

Soldier On

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Summary: A one-shot look into Clark's mind after he responds, as Superman, to a great tragedy.

A hazy darkness filled the entire room. The curtains were drawn tightly closed; the slight glow emanating from them gave evidence of the daylight outside, leaving the room in a constant state of twilight.

The room was occupied by a sole individual, shrouded in the half-light and devoid of any life or feeling. Not that Clark really cared or anything because the darkness suited his mindset. The curtains shifted slightly, a single, tiny ray of the offensive light briefly illuminating his features, showing the mask of anguish and tears pouring down his cheeks.

He sat perched precariously on the edge of the bed, hunched over, his broad shoulders shaking silently. His appearance was haggard, like a man who had gone through hell and back many times over and, finally, had succumbed to the pressure. Dark, coarse stubble graced his normally smooth skin. He clearly hadn't shaved in a few days and if the bags under his eyes weren't evidence enough, there was always the haunted look filling his eyes as though he'd witnessed a great tragedy that had struck him to the core.

Clark drew in a large, ragged breath and dragged his hand across his weary face. If anyone could guess, here was a man who'd reached his breaking point.

Clark's thoughts were as dark as the room he was in. As Superman, he was used to being everyone's hero. The one who swooped in to save the day when hope was minimal and all seemed lost. Even under the grimmest circumstances he would grin and bear it, coming to the rescue, but even the Man of Steel could only handle his fair share of horror and tragedy. But where was Superman's hero? Who saved him when all hope seemed lost in his eyes?

One might have asked, as Clark definitely did, "Why him? Why does it have to be him?"

The only answer anyone, including Clark himself, could expect is because he could. He had the power to make a difference.

Three days before, this man had reached his limit.

Clark sank deep into the dark recesses of his mind and into the memories that haunted him. "Bang!" A shot echoed like a ghost through his tormented psyche. Clark desperately closed his eyes tight and dug his palms into the sides of his head as though trying to squeeze the painful memories out.

"Bang! Bang! Bang!"

His face screwed up in pain, the tears squeezing out of the corners of his closed eyes. He dug his palms harder into his head. And then it happened; the images he had tried so hard to block out flooded through his mind.

The choking scent of gunpowder filled the air as five figures in dark clothing and masks ran through the hallway, like monsters from nightmares. Each brandished a sawed-off shotgun, shooting bullets into the crowds of kids who tried desperately to escape. Children ran into classrooms, screaming in despair as they tried to get away from the hail of bullets ripping through the hall.

Clark flew onto the scene with all the speed he could muster, throwing himself between the armed men and the fleeing

children. The bullets impacted his chest and ricocheted off.

He grabbed the nearest two men and knocked them into each other with force enough to break bones. Two others stopped, terrified, at Superman's sudden appearance while the final man ran towards another classroom on a final suicide mission. He burst through the weak barricade and into the full room, popping off a few more shots before finally turning the gun on himself. Superman arrived just in time, grabbing the speeding bullet in his outstretched hand, and knocked the final shooter unconscious.

Having apprehended all the shooters, Clark turned hesitantly to survey the damage, only to be horrified.

Blood was everywhere, like a botched, splatter paint job. Children were screaming and crying out in pain, a sound he would always be haunted by for the remainder of his life. He took off, flying through the roof, gathering up the waiting medical crew to save as many lives as they could.

Clark jerked suddenly away from his memories to find himself still in the dark room. How long had it been... two days? Clark shook his head and tried to drive away the sound of shots and screams which still echoed through his mind.

He gazed across the room to see a dimly-lit reflection in the mirror. He looked terrible. His thoughts once again turned dark. What was humanity coming to? Why were humans such a deeply flawed species? So much so that a group of men could run through a school, killing innocent kids.

Why hadn't Clark been faster, stronger... maybe if he was then ten more kids would still have a future. Clark was filled with an immense self-loathing. He had let ten kids die. He remembered every one of their faces and had seen those lives extinguished in an instant, like the flame of a candle.

How many had Clark saved in his lifetime? He couldn't even remember. Though, how many more had died because he hadn't gotten to them in time? The blackness in his mind and heart was growing with every tragedy he witnessed, every life that was lost. He was so weary of playing the hero to a race that killed their own fellow beings without so much as blinking. He was so tired of being the invulnerable "Man of Steel" who was supposed to be strong, when, inside, every death was like a kryptonite knife poisoning his heart.

His thoughts turned darker still. It would be so easy to end it all. To never have to feel the pain or the death and destruction of a people that he cared so much about and, more importantly, not to have to deal with all his internal pain alone. He had no one to turn to with his thoughts because no one could know the truth of what he really was, not even his closest friends at the Planet. The one woman he loved, his best friend, he wanted to tell everything to and have her take away his pain and despair. Those who did, like his parents, would be too heartbroken if he confided in them the truth of his thoughts. He had to go through life bearing his burden alone because as Clark Kent no one was allowed to know the truth and as Superman he had to keep up the façade as the invulnerable "Man of Steel."

The darkness was steadily closing in and gripping his heart in its iron grasp. There was so much kryptonite in the world and it was surprisingly easy to obtain if one had the right connections. No one questioned why the hero wanted a piece of material that could cause his demise. Who knew that his worst nightmare could be his greatest salvation?

Clark let out a bitter, humorless laugh that turned into more of a choked sob. "A suicidal Superman. Who wouldda think it?"

Clark's shaky, clammy hands picked up a small metal box sitting on the bed beside him. Even through the lead, he could feel the deadly thrum of power that belonged to the neon-green rock beneath the lid. His hands started shaking so violently that the box almost slipped from his grasp. He placed his clammy fingers over the lid, his already shaky breath quickening with the finality of what he was about to do.

“Superman! Help me!”

“Superman! I’m not ready to die!”

“Fire! Fire! Somebody get some help!”

Clark’s keen senses effortlessly picked up the distressed pleas for help. He sat completely still in the dark solitude for a moment, trying to steady his breath and trembling hands. Sighing with exhaustion, both mental and physical, he let the lead box fall to the floor with a resounding thunk.

He sat on the bed, his head hanging, then stood up slowly and ran a hand through his hair. He trudged over to the window and braced himself, then threw open the curtain, basking in the glow of the sunlight.

He loved the human race like his own because they always had been his own kind, since the day the Kents adopted him. He had to fight for them, protect them, even if they were self-destructive.

“I’ll live to fight another day,” he said softly, looking out over the city then, removing his outer layer of clothing, took off in a blur of color.

THE END