

Despair

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Rated: PG-13 for major angst and drama

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Summary: This takes place almost two years after the end of season four. Lois has died six months prior to this piece while she was pregnant. Clark is in despair, and this is his first day back to work since she's been gone. This is the alternate (and somewhat happier) ending for "Distraught."

A/N Takes place almost two years after the end of season four. Lois has died six months prior to this piece while she was pregnant. Clark is in despair, and this is his first day back to work since she's been gone. This is the alternate (and somewhat happier) ending for my other tale "Distraught." Not entirely necessary for you to have read that one first, but it would give you a better impression. This tale picks up after Clark leaves the Lanes' apartment, and goes a slightly different route from there.

A/N: WHAM warning. I wrote this in an extreme fit of depression, so only I can take the blame for the events that happened in this story. I apologize if this offends anybody. Do not read if you think this may be a trigger or if you are uncomfortable with the topic of depression or suicide. I don't however own any of the people or places represented in this story. They are owned by Warner Brothers and DC.

Clark stood before his counter, staring at the lead box. It was just sitting there, innocuously — for the time being, anyways. The second he opened the lid, it would not be so innocuous, he knew.

His eyes burned with how many tears he had shed today and the tears he still had yet to shed.

He still couldn't believe it. Perry White knew the truth. He'd finally had the gumption to tell him. And Lois' parents. They knew now too. Part of Clark was still shocked at himself for revealing so much — after all, it was ingrained in his core to never tell anyone the secret. And yet he had done it. Briefly Clark marveled at how far gone he must really be.

This was not, in fact, how he'd imagined his day going. Actually, he had hoped it would go much better than this. That's why he'd gone to the Planet.

No one had expected him to be at work today. Sure, it had been six months — but Clark knew very well that Perry was giving him as much time as he possibly needed or wanted off from work. After Lois and the baby had died, no one had wanted to leave his side. His parents had stayed with him for three straight months, with the occasional fly-out for Clark to stay at their place with them. And they showed up just about every other week as it was now, so it wasn't like he was alone often. As it was, they had just been here this last weekend. Not to mention the fact that Perry and Jimmy dropped by periodically — Jimmy more often, usually with pizza and a movie. Even Lois's parents were at their — his, he corrected — home oft times, checking in on Clark, not letting him slip out of their sight for a moment longer than necessary for fear that it would mean his life.

Even Superman had dropped off the face of the earth for about four months. In fact, the only reason he even donned the cape at all was because it was a large scale disaster — several tornados had torn through his home state, and Clark was finally prompted into action. There was large speculation about why, but

Clark never hung around long enough to give a quote of any sort — Lois Lane and Lois Lane only could write articles about Superman. Only she would ever get a full scale, accurate interview- and Lois would never be there to do that again.

To his parents, the fact that Superman had returned was a good sign. A sign that they could breathe easy once again. Superman was back. Nothing to it anymore — oh, sure, they still worried. But the future didn't look so bleak.

To Clark, Superman's return put the nail in his coffin. It was hard — beyond hard — it was excruciatingly painful to spin into the suit and fly off at any given moment, without Lois there to provide an excuse, without her dangling over yet never falling into the jaws of death, without her there to come home to.

When Superman returned, that was when Clark had started planning. Putting on smiles, making an effort to appear all right. Making things perfect. Slowly gathering up his supplies — two weeks ago he broke into Star Labs and stole the lead box and the items within it. The box sitting before him now.

He hadn't known when would be the right time. Every time his mind had wandered back to this lead box that was stuffed in the back of his closet, something else had come up. Someone would call for Superman's help, the phone would ring, someone would come over, or he would be prompted to write an article with the information Jimmy or Perry would send him- asking ever so carefully and politely if he "felt so inclined" to take a look at this information, or write this op-ed piece, all from home.

Clark allowed himself a small laugh at that. Perry had taken him off of op-ed pieces ever since he wrote one about a new children's park and given it a rather bleak outlook. Okay, it had been more along the lines of a very dark slant. Perry had emailed him later on that, while the piece was very well written, it lacked a certain amount of fluff for the Sunday paper, and he was going to have Ralph add some stuff to it. Clark had opened the paper up on Sunday to find he shared a byline with Ralph on the article — and Clark hadn't written a word of it.

The first surprise Clark had given his boss was when he turned in, completely out of his own volition, an article about Superman. In fact, the only article that anyone had been able to get about Superman. About a month ago, now. When Perry had asked him how he got it, Clark had lied, saying he was walking aimlessly about Metropolis when he'd ran into him mid-rescue, and feeling the impulse to get something out of it for the Daily Planet, had stuck around to see what happened. He told Perry that Superman approached him afterwards, and gave him a look of pity and a couple of quotes.

That part wasn't so much of a lie. Clark often gave himself looks of pity and mostly distaste. Every time he stepped in front of a mirror.

But Clark knew the biggest surprise had been when he'd returned to work today. No one had seen that coming. Even Clark hadn't expected it from himself — but the second he walked through that bullpen and saw Lois's desk, he knew exactly why he had done it.

He did it because today was the day.

It was the right time. Going into the Planet this morning had shocked him — and he realized that he couldn't do it anymore. He couldn't someday find himself at his desk at the Daily Planet, without Lois, just working tirelessly at his desk as he used to. He couldn't just go out and get quotes for articles, interview people — even go get a coffee — without Lois being at his side. He didn't think he would ever recover that much.

And so, here he was. Clark checked his wristwatch — five minutes. Five minutes and his suicide letter-email would be sent out to everyone whom he thought deserved it. Five minutes to do the deed. He hoped Perry would be able to find the obit — which was more along the lines of a full-blown article — on his computer all right. For a moment, he considered whether or not

he should have left that there. Maybe he shouldn't have said he was Superman — let the public guess, draw their own conclusions — but no. He did not want to perpetuate his lies even through his death. The world would have to know. They would have to learn to let go of their dependence on their savior — he couldn't let them believe that even though Superman hadn't been seen in a while, that *maybe* he'd come back, just this once, just for them... No. He couldn't do that to them. The people deserved to know.

Clark breathed in deeply. His hands hovered above the latches to open the box, not moving to open it as he let everything, all his memories, the faces of the people he knew and loved, flood through his mind. When his mind finally rested on Lois's face, he popped the lid.

Immediately he was washed over with a strong sense of pain — so much so that it almost knocked him back a step. But it did not — could not — equal the amount of emotional turmoil he was in right now. Clark neared the box again and perused his choice of weapons. Before him sat a shard of pure kryptonite — which, if he so chose, he could use as a dagger. He allowed his fingers to graze over it briefly, before feeling burned and quickly removing his hand. Now *that* was problematic. He couldn't very well stab himself if he couldn't even pick up the weapon to do the deed.

Clark shook his head, wincing as he felt his head throb when he did so, and moved on. He picked up the vial of liquid and examined its glowing, green contents. This would work, he thought to himself. Poetic- Lois and their son had died in a much similar fashion of kryptonite poisoning. He nodded to himself. *Yes, this will do.*

Clark slowly began to walk away with the vial in hand — when an insistent-sounding knock sounded on the door, causing him to jump and drop it. The vial shattered upon impact with the ground — Clark's reflexes not being quick enough to catch with his exposure to kryptonite. Some of the liquid splattered onto his hands at his desperate attempt to grab it, and he recoiled in pain at the burning sensation — a scalding heat that seemed to sear straight through his skin and into his blood stream. He attempted to dry his hands off on his pants. The burning sensation remained. Clark swore and scrambled back to the box, removing the gun and holding it firmly in his hands.

There was another knock on the door, this time accompanied by Perry White's gruff voice. "Kent? Kent?! KENT! If you don't open this goddamn door soon, I'm gonna have a fit — hell, I'll bring the entire Metropolis police force down on your ass just to get this door open!! Clark Kent, do you hear me?"

The door handle jiggled, followed by a frustrated response by Jimmy. "Chief, stop shaking the door! I can't get it open if you keep doing—"

"Try harder. KENT!"

Clark's eyes widened as he realized they were trying — and with Jimmy's skill as a lock picker — most likely going to succeed at getting inside, whether he liked it or not. He trembled. No. They couldn't stop him. There was nothing stopping him anymore. He looked at the weapon he held in his hands, trembling all over — half from pain of kryptonite exposure, and half from fear.

Fear? Had he really just thought that? Clark had believed there was nothing left to fear — certainly not death. Not when Lois was gone already. *No, fear of being stopped. Of being found,* he justified his reaction.

Sweat broke out on his brow- likely from the kryptonite exposure. Nothing else. He raised the offending weapon to his temple and rested it there for a moment, closing his eyes briefly. He focused on the feel of the cold gun metal against his feverish skin, reveling in it. It was like a splash of cold water, a grip on reality. And with the feeling came a strong sense of clarity that

had abandoned Clark ever since Lois had died.

Suddenly the door burst open and Perry White stormed through leaving a very surprised looking Jimmy behind him. Perry froze in horror at the sight of the young man before him. Clark stood facing his counter, so that Perry could just make out his profile as he stood there, gun pressed to the temple of his forehead, hands trembling and eyes shut tightly against the pain.

Perry had seen some pretty harrowing things in his lifetime. But he swore to himself, nothing would ever perturb him more than this image, even if he lived as long as Superman would.

Provided Superman didn't end things right now.

Perry swallowed hard. Clark hadn't pulled the trigger yet, even though he'd had the time. He took that as a good sign and tentatively spoke. "Clark."

Clark was struggling to remain on task, but Perry's firm yet careful voice sliced through his mind. His mind was swirling, and it was only a firm determination that kept him standing on his own two feet. What he really wanted to be doing was curling up into a ball on the floor in pain — a pain that had gone beyond a mild irritation now, and had settled deep into his bones.

"Clark," Perry repeated. "Please. Don't do this."

Clark heard the genuine fright and concern in Perry's voice. But most of all, it was the simplicity of his words that had shocked him. Four words that made him actually think about what he was doing. The cold clarity had returned to him, and for a moment he saw what he was doing, saw how despicable it was. How despicable he was. He was a terrible person. He didn't deserve to have people care about him so. He didn't deserve to live.

"Please," Perry reiterated upon seeing the younger man set his jaw firmly. Clark's eyes still hadn't opened since Perry had walked into the room, but he could still see the arguments that Clark was having with himself. Perry had known the man long enough now to know exactly when he was thinking and his precise thought process.

Clark swallowed hard, still opting to not open his eyes. If only Perry weren't here, or Jimmy. There would have been no hesitation on his part. Then he wouldn't have to think about it, about the effect it might have on them to have to experience it, alone watch it happen. That struck him suddenly, and once again was filled with a mixture of sadness and self-loathing. What would this do to everyone around him? Perry, Jimmy — his parents? What would the world think when they'd discovered Superman had committed suicide? He had forced himself past the issue before, but couldn't help but face the facts now. Clark grasped the gun in his hand tighter — if he didn't, he feared it would slip out of his hands, he was shaking so much.

"You don't have to do this, son."

Clark breathed as deeply as possible, a sharp pain entering his lungs along with the necessary oxygen. *I'll just be back here in a week,* he thought to himself. He heard Perry take in a sharp breath, and was finally prompted to open his eyes and seek out his boss, not removing the barrel of the gun even a hair away. He realized all too soon that he had spoken his sentiments aloud. *I must be really out of it,* he actually thought this time. The dry feeling in his mouth and the dizziness confirmed that fact for him.

Perry stared into the young reporter's eyes and noticed for the first time in his life how tortured and haunted they were. *Broken,* he thought. Clark Kent was broken. The pressure of being Superman, coupled with the deaths of Lois and their baby boy, had destroyed Clark. Suddenly he felt as if he saw things through Clark's eyes, and recognized the why. Clark Kent had died when Lois had. All the man felt he had to do was finish the job. Perry became even more horrified at the realization. What could he do to convince a dying man that life was worth living?

Suddenly Sam and Ellen Lane raced up, breathless. Jimmy

threw his arm out to keep them from entering the room and frightening Clark off, but it didn't matter. They were both frozen stock still, staring past the form of Perry White to the look of the tortured man with a gun against his skull. *Our son-in-law*. Sam Lane swallowed hard. If it had been anything other than a gun, he would have been able to do something. If it was poison, he could have tried to administer an antidote- anything he could have tried to fix. With a gun, it could all be over in less than a second.

Clark's eyes registered their arrival, and subconsciously he grazed his finger lightly against the trigger. He could no longer hear everyone's heartbeats skip, or the catch in their breaths. But he could vaguely see the recognition of danger in each one's expression — his vision was blurred by tears and a stinging pain.

"Please, Clark. Don't. For us."

Clark turned his eyes to look at the young photographer. Jimmy's words sounded as haunted as he felt. Clark's gut clenched up. Jimmy was like a brother to him, and his best friend at that. He trembled violently now, fighting with himself, begging his inner self for some sort of release from this emotional bondage while at the same time trying to physically wrest the gun away. He fell to his knees, weak from the long term exposure to the kryptonite that sat in the open lead box. Now and only now, Clark felt his arm drop with the gun loosely held in his shaking hand. He stared at the weapon for a few excruciatingly long moments.

Finally, Clark turned his eyes to his boss's once more, looking sadder and in more pain now than he had ever felt before. He whispered his next words.

"Help me."

Then the world went black.

Ralph sat at his desk at work, bored out of his mind. He had just finished his article, and Perry and Jimmy had run off after Clark, so he officially had nothing left to do. He took a sip of his coffee, and prepared to open up a game of solitaire when suddenly a message popped up in the corner of his screen saying that he had one new email. Shrugging, he clicked on the box, and opened his email. He frowned at seeing the name attached and glanced at Clark Kent's desk. The man wasn't even here. He shrugged it off again, and it opened.

As he read the short message, he suddenly gasped and dropped his coffee mug, where it spilled and shattered on the floor beneath him. The people in his area looked at him briefly, wondering what was going on. Ralph continued to stare at his computer screen and brought his hand up to cover his mouth, eyes widening in horror as he reread it. "Holy. ..." he trailed off before suddenly jumping out of his seat. He couldn't sit still. Not after discovering something so horrifying. It suddenly didn't seem right that a moment ago he had been bored out of his mind and ready to play a stupid game.

Not when Clark Kent had just declared himself dead by suicide.

His mouth went dry and Ralph turned to the nearest person. "Gil, did you get an email from Kent?"

The man turned and looked at his inbox. "Uh, yeah, I did. Let's see what the poor guy said —"

"Don't bother. Call MPD. Now."

"What?"

"Now." Gasps started flying up around the office as more and more people began reading Clark's suicide note, and everyone began moving about frantically at the realization that it might very well be true.

Ralph heard his own heartbeat against his eardrums, and he had to strain to listen as Gil finished his call to the police. "How long ago? Okay. Yes, yes I know. All right then. Thank you." He hung up and looked at Ralph with a notable amount of fear in his eyes. "She said they've already had a call to head out to that area

and sent a team out there along with a medical crew."

Ralph felt his eyes widen. So it was true. He looked around the office and suddenly realized everyone had been trying to listen to the phone call. The bullpen sat in still silence, the realization sinking in.

Clark Kent had committed suicide.

The heart monitors in the room began beeping wildly. Perry White shot straight up in his chair, suddenly alert. He watched Clark as his form began to shake and tremble and he tried to fidget restlessly out of the leather straps that bound his wrists. A doctor rushed into the room to make sure everything was all right.

Clark had worked himself into a full blown panic. His eyes roved endlessly behind his closed lids, and he felt as though his heart was going to pound straight out of his chest. "N-no," he muttered. "Nnn. .. no... L-Lo... LOIS!" He suddenly shouted and pulled his eyes open and himself up into as much of a sitting position as possible.

Clark blinked a couple of times to get used to his surroundings. A doctor was hovering over him in mild shock. Perry was sitting on the edge of his seat, leaning forward out of concern. Clark felt his heart slow down and managed to bring his ragged breathing under control. He tried to put his head in his bandaged hands, but found them bound to the sides of the bed. A look of confusion spread across his brow as he tugged against the straps. Nothing happened.

Suddenly a look of fear spread across his face. His eyes darted around the room, as though in search for kryptonite. He started to panic again.

"Kent," Perry's voice soothed. He reached out and placed a gentle hand on Clark's bandaged one. "It's all right. Calm down. You're all right."

The heart beat on the monitor slowed down dramatically as Clark nodded and tried to bring himself under control, to the point of his heartbeat almost being nonexistent. Clark lay back down, mind unsettled. He closed his eyes, leaving Perry wondering if he had fallen asleep. The editor stood and moved as if to leave the room.

"Perry?"

Perry turned around to face the haggard-looking man in the hospital bed. His eyes remained closed. "Yes, Clark?"

There was a long pause before his eyes fluttered open and those dark brown irises stared up at him. Perry swallowed. They didn't seem as haunted as they had last night. "Thank you," Clark whispered, voice hoarse.

Perry felt his heart break and nodded, eyes tearing up. "No problem." He looked to the floor, both of them just thinking about the incongruity of it all. "I'll just... um, go get Dr. Klein and tell him you're awake. Oh, and, uh, your parents are here, too."

Panic flashed in Clark's eyes before it subsided and he nodded.

Perry nodded in response. "Right. So. I'll just go get them then." He tapped the door jamb twice before leaving the room.

Clark sighed and relaxed as best he could into the uncomfortable bed. He closed his eyes briefly, allowing his mind to wander, mulling over all that had happened last night.

"Clark?" a soft, familiar voice called out to him.

Clark opened his eyes and saw his parents standing in the doorway, eyes puffy and red. His mother had tears staining her cheeks, and even Jonathan's eyes had become wet at seeing Clark like this. Clark could see the fear, the pain standing out in their eyes, and he immediately realized how terrible a thing he had been planning on doing. Lois was like their daughter, too, and it was their grandson who had died. They were hurting as much as he was. He couldn't hurt them any worse.

After all, Clark knew what it was like to lose a son. Clark swallowed past the lump in his throat before making an effort to speak. “Mom?”

She rushed toward him and embraced him in the fiercest hug he had ever known. He tried to return it best he could.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered into her shoulder, and in response she squeezed him tighter. His father came up and set a comforting hand on his shoulder.

It would be all right.

Two Years Later

Clark sat at his desk at the Daily Planet, finishing typing up his story before printing it out. “Come on,” he muttered to himself as the printer slowly spit out his document. His phone rang and he sighed as he picked it up. “Clark Kent, Daily Planet.” He listened intently to the mysterious source on the line, jotting down notes as he did so, and nodded as the conversation finished. “Well thank you very much. I’ll run this by my employer.”

It took everything in Clark to speak evenly and end the call without revealing to the source just how important this information could be, in the right hands. Clark jumped up out of his seat and made his way over to Perry White’s office, notepad in hand. He nearly knocked Jimmy over in the process.

“Whoa, CK, watch where you’re heading.”

“Sorry Jimmy.” Clark kept moving. Jimmy shouted after him.

“Wait, Clark, don’t interrupt Perry — he threw me out once already—”

Clark just waved him off as he burst into Perry’s office without even knocking. “Chief, I think we oughta check out this lead more. You remember the Vanderworth case? I just got a call from a source and he says—”

“Kent,” Perry growled. “Can’t you see I’m in the middle of something here?” He gestured to the pretty brunette woman sitting in the chair nervously. Clark quickly surmised that this was a job interview and shut his mouth promptly.

“Oh. Sorry.” Clark stood there still, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. He couldn’t just let this chance slip away. It had a lot of potential. Even some Superman potential. He looked expectantly at Perry.

Perry sighed. “Clark Kent, meet Laurel Carter.”

She stood awkwardly and outstretched her hand eagerly. “Hi. It’s nice to meet you. I’ve read most your work.”

Clark shook it, thinking briefly how pretty she was before shaking that thought from his head. “Nice to meet you too, Miss Carter.” Then he turned back to Perry White, glancing back at the woman every now and then. “Anyways, Chief, so this guy says that some of the evidence in the first round of trials was forged and—”

“Clark, what happened to that other article you were working on, the one about the car remodel—”

“Already done, Chief.” He tossed the copy he’d just printed onto Perry’s desk.

“Now listen here, Kent, I—”

Clark suddenly got a far off look that Perry recognized as his listening pose. He cast one last glance at the woman with a smile. “Gotta run, Chief. Miss,” he nodded her direction before bolting out the door.

Perry sighed, before throwing out for good measure, “And don’t call me Chief!” He smiled at the young woman who was curiously staring at Clark’s receding back. “If that man wasn’t... the, uh, best reporter I’ve got...” Perry froze and looked into the woman’s hopeful face. A feeling of *deja vu* washed over him, and something clicked in his mind as he watched her expression. He had to be picky with his staff members, he knew, and he didn’t have much room for hire — but he had been pleasantly surprised before. Besides, the look on Laurel’s face showed that she had some obvious interest in the reporter — and by how many times

Clark had glanced her way during the brief time he’d been in here... let’s just say it went beyond mere politeness. Perry thought a moment, looking over her references and credentials. Finally he sighed, deciding to test her. All she needed was one trait. One trait he was looking for...

“Look, Miss Carter, I understand that you want a job here, but great shades of Elvis! You’re aiming pretty high. I have lots of reporters out there with a lot more experience than you’ve got, and they’re secure in their sources and don’t stop at the first sign of danger. What do you think you have that I can’t find in any other... hack reporter?” His lips twitched at using the term.

A fire ignited in her eyes. “Look, Mr. White, I might not have the same amount of experience as... as Mr. Kent there, but you can bet your ass and my paycheck that I’ll be worth my weight. I’m a damn good writer and I’m not afraid to live on the edge and I won’t give up.”

She suddenly seemed to remember herself and tucked a stray hair behind her ear, frowning slightly. Right as she was about to open her mouth again to protest, Perry White grinned.

“Damn, you’re a spitfire.”

She looked up at him in confusion. “I’m sorry?”

His grin widened. “No, that’s a good thing. Our office has been missing exactly that sort of spirit for... well, for too long.” He sorted through some papers on his desk, passing her one.

“Look into this. Bring me back an article by Friday and if I find it successful, you’ve got yourself a job.”

She positively beamed. “Thank you, Mr. White! Thank you so much.”

He held out his hand for a shake. “No problem, Carter. Oh, and Carter?” She turned at the doorway. He tried to hide his smile.

“Welcome to the Daily Planet.”

As she smiled and bolted from his office, Perry let out a laugh at the irony of it all. Maybe, just maybe, this would work out.

THE END