

Make Love, Not Warcraft

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Summary: Years after Clark leaves Metropolis during the freak heat wave, he and Lois meet up in the most unlikely of places. But will old scars run too deep to fix what is broken between them?

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Disclaimer: I own nothing. I make nothing. All characters, plot points, and recognizable dialogue belong to DC comics, Warner Bros., December 3rd Productions and anyone else with a stake in the Superman Franchise. I'm just having fun with their toys. The World of Warcraft games and characters belong to Blizzard Entertainment. I don't own them either. In fact, I've spent so much money playing the games (since 2006!) that they may very well own me instead.

This story is in response to the challenge issued by Lynn S.M. on the Lois and Clark Fanfic Message Boards. The stipulations were 1) Lois is wearing an elf costume, and it is not because she is undercover, 2) she may be dressed as any type of elf (examples given included Tolkien-esque elves and Santa's helpers), 3) the story must be gfic, 4) Lois is an adult in the story, and 5) it cannot be Halloween-related. As a gamer, this was what I was able to come up with.

Author's Note — The majority of this story is set on November 13, 2008, the night of the Wrath of The Lich King expansion release.

Also, in this universe, it took years before it was discovered that Superman was NOT the cause of the Metropolis heat wave. And even longer before Clark found the heart to return.

What a crowd, Clark thought to himself as he waited outside the once familiar Gamestop in the heart of Metropolis.

Despite the chilly temperatures of that mid-November night, a good hundred or so night elves, orcs, dwarves, trolls, and taurens milled about on the sidewalk. Some stoically stood around, leaning against the side of a building, saying nothing, but impatiently tapping their feet, perhaps a hand resting lightly on the pommel of an epic sword, mace, spear, bow, or war hammer. Other stood in loose circles, talking the minutes away — all friends or brand-new friends brought together by their common interest. Some, in a direct departure from the sword-and-magic fantasy world, stood around texting on their phones. Clark heard snippets of conversation as he tried to patiently await the midnight release of the newest World of Warcraft expansion pack, The Wrath of The Lich King. He nearly smiled as he heard a few of the obviously more hardcore players speaking phrases in the various languages of the game — mostly greetings, from what he heard. Idly, he wondered — since he'd long ago memorized all of the limited phrases spoken in the different racial factions — if he should mentally increase the number of languages he knew.

The thought did not amuse him. It only served to

momentarily darken his mood.

After completing the goals in The Burning Crusade expansion just a few months before, he'd spent the majority of his free time pursuing some of the more obscure achievements in the game, biding his time until the next expansion. Now he was less than an hour away from new content, a new class of characters to play, and a higher level cap. Excitement rippled through him and he fought hard to keep his private smile from crossing over his lips. He didn't want to look like a crazy person.

Of course, under the heavy prosthetics and makeup that he wore, it might have been hard to tell, if he only cracked a small smile. After all, he *was* dressed as a tauren — a bull-like creature which stood like a man, and whose in-game design and civilization appeared to have been heavily influenced by Native American cultures. The latex snout he wore would likely distort any movement his mouth could possibly make, at the very least.

"Dude, I can't *wait* to try out the new Death Knight class," a human warrior said, close to Clark. He looked over and his heart stopped for half a beat.

Jimmy.

It didn't surprise Clark in the least, seeing his old friend there amongst the fellow geeks who'd gathered together to pick up their copy of the game as soon as it was available. Jimmy had always been a computer nerd and gaming enthusiast. *Of course* he would have tried Warcraft and fallen under its spell.

Seeing his friend should have gladdened Clark's heart. It should have made him want to rush over and engulf the younger man in a warm hug, complete with hearty slaps on the back. It should have made him run over and catch up with the man. Instead, seeing Jimmy only brought a stab of pain to Clark's already conflicted heart.

He'd only just arrived back in Metropolis that afternoon. He hadn't done much more than secure the keys to his new apartment and get ready for tonight's gaming party. Well, he guessed he couldn't describe the apartment as new, not totally. Through a stroke of random luck, as Clark had decided to move back to Metropolis and see if he could pick up the pieces of his shattered life, he'd found that his former residence on Clinton had just become available again. He hadn't even flown out to see the old place. He'd just called up the landlord and said that he would take it.

Mentally, Clark kicked himself. After all these years, did he really think he could just waltz back in to the life he'd left behind? The life he'd felt forced to drop in a hurry, as the weather patterns in the city had become alarmingly hotter with each passing day — a phenomenon that had been linked to Superman's extraordinary powers? A solar conductor, they'd called him. They'd blamed the use of his powers around the city — making rescues, mostly — for the shift in the temperature. Instantly, the tide of public opinion had turned against him and he'd felt forced to voluntarily leave the one place on Earth he loved. In doing so, he'd also had to leave behind the one woman he'd ever loved in his life.

Lois.

Every second of every day without her had been an exercise in complete agony. He'd kept up what contact he could with her in the beginning — sending postcards when he could but never having an address to give her in return so that she could write back to him. He'd called too, in those early days, though the pain of knowing he could never see her again tore his heart with razorblade sharpness. Soon though, the phone calls became fewer and further between as he traversed the globe, never stopping in one place for more than a couple of short weeks at a time. Their once easy friendship morphed into a strained and uncomfortable thing, and eventually, even those short phone calls hurt too much for Clark to bear. It was easier on his destroyed emotions to send the bright postcards and occasional emails to her, until she'd gone

and married the devil — Lex Luthor.

Clark hadn't blamed Lois for wanting companionship. And maybe she'd actually loved the man. Clark had no way of telling. All he knew, as he watched from a distance through newspaper articles and television news coverage, was that Lois had married Luthor a little better than a year after Superman had abandoned Metropolis. She'd remained married for nearly eight years, until an investigation that Jimmy himself had headed had uncovered the truth. Luthor's nuclear power plant, which had opened during the freak Metropolis winter heat wave, had been steadily leaking into the river, which had, in turn, raised the temperature all over the city. What was worse, were the memos Jimmy had somehow managed to uncover, all sent to — and ignored by — Luthor from his scientific departments telling him of the leak and the devastating effects it was having on the city's natural ecosystems.

It was only in the years after Superman's self-imposed exile that the leak had finally been tended to — further proof that the leak had likely been staged in order to unceremoniously evict the superhero from his home. An arrest attempt had been made, but, true to Luthor's nature, he'd refused to let the situation slip from his control. Rather than allowing himself to be handcuffed, tried, and prosecuted, he'd committed suicide. One single shot from an antique pistol to the roof of his mouth, all within full view of his wife.

Lois had swiftly been cleared of any charges. It had been painfully obvious to everyone that she hadn't known anything about her late husband's nefarious plot. Besides, the world over knew that she was Superman's biggest supporter and friend. There was no way she would have ever allowed Luthor to do what he'd done, had she known about his underhanded actions.

Clark had been ecstatic to learn that he had never been a solar conductor, that he'd never unwittingly gambled with his friends' and family's lives. He'd thought about returning home to Metropolis immediately. The only thing that had stopped him had been utter fear and shame. Could he really just go back home and pretend like nothing had happened? How could he ever face Lois again? So, for a time, he'd spent each day alternating between a sudden resolve to go home and try to make amends, and a defeated decision to stay away, working as a constantly moving correspondent for a paper which was most definitely not the Daily Planet family he'd come to know and love during his brief tenure there. Then, shortly after Lois had buried Lex Luthor, Clark had gotten wind of the fact that she'd hooked up with some FDA agent.

What was his name again? Clark asked himself. He ransacked his brain for a few moments. *Sanderson? Scarab? Scarface? Sardine? No, wait. It was Scardino.*

Before Clark had known what was happening, Lois had been on her second marriage, and all desire to go back home had rushed out of him like a deflating balloon. His heart completely broken, he'd quit his job and went back to wandering the Earth without a purpose. That had been roughly three years ago. Three miserable, long years, each second of which had been steeped in a potent brew of regret and self loathing.

He'd only returned to Metropolis because he'd heard a rumor that Lois was once again single, though he hadn't heard what the circumstances were, and though he couldn't seem to verify the report.

"Naw, man, the Death Knight's going to be a loser class," one of the guys in Jimmy's group said dismissively. "Paladins rock the hardest."

"Oh please," said a short girl who was dressed like a troll. From her get-up and the stuffed tiger she carried, Clark guessed she was a hunter and the tiger was the pet who fought alongside her.

"Sally, seriously, hunters suck *so* hard," Mr. Paladin retorted. "Every newb makes a hunter."

"You just can't handle that I routinely out DPS you," she said, rolling her eyes, easily tossing around the game's slang.

Clark didn't even need to translate the shorthand in his mind. DPS, or damage per second, was always of the utmost interest to the members of his guild, whenever they grouped together to fight their way through a dungeon or raid instance.

He tuned out the conversation to inwardly sulk. Seeing Jimmy had torn a hole in Clark's chest. He missed his old life so desperately, but he was so afraid that he'd destroyed everything in his frantic effort to protect the ones he loved. He wondered if having a life as Clark was even worth it anymore. If he couldn't ever repair the smoking ruins of his once close friendship with Lois, he might as well give up on the idea of having a normal life and become Superman full-time.

It was funny, in a way, he mused. In the beginning, he'd all but murdered Superman and buried the garish primary colors that had once heralded a hero, but which then signaled the scariest threat the planet had yet faced. At least, until the Nightfall asteroid had come within a few short hours of killing all life on the planet. For the span of a month, Superman had once again been gazed upon with adoration and gratitude, before public opinion had again cooled and he'd become shunned and feared again. He'd limited Superman and his powers to only the very worst scenarios and tried to ignore the murmurs of fear his presence incited. For a time, Clark Kent had existed almost completely alone, had almost become one man instead of two. Then, as time had gone by, and Superman had been cleared of any wrongdoing in causing global warming, he'd gradually lost his grip on Clark and slid almost solely into the skin of Superman. What good was the broken soul that had once been a reporter for the Daily Planet? He could at least still do some good as a superhero.

At some point, he'd discovered Warcraft — deciding to try it out after reading several articles on the game. And as he'd slipped into the digital world and began to complete quest after quest, he'd found that the innocent exploration of the game had led to an addiction. The longer he stayed logged in, the further he managed to level his avatar, the more the outside world and his problems seemed to melt away. The harder he focused on his role in a raid, the less time he had to stew in his own lonely, miserable feelings of self loathing over having ever let go of Lois.

At five after eleven, the doors to the Gamestop opened, the launch party for The Wrath of The Lich King finally getting underway. This store, unlike most others, seemed to really go out of its way to make the launch a true event. Within minutes, a trivia contest got underway, the contestants dressed as a human mage, a night elf hunter, an undead priest, and blood elf paladin. Clark hadn't even attempted to become a contestant. With his flawless mind, it would have been a bit too much like cheating. Instead, he was content to stand back, leaning against the counter, and watch as the questions and answers came fast and furious. In his mind, he easily answered every question, never second guessing himself.

It didn't take long for the trivia competition to lose its appeal, however. Clark took to wandering the store, browsing titles of games for systems he didn't own. He spotted a rack of t-shirts and looked through them, eventually extracting a black one with the logo of the Horde emblazoned on it in blood red. He draped the shirt over his forearm just as the trivia ended, only to be replaced by a costume contest. Since Clark had actually needed to labor over his disguise, he entered and took a respectable third place, the winner dressed as the leader of Orgrimmar — Thrall the orc. The young man's get up was perfect in every minute detail and Clark wondered how many hours the man had spent on his costume.

Probably wears it to conventions and the like, he thought to himself as he snuck another peek at the impressive costume.

At the stroke of twelve-oh-one, a small army of employees started to take each customer according to the ticket he or she had been handed when they'd walked through the doors. Clark was twenty-seventh to receive his copy. He paid for the game and his shirt, then looked around one last time at the gathered group of fans. He was surprised at how calmly and orderly things were progressing. With one final look back, he made ready to leave, only to bump into someone while his attention was elsewhere.

"Look where you're going, you overgrown cow!" the surly female voice said.

"I'm sorry, I..." He paused as the sound of the voice registered in his rusty brain, throwing some long disused gears into action.

He looked at the lanky blood elf warlock before him. Shorter than he was, but not by too much. Perfectly shaped features. Skin a painted rosy color — like once pale skin that had been kissed by the sun. Straight blond hair pulled back into a single warrior braid that was long enough to bump into the top of her posterior with every movement. Her gear, of course, being nothing less than the most epic items for her class of fighter. A fire in her eyes that could set the entire world ablaze in an instant.

Clark knew her even before his mind could form a single coherent thought.

"What are you staring at?" she asked gruffly.

"Lois?" he asked, his eyes misting over. He'd never been one to shed many tears, but in that moment, he could have cried an entire river in his joy at seeing her.

Lois' brow creased in a frown. "Do I know you?"

Clark could barely nod, the lump in his throat so large that it was choking him. He swallowed hard, trying to make enough room to breathe and talk.

"It's me," he said after a moment, his voice cracking with emotion. "Clark." Blind to what he was doing, he put a hand to his chest as if to identify himself.

The anger in Lois' face swiftly turned to confusion. "Clark?" she asked, as though she'd heard wrong.

He nodded again, this time more confidently.

"Clark?" she asked again as her emotions swirled again, this time anger and joy dueling it out in her features. "Is it really you?"

"It's really me," he confirmed for her.

"What... what are you doing here?" she asked, her voice going soft and her eyes widening in shock as she registered just what his presence in Metropolis might mean.

"It's uh, the launch party?" he joked uncertainly, gesturing lamely to one of the huge standing displays by the front windows.

Lois' mouth set into a hard line. She was not in a mood for jokes. Clark sighed softly.

"I finally came back home," he said in a near whisper, almost afraid to utter the words, because if Lois told him to get lost, he would. No more Metropolis. No more Clark Kent. He wouldn't have the strength to continue his human facade.

"Did you? Or are you going to up and leave again at the first sign of things getting rough?" she demanded harshly.

That was an epic sword thrust to his heart. "That depends," he said after struggling for too-long a time to find the right words.

"On what?" Lois asked, fingering a small pouch at her belt that Clark guessed was filling in for her purse.

Clark looked away, unable to meet the brown eyes that had captured his heart and soul from the very first moment.

"Us," he whispered.

"Us? *Us*?" Lois said, her anger rising. "After all this time, you think there's any 'us' left? Fifteen years, Clark. *Fifteen years!* And barely a word from you in all that time!"

"I know," he said, no trace of any strength in his voice at all. "I don't expect forgiveness. But, I'd be lying if I didn't say that it is *so* good seeing you."

"You'd *better not* expect forgiveness," she growled.

"Look...are you busy tonight?" Clark asked hesitantly. "Can I buy you a cup of coffee or something? I'd like to...try to apologize to you. Make amends. Explain why I sort of...fell off the face of the Earth for a while."

"Well, I *was* going to go home and start leveling up my character," she said after a moment. "But I guess I owe it to myself to see why you completely abandoned me."

Ouch, Clark internally winced.

"Just let me get my copy of the game," she added.

Clark nodded. "Of course. Mind if I wait with you?"

Lois shrugged. "Whatever."

Clark mutely nodded once again and followed her as she joined the back of the line. As they waited, he kept sneaking glances at her costume. She caught him looking once.

"What?" she demanded to know.

"Nothing. I guess I just never pictured this. You dressed up like a blood elf. That fact that I'd ever run into you at the release of a new gaming expansion pack. I mean, you never struck me as the type to play anything more than maybe a bored game of Solitaire on the computer." He stopped himself. "Then again, maybe it *does* make sense in its own way — all the competition in leveling and getting the best gear and the achievement system. I guess maybe I *can* see why the ever intrepid Lois Lane might fall under the game's spell."

"I only started playing because of Lucy," she said, her mouth drawn into a tight line. "Her husband started playing, so she started playing, then she roped me into it. I'm only Horde-side because her husband wanted to be an undead." She raked her eyes over his own costume. "Never pictured you as a tauren," she said after a moment, no hint of any amusement in her voice.

"I thought they were interesting looking. Kind of noble too, which was exactly the opposite of how I was feeling when I created the character," he admitted, his heart aching at the memory of his extreme loneliness and depression at the time. "I called myself Greenhorn, after the way you viewed me when we first became partners."

The line moved slightly and they inched forward.

"I named my avatar Wildrose," Lois said after a moment.

"Wildrose," he repeated. "I like it. A natural beauty, but if you aren't paying attention, you'll get hurt by approaching — stuck by a thorn," he said approvingly. It seemed an apt description for the Lois who'd stormed into Perry's office during his interview so many years ago.

"I'm on the Norgannon server," she said after another short silence. She seemed to be scraping the bottom of the barrel to keep the conversation moving.

"I'm on Kargath," he replied.

Lois nodded mutely. Clark found himself scrambling for something to say — anything that would keep her talking. He'd missed the sound of her voice the way a man left to rot in the blackest prison cell missed the sunlight. He'd missed the sound of her laughter even more, that lack of it in his life a pure poison to his soul. As he sought out something to say, he allowed himself a moment to listen to the sound of her heartbeat. It at once quickened his pulse, fanning the flames of his love and desire for her ever higher, soothed him as it always had, and intoxicated him like a potent drug injected directly into his veins.

"So...a warlock, huh?" he finally managed, finding the topic of the game easier than the much harder apologizes and confessions to come.

Lois shrugged in an almost bored manner. "I liked the idea of spell casting. Seemed like an interesting way to cause damage. Let me guess...druid?"

Clark nodded. "I liked the idea of being able to deal damage, take damage as a tank, or heal as needed. It left it open for me to solo as much as I wanted." He sighed. "Sometimes, it's easier

being a loner.”

“Yeah,” Lois agreed emotionlessly.

An uncomfortable silence fell between them as they continued to wait in line for Lois’ turn to purchase her game. Like Clark, she had pre-ordered the game, and the transaction went smoothly and swiftly. At last, they were headed away from the Gamestop, where several of the alien-like draenei were engaging in another round of trivia.

Lois led the way down to the Dunkin Donuts on the far corner of the street. It was one of the only places to get coffee around the clock. Clark led them over to the couch and armchairs that lay nestled and unoccupied into the deserted donut shop. Lois started to give him her order before he stopped her and recited the way he’d always seen her take her drink.

“You remembered,” she said, a minute amount of wistfulness coming through in her words.

Clark nodded. “I remember,” he said simply. “I remember everything.”

He hurried to the counter then, both eager for and utterly dreading the conversation that was to come. Whatever he said, whatever Lois said, had the power to make or break him. If she chose to leave their friendship buried in the past, then Clark Kent would die that very night. Superman would live on, but he would no longer be the upbeat hero he’d once been. And he would no longer be a friend to the press — he would no longer speak to reporters of any kind, would no longer work to give the news quotes they could use to air on television or print onto paper. He would reserve his words for those he was rescuing and those emergency responders that he would be working alongside.

Only one sleepy college-aged man seemed to be helming the store at this late hour, though Clark could smell the pungent odor of cigar smoke wafting in through the staff door in that back, which had a brick wedged against it to keep the door slightly ajar. Clark was glad that the cashier had at least one other person to keep him company, and to back him up in the event of a robbery. Clark placed his order and the man all but sleepwalked his way through filling it.

“Here,” Clark said as he sat down in the armchair. He wanted nothing more than to sit next to Lois on the couch, but he dared not press his luck. “I got you a chocolate chip muffin too.”

Lois nodded her thanks and Clark took a bite of his plain cake donut. He wasn’t even hungry — his stomach too knotted in terror of how the next minutes would play out. For her part, Lois picked tiny pieces of her muffin apart and nibbled on them uncertainly. She took a sip of her coffee after a few minutes.

“So, are you going to start talking or what?” she finally asked, her voice sharp as icicles.

“I’m trying to figure out *where* to start,” Clark admitted with a sigh. “There’s so much...”

“Why don’t you start by explaining why the hell you just up and left when Superman... when *I* needed you the most. And why the hell you’ve been avoiding me for nearly fifteen years.”

“After I left,” Clark said, purposely avoiding Lois’ first demand of where to start, “I moved around a lot. It was a lot like the old days, after I graduated from college and before I came to Metropolis. Just...I had a lot more on the line this time,” he said, studiously remaining vague. “It was hard on me, Lois. I felt... ripped away from my life. I felt... disconnected from the world.”

“Moving around doesn’t make you incapable of sending an email or two. Or from making a phone call,” she argued.

“I know,” he said, dipping his head once in contrition. “And I apologize for that. It’s just that...and please, don’t take this the wrong way...it hurt too much after those first few that I sent over. It just reminded me of everything I’d lost.”

“Right,” she snorted. “Because you were the only one who lost something that day.”

“Lois, I...”

“No,” she snapped. “Did you ever *once* give a thought to how *I* was feeling? I lost Superman *and* my best friend in the same miserable twenty-four hour span. I can almost forgive Superman for disappearing for so long without contact. The entire world thought he was a danger to them. But *you*? You up and *left me*, Clark! You left me when I needed you most.”

“To save Superman?” he asked, trying hold back the bitterness in his voice.

“You took away my best friend,” Lois said, her voice losing some of its venom and trembling now. “You took away the one...” Abruptly, she bit off her words.

“The one what?” Clark gently pressed.

“Never mind. It doesn’t matter,” she replied, refusing to meet his gaze.

“It matters,” he said, his voice low enough to sound like a plea.

“Why?”

“Because it does. Because it can make or break tonight,” he said honestly. “Please, Lois, I have to know. The one what?”

“The one man who I thought maybe — just maybe — I could see in my life for the long term,” she said after a moment of internal struggle. “The one man I imagined I might be able to see a future with.”

“You...really?” Her words had caught him off guard.

“And I thought you felt the same way about me,” she answered, appearing to be purposefully ignoring his question.

“I did!” Clark hurriedly replied. “I still do. That’s why it hurt so much to stay away.”

“You never should have stayed away to begin with!”

“I didn’t have a choice!”

“There’s *always* a choice, Clark!”

Clark sighed heavily. “Not in my case. Especially not once I’d heard that you’d gotten married to Luthor, of all people.”

“You never did like the man,” Lois said, as though freshly remembering Clark’s disdain for the billionaire. “Did you know he was... who he was?”

“A crime lord? No,” Clark said, shaking his head. “I didn’t have any evidence. Just a gut reaction to him. A feeling of unease. Like my spine would crawl in his presence. When you married him...” he shook his head again, searching for words, “my world shattered, much worse than when I’d first left. Then I heard about what happened to Luthor, but by the time I felt like maybe I could try to come home, you’d remarried.”

“Dan,” Lois said with a nod.

“It was like I’d been punched in the gut. Not because you’d found happiness — that’s all I ever wanted for you. But because I’d missed my last chance. I knew that if I came back to Metropolis, I’d find the city empty. There would be no more reasons left for me to attempt to scratch out a living here.”

“Until now,” Lois said, arching an eyebrow. “Why now?”

“I got tired of living the way I was.”

“Which was...?”

“Like a fugitive,” he said, expelling a controlled but heavy breath. “Never settling in one place long enough to do anything. Never feeling like I belonged anywhere.”

“I looked for you, you know,” Lois said after a long and thick silence blanketed the room. “I tried everything. Every contact I had. Every available resource on the internet. I’d get a postcard from you in those early days and get excited that maybe this time, I could find you, only to find no trace of you at all. It was like you were a ghost. Eventually, I gave up. It was obvious to me that, for whatever reason, you didn’t want to be found. I thought maybe it had something to do with Superman — no one could pinpoint where he was either, and you did leave when the heat wave was blamed on him.”

“You...looked for me?” he asked, almost in a state of disbelief.

Lois nodded. “I thought if I could find you, I could use some of the money I’d saved up for a rainy day and fly out to see you. Maybe convince you to come back home. But then...I don’t know. It felt like you were pulling away. I didn’t hear from you as often, until at last, everything stopped altogether. That’s when I started to feel like you just didn’t care. That Superman was more important than I was.”

Clark’s heart dropped out of his chest and onto the floor, along with his jaw. “Never,” he swore in a low whisper, his voice rough with self loathing and so much love for Lois that it hurt. “The only reason I stopped was because it hurt too much, thinking about everyone I’d left behind. It hurt too much to think about the life I’d walked away from — what I maybe *could* have had, but knew would now never be possible. And then, when Luthor entered the picture...” He dropped his gaze to the floor and turned his head slightly away from her. “It was one of the worst moments of my life. I knew I’d lost any chance...” He couldn’t finish. “And, I’ll admit, I had to protect my...my friend. Superman, that is.”

Lois nodded thoughtfully. “I never understood that,” she admitted after a moment. “I know Superman is your friend and all, but to just up and leave when he did? Why? What hold does he — or did he — have over you, Clark? It was like you two were lovers or something. Why didn’t he take *me* with him too?”

“It’s complicated, Lois,” Clark said, looking down at the table and spreading his palms around the surface. “I went because I had no other choice. And with Superman believing that he was a solar conductor, he couldn’t risk having you anywhere near him. He was *scared*, Lois.”

Some of the ice in Lois’ eyes melted at that. “Yeah, I guess.” She fiddled with her cup of coffee as she spoke.

“So, uh,” Clark ventured. “I’m not, uh, taking you away from your family or anything, am I? It’s getting late.” He hoped with all his might that she would stay a little longer.

“Huh? Oh...no. It’s just me. No husband, no kids, not even a pet to speak of right now,” she said.

“Lois Lane, without any fish?” Clark asked, bravely toeing the line of joking with her.

She shook her head. “I’m a completely single white woman right now. The perfect candidate for a personals ad.”

“Well, technically speaking, at this moment you’re a single white *blood elf*,” Clark corrected her, feeling more brazen since she hadn’t shot down his prior joke.

Lois cracked the smallest of smiles. “Yeah, I guess.” “So...what happened? Uh, if you want to talk about it, that is.”

Lois shrugged. “I realized at some point that I’d never really loved Lex. I think I stayed with him because part of me felt safe with him. He was...someone. Someone to keep the loneliness at bay. Only, he was gone so often on business trips that it was almost like I was single anyway. And when I went with him to wherever it was that he was jetting off to, I spent the overwhelming majority of my time alone anyway. He didn’t want kids and I was more than happy to oblige. I didn’t want to bring a child into a marriage that started to feel like it had been built on shadows and lies. And with Dan...” she shrugged. “Half the female population of Metropolis knew him on an intimate basis. So I filed for divorce.”

“I’m sorry,” Clark said, his heart hurting for her.

Lois shook her head. “Don’t be. I married him too soon. I realized, midway through the divorce, that I was relieved to be leaving him, not sad.”

“You didn’t love him?”

Lois averted her gaze to stare out the windows at the front of the donut shop. “The thing about Lex and Dan? They weren’t...” she swallowed hard.

Clark’s eyebrows crept up into his hairline. “What?” he asked

simply, his voice husky from choking back all of the emotions surging within.

“Neither one of them was you.” She couldn’t — or wouldn’t — meet his eyes. She kept her gaze studiously glued to the empty street beyond the windows. “I hated myself for feeling like that — for wishing for something I could never have.”

“You can,” Clark said, the words coming from him before he was fully aware that he was speaking.

“Yeah, right. Until the next time you run off without any warning.”

Clark winced at the acid in her defeated-sounding words.

“Lois, from the moment I met you, I’ve been yours. My greatest dream has always been to be with you. I know, I know. I don’t deserve a second chance. Not after what I did. I don’t blame you if you can’t ever trust me again. But, if you’re willing, I’d like to try to make things up with you. I miss you, Lois. I miss our friendship. I miss working side by side with you. I miss you coming to my apartment at three in the morning because you figured out some vital clue to our investigation. I miss sharing a pizza and a rented movie with you. I miss buying you coffee and Double Fudge Crunch Bars and take out Chinese food. Please, Lois. If you find it within you, I’m begging for a chance to make things right with you.”

“I don’t know, Clark. I’m not sure I can handle the heartbreak a second time,” she said, biting her lower lip in indecision. “How can I ever trust you again?”

“Because,” Clark said, coming to a sudden decision, “if you give me the chance, I’ll explain everything.”

“What do you mean, everything?” she asked warily.

“*Everything*,” he insisted. “Why I had to leave when Superman did. Why I always seemed to snag the Superman exclusive. Why I sometimes had to sneak off with a flimsy excuse, if I even managed to give one at all. Once you know everything, then you can decide what to do — to trust me, to trust me even less than you do now...and that’s a very real possibility...to print the story for the entire world to read... though I hope, for the sake of my parents, if no one else, you don’t. Please, give me one last, undeserved chance.”

Lois remained silent for several long minutes, caught in some internal battle. She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose, as though trying to will away some headache. Finally, she opened her eyes again, and Clark could see a mix of fire, ice, and pleading in those once-familiar chocolate orbs.

“Fine,” she said, folding her hands expectantly before her. “Explain.”

Clark shook his head. “Not here,” he begged. “What I need to tell you...it’s a bit sensitive,” he said, nodding discreetly at the group of goblin engineers who’d wandered in from the launch party at Gamestop.

“Fine, let’s walk,” Lois said, her voice taking on a slightly icy tone.

“Thanks,” Clark said humbly. “Another coffee, before we head out?” Seeing the indecision in her eyes, he quickly added, “I’m getting one.”

“Okay,” Lois finally accepted.

“Be right back.” He swiftly collected their combined trash and threw it out before heading to the counter for a second round of drinks. In mere moments, he was back with two fresh, steaming cups. “Shall we?”

“Where to?” Lois asked.

It was a simple enough question, but it lanced Clark’s heart. Once upon a time, an unspoken agreement would have passed between them, deciding on whose apartment they would be going to. But Lois made no offer to invite him to her place, and Clark didn’t yet have any furniture at his.

“Let’s just walk,” he said. “It’s not *too* cold tonight, is it? I mean, uh, my costume is covered in tauren fur,” he weakly joked.

"I'll be fine," Lois said, nodding. "Let's go."

They left Dunkin Donuts and headed out into the night. Clark loved this time of night in the city, when the hustle and bustle of daily life slowed to a crawl and the once noisy streets grew quiet and still. Centennial Park wasn't far, and they soon found their feet taking them there. They passed the fountain in the park, heading deeper into the place, until Lois finally stopped at the playground. She hopped up onto one of the swings and allowed herself to sway slightly. Clark leaned uneasily against one of the far support beams, watching her for a moment. She seemed both older and more troubled than he'd ever seen her, and yet younger and more vulnerable at the same time.

"So...talk," she demanded after a moment. "Or are you going to run away again?"

Each time she brought up his departure, it pushed the knife in his heart in a little deeper.

"I'm not going to run. I'm through with running," he promised her. "I'm just...trying to figure out the best way to say this."

"Just tell me, Clark," Lois said wearily. "What was so important about following Superman that you had to disappear for fifteen years?"

Clark sighed and drew in a deep breath, readying himself to take the plunge, knowing that once he made the leap, he could never go back. It was simultaneously the most terrifying thing he'd ever done, and also the most freeing.

"I didn't leave to follow Superman," he said at length, while his guts twisted in fear of what he was about to do. "I left because I *am* Superman." His voice was so low, he feared the breeze would spirit it away before Lois could hear what he'd said. "I left because I couldn't stand the thought that I might be a solar conductor — that my being close to you would kill you. I couldn't let that happen. I loved you too much."

"You...wait a second," Lois said, waving her hands slightly as if to say 'slow down.' "You said you're..."

"I know," Clark said hurriedly, his voice urging her to take a more confidential tone. "I know it sounds ridiculous. But it's true. I can prove it."

He stepped away from the swings and floated a good six inches above the worn out dirt. After hovering for half a minute, he gently landed again and then went into a spin, during which he removed his costume down to the regular clothing which lay hidden beneath and the accompanying prosthetics until he resembled his normal self again. He dumped the cheap latex into a heap along with his costume onto the ground as he slowed down to show himself to Lois. He did not bother to put on his glasses, and merely held them in his hand by one earpiece as he resumed his spot against the support beam, leaning against it with his back. More exposed than he'd ever been in his life, he fearfully await her response.

Lois sat very silent for what felt like a lifetime. Despite the coolness of the night, Clark felt a sheen of moisture spring up on his forehead. He had to fight to resist the urge to wipe it away. One fat bead of sweat trickled down the back of his neck.

"You *lied* to me," Lois finally said, her voice seething with anger. "You lousy, no-good, lying piece of s..."

"Ssh!" Clark urged her. "Please, Lois. I can't afford for anyone to overhear us."

"You *lied* to me," she insisted, but Clark had to admit that at least she was being quieter about it. "*How could you?* I thought you were my *friend!* Instead, I find out that you're been laughing at me all along. Good old Lois, too stupid to see what was right in front of her nose, right?"

Clark shook his head, putting his glasses back on, hoping that she might see him for who he truly was — Clark. And, he admitted, he felt less naked with them on, like they were some vital piece of armor that could save his life.

"Never," he said quietly. "I never meant to hurt you, I swear it. I never laughed at you. I'll admit, I was glad that you never made the connection. It meant that I was safe — if you couldn't peg the man in the blue suit with the one in the business suit, it meant the rest of the world didn't stand a chance of discovering that Clark Kent pretends to be a superhero in his spare time."

"You thought I would out you!" Lois accused as comprehension dawned in her face.

"At first," Clark said, not bothering to deny the charge. He was done telling the half-truths and partial lies that had defined his entire life. "I knew how tempting it would be — the way it would provide a guaranteed Pulitzer. I was afraid of what would happen to my parents — the way their life would never be the same, the way they would no longer *have* a life. They would have needed to resort to a life of isolation and hermitage somewhere where the media couldn't hound them and Superman's enemies couldn't find them and use them against him. I was afraid of what would happen to *me*. My parents' greatest fear was that I would be found out for what I am, and that some scientists would cage me and dissect me like a frog."

He sipped a small amount from his cooling coffee. "Once we became friends, I knew I could trust you with my secret, but I wasn't ready to share yet. I've never told anyone about what I can do. I was afraid that you might reject me, and I wanted, so badly, to be with you as more than a friend and colleague. I needed to know that, if you agreed to go out with me, that it was the real man you were choosing, not his avatar. The farmers' son, not the alien hero. But, before I could get up the nerve to ask you out, the heat wave struck. I couldn't trust Luthor, so I dared not say a word about my alter-ego when I found out that you were marrying the billionaire. And then we lost contact..." He allowed his voice to trail off helplessly.

"I never mean to lead you on, I swear," he continued after a moment. "I never meant to hurt you. I hated every minute that I had to carry around my secret in front of you. I was just too scared...too *cowardly* to risk telling you the truth. For that, I will be forever sorry."

Lois closed her eyes against the tears that were brimming there. Clark could see the soft lights in the play ground reflecting off the shimmering wetness.

"I want to believe that," she said at length. "But I just don't see how I can ever trust you again." She looked up at him, daring him to make a response.

"I understand," he said simply, shrugging slightly. "Look, Lois, I know there isn't a single thing I can say to you that will rebuild your trust in me, if it ever can be restored. All I can do is swear to you that I'm done lying to you. I'm done hiding. I've wasted so much time when I had otherwise hoped to be with you. I've become a gaming junkie in an effort to numb myself to the world, all because I have spent the last fifteen years dying inside over losing you. So, please, Lois, try to believe me." He looked away, up into the dark post-midnight sky. "I'll tell you what, Lois. I want to be completely open and honest with you. So, ask me anything. I don't care how personal it might be — if you have a question, ask it and I'll answer it if it's within my power to do so. Day or night. I don't care if you call me up at four in the morning to ask me what my favorite breakfast cereal is."

"What do you mean, if it's within your power to answer?" Lois asked, ignoring the rest.

Clark sighed and dropped his gaze to examine the dirt beneath his feet. "There are certain things...about my origins... that I don't know. My parents...the people who gave me life... they left messages for me, but what they told me was extremely limited. There is so much that I don't know about the place where I came from, who my biological parents were, why they chose for me to end up in Kansas. I wish I knew the answers to all of my questions, but I don't. And I know, with certainty, that those

answers will be forever out of reach, because my entire race of people is extinct, with the exception of me.”

“Is...is that true? You’re the last?” The question came out shy and unsure.

Clark nodded sadly. “Yeah, as far as I know. I saw Krypton get ripped apart by a violent explosion just seconds after my ship was safely out of the planet’s atmosphere. No mention was made of any other children that had been sent away for a chance at life.” He dared to look up from the ground, meeting Lois’ eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Lois murmured.

He shook his head. “Don’t be. Everything that happened...it brought me here. To Earth. To Metropolis. To you, if you’ll have me.”

“Clark...I don’t know...” Lois stammered. “It’s just so much to take in. And I feel so...so...betrayed,” she said, her voice rising an octave as she appeared to fight her rising anger. She cleared her throat and lowered her voice. “I can’t just pretend like this never happened. Like you didn’t lie to me every single day I knew you. Like you didn’t walk out of my life without so much as a backward glance, even if you felt that you had to. Like I didn’t cry myself to sleep some nights, wondering what the hell I’d done to make you suddenly cut off contact with me.”

Clark hung his head in shame. “I’m sorry, Lois. I never meant to make you cry.”

Lois made a non-committal grunt. For a long while, silence reigned, with neither of them feeling brave enough to broach the fragile truce. Finally, Clark moved from his post at the swing’s support beam and sat down in the empty swing to Lois’ left. He looked over at her for another few seconds, waiting to see if she would tell him to get lost or not.

“Did...” he finally began to say, shattering the quiet peace of the park. “Did you...have any questions for me?”

Lois sipped at her coffee, making a face against the now cold liquid. “Only about a million.”

“Here,” Clark said, reaching for the Styrofoam cup. She handed it over, and, with the help of his heat vision, he swiftly had the drink steaming again. “That’s better,” he announced in a near whisper, more to himself than to her.

“Thanks,” she said as he passed the cup back.

“So...”

“So...” she repeated in the same inquisitive tone.

“What do you want to know?” he asked.

“Everything. Nothing. I don’t know. You came to Earth as an infant, right? I mean, I’ve seen the pictures at your parents’ farmhouse.”

“Right. They guessed I was about two months old or so when they found me.”

“But Superman wasn’t heard of until the space shuttle incident.”

Clark nodded. “My abilities developed over the course of my teen and pre-teen years. I always felt like I should use them to help people, but never figured out how, without exposing myself to the public that I was more than what I appeared to be. Until I met you. You mentioned keeping a change of clothes on hand and that’s when the idea for a costumed alter-ego first hit me. I never expected it to work as well as it did. I was so nervous, flying out to the space shuttle, letting the world meet the unnamed character I’d created. That you’d unknowingly helped me to create. I thought for sure someone would recognize me, or laugh at me, or run screaming in terror from the strange being in their midst. But no one did any of those things, and I knew, in that moment, when you looked at me with trust in your eyes to fly you back to the Planet, that this was going to work out. That I could really pull off keeping my identity safe while still being free to help people who needed it. I never thought...” He gestured vaguely before continuing at an even quieter decibel. “I never once imagined how much I was about to screw up my life.”

“Are you blaming me?” Lois asked defensively.

Clark shook his head. “I’m *thanking* you, Lois. Because of you, the world has Superman. Because of you, I found a way to help, when I’d only ever felt frustrated and helpless when seeing or hearing someone in need. You set me *free*, in a way. *I* am the *only* one to blame for how I handled my dual identities.”

Lois made another sound of acknowledgement, but did not comment otherwise.

“I know it’s a lot to take in,” Clark said after a moment.

“Damn straight,” Lois mumbled.

“I want you to take as much time as you need. I know it’s overwhelming right now. I know it might take you a while to sort through your thoughts and feelings. I know you’ll probably have a million questions — things that might pop up into your mind when you least expect it. I don’t expect you to forgive me. Not tonight. Maybe not ever. And I promise, I’ll understand if you never want to speak to me again.”

“You can’t even *begin* to understand how furious I am right now,” Lois said after an uncomfortable silence had fallen between the two old friends.

“I know that too,” he replied quietly, watching his breath mist in the cold air.

“And...?”

“And...I’m not sure what else to say here, Lois. I’m sorry. If I could change the past, I would. But I can’t. All I can do now is promise you whatever answers I can give you and assure you that I’m done lying to you.”

Lois nodded. “I think...” she said slowly. “I think I need to go home and process this.”

Clark nodded in turn. “Can I take you home? I might not be in costume anymore, but it could be a modified escort quest.”

She didn’t laugh at his attempt to lighten the mood. “No. I think I’d rather be alone for now. I need some space to think.”

“Lois, please, it’s late and I’d feel better if...”

“No, Clark,” she said, cutting him off sharply. “Just give me some space, okay?”

He reluctantly dipped his head in acknowledgement. “Okay.”

“I’ll let you know if and when I’m ready to talk,” she informed him, getting off the swing to stand and leave.

“My office is still the same,” he told her. “I don’t have a landline yet, but here’s my cell,” he added, quickly scribbling the number in question on the back of his receipt from the store. “I’m actually back in my old apartment, just in case you decide that you’d rather talk face to face. Again, any time, day or night, call for me and I’ll be there to answer your questions.”

“Thanks.” She pocketed the receipt, putting it in the pouch that she wore on her belt. “I’ll be in touch.”

“Goodnight, Lois. I’m glad I ran into you tonight. And, for the record, I’m glad that you know everything now.”

“Goodnight, Clark.”

With that, she turned and strode away, leaving Clark’s heart aching. He’d wanted so desperately to reach over and touch her — to shake her hand or give her a quick hug. But he understood all too well that he would never again do those things unless Lois chose to accept him back into her life. Until then, he would have to content himself to having had one more conversation with her — one that he would have to consider as closure if she chose to reject him and cut off all contact with him.

He watched her until she was out of sight, then he tuned his super hearing in on her heartbeat, listening until he heard her unlocking her car, climbing inside, and pulling away from the curb. He was sorely tempted to follow her in the guise of Superman flying over the city, but that somehow felt like a total invasion of her privacy. It was a friendly luxury he could no longer afford, unless and until she chose to forgive him and once again count him among her friends.

With a conflicted heart, Clark picked up his belongings and

flew back to his apartment.

One month later...

“Merry Christmas Eve, Clark,” Clark muttered to himself as he sat down at his computer.

He was clad in sweatpants and a soft, old t-shirt, the battle armor of hardcore gamers everywhere. He took a bite of his cereal as he logged into his Warcraft account and waited while the game connected to his server. Tomorrow morning, he would fly out to Smallville to spend the holiday with his parents. Not that he felt like celebrating anything. More than a month had passed since he’d bumped into Lois at the launch party at Gamestop. As of yet, she had maintained complete silence. No phone calls. No emails. No late night knocks on his door. Clark’s nerves were completely frayed from wondering and worrying about if and when she would contact him, and what she might say. The hope he’d carried about salvaging their damaged friendship had begun to sputter in a death throes.

He ate his cereal as he leisurely checked his in-game auctions, pleased to find that he’d won his bid on a rare piece of armor, but bummed that he’d lost out on an equally rare in-game mount. He joined up for a dungeon run with a couple of other members of his guild, and despite the difficulty of the instance, they handily defeated the bosses. Evidently, he was not the only one with nothing better to do on Christmas Eve. He was about log out of the game when purple text appeared in the lower left corner of his screen — a private message from another player, known as a “whisper.”

Clark? it simply said.

Clark read it twice, blinking in surprise. The user name next to the message read Wildrose.

Lois? he typed back with trembling fingers. It couldn’t be her. She didn’t even belong to his server!

Yeah. It’s me.

But...how? I thought you were on another server, he typed, trying hard to steady his racing heart. He didn’t yet know what she wanted. For all he knew, she wanted to invite him into a group to go kill some elite creature.

I was. The message took several long, nerve-wracking minutes to appear. *I paid for a server transfer.*

Why?

Because, came the words. *I thought maybe...I don’t know. Maybe it might be nice to be on the same server as you.*

A spark of hope flared into Clark’s long deadened heart.

“Just say the word, Lois,” he pleaded to the empty air of his apartment. “Please, tell me that we’ll be okay.”

He knew he had no right to ask that of Lois. To be honest, he doubted that he was worthy enough to ask such a thing of even his furniture. But he wanted Lois’ friendship back.

Lois? he typed after she failed to respond. He wondered if she was hesitating on typing anything further or if she was engrossed in battling some creature.

Yeah, I’m here.

A copper for your thoughts? he pressed when once more, the purple text stopped appearing on his screen. A copper was the game’s equivalent to a penny — the lowest possible unit of currency.

A bit more than a copper, she responded swiftly. This time, she added a rudimentary smiley face.

Clark smiled a bit to himself. *Fine then. How about thirty-six thousand, seven hundred and fifteen gold, eighty-one silver, and ten copper? I’d offer more, but that’s all I’ve got at the moment.*

Another smiley face from Lois lit up his heart.

I was wondering — did you have any plans tonight? she asked him.

No, he responded honestly. *I was just about to log out and read before bed. Maybe a quick buzz around town. Why?*

The thing is, she typed, sending each new sentence to him in its own block of priceless purple text, *I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, ever since the launch party. A LOT of thinking. I was so furious with you that night — the culmination of fifteen years worth of hurt I’d stored up inside. But now, I’m seeing things a little more clearly. I was wondering if we could maybe get together to talk some more.*

Clark’s heart nearly stopped. Had he read that correctly? He checked it four more times, just to be certain that so many hours of game play hadn’t messed with his eyesight. But there it was, just as true as the night was cold.

Absolutely, he typed back, needing to retype it several times due to typos. His entire body was trembling with excitement tinged with a healthy dose of fear. After all, she still hadn’t said if she could accept his existence back into her life or not. *Where do you want to meet?*

Why don’t you come over? she offered. *It’ll be faster that way.*

I’ll be there before you know it, he promised.

She typed in her address — one of the houses on Hyperion Avenue. Clark knew the place. He’d been in the area just two days before, responding to a domestic abuse situation just a few doors down from the number Lois had given him. He hastily typed a goodbye to Lois and logged out of his account.

Feeling grubby from so many hours spent in front of his computer that day, he decided to take a quick shower before searing the fine layer of stubble off his cheeks and chin with his heat vision. He dressed in his best jeans and a plain brown sweater before stepping out onto his terrace, his old landing and takeoff spot. In seconds, he was streaking across the night sky, faster than any human could ever hope to see.

In less than a minute since leaving his place, and less than five minutes from Lois’ request to meet him, he found himself standing on the sidewalk before her home. Taking a deep breath to steady his nerves, he mounted the steps up to her front door. He hesitated only for a second before he knocked on the solid wood, all the while battling his fear and elation. Lois wanted to talk to him. But he knew on a visceral level that the conversation ahead had the power to either cast a spell that would resurrect Clark Kent back to life, or to kill him for good, even if Lois herself did not realize the power she wielded.

Two years later...

“Clark?”

“Yeah, in here,” he called back.

He finished laying the last strand of garland on the Christmas tree, in preparation of hanging the ornaments later on that evening. He stepped back and admired his handiwork. The tree looked perfect so far, almost a thousand multicolor lights throwing off a warm glow that seemed to almost physically warm the room around him. The golden garland reflected back the light, and he could all but see how it would look with the assorted decorative ornaments adorning the branches.

“Nice work,” Lois said from behind him, a smile in her voice. “But you forgot the star on top.”

“No, I didn’t. I was waiting for you to get home,” he replied, turning to meet her and kissing her as soon as he was facing her. “How was it out there?”

“Not as bad as I thought it would be,” she replied, shrugging out of her thick winter coat and laying the bags, laden with gifts, on the floor. “How was it here? Did Michael give you a hard time?”

“He was as good as gold. We watched The Grinch and Garfield’s Christmas, then had our bath and bottle. He fell asleep pretty quickly.”

“I’m glad,” Lois said, smiling brightly. “He’s been so fussy lately at night.”

“I think the colic is finally over,” Clark agreed. “At least, I hope so. Poor guy had such a rough time last month.” He reached into the storage box filled with Christmas ornaments. “Now that you’re home, I can add the star,” he said, fishing for it. “Maybe after Mikey’s midnight feeding, we can put on some of the decorations.”

Lois shook her head. “Tomorrow, I’m too beat tonight.”

Clark found the star and carefully extracted it from the box. “Remember when I gave you this?”

“How could I forget?” she said in a soft, awe-filled voice.

It had been just before he’d left Metropolis, really just a few days before the heat in the city had started to increase at an alarming rate. He and Lois had been discussing their upcoming holiday plans and Lois had mentioned that it was looking more and more like she’d be spending Christmas alone for the first time in her life. Clark had promised that she could spend the holiday with him, if she wanted to. The next day, he’d presented her with the star he now held in his hands — a perfect, multi-rayed star shaped out of a piece of clear crystal he’d once come across in his world travels. He’d spent most of the night carefully creating what he’d considered to be his masterpiece, though he’d given Superman all the credit when he’d given Lois his gift, though it had been more than a month before Christmas.

“The night you gave that to me was the last night I was ever truly happy,” she continued, as he floated gently upward to place the star on the top of the tree. “At least, it was until that Warcraft release party, when I knew you’d come back home. I didn’t see it that way at the time, but in looking back... I wish I’d never taken that month to think about things. I wish I hadn’t wasted any more of our precious time together.”

Clark landed softly and looked at his handiwork before looking at Lois. “That month was harder than all of those years spent apart from you, because I knew that whatever happened, it would make or break me. When you whispered me on the game that Christmas Eve... my every prayer felt answered, even though I wasn’t quite sure what you would say to me when you asked me to come meet you.”

Clark thought back to that night. He’d gone to Lois’ house — the house they now shared as a married couple and family — hoping for the best and expecting the worst. As he’d anticipated, she’d had tons of questions for him, most scribbled down on a pad of yellow legal paper, some in ink, some in pencil, some neatly and deliberately written, some barely legible scrawls written in haste. He’d answered them all to the best of his ability, feeling for all the world like he was being interviewed for the big expose piece that would alert the world to Clark Kent’s penchant for flying around town in Spandex, saving people. Dawn hadn’t been far off when he’d finally answered the last of her questions.

But the sleepless night had been worth it. Lois had chosen to forgive him for the lies he’d told and the crimes he’d committed against her, as he still viewed his actions. They had parted that frigid Christmas morning as friends, and by Valentine’s Day, Clark had asked her out on a date, once he’d known that they truly could be comfortable around one another again.

Dating had gone over better than Clark could have ever dared wish for, and by the end of the year, they had married in a small, intimate ceremony — just their families and the closest friends they had. Shortly after their Hawaiian honeymoon, they had been shocked to discover that a baby was on the way. Lois had fretted the entire time, wondering if her age would negatively impact their unborn son. But the pregnancy and birth had gone smoothly, and their child was absolutely perfect in every way.

For Clark, that Christmas Eve had given him even more than the family he’d always yearned for, the wife and child his heart had bled for. It had given him his entire life back. Clark Kent had been found worthy of his continued existence. Lois had wanted him, needed him. Superman had been allowed to continue his

mission to better the world, but it had been Clark who’d been granted a stay of execution. As soon as Lois had forgiven him, he’d set to work reclaiming the things he’d lost, including returning to the Daily Planet. Perry had been overjoyed to see the younger reporter, and had needed no convincing to give Clark his old job — as well as his old partner — back.

“Clark? Did you hear me?” Lois asked, jarring him out of his memories.

“Huh? Sorry, I guess I got a little lost in thought for a minute there,” he apologized. “What did you say?”

“I asked if you wanted the newest Warcraft expansion. It’s coming out in a few days,” she repeated as she snuggled into his side, still admiring the undecorated tree.

“Oh, that. I guess so. It could be fun to check out, I guess. It’s been so long since we last played though. Part of me misses the game. It was a big part of my life for a while there. It was the only thing that kept me sane in my self-imposed exile. On the other hand, it’s been so nice to not need it — to have you and Michael in my life. Part of me doesn’t miss the game at all. Why? Did you want to get it?”

“I thought about it,” she admitted, “but I think, maybe for now, I’ll pass. Michael is still so young and we’re still so sleep-deprived as it is. Plus, I feel like maybe our new family is adventure enough.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

THE END