

# The End of an Era

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Summary: Lex Luthor has been sentenced to be executed for his many and various crimes. What might his last thoughts be?

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“It’s time, Mr. Luthor.”

The prison chaplain’s final message to the condemned. It isn’t the last thing he’ll tell me, of course. Pastor McFarland is one of the old-fashioned ones who walks the last mile with the prisoners on the way to the gas chamber. The state allows the condemned to choose the “method of passing from this world to the next,” as the warden so tenderly phrased it. I could have chosen to die by lethal injection or, unlike any other inmate over the last forty-seven years, by hanging.

I picked the gas so I could sit up and look out the window at the witnesses.

One of the guards — intending to show compassion, I suppose — told me yesterday that the best way to deal with my — my “upcoming situation,” as he referred to it — was to take a big breath as the capsules drop into the solvent below my chair, hold it as long as I possibly can, then exhale and take in another deep breath. By that time the cyanide gas would be dense enough to bring about my death within seconds, producing a minimum of discomfort.

I considered asking him how he learned that technique, but there was no profit in irritating someone who was merely trying to help me. So I just smiled and thanked him.

Two burly guards enter cautiously and place a leather band around my waist, then handcuff my wrists to it. I could bend and scratch my navel were I so inclined, but nothing more.

I stand still as one guard snaps cuffs around my ankles. After so many months in my cell, then a few more on Death Row, plus two days in this holding area near the gas chamber, I doubt that I could run away from a sick kitten. But it is proper procedure, after all, so I submit. Resistance would only cause bruises and embarrassment.

Where is Superman? Surely he’s nearby, ready to swoop down and carry me away from my imminent demise. Or perhaps he’s waiting until the very last moment — for dramatic effect, of course. He has saved so many innocents over the last few years, so what’s one more? And he could come back at any time to repair any damage done during the rescue.

Even if he doesn’t consider me innocent — twelve jurors who were laughingly referred to as my “peers” did not — the very existence of the death penalty must rankle him. The colorfully clad hero who has dedicated himself to saving lives must feel obligated to save mine.

He simply must.

The pastor breaks my train of thought. “Do you want to hear any particular passage? The 23rd Psalm is pretty popular along this corridor.”

I shake my head. “No, but thank you. I would appreciate some

idle conversation, though. The distraction would be most welcome.”

He nods and almost smiles. I hobble into the corridor for my final journey along the Last Mile, ready for my last-minute rescue.

Assuming Superman isn’t busy with a volcano on the other side of the world, that is.

I don’t know why this is called the Last Mile. The reinforced steel door is less than a hundred feet from me. Closer to seventy feet, I’d guess. Perhaps it just looms that large in the minds of the prisoners about to have their lives cruelly ripped from them. I know it seems like a long way for me right now.

No one shouts out anything resembling “Dead man walking!” either. Perhaps it is because there are no other prisoners nearby, or perhaps these guards simply disdain such theatrics. I consider asking them, but I find that the subject does not truly interest me.

Samuel Johnson was mistaken. The knowledge of certain death looming within a fortnight — or, as in my case, a few minutes — might sharpen the intellect of some, but my mind is focused only on avoiding that fate in any way possible. Perhaps Mr. Johnson simply had no personal experience with the situation.

The guards gently tug me into a shambling stumble along the corridor. At least they’re granting me some respect, although I doubt it’s due to me personally. It’s the impersonal, respectful treatment of the living toward one who is about to die.

Irrespective of the shackles on my hands, I would refuse to salute them even were I free. My admiration for the Romans does have some limits.

McFarland is blithering on about a college basketball tournament and the wonderfully talented players participating. He’s mentioned a specific team several times, from one of the Mid-Atlantic states, which boasts a player who the pastor believes will become one of the greatest of all time. I’d ask him to stop talking, except that he’s keeping me from becoming disassociated from the reality of my situation. Besides, this Jordan Michaels and his bright prospects for a future in professional basketball are suddenly very important to me. I would relish watching him play for a long, long time.

I stop six feet from the huge door and one of the guards drags it open.

I see the chair for the first time and I feel my knees go weak.

McFarland is suddenly beside me, his powerful grip on my upper arm supporting me. “Don’t lose it now, Alex,” he mutters. “It won’t be much longer.”

No one has addressed me as Alex since I was eleven years old. I want to turn my head to face him and give him some devastatingly barbed and cutting witticism. But my brain fails me. All I can think of is that chair.

And there’s no one between it and me.

I have no idea where Asabi is or what he is doing now. He disappeared after my clone’s abortive attempt to transfer himself and Lois into new bodies. Nigel, of course, is dead, as he foolishly allowed himself to be poisoned by a jewel thief. Mrs. Cox testified against me at my trial in a plea bargaining deal which netted her a greatly reduced prison sentence, one which she is currently serving at a location unknown to me. Neither Bill Church nor his misbegotten son would lift an eyebrow to assist me, even if it placed me in their debt for the rest of my life.

Which, unfortunately, will not be long, assuming Superman does not rescue me.

I suddenly find myself seated with my legs clamped to the front of the chair. They haven’t removed the ankle cuffs, but my hands are free — only, however, long enough to secure them to the metal arms of the chair. The metal seat is uncomfortable. “I’d like a cushion to sit on, if you don’t mind.”

Warden James Castle shakes his head gently. “Sorry, we can’t give you one. The cyanide would seep into the fabric and become dangerous to handle.”

I look down at my state-issued prison suit. “What about my clothing? Would it not also be poisoned?”

He places a soft hand on my shoulder. “We won’t be reusing that, Alex. The clothing will stay with you.”

I feel my skin go cold. He means that I’m already wearing my funeral attire. “I — I don’t suppose I could change my mind about the lethal injection, could I?”

He almost smiles, then turns away. He obviously believes I was trying to be flippant.

I was not.

One of the guards secures my head with a padded cloth strap. It’s tight enough to hold me still, but not tight enough to cause pain.

A man I didn’t see before places another band around my head, one with a bundle of wires trailing down in front of me. He opens my shirt and affixes adhesive pads to my chest, straps a blood pressure cuff around my upper arm, then straightens up to look through the window. Another man is looking at a black panel containing several displays, which I assume is a medical monitor of some kind. The man outside looks at the one inside and nods. The man inside nods back and refastens my shirt. He straightens and says, “We’re ready, Warden.”

He never looks at my face.

I sense Warden Castle gathering the guards, the medical technician, and Pastor McFarland with his eyes. They follow him out of the small room. The pastor pauses and looks back. “Any last words?”

Dozens of thoughts collide in my mind. Unlock my restraints immediately. You’ll never hold Lex Luthor! This isn’t fair! I’ll have you drawn and quartered over an anthill. You can’t do this to me! Please don’t leave me here! I will come back again. Just send me to bed without my supper and I’ll be good! Please don’t kill me!

None of them finds a path to my tongue. McFarland sighs, turns, and steps through the door.

It clunks shut and someone on the other side dogs the hatch.

Where did that phrase come from? Oh, yes, of course, it’s a naval term meaning to crank the door on a ship closed and sealed. It would have to be sealed, given the volume of lethal gas which will soon fill the small room.

I wonder for a moment what they will do with the gas after I—  
Best not to think about it.

The thick drapes outside the large window are drawn open as if introducing a stage play. That’s fitting, I suppose. This is my final starring role, one which hopefully will end happily in a swirl of primary colors and gelled hair.

I look to see if I can find any sympathetic faces. I don’t, of course. I see three television network news reporters, Judge Davis from my trial, my reluctant attorney, the governor of New Troy, perhaps a half-dozen newspaper reporters—

Clark Kent.

Clark Kent is seated in the front row, almost directly in my line of sight. I wonder for a moment how he arranged that, then dismiss the thought as unimportant. I glance around him to find his wife — the woman who should have been Mrs. Lex Luthor — but I don’t see her. Perhaps she couldn’t get credentials, perhaps the state wouldn’t allow more than one representative of the Daily Planet, or — and I flatter myself, of course — she couldn’t bear to see me die, to lose me forever.

Warden Castle is droning on about justice or some such drivel. Justice! Were there any real justice in this world, I would be ruling it. All the people, not just those of Metropolis, would have to look up to see me. As I boasted to Kent and the woman whom I still love on the night I met them, I deserve to be the highest—

Wait a moment.

On the night of his first appearance — the night he issued his challenge to me — Superman told me that if I wanted to see him

to look up. And as I think back on it now, he was all but throwing my own words back into my face. How could he know what I said —

No. That is impossible. There must be another explanation.

Of course. Lois must have told him. She had to have bragged on me to him during that flight from the EPRAD shuttle launch to the Daily Planet and told him what I said. He must have taken it personally, the over-muscled micro-brained alien.

I look at Kent, the model of mid-western blandness. His face usually seems to wear either a smile that hints that he knows a secret none of the rest of us know, or an expression of firm determination to accomplish something he deems important.

Except for now.

Right now, he looks almost predatory.

He must be anticipating my demise and my permanent absence from his wife’s life. He still fears that she will come to her senses, terminate her relationship with him, and return to my side where she belongs. And it is well that he does worry, for I have no doubt that, given sufficient time, Lois Lane would one day be Lois Lane Luthor. This is Clark Kent’s fear, his nemesis, his nightmare, and I deeply regret that it will end in a few moments.

So why is he staring at me with such intensity?

The speaker inside my chamber draws my attention. Castle has just informed the small group that I have no last words to share, as if I would grant them the satisfaction of hearing them. He also says that all legal appeals have been exhausted, and that despite multiple protests from anti-capital punishment groups, the execution will proceed as planned.

Then he turns to me and stares at me through the window. “May God have mercy on your soul, Alexander Luthor,” he intones.

There is no microphone on my side, so I cannot respond. A metal cover slides over the speaker, sealing it away from the gas. If only there were something like that on this chair!

I can see Pastor McFarland standing to one side of the triple row of seats, his head bowed and his lips moving. He must be praying for me. Whether he’s praying for my soul, for a quick and painless death, or for a miracle to save me, I cannot determine. Besides, the only miracle available to me now is Superman, who has refused to state his opinion on my fate. I recall his words from yesterday’s televised interview exactly.

“I have no comment on any legal proceedings concerning Lex Luthor. I will abide by and support whatever decision the court makes.”

The moderator wouldn’t let go of her subject. “But what if he’s acquitted or pardoned somehow, or his sentence commuted? Would you take some action at that point?”

“No, I would not. I am not a court of law. I am not a judge or a jury or a prosecutor. I’m just a friend here to help. If I possessed any additional information necessary for the trial, I would already have informed the court and its officers. The law must take its course with Lex Luthor without any interference from me.”

So. Despite my desperate situation, it appears that I cannot count on Superman’s help.

Warden Castle catches my attention as he treads heavily to one side of the room and nods to someone I can’t see. A hand reaches out from that area, just inside my restricted field of vision, and holds up three fingers, then two, then one—

I take the deepest breath I can. At the same moment, I hear something drop into a vat of liquid somewhere below me. Wisps of white smoke emanate from beneath the chair.

It’s starting.

I look over the faces of the witnesses. No one cries for me. No one seems to exult in my death, either, so that is at least some—

No. Kent looks grimly pleased.

Odd. I never realized how much the shape of his face resembles that of Superman. The expression also reminds me of

the caped hero. His eyes—

Are glowing.

They're glowing!

I blink as the gas begins to sting my own eyes, but I look at Kent once again and see that it wasn't an illusion. The man's eyes are glowing red. It's not a reflection or a trick of the light. They're red!

There is only one explanation. Clark Kent is Superman!

I shout my discovery to the room but they don't hear me. I take in a deep breath to shout louder but the gas is too thick and I begin to cough. My eyes are watering and all I can make out is Kent's red glowing eyes and I can't hold my head up and I think what cruel irony that I have learned my greatest enemy's secret so late in the game too late to use it and now he's won and I can't catch my breath and I can't think and I can't feel my tongue and Superman isn't coming to save me and I don't want to die please don't let—

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Clark waited with the rest of the witnesses as the doctor watched his monitor. After nearly five minutes, he sighed deeply and stood. "Warden Castle, the prisoner is no longer alive. There is no respiratory activity, no pulse, and no brain activity. The execution is complete."

Clark refused to smile.

Castle stepped in front of the chamber windows as an assistant drew the curtains. "That's everything, folks. We'll let everyone know about any funeral arrangements when they're made. And if no one claims the body, it will be buried along with the other unclaimed prisoners' bodies in the penitentiary cemetery." He pointed to the double doors at the back. "Please exit in an orderly fashion. Thank you for your courtesy while you were here with us."

Clark waited while the rest of the group filed out, then he turned to go. "Excuse me, Mr. Kent," said Castle, "but could I have a quick word with you? Off the record?"

Clark hesitated, then nodded. "What can I do for you, Warden?"

"This may seem like a — an indelicate question. And if I'm stepping over a line, please let me know."

This was unexpected. "Go ahead, please."

"I know that you had some — very personal dealings with our late guest."

"You mean Lex Luthor, crime boss extraordinaire, murderer, arsonist, extortionist, thief, corruptor of the innocent? That guest?"

"Er — yes. What I wanted to ask you is — well — was this a professional assignment or a personal visit?"

Clark frowned and tilted his head to one side. "I'm here because my editor assigned this story to me."

"That's all?"

"Yes. That's all."

Castle's gaze fixed on Clark's, and the reporter suddenly felt as if the warden had seen something he couldn't explain. But only Luthor could have seen Clark's eyes — that had been the first thing he'd checked when he entered the room. The glass was tinted and non-reflective; even the light from a flashbulb would have been drastically muted.

"Why do you ask, Warden?"

Castle rubbed his jaw and broke eye contact. "Because of the way Mr. Luthor was staring at you. I doubt that anyone else could tell, but I've seen over a dozen of these, and I know when a prisoner is looking at someone. He even tried to tell you something at the last minute." The warden looked up at Clark again. "Any idea what that something might have been?"

Clark's face smoothed out. "I'm sorry, no. If Luthor had a last-second epiphany, he waited just a little too long to share it."

"I see." Castle put out his hand to Clark. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Kent. I hope we have you back again soon to visit one or

more of our inmates with better prospects for survival."

Clark took the man's hand and shook it. "Thank you, Warden. I hope to take you up on that offer soon."

He turned and walked out of the room.

Clark Kent hated death with a passion. He would not — could not — feel pleasure at anyone's death, not even Lex Luthor's. It was contrary to every ethical fiber of his mind and body to be glad that a man was dead.

Still, the sun seemed to shine a bit more brightly today without the shadow of Lex Luthor being cast upon the people Clark had sworn to protect. They could go about their busy lives without fear of becoming another of Luthor's victims. It went without saying that the innocent would be safer now that the monster was gone.

And both he and Lois would sleep better tonight.

THE END