

# A Father's Kryptonite

## Anti-Kryptonite

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Rated: G

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Summary: During the events of "Home Is Where The Hurt Is," Jonathan thinks back on life with Clark and hopes for more years yet to come.

Disclaimer: Portions of dialogue, as well as plot points, are taken from "The Green, Green Glow of Home," written by Bryce Zabel, and from "Home Is Where The Hurt Is," written by William M. Akers and Eugenie Ross-Leming & Brad Buckner. No copyright infringement is intended.

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Souvenirs and mementos tastefully decorated Clark's apartment, tangible memories of the years he had spent searching the world for a place to belong. There was no rhyme or reason to them; a facsimile of a terracotta warrior — presently with a big red bow tied around its neck in the spirit of the season — was situated in a corner opposite the wall where a hand-woven rug from Australia hung over a few glass-blown figurines from Spain and a death-mask from Africa. The only thing that bound all the objects together was location and meaning.

Each item meant something to Clark.

Jonathan remembered the story Clark had told about finding a settlement of aborigines who had, upon discovering that he spoke their native tongue, accepted him into their lives and showed him how to weave the vibrant threads into tribal patterns. Clark had been forced to leave the friendly natives when a young boy began telling tales about how the American had floated him up and out of a well.

The terracotta warriors had fascinated Clark, and Jonathan felt a wistful smile shape his mouth as he remembered the excitement bubbling in Clark's eyes and the words spilling from his lips as he explained how he had been able to use his telescopic vision to see the individual strokes used by those who had fashioned the original statues. He had fled China when individuals in several towns had spoken enough about the miracles flowering through their region that a larger city's newspaper had run the story.

The death-mask had been a gift from a Nigerian princess who had urged Clark to flee before her people connected him to the "spirit" that had pulled several warriors from the destruction of an earthquake. The figurines had been acquired shortly before leaving a step ahead of an investigation into a string of foiled muggings and rapes. He had bought and shipped the books from England to Smallville because he had been forced to book a plane he had no intention of boarding simply to evade the scrutiny of a newspaper intent on uncovering the story behind alleged "guardian angel" sightings.

More odds and ends from Borneo, Bangkok, Bolivia, Saudi Arabia, and Italy adorned the shelves and walls all about Jonathan, and yet instead of connecting Clark to the world he had sworn to protect, they only served to further isolate him — proof that he could live in one place only briefly before his differences and his need to help endangered his anonymity.

Until, that was, Superman.

Superman had given Clark the chance to help as he felt morally compelled to do yet still retain the normal life he craved so much.

Jonathan frowned at the furnishings all around him, a bitter taste in his mouth.

Superman had also made his son a target for every villain in the world, a red and blue blur that might as well have been a bull's-eye.

"So, I guess this is what being sick feels like," Clark had said in an attempt to ease the fear of the three people who knew him best — who knew all of him, or rather, *both* of him. It hadn't worked.

"Sick," Jonathan muttered, his eyes following Martha as she made her thirteenth trip to the door to look for Clark's arrival. "Clark never gets sick."

"He'll be all right," Martha assured them both, her voice too loud in the quiet, empty apartment — empty because it was devoid of purpose without Clark to give meaning to the mementos and belongings and furnishings.

"Of course," Jonathan said uselessly. Then, because he couldn't quite help himself, he muttered, "How long does it take to deliver a tree to the Coates Orphanage, anyway?"

A small smile graced Martha's lips. "Superman could probably do it in three seconds flat if he needed to."

Jonathan smiled back, taking her hand in his. "But we both know Clark will take longer. He'll give the kids a chance to exclaim over their superhero."

"And he'll make a plea for the orphans' futures," Martha added proudly. "And if he hears any cries for help, he'll answer them, of course."

"Martha ... " Jonathan swallowed. "Martha, I don't think he's well enough to help anyone. I'm not saying that he won't try, but I've never seen him so weak, not even after ... "

"After the Kryptonite," Martha bravely finished for him.

Unable to face remembering the times when he had seen his indomitable son felled by the lethal stone, Jonathan turned away. "Well, maybe there's something on the news about him."

He picked up the remote and flicked the power button, but inwardly he was praying that Superman's name wouldn't even be mentioned. The last thing Clark needed was news of his sickness flashed across every television screen in the world, informing the criminals that it was safe for them to come out and play.

There was a brief report that Superman had made his annual appearance at the orphanage, and then the newscasters moved on to more exciting stories. A part of

Jonathan was relieved; the rest of him was consumed with worry for his son.

Though he continued to stare at the TV, he couldn't have said what else was shown. Martha paced and tidied and worried. She was filled with a nervous energy that Jonathan had grown familiar with over the years. Generally, his wife was vibrancy cloaked in gentleness and sharp wit; now, the cloak was slipping, as it did when her emotions got the best of her.

Not that his own emotions were much more controlled at this point, Jonathan admitted to himself as he stuck his hands in his back pockets to hide their trembling.

"Jonathan," Martha whispered, and he instantly turned to her. That note of weary longing was the cue he had been waiting for, the sign that it was now safe to pull her into his arms, to ground her restless flight with his solid embrace. He gave her no words — words had never been his forte — but he clasped her tightly to himself and gave comfort even as he partook of it.

"He'll be all right," he murmured into her hair, praying that the simple statement would become a fulfilled prophecy. "He's strong."

A scuffle outside the door made both the Kents freeze and turn their heads toward the noise in unconscious imitation of Clark's far-off listening pose.

"Jonathan! Martha! Help me!"

Martha was first to the door, but Jonathan was just behind her. He froze when he caught sight of Clark collapsed on the ground, Lois doing her best to support him, half-caught beneath his weight. With a gasp, Martha flew to Clark's side, her hand instantly going to his forehead, her eyes filled with tears.

"He made his speech and got out of sight, but then he collapsed," Lois hurriedly explained, her voice breaking with the tears she refused to let fall. "I got him into a cab and brought him here — don't worry, the driver thought he was a look-alike. I mean, what else was he supposed to think? Superman never gets sick. Anyway, I knew he wouldn't want anyone to see him, and I tried to get him inside, but he passed out, and now I can't get him to wake up or respond or look at me or —"

"Hush," Martha said soothingly, her hand on Lois's shoulder halting the brook that had so quickly sped past them. She said more, but Jonathan didn't listen to the reassuring words; he could only stare down at his son. What scared him the most was the fact that Clark was still dressed in the Superman Suit — if he had possessed even an iota of extra strength, Jonathan was sure Clark would have changed into his regular clothes. But he hadn't, and now he lay pale and sweating and unconscious just outside his apartment.

And, Jonathan asked himself, what would happen when they got him inside? What would they do? What *could* they do? None of them were doctors; none of them knew anything about Kryptonian physiology. How could they help him?

"Jonathan, help Lois get him inside," Martha directed. "I'll grab some cold water and washcloths —

we can't let him get as hot as he was earlier."

Between them, Jonathan and Lois managed to wrestle Clark up the front steps, though the door, down through the living room, and into his bedroom. Jonathan would have preferred to lower Clark more gently onto his bed, but this was one instance where that dense molecular structure was more a liability than a blessing.

"My boy," Jonathan couldn't resist murmuring, a vise gripping his heart as he looked down on the son he had once thought he would never have. But looking down at Clark like this only served to dredge up memories of another terrible night in a darkened workshop in Smallville, Kansas.

"I'll help you get the water," Lois volunteered, as full of nervous energy as Jonathan's wife, both of them imbued with the need to *do*.

Jonathan was only dimly aware that they left the room. Tenderly, he lifted Clark's legs onto the bed and arranged his son in as comfortable a position as he could manage.

He had, Jonathan realized suddenly, bought into the Superman myth Clark so decried. Somewhere along the way — maybe after seeing him emerge unscathed from falls out of his tree-house or painful misses with the sledgehammer or too long a time under the broken ice of their lake, or maybe after watching the news as his son raced into erupting volcanoes or held nuclear bombs as they exploded or tamed a tsunami by simple virtue of his own speed and ingenuity — Jonathan had started to believe that his son was just as invulnerable and unstoppable as the world believed him to be. He had forgotten that no one was completely invincible and that just as his son's tender heart could be broken, so could his body be weakened and hurt.

"I'm sorry, Dad." Clark's voice was a pale shadow of his usual strength, his eyes glazed even as he did his best to meet his father's gaze.

"For what, son?" Jonathan dropped a hand to rest on Clark's shoulder, careful to keep the pressure light lest it worsen his already-labored breathing.

Clark clearly struggled to get the words out. "Well, you guys get sick all the time yet still manage to keep going. I should be stronger."

"If your mother heard you say that, she'd probably smack you," Jonathan said, his smile just as faded as Clark's voice. "You have nothing at all to apologize for, son, and don't ever think you do. You'll be all right."

How many times had they all said something similar to that statement, Jonathan wondered, and why didn't he believe it yet?

Clark's lips tried to curve upward, but he couldn't seem to summon the energy needed to complete the smile. "I love you, Dad," he murmured before sliding into a light, troubled doze.

The vise around Jonathan's heart squeezed even tighter. That had sounded too much like a goodbye.

When Martha bustled back into the room, her hands filled with a bowl of ice-water and several washcloths and Lois just behind her, Jonathan numbly moved back out of their way.

“So, I guess this is what being sick feels like.” Clark’s words rang once more through Jonathan’s mind. He only wished they did not sound more foreboding with each recollection.

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21 years ago ...

Jonathan closed the bedroom door softly behind him; Martha had just gotten to sleep, and he didn’t want to risk waking her. The spoon clinked against the half-empty bowl in his hands, and he winced, only breathing out a sigh of relief when he didn’t hear any stirring from within the bedroom. With soft steps — or at least as soft as he could make them — he made his way downstairs to deposit the dishes in the sink. It had taken a lot of coaxing, but he had finally managed to get Martha to try the chicken soup — made by Mrs. Irig, thankfully, not him.

“Daddy?”

Jonathan whirled away from the sink, his heart pounding a rapid tempo against his chest. “Clark! You startled me. Is everything all right?” His tone turned from jovial to concerned as he got a good look at the dejected, wilting boy hovering on the threshold of the kitchen. “Come here, son.”

Tentatively, as if unsure of his welcome, the boy who had brought laughter and light and miracles back into Jonathan and Martha’s life eased his way into the kitchen. When Jonathan held out a welcoming hand, Clark let out a relieved sigh and collapsed into his father’s arms. Jonathan tucked him close, marveling once again at the feel of the child who called *him* Dad.

“What’s wrong, Clark?” he asked softly. He tried to cover his grunt as he picked the boy up and set him in his lap. Even as a baby, Clark had always weighed more than he should have, an oddity his loving parents found all too easy to overlook in favor of the love they held for him.

Clark fisted a hand in Jonathan’s shirt but kept his gaze fixed on his chest, as if he did not dare look into his eyes.

“Clark?” Jonathan prompted. Martha was so much better at these moments where intuitive understanding seemed to be a prerequisite, but Jonathan didn’t think Clark’s despair could wait. “You can tell me anything,” he added, a hint of uneasiness uncoiling in the pit of his stomach. An image of the ship, and the baby lying so tranquilly within it, flashed through Jonathan’s mind.

Finally, Clark lifted his head and granted Jonathan a glimpse of misted-brown eyes under ebony brows drawn down with some dismal emotion. “Dad, what’s wrong with Mom? Is she ... is she going to ...” The last of his question was uttered too softly for Jonathan to hear, but Clark looked up anxiously, awaiting the answer.

“You mother’s sick with the flu, son.” Jonathan frowned. “She’ll be better in a day or two. Until then, she just needs rest and a bit of extra care.”

Clark’s expression lit up with an inner brilliance that took Jonathan’s breath away and stirred that fierce protectiveness he hadn’t even known he possessed until those strange government men had come asking their

probing questions and looking suspiciously at the baby clutched protectively in Martha’s arms. “You mean ... she’s not going to die?”

“Die?” Jonathan repeated, startled by the mere notion. “Of course not. It’s just the flu.”

“But ... she barely ate anything — and she was crying in the bathroom this morning. I heard her.”

Jonathan felt that flicker of uneasiness stir once more from its wary slumber. Clark had been outside doing his chores when Martha had made her torturous trip to the bathroom, a *long* distance for him to have heard his mother’s discomfort. Unconsciously, Jonathan’s arms tightened around his son, holding him closer, shielding him from the world and his own uneasiness and whatever Clark’s strange past would make of his future.

“Everyone gets sick, Clark,” he explained awkwardly. “It’s just the way things are. But usually they get better and are back to normal in a couple days. Your mother generally gets the flu about once or twice a year, sometimes less. It’s not fun, but it’s not fatal either.”

“Why haven’t I ever gotten sick?” Clark looked up at Jonathan expectantly, awaiting the answer he thought his father always had. How could he know that this time his dad didn’t know what to say? How could Jonathan explain to this vulnerable boy that he didn’t understand why the baby who had fallen from the sky never showed any pain while teething, never caught a cough or a snuffle, never missed school on account of the flu — and that they might never know the reason?

“Because you’re special,” Jonathan finally said thickly, looking down at Clark and wondering how anyone could love someone so much. He didn’t care what happened to himself, or what the answers to their many subdued questions about Clark’s origins were, or how many more moments of uneasiness he would have concerning his son’s differences — he only knew that he would do anything and everything to keep Clark safe and happy.

“You’re special,” he repeated, “and I love you very, very much. Now, since your mom is sick and needs special care, what do you say you make her a nice card telling her how much you love her?”

Clark was instantly excited about the project, already slipping from Jonathan’s lap to retrieve his beloved crayons and pencils. “I’ll write her a really nice note,” he promised, that lock of hair stubbornly flopping over his forehead as it always did. “And I’ll draw her a picture. What do you think I should draw for her? Something that she loves more than anything else in the world!”

“You,” Jonathan said with a fond smile. “Draw her a picture of you — that’s what she loves most.”

His small hand patted Jonathan’s arm comfortingly. “I’ll draw us *both*, Dad, because she loves you too. And I’ll write and tell her how much we love her and are sorry that she’s hurting and that we hope she gets better soon.”

“She loves your notes.” Jonathan shook his head,

thinking of the stash Martha kept of every note Clark had ever written to her — and there had been a great many of them during the last four years. He still remembered the day Clark had walked into the kitchen and stunned his parents by announcing that he had learned to read since Martha had taught him to write the alphabet the day before. Jonathan knew he was a bit biased, but he thought Clark was incredibly intelligent and remarkably skilled, for an eight-year old child, at conveying his thoughts through the written word.

“Daddy?” Clark shyly looked up from his art supplies. “When I finish making the card, can I see Mom?”

Jonathan ruffled the boy's hair to hide the rush of warm tenderness engulfing him. “Of course, son. I think that will make her feel better all by itself.”

“Really?” Clark smiled his beautiful, uplifting smile. “So, even if I don't get sick, I can help when other people do?”

“Of course, Clark. You can always help.”

And when Clark finished his card and showed it to his father, Jonathan squelched his uneasiness at how striking the likenesses were and how fast the boy had drawn them, and he took Clark's hand and led him upstairs to pay Martha a visit.

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The air inside Clark's apartment was too still, weighted with fear, its silence unbroken by anything save the uncaring drone of the television. Martha was continually wringing out washcloths to set on Clark's brow in an attempt to bring his temperature down enough so that smoke didn't once more rise from his skin. She hadn't yet paused or hesitated in her self-appointed tasks, but Jonathan could see the terror that made her hands shake, and he marveled at the strength she possessed to keep her face fixed in an encouraging mask. He himself couldn't bring himself to move from the temporary paralysis that had taken hold of him and left him leaning against the wall.

“We have to do something.” Lois stood with the announcement, her body crackling with barely restrained impatience, her eyes dark with stress and fear.

“What *can* we do?” asked Martha — calmly, though Jonathan could see the beginnings of desperation eating away at her mask.

“I don't know. But there must be something we can do, someone we can call. I know!” Lois halted her pacing, her entire countenance changing from manic despair to startled realization. Jonathan watched her in fascination as he suddenly understood a little more of Clark's fond explanations of his fiancée's rapid-fire thought processes. “Dr. Klein,” she exclaimed. “I'll call Dr. Klein. No,” she contradicted herself, shaking her head violently as she resumed her pacing, “I can't call him. There are too many witnesses at S.T.A.R. Labs, too many ways for the information to get out. Besides, Dr. Klein is somewhat absentminded — I don't know how well he can keep a secret. But then ... who?” The last word was a frustrated, sad breath that fell from her lips and faded away almost before anyone could catch it.

When Clark stirred, Jonathan's breath caught in his throat. He waved the women to silence and bent over his son to hear the words he struggled so valiantly to shape. “I'll ... be all ... right. It's ... just a flu. Don't ... worry.”

Martha's expression threatened to crumple. “Just a flu?” she repeated in a strangled tone. She shot a glance at Jonathan, both of them remembering their shock when Clark had come into Lois's apartment dragging his feet, slumped into a chair, and then ... coughed. Clark never coughed. He never sneezed. And he most certainly never collapsed without being in the presence of a certain green stone that Jonathan hated with a passion.

“This isn't just a flu,” Martha said firmly, Jonathan's hand on her back lending her voice a steadiness it had lacked a moment ago. “It must be a Kryptonian virus ... but how would you have been exposed to it?”

Clark didn't answer, his eyes moving restlessly behind their lids, his hair slicked to his brow. It was so strange to see him sweat, so terrible to see him weak, so wrong to see him hurting and not be able to help. Jonathan's knees threatened to give out, but he reminded himself to be strong for them all.

Martha turned to Lois. “Were you two in contact with anyone lately who might have wanted to kill Superman — anyone who could have somehow gotten their hands on this virus? I mean, if there — “

But Lois wasn't listening; her attention was riveted on the TV Jonathan hadn't had the heart to turn off lest the silence shatter him. He looked to the screen, suddenly nervous about whatever had caught Lois's attention — what if someone *had* caught a glimpse of Superman's collapse? — but all he saw was what was obviously an infomercial.

“That's it,” Lois breathed. “He's very good at keeping secrets, trust me, and I know he can do it. He has to be able to.”

“What — “ Martha broke off when Sam Lane's image flashed onto the screen. He looked exactly as he had earlier when trying to convince Jonathan to invest in some ridiculous rubber lips.

“My father.” Lois spun to face the Kents, her entire being glowing with renewed hope. “He's worked on anything and everything imaginable, I know, but he's also a licensed physician. If anyone can help Clark, it will be him.”

Jonathan hated the necessity — wanted only to beg her to call whoever she thought could help his son — but he stepped forward with the habitual words of caution. “Lois, it's not that simple. No matter that the word means nothing to those of us who know him, Clark *is* an alien. His physiology is vastly different from our own. And if Sam does help him, he'll be here, monitoring him and ... studying ... him.” Jonathan had to swallow down that fierce protectiveness and terrible accompanying fear before he could continue. “None of us will be able to reveal who Superman is to us. We'll have to be very careful not to slip up. And we'll have to have an excuse for why Clark isn't here — and why we are.”

Somewhere in that speech, though he couldn't

pinpoint exactly where, Jonathan realized that he had transitioned from a warning *against* asking Sam's help to advice about how to handle him while he *was* helping Clark. Still, he couldn't bring himself to regret the switch.

For a moment, Lois looked between Martha and Jonathan before her eyes slid inexorably back to Clark. "I understand that, and I'm not saying it's going to be easy. But if there's even the slightest chance that we can save him ... " Instead of tears, her eyes were filled with a will of iron that refused to be bent or molded. "We have to take that chance. I know this has been your secret far longer than it has been mine, but ... I can't bear to lose him."

"Oh, honey, neither can we." Martha enveloped Lois in a hug that Jonathan joined by virtue of a hand on his wife's back. "Please, call your father and ask him to come."

As if she were the one who possessed superspeed, Lois dashed from the bedroom to make a dive for the phone. A moment later, her voice spilled mingled words of command and plea into the apartment, obliterating the still, silent air and replacing it with hope and a chance for life.

"It'll be all right, Jonathan." Martha slid a comforting hand up his shoulder. "Sam won't find out about Clark. He'll just think he's treating Superman."

"Who cares if he finds out?" Jonathan uttered hoarsely. "I just want our boy to be well."

His wife leaned her head against his broad chest, settling into his automatic embrace with the ease of long familiarity. She was careful to hide her face when she uttered her question, the words muffled: "He will be all right, won't he?"

"He will," Jonathan vowed, though he was immeasurably frightened by this sign of the depths of his wife's terror. "He's special, Martha — not because of where he's from or what he can do, but because he's our son. And he'll be okay. He will."

Locked in each other's arms, they stood vigil over their son and waited for Sam Lane to arrive with a miracle.

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17 years ago ...

The smooth wood fit the calluses on Jonathan's palms as he fashioned the material into fence posts he and Clark would start putting up in the south pasture when the weather warmed a bit. The barn was warm, but with enough bite to the air to remind him that outside its protection the wind was blowing snow from one end of the fields to the other. At least Martha had already married him so he didn't have to be out plowing the powdery stuff, he thought with an inward grin.

The door was pushed open with a gust of swirling snow, and Clark easily slipped through and scampered over to Jonathan's side. He wasn't wearing a coat — he never did without being prompted — yet he betrayed no sign that he was cold. His dark eyes were alight with that inner strength that so delighted Jonathan and Martha and ensured that he was never without friends at

school.

"What are you doing, Dad?" Clark curiously examined the fence posts — both those already formed and those waiting to be worked — his hands idly running over their lengths.

"We'll be replacing the fence over by Wayne's place. You finished the last of your homework?"

"Yeah." Clark picked up one of the posts and swung it like a bat, his eyes darting from darkened corner to hayloft to the stalls in the back, never settling for long in any one place. Jonathan said nothing, not even to mention that no twelve-year old boy should be able to so easily maneuver the heavy posts with one hand. Both he and Martha had felt it best to let Clark be himself; they didn't want him to think they were afraid of him or leery of his abilities. Still, it was becoming harder and harder to hide the oddities from the rest of Smallville. Jonathan was almost certain that Wayne, at least, knew there were curiosities about Clark, but so far he had been enough of a friend to keep his silence.

"So what are you doing out here?" Jonathan asked as he turned back to the wood. He could tell Clark wanted to talk to him about something, but, just as obviously, he had to work himself up to it. "Looking for extra work?"

"Sure, if you need help," Clark easily agreed. He was almost always cheerful, unfailingly optimistic, and eager to help others, but Jonathan and Martha had both noticed that in the last year or two he had grown less talkative, more thoughtful, and almost wary around others. He had spent the majority of the summer holed up in his tree-house, which he had, chillingly, named his Fortress of Solitude. Jonathan could still remember the look of pain on Martha's face when she had seen that name, formed by a child's hand on the sign hanging over the tree-house's entrance.

Jonathan remained quiet as he sawed the lengths of wood and bored holes through the centers for the barbed wire they would string through them. Clark helped him without a word, content to remain at his father's side; his hands blurred as he worked, and the holes were punched through almost effortlessly.

"Dad?"

Carefully, Jonathan continued working, though he stopped sawing so that he could match the quiet volume of Clark's voice. "Yeah, son?"

"Remember when you said I could talk to you about anything?"

"I've said it more than once, and I meant it every time." His blue eyes were fixed on the wood held in his work-worn hands, but all his attention was fixed on the boy at his side.

"I tried to talk to Mom, but when I mentioned changes, she said I had better talk to you." Clark frowned. "Why is that?"

Jonathan cleared his throat. "Could be any of a number of things, boy. What changes were *you* talking about?"

The post in Clark's hands crumpled in a shower of splinters.

Clark's expression shattered into a mask of terror.

Jonathan's heart stopped.

"Come here, Clark." Jonathan pulled his son's small, trembling form into his arms, held his tear-streaked face against his chest, and buried his own face in Clark's black hair, inhaling the scent of it. He had no words to give the boy, but he gave him his love and hoped it was enough to protect him from the entirety of the world outside their farm.

After a long moment, Clark pulled back enough to look up, tentatively, at his father. "You're not scared of me?"

"Scared of you?" Jonathan's brow creased. "And why should I be afraid of you, Clark? I know you; I love you. What is there to fear?"

Clark looked away. "Lots of things," he mumbled. At Jonathan's hand on his cheek, he looked up to meet his gaze. "Dad, you don't know what I can do. I can run from here to the school in a minute. I can lift the front end of the truck. Last week, I set a pile of hay on fire just by *looking* at it. And then, I blew on it, and it turned into ice! And today ... " His voice trembled, and he set his jaw. "Today, I looked at Mom, and I saw her bones! What's wrong with me? Why am I so different from everybody else?"

"You're adopted, that's why," Jonathan said matter-of-factly. "We told you that before, but we never told you how we found you."

Paling, Clark stumbled out of Jonathan's arms. "Am I ... I'm not ... what am I?"

A thread of steel laced Jonathan's next words. "You're my son, Clark Kent. That's the most important thing. Your mother and I couldn't have any children, but we wanted one more than anything else in the world. And then, you arrived, a gift from heaven. You fell from the sky in a tiny ship just in time for us to see you and take you as our own. I don't know where you're from, or why exactly you can do all these things, but I do know this: I love you, Clark, and nothing is going to change that. You have these abilities, yes — which, by the way, I'm glad you finally decided to tell me about — but who you are isn't changed by what you can do. Do you understand me?"

"But what if I hurt someone?" Clark whispered, his eyes once more fixed carefully away from Jonathan. "What if I *look* at someone and they burst into flame? What if I forget how strong I am and break someone's arm? What if I see something I'm not supposed to? What if I freeze someone to death trying to blow out candles or something? What if — "

"That's an awful lot of 'what-ifs,'" Jonathan said wryly, tugging his son once more into his embrace. "But why don't I ask you a question? Do you think I shouldn't use this saw just because it can hurt someone?"

"No," Clark replied grudgingly. "But, Dad, this is differ — "

"The reason I can use it," Jonathan interrupted, "is because I know how to control it and because I'm careful with it. These abilities of yours are gifts, Clark, tools, and you can use them to help — if you learn to

control them, and if you're careful. Now, why don't I get on a heavier coat, and we'll go to the north field and practice these abilities of yours. And we'll keep practicing until you can control them all the time."

"But what if I mess up?" Clark wrapped his arms around himself, and Jonathan knew it wasn't because of the cold. "What if I hurt you?"

"Clark, when you were still a baby, you bit my finger while I was feeding you. It hurt, but I didn't stop loving you."

"I ... " The boy hunched over himself, resisting when Jonathan tried to pull him back into his arms. "I can't believe you're not afraid of me. *I'm* afraid of me."

"That's why we need to practice." Jonathan paused, hating to threaten the fragile hope even now beginning to erase the residual terror in Clark's eyes. But he knew the words needed to be said; he knew he — and Martha — could never survive having their son taken from them by men like those who had come nosing around shortly after Clark's arrival. "But, Clark, some people will be afraid of you, because people are afraid of anything that's different. You need to be careful to only practice your powers where no one can see you. For now, only use them in the north field and maybe in your tree-house. If anyone else saw what you could do, they'd ... " Jonathan swallowed back his own fear. "They would take you away from us and ... I don't know ... dissect you like a frog or something. So, promise me you'll be careful?"

"I know, Dad," Clark agreed calmly. "I already decided that nobody else could know about it. I just want to be like everyone else, but if anyone knew what I could do, I don't think they'd see Clark when they look at me. And I want to be Clark."

Despite himself, a grin tugged at the corners of Jonathan's mouth. "Really? And why is that?"

For the first time, the boy willingly met Jonathan's eyes. "Because you and Mom love Clark. I would never do anything to change that."

"Good." Jonathan cleared his throat and straightened, one hand falling, seemingly absentmindedly, to ruffle Clark's hair. "Now, you'll need something to remind you to be careful with these abilities when you're with others. Any ideas?"

Clark brightened. "I've always wanted to wear glasses like you and Mom."

"Glasses?" A laugh shook Jonathan's broad frame. "When you can see a mouse moving from a pasture away? Well, no one would suspect you, that's for sure. Why don't I see what I can do?"

A small hand slipped into Jonathan's as they made their way out of the barn. "Thanks, Dad," he whispered shyly.

Jonathan couldn't get any words to emerge past the lump in his throat, but Clark's hearing was exceptional, and he heard them anyway.

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Sam Lane was, predictably, astonished to find that his daughter still had faith in him, astonished to realize that she wanted him to treat Superman, and astonished

that Superman was sick — and in that order. There seemed to be a delayed reaction between Lois's impassioned plea and his response, but finally, in a move so reminiscent of Clark that Martha let out a tiny gasp and Jonathan had to look away, Sam reached out and cupped his daughter's cheek in his palm — a silent promise that he would do all that he could.

Jonathan knew more than a bit about a father's desire to be something of which his children could be proud. He had seen Sam's over-the-top efforts to impress Lois — a surprise visit for Christmas, a tagalong android to vindicate the work she had splashed across the front page, the ridiculous statements or claims or excuses tumbling out of him no matter how he tried to stop them — and Jonathan had recognized them for what they were, something he wasn't sure anyone else had. Now, Sam realized that all he had to do to win his daughter's gratitude and pride was save a fallen superhero.

All he had to do was save Jonathan's son.

It was hard to stand by and allow a doctor — worse, a doctor with somewhat sketchy morals — to examine Clark, but it wasn't as if they had a lot of choice in the matter. Clark's breathing had grown more and more labored in even the half hour it had taken for Sam and Ellen to arrive. There was no telling how much more time he had left to live.

Martha was trying her best to be strong and to soothe Jonathan's fears about the doctor studying their son, but it was hard for her to pretend that Clark was Superman, a hero with whom she presumably only had a passing acquaintance. Jonathan did his best to be strong for her in return, but he was having almost as hard a time as she. He wanted to be right at Clark's side, a hand on his shoulder to reassure him he was not alone, a voice to lead him back from his frequent lapses into unconsciousness ... but that would have given away too much.

Lois did her best to reassure them both, but her own features were strained with the self-control required to keep her from irrevocably proving either that Superman was Clark or that she was cheating on her fiancé. She did not weep, but she grew quiet and uncertain, pale and tremulous.

They all remained silent, bravely refusing to pester Sam with questions that might only serve to distract him and slow the miracle they awaited with breathless anticipation. It was, unsurprisingly, Lois who lost the battle for patience first.

"Can you save him?" She uttered the question softly, but everyone in the apartment instantly fell even more silent than before. Jonathan put his arm around Martha, conscious of the fact that they had stood in just this manner when awaiting Doctor Harris's report on their ability to have children. It was not a comforting thought.

"Lois ... " Sam stood to put an arm around Lois's shoulders. "You were a little girl when you thought I could do miracles. Now you're grown up, and you know ... miracles come at a price."

"Yes." Jonathan had never before heard Lois speak

so softly ... or in such a lost, hollow tone.

As if recognizing that same fact, Sam straightened. "Now, there is one ... controversial ... treatment. The theory is to bring the host body to the point of death."

The rest of Sam's explanation was lost to the roaring in Jonathan's ears. For an instant, he was terribly afraid that he was having a heart attack, so painful was the vise gripping his heart. Martha was leaning against him, and he couldn't have said how they were both still upright.

Jonathan and Martha had stood by in Smallville and watched as Clark fought villain after villain, conquering them in battles that were shown across the world as news, though it had seemed more like the stuff of fiction. They had supported him when he had been without his powers after that first encounter with Kryptonite. But they had never seen him sick, never had to sit by and watch him suffer in the grips of an enemy no one could combat, and it was tearing them apart. Jonathan could feel the shards of fear and empathetic pain twisting in his stomach, could see the effects of the same in his wife and Lois, yet he knew that no matter how much they were suffering, Clark was enduring more. He was already weak from the ravages of the disease — how could they expose him to yet more agony? What if they couldn't bring him back from the point of death?

Lois stared at Clark for a long moment. "Are you asking me to make that decision for him?"

Jonathan opened his mouth, ready to squelch this idea before it could go any further, but he never got the chance to utter the revealing words.

"You don't have to." Clark's own voice was tortured, but still definitive. "The answer is yes."

Together, moving in sync, Jonathan and Martha sank to the couch, their hands clasped inseparably together. There was only one thing that could bring Clark's body to the point of death, only one element that was even more dangerous than this viral infection.

Kryptonite.

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2 years ago ...

At least the storms had all blown westward, Jonathan thought as he led Clark into the workshop where he had stowed the strange green rock. Worry for his friend, the strange occurrences on Wayne's land, and the glowing rock itself lent enough of a surreal air to the occasion; thunder and lightning would only have served to accent the dark undertones.

"Wayne Irig found a rock on his property last week," he explained quietly, knowing Clark would be able to hear the soft words. "He sent a sample of it over to Wichita for analysis. Then the feds showed up."

"It doesn't make any sense, Dad." Clark waved his hand for emphasis. "Why go to all this trouble for a rock?"

"Because the preliminary reports said it was some kind of meteorite." Jonathan ducked under a pair of hanging bicycles to retrieve the lead box, grateful when Clark pushed one aside to give him more room. "And Wayne — Wayne thought it might be worth money. He

gave it to me for safekeeping — those federal types were giving him such a hard time. I figure,” Jonathan said, setting the box down and pulling open the lid to expose the sickly green glow, “since he found it a few miles from where we found you, it was probably related.”

His eyes were captivated by the luminescent glow, his thoughts centered on Wayne's disappearance and the strange men camped on his land, so he didn't even notice Clark's sudden discomfort. Later, he would ask himself how he could have been so oblivious, but then, why *should* he have noticed it right away? Nothing had ever before adversely affected Clark; his son was invulnerable, impervious to harm, and unstoppable. What could a rock possibly do to Superman?

“Dad, I'm — “ The tension roughening Clark's voice caught Jonathan's attention. “I'm feeling kind of strange.”

“Strange” did not cover the look on Clark's face as he bent over double — “tortured,” perhaps, or maybe “agonized,” but not “strange.” No, “strange” was as mild a word for what Clark was feeling as Clark's façade was to Superman.

A few words passed Jonathan's lips — he couldn't have said what they were, for in the next instant, Clark collapsed to the ground, crashing into a stack of feed bags. All thought instantly fled, all reason submerged beneath panic.

Jonathan abandoned the stone. “Clark! What's happening? What's wrong, son?” He knelt beside Clark and rolled him over so he could see his face — it was much too pale and drawn with pain. “Clark? Clark?”

There was only terrible silence as the green glow of the meteorite cast sickly shadows over Clark's features and reflected eerily in the lenses of his glasses.

“Martha!” Jonathan shouted, a ragged edge to his voice. Clark didn't flinch as he so often did when a loud noise sounded in his superhearing. That, more than anything, scared Jonathan.

Gently, shakily, he stroked Clark's cheek with his hand. “Oh, my boy,” he murmured brokenly. “Oh, my boy.”

The next moments were some of the longest in Jonathan's life. When they had first found Clark — for months afterward, even — Jonathan had held a secret fear that the boy who had so miraculously and mysteriously come into their lives would just as mysteriously disappear. But that fear had faded, leached away by the cumulative months and years that had passed with their son still safely in their lives. Now, that fear returned with a vengeance.

Only when Martha came bustling into the workshop, her face draining of all color when she saw Clark on the floor, did Jonathan gather the strength to move. He stormed over to the lead box and slammed the lid shut. The effect was almost instantaneous.

Clark groaned as he regained consciousness and again when he tried to sit up.

“What happened? What's going on?” Martha was asking the questions on autopilot as her hands fluttered

over Clark.

“I did it,” Jonathan grated. “I opened this ... this box ... and he collapsed.”

“It's not your fault, Dad,” Clark assured him weakly. When he almost collapsed again, Jonathan abandoned his self-recriminations and moved to give him some support. “We couldn't have known that rock would hurt me.”

“Here, get him into the house,” Martha directed them assuredly. “Be careful, Clark. Don't over-exert yourself.”

Jonathan remained silent as he helped Clark to his feet. He didn't complain when most of Clark's weight bore down on his shoulders as they made their stumbling way into the kitchen. He deposited Clark into one of the chairs at the table and then moved to get some water. It was doubtful that water would help, but he didn't know what else to do. He felt as if his entire world was crumbling. What if Clark didn't get any better?

“Oh, Clark, honey, you're burning up,” Martha exclaimed.

“Don't get scared, Mom,” Clark advised when she stuck a thermometer into his mouth. “My body doesn't work like other people's.”

What an understatement, Jonathan thought. Clark's body worked so differently that he hadn't even had a word besides “strange” to describe the pain coursing through him.

“But how do you feel?” Jonathan asked over his shoulder to distract himself from the raw memory. “That's the important thing.”

“Better.” Clark shifted his features into a reassuring mask that Jonathan instantly saw through. His son always tried to help other people; it was what he did. “I think I feel ... better.”

His words were belied by the sudden shattering of the thermometer, so abrupt and startling that Martha screamed.

The solid pitcher made a thunk as Jonathan set it on the table, a sound too reminiscent of that made when Clark had crumpled to the cold ground. “What do you mean, you *think* you feel better?” Jonathan demanded. “Don't you know?”

“He's never been sick before, Jonathan,” Martha pointed out. “It's a new experience.”

The creaking of the stairs alerted them all to the fact that Lois was approaching. Clark's expression turned almost panicked, more afraid than he had been when reacting to the green stone. “She can't know anything about this,” he commanded desperately. Jonathan and Martha exchanged glances, well-used to concealing important things about their son.

Lois looked a bit nervous at facing the three Kents. “I, uh, I-I thought that I heard the fax. ‘Scuse me.”

As soon as Lois was out of sight, Jonathan turned his attention back to Clark. He almost wept when Clark tried and failed to lift the pitcher of water. Checking his immediate impulse to help, Jonathan looked away in an attempt to pretend he hadn't seen, but Clark was more

honest than that.

"I lifted a rocket into orbit before, and now I can't even lift *this*," he stated almost bitterly, sending another pang of guilt through Jonathan's heart.

"Don't worry about it," Martha said calmly. She easily lifted the pitcher and poured Clark a glass of water. "You'll bounce right back."

"I don't understand," Jonathan muttered. "How can a rock that's probably from the same planet as Clark make him sick?"

Martha sighed in frustration, eager to avoid any subject that harmed her son. "Because it's poison. That's all we need to know. And," she said, meeting Clark's eyes, "we're not going to let it near you again."

"Look at this!" Lois burst back into the room, papers clutched in her hands.

Jonathan didn't bother to listen to the rest of her exclamation; instead, he watched Clark. It didn't take an expert to see that Clark Kent was absolutely smitten with Lois Lane; Jonathan and Martha had already suspected as much from listening to their boy talk about his partner, but it had been even more apparent when watching the two reporters together. All day, Clark had followed Lois around, showing her everything he thought she might like, his body always angled slightly toward her as if he couldn't bear to miss anything she might say or do, his lips curving upward whenever he looked at her, which was often. When hearing of the feisty, award-winning reporter, Jonathan had felt only amused — and mildly relieved — that his son had finally found someone worth staying in one place for, but now he wondered if Lois really was worth it. Was she good enough for his son when she hadn't even paused long enough to notice that Clark was ill? Or did it not even matter to her?

Suddenly, as if she had heard Jonathan's thoughts, Lois paused. Then, without missing a beat, she reached out a hand to Clark's chin and tilted his head so she could get a better look at him. "Clark? You look *horrible*."

"It's ... " Clark's expression took on a distinct deer-in-the-headlights look — he had always been a terrible liar. "It's my allergies."

Lois frowned. "You never said anything about being allergic to anything."

"Uh, they always kick up when he's in the country," Martha chimed in.

"Real bad this time of year," Jonathan added, though the very idea of Clark allergic to anything was ludicrous. At least, it had been before he had opened that box and felled his son.

"Oh." Lois placed a comforting hand on Clark's shoulder. "Well, I tried to warn him about those amber waves of grain." She hesitated, clearly torn. "I ... better get right on this. You ... feel better."

Clark nodded and tried a smile; then he watched her walk away. Not until she was out of sight did he breathe a sigh of relief, a sigh echoed by both his parents. He glanced up at them, a real smile appearing like the sun peering from behind dark clouds. "I'll be fine," he

assured them both. "You're right — I'll bounce right back."

Whether he was correct or not, Jonathan wasn't certain, but he did know one thing: *he* might not bounce right back if he ever again had to watch his boy fall, weak and hurting, to the ground.

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Jonathan couldn't watch as the Kryptonite leeches the strength and vitality from Clark's body and soul. He couldn't watch as that green glow grew stronger, feeding on Clark, and his son grew paler and more still. He couldn't watch as Superman writhed and twisted in agony, small murmurs of pain leaking from his tightly clamped lips, Lois's hands on his all that kept him from curling into a tight ball. He couldn't watch as Lois sat vigil over her fiancé while he died, bit by bit, killed by his own friends and family as much as by the disease.

Instead, Jonathan sat on Clark's couch, and he looked around at all of Clark's belongings, and he smelled the scent of Clark, and he wished that Clark were there. He didn't want to be sitting by while Superman suffered — he wanted to be there for Clark Kent, his son.

"Daddy!"

Lois's shriek tore through the heavy shroud that wrapped the apartment in a haze and protected them from the non-stop sirens outside — the sirens Superman would have stopped in an instant if he could have.

Sam responded immediately, on his feet almost before the echoes of her cry had faded. Martha rushed toward the bedroom and stood on the threshold, her eyes deep shadows of terror. Ellen stepped up beside her and placed a tentative hand on her shoulder, sensing the other woman's turmoil even if she couldn't understand the full reason for it.

But Jonathan couldn't move. He didn't want to go into that room and find out that Clark was dead. He didn't want to have an image of a pale and too-still body burned into his memory, overshadowing all his better memories of his boy. He didn't want to face a reality without Clark in it.

There should be a word for parents who lost their children, he thought numbly. Children without parents were called "orphans"; wives who lost their spouses were "widows," and husbands "widowers." But what did you call a parent who had lost his son? "Bereaved" was the only word that came to Jonathan's mind, and yet it seemed too little to cover all that he felt.

Incomplete.

Abandoned.

Useless.

Broken.

Maybe it was better there wasn't a word for it — maybe no word could say all that he felt. Maybe it wasn't even fair to try.

"He's in a coma." Sam's words sounded loudly and clearly.

Despite his best efforts at remaining stoic and strong, Jonathan put his head in his hands. An instant later, he was on his feet and rushing toward the Kryptonite. "We

don't need this anymore, is that right?" he demanded.

Sam looked up from his examination of Clark, one hand lightly brushing Lois's shoulder as she visibly sought to pull herself together. "Yes, close it. His body is now too weak to support the virus, but we don't want him getting any worse."

With vindictive strength, Jonathan slammed the lead box closed, doing what he should have done immediately in that workshop in Kansas two years ago. A surge of bitter satisfaction flooded his being as he pushed the box out of the room. He knew lead protected Clark from the Kryptonite more effectively than distance, but he couldn't help feeling relieved when the guards from S.T.A.R. Labs arrived to return the stone to their vault.

For the next hour or so, Jonathan paced, back and forth, back and forth. The Christmas decorations Clark had put up for his parents' arrival now seemed garish and out of place. Clark had always loved the holiday season, Jonathan thought in despair. It made it that much worse that he now hovered so close to death while carolers sang their songs about eternal peace and life above.

Eventually, curled up next to Clark so that, Jonathan suspected, she could hear his heartbeat, Lois slept. Martha was not so lucky. Jonathan kept trying to get her to rest, to lay down, to take a breath, but she could not still herself. Her vibrancy had turned into manic desperation, and she was sick three or four times — not a disease, only stress and tension and fear.

Several times throughout the evening, Jonathan caught Sam staring speculatively at his daughter and the superhero the entire world knew she adored. As if fear for Clark's life was not enough, Jonathan thought grimly, he now had to worry about the Lanes figuring out Superman's true identity. And if there was even the slightest chance that Clark would survive to see morning, Jonathan knew that he had to protect Clark's secret identity for him, safeguarding that which at the moment he could not, defending his future.

He waited until Martha had dozed off — her complexion pale, her features cast in shadow — before he quietly made his way into the bedroom. Sam was asleep, his head propped precariously on a hand. Jonathan took a moment to examine Clark and the woman who slept in his arms. No matter the danger, it did the father's heart good to see how much Lois loved his boy. For so long, Clark had despaired of her ever loving him, and Jonathan secretly admitted that he had sometimes wondered in frustration why this reporter could not love his son — but now she did, and with such apparent devotion that Jonathan now had to hope she did not betray her love to her parents.

"Sam?" He put a hand to the doctor's shoulder, whispering so that he didn't disturb their children.

"Huh?" Sam looked up groggily. "Ah."

"May I?" Jonathan gestured to the seat beside him and sat when Sam indicated his permission. Once he had settled himself, however, he found that he couldn't look away from the couple lying before him. All the words

and excuses and explanations he had planned to misdirect or allay Sam's suspicions vanished from his mind, and so he said nothing. What could he have said? How could he lie to this man who might yet save Clark?

It was Sam who spoke first, perhaps as leery of silence as his daughter. "Jonathan, I want to thank you for being so good to my little girl. It's been tough for her to trust people, and I feel somewhat to blame for that. I was thrilled she found Clark," he added quickly, as if afraid Jonathan would take offense.

"He's a special son," Jonathan murmured. Only after the words were already uttered did he remember that he was supposed to be providing an explanation for Clark's prolonged absence and Lois's devotion to Superman, not saying things that could so easily confirm any suspicion Sam might have.

But how could he hold these words back? If these were — God forbid — Clark's last hours, could Jonathan really spend them lying — with more lies sure to follow when they had to explain Clark's permanent disappearance?

"He must be," Sam agreed easily with no sign that he had heard the confession implicit in Jonathan's statement. "Superman must be a special friend."

All Clark's life, Jonathan had taught him to be careful, to always fade into the background, to do what he could to blend in with everyone else. All his life, he had warned him about the dangers of being discovered and unmasked to the world. He hadn't stopped him from becoming Superman — well aware of just how badly Clark needed to help and just how hard it was growing for him to do nothing — but he had silently worried about the possible consequences of going public.

And yet, somewhere buried deep inside Jonathan, there was a part of him that wanted the world to know it was his son who was the hero. He wanted people to recognize that it wasn't some impersonal, alien demigod hovering over their heads and their lives who swooped in just long enough to make the rescue and then flew away unharmed and unaffected — it was a living, breathing, feeling man who admirably kept a demanding job and longed to be loved for who he was and hurt just as much as any of the victims he saved or lost. It was a small part of Jonathan, to be sure, but every once in a while, it made itself known, and this was one of those moments.

"Well, he and my boy have a lot in common," he observed neutrally. Superman was special to the world — Jonathan would never argue with that — but Clark was special in a much more personal way.

Before Sam could reply, Lois stirred and sat up. She gazed down at Clark for a moment, reassuring herself that he still lived, before she looked to the two other men. "Has there been any change?" she asked dimly.

Sam stood and moved to the bedside. "No, not yet. But you look more drained than I've ever seen you. Now, I want you to take a break — you go to your place for a while."

She was already shaking her head. "I can't leave. Jonathan, tell him — I can't."

Now that his attention had been drawn away from his son, Jonathan could tell that Sam was right: Lois could barely stand, and there was a hollowness to her eyes that was truly frightening in such an indomitable personality. Still, he knew from his years living with Martha that it would not be easy to convince Lois to leave.

“Lois,” he said kindly, “Martha’s feeling poorly. We’d both like it if you came with us. I think *Clark* would appreciate it, too,” he added.

When Lois hesitated, Sam pressed the advantage. “I promise I’ll call the minute there’s a change.”

The cab ride to Lois’s place was long and quiet. All three of them were too drained to say much, too worried to speak of inconsequential things, too afraid to dare speak of tomorrow. Jonathan steadied Martha when they exited the taxi and moved up the stairs into the apartment building. Lois remained upright by sheer strength of will, but any movements beyond that seemed to be made on autopilot.

“You two can have the bed,” she commented numbly as she locked the door behind them. “I know I wouldn’t sleep well anyway, and I can curl up on the couch.”

Martha frowned. “Are you sure, honey? We would hate to kick —”

“Please.” Lois paused, as if she had suddenly forgotten what she was about to say. “Please,” she said again. She turned and strode to the window, one hand fingering the curtain hanging over the glass. Jonathan wondered what she was seeing — and how many times Superman had flown in or out through that window, how many times he had carried Lois through it.

“Clark asked me to take care of you both,” Lois admitted softly, unable to look at them. Jonathan put an arm around Martha’s shoulders, silencing her with a look, stilling her with a touch, reassuring her with his presence. “And I promised him I would. But ... I don’t know if I can.” She finally turned to face them as she forced a smile that did nothing but emphasize her repressed tears. “I don’t know how to do this — I don’t even know if I can take care of myself, let alone anyone else.”

“Oh, honey, I’m sure Clark meant that we’d all help each other.” Martha stepped forward to take Lois into her arms. “He knows you’re strong, but no one can be strong *all* the time. And we’re here for you. You know that, don’t you?”

“I know.” Her smile was tremulous and obviously more for their benefit than hers. “It’s just ... I don’t know if you realize how much Clark has changed my life. Before him, my life was ... dark, and dull, and dim, and it was so lonely, so isolating. And then Clark came. And gradually, little bit by little bit, things became lighter, sharper, more vivid, and I wasn’t alone anymore. I can’t even say when it happened exactly or when I first noticed it; it just ... happened.”

She shook her head and moved once more to the window. “Do you know that every time I enter the newsroom, Clark is smiling at me? Before I knew that he could hear my heartbeat, I thought it was magical —

well, at first I thought it was disconcerting, then I found myself looking forward to it, and finally, I thought of it as magical. And then I found out how he could always know when I was on the elevator ... and it’s still magical. Because no matter how many times I’ve come into the newsroom since we’ve met, he *still* looks up to see me enter, and he *still* smiles.”

Lois looked at the Kents over her shoulder, the poignancy in her expression making Jonathan feel somewhat dizzy. “I don’t think I can go back to the way things were before Clark. I can’t go into that newsroom without knowing that he’ll be there, smiling at me. I can’t write stories without his name beside mine. I can’t ...” “The rest of her words dissolved into all the tears she hadn’t been able or willing to shed earlier.

Instantly, Martha was there, holding onto her and shedding a few of her own tears. Jonathan joined the hug, an arm around his wife and a hand on Lois’s shoulder. Martha was murmuring a stream of words that meant nothing in and of themselves but were comforting nonetheless.

“He’ll be all right,” Martha stated firmly when the stream ended, her strict, no-nonsense glare taking in both Jonathan and Lois. “There’s still a chance, and there’s always hope.”

Somewhat calmed, Lois smiled at her. “Taking a chance — that’s what Clark said he and I were all about.”

Jonathan nodded his agreement. “In a way, Lois, I think you’re the only thing he’s ever taken a chance on.” When both women frowned in confusion, he elaborated: “Clark is always so careful, so cautious about everything. Because of how vulnerable he sees us as being, he’s afraid of hurting anyone, afraid that he’ll be too late to save everyone. Because of his desire for a normal life where he can be accepted, he’s afraid of being rejected, afraid of being found out. And yet as soon as he came to Metropolis, he was done running, done, for the most part, hiding. He found a way to help and stay at the same time, and all because of you, Lois.”

“That’s right,” Martha agreed with a firm nod. “Every other time he came close to being discovered, he’d simply pick up and leave. But he couldn’t bear the thought of living without you, honey.”

“I don’t remember a specific moment when Clark decided that he would tell you or precisely when he told us he was going to tell you who he was.” Jonathan shook his head. “After the first several months, it just seemed to be a given. He’d slip it into conversation as casually as if it were already done. ‘When Lois knows, I’ll ... ‘ or ‘We’ll do this or that after I tell Lois.’”

With a rueful chuckle, Martha gently wiped away the tracks of tears on Lois’s cheeks. “He did take a chance on you, Lois, and I, for one, am very glad that he did. I don’t think he could have chosen a better woman.”

“He will be all right,” Lois said slowly, as if only now allowing herself to believe it. With a single finger, she wiped away a last recalcitrant tear. “You’re right. If anyone can pull through this, it’s Clark.” She met Jonathan’s gaze. “He’s strong where and when it

counts.”

“That he is,” he hoarsely replied. “But we all need some rest.”

“You and Martha take the bed,” Lois commanded, the fire back in her eyes — not as strong as usual, but stronger than it had been since Clark had slipped into a coma. “I’ll be right out here if you need anything.”

As he walked toward the bedroom, Jonathan glanced over his shoulder. He saw Lois folding herself into a chair near the window and once more gazing out over the city. She was looking, he realized abruptly, in the direction of Clark’s apartment. And for some reason he couldn’t explain, Jonathan felt immeasurably cheered, as if Lois’s determination alone could bring Clark back from the verge of death.

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11 months ago ...

Flying with Clark was an experience Jonathan always found somewhat disconcerting. He had known for most of his life that he was a farmer, bound to the earth, so in many ways, it was almost ironic that he had become the father of the only man on Earth who flew. Jonathan couldn’t deny that it was exhilarating to feel his feet leave the ground and the wind cradle his body from below even as his son’s strong arms kept him secured to his body above, but he also knew that if it were anyone other than Clark holding him, he would have been too frightened to enjoy the experience.

“You doing okay, Dad?” Clark asked, always careful with either of his parents when he flew with them.

“Fine,” he answered shortly. The ground was very far beneath him, and he had a great view of it — which didn’t mean that he was nervous, Jonathan assured himself. It just meant he was prudently cautious.

Clark tightened his arms around Jonathan, more to reassure his father than anything else. “We’ll land at my place and then go from there. I don’t want anyone to catch sight of you with Superman.”

As soon as they had landed on Clark’s patio and entered his apartment, Jonathan straightened his clothing and did his best to remind himself that flying was almost commonplace in his life, certainly much more so for him than anyone else.

“So how far away is this jewelry shop?” he asked, quite proud of how steady his voice sounded.

“Not too far away; it’s just a couple blocks from the Daily Planet.” Having spun into his regular clothes, Clark shoved his hands into his pockets. “You’ll have to tell me what you think of it, Dad. Maybe I should go someplace nicer, but she did say she liked them a lot. What’s more, I could tell she actually meant it, which isn’t always a given with Lois.”

“Well, son, I just bought your mother’s at a little place in Wichita, so I might not be the best judge for something like this.”

“I know, but Mom said she loves the one you bought for her, and I want Lois to love hers in the same way.”

“Clark, if she loves you, she’ll love whatever one you get for her. It’s not about what it looks like; it’s about who gives it to her.”

Clark paused and then turned to pace a few steps.

“Well, I’m not even ready to give it to her yet. I mean, I am, but I don’t think she’s ready for it.”

Jonathan frowned in confusion. “I thought you said she told you she would do anything for you.”

“No, she told *Superman* that there wasn’t anything she wouldn’t do for *Clark*. And that’s ... “ A grin emerged to overtake Clark’s face, and he all but floated off the floor. “That’s pretty amazing. I mean, the last I knew she only loved me like a brother. Of course, she did take it harder than I thought she would when Clark died. And when Superman stayed at her place while I was blind, she didn’t fawn over him like she used to — *and* she was pretty concerned about where Clark was. Well, actually, she was kind of mad at me, but if Jimmy hadn’t spread that rumor about Mayson’s cabin, she *would* have been concerned about me. And — “

“Son,” Jonathan shook his head with a chuckle, “has anyone ever told you that your life is very confusing? How *do* you keep it all straight?”

“I don’t know.” He fiddled with his glasses, a nervous habit he had developed whenever he felt that anyone looked at him too closely or hinted at his secret. “It’s either another superpower or a survival trait.”

A wave of tenderness overtook Jonathan, and he stepped forward to place a hand on his son’s shoulder. “Well, where is this shop?”

He had heard a great deal about the distant politeness of big cities and how no one ever knew each other, but it didn’t surprise him in the least when Clark greeted quite a few neighbors, regular vendors, and habitual walkers by name. That was the sort of person Clark was, and no matter that he could never allow anyone too close, he had always shown himself to be friendly. Never having had a moment where he didn’t feel proud that Clark was his son, Jonathan was more than happy to be introduced to each of Clark’s acquaintances and to receive their compliments on his boy.

“Here’s the shop, Dad.” By the intent look on his face, Clark had already forgotten about the others; he was totally focused on his task just as he had been completely focused on winning Lois’s heart for the last two years. “We had been talking about marriage outside — not exactly favorably, mind you — and then she was looking at this counter and said they were beautiful. She mentioned the cameos, but she was playing with her left ring-finger, and I could tell she was looking at the engagement rings. I distracted her because I didn’t want her to know I noticed. What do you think of them?”

Jonathan pretended to look over the display case full of rings as he thought through his answer. In truth, he wasn’t entirely certain why Clark had chosen now to pick out the ring — it wasn’t as if he and Lois were even dating. On the other hand, Clark had been in love with Lois for a very long time, and it certainly seemed that Lois liked his son a great deal more now than she had to begin with — but did she *love* him?

“Ah, Mr. Kent, it is good to see you again.” A dark-skinned man emerged from the back of the small shop with a smile on his lips and a slight accent edging his

words.

“Mr. Kent, huh?” Jonathan was quite proud of how well he hid his amused grin. “You must have a good memory to remember Clark. How long has it been since that Prankster was put away, Clark? Several months, wasn't it?”

Clark shifted uncomfortably, a blush staining his cheeks when the owner said: “Oh, Mr. Kent visits frequently, and he always looks over the same merchandise. I keep telling him there is more to my store than the engagement rings, but I have not yet convinced him, I think.”

“I've just been by a couple times,” Clark corrected hastily. “Jim, this is my dad, Jonathan Kent.”

“Ah, so you have finally decided on a ring?”

Taking pity on his son's discomfiture, Jonathan shook his head. “We just want to look a bit longer, if you don't mind.”

“Of course. I understand how important this decision is. Just call if you need me.”

“Thanks.” Clark kept his eyes fixed on the display cases, avoiding eye-contact with his father.

“They all look pretty to me,” Jonathan said neutrally. He had hardly known how to pick out Martha's engagement ring; he wasn't certain why Clark had wanted *him* here and not Martha.

“I *have* come by pretty frequently,” Clark admitted in a rush, as if he hadn't heard Jonathan's statement. He finally looked up to meet Jonathan's gaze, revealing his expression of heartfelt longing. “It's just ... Dad, after that fiasco with Luthor, I didn't think I'd ever have a chance. I thought she would never love me outside of the Suit. But lately, every day it's as if she lets me see a little bit more of her. I love her so much, and I just ... I can't help hoping even though I've told myself a thousand times that she already said she didn't love me.”

“Now, she's never said that, son,” Jonathan interrupted. “You know your mom thinks she loved you even while she was engaged to that monster. She says that Lois *must* have loved you since she seemed more worried about you attending the wedding than the wedding itself.”

“I know, Dad, but ...” Clark shoved his hands into his pockets and looked back at the rings, as if his eyes were magically drawn to them. “What if she can't love me the way I want her to? What if she never does? How long am I supposed to wait? When does it go from patiently waiting to ... delusional? And what if she *never* loves me?”

Horror flashed through Jonathan, but he knew he had to handle this very carefully. He liked Lois, had noticed some of her similarities to Martha, and had cautiously looked forward to calling her daughter, but he didn't know her very well. He couldn't make promises on her behalf to Clark — and he certainly didn't know the answers to his son's questions. But there was no way he was going to ever let Clark think he wasn't worthy of being loved.

“Clark, what isn't to love?” he asked quietly.

“You're there for her when she needs you, you protect her, you respect her for who she is, and you —”

“I've made mistakes, Dad.” Clark shook his head wearily. “I lie to her all the time. I —”

“Son, when it comes down to it, you do the right thing.” Jonathan took Clark's shoulder and made him face him. “Of course you make mistakes — you're not infallible — but you would never knowingly hurt anyone, least of all Lois.”

“But I can't make a mistake!” Clark cried. “I can't mess this up, Dad! I can't ... I can't do that again.” He paused, swallowed, and then asked in a very quiet voice: “How did you know you were the right one for Mom? How did you know she would be better off with you than anyone else?”

“I loved her, and I realized she loved me. I knew that as long as we both loved each other enough to put the other's needs ahead of our own, we were the best thing for each other. And, Clark, you've been putting Lois's needs and wants ahead of your own for a long time. Does she do the same for you?”

“Sometimes,” he whispered. “A lot, lately.”

“Then, Clark, which of these rings do you think Lois would like?”

Clark brightened. “You really think it would be all right to buy one?”

“I think if you don't, you'll just keep wasting time coming here to stare at them.”

“Well ...” Almost fearfully, Clark drifted closer to the display case to point at an engagement and wedding ring, both silver, the former boasting a small, star-bright diamond. “I think she'd like that one. And I think that if she wore it, it would be beautiful. It's not enough to dominate her or steal attention, but it would complement her perfectly.”

Jonathan put his hand on Clark's back. “Then that's the one. Don't let it get away.”

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Stretching out on the bed with Martha curled up near his head, Jonathan realized just how tired he was. It had been a long day, not just in hours but in the emotional turmoil stirred to life within them, and it wasn't over yet. How could he lie here so comfortably when Clark was wracked with pain brought on in part by Jonathan himself — by his complicity, if not by an actual deed?

“What if he doesn't get better?” He voiced the question so quietly it was almost inaudible. It was a matter that needed to be addressed — perhaps — but he said it more to hear the determination and faith in Martha's vehement denial.

“He will, Jonathan! He'll be fine.”

Inexplicably reassured, Jonathan felt himself relax. “Good,” he murmured softly.

“I wish this were all over,” Martha confessed almost as softly. “I don't know how other parents do this — I can't bear to see him hurting.”

“You've done everything you can to help him, Martha; I think that's what all parents do. I just wish I had done better myself.”

“What?” Martha drew back to study his face. “What

would make you say that, Jonathan?”

“I told Lois that Clark was cautious because of his fear — well, I’m the one who made him afraid. I spent so much time warning him to be careful, telling him not to let other people know ... Does he know how much I love him? Does he think that I was ashamed of him? I didn’t want him to be Superman — does he think I’m not proud of him? He apologized to me, Martha — he *apologized* for not being stronger. Have I made him feel like he isn’t enough?”

“That’s ridiculous,” Martha pronounced with that certainty she always possessed, that assurance that the world was ordered in the way it should be. It was the quality that had first attracted Jonathan to her. “Who spent hours in the cold snow and the hot sun alike helping him learn how to control his powers? Who assured him that it was the man under the Suit — the man, not the powers — that we loved? Who did his best to reassure him the first time he lost his powers due to the Kryptonite? Who is there for him every time he needs him, allowing him to talk about his desires for a family and his fears about the kind of man he is? Clark knows you love him, Jonathan, and he depends on that love so much that I know he doesn’t doubt it. Clark didn’t learn how to be a superhero by watching television or reading books, you know; he learned from the example that has been in his life for as long as he can remember.”

Words escaped him, and Jonathan turned his head into Martha’s hair to hide the blatant emotion on his face. “I love you,” he whispered.

She willingly clung to him. “And I love you, Jonathan. We’ll get through this.”

“You know,” he whispered, “I see Clark leaning on Lois, depending on her to give him the determination to continue on, the fire to right the wrongs of the world — he looked for a woman with the same strengths you possess. I’m glad he can depend on her the same way I depend on you.”

“Oh, Jonathan.” Martha kissed him lightly, and they held each other a moment more before settling in to snatch what few moments of rest they could.

The ringing of a phone sliced through the tense tranquility that always occurred in those restless hours between divergent storm-fronts. Jonathan sat up, instantly awake, and grabbed the phone. “Hello?” he answered, doing his best to keep from hoping too much. “Yeah, Sam?”

A withdrawn breath and a hand on his arm made him start to look back to Martha, but the movement was halted by Sam’s next words.

“He what?” Jonathan demanded, certain he had heard wrong. But he hadn’t.

In one instant, with two words, the world was righted. Everything was returned to normal; the catastrophe was averted; the sun began to once more shine. It was as if, in that instant, Jonathan suddenly remembered how to breathe again.

He turned to grin at Martha, showing her the depths of his relief and joy and seeing it reflected in her face as

the tension completely drained from her body. “Yes!” he exclaimed even as he moved to hang up the phone.

“Lois!” he called, eager to share his newfound optimism and exuberance with everyone else, eager to banish the terror from Lois as it had been banished from him and his wife.

Lois was already moving toward them, their paths converging in the kitchen. “I know,” she said, her eyes alight with more life than they had held since she had called them for help. “I know — he’s awake!”

Jonathan paused mid-step. “How did you know?”

“I’m going over there!” Lois pronounced, whirling to find her coat.

“We’re right behind you!” Martha already had her coat halfway on, but she paused to put a mug of cold coffee into the microwave. “Oh, oh, you’re half-asleep — take some coffee.”

“Okay, thanks.” Lois’s words were only half-hearted; she probably hadn’t even really heard what Martha had said. The realization that Clark had woken from his coma and that he was improving seemed to suddenly sink into Lois’s mind, and a breathtaking smile erased the fear and exhaustion from her features. “Oh. He’s going to be all right. He’s going to be all right!”

“We both know it.” Martha accepted her hug with her own beautiful smile, and Jonathan basked in the warmth from both, feeling himself grow strong and content as a result.

Lois was already gone again, flitting from the embrace to grab her shoes.

“Don’t forget your coffee!” Martha called out, ready to start mothering everyone else again now that it seemed Clark was on the mend. She turned and opened the microwave to scoop up the cup with both hands. Her smile hadn’t yet disappeared, and it didn’t — until a noxious scream was emitted from the microwave to crawl inside their minds and rip them to shreds.

Accompanied by the sound of shattering glass and the comforting scent of coffee, Jonathan felt his body begin to fall. He was helpless to stop it, helpless to keep himself upright; it was as if all cohesion — all balance — had been obliterated before the path of the whining shriek carving its way through his head to scrape the confines of his being.

As abruptly as it had begun, the agonizing sound was gone.

Jonathan lifted his head — dimly aware that he had regained the ability to do so — and looked around him. Only gradually did he realize that a breeze had dispersed the smell of coffee, two windows were now splinters of wood and glass, and the microwave was gone. He hadn’t even managed to take a full breath or regain his feet when a blur of familiar colors swooped in through one of the demolished windows and landed in the living room.

For a moment, Jonathan feared he was dreaming, or perhaps dead, but Sam’s words echoed once more through his mind: “He’s awake.”

He wanted to say Clark’s name, but his mouth had dried and his throat had closed up, making speech

impossible. But who needed speech? It wasn't enough, not nearly enough compared to the feel of his son's strong arms around him and the sound of his healthy breathing and the sight of his silvery-brown eyes filled with their usual vitality and concern.

"Are you all right?" Clark managed a quick glance at his parents, but his attention was mostly on Lois. Not that Jonathan was inclined to be picky.

"Are *you* all right?" Lois demanded, pulling herself upright only incidentally as she threw herself into his welcoming embrace. "Oh, we thought we were going to lose you!"

Ordinarily, Jonathan would have allowed them a moment, but he had almost lost his son, and all his patience had been exhausted in the hours watching the Kryptonite fight for dominance over Superman. Without a second thought, he joined Clark and Lois's hug, putting his arm around Clark and trying to convince himself that it was real — that Superman had once more miraculously emerged unscathed against all odds.

"Oh, boy, you had us worried," he managed to say, caught between jubilation and residual worry.

"We were *terrified!*" Martha exclaimed as she, too, reacquainted herself with the feel of her son's embrace.

Clark hugged both his parents, but he kept his hand in Lois's, and his first words were directed to her. "Your dad's theory was right, Lois; he saved my life."

Jonathan smiled and shook his head. Leave it to Clark to be more interested in repairing Lois's relationship with her father than relief that he had survived.

"And you saved ours," Lois said softly with a glance to the Kents.

Clark smiled self-consciously, and Jonathan's breath caught in his throat at the sight of it.

His son was smiling.

It didn't matter that Sam's android had recorded the voice of the man who had implanted the lethal device in the microwave; or that Superman immediately left to arrest the assassin; or that Lois followed him, both of them eager to stop the villains and publish the story, neither one willing to slow down and rest after the traumatic event that had almost destroyed their lives. What mattered was that Clark was alive, and he was well, and he was smiling. What mattered was that when their adventure was over, Clark returned to the apartment with Lois at his side, and he smiled again at his parents.

And somehow, some way, strangely, miraculously, when Clark hugged Jonathan, all the pain and the fear and the worry of the last twenty-four hours were gone, the scars healed. And Jonathan was no longer broken, but whole once again.

THE END