

With Friends like These

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Summary: Sometimes it takes an extraordinary event to make a “celebrated man” ordinary. When the celebrated man is Lex Luthor and his shocking condition allows him to know who his real friends are, things take an interesting turn!

Legal note: The characters in this story are property of DC Comics, December 3rd productions and Warner Bros. No copyright infringement is intended. I have just borrowed the characters for a small bit of time to play in their universe.

In this story Lex Luthor and Arianna never divorced. Lois and Clark have worked together for the past three years.

The Daily Planet’s reporting team of Lane and Kent sat quietly in the back of the brightly lit ballroom of the Lexor Hotel. In a few minutes Lex Luthor was scheduled to speak at the charity event for the Moreland Institute for the Blind and Vision Impaired.

Clark leaned over and whispered softly into the ear of the beautiful woman by his side. He could sense how the wisps of his breath sent quiet shivers down her spine. “Ahem ... *Miss Lane*, aren’t you supposed to be taking notes? It’s considered unprofessional to wiggle your left hand to see if your engagement ring catches the light.”

She blushed slightly and then turned her head to quickly kiss him on the nose. “I can’t help it! It’s only been twenty-four hours since you proposed and I’m still dancing on air!”

“Perry will have us dancing on *something* if we don’t deliver a story that neatly fits into six inches of type space for the Metropolis’ Events column.”

She made a silly face and said, “Spoilsport. OK, back to work.” So saying, Lois picked up a pencil and started writing furiously into her notepad. At that moment, the Master of Ceremonies, Dr. Clive Elbron, a noted ophthalmologist, stepped onto the stage to introduce Lex Luthor and the audience came to life, applauding enthusiastically. Lex waved to the crowd, approached the podium and began to speak.

“Looks like you got started just in time, ‘The Man of the Hour’ is about to speak.” Clark said, somewhat sarcastically.

“Don’t worry,” Lois said softly, “someday we’ll crack wide open his *entire* rotten operation. Until then, let’s just play along with his charade.”

Clark nodded and stood up, “Let me get you a bottle of Perrier. I’ll be right back.”

She smiled her thanks and went back to listening to the opening remarks of Lex’s speech.

“My dear friends and colleagues, welcome to this charity event for a most worthy cause — the prevention of blindness!” Lex hesitated for a moment, shook his head and then started speaking again. “As all of ... you are aware ... country ... incurable ... degeneration ...”

He had been freely gesturing with his left arm when suddenly; the extended limb stopped midair and then dropped to his side, useless. Lex tried turning his head to the left, a shocked expression on his face. He attempted to speak, but no sound

issued from his mouth. He glanced around the room, and his eyes grew wide with confusion and fear.

Without warning, one of Metropolis’ most renowned citizens crumbled to the ground like a broken marionette.

Several spectators began murmuring in confusion. One woman screamed. Dr. Elbron jumped onto the stage and in haste approached the podium to provide medical assistance.

Rapidly, noise and chaos took the place of calmness and order. Like a great dark wraith, Lex’s majordomo Nigel St. John appeared, crossed the stage and kneeled over his employer’s prone body.

Thinking swiftly, Lois pulled out her cell phone, hoping the cranky, new fangled device could pick up a signal, and rapidly dialed for her partner.

Clark was in the bar when his phone chirped. He answered and before he could utter a greeting, Lois in a high-pitched babble filled him in on what had taken place.

“Don’t worry about a thing, honey; I’ll take care of the situation.” He said good-bye and hung up, deeply shaken. Lex Luthor was a menace with many enemies, but this event came as a complete shock. Clark had to put all thoughts aside and get the man to Metropolis General.

The first sound to pierce the deep mists of Lex’s mind was a sluggish almost-breathing sound, maddening in its persistent pace. Following on the heels of the breathing sound was the sharp squeaking of wheels on the floor. He could hear strange beeping machines operating somewhere close by, and the far-off shrill ringing of an ignored telephone. The steady sound of light, but urgent footsteps echoed through the corridors.

Each sound, one by one, reached through his ears to a weary brain, smashing together like some great mad symphony assaulting his eardrums.

His body, his limbs felt heavy, stone-like, unresponsive to his brain’s commands. Yet his mind experienced the lightness of a feather, as if he were floating on the waters off some incredibly, magnificent exotic shore. But it wasn’t any beach that he remembered and he had walked on several fine seashores. This beach seemed an illusion; water did not crash on its coast, but some strange, viscous liquid that he floated in.

Slowly, very slowly, the familiar, yet reassuring resonance of human voices caressed his ears. One spoke in soft tones while the other was crisp and demanding ... perhaps on the edge of hysteria. These voices suddenly became sharper, more distinct. He heard his wife’s light accented voice and the deep baritone, like aged brandy, of his friend’s voice.

What *was* going on here?

Where the hell was he?

Than just as quickly as he heard all the sounds and experienced these weird and wonderfully light, yet leaden sensations, the beach with its strange waters surrendered him into a warm, heavy darkness.

A charming, lovely voice, filled with compassion, broke through the dark, weighty waters that had engulfed him. “Please, sir, you need to wake up. It’s time for your medicine.”

“What?” His voice sounded distant, sluggish, almost peevish. He struggled to open his eyes; they were sensitive to the filtered light coming in through the blinds.

The voice spoke again, filling him with warmth and encouragement, “You are in Metropolis General Hospital in the Reeves Neurological wing. That rather annoying breathing noise you’re hearing is the blood pressure cuff. I’m sorry to be the person to tell you this, but you suffered from a Transient Ischemic Attack or brain attack. Blood flow to the brain was temporarily interrupted.”

He remembered now. He was at the Lexor Hotel, attending a

charity event and was about to give a speech, when he felt a sudden numbness on the left side of his body. Immediately his vision blurred and his words began to slur. He sensed the audience murmuring in confusion, and before he could request assistance, his legs collapsed beneath him.

The honeyed voice, unaware of his musings, continued, "... fortunately, Superman was in the area and brought you directly here. The ER doctor and his team administered tPA*, which worked rapidly to dissolve your blood clot. Mr. Luthor, you are a very fortunate man. If you had been alone or far from a medical facility like Metro Gen ... matters could have been much worse. We have a team of physical and speech therapists who will work with you so that you can return to your normal activities. With a few ... modifications of course."

"Normal self? Few ... modifications? Wh...what on Earth is happening to me? I am invincible ... invulnerable! Th...this sort of thing happens to ... to *other* people! Wh ... where is my doctor? Where is Gretchen Kelly?" All of a sudden he realized his slurred speech was not just drug-induced. He was having difficulty speaking. His life had changed, his *body* had betrayed him.

He looked into the black woman's beautiful, soft hazel eyes, expecting deception, but they only spoke the truth.

"Nurse," he struggled to speak, "I... I *need* to get out of h ... here."

The woman's left eyebrow arched in what he suspected was annoyance. "Your wife tried to contact Dr. Kelly, but her office informed us she is on vacation in Europe. Fortunately, the office manager provided your complete medical records." She added with a tiny note of reproof in her voice. "I am not the floor nurse. My name is Dr. Kiri Morro, the neurologist assigned to your case. Mr. Luthor, I'm afraid you won't be leaving the hospital in the foreseeable future. For the moment, your body is begging for its medicine and rest."

With not a small amount of effort, he turned his head to the right and watched her make some adjustments to an intravenous drip. He felt himself being drawn back into the thick sea of liquid and gradually slipped into unconsciousness.

He awoke hours later. The room was dark, and he reasoned it must be some time in the evening. Again he heard voices. The normally soft tones of his wife Arianna, usually cloaked in the tones of upper echelons of British civility, were now sharp and strident.

Nigel St. John's voice, also with an English accent, was as always smooth and in control.

Now their words were clearly audible and Lex fervently wished with all his heart they were not.

"I tell you, if we just make some changes in his IV drip all of our problems will be solved. The hospital staff or perhaps that doctor who keeps sniffing around him will be blamed. We'll never get a better chance! LexCorp will be *ours* for the taking!"

Weighing his words carefully, Nigel spoke, "That would be a very unwise course of action, Mrs. Luthor ... Arianna. Surely there will be an investigation into the cause of his death? That insufferable flying do-gooder is bound to come around here and look in on Mr. Luthor."

"Don't be ridiculous. We both know that that 'insufferable do-gooder' is Lex's worst enemy! Superman wouldn't investigate his death. If anything, like us, he will be relieved he's gone!"

"Nonetheless, I strongly suggest we remain on the side of caution and wait. The doctors all agree your husband will make a complete recovery and live a normal life. *If* he is willing to follow a strict discipline of diet, physical therapy and exercise. He's going to *loathe* giving up cigars."

Arianna Carlin-Luthor sniffed delicately and moved her head slightly, causing her luscious red brown hair to wave gently

around her face. "He is *far* from a normal man; he's capricious, cruel and he stands in the way of our making a great deal of money. Good Lord, Nigel, we can take over the company, gut it and live someplace very different from here." Her voice became soft and vulnerable. "Someplace warm and sunny, with excellent room service."

"It is an appealing concept. When I retire, it will be a stunning location where good music, excellent literature and the arts are appreciated ... perhaps Zurich. The older man looked at his fingernails and then continued. "Any discussion about terminating his life — especially now — is out of the question. The timing is deplorable. He is being monitored around the clock. You must remember Lex Luthor is a very important businessman and highly esteemed member of Metropolis society. Many people look up to him — depend on him for their livelihoods."

She sniffed again. "That is where you are wrong, Nigel. The only people who have bothered to see him are LexCorp accountants and lawyers, led by that toadying Sheldon Bender." She stopped and Lex listened as the heels of her expensive hand-made shoes clicked sharply as she walked over the linoleum floor. He could imagine her head bowed as she paced to and fro across the floor. No doubt, she was wearing one of her chic pants suits, accessorized with the exquisite jewelry his money allowed her to purchase. "Surely you cannot mean that *rabble of reporters* downstairs waiting to hear if he lives or dies. They don't care about him, only about how many newspapers this stroke of his will sell. *We* certainly don't care about him!"

Her companion nodded his head in quiet agreement. "Very well, we shall set a plan in motion, but it must be done with a high degree of caution and definitely *not* something as amateurish as tampering with the IV drip. Perhaps upon our departure I can contact one of my ... associates."

The tone of her voice altered slightly, almost to a seductive purr. The thought of his beautiful, albeit traitorous wife with Nigel sickened him. "I am so glad you have come around to my way of thinking. Lex is a proud man and when he awakens I will let him know that woman ... "

"Dr. Morro is the best neurologist in Metropolis," Nigel interjected, "she does not deserve to be the object of your jealousy. The good doctor is merely doing her job."

"Be that as it may, she's spending far too much time with him. After all, he is still *my* husband. In any case, I intend to tell Lex that the good doctor has not been entirely truthful with him and that his left side is permanently paralyzed. Such knowledge will naturally depress him and he'll become irrational. His will to live shall slip away. That's where your associate's talents come into play. Afterwards... who would doubt the word of a grieving widow? Especially one who is thoroughly trained to understand the intricate workings of the human mind?"

"Indeed. It will take time to plan his demise in a way that it won't point back to us."

"Nigel, you have such a deliciously dangerous mind. I look forward to working with you in the future. By the way, we will need to deal with Asabi. He is completely loyal to Lex and will not be turned. Oh, and there is just one other thing."

"Yes?"

"Lex's remains are to be cremated so I can spread them on the streets of Suicide Slum and then I intend to dance on the ashes."

Nigel worked hard to suppress a shudder; even his employer for all his misdeeds deserved a better resting place than that. For his own sake, he needed to keep a sharp eye on Arianna.

Their voices faded as they walked out of the hospital suite. Lex Luthor laid in his tight bed, covered with the coarse white sheets and single thin blanket, smelling of antiseptics and sweat. He felt strangely chilled, hollow and abandoned. Waves of hot anger and pity came first, followed by the sudden icy touch of

fear. Had he mistreated Arianna so badly, that she would disrespect his remains to such a loathsome degree?

Also, was it true? Were they the only ones who came to visit him? Did his life outside of LexCorp matter so little? Was not Metropolis *his* city? From what the doctor said, it seemed that Superman was able to bring him to Metro Gen only moments after the stroke occurred. If it were not for him, LexCorp would be in the hands of his devious wife and wayward 'friend'. He owed the Man of Steel.

That knowledge maddened and humbled him.

But then he thought of Nigel and his dear, sweet 'loving' wife Arianna — these people were *supposed* to be his friends! The closest ones in his life. All they cared about was money and discovering a convenient method to snuff out his existence and then destroy the corporation he had spent a lifetime creating. Lex felt sick to his heart. Suddenly, an exasperating thought came to mind: now he knew how Ebenezer Scrooge felt when he was faced with his past, present and a very bleak future.

Lex firmly resolved to survive this stroke and come back stronger, perhaps kinder. He thought about the gentle Dr. Morro and was comforted that she possessed a compassionate heart. Her tender eyes and sweet voice would be something pleasant to contemplate on in the troublous days ahead.

He would do whatever he could to protect himself against the machinations of his wife and major-domo. The thought of calling in the aid of Superman to protect him was somewhat revolting, but it would be worth it, just to see the look on Arianna's face when he slapped her with the divorce papers ... *after* she and Nigel were arrested for attempted murder, of course.

THE END

*tPA = tissue plasminogen activator