

Break

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Summary: A different ending to the episode "House of Luthor." Superman manages to break the cage when he rams it, resulting in a messier escape. A detailed 'what-if'. Warning: descriptive injuries and wound treatment.

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Part 1: Escape

The burning was constant, ebbing agony through his entire frame, but the organ music playing floors above blaring in his ears was even more painful because of what it meant. Clenching his jaw, he forced himself up to his knees.

"Come on, get up," he ordered himself.

Gritting his teeth, he gripped the white cummerbund Luthor had taunted him with tightly in his hand and got to his feet. He knew he didn't have much strength left but there was no choice. He would either force his way out or he would die. With a deep breath, he set his eyes on an area not reinforced with the door frame. Luthor had engineered the box robustly and had ensured the door itself was not a weak spot. He also knew the bottom frame of the cage was magnetized to the floor through the concrete because he could hear the buzz of solenoid coils under the floor. He would likely never forget the sound of them energizing as the bars came down around him.

He backed up as much as he dared, wanting some level of a running start, even though every inch closer to the bars on the other side sapped what remained of his power. And then he charged.

With a silent pleaful prayer, he bashed his side and shoulder into two of the bars as hard as he could, so much so that he doubted the amount of effort he put into destroying Nightfall even compared.

Pain exploded into him as green shards intermingled with steel scattered all over the floor. He followed, through the now broken cage. His vision flashed white as his entire right side crashed down onto the concrete and debris. Fragments of the cage sheared into him, but he didn't have time to curl up and wish death to end it, for he had decided to live.

He scrambled up, gasping as he peered down at himself to find several fragments of glowing metal protruding from his arm, side, and leg. He swiftly yanked them out, using the cummerbund as a makeshift glove, tossing them back into his former prison before hurriedly pressing his worst injury with the white cloth to staunch the bleeding. He then wrapped his cape around himself. Although he didn't think most of his wounds were bleeding a concerning amount, he did not want to leave a trail.

Carefully, he urged himself forward, but, while having plenty of motivation, his whole being throbbled with unparalleled fatigue and brokenness.

The music was gone. Was the wedding over? It didn't seem like enough time had passed, but it wasn't like he could rely on his internal clock right now anyway.

He paused by the barrels, kicking himself for not heading the opposite way immediately—wasn't there another elevator that way?—but then the sound of someone running met his ears and he had no time.

He hurried further behind the barrels and collapsed against the far wall before freezing in place and biting his lip to hold in the cry of pain caused by jolting his side onto brick.

"Sorry, no time to chat. I think I'll just take my pound of flesh an—"

Luthor froze at the sight of the destroyed cage before whipping around and slamming his ax into the nearest barrel with a barbaric cry of rage.

Superman didn't dare breathe or move at all.

Luthor stormed off in a whirlwind of wrath and hate.

He sagged further to the floor, partially propped up by the wall. He shifted against a barrel, away from the cold wall, and was unable to stop himself from sinking closer to the concrete. He would just lay here and rest for a moment.

He closed his eyes, wondering for a fluttering moment if he was far enough away from the kryptonite, but then his mind surrendered to sleep.

"What on earth is this?!" a startled voice asked as the sound of several people making their way down the wooden stairs echoed through the cellar.

"You've got me, but there's blood," the voice of Bill Henderson said. "Someone or something literally broke through the bars."

"Has the room been cleared? Any clues to what was in there?" another voice asked. It sounded like the Police Captain, Wallace.

Superman opened his eyes, alarmed at finding how blurred his vision was, not to mention how numb his whole side felt. That couldn't be good. He needed to get out of there.

"We're about to clear it," a voice put in.

"What was Luthor doing down here? Just when I think I can't become more disgusted with that monster.... Good riddance to him," another voice said.

Superman steeled himself to move. He knew he didn't look good, but being found crumpled on the floor like a dying animal because of what Luthor had done to him felt like giving the man another victory. He got to his knees, using the nearby barrel as a brace. But he didn't have any energy left to stand. He needed help.

"Bill!" he called out, grateful that his voice didn't crack. He wasn't certain he would have been as lucky if he had needed to speak more than one syllable.

The four men lifted their weapons and rushed to that side of the room. Bill Henderson saw him first.

"Good heavens!" an officer exclaimed behind Bill's muffled curse.

"What happened?!" Bill asked, appalled as he put his gun away and moved to help.

"Luthor," Superman stated wearily.

"Get the paramedics down here, now!" Wallace ordered, grabbing hold of his radio. "This is Wallace. Get six more units here pronto. We will need an escort and get another six at the nearest hospital to secure it."

"Superman?" Bill asked, ignoring the sudden commotion behind him.

"Poison," he said, casting his gaze beyond Henderson and to the shattered cage. Kryptonite was too big a word, so he hoped Bill would correctly identify the foreign green material as the danger. "Need to . . . get out."

Henderson came to his side after a brief moment of hesitation. There was blood, and it seemed to be seeping from everywhere. There was even a cut on his cheek that extended down to under his ear, with lines of drying blood that disappeared

beneath the neckline of his suit.

Henderson draped Superman's right arm across his shoulders. It was a tight fit behind the barrels, but there was no way a stretcher would fit back there.

"Ready?" Henderson asked.

Superman nodded and gripped his shoulder in grim determination.

The Inspector stood up, pulling him to his feet, but the movement caused razorblade like pain to rip along his whole injured side and he couldn't stop himself from crying out.

"The paramedics are on their way," one of the officers said, approaching but uncertain on how to help. His badge read Collins.

"Collins, get his other side when we're beyond the barrels. Matthews, be ready to help if need be," Henderson ordered, ignoring the bloody, formerly pure white cummerbund that landed by his foot.

Wallace had left to help orchestrate their extraction of the downed hero.

"Thanks. Luthor stopped?" Superman asked, having to allow Henderson to take more of his weight as they came out from behind the barrels. Collins quickly came to his other side and mirrored Henderson's grip.

"Yes. Perry White and his team got the evidence against him and he just took the coward's way out off the balcony," Bill bluntly summarized.

"Married?" Superman asked, unable to keep the grimace from his face as the presence of Kryptonite continued to echo throughout the room. It also became obvious the barrels had been offering some protection.

"No, we got there in time, though it sounded like Lane stopped it just before then anyway."

Superman sighed in relief, but that feeling was short lived as he found he couldn't keep himself upright any longer.

"Matthews, help!" Henderson shouted.

Matthews rushed forward, preventing them from dropping the Man of Steel.

"Okay, get his legs. We've got to move. He needs to get away from that glowing stuff ASAP."

"You think it's radioactive?" Matthews asked.

"That's my guess."

"A hazmat team has been called for it," Collins said. "The Cap made the call on his way out."

"Good. Better to be safe," Henderson said as they suddenly moved.

Henderson was glad Superman's uniform had a belt, thin as it was, as it gave him something to hold onto as they made a beeline to the stairs.

Superman nearly blacked out as they passed the cage, and he might have moaned from the red hot spike of pain but he was beyond himself now. Everything was murky and he felt submerged.

He heard Henderson and Collins breathing heavily as they carried him, and Matthews grunt when he almost missed a step. He was also distantly aware of a growing wetness gathering at his side as a dull throbbing coiled around his chest and right thigh.

"Hold open the door!" Matthews shouted up the steps. "We're coming!"

They made it up to the landing and through the door ten seconds later, the men urgently getting him out of the toxic room.

A stretcher appeared in front of them a blink later, and, before he could fully take a breath, several paramedics took him from Henderson and the others and placed him upon it.

He wanted to take a moment to collect himself—never had so many touched him so boldly at once as Superman, or Clark—but the atmosphere around him suddenly plummeted into chaos.

Hands pressed against him and things were passed overhead. He felt something metallic and cold run along his side and down

both his arms before the top front half of his uniform was yanked away. He didn't resist.

From what little he could see of himself, fragments of the cage had done more damage than he had thought. He had never seen so much of his blood before. He wondered if he was in shock. He felt he should be more disturbed about being so exposed, but perhaps the sight of his red boots beyond blood spattered blue spandex was just too much to register anything further.

"Hold that! Grab another! There is no blood bank for him! We have to stop the bleeding!"

"More gauze!"

"I've got it, here!"

"Good, good."

A hand went against his neck and he could make out hazy forms above him as all speech he heard turned garbled. He felt things being secured onto his bare chest, an odd sensation on his inner forearm, and someone wrapping something around his sore arm and thigh as something white was taped to the side of his face. Soon after, a plastic object was placed over his nose and mouth. He sucked in revitalizing air. Blinking, he strained to understand when Henderson's face appeared above his. They were still moving but slower than before.

"Superman, is there anything you can tell us? How do we help you?"

"Lead blocks the ... radiation," he managed through the mask. "No harm to you ... short term. Not sure long term."

"Okay. Anything on how to best help you?"

"Clean wounds. Can't have any ... left in me."

"Can you feel any of it right now?" Henderson asked, concerned.

"Yes. I don't feel as bad, but..."

"Do you have any next of kin? Anyone you want us to call or to be your advocate if need be?"

"Hmm ... White. If he accepts," he managed, forcing his mind to think. "I trust him."

"Perry White?" Henderson asked.

"Yes."

"Okay, I'll get a hold of him as soon as I can."

"Sir, we have the reporters and public pushed back. We should move him to the ambulance now," a voice said.

"Agreed," Henderson said, pulling away.

A flurry of activity swirled around him again, and he was forced to close his eyes. Soon after, shouts of what sounded like some form of instructions echoed overhead.

"Alright there, Superman?" a voice asked as a hand gripped his shoulder.

"Dizzy," he whispered.

"Okay, just let me know if you feel like you might throw up," the paramedic said gently. "Hang on, we're going to lift you on three."

The haze of movement enveloped his senses again and he couldn't differentiate any of it for a long moment, save for the lurch of the stretcher being secured to the floor of the ambulance. He couldn't even attempt to hold back a pain-filled gasp at the jolt as a wave of whirling agony nearly swallowed him.

"Sorry, my friend. So sorry. They'll take you to the hospital now," another voice said before he heard the slam of two doors.

He felt the paramedic's hand on his shoulder again. He latched onto the sensation like a child grips their father's hand in the dark.

He exhaled shakily.

"ETA, seven minutes," the driver said as things calmed enough even though the sirens of the ambulance suddenly blared above him.

His vision began to clear somewhat so he took a moment to take stock of himself. He was propped up about 60 degrees and he saw his arms and right leg were wrapped while his torso had two

bandages liberally taped against his skin. Red blotches were on all of them, but at least he wasn't in danger of bleeding to death. And he had an IV in his left arm. When had they put that in? He blinked up at the bag. Saline? He supposed that was okay. It was supposed to help with hydration, right? He was pretty thirsty.

He closed his eyes.

Perry walked further away from the building with Jimmy, Jack, and Lois. The coroner had arrived and the area where Luthor ... landed had thankfully been cordoned off.

He was grateful the wedding had been stopped and that Luthor would never be able to harm anyone else ever again.

But where was Clark?

He had done so much to bring Luthor's activities to the light and now he was nowhere to be found. Had Luthor done something?

His thoughts were suddenly sidelined when a storm of police cruisers swarmed the side entrance of the LexCorp Tower with an ambulance close behind. There was already a police presence around the building but this felt different, urgent. Police blanketed the area and began directing news crews and pedestrians further away. What on earth had they found?

Horrible images came to his mind. He knew 'The Boss' had his hands on everything, including human trafficking. Surely the billionaire hadn't been so sure of himself to hold human slaves at the heart of his empire! Wait—he was that confident.

The paramedics rushed into the building as another vehicle was suddenly waved down the street by the police. A hazmat van. What in the world was going on?!

"Perry, what's going on?" Lois asked, scared that yet another putrid secret was about to shatter her world again.

"I don't know," he said, worried himself.

They continued to watch from a distance as a huge crowd of officers exited the building. The police were surrounding what he could only assume were paramedics guiding a stretcher to the ambulance. It was impossible to tell for sure though because they were holding up a tarp as they went. They couldn't see much beyond that but the first responders were swift and coordinated to get that covered stretcher into the ambulance in record time.

With sirens on and lights flashing, the ambulance pulled out, joined by a large escort of police cruisers.

"Who was that?" Jimmy asked.

"Don't know, but it must be someone important. They usually only escort dignitaries like that," Perry said grimly.

"Perry White!" a voice shouted from the direction of LexCorp Tower.

Perry, Lois, Jimmy and Jack turned to find Henderson running across the street toward them, away from the gathered police.

"Bill?!" Perry asked. The man had what Perry was certain was blood on his suit. "Are you okay?!"

"Yes. It's not mine. Would you mind coming with me to the hospital? It's important," Henderson stated, glancing at Lois. "I'd rather not discuss it further here."

"Oh, sure, sure. No problem, I'll come," Perry said, before turning to Lois who was about to speak. "Go home. You've been through a lot today. Wait. Don't go home. Just in case reporters are already there. You can stay at my place until this calms. Alice won't mind."

"Okay, Chief," she said, biting her lip at seeing Henderson's rather serious expression.

"Jimmy, Jack, make sure she gets there. You can take my rental. She needs to get out of here before the media notices her."

They nodded and headed off as Perry looked back to Bill.

"Alright, we can take my car. It's this way," Henderson said.

Knowing an anxious man when he saw one, Perry kept pace and asked no questions as they went to the car and got in. Only

when they pulled out of the parking lot did Perry look over at the Inspector, expecting answers.

"We found Superman critically injured in Luthor's wine cellar. There was a green glowing cage and my guess is that Superman managed to break out of it less than an hour before we got down there. However, in doing so, it did a number on him."

"He was hurt? You mean—this blood is his?!" Perry asked, pointing at the man's darkened sleeve.

"Yeah. Whatever that green glowing stuff is, it can kill him. We had to carry him out of there. Which, when we get to the hospital, I'll need to get decontaminated before we can see him. I likely got some of it on my suit."

"Kryptonite. It's real," Perry breathed, horrified.

"Kryptonite?"

"Pieces of Krypton, his home planet. A few months after he first appeared, there was a lunatic trying to hunt him down, claiming he was a threat to humanity and he believed he could kill him with a rock. He almost killed Clark Kent, believing the man was Superman himself! Lois and Clark covered the story," Perry explained.

"Did the man have any of this kryptonite?" Henderson asked.

"Supposedly. It's a meteorite. It was being dug up in Smallville. When it was all over, it was sent to the meteorological society there or something. I can have someone check if you like."

"Please. We need as much information as possible."

"So why are we going to the hospital exactly?" Perry asked.

"I asked Superman if he wanted anyone to be his next of kin or medical advocate. He asked for you, on the condition you accept. Said he trusted you," Henderson said, turning at an intersection.

Perry blinked, rocked to the core. He had never felt so humbled before in his life.

"Great shades of Elvis. I'm ... blown away. I accept of course," he managed. "What's his condition? How bad is it?"

"He was conscious and talking when we loaded him in the ambulance, but he lost a lot of blood and has several lacerations, puncture wounds, and burns."

"And Luthor had him in a cage?" Perry asked, trying to wrap his mind around what he was hearing.

"Yes. I'm not sure for how long, but I don't recall hearing about any Superman rescues at all today. Do you?"

Perry frowned. "No."

Henderson hummed as they turned into the hospital parking lot.

Part 2: Glow

Barb Noel had seen a lot and treated a broad range of patients from all walks of life throughout her nursing career. From homeless to even foreign nationals, including a prince, she had tended to wounds, illnesses, and delirium for over two decades. So when the Chief Nursing Officer (CNO) and one of the Hospital Administrators came to her with two high ranking police officers, she knew the day was only about to start.

That had been less than ten minutes ago, and now she, along with a team of doctors and nurses she had requested, were waiting.

They hadn't been told much, but knew Superman had been injured somehow by the now late Lex Luthor. A radioactive material was involved, but it seemed like short term exposure was not dangerous to humans, only to Superman. They would still be taking precautions, however, which was why they had a lead lined bio waste bin at the ready and all of them were at least wearing lead aprons. Most of her younger nurses were wearing respirators in place of surgical masks while she decided to wear an N95 mask due to the low supply of respirators.

The ambulance finally arrived and as the doors opened, the sight of the red and blue suit partially cut away with bloodied bandages gave them all a hard kick in the gut, but then their

training kicked in.

He was conscious and lucid but clearly not doing well. They removed the stretcher from the ambulance.

“Superman, I’m Barb Noel, Charge Nurse,” she introduced, running alongside the stretcher as an escort of police around the stretcher ran with them. “We’re going to cut away the rest of your uniform and move you to another stretcher once we’re inside. Then, per radiation decontamination protocol, wash you down before placing you onto a bed for you to receive further treatment. We want to ensure as much of that poison is gone before anything else,” she said, talking clearly and directly to him as they entered the ER and immediately wheeled him to the floor they had just prepped.

“Okay,” he said, though not as clearly as she would have hoped. She took note of the long lines of dried blood stretching out from under the gauze on his right cheek. The blood had trailed down his neck and had clearly been soaked up by the cloth of his uniform near his collarbone. It told her he had been losing blood for an extended period of time.

They entered the designated room and got to work.

“You’re going to need to forget your modesty for a minute, but we will cover you as soon as we have moved you over,” she said gently.

“I understand,” he said, resigned.

That was more than she had expected, but her attention quickly fell to his form as they began cutting away what remained of his uniform. She glanced over at Dr. Carson who was currently doing a visual examination.

Carson was an extremely skilled doctor and surgeon, which was why he had been chosen to head the care for Superman. He was a tall, middle aged black man with very short hair and olive green eyes behind black framed glasses. Letting the nurses work their magic, he decided on the best course of action for his new patient.

Superman had a dozen cuts on his arms, half of which were bandaged and Barb imagined half of those would require help to keep them closed due to the amount of blood that had come through the gauze. He also had a few burns scattered across his body, although his right side in general had a higher concentration and seemed to have a sunburn-like tone overall. The only thing that really caused her eyes to pause on his left side at all was the cluster of angry bruises blooming against his ribs, as if he had been relentlessly kicked many times. However, the wounds on his right side and thigh were the most concerning due to their size and location.

They finished cutting through the belt and began to shift the material away in preparation to lift him.

Suddenly, Superman yelled out in pain and flinched hard to the left, as if trying to move away from a hot coal.

“Turn him!” Dr. Carson ordered.

Hands quickly did as he said, revealing a slender, glowing green shard that must have previously been nestled between the folds of his cape beneath him. Barb grabbed it quickly with her tweezers and swiftly dropped it in the special bio waste bin beside the stretcher.

Everyone took a moment to breathe as Superman calmed, enabling her to examine his exposed back where the shard had brushed against.

An angry burn, already blistering, was left behind, declaring to them all how dangerous this material was to the Man of Steel.

“Alright, let’s move him now. Careful not to disrupt the cape. There might be other shards hidden,” she advised.

“I’ll get it in the bin as soon as he’s clear,” another nurse said.

“Good. Alright, on three,” Carson said.

She covered him from the waist down as soon as he was on the fresh stretcher and the old was pulled away to the far side of the room. As soon as his shredded uniform was completely stuffed

into the bin, cape and all, he visibly relaxed and the crow’s feet around his eyes receded some, though not completely.

“Alright, do you feel any poison still?” she asked.

“I think ... I think there’s some in my side,” he said, fogging his oxygen mask. “I feel it mostly there now.”

“Once we clean you, we’ll take care of that wound first,” she said before looking at Carson.

“I am Dr. Carson. I’m your head physician and, if needed, surgeon. Dr. Price is assisting me, and the nurses around you are the only people allowed in this room without myself or Nurse Noel,” he explained as the six nurses prepared sponges, rags and water. “This is, of course, for your safety and privacy. Do you have any questions?” he asked.

“Visitors? Inspector Henderson?” he asked.

“He and your chosen medical advocate will of course be allowed in at any time. As for other visitors, only those with your expressed permission will be allowed in during visiting hours.”

He nodded, appeased.

“Alright, I’m going to have the lights turned off for a moment. This material glows, so I want to see if we can use that to our advantage,” Carson said, nodding to a nurse to turn off the lights.

The area fell into darkness with the only yellow and white light coming from the far windows and emergency hall lights beneath the doors. However a very faint, translucent green ebbed forth before them, heavily blanketing the right half of Superman’s frame in a ghostly glow. Blotches of brighter green dotted him and two even dared to gleam through the dressings in his side. Superman slowly lifted his glowing hands, no doubt looking down at himself.

“Lights on. Dr. Price, you and your team will switch off with us half way through while we wash up to avoid recontamination,” Carson stated, his eyes calculating.

“Yes, doctor,” they said, stepping back. They had yet to touch Superman or anything that might have the radioactive material.

“Alright, now that we know where it’s at, let’s get it,” Carson said.

“Worse than expected?” Superman asked, his breathing more labored than before.

“It’s nothing we can’t handle,” Carson said confidently.

They washed him quickly, turning the lights off and back on every so often until there was nothing glowing on Superman’s exposed skin any more. They went through several sponges, very careful to not reapply anything they had just removed. Half way through, Price’s team swapped with Carson’s, bringing a geiger counter they had managed to procure.

“It’s not detecting high enough radiation to be a threat to human biology,” Price said, relieved as he continued scanning the gathered debris. The geiger counter rarely clicked. “Even at the highest reading I’ve measured, we would need to be around it for an extended period for it to become a concern.”

“Good,” Superman whispered before anyone else could comment.

Carson’s team left and rid themselves of all contaminants before returning fifteen minutes later to swap back. Upon their return, Price and his team had finished and soon left with the contaminated water and sponges. Barb was pleased but not surprised by their efficiency but her pride quickly fell to the wayside while looking back to their patient.

Settled into the fresh bed, Superman was looking very pale as Ann, another nurse, placed a warm blanket over him. The cut on his face was particularly prominent, even with the oxygen mask partially covering it. Barb wasn’t sure if he felt better or not, perhaps ‘not as bad’ would be a more accurate description.

“Do you know why it affects you the way it does?” Carson asked.

“I’m not sure,” Superman said softly. “I think I absorb

sunlight. So maybe I absorb this ... but it hurts me.”

Barb stopped herself from glancing at Carson. She knew he was just as concerned with Superman’s vital signs as she was. Alien or not, intuition screamed at her that his blood pressure should not be so low, or his heart rate that high. It was no doubt linked to severe blood loss.

Carson moved to speak but was interrupted by a knock on the door. It was partially opened by Dr. Price who peered in.

“Inspector Henderson and Mr. White are here. Is it alright for them to come in?” he asked.

“Superman, are you alright with them being here while we treat you and discuss your situation?” Carson asked.

Allowing visitors in during treatment was out of the ordinary, but Barb wasn’t surprised Dr. Carson was making an exception.

“Yeah.”

Carson nodded to Price, motioning for them to come in.

After Henderson had taken a shower and changed into a new set of clothes in a side room in the hospital, he and Perry followed the officer toward the designated area where Superman was being treated.

Perry’s feelings on hospitals were usually pretty neutral compared to most people’s, but this visit was different. There were police at every entry and two officers at every hall junction leading up to Superman’s room.

It was only in warzones or particularly sensitive areas where so much security existed at such a high alert. If he didn’t know better, he would have believed the President had been taken to this hospital in an emergency.

But he knew it was even more serious.

The strongest man alive was in intensive care. The being who unequivocally proved they were not alone in the universe and who had saved them from the annihilation that would have followed from Nightfall had almost been killed. Still might not make it. They didn’t know how bad things were or if there was a point of no return after an extended period of Kryptonite exposure.

Was it like radiation poisoning for humans?

“This is Dr. Price. He can take you from here. Please tell Superman we’re pulling for him,” the officer said before departing.

Perry and Bill looked at Price.

“Wait here for a moment,” he said, going to the door down the hall. He opened it and spoke with someone in the room before looking back and waving them over.

“We just finished removing all the loose contaminants covering him,” Price said, stepping aside and offering them lead aprons. “But just to be safe, put these on.”

Perry and Henderson quietly entered after putting on the aprons, not sure what to expect.

There were three nurses in the room, each with some radiation protection, but not as much as Perry expected.

A tray of medical instruments and a heavy duty biowaste bin was at the foot of the bed with a doctor, but their eyes were on the individual in the bed.

His red and blue uniform was gone. Instead, there was only bare skin and bloody bandages. Though a blanket covered most of him, his arms were out. His left, inner forearm had an I.V. line even though his skin should be impervious to needles, but that was the least of it. His skin on the right half of his body looked raw and cuts and sores were scattered among bandages.

Like a man suffering from severe radiation poisoning, Perry mentally lamented. He steeled himself.

“Hey, son,” he greeted, approaching the bed and imitating his late grandfather.

When Perry had been a boy, he had ended up in the hospital after an accident. His grandfather was the only one who made him feel like it was going to be okay, and he did that by not focusing

on his injuries, but on him.

“I see you’re getting the royal treatment already, but if you need anything from me or my people, just ask,” he said, unhesitatingly placing his hand on the uninjured corner of Superman’s shoulder.

“Thanks,” Superman said with a tired smile.

Perry never thought he would hear Superman sound so faint.

“We’re combing through LexCorp now and have secured all of the Kryptonite at the scene,” Henderson said, following Perry’s approach. “And like Perry, if you need anything, just ask. I do, however, need to get your statement before I head back. Is that alright?”

“Sure,” Superman said, before Henderson looked at the doctor.

“I’m Dr. Carson, Superman’s primary and overseeing physician,” the man beside Superman said, before indicating the chairs off to the side. “We need to continue treatment, so if you stay, you’ll need to stay over there and hold your questions until we get a few things squared away,” he said, not looking pleased but understanding it was necessary.

“Of course,” Henderson said while the nurses began moving around the bed.

Perry nodded appreciatively and took the chair beside the Inspector who decided to remain standing.

“Are you okay with the sight of wounds?” Carson asked them after a split second.

“I’ve seen my fair share,” Perry reassured as Henderson nodded.

“Okay. Well, Superman, before we start, you’ve lost a fair amount of blood and your blood pressure seems low. It is certainly very low for humans, and your heart rate is high,” Carson said as one of the nurses reclined the bed, easing Superman back. “So, if you’re not opposed, I’d like to take a blood sample now to see if you could receive a blood transfusion or some blood plasma. If not, we can stick with a normal saline drip or try one with more nutrients.”

Superman looked startled, and for a long moment they all thought he was going to answer a vehement ‘no’, but instead he closed his eyes for two seconds before opening them again.

“Destroy after and ... seal information learned,” he said.

“Of course,” Carson agreed, relieved. “Barb?” he asked, requesting the Charge Nurse to take the sample that very moment.

She cleaned a non-injured part of his left arm and prepared it for the blood draw on the opposite side of the bed as Carson, mindful of the IV that was already in that was providing him fluids.

“Have you ever used any earth medications?” Carson asked.

Superman exhaled slowly, his eyes falling on the needle in Barb’s hand.

“You don’t have to watch,” she said gently, sensing his unease. “There might be a slight pinch but I’ll be as quick as I can.”

“I’ve never had blood drawn,” he whispered.

“Well, counting down in my head from fifteen helps me. Go ahead and start now,” she said, suddenly easing the needle in without preamble, to the amazement of Superman who simply stared. Perry liked this woman. “I’ve found the anticipation is what unnerves patients the most. Best to just get it over with,” she said with a smile.

Superman smiled in return before looking back at Carson once Barb taped a cotton ball to the needle prick.

“Just basic pain reliever ... but it didn’t work,” Superman said, answering Carson’s earlier question. “But I had my powers then.”

“Hm. Well, I’m going to try giving you some local anesthetic for wound debridement, unless you prefer I don’t,” Dr. Carson said.

“Please. Hopefully it’ll work,” Superman said, handling his vulnerable condition rather well, Perry thought, although he did suddenly look queasy.

“Well, if it doesn’t, we have a few other things we can try,” Carson said assuringly. “Now, let’s get you onto your side.”

Barb handed the vial of blood to another nurse who quickly left the room with it before they gently helped Superman turn onto his left side and carefully removed the largest bandage. Superman’s wrapped hand closed around the bed’s metal side rail. While Henderson was passive, Perry nodded to him encouragingly.

Perry kept his gaze on Superman’s hands and face, but he still saw the exposed wound. It was a three inch gash above his hip with burn marks on the edges. Perry had been a war correspondent during the Vietnam War, so this by far wasn’t the worst injury he had ever seen. But he was still glad Superman couldn’t see it from how he was laying. He really hoped the anesthetic worked.

Superman exhaled shakily, drawing their attention.

“Alright there?” Dr. Carson asked.

“Yeah ... No.” He took a few breaths, clearly trying to stay calm.

“What’s wrong?” Perry asked.

“Just give me a second,” he said, taking a deep breath, holding it, and slowly releasing it.

“Ah. Well, no one likes being poked and prodded, and considering your situation, being a little nervous is to be expected,” Carson said gently.

“More than a little,” Superman corrected, closing his eyes.

“Okay. Okay, I’m good.”

“You’ll feel three pinches in succession in, three, two, one,” Carson softly warned. The first injection went smoothly and Carson followed it up with two more around the wound. “Okay?” Carson asked.

“Yeah,” Superman breathed, though his hand didn’t let go of the railing.

“We’ll give it a moment to begin working. It should start feeling numb in a bit and then the only thing you should feel in the area is pressure, no pain,” Carson said before giving a subtle nod to Henderson.

“I’ll try to keep this short,” Henderson said, placing the tip of his pen on the notepad. “How did you get in the cellar?”

“Luthor called Clark late Saturday. Wanted to talk to me, so I went. ... I think I got there just after seven. A Mrs. Cox led me down to Luthor and then left,” Superman said, talking slowly but with purpose, no doubt to distract himself from how he was feeling. “He wanted me to get Clark to the wedding,” he added.

Perry didn’t bother to hide his scoff.

“Yeah,” Superman agreed. “He also wanted me to go.”

“Why?” Henderson asked.

“Make Lois happy.”

Perry frowned.

“She okay?” Superman asked after a moment.

“She’ll be okay. Right now she’s at my place with Alice,” Perry assured, smoothly interjecting.

“So what happened next? I gather you refused to ask Clark to go to the wedding for him?” Henderson asked.

“Yeah. He didn’t like that. Then the cage came down.” He exhaled shakily.

Carson looked up, appearing as if he was thinking about stopping the conversation. He glanced pointedly to the heart monitor instead.

“So how did you escape?” Henderson asked, moving it along.

“I heard the organ music; thought I had some time to try ... before Luthor. ...” He took in a shuddering breath. “I somehow stood and then ... rammed into the bars. They shattered and ... I fell on them.”

“We think you got out about an hour before we got down

there,” Henderson said.

“Luthor passed through before you. I barely made it behind the barrels. ... He didn’t see me. He had an axe,” he said. “Broke a barrel and ran off.”

“Great shades of Elvis,” Perry whispered, horrified at the mental image and by the knowledge of what could have happened.

“I think I fell asleep after, and then I woke when you came in.”

“Thank you, Superman. I’ll keep you updated on the investigation. If you think of anything you feel may be important, feel free to tell Perry and he’ll tell me,” Henderson said as Perry nodded.

Superman smiled appreciatively before frowning.

“There is something. A few days ago, the alarm at the Metropolis Bank on Main went off. ... I went and learned it was a false alarm by the guard there, but then I felt the presence of kryptonite. It was only for a few seconds and I didn’t see anyone suspicious, but looking back. ...”

“It was a test run,” Henderson concluded grimly.

“Wish I had realized that before, but mind was on too many things,” Superman said to himself.

“I’ll look into their security system and see if and how it links back to Luthor. The cameras might have also caught something,” Henderson said, jotting down a note.

“Thanks.”

Henderson nodded before heading out, gently closing the door behind him. Perry looked back at the doctor.

“Alright, let’s see where we’re at,” Dr. Carson stated, lifting a pair of forceps. “Can you feel this?”

“Uh, no,” Superman said, surprised.

“This?” he asked, placing the tips of the forceps against his skin further from the wound.

“No.”

“Very good. Let me know if you feel anything other than pressure here,” he said as two nurses shifted forward.

They got to work.

Superman laid there in silence, and Perry suspected he was afraid to move. Not too long after, he suddenly stiffened as Dr. Carson removed a green shard before dropping it into the shielded biowaste bin.

Superman relaxed in relief.

“Whoa,” Superman said. “That helped.”

“Let me know when you can’t feel anymore,” Carson said.

“Alright.”

They continued for a few minutes longer before Superman interrupted their pensive thoughts with a soft chuckle.

“Did I miss something?” Perry asked, not the only one confused.

“Just thinking about what my dad would do if he was here.”

“Oh?” Perry asked, intrigued.

“He’d have kittens. He’s always telling me to stay away from doctors and scientists, because they’d dissect me like a frog if they ever got the chance. It’s just ironic.”

Perry smiled, seeing the humor as he grew curious. “Your dad?”

Superman closed his eyes, as if suddenly realizing what he had said and regretting it.

“Nevermind,” Perry said reassuringly.

Dr. Carson cleared his throat. “About what you told me earlier, that you might absorb sunlight so might be absorbing the radiation this poison gives off, I’m going to have the hospital make some calls. See if we can get some sunlamps in here. I would just open the windows and have the police increase security to however much they want to allow that, but it’s already dark and unfortunately that far window doesn’t face where the sun sets or rises,” Carson said before nodding to one of the nurses to go to the hospital administrator about the request for sunlamps before

adding another task. “Let Dr. Price and his team know they can return to help as well.”

She nodded and left immediately.

“I have some contacts. I can make some calls as well if you feel that would help,” Perry chimed in.

“Can’t hurt. But they have to be full spectrum, which is fairly new. A suntanning lamp won’t do. If he does absorb sunlight, we have no idea which part or combination of the light his body uses,” Carson stated.

“Okay. I think I know exactly who to call. That alright, son?” Perry asked, looking at Superman.

“Yeah, Mr. White. Thanks,” Superman answered.

“I’ll be back soon,” Perry said, heading toward the door.

“I’ll be here,” Superman returned.

Walking out, Perry couldn’t help but think about how strange it was to realize Superman had a sense of humor.

Part 3: Update

A nurse opened the door for Perry, allowing him re-entry into the room some time later.

“Any luck?” Dr. Carson asked, glancing up before looking back down onto Superman’s right arm.

He was working on a puncture wound near his right bicep while Dr. Price was tending to his left hand covered in burns. The wounds they had finished working on were either taped closed or tightly wrapped in neat white gauze. They weren’t using stitches, which made Perry wonder if it was because of the clear uncase Superman had around needles or if there was another reason. Either way, they had certainly made a lot of progress and Perry was glad they seemed to be done with the most serious wounds.

“Yes, actually. My friend, Joe Harding, will be here in three to four hours with some full spectrum lamps. He owns a business that manufactures a variety of specialty lamps. Greenhouses and research laboratories tend to buy from him the most. He’s driving them in from out of state himself. It was the fastest way. I didn’t tell him why, but he understands it’s extremely important,” Perry said.

“That should help a great deal,” Carson said, smiling.

Superman turned his head and managed a quiet but heartfelt, “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure, Superman. I only wish I could do more,” Perry said, sitting back down while staying out of the way. “I also told the Hospital Admin and learned their best shot at getting any lamps in would be tomorrow at the earliest.”

“I’m not surprised. It’s definitely a good thing you’re here,” Carson said, before looking at one of the nurses. “Lights off, please.”

The lights turned off and Carson only needed to retrieve one more shard. The green glow was extremely unnerving to Perry and he was glad when it disappeared. Superman sighed in relief.

“Lights on,” Carson said.

“That was the last,” Superman mumbled.

“You don’t feel any more Kryptonite at all?”

“No. That pain is gone,” he said, relieved.

Carson nodded, refocusing on his work.

Perry shifted his chair a little closer to Superman’s bed so Superman could more easily see him.

“I’m going to avoid using anesthetic for the rest of these. We’re approaching the maximum dosage for an adult of your size and considering everything I’d rather not push it,” Carson said.

“Hm,” Superman hummed, barely flinching as they moved to the next wound. More confident, they picked up their pace.

“Is there anyone you’d like for me to get a hold of? Like Clark or Lois? Do you want them to come?” Perry asked.

Superman frowned. “Clark said he ... needed to go ... some’ere.”

Perry straightened, wondering why Clark hadn’t told them

before leaving. But then he always was rushing off to some place, and it did occasionally pay off. However, the timing was concerning.

“Was this right after he told you about Luthor’s call?”

“Yeah.”

“We haven’t seen him since yesterday afternoon,” Perry said worriedly.

“If you think Luther ... did som’pin to him, I’m sure ... he didn’t. He woulda gloated.”

“That’s ... reassuring I suppose,” he said, noticing how the Kryptonian was beginning to slur his speech.

Superman hummed in agreement before seeming to drift off.

The nurse who had taken the blood sample returned a minute later with a clipboard, looking discouraged. She held the board out for Carson to see, who frowned.

“Change his saline to R.L.. It’s too risky to give him blood or plasma, but from his blood make-up that should be okay and will help some,” Carson directed, before returning to the puncture wound.

The nurse quickly left to retrieve the new IV.

“R. L.?” Perry asked.

“Ringers Lactate. It has some nutrients in it similar to plasma but carries no risk of biological rejection like blood and plasma does,” Carson explained. “I don’t know how his biology is different from ours exactly, but I feel giving him R.L. is worth the risk considering his current state, and his blood work seems to indicate he would benefit from it.”

“Hm. I feel ...” Superman mumbled, tightly closing his eyes. “I feel like I’m spinnin’.”

“Are you nauseous?” Carson asked, wrapping up the second to last wound.

“A bit. Ears ringing now.”

“How is your vision?” Carson asked, not pausing in his primary task as Dr. Price finished wrapping Superman’s fingers.

“Blurry. Was getting better. Worse now.”

Carson nodded to Price who took out his penlight.

“We’re going to check your eyes real quick,” Price said. “I’m going to touch your face.”

Carefully lifting his eyelids, he panned the light across his eyes, watching for a reaction.

“Delayed but equal dilation,” he commented, before holding up a finger. “Try to follow this.”

Superman tried.

“Delayed again,” Price said. “Anesthesia Toxicity?”

“Possible,” Carson said with a frown. “Ann, can you bring in a unit of propofol and benzodiazepines, along with succinylcholine? Though unlikely, I want them on hand if they’re needed.”

“Yes, doctor,” she said as the previous nurse returned with the Ringers’ bag and connected it to his I.V. line.

“If an arrhythmia shows up, I want to give him a bolus of 1.5 mL/kg of twenty percent lipid emulsion immediately,” Carson said.

“Agreed,” Price said, glancing at the heart monitor. It seemed unchanged.

“We’re almost done here. As soon as we are, I’d like you to try to eat and drink something and then go to sleep, okay?” Carson said, talking directly to Superman now as he finished with the last wound which thankfully wasn’t too bad.

“Kay,” Superman said.

One of the nurses gave an acknowledging nod to Carson and left to get a tray of food. Soon after, Carson leaned back, moving the tray of instruments away.

“We’ll check the bandages tomorrow morning and go from there,” he said as the nurses returned with the requested medications and tray of food. “Superman, if it is alright with you, Mr. White and I will give you some peace to eat while we talk in

the other room.”

He nodded, clearly too out of it to be able to follow a conversation anyway.

Perry followed Carson as Dr. Price and the nurses got Superman squared away with a late (very late) dinner.

“So, is he going to be okay?” Perry asked.

“I honestly can’t say yet. We’ll keep an eye on the possible anesthesia toxicity, although I’ll admit that’s not a high concern of mine.

“He definitely has radiation poisoning, as you’ve likely noticed, and I am concerned about his vital signs there. Granted, considering what I’d expect them to be for a human in his situation, I’d say he’s a miracle. However, even with that good comparison, his vital signs are not improving. They’re getting worse actually.”

“What can we do?” Perry asked.

“Nothing more than what we are already doing or expect to do in a few hours with those full spectrum lights.

“We did try to get a chest x-ray while you were out, but his body is too dense. I suspect he has some cracked ribs on his left side, four to six ribs, but we can’t be sure. Fortunately, if they are cracked, they haven’t punctured his lungs and his blood pressure doesn’t indicate that he’s still losing blood, so I’m confident there’s no internal bleeding.” Carson rubbed his forehead, undeniably wary. “I’m hoping food and sleep will do him good. More often than not that makes the biggest difference in trauma patients.”

“Do you know if the hospital is going to make a statement?” Perry asked.

“That’s up to the Hospital Administrator, but I suspect so. We can only hide him for so long, and it may be best if we bring it out directly on our terms instead of it being leaked,” Carson said.

“I agree,” Perry said as Barb stepped into the room.

“He’s asleep, doctor,” she said.

“If you or Superman need me, here is my pager number. I’m going to make a few more calls and return, but I’ll stay in the hospital. I think I’ll contact the Superman Foundation as well. I should have done that earlier,” Perry said.

Carson took his business card with a handwritten number on the back.

“Before you go, did you provide Security with a description of your friend and his truck?” he asked.

“Yes, they have it. And I’ll go out to meet him when he’s due to arrive,” Perry said.

“Alright. Very good.”

Perry headed off with that.

Well, he had made all the calls he needed, including to Alice, Jimmy, Mr. Stern, and the Superman Foundation.

Thankfully, Alice was very understanding even though he didn’t give specifics and couldn’t promise when he’d be home. He didn’t talk to Lois, as she was resting in the guest bedroom, but that was just as well.

He did learn from Alice that Lois had called her mom and let her know she was staying at a friend’s house to avoid the press. Perry felt bad about not realizing Lois’ mom was at the wedding, but in the end he was just happy Lois had avoided the press and that Mrs. Lane didn’t seem too upset.

However, with that potential crisis averted, he quickly realized he was faced with another. He wasn’t sure when he would tell Alice and Lois about Superman being the reason he was at the hospital, but knew telling Lois now would be most unwise.

He got a hold of Jimmy and Jack at Clark’s place next, but unfortunately Clark was still missing. It was concerning but there was nothing anyone could do at the moment. However, he did task them to look into where that Kryptonite went after the fiasco in Smallville. He doubted it had remained with that geological

society or whatever it was, and hopefully whatever they might learn would help Superman or at least Henderson’s investigation.

As for Mr. Stern, he got some good news. It was quite gratifying to hear a man of Stern’s calibre express himself so plainly over recent events, and his heart soared at the strong possibility of the Planet’s eventual return.

Contacting the Superman Foundation was both easier than he had thought and yet harder. Mr. Brown was certainly thorough in verifying that Perry was who he said he was, but then once he was positive of his identity, he agreed the Foundation would follow Perry’s lead. Apparently, Superman had a list of people the Foundation was to treat with special consideration. Perry didn’t inquire further but Mr. Brown expressed his thanks, promising the Foundation would prepare for the likely fallout that would follow once the hospital gave a statement. Brown agreed it was best for them to be proactive instead of reactive, especially where the press was concerned. He promised to send Perry a statement from the Foundation for him and, if possible, Superman to approve as soon as possible.

Phone business done, he quietly returned to Superman’s room, nodding softly to Nurse Barb Noel who was double checking the IV bag above the bed.

He silently eased down into the chair beside the bed.

For a long moment he assumed Superman was asleep, but then he saw his eyes open.

“Would you like to be alone?” Perry asked gently.

“No. I would like a favor.” He glanced at Barb with a silent request.

She finished her work and pulled back.

“I’ll be outside,” she said understandingly, leaving half of the room lights off to keep the illumination low so he could sleep if he wished.

As she left, Perry leaned forward.

“What do you need?” Perry asked.

“If things get worse,” Superman said, his shallow breathing forcing him to talk slowly. Perry wasn’t sure if he sounded worse than before or not, but he certainly didn’t sound better. “Call the Kents. Tell them Kal-El said ... they can talk to you.”

Perry frowned, confused but accepting. “Alright. Clark’s parents?”

He nodded.

“Who is Kal-El?” Perry asked.

“Me.”

“Oh. Okay. Anything else?” he asked.

“Nothing right now. Thanks,” he said.

“Of course.” Perry shifted forward. “Superman, I felt it prudent to inform your Foundation of what’s happened. I spoke to Mr. Brown directly and he wanted me to let you know he has everything handled there. He’s working on a statement now, for when this likely comes out.”

“Thanks. That’s good.”

“No problem. Uh, concerning the Kryptonite, Mr. Brown doesn’t feel trying to hide its existence or effect on you would be wise, considering everything.”

Superman sighed but nodded. “I agree. Trying would be difficult now ... if not impossible.”

“Okay,” he said, deciding to move on. “If I hear from Clark or Lois, do you want me to tell them anything? Do you want me to tell them what is happening?”

“I trust your judgement, Mr. White,” he said, closing his eyes. “Tell them whatever ... you feel they should know.”

“Alright.” Perry eased back, hoping his friend would arrive before too much longer while wondering why Superman would want him to talk to the Kents.

Hm. Did the Kents know him well? It would explain how Clark can always get a hold of him.

He focused on Superman’s face. His forehead had a light

sheen of sweat on it and a frown of discomfort remained even as the clear signs of sleep appeared.

Perry remained, keeping vigil as his eyes suddenly froze on Superman's face.

"Great shades of Elvis," he breathed, his voice so soft it was silent.

"Mr. White?"

He looked to the door and found Dr. Carson. He stood up and went to him, knowing by the look on his face he wanted to talk.

"Yes?" he asked, joining him out in the hall.

"The hospital administrator is going to make the announcement in a few minutes," Carson said. "He'd like to pass a few things by you beforehand."

"Alright, thanks," he said, heading back out.

Lois gratefully sipped the mug she had gotten from Alice as they watched the news together. Of course, besides the death of Luthor, the primary focus was what was going on at the Metropolis General Hospital.

Although she felt bad, a part of her was relieved the media was so distracted. Had it not been for this mysterious patient, she had no doubt that she would be the focus of the press. Granted, she was certain it was only a matter of time before they turned their focus onto her.

"Thank you, George. I am in front of Metropolis General and we just learned that the Hospital Administrator will be coming out to give a statement," the reporter on the television said, standing with a sea of other reporters near the main entrance of the hospital. "We—" He cut himself off as people came out of the doors.

The man in front came to the podium with another at his shoulder.

"Good evening. I'm Jeff Kraft, the Hospital Administrator, and beside me is Captain Wallace of the MPD." He motioned to the uniformed man beside him before turning back with a deep breath. "I am going to give a statement and then Captain Wallace will follow up.

"Less than three hours ago, Wallace and his team found Superman in LexCorp Tower. He had multiple injuries and required immediate medical attention, which was swiftly provided by first responders. He was then transported here for further treatment and is now resting. When he arrived, he was conscious and able to answer questions. His current condition is critical. We do not know how long it will take for him to recover, but he will remain here until further notice. Thank you," he said to the astonished assembly of press and onlookers.

A cacophony of voices immediately followed, some shouting out in dismay, others screaming questions.

"What happened?"

"Did Luthor do it?"

"What hurt him?"

"Is he going to be okay?"

"Is this why the hazmat team went in?"

"What treatments are being done?"

"Is there a danger to the public?"

"Did he need a blood transfusion?"

"Can he get blood transfusions?"

The Captain stepped up, lifting a hand.

"Please, please!" Wallace shouted over the chaos. It quieted.

"The investigation is ongoing so I will not go into details. However, due to public health concerns, I must address the hazmat team that went in following our retrieval of Superman from the scene. First and foremost, again, there is no threat to public health. Second, there was radioactive material found but the level of radiation the material gave off was so low it barely compared to the radiation we are exposed to on a typical day from the sun. So rest assured there was and is no danger to the public or to the first responders who were initially exposed. All of the radioactive

material has since been gathered and stored in lead containers at a secure location out of an abundance of caution."

"Was this material what hurt Superman?" someone yelled out.

"It was involved, but I won't say anything further due to the ongoing investigation."

Kraft stepped back up, asking for calm.

"We will provide an update when his condition changes.

Thank you," he said, turning and being escorted back into the hospital.

Wallace returned to the stand but Lois' heart was thudding so loudly she couldn't hear his platitudes on city response and how they would continue to handle city emergencies during Superman's recovery.

"Lois?" Alice asked uncertainly.

She looked like she was about to throw up.

"Luthor tried to kill him," she gasped. "I know it."

"Oh, Lois," Alice started, only to be interrupted by the telephone.

Apologetically, she got up and answered it as Lois wiped her eyes.

"Perry?" Alice asked, causing Lois to freeze. "Yes, I just saw. —Okay. — Wait, Lois is with me.—Yeah. As you'd expect.—You are?" She listened for several minutes, nodding and grimly humming her understanding as time went on. Lois was too afraid to interrupt. "Okay. I'll tell her.—I understand. — Yeah, stay as long as he needs you.—Good.—Okay. Good night. — Love you too."

She looked up after hanging up to find Lois waiting anxiously.

"What did he say?" Lois asked.

"He'll be staying with Superman for now. Superman asked him to act as his next of kin and medical advocate which is why that Inspector asked him to go to the hospital," Alice said. "He also said not to worry about Clark. He knows where he is."

"Is Superman doing alright? How bad is it?" she asked, partially relieved to hear about Clark but more concerned about the current state of Superman.

"Perry said there was a story you and Clark Kent did several months back. He said that crazy Colonel was right. Kryptonite does exist and it can hurt Superman."

"But how is he?" Lois asked earnestly.

"Not well, but they're hoping to be able to do something soon to help him. Perry called a friend who manufactures special lamps and the doctors are hoping that will help until the sun rises."

"The sun?" she asked before recalling the heat wave (...that was caused by Luthor's power plant...). "The theory of him getting his powers from the sun was right."

"Perry said it's also why that Kryptonite stuff hurts him. He's absorbing whatever that stuff gives off."

Lois' eyes suddenly widened, remembering something else.

"Henderson had blood on his clothes. He said it wasn't his. Oh my *gawd!* Did he need a transfusion?"

"They tested his blood to see if they could give him a blood transfusion or plasma, but they can't."

Lois looked miserable as Alice quickly moved on.

"Perry said he's sleeping now, and they took care of his wounds pretty fast after he arrived."

Lois sniffled.

"Perry wanted me to tell you it's not your fault, and that he'll call as soon as there's a change."

She wiped her eyes and nodded.

"It goes without saying that you can stay for as long as you need," she said after a moment.

"Thank you," Lois said.

"Perry talks about you all the time. I'm happy to help you," she said soothingly.

Part 4: Light

Perry waited as the operator connected him to the Kents in Smallville, hoping he was going about this the right way. He hoped so. He took a deep breath, trying to come to terms with the fact that a man he played poker with and bossed around all the time was also the Man of Steel.

It was mind boggling to know the man who had stopped Nightfall lost fifty dollars to him at poker.

Strange didn't begin to describe it.

"Hello?" an older female voice asked.

"Hi, Martha Kent?" he asked.

"Yes, who is this?" she asked.

"This is Perry White. Your son works for me at the Daily Planet. Well, worked while it was still running."

"Oh. Oh hello. Nice to, uh, talk to you. Clark has mentioned you a number of times, of course. Nothing but good things," she said.

Perry could tell she was trying to hold it together. She must have just seen the news.

"So, uh, what can I do for you?" she asked.

"Mrs. Kent, uh, Kal-El told me to call you," he said. "And uh, I actually wanted to make sure everything was okay with the emergency *Clark* left to attend to late yesterday."

She was quiet for a long while. He could only hear her breathing.

"Oh, yes. I'm not sure when Clark will be able to return though," she said, her voice wobbly.

"I understand. Is there anything I can tell his friends here?" he asked, thankful she seemed to be understanding what he was doing. "They were worried."

"Yes, thank you. The bank required his signature for some legal issues, and because of the coming harvest, it couldn't wait. He is now helping Jonathan, my husband, with the new equipment that will be used on this year's crops," she said, growing steadier as she went.

"I'm glad things were worked out," Perry said, before shifting the topic. "Well, I'm staying with Kal-El for the time being. We're thinking some sun will do him some good, but if you know anything that might help us..."

"I know his normal temperature tends to run high."

"How high?"

"99 to 100.3 degrees," she said.

"Okay, anything else? Anything the doctors can expect?"

"The first time he was exposed he passed out and it took about a week for him to get back to his normal. That was from less than a minute. The second time, he recovered a little faster, but he was in sunlight the whole time and exposure lasted about two minutes."

"Is there anything we should be careful about or make sure we don't do?" he asked.

"When he begins to recover, his hearing is the first thing to return and is extremely sensitive."

"Alright, thank you," he said, wondering if there was anything else he should ask.

"How is he?" she asked, fearing the answer.

"Better than what could have been expected. The doctors and nurses have done everything they can to tend to his wounds and such. He's on oxygen, and they wanted to give him a transfusion, but they determined that they couldn't so are sticking with a special saline solution to give him basic nutrients. He did eat though."

"I wish I knew more that could help," she said after a moment.

"It's alright. You've given me a few things to tell the doctor. And I'll play the secret source excuse, which isn't exactly a lie," he said.

"Thank you," she said, unable to fully express the depth of

her gratitude.

"It's the least I can do. Well, I'll let you go now, and I'll try to give you an update later if I can."

"Okay. Good night, Mr. White."

"It's Perry," he gently corrected.

"Perry."

"Good night."

He and Perry went way back. They met in college and although they went down different career paths, white collar versus blue, they remained close and made an excellent team, especially where it came to business.

So when Perry called stating it was an emergency and very well might be the most important thing they had ever done together, he believed him, even though he didn't understand how bringing special lamps could be so vital.

He turned toward the hospital, hoping to spot Perry before too long. Unfortunately, he had to devote his attention to maneuvering around news crews and a sea of people holding candles before stopping at the entrance of the hospital's main parking lot by an officer. Bewildered by the number of police around and the candlelight vigil that had begun to wrap itself around the hospital's property line, he rolled his window down.

"Yes, officer?" he asked.

"Joe Harding?" the officer asked.

"That's me," he said, surprised.

"May I see your ID?" the officer asked.

Joe frowned but complied. "Sure," he said, showing him.

"Thank you. Please head over to that ambulance entrance over there. They'll tell you where to go from there," the officer said. "And thank you for coming."

"Oh, no problem," he said, confused but confident he would be getting answers soon.

He rolled forward and quickly navigated to the indicated entrance, spotting his old friend with more security. Perry waved at him as he pulled over and put his truck in park.

"Perry!" he called, hopping out.

"Joe, I hope you didn't get any speeding tickets over this," Perry said good-naturedly.

"If I did, could I bill you?" he asked.

"Joe, after this, I'll pay for whatever you like," Perry said.

Joe laughed, going to the back of the truck and opening it. "Now what is this about?" he asked, curiously glancing at the officers on either side of Perry.

"Just listened to your music, I take it?" Perry asked, unsurprised.

"Yeah, but now I'm wishing I had listened to the radio."

Perry chuckled uneasily. "Well, you remember a few months ago when you asked me if I'd be able to arrange a meeting so you could meet a certain someone?" Perry asked.

Joe blinked, instantly recalling his request to see Superman—but that can't be what he's talking about, right?

"Well, you'll be able to do more than that today," Perry said.

"What?" Joe asked, confused as he pulled down the dolly in preparation of loading the boxed lamps onto it.

"Now you heard what happened earlier today?" Perry asked as he and the officers quickly helped unload the four lamps.

"With that slimeball, Luthor?" he asked with the dolly now full and ready to go.

"Yeah."

"Knew there was more to him than what was seen. What the heck did that monster do?" Joe asked, gathering he had done something horrendous with how Perry was talking.

"Somehow the man got ahold of a material that can hurt Superman. I won't go into specifics, but I will say taking a swan dive off the balcony was too good for him."

"Well, I imagine his landing was pleasant compared to how

his eternity will be,” Joe guessed.

“I suspect so. Well, I called you for the full spectrum sunlamps because the doctors are hoping it’ll help Superman recover.”

“Wow. All of this makes a lot of sense now,” he said, trying to digest the fact something had hurt Superman enough for him to need the hospital.

He hadn’t even needed help after taking on Nightfall twice—well, he was gone for a few days, but still.

He walked beside Perry while guiding the dolly, trying not to feel too intimidated by the escort of police and the dull hum of activity through the hospital. Coming to a hall junction, a doctor joined them.

“Hello, Mr. Harding, thank you for driving all this way,” the doctor said, holding the hall door open that led to a different section of the hospital. “I’m Dr. Carson, Superman’s physician.”

“Hello. And I’m happy to help, especially now that I know who I’m helping,” he said.

They went down the hall and entered an elevator, passing several sentries. There was no other word for it. Joe had never seen so many serious armed men in one place before.

“Is there anything I should ask maintenance to bring to the room for the lamps?” the doctor asked.

“I just need a few wall outlets. I have everything else,” he said.

“Very good.”

“I wasn’t sure how many watts you needed so brought a range,” Joe added.

“Alright. I’d like to start with the lowest first and go from there. I don’t want to overwhelm his system,” Carson said, leading the way.

“Alright, just know that each lamp can emit more concentrated light than the sun at the maximum setting. The sun’s whole light spectrum is there, so precautions should be taken. There’s no cosmic radiation, of course, but the lamps produce everything from infra-red to ultraviolet light, just like the sun at midday, so it can cause sunburns and hurt our eyes.”

Carson nodded. “Understood.”

They walked for a moment in silence.

“So, uh, how bad is it?” Joe asked, although as soon as he asked he wondered if it was even appropriate to ask. Probably not, but Carson still answered after a nod from Perry.

“There’s no point sugar coating it. He’s in critical condition with a number of lacerations and puncture wounds, on top of suffering from radiation poisoning. If you help us in the room, rest assured the radioactive material is gone now and doesn’t affect us as it does him even if it was still there. However, if you would rather assemble the lamps in the side room for whatever reason and show one of us how to operate the lamps, we can do that,” Carson proposed.

“I can help in the room. I assume you want to do this sooner rather than later, and teaching someone else, though easy, would still require time,” Joe said.

“Yes. The sooner he gets this light, the better,” he answered plainly before taking a breath. “I think it goes without saying that what you learn and see here today cannot leave this building.”

“Of course,” Joe said, mentally gearing himself up as they slowed their approach to a door with two police on either side.

Carson entered first and Joe maneuvered the dolly with practiced ease after him even though he was extremely nervous.

Joe couldn’t help but stare as his eyes fell upon the form on the bed at the far wall.

He didn’t look like Superman.

He couldn’t be Superman!

He was motionless, and his skin looked more grey than tannish-pink on his left side, while his right was angry red, as if horribly sunburned. A blanket and sheet covered him from mid-

chest down. His face was covered by an oxygen mask and an IV bag was suspended above his bed with its line ending at the crook of his left arm. His arms and hands were heavily wrapped and there was a long cut Joe could see on his cheek, held closed by butterfly bandaids. He appeared to be asleep and the beep-beep of the heart monitor, which sounded abnormally fast, echoed through the room. Joe barely noticed the nurse by the bed as Carson approached the being who should have been the strongest man on Earth.

“Superman? Superman can you wake up?” Carson gently asked, placing his hand on the Kryptonian’s bare shoulder.

Superman stirred and slowly opened his eyes. Joe averted his gaze, unsure how to feel about seeing the god-among-them so vulnerable.

“Mr. Harding?” Carson asked.

“Yes, doctor?” he asked, straightening.

Carson motioned him to come beside him.

“Superman, this is Mr. Harding. He brought the lamps and is going to set them up,” Carson said. “We’re going to try the lamps now. Alright?” Carson asked.

“Kay,” Superman mumbled in reply.

“Okay. Mr. Harding?” Carson said, “Please place the first lamp here.”

Joe set to work with the aid of Perry, opening the box and assembling the equipment as quickly as he could. A few other nurses came in while he and Perry worked, handing out sunglasses and sunscreen to them all. Fifteen minutes later, the first lamp was up and they were all ready - sunglasses and all.

Joe sent up a prayer for this to work as they hoped.

“I’m going to lower the bedding, alright?” Carson warned Superman, easing the white cloth and light blue blanket down to the hero’s waist.

Joe busied himself with double checking the settings of the lamp, but the monitoring lines, bruises and bloody dressings stood out so blatantly it was impossible to miss or ignore, even from the corner of his eye.

“Uh, lowest setting first, correct?” Joe asked.

“Yes, thank you,” Carson said.

“Ready,” Joe said, hand on the dial.

Superman gave a slight nod of his head and Carson motioned a ‘go-ahead’ to Joe as those nearest the bed all moved back.

Joe turned the dial, keeping his eyes on Carson in case he needed to quickly turn the light back off.

The light shined onto Superman and immediately his breath hitched, as if he had just been dumped into a bucket of ice water. Joe was about to turn the light back off, but Carson motioned to wait.

After a few seconds, Superman relaxed.

“How are you feeling?” Carson asked.

“Pain is fading,” Superman whispered.

“Slowly increase the intensity,” Carson told Joe.

Joe did so, and the effect was instant. The fast beeps of the heart monitor slowed and the pained wheeze from the mask softened.

“I’ll get the other lamps up,” Joe said as Perry was already opening the next box.

They worked quickly, bolstered by the small signs of recovery they could already see in Superman. His breathing had continued to ease and it was clear the pain he was in was far less than before.

By the time the next lamp was ready, the redness of his skin was beginning to fade. Eager to see further improvement, they quickly turned on the second lamp.

“Look!” one of the nurses said, pointing at the cut on his cheek ever so slowly closing up before their eyes.

“Barb, start removing the bandages from his hands and arms,” Carson said, while lifting up the sheet and blanket from his

feet and legs, leaving just his waist and upper thighs covered.

Barb did so, slowly revealing a plethora of cuts, burns, and gashes. It was meticulous work, and Superman winced in pain throughout the process, but then the exposed wounds too began to close and heal under the light—although far more slowly than the cut on his cheek. One would have to watch very carefully to observe the change in real time, but it was easy to notice a change when looking back at it after half an hour of doing something else.

“That’s amazing,” Joe said, looking up while setting up the third lamp near the foot of the bed.

“Feels amazing,” Superman whispered.

“Do you want more light, or is this level good?” Carson asked. “I don’t want to overwhelm your system.”

“More please.”

Carson nodded and indicated to Joe to direct the third light primarily on his legs. He turned the light on.

“Once his arms are healed, remove the bandages on his legs. Hopefully the wounds on his side will be closed enough for us to uncover them next.”

Barb and the other nurse by the bed nodded as they got to work. Bloody gauze was discarded and Joe quickly looked away, not wanting to risk seeing an injury that may make him particularly queasy. What he had already seen had been bad enough, if he was honest, although seeing injuries heal like that had more than made up for any prior unease.

“Doctor?” a nurse asked, noticing Carson’s attention had shifted.

He was looking at the I.V. bag.

Instead of the typical ‘drip-drip-drip’ of fluid from the bag into the line, it was a hard solid stream, as if the fluid was being tightly squeezed or sucked from the bag.

Somehow, Superman’s body was actively pulling the solution into his veins.

“We need more R.L. bags. This one will likely be empty in the next five minutes,” Carson said, hurriedly preparing the I.V. ports as one of the nurses quickly retrieved what was needed.

The room was getting warm and they were beginning to perspire, but they didn’t care as Superman’s condition continued to improve.

With all four lamps on and I.V. bags full two hours after they had started, they pulled back and accepted that all they could do now was wait. As they waited, Joe took a moment to show the nurses how to operate the lamps. It wasn’t difficult but there were some differences important to know about between the models.

“How long does it typically take for you to recover after exposure?” Dr. Carson inquired, even though Perry had given him some information about it hours earlier.

“Depends,” he said, seeing no harm in being honest and answering through the oxygen mask. “First time, I immediately passed out—was just near it for less than a minute. Took me a week to get back to normal. The second time I was able to recover faster, but I was exposed while in sunlight. This is only the fourth time I’ve encountered it.”

He closed his eyes with a grimace.

“Pain?” Dr. Carson asked.

“Twinges,” Superman admitted.

“Healing can be painful,” Dr. Carson said gently. “And considering your healing has accelerated, some discomfort is to be expected. But let me know if it gets worse or doesn’t fade.”

Superman nodded.

“Do you think you’ll be able to sleep if we get something to cover your eyes?” Carson asked.

“I think I could fall asleep right now,” Superman said, smiling tiredly.

Carson chuckled. “Alright, go on and sleep.”

“I’ll update Clark and the others, alright?” Perry said. “And you were right, Clark is fine. He’s with his parents. Had to sign

important bank papers and is now helping his father with some farm equipment in time for the harvest.”

Superman blinked. “Oh, okay. That’s good. Thanks.” He then focused on Joe, lightly lifting his hand which was still healing from the radiation burns. “And thank you, Mr. Harding.”

“No thanks is necessary, Superman,” Joe said, unable to completely hide his embarrassment intermingled with the pride at being thanked by Superman. “I’m honored I’m able to help you. Not including Nightfall, a number of my family and friends owe their lives to you,” he said, causing Superman to smile. “Good night, Superman.”

With that, Perry and the others left as Barb remained to replace the bags on the I.V. line again.

Part 5: Visit

Lois couldn’t sleep, but neither could Alice, so they kept each other company while they waited to hear from Perry.

It was past midnight when the phone finally rang. Alice quickly answered and let Lois listen in by angling the phone’s earpiece out as she stepped beside her.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Alice, it’s Perry,” he said, fighting back a yawn.

“With good news, I hope?” she asked softly.

“Yes. The lights are working. He’s doing much better ... much better than a few hours ago,” he said. “They’ve elevated his condition from Critical to Serious. They suspect that come morning it’ll be Fair.”

Lois bit back a relief-filled sob, not wanting to risk causing Perry to hide the truth in an attempt to spare her feelings. She wasn’t stupid. Or, well, considering recent events, maybe she was. Sometimes.

“Thank heavens,” Alice said.

“He’s sleeping again,” Perry said. “They’ll make a statement to the press in the morning.”

“Okay.”

“Due to how late it is, I think it’ll be best for me to stay at the hotel nearby with Joe so we can quickly return to the hospital if they page me before morning,” Perry continued.

“Do you think that’ll happen? That he’ll regress in the night?” Alice asked, worried.

“No, but we don’t know much about his physiology, so I’d rather not assume.” He sighed, collecting himself. “It was bad, Alice. Not as bad as some of the things I saw in Vietnam, but ... I’m glad Luthor is dead.”

“So he did it then?” Alice said grimly.

“No question. Superman told me most of it. He ...” He trailed off and refocused. “How’s Lois?”

Alice glanced at her.

“I’m okay, Perry,” she piped up, trying to sound calm and not on the verge of tears.

“I didn’t mean for you to hear some of that, honey,” he said, resigned as he quickly realized she had been listening the whole time.

“I’d rather learn it now than later,” she said with a sniffle.

“Oh, Perry, how could I have missed seeing who he was? I was so stupid! Clark tried to warn me! But I didn’t want to listen, I ... I don’t know.”

“Honey, Luthor was very good at hiding the truth, especially from the people he didn’t want knowing it. He worked very hard on that, it’s why it took us so long to get hard evidence,” he explained.

“I still should have believed Clark. Should have trusted him more.”

“You can’t change the past, but you can learn from it. And as bad as this experience is for all of us, I think we’ll come out stronger from it, and that includes Superman.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” she said, although still with clear self

loathing before she deflated. Her thoughts shifted. “Do you ... do you think I could go in and see him tomorrow?”

“I don’t know. Security is extremely high, and ... I don’t know if you seeing him right now would be a good idea. There’s also the fact you were engaged to Luthor. If the media saw you... .”

“I need to see that he’s okay, and I need to tell him I’m sorry. I’ll go in disguise, whatever I need to do. Please, Perry,” she said.

Perry sighed. “I’ll talk to the doctors tomorrow, and if they give the okay, I’ll let you know. But if they say no, accept that.”

“Thank you.”

She pulled back, allowing him and Alice to continue talking without her.

She prayed she would be able to visit Superman tomorrow. She needed to try to make amends.

Henderson wanted to throw up. He wasn’t a violent person, and was usually very calm even in horrible situations. It was why he was an Inspector. But what he was witnessing here was beyond despicable that he wanted to shoot something. He knew he wasn’t the only one who felt Luthor deserved worse than he got.

Luthor had recorded the whole thing.

From the moment Superman entered the cellar to the moment investigators found the camera. Everything had been captured in mind-numbing clarity, including sound.

Henderson fast-forwarded through hours of Superman struggling in the cage, and then he forced himself to watch at normal speed whenever Luthor returned to gloat and curse at the Man of Steel while he kicked him over and over again. It was especially disturbing to Henderson when he realized the only reason the man stopped and left whenever he did was because he was tired.

The last few hours of the video were the worst, and the disgusting taunts from Luthor about Ms. Lane made his skin crawl. Henderson was relieved when Luthor left for the wedding, knowing the video must almost be over.

Superman went still in the cage.

Several times, if he hadn’t helped Superman get out of there, Henderson would have been convinced he had just died, but then he would moan and stir again.

And then the organ music began to play.

It was one of the most heart-rending, awe inspiring things he had ever seen in his life.

Superman got up to his knees.

“Come on, get up,” he heard Superman grit out.

Superman didn’t need super powers to be super.

He stood up.

Henderson barely breathed as he watched Superman break through the bars and crash down. It was agonizing to watch him lift himself from the mass of splintered green and spreading red, but it was also another example of Superman’s unending perseverance.

And then he saw Superman scramble behind the barrels moments before Luthor stormed in.

“Sorry, no time to chat. I think I’ll just take my pound of flesh an—”

“That man was truly a psychopath,” Captain Wallace stated beside him as Luthor lashed out with the axe before storming away.

Henderson had all but forgotten he wasn’t the only one watching this astounding example of good versus evil.

An FBI agent sat silently to the side, but Henderson could tell even he was getting affected. Three other people were in the room with him and Wallace, although he doubted they would be the last to view this video evidence.

They watched the rest of the video, unable to do anything but stare in morbid fascination as Superman groaned and went limp

while Henderson, Collins and Matthews carried him past the glowing cage and up the stairs to safety and help. Henderson swallowed as he pushed his memory of the minutes afterward aside.

“The Kryptonite has all been secured, correct?” a fellow investigator asked.

“Yes,” Henderson said. “And we’re combing through Luthor’s things to make sure there’s not a hidden stash.”

“Good. We can’t allow any of this to get into the wrong hands,” the FBI agent stated.

They all unequivocally agreed.

Superman woke to the sound of someone adjusting some equipment beside his bed. He removed the cloth that was covering his eyes and squinted up at Nurse Noel who had sunglasses on.

“Good morning, Superman.”

“Morning,” he said.

All four full spectrum lights were still on and the room was definitely warm but not as hot as he had expected. He glanced over and saw the window was open and a large fan was on beside it as a maintenance man installed a window AC unit. The man beamed at him when he noticed him awake so Superman waved with a soft smile before looking at Barb.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“Better,” he said before looking down at himself.

All of the wounds on his arms were now bright, tender pink scars and most of the ones on his legs were as well. All but the worst of his burns were completely gone and he could move his hands without severe pain. However, the bruises on his left side were still there. If anything, they were more prominent, with bright purples and blues brushed across that side of his ribcage like paint accented with vibrant blood red blotches that marked where Luthor’s steel-toed boots had struck him directly.

Well, at least that explained why it still hurt to breathe. He suddenly realized he had slept with the oxygen mask on. Shouldn’t he be doing better by now? Or maybe he was being unrealistic. He had almost died less than twenty-four hours ago, and this exposure was by far the worst he had ever had. Would his powers return after what had happened?

“We’ll remove the bandages to your right side soon,” she said, pulling his attention away from his darkening thoughts.

Superman nodded. “What time is it?”

“Just after eight. Mr. White was in here earlier but he’s gone to grab some breakfast and make a few calls,” she said, replacing the empty IV bags. “The hospital has also given another statement to the public. You’re now officially in Fair condition.”

“Does that mean I’ll be able to leave soon?” he asked, reassured by the positive prognosis.

“That’s up to Dr. Carson, although I think he’ll prefer to discharge you once you’ve fully healed and your abilities have all returned.”

Superman sighed in defeat, before wincing sharply as the movement made his whole side flare in discomfort.

“You likely have a few cracked ribs on that side. In a bit I’ll teach you some breathing exercises to help prevent you from developing pneumonia and other complications,” she explained.

“Is this why I’m still on oxygen?” he asked.

“In part. Dr. Carson also noticed your healing improved when he increased the oxygen flow. He hasn’t turned it back down.”

“It does hurt to breathe a little,” he said with a frown.

“That’s understandable. Just remember to try not to twist or move too quickly,” she advised.

“Would a brace or something help?” he asked.

“Unfortunately, we’ve found wrapping reduces breathing capacity, and that’s very bad in preventing pneumonia. However, if you feel like you need to cough, or sneeze, hug a pillow firmly to your chest when you do. It helps a lot, and it’ll help when we

begin the exercises,” she said, bringing over a spare pillow.

“Alright. Thanks,” he said, a little bewildered. He couldn’t remember ever sneezing or really coughing before.

“Visiting hours begin at 10. I understand Mr. White asked Dr. Carson if someone could come see you then. He said that would be alright, if it was okay with you,” she said.

“That should be fine. Did Mr. White say who?”

“No, but I’ll ask.”

“Thanks.”

“Would you like the TV on?” she asked.

“Sure.”

She brought him the remote after turning on the television to a soap opera.

“I’ll be back in a bit,” she promised, closing the door behind her.

Lois took a deep breath as she entered the hospital. The moment Perry had called saying she could come at ten, she had been trying to keep her emotions from spiraling.

She knew Superman had agreed to see her, which was a relief, but all she could think about now was whether or not he blamed her for what had happened to him. Was he angry with her? What did he think of her, almost marrying that ... that monster? Could he forgive her? And what about what she had done to Clark? She shuddered, not even wanting to think about Clark because it hurt so much. If she had listened to him, maybe they could have brought Luthor down together and Superman never would have gotten hurt. Lord, Superman had almost died! She knew Perry wasn’t telling her everything, but he didn’t need to. She could tell by his voice and the look on Henderson’s face when he had hurried to Perry yesterday with blood on his clothes. It had been bad.

Perry walked beside her, leading the way to the room. Security was heavy and they nodded mutely at them as they passed.

“I know they want to move him after lunch, just so you’re aware. They want to move him to a room facing the sun,” Perry said.

“Why haven’t they moved him already?”

“Security, to put it simply,” Perry explained before changing the topic. “I’ll just stay for a bit and then I’ll go get us something to eat. I know you didn’t eat breakfast.”

“Alice told you,” Lois complained.

“No, you just did.”

She rolled her eyes before they came to a door with an officer on either side.

“Inspector Henderson is talking to Superman. He’ll be out in a moment,” the officer to the right said.

“Oh.” Lois looked worriedly at Perry who suddenly looked grim.

Fortunately, the officer was right and Henderson stepped out a minute later. He averted his gaze from Lois and met Perry’s eyes.

“Mr. White, ma’am,” he greeted. He obviously knew it was Lois, but they wanted to keep her identity a secret.

“Any update on the investigation?” Perry asked.

“Ongoing, but the FBI and the DoD are now involved. It’s going well, all things considered. You and your team did well. Thanks again for your help,” he said before glancing at the door. “Give him a moment.” He then walked away.

Lois’s eyes were wide, but for once in her life she held back her questions. She wasn’t sure if she had the right to ask them, and it certainly wasn’t the time to quench her curiosity.

They stood outside for another two minutes, and it felt like twenty. Finally, a nurse stepped out. Perry seemed to know her as she gave a nod in greeting before departing.

With that, they went to the door and Perry entered after

giving a soft knock.

“Superman?” he asked.

“Hey, Mr. White.”

His voice was stronger than she had expected but weaker than she had hoped.

Lois stayed behind Perry.

“Up for a visitor?” Perry asked softly.

“Please.” Superman sounded desperate for a distraction.

Lois entered, finding the room was notably warmer than it was in the hall, but a hum of a recently installed window AC unit indicated it could be hotter. At first she was confused by not seeing a bed, but then realized half of the room was almost completely divided by a privacy curtain. Bright lights lay beyond and shined out from under the curtain and glistened mutely through its fabric. She immediately knew this was due to the special sunlamps helping Superman recover.

Perry looked at her encouragingly as he walked her to the chair near the opening of the curtain. The chair faced the wall, positioned parallel to the curtain. Sitting down, she realized she was actually right next to the bed, as she could now see Superman’s head and bare right shoulder, but not much else. She supposed she could lean forward and around the edge of the curtain to see more, but that felt like it would be an extreme violation of privacy. He was reclined back a bit from a completely upright position. His face was turned slightly away from her and looking toward the yellow, healing light. Part of her was relieved. She wasn’t sure she was ready to fully face him just yet.

“Hi, Superman,” she said, her voice faint as her eyes trailed over the part of his face she could see and stilled over what could only be a freshly healed cut on his right cheek under the elastic band holding the oxygen mask onto his face.

Upon hearing her voice, he turned his head and smiled weakly at her.

Perry handed her a pair of sunglasses and straightened.

“I’ll be back later,” Perry said, leaving the room without another word.

She took a deep breath and put the glasses in her pocket. She wasn’t in direct line of the light. “I ... I have a lot I want and need to say, and now I can’t think of how,” she stated flatly, afraid she might burst into tears at any moment.

Silence rose.

Finally, he spoke. “I’m glad you stopped the wedding.”

She snorted. “Yeah, me too.”

“Why did you?” he asked.

She stilled and closed her eyes. “The truth?”

“Please.”

She opened her eyes and looked at him. “Clark,” she answered.

Superman’s eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“I—I realized something,” she added before covering her face with her hands. She tried not to cry in front of Superman, but it was no use.

“Oh, Superman, I was so horrible to him! I wish I had listened to him, I wish I had done things differently, *chosen* differently. Instead, I was an idiot, and what’s more, I put you in a horrible position and *then* no doubt became part of why you’ve ended up here. I’m so sorry, Superman. I’m so **so** sorry!” she sobbed while doing her best to be quiet. The last thing she wanted was to be caught sobbing her eyes out in front of Superman before being kicked out.

“Lois, please ... don’t cry,” he said.

She sniffled and tried to get herself back under control, but his voice was so pained it just proved to her how much she had screwed up.

She then felt his hand on her knee.

Looking down, she was startled by two things. The slight tremor in his hand and the pink of new scars she could see

scattered along his forearm and up to a mean looking mark on his bicep. Healed cuts and puncture wounds? *Burns?*

Her sobs were severed in her throat as rage overwhelmed all other sensation.

“He did this?” she grit between her teeth.

He moved to pull his arm back, but she took his hand and didn’t let go as she slowly met his eyes.

He looked away, and she was horrified by a thought. Did he feel ashamed? Afraid of her reaction? She desperately hoped not. “Superman?”

“He didn’t do this exactly. I did, to escape,” he managed.

“Then you’re stronger than anyone could have guessed,” she said, giving what she hoped was a comforting squeeze.

Superman exhaled shakily. “Henderson said something similar.”

“Because it’s true,” she said. He slowly looked back at her. “Why did you try to pull your arm back?”

“I don’t know. Ashamed, I guess. I shouldn’t have fallen into his trap. I was overconfident.”

“If anyone should be ashamed, it’s me. And I am. I was so blind. I have no excuse, I don’t know why I did what I did. I hate myself for what I did to Clark, and to you. I never should have put you in that position. It was selfish and wrong for so many reasons. I feel sick even thinking back to any part of that entire day.”

“I’m sorry I said what I did to you. The robe comment. The moment I said it, I wanted to take it back. I was angry, but I shouldn’t have treated you like that.”

Lois shook her head, waving off his concern. “If it makes you feel better, I forgive you, but right or not, your words did make me realize what I was doing.” She closed her eyes in self loathing. “I acted like such an idiotic teenager. What was I thinking?!”

“Lois, it’s over and done now. I suppose the only thing anyone can do is learn from it all and move on. Dwelling on it doesn’t help anyone.”

Lois laughed in spite of herself. “You sound like Perry.”

“I’m glad.”

“Alright, well, as long as we can both agree to learn and move on, let’s do so. I just hope Clark can forgive me.”

“He already has, Lois. And he wasn’t perfect either. He ... wishes he had gone about things differently too.”

“He has? He does? Did he tell you?”

“Not quite, but ... Lois, he has something he wanted to tell you for a long time, but he was ... afraid. It’s what has no doubt made everything so complicated between you and ... us, I suppose.” He closed his eyes. “I really hope I’m not botching this up.”

Lois frowned. “Well, you’re not making much sense, but I think you’re right. Complicated is a good word.”

“Lois, you have no idea,” he said, smiling so tenderly at her that she fleetingly wondered if Superman actually loved her.

However, the moment was lost when his face fell into a grimace.

“Superman?”

She released his hand when he pulled it away. She stood up, her concern quickly growing to alarm when he gasped out in pain.

“What’s wrong?”

“My ribs,” he bit out, suddenly bracing his arm against his left side.

She moved forward, forgetting the purpose of the curtain as she shifted it aside in the hopes of seeing how she could help.

Under the intense light, she was met with a sight she would never forget. Above a waistband of medical exam shorts, his entire left side was adorned with such colorful bruises it might as well have wept in agony all on its own. On his right side was another cluster of recently closed wounds shining under the glaring lights, but her horror truly came when he screamed.

Part 6: Healing

She didn’t know what to do, so she put her hand on his right shoulder in an attempt to comfort as she turned toward the door.

“Help! Someone help!” she cried just as the door was slammed open and a storm of nurses and doctors charged in, most of them with sunglasses.

They pulled the curtain away completely and swarmed around his bed.

“What happened?” one of them asked above Superman’s pain-filled groans.

“I don’t know! We were talking and then he gasped. I asked him what was wrong and he said it was his ribs!” she explained as quickly as she could.

“Superman, talk to us, what’s happening?” a nurse asked.

“Burning, it feels like my ribs are burning!” he answered, gasping for breath. “So hot!”

Lois was yanked back, and it took her a split second to realize it was Perry.

One of the doctors took out a stethoscope and listened to his chest.

“I’m not hearing any fluid. Lungs are clear.”

Superman tried to remain still but it quickly became too much. He curled protectively onto his side, wrapping his arms around himself, panting, before he suddenly flinched from the doctor’s touch.

“If his ribs are broken and not just fractured, he could easily puncture a lung!” one of them warned.

“Superman, try not to move. We’re giving you something for the pain, just hold on,” the black doctor said, injecting something into the IV line. Lois believed Perry had told her his name was Dr. Carson.

Superman moaned, squirming and shifting, trying to reduce the stress on his left side as he inadvertently pressed against the bed’s right railing in his effort. The nurses and doctors desperately tried to keep him still, but then Superman abruptly and violently flailed with a shout.

The railing snapped and the nurses on that side barely pulled back in time. He fell off the bed with a startled cry, quickly rolling into the fetal position before raising his arms over his head as if he expected to be struck.

No one moved for a long moment as he wheezed.

Somehow he still had the more critical tubes in place, such as the I.V. line in his left arm, but half of the monitoring stickers had come free and the oxygen mask was off. He was shaking and barely had his eyes open, though he might as well have had them tightly closed for how much he was actually seeing.

“No one touch him!” Carson ordered as he lowered himself to the floor beside him. “Superman, you’re in the hospital, you’re safe. No one is trying to hurt you. We’re trying to help relieve the pain in your ribs.”

“Should we risk another dose of morphine?” the other doctor whispered.

“Let’s wait a moment,” he said softly, before pointing to the bruises they could see on his back that were now rapidly fading from blue and purple to brown and healing yellow.

Superman shuddered, slowly opening his eyes fully and looking around while trying not to move. At first, it didn’t look like he knew where he was, but then he suddenly sagged with immense relief and lowered his arms, exhaling heavily.

Carson crawled closer, but still didn’t touch him.

“I-I’m sorry. I thought I was back there,” Superman whispered, blinking away his confusion.

“Quite alright. That level of pain in these circumstances can throw anyone. How is your pain level now?” Carson asked sympathetically but without pity.

“Better.”

“One to ten?” he asked pointedly, noticing how his patient

was bracing his side as he moved to sit up.

“Six, seven maybe,” he admitted with a wince, squinting at him.

“I can’t give you another dose of morphine just yet, but let me know if it gets worse,” he said as he motioned for two of the nurses to approach. “Let’s get you back on the bed.”

Now with things much calmer and his vitals were stable, the other medical professionals took their leave, allowing Dr. Carson and the two nurses to handle things.

Perry and Lois remained back and after a minute approached the bed, both now wearing sunglasses since the curtain wasn’t drawn.

“What happened?” Perry asked gently.

“From what I can tell, his ribs began aggressively healing,” Dr. Carson said, unbothered by the inquiry. It was clear Superman wanted to understand what was happening as well. “All of the dull, drawn out pain a human feels in the months it takes to heal a fracture or broken bone, he’s experiencing in a fraction of the time. It would explain why the pain is so intense. Unfortunately, I’m not sure how long it’ll take for his ribs to fully heal, but thankfully morphine seems to work well enough to take the edge off the pain.”

“It’s a big edge,” Superman pointed out gratefully as the older nurse helped to better situate his oxygen mask.

“Considering the amount your bruises have faded, I can imagine. You just healed an equivalent of at least eight weeks in less than two minutes. I’m amazed you remained conscious to be honest, especially when considering the fact you don’t have much experience with pain.”

“This year’s been a humbling experience. Before this year, I’d never been physically hurt,” Superman said before he could stop himself. He frowned. “Why do I feel ... I don’t know, off?”

“The morphine. I gave you the maximum dosage that I feel is safe for you. You’re likely feeling detached from everything. How’s your pain now?”

“Five. It’s pulsing, but it’s better.”

“Alright. I think we’ll let you rest now and if the pain doesn’t continue to go down I’ll give you another dose in half an hour. Also, in a little over an hour we’ll move you to the other room for some direct sun,” Carson said.

Lois stopped at his bedside and gripped his hand.

“I’m glad you’re alright,” she said, her voice shaky.

“Sorry for scaring you,” he said.

“You have nothing to apologize for, just rest and focus on getting better,” she said gently, squeezing his hand.

“Alright.”

She smiled and left with Perry.

“You okay, honey?” Perry asked once they entered a secluded waiting room off the secured hall. There were some tables and chairs, as well as a vending machine.

Lois took a deep breath as she looked at him. She had tears in her eyes.

“You were right. It was really bad. Is really bad,” she said. “He has so many scars, and that pain...” she whispered, closing her eyes.

“He’s much better than he was,” he said. “He’s going to be okay.”

“For a moment, he thought he was back there,” she breathed, unable to fathom being in such a state.

“It’s going to take time, but he’ll recover, and not just physically.”

“Do you think he’d be open to seeing someone? A psychotherapist?” Lois asked.

“I don’t know, it might be best to wait and see.”

“My sister has started seeing one, maybe—”

“Lois, dear, I know you’re trying to help. What you just saw

is a lot to take in and what he went through and is going through is no doubt traumatic, but I don’t think this will help him right now. Men process things differently, human or not,” he started before shifting his approach after seeing the persistent gleam in her eyes. “But I’ll keep it in mind. If I see an opportunity, I’ll suggest it to him, alright? But I don’t want you to do it. This sort of thing is better handled in a man-to-man sort of way. If you try to do it, even with your heart in the right place, it would do more harm than good. Understand?”

She nodded, honestly taken aback by his stern stance. “I understand.”

“Good. We both want what’s best for him, and with me being named his next of kin, you can be sure I’m going to treat him as such. Although I likely won’t tell him outright, he’s one of my boys now. I’ll be sure he gets what he needs whether he likes it or not, okay?” Perry promised.

“Okay, Perry. Thank you.”

Lois relaxed, grateful Superman had Perry in his corner.

“I feel ridiculous,” Superman stated as they wheeled him into the hall in a wheelchair.

“It’s hospital policy to transport patients this way or by hospital bed,” Nurse Noel said, amused by Superman’s bemused expression as she made sure the I.V. line and other connections were secure on the chair’s back wall and pole.

Wearing a hospital gown over the medical shorts, his bare legs were covered by a blanket while his feet were in hospital, non-slip socks. He still had the oxygen mask, despite his assurance that he no longer needed it. Dr. Carson said otherwise, pointing out that it was helping him heal, just like the Ringer’s I.V. was. He couldn’t argue with that, especially since he was still going through a bag every fifteen minutes. He decided not to think about the other bag that accompanied that.

They started their way through the hospital, trying to not attract attention, but that proved impossible, especially with security heading off each junction and ensuring a clear path.

“It’s Superman!” was quickly heard down the halls.

Soon after, people began poking their heads out from rooms and gathering on the fringes of doorways to look at the black haired man in a wheelchair being pushed by Dr. Carson.

As much as he wanted to, Clark didn’t duck his head or shy away from the attention. Instead, he took it in stride, wrapping his Superman persona around himself like a massive shield as he met the gazes of curious onlookers with a kind smile.

“Feel better, Superman!” someone suddenly shouted, and that’s all it took for the cascade to follow.

“Thank you, Superman! You saved my mom’s life last month!”

“We love you!”

“Thanks for saving us from Nightfall!”

“Greatest hero ever!”

“We’re praying for you!”

“You saved my brother! Thank you!”

Many other voices followed, each similar in message and enthusiasm, uncaring about his less than super appearance.

Weaving through the corridors, all the way to the west end of the hospital where his room was, thankful voices continued to follow him, calling out well wishes, encouragement and their gratitude.

He had never felt his chest so tight with emotion or his soul so high. He felt as if he was enveloped in the glow of a million suns, and while he tried to keep moisture from gathering in his eyes, he failed.

Only when the door to his new room closed did he let his tears silently fall. Wiping his eyes, he tried to collect himself as Barb came around the chair and knelt before him.

“Here, Superman,” she said, holding out a tissue.

"Thanks," he said with a wobbly breath, torn between being relieved Lois wasn't there to see him like this and wishing she or Perry were there.

Lois had left the hospital with Perry not long after his ribs had healed. Perry promised to return the next morning. Perry's friend, Joe Harding, had headed out assuring them Superman could continue using the lamps for as long as he needed and could even keep them if he wished.

"You know, I just realized no one has directly thanked me for Nightfall before," he said after a moment. "And to see and hear so many people tell me..."

Barb stilled and her eyebrows rose.

"Of course, I don't do what I do to be thanked, but it just sort of struck me. Gosh, look at me, who needs Kryptonite when I turn into this with a few thank you's?" he said, trying to dry his stubbornly weepy eyes.

"They were more than just simple thank you's. And sure, acknowledgement shouldn't be the reason for doing good, but just as people should do good for the sake of good, people should acknowledge the good done by others because it is also the right thing to do. Genuine acknowledgement is important. It facilitates all types of healing in all situations and solidifies purpose by providing a clear, however close or distant, personal connection," she said, taking hold of his scarred hand. "You've impacted a lot of lives, and I understand you might feel it shouldn't affect you so much. I get that.

"For me, I've been a nurse for over twenty years. Saving people is my job. I love doing it, and for a while it felt strange whenever someone thanked me. I'm just doing my job, after all, but to them, it's meant the difference between still having their loved one and not. Still being alive and not. Grasping that can hit you pretty hard. And for you, there's also the fact you're not being paid for this, and I dare say you sacrifice a lot to do what you do. Being thanked acknowledges that sacrifice, even if only a little or in a roundabout way. So I'm not surprised you're so affected."

He blinked as he let her words sink in, his eyes red from tears.

"Now let's get you into bed. Your hands are freezing!" she said.

Barb and another nurse quickly helped him into bed as Dr. Carson checked his most recent blood work on the clipboard.

They covered him with a blanket, leaving his arms and half his chest exposed after securing the ECG electrode stickers to his skin again.

Now settled, he took a moment to look around the room.

It was smaller than the other room, but that was likely because they didn't feel they needed as much equipment or personnel as before now that he was stable and edging closer to Good condition. His bed was facing the large window, currently covered by thick blinds. However, he did notice that he seemed to be able to hear noises from outside more clearly than before and the air smelled less sterile.

"Superman, compared to how you feel normally, what's the biggest difference right now for you? I'm trying to get a better gage for how different you're feeling from your normal," Carson said.

"Besides the constant ache I'm feeling everywhere right now, the biggest difference is feeling cold, which is strange. I don't remember ever feeling cold before. And tired. I'm not as tired as yesterday, but I'm beginning to really understand what people mean by being tired of being tired."

"Your body temperature is sitting at 98, which is a little under your normal, right?"

"How do you know that?" Superman asked, taken aback.

"Mr. White told me," Carson said, not that surprised by Superman's reaction. He hadn't been awake when he had spoken to White about that.

"Oh, okay." He relaxed. "Yeah, it's usually just above 99, but never above 100.5, at least as far as I know."

"What's your pain level right now?" Carson asked.

"Three. It flickers to five sometimes but it goes back down."

"But the three is constant?" Carson asked. "Where?"

"Everywhere, but I suppose my bones and muscles mostly.

The spikes are in my joints."

Carson jotted something down. "Stomach ache or headache at all?"

"My head has been hurting since the cage, to be honest, but it's around a dull two now, I suppose. My stomach feels ... uncomfortable. I'm not sure how to explain the feeling. It's better than it was but it's not ... calm. Most everything else is a ... I don't know how to describe it. It's not a sharp pain or burning, more like a layered, spread out pain with an odd sensation. Tingles maybe? Why does it feel that way?"

"I think it could be the damage the radiation did to your body. Cellular damage, unfortunately. The good news is that it seems to be healing," he said, adjusting the blankets down to his waist so his whole chest was bare. "Alright. Well, let's go ahead and get you some real sun," he said, nodding to the nurse who was ready by the blinds. "Ready?"

"Yeah," Superman said.

The blinds slowly opened, revealing that the windows had already been slid open as far as they would go, allowing completely unfiltered light into the room and onto his face, arms, and chest.

Warmth ebbed forth, and it was so revitalizing he sagged completely into the bed, limp.

"Superman, are you okay?" Carson asked, checking his pulse.

"Yeah," he whispered before he instinctively grabbed the edge of the blanket and tugged it aside, trying to get it off of himself completely before he stilled. The sun was better than the lamps, even all four at once, and he wasn't even fully exposed. The light just felt smoother and went deeper. His skin was practically singing.

Distantly, he heard Barb and Carson talking urgently.

"Tis okay," he muttered.

As energizing as the light was, the caressing heat reminded his whole being of how weak he really was. Aches deep within began to bleed away, his core doing all it could to spread the power to cells still recovering from the radiation damage as quickly as it could. But doing so took a lot of work.

He was so tired.

His awareness began to collapse.

And then he wasn't aware at all.

"Should I close the blinds?" the nurse asked worriedly when Superman stopped responding to them.

"No. No, his heart rate is solid. Maybe this is normal for his people. Considering the pain that he was describing, maybe this is addressing that damage, and sleep can only help him," Carson said as he watched the monitors carefully and listened to Superman's lungs and heart with his stethoscope.

"Is he sleeping though?" Barb asked.

"I don't know," he said, pulling out his penlight and carefully opening Superman's right eye before shining the light across it. He watched for a reaction to the light before doing the same to the left. "This might be closer to a pseudo coma."

"Doctor," Barb said, pointing.

He turned and caught sight of the remaining bruises on Superman's torso instantly vanish, leaving only healthy skin. Without hesitation, Carson removed the blanket completely to allow as much sunlight to touch his patient as possible.

"Take off his socks, and let me know if anything changes. I'm going to update the Administrator. He's going to make another statement this evening," he said.

Barb nodded her understanding.

Lois closed her eyes as she turned off the TV.

The hospital had just given an update on Superman's condition, which was, thankfully, continuing to improve. They refused to go into specifics of course, stating patient confidentiality, but it didn't seem to really matter. After the dozens of people who had seen him when they relocated him in the hospital, the gist of his visible injuries spread and speculations beyond those took off.

The curiosity of people was unfortunately as unquenchable as always.

The apparent scar on his face was the most discussed, coupled with the additional proof that he was no longer invulnerable because he also had an I.V. and was on oxygen.

The secret of Kryptonite was out, but how it worked and how Luthor apparently used it against their hero was up for debate.

Lois felt sick after only hearing a snippet of a conversation between 'experts' discussing what might have caused those injuries and speculating on his physiology.

She really hoped Superman wasn't seeing any of this.

The only good thing coming from all of the press was the multitude of stories about people around the world showing their support and concern for Superman, such as the numerous vigils taking place in countless cities and the uptick in donations to the Superman Foundation.

Mr. Brown of the Foundation had given a statement on behalf of Superman, thanking all of the well-wishers and those who made donations. In the next week, they would be syphoning donations into the local and international communities in different ways, including to the hospital treating Superman.

That portion of news was heartwarming, to say the least, and Lois took solace in knowing Superman would at least approve of that.

Martha and Jonathon silently watched the news that night, trying not to let their fears run wild. Thankfully, Perry had given them another update, so in a lot of ways they knew more than the media, but news about Superman was not all that had their attention.

The support for their son was more than they could have ever hoped. Martha cried when she saw all the vigils for her son around the world and Jonathon was reassured by the hospital's efforts to keep him safe, and while they of course wished the existence of Kryptonite hadn't been revealed, they understood there really was no feasible alternative.

The talking heads blabbing about how their son's body worked, however, really needed to stop.

They wished they could do something about the maddening chatter, but all they could do was change the channel. They really hoped Clark was not near any televisions. They knew how mortified he would be over being the subject of such discussions and theories.

Hopefully Clark would be well enough to leave before too much longer.

Perry returned the next day with a package in hand, quickly being led toward Superman's new room; however, he was growing concerned by the noticeably higher security.

"Inspector?" he asked, surprised to find Henderson waiting for him with Dr. Carson in a secluded hallway.

"Mr. White, I wanted to be the one to inform you of the threats to Superman's life the hospital and the Superman Foundation just received," Henderson said grimly.

"Threats?!" Perry asked, appalled.

"Yes. We've doubled security and are in the process of increasing the perimeter of observation around the hospital."

"Do you know who're making the threats?" Perry asked.

"I feel it's attention-seeking scumbags but we're not going to risk it. It's why we're now having a guard inside the room and not just outside," he said.

"Alright," Perry said as they resumed walking toward Superman's new room. "How is he doing?" he asked after a moment.

"His life signs have improved a great deal and his body temperature is now 100.1," Carson said before taking a deep breath as he handed him a pair of sunglasses. Perry didn't like the change in his expression as he took the shades with his free hand. "Now, I don't want to alarm you, but after moving him to this room and opening the windows to expose him to direct sunlight yesterday, we believe he went into a kind of self-induced coma."

"What?" Perry asked, now really alarmed.

"I think this is a normal physical response for his people. I do wish I knew exactly why, but it's clear that he's getting something from real sunlight that he wasn't getting from the lamps. And although the lamps no doubt helped, likely saved his life even, they weren't able to completely heal him. Come, I'll show you what I'm talking about."

After putting on their sunglasses, they entered the room which, unfortunately, didn't have sunlight pouring in just yet. Instead, the four lamps had been set up again and Perry immediately knew what Carson was talking about.

"The scars!" he exclaimed.

About half of the scars were completely gone, with the rest not as raised or as red as they had been before. And the bruises were nowhere to be seen.

"Yes. Just like how his wounds closed under the lamps, his scars healed under direct sunlight. I'm hoping the rest will vanish once the sun reaches this side of the building again. For now, however, we're placing him under the lamps again because they're better than nothing."

"And I take it it's for security reasons that he's not moved to wherever the sunlight is?" Perry asked, frowning.

"This room is one of the safest rooms with a window that receives direct sunlight. It's why it was selected to begin with," Henderson stated. "No buildings or vantage points beyond have a direct line of sight through this window, let alone to his bed."

"'Line of sight'? You mean you're concerned about snipers? Great shades of Elvis!" Perry exclaimed.

"We're not taking any chances. The world knows he's vulnerable right now, and we have no idea how long before his powers return. There is some talk of relocating him to a more secure location, but the move itself would be challenging because that would require a great deal of prep all on its own. And that's assuming an agreement is made on where to move him," Henderson stated, clearly stressed. "Anyway, I've been in meetings with the DoD and they've been overhearing chatter through their networks. They make it sound like it's posturing more than anything, but they're on high alert, which is concerning in itself. There are governments out there that would want nothing less than for Superman to be gone, after all."

Perry nodded darkly. "Okay, so is there a plan?"

"We're keeping him here for the time being. With all the bad that comes with the publicity, there is some good. There's a lot of cameras around and that's a deterrent on its own," Henderson said.

"As long as they don't want to be caught," Perry pointed out.

"Most fortunately don't, but for the minority it's why we've increased security," Henderson agreed.

"So how much longer do you think he needs?" Perry asked, looking to Carson.

"I'd say he's gone from near zero percent to about 80 in less than thirty six hours, at least as far as human condition, so that's promising," Carson said optimistically. "I just hope his powers recover as quickly as his body. If they do, I would say he could be

back to himself in four or five days on the outside.”

Perry nodded before looking back to Superman who was oblivious to the world.

“Anything else?” Perry asked, looking to Henderson who was sticking around longer than he typically would.

“Yes, but it’s just another reason to hope Luthor is in the lowest level of Hell,” Henderson said. “After Jimmy sent me what he found out about where Luthor might have gotten the Kryptonite — thanks for that by the way—we’ve been trying to make sure all of it has been located. Well, after ordering all of Luthor’s items and properties to be scanned with the calibrated Geiger counter, we found that he had coated the metal of his steel toed boots with it, beneath the leather.”

“That son of a—” Perry grit out, both he and Dr. Carson immediately realizing why Superman’s ribs had been so damaged. Lowest level indeed.

Part 7: Diversion

It was the following day when Superman finally opened his eyes.

“Good to see you awake, son,” Perry said, sitting beside the bed.

Superman looked down at himself and was astonished to find he was completely healed. He held up his hands and looked at his palms, expecting to find the burn scars, but he found nothing.

All of the pink scars that had been scattered across his body were gone and there was no evidence whatsoever that they had ever been there. He looked up to find Perry and Dr. Price smiling at him as the sunlight from the window continued to pour onto his skin.

“What time is it?” he asked, sitting up. He knew he had been asleep for a while, but had no idea for how long.

“1:15 pm,” Price said.

“I’ve been asleep for a whole day?” he asked, surprised.

“Two days. It’s Wednesday,” Perry said.

“Soon after you fell asleep in the sunlight, Dr. Carson determined you had actually gone into a coma. Don’t worry, we think it’s something normal to your physiology because, as you can see, it sped along your healing a great deal,” Price explained.

“Why didn’t I do it sooner?” Superman asked.

“You might have been too weak before, or maybe you needed real sunlight or perhaps a combination thereof. The nurses were barely able to keep up with replacing the I.V. bags for a bit there, and then it teetered off. It was only about fifteen minutes ago when your body pushed out the needle,” he said, pointing to his elbow.

Superman looked down at his arm to see the needle was indeed gone, before his focus quickly shifted to the corner of the room to a police officer.

“Did something happen while I was out?” he asked, wondering why the cop wasn’t in the hall.

The doctor looked grim and Perry sighed.

“There were a few threats made on your life early Tuesday. Two arrests have been made, but no one has breached security,” Perry said.

Superman groaned and shook his head, unable to think of anything to say. With that, Price decided to move on to a different topic.

“Dr. Carson will be here later today, along with Inspector Henderson,” Price said. “In the meantime, how do you feel?”

“A lot better. There’s no pain at all,” he said, amazed.

“And your powers?” Price asked.

Superman closed his eyes and concentrated for a few seconds before shaking his head.

“No. Nothing yet,” he said with a frown.

“That’s alright. You’ve made a lot more progress than we could have imagined when you first came in and Dr. Carson and I

suspect it takes a great deal of stored energy for your powers to actually manifest,” Price said. “So we’ll continue having you soak up rays as much as possible and wait.”

“Should I stay here though? I don’t want to cause any more problems I imagine I have already caused to the hospital,” Superman asked, concerned.

“Some plans have been discussed, but we’re hopeful you’ll be well enough before too long. Try not to worry about it. The Superman Foundation has provided funds to cover the security and more for the hospital,” Price assured.

“Oh, good,” Superman said, relaxing.

“Doctor, could I talk to Superman privately?” Perry asked after a moment, also glancing at the officer. “Shouldn’t be more than twenty minutes.”

“Of course,” Price said, who motioned for the officer to follow.

“Mr. White?” Superman asked, clearly a little confused as the door closed behind the officer.

Perry reached under his chair and retrieved a large package he had brought with him the day before when Superman had been unconscious.

“What’s this?” Superman asked, taking the bag and opening it.

He immediately saw bright red fabric, neatly folded within.

“I felt it necessary to go ahead and retrieve it for you,” Perry said, meeting his eyes.

Superman slowly pulled his folded uniform from the bag. The bold yellow S on the front.

“How?” he asked, bewildered. But then he stilled. “You know.”

Perry nodded. “Since after you told me to call the Kents.”

Superman placed his hand on his forehead.

“I’ve kept Mr. and Mrs. Kent updated,” he said, deciding to not outright say anything that could reveal his identity, just in case. He put his hand on Clark’s shoulder reassuringly. “You have nothing to worry about.” Perry then pulled him into a brief hug.

“Thank you,” Clark said, before pulling back.

Perry, like any southern gentleman, swiftly but smoothly moved on as he cleared his throat.

“Well, since we still have time, I have news. Good news first. The Planet is coming back. Mr. Stern is the new owner of the Daily Planet and rebuilding will begin next week.”

“That’s excellent news!” Clark beamed. “But what’s the bad news?”

“I think it’s more disturbing than good or bad. A few days ago, I tasked Jimmy to figure out how Luthor might have gotten the Kryptonite and he learned that the samples sent to the geological society after that whole Trask fiasco had been ‘destroyed’ a few months ago.”

“Destroyed?” Clark asked, disbelieving.

“Apparently it had been ‘misfiled’ and ‘accidentally disposed of’. No accusations of theft were made, so no police report. It all remained internal and categorized as a mistake,” Perry explained.

“Convenient,” he said sarcastically.

“Quite. Well, Jimmy got ahold of the names in the ‘accident’ and gave all the information to Henderson. Right now, Henderson is focused on making sure all of the Kryptonite has been accounted for since, fortunately, there was a record of the initial weight and that appears legit,” Perry continued before sighing. “Henderson hasn’t found all of it yet, but they found that Luthor had put some of it in his boots and had been in the process of making a few bullets.”

“The boots? The boots he kicked me with?” he asked, automatically bracing his recently healed side.

“Yes. He also had a broach with it. Henderson has been extremely thorough, and anything that is heavy or may be leadlined, they’re taking apart and checking. That’s how they

found the bullet mold.”

“I’ve never been relieved that someone is no longer here, but I am now,” Clark breathed.

“I understand, son. I actually have darker thoughts concerning that monster, but I won’t entertain them further.”

“So what’s the full story on the threats?” Clark asked, sensing the doctor had not been totally upfront with him.

“From what Henderson has said, it might be best to have you out of here before too much longer. The DoD is antsy, according to him.”

Clark frowned.

“The hospital, of course, doesn’t want to pressure you and wants to avoid any bad PR, so that’s why Price didn’t go into detail about the threats,” Perry warned.

“How serious are they really?”

“Some threats have been from foreign extremist groups, but the domestic loonies are who Henderson is most concerned about.”

“I need to leave. I could be putting people in danger,” Clark stated.

“Let’s wait until Henderson arrives before doing anything though, alright?” Perry said, though he agreed with Clark.

Clark nodded as the doctor knocked on the door.

Henderson sighed. His men were beginning to jump at shadows, and the DoD wasn’t much better as far as he could see. The fear of something happening was beginning to become just as dangerous as something actually happening. For that reason alone, he was eager to move Superman to a different location—now that they had enough men and a viable plan to do so.

“Inspector,” the officer by the door greeted. “The doctors are already inside.”

“Thanks,” he said, entering.

Henderson blinked when he found Superman seated on the edge of his hospital bed already wearing his red and blue uniform, boots and all.

“Superman!”

“Hello, Inspector,” Superman said, smiling.

“Feeling much better I take it? Super yet?” Henderson asked, trying not to get too hopeful.

“Uh, no, not yet, unfortunately. I think I’m close though,” Superman said. “I’m feeling much better. All my injuries are gone. I think I might be feeling human,” he said with a hesitant shrug and smile.

“That’s still excellent. I actually came in the hopes of talking you into going to a different location to finish recovering, but it looks like I won’t need to convince you,” Henderson said, glancing at Perry, Dr. Carson, and Dr. Price.

“No, no convincing needed. The hospital has done more for me than I could have ever asked for and, considering the security risks that are mounting, it’s better if I go,” Superman said, standing up.

“Alright. Well, we have a plan, so now that I know—”

Henderson immediately stopped as Superman flinched and turned to the right, bringing his hands up to his ears.

“Superman?” Dr. Carson asked.

Superman shook his head, silently asking for a moment.

He closed his eyes, grimace still on his face, but then his expression changed.

“Bomb in ER. Distraction to rush this side,” he said, before his form abruptly blurred and air was sucked in to fill the void left behind.

The noise rammed into his skull without warning, but despite the jolt of pain he was grateful. His powers were returning! But then his relief vanished when the reason his super hearing had been triggered became clear.

‘Okay, run in and chuck it. Then get out of there,’ a voice said. The voice was muffled by the sound of a running engine.

‘Right. Thirty seconds,’ another voice said, pumping himself up.

“Superman?”

He shook his head, pleading for silence as he focused his hearing.

‘Once the ER blows—’ the voice prompted.

‘You all will storm the wing where Superman is,’ the second voice finished as the screech of brakes sounded and the slam of car doors followed. ‘Help! My arm!’ the same voice cried hysterically.

“Bomb in ER,” Superman stated, looking at Henderson. “Distraction to rush this side.”

There was no time.

He bolted before they could respond, praying he would make it in time. He hadn’t been sure he would be able to move at super speed, but he had decided to try anyway. Thankfully, enough of his powers had returned to allow him to move faster than human, but he was certainly not back to full. Maintaining his speed was difficult, and he soon wanted to stop to catch his breath, but the moment he saw the gun, he knew he couldn’t.

Mr. Teal was waiting to be seen for an x-ray in the ER. At first he wasn’t sure if the hospital was still seeing patients considering Superman was there, but he was relieved and pleasantly surprised to learn only the far west wing of the hospital was cordoned off, along with the area for the ongoing vigil on the opposite side of the hospital property. Everything else was as close as it could possibly be to being normal, although security all around was very high. Well, he couldn’t fault them for that and was just happy that he wouldn’t have to go all the way to the hospital downtown.

He was pretty sure he had broken his fingers, but considering the condition of a few individuals around him he couldn’t complain. Especially when compared to a young man with a backpack who had just rushed into the ER. His arm was bleeding profusely and it was obvious that he needed help. It was a wonder the guy hadn’t already passed out!

Nurses hurried to help him, but then he did something that made no sense. As soon as he was on his way to get treatment, he chucked his backpack as far as he could deeper into the hospital and then turned to run, pushing a nurse flat on her back!

Alarm bells rung in Teal’s heart alongside a spike of anger at the sight. Why would someone gushing blood rush into the hospital only to throw a bag and turn to flee?

Teal got up as he spotted a distant security guard moving as well, but he was closer to the running man. He moved and managed to grab him as a bag of fake blood dropped onto the floor from the man’s sleeve, but before Teal could bring him down, he was suddenly staring down the barrel of a gun!

Was this it? Was he going to die right here? Why did he have to get involved?

And then the back of a hand with a vibrant blue sleeve appeared just beyond his nose just as....

Bang!

Teal leapt back as the owner of the hand that had just caught a bullet merely gave a grunt before closing his fingers over the barrel and *squeezed*.

“Superman!” Teal gasped as the sound of giving metal met his ears.

Superman was livid and didn’t respond to him, instead, he yanked the gun from the man’s grasp and then ran down the hall toward where the bag had been thrown.

Superman scooped up the black backpack from the floor as he dropped the ruined gun, ignoring the astonished stares from the

people around as well as the pain blossoming out from his palm. He took a deep breath, knowing he was in no condition to contain a bomb blast and he couldn't risk accidentally setting it off while trying to disarm it. His only option was to get it far enough away before it blew. Which meant there was only one thing to do.

Superman moved again the next second, blurring before human eyes and reappearing outside, beyond the entryway with the backpack. Breathing heavily, he pushed himself harder, knowing every second counted. He leapt up.

Unfortunately, instead of turning into a red and blue streak into the sky as most were accustomed to seeing (and what he was attempting), he instead landed on his feet with a heavy thud, back onto the sidewalk.

He couldn't fly yet.

Biting back a curse, he did the only thing he could think of. Bending his knees, and with both hands under the cursed pack, he hurled it up as hard as he could. His strength propelled it up like a rocket, but the effort threw him off balance. He stumbled backward onto a bench just off the walkway to the hospital, but he didn't care. Now sitting on the bench, his eyes remained focused on the black pack, praying it would keep going.

Everyone within view was either staring at him or watching the bag soar higher and higher.

It went above the trees and then above the buildings, streaking so far above their heads that it was soon a spec in the sky.

Roughly fifteen seconds after he had thrown it, it exploded, its boom sounding like a distant crack of thunder as it turned into an expanding dark cloud.

Superman closed his eyes in relief, oblivious to the gathering crowd as he took a moment to just rest.

The sun felt so good, and being outside after four days in a hospital room.... Even though the lamps and sun had been wonderful in the hospital, there was certainly something to getting sun out in open air. He basked in the light and slouched further on the bench.

He allowed his hearing to wander, hoping Henderson and his men were already taking care of the group that was supposed to move in after the 'distraction'.

Thankfully, he didn't have to try too hard to pick up Henderson's voice.

'Read 'em their rights!' he ordered. 'Any word on where Superman is?'

'Yes sir. He's sitting on the bench outside the ER. He just threw the bomb into the sky. It exploded well above everything,' someone answered.

'Okay, I'm heading over,' Henderson said.

Superman smiled, concluding they had apprehended the remaining men and the danger was over.

"Superman?"

He opened his eyes and turned toward the very young voice that had spoken and was surprised to find a little boy sitting on the bench with his mother less than a foot from him. They were both staring at him excitedly but also uncertainly.

Superman blinked. Had they been sitting there the whole time?

"Hello," he greeted, straightening up. "May I continue sitting here?"

The boy giggled and scooted closer to him, unbothered by the people watching.

"Yeah!" the boy said, suddenly confident. He held out his hand. "I'm Joseph."

"Hello, Joseph," Superman said, amused as he gently shook his tiny hand as his mother tenderly watched.

"Ow, that looks like it hurts," the boy said, pointing at Superman's palm after they pulled their hands back.

Superman looked down and found a circular bruise at the

center of his hand, thanks to the bullet. It was already healing, but he decided to angle it directly into the sunlight and was happy when it instantly healed.

"Whoa, that was awesome!" the boy shouted, leaning closer to him, though suddenly with concern. "So are you okay now?"

"For the most part, yes," Superman said reassuringly.

"My grandma cried when she learned you were in the hospital," Joseph informed him matter of factly. "She even had us all pray for you."

"Joseph," his mother interrupted, quite embarrassed and looking at Superman apologetically.

"Well she did," Joseph pointed out. "But now that you're mostly better, she'll be happy, just like I am now," he explained.

Superman smiled, touched by the boy's innocent nature.

"Superman?"

He looked up to find Henderson accompanied by two officers.

"Inspector," Superman said, standing up and instantly getting a better appreciation for how many people were gathering to try to see him, even from a distance. For good or ill, news crews were also present and more were arriving.

Hospital security had done a good job keeping the front area clear, in preparation for allowing officers and crime scene investigators enter the hospital, but they couldn't stop people from gathering beyond the perimeter they had hastily made, and they were still guiding people out of the area as well.

He looked back to Joseph and his mother and smiled warmly.

"It was nice talking to you, Joseph, and please tell your grandma I appreciate those prayers. Ma'am, whatever you're doing with him, you're doing fine," he said with a parting wave.

The young mother beamed as Joseph waved back proudly.

Superman turned back to Henderson, feeling better than he had in a while.

"I've just squared things away. The vehicle here is set to take you to an undisclosed location," Henderson said, motioning to the SUV just now approaching.

"Thank you," he said, before glancing at the gathered assembly of onlookers and extremely hopeful news anchors.

Henderson smirked and made an expression that could only mean 'up to you' as he stepped aside.

Deciding it was for the best, he went to the edge of the sidewalk and before the makeshift assembly, causing many to gasp in excited surprise as he raised a hand for silence. The press scrambled with their microphones.

"I didn't intend to make such an impromptu public statement, but I see no point in holding off," he began, speaking loudly as all the cameras in range focused on him. He glanced back at the hospital and smiled before facing them all again. "First, I am eternally grateful for the care I received by the first responders and by the people here. I am not exaggerating at all when I say they saved my life. Second, I am thankful for all the well wishes and prayers sent for me and the donations made to the Superman Foundation. The outpouring of support has been..." His voice became suspiciously gritty for a split second before he cleared his throat. "It means a lot to me. More than I can ever say. Thank you."

There were some cheers before silence reigned again.

"I will finish my recuperation at an undisclosed location, as I'm sure at least some of you saw that I can't fly yet. By the way, if anyone has a recording of that, I want a copy," he said seriously before cracking a smile.

The crowd roared with approval before falling quiet once more.

"Anyway, I hope to be back to my normal self by next week. Until then, my Foundation will continue to give updates as appropriate. Good evening," he said before turning to Henderson.

Henderson led him to the SUV as the crowd pulled back and

began chanting, “SUPERMAN! SUPERMAN!”

Meanwhile, the press attempted to throw out a few questions but they were soon swallowed up by the enthusiasm around them and simply gave into the moment and joined in the celebration of seeing a much healthier Superman head out.

Part 8: Resolution

Lois smiled softly as she recalled Superman leaving the hospital. That had been a few days ago and no substantial reports had been given since other than that he was continuing to take it easy.

She was beyond relieved, but lately her concern had shifted to Clark.

He had just returned from Smallville according to Perry, and while she supposed she could call him, she was afraid. And the fact he hadn't called her made her even more afraid.

She didn't know what to do. She had just returned to her apartment after staying with Perry and Alice—she would NEVER forget their generosity—and the Planet would reopen by the end of the month.

Things were moving forward whether she was ready or not.

Fortunately, the worry of reporters hounding her had faded. She wasn't sure how, but a rumor about her had surfaced stating that she had actually been involved in the investigation of Luthor and had played the part of fiancé to get close to him. She wasn't complaining but she wished it had actually been true.

True or not, Henderson, Perry, and those in the know were not refuting it.

She wasn't quite sure how to feel about that, she only hoped Clark would be alright with that accepted deception.

Clark.

What should she do?

Should she give him more space? Wait for him to reach out? Was that right? They would be working at the Planet again, but would they return to being partners?

Superman had been confident that Clark had forgiven her, but how was that possible when she was certain she would never be able to forgive herself?

Maybe she wasn't calling him to torture herself. The fear of not knowing and imagining the fallout was likely worse than what the reality would be. But then, perhaps reality would be unimaginably worse.

But it would be nothing more than she deserved.

'You're an investigative reporter, Lois. Investigate,' he had said. And she had, but not deeply enough, or really much at all. Her instincts had failed her.

No.

That wasn't right.

She had failed her instincts.

What were they saying to do now?

She picked up the phone and hung up half way through dialing.

This had to be face-to-face. Maybe she could call Perry and ask him to arrange some—no that felt wrong.

She couldn't rely on anyone with this. She had made this mess; she had to fix it.

She grabbed her purse.

Clark sighed as he flipped to another channel, trying not to feel too exasperated as he reclined back on his couch.

He knew it would take a while for the people of the world to shift their attention away from what had happened to him, but he wished their obsession with it all was over already.

Though, he supposed it could be worse. The video of that whole nightmare could be public knowledge. Thankfully it wasn't. The government had put a tight seal on it and he had it on good authority that that tape would never see the light of day. And the

people who had already viewed it happily swore (and were ordered) to never reveal what they had seen.

He would take what he could get.

As it was, theories surrounding his healing capabilities and how exactly he had been lured into Luthor's trap remained.

He was sorely tempted to tell Henderson to just let that information become public knowledge, but he couldn't do that to Lois.

He wondered if he should call her. Part of him desperately wanted to check to see how she was for himself, but another part of him wasn't sure if either of them were ready to have a conversation that would likely turn emotional. After she had visited him in the hospital, he knew she blamed herself, and although she had no doubt made some serious mistakes, she wasn't the only one.

But most importantly, in the end, Clark wasn't foolish enough to believe Luthor wouldn't have attempted something else to get to him. And unfortunately it was very likely he would have at least tried to use Lois.

He moved to sit down while stirring his Oolong tea when someone suddenly knocked on his door.

Lois couldn't keep her hands still as she waited at the door, praying he was home and would answer the door as much as she desperately hoped he was out.

But then the door opened, and there he was.

His expression was a stunned surprise, and that terrified her.

“I'll leave if you want me to,” she said immediately.

“No. No, come in,” Clark said, stepping aside.

“Thanks,” she said, nervously shuffling forward.

She never thought she would feel so awkward around Clark, but she knew she had no one to blame but herself.

She went in and waited for him at the bottom of the stairs anxiously.

“I-uh, I'm so sorry, Clark. I was so wrong,” she said as he led her to the couch and motioned her to sit as he sat at the other end. “I was so horrible to you, I—” She covered her face, choking back tears. “I have no excuse. I was so blind. I wish I could do that day over again. I'm **so** sorry! If I could take back what I did, I would.”

“I know you would,” Clark said before clasping his hands together, clearly as nervous as she was. “I'm glad you're here though. And you can stop apologizing. You've realized what you did and are clearly sorry for it. I've forgiven you.”

“I don't know how. Superman almost died because of me,” she said with a loud sniffle. “And I hurt you. And yet you still kept trying to warn me about Luthor.”

“I couldn't give up on you,” he said to her, before looking down.

Lois swallowed. “You're why I stopped the wedding. Why I couldn't say ‘yes’ and said ‘no’ instead.” She exhaled shakily. “I realized ... I realized I was making a mistake. I realized if I didn't stop it I would regret it for the rest of my life. And I realized...”

She was afraid to continue. What if he no longer felt the same way? What if what she had done had turned his feelings toward her sour? What if he no longer loved her?

“You realized what?” Clark asked softly, shifting toward her ever so slightly.

“I need you, Clark. I don't know why it took me so long to see it, but I can't imagine a life without you. I love you. And not like the way I had said before.”

She couldn't stomach even repeating what she had said at the park.

“If you still love me the same way as before, I want to love you that way back,” she whispered softly.

He took her hand and was suddenly close to her, pulling her against his chest and she eagerly went, allowing his arms to encircle her as she pressed her face against his neck and shoulder.

"I still love you," he said. "I never stopped."

She clung to him, and neither knew how long it was before they eased back. When they finally did, she wiped her eyes and gave him a shy smile.

"So, what now?" she asked.

He smiled softly but his posture became hesitant.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I want to tell you something, but I don't know if now would be a good idea," he said.

She frowned, and then the words Superman had spoken in the hospital came back to her.

'Lois, he has something he wanted to tell you for a long time, but he was . . . afraid. It's what has no doubt made everything so complicated between you and . . . us, I suppose.'

What on earth did he want to tell her, and why was he so afraid? And how did it involve Superman?

"I've wanted to tell you for a long time now, but I've been afraid of how you would react, and now I'm even more so. I don't want you to think I didn't tell you because I didn't trust you or that I enjoyed keeping it from you. I hated keeping it from you and had planned on telling you immediately if . . . Well, no point discussing that. We're here now, and I don't want to mess this up." He sighed and combed his hand through his hair fretfully.

Ah, so he was afraid of her Mad-Dog Lane reaction. She sighed.

"Am I really that scary?" she asked, wishing she found it funny, but instead she just found it sad.

"No! . . . Yes. Sometimes," he amended. "But it's not about that, especially now. I'm afraid of what knowing this could do to *you*. Before, I knew telling this secret would make you feel tricked because I had hidden it for so long, and so you'd be angry with me, but now . . . while you may still feel tricked, there's more to it now."

"Is the secret that bad?" she asked, confused and worried. "Does your secret involve something illegal?"

Superman obviously knew this secret, but he clearly still held Clark in high regard, so what could it be?

"I . . . I haven't really thought about the legality of it before to be honest, but no. It's not . . . *bad*."

"Then what do you mean that it's not just about me feeling tricked anymore?"

"It's about what it would mean," he said, looking suddenly pained. "Especially concerning what has recently happened."

"Just tell me. If you don't, what I imagine will no doubt be worse than the truth," she urged.

He looked at her doubtfully but nodded, resigned.

"Okay, but just remember that everything is okay now. The past can't be changed but we can move forward, and I want us to move forward together. And I'm sorry you're learning my secret this way. I had hoped to break it to you at a perfect moment, but I realize now that a perfect moment would never have come."

"Clark," she said, exasperated. "Just tell me."

Clark heaved in a deep breath, apology and thick worry clear on his face.

"Lois, when I disappear or run off, it's not because of any of the excuses I spout off," he began. "And it's not because I am not interested in what you're saying or in whatever is going on. I'm going because . . ."

He slowly took off his glasses and she blinked in confusion at the action, but her mind was more focused on hearing what he would say next than on figuring out why he had taken his glasses off.

"I'm Superman."

Her brain seized before all the gears in her mind suddenly began rotating at near breaking speeds.

Superman?

He was Superman?

But. . .

And then she understood what he had meant when he said that it wasn't about feeling tricked anymore but about what the secret would mean.

It meant that it wasn't only Superman who had almost died, but Clark.

It was Clark Luthor had almost killed. Clark who had been rushed to the hospital with dozens of wounds and radiation poisoning. It was Clark who she had seen covered in bruises and scars. Clark who had screamed out in pain and flashed back to being beaten by Luthor while surrounded by nurses and doctors.

It wasn't just Superman, but Clark, her best friend. Her partner.

Her decisions had almost cost her Clark.

"I think I'm going to throw up," she gasped, before bolting to his hall bathroom.

He hurried after her, concerned, before kneeling behind her and holding back her hair.

After a few minutes, she wasn't sure if she should be relieved that she had only dry heaved or mortified that she had dry heaved.

"Are you okay?" Clark asked tentatively.

She nodded as she pulled back before shaking her head 'no'. She slumped down on the bathroom floor, resting her back against the side wall while looking down at her hands.

"I don't know what to say," she whispered, tears silently rolling down her cheeks.

"You don't need to say anything. The important thing is that we're both here together," he said, shifting over to sit beside her.

She took his hand with both of hers, but was too shocked to do anything else.

"Are you okay now?" she asked. "I mean, fully recovered?"

"Yes. Dr. Carson has asked me to give myself another day before I return though," he said before helping her to her feet.

She didn't resist and hugged him.

Soon after, they returned to his couch and just snuggled. They could talk about their future the next day. Now . . . now they just wanted to be together.

The sonic boom echoed over Metropolis and the people below smiled. It had been a month since Superman had left the hospital after his harrowing encounter with the late Lex Luthor. Although the details of what exactly happened would likely never be made public knowledge, there were now very few people in Metropolis who took his presence for granted.

They knew he was not immortal or completely invulnerable now. And though he would always be super to them, he was now more than just a hero who swooped in to save the day. He had a personality, depth, and sense of humor.

From the stories of his transfer across the hospital and the video of his failed flight, to the statements from the first responders and his words outside the hospital, his given name was about more than just his powers now.

He was strong and persistent, but also gentle and softhearted.

He was their Superman, and his resilience was unbreakable.

THE END