

A Stark Conversation

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Summary: It was supposed to be a routine press conference...

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"And now, Mr. Stark has prepared a statement," Colonel James Rhodes said from the podium. "He will not be taking any questions. Thank you."

"Figures," Lois muttered under her breath as she sat next to Clark on the uncomfortable folding chairs that had been set out for the press conference. "These guys *never* want to answer questions."

Clark said nothing. He merely waited to see what the official statement would be, concerning the emergence of the world's newest superhero, Iron Man. A heartbeat later, the room hushed a bit as billionaire Tony Stark entered the room and took the podium, saving Clark from needing to calm Lois down.

"Been a while since I was in front of you," the man said, holding a stack of note cards. He smiled nervously. "I figure I'll stick to the cards this time." There was some scattered laughter throughout the room. "There's been speculation that I was involved in the events that occurred on the freeway and the rooftop."

A voice from the crowd interrupted. "I'm sorry, Mr. Stark, but do you honestly expect us to believe that that was a bodyguard in a suit that conveniently appeared, despite the fact that you—"

"I know that it's confusing," Mr. Stark said, interrupting his interrupter. "It is one thing to question the official story, and another thing entirely to make wild accusations, or insinuate that I'm a superhero."

"I never said you were a superhero," the other man shot back.

For half a second, the billionaire looked flustered, but Clark gave him credit for how quickly he recovered.

"Didn't?" he asked. "Well, good, because that would be outlandish and fantastic. I'm just not the hero type. Clearly." Clark's practiced ear noted hints of worry in Mr. Stark's voice. "With this laundry list of character defects, all the mistakes I've made... largely public..."

"No kidding," Lois scoffed.

"I don't know, Lois," Clark whispered back. "I'm starting to think that maybe..."

"Just stick to the cards," he heard Rhodes encourage the billionaire in a whisper.

Mr. Stark seemed to think it over for a second or two. Then he disregarded the note cards. "Yeah, okay. Yeah. The truth is, I *am* Iron Man."

The room exploded into noise — shocked gasps, shouted questions, arguments, groaning from Mr. Stark's handlers, even

scattered cheering. Flashes of light from a hundred cameras exploded into action. The crowd stood, scraping their chairs heedlessly backward as they surged forward — all of them wanting to ask questions, to be heard, to grab a photo of the historic moment when the very first of the world's superheroes offered up his secret identity on a silver platter.

"That was a stupid move," Lois said with a shake of her head. If it wasn't for Clark's enhanced hearing abilities, the words would have been lost in the sea of noise surrounding them.

She was right. Tony Stark had just done the worst possible thing — not only to himself, but to all of the other superheroes around the world. Clark could already hear the speculation of whether or not other superheroes had secret identities as well, even if it was only in his own mind so far. He wasn't naive. He knew the questions would come. Worse, he knew the hunt would start in earnest again. He'd lost track of how many times he or one of the other members of the Justice League — as they'd come to call themselves — had been hunted down in an effort to expose their true identity.

His phone rang. He grabbed for it while catching Lois' eye. She nodded, then pushed forward with the rest of the crowd. Clark did his best to slip out of the room and into the empty hallway behind them in as timely a manner as he could.

"Yeah, I heard," he immediately said as he accepted the call, knowing exactly who was calling and why. "I'm here, at the press conference. Right. I agree. An intervention is necessary. I'll do it. Can you call the others? Thanks, Bruce."

He hung up the phone and headed back into the fray. The crowd was now even more animated than before, mostly due to Mr. Stark's refusal to answer any more questions. In fact, it appeared that he was leaving the conference. Lois gave him a questioning look as he made his way to her side again.

"Bruce," he said simply.

"I thought as much," she said.

"We need to have a little chat," he said vaguely, knowing she'd get his meaning.

She did and merely nodded. "I'll meet you back at the hotel?"

"It could be a while," he warned her.

"That's okay. You do what you need to," she encouraged him, giving him a quick kiss on the lips. "Go."

Clark bowed his head in deference and once more ducked out of the room. He scanned with his x-ray vision to find where the billionaire was. He was being ushered out a back door. Clark swiftly found a place to change, then flew down to meet the world's newest hero.

"Mr. Stark?" he called as he floated down before the man.

"Superman! Lovely of you to stop by," came the reply. "And it's Tony, please."

"May I have a word with you... Tony?"

Tony looked to the men who were guarding him. "Go," he told them. Then, "What can I do for you?" His words were suspicious and heavily guarded.

"We need to have a little talk about your announcement just now," Clark said evenly, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Huh, funny, I don't remember inviting you to the party," Tony quipped.

"Luckily for me, I was in the neighborhood," Clark replied. "Now, please, come with me. I promise no harm will come to you."

"Of course it won't. It would be bad for your Boy Scout image if I went missing or got injured while with you." He frowned.

"What if I don't want to come with you?" He pressed a button on the side of his watch. It was a subtle move, but Clark saw it nonetheless.

"Tony, I don't think you realize the can of worms you just opened in there," Clark said. He took a step toward the other man with his hand held out. "Please, come with me."

“I don’t think so.”

As the words were spoken, an Iron Man suit appeared behind Tony. It flew straight at him, the pieces opening and falling apart as they came closer. They flew straight at their creator and engulfed him in their protective casing. For a moment, the efficiency of the unmanned suit amazed Clark so much that he simply watched the events unfolding, before he could force his body to react. By then, it was too late. Tony Stark had fully transformed into Iron Man.

“Jarvis, let’s boogey,” Clark could hear him tell the suit’s artificial intelligence.

“Sir,” Clark heard the onboard AI reply, “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“That wasn’t a request. Full power. Now.”

In the next moment, he was shooting away through the sky. Clark shook his head, then bolted after Tony. He had to admit, the thrusters on the suit were powerful. Tony was moving fast!

“I can move fast too,” Clark muttered to himself as he gave chase.

After all, at some point, Tony would run out of power. Clark, on the other hand, could go on flying at top speed for a while. The trouble was, there was no telling how long it might take before Iron Man’s power source ran dry.

“Boy, I wish I had some Kryptonite right about now,” he heard Tony saying as he flew.

“That’s not exactly easy to get a hold of, sir,” replied Jarvis.

“Please,” Tony said, his tone of voice suggesting an accompanying eye-roll. “Check eBay. People are always selling weird stuff on there.”

Tony swerved around a skyscraper. Clark followed suit, daring to pass as closely as possible to the building in an attempt to shave precious seconds off his pursuit and to narrow the gap. He had to admit, once Tony was in sight again, he *did* appear to be slightly closer. He pushed himself even harder and the telltale sonic boom of Superman exploded in his wake. Tony sharply angled up. Clark immediately altered his flight path.

“Jarvis? How are we looking?” Tony asked.

“He’s still on your tail, sir.”

Clark heard Tony swear. “What is it going to take?”

With that, Tony made a sharp U-turn. He faced Clark and raised his palm. Clark quickly decelerated, becoming wary. What was Tony up to now? A second later, he had his answer. He heard the charging sound a second before a blast of energy hit him, knocking him back a bit. But though he’d been taken off guard, Clark quickly recovered. He shook his head and rolled his shoulders, as though it would clear his mind and help him focus. He approached Tony once more.

“This needs to stop, Tony,” he called out to the other man. “I just want to talk.”

“Talk is cheap. And I have an expensive ear,” Tony shot back as the charging sound began again.

Clark veered to the side as the blast of energy hurtled toward him. Blast after blast he dodged before he finally got his opening. With a blast of heat vision, he shattered the device. Working swiftly, he disabled the other palm as well. Tony faltered where he stood, hovering in the cloudless blue sky.

“Sir, we have a problem,” the AI informed the man in the metal suit.

“So it seems,” Tony replied dryly.

Clark knew from the way the man had been flying earlier that he used the hand thrusters to help him steer. He flew cautiously over to Tony and grabbed hold of the man’s shoulder.

“You need to come with me,” he insisted, as he began to tow the disabled suit along.

“This is called kidnapping, you know,” retorted the billionaire.

“Look, Mr. Stark—” Clark began.

“Tony,” the other said, cutting him off. “I already told you

that. I thought you had super hearing,” he grumbled.

Clark just shook his head. “Look, Tony, all I want is to have a conversation.”

“Iron Man and the Man of Steel. How poetic.”

“And a few of my friends,” Clark said. “Hold on. We’ll be there before you know it.”

Clark shot away as fast as he could go. He needed to disorient the suit’s AI system. It simply wouldn’t do if Jarvis was able to track where they were heading.

“Jarvis, tracking,” Tony ordered.

“I can’t, sir.”

“What do you mean, can’t?”

“We’re moving too fast. My sensors can’t process the information fast enough.”

“Just sit back and enjoy the ride,” Clark told them both. “We’ll be there in a moment.”

True to his word, they arrived at their destination a few moments later. Clark slowed as he angled them both into a descent. In seconds, they’d landed.

“Jarvis, where are we?”

“I’m not sure, sir,” the robotic voice replied.

“Welcome to the Hall of Justice,” Clark said, as he opened the door for Tony to walk through. “Straight ahead, please.”

He heard Tony huff in annoyance, but, to his credit, he *did* start walking. Down the marble hallway they went, passing by impressive, richly decorated columns on either side. Tony opened the front of his mask, and Clark could see him eyeing even the smallest details of the place. Clark didn’t blame him. Even after all these years, the place still amazed him. He had to hand it to Bruce. He’d known what he was doing when he’d had the place built.

“In here,” he said, moving alongside Tony and opening a set of massive double doors, made of the richest mahogany wood.

“I’m not sure everyone’s here yet—”

“There’d better be alcohol,” billionaire replied in a bored tone, cutting him off.

“Perhaps just some coffee,” Clark said. He needed Tony to be clearheaded for this important talk.

“Goody two shoes.”

Clark ignored him and stepped into the richly furnished room. Most of the others were already there, he could see. That was good. He wanted this meeting to be over and done with as quickly as possible.

“Ah, Mr. Stark. Please, take a seat,” Batman offered as he broke off conversation with the Flash.

“Okay, look, everyone, it’s Tony,” Tony said, saying his name slowly, as if he was speaking to a group of children. “Let’s drop the formalities, okay?”

He took a seat in a plush, overstuffed armchair. He found the controls to recline the seat and put his feet up. Clark knew the man was posturing — trying to look comfortable and unconcerned — but he didn’t miss the way the billionaire checked the room for windows and doors by which to escape if necessary.

“Who are we waiting on?” Clark asked, directing his question at Bruce.

“Just Lantern,” Bruce replied.

“What about Manhunter?” Clark asked, scanning the room again.

Bruce shrugged. “He couldn’t make it. But I’ll fill him in later.”

Clark nodded. “Okay.”

“Hang ten,” came a new voice from the hallway a few minutes later.

A man clad in green came surfing in on a wave of green energy. As he came closer to them all, the wave shrank, bit by bit, until it vanished, leaving him in the center of the meeting space.

“Nice entrance,” Wonder Woman quipped dryly.

“I liked last week’s better,” Clark said with a shake of his

head. “You know...the hang-glider thing. I give today’s entrance a six.”

“A *six*?” asked the newcomer. “That’s harsh, Supes.” He put a hand to his heart as though wounded.

“You’re late,” Batman observed.

“Late?” Green Lantern asked. “Cut me a break. Not all of us have private Bat-jets or whatever, you know.”

Wonder Woman stifled a laugh and settled herself deeply into the couch cushions where she sat. “Let’s get started, shall we?”

Clark nodded again. “Good idea.” Everyone took a seat while he remained standing. He waited for everyone to settle down before beginning. “Mr. Stark...Tony...the reason why we’ve brought you here is—”

“Don’t tell me,” Tony interrupted from his chair. “You all want to extend an invitation to me to join your little group, right? Sorry to break it to you, but I prefer to work alone. I don’t do the organized teamwork thing.”

“Actually, no, that’s *not* why you’re here,” Clark replied. “As I told you before I brought you here, we need to talk. Your little stunt at the press conference this afternoon was reckless.”

“It was *stupid*,” Batman put in.

“Do you even realize what you’ve done?” Wonder Woman asked, shaking her head.

“Well, I got the world off my back about the Iron Man thing,” Tony said, casually shrugging his shoulders.

“No, what you did was put a giant target on your back...and on ours,” the Flash said, scowling.

“Even more than we had them before,” Batman agreed.

“Thanks to that little stunt of yours, everyone in the world is going to wonder if the rest of us have secret identities,” Clark said, pacing the floor.

“And?” Tony asked, drawing the word out, as if confused over the other heroes’ concern.

“And,” Clark replied evenly, “it’s dangerous for us. Just like you, we have lives of our own that we’d like to protect and keep private.”

“Oh, like how you wouldn’t want anyone to know how you’re actually news reporter Clark Kent?” Tony replied with cool confidence. “Please, don’t bother trying to deny it.”

“I’m not sure...” Clark began, undecided how to proceed. His first instinct was to deny the allegation — even if it *was* true — and protect his identity and family. But if Iron Man was here to stay, shouldn’t they all have some level of full disclosure? After all, the members of the Justice League had been open with each other for years now.

“Oh, please. I’ve known since that first press conference you held, regarding your identity,” Tony continued, cutting him off. “When that *Top Copy* chick tried to expose you. Maybe the rest of the masses believed your lie, but that shoddy laser work didn’t fool me for a second. Oh, it was a valiant attempt, I’ll give you that.”

Clark sighed. “It was all I had to work with,” he admitted in a soft voice.

“And you, Batman...or should I say, Bruce Wayne,” Tony said, looking piercingly at the Caped Crusader, “you’ve done pretty well at keeping your identity under wraps. It took me a little longer to figure out who you were. But unfortunately, there’s a pretty significant, glaring detail that tipped me off.”

“And that was...?” Batman asked, his voice giving away nothing as to his feelings.

Tony shrugged again, evidently pleased with himself. “Your gadgets. Who else in all of Gotham is rich enough to afford all of those gizmos? The Batmobile alone screams WayneTech.”

Bruce glared at the man, hard.

“So, what? You’ve figured out who all of us are?” Green Lantern asked.

“Most of you,” Tony admitted proudly.

“And I am...?” Green Lantern asked in a challenging manner.

“Dunno,” Tony said, picking at the fabric of his chair in a bored manner. “You were never important enough for me to worry about. Now, Wonder Woman...*she’s* someone I’d like to know better.”

“Pig,” Wonder Woman muttered, just loudly enough to be heard.

“Sorry, Princess,” Tony said, his voice devoid of any apology. “And I *do* mean Princess...Diana.”

She gaped a little. “How did you...?” She stopped herself. “You know what, I don’t care.”

Clark cleared his throat subtly, grabbing everyone’s attention. “The point is,” he said, leaning against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest, “if you know who we all are, then you know that we all have loved ones we’d like to protect.” He gestured with one hand at the rest of the Justice League. “Spouses, kids, best friends, parents.”

“So? Protect them,” Tony said, appearing to stifle a yawn.

“Don’t you understand? You just painted targets on our backs...and those of the people we love,” Green Lantern said.

“Hal’s right,” said the Flash, either forgetting for a moment that Tony hadn’t discovered Lantern’s alter ego, or deciding that since most of them had already been outed, that it no longer mattered if the secret was kept. “Oh, and by the way, I’m—”

“Barry Allen,” Tony interrupted. “I know.”

“By coming out with your secret identity,” Bruce broke in with a scowl, “you’re going to stir up people’s curiosity again. God forbid someone figures out who we really are...everyone close to us will automatically be in danger from our enemies.”

“Yeah,” Barry said. “I know you haven’t been doing the superhero thing long, but you have no idea what kinds of true evil are out there.”

“Barry’s right,” Clark said with a single, solemn nod. “There are those who would gladly kidnap, torture, and kill the people we love in order to get to us.”

“I don’t know what kinds of evil are out there? Have you forgotten that I was a terrorist captive? Which, by the way, I noticed none of you saved me from.”

“There were...complications,” Clark muttered, still feeling ashamed that none of the League had been able to find and rescue the billionaire.

Tony waved it off. “Whatever. Look, it’s not like I’m going to go buy some airtime to broadcast to the world who you are,” he said, his hands up in a placating gesture.

“It doesn’t matter,” Clark said with a shake of his head.

“You’ve put the idea out there that superheroes have lives outside of saving the world. And even though it’s true, it’s not something any of us want the world to consider. I mean, aren’t you close to Miss Potts?”

“Pepper? Maybe. What’s it to you?”

“Don’t you worry about what might happen? If you get serious with her...date her, marry her...she’ll be the first person your enemies are going to go after. And, as I understand it, you’ve made plenty of enemies in your lifetime already,” Clark replied evenly.

“Even if you don’t get close to her, she’s associated with you. She’s already marked,” Diana added. She took a sip from a glass of ice water.

“Pepper can handle herself,” Tony assured them. “You should have seen what she was able to accomplish during my...encounter with Obadiah. Just because you all live your lives scared, doesn’t mean that Pepper and I do. Or even should.”

“And if you have kids?” Clark asked.

“No. Never going to happen. I’m not a ‘kids’ kind of guy. You might be, *Clark*, but I’m not.” Tony got up from his seat and wandered about the room as he spoke. He scanned the table with drinks and looked disappointed. “No wonder you’re all so pissy. Where’s the booze?” He snapped his fingers as best he could while

in the Iron Man suit. “I know. We should all go out and get a few drinks. Maybe it’ll loosen up all of you uptight heroes.”

“We don’t drink during business,” Hal said with a hint of disapproval in his voice, his brow furrowed beneath the identity-obscuring mask he wore.

“Bunch of stick-in-the-muds. See, *this* is why people are ultimately going to like Iron Man better than any of you. I’m a lot more fun.” He picked up a can of Mountain Dew and popped the tab on top to open it. He took a long sip.

“It’s not a popularity contest,” Diana said, rolling her eyes.

“Says you. You know Bruce is always ribbing Clark about the public’s love for Batman versus that for Superman,” Hal quipped, earning a glare from both of the heroes in question. “What?” he asked innocently, his grin stretching across his entire face.

“Diana’s right,” Bruce said after a moment. “It’s not about popularity. It’s about safety. And right now, all of us are in danger. *You* most of all,” he said, jabbing a finger in Tony’s direction.

“Could you take the mask off? It’s hard to take you serious with that thing on. I think it’s the little pointy ear things. Or maybe the sharpness of the nose. Something,” Tony replied, waving his hand in front of his own face as if to demonstrate his point.

Bruce sighed, and he wasn’t the only one. But he did not remove his cowl.

“You’re too insolent for your own good,” Aquaman grumbled, speaking for the very first time as he passed a stress-relief ball from hand to hand.

Tony rolled his eyes. “No one asked you, Fishlips. Look, if it makes all of you super-whiners feel better, I’m not going to give away your secret identities. I have *some* morals, you know.”

“Pfff!” Clark heard Aquaman mutter to himself.

“I’m not going to sell your personal information to the news or to crime syndicates or anything like that. Frankly, I like what you guys do and, honestly, I can make way more money in the same amount of time by inventing something.”

At least he sounded partly sarcastic, Clark noted.

“No offense, Tony, but that’s not what we’re worried about. We *know* you won’t betray us,” Clark said. “It’s just—”

“Just *what*?” Tony pressed, interrupting. “Because what’s done is done. Unless one of you have a time machine stashed someplace, we can’t erase the past. And, if I’m being honest, I *still* wouldn’t do things differently. I’m comfortable with my decision to be upfront with the world. At least I won’t have people hounding me about my identity.”

If only H. G. Wells would show up with his time machine, thought Clark. But of course, there’s no way of contacting him.

Bruce was looking at Clark expectantly, as though he could read his mind. Clark shook his head. There was simply no way to get hold of the time traveler. He merely showed up whenever it was convenient for him, which, for Clark, usually meant that his or Lois’ life was in grave danger. He had to admit, if even just to himself, he actually hated seeing the kind older writer, even if he did like the guy on a personal level.

Tony caught the look. “What?” he asked slowly, flicking his eyes between Clark and Bruce. “What do you two know?”

“Nothing,” Bruce easily lied.

“Do you...have a...time machine?” Tony asked incredulously.

“No, we most certainly do not,” Diana said. It wasn’t a lie. They really didn’t have one.

“It’s science fiction,” Hal added with an easy laugh and a smile.

Tony looked unconvinced.

“Believe me, if I had access to a time machine,” Clark said, “there are a lot of things I would go back and change.”

That was true. He’d often wished he could travel back in time to do things differently, like stopping Lois from ever getting involved with — and nearly married to! — Lex Luthor, and the way he’d kept shying away from telling Lois that he was

Superman.

“Good,” Tony finally said with a nod, even if he didn’t look fully convinced still. “The very idea is ludicrous.”

“Right,” Clark said with a nod, while he and the rest of his friends bit back their laughter.

“Look, time machine jokes aside,” Diana said, “the idea of superhero secret identities is out in the public’s mind again. What we need to figure out is damage control. We can’t make people forget about Tony’s little stunt, but we *can* do our best to deflect people’s suspicions.”

“If we make a public statement and say that we don’t have secret identities, we’ll look like liars,” Barry said.

“Because we *would be*,” Hal pointed out.

“But if we say nothing, it gives people time to think...and plot. People like Diana Stride,” Bruce said, nodding in Clark’s direction.

“We don’t even know people are definitely going to assume that we all have secret lives,” Aquaman said.

Clark shook his head. “No, we don’t. But we have to be prepared for any scenario. I’m not willing to risk it. Bruce and I have had a *lot* of close calls over the years. It’s exhausting and terrifying.”

“I have to agree with Clark,” Hal offered. “And I’ve only had a handful of close calls. It’s different for you, what with living under the ocean where very few people can get to you. Sorry, Orin,” he added quickly.

“You make it sound like scary guys with guns are right outside the door,” Tony quipped dryly.

“Clark was Superman for less than a month before someone tried to kill him,” Bruce said with a deadly quiet, intense voice. He didn’t even look at the fellow billionaire.

“I think we should take things as they come,” Clark said, trying to pull the conversation back on track. He didn’t want to discuss or think about Jason Trask, and the terrifying way Kryptonite had been introduced into his life. “If we call a press conference too soon, we look like we’re trying to hide something. Which, to be fair, we are. I guarantee the issue will be brought up somehow...Op-Ed pieces, television news stations, direct questions at press conferences. When that happens, we can address the world, either individually or as a group and brush off Tony as an anomaly...the only one of us who has a life outside of our superhero duties.”

“You really think that will work?” Barry asked skeptically.

Clark sighed softly. “I don’t know. But I think it’s our best shot. In the meantime, Tony, if anyone questions you...”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Tony replied, his hands up as if to ward off Clark’s warning. “I don’t know you. I don’t think you guys have real lives. Et cetera, et cetera.”

Clark nodded stiffly. “Good.”

“So, *Dad*, is the lecture done or can I go now?” Tony asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

The members of the Justice League exchanged glances, an entire, silent, conversation passing between them in those looks. Each of them nodded to the others’ unspoken question. Bruce stepped forward.

“I think we’re done here,” he said with finality.

“Good. Because I have a dinner date to make,” Tony quipped.

“Actually,” Clark said, as a sudden thought crossed his mind, “there *is* one last thing.”

“Now what?”

“There’s this government agent...Coulson. Phil Coulson. Chances are good, if he hasn’t approached you already, that he will. He’s got this idea for a superhero team. He’s calling it the Avengers Initiative under a department called S.H.I.E.L.D. All of us have been approached, almost from the moment we’ve first gone public.”

“Are you saying not to do it?” Tony asked, looking surprised.

Clark shook his head. “I’m not telling you to do it or not to do it. It’s just a friendly heads-up, that’s all. He and Nick Fury can be a little, well, persistent.”

“How persistent?” Tony asked, with what sounded like genuine curiosity and maybe some concern.

“Well,” Clark replied, thinking. “I went public in...” He paused to think for a moment. “Ninety-three. It’s two-thousand eight now. And Coulson approached me *again*...oh, about two weeks ago, asking me to join.”

“Last month for me,” Barry put in.

“Yesterday,” Hal added.

Tony paled by the slightest of degrees.

“You sound a little...concerned...about Coulson,” Barry said after zipping over to the fridge for a drink. He popped the top of a can of Pepsi and drank.

“I might have met him before the press conference,” Tony admitted.

“You’re doomed,” Barry said playfully.

“Not a chance,” Tony replied. He thought for a moment. “Let me get something straight. All of you Boy — and Girl — Scouts said no to him? Continuously?” He sounded more than a little shocked.

“We’re all in agreement that we work *with* the government, not *for* it,” Diana said.

“Fair enough,” Tony said acceptingly, and with a slight nod of his head.

“To be fair, what Coulson is proposing isn’t a bad idea,” Clark clarified, “but it’s not something that works for us.”

“Well, like I said, I prefer to work alone,” Tony said, his tone of voice indicating that the subject was closed. “Now, about the ride home that you owe me,” he said, pointedly looking at Clark.

Clark nodded. “Okay.” He saw everyone else’s questioning looks and shrugged. “I had to take out some of his thrusters to get him here,” he explained with a slight reddening of his cheeks.

“I *should* make you pay for that,” Tony deadpanned, “but I doubt you can afford it on a reporter’s salary.”

“I think you should make him *walk* back home,” Diana said with a smirk.

Clark couldn’t hold back an amused smile. “Maybe next time. I *did* promise, after all.”

“Fair enough,” Bruce said with a nod. “See you and Lois tomorrow night for dinner?”

Clark nodded in turn. “Absolutely. Uh...just tell Alfred no seafood. Seafood and Lois are at odds right now.”

Bruce’s eyes widened by the smallest fraction. “You said the same thing last time she was pregnant. Are you two...?”

“Yep.” He dipped his head a little in acknowledgement.

“Congrats. This is number three now, right?”

Clark nodded again. “And four.” He grinned broadly. “Just found out yesterday at the doctor’s.”

There were a few pats on his back and general words of congratulations.

“That *is* a reason to celebrate,” Diana said, smiling brightly. “Bring her to the next meeting. We’ll have a party.”

Clark chuckled. “Will do. Bruce? Is Vicki coming too?”

Bruce nodded slightly. “Of course. She loves spending time with Lois.”

“Lois will be glad to hear it,” Clark said. “She values Vicki’s friendship.” Then, as Tony cleared his throat a little, “I’d better get going. Come on,” he said, turning to the newest hero.

As before, he took hold of the Iron Man suit and whisked the billionaire away, slowing only once the Hall of Justice was safely out of sight behind them. He heard Tony huff in annoyance.

“You know, you don’t have to break the sound barrier every time,” the billionaire complained.

“Sorry,” Clark apologized, “but it’s for the best. None of us ever take the chance that our meeting place can be found again by

outsiders. If you noticed, your suit’s onboard AI wasn’t active while we were inside the Hall. Bruce has designed some pretty effective building materials to keep out unwanted signals.”

“Huh,” Tony said simply, as though he actually *hadn’t* noticed the absence of his Jarvis system. “I guess Jarvis *was* strangely silent.” Then, to his suit, “Jarvis? You there, buddy?”

“Yes, sir,” came the robotic, male voice. “I’m sorry, sir. Is everything all right? My signal could not get a fix on your location. All attempts to reach you failed.”

“I’m fine,” Tony assured the AI system.

“Would you like me to contact the authorities to apprehend Superman, once you have landed?”

Tony shook his head. “No, that’s okay. We’ve come to an understanding.”

“As you wish, sir.”

Before long, Tony’s cliffside home came into view. Clark slowed as he angled down into a landing, bringing them both down right in front of Tony’s front door. He took a step back as he let go of the Iron Man suit.

“Look, Tony, about today...”

The billionaire put a hand up to silence him. “No. You did what you had to do. I get that.”

“But the way I approached it...”

Again, the hand went up. “It’s a good thing you did. I never would have gone willingly. No hard feelings.”

Clark allowed himself to smile slightly. “Glad to hear it. I’d hate to make you an enemy.”

Tony chuckled. “Likewise.”

“If there’s ever anything I can do...” Clark offered, leaving the invitation hanging in the air.

“There is. You can get the hell out of here. Pepper should be here any minute.”

Clark laughed. “Got it. I guess I’ll be seeing you around.” He went to lift off the ground, but hesitated for a moment. “Since we’re colleagues now, at least, in a way, can I ask a favor?”

Tony’s face was unreadable. “Depends on what it is. I may be rich, but I’m not lending you money.” His tone was at least playful and no longer guarded.

“Would you be willing to grant me an interview, in light of today’s press conference?”

Tony laughed hard. “Gotta pull in the stories, huh?”

Clark shrugged lightly. “It’s what I do for a living. And Perry will kill me if I don’t at least try.”

“Tomorrow morning, eleven am. Bring drinks. Good stuff, not the local swill. Something from overseas.”

Clark chuckled once. “I’ll see what I can do.” Again, he hesitated, though this time his boots left the pavement. “Thanks, Tony. And welcome to the club, uh, so to speak.”

He didn’t wait for an answer. He simply flew off. After all, Lois was waiting for him.

THE END