

# Mr. Kent and Mr. Wayne



by

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The massive study door swung open on silent, electromagnetic hinges. A figure who rivaled the door for mass leaned into the darkened room and said meekly,

"Bruce?"

"Here." The reply came from behind a desk that could have served as a respectable community theater stage. A small spotlight on the desk was the sole source of light in the room, illuminating a bewildering assortment of tools and electronics and sinister-looking blades laid out over the desktop. Clark Kent walked around to where Bruce Wayne was hunched over a

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circuit board mounted inside a black plastic disk. He delicately poked at the assemblage with a soldering iron.

"Just a minute," Wayne said as he continued to focus exclusively on circuitry.

Kent stood patiently, looking over the melange of items on the desk. On a coat tree next to it, there hung a vest made of some rubbery gray plastic. He picked up the vest and examined a cracked, flattened portion.

"Bullet?" he asked.

"Forty-five hollow point," replied Wayne. "Popular this year."

Kent set the vest down. "Honestly, Bruce, how do you do it?"

"It's quite easy, really. You heat a post with the tip of the iron, then the solder melts on contact."

"I meant, how do you put your life at risk night after night."

"I do everything possible not to risk it," replied Wayne. "It's others who seem determined to do so."

Wayne snapped a cover onto the disk he'd been tinkering with, then stood and threw it. It traveled the length of the huge room, in mid-air sprouting a wreath of short spikes, and stuck itself dead into the bull's eye of a dartboard on the far wall.

"Nice aim," commented Kent.

"Gyroscopically guided along an infrared beam," Wayne explained. "It works, but it's bulky and prone to malfunction. Still testing it." Wayne looked up, and seemed as if he were only now noticing Kent's physical presence. "So how did you get here?"

"I flew."

Wayne nodded. "Coach?"

"A reporter's salary doesn't get you first class. Although, if you give me a useable quote on interest rates, I can expense the flight and maybe afford an upgrade."

"The federal reserve is unlikely to raise short term interest rates in the next quarter in an attempt to free up production capital that might stimulate employment growth and aid the sluggish bond market. Do you need it typed up on letterhead?"

"No. Just e-mail it to me."

Wayne raised his voice a bit, as if speaking to someone hiding in the shadows.  
"Command. ASCII transcript. Time preceding thirty seconds. E-mail to ckent@dailypplanet.com."

"You're recording this conversation?"

"Digital audio with speech-to-text transcription. Video from four angles as well."

Kent slowly scanned the room, squinting ever so slightly.

"I can only find three," he admitted finally.

"Good," replied Wayne.

"You're definitely getting more paranoid, Bruce."

"I doubt it."

Kent shook his head slowly, then turned and walked to the window. He looked out at the rainy night, droplets on the glass casting leprous shadows on his face. Wayne tidied up his desk, tucking each weapon and tool into form-fitting compartments hidden in the drawers. When he was done, all that was left was an immaculate leather blotter and gold pen set.

"So I'm assuming this isn't a social call," Wayne said at last.

"No," replied Kent flatly. "I wanted to ask your advice."

"Marry her," Wayne answered. "Jewish ceremony. Big red and blue chuppah."

Clark Kent let out a tiny smirk and snort. "Chuppah?"

Bruce Wayne shrugged. "I just like saying the word."

"Well, thanks for the suggestion, but that's not what I came to ask."

"The MidEast." said Wayne, all levity gone from his voice.

"Yes. The president has asked me to serve as an official emissary in the negotiations. But, unofficially..." Kent's voice trailed off.

"Unofficially, he wants more direct help?"

"Covert operations along the border. Mostly protecting our troops from ambush. Some missions to capture known terrorists. Disarming hostile insurgents."

"It all sounds very noble," Wayne commented. "But you have a problem with it?"

"You know I don't like to get involved in politics."

"Then why did you give the keynote at the Republican national convention?"

"That was different," Kent replied with a dismissive wave. "That was a favor to the president."

"And this is?"

"This is involvement in an international situation. I don't want to be called on to settle geo-political conflicts."

"You're saying you just want to keep rescuing school buses dangling off bridges, or diverting lava flows from peasant villages?"

"Bruce, this is serious."

"I'm being completely serious. You like saving innocents from random disasters beyond human capacity, but not getting caught up in military disputes of our own making."

"Basically, yes," agreed Kent. "But you say that as if you think that I'm outside humanity, as if I not one of you."

"You're not."

"This world is my home. Human beings are my people. Adoptive, perhaps, but that doesn't mean what affects the people of this world doesn't affect me. No man, no matter how super, is an island, you know."

Wayne lifted his hands in a gesture of deference. "Since only you can know such things, I'll take you're word for it. Personally, I'm inclined to distance myself from humanity as much as possible."

"I know. But you're human, Bruce. You're connected by birth to it all. And you're an American. Don't you even care about your country?"

"Being human and American are just accidents of my birth, just as being not is for you," philosophized Wayne. "In any case, even though I live here, I never really thought of America as mine. And I even own significantly larger portions of it than most. The people who control this country don't care much about what I think. They have their own agendas."

"You could be one of those people who help guide this country. You have the wealth and power to move in any circle you want. You could shape policy, help change things."

"People with wealth and power don't want things changed," answered Wayne. He picked up an elegant teapot from a gleaming silver service tray. "Tea?" he asked Kent.

"Is it regular, or that weird herbal stuff?"

"Weird herbal stuff."

"No thanks," said Kent, then faltered. "Oh, just put a lot of milk and sugar in it and give me one."

Wayne presented Kent with a delicate, gold-rimmed cup and saucer, full to the brim.

"It's gotten a little cool," he commented. "You might want to warm it with your eyes."

"It's fine. Thank you." Kent took a sip. "Uh. It's awful."

"The Kirgiz of Northern Xinjiang in China drink about a quart of that a day. Very low instance of cancer and heart disease. Many live past 80."

"But do they enjoy it?" cracked Kent as he took another sip. "Ugh. Does it taste any better without milk and sugar?"

"No," Wayne replied, and tipped up his cup in a salute before drinking.

Kent drained his tea with a grimace, then set the cup on a shelf.

"I've just been having a tough time, I guess," he began. "The news. The editorials. I hear it all at work, you know. They're so critical lately. And that awful cartoon."

"You mean the Internet one where you have a swastika on your chest?" asked Wayne. "It's pretty good."

Kent sighed. "It's not funny, Bruce."

"I didn't think it was funny. I just thought the likeness was pretty good."

"Why would someone do that? All I was trying to do was stop people from getting hurt, property from being destroyed."

"You intervened in a riot. Those only happen when bottled up anger reaches a critical mass. They're a natural release."

"They're destructive."

"I didn't say they were good," explained Wayne. "I said they were natural. Stopping one is just delaying the inevitable—plus all the repercussions of appearing to choose the side of the status quo."

"Damn it, I did not choose sides. I just sent everyone back home and put a stop to pointless violence."

"Some might say the point of it had to do with the quality of the homes each side had to go to."

"I did what was right."

"If it's any consolation," said Wayne, "I think you probably did."

"I know I did. Those that think otherwise just don't understand."

Wayne poured himself another tea. He offered the pot to Kent, who politely waved it away.

"You don't face the same things I do, Bruce," Kent began. "You work small. Quiet. The night in one city."

"Believe me, it's enough."

"But you don't have to make life and death decisions that affect hundreds. You don't have to worry about public perceptions of your actions. You're a shadowy outlaw. I'm an icon. People still debate whether or not you even exist. Every night I read an editorial branding me a racist or a tool of American imperialism or the antichrist in a cape. I'm just doing what I can to keep this world running, to help people who don't realize what's best for them. Why do so many seem to hate me for that?"

Wayne stepped up next to Kent. "You want to know why people hate you?"

"Yes. I want to know."

"Look over there."

Kent turned to look out the rain-streaked window. "Where?"

"Right there."

Kent squinted minutely. "Where?" He looked for a moment, then turned back toward Wayne. "I don't see—"

An iron fireplace poker slammed over the bridge of Kent's nose with such force the shaft bent to fit the shape of his cheekbones. Wayne dropped the bent poker with a clatter and rubbed his hands together briskly.

"Ouch," he said. "Stings."

"What did you do that for?" demanded Kent.

Wayne continued to rub and shake out his hands. "That blow would have killed any human being who has ever walked the face of this earth. That's why they hate you. You're impervious. You deign to live among and claim kinship with people, but you don't suffer the same pain and fear and doubt and lifetime of subliminal rage at mortality. You're a condescending god, without even the decency to remain invisible, who swoops out of the sky to solve any problem too big for humanity to handle--except for the ones you feel it's inappropriate for you to become involved in. You're all powerful and you know better than everyone. And to make it really annoying, most of the time, you're right."

"Is that really what you think of me?" Kent asked.

"Me? No," Wayne replied. He picked up the bent poker and worked its new, odd angle back into the holder by the fireplace. "I'm glad you're around. I was just telling you what people think."

Kent managed a smile. "I didn't realize you were such an expert on people, Bruce."

"It is wise to study the ways of one's enemies," Wayne replied, with a hint of smirk as well.

Kent continued to stare out the window and rocked a bit on the balls of his feet.

"So have you decided what to do about the MidEast operation?" asked Wayne.

"I don't know," Kent replied. "Maybe I'll just disarm both sides and watch them throw rocks at each other."

"Let me know if you do," Wayne said. "I'd make the trip to see that."



"I should be getting back to my hotel. I have an early flight tomorrow."

"You're welcome to stay here. Pick any wing you like. And the guesthouses are very nice, so I hear."

"Thanks for the offer, Bruce. But I prefer the small, well-lighted normalcy of a deluxe single room. Besides, something about this place always gives me the creeps a little bit. No offense."

"None taken. In fact, I can't think of higher praise."

"Well, good night then, Bruce." Kent started toward the door.

"Wait," Wayne called after him. "Do you have your ticket?"

Kent fished into his lapel pocket and handed Wayne an airline ticket folder. Wayne took it, then picked up a phone. He dialed a number, apparently from memory, and waited. Eventually, he spoke into the phone.

"Hello, Susan. Hi, it's Bruce Wayne. Sorry to bother you so late. I see. Well, that's good. Oh yes, very well, thank you. And you. That's great. That's great. Glad to hear it. May I speak to Gordon please?"

There were a few moments of silence, during which Wayne studied the ticket.

"Gordon, hello. Bruce Wayne. Sorry to bother you so late. Can you get me a first class seat for the 8:35 tomorrow, Gotham to Metropolis. Right. Yes, just one. Great. Thanks, Gordon. Right. You too. Good night."

He hung up the phone and handed Kent the ticket back.

"First class, all booked. Just tell them at check in that you're the executive upgrade customer."

Kent bowed his head slightly in gratitude. "Thanks again, Bruce. There are definitely times I envy you."

Wayne held up the cracked, flattened vest. "I envy you fairly often," he said.

Clark Kent silently opened and shut the study door. Bruce Wayne stood alone in the room for a few minutes, sipping his tea. When he was finished, he set down the cup on the serving tray and walked over to a carved wooden panel in the wall.

"Scan," he said.

A beam of light passed across his eyes, scanning his retina patterns. The panel slid open revealing a narrow stairway that descended sharply into darkness. He stepped down and the panel closed behind him.

**END**