

A Bird in Hand

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Summary: When Alt Clark is thrown into a prison cell in the Congo, he is surprised to find an unexpected cellmate hiding in the darkness.

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Prologue

Clark thought of her often.

Actually, that was an understatement. The truth was, he'd barely thought about anything else for well over a year now. After meeting another world's Lois Lane, his entire life had been turned upside down. He'd felt the overwhelming pull of their connection, that inexplicable yearning that continued to grow in her presence. It was stronger than any feeling he'd ever known, and it had left him unable to stop wondering: What would his own Lois have been like?

Would she have looked the same? Had the same voice? The same scent? Would she have felt the same way in his arms...

Would she have had the same power over him? Or, as crazy as it was to even consider, would that connection have felt even stronger?

After all, the Lois he met wasn't *his* Lois.

Maybe it really would feel more... *right* with her somehow?

He kicked himself internally, as he often had to these days, needing to stop ruminating on something he would likely never have. It wasn't healthy. Everyone around him knew it, tried to gently encourage him to move on. But it was easier said than done...

Clark's gaze drifted out of the window of his apartment. He let out a quiet sigh as he watched the sun dip beneath the horizon, feeling a growing heaviness as he greeted the end of another day. He wouldn't go as far as saying he was depressed... He was still so grateful to have found a way to use his powers to help people in a more meaningful way. It had easily made up for the loss of Lana. But there was still this unshakeable sense that something was missing, and it hung over him, casting a shadow over any hope of contentment.

Would it always feel this way?

Maybe there were just some things you never fully moved on from...

That had been true of his parent's death, anyway. Sure, life kept happening. Time itself moved on, and plenty of things changed. He'd grown around his grief, made the most of the life he had. But their absence never really left him. He'd been young enough that their memory felt somewhat distant... yet still old enough that it would always be embedded in his heart.

He just hoped they'd be proud of the man he'd become...

Clark gulped back the last swig of his oolong tea before heading over to the sink to rinse out his cup. He frowned when he heard a knock at his front door. Twisting towards the sound, he lowered his glasses so he could see who would be calling at this late hour.

The sight of the man on the other side made him jolt, dropping his cup into the sink. Porcelain clunked loudly against metal as he stood frozen.

It was Herb.

He felt his heart rate quicken at the implication. There was only one reason his time travelling friend would be here.

He'd finally found her.

—

3 years ago, in the Congo

Clark groaned as he rolled over, the stone floor of the prison cell unforgiving against his bruises. Pain radiated from his shoulder where he'd landed after being shoved inside. He desperately needed to get the weight off of the injured area, but it was proving difficult to find a spot on the floor that didn't aggravate something.

The men who'd seized him hadn't exactly been careful to avoid any further harm when they'd manhandled him, his words of protest falling on deaf ears. Keeping him comfortable seemed to be pretty far down on their list of priorities.

Now it was just him, alone in the dark, with no indication when these men—who'd relished their captain's orders to deliver a severe beating—would return for round two.

More importantly, he was no closer to finding the woman he was searching for.

He just hoped he wasn't too late.

Clark shifted position again, slowly this time, testing the waters with every inch of movement. Yet still, a sharp jolt of pain caught him off guard, shooting from his ribs and down his side. He gasped in shock, and the intake of breath irritated his throat. Before he had time to process the pain, a violent coughing fit took hold, wracking his body and triggering even more agonizing sensations.

By the time he was able to steady himself again, he was too scared to move another muscle, breathing in and out as gently as he could. He willed himself to calm as he let his equilibrium recover, peering into the darkness in search of... something, anything that might give him an idea of what to do next.

Neither he nor Herb had thought up a plan of escape if he was taken prisoner. That felt like a foolish oversight now... but at the time, it just hadn't occurred to him it was a risk. Not once did he imagine the people holding Lois prisoner in the Congo would have kryptonite. It was three years before Superman had even been exposed to the world... they shouldn't have known about, let alone had access to the poisonous meteor.

It had to have been Tempus.

There was no other logical explanation. He must have travelled back in time, found out where they had been holding Lois and given her captors some kryptonite, just in case Clark ever showed up. Because god forbid he be allowed any chance of happiness, even after Tempus was defeated. The men who'd captured him hadn't even known who he was beyond some nosy reporter for the Daily Planet. Had it just been sheer bad luck that he'd arrived while the kryptonite had been around? Or had Tempus told the captain to carry it with him at all times? That seemed the most likely scenario...

The guy was truly diabolical!

Clark had encountered plenty of struggle and suffering in his life, been filled with grief-fuelled anger for many of his short years... but he'd never hated anyone as much as he hated that violent psychopath. The man seemed hell-bent on causing him nothing but pain, in any universe.

Still, there was no amount of anger that would change his situation now.

All Clark could do was try and get as comfortable as possible, recover whatever strength he could and hope his powers returned quickly enough that he might have a

chance of escaping. Then he would get back to his search... with a little less naive carelessness this time.

As he lay there in the darkness, trying to remember what time it had been when he'd left and how long it would be until the sun came up, a sound caught his attention. It was just a faint whisper of a noise, a barely perceptible passing of breath over someone's lips. And yet something inside him screamed familiarity.

He lifted his gaze and peered uselessly around the shadowy space, eyes still adjusting to the low light, unable to make out what was real and what was his hopeful imagination.

Was that a person on the other side of the room?

He remained as still as possible, holding his breath as he waited for proof that he *wasn't* just imagining things... and there it was again. That whisper of sound that felt like it was calling out to him.

It was her...

Could it really be her?

Don't be ridiculous, he scolded himself.

He had to be delirious. He'd been kicked in the head enough times to believe he might not be thinking straight, might only be semiconscious, half awake and half in a dream, where the fantasy of her presence would make much more sense.

After a full minute without another sound, Clark began to accept that theory, but then he heard something else. Just a slight shuffle of movement, but it travelled across the room with enough volume that he was sure he wasn't imagining this time.

"Is someone there?" Clark called out in its direction.

A tense silence followed.

Whoever—or whatever—had made the sound, froze completely. Clark strained his hearing, until he could just about make out a faint heartbeat, in spite of his weakened condition.

Whoever it was, the speeding rhythm of their pulse told him they were terrified.

"It's okay," he tried again, pushing the pain out of his voice and adding as much softness as he could. "I'm not going to hurt you."

A few excruciatingly long seconds passed, during which Clark's mind spiralled through a million fantasy images of the person who could be on the other side of the room.

And then finally, she spoke.

"Who... who are you?"

Her words were hoarse, her throat dry. She spoke tentatively, as though she'd not used her vocal cords for some time and was unsure of their ability. Yet still, there was no mistaking the subtle nuances of her tone.

It really *was* her.

Lois.

His Lois.

Clark's heart pounded in time with hers as he willed his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

From the minimal moonlight coming in through the tiny, barred window, he could just about see a faint outline of her silhouette becoming more distinct, and it felt just as familiar as her voice.

"Lois?"

The question slipped from his mouth without his conscious permission, and he immediately regretted it. She froze like a deer in headlights, and he cursed himself for spooking her.

"How do you know my name?" she asked, suspicion hardening her tone.

"It's okay, I'm... a friend," Clark explained quickly. "I... came here to rescue you."

He heard a sound he was pretty sure was a scoffed laugh in response.

"I guess the plan got a little side tracked..." he admitted.

"Who sent you?" she whispered.

"Perry... Mr. White... he told me what happened to you..."

"Perry?" she asked, a touch of hope entering her voice. "My boss sent you?"

"Um, sort of... Are you hurt?" he asked, willing her not to linger on the vagueness of his answer.

Clark didn't want to lie to her, but he was sure diving right in with the truth wasn't the best idea either.

Besides, he really did need to know she was okay. He had no idea what she'd been through since she'd been taken. Herb had managed to get them here as close to the time of her disappearance as possible, but it'd been hard to pin down the exact day. She could have been alone in this cell for days, maybe even weeks.

Clark could see her outline becoming clearer in the dim light, just able to make out the subtle shake of her head.

"I'm fine," she added dismissively. "But people know where you are, right? They'll come looking for you?"

"I have a partner on the outside. I'm sure he'll find us."

Herb might not have super-powers, but he was a technological genius beyond his time. If anyone could figure out a way to get them out of there, he was sure it was him.

Assuming he hadn't been caught too...

But even if Herb wasn't in a position to rescue them, Clark was pretty sure his powers would return once the sun came up, as long as he made sure to catch whatever natural light trickled in through the small window.

All they had to do was make it till morning.

Clark decided to move again, the joy and adrenaline of this new development giving him just enough strength to withstand the onslaught of pain shifting his position caused. He kept going until he was sitting upright, resting against one of the cell's walls, clutching his left shoulder like he was trying to use his own hand as a splint.

"You're injured," Lois observed, her shadowy face peering towards him.

Guess he hadn't been hiding his grunts of pain as well as he'd thought...

"I'm okay. It's just my shoulder," he reassured her, trying to move it slightly to prove his point, but only causing an involuntary shriek.

"*That* doesn't sound okay," she countered.

"I... uh... I don't know. I think it might be dislocated," he admitted.

He was a little shocked at his own suggestion. After all, he'd lifted a rocket into space only a few days ago... but as he lifted his other hand up to compare how things felt, he had to admit, it did feel shockingly out of shape.

Lois watched him carefully for a moment as though thinking something over, then rose to her feet, moving swiftly in his direction.

Clark's heartbeat tripled in speed as she crouched down in front of him, her hand reaching out towards him in the darkness, landing on his chest.

He stayed frozen, too scared to make a sound as her fingers searched across his torso. Every moment of contact sent waves of tingling electricity through him, even through the fabric of his shirt.

Eventually she found his shoulder and began carefully inspecting it. It was painful. He was sure it must be painful... but he was barely aware of it, barely even tethered to the earth.

Because she was touching him.

Lois... *his* Lois, was touching him.

He'd dreamt about this moment, wondered how it might feel for well over a year; but no fantasy version of events could have prepared him for the intensity of her presence and his reaction to it.

"What's your name?" Lois asked as her movements got a little firmer, and he gritted his teeth against sharp resistance.

"Clark... Kent," he managed, before yelping again as she tugged at a certain unforgiving angle.

"Clark... Well, Clark, it's definitely dislocated."

"How do you know?"

"My dad's a doctor. Well, used to be anyway," she said, with a hint of bitterness. "Look, I think I can pop it back into place if you want me to, but it's going to hurt."

It took him longer than it should have to respond, but even in the dim light, with only the outline of her features faintly visible, he was awestruck by how beautiful she looked. He couldn't really see her eyes... and yet somehow, he knew she was looking right into his, and that knowledge was making him feel heady.

"I trust you," he whispered.

Lois seemed to frown, tipping her head. "Um... Why exactly?"

Damnit... Clark mentally kicked himself again. He was being weird. If he wanted her to trust him, he couldn't start acting like a love-struck stalker. He needed to pull himself together.

Clark cleared his throat. "I, uh... you just seem very sure of yourself."

She laughed, a real, full laugh, and the sound was like a shot of pure joy to his heart.

"So I've been told. That's not always a good thing, though..." she said, gesturing at their cramped quarters.

"None of this is your fault," Clark said firmly.

She turned her head towards him. His words hung between them for a moment as she mulled over them, like she was trying to gauge his sincerity.

"Of course it is," she said finally. "I always do this. You know... jump into the pool without checking the water level first. It's a bad habit. Reckless. Stupid."

"Seems pretty brave to me," he countered.

"Did you get hit on the head on your way in here?"

The almost teasing tone of her voice caused a wide grin to break out on his face that made him grateful she couldn't fully see him in the shadows. If she could, she'd have known there was something more to his affection.

Clark had almost forgotten about his shoulder entirely when she yanked on his arm without warning. He cried out in sudden agony as his shoulder popped back into place... and then relief followed, along with a gushing exhale.

"Sorry... it hurts less if you're not expecting it."

Lois gave his shoulder one last check over before returning to her spot on the other side of the room. Clark simply stared after her, holding his breath to prevent any sound of disappointment from emerging at the sudden loss of contact.

Finally, he was able to say, "Thank you."

"Hey, it's the least I can do," she said, crossing her legs on what he could now see was a small cot bed. "I'm the reason you got hurt, right?"

"No, that was my own fault, believe me. I... should have been more careful."

"So, what's your deal anyway?" she asked. "You in private security or something? Special ops?"

"Uh what? Oh, no, I'm uh..." Clark fumbled. "I'm just... another journalist like you."

"And yet Perry sent *you* here instead of calling the authorities?" she queried.

So this is what it felt like to be interrogated by Lois Lane? It was somehow both intimidating... and electrifying.

"I uh... well, we didn't want the men who took you to find out we were onto them. Thought it might spook them into doing something... worse. Besides, I have some experience in... rescuing people..."

"Oh really?" she said with a hint of amusement. "What were you, a volunteer firefighter back in Kansas or something?"

Clark froze. "How did you..."

"The accent, Clark," she said, like it was nothing. "So how did some country farmboy manage to get a job at the Daily Planet? And on top of that, earn Perry White's respect so highly that he'd trust you with a dangerous mission like this?"

"What makes you so sure I'm a farmboy?" Clark countered.

She shrugged. "Educated guess... I'm right though, aren't I?"

Clark paused. "I... lived on a farm for a while..."

"I knew it! I bet you send your mom home some of your pay-check each month, too, don't you."

“Um, no...” Clark said quietly. “I... my parents died when I was thirteen.”

Her tone softened immediately. “Oh... I’m... I’m so sorry...”

“It’s okay, it was a long time ago,” Clark assured her. “Anyway... I kind of bounced around from there. Learned a few things along the way... just trust me when I say I was the best option to get you out of here.”

Lois seemed to accept his answer for now, but he knew that wouldn’t last forever.

A long silence fell between them. Clark couldn’t figure out what to say to break it. He wanted to ask her a million questions... but he was scared he might say the wrong thing, might put his foot in his mouth and make her even more suspicious of him than she already was.

Besides, he was beginning to feel an overwhelming tiredness pulling at his consciousness, demanding he surrender, and it was getting harder to think. The kryptonite exposure followed by a nasty beating had taken more out of him than he’d realised.

Just as he was about to let her know he was feeling suddenly woozy, his body went limp beneath him. He flopped helplessly to one side, sliding to the floor with a weak moan.

“Clark?” Lois called out.

He tried to answer her, opening his mouth to do so... but no words followed. His tongue felt heavy and useless as he tried to get it to co-operate. She crossed to his side, her questions sounding like distant whispers as unconsciousness began to swallow him whole, demanding rest.

The shadowy image of her face brightened into fullness as his mind drifted into a feverish, but beautiful dream.

—

Lois watched the unconscious stranger who’d been thrown in her cell, his body twitching every now and then like he was still in pain.

She’d tucked her pathetic excuse for a blanket under his head and tried to make sure he was lying in a vaguely comfortable position before retreating back to the cot bed on the other side of the cramped space.

Her mind was already picking through every detail of their encounter so far. She wasn’t sure what to make of his story. Clark had given what seemed like intentionally vague answers, and he’d obviously been holding back some elements of the truth... and yet her attention seemed more drawn to something else about their exchange.

She’d felt something... familiar.

It wasn’t that she’d ever met the man, of that she was certain, even in the limited light. But something about him had felt irrationally comforting. Safe. Like coming home...

Then she’d touched him, and an even stranger sensation travelled through her. Like something inside of her had stirred awake. A part of her she hadn’t even known was there, lying dormant.

What the hell had that been?

Her feelings seemed to have no logical place in the context of their situation. Was it some weird version of Stockholm syndrome or something? Had she been so psychologically impacted by the last few days of isolation that company of any kind had felt immediately soothing?

The sceptical half of her brain wanted to retreat as far away from the unsettling feeling as possible, but there was something stopping her from doing so. Like she was caught in the pull of a magnetic force that was too powerful to be simply disregarded.

But she was stronger than that, wasn’t she?

She was Lois Lane.

She wasn’t going to be drawn in by some unexplained irrational desire to be close to a guy she’d never even met. She’d had more than enough experience with guys who’d had seemingly innocent intentions over the years and had learned enough times by now that it was never a good idea to believe someone was as good as they seemed.

Yet something within her screamed that this one was different. That he wasn’t like Claude or any of those other man-children who had unfortunately crossed her path, luring her in with tempting promises they were never going to keep.

Something told her she really *could* trust him.

Lois knew she should be trying to sleep, but she found herself inexplicably wired. Her cell-mate’s quiet snoring echoed around her as she settled on her side. It was dark in the small cell, but her eyes had adjusted to it pretty well over the last few days, and she could just make out the outline of his form, his chest rising and falling with every breath.

He was a big guy... defined muscle shaping the outline of his broad shoulders. The thought might have even intimidated her if he hadn’t had such a gentle energy about him. If he hadn’t spoken with such soft sincerity.

Lois sighed, shifting position slightly, her eyes never leaving Clark’s body as she watched him sleep.

Who the hell was this guy? What wasn’t he telling her?

Was he really going to get her out of this mess?

Tears stung at the corners of her eyes as the hopelessness she'd been submerged in for days began to rise again. She so desperately wanted to make it out of this alive, to see her sister again, her friends at the Planet... hell, even her mom and dad. But it felt so incredibly foolish to let herself hope for that.

After all, she knew how brutal these men could be.

—

“Wake up!”

Clark stirred into consciousness abruptly, the fear in Lois' voice jolting him awake like a hit of smelling salts. He had no idea how long he'd been asleep, but they were still shrouded in darkness. It didn't take him long to work out where the fear in her voice was coming from. Footsteps were heading towards them, growing louder by the second.

Their captors were coming back.

“Stay behind me,” Clark said as he rose to his feet, moving with greater ease than he'd expected.

His injuries must be healing, even without the fast charge of sunlight.

“Stay behind you?” Lois asked, “What the hell are you going to do?”

Before Clark could answer, they were unexpectedly bathed in light. His hand flew up to shield his eyes, and he blinked furiously as he struggled to adjust to the sudden brightness. The door beyond their cell creaked open, and he could just make out the outline of three men marching into the room, rifles held up to their chests.

Clark felt the presence of kryptonite immediately, its familiar agony coursing through him. He tried to disguise his reaction as simple discomfort from the light, letting out a single groan of pain before taking in a deep breath and gritting his teeth, willing himself to acclimatize to the sensation.

Whatever their purpose was in coming to see them, maybe it would be short-lived. Maybe he wouldn't have to bear the indescribable assault on his senses for too long.

The man in the centre, who seemed to be their leader, took a puff of a cigar dangling from his mouth and then slowly pulled it away with his free hand, directing a cloud of smoke towards his prisoners. He peered through the bars towards them for a moment like he was examining every piece of information he could get from their tense expressions.

“I want to know who you work for,” he said finally, his gaze lingering on his newest captive.

“I told you,” Clark replied. “I'm just a reporter. I work for the Daily Planet. I was here investigating my colleague's disappearance.”

“It's useless Clark, I've been telling these lunkheads the same thing for weeks, and they won't listen to me,” Lois's frustrated voice came from behind him.

He turned around to give her a warning look, amazed she was antagonising them even now—but the shock of seeing her in the full light almost threw him more off balance than the kryptonite, and all he could do was gape at her open-mouthed.

She was just... so beautiful.

How was it even possible for someone who'd been a prisoner here for who knows how many days to still look that beautiful?

“Don't you think you'd have gotten something out of me by now if I was anything more than I said I was?” she continued her tirade, her defiant instincts still somehow active despite the fear he could see behind her eyes.

The captain gave her a disgusted look, dropping his cigar to the ground and crushing it under his boot suggestively. Then he returned his attention to Clark, taking a couple of steps closer, eyes boring into him with a gleam of confidence that indicated some unknown knowledge he thought gave him the upper hand.

Clark felt the air leave his lungs, muscles clenching painfully tight as the man's closer proximity dialled up the kryptonite's effects to unbearable levels. He couldn't stop his body from trembling, but he tried his best to make it look like a product of fear and not anything more unusual.

“We found your partner, Mr. Kent. The kind of advanced technology he had in his possession did not come from a simple newspaper...”

Clark felt sick, both from the kryptonite and the knowledge that Herb was now a prisoner too.

“If you've hurt him...” he managed to croak out.

“Oh, don't worry, he's as comfortable as you are. For now, anyway...” The man smiled cruelly. “But my hospital-ity is growing very thin. You have until tomorrow morning to tell me who you both really work for... if you don't, I will kill one of you. Slowly. While the other watches.”

“No!” Lois exclaimed. “Please, this is my mistake, I was operating alone. You don't need to hurt anyone else—”

“Maybe once one of you is dead, you'll see how fruitless your loyalty to your employer really is,” the man said with finality.

He turned his back on his prisoners, signalling for his men to open the door. Clark felt immediate relief from the kryptonite, but he knew any opportunity to reason with them had also left with it.

As the door closed behind them, he and Lois were plunged into darkness once more. Fear travelled down Clark's spine as the brutal reality of the man's threat settled in.

He had to get Lois out of there before they returned.

No matter what it took.

—

"No, no, no, no, no..." Lois repeated the words in frantic panic, looking around pointlessly.

It wasn't like some magical way out of the cell could have appeared out of nowhere, but she couldn't stop her wild eyes from their desperate search for something, anything, to latch on to.

"It's okay," Clark tried to reassure her, placing his hand on her arm from behind.

"How is it okay?" she practically shrieked at him, pulling away from his touch and spinning around to face him. "Dammit, why did you have to come here? It was bad enough when it was just me I'd gotten into this mess, now I might have to deal with your blood on my hands?"

"That's not going to happen," her infuriatingly calm cellmate insisted.

Lois eyed him with suspicion. There was something about his conviction that told her this wasn't just a valiant attempt to deny the reality they were facing.

He knew something she didn't.

She fixed him with as threatening a glare as she could manage in the dim light.

"Who are you, really?" she demanded. "And don't give me anymore 'friend of Perry' lines, I was barely swallowing that fairytale as it was. What the hell was he talking about? What tech does your partner have?"

Clark said nothing as she finished her tirade of questions, but his body language, and what she could make out of his expression, gave away what seemed to her like guilt, shame, regret...

So there it was.

He really was a liar after all.

"I knew it, you've been lying since the moment you were thrown in here, haven't you? I can't believe I almost..." She caught herself before letting him know the effect he'd really had on her. "You're good, you know that? Really,

just such a top-notch liar, you deserve a gold medal for that performance..."

"I haven't lied to you," he pushed back. "My name really is Clark Kent, and I do work for Perry White."

"But there's more to it than that, isn't there?"

Clark hesitated, staring at her for a long moment like he was trying to figure out whether *she* was safe to share the truth with.

"Yes," he said finally. "There's more to it. Look, I can't explain everything, but... when morning comes, I *will* be able to get us out of here."

She huffed a much less good-natured laugh than she'd been allowing him before.

"Are you completely deluded?" He opened his mouth to respond, but she cut him off immediately. "No, I know, you're just like every other man. You've got this testosterone surplus that says, 'I can do it myself.' Don't you get it? There's no way of getting out of here, Clark! If there was, I would have figured it out for myself."

"It's not like that. There are things I can do that you don't know about yet," Clark tried to explain. She could see his calm facade starting to falter. "Please... you just need to trust me."

"Why? Why the hell should I trust you? I don't even know you! You show up here with this flimsy story about a rescue mission, make me feel like there's some actual hope... and then it turns out you've been lying to me the whole time?"

"I haven't lied..."

"Oh right, sure, you were just omitting the truth, that's not really lying... Do you really think you're getting me to trust you on a technicality?"

"Look, the full story is... complicated," Clark weakly defended.

"Well... why don't you start trying to uncomplicate it for me, then? It's not like either of us are going anywhere..."

Lois watched her cellmate run a shaky hand through his hair, before looking up at her, expression wracked with indecision.

"I don't know what to do here," he muttered. "If I tell you everything, you're just going to think I'm crazy!"

"Whatever it is, I can handle it, Clark. I deserve to know the truth. Especially if one of us is going to be dead in the morning..."

That cold prospect hung between them, and Lois could see any resolve Clark had to keep the truth to himself was fast slipping away.

“Okay,” he said finally.

She crossed her arms over her chest, staring back at him expectantly and he sighed, beginning to pace back and forth. It seemed bizarre to her that, under the circumstances, he seemed even more scared than she was.

“Look, I know how this is going to sound, but just please... try and keep an open mind, okay?”

“It can’t be any worse than what I’m imagining!” Lois assured him. “Would you just spit it out.”

He gave her one last long pleading look before finally surrendering.

“Well... I guess the first thing is that... I... have certain... powers.”

“Powers...” she repeated flatly back to him.

“Usually... they’re gone right now...”

Lois huffed. “Of course they are.”

Clark continued anyway. “... but when the sun comes up, they *will* come back. And when they do, I’ll have the strength to smash through that wall and get us out of here.”

“You’re going to smash through the wall,” she said, not bothering to hide the disbelief in her voice. “When the sun comes up? What are you, like some kind of reverse vampire? I just popped your shoulder back into its socket, and you’re trying to tell me you’re some kind of superhuman hero guy who’s going to miraculously save the day?”

“Yes,” he confirmed, meeting her incredulous gaze for a long moment, before shaking his head in defeat. “See, I knew this was pointless.”

“No, please, let’s keep going... So, to recap. You’re my knight in shining armour with super strength and... what else? Have you got a horse and cart waiting outside so that we can go riding off into the sunset?”

“Actually, it’s a time machine...”

“Okay, that’s enough.” She shot him a death glare.

“I’m serious, Lois. My partner, Herb, and I... we come from the future,” he persisted.

“Please stop it...”

“Well, technically, he’s from the past. But he’s a genius scientist, way ahead of his time. He built a time machine and a bunch of other inventions and...”

“STOP!”

Clark flinched at her shrieked command and then squirmed, as though the sound of his own crazy words had finally hit him.

“I’m sorry, I know what this must sound like. But please, just...”

“What is it that you’re trying to do here?” Lois eyed him suspiciously. “Is this some kind of test? Or did they send you in here as some weird form of psychological torture?”

“I’m not trying to hurt you,” he said, taking a small step towards her.

She took a step back. “Then you must be a complete nutjob!”

He looked surprisingly wounded.

“See this is exactly why I didn’t tell you the truth!” he exclaimed, throwing his arms up in the air.

“Hey, you don’t get to be all indignant here! I’m the one that was lied to! I’m the one who’s been stuck in here for days, with no one to talk to, no idea whether I was going to live or die every damn day...”

She could feel the hitch in her own voice as she stopped, could feel hot tears stinging her eyes... and any frustration Clark had been expressing immediately subsided.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly.

They both fell silent for a moment. Lois’ mind was racing, torn between the entirely rational, sane response of not believing a word he was saying... and the persistent niggling instinct that he was somehow, as crazy as it was, telling her nothing but the truth.

“Look, if you can’t accept all of what I’m saying... I understand. It’s a lot to just dump on you without any context or proof. But just please, believe me when I say that I came here to help you. That I care about you.”

“Why?” she asked, feeling a jolt of suspicion again. “If you’re from the future like you say you are, why do you even care about what happens to me?”

Clark swallowed, seemingly regretting giving away that much. His eyes searched hers as he tried to figure out how to respond, and she swore he suddenly looked even more vulnerable than before.

“I met you. Once. Well, an alternate version of you...”

“An alternate version of me?”

“Yes... from a parallel Earth. She needed my help to get home, so she sought me out and we became... friends.”

“Friends,” Lois repeated back, the word seeming to so obviously not match his feeling.

He said nothing, eyes imploring her not to push it.

She started pacing, partly so she wouldn't have to look right at him anymore. The depth of his emotion was unsettling her more than his words.

"So, what, you came here to rescue me because you met some woman who looks like me and what... thought you'd try out the home-grown version?"

"That's not what I..."

"Cause let me tell you, buster, if you thought you'd swoop in and save my life, and then I'd just swoon into your arms, you were sorely mistaken."

"I would never expect... Lois, I didn't come to the Congo, three years in the past, and get thrown in this prison cell, just to try and hook up with you..."

She fell silent, unable to argue with that logic.

"Well, what exactly *were* you hoping for?"

"You'd been gone so long, you were officially declared dead," he told her. "I just... thought maybe I could stop that from happening..."

Lois blinked back at him, opened mouthed, his words confirming every fear she'd had since she'd been captured. That she'd be stuck there until the end. That she'd never make it out of this alive.

"No, that's just... I don't have to listen to this," she muttered.

"Lois..." he said, taking a baby step towards her.

She flinched away again, looking at him in horror. Clark froze, her expression seeming to hurt him more than the dislocated shoulder had. The pain on his face somehow managed to make her feel guilty, in spite of her growing desire to be as far away from the man as possible.

"Just... leave me alone," she warned softly, unable to cope with the idea of him getting any closer.

She was finding it hard enough to stay rational as it was. She didn't need that magnetic sensation she felt when he got too close throwing her for a loop.

Without another word, she headed over to the cot bed and lay down, hugging her knees to her chest and turning to face the wall. It felt ridiculously childish, even as she was doing it, but she just couldn't deal with any of it anymore. She needed some time to process all the ridiculous claims he was making and figure out how she was supposed to respond to all of this.

Silently, she pleaded for him to let her retreat, to just let her be, long enough for her to decide whether he was friend... or foe.

Thankfully, he didn't say another word.

—

Clark let himself flop back against the wall, sliding down it until he hit the floor. He tipped his head back, resting it against the cold stone, and stared up at the ceiling.

The adrenaline of the last few minutes began to settle, and he took a few deep breaths as he tried to order his thoughts.

Somehow, the anguish of his recent kryptonite exposure was nothing next to the pain of her rejecting him.

The way she'd looked at him when he'd told her the truth.

The way she'd flinched at his every movement.

She was terrified of him.

And why wouldn't she be? He'd been such an idiot, thinking she might have been able to absorb any of this stuff under the circumstances.

Maybe he shouldn't have said anything. But he was just so confused about how to handle all of this! And he couldn't bring himself to be dishonest with her.

Not now.

Not after everything she'd been through.

All the mental rehearsals he'd had for how this conversation might go had proved useless. He'd been completely unprepared for the reality of explaining who he was... not to mention how painful it would feel when she turned away from him.

Clark shivered, pulling his own knees up to his chest in a way that mirrored her position on the bed.

This was every fear he'd had when Herb had first come to him, playing out in full technicolour. That he'd find her. That she'd instantly reject him. That the empty hole he'd felt ever since another world's Lois had shown him what real love felt like would never be filled.

But he had only himself to blame.

He knew it was his screw up, his overconfidence, that had led to him being taken prisoner alongside her, instead of both of them being a million miles away by now... safe, away from the darkness and danger.

If he'd been able to get her out, maybe he could have eased her into all of this. He would have had Perry and Mr. Olsen's help to explain the truth, to reassure her he wasn't someone to be afraid of.

Instead, he was asking her to trust what he knew sounded completely insane, in a setting that didn't exactly promote safety.

He just hoped he hadn't screwed things up so badly she'd refuse to go with him when the time came.

—

Lois hadn't even intended to fall asleep, but she could feel the slight warmth of the morning light creeping over her skin, and she knew it had to have at least been a few hours since she'd given up trying to reason with her infuriating cellmate and decided to shut him out instead.

What else was she supposed to have done? The guy was clearly nuts, wasn't he?

His words were, at least... but she still, even now, couldn't shake the sense that he was safe. That he was trustworthy somehow... in a way she couldn't even rationalize.

Carefully, she pried her eyes open. She was facing away from the wall and could immediately see Clark sitting cross-legged on the floor in the middle of their cell, eyes closed, face tipped up towards the soft beam of sunlight streaming in through the window.

He looked so peaceful, so... innocent.

She hadn't really had time to acknowledge it last night in the harsh light of the overhead lamp, but the man, crazy or not, was also incredibly good-looking.

Argh, but that was exactly why she shouldn't trust him, wasn't it?

It was always the charming handsome guys who had another agenda. Besides, who in their right mind could look that peaceful after being told they might die at any moment?

Lois felt a wave of determination flash through her. She sat up, resolved to tell him exactly that, to demand he stop pretending he was something he wasn't, when a fluttering sound caught her attention, drawing her eye to the window.

Standing there in between the bars, was a bright yellow bird.

It looked just like a warbler... but she knew that was impossible. There was no way one could have ended up here in the Congo, was there?

Lois watched transfixed as the small bird hopped through the bars, head tipping from side to side curiously, before it took flight again, this time landing right on top of Clark's head.

He jolted slightly in surprise, but managed to stay fairly still, lifting his hand up in gentle offering. The bird hopped on eagerly, and Clark brought the little creature down in front of him, observing it with a smile.

"Hey, little guy," he whispered. "Where'd you come from?"

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me..." The words came out of Lois' mouth impulsively.

It was just... too much.

Clark's head twisted towards her so quickly she was surprised it didn't spook the bird. He looked mildly self-conscious at her reaction, but did nothing to get rid of the little creature he was so delicately cradling.

"You're awake," he said quietly.

She was sure he sounded nervous. Guess he'd had some time to ruminate on their situation too. God, she'd give anything to be able to read his mind right now... to know what was going on in there for sure.

She prided herself on being good at reading people... but this guy... he was like no one she'd ever met.

"You know, in some cultures, a yellow bird is a good omen," he said tentatively. "It symbolises new beginnings."

Lois shook her head in disbelief again. "There's no new beginning here, Clark. Once those men come back... it's the end."

"No, it's not," he said, with unexpected conviction.

Clark rose to his feet, bird still resting on his hand, and leaned over to the window to set the little creature down. It chirped happily at him before hopping back through the bars and flying away.

Lois watched, intrigued in spite of herself, as Clark just... stood there in front of the window, taking a long deep breath. It looked like he was drinking in the very sunlight itself...

Then he opened his eyes and looked at her with newfound assurance.

"I'm going to get us out of here now," he said, his voice sounding more authoritative than she'd have thought him capable of. "Just... stay back."

"Wait..." she called out in concern.

She wasn't sure exactly what he thought he was going to do, but she had a horrible feeling he was about to get himself badly hurt.

Except... why should she even care what this nutcase did to himself?

But she did care.

Something about the infuriatingly endearing, confusing, mysterious, puzzle of a man, had made her care.

Clark turned his back to her, facing the wall across from them with intention. She watched dumbfounded, wondering whether to try and physically hold him back, when suddenly

the wall just... exploded with a burst of unexplainable red light.

Dust and debris hung in the air as he turned back towards her. She could already see the world beyond the wall becoming visible behind him, freedom suddenly right within grasp.

“How did you...?” she breathed.

“We have to go,” he said. “I have to find Herb before they realize what’s happened.”

Clark held out his hand, eyes imploring her to take it, but she just stared at it, her mind whirring a million miles a second as she tried to process what had just happened.

“Please... take my hand,” he said urgently.

She looked into his eyes, searching their depths for answers. There was not a trace of pretence behind them.

Going with him had to be better than staying here to be found by their captors... and yet taking his hand felt like such a giant leap of faith.

Maybe the hardest one she’d ever made.

She was scared. Scared of trusting the wrong person again. Scared of another error in judgement making things even worse for herself.

Just as she could feel the desire to run increase, the yellow warbler entered her mind again, and she considered the ease with which the creature had recognized Clark as a safe place to land...

The little bird had trusted him without question. Picked up on that softness radiating from him, let it inform its decision to come closer.

Maybe... she could do the same.

She felt something inside of her release its protective hold, letting that guarded wall drop down and allowing her to take a first step towards him.

Lois had no idea how to make sense of any of the night’s events yet... but for the first time in a long time, she decided to trust her own heart.

She reached out and took his hand.

THE END