

Before It's Too Late

by Kala Lane Kent

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Rating: T

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Clark stared at Lois as though he'd never seen her before. She'd just yelled at - *cursed* at - Jor-El. It was nearly impossible to think that she had. Nearly.

Of course she did. This is Lois Lane we're talking about here. "Impudent..." Jor-El began, but Clark cut him off.

"Father, she is my wife," he said, and his voice was as low and stern as Jor-El's had been moments ago in castigating him. "I love her, and I will not renounce her. I understand that you do not approve of my choice, but that does not affect my decision. This is my choice - this is my life."

"A true Kryptonian would never..."

He never got any further, Lois interrupting with utterly scorn, "Did you miss the fact that he was raised *human*? I don't care *where* he's from; he's one of us in all the ways that count."

Firmly ignoring her, Jor-El kept his gaze locked on his son. "Kal-El, you will never be one of them. Not even *this* will make you one of them." The warning tone in the hologram's voice was clear.

But the younger Kryptonian didn't flinch. "Father, I do not care," Clark replied, silencing both of them momentarily. "I know what I am, and what I am not."

"So you say, but you are forsaking your mission," Jor-El replied. "How can you trade the love of an entire world for this one person? Did I not tell you to never set one of them above the rest?"

That was enough to bring a snort if derisive laughter from Lois. "Yeah, that works just fine if you're talking about kids or pets. And who says he traded? Trust me, I get left in the lurch a *lot* while he's out taking care of the rest of the world."

Clark couldn't help wincing slightly; hadn't they just had that fight? Recovering himself, he took a step forward, blocking Jor-El's view of Lois. "It is not negotiable, Father. I do not wish to hear any more on this topic. I came here for a reason, and it concerns my mission. Let us deal with the needs of the many and set aside this conflict between a few."

The hologram hesitated, still looking balefully at Lois. Clark didn't have to turn around to know she was glaring right back. That was his Lois: indomitable. Stubborn. Magnificent.

Looking down slightly to hide a smile, Clark began to ask about the sunspot activity yesterday.

A small midwestern town lay in shambles, and the local squadron of the National Guard knelt in neat ranks down the center of Main Street. Many of them had severe burns on their

hands and forearms, where Zod and Ursa had melted their rifles. They would not have capitulated even then, if several of their number hadn't attempted to attack Non with only their standard-issue knives and their bare hands. Not one was able to do more than annoy the towering Kryptonian, who after a moment of staring at them perplexedly had simply flung them away from him. One man had gotten up and come back at him; they had last seen him soaring above the roofs where Non had thrown him. That had demoralized them into accepting surrender.

The townspeople had barricaded themselves into their homes, for the most part, and General Zod was inclined to leave them there for the moment. None of them, singly or together, could possibly have the least effect on himself or his two followers. If they attempted to resist his rule, it would be a simple matter to tear apart their meager houses. Until then, he was more intrigued by the man kneeling directly in front of him.

This human had knelt only after asking that his men be spared if he would submit, and even then did so with the hesitance of one who did not cow easily. From this Zod concluded that he was the leader of the military force which had quickly arrived and been just as quickly overmatched. It was he who had given them the order to surrender, and he had also asked that he stand for his men, that whatever punishment Zod intended to inflict on them be executed upon his person. This notion of sacrificing oneself for one's subordinates was so outlandish as to be laughable and interesting at the same time, and so the General had taken this individual aside to question him further.

"So you say that these men are your responsibility, and you were charged with leading them into battle, where they do hazard their lives, yet it is your duty to spare them from wholesale slaughter?" Zod asked. "And that this is the attitude of all wise leaders in your country, that they do not spend the lives of their minions freely, but trouble themselves over each that falls?"

The man could not be broken of his habit of looking directly into Zod's eyes, and a gleam of defiance still shone in his countenance. "Yes. Only a tyrant or a fool would not care for his people and try to shelter them as much as he can. Fools lose their positions; tyrants tend to lose their heads."

The Kryptonian actually laughed. The pathetic thing was trying to *threaten* him! "I should counter to your words that if a tyrant be invulnerable to all harm, and possessed of powers beyond his inferiors' reckoning, he should use them as he sees fit. For none may stop him, and these lowly creatures should be glad to die in service of one greater than themselves. Indeed, as we have observed your nation but a short while, we have seen such excessive wastefulness that the common man's life would be much improved under our rule. We should be greeted with joy."

"You've chosen the wrong country, the wrong *planet*," the man replied. "We value freedom more than life itself - and yes, that freedom incurs some mistakes. But no man in this country will gladly become a slave, no matter what you promise him."

"Then every man in this country shall die if they will not serve us," the General said coldly. "You speak of liberty - an abstract concept, human. Its glory will pale beside the ashes of those who defy Zod."

"You can't kill us all..."

"We can, and we shall, if your people do not see reason," said General Zod. "Every man alive shall bow to me." He looked away from the human, toward the constant babble of noise he could hear in the distance. More towns, more cities, more people - an endless flood of them,

it seemed. If they were all as tender-hearted as this example, surely they would yield after the first hundred thousand or so were slain so handily.

But the man had one more thing to say. "There's one man you won't be able to subdue," he said proudly. "One man who'll send you and your two friends packing. Superman has never failed us."

"Superman?" Zod scoffed. "And who is this being?"

"He's called by some the World's Defender," the man answered. "Superman fights for truth and justice. He has the powers to do what you've done, but he's a savior, not just a destroyer like you."

A being with powers similar to his own... "And where does this Superman hail from? Speak quickly, human."

"A planet called Krypton," the man replied, and saw General Zod's eyes widen in shock.

"It could only be the son of Jor-El," Zod muttered in his own language. "Only he was convinced of the planet's peril ... and only he had hubris enough to send his only progeny to another planet to be its savior. At last, my old enemy, vengeance is near at hand. Did I not tell you that you *and your heirs* would one day bow down before me?"

Returning to English, Zod bent forward and locked gazes with the human. "You will tell me all that you know of this 'Superman'. Most particularly, where he can be found."

"I'll do no such thing," the man managed to say, the tendons in his neck standing out. "He'll find *you* soon enough, and I only hope I can witness it."

"You will speak," Zod replied, eyes gleaming. "Or you will pay for your defiance ... with the lives of your soldiers."

"No..." the human began, but Zod cut him off.

"Speak, or listen to them scream," the General said coldly, and the man bowed his head at last. Zod allowed himself a small smile as he finally got the information he'd sought.

"What do you mean, you *recognize* it?" Clark slipped out of that formalized speech into a shocked tone, and the hologram actually flinched. On one of the smooth crystal walls above them, enhanced images of the solar flare played in a repeating loop.

"My son..." Jor-El paused for a long moment. "That object was manufactured on Krypton. It is of my design. It is ... it *was* a small corner of an alternate universe known as the Phantom Zone. This was one of my last discoveries, before the destruction of our planet, and it was put to a use that seemed the lesser of two evils. But now that use has become folly, like so much else of the last days of Krypton."

"Father, please explain," Clark said. He could hear the weariness and dejection in Jor-El's voice, and it frightened him. Jor-El was usually confident to the point of arrogance. "Whatever was done, is done, and cannot be changed. We must focus on the present and the future."

"To do that you must understand the past," Jor-El said. "In the last days, three great criminals arose amongst us. Understand that Kryptonians are ... *were* a civilized people. We had very little crime, very little social conflict. Those who went against our laws were rehabilitated into productive members of society. But there were three incorrigibles who defied all attempts to transform them. Ursa harbored an unreasoning hatred of all males, and could not resist her urge to unleash violence on her unsuspecting fellow Kryptonians. Non was little more than a beast, voiceless, a creature of great strength and greater rage. His weakness lay in following without question the directives of a superior - he might have been rehabilitated, given time. But the both of them would be no more than regressives, throwbacks to a more a

savage time, if not for the influence of General Zod."

"General Zod rose very high in the Council's esteem. He was ... at one time I considered him an ally. A friend, perhaps." Jor-El paused, then visibly steeled himself to continue. "None was more shocked than I when Zod turned traitor to everything Kryptonians held dear. He - and his two followers - sought to destroy our society, installing Zod himself as absolute dictator. His plot was discovered and foiled. But by his actions he had proved himself beyond all remediation."

"Krypton had no capital punishment; we were not such a barbaric society as that. But we had no other means of dealing with Zod and his cohorts. So it was decided by the Council that they should be sent into the Phantom Zone, to languish there, alive and unchanging, forever."

"And you think capital punishment is barbaric?" Lois muttered, shivering slightly at the thought. "Jeez."

"Eternal living death," Jor-El said. "It was not an option I preferred, but it was the only one available to us. And now it has released my sworn enemies upon this planet. Not only *my* enemies, my son - General Zod swore that he would take vengeance upon my heirs as well."

Not even Lois had a comment to that. The perceived threat was growing larger with each word. Until now, Superman's enemies had always been human - very intelligent, often well-armed, but still only human. This was a paradigm shift. Clark took a deep breath to steady himself before asking, "Let us assume that they have survived the explosion and arrived somewhere on earth. What should I expect to face, father?"

"All three shall possess your powers. Perhaps, since they were exposed to such high amounts of radiation during the solar flare, they may have those powers in equal strength to your own. Non and Ursa have neither your intelligence nor your ability to strategize, but General Zod is a tactician of the first order. His only weakness is his rage. It may blind him so that he pursues you recklessly."

For a moment, all three were silent. Not one, but *three* beings with Clark's powers, all of them dangerous, all of them out for vengeance. The prospect was daunting. Only one person present was utterly confident of Superman's ability to triumph over evil. "No sweat," Lois said defiantly. "They're not used to this planet. It took you *how* many years to learn how to use your powers, Clark? It'll be like fighting babies with bazookas. Lots of power, no finesse."

"That's still very dangerous. I've never faced anyone who could even approach me for raw strength. I'm used to holding back - they're not." Clark sighed heavily, feeling as weary as if he'd already fought the trio. "At least Lex Luthor is still in prison. I don't want to think what kind of trouble *he* could get into in the middle of this mess."

"All right, so what are we gonna do about it?" Lois said, looking expectantly at the two of them. Something *had* to be done, after all...

He knew that tone in her voice, knew when she was plotting. And it couldn't happen this time. Not with the stakes this high. "*We* aren't going to do anything. I'm taking you and the puppy to your mother's until this is over."

"*WHAT?!*" Lois stared at him, looking for a moment as if she were the one with the scorching heat vision. "You and what army, Kent? Just who the hell do you think you're dealing with here?"

His answer was short and to the point, determined not to be swayed. "My wife. Who happens to be *extremely* vulnerable. I don't want you in harm's way."

It was clear that it went over about as well as he thought it would when she glared up at him in utter fury. "Bullshit. I'm a *reporter*. In harm's way and taking notes on it is my *job*

description," she snapped. "You knew that when you married me - *and* you work with me, so you don't have an excuse. Besides, there's *three* of them. Even you might need a little help."

"Lois..."

"Don't start, Clark. You're not gonna leave me at home like some little mouse while you go out and fight the bad guys. If there are three of them and they *all* have your powers, you're gonna need all the help you can get."

"Exactly how do you plan to aid him?" Jor-El asked, a trifle coldly.

Those blazing hazel eyes cut over to the hologram. "Well, for one thing, I can walk up to those three with a chunk of kryptonite. He *can't*. Got any better ideas?"

"That's way too dangerous," Clark protested. "Lois, we're not certain whether the kryptonite radiation affects humans."

"So what, you're just gonna ask them to stop? *Politely*, knowing you?" Lois paused and stared at him for a moment, then added, "Remind me how you *ever* survived without me?"

"While your interaction is fascinating," Jor-El began, "our time may be better spent discussing methods of recapturing General Zod and his followers." They both turned to look at him, Clark surprised, Lois glaring sourly. "I believe the idea, put forth by Lois of the House of Lane, has merit. While you, my son, cannot risk exposure to kryptonite, the three criminals from our planet will certainly be weakened by it."

"Holy shit, the giant floating head *agreed* with me," Lois muttered under her breath.

"Father, we do not know if kryptonite radiation has any adverse affects on humans," Clark protested. "I do not wish to risk Lois' health."

"It can't be *too* dangerous or Luthor would've grown another head or something by now," Lois retorted. "Besides, we're talking my health versus the conquest of the whole freakin' planet. People get x-rays and use microwaves all the time; I think I can survive saving the world."

Clark was still frowning, clearly not wanting to endanger her, when Jor-El spoke again. "There is another alternative. I ... had suspected that your powers might grow burdensome. That you might choose to live as one of your adopted people, rather than as one of us. To that end, the Fortress contains a power source radiating the rays of our red sun, Rao. If you had chosen to give up your powers, you would have stepped inside a crystal chamber and exposed yourself to that radiation, rendering you powerless without the danger of kryptonite. We can easily relocate the power source so that the red sun's rays shine throughout the Fortress, while you are safe inside the crystal chamber."

"So if we can lure them *here*, we can turn that radiation on *them*," Clark said. "All we have to do is trick them into thinking I'm losing my powers in the chamber." He didn't notice Lois' dark look toward Jor-El. She suspected that the red sun chamber might have been a failsafe; if Clark had been less adamant about having her *and* his mission...

Clark and Jor-El were in the thick of planning, and neither noticed when Lois quietly slipped away. Curiosity was a large part of any good investigative journalist's nature, and on her initial visit she'd pestered Clark for a tour of the immense Fortress. Lois could remember entering a room far to one side that had held several items he had collected, an unassuming little lead box amongst them, which Clark had told her contained the kryptonite Luthor had used to nearly kill him.

The Fortress had not been designed for security; it was unlikely that most humans could ever locate it, so the interior rooms weren't locked. It was a simple matter for Lois to retrace her steps and locate the particular chamber that held the kryptonite. There were actually two

pieces stored here, behind lead shields: the large chunk that Luthor had once hung around Clark's neck during the California fiasco, and a smaller piece the madman had begun wearing as a ring. Clark had confiscated both when Luthor was imprisoned, keeping the smaller piece in a tiny lead box just large enough to hold the ring.

Lois glanced back over her shoulder, listening for any suspicious silences, but she could easily hear Clark busily plotting with his father. He'd be furious with her if he had a clue, but it never hurt to have a failsafe. She slipped the little lead box into her pocket with only the slightest pang of conscience. The biggest worry would be taking the chance that it could harm her husband, but it was a chance they would have to take. *Insurance*, she told herself as she quickly made her way back to the main chamber. *Just in case it all goes to hell, I can warn him and toast these bastards. I never would've thought I'd be grateful to have kryptonite handy...*

The pair flew back to Metropolis in a much grimmer mood. Clark was subdued, nearly brooding. Not unusual after a trip to the Fortress. Lois was already beginning to associate that place of loneliness and grandeur - and the serious mood and formalized speech that overcame Clark after a visit there - with his other name, Kal-El. The way Clark spoke to her, and the way Kal-El addressed the hologram of his father, were so markedly different that they almost seemed to belong to different people. At any other time, Lois would have been delightedly puzzling out how all the facets of her husband's personality - Clark Kent, Superman, and Kal-El - fit together into the whole person whom she loved.

But not right now. Lois currently had the feeling that he was keeping something from her. Had he and Jor-El discussed something dire while she'd been swiping the kryptonite? Or had he realized she'd taken it? She tried not to think so hard about the heavy little box in her skirt pocket. Really, either could explain his silent, somber mood.

She didn't have long to ponder it. They touched down at the apartment, Bagel already yapping and scratching excitedly on the sliding glass door. "Help me gather up the puppy's things," Kal-El said as Bagel exploded out onto the balcony, desperately cadging affection without a clue to the situation. "I don't know how long this will take, and I want her safe at your mother's house."

"Sure," Lois replied, kissing his cheek before making her way inside. While grabbing the bag of puppy food, she had to pause to chuckle at the surrealism of Superman, in uniform, standing in the kitchen with a dog crate in one hand and a bright red leash in the other. Equally funny was watching him attempt to catch and put the exuberant pup in her crate.

It took better than ten minutes before he finally managed it, only to have Bagel whine and scratch from inside the cage. You had to have sympathy for the poor, confused thing. "Hush, baby Bagel, it's all right. We'll be going soon," Lois called soothingly to the puppy, then added to her husband, "We'd probably better put all her stuff in a grocery bag. I'd hate to drop a ceramic dog dish on some pedestrian's head from a thousand feet up. Unless it's my ex. God knows *he* deserves it."

That finally wrung a chuckle from Kal-El, who kissed her as they headed back outside. "I hope no one photographs this," he sighed as they took off, Lois curled into one arm, the other bracing Bagel's cage. "Superman, Clark Kent's wife, and a beagle puppy with all accessories."

Any reply Lois might have made was drowned out when Bagel pressed her nose against the cage's wire door. The wind speed, or a glimpse of roofs far below her, alerted the pup to her situation, and she started whining piteously. Lois and Kal-El both spent the rest of the

short flight trying to soothe her.

Lois was so frazzled by the pathetic whimpering that she didn't even look up as Kal-El set her and the dog crate down on the roof of her mother's house. "See, baby girl, it's okay. Bagel, it's all right," Lois whispered, kneeling to stick her fingers through the wire door. The beagle did look honestly terrified as she licked Lois' hand frantically, white-tipped tail beating against the walls of the crate.

"I love you, Lois," Kal-El said in a resigned tone behind her. "I'm sorry. It had to be this way for your sake."

That was enough to get her attention. She always hated when he sounded like that, like he had done something wrong. "I love you, too," Lois answered bemusedly, straightening up and turning with an affectionate smile. Her expression changed mid-sentence as she turned to look at him. "What's all this..."

Kal-El was already soaring away. He'd dumped her at her mom's house, just like the helpless puppy. And she still had the damn kryptonite in her pocket.

"Oh, you *bastard*. Fine, we'll just do this the hard way." Growling under her breath as she opened the door to the rooftop stairwell, Lois let the puppy out of the crate and they both started into the house. Already her mind was awl, plotting her next move and wondering just how she could pull it off.

Ashamed of himself for having flown off like that - Lois would want to *kill* him later - Kal-El still felt that he'd made the right choice in leaving her out of this. He couldn't bear the thought of having her in the midst of the danger, glad she was safe ... so why was he feeling so guilty for it?

No time to ponder. He had thought he would have to seek them out, but Kal-El quickly realized that his foes were looking for *him*. The moment he rose above Metropolis to listen for them, he saw fire blossom on the skyline. Somehow he knew it wasn't an ordinary fire, just a badly-timed electrical shortage. *They're here*.

Racing toward the fire, Kal-El saw the three for the first time. They hovered above the flames, calmly surveying the destruction they'd caused, as people below fled into the streets. It looked as though they had randomly set things alight; a city bus, several floors of an office building, and even a swath of the asphalt were blazing. *Someone doesn't know how to target their heat vision*, he thought grimly.

A quick glance of his x-ray vision revealed that the building they'd chosen was empty, and the bus passengers had escaped in time. So far, so good - he could focus on the three criminals. "General Zod," Kal-El called out, coming to a stop in midair.

The man in the center of the group saw him, and smiled. "At last, son of Jor-El. I have waited long for this moment." With no further warning, his eyes gleamed redly as he directed his heat vision at Kal-El.

The younger Kryptonian flung out a hand, deflecting the deadly heat back at Zod. His hand stung, and he gritted his teeth to ignore the burning. Ursa turned toward him with a sinister smile, and added *her* heat vision as well. He deflected that with his other hand, feeling blisters on both palms now. No, this *had* to stop. His control was better, and he quickly fired three bursts of heat vision, one per villain, aiming not for their faces as they had done to him. He targeted their midsections, and the sudden burn distracted Ursa enough that Kal-El could follow up with a gust of freezing breath to knock her from the air.

Zod had stopped his own heat vision to dodge Kal-El's, but the moment the younger

Kryptonian ceased, Zod was aiming at him again. This time Kal-El countered with his own heat vision, eyes locked in a red-laser glare. Their strength was equal, and the deadly beams deflected away. Kal-El didn't waste the moment of surprise that tactic granted him; he shot toward Zod, knocking him from the air, the force of his flight sending the General caroming through the wall of the empty building nearby.

Kal-El had no chance to savor his early advantage. Powerful arms fell around his shoulders, and Non started squeezing the breath out of him. Other opponents had attempted that trick before, and Kal-El forced his hands under Non's wrists, ready to push the giant off him. But to no avail. He realized with a trickle of fear that Non was *stronger* than he was. The big Kryptonian grunted and squeezed harder.

"Let *me* kill him!" Ursa called stridently. Kal-El's vision was dimming as his oxygen was cut off, but he saw her soar up to them, fist cocked, an insane gleam in her eyes. He faintly heard General Zod call out in protest, and then the impact made him see stars.

Non and Kal-El tumbled through the air from the force of Ursa's punch, and the villain was disoriented enough that Kal-El managed to struggle free. He grabbed one of Non's wrists and started flying in a tight circle, spinning Non around like a carnival ride. The big Kryptonian shouted wordlessly, flailing his free arm, and Kal-El let him go. Non pinwheeled through the air, roaring, and crashed into a radio tower a mile away. The top of the tower broke off as the Kryptonian smashed through it.

"Oh, *no*," Kal-El growled, darting to catch the tower before it crushed the fleeing, screaming pedestrians. He felt a slight change in air pressure behind him, and instinctively whirled around, the tower cutting through the air like a gigantic baseball bat. It smacked into Ursa and spun her off into the distance, shrieking in frustrated rage. Kal-El couldn't help flinching slightly; even knowing who she was and what she'd done, he still hated to strike a woman. Lois would've rolled her eyes and snorted at him for the thought. Thank God she was safe, even though he hated having abandoned her without a word...

...little did he know that Lois had dumped the puppy on her mother with almost no explanation, run outside, commandeered the first car that passed by, and driven like fury to reach the *Daily Planet* offices. She was, at that moment, standing awestruck in the street just outside the newspaper building, having looked up at the sound of the crash. Lois saw what Kal-El could not; General Zod, having soared far above him, coming down at top speed to smash Kal-El into the pavement. The street surface buckled from the impact for several blocks, and the top of the radio tower clattered down to narrowly miss a few bystanders.

Lois' heart seized up in her chest, seeing the General hovering over the hole in the street, and icy dread closed over her spine as Non and Ursa came flying back. She waited, hoping it couldn't have ended so quickly, and feeling very small and very vulnerable compared to the titans battling in midair...

Kal-El had been knocked through the subway level, down past the drainage system, all the way to the bedrock of the island. He suspected his pursuers were waiting above him, so he vaporized rock with his heat vision and came up several blocks away. Before the three had even seen him, Kal-El had blown a gust of wind stronger than any earthly tornado, flinging them away.

His full attention focused on the three criminals, Kal-El saw them regroup and fly slowly toward him. Zod knew now that strength and powers wouldn't win this contest; it would be up to strategy and teamwork. The General was sizing up his opponent more carefully now, holding Non and Ursa in check.

"You know you cannot win, son of Jor-El," Zod called mockingly. "You cannot hope to best the three of us."

"We'll see about that," Kal-El replied, projecting a confidence he didn't feel. It looked as though he would have to lure them to the Fortress after all.

He didn't see or feel his wife's gaze as she stood watching below with dawning horror. Jor-El had been right. Their powers matched his too closely for an easy win, the continuing fight moving the foursome closer and closer to the *Planet* itself. "I'm going to have to do this, there's no other way. Either that or I stand a very good chance at losing him along with the rest of the world. What's your choice, Lane?" she whispered to herself, already knowing the answer.

Closing her eyes, gathering her courage and more than a little bravado, Lois' hand touched the small cold surface of the lead-lined box. "Oh my God, what the hell am I doing?" At that moment, she heard another crash of impact above her. *We have to get them out of here before they manage to take out my husband and half of Metropolis with him. And he's not going to be able to manage this one on his own. There's no other way, Lois.*

That was enough to quell the instantaneous fear. There was no question of what needed to be done. With a determined clench of her jaw, Lois held tight to the box and ducked into the *Daily Planet's* revolving glass doors. *Time to save the world. I just can't believe I'm doing this in a dress.*