

After the Fall

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Rated PG for angst and an occasional mild swear word

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Summary: How does Clark handle the emotional and psychological aftermath of his having killed Nor?

I do not own Lois, Clark, or any characters herein; they belong to Warner Brothers and DC Comics. Some lines have been taken from the episode "Battleground Earth," written by Eugenie Ross-Leming & Brad Buckner. This story is strictly not-for-profit. Also, I have moved the events of a certain first season episode to the start of the fourth season. Those events aren't mine, either. Proper attribution for them will appear at the end of the story, as will additional disclaimers and reference citations.

WHAM Warning: This story is pretty angsty, but none of the regular characters die. (There is only one death in the story, and that takes place very early on.) The ending is upbeat.

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my beta readers, Corrina (Female Hawk) and Ray. Their suggestions have made this story far stronger than it otherwise would have been.

Superman lay momentarily stunned -- as much by the surprise of being sucker-punched as by the actual blow from Nor's drei. He leapt to his feet while the hurled drei rematerialized beside his opponent. For a few minutes, nothing could be heard but the clanging of drei shaft upon drei shaft as the two adversaries engaged in a deadly dance.

Then, during a relative lull, Nor drawled, "I've decided that when I kill you, I will make your concubine my own. I wonder how long a mere human could survive the attentions of a *real* Kryptonian? I have some entertaining experiments in mind to find out."

Nor's words stirred a fire inside Superman which he did not know he possessed. He became one with the weapon. All else vanished. No doubts. No heart. No mercy. Just the kill. The next thing Superman knew, he was standing over Nor's body. Nor's *dead* body.

Thank God, Lois and the rest of the world were safe from the tyrant! But... he had killed a man. He, who -- in both personae -- had held life precious and did all he could to protect it, had taken a life. He had betrayed his own convictions and the trust the world had placed in him.

He heard Lois approaching and knew he couldn't face her. Just thinking about the look of disappointment and horror on her face -- before she schooled her features -- was unbearable. As fast as superhumanly possible, he left his killing field to fly to the familiarity and isolation of his home.

About twenty minutes later, Lois knocked on Clark's door. She had driven as fast as she could to his apartment. She had figured that he would either be there or in Smallville, and it was a lot easier for her to get to Clinton Avenue. She saw that she had guessed correctly -- there was a light shining through the translucent curtains on his door; he was home. She knocked on the door and waited. No answer. She pounded harder. Still nothing. She called through the door, "Clark? Clark, let me in! I need to know you're OK. I know what happened, and I know you must be hurting."

When Clark didn't even bother to respond, her worry increased. She rummaged through her purse for the key he had recently given her and soon had the apartment door opened. The sight which greeted her eyes did nothing to alleviate her concerns. Clark, still in the Suit, was floating above the sofa, sitting curled into a fetal position as he rocked and muttered to himself. She could just catch his words: "I killed him. I killed him. I killed him. I killed him." It was obvious to her that he must have been repeating his awful mantra the entire time he had been home. His eyes stared into nothingness.

She walked over to him and put a hand on his arm. "Clark...?" His mantra continued.

Alarmed now, she said more forcefully, "Clark! Listen to me! You did a good thing! Yes, you killed Nor. But by killing him, how many innocent lives did you save? So many people had already died because of him. How many more would have died if he had lived? Thanks to you, those people will stay alive. And if you hadn't killed him, he would have killed you. Every life you save from now on would have been lost if you had let Nor live."

The mantra ended, and Lois could see he was listening to her. She started to rub his back soothingly while she kept on speaking words of encouragement. Slowly, oh so slowly, his eyes focused on her and his rocking stopped. He lowered himself onto the sofa and uncurred to a more normal sitting position. But the haunted look never left his eyes. His shoulders drooped. His spark was gone.

Lois sat beside Clark and held his hand in her lap. She decided to try another approach. She fished in her mind for some other subject -- anything other than Nor's death -- that she could put forth. "I heard on the radio on my way over here that all of the other Kryptonians have left Earth for good."

Clark finally spoke, his voice flat. "Yes. I told Zara telepathically to leave without me. That I was unfit to be a ruling Lord... and that she should marry Ching."

Lois could see that this conversation was not going to head anywhere productive. She tried another topic. "Oh, I found out what happened to STAR Labs' missing kryptonite. That whack-job Colonel Cash had taken it. He had turned some of it into a gas and was going to use it on all of you if the fight's outcome had not proven satisfactory. Fortunately, that turned out to be unnecessary. As I was leaving, I heard him give the order that the unconverted portion of the rock was to be returned to STAR Labs. I plan to find out what he is going to do with the kryptonite gas."

His only response to that conversational gambit was a grunt. They lapsed into silence. Lois sat next to Clark, put one arm around his shoulder, and rubbed his nearer thigh with her free hand. After a minute, Clark spoke. "Look, Lois, I appreciate what you have done. But I need to be alone now. OK? Besides, you have a story to write up."

His voice was still dull, and it obviously cost him a great deal of effort to pull himself together to say that much. But even so, his words sounded more like himself. And he was right. She did have a story to write up -- and it was likely to earn her a Kerth, at the very least. She hoped he would be all right by himself for a few hours.

"OK, I'll go back to the office," she conceded, "But I'm coming right back over here after work. I don't want you to be alone any more than you have to be right now. And promise me you'll call your parents as soon as I'm gone. They've got to be worried sick about you, and I'm sure the call would do you all good."

He nodded his agreement.

Clark was grateful to Lois for breaking him out of the horrible state in which he had been since he had arrived home. He could now think more clearly. And with Lois gone, he had

plenty of time to think.

Preserving life had been his foundational tenet. Since he hadn't abided by it, could he trust himself to practice any of his core beliefs? For the good of society, murderers must be prevented from ever killing again. He was a murderer, but there wasn't a prison that could hold him. Because of his super abilities, the only one who could prevent him from killing again was himself. And there was only one way to guarantee that he would never kill anyone else: He himself had to die.

A part of him objected. [If you were to commit suicide, you would, in fact, be doing the very thing you are trying to avoid -- namely, killing again. Is killing yourself any better than killing anyone else?]

He squashed that thought. Committing suicide wouldn't be murder. It would be capital punishment.

[But capital punishment requires a judge and a jury as well as an executioner. Although you can kill yourself, you can't be your own judge and jury. What you would be doing would, at best, be a revenge killing -- still murder.]

But Clark kept coming back to a few simple facts: He had killed once; he might kill again; therefore, to preserve the lives of other people, he must kill himself.

His first step was to fly to STAR Labs.

Lois answered her phone, "Lois Lane. Daily Planet."

"Lois, thank God you're there. I tried calling Clark, but he didn't answer his home or his office phone."

"Dr. Klein. What's wrong?"

"It's Superman. He just left STAR Labs with a container of kryptonite. And he wasn't himself. He was so subdued; it seemed like it was an effort for him to speak at all."

Lois was alarmed. "Superman is depressed, and you gave him *kryptonite*?!?"

"I had to give it to him. What else could I do? It is his, after all. He had only loaned it to us for study and for safekeeping. Keeping it would have been tantamount to theft."

Lois said grimly, "You never should have given it to him when he was in that state of mind. I have to go find him. Goodbye, Dr. Klein."

When Lois once again opened the door to Clark's apartment, Clark was lying on his side, doubled over in agony. On the glass table in front of his sofa sat an opened, lead-lined box with kryptonite glowing inside. Clark had changed into black jeans and an accompanying black t-shirt; she wondered whether he had deliberately chosen to wear the color of mourning.

Lois hurriedly closed the box. She knelt in front of him and hugged him as best she could. When Clark had recovered enough to sit up and talk, Lois gently asked him, "Why, Clark?"

"Trask was right. I'm an alien and a killer." He laughed bitterly. "He was even right about the alien invasion. The world would be safer if I weren't in it."

"Clark Jerome Kent! Don't even think that nonsense. Trask may have been right about the invasion, but he was horribly wrong about you. You have always used your powers to help other people. You are the kindest, gentlest man I know. You only killed today because you had to."

Clark's voice became strained. "No. That's just it. Nor was talking about you. Trying to goad me. It worked. I... lost control. I didn't know what I was doing. When I came to my senses and saw Nor's corpse..." Clark's voice became barely a whisper, "I was pleased. Not only did I kill, but for a moment, I actually took satisfaction in another man's death."

Lois' voice was thick with concern and love. "Oh, Clark. You did what you had to do. Are you pleased now about his death?" She, of course, already knew the answer to that question.

"No."

"Then forget your earlier reaction. It was just adrenaline and testosterone speaking; it wasn't really you."

"But even if what you say were true, it was *me*. It was *my* hormones. What happens the next time a would-be killer or rapist makes me angry? Will my hormones kick in like that again? Am I like a shark who has first tasted blood? I can't take that chance. For the safety of everyone on this planet, I can't live."

"Clark, you're scaring me. You need to talk with someone who can help you more than I can. Would you call Dr. Friskin?"

"What's the use? What could she do? Could she bring Nor back to life? Could she guarantee I won't ever kill again?"

"You know she can't do either of those things. But she can help you regain some perspective. She can help you realize that you are still a good and decent person who on any given day contributes more to the well-being of others than many people do in their entire lives."

"No, Lois. I won't see her. I don't want to 'regain some perspective.' And my being among other people would be too dangerous. For the good of society, I must die."

Lois' anger flared. She started pacing and gesticulating wildly while she gave way to sarcasm. "Yeah, that's right. Society would be so much better off without you. It would be better if more people died in fires; if more attempted rapists, muggers, murderers, and thieves were able to get away with their crimes because Superman wasn't there to stop them; if more politicians got away with corruption because Clark Kent wasn't alive to expose them. And your parents and I would be so much better off, too."

Lois dropped her sarcasm and stopped pacing. She turned to look directly at Clark. "Have you *any* idea of the *hell* you would be putting your parents and me through if you were to kill yourself?!? Of the pain we would have to live with for the rest of our lives? Of the self-recriminations your death would cause? Do you think we would ever stop wondering whether anything we could have said or done might have stopped you? Whether we were in part to blame for your death?"

Lois saw that Clark had begun looking increasingly horrified as she told him the ramifications of his committing suicide. Clearly, he had not considered how his actions would impact others. Lois knew he would never deliberately do anything to cause his parents or herself grief; his mental anguish had obviously caused him to be so self-absorbed that he was only just now considering how hurtful his death would be for others.

Lois stopped pacing and knelt before Clark, taking his hands in hers. She forced herself to speak more calmly.

"Clark, promise me, on your word of honor, that you won't try a foolish stunt like this again. Promise me that you won't try to commit suicide. The world needs Superman. And I need *you* -- Clark. I couldn't bear to lose you. If not for yourself, then for your parents and me -- please, please live!"

She could see Clark's eyes soften. "I promise." He stood up and, with a gentle pull on her hands, encouraged her to do likewise. He took her in his arms. "And... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Thank you. And I'm staying here with you tonight. No arguments. On our way in to work tomorrow, we can return the kryptonite to STAR Labs."

"Lois, I'm not going in to work. I can't be around people any more than is absolutely necessary. You shouldn't even be here. It's not safe."

"Didn't we go through all of this once before -- when you broke up with me 'for my own good'? I didn't buy what you said then, and I don't now. For *your* own good, and for *our* own good, I'm staying! But if you need a few more days before returning to work, I can keep up the story I told Perry about you going undercover to research the effects of Superman's absence on organized crime."

"Thanks, Lois."

Lois awoke in the middle of the night to hear a terrified Clark screaming repeatedly, "No!" She rushed out of his bedroom to see him levitating over the sofa, thrashing wildly in his sleep. She didn't dare go near his rapidly moving limbs; she didn't want to be inadvertently super-punched. So instead she called Clark's name, softly at first and then louder. After her third call, Clark bolted upright with one final scream. He looked about wildly for a moment, and then, as awareness of his surroundings and memories of the day's horrors returned to him, he dropped down to the sofa and slumped down, muttering, "Only a dream."

Lois walked behind the sofa and leaned over its back to give Clark a hug. "Wanna talk about it?"

"No."

She continued to hug him for several minutes, until he insisted she go try to get some more sleep so she would be awake for work the next day.

Lois had not wanted to go to work, but she had scheduled a meeting with a source, and she couldn't contact him to cancel. She decided that she would just drop the kryptonite off at STAR Labs, see the source, and come right back to Clark's apartment. She wouldn't be gone more than a couple hours. She called Perry to tell him that she wouldn't be in to work that day due to illness. She rationalized to herself that that was the truth -- she was worried sick about Clark.

As soon as her meeting was completed, Lois returned to Clark's apartment and she saw that the intervening hours had brought change to Clark and to the apartment -- and not for the better. The windows now all had new sun-blocking drapes. And they were all closed. Despite it being a sunny morning, the apartment was so dark that she had barely been able to see Clark until she turned on a light. Clark was sitting drooped on the sofa, his forearms resting on his thighs and his head bowed. His chin sported stubble. On his coffee table were several of the day's newspapers, including some of the less reputable ones. The Dirt Digger's headline screamed, "Superman -- Super Menace?" The Whisperer's wasn't any better -- "Is Superman Gone for Good? Good!"

Lois immediately started opening the drapes. "Clark, you need sunlight. It's not healthy for you to be in the dark."

"I don't care. I'd rather risk my health than other people's. I promised you that I wouldn't commit suicide, but I can at least try not to be so super. The sun gives me my powers, so..." he let his voice trail off.

Lois' anger flared. "Enough is enough! You won't go see Dr. Friskin? Fine! But if you won't help yourself, I'm going to get you the help you need." She stalked out of Clark's apartment and went directly to Dr. Friskin's office. Dr. Friskin had the day off, so Lois next drove to STAR Labs.

"Dr. Klein, I'm so glad you're here. I need to speak with you about Superman. I didn't stay to talk earlier this morning when I dropped off the kryptonite because I hadn't wanted to tread on Superman's privacy, but now, for his own good, I'm going to have to. You were right to be concerned. He was so upset over having killed Nor that he had used the green rock to attempt suicide. He won't be trying that again, but I think he is engaging in another form of very slow suicide -- he has cut himself off from all sunlight. He needs professional help, and he needs it now."

"What can I do? I'm not a shrink."

"No, but you know him better than anyone else in the medical profession, and he trusts you. He refuses to see a psychiatrist. Isn't there anything you can do?"

The doctor thought for a moment. "Red kryptonite."

"What?!?"

"Red kryptonite might help him."

"But that stuff makes him apathetic. He's already in bad enough shape emotionally."

"That's why red kryptonite -- in a small dose -- might help him. It might take the edge off his emotions, kind of like Prozac would for a human."

"But he can't very well be around red kryptonite for the rest of his life. Who knows what long-term damage it might do to him?"

"He might not have to be. The most effective form of treatment for depression in humans is a combination of medication and psychotherapy. The medication provides rapid help to the patient, while the psychotherapy provides long term benefits. Maybe we could do something similar with Superman -- if he were exposed to red kryptonite, perhaps he would be in a better state to listen to reason and maybe even undergo psychotherapy. Once his mental state is stabilized, we might then be able to wean him off of the red kryptonite."

"So, do all humans stop the medicine once they've had psychotherapy?"

"Not all. Some do. Of course, others need a lot of time before they can be weaned off, and there are some folks who can never get off the meds." He saw Lois' look of dismay and awkwardly tried to recover. "Oh, but I'm sure that Superman wouldn't need the meds for long. He's shown himself to be very resilient. One other thing, and it may be important... How were you able to find Superman? Where was he?"

"I found him somewhere I knew he sometimes goes to be alone."

"Had he been aware that you knew of this place?"

"Yes. Why?"

"It's just that if he had really wanted to commit suicide, he could have flown someplace far away from civilization before exposing himself to the kryptonite. His choosing to go somewhere that he could be found is a good sign. Some part of him must have wanted to be found, must not have wanted to die. A lot of suicide attempts are really cries for help; it sounds like his may be one of them. Given that, I think it more likely that he may be willing to try red-kryptonite therapy."

After pondering the idea briefly, Lois agreed that it might work, and that it was certainly worth a try. Dr. Klein retrieved a number of small red kryptonite pebbles from their safe and put them in a lead-lined box which he gave to Lois. He instructed her to start with a single pebble and gradually increase the number Superman was exposed to until he seemed calm enough to be thinking straight. She at once returned with them to Clark's apartment.

Were it not for the drapes again being closed, she would have thought that Clark had not moved at all since she had left him sitting dejectedly on the sofa that morning. She came in and offered a tentative, "Hi." When he didn't react at all, she repeated her greeting with more force. This time, Clark returned it, albeit in a low monotone.

"Clark, do you love me?"

That got Clark's full attention. He turned his bleary eyes toward her. "What?! Of course I do!"

"Do you trust me?"

"You know I do."

"Then will you do something for me?"

"Anything in my power -- if it won't endanger you or others. What do you want me to do?" He had worked up enough curiosity to ask. She took that as a good sign.

"First, promise me."

Now he really looked suspicious of where this line of questioning might be leading, but he nevertheless made the promise.

"I just got back from speaking with Dr. Klein, and he thought

you might feel better if you were exposed to a small dose of red kryptonite. Would you try holding some for a while?"

"That wouldn't make me feel better; it would make me numb. Anyway, I don't deserve to feel better."

"A small dose shouldn't numb you. Besides, you promised!" Lois pushed aside the twinge of guilt she felt at manipulating Clark like that. After all, it was in his own best interests, even if he didn't realize it yet.

Clark said nothing; he just held out his hand. Lois opened the lead-lined box and handed him a red pebble. It didn't seem to have any effect on Clark; so, every half hour or so, she handed him another pebble. Finally, when he was holding five pebbles, he seemed to relax into a state more like his normal self.

Now that he was finally in a receptive state, she decided to reiterate her arguments of the previous evening.

"Clark, now that you are thinking more clearly, could we talk some more about what happened yesterday?"

"Do we have to?" Clark looked like a little boy being told he had to get a shot.

Lois grinned apologetically in reply. "Yeah, we do. I know that killing Nor went against everything you believe in, and I can understand why you don't want to discuss it, but it will help if you do. You do realize that had Nor lived, many other people would have been killed? That although they don't know it, those people owe you their lives? And that had Nor killed you, he or his minions probably would have succeeded in taking over the world?"

Clark nodded an affirmation.

Lois continued, "You couldn't have defeated Nor without killing him. He would have made it a fight to the death. If you hadn't killed him, he would have killed you. You know that, too?"

Again, Clark nodded.

"So there wouldn't be a court in the land that would find you guilty of murder. Everyone has a right to protect themselves. And, when confronted with deadly force, they have the right to kill in self defense. Of course, under the circumstances, you won't be undergoing a trial. But you do understand that there isn't a jury around that would pronounce you guilty?"

"But those are human laws made by and for humans. I *have* to hold myself to a higher standard, Lois. When I was growing up, I enjoyed reading Spiderman comic books. I'll never forget something said in the very first issue -- 'With great power there must also come -- great responsibility.'"

Lois smiled. "Funny you should mention that. I read that issue, too. Do you remember the context of that quote? Peter Parker came to that conclusion while he was blaming his inactions for the death of his uncle. He rose above that awful experience to go on to do great things to help people.

"Clark, you have so much more going for you than that mixed-up kid ever did. I know you, too, can learn to overcome what happened and live a full life helping people once again."

Clark gave her a strange look. "Lois, Peter is a comic book character. He's not real. What makes you think that real life is anything like that?"

Lois sighed. She had thought she was making progress. She decided to try another tack. "OK. Forget Peter. Suppose that when the Dillinger clone had pointed his gun at you, I had used one of my martial arts moves on him; but instead of just disarming him, I had accidentally killed him. Would you have forgiven me?"

Clark gave Lois a loving look such as she hadn't seen since before the whole nightmare of a duel had started. "Of course."

"Well, then, give yourself the forgiveness that you would have given me!"

"I can't, Lois. Don't you see? Because I'm Super, I can't allow myself to have an accident of that kind. If I forgive myself, I might slip again. I can't allow that to happen."

"Clark, you can forgive yourself without forgetting what happened. I know you could never forget, even if you wanted to. What happened yesterday will haunt you for a very long time -- I know that, too. If I could take away that pain, I would. But when you are mentally beating yourself up yet again over the events of yesterday, I want you to think about -- really think about -- everything we've just been saying. Would you do this for me?"

Clark sighed. "For you? I'll try."

"Good. Thank you. And would you go back to Dr. Friskin?"

"No, Lois. That I won't do, even for you." He gestured at the tabloids on his coffee table. "I'd have to go as Superman, and I couldn't do that. I couldn't be Superman again even if I wanted to be. There are too many good citizens afraid of him. I couldn't bear to go to a rescue and find that a crime's victims are more afraid of me than they are of the thugs. And what if I lose control again? I can't risk killing again, and I would have too many chances of doing just that as Superman. No, I've worn that Suit for the last time. Superman is dead. When I killed Nor, I killed him, too."

Lois decided to let that topic drop for the time being, favoring instead a more important goal. "Well, if you won't be Superman again, would you at least be Clark? Would you go back to living your life as Clark Kent? It's been too long since I've had my partner at the Daily Planet, and I miss him! Besides, I'm on the trail of a hot story, and I could really use your help with it."

Clark saw through her ploy of needing assistance -- after all, since when did Lois Lane ever ask for help on a story? Even so, he couldn't refuse his love her request. "All right. I'll go back to living Clark's life." He held up a cautionary finger. "But *not* Superman's."

"Deal, partner!" She mentally added, "At least for now."

Clark didn't find returning to his old life as a journalist as difficult as he had feared, but he steadfastly refused to engage in any Super activities. He only put the Suit on once more during those first few weeks -- when he had tried to turn himself in for murder. Nothing became of that; Nor was deemed a war casualty, and so his death was not punishable. Clark had made sure that only the relevant authorities had seen him at that time. After a few weeks of Superman's absence, public speculation was running high as to the cause, the most popular view being that he had simply left with the other Kryptonians. But one thing was certain, crime was on the rise. Lois convinced Clark that he should at the very least don the Suit one final time for a press conference in order to put the rumors to rest and give the public closure.

And so Clark found himself in the spandex once again. He approached the microphones to deliver his speech. "Good citizens of Metropolis, I have been proud to call this city my home for the past few years and to serve in whatever way I could. It has always been my desire to use my abilities to help others and to preserve life. But as you know, the last time I was seen in public, I took a life. I have tried to turn myself in to the authorities for prosecution, but have been informed that because Nor was attempting to conquer this planet, my actions were seen as appropriate acts of wartime defense, and therefore, I would not be prosecuted. Nevertheless, my deeds from that infamous day have caused many honest citizens in the public to fear me. In order to ease those fears, I have decided to retire from public life. I leave the safety of this city in the competent hands of the Metropolis Police and Fire Departments."

Clark stepped away from the microphones, but just as he was about to take flight, Inspector Henderson approached him and spoke quietly but intensely.

"I never thought I'd see the day that Superman showed himself to be a selfish coward."

"Inspector?!?"

Henderson gestured for Superman to accompany him away from the microphones and the press to where they could have a more private conversation. Clark followed the inspector's lead.

As they walked, Henderson replied, "You heard me, Superman. Your speech was a crock, and you know it. You want to ease their fears? You could do that by going back to doing what you used to do for them. This is about your having killed that psycho, isn't it? You're feeling guilty about that. You're afraid that something like that will happen again. And so you're taking the selfish and cowardly way out and just giving up."

Clark was amazed at how perceptive the inspector was. "How...?"

"How did I know? Do you think you're the only one who's been through this? Hell, every single officer I know has either killed someone already or has dreaded the day he would. And you know what? The good officers, the strong ones, keep at their jobs anyway. They remember why they began serving, and they learn to work despite their fears. And it's a good thing, too. Can you imagine what the city would be like if every officer who had killed someone -- or who was afraid that they might have to kill someone at some point -- quit their job?" His voice softened. "There are resources available to help police officers do this -- counseling, support groups, and the like. Superman, you know you're considered an honorary police officer. Say the word, and I can get you into a group."

Clark was touched by Henderson's gesture. "Thank you, Inspector. Your offer means a great deal to me. But I can't take you up on it. I know people behave differently when I am around. Just my presence would inhibit the other group members from saying what they have to say to get help for themselves."

"There's another option. There's a high-tech type of online support group -- a 'newsgroup.' Only police officers are given the password needed to join, but no one needs to know who you are once you have the password. You could get the help you need and still stay completely anonymous. The newsgroup has helped some of my cops get back on their feet. Think about it, Superman. It's not that we couldn't survive without you -- I'd pit the men and women of the MPD against those of any other city, any day. But you can get to the scene faster than we can, go places we can't go, lift things we can't lift, save lives we can't save. Countless people here and around the world owe their lives to you, and you could save many more if you continue your work."

"But what if I kill again?"

"Then you deal with it then. Are you gonna let yourself be hamstrung by 'what ifs'? Then here's a 'what if' for you: What if you just retire, and many people that you could have saved die as a result? Wouldn't you be at least partially responsible for their deaths? Look, why don't you join the forum and talk with others who have been there. Come out of retirement if and when you are ready. But at least give it a chance."

"Thanks, Inspector. I'll do that."

Clark found the newsgroup to be quite helpful. Over the next several months, he "talked" online with others about his fears and his guilt, always being careful to couch his wording as if he were a human police officer. Gradually, his nightmares subsided, and his obsession changed to preoccupation and then to frequent spasms of remorse and fear. He found that talking with others who had been through something similar had helped him to learn coping skills, so he no longer needed the red kryptonite. He eventually even grew to miss donning the Suit. He started to help out a little here and there as he had done in his pre-Superman days. But he was now more careful than ever to cover his tracks when he did. After all, the stakes were higher now than they had been in the old days. If he got careless now, not only would he have to move, but so would his new bride. (He still couldn't

believe that he was lucky enough to have Lois wed him!) And yet he kept Superman in retirement; after all, the only thing that had really changed in the public's perception of Superman was that he was no longer mentioned much in the public media and people had started to think of him as but a memory. The thought of what the public's reception of him might be should he appear once again made him extremely nervous. Each week, he decided to give himself another week to recover before making his re-entry onto the public scene. And so the weeks unfolded until nearly a year had passed.

As Lois and Clark entered the Daily Planet's bullpen, Clark noticed a distinguished-looking gentleman standing nervously beside his desk.

"Can I help you?"

"Might I have a moment?"

"Certainly, Mr...?"

"Daitch. Professor Stephen Daitch, astronomer. I understand the Daily Planet had a 'special' relationship with Superman. I know he hasn't been seen for a very long time, and for all I know, the Kryptonian ship may have come back for him. But if he is still somewhere on Earth, it is imperative that I see him tonight, around 8:00pm, at EPRAD...."

"What's this about?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you, other than to say that he is our last hope for avoiding catastrophe on an unprecedented scale."

"Well, I can try to get a message to him, but I can't promise that he'll be there."

"That's all I can ask. But please let him know how important this is! And... thank you."

When Professor Daitch left, Lois asked, "Well? What did he want?"

"Perhaps we should discuss this in the conference room."

She reiterated the question as soon as Clark had closed the conference room door behind them.

Clark answered, "I'll know more tonight. He said Superman was needed to avoid a huge catastrophe. Superman is to meet him at EPRAD."

Lois looked hopeful. "And...?"

"And I've decided that Superman should pay him a visit. If what he said is true, I'll have to act. And if it isn't, he'll have been the only one to see me, and Superman can disappear again, with the public none the wiser."

Clark struggled to keep the dignity and composure characteristic of his Superman persona, but inside, he was staggered by what he had been hearing. Unfortunately, Professor Daitch hadn't been exaggerating; if anything, he had understated the severity of the situation. He was calmly talking about the end of the world as we know it. Clark knew that if Superman didn't step in, the fallout from nuclear explosions -- the only alternative available -- could also irreparably harm the Earth. He had made his decision before Daitch even asked.

"Of course I will do what I can. I guess we're about to find out what my limits really are."

Lois reached up to caress Clark's cheek. "Oh, Clark... What are you going to do?"

Clark, in turn, cupped Lois' cheek with his hand. "The only thing I *can* do. Lois, if I don't go up there, it's the end of civilization. Billions of people will die. You know I have to do this."

"But that doesn't mean I have to like it. It's not fair. Don't we deserve even a little time just to be happy together? You've gone through so much -- *we've* gone through so much -- to get here. And now, we're barely home from our honeymoon when *this* happens." Lois could restrain herself no longer. She embraced

Clark as tightly as she could, and she burrowed her head into his chest, her tears dampening his shirt. "Clark, what if... what if you don't come back?"

Clark sighed. "I know, honey. I'm scared, too. I don't want to do this, but I have to. There's no other viable choice."

They hugged each other in silence for a while, each thinking of the days to come. Finally, Lois pulled back to look Clark in the eye. She swallowed, grimaced, and nodded. "You're right. You have to go. Just... Try to come back safely?"

"Of course, honey, of course." Clark leaned forward to seal his promise with a kiss, which Lois' lips parted to deepen. They spent the rest of their evening telling each other without words just how much in love they were.

Clark decided to don the Suit in the human manner. His mind was so awlright that he didn't feel like spinning physically. He laughed at himself when he realized that he wasn't sure which frightened him more -- that he would fail to stop Nightfall or that the gathered crowds would recoil in fear at the sight of him. He was being ridiculous, he knew, but the knowledge didn't change the fear. His boots on and his cape adjusted, he took off for the launch site.

Lois knew that she couldn't show up as Superman's wife, but it was well-known already that she was Superman's friend. She could not resist giving him one last friend-to-Superhero kiss for good luck. When she broke off the kiss, she whispered in her husband's ear, "I am so proud of you. Good luck!"

Clark nodded his response and then turned to Professor Daitch. As he listened to the professor describe how to use the oxygen tank with which he had been fitted, he looked around at the crowd. The faces he saw were anxious, but hopeful. He listened in on some of their conversations and was relieved to realize that the anxiety was all directed toward Nightfall, not toward himself. Whether it was because of the passage of time since the Nor debacle or the enormity of Nightfall's potential for disaster, Superman was no longer perceived as a threat to the honest citizenry. That realization struck him with almost as much force as did the news of Nightfall the previous evening, and it spurred him on to even greater determination to succeed with the task at hand.

Clark flew faster and longer than he ever had in his life. As Nightfall loomed larger and larger, he fought the urge to slow down to protect himself. The colossal rock obliterated his view of more and more stars, until at last it was all that he could see. He double-checked his trajectory, closed his eyes, and put forth one last burst of speed. The jolt of the subsequent explosion caused him to lose consciousness.

The first sensation Clark experienced when he came to was that of motion. He opened his eyes, and the sight of the rapidly approaching Earth brought to mind the recent events. He regained control of his body shortly before re-entry and returned to the remains of the asteroid to survey his work. He noticed that one very large piece, about three miles wide, remained intact and was on an intercept course with the Earth. He had to change its trajectory, or there could still be massive devastation. He pushed against it. It wouldn't budge. He paused a second to regroup and catch his breath and then tried again, straining with all his might. Nothing happened for a few seconds, but then he felt the chunk give way -- ever so slightly at first, and then with increasing momentum. With one final heave, he sent it hurtling away from the Earth's path.

A rapid but thorough examination satisfied him that the remaining debris was all small enough to be harmless were it to enter the Earth's atmosphere. He wasted no time before returning to Earth. As he descended, he thought again of the crowd's earlier

reception of him. True, it had been favorable then, but was that just because their fear of Nightfall had temporarily displaced their fear of him? Now that he had taken care of the asteroid, how would they greet him? Would the apprehension they had shown him a year ago resurface? Sure, they would be grateful to be alive, but would they nevertheless step back from him and wish him to go away, lest he kill again?

It felt good to be back in the Suit and able to help people openly once more, but if his presence frightened the crowd, then Superman would have to go into retirement once again.

Clark came to a controlled landing in front of the waiting crowds. He was met with a hearty welcome; he had heard the cheers start as soon as he came close enough to be seen by humans, and the roar continued long after he had touched down.

Clark was amazed. He had not dreamt that, once the danger to Earth was past, he would be met with such universal welcome. If anything, the people were even warmer toward him now than they had been before he had killed Nor. He was overwhelmed by the effusive reception.

He scanned the grounds to find Lois and saw her meet his gaze with eyes wet from tears, a smile of love and gladness on her face. He permitted himself the barest of smiles and the briefest of nods to acknowledge and share in her joy at his return. A proper reunion would have to wait until they were in the privacy of their own home. That morning, they had decided that if he did return from his mission, Lois would call in the story to the Daily Planet while he was debriefed, and they would meet at their Hyperion Avenue home as soon as possible thereafter.

Clark took a moment to compose himself and then turned to the crowd and motioned for quiet. "As EPRAD may have informed you already, the mission was successful. The impact destroyed Nightfall, and the danger has passed. Are there any questions?" After addressing several questions regarding the mission's success and what it was like to fly in space, he chose a young man in a New Troy State University t-shirt to ask the final question. "Yeah, Superman. Now that you're back, will you stay here in Metropolis and help out like you used to?" Before Clark could answer, someone else in the crowd started a chant of, "Stay! Stay! Stay! Stay!" It was picked up -- at first by one person here and two people there, but within seconds, the chant swelled until it was a deafening roar taken up by everyone in the crowd.

Clark once again raised his arms for quiet and addressed the crowd. "You may recall that when I left last year, it was because I had no desire to frighten honest citizens. It was for that reason that I have stayed away. But you have shown me today that that time of fear has passed. Your enthusiasm has warmed my heart and shown me that it is time to make Metropolis my home once more. It is with great pride and delight that I will once again do what I can to provide help in this city and around the world. Thank you."

He smiled and waved to the crowd one last time before turning to Professor Daitch to report on his mission. Shortly thereafter, as he flew home anticipating a proper reunion with Lois, he thought about his life. He believed the days ahead would be better than any he had yet had; not only was he married to his beloved Lois, but he was also now finally ready and able to be Superman again. Life was good.

THE END

Credits and References

I have borrowed some events and several lines from the Lois & Clark episode "All Shook Up," written by Bryce Zabel. I have, however, played fast and loose with the plot.

I decided to use newsgroups rather than forums or message boards for the support group. I based my decision on the Internet

timelines found here

http://www.experiencefestival.com/a/Internet_forum/id/2009227
and here <http://www.spiritus-temporis.com/internet-forum/history.html>. I might have gotten away with using a forum, since they had existed during the time of this story, but I figured that they would not yet have established themselves to the point where the police would be using them to form an online support group.

My information about posttraumatic stress disorder came from these pages:

<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/reintegration/guide-pdf/SMGuide.pdf> <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/what-is-ptsd.asp>

My thanks to Aria for telling me about them.

I learned about the treatment of depression (in humans, of course!) from the following sites:

<http://psychcentral.com/lib/2008/depression-treatment-psychotherapy-medication-or-both/>

<http://www.healthyplace.com/depression/psychotherapy/nimh-psychotherapy-and-antidepressant-medications-work-best/menu-id-68/>

<http://www.healthyplace.com/depression/psychotherapy/talking-therapy-equals-antidepressant-drugs-for-severely-depressed/menu-id-68/>

Admittedly, some of the information presented in the sites may not have been known in 1996; any anachronisms were motivated by plot necessities.

Please note that I am not a medical doctor. (I only have a Ph.D., not an M.D.) Nothing in this story should be construed as medical advice. Clark's recovery from depression should not be taken as typical of humans; after all, as he pointed out to Lois in the pilot episode, "I am not your typical male." ;-)

The Spiderman quote is taken from the debut issue of Spiderman, as seen here:

<http://goodcomics.comicbookresources.com/2006/12/07/comic-book-urban-legends-revealed-80/>