

# Illuminated: A Tale of the Multiverse

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Rating: T

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Imagine: there are hundreds, even thousands, of other dimensions, other Earths, other Supermen. And out of all of them, he alone has been asked to do this, come to a world with no Superman and stand with a Justice League that's almost an exact mirror of his own, fight alongside them in a battle that could end this world. That could end *him*.

Of course he'll do it. His dimension will not dissolve into chaos without him; he leaves his world in capable hands as he travels to a new one. The only anchor that could have held him there is long gone, and now the faint thrill of curiosity is the strongest emotion he's felt in quite some time.

This world's Watchtower is almost the same as the satellite he knows, but before they let him go wandering around, J'onn takes him aside for a private word. In his own dimension he always trusted Martian Manhunter, a bond of friendship between the two outsiders who can pass for, but never quite *be*, human. "Kal-El, there is something I must tell you," J'onn says, and his expression is worried.

"Speak, then," Kal-El replies.

"In this world, the JLA has a media liaison. She is here, and it is inevitable that you will meet her. She has been instrumental in coordinating this alliance and in gathering military intelligence to which we would otherwise have no legitimate access."

The military connection is his clue, and he sucks in a breath so painful it feels like the air is kryptonite-laced. "It's Lois."

"Yes," J'onn tells him, as gently as he can.

Kal-El is lost in memories for a long moment. Sunlight on raven hair, that saucy smile, her face softened by sleep as she lay against his shoulder on silver sheets ... and his last sight of her, so pale and fragile, her fingers cold within his careful grasp. "Lois Lane, after all these years..."

J'onn clears his throat uncomfortably. "Lois Lane-Kent, in this world. It will be awkward for both of you, I am afraid. You see, this Lois is your widow..."

Lois Lane-Kent knows about the multiverse. There are precious few secrets that can be kept from her, here or anywhere else. It was usually a comfort to know that in a thousand other worlds, a thousand other Loises have lived some kind of happily ever after with their Supermen. Most of the time that makes her grief more bearable. Sometimes it just provokes a sick, clotted mixture of rage and envy.

It's Bruce who breaks the news to her. "We need him," he tells her. "In this fight, against

this foe, we need him more than ever. And there are ways - dangerous, more dangerous than you can imagine - to cross dimensions."

The raven-haired reporter forgets to breathe in a moment of punch-drunk disbelief. "You brought someone else's Superman *here*," Lois says harshly. Of course Bruce got to deliver the blow. He knows how much this will hurt, and how Lois Lane (all the Loises in all the worlds) reacts to such pain: with anger. If looks could kill, he'd be incinerated on the spot. "Goddamn you, Bruce, of all the things you could do to me..."

He silences her with a gloved finger against her lips. "It's going to be just as hard for him, Lois. In his world, you were the one who died."

They both brace themselves for the meeting, each thinking, *I can get through this. For the fate of this world, I **will** get through this.* But nothing, not even the most well-meant warnings, can prepare them for the shock of seeing each other again, and they both freeze, staring.

*She's so young*, he thinks. Somehow he thought the Lois of another world would look slightly different, the way some of his colleagues on this Earth have different costumes, different scars. But no, she's exactly the Lois he remembers, somewhere in her late twenties. The same take-no-prisoners stride, the same determined lift to her chin, the same keen intelligence in her gaze. Lois in the prime of her beauty and ferocity, Lois as he loved her so passionately. Lois as he lost her.

The sight of him hurts worse than she could've imagined. He's older than he ever lived to be on this world, a touch of gray at his temples, a hint of lines around his eyes. And his face, oh, that handsome face - so much sorrow is written there. She fell in love with his easy smile, the smile of a man who truly believed that good would always triumph in the end, a smile that made everyone around him shake off their cynicism and see the world through his optimistic eyes, if just for a moment. But this is a man who knows grief as she does, who has lived with its company day and night for far too long.

They stare as Bruce and J'onn make the introductions. They shake hands numbly, almost impersonally, except for the way their eyes remain fixed on each other. It's a relief when they're all called to the strategic meeting, when they have to break the magnetic lock of each other's gazes. The gravity of the situation helps them both to shove their personal pain aside; the world is at stake here. Private grief must wait.

Once all the available information is pooled and analyzed, the room goes silent as each member of the League digests the news. The situation is worse than any of them thought. Even with all their powers, even with Superman among them once more, tomorrow's battle may be the last for all of them.

This is not precisely his team, he has not been their leader here for years, but it still feels natural for him to step up and encourage them. He speaks of confidence and determination, of their dedication and the strength of their team, and as he meets each of their gazes a little of the fatalism vanishes.

In the back of the room she bites her lip as she realizes that once again, he has brought more than his powers, more than his expertise. The thing that Superman always brings with him, brighter than his vivid cape, is hope. Just experiencing this for the first time in years was both balm and poison to her cynic's heart. Waking the past in ways that shook her to the core. And she was finding that that was just what she's needed in this fight.

It's late on the eve of battle, and she cannot sleep. Instead she goes to one of the immense windows to look down at the Earth below. It's a bittersweet view; no human can look down on their home planet without a sense of awe at the scale revealed by this distance. But for her, it also brings back memories of flying with him.

"It's beautiful," his voice says in her memories. "I never tire of looking at it from up here." Belatedly she realizes his voice is also present in the room with her, and Lois whirls around to see him standing at the door.

She only stares to him for a silent moment. Part of her just wants to fling herself at him, let herself believe he is her Superman come back from the grave, hold him until she can forget that he took his last breath in her arms. Seeing him, the grief is fresh, like scraping at a barely-healed wound until blood weeps from it again.

But she doesn't know if she should, if he'll let her. How long has it been for him since he lost her? Have his wounds healed over, leaving only scars on his heart that he wouldn't want reopened?

"It is beautiful," she manages to say, and turns away nervously. Her hands are shaking, and to steady them she pulls a cigarette from the pack in her pocket. Slipping it between her lips, she has the lighter out, and then he is *there* in front of her with a gust of super-speed.

He snatches the cigarette from her mouth, crushes it savagely; tiny flakes of tobacco and paper drift from his fist, and his eyes burn with loathing. She stares at him, wide-eyed, and in a low furious voice she's never heard from him he tells her, "In a few years, a new and more virulent strain of flu will sweep through the world. You'll catch it on assignment. You'll be too stubborn to go to the doctor, you'll force yourself to keep working, and you'll eventually develop pneumonia. No one, not even me, will know you have more than a common cold until you collapse at a press conference. By the time you're taken to a hospital, it will already be too late. Your lungs will be compromised by years of smoking, and the infection will be too far along to respond to medication. The doctors will do everything they can for you, draining the fluid from your lungs and putting you on a ventilator, but it won't be enough. Your lungs will stiffen and fail, you'll die before you reach thirty, and for all of my powers all I will be able to do is watch you slip away. *So stop smoking. Now.*"

Lois blinks at him, startled breathless. The future he describes seems so plausible that she can almost *see* it. How terrible for him to have lost her that way... but he is not the only one who mourns. "Let me give *you* some advice, then," she says, and her voice starts out stable but develops a tremble over time. "When something called Doomsday lands on your world, don't waste time trying to find out if it's sentient, if it can be reasoned with, if it's just some poor misunderstood alien. It's a *monster*, a killing machine; it knows nothing else but destruction. So just fucking vaporize the damn thing from a safe distance instead of getting into a fight with something as strong as you are. You'll kill it in the end but you'll take out fifteen city blocks in the process, with dozens of bystander casualties, and once you succeed in saving us from it you'll be so broken that you can't even stand. *You*, who can let bullets bounce off you and claim that fire tickles and lift an island, you'll be fucking *beaten to death* by some crazy-ass monster, and while I'm holding you and screaming for a medic your last words to me will be 'I'm sorry, I love you,' spoken around the blood bubbling up between your lips."

She's shaking by then with the anger she never let herself feel toward her Superman, and the last of it she snarls up into his face. "I'll break the arm of the poor paramedic who tries to pull me off you, they'll have to sedate me because I'm screaming at you not to leave me, and after all of that I have to remember to come up with an explanation why my *husband* died the

same day. I have to grieve for you twice, and I have to remember not to go to Superman's memorial in Centennial Park too often unless I want those ugly rumors to start again, that I cheated on my husband with a hero, so I spend altogether too much time at what I know damn well is an empty grave with Clark Kent written on the headstone. It hurts even more to know you're not there, even in death you're out of my reach, because we agreed we'd never reveal your secret and I kept that promise."

So much pain surrounds them both, and he has never been able to bear to see her in pain. "I'll keep that in mind," he tells her softly, gently. "At least we were together in this world, at least we were married for a while. At least we had that much of each other. I had so little time with you, just two days..."

"Two years," she replies, her voice breaking. "The best two years of my life, in spite of all the bullshit it took to get there." His questioning look brings out the rest of the story. "Perry sent us on a ridiculous assignment to Niagara Falls to expose some honeymoon racket. I figured it out then, when you tripped over the stupid pink bear rug and fell into the idiotic Flames of Love but didn't get burned. We went to your Fortress and you told me everything, gave up your powers to be with me, and then these jackasses from Krypton showed up..."

"General Zod, Ursa, and Non," he supplied. "It happened like that for me, with Niagara and everything, only the way you found out was by shooting me. When I didn't fall down you knew it was *me*, and I was so furious at you for risking Clark's life. Then you told me it was just a blank, and realized I'd been outsmarted, but it only made me love you more. We went to the Fortress and... Afterward I gave up my powers so I could live my life with you, but Zod and his followers ruined that."

So close, but not quite the same. Lois took up her version of the story again. "Somehow you got your powers back, you beat them, but we had to split up. The world needed you more than I did, so I let you go. But it was killing me to see you at work, I couldn't sleep, couldn't focus, and you decided to steal my memories with some kind of amnesia kiss." She glared at him, the steel in her gaze all too familiar. "As if any reporter worth her salary was going to just accept a two-day blank spot in her memory. I went to every therapist and hypnotist and everything else until I got those memories back, and when I eventually confronted you, you admitted the truth. I gave you no choice but to let me back into your life, and you'd never stopped loving me. Eventually we figured out how to balance the mission and a relationship, and we got married. Sure, the certificate says Clark Kent, but I knew I was getting the whole package, best friend and top story, lover and hero."

It's a sweeter tale than his own, and Kal-El gives her the counterpart reluctantly. "You and I, after the battle, we agreed to break up, but I could see how much it hurt you. Always so brave, Lois, no matter how painful something is, you always do the right thing. You're as much a hero as I am. In my world, though, there was so much death, so much destruction, that I didn't think the world could recover from it. My solution was to turn back time, back to the moment when the Phantom Zone prison first broke open, and I was there to stop all of that from happening. In the process I managed to keep you from getting suspicious enough to try the trick with the gun, so for you it was as if those two days never happened. I was the only one who remembered, and I kept my distance from you after that. It hurt to see you flirting with Superman and teasing Clark like nothing had changed, because for you nothing had. So I took a step back, threw myself into the mission, and kept my loneliness to myself. Maybe eventually things would have changed, but you got sick, and I wasn't watching you closely enough to catch the symptoms until it was too late..."

He looks so haunted, lost in the remembered pain. Her heart aches for him. "It wasn't your fault," she reassures him, automatically reaching for his face. His eyes slide closed in simultaneous agony and relief at the caress.

"There was never another. Not like you," he says, voice rough with pain. His arms slide around her waist almost without conscious effort, the gesture automatic once upon a time. "I never loved again. Yes, after you were gone, there were some who..."

"Made the nights a little less lonely?" Lois suggests with a sad, knowing smile. "Me, too. None who could replace you, but a couple who at least made me feel like not all of me had died with you."

"It was like that for me too, with Diana," he tells her, and sees a flash of jealousy in her eyes.

"The Wonder Wench. Why am I not surprised? She always had her eye on you here, too, but she knew you were *mine*."

"She knew that in my world, too, but she was a good enough friend to comfort me from time to time," Kal-El tells her with a small smile. It's so very Lois, to be angry at a woman in another world who dared lay hands on Kal-El even after that world's Lois was gone, that he can't help but be charmed by it.

"That's what Bruce was to me," she admits, "but in the end he was just too emotionally unavailable."

"I had the same problem with him," Kal-El tells her, and her eyes go wide. He laughs softly. "I'm an alien, Lois, why should I subscribe to human prejudices?"

That earns him an eye-roll of epic proportions. It truly wasn't an issue, just a surprise. "Oh, stop," she scolds lightly.

"It didn't last, either. Now he's with Diana, most of the time. They have the ... healthiest dysfunctional relationship I've ever seen, if that makes any sense."

"Pretty much what they have here, too," Lois says. "Some things are the same across all the worlds, and after you leave I intend to tell Bruce that his inability to maintain a normal relationship is one of them."

"You're welcome to - assuming we all live through this," he adds quietly.

"Of course I'm assuming that," she replies. "You're here." Her faith in him calls up that smile she knows so well, and seeing that look she loves and remembers so much calls up other memories. "You know, J'onn told me that there are so many parallel worlds out there. Bruce married Selina Kyle in one and he and Catwoman have a kid, so it gives you an idea of what can happen. There's a world where the two of us met in our mid-teens and I helped you come up with your caped persona." She grins wistfully at that, then gives a little laugh. "There's another where you told the world your secrets and we're raising a ton of kids. In another one, you went to find Krypton and I only found out that I was pregnant after you were gone. And I nearly married someone else. Just about every other conceivable situation, from what they told me. So many possibilities for us."

Talking about these alternate worlds brings her back to square one, their current situation. It just doesn't seem fair. "But, in the end, we were the only two that wound up alone. Why? I mean, what reason, other than for us to be the sacrifices in this battle probably, was there for..." Her expression clouds all the more then, trailing off as a ghost of a thought whispers through her mind. For the second time that day, she forgets to breathe.

For a long moment they simply look at one another. Different lives, different worlds, but so much the same. Her eyes have the exact same mixture of amber and green, for which hazel

is too plain a word, and his one unruly lock of hair falls precisely where she remembered it. Different people, but yet again, so very familiar.

Slowly, so she can pull away if she wants, he slides one hand up from her waist to the back of her neck. It was always one of her sensitive places, and as he rubs gently at her nape, her eyes slide closed just the way he remembers. From there it's a foregone conclusion, and as he leans down she's already lifting her face up. Their lips meet, hesitant at first, and then she stands on tiptoe to kiss him more thoroughly.

He takes her in his arms and lifts her up, still kissing her. This, they don't need to discuss; they both know what they want and need from each other. Tonight, for this one night stolen out of time, he has his Lois back, and she has her Kal-El.

In Watchtower security central, Bruce smiles at the image on the screen as Kal-El carries Lois out of the frame. Two sundered halves have found their way back together at last. "Well done," he says, and offers his hand to J'onn for a congratulatory shake.