

Ubermann

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Rated: PG

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Summary: Perry White has a close encounter he'd rather not recall.

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Author's Notes: On the LnC board there was a complaint that no one had written an irredeemably evil (as opposed to deranged) Superman. (At least not recently.)

Lebanon, 1973

Perry White had lost the feeling in his hands and feet some time ago. He was kneeling on a hard dirt floor, a rough sack over his head, his hands tied behind his back. He'd lost track of time but was fairly certain he'd been in the small cell for several days. It hadn't been so bad when his translator and his driver were still with him — at least he'd had someone to talk to then. But they'd both been taken elsewhere and he feared the worst for them. The group that had 'captured' them at the checkpoint had identified themselves as the 'Cleansing Sword of Allah', one of the more extreme Islamist groups. They had no love for Americans or locals working with Americans.

At first Perry had hoped they merely planned to ransom him back to the Daily Planet. Although U.S. policy was that the U.S. government did not pay ransoms, Perry also knew that his editor might be willing to negotiate to get him back in one piece. But he'd been a prisoner for several weeks now, and any hope that he might get out of this was fading. His captors had moved him several times already. After this last move, they had kept him tied and hooded. He suspected he was in one of the border villages but he had no idea which one or which side of the border he was on.

He heard men shouting, arguing. In his time in Beirut, Perry had learned a little of the local language — at least enough to order a meal and tell if his translator was doing a credible job. He was certain the argument was about him, whether or not they should kill him immediately or wait for the guy with the camera.

'So this is how it ends,' Perry reflected. He missed Alice and the boys and regretted not spending more time with them. Was getting the story worth his life? He had thought so, before. He had thought that nothing was more important than exposing the truth. The truth shall set you free. But what good is it if no one ever finds out what you found?

The shouting stopped. He waited for scuffle of feet on the dirt floor. He steeled himself for the inevitable.

"Mister White?" The voice had an American accent. Perry hadn't heard anyone approach.

"Yes..."

He was lifted to his feet and supported by strong hands. The rope binding his hands parted but the hood stayed in place.

"We're getting you out of here," the voice said. Perry felt himself led out of the building, then arms went around his chest and he felt himself and his rescuer rise into the air in silence.

It was the silence that clued Perry into the fact that there was something very odd happening. He knew he was in the air, but there was no sound of rotors, or engines. He had heard rumors that the NIA had perfected silent, invisible helicopters. Perry hadn't believed any of it, but it was just possible he was wrong.

Just possible.

After a few minutes, they dropped lower and soon Perry felt the ground beneath his feet and he was urged forward into another building. The hood was removed. He blinked as his eyes adapted to the sudden light. He was in a small hut, surrounded by men dressed in black military gear.

"Mister White, glad to see you in one piece..." one of the men greeted him. "I'm Major Jenkins." The man beckoned to one of the other men. "Check him over."

The accents were American and the labels on the equipment were in English. Jenkins grimaced as another man entered the hut. Like the others, this man was also dressed in black. The one difference Perry could see was that Jenkins and the others were armed and the newcomer was not.

Jenkins cleared his throat, nervously it seemed to Perry. "Any sign of the other two?"

"Bodies in shallow graves," the man said. His voice belonged to the man who had rescued Perry.

"The 'Cleansing Sword' has a training camp about five clicks north of the village," the man continued. "They're planning a major attack against UN targets."

"No question about the accuracy of your intel?" Jenkins asked.

"Is there ever?" the man asked in return.

"And what about the village?" Jenkins asked.

The unidentified man canted his head as though listening for something then shrugged. "Bomb factories, munitions, you name it. They were in it up to their necks."

Now Perry heard the sound of explosions in the distance.

"No survivors, of course," the man added.

Jenkins's expression was grim but he nodded his acknowledgement. The man gave a sardonic salute and left the hut.

"Bastard," one of the men murmured.

"Careful," one of the others warned. "You know about his hearing...and everything else."

"So?"

"So, you don't want to end up like that village, do you?" someone said.

"Stop all of it, right now," Jenkins ordered.

The first man glowered but stopped complaining.

"Like it or not, he's a member of this team," Jenkins added.

The medic gave Perry a clean bill of health, considering his ordeal. "We'll be evacuating you to Ramstein in the morning," he was told.

He grabbed himself a cup of coffee and headed outside to talk with his rescuer. His journalist's instincts had kicked into high gear — there was something very strange going on here.

The man was standing outside. The moonlight highlighted the planes and hollows of his face, giving him an almost demonic appearance.

"I wanted to thank you personally for getting me out of there," Perry said. "I'm pretty sure they were planning..."

"They were." The tone had a finality to it but Perry wasn't going to be deterred.

"So, what do I call you when I write my story?" Perry asked.

"You don't."

"Well, what do your friends call you?"

"As you've surmised, I don't have any friends."

"What do your team mates call you?"

The man's teeth shone white in the moonlight, making him look even more demonic. In the light of the hut, the man had looked ordinary — dark hair, brown eyes with a slight oriental cant, olive skin. He could have been Hispanic, Mediterranean, Filipino, almost anything. Perry had a suspicion he wasn't any of those.

"You've heard what my 'team mates' call me most of the

time,” he said. “They also call me ‘El Diablo’, when they’re feeling charitable.”

“And why do they call you that?”

The man was silent for a long moment. Then, “Have you read *Le Carré*?”

It was an odd question, but Perry bit anyway. “Some.”

“He makes some interesting points, don’t you think?”

Governments can claim the high ground based on their alleged ideals — freedom, whatever. They can claim that their actions are purely defensive, in response to some aggression from the other side, whoever they may be. But on a practical level, you really can’t be less ruthless than the opposition, no matter what your vaunted morals are. And therein lies the rub. Someone has to be the blunt instrument. Someone has to do the dirty work, no matter how dirty, no matter how immoral.”

“That doesn’t explain why your team mates call you ‘El Diablo’,” Perry observed.

“They are charged with ‘tending’ the most dangerous being on the planet,” he said. “It offends their sensibilities. They choose to deny that they too are monsters. They pretend that their moral platitudes protect them from the blood on their hands.”

“And you don’t pretend,” Perry said.

El Diablo didn’t answer.

“What makes you the most dangerous being on the planet?” Perry asked. He didn’t expect an answer.

El Diablo surprised him. “I’m not human. And I don’t mean that metaphorically. I am not a psychopath or mentally deranged, although I’m certain my ‘team mates’ would be willing to argue the point. I was not born on this primitive backward planet. I can see farther, hear more than any human. I can move faster than thought itself and there is nothing, and I do mean nothing, native to this planet that can harm me.”

“And why are you telling me this?” Perry asked. “I’m a journalist.”

The man shrugged. “You won’t tell anyone. Aside from the national security issues, you’re smart enough to know that no one will believe you. Besides, you have a wife and two little boys...”

Perry felt his blood run cold — he’d always heard the phrase but hadn’t actually felt it until now.

“You wouldn’t...”

“You have no concept of what I would and would not do,” El Diablo said. “What I can and cannot do. But I do know that if you mention our conversation to Jenkins, he’ll likely order me to do something I would rather not do at the moment.”

“And why not?” *Keep him talking. Make contact... Establish your humanity...*

“You are smart, dedicated and reasonably ambitious,” the man said. “In fifteen to twenty years, I expect that my services will no longer be considered advantageous and I will need a fall back position. I expect you will be in a position to help me then.”

Somehow Perry knew he meant it.

Metropolis, 1993

Life was good, Perry mused as he looked out his office door at the newsroom beyond. Lois Lane had brought in yet another series on organized crime in the city. It promised to be yet another award winner for Lane and the Daily Planet.

There was a knock at his office door. Perry signed for the letter the messenger had delivered and opened it as soon as the messenger was gone.

‘Meet me at noon at the Ace O’Clubs. A. Jenkins.’

A. Jenkins? Arnold Jenkins? Perry felt a chill breeze run down his back. Arnold Jenkins was now a brigadier general assigned to the Pentagon. He was well regarded as a level-headed administrator; not given to panic or fantasy.

In fifteen to twenty years... my services will no longer be considered advantageous...

Jenkins was waiting for him in a back booth of the bar when Perry walked in. Jenkins was about Perry’s age but looked far older. His hair was white, his face a roadmap of scars and wrinkles. He didn’t smile when he caught sight of Perry.

“Our mutual friend has gone rogue,” he said without preamble. “You and I are the only ones left who can identify him on sight.”

“And what makes you think I could identify him after all these years?”

“Believe me, you’ll know him,” Jenkins said.

“And why would he be interested in coming after me?” Perry asked.

“Three years ago, the black ops project code-named Ubermann was ordered to be decommissioned,” Jenkins said.

Perry waited for him to continue.

In fifteen to twenty years... my services will no longer be considered advantageous...

“He was considered a loose cannon and there were fears of what would happen if he, and knowledge of he had done, what he could do, became public knowledge,” Jenkins continued.

“He became an embarrassment and someone had the bright idea to try and kill him,” Perry surmised aloud.

Jenkins nodded. “As I said, you and I are the only ones left who can identify him on sight. The others... I doubt their bodies will ever be found. As for him, he just disappeared. Given his abilities, he could be anywhere.”

“So, why would he come after me?” Perry asked. “And what do you think I can do?”

Jenkins didn’t seem to hear him. “I’m afraid for our planet, Mister White. He’s not human. He doesn’t see things the way we do, doesn’t feel the way we do. And I have no idea how to stop him. Both LexCorp and Waynetech have contracts to try to find something — of course they have no idea that the threat is real and immanent.”

“What do you think I can do?” Perry repeated. “I’m a newspaperman, not a soldier.”

“I just wanted to warn you,” Jenkins said. “You were the only person he ever said more than two words to in polite conversation in all the time I worked with him. He never did tell me what you two talked about.”

“He told me a little about himself,” Perry said. “Nothing I would ever care to repeat, much less print. I’ve never been a big fan of science fiction.”

Jenkins’ smile was grim as he nodded. “If he does show up... do what you have to do to keep yourself and your people safe.”

Jenkins dropped several bills on the table and walked out, leaving Perry alone.

Perry hoped El Diablo was a problem he wouldn’t have to face.

The taxi ride back to the Daily Planet was relatively uneventful except for the wails of sirens heading to an accident in the Pelham Bridge.

A dark-haired man in a gray business suit was waiting in Perry’s office. Perry had forgotten that he had an interview scheduled.

He only glanced at the man as he settled behind his desk. On the desktop was a job application. Clipped to it were several typed sheets — writing examples — and clippings from various newspapers.

“So, Mister...” Perry began.

“Kent. Clark Kent,” the man said. There was something oddly familiar about the voice.

In fifteen to twenty years... my services will no longer be considered advantageous...

Dark hair, brown eyes with a slight oriental cant, olive skin.

This time the eyes were behind a pair of heavy dark-framed glasses that masked the shape of his face, but Jenkins had been right. Perry would recognize that face. A face that hadn't aged a day in twenty years.

Perry turned his attention back to the paperwork as he tried to hide his anxiety. "Yes. Kent. Professor Carlton called me about you. Haven't seen him in... let's see... editor of the Smallville Press... that's..."

"Kansas."

Perry had no doubt that everything in the resume would check out. The only question he really had was: was this man really Clark Kent, or was Kent another body that would never be found?

Perry's intercom buzzed. It was a welcome interruption. He picked up the handset and listened for a moment. One of the assistant editors had a reporter who wanted approval on something that didn't need to be handled immediately.

"Well, tell him to keep his pants on," Perry ordered. "And where's my lunch? If Carlini's can't deliver on time, find a place that can." He slammed down the receiver. "I bought a blood pressure monitor last week, you believe it?" he said with a sigh. "Hell, I'm only fifty-two."

"Paava leaves," Kent said.

"Excuse me?"

"The Yolngu tribe in New Guinea eat paava leaves to relieve stress. Puts them in a meditative state. Maybe you should try it."

"Uh huh," Perry said. "Sounds like you've done some travelling."

"I spent some time in a lamasery in Tibet and with the Sherpas in Nepal," Kent told him. "I just got back from Australia. I've been studying the Dreamtime theory in Aboriginal mythology."

"A citizen of the world." *No wonder the government hadn't been able to find him.*

"Not really," Kent said. "It's my first time in Metropolis."

Perry took a deep breath to calm his nerves. He was sure his blood pressure was way over what it should be. "Mister Kent. This is the Daily Planet, the greatest newspaper in the world. Our people are dedicated servants of the fourth estate who deal routinely with matters of international significance..."

As he spoke the office door swung open and Jimmy Olsen walked in, tossing a set of keys on his desk.

"Okay, Chief, I fixed the horn on your golf cart," Jimmy announced. Perry wasn't sure if he should be relieved by Jimmy's interruption or not.

Not. "Not now, Jimmy."

"The tone's still off, but..." Jimmy went on.

"Not now."

Jimmy finally seemed to realize that Perry wasn't alone. He shut the door as he left.

"He's a good kid. Just a little oblivious at times," Perry explained. "As I was saying, I just don't think that..."

The door flew open once again. This time it was Lois.

"Chief, I think there's a story here and we should check this guy out. The crazy one this morning? His name is Samuel Platt and he was an engineer at EPRAD for ten years. He's..."

"Can't you see I'm in the middle of something here?" Perry asked.

Lois gave him a blank look but didn't leave.

Perry sighed. "Lois Lane, Clark Kent."

Lois nodded, her mind obviously elsewhere. "Nice to meet you," she said then turned back to Perry. "Anyway, this guy worked on the Messenger, he..."

"Lois, what happened to that mood piece I gave you? The razing of that old theatre on Forty-second?"

"I wasn't in the 'mood.'"

Perry noticed a smile on Kent's face at Lois's response.

Maybe there is something human there. Or maybe I'm wrong about him being El Diablo.

"Now listen here, Lois, I..." Perry began.

Jimmy tapped on the office door window, catching Lois's attention.

"Gotta run," she announced. "Catch you later, Chief."

Perry simply shook his head as he watched her leave.

"If that woman wasn't one of the best damn investigative reporters I've ever seen, I'd..." Perry paused and sighed. He had a more immediate crisis to deal with. "You look familiar. Was your father in the army, in Lebanon maybe? During the civil war?"

Kent shook his head. "I just have a familiar sort of face."

Perry considered his options. He could turn Kent away or hire him, hoping he wasn't El Diablo.

One of the staff reporters, Hanover, knocked on the door then opened it just enough to stick his head in. "MPD just IDed the people in that cab that went off the Pelham Bridge. Brigadier General Arnold Jenkins and the cabbie, Julio Ramirez."

Perry nodded, trying to keep his dismay from showing.

"The big question is what was Jenkins doing in Metropolis?" Hanover added.

"No mystery there," Perry said. "He was having lunch with me. We go, went, way back. I assume it was an accident?"

"Looks like a tire blew, driver lost control," Hanover said.

"Although how the cab hopped a three-foot guardrail is anybody's guess."

"Keep me posted if the investigation comes up with anything more," Perry instructed. Hanover closed the door.

"You don't believe it was an accident, Mister White?" Kent asked.

"I don't know," Perry admitted, watching Kent's face for any flicker that he was anything more than an eager twenty-something looking for a job. There was nothing.

Keep your friends close and your enemies closer?

Perry held out his hand. "Welcome to the Planet, Kent."

"Thank you, Mister White," Kent replied, squeezing Perry's hand just a little too tightly. "Somehow I knew I wouldn't be disappointed coming here."

THE END