

This I'll Defend

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Summary: Two off-duty soldiers try to make sense of the weird incident that happened on their base during the Metropolis-wide blackout. An "Operation: Blackout" Canterbury tale.

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This story is part of the "Canterbury Tales Series," which includes ["The Psychic's Tale,"](#) ["The Lookalike Agent's Tale,"](#) ["The Slumlord's Tale,"](#) ["The Nun's Tale,"](#) ["The Showgirl's Tale,"](#) ["The Florist's Tale,"](#) ["The Cabbie's Tale,"](#) and ["The Panhandler's Tale."](#)

"Hey, Bruno."

"What's up, Tim?" Sergeant Bruno Miles pulled the barstool out, sat, and turned slightly to talk to his friend.

"Not much. Here, have a drink." Corporal Tim Paladin motioned for the bartender. "Whiskey. Make it a double for my friend here. He needs to catch up."

"Thanks," Bruno said, nodding his acknowledgement as the bartender went to pour his drink. He studied his friend for a moment. "Geez, Tim, how many have you had already? You're half drunk and don't you deny it."

"A few," was all Tim would say. He didn't argue with Bruno's analysis of his state of inebriation. After all, the man knew him better than anyone. They'd grown up together, next-door neighbors and close as brothers, despite their age difference.

"Yeah, well, I guess I can't blame you," Bruno said after a moment. He knocked back his whiskey in three shots once the bartender, Phil, placed it before him.

The little hole-in-the-wall, complete dive of a bar was one of their favorites. The food was exceptional and Phil was about as good a bartender as could be found. The place was usually sparsely populated, especially at this time of the day. Most people were having lunch at respectable restaurants. Yet a heavy, choking haze of smoke hung permanently in the air like a thick drape. The air was gray with it, and the dim light bulbs did little to cut through it and brighten the place. A worn, but well-kept pool table stood near the far corner, under a Michelob lamp and before a neon Budweiser sign on the wall.

To the two divorced men sitting together, the place felt like home.

"After all, we've earned a few drinks," Bruno continued, slipping a cigarette from his pocket and lighting it, "what with the city-wide blackout and all." He took a long drag, savored it for a moment, then exhaled the smoke from his nose. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Yeah," Tim agreed, grabbing Bruno's pack of smokes and taking one for himself. "That was nuts. I'm glad it's all over." He caught Phil's eye. "Bud Light over here."

"Heineken, when you get the chance," Bruno added.

"Anything to eat for you boys?" Phil asked, nodding, and wiping his hands on a clean bar rag. He was an older southern gentleman, and the two younger men knew that he looked at them almost as if they were his sons.

Bruno shrugged. "Sure. Bacon swiss burger, just pickles, extra fries."

"The pulled pork sandwich, heavy on the barbeque sauce, and onion rings," Tim said after a brief delay of contemplation.

"Coming right up," Phil assured them as he went to fire off their order to the kitchen.

"So...are we gonna talk about it?" Tim finally asked, after a long stretch of silence, broken only by the droning of a TV, all the way on the other side of the bar.

"What's there to talk about?" Bruno asked.

"You know. The guy."

"The guy," Bruno repeated, frowning.

He didn't want to think about "the guy," not if he could help it. But, of course, it couldn't be helped, could it? Sooner or later, the "incident," as the two referred to it, would need to be discussed. Questions would be asked about Captain Jones' missing uniform, the bent bars in the small holding cell, and the logged entry Bruno had made that they had detained someone, before the man had simply vanished into thin air. Bruno wasn't looking forward to answering those questions. The answers sounded too fantastical to be real.

"Yeah," Tim responded, looking into the depths of his drink. "What are we gonna tell them, when the bosses start asking about it?"

Bruno shook his head, swirling the mug of beer in his hand, watching the foam go around and around. "Hell if I know."

"I mean, we gotta tell the truth, right? We'll be in trouble if we don't and they find out somehow."

"The truth? You think anyone's gonna believe the truth? 'Yes, sir, we locked up a suspicious looking individual in a stolen uniform. He was going on and on about some kind of threat and next thing we knew, *poof!* He was gone.' Yeah, that'll go over well." Bruno snorted his disgust.

Tim fell silent a moment as Phil brought their lunches over. He took a long, slow sip of his drink before regarding his steaming sandwich.

"You think Superman came by and busted him out?" he finally asked, stubbing out what was left of his cigarette in a worn ashtray.

"Hell if I know. Maybe. Doesn't seem like his style though."

"What do you mean?"

Bruno shrugged, biting into his burger. "I mean," he said, his mouth half full, "he doesn't go around busting criminals out of prison. Or holding cells," he amended as he swallowed. "He's all about putting the bad guys *behind* bars, not bending the bars so they can waltz right on out again."

"True," Tim conceded, biting a stolen fry in half, "but what else could it have been?"

Bruno shook his head slowly. "I wish I knew."

"You don't think..." Tim began after a while, studying the last quarter of his meal.

"Think what?" Bruno asked, weary of the topic.

"Well...what if?"

"What if?" Bruno looked up from adding more salt to his fries. He caught Tim's eyes and held his gaze for a moment, trying to figure out what was going on in his friend's head.

"What if that wasn't a regular guy?" Tim finally said, swallowing another bite of food. "What if Superman didn't spring him loose? What if that *was* Superman?"

Bruno choked on a fry and coughed violently after a laugh tried to rip through him. He balled up his fist and pounded on his own chest, as if it would help.

"Timmy, you've been drinking too much," he said, shaking

his head.

"No, no, hear me out. What if, for whatever reason, Superman snuck onto the base?"

"Why would he do that? Why not just fly in and tell us about the threat with the satellite?"

"I don't know," Tim admitted.

"And why would he identify himself as Clark Kent? You know, the *newspaper* guy?" Bruno asked impatiently.

Tim shook his head. "Beats me. Aren't he and Kent supposed to be friends or something? That Lane and Kent team seems to get all the exclusives with Superman, at any rate. And besides, if you think about it, Superman and Kent kind of look alike. You can't tell me that you haven't noticed it in all those 'Lane and Kent' posters around town."

Bruno couldn't argue that. He supposed there was, at least, a passing resemblance between the two men.

"That still doesn't explain why Superman would pretend to be Kent. *Especially* if those two are friends. Sneaking onto the base like that's a crime. Why set up someone who's supposed to be a friend?"

Tim didn't seem to have an answer for that. He quietly nursed a few sips from his beer.

"Nah, that couldn't have been Superman," Bruno concluded.

"Then what explanation do *you* have?" Tim challenged.

"Those bars didn't bend themselves open. What, do you think Clark Kent is some kind of real-life Magneto or something?"

Bruno sighed. "Of course not."

"Then what?"

"I don't know. But I ain't buying it that some reporter is a superhero."

"I never said Kent is Superman, you dolt," Tim said, ribbing his friend. "I said Superman was *pretending* to be Kent."

"Whatever," Bruno said unhappily.

Some reporter is a superhero.

His own words echoed back in his mind.

Clark Kent. Superman. The wheels started turning in Bruno's head as his stomach began to churn. He had to fight down the urge to throw up the bite of burger that he'd just swallowed down. What if Tim had it backwards? What if Superman wasn't pretending to be Kent. What if he *was* Clark Kent?

"You okay, man? You're turning green."

"Yeah, no, I dunno know," Bruno stammered.

"Yeah, right. What's going on in that head of yours?"

Bruno saw no point in holding back his theory. It was probably the least weird thing that had happened in the last couple of days, he mused. He cleared his throat, trying to work down the remnants of bile from the back of it. He lowered his voice to a whisper as he spoke.

"I was thinking. What if that really *was* Superman, like you said. Only he wasn't *pretending* to be the reporter."

"You mean...?" Tim said slowly, as he made the connections his friend left hanging in the air amid the ever-present cloud of smoke.

"Yeah."

Tim let out a low, drawn-out whistle. "Damn, man. What do we do with this?"

"Nothing," Bruno said, suddenly decisive.

"Nothing? Are you crazy? This is huge!" Tim replied, his voice arcing higher until he remembered to keep it quiet.

"I know," Bruno said, putting a hand briefly on his best friend's shoulder. "But think about it for a second, would you? If it's true...we have no proof. Strong circumstantial evidence, sure. But hard proof? Not a shred of it. And even if we did...so what? Superman's always been good to us right? To all of us guys in uniform — cops, firemen, armed forces. Right?"

"Right."

"So, leave him be. Let him have whatever secrets or private

life he wants, so long as he remains on the side of good. He's not hurting anyone by living his life, right? So why try to mess that up for him? The guy's saved all our lives on a daily basis since he appeared over a year ago. I'm not about to be the one to destroy whatever life he's managed to build. Are you?"

Tim shook his head. "No way, man. Between the other day, the Nightfall incident, and that car accident I was in last winter, the guy keeps regularly saving my butt. I sure don't want the guy pissed off at me."

"So, we're agreed. We'll live by the army motto."

"This I'll Defend," Tim said solemnly, stretching out a hand to Bruno.

Bruno took it and gave it a firm shake. "This I'll Defend," he swore, his voice like an oath.

"So, what are we gonna say, when we get questioned?" Tim asked after a moment of checking the score of the game on TV.

Bruno sighed noisily. "The truth, I guess. At least, most of it. Yeah, yeah, I know what I said before," he said, waving off Tim's protest. "We just have to phrase it right. We saw someone suspicious sneaking around the base. He told us about the threat to the satellite. We locked him up for questioning and by the time we filed the report, he was gone. We never got a name. We think he was trying to help Superman. The guy was tall with brown eyes, dark hair. That'll describe half this city."

"They aren't going to believe us," Tim said dubiously.

"If we stick to our story long enough, they will. Someone will finally assume that the man was working on Superman's behalf down here on the ground while the Man of Steel was up in space by the satellite. It's really not that hard to believe."

"If you say so."

"It'll work, I'm telling you. It has to. And when it does, everyone will walk away happy. We'll be cleared from any wrong-doing. Kent, if he really is, you know," he said with a vague gesture as two bikers walked by, "gets to keep his secret. The higher-ups will have an answer they can believe. And, best of all, for a change, you and I get to defend this planet's greatest protector."

THE END