

Balance

by repmetsyrrah

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Rating: K

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A/N: This was my attempt to write a glimpse of a not-so-good part of Lois and Clark's marriage. i.e. a realistic look, because as brilliant as they are together they're not perfect. This is set six years after my fic *Poison*.

"Look, Kent," Perry interrupted Clark's latest rambling apology, "I get it, I do, but-" he frowned and ushered the other man into his office, closing the door behind him. "I get that you have all these other responsibilities, I do," he continued once the bullpen had been shut out. "And, hell, I'm glad you do it because it makes for *fantastic* news. But I hired you to report on the news, not make it. This is your third late article in a month. If this goes on you're seriously looking at a pay cut."

Clark didn't quite know what to say to that, it wasn't exactly unexpected but he knew he just needed another chance. "Chief, I'm sorry," he started but Perry waved it away.

"Don't be sorry, be on time," he ordered him. "It happens to the best, you know," he sighed, looking out the window over Metropolis, "they just lose their game after a while. Reporting like the style you used to have takes energy and a lot of commitment."

"I'm just having a bad week," Clark insisted, hoping the words didn't really come off as childish and desperate as they sounded.

"You're having a bad month," Perry corrected. He shook his head again and sat down heavily in his chair. "You're a good kid Clark," he sighed, "and one of the few reporters I don't like being too hard on but I have a paper to sell here."

"I understand," Clark told him.

"I know you do," Perry agreed, "and I know that sometimes a good reporter can lose their game completely and sometimes - sometimes they do just have a bad month. You've got a week to get your act together or else we're going to have to do something."

"Thank you," Clark replied gratefully, hurrying back to the bullpen.

"Try doing a piece with your wife," Perry suggested, calling after him, "you're a great team, hire a babysitter or something for the kids and go chase a proper story."

"Yes, sir," Clark called over his shoulder, turning his eyes back to the front just in time to narrowly avoid tripping over his four sons.

"Wow," Jason commented, a hint of sarcasm in his tone as he tried to keep his three six year old brothers under control, "you're calling Uncle Perry 'sir'- this must be serious."

"You've been spending too much time with your mother," Clark told him, hugging the triplets as they all attempted to tell him about their day at the same time.

"Well it's not like you're around much anymore," the seventeen year old replied bluntly.

"Jason, that's mean," Toby, the youngest, said, frowning at his older brother.

"Whatever," Jason sighed, shrugging his shoulders and rolling his eyes, "still true." With that he stomped off it true teenage style to the kitchen, muttering about school food being only fit for dogs.

"So, you guys have a good day at school?" Clark asked, ushering the children back to his desk while search desperately for Lois. If he was going to start getting back in Perry's good graces he needed to start now.

"-are you listening, Dad?" Jonny asked, pulling his attention back to his kids.

"Sorry, buddy," Clark apologized, "I'm just having a rough day at work, you seen your Mom around anywhere?"

"She's probably gone to get Skye from choir practice," Nathan told him, nodding at the clock, "that's why Jason pick's us up on Tuesdays." Clark nodded and winced as he saw the time, it was far later than he'd thought, he was looking at pulling another all-nighter and he could only hope Superman wasn't needed for any major disasters. "Was Uncle Perry really angry at you?"

"Yeah, but don't worry, kiddo, I'll figure it out," he assured the three of them as he spotted Lois and their daughter coming out of the lift.

"Okay," Jonny said, accepting without question that his Dad was going to sort things out and get back to normal.

Clark wasn't so sure. It wasn't just the late articles, he knew he'd been off his game for a while. The last article he had handed in on time had been a page six one about an attempted bank robbery six weeks ago. And the only reason he'd even gotten that was because he'd been the one to stop it.

Jason had been upset when he'd got back he remembered, he'd had to leave in the middle of helping the boy with his homework. It wasn't until Superman was called away in the middle of the teenager's piano recital had he started his sulking mood though. Clark had tried everything but Lois had assured him Jason was just being a typical teenager and would come out of it in time.

Speaking of Lois... she had just entered the bullpen with their only daughter, Skye, trailing after her. Toby was thrilled to see his big sister, after being separated for whole day, but Nathan and Jonny was less enthusiastic. Clark didn't blame them, Skye had also had a baffling and sudden change of attitude recently- and towards her younger siblings particularly. When she once found them fun and cute, she now seemed to find them annoying and an embarrassment.

"Let's go say hi to Mom," Clark suggested to his other two children, hoping that plane with a problem engine over Utah turned into be a false alarm.

"Hey, CK, a moment?" Jimmy stepped straight into his path, Jonny and Nathan continuing towards Lois without their father.

"It's not really a good time, Jim," Clark told him distractedly.

"I just thought you should know that Superman's been way more active in the past two months than usual," the younger man said, raising an eyebrow at his friend.

"Well, there has been more need lately," Clark said, wondering what his friend's angle was.

"Not really," Jimmy told him, in a forced casual sort of way. "He just seems to be responding to lesser disasters more often."

The plane over Utah was losing altitude and the air traffic control was trying to divert

flights around it. A plane could survive without *one* of its engines, Clark reminded himself, still keeping an ear on the situation.

Jason had returned from the kitchen with a coke and was chatting happily to Lois and his siblings. He looked nothing like the surly teen who'd arrived.

Jimmy followed Clark's gaze and nodded understandingly. "Jason's giving you a rough time isn't he?" he asked, changing the subject.

"It's weird," Clark admitted, "I'm his hero one moment and the next he's being rude and acting like a..."

"Teenager?" Jimmy suggested with a wry grin. "Man, I gave my parents *hell* when I was his age. Don't worry, he'll get over it."

"I hope so," Clark sighed.

"But back to Superman," Jimmy continued, turning back to Clark, "He's been a lot busier lately. I just thought you should know. I mean, sometimes you don't even notice things like that, do you?" He gave his friend a significant look then disappeared back to his desk.

Clark contemplated his friend's words as he continued towards his wife. Had he really been in the cape that much more recently?

But if he had it was only because it was necessary, right?

Right?

"Hey, Dad," Jason was the first to notice him, and back to his usual happy self again.

Clark swore he'd never acted like that when he was a teenager... Had he?

The plane was righting itself now but it was still making an emergency landing and other air traffic was being diverted. It would be easier if he gave it a hand...but no, Jimmy was right. He blocked the plane out.

"Oh, good." Lois' voice pulled him away from the plane, she seemed pleased to see her husband there. "Clark, I was going to leave now and take the kids home early today. You coming too? You haven't been home much and it's been nice to have everyone present for a family dinner."

"I can't," Clark replied, "Perry wants me here."

"Okay," she said, surprising him. He'd expected a protest. "But I still need to talk to you, kids, we'll be back in a minute," Lois called to their children as she led Clark into a conference room. "We need to talk," she said, her voice changing to one of anger. "I can't remember the last time we ate together or I actually woke up next to you or... I can barely remember the last time you were home at all when we were, Clark. Don't talk-" she snapped as he opened his mouth "- I've been tolerating it but enough is enough, your children need you, Clark, you're putting too much time into being Superman and you know it."

"I-"

"The world survived five years without you," Lois interrupted, "they'll survive a night. Spend some time with your family instead."

"Lois I have to go," Clark said quietly, truly regretting having to leave. But a small village in Japan had just been hit by a severe earthquake and he knew this wasn't one of the minor disasters he'd been wasting time on lately.

He didn't look back as he left, he didn't think he could cope with the look on his wife's face if he did.

The lights were off when he finally got home. He could hear the six familiar heartbeats as he landed and that in itself calmed him a bit even if only five of them were slow and rhythmic,

indicating the kids were asleep.

But one was faster and more alert. Lois was awake and waiting for him and, given the way he'd had to leave that afternoon, it clearly wasn't for anything good.

She was sitting in the kitchen in her pajamas and dressing gown, sipping a cup of coffee and reading over some papers she had on the bench in front of her. She looked up as he entered but her face didn't give anything away.

"Go and change," she said the dangerously calm way she had developed when she was really angry but the kids were asleep. "I want to do this with Clark, not Superman." She looked back down at the papers on the bench, clearly it was an order not a request.

Clark returned thirty seconds later, dressed in a T-shirt and pajama pants. His glasses remained untouched on the coffee table. He never wore them when it was just the family at home.

"You've been gone a lot lately," Lois started, not looking up from the papers she was studying on the bench.

"I know." Clark didn't know what else to say after that so he waited for Lois to continue.

"I had to let Sally take the interview with Chinese ambassador because you were too busy pulling kittens out of trees to pick up the triplets from school yesterday."

She waited for a while and Clark wondered if he was supposed to say something. "I'm sorry?" he tried cautiously.

"Sorry isn't really good enough anymore Clark." Lois shook her head, "this is really hard for me to do," she told him, "I never thought it would come to this." She sighed and slid the papers she'd been reading across the bench. "News in the bullpen spreads quickly," she said quietly, as Clark quickly read what was written on the stark, white sheets, "in our family as well. I know Perry's given you an ultimatum and I know the pressure to produce a good story to save your career will take you more away from this family than ever and I don't think the kids can handle it."

"Lois," Clark started, looking back up at his wife. "I can't do this."

"Well I'm not letting these kids be disappointed by their father anymore, this is a compromise Kent," she said firmly, "I give up half of what's bound to be a first page scoop and share a by-line and you give up zooming off every time a little kid cries because his ice cream fell on the ground."

"I can't take credit for an article I never worked on," Clark protested, reading over Lois' snappy and precise writing with his name alongside hers at the top. "Besides, Perry will know I wasn't on this."

"But you were," Lois informed him, "last night, you flew Martha in to look after the kids the accompanied me down to the wharf to help tape that last, incriminating conversation."

Clark frowned, "But I was in Africa," he said, "preventing a flood."

"You mean a flash flood that never reached that sleeping village where no one was even looking up? The one that didn't even make the news *anywhere*?" Lois asked, raising her eyebrow. "This article is going in the *Planet* on Wednesday, with both our names on it," she promised him. "And you are going to get back on your game again and help me deal without two angsty teenagers and three six year old hurricanes, while balancing your superheroing and very successful journalism career."

"Anything else you want me to try and juggle?"

"Nothing you haven't been doing for the past eleven years," she told him, "Clark, everyone falls down once in a while, but the lucky ones-" she tapped the article on the bench

"-have someone to help them back up."

Clark looked back down at the article with an un-deserved shared by-line and back up at his incredibly beautiful wife who he felt equally undeserving of. "I think I might be the luckiest man in the world," he told her softly.

"Damn right you are," she replied firmly, kissing him on the cheek, "now come to bed."