

Vigils

by Dandello (AKA Librarian)

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Rating: K+

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A/N: An expansion on Chapter 18 of **Shadows in Darkness**.

Clark Kent was Superman. It was hard to believe but it was true. Clark Kent was Jason White's biological father. And now Clark was lying in a hospital bed in an intensive care unit in the middle of STAR Labs. It had taken the trauma team from Metropolis General better than two hours to remove all the kryptonite from his chest and deal with all the damage Luthor's four shots had done. The ironic part - if one could call it that - was that Luthor had been shooting at Clark Kent, not Superman.

The uniformed police officer standing outside the ICU door used a keycard to unlock the outer door for her. Security around the unit was incredibly high - Luthor might be dead but there was little doubt that the people he was working with still had Clark marked for death. The MPD was taking no chances.

Lois rapped on the door to the room where Clark was and a white uniformed nurse unlocked it. Lois stopped just inside the door, taking it all in. The room was larger than it looked from outside and looked more like a lab than a traditional hospital room. It wasn't even rectangular - it was octagonal instead and the lighting was a little on the pink side. *Was this really what Krypton's light looked like? It's not too different from Earth.*

Lois stepped closer to the hospital bed that was the centerpiece of the room. The head of the bed was raised slightly and the side-rails were up, covered with heavy padding. The bed's occupant was pale, eyes half open, un-focused, unseeing. His hair was mussed, over his forehead almost into his eyes, broad dark strokes against pale skin. Lois reached out and brushed his hair away from his eyes. He was warm to her touch, too warm, fever hot. A pale green thermal blanket covered his body but it didn't disguise the refrigeration blanket under it.

Beside the hospital bed, a respirator hissed and clicked. A tube went from it, and an oxygen tank, to a clear plastic tube that had been pushed down his throat. Clark's chest rose and fell in time with the machine. 'Oh Clark, what have we done to you?' she wondered.

Several plastic bags hung on a pole by at the side of the bed. One bag was feeding a white fluid into a tube that was threaded through one nostril. Other bags fed other tubes that dripped colorless liquids into veins in both of Clark's arms. A drug pump was pumping measured doses of something into yet another vein, drugs to keep him comatose, unmoving, unknowing. Lois knew that if he was allowed to become conscious, he would fight the doctors and nurses trying to help him. He would probably even hurt himself in his efforts to break free.

When he was a patient at Metropolis General, they hadn't been able to do much beyond

watching and waiting. He simply flew away as soon as he was able. Had that only been a week ago?

A large sign on the wall above the head of the bed read: NO SMOKING. Lois managed a chuckle. Metropolis had outlawed smoking in public places nearly five years before, and even though STAR Labs was a private firm, she doubted they allowed smoking anywhere on the premises.

Lois wanted a cigarette to calm her nerves, but she wasn't going to leave the building to assuage her cravings. She wasn't going to leave *him*.

She spotted another, smaller sign that read: 'My name is Clark Kent. I can hear you.'

"Can you hear us, Clark?" Lois wondered aloud. "I hope so, 'cause then we can tell you we're only trying to help. We want you to get well. And I don't want to lose you again. I don't want Jason to lose you."

A group of electronic monitors occupied a rack on the wall by the head of the bed. Various lines and wires attached the different monitors to Clark's body. She glanced at the readings, although she knew she probably wouldn't understand what they meant. The EKG beeped with its persistent rhythm of 40 beats per minute. That was the reading the last time he was in the hospital, when all the doctors could do was watch and wait. *Was that normal or low for him?* She didn't know. Another readout caught her eye. Lois recalled reading somewhere what anything over 106° Fahrenheit was incompatible with human life. The internal temperature monitor read 108°.

She glanced at the nurse, afraid to ask.

"His temperature started spiking a little while ago," the nurse explained. She had a trace of an Irish accent. "I've been told by Doctor Faulkner that his normal temperature is a couple degrees paranormal anyway, so it's probably not as bad as it looks. I'm April Dunnigarth, by the way."

The nurse moved one of the chairs closer to the bed so Lois could sit.

At Met General there had only been the one chair and his uniform had been laid out on it. Of course, she and Jason were only there for a short visit. Anything longer than a few minutes would have raised too many questions. Of course, she hadn't remembered the truth then, either. The truth that Clark Kent was Superman.

Richard had driven her and Jason to Met General that day, the day after Superman fell from the sky. Thousands of people blocked the streets, waiting for word of their savior, their hero. They filled the streets west to Broadway, east to Jefferson, north to Forty-fifth and south to Thirty-ninth. Some held plates with lit candles, others just stood and waved handmade placards. They'd started coming when the news first hit. The police, many of them on horseback, moved through the crowd to keep an eye on possible trouble, but there were no disturbances, no problems. The crowd was waiting in quiet vigil, sending up prayers and good wishes for the man who had saved them.

The traffic was so bad that Lois and Jason ended up walking the last block to the hospital. One of the police officers at the hospital entrance recognized her and let her pass, calling ahead for her.

A white coated doctor met her at the elevator and ushered her and Jason past the officers at the nurse's station. Lois had visited an ill friend there several months before and knew that the intensive care unit was along the corridor they were heading down. But the doctor didn't head to the ICU. Instead he guided her to an ordinary patient room.

Superman was lying in an ordinary hospital bed, wearing an ordinary hospital gown.

Someone had cleaned his hair and the iconic curl lay against his forehead. He looked like he was simply asleep, chest rising and falling slowly. The only noise was the steady slow rhythm of the heart monitor.

The doctor closed the door behind her, leaving her and Jason alone with the super hero.

"Is he going to get better?" Jason asked.

"I don't know."

"I want him to. I like him."

"Me, too," Lois admitted. She stepped closer to the bed, trying to find the words she had wanted to say.

She thought of the first time she saw him, when he saved her life and the falling helicopter. *You've got me? Who's got you?* She thought of that first night when he descended like a god from the heavens. He had been smiling at her as he stepped down onto the penthouse patio.

"Can you hear me?" she said softly. "They say, sometimes, when people are..."

She took his hand. His skin was warm but his hand was limp. "There's something... something I need to tell you. Jason is your son. Please don't leave us again."

Her eyes filled with tears again. On the other side of the room, Jason was running his finger over the raised emblem on Superman's neatly folded uniform. Lois turned back to Superman. He looked so normal, like he should just open his eyes and everything would be all right. She leaned in and kissed him. His lips were soft and warm, just as she remembered.

There was no response, no change. Miracles didn't happen like that.

The heart monitor beeped on.

"Come on, honey," she said, taking Jason's hand. He squirmed free and ran back to the unconscious man in the hospital bed - the man who was his real father. Jason lifted himself up and kissed Superman on the forehead. Then he ran back to join his mother at the door.

There was no one waiting vigil outside of STAR Labs. No one, outside of a select few, had any idea that it was Superman lying in the ICU, hooked up to a respirator and monitoring equipment. Clark Kent was a nobody, a journalist who was raised in Kansas - certainly not a superhero.

Clark Kent was Superman.

The heart monitor kept beeping. Forty beats per minute. Beep... beep... beep...

Martha Kent had just poured herself another cup of coffee when she was struck with a feeling of disquiet. She wasn't a superstitious woman but over the years she had come to trust her intuition. She picked up her cell phone and keyed in her son's cell phone number. She knew it was probably nothing and she really shouldn't call him while he was at work, but the feeling that he was in trouble just wouldn't leave her. But so many bizarre things had happened in the past week. Besides, she still needed to let Clark know that she and Ben were back in Smallville and were okay.

She was surprised to hear a woman's voice on the phone. "Hello?"

Did she have the wrong number? Martha was certain it was right. "Oh, is Clark there?"

"Mrs. Kent?" the woman asked.

"Yes? Who is this?" Martha started feel even more worried.

"Lois Lane. I'm Clark's partner at the Planet," the woman said. She sounded rushed and worried. "How soon can you get to Metropolis?"

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Clark's been shot," Lois Lane said. *How could he have been shot? He's Superman for heaven's sake.* She almost missed Lois's next statement. "We're flying him to STAR Labs right now. He's in pretty bad shape."

Martha felt herself go cold. The phone dropped from nerveless fingers. "Mrs. Kent...? Mrs. Kent?" the woman's voice repeated through the tiny speaker.

It can't be... it can't be...

Martha picked up the phone and leaned against the kitchen counter. "I'm sorry," she said, trying to keep her voice from shaking. "You said Clark was shot? How?"

As she spoke the screen door opened and her neighbor, Ben Hubbard, walked in. He saw that she was on the phone and waited, curiosity written across his broad face.

"Lex Luthor," Lois answered. "He was using kryptonite bullets. Clark was trying to protect Perry White, our editor, and Luthor shot him."

Kryptonite... do they have any idea what that could do to him?

"How soon can you get here?" Lois asked.

"We'll try to get the first flight out," Martha said. Ben gave her a worried look and she put the phone to her chest to muffle it.

"Martha, we were in Metropolis just last week because you had a premonition Clark was in trouble," Ben reminded her. "But he was fine, remember?"

Of course she remembered. But Ben didn't know that it was Clark the crowd had been waiting vigil for outside the hospital. Ben thought it was for Superman. He hadn't understood why she had been so reluctant to leave, why she hadn't been anxious to hunt for her son - she had known exactly where Clark was. But she hadn't been able to tell Ben that.

She took a deep shuddery breath. "Clark's partner is on the phone. Clark's been shot. They're flying him to the hospital right now."

Ben just stared at her for a moment. Then he pulled out his own cell phone. "I'll see what Grace at the travel agency can do for us."

Martha brought her phone back to her ear. "Miss Lane, take care of my boy, you hear? You don't know how special he is."

"I'll do my best," the woman on the other end promised and hung up.

"The first flight out from Wichita leaves at four in the morning," Ben said. "It gets into Metropolis at ten their time."

So long to wait. Dear Lord, watch over my boy.

It had been all over the news: the bizarre EMP-like blackout that damaged the *Explorer* space shuttle and prompted the sudden return of Superman; then the earthquake that would have devastated Metropolis had it not been, once again, for Superman's timely intervention; and finally Superman's fall to Earth following his lifting of an artificial island into space, thus saving Metropolis, probably the entire planet, yet again.

But Superman was lying in a hospital bed, unconscious. There was no word, not even speculation, on if he would ever regain consciousness.

Martha badgered Ben into going with her to Metropolis. The closest they could fly was Cleveland, but they were able to rent a car and drove the rest of the way to Metropolis.

The city had been quiet, almost like it was holding its breath.

Despite the exhausting trip, Martha didn't want to rest. A huge crowd was blocking the streets around the hospital. Like the city, the crowd was quiet, waiting. Many people held lit candles. Others had placards that said 'Superman, we love you,' and 'Get well, Superman.'

Several television vans were parked close to the hospital entrance. Martha wondered how

ambulances were getting through and then realized they were probably being diverted to other hospitals. Clark would be horrified if he knew people's lives were being endangered because of him.

There was a commotion as a young woman and her young son came out of the hospital. Martha's breath caught in her throat as she looked at the boy - he looked just like Clark had at that age. Was it possible?

People with microphones were shouting at the woman and she held her son close. "Miss Lane, what did he look like?" "Did he say anything?" "Is he going to make it?"

Martha watched as Lois made her way through the crowd toward a waiting car. The younger woman seemed so stricken, like she was fighting back tears. Suddenly, Lois was right in front of her. Martha reached out and touched her sleeve. *Nobody can know the truth, Ma. Not as long as any of my loved ones are alive.*

"He'll be okay," Martha said. Lois gave her a blank look. "He's a strong boy." Martha gave the boy's cheek a little pinch. He looked so much like Clark did at that age. "He'll be all right," she repeated.

Lois seemed uncertain as to how to respond and so said nothing, hurrying away to the waiting car.

Martha wanted to go into the hospital. She wanted to tell them who she was, to sit at the side of her son, to hold his hand, but she also knew that no one would believe her. *Nobody can know the truth, Ma. Not as long as any of my loved ones are alive.*

Oh Clark, what have they done to you?

Jimmy was going over his photos of the most recent arson fire when Polly Harper's phone rang. Perry and Lois had left the newsroom together hours earlier, and it looked like Perry had actually spent the night in his office. Clark, Richard and Jason had disappeared the night before and Jimmy knew that Perry and Lois were both worried sick about them - it wasn't like Richard to disappear and certainly not with Jason in tow.

Polly listened intently to the caller on the phone, taking quick notes. "I'll get right on it, Chief," she promised whoever had called her. It sounded like it had been Perry.

"Marco," Polly called to one of the gofers. "Pull me up the obits we have on file for Richard White and Clark Kent."

Jimmy felt the blood drain from his face. *Obituaries? For Richard and Clark?*

Polly took a deep breath and Jimmy saw how bright her eyes were - she was close to breaking into tears. "That was Perry," she said. "Richard's dead, and Clark was shot by Luthor. Perry didn't say what Clark's condition was, just that I'm to update his obit. But I'm guessing that it's not good."

"I'm with you on that," Jeff Ryan, another Daily Planet staffer, agreed. "One of my sources just called from Met General. The senior trauma team was called over to STAR Labs to handle a priority patient with multiple gunshot wounds who was being flown in. No name was given on the patient, but I don't believe in coincidences."

"Why would Luthor want to shoot Clark?" Jimmy asked.

Jeff gave him a pitying look. "Why does that mad man do anything?"

The newsroom's reaction to the news wasn't quite what it had been when Superman fell from the sky. That day many of the employees had gone home to be with their loved ones following the earthquake that nearly devastated the city. It had been quiet in the newsroom

except for the drone of the commentators on the monitors and the occasional phone calls. And even those seemed muted somehow.

Perry had seemed to be the only one not affected by the thought of Superman's possible death. He walked out of his office and called to Gil. "Hey, what's the story on that big chunk of whatever-it-was Superman pulled out of the ocean?"

"Well, astronomers say it settled into orbit somewhere between Mars and Jupiter," Gil said, reading from his notes. "Supposedly, it's laced with kryptonite, and it's still growing."

"But what are we calling it?" Perry demanded. "It needs a name. Something splashy. Something big."

"Planet Ten?" Gil suggested.

Perry made a face. "Well, that's a terrible idea."

Lois had turned off her computer and was putting on her coat.

"Lois, what do you think?" Perry asked.

"I don't know Perry," she said. "Call it... New Krypton."

"New Krypton," Perry repeated. "Gil, run with it." Lois and Richard turned to leave. "Where are you two going?"

"To the hospital," Lois had answered. She was holding Jason's hand. Jimmy wasn't sure if the little boy had any idea what was happening around him.

"I'd be careful down there, Miss Lane," Jimmy warned, wishing he had Lois's courage to just go down and demand to see the hero that had saved them all. "It's a madhouse," he added.

"We will, Jimmy," Lois assured him. "Thanks."

Jimmy had watched Lois and Richard leave, wishing he could go with them and hating himself for not having the courage to ask.

The world prayed for Superman that night. But was anyone praying for Clark now?

Jimmy tried to settle down to work but his heart wasn't in it. Clark was one of his best friends, despite an absence of nearly six years. *Why would Lex Luthor want to shoot Clark Kent?*

Jimmy was thinking of taking a late lunch when Perry walked across the bullpen, Jason in tow. The editor beckoned to Jimmy to take the boy. "You can use Richard's office," Perry instructed. "Don't turn on the T.V. in there though. I'd rather he didn't... If there's bad news I rather it came from his mother or me."

"Sure chief," Jimmy agreed. "How was CK? When you left, I mean?"

"They just started surgery. He was alive, at least. And I haven't had a call from Lois saying otherwise." Perry suddenly looked far older than his sixty-some-years. "This isn't how it's supposed to be, you know," Perry murmured. "Clark's a little younger than my youngest son. I shouldn't be waiting for news that he's died at thirty-four. That he died because he made sure I was safe first."

"It's that bad?"

Perry nodded. "Yeah, it's that bad." The older man took a deep breath as he seemed to mentally change tracks. "Polly, Jeff, in my office! We have work to do."

Jimmy grabbed Jason's hand and opened the door to Richard's office as Polly and Jeff hurried to join Perry. Jimmy knew Richard kept drawing paper and markers in his desk to keep Jason occupied.

Oh my God. Richard's dead... And Clark was shot...

Jason was already busy drawing pictures. Jimmy watched as the boy drew pictures of a

bald man with blood coming out of his neck.

They also serve who stand and wait...

Jimmy realized he would stand and wait and keep Jason safe for as long as Lois needed him to.

Dear Lord, watch over Clark and Lois and Jason...