

Alone

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Summary: Clark has always taken solace in that space between Earth and the stars, especially during the hardest times of his life. A collection of stolen moments in that perfect isolation.

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Disclaimer: I own nothing. I make nothing. All characters, plot points, and recognizable dialogue belong to DC comics, Warner Bros., December 3rd Productions and anyone else with a stake in the Superman franchise. Extra special thanks and hugs to my amazing beta, Anti-K. You are the best, hun!

Alone.
By myself.
Completely on my own.
Silence.
Blessed silence.

This is truly a rare moment. Everything is quiet and still. No noises assault my sensitive ears. I can't hear the conversations of my neighbors, clear as day though they live several miles down the road. My ears are deaf to the radio transmissions of cars as they drive by the house. No sounds of screams coming from the Smallville hospital, as I sometimes hear on my trips into town. Not a single moo or neigh or cluck from the neighboring farmsteads. Zero coughs and sneezes coming from the small elementary school while I sit, a good mile away in my senior calculus class in Smallville High.

I am wrapped in a world without sound — the perfect vacuum that space provides.

Space.
Endless space.
Emptiness.

Only, it's not really empty, is it? Everywhere I look, the lights from far-flung stars catch my eyes. Whole galaxies spread out as far as my impressive telescopic vision can see. Planets, gleaming back the light of the bright yellow sun, are in that mix too.

Planets which, for all I truly know, may contain life. Just like Earth. Just like whatever place it was that gave birth to me.

I know now — and have for a while, I think — that it is impossible that I was born of an Earth man and woman. There's simply no way. I'm too different. Too powerful. Too freakish.

I can see and hear what I should not be able to.

I can set fires with my eyes.

My breath can chill just about anything.

My muscles are able to lift things that are many, many times my own weight.

My skin is impervious to cuts, scrapes, bruises, burns, and punctures.

I'm faster than any car, truck, train, or plane.

I can fly.

To believe — or try to believe — that I am some kind of genetically altered laboratory experiment is not a possibility. If I was, I'm sure America would be a land which would crank out super soldiers by the hour in order to keep the safety and security of our land. War would no longer be a fear. No, my flesh and blood, despite their striking similarity to everyone else on Earth, cannot have been spawned on this planet.

Alien.

If I'm not of Earth, that makes me an alien. Oh, I lack the green skin and the antennae that most people would automatically associate with that word, but I'm almost certain that I'm an alien, even if I don't know what kind I am. Martian? Plutonian? Perhaps where I'm from isn't even in the Milky Way galaxy. Maybe I'm from some unknown space rock that I'll never come to know even the name of.

Does it matter?

The question is one that's tumbled around in my mind for a while now, ever since I was ten years old and discovering just how fast I was. What difference does it make if I'm from Earth or some planet from Alpha Centauri? I am who I am. Knowing my roots wouldn't change anything. And who I am...I'm still trying to figure that out.

Maybe it's the fact that I'm only just eighteen, and no eighteen year old knows exactly who they are just yet. Maybe it's because I am an eighteen-year-old alien freak with unfathomable powers that makes me uncertain as to the person I'll be for the rest of my life. Oh, I know certain things — values instilled in me by my parents since the day I unexpectedly crashed into their lives. I know I'll never use my extraordinary abilities to hurt people or to cheat my way to the top. And I know that I want to pursue journalism in college and make my living as a reporter, righting whatever wrongs I can.

But...what else?

Is that all there is to me? A bespectacled young man writing for a newspaper? One who hides his true abilities, and, instead, puts on a daily act where being mediocre is the best he can aim for? These gifts I have...or this curse of being so different...I feel like I carry this burden for a reason. As though I'm meant to be something more than I am. Someone who isn't so boring and vanilla and utterly forgettable.

Forgettable.

I've never really thought of myself this way. But, really, who would notice me, of all people, in a crowded room? Lana sure forgot about me fast. We broke up and a week later, she was dating two other guys simultaneously. We still don't talk, even though it's been a couple of months. But, if I'm forgettable...isn't that what I've always strived to be? The unnoticed, unremarkable man who blends in perfectly with those around him. The one who doesn't stick out in any way, shape, or form.

Mediocrity. My best form of camouflage.

I like the quiet here, up amongst the stars. I like the solitude it gives me, so that I can try to figure out answers to questions I've always been afraid to ask myself.

Alone.

Free to be who I am, without shame or fear of my powers or my alien self. Free to loosen the tight restraint I have to constantly keep on my powers, lest I hurt or kill someone. Severed from the rest of humanity in one of the most extreme, physical ways that I can think of. Alone here, I feel as isolated as I do from the rest of the world even as I walk amid my peers on the streets of my hometown.

Blissful silence.

Aside from my turbulent thoughts, there is no sound out beyond my body. Just an achingly eerie wall of silence. With nothing else for my ears to pick up on, I can hear the whooshing of my blood as it pumps through my heart and shoots through my veins. I can hear my heart pounding away. I can hear the gurgling noises as my stomach digests my dinner.

It would drive me insane if my mind wasn't already spinning at a million miles a minute.

And my only true hope is that I don't remain alone for the rest of my life.

Alone.

Just as isolated here in the vastness of space as I am when my feet are on the ground. Just as lonely here as I am even while standing in the midst of some of the busiest cities on the planet. Just as detached from the world as I am while I drift from country to country, searching for something I'm starting to think might not exist. At least, not for me.

Home.

Not the farmlands of my youth. Not the fields where I practiced each of my terrifying new powers each time one made an appearance. Not the four walls of the house where my parents raised me from a foundling child into the man that I am now. Not the small town where I grew up, knowing everyone by name, and having them know who I was in return.

I need...something more.

Something that I can't yet verbalize.

A sense of belonging — of knowing on a soul-deep level that I am finally where I'm meant to be.

I've lost count of how many places I've been — everywhere from major cities to the most obscure little villages — all flung far and wide across the globe. I guess I *could* bring them all to mind, if I wanted to. But the truth is, I wish I could *forget*. Not all of the amazing sights I've seen and interesting people that I've met. But I wish I could shake off the memories of how alone I felt in each place — each time more soul-crushing than the last.

Homesick.

That's what I am.

Is it possible to be homesick for a place you've never been? A place that might not even truly exist at all?

I'm not looking for perfection. I'm not expecting some grand utopia to materialize before me. I just want to — for once — feel some kind of connection to a place. To know that I would be sad if I ever needed to leave it. To find just one compelling reason to stay put, shake the travel dust from my shoes, and build a life.

Alone.

Here above the swirl of clouds against a green-and-blue planet, I am alone.

It's good to finally be on my own, even if only for a short time. So much has happened lately that I almost feel like my head is actually spinning.

Superman.

The whole world now knows that there is a super-powered being who lives amongst them. And, to my lasting surprise, the world has embraced him, though they have every right to be terrified of the awesome powers he wields with such ease. The powers he could use to easily subjugate the world, if he so chose. The powers the world has seen and has immediately known he would never use to hurt them.

For the world's acceptance, I am eternally grateful. I'm not sure I could have withstood worldwide rejection — looks of fear and loathing each time Superman attempts to make a rescue. From the time when my powers really began to manifest — when I knew that I was more than just a really fast, really strong pre-teenager — I've felt compelled to use them to aid people. To help when I can. Until now — until the birth of Superman — I've always been too afraid to do more than the bare minimum, using my abilities only when I'm certain no one will notice.

Lois.

I owe her a debt of gratitude, for being the muse who inspired the garishly-clad superhero. I'm not sure she'll ever know just how much I needed that mental push to come up with Superman.

And yet, I've always feared this place in my life, where I am completely exposed to the world at large. To have everyone know of the abilities I have. To reveal myself as anything but a common, ordinary, maybe even boring, and completely unremarkable man. True, I've separated the man and the cartoon-character hero enough to protect my true identity. And if Lois

can't tell that Clark and Superman are one and the same, I know the rest of the world doesn't stand a chance at uncovering the truth.

Still, the world may cheer whenever Superman appears, even in the worst disasters, but somehow, those cheers make me feel even more alone, more isolated from the world, than ever before. Because they aren't cheering for — aren't loving and accepting — anything real. Like the great and powerful Oz, they adore the illusion, without ever caring for the man behind the curtain — or the cape, as the case may be.

And Lois.

The way she looks at the blue-and-red-clad avatar I've adopted. It warms my heart to think that Superman has one steadfast and true friend. But at the same time, I know she doesn't — and may never — look at me, Clark, the same way. And it breaks my heart, to know that I may never attain the one desire my heart has above all others. To love and be loved by my reporting partner, my friend. It's that thought, more than any of the things that physically set me apart from normal human beings, that makes me feel like the loneliest soul in the universe.

Alone.

I never thought it would be this way.

I never thought my very presence could be a hazard to the lives of the people I care about most. But now, it seems, that is the case. The escalating heat in Metropolis is all too solid proof that my super abilities are destructive.

How could I have ever assumed otherwise?

How could I have possibly known that I'd become a lethal super conductor for the sun's rays?

The sun.

That life-giving star I now face, as I hang suspended, miles above the surface of the Earth — hoping that, as I recharge my body, I don't bring that same star's vengeance upon the city I used to call home.

Used to.

I can no longer stay in Metropolis. It's too dangerous. In fact, I may never have the chance to call anywhere on this planet home ever again. How can I, when I now carry the knowledge within me that, by staying in one place for too long, I can hurt or kill people? Already, there have been reports of several heat-related deaths in Metropolis. That's blood on my hands that I will never be able to wash off, even if it was never my intention to cause harm.

To help — that's all I've ever wanted. To help and to build a life — a real life — for myself.

Both dreams are now gone, withered in the heat and turned to ash, only to be blown away in the stifling winds that only occasionally wind their slow way through the city. I must take to the road once again, be the perpetual nomad I once was. A wanderer with no wanderlust left in his heart, only bitterness and regret at having been forced to leave his Eden on Earth.

Lois.

The hardest part of all of this has been saying goodbye to her. The loneliness left in the wake of that final kiss is like a black void in my heart. It's as if an entire piece of my soul has been violently ripped away from me. An ache has settled deep within my heart — a tearing, pulsing, stabbing pain. It makes every beat of my destroyed heart feel like absolute torture, every lungful of air burn like flaming glass shards, every thought sear through my brain like a Kryptonite bullet.

Lois.

The only woman on this entire planet whom I'd ever imagined building a life with. The one person on this planet I vowed to myself I would never, ever hurt. The one person I may have hurt the most with my resignation from the paper and my intention to leave the city, never to return if I can avoid it. She

didn't have to tell me how deeply my departure has wounded her. I heard the hitch in her voice, smelled the salt of her tears as I reluctantly put my back to her and willed myself to walk away. I'm supposed to be her friend. Not just any friend either, but her *best* friend. And I've abandoned her.

Alone.

For the treason I've committed against Lois, perhaps living my life completely alone is exactly the punishment I deserve. Oh, the irony of the situation. In order to ensure that I don't hurt Lois, I've had to hurt her. The whole thing was a lose-lose situation for me. There was simply no way that I could have protected her and not broken her heart at the same time.

But Lois' life and safety mean more to me than anything, even my own happiness. So I didn't fight what I knew I had to do. I haven't even allowed myself to look back — no stolen glances over my shoulder as I left the bullpen, no fly-bys around her apartment to check on her. It's been easily the most difficult thing I've ever had to do in my life — to walk away from Lois and the only chance I've ever felt I had at attaining my happily ever after. To wave goodbye to that wonderful feeling of connection and belonging that Lois brought into my life. To force myself to willingly embrace the loneliness, the isolation, the solitude that has always been a constant thread in my life. To exile myself from everything and everyone who is important to me.

I can't even just pick one place and resign myself to a life of hermitage. To stop, to scrape together some semblance of a dwelling — I won't ever have a true home that isn't in Metropolis — is death. Not to me, but to anyone else in the area. Even if I were to build a simple igloo up in the Arctic Circle, as a solar conductor, I'm too afraid of how I might irrevocably damage the environment to even consider it.

And so, I brush aside the tears in my eyes, try to swallow past the lump in my throat, and struggle to shoulder the heaviness that my heart feels. I have no other choice.

Alone.

I know now that I truly *am* alone. The globe told me everything. My father — Jor-El — told me the whole story in a series of messages that he always meant for me to have. About how I am the only surviving Kryptonian. How the world I came from died in a violent explosion that ripped the very stone of the planet apart. How my landing on Earth was not random chance, but a carefully calculated decision in order to give me my best chance at a life where I could possibly fit in.

Jor-El was wrong.

Try as I might, I'll never fully fit in with the people of this planet. I can blend in as best I can. I can play-act at being normal. But I'm not. Normal for Krypton, maybe. For Earth? Never.

And yet, maybe I don't have to be as lonesome as I once was. Now that I'm here, in Metropolis, I've finally found my home. I've finally discovered the one place on this planet where I find my heart and soul to be at peace, the once burning wanderlust within them now fully extinguished, so that not even the minutest ember survives.

Lois.

My reason for staying, the light in the once oppressive darkness of my heart, the one who has, unknowingly, taken away my loneliness with the simple act of becoming my friend.

It's not that she's the first friend I've ever had. I've had plenty in my life — people I've grown up with in Smallville, people I've worked with, people whom I've randomly met during my travels, though the latter are more properly given the title of acquaintance than true friend. But Lois is the first to have truly altered my life. Without her, I don't know if Metropolis would be my home. Without her, I would still believe that love — that life-altering, true, deep, forever kind of love — could not possibly

exist for me.

Still, after the messages that my father left me, my very soul feels heavy — like some invisible weights have been suddenly thrust upon me. And I'm struggling — truly struggling — to find away to lift that burden from my heart. To find a way to make peace with the awful knowledge I now possess.

I am truly alone.

There is no one else left alive in the universe who is like me. No one who shares my bloodline. No one who can tell me more about the mysterious, faraway planet which no longer even exists, save in the form of radioactive green chunks of stone. Glowing pieces of torment and death. No one left who can even remotely relate to the isolation I feel.

I am the last of my kind.

Krypton lives on only so long as I continue to draw breath. And when I finally die, my entire race of people dies with me. Some legacy I've inherited, huh? Because, no matter what deeds I accomplish on Earth — no matter how many lives Superman saves, no matter how many criminals Clark's investigations put behind bars, there isn't a thing either of us can do for the planet which birthed us.

The last son of Krypton.

No longer will I ever come to this special place of mine, this haven between the stars and the ground, looking for the place I came from. Never again will I harbor any hope of meeting the people who gave me life. Gone are all thoughts of reconnecting with anyone who is like me.

And it hurts, this fresh wave of isolation, in a way that I've never quite known before. Now, instead of grieving over just the feelings of seclusion that I have, I'm grieving over an entire piece of my life, my history, lost in one terrible moment.

Alone.

Alone and furious.

Alone and heartbroken.

Luthor.

My sworn nemesis.

Lois' evil husband-to-be.

I still can't believe this is happening. I still can't understand how it came to pass that my entire world has come shattering down around me in a trillion unrecognizable pieces. I still can't fathom what it is that Lois sees in that vile snake that would make her want to throw away her life on him. I still can't figure out why Lois can't see how Luthor has already wrapped his tentacles around her — already controlling her, already mentally abusing her by cutting her off from her friends.

Abuser.

That's what Luthor is. And that, to me, is far more despicable than anything else he's done. Not the corporate fraud. Not the murders he's likely ordered. Not the crime organization that I'm certain he heads. All of that pales in comparison to his — so far successful — attempts to change and break the smartest, most passionate, most amazing woman I know. His aim — I'm sure — to control her, to break her away from everyone who loves and cares for her.

Love.

There is no part of me that believes Luthor is capable of loving anyone but himself, let alone Lois. It just isn't in a man like him — a hardened criminal out only for himself — to love. Not the way a person *should* love, at any rate. No, criminal isn't the right word. Sociopath is more accurate.

Conquest.

I'd bet my last dollar that this sham of a wedding is about nothing more than conquest to Luthor. A way to say that he won — won Lois away from Clark, and, more importantly to him, from Superman. A trophy to display to all the world to bolster his own twisted image. A shiny decoration to distract people from the

monster beneath the tailor-cut business suit.

Alone.

Luthor isn't my main concern. It's Lois. I ache for the once easy friendship we used to share. I hold my breath every time the phone rings, hoping it's her, and dreading that slim chance that it is, and that I'll have to face that painful awkwardness that now spans between us — an impassable chasm that not even I can find a way to cross. Every brunette with a shoulder-length haircut that I pass on the street has my heart hammering in my chest while I covertly check to see if it's her. But, of course, with the exception of one excruciating phone call between us, none of these things have come to pass.

And a hole has been torn in my heart at the unexpected loss of my best friend. More than anything, I want her back. To have just one more day of having her by my side, the way things used to be. To be able to speak to her once more, without having to try so hard to find something — anything — to say to her. To try to salvage some kind of closure for myself, hoping it would staunch the bleeding hole in my chest where my heart used to reside.

Alone.

No one will ever compare to Lois. No one ever has before. No one has ever earned my complete trust before — caused me to open up as much as I have. The truth is, with the exception of my Spandex-clad activities, with Lois, I have no secrets. Never before have I ever been able to be this relaxed, this open, this comfortable with another living soul.

To suddenly lose all of that... it hurts beyond words. And I know that, once she marries Luthor, all chance of regaining what we once had will be lost forever. Because I will never be able to trust her, not because of anything she's done to me, but simply because she'll be married to the devil.

I'm not sure what I expected, declaring my love for her in the park. Did I think she would turn around, shun Luthor, and fling herself into my arms instead? Did I think she would suddenly believe my suspicions about the billionaire? Did I really, truly believe that I could salvage our already strained and fractured relationship? Did I, for one second, believe that, by divulging all my pent-up love for Lois, I would suddenly find myself alone no longer?

No matter. Whatever it was that fueled my actions, everything has backfired. Rebuffed by Lois, propositioned as Superman, downgraded from best friend to casual acquaintance, I am now more alone than ever before.

Alone.

And it's all my fault.

If I hadn't been so stubborn.

If I hadn't pushed Lois away.

If I'd just told her my secret. If I had only trusted her. If I hadn't been so afraid or held such impossibly high standards for myself. If I had opened up, been honest with her about what I am, and how I feel about her.

If.

If.

If.

A million could have, should have, would have moments. A millions ways I destroyed my one chance at love and happiness. Innumerable ways in which I, and no villain, destroyed my own happy ending. Countless fractured hopes and dreams crumbled at my feet.

Scardino.

His very name is acid on my tongue. His very presence burns my eyes. His very voice sears my soul.

But, he seems to make Lois happy.

And that's all that should matter, right? All I've ever wanted is for Lois to be happy. Except, I can't enjoy sitting back and watching Lois waste her time on "Please, call me Daniel."

Because I know he isn't right for her.

Or is he?

I'll admit, sheepishly, that he's been there for Lois when I haven't been able to. He hasn't run out on her with a half-formed excuse. He hasn't caused that look of absolute heartache and betrayal by disappearing each time things progress — the sharing of feelings, a date, even a stakeout where her partner was supposed to be at her side the whole night through.

I know I should step back, that Lois' choice is only hers to make. Scardino or me, I have no say in who she should be dating — especially not when I've been so lousy to her lately. Especially not when I'm still hiding entire volumes of who I really am. Especially not when I continue to hide things, knowing that each time I can't explain my sudden departure or too-long absence, it hurts Lois a little more deeply.

I've done this all to myself. I know it. I can't deny it. But I'm still having trouble accepting it. That I've gambled this far with my own happiness, only to find myself teetering on a knife's edge in my relationship with Lois. One false move, one gust of wind, one misspoken word, and I'll plummet right off the edge, falling forever from her graces. And I can't help but to feel angry. Not at Lois — none of this is her fault. I can't blame her for wanting to feel loved and important and happy. Instead, the anger I have is directed squarely at myself, for allowing things to get to this point. And, I'll admit, a smidgen of anger is reserved for Scardino. As much as I've left openings for him to come swooping in on Lois, he's deliberately — and irritatingly successfully — tried to horn in on my time with Lois.

So here I am — alone again. It's strange, to feel this way. Lois hasn't outright rejected me. She hasn't broken up with me. She hasn't stopped being my friend or the partner at work that I've come to know and love so well. But I still feel disconnected from her, somehow. Like Scardino's appearance into our lives erected some kind of invisible barrier between us. I can see Lois, hear her, even touch her. But it isn't the same. It's almost as if a ghostly apparition of Scardino stands between Lois and me whenever we're together.

And so my heart once more bleeds in my loneliness, yearning to be able to fix things between Lois and me, knowing that I'm still too scared to tell her what I am — a lying alien who pretends to be a hero.

Alone.

Alone and terrified.

Heartbroken beyond words.

Lois.

She doesn't remember me. Looked straight at me with not a single hint of recognition in her eyes. Almost looked *through* me with her blank stare, devoid of any emotion or knowledge of who I am.

Empty.

Her stare wasn't the only empty thing. My heart instantly felt deflated, dead, when she uttered those words, letting me know that any memory of me was gone. It was almost better when she thought I was Clark, the scoundrel of her romance novel. It was almost better when she didn't trust me. Almost. For me to be a complete stranger to her — this hurts in a way that I don't have adequate words for.

Words.

They seem to be failing me lately. I'm not sure what I can say to Lois and what I shouldn't. I want to take her in my arms and tell her how much she means to me — what I once meant to her. I'm not sure how to respond when my parents and friends ask me how I'm holding up. Sure, I can force down the lump in my throat long enough to give them a half-hearted assurance that I'm doing fine, but all I really want is for someone, anyone, to really understand what it is I'm going through. To have *answers* instead

of platitudes meant to mollify me.

Inaction.

It's so hard for me to sit by on the sidelines, to not be able to help. It's killing me to watch Lois struggling to regain her identity, her memories, the things that make her who she is, and be completely powerless to do anything at all to make it easier for her. I'm the most powerful man on the planet, yet my strength, my abilities, count for less than nothing right now. Words can't describe how utterly frustrating that is. I am — have always been — a man of action. I'm not used to sitting uselessly by, waiting for problems to resolve themselves.

Yet what choice do I really have? The doctors have to treat Lois as they deem best for her particular injuries and memory loss. The process can't be rushed. Not without gambling her very essence.

So I float here in this void of space, as I always have when I want to be alone with my thoughts. And I ache immensely for what I've lost — for what I have to believe I can regain, even if I know in my gut that Lois may never recover. It's harder now, this feeling of being completely alone. It used to be that I could only try to imagine what it would be like to finally fit in, to connect, to belong, to be loved. Now I *know* what it is that I'm missing, and it hurts greater than I ever imagined it could.

Lost.

If I feel this lost and confused, I can't even begin to imagine what it must be like for Lois. Granted, after the first incident with Nightfall, I did suffer from a bout of amnesia myself. It was so difficult, living in a world where everything felt fuzzy and just out of reach. But I still had some gut instincts which proved to be right — knowing that Lois and I were close friends, knowing that Cat and I were never together as a couple, things of that nature. Lois seems to be more of a blank slate — her memory loss more significant and more complete than mine ever was. I can't even begin to fathom how terrifying that must be.

But, again, there is literally not a thing I can do to speed up the process of regaining Lois' memories, nothing I can contribute to aid in her self-discovery. So I must content myself to wait and remain nothing more than a close friend and concerned support person for Lois, even if this inaction kills me inside. And it *does* kill me, every second of every day.

Alone.

For the first time in a long time, we each must face our battles alone.

Alone.

Is it even possible for one person to feel this lonely, this disconnected, this crushed in mind, body, and spirit?

Not alone.

Impossibly, I am not the last living Kryptonian. Against all odds, a number of my people survived the planet's violent death, by the sheer luck of being on a ship, far away from the home they knew, searching for a new, stable planet to colonize. I should be happy. No, I should be *ecstatic* to find out that there are more people like me, to know that the Kryptonian race will not die with me.

But, I'm not.

At least, not fully.

I *am* glad to know that people from the world which birthed me are still alive. It's a relief to meet others who share my roots. But knowing what I know now, that they want me to be the savior of their people, I almost wish I *was* the last one alive. At least then I wouldn't have been ripped away from my real home, my real family, my real friends.

Why did I agree to this? Why did I ever leave home? Why did I willingly part from Lois?

The greater good.

I had to at least *try* to save the residents of New Krypton. I

couldn't turn my back on a group of people who are suffering. I never could, even as a child. I had to try to fix the hurts of the world, even if the only reward I received was taking on pain myself.

What can be more painful than leaving behind the people I love, not knowing if I'll ever see them again in this life?

Sadness and regret duel within me. I'm angry too. Angry that I was ever forced to choose between the people who need me on Earth and those who need me on New Krypton. Angry to have been thrust into a marriage to some stranger I can't possibly love as more than a friend. Angry that I had to give up the one person I *do* love more than life itself.

A flurry of activity buzzes all around me, but I've tuned it all out to stare out this window into the void of space, once a safe haven and port of calm inside the storm of my life, and now as cold and unfeeling as a grave. I've never been this deep into space before, not even when trying to stop the Nightfall asteroid. The distant stars and planets that I see beyond the thick, unyielding glass are all strangers to me. Though hundreds of people surround me, and though I feel as though some Elder or another shadows every move I make, scrutinizes every breath I take into my lungs, I feel utterly alone. I may as well be drifting in some vacuum, devoid of other life, left to rot in mind and body on my own.

Alone.

I've left Lois alone back on Earth, with nothing more than a shaky promise — at best! — that I will return. My heart, heavy as it is, wonders if I'll ever be able to keep that promise. My soul lays tortured by the possibility that I might never see Lois again, or my parents, or my friends. My mind is in anguish over the idea that I might never again step foot on my beloved Earth again.

Traitor.

That's how I feel. Like I've turned traitor against everyone who resides on Earth. The people there — they need Superman, if not Clark. They've come to rely on — to a certain degree — the alien's powers when they are in trouble. They count on him to help make their world just a little bit safer, even as they accept that he can't be everywhere at once. Now I face a different world, a different set of circumstances, a different foe to defeat, a different race of people to help. And I worry that I won't be able to. After all, what do I know about waging war with anyone? I've always worked to prevent and end wars. What do I really know about ruling anyone? I've always been content to be just another face in the crowd.

Alone.

By choosing to help these people, have I doomed myself to a life of loneliness and misery? To have resigned myself to a loveless marriage, where every moment of every day will be spent thinking of and loving another? To have surrendered myself to a life where I'll feel like a fraud — a pauper acting as king, an unskilled laborer pretending to be a master at my craft? And if I *can* find a way home somehow, will I have caused too much damage in the wake of my leaving to ever regain all I've so recently set aside? Will the public ever trust Superman — that super deserter — ever again? Will Lois move on with her life — find another man to love, marry, and raise a family with?

What have I done?

Alone.

Blissful silence. Or, as silent as it can get, here in the vacuum of space. I guess there is no true silence — even here, though sound does not travel out beyond the reaches of the world's atmosphere, I can still hear the beating of my own heart and my ears ring slightly as they strain to capture any stray, nonexistent sound.

Still, it's nice to be in this place of deadened senses. I feel like I've had a lifetime's worth of sound, sights, and overall

experiences all uncomfortably crammed within the last few months. The last time I was ever whole. The last time I ever will be whole.

Empty.

I feel completely drained of life, of the desire to live. I feel hollow inside, making this otherwise invulnerable flesh of mine feel ever so delicate and easy to shatter. I feel like all of my insides have been scooped right out of me and left to be stomped upon in the street. My heart feels broken into a trillion little pieces, squeezed into dust, torn from my chest. The pain is unbearable.

Lois.

My Lois.

The love of my life.

Gone.

For all that I can do both as Clark and as Superman, I could not fight against so powerful an opponent as age. I could not defeat the vileness of disease. I could not prevent death from taking her from me. That knowledge, however, does nothing to soothe the ache in my heart. It does nothing to lift the feelings of guilt that I feel. I couldn't help her — I've never gotten used to being in situations where I can't aid her in some way, can't save her from some hurt, can't protect her from some evil. And this time, it was worse, because my inability to do anything forced me to watch as my wife grew older, sicker, and eventually died.

I was there as she passed. I watched her last shuddering breath as she drew it in. I heard the wheeze as the air leaked back out of her lungs. I saw the fire, love, passion, and intelligence in her eyes as it dimmed, then finally extinguished. I heard her heartbeat vanish even before the machines in that hospital room began to blare, urging the doctors and nurses to come running to her room.

Though our grown children were in the room with me, though doctors and nurses filled the rest of the room, I felt completely alone. Like I was trapped in some kind of invisible bubble, I felt detached, isolated from the rest of the world. The rest of the world ceased to exist as my life came crashing down around me. Only Lois and I were reality in that moment.

It was almost worse at the funeral. Completely surrounded by people, I felt unable to connect to any of them. I even felt removed from my family. The pain of losing Lois was just too much for me to handle. And when I was brought to the present, when people did try to engage me in conversation, in condolences, in shared memories, all I wanted was to be alone. It's not that I didn't appreciate the attempts to lift my spirit and mend my heartbreak, but my grief was far too great for much of it to really make a difference toward my mood.

I'm not one to cry much. Never have been, though Lois would call me a master of sulking sometimes. Even after I've been in the worst disaster areas, even when I've responded to the most horrific accidents, even when my personal life has been in shambles, tears don't easily flow from my eyes. But in the last few days, I've spilled a lifetime of salty tears. I know Lois is free now from the pain which infused her body all too often once she got sick. But that only means that I'm left here behind.

Standing by my wife's gravesite was the worst moment of my life. Nothing else has compared. Seeing the casket lowered into the ground made her passing more final, more real, than anything else up until that point. Until then, everything else had felt surreal, like I was floating in a fog of gossamer images, like I was watching someone else go through the motions of planning a funeral, choosing a casket, greeting fellow mourners at the wake. It simply could not be my own life. It had to be someone else who was going through those terrible things. But seeing my wife's casket disappearing into the earth brought it sharply home that this was real, that I was the poor man who had lost his wife.

Going home was somehow even worse than standing there in

the bright sunshine in the cemetery. The silence that greeted me as I walked through the door was deafening. The emptiness housed within those walls stretched on into eternity. I didn't know where to start picking up the pieces of my life, or even *how* I was supposed to do so. Part of me didn't want to, feeling like it would somehow feel like a betrayal to Lois, even though I *knew* she would want me to find a way to keep on living, keep on fighting for the good of the world.

I'm grateful beyond words for our children. Without them, I would truly be alone once more. My heart would be far more shattered. I would have no desire to keep on living, even as my own body ages and weakens a little more with each passing year. All the strength that I have left, I hold on to for their sakes. I rise each day for them. They give me a reason to smile, to laugh, to feel some joy in my life, even though I know that my life has been irrevocably altered. They give me space to be alone when they know I need it — private moments to reflect back on my life with Lois and all the wonderful years we had together, moments to privately mourn what I have lost, moments to ponder my future. And they make sure to be around when they know that I need to have their love and support — moments where my sorrow threatens to crush me, when I need the comforting presence of another, when I need a listening ear or just the right words to be said to me. In those respects, they are so much like their mother.

For the strength they now lend me, I am forever thankful. I truly could not go through this on my own.

Alone.

One last stolen moment away from the hustle and bustle of the Earth.

One last time to savor the silence of space.

One last opportunity to float here, on my own, gazing up at the universe which birthed me and the home where I grew to be a man.

One last minute to reflect back on my life — all the amazing things I've lived through, all the incredible people I've met, all the indescribable adventures I've shared with my family.

I know, in my heart, that I will never again visit this place, this familiar sanctuary of mine. I'll miss the alien comforts of this space, caught between the Earth and the stars, visiting with the moon and sun together. As much as this place has always reinforced just how different I am from others — how isolated and alone my Kryptonian genetics make me — it has always been a refuge for me, where I could be certain that the distractions of the world around me would cease to exist. In the cold emptiness, I could clear my mind. In the silence, I could work through my thoughts, my feelings, my problems. In the solitude, I could take a moment to shed the burden of Superman's job, even if that moment was often far too brief. In the path of unobstructed sunlight, unfiltered by layers of pollution, I could recharge my body before returning to Earth to recharge my spirit with Lois.

Lois.

It seems unreal how long it has been since death separated us. Years of living on my own. Years of missing her every single day. Years spent trying to find some way of carrying on without her to encourage me, to recharge me, to ground me to the world in which I reside. Yet my memories remain crystal clear. It seems like only hours have passed since I last beheld her face, heard her laugh, touched her flesh. It feels like mere seconds since I last felt her lips upon my own, felt the brush of her breath in my ear, made love to her.

My memories.

They are the only things which haven't deteriorated with the advancement of old age. My flesh is far less impervious than it once was. My muscles weaken. My eyesight, though still sharp,

is worsening. I can barely hear more than the average human being now. And my flight now drains me of energy and I find myself avoiding it when I can. Now I only rarely allow myself to taste the freedom that comes along with defying gravity. And it is this which hurts the most about aging. Losing the rest of my powers would be a breeze compared to the heartache of losing my flight. Flying has always been the one power that was of the greatest comfort to me. It always felt the most natural to me — closer to breathing than to being a conscious effort that I had to put forth.

As a result of my failing powers, Superman has ceased to exist. I guess the correct term is retired. After all, I didn't fake his death. At least the world isn't lacking for heroes in his wake. My children have taken up the cape and kept the superhero fantasy alive. And that's what it is, a fantasy. Because the truth is, powers notwithstanding, we are all just average people. And while I would call my children special, we are no more special than any other man or woman on this planet.

You would think, after all of these decades of being Superman, that I would welcome the chance to sit back and relax, to take some time to enjoy what little time I have left in the mortal realm. I should feel entitled to take some time for myself, instead of being at the beck and call of the world. I should revel in not having to drop everything at a moment's notice to rush off to an emergency.

I hate retirement.

Being forced into idleness has been like a Kryptonite knife in my heart. I'm used to being active, to having something to investigate, to righting whatever wrongs I come across. Having to admit that I can no longer do what I once could has been painful, at best. At the worst, it's been like a slow, intangible death.

Death.

I feel it, creeping ever closer, though I'm not physically sick. Still, I feel myself slipping away a little more every day, as though I'm somehow fading. It's becoming harder to feel connected to the world that I love so much. It's almost as if I'm floating through these last, final days, as much as I'm floating here in this old refuge of mine. But I'm at peace, knowing that my end is drawing close. What I once feared now comforts me. I'm ready to see what comes next, once I've passed through the veil of death.

I have no regrets. I've lived my life to the fullest. I've seen and done things that no one else has. I've loved and been loved in return. Lois helped me to feel connected to the world in a way I didn't know was possible. She took away my heartache and loneliness, replacing it with such love and acceptance that it still takes my breath away, even now. I've raised a family — flesh-and-blood children born out of the love Lois and I shared. And the love I instantly had for them, stemming from the moment I first learned of each of those pregnancies...I can't even put it into words. Watching them come into the world, seeing them grow and learn each day, becoming best friends with them, with Lois by my side the whole time...it's been the most amazing adventure of my life.

Who would have thought that the best moments of my life would have been all the smallest, quietest ones? A lazy Saturday morning in bed, my wife in my arms. Rocking a teething infant to sleep in the middle of the night. Rainy days spent putting puzzles together, building with blocks, teaching my kids how to read. Movie nights. Driving to the outskirts of the city to stargaze. Holding my grandchildren for the first time. A quiet dinner alone with Lois.

No, I'm not afraid to die. I've already experienced everything I've wanted to. There is nothing left here for me. I know my children and their families will mourn my passing, but they have each other, and that will ease things for them. I'm ready to say my last goodbyes. I'm more than ready to reunite with Lois. Her

soul and mine are inextricably linked and I yearn to be with her again.

Alone?

Not as long as Lois' soul exists.

THE END