

First Responder

By Deadly Chakram <dwelf82@yahoo.com>

Rated: PG

Submitted: August 2015

Summary: Often, Superman is the first one on the scene of a crime, an accident, a disaster. Clark spends some time processing that fact as he adjusts to the idea of being a hero.

Story Size: 1,852 words (10Kb as text)

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Author's Note: Much love and thanks to AntiKryptonite for being the world's greatest beta!

It's happened again, as it often does.

A cry for help has captured my attention. Something bad is happening. Someone needs Superman. And so I must drop what I'm doing, pull on the tight-fitting, garish suit, and fly toward where the call of distress came from. I rip through the cool night air at a breakneck pace, knowing every split second counts.

As it happens — fairly frequently — I'm the first one on the scene.

I can tell, even before I start to descend into a landing, that I will once more be the absolute first responder to lend my aid. No sirens yet wail in the late night air of Metropolis. No flashes of red-and-blue lights announce the approach of any sort of emergency services. No flurry of activity unfurls beneath me as I begin to angle my flight path down to the street.

It's hard, being the first one on the scene — regardless of what, exactly, is taking place, or has already taken place. Assessing the situation. Making split second decisions, trusting that my instincts are correct, hoping that I don't make a mistake and cost someone their life. Seeing the blood, the gore, the horrific injuries, the dead. Smelling the sharp metallic scent of blood, strong enough to taste — a horrible almost coppery tang that coats my tongue. Choking on acrid smoke if there is a fire. Hearing the moans and groans of pain, the pleading calls for help, the frightened, shuddering breaths, the weeping. Feeling blood, sticky and slick all at once, as I help people get out of whatever situation I find them in. Feeling their shaking reverberating throughout my own body as I cradle them to my chest as I ferry them to safety. Feeling the extra heavy weight of the dead in my arms.

I've only been Superman for a short time — just a couple of months. But in these short few months, I've been at more accidents, more tragedies that I care to recall. And, at more than half of them, I've been the first one there. It's been just me, alone, figuring out what to do, how best to help, making decisions which could cost people their lives. The pressure, even if it's only pressure that I put on myself, is unbearable. So I am forced to find ways to squeeze those thoughts right out of my head.

When I'm making a rescue, I can't afford to second-guess myself. I don't have time to ponder my options. I must be swift and decisive. There is no place for thinking about the stress of the situation. So I act and react as quickly as I can. I size up a situation in an instant and let my instincts take over. I am firm in

my decisions, though I always allow myself to be flexible enough so as to adapt to the ever-changing dynamics of whatever circumstances I face.

It's getting a little easier, now that I have some experience in making rescues under my belt. I've found ways to keep my mind focused on the moment, instead of wandering through all the endless possibilities of what could go wrong. I've constructed mental walls to protect myself from the horrors of the moment, even if those walls crumble to dust once the situation is handled and Superman leaves the scene, ceasing to exist until the next time someone in dire need calls for him with panic in their voice.

And when those walls collapse — sometimes it is unbearable. That's when I finally have the time to comb over and reexamine every minute action I took during that rescue. I hate those moments — when my mistakes come back to haunt me, and, like a thief, they steal any rest I'd hoped to get. I know there is still a lot I need to learn — how best to handle each unique scenario I come across. But there are times when my mind all but obsesses over each and every minuscule error I've made — real or imagined — even if they didn't affect the outcome of the rescue.

I am, I think, my own worst critic.

Rarely have I heard murmurs of criticism over Superman's actions. Whether that's because people really don't fault him for being a fallible man, if not one who was born to the human race, or because they feel that the god in a cape is beyond reproach, I'm not sure. Perhaps they just accept that even he has his limits — that he can't be everywhere at once, that sometimes he just can't save everyone, no matter how hard he pushes himself, no matter how far he pushes his abilities. I'm so very thankful for the world's acceptance of my physical limitations. I'd feared that it would be all too easy for the planet to look at the unthinkable powers Superman possesses and forget that he's only one man who can only do so much.

You would think that, as a reporter, I would have gotten used to the sights, sounds, and smells of emergencies as they unfold, or the aftermath of any number of tragedies. You would think it would have been almost a form of training for me, even if I didn't know at the time that I would eventually take on the persona of an alien superhero. But the truth is, there is a world of difference between the sides of police barricades. There is a chasm between being a mere observer and an active participant.

And while it's sometimes less of a struggle for the reporter in me to banish the memories of some particularly gruesome event, there is always that knowledge there that Clark himself wasn't responsible for saving those lives. It's easier to look more objectively at the situation — to see things in terms of written descriptions in black ink on the newspaper's face. There's a certain distance there, between the passive observer and the event as it plays out. But when Superman's the one in the thick of things, relying on instincts and swiftly but carefully calculated risks to save as many lives as possible, it's almost impossible not to internalize everything, to not allow his very human feelings to get in the way of things, to banish the lingering memories of those he's saved and those he hasn't. There is no distance there to protect his mind and heart, even if his alien genetics make his flesh invulnerable.

Lois has been my one saving grace. Ever since she decided to accept me as her writing partner and brightened my world with her friendship, she has been the ray of light which pierces the darkness that sometimes descends on me from having been at the scene of some horrific situation, especially the ones where I have been the first to arrive. Being with her, no matter if it's as two friends sharing a pizza together or two coworkers working late into the night, sifting through impossibly thick stacks of research, makes me forget about whatever mistakes I think — or know for a fact — I've made during the day. Her presence calms my brain and redirects my unpleasant thoughts to much happier things. She

soothes me in an indescribable, soul-deep way.

But when she leaves, the images come back. Smears of bright red blood. Tear-stained faces. Torn and burnt flesh. The roar of a fire. The crack of a gunshot. Wounded, screaming people. Silent, stiff, unmoving dead bodies. Cries of fear. Pleas for salvation. Split-second decisions shooting through my adrenaline-soaked brain. All ghostly apparitions which haunt me each time I close my eyes. All gossamer images which float before my open, waking eyes. Whispers of sounds that echo in my ears. Weights thrust upon my faltering shoulders. But I always know, somehow, even in the most difficult moments when I struggle the hardest, that the brief reprieve Lois unwittingly provides me will be enough to sustain me and see me through the darkness.

Still, there are nights when even the light Lois brings to my life fails to pierce the darkness of my dreams — if I manage to sleep at all. Sometimes, the worst tragedies stick with me no matter how hard I try to shove them aside and lock them behind some closed door in my mind. Although, I will say that even now, even so early on into Superman's career, it's been getting a little easier to put those images, those horrible memories out of my mind. For that, I'm both grateful and terrified. Grateful because it helps me to do my job — both of my jobs — better. It helps me to focus on what I need to and to rest in order to stay mentally and physically sharp. Terrified because I'm scared that I might one day become completely desensitized to the death and suffering I've so regularly been seeing. It's absurd, of course, to even think that I'll ever get completely used to seeing dead, wounded, or imperiled people. It hurts too much to see such suffering. It's too shocking to see the depths of evilness that some people can sink to.

And yet, even in the worst situations imaginable, I constantly see flashes of overwhelming goodness and selflessness, that it lifts the darkness pressing on my heart. Strangers who put themselves physically between an assailant and their victim. Acquaintances who will offer a helping hand where they can to save a life, comfort an injured person, console someone who's lost a loved one. Groups of people who will band together for no other reason than the simple fact that there is another human being who is in need. It's those moments — those bursts of humanity — that break through the somberness like pure rays of sunlight.

Those moments help fuel me through whatever horrors I'm witnessing. They give me hope and confidence. Hope for a brighter, more peaceful, more unified future. Confidence that good still exists in the world, even in the face of man-made terrors, even when Mother Nature herself seems upset with the planet. They bolster me as I go about the business of tending to whatever the situation is — a hostage situation, a shooting, a fire, an earthquake. They help to dim the worst of the memories as I recall to mind such beautiful moments where humanity has shone so brilliantly.

And so, I now descend rapidly into my landing, steeled in mind and heart for whatever awaits me. I am ready to do what I was born to do. I will, once again, be the first responder.

THE END