.

“I dropped everything at school. I'd go to class, come home, slam my door, and sneak out the window.”
Lois’ eyes widen in surprise. This is news to her.

“What?”


“What would you do?” Lois asks, genuinely curious. The Smiths album is still playing in the background, like a blanket of noise over their hushed conversation.

“Just walk around. Meet people. I just told people I was a student, no one ever seemed shocked to see me. And it was true. I'd go to restaurants, do dishes for a sandwich, or sweep and scrub bars to stay for shows. I'd go to libraries and read.”

“I don't even know what to say to that,” Lois says. “I can't believe we've never talked about this before.”

“We haven't? Really?” Clark also seems surprised. “I guess it was just a rough year. It was so tense at home, I feel really divided whenever I think about it.”

“I wish I could have taken off like that my senior year,” Lois says, giving his shoulder a gentle shove. “Anything to get away from my wreck of a mother. And to see the whole world at that age. It's not the same when you're a cynical old person.”

“I love it here,” Clark says, closing his eyes. “I always have. That's what makes this the hardest, feeling like it’s giving me up after all these years.”

“Hush,” Lois says, kissing him again. “Stop being so dramatic.”

There is a well of fear in her and she's desperate not to dredge it back up. Clark's breathing is shallow, but it evens out in a way indicative of sleep after a few minutes. The Smiths’ “The Boy with a Thorn in His Side” is playing.
Lois is awake, wide awake still. She feels the pull of DC on her mind, a route to answers on the horizon. Every fiber of her being wants to stay here, to fall asleep with him and dream, but she knows she can't. She'll be damned if she stops fighting before it's too late.

So, she quietly slips out of bed and sneaks out of the room.

She stops in the hall, sends Bruce a text.

*We’re running out of time.*

Outside, she finds Jonathan and Martha on the porch swing. She gives them hugs, talks for a moment, and then takes off. She books a last minute flight out of Wichita through her phone before she reaches the end of the lane.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter is so long. heh.

remember when i said creative liberties. yeah. taking 'em.
Two days. It has been 48 hours since Bruce came back to DC. Two days of working, walking streets in baseball caps, asking questions, pretending to be homeless to overhear things, searching federal US and Colombian databases, and nothing.

Dick has sent texts letting him know the Colombians are still sitting in jail. No one has come to kill them or bail them out. The Koreans haven't resurfaced. All the questioning and searching turned up nothing. The lucky break he had in Blüdhaven was starting to feel like a fluke or a dead end.

Then Lois calls.

He’s been beating his Colombian lead so fiercely he had left off prodding at the CDC. Maybe it was a sign of his deep fatigue that he hadn’t yet poked around more. He hadn’t considered that maybe she was working with someone else already on the inside, instead of an exterior contact.

Maybe her motive wasn’t hers.

A few keystrokes and he’s into the servers housing the CDC security footage records. He scrolls through the long list of dated and timed logs and finds the time mark where Jeanine Kowalski took the vials.

And then he scrolls forward.

It is only ten minutes later in the log, when he was on the roof with Superman, that another person slips into the room. He has a keycard that he is using.

In the footage, the man does not bother with the freezer, but spends a few minutes on a computer, then a laptop, and then he stands and takes physical files from a filing cabinet and leaves the lab.

Bruce watches it twice. The CDC might not have been actively erasing file information to protect themselves-- maybe someone else was doing it for them. So, who?

He finds the log of keycard access to the room that night after several minutes of searching. Jeanine Kowalski’s card was used, and then her card was used again. So she left it for whoever
the man was. But it puts him at a dead end…unless…

The man had logged into the computer with ease. He didn't consult a piece of paper or pause to think, even though the password must have been at least 16 characters long.

Deep in the data logs, he finds it-- the desktop had been accessed by a different employee account.

Oren Bordeaux.

From there, it's easy. Employee files and address information, history of work, grad school records.

Not a coworker, not a boss.

A former boss.

Bruce doesn't know if they started dating before or after he resigned from the lab for another department. Either way, it is a piece of the puzzle. Here is a link to a possible motive, a force or purpose beyond Jeanine Kowalski and her otherwise uneventful life.

One step closer to finding the link between the Colombians and the North Koreans, and how or why they had planned all of this.

He doesn't need to write the apartment address down. He already has it memorized.

Out the window, the light has already shifted past the hazy plum of twilight to a more proper inky black. There is only a thin sliver of moon tonight; it is a waning crescent, more slender every night.

He suits up without bothering to contact Alfred. Fortunately, Bordeaux’s apartment is in the city, close to where he works. It's nice to feel like he finally has something to go on; for the first time in days he doesn't feel the fog of exhaustion hanging over him.
It takes him a little under forty-five minutes to make his way to the apartment building without a vehicle. The Batmobile is still in Gotham and taking the jet would be pointless. And there's something mind-clearing about the run across rooftops, the puzzle of tunnels and maintenance shafts, to get him to the roof of Oren Bordeaux’s apartment.

The grappling hook line lowers him to the narrow balcony of the apartment. Inside, it is dim, only lit by a small lamp in the living room. In the pale glow cast by the low light, he can see the kitchen beyond and a half-full milk jug sitting out on the counter.

There is no movement in the apartment.

And all his good feelings, built up by the lead to go on and the trip across the unfamiliar city skyline, vanish. Something is wrong.

He slides a tool against the edge of the balcony door and lifts the lock. He tugs at the door until it opens.

The air that pours out of the apartment is freezing. It is full of the sour smell of spoiled milk and beneath that, the bitter, acid smell of something dead. He puts the biomask on his face and steps in, pulling the door closed behind him.

Someone cranked up the A/C as high as it would go. The vent is rattling a little, air churning out in bursts. The thermostat is set at 56, the arbitrary bottom limit of the machine. The switch for the fan is pushed to ON, the Auto setting turned off.

The living room is empty. There is no sign of struggle. There is a glass next to the jug of milk, an inch of coagulated liquid in the bottom.

He looks into the bedroom. It is also empty, the bed made, the drawers of the dresser all closed.

There is a guest room that doubles as a study. The bed there is stripped down to a plain mattress and the dated, boxy computer is turned off.

The final room is the bathroom and it is there that he finds Oren Bordeaux’s body.
The body is face down in the bathtub, bloated with rot. Just from the appearance, the smell, the way the skin responds to a gentle depression of one gloved finger, it seems safe to assume that Oren Bordeaux has been dead for at least three days.

There are smears of blood on the tile and the bath mat; there is splatter on the mirror and droplets across the sink. A hand towel is on the lid of the toilet, and the shower curtain is torn halfway off the rod. The broken shower rings are scattered around the room, one in a dusty corner, one on a soap ledge in the bath, one in the sink, two dangling empty on the rod.

Whoever killed Oren Bordeaux must have caught him just as he was drying his hands, turned away from the mirror. They didn’t bother to clean everything up, but there was an area right in front of the sink that was bright with the shine of cleaning products-- probably a foot or shoe print that had been wiped away.

A wide swath of blood is streaked across the edge of the tub, where his body must have scraped as he was being rolled into the bath. He’s still dressed, his shirt taut against his swollen skin, blossoms of sticky blood radiating from three separate wounds on his back. The fabric in each place is cut in a clean, short line-- so a knife and not a gun.

One stab wound is on his back, mid-upper right. That would have been the first blow, between the ribs, a lung. The other two are lower back on either side, matching kidney punctures. Based on the minimal amount of blood on the floor outside the tub, and the copious amount inside around the drain and sticking the clothes to the tub edges like a morbid glue, Bordeaux had been stabbed quickly and dumped into the tub while in shock and still alive.

Whoever had done this had known exactly what they were doing. There must have been no hesitation involved. Even the cleaning was calculated, intentional-- just enough to remove identifying information and not a spot more.

And now he’s back to the Colombians. They had taken all the evidence from the federal building and killed a guard in the process; if Oren was their contact, then they must have come looking for the other files. At this point it’s hard to say if he was trying to double-cross them by hiding information or if the exchange was planned; if they killed him as a matter of tying up loose ends or out of anger.

He thinks of the missing gunman slicing at his face with a boot knife, one just the right size and shape for the fatal wounds in Oren Bordeaux’s back.

Without looking, he knows he won’t find anything else in the apartment. It wasn’t ransacked because there was only one thing they were after and Bordeaux must have had it out for them; so
likely, it was a planned exchange, cleaning up after themselves at the CDC together.

He spends another twenty minutes in the apartment anyway.

The computer turns on and does not require a password. It only takes a little bit of clicking around to determine that it was not used for work. It is unconnected to internet of any kind and is full of installed video games, all ten or more years old. It’s pure nostalgia, nothing else.

Otherwise, the apartment is fairly sterile, emotionally-speaking. There are dry goods and some rotting produce, the spoiled milk, generic and plain dishes filling the cabinets in the kitchen. The closest thing to a personal item among the cupboards is a mug with a university logo.

The bedroom closet is full of basic clothes-- there are no t-shirts with pictures, no childhood souvenirs saved in the dresser. Under the bed, there are rubbermaid bins with a winter coat and boots, an old backpack, nothing else. If Jeanine Kowalski had ever given him sentimental gifts, he did not save them.

Bookshelves in the living room hold science manuals, textbooks, and medical journals. There are no novels, no works of fiction or poetry. The more time he spends in the apartment, the more it is clear that Bordeaux’s life must have been cold and clipped of most human interaction or connection.

The only thing in the entire apartment that stands out is a framed picture on the wall by the couch in the living room. It is of a young Oren Bordeaux and an Asian woman with graying hair. She looks happy, at ease with him in the photo-- his body is stiff and awkward beneath her arm around his shoulders, but he is beaming, his smile genuine.

Batman carefully takes the frame off the wall, unlatches the backing. The picture has a handwritten label in scrawling blue ink, “Jiho and Oren, 2004. XO”

It is Korean. He reads it four times before he will admit to himself that he understood it the first time and it still seems like nonsense: “I do not mock my pine tree.”

He stands mutely in the living room for several minutes in the chilly air, staring at the picture and the text on the back, flipping it one way and then another, trying to force some meaning out of it. The most obvious thing to take away is that Oren was close to someone Korean. Close enough to keep a picture in an otherwise antiseptic apartment, but from the note and the pose in the picture it’s hard to tell if they were friends or lovers. It is ambiguous, casual, familiar-- the only thing he
feels like can rule out at this point is that they were strangers or newly dating.

And something about her face, the name, tugs gently on his mind, but he cannot unravel the thread it is attached to.

Colombians on one side, Koreans on the other. Oren Bordeaux was clearly functioning as both some sort of link and manipulator. But why? That’s the wall he keeps beating his head against. It’s starting to look more and more like sheer insanity after all. Why Superman?

He uses his cowl to snap pictures of the photo, front and back, and replaces it in the frame on the wall.

This will require more digging. He feels tugged in branching directions and he isn’t sure which branch to follow first. He wishes the pieces weren’t so small and fragmented, the picture he’s building emerging as if pixel by pixel in painstaking slowness.

His phone buzzes.

We’re running out of time.

It’s from Lois.

And that decides his priority. Whatever they were planning to do, whatever role Oren Bordeaux played after convincing Jeanine Kowalski to help him, the first thing he needs to do is find those files and find out exactly what it is that is killing Clark Kent and if they cared to develop an antidote.

Unless he needs to shake things up and follow the ensuing reactions, he doesn’t want to let anyone know that Oren Bordeaux has been discovered, so as much as it irritates him to leave things as they are, he doesn’t phone in an anonymous tip to the authorities. Within a few days, the stench should start to escape the apartment and it will be better for the call to come from a neighbor or building super.

He will track the Colombians. He needs to find them as soon as possible.
Before leaving the apartment, he replies to Lois:

*Found boyfriend. Dead. What do you make of this?*

And he sends the pictures of the photo.

*Oren Bordeaux. Jiho ???. Korean translates “I do not mock my pine tree.”*

If she can dig around there, he can focus on finding the Colombians.

*Driving to airport will search asap,* Lois replies, and then a minute later,

*Oren is Hebrew for pine. Inside joke?*

And if he had been harboring doubts about enlisting Lois, they are fading fast.

He leaves the apartment, locking the balcony door behind him.

If the trip across the city to Bordeaux’s had been mildly therapeutic, he is so distracted on the way back to the hotel that it doesn’t even register. It is all a mix of muscle memory and half-conscious decisions.

At the hotel, he forces himself to change out of the suit. At home, he would have leapt right back into searching, but he doesn’t have the luxury here. He sits at the polished hotel desk and faces the fact that whatever is going on is big enough, powerful enough, that someone was likely scrubbing federal databases. He begins the most basic of detective work: monotonous, patient, grain by grain sifting.

Bruce abandons the algorithms and federal databases and begins crawling through local border crossing reports and files. He exempts everything that has federal filings and trudges through. Hours of mind-numbing work that feel like a paradox, every minute a lifetime, every minute a rushing nanosecond. It is slow work. It is eating precious time too quickly.
At some point in the morning, Alfred brings food that goes untouched on the desk. He speaks for a moment, something about sleep and eating and basic requirements, but Bruce tunes it out.

Right as he is ready to give up and take a break, he finds something.

A single file from a tiny Texan border town that must have been overlooked in an orchestrated information wipe.

The details of an arrest, a minor infraction of public drunkenness, a name, an alias, a picture.

*El Brazo del Sol.*
Chapter Twelve

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*El Brazo del Sol.*

There is a mugshot, several years old but very clearly him, of the gunman Bruce had fought and then saved in a federal evidence building just days ago. The man who had been taken from police custody in a hospital rather than killed like his accomplice. The man who had likely murdered Oren Bordeaux.

Someone important.

Carlos Valera.

The report is succinct; they took him in after he caused a disturbance in front of a thrift store, he was drunk and angry and calling himself El Brazo del Sol, was on record saying they'd regret bringing him in. They dropped it a few hours later, let him walk, no reason given-- he might not have even realized they'd started a file, possibly generated by an annoyed and bored deputy.

Bruce sits and glowers at the picture, thinking about what his next move should be. A name is something to go on, but it means more searching. More crawling through digital space. His phone is buzzing. He must have been hyper-focused, despite not wanting to miss emergency texts: There is a backlog of forty messages. He skims them, just to make sure there isn't any vital information, but a question about how Superman is doing has descended into Barbara and Dick making dinner plans.

*Get off group chat. Right now.*

The phone falls silent.

Alfred is standing, stretching, making a cup of tea in the kitchen of the suite.

Bruce stares. He thinks. There is going to be more searching. Now he has to decide where to start again. There was the elation of a breakthrough but it is fading fast; is is another string to pull, a beginning of the next piece. But now to find Carlos Valera, to track him down, to see who he is
“Master Bruce,” Alfred begins.

“I need to think, Alfred,” he says. “And then probably more computer work until nightfall."

“Master Bruce,” Alfred says sternly. “Eat.”

There is food on a plate beside him on the desk, breakfast food cleared away untouched and replaced with a sandwich, and he finds that he can actually eat, he does have an appetite again. He mentally replays, for the hundredth time, the snippets of conversation in Spanish that the gunmen were having when he crept up on them, but can remember nothing significant.

The phone buzzes again and he picks it up angrily, ready to tear into Dick. But the message is from Clark.

*I don't want to alarm you, but I'm now having what may be considered severe headaches.*

Bruce's breath catches in his chest. This is not good news. His brow furrows and he texts back,

*The trick, Mr. Kent, is not minding that it hurts.*

While he's waiting for Clark to respond to this, he finds a copy online of the Wong-Baker Faces pain scale. How Clark responds to the Lawrence of Arabia quote will help determine how bad it is, along with the chart and its cartoonish, simplified expressions.

*Only would have texted if it was bad.*

Bruce swears, catching Alfred’s attention from across the room, where the older man is repairing a torn section of cape.

*Sorry. I know. How bad? What number?*
He sends the text and the image of the scale, and waits, tapping his foot impatiently. Carlos Valera’s mugshot is still glowing at him from the laptop screen.

*The level is inconsistent. It's been between a 6 and 8. 10 for a few minutes today.*

They are running out of time. Bruce can feel it slipping through his fingers, elusive and intangible in a field of solid obstacles. Every delay feels like a wall to barrel though.

*So sorry Clark. Working fast as I can. Try ice?*

Bruce feels sick even thinking about how helpless Clark feels, how slowly he himself is working. The hugeness of the task of finding one laptop and set of files, that could already be destroyed, in the whole of the world, is overwhelming. He can't afford a second away. But he also can't afford to leave Clark without some immediate help, some feedback.

*No ice. Too cold. Don't want to keep you, thank you.*

Bruce wonders what he means by this- it's blazing hot in Kansas right now- but also doesn't want to push.

*Anytime. Text if more changes.*

“Is everything alright?” Alfred asks quietly, examining the cape one section at a time.

“No,” Bruce sighs. “Clark is starting to have severe headaches.”

“That must be difficult for someone who has not had reason to develop long-term pain management strategies.”

Bruce looks up suddenly, with intensity, at Alfred.
“Thank you,” he says, and Alfred nods.

Do you have anything memorized? Poetry? Mathematical sequences? When I need to distract myself from injuries, it helps to focus on something specific and concrete. The digits of Pi or the Fibonacci sequence, the Gotham and federal tax rates applied to a specific income, or as many stanzas as I can remember of The Odyssey or Gilgamesh or whatever poetry I’ve been in the mood to read. I work on one until the pain outweighs my focus and then I switch to something else, usually alternating categories. If it’s too difficult to think about complicated things, I go through lists of facts. Countries of Europe in alphabetical order, ten highest mountains in descending order, top ten lakes by volume.

Bruce sends the message and immediately regrets sending it all in a block, imagining that it would be hard to read with a headache; then again, reading it might be a good mental distraction in itself.

He stands up and stretches, gets the laptop Alfred was using from the coffee table by the in-suite couch, and sets it up on the desk next to the laptop with Carlos Valera’s mugshot.

“El Brazo del Sol,” he says out loud, musing.

“The Arm of the Sun, or the Sun Arm,” Alfred answers. “Interesting choice considering the circumstances. Of course, it appears it was chosen years ago and is mere coincidence.”

“It is ironic,” Bruce agrees ruefully.

Thank you. I memorize most things I read. Will try. Clark answers after the phone has been silent for a while. Three weeks ago, Clark would have teased him about having parts of Gilgamesh memorized or reciting the Fibonacci sequence; Bruce misses it.

“Shall I go out and leave you to work?” Alfred asks, folding the cape into a compact square. “If you don't mind, I'd prefer to keep you company for a bit. If the television wouldn't distract you.”

Bruce stops typing and takes stock of his own physical and mental reserves. He has eaten, he has slept, he needs a shower at some point but isn't willing to stop working just yet. And he finds that he is, in fact, pretty desperate for Alfred to stay.

“Please,” he says, without turning, beginning to type again.
The older man sits on the couch and takes off his shoes, stretches out and turns the TV on. The volume is turned to a low murmur and Bruce glances over to see the closed captioning turned on. An older BBC program is playing.

Forty minutes later, he has decided there are far too many men named Carlos Valera. He’s just about to give his eyes a break-- there were six hours of searching before this phase started-- when there’s a knock at the door.

Alfred sits up quickly and begins putting his shoes on. He turns the TV off mid-program.

Bruce is already on his feet, at the door; he turns, surveys the room. The cape is set inside a drawer, nothing else is visible except empty plates and coffee cups and laptops.

“Hello?” The knocking grows more insistent. “I know you’re in there, Bruce.”

“It’s Lois,” Bruce announces to Alfred. He isn’t surprised; he was expecting her to show up eventually.

He opens the door for her, pokes his head out into the hallway and looks around-- two men trying to be subtle about using their phone cameras are at the far end of the hallway. He winks at them and ducks back inside, locking the door with the chain.

“Hey,” she says to him, once they’re past the entryway and into the room. “This is an amazing hotel. You know it’s swarming with those tabloid creeps?”

“A maid got fired yesterday,” Bruce says, rubbing his neck. “For selling the room number.”

“Yeah, well, it’s how I found you,” Lois says casually. “So it can’t be all bad.”

“The manager offered to let us exchange the rooms,” Alfred says from further back in the suite. “But this one has the advantage of roof access. And good evening, Miss Lane, it’s a pleasure to see you again.”
“You, too, Alfred,” she says, offering a hand to shake. “Clark talks a lot about you and how much he appreciates your hospitality.” Here, Lois gives Bruce a sidelong glance, gently teasing.

“He does very much enjoy tea,” Alfred smiles. “And he’s a delightful guest. We’re always pleased to have him.”

Bruce is about to change the subject, to ask Lois how her investigation has been coming along, when she looks past him at the laptop and raises an eyebrow.

“I thought you said weren’t an Esteva fan? Did I sway you?”

He turns. It is still a mugshot of Carlos Valera.

“What are you talking about?” Bruce demands. “Do you recognize him?”

“Gosh, Bruce, you don’t have to beat it out of me,” Lois exclaims, walking closer to the laptop to study the picture. “Yeah, it’s definitely him. Cary.”

Bruce steps up next to her, looking down at the laptop. “That’s the gunman, Lois. The one who was taken from HU. He might have also murdered Oren Bordeaux.”

“That federal building was only a few blocks from the concert,” Lois says softly. “Damn it. I thought they were just weird. It figures. Do you know who Esteva is? Like, really know?”

Bruce shakes his head. “I don’t spend much time on Wikipedia.”

“Don’t be a snob. She’s Estefania Rojas. You’ve honestly never met them? Her family is massively wealthy; her father and uncle co-own Rolizar, the fruit and coffee exportation empire. And I don’t use ‘empire’ lightly— their private complex supposedly has houses for five families and makes Wayne Manor look like a cottage, no offense.”

“They must not make it to Gotham often,” Bruce says, with a grim set of his mouth. It feels like the pieces are starting to fall in place, but only on half the puzzle, and the picture is ugly. “And I don’t get out much. For all the Wayne fortune, my circle is pretty small. But I’ve heard the name. I still don’t understand what they have to do with Carlos Valera and I’m wishing you’d get to the
“I have to tell it like a story,” Lois says, “be patient. An extra five minutes isn’t going to kill you. When I shadowed her for that piece for the Planet, she had the usual high-maintenance pop-star entourage. Most of them were friends, or people who thought they were friends. But Esteva’s brother, Sebastián, sticks to her like glue-- he’s always, always with her, and on his phone half the time. And always with him is their cousin,” Lois points to the screen. “Cary Valera.”

“How certain are you?”

Lois gets even closer to the screen. She taps the picture with one polished fingernail.

“See that speck?”

Bruce leans. There is, indeed, a speck, right by his eye. It's hard to see it clearly in the dated photo, taken with an old police station camera-- it could be dust or a freckle or a scar.

“I see something.”

“That's a tear drop. It's a tattoo. Cary, Sebastián, and Esteva have matching ones. Beside Cary’s eye, on the back of Bash’s shoulder, and over Stef’s heart. Blood, sweat, and tears. Like I said, they're a little weird. Super close.

“Cary is ostensibly security. He openly carries a gun. Sebastián never does but anyone who comes after Esteva would have to get through him first. Over my dead body kind of deal. No wonder they took him from HU. The whole family must be pissed.”

“Do you think he's involved on his own somehow?”

“Not without Bash knowing, absolutely not,” Lois replies. “And if they're mixed up in anything, Bash would be behind it, unfortunately. He’s a bit of a control freak and Cary adores him. Cary is a cousin on their mother’s side-- rumor has it that they saved him from cartel life and prison when he was just a kid, stuff his father was mixed up in. They raised him.”

“Well, this saves me a lot of time searching in Colombia,” Bruce says slowly.
“Kind of?” Lois says. “Their place is a bit off the grid. Not exactly the kind of place you can just get an address for. It’s notoriously hidden.”

“So we need to make contact,” Bruce says, musing. “We need an invitation.”

“And Clark thought the universe was rejecting him,” Lois says. “Fans were pretty upset about the shooting last week. The concert ended early. They stuck around in town and she’s performing again, tonight, soon. We have a chance to find them, today, and chances like this are hardly just chances.”

“Clark thought what?” Bruce asks. “He said that to you?”

“He was being dramatic,” Lois says offhandedly, but there is an undercurrent of concern, an understanding that this is also an exchange of information too serious to be discussed seriously. “Something about you in space at the Watchtower and how his two minutes were almost up.”

Lois glances sidelong at Bruce, to gauge his reaction to this. He pales considerably and the knife is back in her heart, twisting.

Then Bruce sets his mouth grimly and says, “Alfred, do you feel up to some shopping? I’m going to need some different clothes.”

“Of course, sir. Any particular kind?”

Bruce looks at the mugshot for another moment, considering.

“Whatsoever is trending right now. Nothing too young, though.”

“Certainly. Shall I go now?”

“Yes,” Bruce says. “And maybe something for Lois.”
“Why me?” Lois asks, startled. “I have clothes.”

“Care to crash an after party with me? Make some introductions? I could do it myself but it might save us some time if they remember you.”

Lois nods quickly. The longer he lets her stick around, the easier it will be to help.

“They will,” she says. “I’m pretty memorable.”

“I’m banking on it,” Bruce says, shutting the laptop screen. “We’re going to have to work smart. There are some questions I can’t ask that you can, but I’ll be a good excuse for you to be there. We can say you’re writing a piece on me.”

“Is there any other way to work?” Lois raises an eyebrow. “Speaking of smart, I did actually hunt you down for a reason.”

“Miss Lane?” Alfred interrupts apologetically. “Your size? And would you care for a drink before I go? I’m afraid Master Bruce is a bit weak in the human comforts department.”

“Do you know how complicated that question is?” Lois asks, laughing. “I’ll help myself if I’m thirsty. And I’ll stop and find something before tonight. Don’t worry, I won’t embarrass you, Bruce.”

“I’ll lend you my card,” he says.

She almost refuses on the spot. But then she thinks of how much the last minute flight from Wichita drained her meager savings, all the eating out she’s been doing in DC that Perry will definitely not be reimbursing.

“Sure,” she says, “Thanks.”

“Sit down,” Bruce says, after Alfred leaves. “Tell me everything you’ve found out.”
Lois lets the rudeness slide and takes a seat on the couch. Bruce sits across from her with a laptop, typing as they sit.

She reaches into her purse and pulls out a USB key and places it on the table. He picks it up and plugs it into the laptop port.

“This is everything I’ve found. Jiho by itself wasn’t much to go on and Oren Bordeaux’s name mostly brought up published research, so, I searched them together. I was hoping for maybe like a facebook tag or something, though he doesn’t seem the type.”

“No,” Bruce agrees, thinking of the apartment. “He doesn’t. What did you find?”

He’s trying to gently redirect to the actual information, but it must not come across that way because her look is one of profound annoyance. She continues anyway, truncating her branching commentary.

“It brought up an obit. For a Jiho Graham, listing Oren Bordeaux as a surviving brother. And that’s when I recognized her. It was a big deal last year, but I’m guessing you missed most of it because of that alien thing in Texas. It was the same week.”

Bruce has already pulled up articles on the laptop while she’s talking. She stands and leans against the arm of his chair, pointing.

“There. That one.”

The article is dated almost nine months previous. It is a blip of news that would have been bigger if it had not been drowned out by an intergalactic crisis. A man and his wife-- a political science professor and a translator of Korean poetry, respectively-- had made the ill-advised decision to travel to her pre-Korean War birthplace in North Korea to search for aging relatives.

They had been arrested, detained. There was a plea for aid from the U.S. Embassy, but within a matter of days, the political science professor, a man named Ira Graham, had been sent home. His wife, a U.S. citizen since her immigration as a child, had been held on charges of treason and subterfuge, despite the fact that the relatives she was looking for would have been in their nineties, and she was executed the same day, while all the world was watching Texas. The U.S. had eventually issued a statement that was little more than whining about North Korea’s actions.
This was something. That Bordeaux’s older half-sister had been murdered by a foreign government and all but forgotten by the U.S. was motive for something indeed.

“Lois,” Bruce says, glancing over at her. “This is big.”

“I know,” she nods. “What the hell they want with Clark is still a mystery to me, but as soon as I realized... I didn’t want to try to give you all this over the phone. What do we do now?”

“We still need those files,” Bruce says. “I don’t know if they’re in the States or in Colombia or somewhere else altogether. And one of us should talk to Ira Graham and see how much he knows about what his brother-in-law was up to.”

“So, that concert is starting. We don’t have a lot of day left. Should I go talk to Ira Graham now?” Lois asks, standing up. “And do you need me to ask around to find the after party? I have some society pages friends.”

“Let me handle Graham,” Bruce says. “He might be clueless, or he could be extremely dangerous. And I can find the party, but ask about it anyway. And drop my name. It’ll help if rumors get there before I do. I’ll pick you up at eleven. Here’s the card. Call me if you have problems.”

When Lois leaves, Bruce sighs and reluctantly pulls his phone out. He syncs it with the hotel speakers and starts playing an Esteva album, figuring he should at least be prepared.

He texts Dick.

What would you consider essential dubstep?

The reply comes a moment later.

IT’S ABOUT TIME.

Bruce lets the music play while he showers, trims his beard, and then looks over the collected notes on the USB key Lois left behind. He also reads several news articles about Rolizar. Esteva’s father seems pretty tame, but her uncle Eduard Rolizar has been in and out of corruption scandals.
It’s an hour before Dick replies again, not with a list of names or tracks, but a link to a shared playlist and a note:

*If this is for a case instead of personal use, I’m going to be heartbroken.*

He downloads the playlist for use in the Hennessey. Alfred returns, empty-handed, but is followed by a delivery just moments later.

Bruce dresses, shifting his mental focus, preparing himself internally. He will do this, then he will go talk to Ira Graham.

When ten thirty rolls around, he is ready.

Chapter End Notes

MASSIVE CREATIVE LIBERTIES.
Chapter Thirteen

The car that pulls up to the curb to pick Lois up is sleek, dark gray, and throbbing with the deep bass of too-loud music. She climbs into the passenger seat to join Bruce, ready to speak, but he doesn’t turn the music down.

She watches him while they tear across town, pushing the speed limit. Alfred has done his job well. The clothes are probably the most expensive dark wash jeans and button-up shirt Lois has ever been in close proximity to, but still look understated and basic. She has met Bruce Wayne before, out on the town for formal functions, she knows it is a mask of it’s own kind. But it still surprises her how distant or foreign he seems, even without speaking.

But when they are approaching the club where the after party is being held, information she found for him as promised but didn’t need to share, the traffic slows to a crawl he cannot speed through and he drops the volume of the music and for a moment, the mask falls away.

“Be careful,” he says. “They’re going to be on edge, with Valera gone. You said Sebastián spends a lot of time on his phone. My primary goal tonight is to overhear as much as possible, to see as much as possible.”

“Should we have a signal?” Lois asks. “If something seems wrong?”

The volume of the music shoots back up. Bruce flashes her a confident smile.

“No,” he shouts. “We won’t need one.”

At the club entrance, he opens the door for her and hands the keys off to a valet. They skip the line forming behind a plush rope and Bruce speaks to a bouncer for a moment, and then they’re being ushered inside, into noise and lights and the sharp smell of alcohol.

“They’re going to be near the back,” she says in his ear, as he leads her to a table. They sit for a moment, and she watches him scan the room, and then without a word he stands and leaves her there. She watches him make his way to the bar, lean over, and talk to the bartender. Then he returns with drinks.

She sips the drink, which is clearly not alcoholic but definitely poured to look like it, and raises an eyebrow. He pointedly ignores it. She desperately wants to ask what exactly he said to the bartender but decides not to.

It is only minutes later that someone appears at the table, someone who looks vaguely familiar to Lois but she can’t remember the man’s name.

He leans over to Bruce, shouting above the music.

“Miss Rojas heard you were looking for her. She’d like you to join her in the VIP room if you’d care to.”

And they’re in.

“Lois!” The Latin girl stands and embraces Lois when they reach the private room overlooking the floor. “You’re so cute tonight! Who’s your friend?”

“Stef, I’d like you to meet Bruce Wayne,” Lois says. “Mr. Wayne, Stef Rojas. And her brother, Sebastián.”
“I’m a big fan,” he says warmly, shaking her hand.

“Sit with us!” Stef says, patting the U-shaped couch. “Bash and I were just making fun of people dancing. You should join!”

Sebastián Rojas is sitting on the edge of the couch, scanning the dance floor below, with his phone on his knee.

“Mr. Wayne,” he says, shaking Bruce’s hand. “Ms. Lane.”

They join them on the couch and more drinks are brought on a tray. The waiter gives Bruce a tall glass with blue liquid. Lois’ drink is a real cocktail that she only sips, but Bruce drains half of his.

“Stef, look at that guy,” Sebastián says softly, nodding toward the floor. “He looks like un pez muerto.”

Stef Rojas laughs and then looks at Bruce.

“So, Mr. Wayne,” she says, “What brings you to DC?”


“That’s too bad,” Stef answers. “It was the second one this week.”

“I heard the first one was interrupted,” Bruce says. “Glad you’re okay.”

“It had nothing to do with us,” Sebastián says without looking up, typing rapidly on his phone.

“That’s what I read,” Bruce answers easily. Lois watches him carefully, trying to gauge now what her role in this should be. She doesn’t want to speak too soon, but she doesn’t want to miss opportunities he’s leaving her. “Thank God. Anyway, I’m glad you’re still in town. I’ve been dying to meet you.”

He’s speaking to Stef and she blushes a little. “Maybe I can come to Gotham sometime?” she offers, “Give a concert?”

Bruce smiles broadly. “That’d be great! Who should we talk to to make it happen? I can get the convention center. Just let me know when.”

Lois notices Sebastián’s reaction to this-- slightly startled, slightly eager. He doesn’t look up from his phone.

“I’ll call Stef’s guy,” he says. “We had a midwest cancellation because of weather damage.”

“So, Lois is writing a piece on you?” Stef asks, sipping her drink. “She’s great, isn’t she? She wrote about me a few months ago. We loved it.”

“I hear she’s the best,” he says, shrugging. “My publicity agent has been on me to do a profile piece for a while, and I said if anyone was going to do it, it had to be Lois. She did Superman, you know. If anyone can salvage me and make me look good, it’s her.”

Lois watches Sebastián startle a little at the mention of Superman. It’s barely a reaction, just enough to confirm things. She doesn’t know if Bruce noticed-- it seemed like all his attention was on Stef, but she’s fairly certain he did.
Sebastián makes a phone call without excusing himself from the room, holding the phone close to his ear and leaning back on the couch, speaking in a low whisper. Lois can’t hear him and Bruce keeps talking, sounding and looking oblivious. He can’t seem to take his eyes off Stef, who is gorgeous and reasonably distracting.

“Where’s Cary?” Lois asks casually when there’s a small lull. “He’s here tonight, right?”

Everything stops. Sebastián stops talking on the phone, Bruce turns to look at her and she can’t quite read the look on his face. Stef looks like she’s on the verge of tears.

“Who’s Cary?” Bruce asks, looking around, sounding curious and too loud. He sounds a little drunk. He’s on his third blue drink and Lois has only had two sips of whatever cocktail they brought her. She’s sure it’s an act but it’s unnerving how convincing he is.

“Our cousin,” Sebastián says quietly. “He’s in Colombia.”

“I’ve never seen you without him,” Lois persists. “Is he alright?”

Stef wipes at her eyes, careful to not smudge her make-up.

“I’m so sorry,” Lois backpedals. “He had promised to buy me a drink if we ran into each other again. I was hoping to see him.”

“He was mugged,” Stef says. “Last week. We flew him home to recover. He’ll be alright but it’s been really stressful.”

“That’s awful!” Bruce exclaims. “I’m so sorry.”

“No matter,” Stef says, sitting up, brightening. “We’ll get through. We’re a tough family.”

“You’ve kept it out of the papers?” Bruce asks. “I read everything I can find about you. I hope that’s not creepy,” he laughs a little.

“I had to pull some strings,” Sebastián says conspiratorially, as if he’s admitting something. “Stef’s had some unstable fans in the past and we don’t want to seem weak because of a freak incident. Cary said whoever it was didn’t even seem to know him.”

“We’ll see him tomorrow,” Stef says with a smile. “I’ll tell him you were looking for him. It’ll cheer him up. He really likes you.”

“Tomorrow?” Bruce says. “Well, damn. I was going to ask you to come visit Gotham with me tomorrow, see the convention center.”

“We’re flying home for a few days,” Sebastián says. “Stef needs to rest before the next leg of her tour.”

She smiles apologetically at him. “That’s really sweet, Mr. Wayne. Maybe I can come a bit early when we get details sorted, have lunch?”

“Perfect!” The smile Bruce gives Stef, bright white and full of straight teeth, seems so unlike the Bruce that Lois knows that she wonders just how deeply he disappears in this act. “And please, call me Bruce, Ms. Rojas.”

“Stef,” she says, smiling back. She leans and whispers something to Bash, nodding again toward the dance floor, and he laughs but doesn’t look up from his phone.
“Do you dance, Bruce?” Stef asks. “Bash and I are unfortunately very harsh dance critics. I just feel like I should warn you.”

“I don’t, actually,” he says, shrugging. “I’m all feet. No rhythm at all. My son, Dick Grayson, is the dancer. He’s too embarrassed by me to go anywhere together anymore, but I’ve heard he can, what’s the phrase,” he looks at Lois as if genuinely searching for words, but then turns back to the Rojas siblings. ‘‘Tear up the floor’. Comes from his circus background, I’m sure.”

“Oh, that’s right!” Stef exclaims. “You adopted him. That’s so sweet. My family took in Cary years ago when his mother died. I can’t imagine just knowing someone needed a family and not taking them in. How old is he now?”

“Old enough to make me feel too old,” Bruce laughs. “I assume you dance, though?”

“I can,” Stef says, “but I’d rather sing. Bash is such a severe critic that I get too nervous.”

“That’s tragic!” Bruce seems horrified. “Do you dance, then, Mr. Rojas?”

“I’m awful. I’m just jealous,” Sebastián says with a wicked grin. “Stef is amazing. Isn’t that right, Stef?”

And then they’re all laughing. Someone brings more drinks. Lois feels so out of place, so on the fringe without the focus of actually gathering story material. It’d be easier if she really was taking notes. This all feels so pointless without direct questions that she isn’t sure what Bruce’s endgame is, though she’s sure he has one.

“Lois tells me you have a beautiful estate,” Bruce is saying when she tunes back in. “You know, I’ve never been to South America?”

“It’s gorgeous,” Stef says. “I love home. I’d stay there if I thought I could grow my career that way. You’ll have to come visit sometime!”

Lois isn’t sure who looks more surprised by this invitation– her or Sebastián. She’s beginning to think that if the Rojas’ are involved in criminal activity, which at this point she’s pretty certain of, that Stef is in the dark.

“Maybe next summer,” Sebastián says, following up his sister’s offer with a distant timeline. Lois notices that even now, he seems to be shielding her rather than dismissing her.

“I’m so busy,” Bruce says. “It’s hard for me to get away at all. But if we schedule it far enough out, I bet I could fit it in.”

“Too bad you can’t come back with us this week,” Stef says, a bit mournfully. “Cary would love to see you Lois. It’d cheer him up a lot. He was pretty shaken.”

“But he might prefer waiting until he’s out of bed,” Sebastián says to his sister, his face darkening. “And if I remember correctly, Lois has a boyfriend.”

“Oh, I’m shameless,” Stef laughs. “He had such a crush on you, I thought I’d set you up. I completely forgot. He moped about that for weeks, didn’t he, Bash? He’s going to be so mad that I told you.”

They’re all looking at Lois to see her reaction, and Bruce, aware that the Rojas siblings are not watching him, drops the mask long enough to give her one purposeful look. She doesn’t know if this was his plan all along or if he’s improvising but she knows a go-ahead when she sees it.
So, pulling on the reserves of a week of tumultuous emotion, she bursts into tears.

Sebastián withdraws into a phone conversation, clearly not wanting to deal with this, and Bruce makes a show of looking away and draining another drink. Stef’s hand is already on Lois’ knee in a gesture of comfort.

“I’m so sorry,” Lois sniffs. “This is so unprofessional. I’m sorry, Mr. Wayne.”

He shrugs without looking at her, his face a picture of total unease.

“Chica!” Stef exclaims. “Do you want to sneak off for a bit, and talk?”

“No, no, it’s fine,” Lois shakes her head, drying her eyes and dropping her voice. “I’m here for work. It’s just...it’s been an awful week. I just started my period, my boyfriend and I just ended things…”

“Then you need a vacation,” Stef says. “Bash. She needs a vacation. Come with us, you’ll love it. We’ll give you the grand tour and take your mind off things.”

He’s on the phone again, and he nods. He doesn’t seem pleased but he’s not arguing.

“Bruce?” Stef says. “Do you mind if we steal Lois away for a day or two? I promise to return her to finish your profile piece soon.”

“Of course not! My whole weekend is boring, anyway. No good for an article.” He’s lounging carelessly, watching the dance floor.

Lois resists showing how startled she is. She thought she was giving him the opening and he’s dropping it, letting it slip away. Is he displaying a huge amount of trust or is he trying to get her out of the picture?

“Are you sure you can’t come?” Stef insists. “The more the merrier. It might make for a good story.”

Stef either is ignoring or totally missing the glare that Sebastián focuses toward her, while still talking quietly into the phone. In the silence that follows she realizes he’s been speaking in Spanish this whole time anyway, so she doesn’t feel too bad about not being able to overhear things sooner.

“I really can’t,” Bruce says, his voice full of remorse. “I have some meetings in Gotham I’ve been putting off, some financial stuff. Like I said, incredibly boring.”

Sebastián relaxes a little when the offer is declined, but then he looks at Lois.

“Stef would love to show you around,” he says. “I just feel like I should be clear, this visit stays out of the papers. This is personal.”

“Of course,” Stef exclaims. “Lois just needs some R&R. No work, right?”

Lois nods. She knows now she will have to be extremely careful, whatever it is that Bruce wants her to do-- Sebastián will be watching her like a hawk. She starts to feel the edge of nervous energy, of the thrill of chasing a story. It takes a lot of effort to ground herself, to remember that Clark’s life is at stake and these people are potentially more dangerous than regular thugs or mafia dons.

“No work,” she promises. “Thank you so much, Stef. That sounds amazing.”
“Don’t thank me yet,” Stef warns. “I’m definitely trying to set you up with my cousin.”

“And we might be seeing you again soon, Mr. Wayne,” Sebastián says, pulling his phone away from his ear. “Do you think you could get us the convention center for Wednesday? Stef’s agent says he still doesn’t have a replacement for the midwest cancellation.

“That was fast!” Bruce exclaims, sounding delighted. “I know they book it pretty far in advance, but I’ll see what I can do. I think a concert would be great for Gotham right now. What’s your number? I’ll text you my contact information.”

They exchange info and then Stef exclaims,

“No more business! No more sad stories or drama. We all need a distraction. Let’s play a game.” She flags down a club waiter and orders a tray full of shots. “You’re a stranger, Bruce. Let’s play Never Ever Have I Ever and get to know each other a bit.”

“This is Stef’s favorite game,” Sebastián says, grinning and looking up from his phone for a second. He returns to texting. “She was so wild when we were kids. She’ll have you drunk within half an hour, Mr. Wayne.”

“Off the record?” Bruce asks, looking at Lois.

“Sure, Mr. Wayne. Unless it gets really interesting.”

Stef and Bruce laugh. Lois excuses herself from the game and Stef pulls out her own phone. Within a few minutes, the room is filling with others from her crowd, who seem like they were just waiting around to be summoned. Lois scoots down to the end of the couch; Sebastián doesn’t leave Stef’s side, but he looks uninterested in playing. He takes a shot anyway when the tray arrives.

Lois is quiet, thinking and watching. She feels alone, that awkward wallflower feeling leftover from school dances. There’s nothing to write, no notes to take. She wonders how Clark is doing, considers texting him. The party around the couch roars with laughter at something Stef has said and they all throw back shots, even Bruce.

Within the hour, Sebastián has been proven right. Stef’s eyes are lit up, shining with excitement and mirth, and she is recounting another exploit from her not-too-distant youth. Bruce looks completely and totally drunk. Lois feels like she’s there alone, the man next to the Rojas siblings a complete stranger. Sebastián is looking more and more involved in an phone call, on the verge of actual upset. When he slams the phone down next to the tray and takes another shot, Bruce slumps forward on the table.

“Oh, no!” Stef laughs, motioning to Lois. “I think he blacked out. I’m awful, but I feel like I just won something.”

Bruce rouses, slightly, rubbing his head. “I’m so sorry,” he slurs.

Lois stands up and takes his arm. “C’mon, Mr. Wayne. Let’s get you out of here.”

“Call me when you get to your hotel!” Stef calls as Bruce staggers to his feet. “We leave at nine in the morning. You can come with us and sleep on the plane.”

Outside, the valet brings the car around and pointedly hands the keys to Lois. Bruce is leaning against the side of the building, looking somewhere between asleep and about to puke. The valet
helps him into the passenger seat and looks relieved when the door is closed without incident.

Lois adjusts the driver’s seat and then pulls away from the curb with a violent jerk, unused to the power coursing through the engine.

“Careful,” Bruce says in a calm voice, “Can you drive stick? Go straight to my hotel.”

“What the hell?” Lois looks over at him for a second. He's already sitting up, completely alert. She returns her attention to the road. Traffic is still pretty thick even in the middle of the night, and the gas pedal is so sensitive it's making her nervous.

She doesn't speak again until she's figured the car out a bit more and they're driving more smoothly toward his hotel. He's also quiet, until they're idling at a stop light.

“How did you do that?” Lois demands.

“You've never seen someone pretend to be drunk before?” He sounds mildly amused.

“I've never seen someone do a dozen shots and then not be drunk before,” Lois shoots back. “I mean, I figured those blue drinks you had coming weren't real, but I can't figure out how you managed that with a tray of shots.”

Bruce gives her a wicked smirk. It's somewhere between the persona he was wearing in the club and the Batman that was standing in her kitchen days ago.

“I'm tempted to not tell you,” he admits. “A magician and his secrets, you know.”

Lois resists the urge to slam on the brakes to shake him.

“I'm also tempted to tell you I actually am drunk and I was just overdoing the performance for effect.”

“But you're not,” Lois says, suspicious. “Are you?”

She gets the feeling that this is the closest thing to a good joke for him. He laughs.

“No, I'm not. If I tell you, though, you have to promise not to tell Clark.”

“You've been asking me to keep a lot of secrets from Clark, recently,” she says, feeling relieved by his obvious good mood. But as soon as she says it, her tone teasing, she knows it was the wrong thing to say. His expression is grim.

“I know,” he says quietly.

“Don't worry about it. I was joking,” she says. She knows he isn't going to tell her now, either of out spite or because he's distracted. But he surprises her again, his voice subdued.

“You can't tell him because he'll know I did it to him, once.”

“What?! Bruce, Clark has never been drunk in his life. He thinks his dad would sense it somehow. And I don't even think he could get drunk if he wanted to.”

“In the Batcave, once,” he says. “Four months ago. And he wasn't really drunk. But he thinks he was.”

“You didn't.” Lois gasps, comprehending.
“I told the bartender I'd make it worth his while to keep alcohol away from me. None of the shots were alcoholic, but he did an impressive job with flavoring. Extract is my guess. It's bitter enough. It's well documented that social drinking has a strong placebo effect.”

She knows he is talking now about the club, not whatever happened with Clark.

“Bruce. Are you honestly telling me you got an entire table of people drunk without alcohol?”

“No. But they thought they were and that was enough. Sebastián Rojas only started talking real business on his phone after the game began. He was too cautious before he thought I was wasted.”

“What would you have done if the first shots had been obvious fakes?” Lois demands, stunned by the audacity of this plan. But maybe this is always how Bruce gets by, a mix of preparation and audacity, the lone man among supernatural companions. Maybe the fact that it worked at all was the reason for his good mood.

“I would have accused the bartender of serving us weak drinks,” Bruce shrugs. “And the second round would have been stronger.”

“And you did this to Clark?”

“He was very upset,” Bruce says, looking levelly at her while they wait at another stoplight. “And I calmed him down. And I don't want him to feel foolish in retrospect. It had been a difficult night.”

“Damn you, Bruce.” She says, intentionally giving the car a bit too much gas when the light turns green. She's actually really impressed, but doesn't want to give him the satisfaction.

“It's nothing a sociology professor hasn't tried,” he says. “There are multiple cases of--”

He stops abruptly and she risks a glance away from the road, even while speeding.

“What?”

“Shut up,” he says harshly. “I need to think.”

“No,” she says, “you don't get to do that. I'm not one of your sidekicks waiting around on you to--”


She shuts up.

They pull into the hotel garage. His eyes are closed and she is supremely annoyed. This is her boyfriend’s life they are trying to save and she might be able to help put the pieces together if he'd just let her in. Actually in, and not just the audience for his arrogant, clever grandstanding.

She slams the car into park, jerking the gear shift. She doesn't care if it's a million dollar car. He can deal.

“I'm going to Colombia,” she says, climbing out. “Call me when you're ready to stop being an asshole and tell me what's going on. And stop asking me to hide things from Clark.”

And she leaves.
Chapter Fourteen

Bruce sits in the car for a long time after Lois leaves. He knows he made her angry but he's too busy to care very much; his mind is working furiously, assembling pieces.

The dawning understanding is not one he has all the concrete evidence for, but he feels it in his gut.

And if it hadn't been for Nightwing breaking up a fight on the docks of Blüdhaven, none of this would make sense. Why, in the months of grief after a beloved wife and sister’s death, develop a cocktail of Kryptonite and disease that would kill Superman?

But the North Koreans were in Blüdhaven, waiting on the docks and angry.

Sebastián Rojas is making phone calls in front of a drunk Bruce Wayne, promising to find lost packages and offering a consolation prize, arranging to be in Gotham, whose docks are a cesspool of illegal trade.

And Estefania Rojas is either very bright or very stupid, saying things like “I love home, I’d stay there if I thought I could grow my career there.” How long have her concerts been a cover for arms dealing? How many other weapons has Sebastián Rojas sold?

What better world to make Colombia the center of, a home for growth and refugees and the future, except one without a United States, the Asian continent ravaged by reactive nuclear war?

What better way to start a war than giving the North Koreans the prop of Superman, either a killed threat or a manipulated dying alien?

He isn't sure how they planned to pull it all off, only that they were planning it, and they've come awfully close to succeeding except for the fact that Clark Kent is hiding in the middle of cornfields in Kansas.

Bruce *hates* being right.

He needs to talk to the political science professor and widower, Ira Graham, and demand to know
who his North Korean contact was and how he had come to be in touch with Sebastián Rojas.

And then he has to get Lois from Colombia, hoping that she’s found where the files are being kept in the time she has on the estate. They must find out, without delay: was there also a cure? Was there ever one? Did they honestly not care if Superman lived, or were they counting on his retaliation after he had been near death, humiliated, and sold like a slave, his anger giving either America or Korea an excuse to push the first red button?

And barring the existence of an antidote, he must find that laptop and those folders so he can develop something as soon as possible, with an understanding of what it was they engineered. Before war breaks out, now that the Koreans are furious with Colombia for delays.

Based on the conversation he lip-read in Spanish while pretending to be drunk, it seems most likely that Sebastián Rojas is going home to retrieve those things and use them to keep the Koreans appeased. That gives Lois a pretty good chance of finding them.

But who knows what the North Koreans will do to Colombia if they don't feel appeased?

More than ever, Bruce feels the pressure of a mad race against time. And it doesn't make it any easier that he is torn. There are too many things to do, too many places to be at once.

Question Ira Graham.

Follow Lois to Colombia.

Find the North Koreans off the Gotham coast.

And all of it could be pointless if there isn't a developed cure in the files. And if the Koreans get the files before him, copy them, then even with a cure the information could forever be a disaster hanging over all of them, the opportunity to buy any highest bidder a window of time without Superman. No wonder the Colombians raced around DC in a mad dash to retrieve every copy. The exclusivity of the documents only drove up their monetary value.

Bruce leaves the car and heads upstairs to his hotel room. The other weapon he has on his side is the chip he put inside Sebastián Rojas’ phone when he slumped on the table. He turns on the more powerful of the two laptops in the room and boots the tracing software.
The window loads with a mirror of Sebastián Rojas’ phone screen and the audio bar is silent. Text messages are live updating but Sebastián’s not making any calls at the moment.

He starts suiting up, letting the laptop run on the desk.

The moment he pulls the cowl on, the laptop speakers crackle and Rojas is giving orders in quiet Spanish, the continued raucous laughter of a drinking game in the background. Batman holds still, listening intently.

Then he catches one phrase: “Matar al profesor.”

It seems as if Ira Graham’s time has run out.

There is no time at all to lose.

He’s out the window before Sebastián Rojas hangs up the phone.

Rather than go up, he leaps the balcony railing and free falls until the last possible second and deploys a grappling hook to swing out of the descent and hit the ground running. He goes down the first manhole he finds.

“Oracle,” he says into the comm. “I need a little assistance.”

He goes north by instinct.

“I’m here,” she says. “We’ve missed you. What’s up?”

“I need tunnels. In DC. I need the fastest way to get to 1734 Corcoran from my current location.”

He’s still running, hoping he won’t have to backtrack. He can hear her typing.
“Got it. Want an overlay?”

“Yes. And I want you to talk me through it.”

The map appears in his cowl, at the edge of his field of vision. He doesn’t want to slow and study it unless he loses contact with Oracle in the tunnel.

She directs, he runs.

“I have you underneath the block, behind Corcoran in an alley. Four and half minute mile. Not bad, Bats.”

“Batman out,” he says, without further comment. There’s a ladder, he climbs it, puts his shoulder to the manhole cover.

It is a little after two in the morning, the streets quiet and dark.

At the rowhouse, he scales the building face very carefully, forces the window lock, and slips inside.

The house is a disaster. Not a ransacked, invaded disaster, but a lived in disaster.

There are piles of books and papers on every surface, and piled on those, empty plastic cups and boxes of staples or batteries or computer cords. And he’s just in an empty bedroom. He creeps out into the hall-- there are books, pens, papers, magazines, clothes, lining the wall on either side.

In the master bedroom, he puts a hand on Ira Graham’s mouth and then says the man’s name sharply and a little loudly.

Ira Graham startles awake and lets out a half-scream. Batman pushes harder on his mouth.
“Shh,” he says. “You need to come with me.”

The professor thrashes around in the bed, his shouting muffled by the gloved hand.

“There is someone on his way to kill you,” Batman hisses at him. “Stop fighting. We need to go. Right now.”

The words break through Graham’s panic and he freezes, his eyes still wide and shining white in the darkness.

Batman slowly pulls his hand back.

The first words out of Ira Graham are, “What has he done?” It is a harsh whisper, full of fear.

Batman hauls him out of bed by the arm and drags him along out of the bedroom, toward a room with alley access. Graham stumbles behind him, crying, “My glasses!”

The front door, just down the stairs, rattles as someone tries the knob.

“Be quiet,” Batman says harshly. “Forget the glasses.”

“I can't see,” Graham whispers back, so faint Batman almost can't hear him.

Scraping and clicking noises are coming from the door knob. Batman steps over a pile of newspapers into the spare room; Graham follows, but trips on the papers and the pile slides out across the floor like carpet.

Outside the window, there are low voices, speaking Spanish.

“Do you have an attic?” Batman turns, still gripping Graham’s arm.
“Yes, but it's full of--”

The front door swings open down the stairs.

There is a small closet in the spare room, back in the corner, buried in a tall pile of banker’s boxes. They are past the point of secrecy, but he can at least keep Graham out of the way and alive. Dead men don’t answer questions.

Batman shoves the boxes and they topple over. He wrenches the closet open. It's packed top to bottom with odd and ends, loose items piled on top of each other, and even in the dark he can see that it is different from the rest of the house-- it is books in Korean, a woman’s shoes and dresses, a bag of make-up.

There are maybe six inches between the pile and the outer frame of the door. It will have to do.

Footsteps are on the stairs. Batman slams Graham into the closet, pushes the door toward him and growls,

“Stay here.”

There is a man in the hall when he turns. The man looks slightly startled but recovers quickly and aims a gun he already has in his hand, a silencer screwed into the barrel.

Batman kicks it from his hand the second before it goes off, and there is a soft hiss and the thud of a bullet in the ceiling, an explosion of plaster overhead. The dust rains down on them as Batman grabs the man's arm and snaps bones in the man’s hand as he spins him into the wall.

The man screams and the voices in the alley start calling out, concerned. They're coming up, one of them scaling the brick outside to the window.

Batman hoists the man up and hurls him toward the window. He goes halfway out, dangling over the ledge in the shattering of glass. The man climbing must be getting glass in his face as he clings to the brick; he curses loudly.

In the moment where the struggling man is still stunned, draped out the window, Batman braces
his feet against the floorboards for leverage and then runs and leaps into a kick, soaring out the window feet first, his body stiff and straight like a ramming rod. He grabs a fist full of shirt as he goes, ripping the man off the window in an explosion of glass and wooden framing.

The momentum carries him across the alley and he kicks off the wall of the opposing house only a foot off the ground, dropping the man to the cobblestone and curling into a flip. He lands on his feet behind the two other men, their jaws slack as they stare at him in the dark. His cape flutters around him and the man on the brick slips down the wall, glass glittering around his feet.

These are not assassins. They are hired thugs. Sebastian Rojas must be feeling the loss of Carlos Valera.

Both of the men on their feet draw guns. The man he dropped on the alley ground moans.

Sirens sound out in the distance, drawing nearer. In a neighborhood like this one, it’s no wonder someone has called it in already, with all the noise they’re making.

“I can tie you up,” Batman says, “and leave you for the cops. Or you can run and tell Bash Rojas that the Batman is coming for him.”

The two men look at each other and then take off running. He turns to the third and cable ties his wrists behind him. His stomach is a mess of cuts. The cops will get him medical attention.

Batman runs and leaps, grabbing the lower lip of the window and hauling himself back up into the house.

Ira Graham is in the closet, weeping.

“What do you know?” Batman demands. He doesn’t want to stick around for the police.

“I told him not to do anything stupid,” Graham wails. He is clutching a green dress. “I told her there was something \emph{wrong} with him, with Oren, that he needed help. And now she’s gone and he's gone off the fucking rails.”

Graham slumps to the floor, weeping. Batman remains silent, waiting him out, feeling the urgency
of the approaching police and the delicate nature of this situation.

“I don't know anything. I can't even manage dinner anymore. How am I supposed to know what he does? She was the only reason he ever spoke to me before. He blames me for everything. He's never said it but I know he does. Why else would he try to have me killed?”

Batman is thinking, reevaluating. He glances around the disordered room, at the closet full of Jiho Graham’s things, at the broken man on the floor.

“Anything he's told you might help,” he says, crouching down. “Anything at all.”

“He came months ago, asking about the men who arrested us, the name of the officer who took her. I lied. I told him I didn't remember. I see his name on his uniform everytime I close my eyes.”

And the grief in his voice goes out to Batman’s own. He knows what this is like, to be haunted by mere minutes in a lifetime.

“I told him to leave it alone. He never listens to me. He's always been dangerous, disconnected. She connected with him, not me. Not anyone. He's been a mess but I couldn't help him. I asked him what he was doing, if she'd be happy with him. He wouldn't answer me. It'd break her heart if she could see him now, how unhinged he is. But I can't even take care of myself. Look at this place.”

The police are in the alley, exclaiming over the cable-tied man. It will only be seconds before they are at the front door.

It's time to go.

“I'm sorry,” Batman says, as he stands. “For your loss.”

Ira Graham looks up at him, and his tear-streaked face is full of venom.

“You're sorry? For Jiho? For what Oren's become? Your League and its fucking alien disasters, your showboating heroism. The world has enough problems without you dragging in the galaxy’s trash for media spectacles while real people die.”
And Batman sees the anger as grief, as the wounded bite of a depressed widower. He knows what it is like for loneliness to spill over as rage, even as Graham’s words cut him to the quick. He makes no defense for himself, for the League, for the necessary work they do.

He just leaves-- out the window, by grappling hook, above the shouting of the DCPD.
Chapter Fifteen

The jet is over the Gulf of Mexico, early in the morning, when he gets the call. His phone rings instead of buzzes, the setting he enabled for emergencies tied to specific numbers.

It is the Kent family landline. He remembers where Martha tacked his number, scribbled on a scrap of paper without a name, to the white fridge in their kitchen.

“Are you safe?” He asks first, as his greeting.

“Bruce, I think you need to come,” Martha sounds like she's been weeping.

He checks the gauges, the GPS coordinates, the time. Lois is on her own in Colombia and he isn't certain how much Sebastián Rojas suspects her. It might not be at all; it might be very much.

“I can be there tonight,” he says, feeling torn. He’s always feeling torn these days. If he makes it to Colombia, finds Lois right away, and brings her back without waiting to find any information, he might be able to make it a few hours sooner but then it wouldn't do Clark much good. He needs at least a little time.

“I really think you need to come right now.”

If she was crying, he would maybe be able to chalk it up to reactionary panic. But it is the calmness, the steadiness of her voice, that convinces him. He wishes it would be safe enough to text Lois, to let her know he was going to be there soon.

He swings the jet around.

“Thirty minutes,” he says, gaining altitude and pushing the engines a bit harder.

When the jet sets down in the fallow field, near the same indentations from the last time he landed it there, he vaults out of the jet and hits the ground running. He leaves the cowl on, the cape streaming behind him. There is a slim chance that there are others at the house, men who forced Martha to make a call, but based on the cadence of her voice he doubts it.
Still, it doesn’t hurt to be prepared.

He is not prepared.

The last time he had spoken to Clark was in the field behind him, when he refused to stay for breakfast with the Kents and Lois Lane.

The last time he had communicated with him was in the middle of the night, via text message.

*How are you doing?* He had asked, just checking in, after leaving Ira Graham’s house.

“*Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.*” Clark had replied, quoting Macbeth. Bruce had taken it as a sign that he was in pain but managing. It even seemed optimistic, which was like Clark in the face of danger.

The Kents are waiting on the porch. They do not seem startled that he is suited, but Jonathan seems to resent it. The old farmer’s hands are jammed into his pockets and Martha is hugging herself, mere inches away from Jonathan.

“No one else is here. Take that damn mask off.”

Bruce obeys, as he climbs the porch stairs. He can feel the set of his teeth, the tenseness of his clenched jaw to prevent a sharp intake of breath, when they step aside and on the porch swing, piled with electric blankets, is Clark.

Cords snake out from the pile, all plugged into an extension cord power strip from inside the house. They are all turned up all the way, every one of them.

“How long?” Bruce asks, turning. He cannot keep the growl out of his voice.

“A few hours,” Martha says. “We couldn’t get him inside. He wouldn’t come in.”
Bruce tears off his gloves, throws them on the porch floor, and crouches near Clark’s head. He knows before he even touches it that Clark’s forehead will be frigid, but he places his fingers against the skin anyway.

Clark stirs, slightly, and opens his eyes. He seems to look through and not at Bruce. He mumbles something that Bruce doesn’t process immediately and Martha says from behind,

“He’s tried to talk a few times since we called you, but we don’t know what he’s saying. We’ve just been trying to make him comfortable.”

She starts crying.

<Kal-El> Bruce says, quietly. <I’m going to take you to the cave.>

He doesn’t know how much time they have at this point and he doesn’t want to think about how few grains of sand are left in this hourglass. But he does know that they have passed the point where being at home is any good for Clark and any comfort to the Kents. He hears Jonathan and Martha talking in whispers behind him, registering their surprise at his use of Kryptonese.

<Bruce> Clark says, his voice hoarse. <Get me out of here.>

<We’re going. Can you stand?> Bruce doesn’t move yet. He doubts Clark can do much of anything, much less walk, but he doesn’t want to assume. He wants to be wrong.

<Maybe for a few minutes> Clark answers. <Hard time thinking. Can’t see.>

<Some light or total dark?> Bruce asks. He had already guessed from Clark’s expression a second ago that some vision loss was likely. He is glad the Kents do not understand them right now.

<Everything like shadows.> Clark replies. <I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me.>

<Kal-El> Bruce says, a note of relief deep in his chest. <Don’t quote children’s poetry at me.>
<Is that a child’s poem?> Clark asks, a faint smile on his mouth.

This has always irrationally irritated Bruce, Clark’s ability to joke at the worst times. But it is faintly reassuring now.

<Let’s go.> Bruce says, standing. <Lean on me. Walk as far as you can.>

He turns just slightly, to look at the Kents, as Clark shoves blankets onto the floor and staggers to his feet.

“I’m taking him,” he says to them. “I’ll bring him back as soon as I can.”

<I’m not coming back.> Clark says. <Don’t lie to them.>

Bruce’s heart stops beating. It is long enough that, had he been well, Clark would have noticed.

And even though he knows Clark is only seeing shadows and light, they meet each other’s eyes.

<Don’t take my job.> Bruce says sternly. <I’m the pessimist.>

<I thought you preferred the term ‘realist’.>

And now Bruce knows how bad it actually is, how hard Clark is fighting. He’s fighting enough to maintain appearances, as much as he can, to make Bruce feel better. But the attempts are limping.

<Your two minutes aren’t up yet.> Bruce says, steadying Clark as he stands.

Martha and Jonathan have not understood the words of their conversation-- of this, Bruce is certain. But they seem to know anyway, or guess, or fear. He stands back while they both hug their son.
Clark makes it down the porch on his own two feet. He makes it across the yard leaning heavily on Bruce’s shoulder. When they reach the second row of the cornfield, just out of sight of the porch, Clark collapses, unconscious, and Bruce catches him before he hits the ground.

He holds him like a child, carrying him across the fields to the jet. Once they are inside, the cockpit sealed and the jet off, Clark’s breathing turns rasping and labored.

They are airborne, Bruce speeding through the sky, when Clark rouses himself enough to say,

<Take care of them for me.>

<Did you forget that I’m saving your life?> Bruce replies.

<Take care of Lois.> Clark persists.

And Bruce knows what he has to do. He doesn’t like it, piling this on top of the physical pain Clark is in, but what’s the point of knowing buttons if you don’t push them when you need to?

<If I get her from Colombia in time, I will.>

<What?> Clark's voice has gathered strength; it is as icy as his skin.

<She offered to go and find the files I’ve been looking for.>

Bruce knows this is cruelty, but that is one area in which he and Clark always differed— the endgame justifies a lot of necessary actions that most people don’t want to take. And saving Lois Lane is always, always something that motivates Clark Kent.

<And you let her?> Clark demands, sounding almost hysterical. Bruce knows without turning that Clark is trying to sit up, to rally himself.

<When has she ever needed permission?>
Bruce knows by the silence that follows this, hearing Clark struggle with the seat restraints, that it hit home. They are Lois’ own words, after all.

<i>I'm going to kill you if anything happens to her.> Clark moans.

<i>You’ll have to stay alive for that.> Bruce calls back to him. The struggling has stopped. <i>Are you giving up already?>

He hears himself, the echo of taunting monologues of a dozen villains drifting through his voice. And in Clark's native tongue, too.

<i>I broke up with her. Or she left me. I don’t know anymore. And everything is black.> Clark says in response. <i>I can't see anything. I have to see her again.>

Bruce doesn’t offer comfort. If saving Clark means pushing him, getting him to fight, to have someone to save-- he will do what is required. And it’s breaking his heart.
Lois is chilly, shivering as she runs through the drizzling rain. She had been trying to play it safe, to bide her time. She's gotten used to Clark rescuing her if she takes risks, but that's not an option right now. She has no idea when or if Bruce is coming. But her hand has been forced-- Sebastián Rojas was making plans to leave early, tonight, right after they’ve arrived, on a different plane than the one taking her and Stef to Gotham.

So when he excused himself from the dinner they were eating in the main house, she waited a moment, complained of a headache, and followed him. It is clear that he is up to something, though she is not entirely sure what, and she is determined to find out. She has no plan to stop him, but improvisation is one of her strong suits.

The light is fading on the western horizon and the rain is being pushed across the courtyard by the wind. The paved walkway is slick beneath her feet and she’s glad she’s wearing sandals with decent tread, even if her toes are damp and freezing.

Sebastián Rojas is ahead of her, entering the smallest of the five houses on the grounds. He’s not looking back. She looks around quickly and then steps off the path into the tall, manicured grass of the landscaped grounds.

Slowly, crouching low, she creeps around the ranch style house and up to the back windows, faintly glowing with interior light. The Rojas estate dogs are barking on the other side of the courtyard. They add to her nervousness, but she remembers they barked like this last night when they were being fed in their kennels and no one batted an eye.

Though the lower edge of the window, she can see Sebastián Rojas and Carlos Valera arguing with each other. She’s surprised at this: despite Stef’s insistence that seeing Cary was most of the reason for the trip, as far as Lois knows Stef hasn’t been to visit him and this is the first Lois has seen him. She had begun to even doubt that he was at the Rojas Estate, or still alive.

There’s a bed in the room that looks like it’s been used a lot recently; blankets in a tangled pile, impressions on the mattress. Cary is out of bed though, standing near a table, hunched over as if he’s in pain. He’s snarling something at Sebastián in Spanish. Lois is kicking herself for not paying better attention in high school or college.

On the table, near Cary’s hand, is a bag. It is the right size and shape for a laptop and a stack of manila files. She instinctively knows this is important, that this is what Bruce was hoping to find, that this is what Sebastián is taking to Gotham.

The hum of a helicopter, one of the family fleet, surges through the rainy air. In the room, Bash and Cary glare at each other. Sebastián grabs the strap of the bag and hauls it off the table-- Lois watches Cary hold tightly to the handle and then let go. He sits heavily in the chair near him and Sebastián leaves the room.

He turns to look out the window and Lois ducks down fast.

She creeps along the house, trying to keep up with Sebastián. If he makes it to the helicopter before she can distract him or intercept him somehow, the bag is as good as gone. In that case, she’d have to just hope Bruce had the sense to stay in Gotham and wait.

Lois slows in the tall grass on the side of the house. The rain and twilight are good cover here, but the courtyard is brightly lit and won’t be so easy to get across without being noticed. Sebastián is
standing on the patio in front of the ranch house, smoking and talking on the phone. The bag strap is looped over his shoulder.

She wracks her brain for something she can do, something she can try, to get his attention without garnering his suspicion. He seemed cautious around her the first few hours but she’s spent so much of the brief trip talking to Stef and playing dumb and pretending to cry about a break-up that he had started to ignore her.

Maybe, then, the best tactic is faking bold-faced obliviousness.

He seems unhurried as he smokes, occasionally looking back at the front door of the house, as if he maybe expects Cary to join him or challenge him again. There is a constant dialogue happening on the phone, in rapid and hushed Spanish.

Lois takes the time to edge away from the house, staying in the shadows and grass, until she’s reached the next building-- a small utility shed. She glances back to make sure Sebastián is still there, that he hasn’t noticed her. He flicks glowing ash off the end of the cigarette onto the wet patio stones and taps at them with one foot.

She risks letting him out of her sight as she hurries around the shed. Then she pulls out her phone and steps out onto the patio, shielding the phone with one hand as if she’s trying to see a message while walking in the rain. When she passes him, she slows and joins him under the patio awning, still looking at her phone.

“Hey,” she says, forcing herself to sound nonchalant. “Is the wi-fi password the same everywhere? My cell service is really spotty.”

“No,” he says. “It’s different for each house.”

“Okay,” she answers, lingering on the first syllable as if annoyed.

“You don’t think I know what you’re doing?” Sebastián asks quietly, pocketing his own phone. “Mierda, Ms. Lane.”

“What am I doing?” She looks up from her phone and raises an eyebrow. She is stalling, that’s what she’s doing. And she doesn’t even know why. She doesn’t know if anyone is coming or what she’d do if she actually gets the bag. Hide it? Suddenly, this seems like a super stupid idea all around.

“C’mon, Lois,” he says with a smile. “The Planet’s investigative reporter? The woman who profiled Superman? I know the piece you wrote on Stef was a diversion tactic. But he’s not here.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Lois exclaims. She doesn’t have to fake her surprise.

“Don’t play dumb,” he answers. “It doesn’t look good on you.”

Now Lois is actually confused, but only for a moment, as the pieces fall into place. He thinks she’s acting alone. He thinks she was using Bruce instead of the other way around. He thinks the piece about Esteva and her music all those months ago was the beginning of an investigation into him. And he’s assuming that she’s here for Clark.

“Where is he?” She demands, hoping that some misdirection will give her time to get the bag, to come up with another plan.

“I was hoping you could tell us, until you were so eager to come home with Stef. A nice touch, pretending to be interested in Cary. He really does like you.”
“If you knew he wasn't here, then why let me come?” She asks, curious.

“For Stef. What else? It’s always been hard to say no to Stef. She gets what she wants.”

There’s movement behind them, behind the closed front door of the ranch house. Cary.

Sebastián drops the cigarette to the patio and grinds it out with his shoe.

“Cary,” he calls out. “I’m sorry.”

And before Lois can blink, he grabs her by her hair and throws her off the patio. She shrieks in surprise and outrage, caught totally off-guard by the sudden violence. Huddled on the wet courtyard stones, rubbing her scalp where the hair was pulled, she hisses the first thing she thinks of at him:

“You’re a snake.”

The front door has opened and Cary is standing there, leaning on the doorframe. There is a baseball bat dangling from his hand. He says something in Spanish to Sebastián, who laughs and replies.

“Miss Lane,” Cary says to her, casually, as if asking about the taste of the coffee. “Are you alright?”

“No,” Lois says. “My head hurts. Your cousin is an asshole.”

Sebastián laughs again.

“Cary wants to tell my father,” Sebastián says to her. “But he doesn’t know how important these plans are to me, how important to our family they are.”

“Stop monologuing,” she says, irritated, pulling herself to her feet in the rain.

There is distant shouting. The dogs bark angrily.

Sebastián’s attention is drawn away, across the courtyard, for a brief second. And Lois knows that this is her chance, this moment when he thinks of her as a neutralized, ineffective threat. She plows her shoulder into his gut, knocking him off balance and into the house. She can be a snake too, if she wants.

When his back smacks the wall, the bag slips down his shoulder and she wrenches it out of the air and toward her, turning to flee. If his father doesn’t know, perhaps he can help. If the corruption doesn’t have its tendrils wrapped around the entire family, there is hope.

She hasn’t made it more than five or six feet when the crack of a hard blow slams against her right side, sending shockwaves up and down her whole frame. The bag falls with a thump to the stones. Lois is too shocked to cry out. Her hand isn’t working. She looks down in mute horror at her forearm, which is bent at an angle that makes her head and stomach spin.

With wide eyes, she looks back at him. He is standing, breathing hard with rage, rain dripping off his dark hair. The baseball bat is in his hands, Cary on his knees on the patio behind him.

Sebastián raises the bat, to swing at her head like it is a curveball he has tracked the motion of across a field.

The dogs are yelping, now. The shouting is louder, panicked. Lois looks around the courtyard for help, but it is filling with men who don’t look like they care much about what happens to her.
Sebastián’s uncle, Tio Eduard, is watching from a low balcony on his own house, the house Sebastián has spent much of his time in the past day. She doesn’t have to see his face clearly to know that whatever Sebastián’s father knows or thinks, the Rojas uncle is not in the same dark.

Lois is desperately hoping that Stef will step outside the house at the head of the yard. Maybe she could intervene. But Lois knows that it will not happen. If Stef is blind to what her brother has been up to, it is by choice and not stupidity.

“Finish it,” Tio Eduard shouts languidly across the courtyard. “We have other problems to worry about.”

Lois knows he is speaking in English for her benefit and it is not a mystery where Sebastián has picked up his mean and violent streak.

“He pulls the baseball bat back, twisting his torso, in perfect homerun form. He swings forward.

If Superman were going to save her, this is the moment he would do it. She accused him once of having a flair for the dramatic, of waiting intentionally until the last possible second. It’s usually a bit of a thrill and she doesn’t always mind.

But he is not coming.

And Sebastián was arrogant enough to talk first, like a monster. But she’s faced down plenty of real monsters and this one is, at least, human. She has time to duck.

It is on the follow-through of his swing, the force of a missed blow spinning his upper body, that there is a faint, sharp twap above her ducked head and the glint of dark metal embedding itself in the back of Sebastián’s shoulder as he screams.

A batarang.

She hopes it hit him right on that stupid tattoo, tearing it off his skin.

Chaos breaks loose.

Sebastián is screaming, furious, swinging the baseball bat again wildly through the air. Cary pulls her back onto the porch as the dogs bay triumphantly—somehow has let them out of the kennel. Guns come out all around the courtyard, men shouting to each other.

Then silence falls, only a breath after the chaos. Tio Eduard has gone inside his house, shut the balcony door. The dogs are growling and barking, but one by one they whine and yelp and fall quiet, in the yard out of sight beyond Tio Eduard’s house.

The dark figure swings over the roof of Eduard Rojas’ house, his cape billowing behind him as he drops out of one of the tall encenillo trees like a predatory cat. She can hear the grappling hook hiss as it recoils itself.

All the men are on him at once, shrieking. Gunshots ring out across the courtyard and Lois is frozen, Cary’s hunched form behind her. He’s slumped, holding his stomach. She isn’t sure if he’s conscious or not and despite the danger, she is unwilling to leave the porch while the bag is still feet in front of her, getting drenched in the rain, too close to Sebastián’s waiting baseball bat to reach out and grab. His attention is on the fight in front of him, but it would only take one backward motion to cave her skull in. Also, when she tries to move, her dangling wrist makes her
stomach lurch. The last thing she needs is to get Sebastián’s attention because she vomits all over his leather shoes and the sopping wet laptop bag.

There were fifteen or so men in the courtyard at the beginning of this fight, not counting Sebastián and Cary, and they’re already down to about eight.

Whether it’s healthy or not, whatever it says about her, she’s always loved watching Clark fight. It is a thing of powerful beauty, the swooping arcs of motion, the alternating drives of physical force— a blur of graceful speed before the point of impact, then a pull back and the steady hover as his eyes or breath do the work, his fists clenched, his limbs still, taut with the expectation of the next lightning burst. It is like a song, with the rises and falls; the arias composed of velocity, fire, and ice. It is like the glory of a thunderstorm on the far horizon.

Watching Batman fight is like watching a tempest from the seat of a rowboat on the swelling ocean. Where Clark covers distance, Bruce clings to a center, returning to it again and again, drawing the fight to himself. It is brutal and furious and full of constant momentum, the crack of bones and thrash of muscle and swick of metal. It is like a sharp and ancient dance, every angle and bend of his body a forged weapon. Bullets snap into Clark like ineffectual, bothersome flies, not worth the trouble of avoiding. Bruce makes bullets look sluggish, his body always just out of their reach.

Lois has never seen them fight together, far too back on the fringe of battles of such scale to ever glimpse more than just the edges of an effort, but she knows now that it would be terrifying, awful in the archaic sense of the word. It is no wonder that Luthor fears them together, that the JLA seems to revolve around their partnership.

There is a crack of actual thunder overhead and the rain is turning torrential.

Batman is motionless in the center of the courtyard, surrounded by moaning or limp bodies.

He has left Sebastián for last.

Sebastián has pulled the batarang from his shoulder and he throws it onto the stones. It clatters across them noisily. He steps forward with a roar.

The baseball bat swings through the air as if driven by a piston.

Clark would let it hit him, let it splinter into pieces.

Bruce drops like a rock and mirrors the baseball bat’s arc with his leg, balanced on the tip of one boot. Sebastián’s feet fly out from underneath him, but before the thud of his body hitting the ground sounds out across the courtyard, Batman has him by the throat and is driving him forward past Lois, past Cary, and pinning him against the house.

Clark’s voice is deep, steady, full of authority when he is Superman.

Bruce’s voice is coarse, a controlled roar, full of temper when he is Batman.

It is hard to not constantly compare them.

Maybe it’s a way to distract herself from her broken arm. Maybe it’s the delicious, secret joy of being one of the only non-caped people on earth who gets to compare them this way.

“Where is your contact?”

Sebastián is gasping for air, his feet kicking uselessly against the stucco of the ranch house.
“On a boat,” Cary says from behind, lifting his head. He staggers into the rain, taking the bag from
the stones and holding it out to Batman. “North Koreans.”

“I know,” Batman says, shoving his arm harder against Sebastián’s neck. “Tell me something I
don’t.”

The look Sebastián gives Cary is venomous. Then Batman drops him, letting Sebastián’s back
scrape the stucco on the way down. He takes the bag from Cary without looking at him, his
gloved fingers tightening around the strap.

“The Xoh Paek. Off the south dock,” Cary adds.

Batman looks at him, his mouth a thin line. He nods appreciatively.

“You want to know why?” Sebastián hisses, rubbing at his throat. “I will make Colombia--”

“No.” Batman says, so harshly that even Lois feels a chill running up her spine. “You won’t.
You’re going to go meet with them. You’re going to tell them you lost it all. The files, the
package. You’re going to tell them the truth. And if you don’t, I will come back here and burn
your houses and fields to the ground, I will freeze every account you have. I will drug you, tie you
up, and take you to the Koreans myself, el Brazo del Sol.”

The name drips off the threat as an insult.

“You can’t,” Sebastián snarls. “You wouldn’t.”

“Try me.”

“Que nos has matado a todos,” Cary mutters and Lois isn’t sure if he’s speaking to Batman or
Sebastián, maybe both.

“Let’s go,” Batman says to Lois, and she stands, cradling her arm.

Cary’s outstretched fingers snag her shoulder and she winces.

“I didn’t know,” he says, shrugging. “I just want you to know, I didn’t know everything. I
wouldn’t have helped him if I’d known. I thought I’d left the cartel behind. I hope you find who
you’re looking for.”

Lois isn’t sure if she believes him or not. She wants to say they never lost Clark, that they aren’t so
incapable or irresponsible-- that Bruce never lost Clark. But she’s smart enough to know you
don’t show all your cards, even at the end.

“You should get out of here,” Batman says gruffly to Cary, putting a booted foot on Sebastián’s
knee and pressing down when the other man tries to get up. Sebastián whines under the force.

“You saved my life once,” Cary says, tapping the small tattoo on his face. “But this is mi familia. I
stay.”

“Keep him here.” Batman says, nodding at Sebastián. “Count to one hundred.”

Cary picks up the baseball bat from the courtyard stones, leans it on his shoulder. Lois notices for
the first time that between the bedroom and the front door of the house, he strapped his gun to his
waist and has not drawn it once. He nods at Batman.

“Go.”
“You didn't kill Oren Bordeaux,” Batman says to him, leaning onto the boot on Sebastián’s knee. Sebastián beats a fist against Batman’s leg, but Batman is watching Cary.

“We found him dead.”

Batman pulls his foot back.

Sebastián moans, holding his knee, and doesn’t try to get up, even when they are across the courtyard and Lois looks back, expecting to see him challenging Cary, fighting him to make a last charge. But he is watching them, the fury in his face replaced by fear.

The Batjet is just beyond the circle of estate houses, hiding under the cover of low trees and shrubs. The helicopter blades are still whirring somewhere off in the distance, on the opposite side of the estate.

Batman climbs onto the wing and then pulls Lois up after him by her left arm. They take off without speaking and he spends a few minutes focusing on the controls, then the pilot’s chair swivels around to face her.

He unzips the sodden bag, gingerly pulling out the laptop and the files. Everything is damp. She tries not to throw up or start crying because now her arm really, really hurts.

If he was Clark, he would take care of her arm first, talk to her. But he is not Clark.

She watches, cradling her arm to her chest, as he seals the laptop into some sort of bag full of white pearl-like beads, and then begins peeling the papers away from the tan folders, one at a time, scanning them intently.

“Take pictures,” Lois says. “In case they bleed.”

“They’re already useless,” he says, sighing and pushing his cowl off his head. He drops them to the side. “I was afraid they would be. But at least they’re destroyed and not on their way to the North Koreans. Let me see your arm.”

She hesitates, then offers her arm out to him. His touch is gentler than she had been anticipating, delicate with precision in how he examines the bones. She focuses on trying not to cry out.

His eyes flick up, meet hers for a moment, and then look back down at the arm.

“This is a bad break,” he says quietly.

“Well. He did hit me with a baseball bat.”

He opens a container on his utility belt and pulls out some orange pills.

“Take these,” he instructs, pulling a black box that turns out to be a first aid kit from under the pilot’s seat.

She takes them with her left hand, pops them into her mouth, and after a moment’s thought, starts chewing.

“What are you doing?” he sounds alarmed. “Don’t chew those.”

“I thought they’d work faster!” Lois exclaims. “Why? Why not?”

“They’re coated,” he says. She can’t hear any spite or derision but it’s hard not to assume it’s
there.

Her mouth begins to burn.

“They won’t work faster, but the burning should fade after a bit. Your mouth might be a little numb.”

Lois feels stupid. Her arm is pure agony.

“This is fucking disaster,” Bruce says bitterly, cracking an instant ice pack in his hands. The slush of the chemicals mixing is the only noise for a moment. He holds it lightly against her arm, near the break.

And somehow, his reaction makes Lois feel a little better. She knows what he said but she hears what he meant:

Clark is going to kill me if we make it out of this alive.

“I thought you were going to be here hours ago,” she accuses.

“I’m so sorry, Lois,” he says. “I was a day late. But you did what I trusted you to do. You found the files and laptop and slowed Sebastián down. I don’t think you needed a babysitter.”

He looks so exhausted and upset that she starts to forget that she was furious with him. But not enough to completely let him off the hook yet, even if he did show up and save her.

“I’m going to drop you off at a hospital,” he says. “In Metropolis. I have to take Clark to the Watchtower.”

“I’m coming with you,” she says, insistent. “If he’s that bad, then I need to be with him. He’s going to want me to be there.”

“Lois,” Bruce says, and he won’t look at her face now. “I can’t take you. Your arm needs attention, more than I can give you comfortably. And teleportation is dangerous, even in good health.”

“I don’t care,” she says, finding that now is the point where she can no longer hold back tears. Her eyes fill with them, they spill over. Her hair is wet with rainwater and her clothes are damp and a few tears on her face won’t change much.

“I can’t.”

“You mean you won’t.” Lois accuses, anger resurfacing.

“He won’t recognize you.”

That stops Lois cold.

“What?”

“I brought him to the cave yesterday. He’s losing memories, he can’t see. He’s hanging on, but just barely. When he does speak, it’s only Kryptonese.”

“Then how do you know?” She demands. “How do you know anything?”

“I speak it.”
This doesn’t even surprise her at this point.

“Then take me to the cave,” she says firmly. “I’ll take a taxi to the hospital from the Manor after. I want to see him before you go. Just a minute or two. I know we’re running out of time.”

She expects to have to fight for this, but Bruce gives no fight. He almost seems relieved that she’s insisting.

“Alfred will take you after. And you can stay at the Manor as long as you need to. I'll give you as long as I can.”
Chapter Seventeen

The ends are falling into place now, every piece nestling in against the other.

Suspicion had been lurking in Bruce’s mind for hours, but it was what he saw in the rainy courtyard while snapping his foot forward into a man’s nose that sealed it. He had divided his attention between the men fighting him and Lois Lane, sitting on a patio across the yard, cradling her arm.

Cary Valera was standing behind her, his shoulders hunched, his gun drawn.

His gun aimed at Sebastián Rojas.

Sebastián didn’t notice, Lois didn’t notice. When Batman knocked the last of the nameless fighting men down to the wet stones, he went straight for Sebastián Rojas. And Cary Valera lowered and holstered his gun.

It had been precautionary, to protect Lois, to slow Sebastián if he needed to. Sebastián, with the baseball bat; Sebastián, swinging to kill; Sebastián, the Arm of the Sun. He had been wrong. Cary Valera had not told the patrolmen in a tiny border town that name on accident. He wondered how many drunken warnings Cary had sprinkled across the States, trying to cut off the serpentine head of apocalyptic plans. Or maybe Cary’s change had been recent. It was hard to say. Maybe Cary Valera had, at some point, been a jealous pretender, trying on the name for size.

Either way, the moment Cary Valera lowered the gun was the moment that Bruce was certain Cary Valera did not kill Oren Bordeaux. The knife had been an unintentional red herring. Which only left one man:

Ira Graham.

Ira Graham lied to him and he was so exhausted and distracted by the reminders of loss that he missed it. The man was cunning enough to mix his undoubtedly real grief with the deceit, the careful references to Oren in the present tense.

The files might have been right there, probably in the house with him, and he left them to fly halfway across the world. He can’t even process how he feels about this because it feels like if he lets himself try, he’ll implode.

Whether he had destroyed the files secreted away from the CDC by Oren or not was the final question. A visit to question him again, to force his way past the lies, would take precious minutes.

It didn't matter at this point if Graham would confess to murdering his own brother-in-law. Bruce could gather enough to turn him over to the police, after.

And now it came down to this: sit in the cave, sift through the salvaged files from the laptop, develop his own antidote. Or risk going to find those final missing files before they’re sold or destroyed and hope they have the answer already saved in them. And he has to make sure Sebastian Rojas shows up to meet the North Koreans before that situation falls apart.

Bruce wants to leave it in his own hands. He wants to solve the problem from the Batcave, by himself, at this point. He is sick of dead ends, of missing chances by seconds. But starting from basically scratch could takes days, weeks, months….

He might still be at that point if Oren’s master files do not have a solution. But if there is even a
slim chance that he can save all those hours of work, he has to take it.

“What are you thinking about?” Lois asks, interrupting him. He looks at her, this woman who has risked so much over and over again for stories and for Clark, for truth. Her arm is limp on her lap, an ice pack resting on it.

“That I might do everything and still be too late,” he says, figuring now is not the time to sugarcoat things.

“He said you'd blame yourself,” Lois says. “But I can't figure out why you're still doing all of this alone.”

“I made a promise.”

“When Clark thought this was just going to be some stupid, embarrassing story. But that's not what it is, is it?” Lois glares.

“No,” he says, with a sigh. It’s his fault, that’s why. It’s his mess to clean up. “But what could the League do against this? None of them have the medical expertise. Did you break up with him?”


“I didn't think so,” Bruce says, draining a water bottle. “His judgment isn't the best right now.”

They sit in the jet in silence. Their ETA is still three hours out.

“I should splint your arm,” he says. He doesn't want to have to, but there’s no way around it. “You don’t want to end up with muscle damage. Are you sure I can’t take you straight to the hospital?”

“I couldn’t convince you to set it, could I?” Lois asks. “I’m assuming it’s not out of your range of skills.”

“Sorry,” Bruce says, a little impressed that she was even willing to consider it. He wonders if she really understands what she’s asking, the pain and danger involved. He doubts it. “I could x-ray it in the cave, but if it needs surgery, you’d be better off with a real doctor.”

“I think that medicine is kicking in,” she says. “And my mouth isn’t burning anymore. What did you give me, anyway?”

“Let’s splint it now, then,” he says, avoiding the question.

She doesn’t press and he knows she’s nervous.

It’s a good thing Alfred learned to stitch and set on him in those first years and has a steady hand for it. The older man rarely complains about the work itself, just the fact that Bruce puts him in the position to require it. And for the most part, Bruce is happy to leave it to him-- stitching up the boys is always something he has a hard time stomaching; for set bones, it’s a struggle to stay in the room. It’s a good thing the kids are fast and rarely break things.

There’s a tan, rolled bandage in the first aid kit and two splint rolls, made of rolled aluminum and bright orange thin foam. He shapes the splints and sets them across his knees.

“You’re going to have to help hold these once I get them in place,” he says to Lois. He offers her a rolled up piece of cloth from the first aid kit. “Bite on this.”
Her eyes widen and she takes it mutely with her left hand. It does not escape Bruce’s attention that her fingers are trembling. Even for Superman’s girlfriend, she’s had an awful night-- usually Clark saves her before she gets hurt.

This is something he absolutely does not want to do. It is something he absolutely must do. The bones felt ragged enough, snapped under the force of a two and a half inch baseball bat barrel, that he’s worried not immobilizing it could cause nerve or muscle damage.

Bruce unclips the end of the ace bandage.

“When I wrap your arm, we’re going to have to straighten it out, hold the joints still. I want you to stay as limp as possible. It’s going to take a minute to roll the bandage and if you pull away, it’s going to make it worse. It might help to focus on something else.”

“That will be easy,” she says, faintly sarcastic. “There’s so much to see and do here.”

He looks around the jet; the light outside the windows is the mere sliver of moonlight. Inside is lit but there are closed panels or unlabeled buttons all around. Her sarcasm is a good sign, though. And it gives him an idea; he remembers the first time Alfred splinted a limb for him. He had been angry and in pain, unwilling to hold still, and Alfred had calmly recited Tennyson at him to distract them both, influencing his pain management techniques forever after.

“I am going to recite something for you, something that always reminds me of Clark,” he says suddenly, wanting her full attention. He has it. Even with her pain and nerves, she raises one eyebrow in a mix of amusement and surprise. He continues. “All I want you to do is focus on my voice. If you need to scream or cry or groan, go ahead. It’s not going to startle me and I wouldn’t think less of you.”

This time, instead of sarcasm, she just nods and holds out her arm, wincing.

He holds it on either side of the break, very cautiously, and takes up one of the splints. He can still hear Alfred’s Tennyson in his head, from over a decade ago. He can still remember reading Sandburg and thinking of the Kent’s farmhouse, the first time he saw it.

“O prairie mother, I am one of your boys.
I have loved the prairie as a man with a heart shot full of pain over love.
Here I know I will hanker after nothing so much as one more sunrise or a sky moon of fire
doubled to a river moon of water.”

Lois holds the upper splint in place while he wraps the bandage. A groan escapes her. Bruce ignores it.

“I speak of new cities and new people.
I tell you the past is a bucket of ashes.
I tell you yesterday is a wind gone down,
a sun dropped in the west.
I tell you there is nothing in the world
only an ocean of to-morrows,
a sky of to-morrows.

I am a brother of the cornhuskers who say
at sundown:
To-morrow is a day.”

Bruce secures the bandage with the final syllable. Lois exhales noisily, pushing out pain and
sucking in relief, and slumps back on her seat, her arm carefully held just a little aloft, sweat beading on her brow. Her mascara is running. She rubs it away with her left hand, on instinct, pulling at the skin around her eyes with her fingertips to smudge it all the way off.

“I have a sling,” he says, digging in the first aid box again.

“Thank you,” she says, and he knows she doesn’t mean just the sling. “I don’t even know what to say to that.”

“Say to what?” He asks, raising an eyebrow. “You handled that very well.”

“What the hell was that medicine?” She asks again, yawning. “I think it’s knocking me out.”

“You’re probably experiencing mild acute stress,” he says, “as a reaction to the broken bone.”

“Fine. You don’t want to tell me.”

“Ibuprofen,” he says. “That’s all.”

“Shit,” she says, paling even more. “I was hoping it was really strong. Vicodin maybe. That’s why I thought to chew it.”

“Well, it probably won’t work as well now that you know.”

“Truth is pain. What is it with you and placebos?” she asks, sounding annoyed.

“They’re effective,” Bruce says. “And non-habit forming. But Alfred can get you something stronger when we get to the cave.”

“I’m sort of excited to see it,” she admits, with a wry smile. “I’ve heard so much about it, but Clark sometimes exaggerates.”

He packs the first aid kit back under the seat. He makes a mental note to restock it later.

“The laptop should have dried out by now,” he says, leaning over to grab the plastic bag full of white beads. The beads are a little larger now, spongy through the plastic. “If I mirror the drive, do you want to help me go through files? We have two hours of flight time left. It’s alright if you’d rather not.”

The offer and the request feel awkward in his mouth, but he knows she’ll do better if he keeps her busy. Plus, she’s likely to actually be helpful.

“Please,” she says, as he pulls the laptop from the bag and brushes a few beads off, picking them up and dropping them into the bag again. “Just tell me what to look for.”

It is two hours of fruitless searching. There are unfinished academic papers, notes, ideas, plans, pictures, videos, everything related to Jeanine Kowalski’s other research-- but nothing that they need or want. He trusts Lois to see things that she knows are significant, but he double-checks most of the files she goes over, just in case.

When they reach the cave, it is the middle of the night.

Dick is sitting inside with Clark, perched on a railing. He hops down when the jet cockpit opens.

“Any change?” Bruce asks, before he’s even all the way out of the jet. He knows the answer. Dick would have called or texted if anything serious had changed. “Dick, you remember Lois
Dick would have called or texted if anything serious had changed. “Dick, you remember Lois Lane. Lois, this is Dick Grayson.”

Bruce helps Lois down from the jet, accounting for her weakened balance.

He knows the cave is impressive. He is not surprised when she does not see any of it. She only has eyes for Clark. She jogs up the stairs, taking them by twos, to get to the medical unit landing. Bruce follows, slowly, after retrieving the laptop and ruined files.

Clark is on the white-sheeted gurney, quiet and still. There are several blankets on him and an electric heater blowing air directly toward him. His kryptonite-weakened skin has allowed puncture, and so there is a saline drip running through an IV. An oxygen mask is on his face.

It is all guesswork. As Clark slips closer and closer to true coma, Bruce can only guess what will prove helpful, falling back on traditional human methods and treatments to maintain life at a basic level. Diodes on Clark’s scalp and neck are measuring brain activity, which is at least somewhere in what is considered normal ranges, even though there are spikes or dips occasionally.

“Why down here?” Lois asks after a moment, looking around at the cave, lit by artificial lights. “I’ve been meaning to ask that for hours.”

“With the way the kryptonite has corrupted his system, I wanted to be certain that sun was not exacerbating the problem. I’m reasonably sure it’s not. So the next step is to get him closer to the sun, as close as I can manage and keep him breathing.”

“But it’s all just bandaids,” Lois says softly, her uninjured hand on Clark’s face. She looks at Bruce and there is nothing but determination in her eyes. “You have to fix this. You know that, right?”

“I know,” Bruce says. And he is not certain that he will be able to. If it were a sheer act of will, nothing could stand against him. But there is only so much one can do about blood. And he knows this, too.

“Give me the laptop,” Lois says. “I will comb over everything again.”

He hands it to her, then calls across the cave.

“Dick, we’ve gotta go. Suit up.”

“You’re not the boss of me!” Dick calls back, but he’s already got his mask on.

“Alfred, make sure Lois has anything she needs. She’ll need a ride to the hospital later.”

“Car?” Dick asks from the walkway below. “Bikes?”

Bruce almost says bikes. They’re maneuverable and fast. But so is the Batmobile, and it would be nice to have Dick in the passenger seat again, just for an evening. He’s feeling oddly sentimental; maybe it’s the stress. There is a possibility, though, that they’ll need to split up after, to take care of different things.

“Bikes,” he says.

And they take off, roaring through the Gotham streets to the south docks.
Dick Grayson wishes Bruce had opted for the Batmobile. Normally, he carefully guards his independence, but these are unusual circumstances. He would have appreciated a moment or two to study Bruce in the car, to feel him out and get a handle on how Bruce is doing with all of this. It’s hard to tell. It’s hard to ask. It’s hard to see, over the commlinks, on speeding motorcycles.

He wishes they were in the Batmobile.

Are you okay? He sends, quickly, wanting to keep stuff off the commlink.

“Stop texting while you drive,” Bruce says over the commlink, sternly.

Except it’s not Bruce, not right now. It’s Batman.

And so Dick Grayson is Nightwing.

Questions of that nature can wait.

“What are we up against?” Nightwing asks as they round a curve. They’re in warehouse territory now; acres of cargo containers and hoists, concrete and cinderblock and brick buildings crumbling in the damp, salty air. “What’s the objective?”

“There is a man turning himself over to the North Koreans. We’re going to make sure it happens.”

“And?” Nightwing says, slowing his bike when Batman edges his over into building shadows.

“Does there have to be anything else?” Batman replies, shutting off the engine of his bike. Nightwing follows suit.
“No, not at all. I really *like* that you dragged us both all the way out here to sit and watch. Did you bring popcorn?”

“Nightwing,” Batman says, pulling out his grappling hook, “Shut up.”

“I have a ship at 300 meters from your location,” Oracle says over the comm. “The *Xoh Paek*, on pier 34. They docked an hour ago, ostensibly to park and fix some navigation computer issues. Coast Guard hasn’t made an appearance.”

“O,” Nightwing says, recoiling his grappling hook at the top of the building. “Batman is not being completely forthcoming.”

“Big shocker,” she says, immediately followed by, “Sorry, Bats, but it is what it is.”

“Don’t throw tautologies at me,” Batman says, holding a pair of night vision binoculars to his mask.

Nightwing envies Oracle this, the casual way she can talk to him and not offend. It should reassure him-- it’s the line, he supposes, between colleague and son. She’s a bit more than a colleague, but he’s mostly a son.

“Forthcoming?” She echoes a second later. “Have you been reading Jane Austen?”

“Brontë,” Nightwing replies easily. “*Jane Eyre*. It feels like home. *Mr Rochester* reminds me of someone I know.”

Even if he’s jealous of the way she can talk to Batman, he’s completely at ease with her. It wasn’t always this way, but they’ve gotten there again.

“Try *Wuthering Heights* next,” she says. “That *Heathcliff* could give our man some pointers.”

“Quiet,” Batman says suddenly, interrupting them both. “Radio silence til my clear.”
The commlink goes dead.

Batman motions toward the distant pier and Nightwing flicks on the night vision in his mask. Batman has the same tech in the cowl, he's sure, but is a bit old school about his binoculars.

There's a man, tall and thin, walking down the pier away from the hulk of a dark gray cargo ship. Nightwing watches for a moment, studying the gait. The man's hands are empty, as far as he can tell, but he could have a gun under his jacket.

It's not very cold out. Like, at all. Even with the breeze from the bay.

“He's going away from the ship,” Nightwing observes.

Batman is very hard to read. Unusually so. More than standard for cowl time.

Which means he's angry.

Furious.

Nightwing can feel it now, crackling in the air around him like an unstable force field.

“I'm going to venture to guess that this is what you weren't talking about.”

“They're on the ship,” Batman says. “Damn it to hell.”

“Now would be a great time to clue me in.”

“That's Ira Graham,” Batman says, as the figure pulls the jacket more tightly around his thin frame. “And he just sold everything about the Kryptonite virus to the North Koreans.”

The words are trembling with fury.
“I think I'll get him,” Nightwing says, “while you make a plan for boarding the ship. Did you bring our passports?”

He can't help it. The words come out of him. He doesn't know if it's defense or habit, wisdom or folly, desperate attempts at defusing the ticking time bomb that is Batman’s rage—just enough to dampen things, not enough to extinguish it.

“Dick,” Batman says, packing the binoculars into his utility belt. He seems to be wrestling internally. The use of his real name catches Nightwing’s attention. His whole body is taut, ready to spring off the building. If he can get there first, maybe he can minimize the damage.

Then he thinks of Clark Kent, on a wheeled bed in the Batcave, murmuring in Kryptonese, his eyes blank with unsight, the hiss of oxygen pushing through the mask on his mouth and nose. Maybe it would be better for Batman to reach the man first.

“Make sure he knows,” Batman says, “that you are the reason he will be able to walk tomorrow.”

“I'll tell him if it ends up being true,” Nightwing responds. “Where should I squirrel him away?”

“I don't want to talk to him,” Batman says, watching the man turn a corner off the pier. “Take him to Gordon. He’ll hold him.”

“What are you going to do with all your free time?” Nightwing asks. He still can't help himself. It's feeling more like a survival mechanism.

“I'm going to go get those files.”

Nightwing wants to talk him out of this. He feels like even on a good day, Batman v. Cargo Ship Full of Antsy North Korean Military would not and could not end well.

“What should I do instead? Subpoena them?” Batman challenges Nightwing’s unvoiced hesitation, as if reading his thoughts.
“Get the files,” Nightwing says, thinking again of Clark, about how much is at stake. “And maybe pray this guy makes it to Gordon, because now my mood is pretty iffy.”

Nightwing leaps before Batman can say anything else, and there is the minor triumph of having the last word. Then the commlink comes back to life.

“Don't kill him. Even for this,” Batman says in his ear. “But God help him if he doesn't get the chair for treason.”

Chapter End Notes

this was up late and i owe you guys another chapter today!
Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Notes

HERE'S A REALLY LONG CHAPTER.

*N enroute with traitor. Will supply evidence within 24 hours. Arrest him.*

Batman sends the message to Gordon before Nightwing's boots even hit the ground. He has to take a breath to steady his hands to do it. He's glad Nightwing was with him tonight; if he'd been solo, Ira Graham would have made it to GPD alive...mostly.

He watches for a moment. Nightwing takes the man down easily, no fight.

Now to figure out the best way to find those paper files from the ship, when he has no idea where to start looking or the layout of the ship's interior. That last one he might actually be able to fix now.

“O,” he says. “Can you get blueprints of the *Xoh Paek* to me?”

“I can,” she says, hedging. “But it’s going to be the base model. It’s not going to account for any modifications they’ve made. Sending it to your overlay now.”

“Back to radio silence, excepting emergencies.”

“Got it. O out.”

The layout, faint green, glows in his field of vision over the night sky and pier. He studies it for a moment. It is dated fifteen years prior. It’s pretty likely they’ve made some changes. His phone buzzes.

*Some context here, B. Traitor a codename? Will arrest.*
Treason, Batman types. N. Koreans. Do not let him post bail.

Big fish. So, no vacation. Gordon replies.

There’s movement on the pier and Batman pulls the binoculars up to his mask again.

The North Koreans are undocking, throwing ropes overboard, hauling up anchors on dripping chains as thick as his torso. If they had any reason to actually believe that Sebastián Rojas still had Superman, Ira Graham must have undone it. He doesn’t know if they’re heading all the way home or just hiding out in open water for the next part.

So many unknowns. Too many.

He swings down by grappling hook, sprinting in the shadows down the pier, and leaps for a rope. His body slams against the hull of the ship, at the port stern, and he dangles in the air for a moment waiting, making sure he was far enough down that he didn’t alert anyone over the slushing bay water.

When he’s certain, he climbs hand over hand up to the railing and after a cursory glance around, flips over. The overlay is still in his field of vision and he decides to treat it as accurate and catalog adjustments as he goes.

The next ten minutes is a mix of creeping, hiding, and listening. The last thing he wants to do is get the entire ship fighting him while he still has no idea where the files are and they’re sailing away from Gotham.

His best bet is to find the captain’s cabin. With information like that, it’s not likely to be stored in a cargo hold or navigation room. Unless, of course, there’s an entire room dedicated to state secrets. There are snippets of overheard conversation, but the crew seems to be few in number (fortunate) and quiet (unfortunate). His Korean is decent, especially after brushing up in the past few days, so that helps.

Getting to the captain’s cabin is a challenge and he has to make a few changes in the layout overlay, but he manages it. Very, very carefully.
He is not at the hatch, but in a utility room right next to the cabin. Batman pulls a small device out of his utility belt and presses it against the bulkhead, listening as it amplifies sounds from inside. Talking.

“<-Colombians. We left without contact. They do not have the package. We have proof the formula is effective.>”

Batman waits until the phone or radio call has ended and the room has fallen silent except for the sounds of someone moving around, maybe writing or eating.

The plan forming in his mind is not his preferred route of action. He already fought some Colombians tonight, but after seeing Ira Graham on the pier he was really hoping to at least get to knock a few more people out.

But he cannot afford to wait until the occupant of the room falls asleep or leaves. The ship is even now distancing itself from Gotham. He is now reasonably sure that the files are within the cabin; how hard they will be to find is an unknown. The chances of neutralizing or disabling the occupant are pretty high; the chances he will be able to do so before the man sounds some kind of alarm are slim. He’s assuming on a ship of this class and with military upgrades, the cabin is equipped with a panic button of some kind.

The ship’s passageways are narrow, making this more difficult, but he has the advantage of surprise. His speed can carry him. When he needs to, he can fly, in his own way.

At the hatch, he considers for a moment, and knocks.

“<Come in>” comes the answer. He opens, ready for action. Fortunately, the man is eating, sitting with his back to him. He doesn’t turn.

Batman starts working quickly, scanning the room, a waterproof bag from his utility belt already in his gloved hand. There is a manilla envelope on the desk, just past the captain’s table, and Batman uses the magnification in the cowl to look-- the tables are in Oren Bordeaux’s handwriting. They’re real.

“<You can take this now,>” The captain says, finally turning.

And he bursts into motion. The captain is half-rising in his chair, starting to shout the alarm, when
Batman grabs the folder, slams his fist into the captain’s face to silence him, and turns on one booted foot, kicking off for resistance in the middle of his spin. His slips the folder into the bag as he runs, letting the autoseal work. Thank God for small tech.

Shouts rise behind him, and then ahead of him. The alert has been sounded anyway. He thinks through the layout as he tears down a passageway, cape flapping out behind him. He grabs it out of the air on the next turn, wrapping it around his wrist so it doesn’t snag on anything while he runs.

Now men are pouring out of the cabins. He had maybe underestimated the number of the crew.

He uses the bulkhead as leverage to launch himself over the heads of three very surprised men, diving into a roll, and back up onto his feet still running. He comes out into a galley of some sort and that’s where they open fire.

He jumps for the ladder and hits it already halfway up, and then he’s out, on the open deck, sprinting for the stern. There is yelling all around him, the Korean phrases a mix of fear and outrage. They weren’t expecting anything like him.

Batman rolls the waterproof bag as he runs, forcing the stiff manilla paper into the shape. He clips it to his utility belt, not losing speed. There is more gunfire. They’re just shooting wildly at him, trying to hit anything or slow him down.

A few of them must guess what he’s going to do and have gathered at the stern, guns raised. One of them is shouting a warning at him. There’s a beam overhead, leftover from the days when ships were designed for masts. It actually probably has radio functionality now. He lets go of his cape, depresses the button on a grappling hook aimed at speed.

It lifts as it arcs him through the air, over more heads. More gunfire. A bullet tears a hole in his cape.

This was far faster than fighting through one at a time, but it’s also a lot less satisfying. He curves through the air, twisting into a flip the moment he lets go of the grappling line, and hits the water in a straight dive. The water is frigid, even in the suit, and he goes down ten or eleven feet with the force of the jump and the angle of his body.

He swims underwater for as long as he can manage and then resurfaces. The boat is a good bit behind him, more than he was expecting, and he realizes they must be speeding into a turn.
Gotham is a hazy skyline in the distance. He swims. He makes sure the rolled, waterproof tube is still safe, attached. The ship cannot turn very quickly and he’s not too worried that they will find him in the dark water.

Then the first wave of adrenaline fades. He knows, because he’s freezing and because his leg feels like it is on fire, straight through the bones. Batman stops swimming, treading water instead, and uses his small flashlight underwater. There are twin streams of blood trickling out from either side of his left calf.

It’s the Atlantic. It’s summer. There’s over a quarter of a mile between him and the pier, which normally wouldn’t be a problem. But blood in open waters means possibly sharks.

He activates the commlink.

“Batman to all points. I’m going to need a pickup.”

“Getting your location,” O says. “Wait...are you...in the ocean?”

“I am,” he says. “Swimming for shore. Have Nightwing meet me there.”

“What level of emergency is this?” She asks suspiciously.

“Code Yellow,” he replies. “I just need a shore pick up.”

“On it,” Nightwing chimes in. “We should have brought the Batmobile. Should I get it?”

“No,” Batman says, thinking yes. He sucks in a breath of air. He’s been swimming while they talk and his leg feels like the bone has been replaced with a red hot poker. But it will fade. The important thing now is to keep moving, to make it to the pier and then the cave.

After a week, he finally has the file.
He tries to alternate using both legs and just using one. As long as he maintains some speed, he minimizes the risk of a shark attack. The wound is bleeding some but it's not a gaping, dumping wound. The swimming at night increases the risk but there's only so much he can control.

It takes him fifteen minutes instead of the ten he expected. Nightwing is standing at the end of an empty pier, high wooden beams backed by tall concrete retaining walls. Batman grabs one of the posts and leans on it for a moment. Before he can get out a grappling hook, Nightwing has spotted him and swings down.

“The guys at the bar are never going to believe this fish story,” he says, smirking, but Batman has known him since he was ten years old. He is worried.

“Just a leg wound. Nothing else,” Batman says.

“Cool story, bro,” Nightwing says, standing on the concrete block the pier beam is planted in, the water lapping at his black boots. “Can I give you a hand?”

Batman has one hand on his grappling hook. The fatigue hits him like a truck. He shakes his head.

“I'll meet you up there,” he says to Nightwing as the hook buries itself in the pier with a thwack. It drags him out of the water, dripping, and he hauls himself up on the pier and that's when his muscles give out.

He lays on his back, his legs dangling over the side of the pier, trickling water and blood down over his boots.

Nightwing’s face appears above him, worry plain around the mask.

“I'm fine,” Batman says. “Just swam a half mile, give me a minute.”

“We should have brought the Batmobile,” Nightwing says again, sitting next to him. “How much blood do you think you've lost?”

“Two pints,” Batman says, taking stock of himself and how his heart is beating, how his lungs are
“I've been thinking that all night, about the Batmobile.”

“Let's go,” Nightwing says, standing. “C’mon, up, right now. I don't want you bleeding out on the back of my cycle. And we are,” he leans over to look Batman straight in the face of the mask, “taking my bike. Together.”

Batman does not argue or agree. He rolls to one side and pushes himself up, catching his balance on one foot, recentering his gravity to avoid using his left leg.

Nightwing is already halfway down the pier and Batman limps after him, hissing the first time he puts any weight on his leg. It is like acid, burning in and out. He's going slowly, and he can feel the blood pooling inside his boot, inside the leg of the suit. He knows he'll regret it later, but he forces himself to walk on it.

He hasn't even made it off the pier yet when Nightwing returns on the cycle. He spins the bike around and pulls up next to Batman.

“Wait,” Batman says, snapping open a pouch on the belt. There's clotting powder inside, the same stuff he used on Cary Valera. The fact that he didn't think of it until just now is only a sign of how muddled his mind must be. If he takes any strong painkillers right now, it's going to push him straight over the edge into uselessness.

He tears open the pale yellow packet and doesn't even bother cutting away the suit. He pours the powder straight onto the wound, the right side first.

“Fuuu,” he chews the word in half, not finishing. There is more relief in the bitten control, as the powder makes contact. It's like pouring gasoline onto fire. He leans against the bike, steadying himself.

“Is the bullet still inside?” Nightwing asks, still perched on the bike’s seat.

“No,” Batman says gruffly. “Clean through.”

And before he can think about it or hesitate, he dumps the second half of the packet on the left side wound.
The noise that escapes him this time, through tightly pressed lips, isn't even a word or anything like one, and the primal sound is more angry than anything else. His vision starts to go black around the edges, but he forces himself to focus.

He's halfway through internally reciting his second numbered list, a catalog of largest lakes by volume, with his face bent to the concrete beneath his feet when he realizes Nightwing’s hand is on his arm.

“Do you have anything to eat?” He asks, lifting his head. Nightwing's expression is bemused.

“I know a great burger joint a few blocks from here,” he smirks.

“Will they make something to go?”

“Wait, are you serious?” Nightwing’s snark and worry both fall away into surprise. “Right now?”

“I need a clear head,” Batman says, slowly climbing on the bike. “And if I eat something on the way-”

“Alfred won't make you take opioids.” Nightwing finishes, gunning the engine. “Damn it, why do you have to be so clever all the time? Yeah, I know a place I can get something fast. That diner on Melrose is still open.”

He lets go of the hand grips and does something on his phone that Batman can't see. Batman doesn't have much of an appetite, but he discovered pretty early on that eating anything right before taking strong painkillers made him nauseous for hours. Alfred might insist on a lot, but not this, not tonight.

“Cheese?” Nightwing asks after a second. “It'd be American.”

“Anything. I don't care.”

“O, have Robin get the Batcycle,” Batman says into the commlink as Nightwing pulls away from the pier.
They ride in silence, the wind pushing water off the cape, the cowl, the suit, as they speed through the dark early morning streets. Nightwing takes a sharp turn into an alley without slowing, and Batman has to shift his balance. The pain in his leg, which had dulled in intensity, flares up again.

The bike slows by a small step in the alley. There's a small paper brown bag sitting there. Nightwing shuts off the cycle, puts a $10 bill where the bag was sitting and weighs it down with a broken brick.

And they are off again. The gaps between streetlights create a strobe light sensation in the pre-dawn dark.

Nightwing stops, once more, just inside the cave. The vehicle bay is another hundred yards ahead. Batman climbs off the cycle, pivoting on his good leg, and accepts the foil-wrapped hamburger Nightwing offers him.

They sit with their backs against the cave wall, cool and damp in the dark. The dehydrators don't work this close to the entrance and there is the perpetual smell of wet rock.

“We should wrap that,” Dick says, peeling his mask off and letting it dangle from his fingers.

Bruce pushes the cowl off his forehead and unwraps the burger. He forces himself to eat.

“No point. I'll be done in a minute.”

“How are you doing?” Dick asks, tracing a shape with the toe of his boot on the gritty cave floor. “I wish I'd gotten a milkshake.”

“Like old times,” Bruce says with a faint smile. “I used to get you those coffee shakes right before we came home. Alfred would be furious.”

Dick laughs. It's a good sound. “Because you'd go to sleep and I'd follow him around talking for an hour straight. I still love those things.”
“I’m done,” Bruce says, wadding up the foil.

Dick springs to his feet and offers Bruce a hand. Bruce takes it and lets Dick pull him up onto his good leg.

“Let’s just walk,” Bruce says, putting an arm around Dick’s shoulders. “If you think you can handle it.”

“You're lightweight,” Dick replies. “I don't even feel you. It's like helping a feather. Are you okay?”

Bruce has been dancing around it but he knows Dick won't rest now until he gets an answer, or until they fight and he leaves, angry and hurt.

“I’m ready for this to be over,” he says. “And to make sure it never happens again.”

“Master Bruce!” Alfred’s voice carries down the cave, sharp and sudden.

“Miss Gordon alerted me to a Code Yellow and said you left the pier fifteen minutes ago,” the older man chastises, coming down the wide hall to meet them. He already has an apron on.

“Clark?” Bruce asks.

“Is much the same. I fear that cannot be said of you.”

“You aren’t going to be very happy, Alfred,” Dick warns. Bruce resists the urge to elbow him in the side. “We got hungry.”

“You didn’t.” Alfred gasps, giving Bruce such a fierce look that Bruce almost feels like a child again. Almost.

“And you’re going to work while I work, Alfred. No time off tonight,” Bruce says. His voice retains authority.
“Very well, sir,” Alfred says. “Are we skipping the localized anesthetic, as well?”

Bruce’s eyes narrow. Alfred doesn’t blink.

“No,” Dick says, helping Bruce up the steps to the computer platform. “We are going to play nice. I will even make the coffee.”

Alfred softens a little at this and nods. “That would be greatly appreciated, Master Dick.”

Bruce slumps back in the chair at the computer desk. He reconsiders, leans forward, unfastens his cape and drapes it over the back of the chair, along with the cowl.

By the time Alfred joins him with a tray of surgical instruments and a stool for his foot, he has the manilla folder out of the plastic bag and spread in front of him on the desk. He’s looking intently over the papers, turning them over slowly, keeping them in order. His leg is a battered ache in the back of his mind, locked out of his thoughts by great effort.

“Lois?” Bruce asks, without looking up.

“Asleep, sir. In a chair. Would you please put your leg up?”

Bruce tears his attention away from the papers long enough to gingerly lift his foot and prop his leg up on the stool. Alfred has put an absorbent sheet under the stool, and when Bruce slowly pulls the boot off his foot, blood and sea water drip out onto the crinkling paper. Alfred leaves and returns with a standing lamp, bright and medical.

And then he is lost in the papers, hungry for information, devouring the data that has eluded his grasp over and over again. He is vaguely aware of Alfred cutting away the suit below the knee, peeling it carefully off his skin. It snags around one of the holes, where the dried blood and clotting powder cling to the fabric. Bruce closes his eyes and swears under his breath. Alfred does not apologize.

He feels the prick of the shots, the chilly burn of the numbing solution counteracting the fiery burn of the wound. But then when Alfred is probing around gently in the wound, examining the
damage with a lens, Bruce feels next to nothing-- the butler had mercy on him, then, and maybe used even more anesthetic than usual.

The paragraphs of dense organic chemistry slow him just a little. He reads them twice to make sure he understands. The molecular structures are sketched out on pale blue paper, long strings of letters above and below. He reads them again, and again.

“Shiga toxin,” he says, comprehending.

“I’m assuming that is not a new expletive,” Alfred observes.

Things start making sense now.

“E. coli,” Bruce says, turning to look down the platform at Clark. “They bound weaponized e. Coli to Kryptonite at the molecular level. The Kryptonite weakened his only natural defense, and he has no other immune system to speak of. I can’t believe I didn’t recognize it sooner. Hemolytic-uremic syndrome. It’s premature blood cell death.”

“For a man who doesn’t bleed,” Alfred says, pulling a stitch tight. “And the solution?”

Bruce returns to the papers, silent. He reads more quickly, scanning details and absorbing summations on the pages. There is one page, tabbed, that has a different structure sketched out, another line of letters. The note in bold at the end of the text emphasizes that this is a theoretical treatment. Bruce reads the whole page over, three times.

“Master Bruce?” Alfred is kneeling, the suture gut and metal instrument motionless in his hands, mid-stitch. “I might recommend breathing soon. I assume the news is not good?”

Bruce leans his chin into his hands, his arms tented in an inverted V on the desk over the paper.

Alfred finishes the sutures and collects the supplies on the tray. He stands, stretching his stiff knees as he does so. He is patient, waiting by the chair, untying the apron.

“The antidote is a form of chelation therapy.”
“But your tone leads me to believe it is not so simple,” Alfred says.

“It’s untested, obviously,” Bruce says. “And chelation therapy is usually used for removal of lead from the human body, using water soluble organosulfur. But Kowalski posits that lead itself could be used to disarm the kryptonite, even at this level.”

“Lead poisoning.” Alfred surmises.

“It’s problematic,” Bruce says slowly. “There is a chance that his defenses are so weakened that the lead will not work quickly enough.”

“That is a problem.”

“And I have to consider the possibility that Kowalski, Bordeaux, and Graham-- one or all of them-- never intended for him to survive, that this itself is the final blow.”

It is very possible, Bruce thinks. The North Koreans attempting to navigate hostage negotiations and unintentionally killing Superman publicly in the process would almost certainly produce the war that Ira Graham desired.

This was not the answer he was hoping for. This was a possibility he should have prepared for.

He’s going to have to make a decision.

“Hey, guys,” Dick’s voice calls down into the cave at the same time Bruce’s phone rings.

Bruce looks at the ID. It’s Jim Gordon. He can’t think of the last time Jim called him instead of texting.

“Gordon is on the phone,” Bruce calls out, at those behind him and at Dick on the upper level. “No names.”
“Jim, what’s wrong?” he answers. He would fear the worst, but he’s afraid it’s already in the room with him.

“Um, hey,” Dick tries again, this time coming down the stairs. Alfred shushes him loudly and then leaves for the medical platform. Lois Lane is stirring. “Maybe turn on the news?”

“You need to tell me what the hell is wrong,” Jim says angrily over the phone at the same time. “You’ve been mixed up in some pretty insane stuff before, but this is pushing the envelope.”

“What are you talking about?” Bruce pulls up current news on the computer. There’s a stream of a national network broadcast-- two of them, three of them, four. He picks one and it fills the screen, the sound muted. His eyes widen. He turns up the sound, the phone still at his ear.

It is buzzing relentlessly. The commlink is buzzing now, too, and then beeping, with an influx of contact attempts. The Justice League comm joins in the fray.

“Good Lord,” Alfred exclaims quietly from the lower level.

“Just watch,” Jim growls. “They’re running what they have on repeat. And then you can fill me in. I’ll stay on the line.”

The newscaster is speaking while the news ticker scrolls by on the bottom of the screen.

NORTH KOREA ON DEFENSIVE. US MILITARY ACCUSED OF VIGILANTE TACTICS. COLOMBIAN LEADERS DECLINE TO COMMENT.

Dick joins him at the desk with a cup of coffee he isn’t drinking.

The images are of the Xoh Paek at sea. There are stills and security camera footage on the upper right hand corner. The security camera is a two-second clip of Batman sprinting down the ship’s deck, a folder in his hand, the video on a loop. The imprint on the video is Korean military text, most of it blurred out.

“Our source tells us that North Korean forces are mobilizing at their head military bases, preparing to go on the defensive after The Batman, an oft-criticized vigilante operating mainly out of
Gotham city, attacked a North Korean diplomacy mission ship early this morning, allegedly killing a high-ranking officer and stealing classified information. It is unclear at this time whether or not the Batman was acting in cooperation with the American military in the continued absence of Superman, but the Department of Defense and National Security Association are both staunchly denying any claims that they were aware of the Batman’s actions. We go to DC now, with Kate Hajira.”

“Hi, Dan, thanks. I’m here in Washington, D.C. with Zachary Mendes, a security guard at the federal evidence holding unit that was the location of a shooting last week. He contacted us after seeing the initial reports and his employers have confirmed his presence at the incident. Now, Zachary, you were the surviving guard that night, is that correct?”

“Yeah, yeah,” A nervous man with pale hair says, nodding to the camera, the microphone in his face. Bruce recognizes him. He is not lying.

“In fact, you were the guard who discharged a weapon, is that correct?” There is offscreen mumbling, a moment of pause. “I’m being told not to have you answer that question on television, Mr. Mendes. I’m so sorry. Can you tell me why you contacted the station?”

“I saw him! I saw him. I thought at first he was saving me, you know? The Batman.” Zachary’s words are tumbling out of him, disorganized. “He fought one of the Colombians but it must have been a diversion, I don’t know. It’s been bothering me ever since. He told me not to tell anyone he was there. He saved the gunman’s life, he made me call 911. He told me not to tell anyone.”

The camera cuts back to a newsdesk. “We have a psychologist here with us, a specialist in the arena of combat and military relationships. Thank you so much for coming in so early, Dr. Fielding. He has some thoughts on the situation. We’ll have a retired law enforcement officer from the DEA to comment on the possibility of an illegal Colombian plot.”

“Well, Dan,” a heavyset doctor says, sipping from a glass of water. “I can’t speak to the closeness of the relationship between The Batman and Superman, but we do know they’ve worked together in a professional capacity. The Batman has always been considered to be a bit of an unstable mind, among my colleagues, and with the prolonged absence and suspected death of Superman, the strain that would create on a mind invested in a combat-forged relationship would…”

“Well?” Jim says in his ear. Everything is buzzing or vibrating or ringing or beeping. Not a single person in the cave speaks.

“I…” Bruce starts and stops. He is enraged. He is terrified. What has he done? How did he not consider the security cameras? That the North Koreans would actually dare use them, even if it
made themselves look momentarily weak?

“The North Koreans are insane,” Jim says, “We knew that. But you just gave them a reason to start WWIII! And I have a man in custody that I absolutely cannot charge with treason without bringing the floodlights of international news down on Gotham. As it is, they are going to rake my ass over the coals just for working with you. If I charge this guy right now to move him out of booking, which I got out of bed at two in the morning to do, how is that going to look? And something tells me that they’ll get court orders for my phone pretty quickly. And suddenly I’m an accomplice. So are you going to tell me what the hell is going on?”

“Jim, I have to go. I’ll call you.”

Bruce hangs up the phone over the sound of Jim yelling.

He turns slowly in his chair, pulling his leg off the stool.

“I need to go to work,” Lois says, pale and on her feet. “I need to go right now. Perry is going to lose his shit. I don’t know what this mess is going to turn into, but you’re going to need at least one voice telling people Superman isn’t dead. And if he does die…” she trails off and kisses Clark’s head. She stands. “If you don’t fix this, then maybe it doesn’t matter.”

“I’ll give you a ride,” Dick says to her, sounding eager to do something. “We’ll take the jet. Bruce?”

Bruce does not speak. The whole thing is spiraling wildly. He is desperately trying to maintain focus; he cannot grasp the flailing edges of control.


“Bruce,” the voice comes sharp from the computer screen, muting the news. He doesn’t turn. He knows without looking that it is Barbara Gordon. She must have directly connected and overridden the code to accept or deny video calls. “I have been trying to get in touch with you for over ten minutes. I know you’re awake. I have hot weapons coming online in North Korea. Are you listening to me? I can’t get in the system for more than a minute or two but they’ve got weapons locked onto Gotham and Bogota, Colombia. They aren’t sure who to be mad at but they’re pretty damn trigger happy right now.
“And the Justice League has been told to bring you in. Do you understand? They have no idea what is going on because you told me not to tell anyone and apparently aren’t answering anybody’s calls. The United States sent a formal request five minutes ago to apprehend you until this is sorted out. They are on their way right now. All of them. I don’t know how you plan to fix this but now would be basically the best time to start.”

“I need to work,” Bruce says, without turning to face her. “Alfred, I need whatever lead chloride we have.”


“What?” He growls, finally turning.

“The Watchtower is empty right now.” She says, raising both eyebrows. “And if we don’t have time for explanations, then I can make some changes to security and buy you some time. I cannot do that for the cave.”

“Change of plans, Alfred,” Bruce says, tugging off his other boot, standing and forcing himself to use his leg as he strides to the medical platform. He’s limping but making good time. “Help me prep Clark.”

Bruce starts unhooking medical equipment, working quickly and carefully. He’s counting on the Flash to wait with the others, for them to make a grand, single charge and overpower him and his technology at once. J’onn has not been poking at his mind and Bruce isn’t sure if his own defenses are so much second nature now or if J’onn hasn’t even tried. He’s not sure which of them distrust him, and how much. He hasn’t done himself any favors there.

When he’s finished and Clark is untethered to any machine, he pulls out his phone and sends texts to Dick and Tim in a group chat.

*Stay away from cave.*

Clark is completely free of tubes and wires.

“Alfred,” Bruce says, suddenly unsure of what to say. “If I can’t..”
“It’s been an honor, Master Bruce,” Alfred says with a gentle smile. “And when you get home, I’ll make some tea and we can chat about it.”

This final show of confidence is a good note to go out on, Bruce supposes.

On the computer monitor, beside Barbara’s face, the news station is showing pictures of the Rojas siblings. The sound is still muted but Bruce guesses that the North Koreans are trying to instigate panic and see what falls apart.

With his leg on fire beneath him, he pulls the cowl and cape Alfred is offering back on over his face and back. He picks up Clark Kent’s limp body, surprised at how light and cold it seems. It feels like the world must end this way.

“Alfred,” he says. “Put those papers in the deep vault with the ones from Colombia.”

“Of course,” Alfred says, and Batman activates the teleporter.
Chapter Twenty

Bruce has been having nightmares.

They are not the old ones, worn out and familiar and horrific in their own little ways.

They are variations of a new theme.

In some, he is forced into the Watchtower and locked up, left behind by the Justice League. They disable the airlock doors, sabotage the Javelin-7, and destroy the teleporter. In this one, Diana tells him over the intercom as they speed away,

“This fight is too big for you.”

In others, his heart nearly rips itself out of his chest with the agony of meaning and desiring one thing while his mouth and feet do another: He is the one who tells them he will not help, he will not be a part of this, and he locks himself into a bunker beneath the Batcave. In that one, Flash won't look him in the eye.

In yet another version, he is restrained in a silo on the Kent farm, a deep well of concrete levels that does not exist (he is sure) in real life. The Kents do not come, and J’onn tells him it is for his own good, this is what everyone wants, Clark will save them all. He can see the Kents waiting on the porch at the point of impact, the mushroom clouds like a field of wildflowers all across the flat landscape for miles, while he beats against the steel and lead door and screams until he is hoarse. Clark does not come.

There is a fourth, in which he is racing across a desert in a hobbled together car, plumes of black diesel exhaust billowing behind him. It is so isolated he cannot tell if he is going toward the fight or fleeing it, both possibilities sitting in his gut like poison. This one, the ambiguous one, is the worst in some ways. He drives until sonic booms throw the car into the air, cities up in toxic smoke on either end of the road. He survives the wreck.

In the fifth of the variations, he is stranded at the Fortress. Hal Jordan flings him in through the icy walls and leaves him, without a word, and he huddles in the frigid air for hours, days, watching the satellite data show the scars of deleted cities as they blink out of existence across the globe.

In every single one, Clark is absent.

In every one, the end is the same. It is the terrifying moment when he realizes, after hours, days, or years, that he wasn't just kept from the fight or the last stand, but that no one is coming, there is no one to find, and despite the defenses, the fallbacks, the failsafes, the last resorts, the emergency plans of seven billion people, he is the last one alive.

The last man, the last human, the last living creature on the face or underbelly or sky of the earth, alone.

And it is his fault.

His fault that the world fell apart, that the world ate itself alive.

His fault that Clark is dead before it even begins.

In his waking moments, he recognizes most of these images as culled from a body of literature, pop culture, film-- the collective fear of global society incubated over the past fifty plus years.
But that doesn't make the dreams any less terrifying.

He has not been sleeping well, only for mere hours at a time in broken up blocks of minutes, cycling through three or four of the variations in one stretch, only when exhaustion keeps forcing his eyes closed. He is afraid to take sleeping pills, afraid he will lock himself into a dozen or more of the dreams and be unable to escape.

When he is awake, he focuses on the things he has to do. It is not over yet, in the waking world. He has threads to pull, leads to chase, men to beat for information. He tries not to think of the dreams. It is becoming harder to not think of them.

They are not truth, they are a portrait of dreaded possibilities, they are not reality.

They are beginning to consume his life.

Bruce has been having nightmares.
Chapter Twenty One

Batman wakes on the floor of the Watchtower transport room, disoriented. He couldn't have lost consciousness for more than a minute or two, he thinks, based on the position of the earth outside the bay window; he looks out half expecting to see a scorched barren planet, but it still looks as it should.

There is a smell of smoke in the air, burnt plastic and seared metal. He sits up, gathering himself into awareness. Clark is sprawled out next to him. He must have dropped him when he passed out. As much as he hates teleporting, it doesn't usually render him unconscious, but it's been a bad few weeks.

He looks around. There are scorch marks in the wall, across a panel fortunately free of electronics; the burn is a ragged line, zig-zagging up and down the wall in a chaotic swirl.

Clark must have panicked during the teleport. Bruce didn't even think to try to explain to him what was going on. The other man was blind, confused, and in pain. Teleport must have felt like a circle of hell. It could have been deadly, this mistake. Like a lot of other mistakes he's made recently. They are becoming constant companions.

“<Kal-el,>” Bruce says, raising himself on his uninjured leg and nudging him.

There is no response.

Clark is very faintly breathing.

“Batman?” Oracle’s voice comes through the Watchtower intercom. “Alfred is reporting that the League is in the cave and furious. He's asking if he should try to explain.”

“He can try,” Bruce says, shouldering the bag of lead again. “But I don't think they're in a listening mood. Try to stall them. Tell him to say I'm anywhere else. On the chance they want to act first, listen later, Superman could be gone by the time I get back up here.”

“How is he now?” Oracle asks, quietly. He can hear her typing. “They don't know you're there. Yet. They think you're at the Fortress.”
“Thank God for Alfred,” Bruce sighs. “And he's fading fast. I'm going to work. Keep me updated.”

He risks leaving Clark on the floor of the transport room and gets a stretcher from the medical bay and wheels it through the Watchtower, leaning heavily on it as his leg aches. It's starting to bleed through the gauze.

The whole walk to the medbay, he distracts himself from his leg and the entire situation by thinking through exactly what the best way to introduce rapid lead toxicity would be. He mentally outlines each step for himself as he hooks up saline, oxygen, EKG, and neural monitors.

Once in the workshop, he searches for a container of lead chloride. He could have sworn there would be some, but there isn't.

Another mistake, another step toward death.

He takes off the cowl and looks at it. It is lined with lead. There must be other lead items, around the tower, in the workshop. He finds a box of tiny lead ingots and decides he can't waste any more time; those and the cowl will have to be enough.

Then it's just a matter of following through. He dumps all the lead and the cowl into a deep kiln meant to withstand high temperatures. He melts the lead down, wearing a mask over his mouth and nose. Most of the pieces of disabled cowl go up in smoke, components and fabric melting away down to the lead lining; he has a vent running on high in the room. He pulls out any parts not melting down with tongs.

The lead cools in a block and he heads to the lab, stopping to check on Clark on the way. The heart rate is slowing, the neural scan is showing decreasing activity.

In the lab, he attaches electrodes to the block of lead and submerges it in sodium chloride. And then he sets a timer and waits, impatiently.

It's hard not to let his mind wander.

He doesn't let it.
When the timer beeps, he reduces the liquid under low heat and scrapes the resulting lead chloride into a container. There is a wall of containers of substances, he limps over to them and reads across the labels until he finds an medical grade acid that will work. He's glad he had the foresight, with Barry, to stock all of this just in case and that it’s actually there.

He dissolves the lead chloride in the acid, balances it with saline, and then he is done.

In the silence of the lab, he pipes the solution into an IV bag and heads for the medbay, focused on each individual step, not letting his mind go any farther forward or back in his own life than the next second, forcing himself instead into distraction.

Later, there may be time to let the weight drop onto his shoulders, to bear it on his back and in his mind, this disaster of looming nuclear war and a dead Superman, of the fear of Gotham in radioactive ash, one of his best and closest friends dead ultimately by his own hand, the possibility of failure an inescapable black horizon. But right now, he cannot dwell there.

He finds himself thinking of T. S. Eliot and it is not a comfort; there is nowhere to escape.

Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all:
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.
        So how should I presume?
Chapter Twenty Two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It is nine in the morning when Diana’s phone buzzes. She’s been on the move since six and has already been to the Batcave in Gotham and the Fortress of Solitude in the Arctic. Alfred showed them around and coldly made excuses at one and the other they couldn’t even get in, but Cyborg’s heat scans showed no bodies. She was also with the Flash when they showed up at the Kent farmhouse, where Jonathan Kent met them on the steps with a shotgun and swore he wouldn't tell them “a damn thing.”

Cyborg and J’onn have both insisted that the Watchtower has remained empty and now they are all drawing blanks. It was supposed to be, if not an easy job, a relatively fast one. Even with an understanding of their weaknesses, she expected Batman to put up a futile fight at best. And that's if he was actually unhinged, a possibility that lurked in the back of her mind in an unsettled way. If Clark was actually dead, it was not outside the realm of possibility as a distant consideration.

But instead, he had vanished. Almost as cleanly and simply as he and Clark had vanished almost two weeks ago, but the search had only been half-hearted; also, he had answered calls, then. And after all this time, he was right. He had insisted Jeanine Kowalski had not been alone, had not been working in isolation-- and it seemed now like he had been the one thinking clearly, not clouded by grief.

It feels as if the world is in an uproar, hinged on the brink of disaster, noisy and insistent. It has felt this way before. Those times did not end well.

But her phone vibrates and she looks at it.

Watchtower. Come alone. Please. -B

Diana stares at it. She isn't sure if she feels suspicion or anger or relief. The “please” causes her to lean toward suspicion; it is unlike him. Then again, they have worked together for a long time, and she wants to trust that he still has some idea about what he is doing. Maybe giving him a chance to explain himself without the others around would be a good idea. And if he's up for a fight, despite their group precautions, she's pretty sure she can take him.

On my way.
The members of the Justice League are arguing over what to do next. She slips away from them as quietly as she can and then remotely activates the teleporter. It gathers and deposits her molecules in order on the deck.

“Batman?” Her voice rings through the room and down the halls, strong and clear. There’s no answer.

The Watchtower is quiet. She wanders through the place- the meeting room, the gym, the dining hall. She strides past the medbay and there is something there.

Clark Kent is stretched out on a table, hooked up to a half-dozen machines monitoring him, a mask and cannula on his face. There is gentle beeping and purring from the wall of medical equipment.

Batman is sitting next to the bed, his back to her. His form is slightly hunched, but that doesn’t seem unusual. His cowl is missing.

The medbay doors open with a hiss and he doesn't look up, doesn't move. Her eyes are pulled to Clark.

He’s like a shell of himself, hollow on the bed. Only the monitors assure her he is still alive.

“You said he was getting better,” she accuses sharply, eyes narrowing as she watches the slow pulse blink green across a black screen.

Batman doesn't answer her.

“You lied to us,” she says. “You lied to me. And now we're on the cusp of war. And I want to know why.”

She’s tempted to use her lasso on him. She's been looking at Clark almost this entire time, unable to tear her eyes away, willing his stomach to rise and fall with breath from across the room.

“Answer me!” She shouts, hand on the hilt of her sword, finally looking at him.
And then she sees that he is not hunched over, brooding. He is collapsing in on himself. His hands, his arms, his shoulders are shaking. The breath that must have been held or silenced until her shout is now crawling out of his chest in ragged gasps, hoarse sounds scraping on his throat.

His suit is cut away just below the left knee, his calf wrapped in thin gauze and bleeding through the white. He is barefoot. His hands, still shaking, pull at his collar and he leaves his fingers hooked there, the fabric pulled as far from his face as it will go. He looks like he's already been in a war, one she thought hadn't come yet.

She is frozen. He lifts his face to meet hers, his features skewed with panic and frustration. He is pale. He drops his gaze to the floor. Diana moves.

She crouches down next to Bruce, feeling startled by this change in him. She puts a gentle hand on his back and the low groan that drags out of him is a brutal noise.

“C’mon,” she says, softly, instinct taking over. She wasn’t raised by an island of women for nothing. “Don’t try to talk yet. Breathe. One at a time. Slow.”

With her hand tracing circles on his back and her words over the gasping, his breathing evens out. It is a slow process. She is patient.


When his breathing is more or less level, they sit without moving for a moment.

“You don’t do anything by half, do you?” she asks. There is no relieved laughter in response. “Mind telling me what’s going on?”

“I can’t do it,” he says, his voice breaking and then gaining a small measure of control again. But he speaks in fragments. “He’s been dying since the attack. Cell death. A shiga toxin bound to Kryptonite. There’s a cure. Maybe. It’s lead poisoning. It might work. It might finish what they started. It’s fifty-fifty at best. God, this is all my fault.”

He stops speaking and she looks at Clark, unmoving and unresponsive in the bed.
“He can't hear us. He's comatose now, but vision and language went before that. I don't know. I don't know if it will work. It might already be too late.”

Bruce’s breath catches again.

“Hey, hey, there. Stay with me.”

And she looks at him more closely-- there are deep, carved circles under his eyes, a days-old beard on his face, and when she gently touches his forehead, it is hot with fever.

“You’re sick. It’s not whatever he has, is it?” Diana cannot keep the alarm out of her voice. The idea of a worldwide epidemic that can even take Superman out is horrifying, maybe more than nuclear warfare.

“No,” he mutters. “I just haven’t been sleeping. I'll be fine. A North Korean put a bullet through my leg and it might be infected. It's fine. I have to decide, right now. He doesn't have much longer.”

And she recognizes his agony: to leave a friend to certain death, or risk a cure that could be poison. It would always be murder to Bruce, his last holdout against the darkness within himself tarnished. But there is a world outside the Watchtower who needs Superman right now, if there is any chance at all he can come. Even with worse odds, she knows what she would do. And she realizes now that it is why he texted her, and her alone. He knew them both.

“I'll do it,” she says. “Tell me what to do.”

There is a still moment in which she waits and his trembling lessens.

“No,” he says, resolve like steel in his voice. He is steadying himself, his breathing evening out. “I will.”

And she stands and watches, choosing not to argue or interrupt what feels like a desperate, last-ditch rallying toward the end. There is a bag of fluid already hanging from the IV pole. He simply reaches forward and takes the tube, plugs it into the site on Clark's limp hand and sets the flow. Such a basic action for such a massive weight.
Diana drags another chair over and sits next to Bruce.

“I’m sorry,” he says quietly. “With Clark out, I didn’t know who else to call.”

“How often does Clark get these kinds of calls?” she asks in surprise. Bruce always seems so unflappable.

“Never,” Bruce says. “I haven't had a panic attack since I was nine. He gets other calls though.”

His voice is approaching normal again, that detached delivery he has for information. But he sounds exhausted and is motionless.

“You've gotten really close,” she observes cautiously.

“We hang out,” he says, half-smiling. It's hard for her to imagine Batman hanging out with anyone. The phrase sounds so modern and casual to her, the implication of a relaxed nature she doesn't see in him. As if on cue, his expression turns serious again. “He’s my best friend. I don't have many. We understand each other.”

She is aware that the entire time they talk, Bruce is watching the monitors. Nothing has changed.

“If this doesn’t work,” Bruce says, and pauses. “If this doesn’t work, and the North Koreans fire on the States, I’m going back to Gotham. And I don’t want you to stop me.”

Diana stares hard at him for a moment.

“Are you telling me that you’d commit suicide?”

He tears his attention away from the monitors long enough to meet hers.

“Diana,” he says, as if whatever he is about to say is something obvious, that doesn’t need
explanation, and he’s humoring her. “My kids are there. Even if there’s nothing we can do, nothing else I can do...I’m going to go be with them. I’m going to try to get them out or die trying.”

“Of course,” she says quickly. She sees him so rarely in this capacity that it’s easy to forget that he is not just a caped man with a sidekick or two, but a father.

They sit, waiting, watching Clark.

“I should let the League know,” she says.

“Don’t,” he answers. “Not yet.”

“They deserve to know,” Diana says, her anger returning. They’re hunting you down right now for your own President and they have no idea what is going on. They’re worried about Clark. You’ve kept all of us in the dark.”

“I promised him.” Bruce says. “He didn’t want to involve the League. And I’d already tried once, so I agreed with him.”

“You have to understand this can’t possibly be what he meant,” she says, exasperated.

“And then it was getting worse, far faster than either of us anticipated,” he continues, as if he didn't hear her. “All I could think about was finding a cure. And then I found it and everything else fell apart. Now, they couldn’t do anything even if they wanted to. They’re more useful on earth right now. You should join them.”

Diana cannot comprehend the arrogance of this, the decisions being made by this man. She just stares at him for a second. And then his fingers tremble again, she remembers he has a fever, maybe an infection in some recent wound in his leg, and she considers that he might not be thinking clearly. She knows she takes it for granted, after all they’ve seen together, that he will keep his head no matter what-- but maybe this is too much for just this moment. She realizes what he is saying, what he is denying.

“Bruce. They might want to say goodbye.”
In all their time sitting and waiting and talking, there has been no change on the monitors. She’s not certain, but she feels as if it should have started working by now if it was going to.

She tried to say it gently, but she still expects him to glower, to argue.

Instead, he puts his head in his hands.

“You’re right,” he says quietly. “Go ahead.”

She hesitates. “Do you...do you want to change before I call them? Take some medicine, put a cowl on? I don’t know.”

“No,” he says, unmoving. “I don’t care.”

“Where do you see this ending?” she asks, suddenly suspicious. It’s not like him to give up so easily, even when injured. “This isn’t like you.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he says. “Just tell them to come.”

“We’re not taking you in after this,” Diana says. “I want explanations but I’m no American. I’m not bound to your leaders. If you’ve been doing all this to save him, keeping it quiet because he wanted you to, then we can yell at you all we want up here. I’m not turning you over to be unmasked and served up to the North Koreans as an ineffectual peace offering.”

Bruce doesn’t look up but she can tell just by watching how he holds himself that this is a weight off his shoulders.

“Now, are you sure you don’t want to change?”

“Bruce!” A woman’s voice rings out over the intercom, urgent and terrified. “BRUCE.”

His head snaps up. Clark does not stir.
“Oracle?” he asks. Diana jumps to her feet, already on the defensive. Something has just gotten worse. She knows even before the intercom crackles again.

“North Korea just launched a warhead,” the voice says, and Diana can tell the woman is crying. “We have eight minutes. They’re evacuating Gotham. There’s no way.”

There is beeping. It sounds like an alarm of some kind.

Bruce is now on his feet, too, off-balance on one foot.

“We’ll stop it,” Diana says.

“Barbara,” Bruce says, his voice dead calm. “I want you to contact Dick right now. You tell him to come get you in the jet. I don’t care if he does it in day clothes. It doesn’t matter anymore. I don’t want either of you trying to get anyone else. Do you understand me?”

“Bruce,” the voice continues, still crying. “Tim won’t answer the comm.”

There’s the tinny sound of metal scraping, vaguely computer-like.

“I will find him,” Bruce says to the voice. “Do not let Dick stay for anyone.”

There is a faint sound like breaking glass. Diana imagines the woman stumbling in her panic.

“This is Wonder Woman,” Diana says, speaking into her own commlink. “There’s a warhead on its way to Gotham city. Flash, grab whoever you can. Hal, we’re going to have to try to stop this thing or redirect it. And Superman isn’t able to help.”

There’s a noise, a foreign sound, as Diana leaves the room. She freezes, looks back.

Clark is sitting up on the bed, ripping wires off of himself, looking nothing more than slightly
Bruce is speaking rapidly in a language she does not understand.

“Disregard that,” Diana says over the comm. “I think Superman has this one.”

“Bruce, is he alive? Bruce?” the voice over the intercom demands.

“He is,” Diana says to her when Bruce doesn’t answer. He and Clark are still talking hurriedly in what she is now realizing is Kryptonese. Clark is stretching, like he was just taking a nap. “He’s on his feet.”

“I’ve got it,” Clark says to her, putting a hand on Bruce’s shoulder. Then, he pulls Bruce into a hug. The other man stiffens, then relaxes and returns the embrace. Clark steps away after a moment. “I’ll be right back.”

“We have impact in four minutes,” the woman’s voice announces. She is sniffling, but not crying anymore. “Plenty of time for you, Boy Scout.”

“Wonder Woman,” Clark says, “Get the others. We’re going to pay North Korea a visit next. Make sure they understand some things.”

She watches as Bruce and Clark share sudden, boyish grins. Bruce reaches back to pull up his cowl.


“Thanks,” Bruce says roughly. Diana thinks he’s going to argue, but he’s surprising her over and over again today. He drops the cowl again and nods. “I’ll man the Tower. Oracle, disable your security protocols.”

“Sure thing, boss,” the woman says. “I’m out.”
“I’m going to change,” Clark says to Diana. “Meet you in the sky.”

“Are you strong enough?” she asks, glancing behind him at the empty medbay bed. He was almost dead. Minutes ago.

He smiles, and already there is color in his face again. She doesn’t even need the answer.

“Just need a little sunlight. I think I’m fine.”

Chapter End Notes

i have tortured you people long enough.

but per my traditional methods, there is much epilogue to follow.
Chapter Twenty Three

Bruce limps to the control room in the tower.

It’s a bit surreal.

He’s moving so slowly on his leg that by the time he reaches the control panel, he can watch out the massive, reinforced bay windows as a miniscule figure hurls a silver and red cylinder toward the distant sun.

The speakers are buzzing with League members talking to each other, talking to him. Despite saying he’d handle J’onn’s job for a bit, he isn’t really processing or hearing any of what they say. He silences the line and uses the computer to connect with a satellite and make a phone call.

“Hello?” Martha Kent answers.

“He’s alive,” Bruce says. “He’s going to be fine.”

He hangs up while she’s shouting for Jonathan, her voice rich with joy.

Another number.

“Hey,” Lois Lane answers, as if they were mid-conversation or she was expecting the call.

“Tell him whatever you want to. No secrets,” Bruce says.

“We can see him now on the news. You wouldn’t believe how excited people are down here. And thank you.”

She hangs up on him.
It’s a nice change.

***

It is late evening after a busy day, but the farmhouse is cheery. There's music playing on the kitchen radio, the strains of guitar floating out onto the front porch. Lightning bugs flicker on and off across the side yard, bathed in twilight.

Clark rocks the porch swing with one foot and takes a deep lungful of the cool air blowing across the fields, relief after the end of July heat. It'll be scorching hot again tomorrow before the sun is even halfway across the sky, but for now there's a northern breeze.

His arm is wrapped around Lois, who is already asleep against him. She didn't last long against the painkillers Clark insisted she finally take, after he and Perry forced her to leave the Daily Planet bullpen and go to the hospital. Her arm is tucked against her, set in a linen-colored cast. She squeezed his hand until a normal man’s fingers would have been crushed under the strain, swearing violently at him when they aligned the bones.

When he tried to ask her how her arm was broken, she was evasive, and finally promised she’d tell him, someday. He didn't press. He was just glad to see her again. There would be more to talk about later-- her arm, things he'd missed, other things-- but he was reluctant to spoil the mood.

The North Koreans had been startled to see him alive. They were rattled by the loss of their warhead and diminished by the public rejection several potential allies gave when their involvement in the plot to kill Superman came more fully to light.

Clark left Lois with his parents for half an hour or so while he made a press appearance, explaining his absence and what it was Batman had taken from the North Korean ship. Ira Graham was under heavy guard in Gotham, awaiting trial. There were calls for Colombia to charge Sebastián Rojas and the musician Esteva had been temporarily banned from entering the United States, despite already giving interviews claiming she knew nothing of her brother’s activities.

“Didn't you interview her? Is that the bodyguard who had a crush on you?” Clark had asked Lois, before his mother made them shut off the television (“Journalists or not, we've had enough of that garbage for today. You did look nice in your suit, Clark”).

“Mm. I don't know. It could be him, I guess.” Lois had replied, already half asleep before they
went out to the porch.

Martha brought out pieces of grape pie and then took Lois’ back inside after seeing her asleep. Jonathan was halfway through his piece before the screen door closed, but Clark held his plate in one hand, unwilling to move his arm away from Lois to eat.

“You have good friends, son,” Jonathan says, licking the tines of his fork and then setting the plate down next to the rocking chair on the worn porch planks.

“I do,” Clark agrees.

“Young mother and I were a bit surprised when…” Jonathan stops, his mouth twisted. Clark knows from a lifetime of experience that his Pa is trying to figure out how he wants to say something, how he wants to dance around things he doesn't want to say.

Clark shifts the pie plate to the hand around Lois, and begins carefully eating it. A crumb drops onto her shirt and he eyes it, then leaves it. It's nice to not need food. It's nice to eat it anyway.

“Well,” Jonathan tries again, “we were a bit startled when Bruce spoke Kryptonese. How long has that been going on?”

So it was the detail where Clark was semi-conscious, losing sight, language, and dying that Jonathan was tip-toeing around, Clark doesn't blame him.

“That's what you're curious about?” Clark asks, a bit surprised. “Of all the things to wonder.”

“Is it a Justice League thing? For emergencies? I am curious, damn it. You're my son. Having you here and not knowing how to talk to you before you maybe died was one of the scariest things your mother has ever lived through. And me, too.”

Clark knows how hungry they are for his communication, how much they fear losing it again. But he hadn't even thought about this.

“No,” he says simply. “It's just Bruce. He found the language database at the Fortress once, and insisted. For emergencies,” Clark smiles. “He probably loved being right.”
“I don’t think he loved any of the past two weeks,” Jonathan says. “Still, I’m glad. That man has a good head on his shoulders and a bit of common sense, something you oughta get sometime.”

Clark knows that maybe he should feel bad about this, that it was all for him, but he doesn’t, yet. He’s got pie, and a sleeping girlfriend, and he’s alive.

“Hey,” he says gently to his father’s teasing, “we can’t all be superheroes.”

Jonathan laughs.

Martha comes out with coffee and sits on the rocker next to Jonathan.

“Well are you going to make an honest woman of that girl,” she asks, nodding at Lois, “and adopt some grand babies for me?”

“Ma!” Clark says around a mouthful of pie, at the same time Jonathan exclaims,

“Martie, you said you wouldn’t.”

“I know I promised,” she says mildly, sipping her coffee. “But then I went to the store to get butter and saw Rachel Price with her gaggle, about ready to pop with her baby. She looks about a month overdue and it made me start wishing again. I’m getting old.”

They have had this conversation too many times. But it is a good evening.

“Maybe next year,” Clark hedges.

“You could ask Bruce about adopting,” she suggests, reaching for Jonathan's hand. “Or us, maybe. We have some experience.”

Clark laughs, trying not to wake or jostle Lois. “Ma, you’ve made your point.”
“Martha, enough,” Jonathan says, not unkindly. “Clark, we’re just glad you came home tonight. It's good to see you well.”

“I’m glad to-” Clark’s phone buzzes in his pocket. He balances the pie plate on the arm of the swing, but Martha whisks it away before he has his phone out.

It's a call, not a text, from a number Clark doesn't recognize.

“Hi, this is Clark Kent,” he answers.

“Mr. Kent,” an accented voice replies calmly. “I'm so sorry to trouble you, but I was wondering if perhaps you have seen Mr. Wayne recently?”

“Oh, hey, Alfred,” Clark says. “No, I haven't seen him since this morning. Isn't he back? He wasn't answering calls at the Watchtower so we thought he'd gone home.”

“I have not seen hide nor tail of him, sir. Sorry to trouble you.”

“Don't worry about it,” Clark says, untangling himself from Lois and standing. “Give me a few minutes and I'll find him. Can I call you back?”

“Certainly,” Alfred says.

Clark hangs up and looks at his father.

“I've gotta go take care of something,” he says. “I shouldn't be gone long.”

Jonathan nods and sips his coffee.

“I'll tell your mother,” he says. Clark can hear her doing dishes in the kitchen, humming along with the radio.
He carries Lois to the bedroom and then changes. She doesn't wake up. He kisses her forehead and takes off, out the window for old time’s sake.

At the Watchtower, Diana and J’onn are in the control room, talking. They greet him warmly and Diana claps him on the back.

“Hey,” Clark says, “Have either of you seen Batman?”

“We have not,” J’onn says. “Are his whereabouts unknown? His mind is closed to me.”

“Isn't it always?” Diana laughs. It seems like there are good moods everywhere. “And to everyone. I haven't seen him since this morning.”

Clark leaves them, flying through the Watchtower at an easy pace. He isn't too worried, yet. The lab is empty, the workshop. He checks Bruce’s room, but it appears untouched. The bed is neatly made, the bathroom clean.

Now he's starting to get concerned. He goes by the medbay and almost passes it, because all the lights are off, but then something catches his eye. He stops and the doors slide open. He flicks the lights on to the dimmest setting.

The first bed is still surrounded by shut off equipment, discarded wires, and empty IV bags. No one has been in to clean up from the morning, and anyone who looked into the medbay must have found the mess distracting.

But in the second bed, Bruce is asleep, snoring gently. There are two empty IV bags here, too: saline and an antibiotic from what Clark can tell. It looks like Bruce set it up himself. He's wrapped in his cape instead of a blanket.

Clark hovers next to the bed, watching. The beard is still a ragged reminder of the past two weeks, but the deep circles under Bruce’s eyes have already started to fade.

He's about to leave and call Alfred when Bruce wakes up suddenly, sitting halfway up before his eyes are even all the way open. He blinks in the dim light and looks at Clark, then rolls over and
lies back down.

Clark tries not to laugh. He's to the medbay doors when Bruce says sleepily,

“How are you feeling?”

“I didn't think you were actually awake,” Clark answers, turning around. “I’m feeling great. You?”

“Getting there,” Bruce says, actually sitting up this time and yawning.

“Alfred called me. He was looking for you.”

“What time is it?” Bruce asks, more alert.

“It was a little after nine when I left Kansas.”

“Morning or evening?” Bruce demands, jumping out of the bed. His feet hit the floor and his left leg buckles under him, and he goes halfway down, sideways, cursing as he falls.

“Woah,” Clark says, catching him, even though he had been halfway across the room. “Take it easy. It’s evening.”

Bruce pushes him away half-heartedly and sits on the edge of the bed.

“You saw your parents then?” He asks, after Clark carries a chair over and plants himself on it.

“I did. And Lois. Spent the evening together. It was nice. My Ma made pie.”

Bruce smirks at him. “You realize that is--”
“Grape. Not apple,” Clark says, grinning.

“I didn’t know you could make grape pie,” Bruce admits, rolling his neck. There is an audible popping of joints. “Alfred probably knows. So, you saw Lois? How is she?”

“She’s fine?” Clark says slowly. He’s starting to suspect that Bruce is feeling him out, trying to decide what to say, like his dad on the porch thirty minutes ago. But this is a bit different. “I got her away from the office and into an ER. They think she might need surgery in a few weeks but said the splint was really good and it minimized—”

Clark stops talking.

He looks at Bruce.

Bruce won’t look at him.

And then Bruce looks at him.

Bruce’s mouth is set in a thin, defiant line, his jaw tense, but his eyes have just an edge of fear.

Fear of Clark.

“My God, Bruce. You splinted her arm.”

“I did,” he says.

“She wouldn’t tell me anything. Kept saying it was a ‘story for a rainy day.’” Clark says, running a hand through his hair. “I don’t even…what happened? Were you there?”

“I was,” Bruce says. “About two seconds too late. I’m so sorry, Clark. I needed her help, though.”
“You asked her to help you.” Clark says flatly, in disbelief. “You asked her? But wait, we’re skipping details here. What happened?”

“Sebastián Rojas happened,” Bruce says, peeling medical tape off his arm. He pulls the curling, soft plastic IV site out of his skin.

“How?” Clark asks, tenaciously clinging now. If he’s going to know, he wants to know all the way. But the name rings a bell. “Wait, the Colombian? The man who tried to sell me to North Korea?”

Clark is now having a hard time keeping his voice down. He’s in the air, no longer in the chair across from Bruce.

Bruce rolls the IV tubing around his fingers, making a loop of the cord that will just be thrown away. He looks like he’s struggling internally, then he swallows hard. Clark can see that his heart rate has sped up.

“With a baseball bat. In Colombia. I told you she was there.”

“When the hell did you tell me? When I was unconscious?” Clark shouts. “He broke her arm with a baseball bat? And don’t try to make this something I gave you permission to do.”

As soon as the words are out of his mouth, Clark realizes what a poor choice of phrasing it was. What he meant was something more along the lines of ‘how dare you involve Lois without talking to me first’ or ‘can we please talk about what happened instead of making me feel complicit before I even know all the details.’ It’s too late to backpedal though.

Bruce glares at him. He stands and very intentionally walks to the trash can across the room, dropping IV supplies into the black plastic bag. He does not limp. When he turns back, his words are like iron:

“I don’t need your permission to do anything, Clark. And neither does she. You would be dead if it wasn’t for her.”

Clark is on the brink of apologizing. He should have been there, to help, to keep her out of harm’s way. It’s his job. But then he thinks of Lois, tough and sweet and smart, being beaten with a baseball bat. He remembers that her arm is so broken they wanted a specialist to set it, they are
talking about surgery. And the idea that Bruce helped put her there, in that situation, and isn’t even denyng it.…

“Go to hell, Bruce. She’s not one of your vigilante projects.”

And a little voice inside is telling him that yes, Lois absolutely would do anything to help save him, even completely aware of the danger; she has taken many risks before this one. And so the words he wanted to say are exactly how he wanted to say them, but he is immediately having second thoughts.

This is Bruce. The man who, by every account, bent over backwards to save Clark’s own life the past few weeks. The man who did save his life. A trusted friend. A friend who is so dedicated to working alone on dangerous things that he has trouble asking for help, but was willing to ask for it this time, if that is any indication of how desperate he must have been.

All the blood drains from Bruce’s face while the words are still ringing in the air.

“Bruce, I’m…” Clark finally manages to say. “I’m sorry. It was out of line.”

“I’m going to go change,” Bruce says flatly. “Meet me on the teleport deck.”

Bruce leaves the medbay, limping slightly, not looking back.

Clark exhales in frustration.

While waiting on the teleport deck, Clark calls Alfred to tell him Bruce has been found. The relief is audible in the butler’s voice.

Clark waits, not even sure why he's waiting. If he didn't already feel so awful, he'd be angry. He might still be angry. It's hard to tell.

And after waking to utter chaos, cleaning up the mess, checking on his parents, he has not really let himself think about or dwell on just what he does remember of the past two weeks. All he knows of what he missed is the brief summary Bruce had given him in Kryptonese while the fog was clearing from his head, and then what he pieced together from various people and news.
Except he doesn't really know what had happened, just the end result. Other than the concrete details, he hasn't had a chance to think about how those details came to light. The League knew he was missing, and that was it. It took a while to talk them down from their fury at Batman and it was only Wonder Woman helping with that that got him anywhere.

He has scattered and blurred memories. Collapsing in the feed barn. Listening to music with Lois. Bruce talking to him on the front porch. They are fragments, tinted with headaches and confusion and chilled skin.

By the time Bruce limps into the teleport deck room, his limp more noticeable now, Clark is starting to feel anxious about how much he now knows he doesn't remember. What if Bruce did ask him about Lois? But Bruce has the cowl on, his lower face impossible to read beneath the beard he's grown. He doesn't seem to be in a chatting mood and Clark isn't sure where to start. And now he's fluctuating back to anger; he is not the one who should be trying to explain things, to make them clear.

“We have one more thing to take care of,” Batman says, tapping a sequence of keys at the command station. “Then you can go.”

“Alright,” Clark says neutrally. “I'll meet you there. Where am I headed?”

“CDC in Washington.”

Batman doesn't offer any further explanation. He steps up onto the platform and is gone before Clark can ask.

When he and Diana had been trying to calm the League, it had been Barry Allen who was the angriest-- it seemed unusual for him, but his words keep echoing now in Clark's mind.

“ We ARE the freaking need-to-know crowd.”

And Clark has to pointedly not think about the fact that he expressly asked Bruce not to involve the League. He had no idea that things would get so awful; he imagined himself staying at the farm, helping through the summer, adjusting to a different kind of normal while Bruce looked for answers and covered for him. But now it almost feels like Bruce used the promise as an excuse to do things his own way.
He knows Batman is already there, in Washington. He should leave and join him. But he kind of wants to let him wait.

“Did you find him?” Diana asks, sounding concerned. Clark turns from the teleporter. “I didn't want J’onn to know we were worried.”

“Were you worried?” Clark asks, furrowing his brow. “I wasn't worried. Should I be?”

“You didn't answer me. Did you find him?”

Diana actually does look a little anxious, which is unusual for her.

He's conflicted, Barry is angry, Diana is worried, J’onn isn't picking up on things. It seems like Bruce withholding information is the only normal thing still functioning. They all seem so altered by the last two weeks.

“I did,” he says. “He was sleeping.”

“Oh thank Hera,” Diana says.

“Why were you worried?”

Diana gives him such a disdainful look, as if she can't believe how stupid he is, that he's annoyed by it.

“His best friend almost died today,” she says. “His words, not mine. He's injured and has an infection. He doesn't heal like we do. He's been working non-stop for two weeks with minimal back-up because he thought you wanted it that way and because he blames himself.”

“It's not my fault he--”
“Is it not?” Diana cuts him off. “You knew who you were asking. You know what he's like.”

“I didn't know it was going to get as bad as it did,” Clark protests. But he's admitting to himself now that he has hazy memories of the point he realized it was getting worse, enough to tell Lois he wasn't going to get better, and not just picking up the phone and telling Bruce they needed more help.

“Nobody did,” Diana says. “Until it did.”

“Why are you defending him?” Clark splutters. “Why are you mad at me? He wasn't keeping you in the loop. Did you know he got Lois’ arm broken?”

“He broke Lois’ arm?” Diana asks, eyes wide.

“No,” Clark presses his temple with two fingers, closing his eyes in frustration. “That's not what I said. He roped her into helping and Sebastián Rojas broke her arm.”

Diana blinks at him. She's got one hand on her lasso, running a fingertip along the twisted strands.

“You are surprised,” she says slowly, “That a man who almost started a world war injured someone who was in his way?”

“No!” Clark exclaims, hating how dense that makes him sound. “I'm angry that Batman...that…”

“Clark, I'm a woman,” she says. “Lois must have known the risks. She doesn't deserve to be kept on the sidelines just because you want her to be. Go date a Kansas girl if you want someone that will stay home. What Batman did was give her a part in keeping you, keeping half the world, alive. Are you equally angry with yourself for the fact that your friend was shot?”

“He was shot?”

“By Zeus’ thunder,” she exclaims, throwing her hands in the air. “What did you think happened to his leg?”
They stare at each other for a moment.

“I'm sorry,” he says. “I'm still putting things together.”

“No, I'm sorry,” she says, sighing. “It isn't your fault anymore than it’s his. Neither of you are the villains here. No wonder you didn't want to involve us. Just, go easy on him.”

“You're usually pretty hard on him,” Clark says, watching her carefully. “And usually he can take it. What are you not telling me?”

“I don’t know if-”

“Diana!” Clark says impatiently. “I can't put things together if no one will give me the pieces!”

“He had a panic attack, Clark. That's the only reason I was here when you woke up.”

“No, he didn't,” Clark laughs at the absurdity of this. “Maybe you misunderstood-”

“Clark. I was here.” Diana insists, sounding irritated. “I calmed him down. He thought he was going to kill you. The chances of the antidote not working were fairly high. I know it doesn't sound like him, but whatever is going on, he's in rough shape. That's why I was worried. So, go easy on him.”

So maybe Bruce wasn't exempt from the change two weeks had worked on all of them.

And it occurs to him now that Bruce was not trying to avoid telling him everything. The man has a lot of practice keeping secrets and if they were discussing what happened to Lois, it was because Bruce wanted him to know. Clark remembers the fear lurking in Bruce’s eyes, realizes that Bruce knew he was risking Clark’s wrath and steered the conversation there anyway, just so Clark would not be in the dark.

“I'm an idiot,” he sighs, pushing his hair back from his forehead.
“Most men are,” Diana replies. “You're in good company. For the record, I'm still furious with both of you. But I think you both need to recover from whatever in Hades happened and then the League can decide what to do about it. Together.”

“He's waiting for me,” Clark says. “He said there was something else we needed to take care of. I should go.”

“Clark,” she says, as he leaves for the airlock in the hangar bay. “Thank you, for today. For saving Gotham. We needed you. The world needed you.”

“You're welcome,” he says. “I'm glad I was here.”
Chapter Twenty Four

Chapter Notes

This is so long it should probably be two chapters, but OH WELL.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Batman tumbles out of the teleportation tunnel onto a DC rooftop, he just barely avoids landing on his leg. He tucks and rolls at the last second, but it’s a rough landing. He climbs, rather than springs, to his feet and stands for a moment just thinking about how much he hates teleporting and how much he’d appreciate a cup of Tim’s coffee at this very minute.

Despite sleeping half the day, he’s still exhausted. He is still having nightmares. His leg is aching in a throbbing way that means he probably needs another round of antibiotics once he gets home. He watches the sky but there’s nothing but clouds, dark gray with night shadows.

While standing, he keeps most of his weight on his good leg.

Minutes pass and Superman doesn’t show.

Batman is aware that he could have possibly, probably, handled some things a bit more smoothly.

Still, he expected that even if they were both angry, they’d at least be able to work together for twenty minutes.

He feels physically ill-- the fever, the pain, the growing surety that he’s just killed a friendship-- plus, he hasn’t eaten for about twenty hours. He should have eaten something at the Watchtower, while Clark was waiting for him, but he didn’t think to.

After another five minutes, he decides to treat it like a stakeout. He crouches on the edge of an air conditioning unit, one of the giant, boxy ones, for a better vantage point, and he waits.

It becomes mentally difficult pretty quickly, since there isn’t really anything specific that he’s watching for on the streets below. Traffic crawls along wide avenues, flanked by clean sidewalks and the softly lit glass building fronts. It is late but even this business district is not sleeping.
He watches people for a while, at the end of a day the world almost ended, studying them in their prolonged security. A group or two staggers down the street in knit circles, drunk and exuberant and moving among each other with uninhibited ease. They go by in peals of laughter and shouting, dangling limbs off the curbs as they wait at crosswalks.

Couples go by, their heads bent together and their arms linked, and the whisper of their words does not reach him. Other couples pass, too, elbow to elbow as they tap away at phones held before them like maps, navigating away from the world at their feet and into other places.

And then there are the single pedestrians, men with earbud cords snaking down their necks as they jog in gray ARMY t-shirts and neon shorts, slowing just barely with a twist of their necks as they meet the crosswalks, not waiting for the lights, stepping on the asphalt in the wake of cars. The women with leather purses hooked over shoulders on thin, buckled straps, holding phones to their cheeks like shields and talking loudly as if saying defensively to all the crowd around, “I have people, I will be missed if I go missing, someone will know if you act like a creep,” and it doesn’t matter if someone is really on the other end of the line or not.

Homeless trudge by, laden with overstuffed purple or navy backpacks with broken zippers, the leftovers of cheap mass production and donation holding whatever varied possessions they’ve amassed as a matter of survival-- a winter hat, half a tube of toothpaste, a pack of trail mix, a tattered paper with a sister’s South Dakota phone number, a black marker, a years-old Tracfone. He cannot see into each bag from here but he doesn’t need to, to guess, to presume.

He watches them all, as he waits for Superman. Minutes tick by and he decides he will wait until two in the morning, not a second later, and then take care of this himself as best he can. He’s close to nodding off, so he slips down from the thrumming A/C unit onto the gravelled rooftop, landing soundlessly on his right leg.

While he waits, he might as well make some preparations. The roof access door is locked but the lock is easy to pick. Once he’s inside, he only has a matter of seconds to get to the security panel on the wall and disable the alarm. There’s a small device in his utility belt made just for this, and he overrides the code easily, and taps through options on the screen to leave the doors electronically locked but the building unarmed.

It’s only a few minutes later that he’s disabled the security cameras. He feels especially paranoid about them now, and having a whole night of footage missing might make security nervous, but no one is going to hunt them down publicly for a project that was off the books. The anonymity is more important.
He returns to the roof, wrapped in his cape against the chilled air of the sky eleven stories up. His leg is becoming increasingly distracting, the feeling of red coals and tight pressure building deep in the muscles again. He considers changing his deadline to one in the morning. A quick glance at his phone, which has dozens of missed calls and unread texts, tells him it is only a little after eleven.

Batman crouches in the shadows of the A/C unit, the moon behind and almost above him in the eastern sky, moving west along the course of stars he cannot see but knows are there. He keeps his right leg under him, his left leg extended before him, balancing. He’s on Eliot again, “The Hollow Men” this time, tapping the inconsistent rhythm on his knee. It’s only one finger moving, but it is definitely what Dick would consider “jittery” for him, if he was nearby to see.

Clark is going to kill him. Or never speak to him again. He’s not sure which would be worse.

A voice, soft and steadily lilting, breaks the silence from above him.

“Take heed what spell the lightning weaves—what charm the echoes shape—
Or, bound among a million sheaves, your soul shall not escape.
Bar home the door of summer nights lest those high planets drown
The memory of near delights in all the longed-for town.”

Superman’s red boots touch down on the pea gravel next to Batman, and he sits beside him, his legs crossed knees over ankles. He has two bags in his hand, one brown and one white.

“That’s what I recited when the headaches were getting worse. It helped. I think I held onto consciousness a bit longer because I kept thinking ‘bar home the door of summer nights’ when everything was fading. I’m sorry I was being a jerk.”

If Clark had arrived moody or pissed, Bruce wouldn’t have even pushed. But an opening like that is a gift. He drops to the roof from the ball of his right foot, stretching both legs out in front of him and leaning against the A/C box.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get to Lois in time.”

“No, you did,” Clark says. “She’s alive. And her risk aversion or acceptance is up to her. It always has been.”
And Clark holds out the brown bag.

“What is it?” Bruce asks, a little suspicious. It smells faintly of something familiar.

“A peace offering. And a thank you. Or the beginning of one. I called Alfred and begged him to tell me what your favorite food is. There’s a place on Pennsylvania Avenue that has good Yelp reviews, so it’s still hot. They don’t usually do take-out, but, I guess I make a bit of an entrance.”

Bruce is speechless, which doesn’t happen often unintentionally. He mutely takes the offered bag and when he opens it, the faint smell grows stronger and is immediately recognizable.

“Mulligatawny,” Bruce says, peering into the bag, still coping with the mild waves of shock. There’s a round, plastic take-out container full of yellow soup with flecks of green scallion leaf on top. Nestled beside it is a plastic spoon wrapped in a paper napkin.

“Wait,” Clark says, opening the other bag. “Alfred only ‘divulged family information’ on the condition that I watch you swallow these first. And he was extremely insistent about the ‘first’ bit.”

He pulls out a water bottle and a small, sealed plastic packet of medium-strength painkillers.

Bruce pulls his gloves off and takes the packet. Clark watches as he breaks the foil seal, opens the water bottle, and throws the pills down his throat in one long swallow.

Content with this evidence, Clark pulls his phone out and starts typing.

“I told him I’d let him know,” he says. “And he seemed not in a good mood to be disappointed.”

“Good man, Alfred,” Bruce says a bit roughly. “I should wait a couple minutes to eat. Are you still feeling okay? Any lingering effects?”

“None that I can tell,” Clark shrugs. “My memories of the past few weeks, especially the past several days, are fuzzy or missing, plus the week before that’s just gone. I feel like I’ve missed a lot.”
“I can start to fill you in on some of it,” Bruce says, checking his phone for the time.

“I’d appreciate it,” Clark says.

Police sirens sound off in the city distance and Clark listens intently for a moment, then relaxes.

Bruce is still watching the time and nearly gives up at the two minute mark. But the idea of going home only to deal with nausea instead of sleep stays him.

“Do you remember what we argued about the week before DC?”

Clark shakes his head.

“Nope,” he says, glancing out over the city skyline.

Bruce narrows his eyes.

“You're lying,” he says. “And I took a picture of the tile placement.”

“Damn it,” Clark says, doing a poor job of faking anger. A smile still tugs the corners of his mouth. “I was losing by a lot, too.”

“Over a hundred points,” Bruce says.

“I still think I should be able to play-- wait, what word was it? I only remember being mad and that god-awful smirk on your face when you pulled out a dictionary.”

“‘Jell-O,’” Bruce says. “Which both has a hyphen and is a name brand.”

“Then what are you supposed to call it?” Clark splutters, looking frustrated all over again. But
again, it is surface frustration. “It's in the American lexicon now, like popsicles.”

“But not in the dictionary. Gelatin,” Bruce says calmly, sipping water from the water bottle. This isn't usual rooftop conversation for them-- their discussions tend to follow stricter, unspoken guidelines of setting and time. But it's been a rough two weeks and things feel a little different, at least for tonight. His primary emotion after everything, right now, is relief. It's putting him in a bit of good mood.

“Who the hell calls it ‘gelatin,’” Clark grumbles. “I think we should start a new game.”

“I'll consider it,” Bruce says. The answer is no. He checks his phone. It's been long enough, just barely.

He tugs the cover off the soup and feels like he must be getting too comfortable-- he’s still out on a roof, but he’s aware of how hungry he is, how much he needed some painkillers, which are both sensations he tries to only let himself fully experience or acknowledge when he is home.

The first mouthful of soup, rice and lentil and coconut milk and warm apple spiced with curry and garlic and cardamom, is so viscerally good to him that he lets his head fall back against the A/C unit and he sighs.

Clark grins.

“You know, I wasn’t entirely sure until just now that Alfred was telling me the truth. I was afraid he lied to me just to spite me for asking.”

“No,” Bruce says around a mouthful of soup, shaking his head. “Alfred doesn’t lie about food. It’s sacred ground to him.”

They sit together while Bruce eats.

“So, do you want me to start at the beginning,” Bruce offers, “Or do you want to ask questions and I’ll fill in gaps?”

“I’ll tell you what.” Clark says, after considering. “Let’s take care of whatever we’re here for. And
tomorrow, or the day after, I’ll bring one of my Ma’s grape pies to the Manor and we can go over all of it then. And have a Scrabble rematch.”

“Fine with me,” Bruce says, scraping the spoon along the bottom inside rim of the container, finishing the soup off. “As long as I don’t need to leave Gotham for a while. I hate this city.”

“Clark,” he says, putting his gloves back on. “Thank you. Really.”

“It was the least I could do,” Clark says.

They stand, Bruce using the A/C unit for balance.

“I’ve disabled the security cameras and unlocked the door up here already,” Bruce says. “We’re heading to the infectious diseases lab. The files have all been destroyed but they have three samples left of the Kryptonite virus. I left them before in case I needed one to make an antidote. I can box them up, but I’m going to need you to get them out of here.”

“Sure,” Clark says to him. “Lead the way.”

They’ve not gone more than a dozen feet when Clark steps alongside him, and says quietly,

“Lean on my shoulder, Bruce.”

“I’m fine,” Batman says, aware that his limp is growing more pronounced and attempting to correct it.

“Or I will pick you up and carry you,” Superman warns. “Like a baby.”

Batman tries to glare but ends up chuckling instead. He puts a hand on Superman’s shoulder and starts keeping most of the weight off his leg.

Inside the building, he gives directions as they reach hallway divides and turns.
“Do you have an overlay in the cowl?” Superman asks, after the third turn in an unmarked beige hall.

“I remember from last time.”

“How many times have you been here?” Superman asks.

“Once.”

“Lab accident,” Superman replies. “I swear you had a lab accident and didn't know.”

Batman ignores it.

They keep moving, down to the tenth floor.

The lab is brightly lit and seems glaring after the dim hallways. Long metal counters glint in the light, covered with empty test tubes, beakers, and microscopes. There are containment showers and eyewash stations every few yards along the walls.

They stop front of a large freezer with glass doors, plastered with warning labels. The door has redundant locks on it: a padlock, a card reader, and a keypad.

The shadow at his arm moves forward with a key and turns it in the padlock, which clicks open. Batman has produced a small, clear mask from his utility belt and put it on with the cowl, covering his mouth and nose. He presses the device against the card reader.

Superman looks around the room for a minute, studying the workspace of those who work with such dangerous substances. Movement catches his eye and he turns back to Batman.

The caped figure is standing in front of the open freezer door, motionless.
“Something wrong?” Superman asks quietly. Between the regular cowl and the biomask, it's impossible to read Batman’s expression. “Is it here?”

In response, Batman pulls the biomask off, holding it in one hand. He is staring at the contents of the freezer, silent.

“Bruce?” Superman asks, alarmed. “Bruce, what the hell?”

But Batman still doesn't answer. Superman looks at the freezer, expecting some new horror.

The vials are grouped by type, some packed in insulated boxes even in the freezer. Nothing seems to be broken or out of place. They are all labeled in bold, printed black type on white stickers.


There are more, with hybrid names Superman doesn't recognize. Nestled in among them is one labeled *Krypton S-4.* Neither he nor Batman reach for it yet.

Superman is aware now of Batman’s rapid heartbeat, but Batman still does not move. He wonders if he should throw him in a containment shower, if he was somehow exposed to something on the way in. But no, that's not what this is.

“We could never stop this,” Batman says quietly. “There are so many things we can fight, but this could destroy us all and there's nothing we could do. And it would be our own fault.”

Superman is aware that he is not included in this collective group. He is outside of it, nearly untouchable. It is clear to him that when Batman says “us,” he means his own kind: humans.

He feels a slight twinge of guilt for what they are about to do, the additional safety their actions will provide him personally. Superman is suddenly conscious of how fragile everyone around him is, glimpsing for a moment the same nightmare Batman contemplates.

Illness and sickness that destroy, that demolish immune systems and leave death in their wake. He thinks of Lois, of his inability to fight an evil in her own bloodstream if it came to that, watching the world around him waste away by the poison in their veins. He thinks of the weeks Bruce and
Lois and his parents just spent, watching him fade and uncertain there would be a cure.

“Put the damn mask back on,” he says roughly to Batman, feeling an edge of panic. They are so close to so much danger. He is irrationally terrified that Bruce will drop dead right in front of him, killed by mere proximity.

Batman shudders, as if coming back to himself. He seems surprised that Superman is right at his elbow. He resettles the biomask over his mouth and nose.

“I hate this city,” he says. He reaches carefully for the stand containing three vials labeled Krypton S-4. Superman notices that Batman is not breathing and doesn't inhale again until the freezer door is shut.

At one of the lab tables, he produces a small lead-lined box from his utility belt and transfers the vials. He snaps the box shut and tosses the empty stand in a trash can.

“Let's go,” he says.

They work their way back up to the roof, Batman leaning more heavily on Superman's shoulder the closer they get to the top. Outside, Batman hands Superman the box.

“Be right back,” Superman says, accepting it carefully. He takes off, soaring through the upper atmosphere, a streak of blue and red. He has missed this so much, this speed, the freedom. In half a moment he is near the sun and without hesitation he flings the box as if it were a baseball. He watches to make sure it is consumed by the gaseous flames and then returns to earth, a blur of light and power.

When he returns to the roof, Batman is sitting against the roof access door, his cape pulled tightly around him.

“Is it done?” He asks.

“It is,” Superman replies. “Do you need a lift home?”

“Robin is on his way.”
“You let him fly the jet? Where is he meeting you?” Superman looks around the roof.

“He's driving.”

Superman sits down next to him.

“Clark, what are you doing?” Batman asks, his voice weary. “Go home.”

Superman ignores him.

They sit for a while, in silence.

“You know,” Clark says, looking over. Batman’s jaw is clenched so tightly the beard doesn't even hide it. Clark forgets what he was going to say. “Bruce, move your leg. For just a second.”

The leg drags across the cement, slowly. Clark breathes on the rooftop and a thick layer of ice crystallizes in the narrow track of his breath.


Batman moves his leg back, resting it on the ice.

The slender moon slips through the sky, shadows falling across the roof when she’s obscured by a cloud. The cloud is trailed by smaller clouds and the light, when it breaks through again, is scattered.

“Poetry or facts?” Clark asks after a few more minutes. “You know I'm going to ask you that all the time now.”

“I know,” Batman says, grimacing. “Poetry.”
“I memorized that Kipling one in high school. For a class. English, for extra credit. It only took a
minute and I hated it anyway. I didn’t think I’d ever actually use it for anything. But I’m guessing
you started memorizing stuff for fun.”

“Private school is hell, Clark,” Batman replies. “Recitation class a lower circle.”

They lapse into silence again.

“So…” Clark says, “This is probably the journalist in me, but what--”

“The Hollow Men,” Batman answers, lifting his head.

Clark wasn’t really expecting him to answer, and he’s emboldened by the reply. He wonders how
much of this conversation is the painkillers Bruce took.

“Isn't that the one about the world ending with a whimper? How does it go?”

“That's the last line,” Bruce says. “It's the part everyone knows.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel stupid? Because it's making me feel a little stupid,” Clark says.

In response, Bruce closes his eyes.

“Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom
Remember us—if at all—not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men
The stuffed men.”
Clark is tempted to tease him to lighten the mood, but he doesn’t. He senses that if he does, this will be a topic of conversation forever off limits after tonight.

“What do you think is better?” He asks after a moment, quietly, mulling over the words instead of trying to escape them. He knows that questions like this, the serious ones, are the reason Bruce would even quote poetry at him at all, the reason their friendship has grown beyond work and actions. “To be remembered as violent or to be remembered as hollow?”

“I think,” Bruce says, shifting his weight slightly, adjusting his leg. “That being the one who remembers might be more important.”

“Hm.” Clark says, considering this. “Maybe.”

He thinks of the Fortress, of dying languages, of lost planets flung across the heavens in bits.

He thinks of granite headstones, the carved rut of letters, of broken hearts flung across the earth in shards.

This is what they share, what unites them: they the bearers of memory, the weight of legacies they did not set in motion driving them.

“It’s a hell of a job,” he says quietly.

“It is,” Bruce agrees. “But someone has to do it. And Robin is here.”

Clark looks over, following Bruce’s line of sight.

Robin waves from the edge of the roof.

“C’mon,” Clark says, standing and offering a hand. “How close is the Batmobile?”

“In the alley,” Robin calls out. “How is he?”

“I’m fine,” Batman says, taking a step forward.
“He's not,” Superman replies, as Batman limps toward Robin and the alleyway. “He's got a fever. His heart rate is a little fast. He took pain meds. Don't let him drive.”

“Clark,” Batman says without turning, “Shut up.”

Robin stands, balancing on one foot on the narrow roof edging.

“Sorry, Batman. Alfred told me the same thing. He suggested getting a hotel, actually.”

“We are getting the hell out of this damn city,” Batman says, pulling a grappling hook from his belt. He pauses, puts a hand on Tim’s head and ruffles his hair. “Sorry, Tim. It's good to see you. You okay?”


“I'll be there tomorrow,” Clark says before they leap. “With pie!”

And he's gone, back in Kansas before they're in the Batmobile.

Batman does not make Robin move from the driver’s seat.

It isn’t until they're on the road, speeding down the beltway that Tim speaks. The passenger seat is tipped back but he knows Bruce isn't asleep yet.

“Barbara said you were going to leave the Watchtower to come find me,” he says, his eyes on the road. “You had to know the likelihood of you finding me in time was statistically impossible.”

“Tim,” Bruce says without moving. He puts a hand on Tim’s shoulder and gives it a gentle squeeze, his eyes still closed. “For you, I would have come with any odds at all. Always.”

Tim’s eyes well with tears. He's been a wreck, internally, all day, fending it off with work and coffee.

“How was Gotham tonight?” Bruce asks, pulling his hand back.

“Busy, but small time. Lots of looting. Lots of drunks,” Tim says, rubbing his eyes with a fist and faking a yawn, just in case Bruce looks over.

“Do you need me to drive?”

“No,” Tim says, a little too quickly. “But maybe we could stop for coffee?”

He thinks for a moment Bruce will tell him no. He cringes inside, knowing what his answer would be if Bruce asked how many cups he's already had today. He can already hear the Dad Voice in his head.

“Sure,” Bruce says, righting the passenger seat, wincing a little. “But only if you get me a milkshake.”

“Got it,” Tim says, beaming. “Next place we find.”

They pull into the Batcave in the small hours of the morning. Alfred is waiting up, drinking hot
water with lemon at the computer desk, watching a black and white movie. He turns it off when Tim cuts the engine.

“Master Bruce,” Alfred says, as Bruce climbs out of the car, peeling the cowl off. Tim hurries around and slips under Bruce’s arm. “It has been an exceedingly long day. I'm glad to see you home.”

“I'm going to bed, Alfred,” Bruce says, accepting Tim’s help. “Upstairs.”

Alfred looks at Bruce, notes the pallor of his skin, the thin sheen of sweat on his temple.

“Master Timothy,” Alfred says, “If you would please, get the crutches.”

“Alfred, no,” Bruce says, as Tim freezes.

“Would you prefer a wheelchair?” Alfred asks, arching an eyebrow. “I do believe we have one.”

“Tim, get the crutches,” Bruce says.

“And perhaps later, we could relocate to a bedroom, but for our immediate needs, the bed down here will do.”

Bruce opens his mouth to protest, but closes it again.

Tim jumps a railing with the crutches in hand and passes them off to Bruce.

“Thank you, Master Timothy,” Alfred says, nodding to him. “Off to bed with you.”

“Alfred--”

“Bed, Timothy,” Alfred says in a tone that discourages arguments. “You've had quite the long
week yourself.”

Bruce is already halfway to the medical platform by the time Tim gives up and mopes to the elevator.

“Out of the suit, please.” Alfred says as he retrieves supplies from a medical cabinet.

Bruce obeys, every motion slowed by fatigue and climbing fever. He tugs a t-shirt over his head when Alfred hands it to him, and then lies back on the bed. It doesn’t matter that it’s not the most comfortable bed in the house-- right now, it feels good enough. He lets himself go limp.

Alfred unwinds the gauze from his leg and curses.

“Do I dare ask how much you’ve been walking on this leg?”

“As much as I needed to,” Bruce says.

“I’m going to have to re-do most of the sutures. And it needs to be drained.”

“You’re angry,” Bruce observes, as Alfred places an IV site in his arm and starts an antibiotic drip.

Alfred doesn’t answer at first. When he does, he’s already sitting at the bed stitching Bruce’s leg.

“In the past 48 hours, you have been in Washington, D.C., Colombia, Kansas, Gotham, and outer space. That pace would kill most men.”

“I’m not most-”

“All mortal men must bleed. I fear when you are with the League, you forget that you are not one of them,” Alfred says, quietly. “They will go home already mended before the dust settles. You come limping home and take days, weeks, to heal.”
“If I wasn’t out there, working-”

Alfred cuts him off again.

“I understand, sir, that you feel it is necessary. It may be. And that is why I stay, waiting here to stitch you up or set your bones or create a cover story for your time in a hospital. But I wish you would remember more often that you are only human.”

Bruce feels the ache of his humanity in every cell of himself right now. He also feels himself drifting-- there must be some strong painkillers next to the antibiotic drip.


Finis.

“It would be the same at the end of the journey,  
If you came at night like a broken king,  
If you came by day not knowing what you came for,  
It would be the same, when you leave the rough road  
And turn behind the pig-sty to the dull facade  
And the tombstone. And what you thought you came for  
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning  
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled  
If at all. Either you had no purpose  
Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured  
And is altered in fulfilment.”

- “Little Gidding”, T.S. Eliot

Chapter End Notes

epilogue tomorrow. :}
Epilogue

It is two days later when Clark shows up at Wayne Manor with a pie in his hand, knocking on the front door in dark brown khakis and a button-up, his Daily Planet ID still clipped to his front pocket. He adjusts the glasses on his nose before the door swings open.

Alfred Pennyworth is standing in the foyer with one hand on the heavy brass knob.

“Mr. Kent,” he says, a bit stiffly. “We were not expecting you.”

Something in his tone, in the absence of usual warmth, stirs alarm in Clark.

“Is he alright?” Clark asks, disregarding formalities. “I told him I’d stop by.”

“‘Alright’ is a matter of extreme objectivity,” Alfred replies, stepping back to usher Clark into the house. “He’s in the study. I trust you can find your way?”

This is unlike Alfred, to not take him back, offer a drink, to not ask about Lois.

Clark looks twice over his shoulder as he walks down the hall, his brow furrowed.

The big oak doors to the study are closed, so he raps his knuckles against the wood.

“Come in,” Bruce calls from within, his voice distracted, and muffled by the door and distance. Clark enters the room, looking over his shoulder one more time.

“Is Alfred mad at me?” he asks, concerned, before turning from the hall.
“No,” Bruce says. He’s sitting at a massive desk, the red cherrywood polished until it is glossy underneath the green desk pad and blotter. There are six separate piles of papers and folders in front of him, the stacks thick with paperclips and signature flags and post-it notes. “He’s mad at me. He’s been avoiding me since I insisted on getting out of bed this morning.”

Bruce leans back in the chair and stretches, a pen still in his hand. His hair is trimmed and the beard growth of the past two weeks is gone. There’s a faint bruise on his left cheek, the palest splotch of yellow and peach. There’s an old Wayne Enterprises logo on his worn, gray t-shirt.

Clark puts the pie down on a low table in the middle of the massive Persian rug, in front of the empty fireplace and joins Bruce at the desk, standing and looking over the papers without picking any of them up.

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” Clark says, scanning the pages of board meeting minutes and project summaries.

“You are,” Bruce says, capping the pen and tossing it onto the desk. “And I’m glad. My hand is starting to cramp. I’ve been signing things for hours. How long are you here for?”

Clark shrugs. “Ten minutes? An hour? Three? Perry thinks I’m pounding the pavement, working on a follow-up piece for the week, but it’s already written.”

“You owe me a Scrabble game,” Bruce says, scraping the chair back on the wood floors and standing. Clark notices the crutches tucked under the desk, but Bruce doesn’t stoop to pick them up. He limps around the desk.

“Sit down,” Clark says. “I’ll get it. Is it still in the cabinet?”

For a moment, he thinks Bruce will argue, but instead, the other man sits in one of the overstuffed chairs around the low coffee table.

The box for the game is a dated, fading maroon, soft at the edges with age and use. At the table, Clark dumps the tiles out and starts turning them face down.

“You have your phone?” he asks.
“Let’s just start a new game,” Bruce says, leaning forward to help with the tiles. He keeps his leg propped out an an angle.

Clark isn’t going to argue.

“How easy do we want to make this?” Clark asks as Bruce flips the last face-up tile over. “Root language for allowed words? Germanic?”

“I’m not going that easy on you,” Bruce says. “Slavic.”

Clark groans but grabs seven tiles.

They’re on the third round before either of them speak again.

“How’s your leg?” Clark asks, putting the letters for gulag down. Bruce is keeping score.

“Fine,” Bruce replies, tapping the pencil against the scorepad while he stares at the letters on his tray. He glances over at Clark and then returns his attention to the tiles. After another minute, he says, “Actually, it hurts like hell. But it’ll be fine. I’m taking a few days off.”

Clark watches, wrestling within himself, as Bruce plays a word that seems like a throwaway.

“Clark?”

He realizes he’s been staring at the board.

“I had ulterior motives in coming today,” Clark says finally, looking at his tiles as if he’s thinking about them. He isn’t. Bruce doesn’t say anything, waiting him out.

The light from the windows shifts in color. They both turn to look. A dark storm cloud is rolling in, obscuring the sky.
“I just really need to talk to someone,” Clark says quietly, giving up the pretense of looking at the Scrabble tiles. He stares at his hands and sighs. “I know it’s only been two days, but I don’t think I’m doing very well. I mean, physically, I’m fine. Whatever you did, it worked. But I’ve been having dreams.”

“Dreams?” Bruce asks, rearranging tiles on the tray in front of him. “Or nightmares?”

“Neither, I guess,” Clark says, twisting his mouth. He studies the swirling whorls of the pattern on the rug. “Maybe more like hallucinations? But I know they aren’t real. They’re just happening while I’m awake. I don’t want to say anything to Lois and make her worry. She’s been having her own nightmares, actual ones.”

“What kind of hallucinations?” Bruce asks, sliding the tiles to the side.

“I don’t know. Maybe that was the wrong word.”

“Clark,” Bruce says, his voice firm. “Just tell me.”

“It’s stupid,” Clark says, pushing his hair back off his forehead. “I don’t even know why I—”

“Clark,” Bruce says again.

Clark takes his glasses off, cleans the blank prescription lenses with the edge of his shirt.

“Just little things. I was talking to my Pa yesterday and for a minute, everything he was saying was gibberish. Couldn’t understand a word. We stopped at Lois’ apartment to get some stuff, and while she’s in the bedroom packing, I lean on the balcony railing and next thing I know, I think I’m looking at my own body on the pavement below.

“I was at my place, getting ready for work, and suddenly I felt like I couldn’t breathe. I don’t need to breathe, I’m just standing there, absolutely fine, except I think I can’t breathe and my chest hurts. I was flying here, thinking about how ridiculous it is and telling myself I’m not going to bring it up, and while I’m watching the skyline I have this sudden conviction that I can’t see. I’m staring at Wayne Tower, slowing down, because I think I’m blind.
“It only lasts for a few seconds. But I have no idea what’s going on.”

Clark puts the glasses back on and steals a sidelong glance at Bruce, trying to gauge his reaction, to see just how unhinged he sounds.

Bruce is looking hard at him, with a pensive expression.

“Do you think some of it’s permanent?” Clark asks, spinning a Scrabble tile under his finger on the sleek table. “Whatever it did to me? Or am I going crazy?”

“Damn it, Clark,” Bruce says gently, pulling up his leg and leaning his elbows on his knees. He rubs his chin with one hand and studies the Scrabble board as if plotting his next word. Clark was half-expecting to be laughed at, half-expecting Bruce to spring into alarmed action. But when Bruce meets his eyes, he just looks somber, maybe melancholy. It’s hard to tell.

“Now would be a good time to elaborate,” Clark says after a minute. “I’m freaking out a little bit.”

Bruce sighs. “It sounds like PTSD. You’ve never had this happen before? After all the stuff you’ve been through?”

“I mean, I’ve had nightmares before, I think, but it’s usually like a one-and-done thing. Kryptonite puts me out, my mind is being manipulated. That sort of thing. Then I get to wake up.”

“You know you can call me, anytime,” Bruce says, studying him now, instead. “And despite how you feel about it, it might help to tell Lois. But I think it will fade. The longer it’s been, the easier it will get. Especially if you’re talking to someone about it. And don’t shut down. Keep doing what you used to do, a little bit at a time. Visit home more, if it helps. It will get easier.”

“Is this what it’s like for you? All the time?” Clark asks, a sense of dawning horror. “How do you do it?”

Bruce shakes his head. “Not all the time. Just the worst parts now. I’ve gotten a lot of practice. And if we’re lucky, you won’t have to. It’s your word, by the way.”
The tiles are in alphabetical order in front of him. He plays the first word he sees, not bothering to give it much thought.

“Thank you,” he says, quietly. “I was really starting to think I was losing it.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re not.” Bruce says, pulling his tiles in front of him again, stretching out his leg. He makes a face at the letters, one of mild disgust, and then at the board, and back. Clark knows they’re going to be sitting for a while while he thinks. “Can you get the blue dictionary?”

Clark does, resisting the temptation to sneak a look at Bruce’s tiles. Not to cheat, just to guess how long they’re going to be sitting there, waiting, if he wants to go find plates for the pie. Alfred still hasn’t come in and Clark knows it must mean an unusual level of fury for the older man.

Bruce flips through the dictionary, scowling at the tiles occasionally, and Clark leans back in his chair. The potential wait time doesn’t even bother him, he feels so relieved. Just having an answer that isn’t brain damage or lunacy is a weight off his shoulders; he didn’t even realize how heavy it was until now, when it’s fading.

He feels suddenly grateful, to be alive, to know Bruce, to get to go eat dinner with Lois, to maybe stop and have breakfast with his folks tomorrow, maybe help with the hay. To listen to Perry White yell at him, to do laundry, to sit and write up copy for a story that has nothing to do with him or superheroes or anything other than just people in Metropolis.

“You know,” he says to Bruce, as the other man now slowly turns pages of the dictionary. Bruce stops turning and reaches for a tile, begins to move it to the board. “I keep thinking how glad I am you were there, in DC.”

Bruce freezes, tile suspended above the board between his index finger and thumb. He doesn’t look at Clark. He resumes motion, puts the tile down, but does not pick up another.

“What do you mean?”

There’s an edge in his voice, something guarded.
Clark remembers Diana’s words on the Watchtower, struck as if by lightning.

_He blames himself_.

Of course he does. Bruce’s guilt complex could swallow the planet.

“Don’t be an idiot, Bruce,” Clark says casually. “What if she’d had that crowd hostage? Demanded that I come? You know I would have gone. And I would have gone in alone. She would have just seemed like one unstable woman, hardly a threat. And then what? She shoots me? It obviously wasn’t a matter of talking her down. Can you imagine what would have happened if you hadn’t already been there? I can think of a couple scenarios and none of them end well.

“So. I’m glad you were there. That’s all.”

Bruce doesn’t say anything.

He looks at Clark.

Clark looks at him.

“Are you going to finish that word or do I win by default?”

There is a single moment in which Clark genuinely cannot tell if Bruce is going to cry or not.

Then Bruce laughs, rubbing his leg and wincing the split second after.

“When have I _ever_ let you win by default?” he says, placing the last three letters in rapid succession.

“Who’s winning?” Clark asks, frowning at the triple point square Bruce just used. He looks over at the scorepad.
“Do you need to ask?” Bruce replies, annoyed, jotting numbers down in pencil. “Play a word.”

Clark can see the pencil mark through the pad, the tally of points in columns.

He grins. He’s ahead by twelve.

“Leave my tiles alone,” he says, floating up off the chair and backward toward the door. “I’m going to find Alfred and some plates for that pie. Is Tim here? My Ma told me she’d take it as a personal insult if we didn’t finish it off today.”

“Your mother,” Bruce says, apparently absorbed in a dictionary entry, “is the last person on earth I want to insult. Tell Alfred if he joins us, I’ll spend the rest of the afternoon in bed, just to make him happy. I’ll deal with paperwork tomorrow.”

Clark stops, halfway out the door, touches feet to the ground. He looks back at Bruce.

“Hey.”

“Hm?” Bruce replies, not looking up from the dictionary. Clark can see that whatever he is reading is a dense paragraph, maybe a contested etymology.

“We’re pretty good at saving the world together.”

“Hm,” Bruce says again, turning a page. “You help.”

And Clark knows they’re both going to be fine.

Chapter End Notes

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING AND COMMENTING. :) I've loved having you all along for the ride. Thank you!
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