

Stranger in Our Midst

By Morgana <cynthia.mccoy533@gmail.com>

Rated: PG13

Submitted: November, 2012

Summary: Imagine a world where Lex is not such a bad guy — he even falls in love! But not with Lois Lane! Amidst Intergang, the theft of a mysterious new energy, and dueling wits with a beautiful agent provocateur, Lois and Clark work to crack the mystery of sensitive technology stolen from a freighter.

A/N: This story takes place in an Elseworld setting. There have been numerous alterations to the plot and timeline. Here are a few points:

This is an alternative world story and as such, Lex Luthor won't behave the same as the character we are familiar with. Lex is still ambitious, driven, and power hungry, his criminal activities are not as vast as portrayed in the series. He does possess a heart, one that can be affected, perhaps even broken. He has a new assistant after Nigel St. John departs. Beyond a good sense of fashion, the mysterious Aykira Milan is *nothing* like Mrs. Cox.

Keep Michael Landes in mind whenever Jimmy Olsen makes an appearance. I always preferred his interpretation of the cub reporter as opposed to Justin Whalin's. Michael's Jimmy was more on equal terms with the other characters and not a glorified gofer.

Cat Grant's character provided female balance and a worthy opponent for Lois in a few precious scenes that were attempted. (The episode *Witness* is an excellent example.) Sadly, with the beginning of season two, cast changes were made and her abrupt departure was never explained. Here is an endeavor to allow her a more graceful exit.

Lois' lack of talent in the kitchen is a sore point for her. After bearing up under countless digs from the likes of Bobby Bigmouth, she is determined to dive in and take on the challenge, once and for all. With a little assistance from Uncle Mike, Mad Dog Lane makes decent attempts at understanding the culinary arts.

It always strikes me how seldom Lois and Clark seem to relate with other people outside of the usual suspects. In the series, we only know about Inspector Bill Henderson, Ralph the creep and dear Dr. Klein. However, what about other characters like Diane the reporter who made two very brief appearances, Clark's landlady or Lois' Uncle Mike? In this work, we get to see Lois and Clark interact with these characters and other folks who might occupy their lives. I hope that filling out these characters' hazy outlines will not bog the narrative down, but provide a more colorful canvas to tell a story.

At the time of this writing there are at least two other stories which will radiate from this one, as kind of a loose trilogy. "Café Americana" and "The Globe" will take references from "Stranger" and vice versa. Perhaps there will be more, only time will tell.

There are so many people who assisted me on this fic they have to be listed in alphabetical order: Andreia, Anti-Kryptonite, Corinna, Erin, Janet, Terry, KenJ, Jenni and a large number of folks who pushed, prodded, pleaded and cajoled. Honestly, without such a large cheering squad I would have dumped this bad boy into the recycling bin ages ago!! Last but not least a happy thumbs up to Dr. Klein's Labrat who stood by me from my stumbling beginnings until the very end.

Now, let's see what kind of trouble an egg salad sandwich can get our two favorite investigative reporters into!

All characters, settings and some dialogue are the property of DC Comics, Warner Bros., and whoever else can legally lay claim to them. No copyright infringement of any kind was intended. This story was written for the joy of playing in the Lois and Clark universe, not for profit, but the story is an original idea and it is mine.

Part One

Rain. Rain. Rain. A relentless downpour hurtled from the heavens, through the early spring evening, saturating everything in its wake. Metropolis' majestic skyscrapers were pummeled foremost, water sliding effortlessly down slick facades. Next, it tumbled down the sides of industrial warehouses, the fluid moving not quite so smoothly over ancient brick and mortar, the building walls pocked and worn from decades of rain and exposure. Finally, the rain pelted over restored upscale brownstones; residences of the city's rich, not so rich, famous and quietly infamous. Far below the building rooftops, fleeing citizenry tried numerous methods to avoid getting sodden. Some clutched recalcitrant umbrellas, others wore hats, either brimming with water or completely soaked; a few grateful souls managed to hail a cab, not without getting a little damp.

Such was a typical rainy spring evening in Metropolis. In one particular alleyway, two of those citizens sat waiting impatiently. After a long day toiling at the Daily Planet, its best investigative reporter team, Lane and Kent, had planned on heading to their separate comfortable and dry abodes. Clark and some friends looked forward to watching a much-anticipated basketball game. Lois also planned on a well-deserved quiet evening at home. Sadly, such was not to be the case; instead they sat in Lois' silver Jeep Grand Cherokee in slightly damp trench coats, keenly aware of the scent of food for their snitch, Bobby Bigmouth.

Notwithstanding the downpour and gloominess outside, both reporters worked hard to keep their moods light. The newsroom day had been long and taxing. Thus, they were in danger of taking work stress out on one another. To top everything off, the insistent pounding of raindrops on the car's metal rooftop only reinforced the desire to be home. The beautiful brown-haired woman sitting in the driver's seat felt a wicked head cold coming on. She thought once more about the delightful chicken aroma assaulting her nostrils. <If that man does not show up soon with *Kerth* level information his dinner is ours!> She thought furiously.

Deciding on breaking the silence, Lois babbled irritably, "I cannot believe we are stuck in a clammy, dark alley behind Callard's during a downpour! Bobby's information had better be good! I was planning on watching two week's worth of my favorite show." She sighed and dropped her chin to her chest than added, "Next time I decide to take an 'urgent' phone call at quitting time, *please* stop me."

"Yeah," Clark empathized. "Perry, Jimmy, Eduardo and Pete are at my apartment watching the Metros go against the Denver Nuggets. Bobby has a knack for meeting in out-of-the-way places, despite the weather, but his information is always reliable. Hey, I thought he was mad at us. Oh, that's right," he smiled mischievously. "It was *you*. Wasn't there something about the absence of any real food in your kitchen?"

Lois' features turned pouty, her prickles were coming out. "There may not be any food in my house, but we, partner, *always*, provide good food for our best snitch – er — source."

Suddenly a familiar head popped up from the back of Lois' Jeep. The ever-famished, self-proclaimed street epicurean Bobby Bigmouth had arrived.

"Greetings, Clark... Lois. Good tips are how I keep myself fed. Do I smell Chicken Marsala...with shiitake mushrooms?"

Lois gasped, hand clutched to her chest. "Bobby! I wish you would *stop* doing that!"

Clark smiled and completed the menu. "With creamy cheese broccoli and wild rice for side dishes, as you requested. Good to see you too, Bobby." He handed over the informant's dinner.

Reaching into the brown sack, Bobby quickly pulled out the savory contents and began eating. Between large forkfuls of food and smacking sounds, he proceeded to do what he did second best...talk. "Mmm, those mushrooms really bring out the flavor! Kent, you got this, 'cause, your partner here doesn't know a shiitake mushroom from a portobello."

"Bobby, enough with the frustrated food critic routine! This rain isn't getting any lighter and the basketball game isn't waiting for me. Spill whatever news you have."

"Take it easy, Kent, I'm delighting in the flavors...wait a second. Do I smell fresh, warm cinnamon rolls?"

Lois triumphantly held up another sack, this one a crisp bakery white, stenciled with the lettering Café Americana. She dangled it before the snitch. "Like the man said, spill!"

His face twisted between desire for the cinnamon rolls and annoyance at the female reporter. Since his accelerated metabolism cried out for satisfaction, Bobby spilled. "Word on the street is a shipment of new technology, something called Harmonic Crystals, is coming in from Leeds, England. They're supposed to be docking in Metropolis Harbor's pier 17 tonight onboard a freighter called *Shackleton*. Only they ain't gonna arrive at their proper *final* destination onboard Project Prometheus 2. The big *detour* is for Luthor Industries in general and LexSolar in particular."

Clark let out a low whistle. But his partner had a puzzled expression on her face.

"Okay Clark, obviously these crystals are familiar to you. Care to fill me in?"

"There have been whispers about those crystals within the solar energy community. Supposedly they are ten times more powerful than nuclear energy, but much more stable and *not* radioactive. EPRAD needs them to power its new space station, Prometheus Two. The original station, or Prometheus One, started with medical and chemical laboratories."

"I get it, P2 is the next step!" Lois piped up.

"Exactly! The second station expands on that idea: microchip-processing factory, solar panel fabrication, hydroponic farming, and a host of other industries. Effectively allowing the space colony to be self-sustaining and build on future expansion projects."

Lois interjected, "Isn't there discussion within EPRAD about this P2 as a jumping-off point for future Mars expeditions?"

Clark nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, but without those crystals the entire space station program gets pushed back at least two years. Luthor's only serious rival is stopped cold. LexCorp would have a firm grip on all future space industries."

Bobby wiped his mouth with the back of a sauce-stained hand. "Yup, Luthor gets the crystals for his space station. Year and a half ago his plans literally went up in the air with the big guy taking the final module of the original station into orbit. This year he's coming back with a plan to get his own station positioned." Bobby whined. "Uh, Come on Lois, how about those cinnamon rolls?"

"Sorry, not so fast!" Lois snapped, holding the bakery bag close. "Where is this industrial-strength heist going to take place?"

"Do I look like a guy who goes around planning ship hijackings?" Bobby asked. "The *Shackleton* is supposed to dock at Pier Seventeen tonight. Maybe some action will happen after the docking or maybe while transporting the stuff to the space agency. Ask Luthor, or better yet, whoever he's hiring to do that job." The snitch's fingers wiggled. "Okay, gimme the cinnamon rolls!"

Rolling her brown eyes, she tossed the bakery bag over the seat. "Those were a special treat from my Uncle Mike. Eat them with respect."

"Oh, I will. I will. Look, I gotta get back to work. Just so you know, Kent, I was mad at your partner here." Bobby said, jerking his thumb in Lois's direction. "She should be ashamed of her kitchen; not even a box of crackers. Somebody ought to give this girl cooking lessons. Nothin' fancy, just your basic kitchen survival skills. But after what happened to me earlier today, this hot stuff had to go to you guys,

instead of that hack reporter who tried paying for prime information with an egg salad sandwich."

"What's wrong with that?" Clark asked bemused.

"The egg salad was rotten, that's what!" The man snorted. "I have my stomach to think about."

The two reporters exchanged surprised looks. Who was dumb enough to stiff Bobby? The reliability of his information was very consistent. Lois' last Kerth award exposing a Columbian drug cartel's trade route had come from intel he provided. Clark spoke first. "Okay. How about telling us who it is?"

"Nope, he might have stiffed me, but just like you, I got to protect my *clients*."

"Well, never let it be said Bobby Bigmouth doesn't have high standards." Lois muttered sarcastically.

"Hey, watch it, Lane. I do have standards. By the way, not that I don't respect your Uncle Mike's baking chops, but his cinnamon rolls have w-a-a-ay too much cinnamon."

"That does it, out!" Lois shouted.

Bobby sniffed, "I was only offering a little constructive criticism." On that note, the snitch departed into the rainy evening leaving Lois and Clark light on their evening meal and heavy on a mystery.

"Partner, it looks to me like a stakeout at Metropolis Harbor is in order," Clark said. "I'll call Perry and tell them what we're doing." He sighed. "So much for a great basketball game. I hope those people leave me some chips! Hey, maybe your Uncle Mike can give us another dinner?"

"No," she answered. "It's the middle of the dinner rush and I would hate to tell him what we used that food for. How 'bout splitting a pizza... or maybe even Chinese? I could go for some tri-pepper chicken. Just as long as it is *not* from that dump, The Green Dragon!" She shuddered, remembering the last time they ordered from there.

Clark bestowed a wry smile on his partner. "You got it. Pizza it is. Stay here where it warm and dry. I'll be back in a minute. Antonio's is right down the block."

Lois watched Clark's retreating athletic form as he got out of the Jeep and swiftly ran through the downpour. <What a great partner; he goes on last-minute snitch runs, helps on a stake out *and* gets take out. By combining our abilities, who knows, maybe this will be the 'Pulitzer' year.> "Besides, Cat's right," she murmured out loud. "He does have a tight end... but he's *no* Superman!"

Two hours later, Lois and Clark were still sitting in the Jeep, only now they were located at Metropolis Harbor's Pier Seventeen. The white cardboard box containing a half-eaten sausage and pepperoni pizza sat in the back seat among the other remnants of their meal. Holding a powerful night-vision 2.5 x 42mm Black Monocular Zeiss binoculars trained to her eyes, Lois intently scanned the area. The usual denizens of the old harbor were safely indoors away from the intermittent rain. Absently rubbing her nose, she felt the warning tickle of a sneeze coming on.

"It never ceases to amaze me what comes out of that purse." Clark said, shaking his head. "How many people just 'carry around' a pair of high-powered binoculars?"

Sighing deeply, Lois launched into babble mode without taking her eyes off the ship, "For the hundredth time, it's a *briefcase*, not a purse. Purses are for reporters like Cat and Diane, not *investigative* reporters. We have to be prepared for nights like this! Carry around our tools-of-the-trade. Besides, the binoculars were in my desk until Bobby called! So, Kent, keep your eyes on that ship!"

Her partner's brown eyes watched as well; he had tried earlier using his x-ray vision to search the old ship's interior, but unfortunately build-up of lead paint that had been used over the years made that impossible. The dark outline of the massive ocean-going freighter *Shackleton* stood majestically in the water. His meticulous scan above decks revealed little human activity, either legitimate or otherwise. No wonder there was so little movement anywhere on the

cramped deck, covered as it was with a multitude of shipping containers, not to mention the continued rain. He wondered to himself. Was it possible Bobby's intel really did come up dry?

"First a back alley, now harbor patrol. Who knows where the rest of this night will lead?" Before she could stifle a sneeze, it escaped. "Achoo!" Lois sneezed. "To a head cold?" She grumbled.

"Some Oolong tea would help move that along."

"Thanks, Clark. As soon as this stakeout ends, I'm grabbing a pot of the stuff. I should be watching my show right now."

"Oh, what show is that?" Clark asked, his eyes smiling mischievously.

"Uh, it's a nature show; about big cats in the African wild." Lois sank deeper into her seat and mentally crossed her fingers. The last thing Clark needed to know about was her addiction to the popular soap opera *The Ivory Tower*. Changing the subject she said, "Jimmy, Eduardo, and Perry are still at your apartment?"

"Yeah," he said, glancing at his watch. "Hopefully the guys are enjoying fourth quarter of the best series in the NBA playoffs."

"Don't worry Clark, maybe there's a Kerth — or maybe even a Pulitzer in it for us. That should make up for any old basketball game."

"Or a nature show?" Clark said teasingly.

Lois looked a little uncomfortable. "Well, they are big cats!" Her face scrunched up again as she sneezed.

"Okay, that's it, let's call it a night," Clark said. "You are catching a head cold, which is not going to help either of us."

"Come on, Farmboy; a little cold is not going to stop me. We stay ten more minutes."

"Okay, ten minutes, no more, then you are going home to a hot bath, tea and, ah, your nature show," Clark said while trying to stifle a laugh.

<Drat!> she thought. <He *does* know about *The Ivory Tower*! No, he couldn't — that's perfect revenge gossip material for use at the Planet.> Still her partner was not the chatty water cooler type, at least, not about their relationship outside of the Daily Planet's newsroom.

<Ah yes... their relationship or lack thereof. Where did she and Clark stand?>

Of course, they were partners and best friends, but every time they wanted to move a little further along; someone, something, or some story got in the way. There was also Superman; the mysterious Kryptonian had set himself as a symbol of all that was good and decent. In her work as an investigative reporter, consistently digging into society's underbelly, Lois appreciated his battle for justice and truth. It was comforting to have him on the same side and yes, even acknowledge her strong attraction to him. However, Clark Kent, the approachable Earthman, should be her first consideration. As much as she wanted, no, *needed* to talk with him, their timing was never right.

Mentally, pulling herself up, Lois sighed. <Stop it, Lane! That man is the best friend you ever had. Getting into a deeper relationship with him is begging for yet another federal disaster. Remember Claude.>

Clark continued looking out the window, studying the Shackleton, but he felt Lois' body tense as if readying herself for a conversation. One, because of his deep rooted fears of discovery, he had been avoiding for months. Where was this working partnership of theirs headed? Anyone could see the chemistry between them; their articles were so seamless it was impossible to tell where one ended and the other began. She was sensitive to his moods and thoughts. They had even gotten to the point of finishing one another's sentences.

However, it was not their working relationship in question here, but a greater commitment as a man extremely attracted to one fantastic woman. He had close relationships with his friends, like Dr. Pete Ross, Bruce Wayne and the people at the Daily Planet. Lana Lang was the closest he had ever come to a real girlfriend, although both of them knew their personalities were ill suited for each other.

His attraction and feelings for Lois were *different* — more mature. He sensed she felt the same. Both of them wanted so much more, but

neither of them could muster the courage to say the frightening words.

Of course, there was the third person in the relationship: a Kryptonian, Kal-El, son of Jor-El, aka Superman. He was betting if Lois knew the truth about him she would be livid for keeping it a secret, perhaps angry enough to end the comfortable relationship they did have.

That frightened him more than anything.

Another loud sneeze brought Clark out of his reverie. "Okay, that's it," he said. "I cannot work with a sick partner. Tonight was a bust. We'll probably have to tackle this whole Harmonic Crystals thing from another angle."

"Oh, Clark, stop being a killjoy. Bobby's information is never wrong! Something is going to happen tonight! If Superman were here he'd scour that ship with his x-ray vision and tell us if anything crooked was happening onboard."

"Well, he's not here and you are getting worse. Besides the ten minutes are up, time for Miss Lane to go home."

"Okay. You win, but I need to make a pit stop."

He was grateful that she was listening to him, especially because the look Clark gave her meant he would brook no argument. She looked more than tired. The slow stiffness in her limbs seemed to him *achy*. He was thankful to see her fire up the Jeep and head through the fog and rain out of Pier 17 and to the Harbor Master's office.

If only the two reporters had delayed their departure for thirty minutes more. Clark's sensitive hearing would have picked up the sound of a mini-sub's engine underwater.

Fifty blocks uptown and high atop the LexCorp tower, the third-richest man in the world stood at his balcony window overlooking the rain-soaked city with satisfaction. If all his plans went accordingly, tonight would be the first step towards Space Station Lex becoming the highest manmade object in the heavens.

His memories drifted back to his parents and their lives in Mulberry Gardens, which was now known as Suicide Slum. His father, a tall reserved man with a quiet sense of humor, grew old long before his time working hard on the docks to provide for his son. His mother, a gentle beautiful woman with a sharp mind, always told him he was destined for better things. In the end, they died penniless, their funeral attended to by only a tiny handful of mourners. Their bodies lay in a disgusting pauper's field just outside of Metropolis.

He remembered vowing to rise above the squalor and immense poverty of his youth; he worked hard, but was not above cutting corners and paying bribes to anyone who could advance him. Sometimes in the stillness of the night, as he slept between satin sheets, he pondered if his parents would be proud of him. Would they consider a Space Station spinning through dark emptiness a fitting monument to their struggles?

He nodded slowly, as if to push away the cobwebs of old memories. The time had come to move onto the remaining tasks for the evening. Despite the dull pain of another mild headache, he went inside toward his antique desk, and then flipped on the intercom.

"Can you come in for a moment, Ms. Milan?"

A gentle voice responded over the intercom. "Yes sir."

Lex Luthor mused about his resourceful assistant and occasional media liaison, Aykira Milan, Nigel St. John's replacement. The former major-domo had decided life as Lex's assistant no longer held any appeal and choose to retire permanently in Zurich, Switzerland.

Mrs. Cox was the natural choice to be Nigel's replacement, but she could never be the bodyguard and assistant she once was. After recovering from multiple injuries due to a serious automobile accident while on vacation in Buenos Aires, working for him in that capacity was impossible.

So after sending Mrs. Cox stargazer lilies, paying for all her medical expenses and providing a generous separation package Lex was forced to hire a personal assistant from within LexCorp who could orchestrate his legitimate day-to-day activities. The H.R. department

provided several internal candidates, but Ms. Milan's recommendations were exceptional. Her unusual skill set such as event planning, finance and a strong background on microprocessor science made her a desirable candidate.

It was her ability in long-range event planning that helped make the White Orchid Ball, as an affair so successful, many in Metropolis' elite social circles still discussed it two years later. The Ball was the first major task he'd assigned Aykira, the first of many she would handle with efficiency and style.

With immense pleasure, Lex's mind traveled back to their first meeting. On the day of her interview, Ms. Milan had arrived fifteen minutes early wearing light make-up, tasteful jewelry, an Anne Klein II grey suit and bearing a briefcase containing her research on the position as Lex Luthor's new assistant. Such efficient preparation appealed to his organized nature.

The H.R. department had informed her one of the high-ranking LexCorp executives would meet with her. However, Lex Luthor himself conducted the final interview, expecting to catch her off guard. There were two elusive qualities, which struck him about this prospective employee: one was her innate gentleness and poise, the other: she seemed like the kind of woman who took genuine care of people around her without getting too close to them. Such an ability intrigued Lex; he wanted to know more about her.

He sketched brief scenarios about a day working for him. She fielded each circumstance with practiced ease; he could see her confidence grow with each correct response. He decided to create a situation designed to throw her off balance.

"Ms. Milan, you have fulfilled my expectations admirably. All scenarios were answered satisfactorily." He smiled smoothly, black eyes dancing. "There is just one more." Gesturing towards a Tiffany crystal pitcher containing lemon ice water and elegantly cut glasses perched atop a coffee table, he said; "Before asking, might I offer some refreshment? We've been conversing for quite some time."

She arched a finely formed eyebrow, "Nothing for me, thank you. Please, what is your scenario?"

Lex stood up from behind his desk and walked over to the antique weapons display. He picked up the sword of Alexander the Great, caressed it, and then turned towards the candidate, his eyes radiant with intensity. "Not so much a scenario as a question of character. Loyalty. Ms. Milan. Loyalty. Alexander's generals remained steadfast with him throughout his lightning swift conquests toward India. No matter what the obstacles, they stood by him and forged ahead."

"I expect loyalty of all my employees; from my executive board members, personal staff, and most definitely my personal assistant. No matter whom, he or she, as the case might be, it is a matter of respect." Holding out the sword to her, Lex waited for an answer. The antique-filled room fairly crackled with tension. A new battle for this century was taking place, not a battle of sword and sinew, but one of minds and steel-forged wills.

Aykira Milan's cool hazel eyes glazed unflinchingly at the billionaire and the ancient weapon in his grasp. Gently she caressed the flat of the blade with her slender brown fingertips, and said. "Loyalty is a commitment, one to stand by, short of breaking the law. Alexander broke his own law by drinking. It was during a drunken rage that he killed a man named Clitus, one of his closest companions."

"Mr. Luthor," she continued, "since we are speaking of Alexander the Great, it was a fact that he approached all of his military campaigns with the utmost care and backed by the greatest army of his time. I came to this interview after intensive study of yourself and the corporation... armed and ready to work."

Lex smiled again, but this time it did not reach his obsidian eyes. He felt strangely fascinated by this woman. She was not afraid of him. His wealth, connections, and power were of no consequence. A woman of such caliber was rare, indeed, and should make the perfect personal assistant and perhaps more.

The tense moment passed when Lex bestowed upon her a

charming smile and extended his hand. "Ms. Milan, I have no further questions. It is my distinct pleasure to welcome you to LexCorp's executive suite."

She responded with an equally beautiful smile. "Thank you Mr. Luthor."

As the weeks and months passed, Lex Luthor grew to depend on Ms. Milan's observations in both business and personal matters. With her exceptional organizational abilities and gentle manner, LexCorp's Executive Suite ran with an easy efficiency never seen before. Definitely more so than Angelica Cox's stress-filled tenure at the executive administrative helm. His executives and their administrative assistants seemed happy, even comfortable with her calling the shots. With such a person handling the day-to-day operations of LexCorp, he could focus on other things.

He even covertly sought her advice on the actresses, models, and politicians' daughters he squired around town. His relationship with Antoinette Baines, the fiery scientist whose 'friendship' he cultivated as a means of learning Prometheus Space Station's secrets, ended partially because of his lovely assistant.

Aykira had been working for him at least a year when Lex introduced her to Dr. Antoinette Baines. The two women took an immediate dislike to each other. Perhaps it had to do with the fact that Aykira discovered her on the terrace in Lex's apartment, having breakfast, wearing the same clothes she wore the previous evening at dinner.

This was not the first time Aykira had met one of his 'houseguests', but this time it was different. Her face did not display jealousy, but instead an expression of intense sadness. So much so, that Aykira later pleaded a headache and went home. Lex could have sworn he saw tears in her eyes. Afterwards Antoinette never spent the night at his home again. For some strange reason he did not want to see that melancholy expression etched on Aykira's face again.

In any case, the plot to sabotage P1 had failed miserably, thanks to the newly arrived Man of Steel. Antoinette, because her dreams of wealth or perhaps keeping Lex as more than a business associate were not realized, demanded Lex pay her something as compensation. Pay her off he did, by promising to lay all their plans at her doorstep if she ever dared blackmail him or mention his name in connection with the Space Station's troubles.

Terrified of the prospect of facing a long federal prison term, Antoinette bolted. She immediately severed her ties to Luthor and resigned from EPRAD. The last he had heard of the scientist, she was teaching physics in an obscure community college in the Midwest.

Of course, Lex Luthor was not totally without companionship, but those affairs were short-lived and few. Although they had dated briefly, the beautiful Daily Planet reporter Lois Lane did not draw him mentally and emotionally as Aykira did. Despite her slim mask of brisk, even standoffish, efficiency, he knew the woman who touched the sword held a similar, albeit smoldering, attraction for him. He took pains to hide his feelings from everyone, but deep in his heart, Aykira was someone he could care for.

He decided to slowly alter their relationship, to put it on a more friendly footing. The first step was to make updating of his business calendar into a challenging game. Aykira surprised him. After the first month, she kept it with greater accuracy than he ever did. They started each morning going over his schedule; sometimes he might attempt to trip her up, only to fail more often than succeed. The second step, in his plan to improve their relationship, Lex teased her with gentle sincerity. To his delight, she responded in kind, but always as a respectful assistant. Still, it was refreshing having a work confidante. Not since the early days of his relationship with former wife Arianna Carlin had he experienced anything remotely like it.

His administrative assistant continued displaying her flair for organizational management and handled people with a lighter touch than himself. Some of his chief executives were more inclined to discuss a matter with Aykira before going to him. She was truly a valuable resource. The time had come to give her greater duties within

the company. She would be the perfect permanent media liaison between LexCorp and the barrage of reporters who would be asking questions about the microprocessors theft from the Shackleton when the news broke.

The military knew what was really stolen and would be too happy for the investigation's focus to be on common technology while they searched for the purloined crystals.

Now he needed Aykira's assistance to draft a memo increasing the hourly work schedule for key scientists at LexSolar. He wanted the crystals installed within Space Station Lex as a power source as soon as possible. With the expected shipment of Harmonic Crystals imminent, the solar panel specifications had to be reconfigured and manufactured quickly to be in time for the mid-summer launch one year hence.

Afterwards, those same scientists' work expertise on the Harmonic Crystals could be channeled to its other applications. LexCorp's financial capacity in government contracts and medical advances would have no bounds.

The report held no mention of these reasons. Its appearance was that of a routine work assessment. His key person at the facility, Dr. Frederick Scott, knew what Lex required. There was no reason to draw Aykira into this plan. He preferred she remain in the dark about his 'other' business activities. Plausible deniability is an important asset

The woman was busy enough with running LexCorp's Executive Suite and her workload was about to increase. Like tonight, she made herself available to work long hours.

He smiled a greeting when she entered the room, wearing a chic silk gold fitted jacket with black pants. Simple gold earrings dangled from her ears and a slender gold pendant hung from her neck. On her perfectly manicured right hand's index finger she wore a square silver ring adorned with intricate, deep etchings on the sides. It must have some sentimental value. He never remembered a time she did not wear it. A pair of black low-heel sling back pumps adorned her feet. He imagined those brown legs covered by silk stockings. <Truly magnificent.> Lex sighed inwardly.

Holding a pad in her arm, Aykira Milan walked further into the lushly carpeted office. "Yes, Mr. Luthor?"

"This personnel assessment and updated work schedule must be done, so thank you for staying late on such a wet, dreary night. Please set up an appointment to see the head physicist, a Dr. George Amundsen, tomorrow. He's mentioned leaving the project and moving home to Seattle. Could you handle that for me? The man is invaluable. If you must, increase his salary by as much as twenty-five thousand dollars as an incentive, effective immediately." Handing her two sheets of paper with his written notes describing the particulars of LexSolar's personnel needs, he continued firing off orders, which Aykira swiftly jotted into her notebook.

Upon completion, Lex sighed, rubbed his forehead, feeling that the mild stress headache he had was slowly abating and he said. "That is all for now." He looked up, shook his head and teasingly said, "My dear Ms. Milan, how do you ever keep up with my demands?"

Allowing herself a bit of amusement, she said with a smile. "You pay better than the next guy." Then, after looking over his notes and instructions, she continued, "This should take all of ten minutes to type and edit. I will forward it to you when it is done, Mr. Luthor."

"Lex, please — no one is here," He said in an equally teasing tone.

Her hazel eyes smiled softly. "Which is precisely why it is *Mr. Luthor*."

"Of course," he smiled back at her, immensely enjoying the game. "In any case, I insist on calling my car service. Taking the Metro on a night such as this is out of the question."

The shade of an impish smile again played across her face. "Mr. Luthor, I arrange for all the executive car services. I already have a car standing by. As you say, it is a rather unpleasant night. I intend to leave as soon as this report is completed."

"Staying tonight in my home is always an option. My behavior would be that of a complete and perfect gentleman." Lex placed a

hand over his heart and bowed slightly. His voice said one thing, but his eyes spoke very differently. The game had moved to a new level.

Aykira's features stilled, then a look passed over them. What was it? Caution? Desire? Deep longing, with a maddening touch of sadness? Like a gentle mist, it vanished and her face once again resembled the mask of an efficient executive administrative assistant. "N... no", she stammered nervously. "That shall not be necessary, although the offer was a kind one. Good night, Mr. Luthor."

"Good night, Ms. Milan."

After a brief nod of her head, Aykira turned, gracefully walked out of Luthor's office suite and went downstairs to her office.

<"Idiot!"> The voice inside her head roared. <He's drawing you in. Another mistake like that will ruin *everything*. Focus on the true task at hand. He is *not* the man you love!> After exiting the circular staircase she walked briskly down the silent corridor, then entered her own stylishly appointed office. Sitting down at the reproduction of a nineteenth century French writing table, she created and edited the report, then forwarded it to her boss as promised.

Minutes later, the intercom went off again, but Aykira Milan had departed for the night.

Part Two

"Yes, of course," a honeyed voice purred. "We can go another time. The job comes first. Bye now, George."

The phone was slammed angrily into its cradle. "Men!"

Jimmy Olsen looked over to Cat Grant's desk, watching the auburn-haired temptress body strike a pose like, well... a cat.

"Penny for your thoughts?" the junior reporter queried.

"You couldn't handle them, Olsen." The gossip columnist shot back.

"Too true, Jimmy, Cat's thoughts aren't worth a plugged nickel." Lois snickered while she walked down the ramp into the bullpen.

Clark, following behind Lois, balancing two steaming lattes and fresh chocolate donuts astride each cup, winced at the remark and said. "Oh Lois, don't start, it's not even 8:30. Especially, after last night."

Her previous irritation forgotten, Cat Grant's face lit up with mischievous delight. Easing over to Clark, the gossip columnist rubbed a perfectly manicured and bejeweled hand on his arm. "Did anything happen last night between you two?" She turned, looking Lois up and down; shaking her head in sheer dismissal of the other woman's sensible charcoal suit and burgundy blouse. "Oh no, what could I be thinking," she pouted. "You were with Lois? 'Madam Iceberg'? How could *anything* happen?"

Fighting a sneeze, Lois was ready to hurl a proper comeback when Perry White emerged from his office. "Great shades of Elvis! Is this a newspaper or a gossip rag? Olsen, where are those contact sheets from the Duncan Street fire? Cat, Senator Kline's daughter's wedding? The article rewrite is due for *tonight's* evening edition. Focus, people focus!" He turned his steely gaze to Lois and Clark and boomed out, "Anything turn up from last night's stakeout?"

Lois grabbed a tissue from her desk, covered her face just as the sneeze escaped. Clark's lower lip turned downward and he spoke after letting out a heavy sigh of disappointment. "*Nothing* turned up Chief. We watched the ship for two hours; drove around the harbor and spoke with a few 'locals' in the Harbor Master's office. No story."

"Ha! A first! The hottest team in town failed!" Ralph shouted gleefully.

Perry turned around and noticing, Ralph barked, "Hey, isn't your city hall piece overdue?"

His face beet red, Ralph muttered "Uh, right Chief," and quickly scurried away.

"What's everybody standing around for?" The Daily Planet's senior editor bellowed, "Get back to work!"

A chorus of "Yes, Chief!" was heard throughout the bullpen.

Everyone raced back to their respective desks attempting to put together the tasks Perry requested. Diane Pallister, a shy, statuesque blonde reporter specializing in articles for the 'City Life' and Weekend

sections of the paper, was walking towards her desk when Lois called her over.

“So, what is up with Cat?” Lois said. “She looked miffed a few moments ago.”

Leaning down, Diane spoke softly. “She’s upset about George; he called to break off tonight’s dinner date.”

“George?” Lois said, her surprise lifting her tone. “Isn’t he that slightly nerdy, ‘wild man’ scientist from Lex Industries? She’s *still* dating him after eight months? That’s some kind of a record!”

The blonde-haired woman shrugged. “I have no idea about Cat’s dating records, but apparently, the relationship is consistent *and* exclusive, especially where George Amundsen is concerned. They met a few weeks after the whole Nightfall Asteroid experience at some science/celebrity charity event. Apparently, he’s a scientist specializing in the new field of solar harmonics.

Glancing carefully over at the gossip columnist’s desk, Diane continued. “George works for LexSolar and lately they have been putting in overtime on some new project. He keeps canceling their dates and she’s getting anxious.” She warily glanced over at the gossip columnist then leaned closer. “Lois, please don’t let her know I told you this.”

“No way! Still, a very impressive bit of information gathering!”

“I learned from the best!” Smiling, Diane continued walking to her desk. Leaning forward in her chair and slowly sipping the mocha latte, Lois thought to herself, <Mantrap Cat Grant in a serious, monogamous relationship? What next, Ralph joins a monastery?>

Cat noticed the conversation between Lois and Diane and easily imagined the subject of their speculation: George Amundsen. A subject which was strictly off limits to everyone; *especially* Perry’s little pet, investigative reporter Lois Lane. After all, didn’t she keep Daily Planet employees’ names out of “Cat’s Corner”? Why couldn’t they respect her privacy?

George — so strange to think of him as “off limits” to anyone ever since meeting him he was anything but that to her.

Their sexual attraction was immediate, passionate and wholly reckless. A *wild man*, she remembered saying to anyone who would listen in the early days of their relationship.

His appearance was very different from the usual model-perfect men she went out with. He had an athletic build, over six feet tall with gentle blue eyes and blonde hair that was beginning to show the first signs of baldness. His nose was broken, the legacy from a biking accident when he was in his early twenties. Still it was George’s voice, which set him completely apart; it was slightly reedy with a tendency to speak in a manner that made the listener think he was totally insecure. Underneath the façade of insecurity and stutter lay a strong, steady individual. One who was willing to look past the Cat’s vamp exterior and see the intelligent, witty woman underneath. For the first time in years, Catherine Grant did not just ‘go through the motions,’ but genuinely enjoyed lovemaking.

Somewhere in the past eight months, the temptress gave way to a mature woman, happy to explore the joys of a fulfilling relationship without games or artifice. On his part, George consistently made efforts to help her grow as a person.

Her high-profile occupation as a gossip ‘columnist’ constantly exposed her to several heavy-hitters in the worlds of politics, sports and entertainment. George’s claim to fame was working to create a better solar battery, not mingling with the high and mighty. Yet he never appeared anxious and was always willing to be her ‘plus one’ at events she knew bored him silly.

The past eight months they shared other passions; good books, favorite local places in the city of Metropolis, cooking and hiking. She smiled inwardly, <Me a nature girl, who would have thought it?> George taught her the bare rudiments of physics and she shared her love of fine Italian sculpture, especially the Renaissance period. In the early winter on a whim, Cat dropped a few of her social engagements to take a clay sculpture class at Metropolis Community College and

really enjoyed it.

It fired her creative energies in other directions besides writing a simple gossip column. There were other places and subjects she considered important now, subjects very different from merely working for the Daily Planet.

She had the Nightfall asteroid and one frightened priest to thank for all this. Such a harrowing experience had forced Cat to deeply examine her life thinking. <There was no longer fulfillment in a series of meaningless relationships, where the heck was the meaning in that? All those *perfect* guys she called already had friends, family, someone to spend Earth’s last moments with. She was alone.>

A thrice-removed distant cousinship shared with Jimmy Olsen most *definitely* did not count.

She was getting comfortable, content with the tall, balding scientist with the hawk nose and faintly reedy voice. But certain nasty thoughts came to the surface. <Now, all of a sudden he had to work late? Shouldn’t that be her avoidance line? Hmm... maybe he wasn’t lying? Wasn’t there some kind of rumor about heightened security at LexSolar? He had mentioned a co-worker of his, Dr. Frederick Scott making his work difficult. But that shouldn’t affect them. Should it?>

“I need to get to the bottom of this!” She muttered aloud.

“Need to get to the bottom of what?” Jimmy asked innocently.

Looking up, her green eyes narrowed. Maybe she couldn’t find out about George, but a genuine computer hacker could weasel the information out of LexCorp. “Cousin” Jimmy might come in handy after all.

“Achoo!”

“That cold is getting no better. You need some chai green tea,” Clark said, concern etched in his deep brown eyes.

“What I *need* is to find Bobby and get my Uncle Mike’s cinnamon rolls back!” Lois grumbled. “We have nothing to show for our stakeout *but* my cold.”

Clark agreed with her. He had missed a great basketball game; the Metros had won their match after going into overtime twice. His guests had departed before he’d arrived, leaving the living room clean with only a few beer bottles and empty potato chip bags in the garbage.

Unexpectedly, Clark’s sensitive hearing picked up the words ‘Metropolis Harbor’. He turned from his partner and said “Perhaps not. Look at the monitor.”

The image of Gloria Campos, LNN’s top reporter, filled the screen. “This just in from Metropolis police, the super freighter Shackleton was robbed last night around 1:30 a.m.

“The authorities are not stating how several crates of cutting-edge Barontech microprocessors bound for LexSolar were illegally removed from the vessel. A press conference held early this morning at LexCorp HQ by Aykira Milan, Executive Administrative Assistant to Mr. Luthor and media liaison regarding this particular robbery. A statement as well as a brief press release, was issued to the five main media outlets.”

The camera cut away to the lobby of LexCorp, where a stunning black woman dressed in a very chic manner spoke to a number of TV reporters. ‘The microprocessors were properly insured. This robbery will only somewhat affect the work timetable at LexCorp. Our computer customers’ government, commercial, and private orders should experience only a minimal delay.’

The scene shifted back to Ms. Campos. “The Metropolis police are examining every lead and LexCorp is hopeful to have the parties responsible brought to justice summarily.” She then closed out the story, stating more details of the robbery would be discussed during the evening news.

“Smooth. She’s much better looking than Nigel St. John,” Jimmy piped up.

“Yes. She’s Lex Luthor’s personal executive assistant and from my source at LexCorp runs a highly organized office.” Cat interjected thoughtfully toward the cub reporter.

Clark looked over at his colleague, noting the tone of admiration in her voice. “This woman must be good if she’s earned your respect.”

Cat turned to face him, jerking her thumb toward the monitor, “Working for Luthor is not for the faint of heart or the disorganized. Say whatever else you want about the man, he only has the best of the *best* working for his inner circle.”

“Who cares about Luthor’s inner circle?” A miffed Lois joined the conversation and turned to Clark. “The Planet was scooped! Only *TV crews* were invited to the conference. If we hadn’t quit our stakeout around midnight, the microprocessors would still be onboard the Shackleton and we...er the Planet would have had an exclusive!”

Clark held up his hands, deflecting his partner’s onslaught. “Microprocessors are not what we went looking for. Ms. Milan said LexCorp won’t miss them. No Kerth awards here, Lois.”

Lois spoke a little softer so only her partner could hear. “*Something* is not right. Bobby’s information has never failed. Possibly microprocessors’ crates were not the only ones stolen.

“Maybe we should speak with Bill Henderson and find out more about those missing crates?”

“Jimmy!” all three reporters shouted.

“No fair. You two always get the geek first; I need him!” Cat snapped

“Finding dirt on some celebrity-of-the-week is not worth pulling Jimmy.” Lois remarked acidly. “We are tracking down *serious* news,” Lois remarked.

Cat’s green eyes flashed with menace; “She was about to lay into Lois when Clark stepped in as referee. “Ladies, we all need Jimmy’s exceptional abilities, but only one at a time. Cat, what are you researching?”

Mollified, the gossip columnist muttered. “It’s a private business matter.”

Clark shifted his gaze from Cat to Lois arching an eyebrow, which halted her from making a “Mad Dog” Lane comment. Jimmy walked over, sensing the tension within the group; he slowed down, rubbed his hands together, bounced on his toes and spoke diplomatically. “CK, Ladies, your wishes are my commands.”

Cat blurted out, “Work schedules for the LexSolar physics department.”

Ignoring her comment, but filing it in the back of her mind for later reference, Lois spoke quickly while rummaging through her briefcase. “Track down how many crates of microprocessors were ordered for LexSolar from Barontech and how many were actually stolen. Here, use this shipping manifest from the Shackleton as a baseline.” Turning to Clark, she continued, whispering. “Maybe General Zeitlin can provide Superman with the number of Harmonic Crystals crates shipped. After all, advertising the theft of a unique new technology like the Harmonic Crystals with military and extraterrestrial applications is not in EPRAD’s best interests. If the shipping manifest we bagged last night says twelve microprocessor crates were shipped, but say, fourteen crates are missing then we’ll know the microprocessors were stolen as a smoke screen. Then somebody, perhaps Ms. Milan, is lying.”

“Amazing how that little ‘pitstop’ for the bathroom at the Harbor Master’s office yielded Shackleton’s complete shipping manifest.” Clark grumbled unhappily. “You took quite a risk.” Changing tack, he asked, “What about Lex himself?”

“Clark, what is this obsession with Lex Luthor? Besides, if Ms. Milan is such a good administrator it will be very easy for her to locate all the information we need.”

“Wait a second, Lois. The existence of these Harmonic Crystals is not exactly public knowledge. Superman cannot ask General Zeitlin for that kind of information.” Suddenly Clark’s phone rang, cutting through the newsroom din. Seeing they were deep in discussion, Jimmy rushed over to answer it.

Cat sighed, walked away from the duo, and around to her desk. Much as she loathed admitting it, Lois was right. Using Planet resources to snoop on George was crossing the line...even for her. She

was going to have to resort to something daring and different – trust George.

“Hey CK, General Zeitlin’s assistant wants to know if you can contact Superman, it’s a matter of National Security.” Taking the phone, Clark quickly found himself deeply engrossed in conversation.

Lois contacted the 12th Precinct and asked to be put through to Henderson. Sounding more irritable than usual, the laconic inspector growled, “The boys bet me \$20.00 either you or Kent would call before ten o’clock. Bad news travels fast, especially when you two don’t get to report it.”

“Spare me, Henderson. Let’s cut to the chase. How many of the microprocessors crates were stolen? Achoo!”

“Honey and lemon, plus a little rest should take care of what ails you, Lois. Afraid your partner will handle this story better than you will? A little healthy competition can be a good thing.”

Rolling her eyes in annoyance, she took a deep breath and said, “Gee thanks, Dad. Just give me the number of crates actually missing!”

Ignoring Lois’ retort as per usual, the police officer responded. “There were twenty crates in all, but only five were stolen.”

“Five?”

“Yeah, and they were considerably smaller than the other fifteen.”

Her pencil made a steady tap-tap-tap sound on the wooden desk’s surface as she mentally rolled facts around. Furiously writing a quick reminder to check back with Jimmy on the Shackleton’s manifest she ‘acquired’ last night. Lois continued her conversation, “How much was the total street value of those crates?”

“Oh, about five point two million... give or take.”

“Impressive. But that’s mere pocket change for Luthor. Still, nice round numbers like that are always exciting to the readership. Hey, why the easy give, Henderson?”

“Because the government, Air Force and EPRAD are all over this one, so help getting these ‘microprocessors’ back is accepted from anywhere.” Henderson sighed. “Even from you two! Oh, yeah, tell Kent if he hears from Superman we could sure use the big guy’s help with this case.”

“But according to the LexCorp spokeswoman the theft of these microprocessors won’t hurt business. Why all the heavy suit reaction?”

“Since when is *anything* involving LexCorp and really Luthor himself simple?”

“Hmm. Point taken. Thanks, Henderson. Achoo!”

Once the phone was back in its cradle, Lois looked up for Clark, but her partner was missing and Ralph was standing in front of her desk.

“Sorry Lois. Clark’s gone, but he did leave this note for you.” Ralph held a sheet of paper between thumb and forefinger.

Lois’s eyes narrowed; he obliviously stole the sheet from Clark’s desk. “Give it here, Ralph.”

“Nope. Not until you tell me where that Intel about the Shackleton shipment came from.”

“Sources are confidential Ralph, even you know that. Now hand over Clark’s note or prepare to be very sorry.”

He continued to dangle the note just out of her reach. “No way, Lane! I...Steve... gimme!”

Steve Landers, the Planet’s head sportswriter, easily snatched the paper from Ralph’s fingers and handed it to Lois. “The newsroom is not a place for games. Crawl back into your hole and let the real reporters work,” he growled.

Frightened, Ralph fairly scampered up the ramp towards the coffee machine.

It was easy to understand why Ralph was scared. Steve was a former football player for the Dallas Cowboys; after an injury sidelined him from the game he turned to his second love, writing. Despite being in his mid-fifties, he kept himself in excellent shape. His powerful frame belied a gentle heart, but he was a man who did not

take kindly to fools in general and Ralph in particular.

Steve looked askance at Ralph's retreating figure and shaking his head, the older man said gently, "Why Perry keeps that guy on salary is beyond me. Know what I mean?"

"Absolutely. Thanks for the assist."

"No problem." He smiled warmly and moved off.

Lois opened the note; it read:

Lois, General Zeitlin needs a meeting with Superman, I'm going to try and contact him. Should be back in a few hours. Clark.

Sighing, she decided her partner could tackle that part of the story. Jimmy was working on the Shackleton's manifest. She needed to focus on Lex's assistant, Ms. Milan. Perhaps she could clarify why the billionaire's LexSolar division might not require the microprocessors. <Hmm... Cat needed information on LexSolar's work schedule. Perhaps the loss of the microprocessors would force workers to be laid off? Why is a gossip columnist interested? Could it have to do with George?>

Walking over to Jimmy's cramped desk, Lois spoke loud enough for him to hear her, but soft enough to avoid anyone else listening in. "Hey, look up Cat's request as well as ours. Who knows, it might be related to our story."

She watched a bewildered expression cross the cub reporter's face. Wisely, he thought better of asking questions; with a nod, he stood up and headed towards the research department.

Lois watched him go then decided it was time to get moving, herself. <If Ms. Aykira Milan is the new public face of LexCorp, it's time for her to get a crash course in media attention... Daily Planet style!>

The mocha latte was now cold and uninviting; frowning at its loss, she poured the remains into her plant pot. Shouldering the ever-present camel-colored briefcase, Lois started up the ramp ready to do battle. But, before doing that, she needed to buy some Echinacea; no way was a simple cold going to slow "Mad Dog" Lane down.

Part Three

After completing the phone conversation and dashing off a note to his partner, Clark immediately raced up ten flights of stairs to the roof. Standing on the top step, he listened for any heartbeats before spinning into the suit. Once, in the early days of Superman, he had made the error of bursting through the roof's access door and startling a maintenance crew. Painfully embarrassed, Clark had sheepishly made an excuse about needing some fresh air and run back downstairs. He found another escape route, from the building, but lost precious time helping a car hijack victim.

Fortunately, this time the coast was clear. Soaring upward into the damp morning air the superhero sped towards EPRAD facility and his meeting with the military head of the space agency, General Virgil Zeitlin.

Flying towards the southern tip of the eastern seaboard always amazed Clark. Each state had a vastly different landscape, which guided him to the Florida space center. The industrial and urban residential megalopolis of BosWash lay spread out beneath him, which eventually gave way to long stretches of Virginia and North Carolina's lush green woodlands preserves.

As a teen-ager, when he begun exploring his puzzling new abilities flying from one place to another always presented special challenges. Such as, avoid being picked up by radar and not get lost. Two special people, besides Jonathan and Martha Kent, helped reduce those challenges and grant easy access to any point on the planet; Ida Schultz and Hutch Parlow.

All through the summer of his eighteenth year, he and Jonathan had spent many a happy evening poring over the few detailed aerial maps available to the public. Hearing about the younger Kent's interest in navigation from Jonathan, Hutch Parlow, the introverted WWII Army Air Corps veteran, spent time with the equally shy teen-ager. Despite a forty-year age difference, a close friendship developed based

on their love of cartography and navigation.

To Clark's absolute delight, Hutch brought out some of the maps he had used as an aviator during his time on the Army Air Corps as well as some of the more modern maps used in civil aviation called sectionals. He took Clark out to Schubert Field, a local private airport used for civil aviation, and purchased some up to date sectionals for Clark as a present. These are maps that overlay each other and give minute details of terrain as well as locating airports, VOR station locations (VOR stands for Variable Omnidirectional Range. It is a specialized radio station, each of which broadcasts on a specific frequency and is used for navigation) and other landmarks used in navigation. He taught Clark the intricacies of plotting a course while having to account for wind speed and direction. Clark would not really need that knowledge since all of his flying could be classified as seat of the pants flying, but if he had declined to learn, questions of an uncomfortable nature might have been asked that he wouldn't want to answer.

Clark fondly remembered sitting with the aviator over tea and his mother's warm chocolate chip and oatmeal raisin cookies listening to thrilling accounts of aerial strategy during the war in Europe. The older man's eyes would sometimes drift far into the past, reliving a particular battle. He mentioned quietly the greatest plane he had ever seen was the *English Electric Lighting*. It was special to him because the plane's navigator had saved his life. Clark had often asked to hear the story, but the older man always shook his gray head, smiled sadly and said, "That's a tale for another evening."

In time Hutch began to train him on the finer points of aerial navigation and as a 'final exam' had Clark ride co-pilot in his plane to Kansas City. For a young man whose special abilities easily allowed him to fly to the city and back in mere minutes it was surprisingly one of the highlights of that particular summer.

Ida Schultz, Smallville's head librarian, also contributed to Clark's store of navigation edification. Many were the times when he could be seen leaving the small library carrying railroad, highway and city maps, first of Kansas, then the United States and finally the planet. These books didn't have as much detail as the sectionals, however at this point what he needed most was an overview. After so many trips to the library, the older woman questioned Martha about it one day at Smallville's General Store.

"That boy has taken out every atlas in the library and put in library transfer requests from as far away as Kansas City! It's not right for a youngster to be spending time with so many books during the summer. Jonathan needs him around the farm to lend a hand with chores and such."

Martha said, smiling innocently, "Clark gets his chores done in plenty of time to read. He likes maps; someday my boy will travel the world."

Her comment had satisfied the older woman, so much so she eagerly began ordering different atlases through Smallville's library on loan system for Clark to study, blissfully unaware of his true purpose.

One night during dinner, Jonathan had commented. "If you weren't so determined to be a journalist, son, cartography might make a fine career."

Superman smiled gently to himself, cherishing the happy memories. Even today, ten years later the now retired Mrs. Schultz would occasionally send an e-mail to Martha with computer enhanced satellite updates of a new atlas for her now world-famous journalist son.

Sadly, Mr. Parlow had died a few years after that wonderful summer, but the young man within still harkened back to every piece of advice bestowed upon him. The Man of Steel had thoroughly familiarized himself with Earth's landmarks.

Clark slowed down as he approached EPRAD's huge facility. Flying overhead, he viewed the impressive space complex. New outer buildings radiated outwards from the smaller, older buildings; when EPRAD was an undersized agency, its budget allowed for lesser

buildings only. Fortunately, the last two administrations realized the need for the space program's expansion and increased its overall budget handsomely.

Touching down near the main administrative building, General Zeitlin's adjutant, Captain Maynard greeted him. "Good to see you again, Superman." The Air Force Officer, a short, well-built man with brown hair and gentle blue eyes framed with horn-rim glasses, smiled warmly as he shook the superhero's hand. "General Zeitlin is waiting in conference room ten. Follow me, please." Clark followed him into the spacious main lobby; its walls displayed pictures of various spacecraft launched from EPRAD. An impressive array of commemorative photos of shuttle crews from previous years also adorned the walls.

Uniformed and civilian personnel alike walked about, but stopped and stared upon seeing the familiar blue, red and yellow suited figure. Superman and his companion approached the waiting elevator, stepped inside, and Captain Maynard pressed the button for the tenth floor.

Following a quiet ascent, the elevator doors opened and the pair headed down a worn beige carpeted corridor totally devoid of pictures or decorations. On the right side was a set of double doors. Stenciled on one was the name Video Conference room 10A.

Captain Maynard opened the door and ushered the superhero inside. General Zeitlin stood at the far end of a long oak conference table, going over several papers and one computer disk. Closer to the entrance, a red-haired technician stood over a computer, preparing a Power Point slide presentation. The technician, a seasoned veteran who routinely set-up video conferences between the Prometheus colonists and the President, looked up saw the superhero and gasped. "Wow! Superman, it is an honor to meet you!" He quickly regained his composure and muttered, "uh sir."

Embarrassed for the soldier's mistake and obvious discomfort; the captain spoke before the General could reprimand him. "Thank you, Kowalski. That will be all."

Painfully aware of his blunder, Kowalski nodded, packed up and departed as quickly as possible.

Virgil Zeitlin, a middle-aged African American, strode towards the Man of Steel, extending his hand in welcome. Over the past few years, the General became the *unofficial* liaison between the US military and Superman. Brusque and commanding in manner and speech, the soldier in him had never completely warmed to the concept of dealing with an alien possessed of vast, unknown powers. The military as a community publicly respected the Man of Steel, but in certain branches of government, xenophobic concerns were clandestinely whispered.

"You wished to see me, General Zeitlin?" Clark spoke in his best civil-but-distant authoritative voice.

"Thank you for responding so quickly, Superman. Before starting, let me offer assurances this situation is not as dangerous as the Nightfall Asteroid, but it is serious. Please sit down." Turning to Captain Maynard he said, "That will be all." Nodding briskly to his superior and Superman, the aide departed.

The superhero sat across the table from the General while the latter started the slide presentation. "Today's news report of the microprocessor theft aboard the *Shackleton* was misleading, for reasons of national security. LexCorp did have some microprocessors stolen, but not as many as the reports stated. It's a cover up. The items stolen were the main supply of Harmonic Crystals."

Playing innocent, Superman looked puzzled. "Harmonic Crystals?"

General Zeitlin began the presentation. "Yes. These pictures were taken at the test facility in Leeds, England where they were created by a joint effort between the US and Great Britain. The crystals' potential as a power source are myriad, but medical applications, especially in regards to the brain, are now being explored; currently the top research hospitals in the world are clamoring for them."

"Our military forces have tested them to power submarines, airplanes and all-terrain vehicles. EPRAD's original plan: use the

crystals to replace the nuclear power plant onboard Prometheus Station 2 with solar panels powered by the crystals. Such an engineering feat is still in the experimental stages, that's why they were brought here."

"Imagine how those plans have been crippled with this theft? Delay of power source transfer will dramatically affect the expansion of Prometheus Space Station 1 and push back P2 by as much as five years."

General Zeitlin opened a lead-lined box revealing a fist sized lavender and white hued crystal. Handing it to Superman he continued, "This is one of the three remaining prototypes; another is under lockdown at a military base in Britain and the last one is at S.T.A.R. Labs where Dr. Bernard Klein is conducting tests on it for medical purposes."

"The potential to help solve the current energy crisis is fascinating; however, the medical properties are even more interesting." Superman said.

"One of the technicians in the Leeds facility had a benign brain tumor for several years. Such medical conditions are always closely monitored. 'Benign' tumor can be misleading; although they may not be cancerous, surrounding tissue can be affected. In any case, shortly after he started working on the project the cells began to shrink, then disappear. After a number of exhaustive tests it was determined for some strange reason the crystals had completely cured his condition."

The General continued the slide presentation by showing 'before and after' pictures of a number of people. "Naturally additional tests were conducted with other patients, some of them facing death. The crystals cured all patients, except for the most advanced cases; simply by exposure to the crystals for a week or more."

"It seems the crystals are highly prized for a myriad of reasons." The superhero responded.

"We need your assistance to track down whoever stole these crystals, Superman. They can be a source of tremendous good for humanity....or evil."

Lois quickly dialed the main number to LexCorp on her cell while buying cough drops and Echinacea at Myers drugstore. Within moments of being transferred, she heard the cheerful voice of Ms. Milan's assistant, informing the reporter that although the media liaison's schedule was booked, a few minutes could be spared for questions. Lois was mildly taken aback at the swiftness with which an interview with Aykira Milan had been granted.

She wondered with a mental snort if it had to do with Lex Luthor's slight flirtation during their interview 'dinner' months ago. She had put a firm stop to his attentions by pushing for his real family background. But Luthor, as maddeningly elusive as ever, skillfully avoided all questions he didn't want to answer. A couple of dates followed, one to the opera and another one at a charity wine tasting. Neither occasion yielded anything but rudimentary previously unknown information on the billionaire.

The article was slated for the Daily Planet's Weekend Section. Hence, with a deadline looming, Lois wrote up a story and Perry printed it, but they both knew it was not up to her usual standards. Shortly thereafter Lex stopped calling and Lois had to admit a rare defeat. Perhaps this was his way of saying 'sorry' by allowing her easy access to his assistant?

Grabbing a Metrocab outside the pharmacy, Lois sat back, reached into her briefcase and pulled out her notebook, concentrating on tightening certain questions to ask Ms. Milan. Lois was engrossed in her interview preparation; time spiraled away while the cab wove through Metropolis' crowded sodden streets. The city's atmosphere fairly teemed with constant motion. Its inhabitants, as cyclists, in trucks, and in cars rode by bumping into potholes and blowing horns to avoid other vehicles. Sidewalks held couples walking hand in hand, people chattering on large cell phones and street vendors hawking their wares.

All this frenzied activity rolled by largely ignored by the reporter; having long since lost interest in the passing cityscape, she was always

intent upon reaching a destination and its story.

Looking up from her notebook, she was pleasantly surprised to realize they had arrived at the imposing, tall headquarters of LexCorp. Alighting from the cab, she breathed in the mid-morning air still lightly humid from the previous night's rainfall.

Walking into the ultramodern lobby, and after receiving a temporary security tag, Lois approached the main bank of elevators and took the special express elevator to the 110th floor. Bobby Bigmouth had mentioned it was better known sarcastically among the employees of LexCorp as "Luthor's lair." The doors opened into a reception area tastefully decorated in twenties-style art deco. Lois walked over to a young Asian woman behind the desk who directed her towards Aykira's office suite.

Upon opening the door marked *Special Assistant to the President*, Lois entered the office suite and noticed a tall middle-aged woman with soft auburn hair framing her face and with laughing deep green eyes. "Hello!" she said brightly, "You must be Lois Lane of the Daily Planet." The tall woman came around her desk and shook the reporter's outstretched hand. Her voice thick with a down-home North Carolina accent, she continued happily, "We spoke on the phone earlier, my name is Jane Connelly, Ms. Milan's assistant. She's in a meeting; as can be imagined, today has been a busy one. I understand you are probably on a deadline. But please wait in her office; it'll only take a few more minutes. How about something to drink?"

"A cup of tea, with a teaspoon of sweetener, if it's not too much trouble, please. Maybe this cold will go away." Smiling, Lois said wryly, "The assistant has an assistant. LexCorp must be humming these days. When was it announced Ms. Milan was the media liaison for this situation? Shouldn't someone from public relations speak to the media?"

Smiling ruefully, Jane deflected the inquiry. "I'm sure Ms. Milan can provide such details a lot better than I can. This way, please." Jane walked over to the other side of her office and opened the door, ushering Lois inside.

Neither 'office' nor 'workplace' was the proper word to begin describing such a sumptuous room. During previous visits to Lex's office and home, the museum décor always gave Lois a strong sense of guarded apprehension, its sole occupant determined to impress guests and clients with shouts of impressive wealth. This space however, was quite different.

The media liaison's office suite was designed to set visitors at their ease with gentle comforts, a sign of true graciousness, not artifice. The room was painted in calming colors of creams and blues, with the large area rug underneath the desk repeating the color palette in a bold grid pattern. Behind the desk, exquisitely designed Brazilian hardwood built-ins maximized wall space in grand library style. As Lois' eyes scanned the shelves of each built-in, she saw well-thumbed books covering a wide range of subjects, from physics, finance, and European history.

Perfectly framed pictures of the Swiss Alps mountain range, Big Ben at night, the Tuscany countryside and a picture of Brasilia, Brazil taken by Ms. Milan on her numerous travels were displayed in matching brown picture frames in various sizes. Books, photos, hand woven baskets and several personal items stated the occupant of this space loved her work, yet possessed a world traveler's eye. A short blue vase of pale pink tulips sat on her desk, the final touch of elegance; this was a workspace almost any woman would appreciate.

A stroke of envy ran through Lois as she sank luxuriously into the chairs upholstered in deep, lush, heavy cream fabric. For the hundredth time she wished the furniture salesperson hadn't coaxed her into buying stylish but totally uncomfortable couches in her own apartment.

The desk, a reproduction of a 19th century French writing table, was supported on slender curved legs, grounded the room in the understated elegance of a bygone era. Jane came in with a steaming cup of tea, placed it on the table beside the chair then departed without a word. Lois wasn't happy about waiting for Ms. Milan but nothing

was to be done...yet. She sat back, sipped her beverage and continued enjoying the delicious décor until her interviewee arrived.

Upstairs in Lex Luthor's office suite, an intense conversation between the billionaire and his assistant was taking place.

"Mr. Luthor, a working relationship already exists between you and this reporter. Ever since your early call this morning, I wondered, 'Why must I take the interview?'"

"Ah, Miss Lane is not just *any* reporter; she and her partner are the *best* in their field of newspaper investigative journalism. Handling her properly is good training for a media liaison."

Unconvinced, his assistant pushed her point. "Much as your trust in my abilities is appreciated, sir, it is *still* not clear why I should handle the follow-up on the Shackleton situation with her, or any reporter for that matter? Isn't the press release sufficient?"

"Credibility, my dear Ms. Milan." Lex countered petulantly. "An open dialogue with a media liaison instead of me riding into the fray provides assurance that although this theft will have an adverse effect on LexCorp, the subsequent investigation is routine. Miss Lane's story in the Daily Planet will calm the public's concerns. Employment at LexSolar, especially among the scientists, continues without interruption. Now, I'm sure Lois is already in your office; please do not keep her waiting. She comes by her reputation for impatience honestly."

Turning aside from his assistant, he strode over to the balcony doors and was about to step into the slightly humid spring morning air, washed clean and sweet after last night's rain. Not hearing the office door close, he looked back at the dark woman and saw the hard glint of resentment at his casual dismissal mirrored in her cool hazel eyes. Luthor walked over, laid a gentle hand on her shoulder, and said encouragingly, "No one on my staff can handle Lois Lane with aplomb quite like you, Aykira. All the important facts that we and the police have deduced are in your report. This is not a major media/business disaster for LexCorp. Simply respond directly and honestly to all her questions."

Suddenly a thousand heartbeats began to race inside and a lump formed in her throat, as she felt the heat of his touch through her clothes. Aykira's mind overflowed with sensual thoughts she had no earthly business entertaining. It was as if the original purpose for her presence in this office were thrust violently aside. She wanted to feel so much more than one touch. Abruptly reminding herself where she was and realizing Lex just bestowed a generous compliment she replied softly, "I shall do my best, Mr. Luthor." Then she quietly exited his office.

Lex walked out to the large balcony past the beautifully designed Smith and Hawkins black wrought iron table and lavishly upholstered chairs and stood looking over the great city in deep contemplation for several minutes. All thoughts of his complex business empire and the Harmonic Crystals were temporarily moved aside. For now, he was simply a man, wrestling with an age old dilemma.

Touching her was another mistake... an overt act of tenderness, first, a veiled, but serious offer to share the comforts of his apartment and perhaps the warmth of his bed. Now his senses were overwhelmed with desire for greater intimacy beyond merely touching her shoulder. He was being drawn in — not by her beauty — but by her strength and integrity. Physical and emotional control was an ability he prided himself on, but now its steady erosion was becoming a source of concern. His head began to ache painfully and his hands trembled ever so slightly. No woman, not even Arianna, had ever affected him like this. God help him, he wanted her. When the time was ripe, Aykira would no longer be his assistant, not a mere lover, but his wife.

If that were to be the case, serious modifications to his plans must immediately be made.

His musings were interrupted by the sound of silken cloth and gentle footsteps; his major-domo, Asabi, walked onto the immense

balcony towards him. Asabi's serene appearance was ever so misleading to the casual observer. Since his replacement of the retired Nigel St. John, he had dispatched all tasks with an accuracy that exceeded even Luthor's expectations. Still, Luthor missed the former MI6 operative; Nigel's sense of humor and dry wit matched that of his employer's.

No matter how hard Lex tried to lure the former spy back in his employ, it was met with a polite but firm refusal. Should he surface again by Luthor's side, MI6 would take a rather dim view of such an arrangement. Hence Nigel remained safely (and anonymously) in Zurich.

"Dr. Scott's plan to rob the Shackleton was carried out to perfection. All the Harmonic Crystals are accounted for, Mr. Luthor. Experimentation and construction of the solar panels and the main power generator will begin immediately."

"Thank you, Asabi." The billionaire bowed his head in thought than spoke softly. "I have another task for you."

Asabi stood waiting his employer's pleasure.

Make sure all the evidence regarding this particular operation is laid at Dr. Scott's doorstep. The man has a reputation for being rather obnoxious and ambitious. Of course, all of this is only necessary if our little *enterprise* is exposed." This last was said without Lex's usual suave ease.

"It will be done, sir." Bowing Asabi departed from his employer with the same stealth as his entrance.

Lex went back to contemplating the city below and the sky above, his headache... and other things, momentarily forgotten.

Returning from Lex's office Aykira felt torn; pleased that he had so much confidence in her talents, yet wary of being drawn ever closer to the man. She was also deeply concerned about the forthcoming face off with Lois...her 'friend'. Fully aware of the other woman's investigative skills, Aykira knew doing an interview with her, no matter how short, was a mistake. Thinking back to her past; there were no less than three occasions Lois had dismantled confident interviewees starting with a simple disarming question and keeping hammering with more questions until she cornered the person into telling the truth.

Innocent questions were the opening salvo to her interviews, but no matter what kind of interview she did, it was always backed up with rock solid research material.

Watching Lois and her erstwhile partner, Clark Kent, in action was fascinating, even pleasurable to observe, but now *she* was the subject. Mentally shaking herself, Aykira thought, <As long as I stick to the facts and not allow myself to be intimidated, Lois cannot possibly lead me into saying the wrong thing. There is nothing *wrong* to say. LexCorp's workings are second nature to me; *she* is the outsider looking for a story.>

Feeling confident, the media liaison smiled upon entering her office suite, and seeing Jane sitting quietly at her desk carefully going over an e-mail, Aykira spoke, "My meeting with Mr. Luthor ran longer than expected. Has Miss Lane arrived?"

Looking up from her monitor, the assistant smiled back. "Yes, she's inside, waiting. Aykira, her reputation as a sharp investigative reporter is well earned, she's already asked about your involvement as media liaison for the robbery. After all, this is a much more demanding situation then discussing the release of a new product line for Lex-Mart."

"No need to be concerned. Miss Lane is probably looking for follow-up material to this early morning robbery onboard the *Shackleton*. Not inviting the newspapers, especially The Daily Planet, was a foolish mistake; they do not like to be ignored. Please, provide my press release when she departs. Also, what time is Dr. George Amundsen arriving?"

Jane consulted her calendar. "Around 10:00 a.m."

"Good. It is 9:30 now; give me fifteen minutes with her. Then interrupt us, say my next appointment is on the way up."

Jane nodded agreement and continued working on the e-mail.

Aykira crossed the outer office, placed a hand on the doorknob, inhaled deeply and entered her office suite.

Hearing the door open, Lois twisted in the chair and stood up, facing an attractive, athletic medium-built African American woman in her early thirties. Her hair and makeup was stylish and well applied. Ms. Milan was clad in a chic aqua blue dress with blue high-heeled shoes. Her jewelry was not the latest fad, but pleasing-to-the-eye silver pieces Lois suspected had been collected during world travels. There was one piece in particular; a thick, square silver ring with intricate symbols carved on the sides and worn on her right index finger. The woman's manner was businesslike, but not aloof; she smiled warmly at Lois and extended her hand in greeting.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Ms. Lane. These meetings regarding the theft have been non-stop."

Lois couldn't help but feel as if she had met Aykira Milan before. Something about her warm, gentle manner reminded the reporter of someone, but she could not quite put her finger on it. Her upper lip quirked. If Aykira were not the subject of this interview, the two might even be on friendly terms. Lois surprised herself by saying, "Please don't concern yourself, my time was well spent admiring your furnishings and the photographs — your office decor is quite unique. Did all of this come with the job?"

The administrative assistant smiled knowingly, "Mr. Luthor appreciates his senior executive staff and their assistants' hard work and long hours. We have an extensive decorating budget; although, the photographs, artwork and books are from my own collection.

Traveling is a passion of mine, but since becoming Mr. Luthor's assistant I only travel for business. Please," she said extending her hand towards the chair just vacated, "make yourself comfortable." The reporter happily settled again into the warm comfortable fabric.

"Now, I understand you have some follow-up questions?" Aykira said as she sat down.

"Yes." Lois reached into her briefcase, pulled out her reporter's notebook and opened to the marked page. "But before we begin, I mentioned to your assistant Jane, it's strange for the executive administrative assistant to Lex Luthor to be handling such a high profile situation as this. Shouldn't the head of Public Relations be the media liaison?"

"This is a valid question. Usually Mr. Luthor or someone from our PR department does handle matters such as these. However in this instance, he has decided to expand my responsibilities and allow me to work with the media regarding the theft."

<Cat was right,> Lois thought to herself. <Someone so unknown outside of LexCorp must be extremely competent to work for Lex on this level.>

"Several months before the Shackleton robbery, LexCorp ordered a rather substantial shipment of microprocessors from Barontech, in Leeds, England. Doesn't the company have a standing contract with Comptronics in Silicon Valley?"

Nodding in agreement, Aykira responded, "Absolutely. LexCorp does business with both companies. Our international customers request Barontech products, while the domestic customers require Comptronics. It is simply a matter of domestic and international configurations being quite different. Since Barontech services the European market and Comptronics domestic, it saves LexCorp millions in conversion fees. All computers fabricated from Barontech microprocessors are slated for the European market. If you wish, I can contact legal and have them messenger over a copy of our agreement with both companies."

Lois, impressed with Aykira's refreshing candor, responded. "That would be very helpful. Thanks."

Waving her pen hand, Lois continued. "You know, I've been covering news about LexCorp for years; it seems the company as a whole and Mr. Luthor in particular is taking a relaxed stance regarding the theft of microprocessors whose street value is well over 5.2 million

dollars. He usually keeps such a close eye on his companies' activities as well as maintains a strong relationship with the public. A theft of this magnitude, even if it is only five crates out of twenty, should be a personal affront to his professional pride. Having anyone else publicly handling the matter might be perceived by his enemies as a sign of... weakness?"

The atmosphere between the two women in the room had gone from friendly accommodation to wary tension. Lois leaned forward, watched the other woman very carefully gauging her reaction. But again, the answers were direct and honest, although this time quite pointed.

"Right. First, the microprocessors are well insured, as was mentioned this morning at the press conference. Second, our technicians at LexCorp will not be affected by loss of employment between shipments. Third. There will be a 'slight' down tick on our production of computers, but another microprocessor shipment is departing from Leeds early next week. As for that other point, Mr. Luthor has a myriad of business interests. It is impossible for him to oversee *all* of them. He requested me to interface with the media and the authorities because of my knowledge of our micro processing business both from a manufacturer's standpoint as well as the impact on LexCorp."

"Hmm, fast turnaround on Barontech's side." Lois jotted into her notebook. Looking up she said, "I appreciate the information. LexCorp technicians jobs are safe, but what about the scientists at LexSolar? Rumor has it the ones specializing in solar energy have been putting in a great deal of overtime. Working on a new project... to build and design solar panels... to power Space Station Lex."

"Solar panels?" The other woman's face displayed confusion. "Excuse me, there is nothing in our reports about solar panels, only computers for private industry."

Taking a chance, the reporter pressed her advantage, "According to my source, the microprocessors were not stolen at all, but a new technology for powering those solar panels which was originally slated for Space Station Prometheus 2 – something called Harmonic Crystals."

This time a myriad of emotions from surprise and happiness moved across the media liaison's face, but finally settled on resentment. Swiftly the features schooled themselves to a calmness her body language did not agree with. "What did you say? Harmonic Crystals?"

Lois got the distinct impression the rug had been 'pulled from under Aykira Milan'. "I was hoping you could tell me." Lois replied candidly.

Before the other woman could speak, a gentle knocking on the door interrupted them and Jane entered the room. "Excuse me, Ms. Milan, but your 10:00 appointment is on the way up from the lobby."

The resentment departed from Aykira's face to be replaced with a look of profound relief, the competent administrative assistant returned. Rising from her chair and coming around the writing table. She extended a hand of farewell to Lois. "I am sorry we cannot finish this interview. My regular appointments are backed up."

"Could we make an appointment to finish this?" Lois said as she stood and placed the briefcase strap over her shoulder.

Aykira glanced at her watch, than shook her head in dismay. "That won't be possible for the time being. I understand the Daily Planet's printers have a deadline. Please ask Jane to consult my calendar for a phone interview later this afternoon and provide you with the press release. It has been... interesting meeting you, Miss Lane."

Lois spoke briefly with Jane Connolly regarding where to send copies of the contracts from Barontech and Comptronics. Despite the reporter's best efforts to push for a twenty minute follow-up phone interview later that morning in time for the evening edition's deadline, Aykira's assistant refused to alter her boss's schedule and granted Lois only ten minutes in the late afternoon. The business of running LexCorp came first. Mollified, Lois departed the office suite.

Standing in front of the express elevator, she mused on Aykira's 10:00 appointment, wondering if it was real or phony. <No, this woman was a professional; if she wanted to end the interview, she would have told me honestly, but graciously.>

The sound of the elevator doors snapping open brought her mind back to her surroundings. A tall, well-built man with slightly balding, sandy colored hair and a hawk like nose emerged from inside. He touched his glasses with a nervous gesture that reminded Lois of her partner. The man's mind was several million miles away; he nearly collided with her.

"Um... pardon me... Oh! Miss Lane!"

"George Amundsen... isn't it? You are Cat Grant's friend. We meet some months ago at the Daily Planet."

"Um... Yes, that's me," he smiled a lopsided, nervous grin and touched his glasses. "Uh, I hate to rush off, but I'm going to be late for my appointment. He jerked his thumb towards the receptionist. "You understand?" So saying, the scientist bowed his head, muttered a quick farewell, and briskly walked to the reception desk.

Shaking her head in a bemused manner, Lois entered the elevator and snickered. "That is the *wild* man? He seems more like a nervous rabbit!" A thought struck her. <George must be Aykira's appointment. According to Diane, he's one of the lead physicists for LexSolar. But why would he need to see her? Scientists, even the best ones, are not high on the food chain in any company. On the other hand, Aykira is Lex's 'eyes and ears'. Maybe he has something to discuss? Perhaps the heavy schedule over at LexSolar, a bigger server to handle the computers workloads, budgets? Who knows? Ridiculous! A man like him involved with international intrigue? What a stretch!> Groaning aloud in frustration, Lois slapped the 'down' button for the main lobby.

During the descent, her mind went over the brief interview. <Aykira Milan was, despite her efforts to hide it, deeply affected when I mentioned 'Harmonic Crystals', like it was good news, but still bad news.> Also, she could not shake the nagging feeling of déjà vu — they had met previously.

<Time to get back to the Daily Planet and have Jimmy dig up whatever he can on both Ms. Milan and Dr. Amundsen, there might be a connection.>

The elevator jogged to a stop; its wide doors opened and a determined reporter-on-the-prowl of a hot story emerged from its confines. Handing over her ID badge to the security desk, she headed outside once again onto the damp, noisy streets of Metropolis and hailed a cab. <This feels like a great story in the making.> She thought as the car nosed cautiously into traffic. <This cabbie had better get a move on; I have to get back to my computer. Achoo! And some more oolong tea> she thought, sighing internally.

Across town and fifty floors above, Clark landed on the Planet's rooftop, spun into street clothes, opened the door and sped downstairs. His meeting with General Zeitlin took longer than expected; Perry would probably demand an explanation for his long absence. Clark thought, <Telling him I spoke with a source regarding last night's theft might appease him. Meanwhile I still need to get my other story written up in time for the next weekend edition.> With an effort borne of practice, he mentally put aside his meeting at EPRAD as Superman. Clark started thinking about his duties as a Daily Planet reporter.

Because of their 'Best News in Town' slogan, Perry expected his team of top reporters to occasionally produce soft news or human interest stories for the Planet's Weekend Section. Currently Clark was working on a story involving a favorite local yarn shop called Rhapsody Knits; its owner Grace Chen, sold high quality knitting yarns from all over the world. For the past five years of the store's fifteen-year existence, she and many of her friends knitted exquisite hats, fingerless gloves, and shawls for cancer victims.

Herself a breast cancer survivor, Ms. Chen knew the importance of compassionate care. Chemotherapy often left the patient with loss of hair and sensitivity to the cold. While undergoing therapy, she taught knitting and crocheting; the soothing activities gave herself and her

students a focus, taking back their lives from the disease.

When her oncologist told Grace the cancer had gone into remission, it was a momentous victory. However, she did not stop teaching cancer patients, but went one step further. She held a meeting with a number of artisans throughout the city, asking them to donate leftover yarn, needles, and mostly their time once a month. In the large back room of her store, men and women would sit down and create the items for donation to cancer victims in hospitals in and around Metropolis. Several of her student/patients, also in remission, made scarves, gloves, and hats — paying forward, as it were, the favor.

Clark had learned about Ms. Chen from Lois' Uncle Mike, who donated refreshments to the group. Rhapsody Knits was across the street from his restaurant. Thinking such community-minded activity could use media exposure, Mike asked if an article could be written in the Planet's Weekend section. Lois always shied away from such stories; considering her writing style as too blunt a force. So Clark's writing abilities were volunteered.

After a few casual meetings with Ms. Chen and her artisan friends, Clark wrote up the story, pulling from his rough notes and recordings made during his visit on one of the artisan's work days. Jimmy had taken several photos of the quaint shop with neatly arranged yarns in every type and color. One photo in the store's large rear workroom showed a beaming Grace with her five staff members, six contributing artisans and two recipients of donated sweaters crowded around a large rectangle wooden crafts table. The table was covered with several colorful hats, scarves, sweaters and other hand-woven garments ready to be packed up and distributed to hospitals and homebound patients.

Clark felt immensely proud of this particular piece; it showed people at their best, helping others. Superman accomplished magnificent rescues on the world's stage, whereas people like Grace, her staff and Uncle Mike really made a difference in small, gentle neighborly ways. Their story, although not hard-hitting like the theft of Harmonic Crystals, deserved telling.

Stepping into the newsroom, Clark reached his desk, booted up the idle computer and began writing the story's final draft. If he worked without interruption, it ought to be complete before the Weekend edition deadline. After a few minutes deeply engrossed in his task, Clark sensed the absence of his lovely partner. Pausing for a minute, as if to consider a line of text on the monitor screen; he listened intently throughout the building for her delicate heartbeat.

Nothing.

Where *was* she? Checking on a lead to another story, he hoped. Now was not the time to attack one of Lex's minions... especially not his executive assistant/media liaison without irrefutable evidence, the results of intensive research. Lois was working with her intuition, wafer thin assumptions and one snitch's questionable word.

Looking around, he did not see Jimmy, Cat or Perry. They *might* have an idea where she went. He quietly prayed she was at the *Java Perk Coffee Shoppe* getting another low-fat mocha latte.

Gazing up the ramp, he saw Steve stirring his latest cup at the coffee machine and leaving his desk headed towards him. "Hey Steve, have you seen Lois?"

"Hmm, not since this morning when I snapped up your note from that weasel Ralph and gave it to her."

Annoyed, Clark responded, "What was Ralph doing with my note?"

"Far as I could see, using it as bait. He wanted to know which of her sources sent you two out to Metropolis Harbor last night."

At that moment, the elevator doors snapped open to release Lois. She strode assertively down the ramp towards Clark and the sportswriter. Upon reaching them, the excited brunette launched into giving marching orders, at full babble mode no less.

"Great Clark, you're back. We need to get a conference room and pull together our notes from your interview with General Zeitlin and mine with Aykira Milan. Oh, what did Superman say about his conversation with the General? Where's Jimmy? I need him to run a full background check on Aykira Milan. That woman is hiding

something." She began digging into her briefcase, searching for her notepad.

Steve smiled, laid a reassuring hand on Clark's shoulder, shook his head and moved off, leaving the younger man to handle his keyed up partner.

"Whoa, Lois! I did not interview General Zeitlin. He asked to speak with Superman and I merely passed on the message."

"Yeah, like he didn't at least tell you something! Come on!" Grabbing him by the tie, she dragged him into the nearby conference room. She turned, stuck her head outside the door, lovely brunette hair swaying. She spotted the office gofer and yelled, "Jimmy, get in here!" Then shut the door.

"Okay Clark; don't hold out on me... spill! Achoo!" Again, Lois sneezed with all her might.

"The last time we heard *that* word, this whole paper chase started!" Clark's additional comments were interrupted by an impatient knocking on the conference room door.

Without turning away from Clark, Lois shouted, "Come in Jimmy!" Instead of the cub reporter's handsome young face, Perry walked through the door. Gazing at both of them, he spoke in a surprisingly soft tone. "Lois. Huh, mind telling me where you've been most of this morning? You and Clark have spent enough time on this rather thin story without solid facts, not half-baked assumptions. There are other assignments on your inbox. Like the Stone and Mercantile Bank story. An announcement went out an hour ago their CEO might step down. So, the piece needs a new ending for this evening's edition. I want the Shackleton case dropped for now."

"Can't Elsie in re-write handle that? There's a story here, it hasn't dried up! If Clark and I can spend just a few hours combining our notes..."

Perry held up a finger to forestall Lois' barrage. "Hold on now, I have to get off this train you're driving. Finish the re-write *first*, then if there's time in the afternoon, you two can work on the Shackleton piece. But if I don't see any tangible results I pull the plug. Deal?"

Looking like a child denied its sweet, Lois mumbled, "Deal Perry."

"Good. Now make like Elvis listening to the Colonel in the recording studio and get back to work. A newspaper runs on paper, ink and hard facts!"

Lois finished her Stone and Mercantile re-write in record time. Unfortunately, as she was submitting it to Perry a phone call from one of her sources told her the CEO was not going to step down after all. Rolling her eyes in frustration, she made deft changes to the last two paragraphs and again sent the story to Perry.

With the article written and all other tasks accomplished, Lois began a rough article outline from her interview notes with Aykira. Another phone call announcing a last minute news conference by the mayor required her and Clark's immediate attention for the remainder of the day.

Part Four

Grateful for the end of a long working day at the Daily Planet, and the clandestine conference with General Zeitlin still on his mind, Clark was relieved to arrive at his apartment at 344 Clinton.

After depositing his business suit into the dry cleaning bag, he dressed in comfortable gray sweats and turned the TV to the Metros playoff game. Clark entered the well-stocked kitchen alcove and began preparing dinner. He pulled out Idaho potatoes, salad fixings, and a thick marinating NY strip steak, with portobello mushrooms, red peppers, and onions. He placed the steak and vegetables into a grilling skillet and waited for it to cook. Heat vision was good for a number of things, but not for cooking an expensive steak!

Ruefully, he thought of Bobby Bigmouth while slicing the vegetables. <The snitch would probably move faster than me when it comes to food.> With super speed the potatoes were sliced, placed into a shallow pan and drizzled with pungent oil olive laced with rosemary and oregano, then the Asian salad was tossed and everything was laid

on the small kitchen table.

Glancing at his wine rack, Clark thought, <All I need now is a proper glass of wine to accent the meal.>

Abruptly, the evening's quiet mood was broken by insistent knocking on the front door.

<At times like this, I really love x-ray vision,> he thought gratefully, lowering his glasses while looking through the door. His rather agitated landlady, a middle aged African-American woman by the name of Gloria Harper, stood holding a pet carrier. Sighing, he crossed his small living room, strode up the stairs, and opened the door.

"Good evening, Mrs. Harper what can I do for you?"

"Mr. Kent, thank goodness you are home! There is an out-of-town family emergency and I need to be gone for a week. Could you look after Pepper for me? He really likes you and everyone else is unavailable or allergic. The last time I took him to a kennel it was not a good experience for either of us."

"Huh um...well." He didn't know what to say. Besides work, his duties as Superman commanded a great deal of his time. A cat needed feeding, attention, and a frequently cleaned litter box...urgh.

"Oh, he can stay in my apartment," Mrs. Harper said. "Feed him in the morning and when you arrive home. Talk to him...maybe a little petting? To cover for any inconvenience, this month's rent is dropped by two hundred dollars. Please Mr. Kent!"

Suddenly a quiet meow was heard from the carrier. Clark looked inside to see a sleek black, white and light brown cat; the feline stared gently up at him with sparkling green eyes. Reaching a gentle paw through the grating, Pepper patted Clark's arm to emphasize his desire to stay. "Meow?"

"It's okay." He spoke gently to the little animal. How could he resist those pleading eyes? "Pepper can stay here with me, *not* in an empty apartment." After taking the carrier from the relieved landlady, several minutes were spent discussing the cat's habits and food needs. A grateful Mrs. Harper gave Clark the keys to her apartment, a phone number for emergencies, than she departed for Metro airport.

After letting Pepper out of his confinement, the inquisitive feline proceeded to explore Clark's apartment. It was hilarious watching him poking around corners and attempting to open doors. He even reached up to touch the wine rack's bottom row. Bored with the main room, Pepper walked to the open door of Clark's special closet where his extra Superman suits were stored and started sniffing, scratching and then plaintively yowling, anxious to solve the elusive mystery by walking around inside.

"Smart cat. You know something about me Lois *doesn't*." Smiling at the cat's antics Clark went back to preparing his dinner, wondering in the back of his mind what his lovely partner's reaction to the little animal might be.

An hour later, dinner eaten and the dishes complete, Clark lay comfortably on his couch continuing to watch Game 2 between the Metros and Denver Nuggets. Another tight athletic contest was in heated progress.

"Meow?"

Looking down, Clark noticed a pair of bright green eyes staring up at him expectantly. Leaning against his couch, the cat stretched its lithe body upward and meowed again.

Patting the couch cushions, he invited Pepper up. Without hesitation, the cat leapt up, touched his nose to Clark's then proceed to walk over the top of the couch until he found the 'perfect nesting spot' close to Clark's head. Smiling, Clark returned his attention to the game and listened to the animal's gentle purring in companionable silence.

The evening's tranquility was broken again, this time by the shrill ring of his phone.

"Hello?"

"Clark, it's me Lois. Do you have any more oolong tea? Achoo!"

Listening to her stuffy nose and slightly scratchy throat, he responded. "That cold is getting worse. Why don't I pack up dinner and come over instead?"

Her voice sounding soft, tender, and not a little tired she said. "No, just the tea. I'm finally getting a chance to watch my... ah nature show."

"It's okay. I am coming over there, see you in thirty minutes."

Finally, the last e-mail of the day was sent. Aykira leaned back and shut down her computer. Today had been long and tiring, yet triumphant. Finally, after many years, a difficult and dangerous mission was drawing to a close. Her mind needed a break from LexCorp, the media and most important of all, Lex Luthor.

Time to shake up the routine; her body needed a vigorous, workout and Carrie's kickboxing class was the answer. Glancing at her watch she thought, <If I hurry to the gym I might make it before the room gets packed.> Quickly, she gathered her laptop and briefcase and then walked out the office. Jane was still hard at work on a PowerPoint presentation.

<The woman is a marvel, but she needs a break.> Aykira thought.

"Jane. Pack up your computer and go home. Scott comes first."

The red haired assistant looked up from the monitor. "Not a problem! Give me only two minutes! Have a pleasant night; are you going to the gym?"

"Yes. If Carrie can squeeze me into her kickboxing class."

Waving good night to her assistant, Aykira departed the building as quickly as possible. Hailing a cab, she endured a ten-minute drive uptown in congested 'rush hour' traffic towards Health life Gym.

[Jab. Jab. Uppercut. Right cross.]

Sweat poured profusely down Aykira's face and neck, soaking her hair and the front of her cream spandex clad body.

Her mind thought furiously back a few hours to that mangled, yet revealing interview. <If I stood my ground with Lex and refused an interview with Lois Lane, this precious information regarding the crystals would not have been discovered. One does not compete with one of the most intuitive minds in the journalistic world unprepared. It is a recipe for failure. Still the near disaster yielded unexpected fruit. Fruit I came to Metropolis for and hopefully can soon depart for home with.>

[Lifting a nine-pound bar she brought it into position to 'mock strike' her opponent in the head than move rapidly, to the solar plexus.]

She had crossed a universe and three continents hunting down those wretched crystals. The manufacturing team in Leeds created them when Bern's chronometer indicated they would. Sadly, due to a mathematical error, she was stuck in this universe. Also, making the attempt to enter Barontech's heavily secured complex far exceeded her talents. Hiring professionals for the job was out of the question; they constituted loose ends. Aykira hated loose ends.

So the waiting game commenced; working as Lex's assistant was the perfect position to monitor Barontech's progress reports on the crystals as well as LexCorp's microprocessors. In time, she developed a reputation for understanding the process of creating the latter while keeping an undercover surveillance on the former through her contacts at Barontech. Whenever EPRAD requested the crystals shipped, she intended to be notified and in position to acquire a dozen of the crystals.

[Left Knee up...kick!]

Her opponent narrowly avoided another 'mock strike'.

Unfortunately, her extremely well paid contact at Barontech failed to inform her about the shipment.

If Lois Lane had not mentioned anything, her ignorance would have continued and more time, perhaps another year would be lost. Remaining here for additional years might put her entire mission in jeopardy; eventually her 'unique' biology could raise uncomfortable questions. Her time, as well as *his*, was running out.

[Lift bar. Strike left, smooth upward movement, keep arms loose, elbows unlocked.]

Lois kept asking questions about microprocessors, personnel schedules, physicists working overtime. What are she and her

ubiquitous partner working on? It sounds like a bigger story than just the Shackleton theft. Some questions were easily averted, others Aykira answered truthfully, while for the remainder no sufficient explanation was forthcoming.

Smiling inwardly Aykira thought <Excellent intel. Some of those Daily Planet researchers need to work for LexCorp.>

Considering Lois Lane, the investigative reporter would return, this time, with her partner in tow. Facing one was bad enough, but *both* of them? Her facts needed to be unimpeachable and no evasive answers to any of their questions. Again she mused, <Why did Lex want her to face this morning's media barrage rather than himself? He thrived on sparring with TV reporters, many of whom were on LNN's payroll.>

Lex Luthor the man was another problem. For two and a half years, she had battled a relentless emotional and physical attraction to him, but lately her efforts had been faltering. Aykira was living in a world not her own; interacting with doppelgangers of associates, close friends and loved ones. The strain and absolute isolation was beginning to take its toll.

<What happens if I return home and this whole quest was a failure?>

The world will have its desperately needed energy source, but he who is most precious to me will be a mere shell.

Her mind traveled back to her conversation with Luthor early that morning.

<<Consider it an instant promotion,>> he said over the phone at 4:30 a.m. <<Your manifold abilities should not be wasted as my mere assistant or just making small announcements about new product lines. This is the perfect way to begin your media exposure.>> She could hear the smile in his voice. He was planning something. Was she were being groomed for some greater role within LexCorp?

Then after the press conference, she was in his office suite, arguing against having an interview with Lois.

That argument culminated with the subliminal mental, physical and emotional exchange between them, beginning with his soothing touch. Her body responded instantly, craving more contact she had no right to yearn for. Could Lex sense her desire? Her sheer loneliness? Did he want her for more than a moment's pleasure?

Aykira was no fool, she knew how charming Lex could be when he desired something. Earth knows, the man could have just about any woman he wanted. Nonetheless, his behavior towards her had always been different in a number of subtle ways. She reflected briefly on the scientist Toni Baines. Toni was a thorn in her side here as well. Aykira's immediate attention required focusing on that particular individual upon her return home.

If Lex's affection was real, could she abandon her quest to satisfy long denied emotions and needs? What if after all the deception and struggle she had endured, the lives she had altered, she could simply send the crystals to her home and remain here... by Luthor's side?

No. Remaining here meant definite exposure.

Exposure yes, of the kind best diligently avoided. This particular kind of exposure only brought her in contact with persons she dreaded like Lane and Kent... the hottest investigative journalist team since Norcross and Judd. If she did not step evenly, six years of patient planning and waiting would come to an abrupt end.

[Strike!] A sharp jolt of pain shot through her right shoulder. Her sparring partner shouted, "Heads up Aykira! Caught you that time!"

<Caught indeed,> she thought bitterly.

"Partner, thanks so much for tea and the dinner! It was a lifesaver! Achoo!"

"From late night stakeouts; to early morning interviews and little or no rest in-between. Lois, your body is telling... no, demanding some down time and you want to compare notes about our interviews? In the first place, what makes you think I got an interview with General Zeitlin?"

"Oh, please Clark, Superman must have told you *something*."

"Maybe," he said as he stood up. "I'm making us some chamomile tea; it should help let you sleep. We can go over your interview notes. While you're sipping a fresh cup... and yes, we can discuss what Superman told me about the crystals."

"Yes!" She squeaked triumphantly and pumped her fist. "The big fella never lets us down!"

Clark smiled as he pulled out a jar of honey and two packets of Chamomile tea from his backpack. Lois had a coffee maker, and blender on her kitchen counter — between the two was a small teapot. Swiftly he set out mugs, spoons and napkins. While waiting for the pot's water to boil, they chatted amicably. Both of them always enjoyed spending time with each other. Clark brought two steaming mugs over to the couch and handed Lois hers. He sat down on the opposite couch. Savoring the delicate herbal blend as it passed over his tongue, he began speaking.

"One of these days, you need to learn basic cooking survival skills. Bobby was right."

Rolling her eyes in exasperation, his partner shot back, "We are talking about the investigation, *not* my culinary skills, or lack thereof. Now come on, what did General Zeitlin tell Superman?"

It was just like her to avoid any uncomfortable subject by getting back to reporting. Honestly, the woman's blood was probably newsprint ink. Her need to be the best, no matter the cost, was one of Lois' traits he found attractive, yet was at odds with. Clark began explaining about where the crystals came from, stating it was a joint research effort between the United States and Great Britain. He moved on to their military, energy and amazing medical properties.

"Dr. Klein was brought in to study the Harmonic Crystals' effect on brain tumor patients?" Lois asked. "Why? He's not a medical doctor."

"No, but he is a renowned authority on brain mapping, along with a couple of other talents he possesses."

Lois smiled, "Does he *ever* leave S.T.A.R. Labs?"

"Apparently, it is not very often." Clark replied drily. "He's been helpful to scientists in several different fields. Kind of a Jack-of-all-trades, Master-of-none sort of thing, but his research yields results. Since coming to Metropolis, Superman has benefited from his expertise many times."

"Not to mention the Daily Planet. It's a good thing Jimmy's old friend introduced them, otherwise where would we or Superman go when really thorny scientific questions require an answer?"

"That's all Superman told me. General Zeitlin and EPRAD need his help tracking down whoever stole those crystals and it's a sure bet they stole the microprocessors as a smoke screen."

"Yeah well, the one piece of research I could get from Jimmy this afternoon was those crystals were not on the Shackleton's manifest or the Harbor Master's list."

"Hmmm, amazing what a quick 'pit stop' at the Harbor Master's office yielded." Clark said ruefully. "You really shouldn't have sneaked in there and stolen those papers. What if someone saw you?"

Ignoring his comment, Lois continued. "EPRAD and Barontech probably took the precaution of omitting the crystals' presence onboard ship. As you mentioned earlier, besides the prototypes, that was the entire world's supply. So more can be created, but leaving such a powerful energy source unaccounted for is frightening."

"Agreed; all the more reason for *Superman* to be looking for the most likely criminals, not you and me."

Lois took another sip of tea, allowing the gentle herbal 'notes' to tease her taste buds. Her throat felt much better she began. "I'm not so sure about that. Anyhow, let me tell you about Aykira Milan. Much as it pains me to admit it, Cat's right about her talents as Lex's assistant. She has a wide range of interests, which doesn't hurt when it comes to working with a bunch of technicians, physicists and businessmen."

"How do you know about these interests, did she tell you?" Clark asked.

"No such luck! Her office bookshelf has a wide variety of publications; physics, accounting, finance, math theory and travel. I

did not just sit around waiting. I thumbed through a few; each one had her handwritten notes over the pages.” Lois grinned happily, warming to the subject.

“Wow! Talk about research.” She laid everything out there for you.”

“Jimmy needs to run a deep background check on her education and whatever else he can dig up. I could not trip her up on any questions regarding the manufacture of the microprocessors. She defended Lex’s decision to have her handle the media and his absence at this morning’s news conference. She even messengered over a copy of the contracts between LexCorp and their main manufacturers of microprocessors.”

“Seems to me, Lois, you have run into a brick wall. Could it be Ms. Milan has nothing to hide?”

She hesitated to answer, because another sneeze was coming on. “Achoo!” She grabbed a tissue and blew her nose. “Urgh! I need more cold medicine. Yeah well, she might not have anything to hide, yet she was definitely surprised when I mentioned solar panels for Station Space Lex *and* she nearly fell out of her chair when the Harmonic Crystals came up. I don’t understand it. Clark, it seemed like she was angry to hear about it from me, but also relieved. My journalistic instincts are screaming there’s a story here...a big one.” Looking suddenly uncomfortable, Lois continued. “Plus there’s something else about Aykira.”

“Oh, what’s that?” Clark cocked his eyebrow curiously.

“It’s the oddest thing, but I feel we have met before and were friends...good friends. Yet for the life of me *where* we met does not come to mind.” Lois lapsed into a contemplative silence.

Clark looked at her gently, she was fighting sleep and a cold, but she was still determined to get the story. With such resolve, no wonder she had gotten three Kerth awards at a young age. However, right now what she needed was rest, otherwise that cold was only going to get worse.

Nevertheless, she still steadfastly ignored his comments about breaking and entering, taking risks of all sorts. It was beginning to worry and annoy him at the same time.

Breaking into his thoughts, Lois started speaking again. “There’s only one way to get to the bottom of this whole thing. I need to make an ‘unauthorized entry’ into LexSolar’s manufacturing and shipping files...on site.”

“What!” Her partner shouted. “A break-in? Lois, that’s crazy! This is not an old disused warehouse for Bureau 39. This is a high tech state-of-the-art facility, secured to the teeth.”

“Yeah well, if we hadn’t broken into that warehouse, Superman would have never gotten his globe thingamajig back. He’s a friend of mine...ours.” She snapped. “It was *worth* the risk!”

“That’s just the point Lois! You take *too* many risks! By jumping into the deep end of the pool, the consequences could be worse than a bump on the head! Look what happened with Prof. Winner, his old colleagues nearly killed you!”

Lois’ eyes grew wide and glaring with anger. Despite never having seen Clark this passionately determined before, she refused to back down. “The story means everything, it’s how I get the job done! Somebody has to go in and stop the bad guys. Maybe I can’t fly like Superman, but by writing about corruption and the ones like Aykira Milan who hide important knowledge regarding a major crime...”

“Wait a minute, Lois, show me one shred of evidence against this woman, more than just ‘your reporter’s instincts?’” This said while making angry quotation marks with his fingers. “Without proof, you could be dragging the Planet into a lawsuit!”

His partner’s voice turned cold with fury. “I have *three* Kerths, Mr. Kent. *All* of them started out with big potential for lawsuits...nothing happened!”

“Yes. I have one Kerth. A good solid story; based on firm research *and* where my life was not constantly endangered while writing it. If

you expect to nab a Pulitzer by raking someone — possibly innocent — over the coals, I want no part of it!”

Lois realizing her partner would not capitulate, changed her tactic, and pleaded. “Come on Clark. See it my way.”

“We *always* see it your way. In a partnership there’s supposed to be give and take.” He fired back.

“What? Like in a tight little marriage? Thanks, farmboy, but I’m *never* adding Kent to my name!”

Hurt and angry Clark stood up answering. “I would never ask you to and at this rate, no one else would be stupid enough to either!”

“Oh yeah? Lois stood up as well from the couch, trying to stand on her toes, looking Clark in the eyes. “Fine! Get out!” She stormed in the kitchen, grabbed his backpack, walked back over to him and tossed it. Clark nimbly caught it while putting on his jacket. “Take this stupid tea with you!”

The evening’s previous harmony was shattered. Clark was so despondent after leaving Lois’ apartment building; he walked home rather than fly, his ears still ringing with her words. What was he thinking, yelling at her like that? He was only trying to protect her. Some of the stunts she pulled were downright dangerous. Okay, it was true about the Bureau 39 break-in. Without her unorthodox methods, he would still think of himself as a ‘Russian experiment gone wrong’ and not as the last surviving son of Krypton. Just for once Lois needed to listen to reason. The story is not always the main thing. Human lives were behind the headlines; occasionally she lost sight of that.

His mind continued along the same lines as he put the key into the lock. “Flying home would have been better; since the terrace is right next to my bedroom. I could just fall into bed and pretend this whole argument didn’t happen.” He thought glumly. Suddenly a scratching sound interrupted his sad ruminations. Using infrared vision, he scanned the living room. “Show yourself! He barked, surprised at the harshness of his tone.

“Me..Meow?” A tiny frightened sound reached Clark’s ears and he was suddenly deeply ashamed of himself. Swiftly he turned on the lights. <First, I yell at Lois, then at a defenseless cat. Who is going to be my next victim? A crippled little old lady?>

Slowly he walked through the apartment, calling gently. “Pepper. Come here little cat, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Peeking around one of the kitchen chairs the animal stared at him wide-eyed with trepidation. The cat meowed piteously again, hoping his sitter was not upset with him.

Bending down, the reporter rubbed behind the cat’s ears and spoke to him consolingly. “Come on buddy, how about a saucer of milk? Then I need to go on midnight patrol.” He contemplated work at the Daily Planet and dealing with a certain prickly female reporter. “Tomorrow is going to be a very long day.” So saying, the dejected young man picked up his feline charge and walked into the kitchen alcove.

“How dare he tell me what to do! I’ve been breaking into places since long before he showed up! Achoo!”

As soon as the words escaped her lips, Lois felt deep regret. Fighting with Clark was not how the evening was supposed to go. They were enjoying each other’s company, without a video and pizza. Yes, it was chatting about work, but she would have gotten him to start talking about them, as more than working partners.

Slowly she picked up the debris of the evening; cups, saucers and napkins, and carried them into the kitchen. In a desultory manner, she straightened the living room, turned off the lights and walked into her cool and calming bedroom. Her limbs moved slowly as she prepared for bed. Sleeping tonight was not going to be easy. <Oh great,> she thought sadly while crawling under the welcoming covers. <Tomorrow at the Daily Planet is going to be one very long day.>

Part Five

The next day the Daily Planet newsroom was the center of “The Big Chill” for Lois and Clark.

They arrived separately. A greatly subdued Clark exited the elevator, wearing a charcoal suit, white shirt and plain blue gray tie; sadly, the clothing matched his mood. He walked stiffly down the ramp, spotted Lois' empty desk, then turned and carelessly sat down at his own. Firing up the computer, he began to work on his latest story.

Ten minutes later, an oddly restrained Lois walked down the ramp, almost in the manner of a woman who did not want attention drawn to herself. After quietly hanging up her pumpkin colored jacket on the coat hook by her desk, she sat down, started her computer, and settled into work. She sent off a number of e-mails, the longest one, to Jimmy, detailing her research requirements.

Jack was the first one to notice it. Lois and Clark were hard at work on their respective stories. So hard at work, they barely spoke or looked at each other. When one did glance in the other's direction, it was quick and furtive. In the past, Jack's ability to read people had spared him much physical harm and emotional pain. What he was reading now between the two investigative reporters was sadness, disappointment and not a little hurt.

He went over to Clark first — the older man was something of a father figure/big brother, so it was easier to talk with him.

"Hey Clark, want some coffee?"

"Huh?" Clark glanced over his glasses at the boy; cast his eyes guardedly over to Lois, than back to him. "Oh, not right now. Thanks, Jack."

Turning to Lois, Jack queried, "Lois? How 'bout a low fat mocha? Since Jimmy's busy, I'm doing the Chief's mid-morning coffee run to the Java Perk."

He got the exact same reaction. Lois looked at Clark rather sheepishly before answering. "Sorry, Jack, have to get this story done." Lois muttered in an undertone, she opened her mouth to say more, thought better of it and continued looking — more like idly gazing — at her monitor.

Jack looked closely from one reporter to another. He was smart enough to know hanging around was *not* the thing to do. With a nod to them both, he trotted up the ramp.

Slowly, like an anchor dragging in rich, black mud, the morning dragged painfully on.

For the remainder of the morning, different staffers walked by the two reporters and sensed a definite coolness in the air. There was no easy banter, note passing or exchange of information. Clark kept his eyes on the monitor of his computer, studiously avoiding looking toward his partner. Meanwhile, Lois refrained from chewing on a fresh No. 2 pencil... a sure sign of frustration. Cat watched the tableau play out with a strange mixture of curiosity and annoyance. Even Ralph got the message and stayed far away.

Lois and Clark existed on a tiny island surrounded by an ocean of desks.

Close to noon, the Weekend Section reporter, Diane Pallister, convinced Lois to join her for lunch at a new Italian restaurant whose specialty was hot grilled vegetable sandwiches. Lois, eager to get away, agreed and the two young women strolled up the ramp and grabbed the elevator.

With a bleak sigh of relief, Clark slumped forward; his body actually 'hurt' from the prolonged tense fallout of last night's argument with his beautiful partner. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the senior editor emerge from his office. With a softer version of his normally booming southern drawl, Perry White beckoned the investigative reporter.

Clark followed the older man as he walked back to his office. Dreading what Perry would ask, Clark decided to only stick his head into his office and asked. "You wanted to see me, Chief?"

"Uh huh," The Senior Editor said with a nod. "No Elvis stories this time, son. Come on in. Close the door. Have a seat." He gestured towards the big leather chair. "What's going on between you and Lois? Had a fight?"

Clark slumped in the chair. The chief had them... him... dead to rights. He did not want to explain about his complex relationship with Lois, especially since he was still trying to define it himself. But what alternative did he have? This was the man who 'knew what he was not supposed to know' about the computer genius Eugene Leland hiding out in Lois' apartment. Clark remembered the entire adventure and the part played by the inquisitive female, Detective Reed, she of the bad hair, make-up and attitude. If it had not been for Perry's interference, the woman would have dumped both of them in jail for harboring a fugitive.

Sighing gently and nervously running his fingers through thick black hair, Clark began, "We have hit a rough spot regarding the Shackleton investigation."

The older man looked at Clark for a moment before replying. "Rough spot? From the looks of things in the newsroom this morning you two just emerged from an avalanche! Well now, son, I've known Lois a long time and she gets... well 'passionate' about a story."

"More like obsessive." Clark mumbled.

"I'll let that one go," the editor responded tersely. "Lois has had to work *twice* as hard as either of us to prove her worth in this male-dominated business. Bet that intuition thing of hers is in full gear and she's bound and determined to see this thing through until the well runs dry."

"Chief, it's not her passion I object to; it's her methods... sometimes." He decided it was best not to mention Lois' intentions of breaking into LexSolar. He didn't want to add 'snitch' to her grievances against him.

The senior editor fixed a hard stare at the young reporter, but spoke in the quiet paternal manner of tempered experience. "Kent, you two are investigative journalist — partners. Trust Lois' instincts to land a great story, but don't let her do anything dangerous... or illegal."

This time sighing inwardly, Clark answered, "Right, Chief."

Walking back to his desk, he reflected, thankfully there were only five more 'official' hours to the workday. At that moment, Jimmy raced breathlessly up to him wearing his photographer's khaki vest and camera bag slung over his shoulder. Apparently, a huge fire had started on the docks of Metropolis Harbor. Clark thanked the stars above for an excuse to get out of the office.

"Jimmy, I'll tell the chief where we are going. You catch a cab to the harbor. I'll meet you there."

"Hey, CK, where's Lois?" The cub reporter asked.

"Still eating lunch with Diane," Clark said, trying hard, but failing to hide his sullenness. "We don't need to bring her in on this one. Please, Jimmy, head downstairs for that cab."

Taken aback by his friend's gruffness, Jimmy responded. "I just thought she might want to come with us. This is going to make great front page headlines!"

Clark realized he had made a mistake, but was still too agitated to apologize. He returned to Perry's office and informed him of their plans. Grateful to see Jimmy gone, he rushed up the staircase to the roof and changed into Superman.

The fire at Metropolis Harbor was indeed a large one; the voracious flames quickly consumed many of the old abandoned wooden piers. Thick, black, greasy smelling smoke plumes rose towering malevolently above the harbor. As Clark flew over the area, his mind was still thinking about how much better it was to cover a story like this with his partner.

His mind snapped back to reality upon seeing a squad of fire fighters entering a smoldering decrepit warehouse. The Man of Steel's unique abilities were desperately needed; not a mild-mannered reporter concerned over his relationship with a woman that he wanted to be so much more than a work partner.

Two hours later, the worst of the conflagration was over. Superman spent time talking with police, fire officials and insurance investigators. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jimmy snapping away furiously. Once ascertaining the local fire department and police

had the situation under control, he excused himself, flew into the early afternoon sky, quickly disappearing from sight.

Moments later, Clark walked over to Jimmy and tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention. “Got enough shots to make the front page sing, Jim?”

“Hey, CK!” The cub reporter looked up in surprise. “When did you get here? I didn’t see you this entire time and thought traffic held you up.”

“No. I’ve been here for awhile talking with some officials and starting to write the story up here.” He tapped his forehead. “Let me call the article in and we can catch a cab back to the Planet.”

Ten minutes later the two men were sitting in a cab heading uptown. They sat in companionable silence for a few moments, but Clark knew there was something on the photographer’s mind. He listened carefully when Jimmy cleared his throat and began to speak. “Uh, CK? What’s going on between you and Lois? Not that I want to pry or anything.”

Sighing gently, Clark thought to himself. <I seem to be doing a lot of explaining about my ‘distance’ from Lois.> He turned and spoke to Jimmy his voice calm and even. “We are having a difference in opinion. It’ll be okay.”

Jimmy fingered his camera case nervously for a moment and said, “CK, Lois is kind of like my older sister; she gets on my nerves, but she’s really just looking out for my best interests, you know? Her instincts, not just as a reporter, are pretty good.”

Clark nodded in silent agreement, lost in his thoughts. The cab drove through the hectic Metropolis streets for several minutes until it pulled up in front of the Daily Planet building. Finally he spoke. “The chief will be ecstatic over these great pictures and a story. This will make his day.”

Jimmy agreed, and the two men got out of the taxi and entered the Daily Planet building. Upstairs in the newsroom, Clark heard a familiar heartbeat pounding in anticipation. He knew what to expect, but he hated getting into an argument with her in front of the bullpen staff.

All too soon, the elevators doors slid open, he and Jimmy stepped out and he saw an irritated Lois. She stormed up the ramp meeting them halfway. “I can’t believe *neither* of you tried to contact me! Diane and I were only a block away! Kent, is this your idea of a joke?”

Out the corner of his eye, Clark watched Jimmy ease back up the ramp and move swiftly towards the darkroom. He did not blame the cub reporter for beating a hasty retreat. Lois was in full ‘Mad Dog’ mode.

Holding up his hands in genuine capitulation, Clark apologized profusely to his partner then continued down the ramp. He was keenly aware that the curious eyes of the entire newsroom staff were riveted upon them. The incongruous thought that Lois was beautiful when angry popped into his mind. Indeed, she *was* striking. She wore an electric blue silk pantsuit; the long white paisley scarf wrapped around her lovely throat was an excellent final touch. If he didn’t put an end to this ‘conversation’ soon, it would just slide into a rematch of last night’s dispute.

His partner, not to be outdone followed him to his desk and was about to start in again when he faced her and said in a tired voice, “Lois, it’s been a long day, covering that fire took a lot out of me. I’m going to write up the article, then head for home.”

He watched her brown eyes first smolder then cool into icy indifference. “Fine!” Lois growled. She stalked over to her desk, sat down, opened her candy jar and grabbed a handful of M&M’s. Seeing that gesture, Clark knew it was *not* fine and the disagreement between them was far from settled.

Lois snuck a look over her monitor at Clark, as she crunched the candy. Angry thoughts came to mind. <He deliberately didn’t page me! I missed writing the Metropolis Harbor fire story. Since when did he and Jimmy go on stories *without* me?>

The story she was working on this morning, although not as good,

was about another possible scandal in the mayor’s office. There was a question about the handling of certain campaign funds. If she finished researching a few points, it might make Perry’s deadline for the evening edition.

Could it be that only two nights before she had wistfully thought he was the perfect working partner? <If I got involved with him, it would have been *another* federal disaster. I’m better off living my life alone.> Sighing softly she dove into her work. The Daily Planet’s newsroom noise and activity seemed to blanket the tension existing between the two reporters, swathing over unspoken words between them.

Later that evening, an emotionally drained Clark flew to Smallville. It was here at his parents’ farm he could seek solace, a listening ear and comfort for his heart. The elder Kents had just started eating when their son arrived. Clark inhaled the delicious aroma of pot roast, string beans and rosemary new potatoes and felt his waning appetite happily return. His mother’s cooking was just what he needed.

Wearing a comfortable old plaid flannel shirt and faded jeans, Clark entered the aged farmhouse and greeted his parents warmly.

After eating dinner, Clark began explaining to his parents about the past few days, culminating with the argument in Lois’ apartment.

“Lois is so stubborn! Breaking and entering into a corporate facility is not going to solve this freighter theft. She’s convinced a highly placed administrative assistant within LexCorp is hiding something.”

Martha stood over her son and husband, filling their coffee cups. “Oh honey, I don’t think Lois would do anything foolish. Does she have any proof?”

“That’s just it Mom, she doesn’t. To make matters worse, we aren’t speaking to each other and its making life in the newsroom... unpleasant.”

“Son, it sounds to me like you two need to stop fighting and start talking.” Jonathan said.

Martha interjected, “It’s what two people do when their lives get closer. Communication, not fighting, is the key word here.” Clark watched while Martha sliced a generous wedge of apple cake and placed it before him.

“Closer? Like as in a couple? Mom, right now we can’t stand to be in the same room with each other.”

Martha Kent’s blue eyes were sparkling. “But eventually, when this problem is worked through, isn’t that what you want with Lois — to become a couple?”

Bowing his head, he muttered, “Yes. However, all I want is for her to be safe. Breaking the law won’t keep her out of harm’s way.”

“Then tell her how you feel, son,” Jonathan said. “But remember, it’s her life; ultimately she has to make the decision to listen when suggestions are offered. In the meantime, if you both want to continue a proper ‘working’ relationship at the Daily Planet some apologizing from both sides is in order.”

Back at the Planet, Lois sat at her desk eating the leftovers of her Asian salad, the day shift having long since abandoned the newsroom. In the background, members of the night shift typing away on their various keyboards reached her ears. She picked at the vegetable remnants, thinking of the strong masculine hands that made it. She thought, <Why do we always end up disagreeing with each other? Last night’s argument came from out of nowhere.>

After mulling that over she continued in thought, <No, that was not exactly true. This lingering head cold was wearing me down and Clark was not very happy about me ‘acquiring’ the *Shackleton*’s manifest from the Harbor Master’s office. After all, I was supposed to be going to the bathroom, not stealing an official shipping document. It was a stupid, impulsive move to make. Probably informing him of my intention to break into LexSolar and ‘acquire’ again just brought it all to a head. *Not smart.*>

Trust Perry to partner her with the world’s oldest Boy Scout!

“Working late again, Lois?” A familiar voice said from above.

Looking up from the salad, she watched as Cat Grant slinked down the ramp as only she could. The tall gossip columnist was dressed in a red silken sheath of sinuous fabric that gracefully fell over her body, exposing an athletic figure.

Rolling her eyes, Lois answered in an annoyed tone, “I’m a *working* reporter. One who deals in real news... not dirt digging. Maybe you ought to try it sometime. Whose society get-together are you crashing now?”

Lois’ watched as the gossip columnist gave a derisive snort and came over to her desk. Cat’s green eyes flashed; ready to make a snide comment, she stopped, reflected for a moment, than spoke. “Not that it makes a difference, but I have an important date with my boyfriend, Dr. George Amundsen.”

“Oh yeah, the ‘wild man’ scientist. We bumped into each other yesterday at LexCorp. He seemed in a hurry for an appointment with Aykira Milan. I’ll say this much, you were right; she is a highly capable administrator. Hopefully, George is up to the challenge of dealing with her.”

Cat arched an expertly tweezed eyebrow and retorted. “Don’t be taken in by his fluster; when it’s important enough, he can stand toe to toe with the best of them, even Lex Luthor’s minions.”

Lois sat back in her chair and gave the other woman a solid appraisal. The flashy gossip columnist had lost her heart to this man. If she wasn’t so sincere it would be downright amusing. In a peculiar way, Lois was genuinely happy for her.

“So someone finally managed to tame the Catwoman. I *am* impressed. What’s next, planning on settling down and having a bunch of kittens?”

Cat stood in front of Lois’s desk, put her hands on slender hips and said, “Okay Lane, the regular crew has gone home for the day; we can quit sparring.”

“Oh please, what are you talking about?” Lois snapped back.

“There are some things more important than work, like having a life *outside* of the job.” Catherine Grant paused for a moment, as if trying to make up her mind about something. Decision made, she walked over to her desk, pulled a chair over to Lois, and gracefully settled down. “Worse things; such as being the punch line to jokes about women, who work too hard and risk the danger of becoming an old maid. Someone like yourself, *Miss Lane*.” Cat stated, pointing a perfectly manicured red fingernail.

“Or fashion plates like me, who after ‘socializing all day,’ have nothing but an empty apartment waiting for them at night. Lois, the world is full of available males but precious few *men*. I found one who truly cares for and respects me; not the façade of the *sexy* columnist, but me.”

Fairly bristling upon hearing the words ‘old maid’ Lois was about to reply when Cat held up her perfectly manicured hands and continued. “Years ago I met a guy I was stupid enough to fall in love with and marry. He turned out to be a world-class jerk. Fortunately, the marriage and divorce was in Nevada easy in and easy out. I won’t bore you with the details of picking up my life and building the new me, but let’s just say from then on men were fixtures I changed as often as my sheets.”

Lois muttered to herself, “Why does that not surprise me?”

Ignoring the sarcastic remark, Cat went on. “So for years, involvement in meaningless relationships and writing ‘fluff’ pieces suited me just fine. Then along came the Nightfall asteroid and life was never the same.” The other woman’s features became haunted and drawn. *Everyone* I called had someone to share that terrible day with... no one wanted me around. See, meaningless relationships are just that... meaningless.” A respectful silence fell between them, than Cat continued.

“Thankfully, I met George; he has reacquainted me with the better part of myself. Who knows what else we can discover... together?”

“Why are you telling me this? What’s the angle?” Lois shot back. Her hands lifted in dramatic heavenward gestures, Cat groaned.

“The angle is you are *wasting* time! Sure, right now you have an Adonis in a cape! Terrific! Still, what kind of a *life* can you have together? He’s great at stopping bullets, but how about taking out the garbage?” Lois watched her shrug her elegant bare shoulders and then pointed to Clark’s desk. “He’s a real man... tight end and all. *Do not* treat him like he’s Claude. He doesn’t deserve that. Whatever has come between you two, I’m betting it’s your fault. Lois, you can’t *always* be right. We are both highly competitive women in a man’s world, but when it comes to what honestly happens between a man and woman... well, that’s different. If you ever want to talk, I’m here to listen.”

Lois watched in stunned, embarrassed silence as Cat got up, replaced the chair under her desk, removed a long black and red silk wrap from her bottom desk drawer and then walked back over to Lois and concluded, “Remember those old maid jokes.”

With a smile touched by a hint of sadness, Catherine Grant exited the newsroom.

“This has been a *great* day,” Lois growled to herself after entering the apartment on Carter Avenue later that evening. “First, Clark and I are not speaking to each other, than he and Jimmy cut me out of the Metropolis Harbor fire story, finally Cat tries to give me advice about taking Clark seriously. Clark. Clark. Clark! Urgh! All I need now is a call from my mother and the day will be complete!”

As if on cue, the phone rang, interrupting Lois mid-babble. Rolling her eyes in frustration, she picked up the phone, expecting to hear Ellen Lane’s voice. But was greatly surprised when she heard, “Hey, big sis; how’s life in Metropolis?”

Despite her earlier mood, she could not help but smile at the sound of Lucy’s upbeat voice. It was Thursday night and she usually called her sister once a week to catch up. Following the Metallo disaster, Lucy Lane had undertaken a deep self-examination of her life and realized she needed to get serious about the future. Shortly thereafter she had moved to Denver, and was going to school for sports medicine, specializing in traumatic athletic injuries. The younger Lane girl had found her niche, which pleased the elder Lanes no end. Sam had finally gotten one of his girls into the medical profession and Lois, although not a medical thriller novelist like Ellen, was still a wordsmith of some ‘small’ repute.

Now, Lucy was settling into her old role of encouraging her workaholic sister to slow down and ‘get a life.’

“Oh, you know; same old, same old. The Daily Planet keeps me busy; lots of investigative stories waiting to be written.”

“Lo-is, that’s not what I mean and you know it. How about going on a real date? Seen any good movies lately? Spent time with people who don’t have ink under their fingernails? There is more to life than watching recordings of *The Ivory Tower*.”

“Hey, I like my show; it’s a fun release!”

Giggling, Lucy countered with, “Ooh, I’m going to let *that* one go! But seriously, you need a hobby. Uncle Mike’s offer to teach you how to cook is still on the table.”

“No way. It’s not a lack of time, but talent. I wasn’t meant to be in the kitchen.”

“Come on, Lois, it’s been nearly twenty years since the kitchen curtains caught on fire! Give it a rest and try something different. You are the only woman I know who is on a first name basis with every take-out joint in a three block radius of her apartment! Besides, Uncle Mike could use the company. Stop by the restaurant any time; he would love to see you.”

“I smell a set-up here. But you’re right; I don’t spend nearly enough time with him.” Her sister turned the tables. “Have *you* met anyone?”

“Hmm — I’ve dated a couple of cute medical guys and had a few laughs. Speaking of cute; how is Jimmy? What about that hunky partner of yours... Clark?”

<That name, that name!> Lois mentally shouted. <Today, I cannot get away from him!>

“Oh Lucy, can we talk about something... someone else?”

For a moment, there was silence on the other end of the line. Lois sat down on the plush striped chair and removed her scarf and shoes while waiting for her sister’s response.

“I knew it! So there *is* something going on! Don’t try to deny it! Evasiveness with me is *never* a good tactic!”

Trapped, Lois decided she needed someone to talk to and since her friend, Molly Flynn was plugging her latest book on back-to-basics nutrition, Lucy was her only option. “Fine. Let me change out of this outfit and I’ll tell you about last night and today... a very long day.”

At La Cira, one of Metropolis’ most trendy upscale Italian restaurants, George waited impatiently for Catherine. She was seldom late, but tonight he was anxiously waiting to talk with her. After his conversation with Ms. Milan, he wanted to share the good/bad news.

Adjusting his tie and looking out the restaurant’s floor-to-ceiling front wood-framed windows for the umpteenth time, he contemplated seriously about the job offer. It was the culmination of many years work; to become team lead physicist designing solar panels for Space Station Lex was beyond exciting. However, of late, his ambitions had changed; he wanted to return home to Seattle. Finally he would be closer to family, old friends and complete his manuscript on the history of physics in the 20th century. However, he did not want to return to Seattle alone, he wanted to share his home with Catherine.

Catherine. Who would have thought an egghead like him would ever find someone like her? Oh, initially, he had figured she was some empty-headed gossip columnist covering a charity event. But, he had discovered she was smart — really smart and creative. The woman had denied her considerable talents as a sculptress and art historian. During many a summer afternoon last year while they hiked, Catherine told him about various artisans from the Renaissance period. She showed him some of her hand-chiseled pieces. He talked to her about physics and she grasped his theories. They shared so much in common, like a perfect mathematical equation, an elegant proof.

Now he wanted to take that ‘proof’ for his own.

George looked up and saw Catherine enter the restaurant; she looked ravishing garbed in his favorite red dress. As she moved easily past the snowy white-linen covered tables, a host of male patrons gazed at her in unabashed admiration. He smiled to himself thinking, <Look all you want, gents, but the lady is mine — or at least I hope she will be.>

Cat smiled as she kissed him on the cheek. Just being with him made her feel special and cherished. “Hello, Handsome.” She purred.

“Hello yourself, Red.” George couldn’t help but grin; it was his private nickname for the striking auburn-haired beauty. “What a sight to see after a long day.” He indicated the chair. “Make yourself comfortable; I ordered your usual Di Frutti Di Mare — of course, I’m having Penne Al Tricolore.”

A Frank Sinatra recording crooned gently in the background. As they waited for their meals to arrive Cat listened intently while George outlined his conversation with Aykira Milan. The new position of team lead scientist came with an incredible raise, his own staff and most of all he would be involved in LexSolar’s most exciting new project. He also spoke bitterly about his adversary, Dr. Frederick Scott, who was determined to make his current work miserable through meddling office politics.

“Dr. Scott is interested in your old position; that much is certain. Have you mentioned this offer to him or anyone at LexSolar? But more importantly; are you willing to work with him until this project is completed?”

His face turned quiet. “That’s just the point; the project will take another year from initial planning to the Space Station’s launch; far too long for him to be a pebble in my shoe. Although the offer acknowledges my years of loyal contributions to LexSolar, my mind is almost made up to leave the company and Metropolis for home in Seattle.”

Momentarily; an expectant silence passed between them. Before either could speak, the waiter arrived and swiftly placed their dinner plates before them. He laid out a separate saucer for Cat’s light vinaigrette salad dressing, than vanished without a word. George was speaking, but Cat missed a few words.

“...it wouldn’t be home without you to share my life with, Catherine. Er... is it too much to hope?”

“Excuse me?” she asked

George examined Catherine’s expression; before the waiter arrived, it was a blank, sad visage as if reflecting on loss. Then suddenly it turned into a landscape of confusion.

“I said, will you give up your life here in New Troy and join me in Seattle?”

Her entire body sagged in disappointment, “Uh, no. I’m not *living* or *co-habituating* with anyone.”

“Live with?” George felt a little hurt, then realizing how his words sounded responded, by taking her hands and staring deep within her sea green eyes. “Catherine! Th... there are a number of new ideas I accept wholeheartedly, but when it comes to spending the rest of my life with you, I am old-fashioned. We are *not* living together.” So saying, he reached into his breast pocket and tried to pull out a grey velvet box. His hands trembled so badly, the box got stuck. He looked down at it and with one mighty tug the box went sailing over the votive candleholder and landed squarely into Catherine’s chilled asparagus salad.

Nearby, restaurant patrons and staff heard the noise and turned around, looking. The couple at the next table curiously craned their necks, saw the box, and smiled encouragement. George, his face scarlet, took the box gingerly from Catherine’s salad, and opened it to reveal a one-carat pear-shaped diamond ring with emerald baguettes. Pushing back his chair he stepped to her side of the table and in one fluid movement was on bended knee, his voice quavering with emotion, he spoke. “Hi...historically the emerald is said to bestow its wearer with unchanging l... love and faithfulness. I...I want our love to last a lifetime. Catherine Grant w...will you marry me?”

For once in Cat’s life, she was completely dumbfounded. She looked intently into the earnest man’s face, his blue eyes pleading for a positive answer. All at once, her life and his felt perfect... whole. In a voice completely void of purr, she answered. “Yes George. Yes. I will marry you.”

The patrons, waiters and maitre de, all of whom had watched in eager anticipation, broke out in hearty cheers and applause. George gazed at Catherine, seeing tears of love spill down her cheeks as he slipped the ring onto the third finger of her left hand.

Part Six

The next day at the Planet started out quietly enough. Lois and Clark again arrived separately and went about their early morning routines without acknowledgement of the other’s existence. They made a great effort to ignore each other and yet appear as if nothing was amiss. Despite sincere conversations with family who dearly loved and supported them, they were both too stubborn to bend.

The rest of the newsroom staff awkwardly circumvented them, afraid to approach either one, fearing the other might construe it as ‘taking sides’. Even Jimmy stayed in his area of the bullpen or hid in the darkroom. Everyone in the bullpen realized neither he nor Clark paged Lois about the Metropolis Harbor story and she was definitely not happy with either of them.

It was becoming a touchy situation for everyone. Well, everyone except Jack; he freely talked with the estranged duo – busying himself by assisting with research requests, getting copy, and whatever else they needed without stepping into either combatant’s ‘war’ zone.

From the confines of his office, Perry White watched the whole farce. “Judas Priest!” He muttered aloud. “Those two are headed the way of Billy Norcross and Serena Judd. Back then ol’ man Krebs was

Senior Editor and ran a tight ship. Krebs wasn't afraid of anything — except stickin' his nose into romantic entanglements on the job. Blast it, he kept quiet back when they had their problems and look were *they* ended up" Perry shook his head mentally erasing unpleasant memories. <No sirree. Not this time. Not on his watch. These two are *special*; Lois is like a daughter and Kent — another son.>

He eased out of the comfortable wooden chair, walked across his office, opened the door and was about to call Lois and Clark in for a conference, when a tornado in the form of Cat Grant burst out of the elevator.

"Attention and greetings civilians! Meet the future Mrs. George Amundsen!" Cat's face effused with pleasure, as she walked — not slinked — down the ramp and held out her left hand for the entire newsroom to see.

Perry came out of his office and watched with mixed emotions as 'the cat' eased over to her desk and smiled gleefully. "Great Shades of Elvis! What has that woman done now?" He muttered aloud.

A passing Steve and Eduardo watched as several female reporters rushed over to Cat's desk, eyeing her ring and emitting squeals of sheer delight.

"Cat Grant engaged?" Steve shook his head in bemusement.

"It's about time," Eduardo countered. He had known about Cat's relationship with the gentle scientist for months and had watched her personality slowly transform for the better. "George is good for her."

Jimmy Olsen, hearing all the commotion, came running out of the darkroom. "What happened?" he asked Diane, who was sipping the last of her morning coffee. Tilting her head in Cat's direction, she responded with a half smile. "Ms. Grant is engaged and she's letting the whole world know it."

"You don't say?" Jimmy said easing his way down the ramp, narrowly avoiding a collision with the USP delivery man.

"So, cousin Cat. What's up?"

"Oh, look at my little 'cousin' trying to get the scoop." A genuine smile of happiness spread across her face as she playfully pinched his cheek. "Take a look at this." She extended her freshly manicured hand, displaying the sparkling diamond and emerald ring.

A broad smile equal to hers made its way across his face. "Smooth," was the young man's sincere reply.

Perry watched the newsroom atmosphere shift from hushed morgue to jubilant party with Cat's flamboyant entrance, swiftly turning the spotlight from Lois and Clark onto her. He thought while chuckling, <Say whatever else you want about Catherine Grant, but the lady has *style*.>

Perry noted the only two people unaffected by the tumult surrounding the gossip columnist. Lois and Clark sat like two ancient Chinese terra cotta soldiers, working hard on their individual stories in a futile attempt to ignore each other no matter what happened. The editor knew this time was the best to sit down and discuss whatever was bothering them... their pride be hanged.

Walking over to their desks, the brief nod of Perry's head indicated he wanted to see them both in his office. The older man turned and walked back to his sanctum and stopped at the door. He watched as the twosome walked grimly toward him, reminding him of a couple of grade school kids' halfhearted approach to the principal's office.

After shutting the door, effectively cutting out all newsroom noise, Perry asked without preamble, "So what's this 'silent' routine all about? Is there something you two aren't telling me?" He observed them closely. Clark sat on Perry's old red plaid couch, nervously fiddling with his tie. Lois perched uncomfortably in the leather visitor's chair; an uncertain pout marred her pretty face. <Look at them,> he thought, <they're acting like a newlywed couple after their first fight.>

Neither one spoke up; Lois looked off into the distance, fighting to keep a sneeze under control. Clark suddenly found solace in the

ancient carpet's faded pattern. Perry, aggravated with the prolonged silence, began talking.

"Listen, you two are the best investigative reporters hands down I've ever seen in this game. The byline of Lane and Kent has taken the Planet's circulation through the roof. So giving each other the cold shoulder ain't going to work. Hell, everybody in the newsroom smells blood! So whatever it is that's happening between you two needs to stay *outside* the bullpen. Go on, git to the Java Perk, sit down, and iron this mess out."

"Perry! I have the Stone and Mercantile story to finish." Lois said, again trying to suppress a snuffle.

"Chief, my 'Rhapsody Knits' article for the weekend edition is almost done. The human-interest angle should have a great impact on our readers. Lois' Uncle Mike is looking forward to reading about it this weekend."

Lois turned away from Perry and for the first time in days stared directly at her partner. "Hey, two days ago you said it *was* finished? What happened! I want to read what you've got. Grace is such a caring person; her story needs the right touch."

"Oh, so *now* you're speaking to me? Before, you didn't want to write anything 'touchy feely' not even for Uncle Mike. Remember two days ago you tore into the bullpen and pulled me from my desk to work on this Shackleton hijacking! Then we got that call from the Mayor's office..."

Perry watched with interest as Lois warmed to the battle, forged ahead. "That's different! Just because I won't write it doesn't mean that I'll let some hack from nowheresville do a third rate job! Uncle Mike is a close friend of Grace's; he would be terribly hurt if the story wasn't the absolute best! She means the world to him. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if one of these days he didn't ask her out on a date."

"Just like Lois Lane means a lot to me. I don't want my partner putting herself in a bad situation," his voice softened, "especially, if I can't be there to help her."

Stunned into silence for the second time in as many days, Lois looked sheepishly at Clark, realizing what he had actually said. "Oh. Clark, I'm sorry about the fight," her voice suddenly sounded very young and small.

Perry smiled at the young people as they stood up, took a hesitant step toward one another, than hugged. Lois finally sneezed and Clark offered her a handkerchief. He was relieved to see them continuing to argue about Clark's article as they exited his office. The tension between them evaporated; Clark's hand gently touched the small of Lois' back.

<Ha!> Perry exclaimed to himself, <Maybe I should take over writing the advice column. Who knows, if I had been around, maybe Elvis and Priscilla would *still* be together.> Chuckling, the editor sat back at his desk, pulled out a red pen and dove into editing Ralph's City Hall article.

Another pair of eyes watched from her vantage point. Despite a number of well-wishers still coming to her desk, Cat observed carefully the scene playing out in Perry's office. She was relieved to see Lois and Clark resolve their differences, whatever they may be.

"Good for you, Lois. Now make sure you tell him how you feel — once you figure it out for yourself," she murmured softly; then turned to another well-wisher.

The rest of the day in the newsroom was business as usual. Lois and Clark went back and forth over each other's articles. Perry publicly chastised Ralph for his poorly written City Hall piece.

Steve had to do an emergency re-write about the Metro star, Roy 'The Shuttle' Burns. Apparently, the pitcher was leaving the team for a spot on the Denver roster. Diane was stuck covering Lacy's department's store yearly flower show. Eduardo was out tracking down leads on a story about the possible renovation of Suicide Slum

by LexCorp.

Cat pored over wedding magazines... in between talking to sources for tidbits to be included in 'Cat's Corner'.

Later in the day, first Clark, than Lois came over to congratulate Cat on her upcoming marriage.

Jimmy and Jack concentrated on their own duties and responsibilities. Once again, all was right with life in the Daily Planet bullpen.

"Ms. Milan, could you come in for a moment?" Lex called from the intercom.

Aykira frowned, than glanced at her watch; it was only 8:15 a.m. She really needed to complete the progress reports on the replacement shipment of microprocessors from Barontech. Computer orders were backing up; they would need to offer incentives to their customers to keep them happy.

<Ah, well, best to see what the situation is, then jump back to work.> she thought then looked hungrily at the sumptuous low-fat peach yogurt she had purchased that morning. <Knowing his penchant for long meetings, this yogurt will be part of my lunch.>

In preparation for the meeting, Aykira pulled three floppy diskettes containing the latest information on her current projects from a case next to her computer. She placed each one into a secure travel folder and then tucked the travel folder into her organizer. Years ago, she had neglected such painstaking preparation, and it almost cost her life. Aykira blamed the lack of preparation on 'youthful' inexperience, but had promised herself never to walk into a meeting without carrying all the necessary tools and in some cases – weapons.

Coming out of her office, Aykira informed Jane where she was going and walked down the corridor to the staircase leading to Luthor's office suite. As she walked, her mind ran over each project and outstanding articles of business while her stomach gently rumbled. She entered the staircase and swiftly climbed its elegant wooden stairs. Reaching the heavy oak door, she smelled tantalizing aromas of freshly baked biscuits, salmon and roasted coffee. <Luthor is having an early morning meeting... with a full-scale breakfast?> She knocked and heard his voice call out, "Enter, Ms. Milan."

The administrative assistant opened the door and stood stunned and yet pleasantly surprised by the welcome sight of a white linen-covered table, generously spread with a sumptuous breakfast for two. Nearby, the stolid figure of Chef Andre stood at the ready, preparing a white spinach omelet.

"Ah, come in, Ms. Milan, a hearty good morning to you!" The words rang out, accompanied by Lex's — Mr. Luthor's — expressive hand gestures and unrestrained smile.

"What is all of this?" she asked, deciding not to hide the surprise in her voice.

His smile reached dancing obsidian eyes; Lex approached and beckoned her into the office suite. "I should think that was obvious my dear, breakfast is served. Would you like orange juice or a mimosa?"

A pleasant, delicious time later, the two settled down on the comfortable settee, lingering over their final cups of coffee. Aykira did not quite believe Luthor's reason for the occasion. He wanted to 'celebrate' her two and a half years of employment with him. They had spent time in easy conversation about the latest Italian art exhibit at the Greystroke Museum. Aykira found herself enjoying – even relaxing — in the man's company. Oh, she knew the billionaire could be charming, even courtly, but she understood the charm was all part of a calculated act for businesspersons and the public at large. Glimpses of Lex Luthor's true nature were few and far between; this, she suspected, was one of those rare times.

"Thank you again for such an unexpected surprise. But tell me, why not wait until it's a full three years?"

"What, and be predictable? Perish the thought!" he teased.

Aykira, warming to their banter, countered by saying, "Mr. Luthor, if there is one thing you are *not* it is predictable!"

She watched his lips curl into a very attractive smile. "From you, I take that as the highest compliment. In the spirit of exchanging compliments, please accept this small token of my appreciation." So saying, he walked to the desk and picked up a slender box covered with silver paper and violet ribbon. He returned to the settee and gently placed it in her hands.

"Please, open it." Lex's eyes fairly danced with excitement.

Thoroughly puzzled, Aykira stared for a moment at the beautifully wrapped box. Her heart beat rapidly inside her ribcage. <Earthsea. What is this?> she thought. Hands trembling, she delicately removed the ribbon, pulled apart the silver wrapping paper, and opened the box. Inside, a glorious steel and gold Rolex woman's watch gleamed up at her.

"It... it's amazing," she breathed. "I... I don't know what to say."

The billionaire removed the watch from its confinement. As he removed her old watch with a crocodile embossed leather wristband and slipped its well-dressed replacement around her wrist. He said, "Thank you, Lex' would be sufficient." Again, he smiled at her.

Her mind contemplated rapidly, logically, despite any outward discomposure she displayed. <What is he doing? Part of me wants to 'let whatever happen, happen'.> But to Luthor she said, "A Rolex watch is too much. I cannot accept this... even as an anniversary present. It's too much..." she repeated.

Luthor's lips spread into that 'killer smile.' "Then, my dear Aykira, let us not play games. In the past few days, you have consistently proven your worth as my assistant and media liaison during this damnable ship hijacking business. Any other executive who did just as good a job might receive stock options or a bonus. A cold 'business' token of esteem. Hopefully, in the years to come, this present will encourage warm memories of our — relationship." Luthor watched her carefully and for a few tense moments, neither spoke.

Aykira tilted her head at an angle smiled and said, "Lex. Thank you for the watch. It is lovely."

He blinked, surprised. "You called me Lex."

She leaned over and placed her hand on his knee, "No one is here."

They both laughed, dispelling any nervous tension between them.

"Since we are now on a first name basis, Lex, please let me return the favor of 'gifts.' Why not accompany me to the Greystroke Museum on Saturday and see the new Italian drawings exhibit? The Daily Planet Weekend section states it is quite breathtaking."

"Aykira, I think that would be delightful." Lex responded, genuinely pleased.

"Excellent. Shall we meet at the museum on Saturday around say... 2:00?"

"Wonderful; let me check my calendar to see if I'm free."

"You are. I run your business *and* personal calendar... remember?"

Speechless, all Luthor could do was nod his head.

"Good." Aykira stood up and straightened her long, burgundy knit dress. "Now, as much as I have thoroughly enjoyed this delightfully grand breakfast, I must get back to work. My employer is a demanding man." She stood, gathered her organizer and walked toward the door. Whirling on her toes, she glanced back, mischief dancing in her hazel eyes. "Oh, and one other thing, Lex."

"Yes?"

This is time spent between two *friends*. Please meet me on the steps of the Greystroke Museum without a limousine and... wear a pair of jeans."

"As you wish," he said, flourishing a bow.

"I do." With a brilliant smile, she departed the office suite.

Lex sat down and leaned back on the cushions of the settee, smiling triumphantly, "She is woman, to be wooed and therefore to be won!"

Saturday, on the stairs of the Greystroke Museum, a nervous

Aykira sat anxiously waiting for the arrival of Lex Luthor.

<This is an insane idea, but fighting my feelings has been a wearisome and lonely battle. As soon as the crystals are located, my assignment here is over and done with. What harm can come of spending time with a man I shall never see again?>

Aykira's musings went no further, from her vantage point on the wide marble staircase leading up to the museum's main building, she could see a familiar figure walking down Tenth Avenue. She gazed at the tall man with a head full of wavy black hair. He was handsome, debonair, and thoroughly dangerous wearing a black leather jacket, black turtleneck... and blue jeans... Lex Luthor had arrived.

His eyes searched the busy Saturday afternoon throng, looking for the one face he wanted to see. Springtime on Museum Mile always meant crowds on the weekends, especially after a particularly long and brutally cold winter. Metropolis residents now craved equal parts sunshine and a bit of culture. Lex had decided to have his limousine driver drop him off a couple of blocks from the Greystroke. He was prepared to change his habits a little in his pursuit of Ms. Milan, but riding the Metro was pushing it. Maybe she did not want to use the limo while they were together, but he was not about to mingle with the common man underground or hail a cab.

Waiting on the sweeping, granite staircase of the Greystroke Museum stood Aykira, wearing a wraparound white cashmere sweater and crisp blue jeans. She had swept her luscious black hair into a sweet, long ponytail and adorning her ears was a pair of sterling silver elongated hoop earrings. Of course on the index finger of her right hand was the ubiquitous silver etched ring. Lex had seen many a beautiful woman, but she was special, different. Mounting the steps and drawing nearer, he breathed in her floral perfume and its scent filled him with delight. The only thing marring the day was *another* of his cursed headaches.

Aykira spoke first as they approached each other, "Lex, you should wear jeans more often; they suit you."

"They are worn only for you, Aykira. Come along, I'm eager to see this exhibit."

They entered the massive building, stood in line in the entry lobby for their membership tickets to the exhibit, 'An Italian Journey: Drawings from the Siegel Collection, da Vinci to Tiepolo'. After a brief walk to the exhibit gallery, Aykira and Lex stepped into another world, an age gone by.

Striking in its range, the subject matter included figure studies, historical and mythological narratives, landscapes, botanical drawings, motifs copied from or inspired by classical antiquity, and designs for painted compositions.

The seventy drawings were so powerful and sensual in their expression; the couple so taken by their sheer beauty, words, mere words need not be exchanged. Shyly, almost like an innocent young schoolgirl, Aykira allowed him to gently take her hand. Yet another tenuous step toward a deeper relationship; one which progressed beyond its previous set boundaries.

Lex uncharacteristically did not try to control their progress through the exhibit. He gave way to taking pleasure in his time with a woman whose intelligence and wit matched his own. In short, the billionaire was certain he had finally found a suitable mate.

After the museum, Aykira and Lex strolled easily and aimlessly through Centennial Park comfortably taking in the late afternoon. They sat near the fountain and 'people watched' as numerous young couples held hands, parents walked with their children and one old couple wearing antique clothing sat quietly on a bench sustained by their deep and abiding love for one another.

As the day drew to a close, Lex suggested a light supper at Bouley, an intimate French bistro, not far from her apartment building. They dined on chilled Maine lobster, mango, fresh artichoke, and Serrano ham in a passion fruit, fresh coconut and tamarind dressing. For a final luscious touch, dessert was acai berry and vanilla sorbet in chilled

glasses. Neither could remember a time when they were both so content to be in another person's company.

The evening descended slowly on Metropolis, wrapping the city in a slightly chilly, dark velvet of a spring evening. The couple walked leisurely arm in arm to her high-rise, neither wanting the evening to end. All too soon, they discovered themselves at the front of the Lucerne condominiums.

"Thank you for a day, the likes of which I have not enjoyed for too long a time," Lex commented with genuine sincerity.

"My feelings exactly, kind sir," she whispered shyly.

Lex lightly touched her hair, his voice slightly roughened with desire. "I would like to do this again... soon."

Her hazel eyes looked intently into his dark ones. "Do you not think it rather awkward being seen around town with your assistant?"

"I have no concerns and neither should you. We are colleagues, true, but friends — yet more than friends." Lex bent down and gently kissed her lips. It started softly, slowly, but a surge of emotion passed between them too strong for denial. Aykira grew bolder, pressed closer, wrapped her arms around his shoulders and indulged in a sensuous full body embrace. His clean masculine fragrance threatened to overwhelm her. She raked eager fingers through his hair, feeling its texture and weight. His tongue teased and played with hers, strong and demanding. A curious heat, only imagined in fevered dreams, surged from the back of her neck to her toes, leaving her breathless and terribly vulnerable.

Lex felt the blood rush to his ears, inhaling delicious floral notes of her scent. He was very practiced in the gentle art of seduction; there had been women in his life — all too many women. However, touching Aykira was different, he sensed she was... innocent. That innocence drove him to want her beyond sensual desires. He yearned for something deeper, more binding than a single night's pleasure.

All too soon, the kiss — with all it entailed — ended. They pulled away from each other, frankly taken aback by its stark intensity.

"Oh...," she breathed, "Lex, we — we need to talk. Please... come upstairs, I can make us some espresso." She searched his features to know if he felt more than mere erotic desire.

His obsidian eyes smoldered and a voice roughened with unconcealed passion spoke. "If I come up there now, I'm staying with you...for breakfast."

Frightened and overwhelmed at the powerful physical thrall Lex held over her, Aykira was at a loss for what to do. Her mind screamed against giving in. If she did, the consequences meant saying good-bye to the man she truly loved. But, she eagerly wanted to feel this man's powerful yet gentle hands to know her intimately.

Common sense — after a strong adamant mental shake — won this round.

"Lex," she breathed, "I...I need time. So much has happened today and there is so much more for us to explore about each other... not just physically. Please let us wait for a little while longer. The waiting will only make the time together sweeter." She took his hand and kissed it tenderly.

He gazed into her beautiful face and lightly touched her cheek with his fingers, loving the contrast of the darkness of her skin against his own pale flesh. His voice when he spoke was roughened by restrained passion. "I am not a patient man when it comes to lovemaking. But for our time together in my bed it will be worth the wait."

Her mind snapped up, as if an icy bucket of water had dashed over her, the ensnaring thrall cruelly torn asunder. With no small amount of heat in her voice she said, "I am *not* Miranda, Antoinette Baines nor any of your other former playmates. For me, making love is an intimate commitment, not a *business transaction*." Drawing back from him physically and emotionally she concluded in arctic tones. "Goodnight, Mr. Luthor. If my job is still at LexCorp on Monday morning, I will see you then." Turning her back, she walked fiercely

into the building's lobby.

He was taken aback by the rapid turn of events; one slip of the tongue and his plans lay in utter disarray. This skirmish lost, he could only regroup and try again. He called after her. "Very well, as you wish. Monday it is. Goodnight Aykira... Ms. Milan." This last sentence he spoke in quiet hushed tones.

Scant moments later Aykira was on her bed, head buried in a plush satin-covered sage pillow crying so hard her stomach ached. There was no reason to spend precious time berating herself for the lapse of judgment. <I am very lonely, plain and simple.> she thought. <If Lex had not made that comment about his bed, it is this bed *we* would be occupying now! I only wanted to spend some time with him, pleasant memories to cherish quietly in the future.> Taking deep breaths, she gradually calmed down and let the cool wisdom of logic resume control.

<My actions were foolish. Have I not seen the number of women he's dated and bedded over the past two and a half years? Earthsea, *I* was the one who made the dinner reservations for half of those women! Many of them beautiful... strikingly so, with the desired social status and business connections Luthor could use to his advantage. What could possibly make me think this man would condescend to having a serious relationship with one woman... *me*?>

<I must admit to myself that there is more than physical attraction for Lex. My heart is involved. Why else would I risk my mission and chance of discovery to spend some time with him? After all, we cross paths each day at work?> Sighing internally, she thought about that other man. So many years spent apart had dulled her feelings. She held onto those diaphanous emotions as a secure lifeline to her past life, a life that was slowly becoming more unreal with each month she remained here.

<Be honest. On a personal level, if it were not for your biological differences, you could happily remain forever. But my — mission — comes before all else... even my happiness.>

"Those thrice cursed crystals must be located... soon!" She spoke aloud into the air.

Part Seven

It was around noon one late spring day; Lois sat at her desk typing the follow-up piece to Diana Stride's trial and imprisonment. The former TV magazine journalist had been a free-lance assassin for a mysterious criminal organization. So far, they had failed to stir up any further information about the group, except for the name — Intergang.

Lois shuddered as she remembered Superman's ordeal with Diana's deadly kryptonite kiss. To see the superhero lying helpless on a hospital bed had nearly broken her heart. His attending oncologist explained the kryptonite was rapidly weakening his body much like a cancer and needed to be treated as such and exposed to a powerful dose of radiation. By stepping into a nuclear reactor, Superman had to burn the lethal poison from his system.

Thankfully, Superman survived his experience with the deadly radiation and was able to capture Diana Stride and her French cameraman. Nevertheless, the adventure had badly frightened Lois — to see him in such pain; she was grateful to have been by his side and provided some small measure of comfort.

As she sent the completed story to Perry's computer, her mind turned once more to another ongoing investigation. It had been over two months since the Shackleton freighter hijacking and despite diligent research on the part of Lane and Kent no clues could be discovered as to the crystals whereabouts. No sign of them had appeared at any of Luthor's Industries, especially LexSolar. Even Bobby Bigmouth; — whose intel had started the entire investigation to begin with, had nothing further to add but promised to keep his eyes open... for a 'tasty' fee.

The investigative reporter chafed with annoyance; she wanted to go after the story with undivided attention. She still felt there was more to Aykira Milan's odd behavior during the latter half of their first

interview. Despite a brief follow-up phone interview, which yielded surprisingly little, Lois' reporter instincts could not shake the notion the media liaison was hiding something. Perry assured her if anything new surfaced, he would allow her to go after the story, 'like the Colonel after Elvis' contract'. In the meantime, there were other assignments needing her consideration.

Jimmy's duties as a fledgling photojournalist were increasing, so much so that many of his research projects for the bullpen staff were backlogged. Some items had been passed over to the research department, but they lacked Jimmy's speed and accuracy. In self-defense, he started training Jack on that aspect of his job and then expanded it to include the 'finer art' of computer research... that is to say hacking. The teen-ager took to his training well; with experience, he would become as proficient a researcher as Jimmy.

'Mad Dog' Lane had decided to utilize these new skills of Jack's. He might not be as fast as Jimmy, but Jack was just as dogged as she was when it came to tracking down information.

Walking over to his tiny cubicle, Lois presented the names of Aykira Milan and Dr. George Amundsen as his research targets. "Find out whatever you can on these two, especially Luthor's administrative assistant."

Jack glanced the paper, looked over at Cat's empty chair and said in a low voice. "Her fiancé? That's hard to believe, he's such a nice guy."

"Hey, you're paid to *research* the subject, not chose who's nice or not."

Unruffled, Jack persisted, "I think you're wrong, Ms. Lane, but okay. A guy like him has co-workers and team members with stuff to hide. Do you mind if I check out a few people on his team?"

"I don't care — just find some information we can use to finally jumpstart this investigation."

Jack, remembering his position as lowest man on the bullpen totem pole, nodded, turned toward his computer screen and bent industriously to the task.

Satisfied, Lois returned to her desk and began going over her notes from the Milan interviews and Clark's information from Superman about the Harmonic Crystals. For some strange, unshakable reason, she was sure there was a big story here.

She looked up from her notes and glanced over to Clark's desk. Where on Earth had he disappeared to *now*?

Around the same time as Lois was looking for her partner, Aykira walked into Lex's dimly lighted office suite to see him inspecting his collection of antique firearms. The man seemed in deep contemplation, not even aware of her presence in the room. Ever since the abrupt end to the 'date' their 'working' relationship had been cordial, but strained. Oh, Lex had apologized profusely on Monday morning, saying he wanted Aykira to consider herself an important part of his life. Nevertheless, she remembered the other women — especially Antoinette Baines: had he not considered her 'important' at one time?

All that aside, there was still her mission. Those crystals refused to surface. She sighed internally — in the meantime, he was still paying her to be his administrative assistant.

"Good morning, Mr. Luthor, these are the latest solar panel integrity reports I assembled from LexSolar. I also took the liberty of creating a spreadsheet compiling this year's first quarter earnings from computer sales in the United States. The financial results are excellent; LexCorp's stockholders will be satisfied."

"Thank you, Aykira. Please leave them on the desk." Lex spoke in a distracted manner; with his left hand, he caressed Alexander's sword.

Aykira placed the binder down and was ready to depart, but when she looked carefully at his face, it was pinched in pain. She walked over to him placed a gentle hand on his and asked kindly, "Lex, are you all right?"

The billionaire turned his head, flinched when the afternoon light from the terrace hit his eyes and smiled weakly. "Never felt better, please don't concern yourself."

Sensing he wanted to be alone, Aykira gave him a quick nod and exited the office. She was certain something was troubling the man, but until Lex Luthor was willing to confide in her, he needed to keep his own counsel.

Lex waited until the door was firmly closed behind her then allowed his body to give into a strange sensation of weakness in his arms and legs. He leaned against the display case for a few moments, waiting for the sickening feeling to leave him. The seizures or whatever they were had been increasing in severity of late. This was the nastiest one to date. He did not want to involve Aykira with his personal health matters, at least not yet. Still, it was time for him to take action.

Limping slowly to his desk, he consulted his day planner and dialed a seldom-used number. "Hello, Dr. Baxter's office? Yes, this is Lex Luthor. I am requesting an emergency appointment with him today." Lex removed a handkerchief from his jacket pocket, paused, and then wiped his profusely perspiring upper lip, while waiting for the receptionist response. "He can see me at noon? Thank you."

Placing the phone in its cradle, with agonizing slowness Lex eased into the leather armchair, its luxurious feel cushioning his aching body, thinking, <Surely Dr. Baxter will get to the bottom of this ailment and I can get back to normal.>

After several agonizing minutes the worst of the seizure had mercifully passed. Lex began perusing the report with eagerness. His on-site contact, Dr. Scott, had managed to send a coded report within the legitimate one. So far, the team had endeavored to create a working apparatus capable of transmitting energy from the crystals to the panels themselves, with far greater efficiency than the original built by EPRAD. Within a few months the device would be ready for preliminary testing.

Leaning back in his chair, slowly regaining his strength, the billionaire thought to himself, <My plans are taking shape; it's all a matter of time now. Space Station Lex will soon become a reality.>

It was late in the workday when Jack approached Lois's desk with the research results. "Hey Ms Lane, I started digging around Dr. Amundsen's work history and discovered he used to work for EPRAD before working for LexSolar..."

Unimpressed, Lois cut the teen-ager off. "You spent all day working on this project and the best you can do is come up with work history? Jimmy could track that down in two minutes."

Jack, determined to prove himself, pressed on, "Ah, let me finish, Ms Lane. A lower level colleague of Dr. Amundsen was a Dr. Frederick Scott, who was Dr. Antoinette Baines' assistant while she ran the Prometheus Space Station project. I managed to talk with one person at EPRAD off the record and he stated Dr. Scott was envious of her holding a position that should have gone to him. Dr. Scott exited the agency shortly after Dr. Baines resigned, left the state, and went to work as a teacher. His departure was under cloudy circumstances, but only days afterwards, was he hired directly by Lex Luthor's assistant... Aykira Milan."

Lois, interest piqued by Jack's extensive narrative, urged him with impatient hand gestures to continue.

"Anyhow, Dr. Scott now works at LexSolar in the same department as George...uh Dr. Amundsen. Cat mentioned that Dr. Amundsen is the temporary team lead for a new project over there, something to do with solar panels. Anyhow, he's only doing that for a few months until LexSolar can find a suitable replacement, since afterwards he and Cat are getting married and they are moving to Seattle."

"So far, so good Jack. What else have you got?"

"Dr. Scott is working with him on that project. According to watercooler gossip I overheard from Cat, he's got his sights set on Dr. Amundsen's position. A recent interview about him in *American Science* magazine states 'he is ambitious and brilliant, but with streaks of arrogance'. He's also known to spend time with scientists of

'questionable political loyalties'. I did a little further digging and found a few photos of some of those shady questionable associates.

"Their names and fields of specialty are on the back." He handed her four photographs. Lois eagerly snapped them up and began studying the men's faces, committing them to memory. "Hans Luger, nuclear fusion; Grant Howell, chemical propulsion; Cameron Axelrod, solar energy and Larry Davelin, petroleum. These men cover the spectrum of energy research. Putting them all together is quite the brain trust."

"Hmmm, better and better. Why is Cameron Axelrod's name in red?"

"He's bad news... a rogue scientist, who has been linked with a number of corporate espionage cases and Intergang. He's originally from Boston. After reading his history I get the impression that the guy is apparently a real charmer."

"Why so?" Lois asked.

Each of the last three research firms he was hired to work at as a contractor were all victims of corporate espionage. The trail eventually led to him, but no one would testify against him."

She nodded. Obviously Axelrod was a man to keep a watchful eye on.

What about Ms. Milan?" Lois tried hard to hide her eagerness.

"She received her associate's degree in business from some backwater school in New York. Attended a night course semester at MIT for physics, even logged a number of classes in the science of microprocessors. Um, let's see there were also classes in American financial history. All during that time she worked as a contractor for LexCorp in various departments. Then for some reason that employment ended and she moved to England."

"Really? Why?" Lois asked, her curiosity piqued.

"Apparently she spent a year working in Oxford's Faculty of History department. After that, she traveled a lot through Europe and South America. After that she returned to this country and LexCorp again as a contractor, made her way up administrative ranks until just over two years ago she was hired by Luthor personally to be his assistant."

"A woman as intelligent as that should be running her own company. Not working for Lex Luthor."

"That's for sure, she's one smart lady. Not bad looking either." Jack added with a quiet smile.

Lois let the last comment pass and fired more questions. "What about her early years? What about her family? Where is she from? Most important of all, where did the money come from to finance her extensive education and travel?"

Jack shook his head. "That's where it gets a little cloudy and interesting. She's an orphan. Apparently all her early life records were 'destroyed' in a fire about five years ago."

"Missing' family history?" Lois questioned. "That's just too convenient. Great work, Jack! Sorry I barked at you earlier."

Obviously pleased that the prickly reporter was happy with his work, Jack nodded and went back to his cubicle.

Lois mused to herself, <He's a good kid and a smart worker. If he keeps this up, I might need to show more respect for his abilities.>

At that moment, Clark exited the elevator, grabbed a cup of coffee, and walked down the ramp. He stepped quickly over to his desk and booted up the computer. Closely behind him walked Cat, her arms loaded with bridal magazines. Humming the wedding march she glided by Clark's desk smiling, her happiness apparent to the entire newsroom. But as soon as she reached her desk, and saw her phone message light blinking, the gossip columnist returned.

"I hope that's my source, getting back to me on the Metros quarterback's betting scandal." she muttered while listening to the message.

Lois shook her head. Cat may be getting married, but she was still a reporter – albeit gossip – but still a reporter. She turned her head towards her true target. "Clark Kent, where have you been all day? Let me guess, you had to return a video?"

She watched as her flustered partner fumbled with his tie and said, “Well, I did keep that copy of ‘Die Hard’ longer than two days.”

Lois rolled her eyes in disgust and said, “Figures. I’ll never get a straight answer out of the office phantom.”

Clark flashed a killer grin and responded, “What have *you* been up to while I was gone?”

Realizing he was changing the subject, she decided to play along, “Working, unlike some folk I know. Perry’s editing the Diana Stride story even as we speak.”

“Great. Now I need to start ‘working’ myself. While ‘pounding the pavement’ for information on one of my filler pieces, Superman rescued some construction workers when the crane collapsed. I managed to get interviews from the crane operator and some of the workers. Pity Jimmy wasn’t there, the only thing the article needed to make it sing was pictures.” So saying with that heartbreaking smile, Clark started typing furiously on his keyboard, anxious to meet the evening edition deadline.

<Scooped again! How does he do it? More importantly, *why* does Superman always give him the best stories? I thought we were *both* his friends?> Lois wanted to say more, but decided it was more important for Clark to get the story in before Perry came roaring out of his office.

<That did it! Apology or not she was getting into LexSolar for her own scoop.> She waited until Clark was completely engrossed in typing, than dialed a number she knew by heart.

“Hello Louie. This is Lois. How’s Doreen? Still enjoying her job as a coach on the ITA Tennis Circuit?”

“Hey kid, long time no hear! Yup, my daughter is making her old man proud! Now if she would just break up with that cop boyfriend of hers! The other family members don’t like to come to dinner when they’re around. Know what I mean? Hey, you still working with that straight arrow... Kent? He’s not giving you any trouble is he? I know guys who know guys.”

Lois felt a genuine smile of pleasure spread across her face, Hearing Louie’s voice brought back several happy college memories. “No Louie, sometimes I wish I could ask the ‘boys’ to get ‘enthusiastic’ with Clark, but it wouldn’t do any good. No, what I need is your help acquiring some ‘equipment’ for a little job I’m planning in a couple of days.

There was a brief silence on the other end of the line; Lois could almost imagine her friend sitting back in his chair, contemplating his next words. “Equipment for a job huh? Local usage or industrial strength?”

Puzzled she asked, “What’s the difference?”

“The difference is knocking over a bank is a different kind of job requiring different or ‘industrial strength’ tools. Knowing you, it’ll be some corporate heist. So the equipment would be ‘local’.”

Taken aback, she responded, “Louie, this is Lois... why would I want to pull off a corporate heist?”

“Yeah, well, like I said, I know guys... and then I know you. Word on the street, is LexCorp has something to do with that freighter hijacking a few months back. You and the ‘arrow’ are probably lookin’ into it. Don’t worry kid; I ain’t saying nothin’ to nobody. Now, what or where is this job?”

After a lengthy discussion with Louie, outlining her ‘equipment’ requirements Lois hung up and started making a list of additional items. Once finished, she looked up and shouted. “Jack!”

Two evenings later in Lois’ apartment, she prepared for her larcenous nocturnal activities. Fortunately, for her, the giant research facility was located five miles outside of Metropolis in one of the country’s most prestigious business parks, Luthor Industrial Park or LIP to the locals.

<Louie’s burglary equipment should get me past the security cameras, locks and the guards.> Lois thought as she donned her stylized ‘cat burglar’ disguise: blond wig, stuffed underneath her black knit cap. Her shoes had one-inch lifts fitted inside. All this designed to throw off an accurate description of the ‘perp’. She struggled for a

moment with the final piece of her ‘disguise’: a pair of blue contact lenses.

She slung the small weighty black bag containing all the necessary tools over her shoulder, exited her apartment, and walked to the parking garage. Swiftly she opened the car door and carefully placed the bag onto the passenger’s side of her Jeep. The late spring night was inky black and once again heavy rain clouds threatened above.

<Good.> she thought, <It’ll be harder to see me in this darkness. Now if the rain will just hold off until after this little escapade is done.>

Lois loved the adrenaline rush just before ‘pulling a job’. It heightened her senses beyond the humdrum of investigative research from paperwork. This is where the action was! She marked her chronometer at 12:30 a.m.

The only one obstacle to dampen her spirits as she drove through the now quiet city streets was knowing this particular ‘job’ did not have Clark’s blessing.

<Rats! Ever since that over-grown boy scout entered my life, *nothing* has been the same.> Her irksome conscience shot back. <But then again, hasn’t your life improved since he showed up? Maybe he is right and this *is* too big of a risk. Turn back now, before any damage is done.>

Annoyed with the mental gymnastics going on in her head, she told her conscience to switch off for the night. Still a nagging feeling kept urging her to turn the Jeep around and head for home.

She continued driving. Metropolis’ skyscrapers receded into the distance, replaced by squat office structures and darkened strip malls, shut tight for the night. In time, she reached the LIP (Luthor Industrial Park) and drove slowly through the night towards LexSolar.

Part Eight

Directly across the wide central concourse of the LIP from LexSolar complex, stood the renowned Conquistador Hotel. It was a popular destination. Designed for the busy multi-tasking business traveler, it featured a select range of services aimed at providing casual hospitality in a well-designed, high-tech and contemporary environment. Lois remembered reporting on several diplomatic functions for the Planet at the high-end establishment. However, what she needed from the place tonight was its back parking lot. It should be dark enough and far enough away from prying eyes and surveillance cameras so she could move about freely.

Lois parked the Jeep in the dark back lot, grabbed her bag and avoiding any pools of light from the parking lights, walked stealthy back toward her objective. Intermittent drops of rain trickled down. The pavement grew sleek with moisture while the ground began to smell damp and earthy. <Great,> she thought. <My cold finally goes away, now it’ll probably come back with a vengeance. Still, this rain is a blessing in disguise it will cover my movements. The dreary weather reminds me of the night this entire investigation started, a night of hard, consistent rain.> The intrepid reporter walked quickly out of the parking lot, staying in the shadows. She gingerly avoided walking on the lawn ... mud left tracks.

Still clinging to deep shadows, by avoiding street lights, Lois ran up the sidewalk away from the hotel for about two minutes; then when the Conquistador was no longer visible, she crossed the concourse that separated the hotel from LexSolar. Now swiftly running down the street, she stopped at the bottom of a long curvy elm tree-lined driveway leading up to the east wing of the building, near one of the smaller entrances. Warily she ran from tree to tree until she arrived at the wide east parking lot. <No trees here, just a long retaining wall leading to the small alcove entrance Louie had marked previously on the blueprint.>

She reached the alcove entrance. Still hugging the dark red brick of the wall, Lois ducked down to avoid detection from the overhead surveillance camera. Once under the device, Lois stretched and stood on tip toes to place a night-time Polaroid snapshot of the entrance over its lens. She counted off 60 seconds to make sure security had not noticed the tampering.

<Oldest trick in the book.> she thought. <Good thing Louie has a

‘connection’ in this place, who was able to take this photo.>

Once that was done, she pulled a tool from the depths of her bag and attached the leads to the swipe lock. It took all of two seconds for the lock to disengage, open the heavy glass door and grant access to the hushed, dark building.

After switching on her penlight and checking for interior cameras along the staircase, Lois ran up the dark three flights to the offices of Drs. Amundsen and Scott.

Her mind went back two days and her conversation with Jack, making ‘requests’.

“Get me the current blueprints of LexSolar and the office location of those two scientists.”

“Anything else?” Jack responded, rising to the challenge.

“Yeah, I need it last week.”

Lois was surprised to find both requests answered before the day shift ended. All the materials she wanted were neatly placed inside two separate red folders Jack had set on her chair. When she asked how he procured the information, his mysterious reply was, “You got resources, I got mine.” So saying, he saluted the reporter than walked back to his tiny cubicle near the research department. <Well I’ll be.> She thought wryly. <Jimmy’s young protégé might just have the chops for this job after all!>

Of course, it would have been much easier to simply ask Cat where her fiancé’s office was located; but somehow Lois did not think the gossip columnist would appreciate George being one of the objectives of her break-in operation.

Later that night at her apartment, wearing comfortable sweats and picking over the remains of Chinese takeout, she had studied the blueprints extensively, familiarizing herself with the building’s layout for quick access and egress.

Now here in the building itself, moving through the somberly quiet and dark corridor, she remembered the scientist’s offices were numbered E-259 and E-258 in the ‘E’ wing. By running up the central staircase and making a sharp left and walking a mere twenty feet further and to her right was E-259, Dr. George Amundsen’s office.

She knelt down to pick the lock only to discover that the door was open. <Oh boy, this is way too easy.> She thought. Before entering the room, she held back for a moment, just in case George was in there sleeping. Cat had told her once he occasionally worked late and took brief naps. Several anxious seconds passed; there was no reaction to Lois opening the door. Moving stealthily, she entered the room.

The office itself was furnished in boring standard tan office furniture. The only way to distinguish George’s office from any other she had encountered was the numerous ‘encouragement’ pictures framed and hanging on the scientist’s walls. < So strange,> Lois thought. <Especially since Cat mentioned he has a wide range of interests.>

On his desk was a picture taken last autumn of himself and Cat bundled in comfortable wool sweaters, walking through a pile of colorful leaves in Centennial Park. It was a lovely shot of a couple very content together. Lois once again felt happiness for the other woman — perhaps even a pang of jealousy. But she quickly put her mind back onto the task at hand.

After an extensive twenty-minute search through all of Amundsen’s files, desk and credenza, not a single item of interest came to the reporter’s attention. She turned on his computer and once the monitor flared to life, she took a chance and typed in CAT for the password. With a gentle *beep* the main menu appeared.

Lois snorted derisively. George completely ignored basic computer security protocol. She wondered, if LexCorp Security knew about that password, would the scientist be fired for such an offense? After all, didn’t he want to protect his files from industrial spies... like her? She ran a master search program to bring up any file with crystal or harmonic in the title or contents. Another ten minutes went by, again nothing.

“OKAY Cat, the ‘Wild man’ is clear... so far.”

Quickly she returned all the papers and books to their proper location. Looking at her chronometer, the time read 2:15 a.m. “I’ve been at this for thirty minutes, pretty soon the guards are going to make their rounds. Hopefully something will turn up in Dr. Scott’s office,” she mumbled to herself.

Kneeling down, Lois peeked outside the office, counted off thirty seconds then walked across the hallway, her footsteps muffled by the thick carpet. Dr. Scott’s office door was an entirely different matter; the lock was not standard office issue, but of a style she had never tackled before. It took the reporter three nerve-racking minutes to understand and defeat the lock. Finally, her hands damp from sweat within her special black leather gloves, she finally managed to slowly open the door and step into Dr. Scott’s office.

Once within the gloomy room, she locked the door behind her. When the guards made rounds, they would probably not expect this door to be open. Cautiously using her penlight, she swept the room and noted it was completely different from George’s. Upon the wall were several pictures of Dr. Scott with noted local politicians and scientists. One EPRAD group picture was taken with Lex Luthor, his hand placed judicially on Dr. Antoinette Baines’ shoulder. Dr. Scott, although Dr. Baines’ assistant at the time; stood far in the background; the only person in the group not smiling. The desk’s surface was adorned with a very expensive red leather desk set. <This guy really wants visitors to think he’s important.>

Lois turned away from the pictures and attempted to open the desk drawers, but they were tightly locked. <Hmm somebody this security-minded won’t leave incriminating evidence in hard copy.> She went to the computer turned it on and rather than take a crack at typing passwords she pulled out the most important device of her ‘equipment’... a bypass ‘slave’ mechanism.

She remembered how Louie’s booming voice rang out clear and loud while showing her how to operate it. {Just hook this little beauty into one of the tower ports and Whamo! The computer will act like it’s yours.} True to his word, as soon as the mechanism finished its take-over routine the computer’s main menu sprang up. Nervous with excitement, she typed in a search program and waited.

For all of three minutes, Lois waited anxiously for the master file search to locate and reveal *anything* related to Harmonic Crystals. She was about to despair that the entire break-in was a complete failure when files started coming up, some with names like Crystal ‘Harvest’, Crystal ‘Instal’ and several others. “Jackpot!” Lois squeaked, careful to remember where she was. She opened Crystal ‘Harvest’ and started reading all the particulars of the Shackleton freighter hijacking.

Smiling with triumph, Lois zipped open her bag and fished out a diskette. <This is perfect! I’ll download the entire sub folder! After the story is sent to Perry’s inbox, we can contact General Zeitlin and tell him who took his crystals! Pulitzer, here I come!> All these thoughts frantically raced through her mind as her fingers nimbly tried to put the diskette in the slot. The diskette bent slightly, refusing to slide in. “What...?” She flashed her light over the computer tower. The slot was sealed off. <Why would Scott do that? Doesn’t he occasionally download information from his computer?> She sat thinking for a few minutes, and then realized Dr. Scott used the new portable, but bulky, diskettes drives. <The only way to download materials from this computer is with that drive. The one thing that is *not* in my burglar bag! Rats! Where’s Jimmy when I need him?>

Much as she loathed doing it, Lois started printing out the information. It took two minutes for ‘Harvest’ to print; she was getting concerned about the noise. Once the file ceased printing, Lois thought she had pushed her luck and decided this was enough material for Inspector Henderson and a grand jury investigation. While her heart pounded out a wild tattoo; she gathered up the printout, shut down the computer, put everything back in its place, and switched off the desk lamp.

Standing by the door, she was about to zip up her bag and exit the office when the sounds of heavy footsteps, keys rattling and deep male

voices reached her perked-up ears.

"I'm telling you Cliff, the printing noise came from this side. Check the odd number offices; I'll check the even ones."

Cliff grunted in agreement and Lois bit her lower lip trying not to cry out. Moving quickly, she dived into the tight knee space under the desk. Holding her breath, she listened as the insistent clatter of multiple keys drew closer and stopped just outside the office door. After much fumbling with the lock, the guard warily opened the door and instead of turning on the light, swept his flashlight haphazardly over the room.

Lois listened as heavy feet entered the office and slowly walked around the still gloomy room. From the sound of wheezing, labored breathing and the faintest whiff of alcohol Lois gathered that this particular rent-a-cop's greatest exercise was watching the camera monitors accompanied by 'liquid' entertainment. Long tense moments later, the guard departed to check other offices further down the wide corridor. Lois waited a good ten minutes before crawling out from under the desk, her muscles relieved after their long confinement. She crossed the room, unlocked the door and peeked out again, checking either end of the dim hallway. Once again the corridor was quiet and deserted; it was 3:25 am. Her hard won information safely tucked in the burglar bag; she slung it over a slim shoulder. It was time to go.

With hasty steps, she ran down the inky dark corridor to the central staircase, nervously pulled the wool knit cap tightly over the blonde wig, then ran lightly down the stairs. Upon reaching the second floor landing; she suddenly heard familiar keys rattling and beams of light flashing on the other side of the door when two men burst out from the 2nd floor entrance.

"Stop! Put your hands up!"

Icy panic shot through her body, but Lois had no intention of stopping for him or anyone. She continued running down the stairs, the guards in eager pursuit. She reached the bottom of the stairwell, practically jumped toward the exit and pulled on the door — it steadfastly refused to budge. Shocked, shaken and adrenal glands desperately activated, the reporter's body twisted to face down her pursuers. The bigger one, probably the 'wheezer', could not halt his lumbering movements to stop in time. Lois turned her body and kicked him hard in the solar plexus. The man went down like a pole-axed steer, dark curses spewing from his mouth.

"Turn around! I have a gun!" The remaining guard shouted.

Not allowing the other guard a chance to react, Lois struck him with another well-placed kick. He also went down, holding his side and coughing. Searching his pockets, she located the swipe cardkey, ran it through the security box and frantically pushed open the door.

Just as she stepped over the threshold, a sharp ugly metallic coughing sound assaulted her ears. All of a sudden hot searing pain passed through her left arm; a dry strangled cry escaped her throat and she clutched the wounded limb. Yet through it all, her wobbly legs kept moving.

Outside the rain now cascaded heavily down with a murky, wet intensity. Instantly Lois' clothes were saturated and now clung to her skin uncomfortably. Her shoes were totally wet and squishy, making her steps painfully awkward and sluggish. Pushing the distress aside, she ran along the dark red brick walls trying to avoid detection and capture. The burglar bag, containing its hard won goods, banged reassuringly against her hip. <Despite the danger of running in the dark, the rainfall's noise should cover my footsteps and the blasted rain ought to slow down the rent-a-cops! I should be back at the Jeep in no time!>

Lois had barely finished her thought when suddenly the entire area burst into fierce, bright illumination and three shots rang out.

Her night vision temporarily destroyed, Lois stuck to the high brick wall until she reached the cover of the large elm trees. She half limped, half ran until she arrived at the end of the long curvy driveway. First over soggy earthen terrain, that sucked and pulled her struggling feet, then easy-to-move-over hard concrete. The staccato rhythm of her heartbeats hammering in her ears, she was grateful to

finally arrive at the Jeep in the Conquistador's back parking lot.

The insistent rain had made progress difficult, especially because she had to keep wiping water from her face. Fighting down her trembling, Lois struggled to get the keys out of her pocket and into the Jeep's lock. Once inside the dry warmth and safety of the vehicle, she gave into violent shaking, wishing she was anywhere but there. Strangely, at that moment her mind traveled to the soothing visage of her partner. <Oh how I wish Clark were here!>

For an agonizing few moments, she clumsily worked to remove the heavy black leather jacket. The dampness and pain made any movement almost impossible. Finally, the jacket removed, she dumped it into the back of the Jeep. Next, she pulled off the damp hat, wig and finally, the blue contacts. Hopefully, the guards would remember a tall blonde assailant, not an average-built brunette.

The old black sweater was ruined, the left sleeve ripped and covered in blood; carefully, painfully, she rolled it up to reveal a deep slash. Leaning back in her seat and trying to catch her breath, she thought <Thank heavens! Not a penetrating gunshot wound.> Unfortunately, the bullet had dug a deep ugly gash in her arm. Between the shock and pain, for all intents and purposes the arm was almost useless; she would have to drive one-handed.

Off in the distance, police car sirens blared shrilly; somehow, she had to get out of there, but how? Surely, the place would be crawling with police in only a few moments. After all, this was the LIP — Luthor territory. The fierce burning pain was making her dizzy, but losing consciousness now was totally out of the question.

She leaned back and permitted one minute to gather her thoughts and make an exit strategy. But the insistent throb of her arm and the feeling of hot salty tears running down her cheeks made planning almost out of the question.

All she could think of was the look of disappointment on Perry's face. How could she expect the Daily Planet's legal team to defend her when she so blatantly flouted the law? However, no one's displeasure could she bear more than Clark's. Yet somehow, the thought of Clark gave her strength. Suddenly a crazy line of attack came into sharp focus and 'Mad Dog' Lane forced the pain to the back of her mind.

Rummaging in the back of the Jeep, she found a large, old red shawl, wrapped it around her shoulders, straightened her wet and matted hair as best as possible, applied a little lipstick and mascara to make a proper appearance then drove like a woman possessed out of the Conquistador's parking lot — straight toward two police cruisers.

"Hey officer! I'm Lois Lane of the Daily Planet. What's going on?"

The policeman, a long-time veteran, groaned inwardly when he saw Lois, thinking she probably heard about the break-in over a police scanner and wanted an exclusive. He lied, "Sorry Miss Lane, it's all a mistake... false alarm."

"Seriously," she gestured at all the emergency lights and security personnel going over the grounds with dogs and flashlights. "This is LexSolar's attitude towards a mistake? I would hate to be around when something serious happens."

The man forced a smile, but said through his teeth, "We will be sure to pass on your recommendation."

"Thanks officer, give my best to Bill Henderson." So saying, Lois backed up her Jeep and drove off, while a police investigative team entered the Conquistador.

Still shaking, Lois fought to control her speed until she was out of sight, then drove as quickly as her arm, pulsating with pain, would tolerate.

It was nearly 4:30 am by the time Lois approached 344 Clinton Street. Driving any further was out of the question. The adrenaline rush from her escape in the downpour had long faded. She was beginning to sweat and feel the mounting pain roiling over her body in acute waves. At any moment she expected to vomit. The struggle to keep awake and park the Jeep drained the last of her strength. On sheer willpower alone, she managed to drag her body out of the car and stumble toward his building.

<Clark; got to get to Clark.> With halting steps she approached his front door and as the grey fringes of unconsciousness over took her mind, attempted to knock.

Part Nine

Inside, Clark was benefiting from a deep restful sleep; Pepper lay contentedly at his feet. Mrs. Harper's family emergency had continued. His landlady had assured Clark another relative could take the gentle feline off his hands, but he wouldn't hear of it. The two had become fast friends. Pepper was welcome to stay with him as long as possible.

Suddenly both man and animal raised their heads. Clark heard Lois' feeble cries for help, along with her erratically beating heart. Instantly he flew to the front door. Flinging it open looking down, he saw the crumpled, wet and bloody form of his partner.

"Lois!" Clark cried out. His throat tightened with alarm as he gently gathered her limp body into his arms and swiftly floated through the apartment into the bedroom. Gently he placed her onto the still-warm bed. He saw the haphazardly wrapped arm and examined it. The bloody gash was severe, but his medical skills, consisting of only the rough and ready emergency variety, could not help in this instance.

"Lois, can you hear me? I'm taking you to a hospital."

"N...no hospital, police would find out! Please... help me."

Clark was about to argue, when he thought of his childhood Smallville friend, Dr. Pete Ross. Reaching for the phone, he dialed New Troy General.

After waiting what seemed like an eternity while the operator put him through to the doctor's private line, Clark heard the clear and steady voice of Pete Ross.

<<"Clark, old buddy! To what do I owe the pleasure of this call... at 4:30am?">>

"I need your help Pete... medically. Can you come over right away?"

The voice on the other end of the voice sounded confused. <<"Ah, can't you bring the patient here?">>

He replied, "No. This was not a Superman rescue... it's my partner, Lois; she's suffering from a – gunshot wound of some kind."

<<"Lois... right. Okay, my shift ends in a few minutes. I'll be over directly. Keep her comfortable and warm. There is a definite possibility of her slipping into shock. Then we have to bring her into the hospital. Oh, by the way Clark?">>

"Yeah, Pete?"

<<"I want a full explanation. *Not* reporting a gunshot wound isn't exactly legal.">>

Clark closed his eyes in relief and said, "You and me both. Thanks, Pete."

Pete mentally shook his head. <Clark's invulnerability should protect him from anything... except kryptonite.> He was deeply concerned about Lois' wound, but thankfully even from Clark's vague description it did not sound life-threatening. For as long as he had known Clark danger and adventure was never far behind him. But now that a certain brunette had entered his life the 'danger' ante had been upped considerably.

He called one of the ER nurses and asked if there were any cases which needed his immediate attention. The stout, competent woman looked over her clipboard and informed him that it was a quiet night. If he wanted to leave early one of the residents could cover for him.

It only took five minutes to change out of his scrubs and into street clothes. He picked up a medical emergency kit and headed outside into the night.

After hanging up the phone, Clark returned to his patient. He tried to make her comfortable, carefully removing the wet shoes and socks. After a brief mental debate as to whether he should take off the wet outer garments he did so – at super speed. He felt like he was invading her privacy, but she couldn't remain in those wet things. With that task, complete he finally covered her slight frame with one of Martha's

colorful quilts. Lois moaned softly under the covers, she was in pain. He never had a need for pain medication, since his Kryptonian physiology rarely experienced hurt of any kind. Feeling helpless, Clark started pacing the bedroom floor. It was all he could do until Pete arrived.

His mind ran on; what could Lois possibly be doing out on a rainy night like this, getting into a situation so terrible she didn't want the police involved? Her body moved again under the afghan, her delicate features contorted in discomfort. His heart twisted at the sight and felt his fists clutched in unaccustomed rage at the person who inflicted injury and pain upon her. If he found out who was responsible they would be very regretful. Clark's eyes began to smolder a deep ruby red, eager to destroy by fire Lois' tormentor.

He caught himself and thought, <Stop! Whoever it was will pay for this later, right now Lois needs your comfort. If she sees your eyes, it's bound to frighten her.> Clark fought hard to get his tumultuous emotions under control. Gradually the super-charged alien eyes returned to their normal gentle human brown. He knelt down on the bed and gathered her into his arms. She snuggled closer to him, instantly feeling loved and protected by his comforting presence. Clark rocked her gently; suddenly a tiny voice emerged from the depths of blanket fabric and his arms.

"D... don't let the police take me away. I only broke in for the story. Please don't be angry with me."

There were dozens of questions running through his mind. Where did she go? Who shot her? He wanted to ask, but instead he brushed long fingers through the tendrils of her damp hair and kissed the sweet forehead. "Shush baby. No one is taking you away, not as long as I'm here."

"Oh... Clark!" She sobbed. "I made such a mess of things, putting my life in jeopardy, just to get a scoop. I kept imagining what everyone might think and say if... if the guards caught me. But mostly I thought about you and how much I wished you were by my side. I... I won't try anything crazy like that again. Next time I *will* check the water level."

He smiled softly thinking to himself knowing full well that Lois Lane would never 'check the water level' no matter what the consequences when it came to ferreting out the truth. "Let's not worry about that now. Your arm needs medical attention and..."

"No! The police will ask questions. Inspector Henderson and that – that ADA Mayson Drake will get involved." She began to struggle in his arms, her heart beating like a frightened, captured bird.

"Shush, no, it's okay. Remember meeting my old friend from Smallville, Dr. Pete Ross? He's coming over to look at your arm. Lois, I trust Pete with my life. He will take excellent care of you."

She stopped fighting and laid her head on his shoulder. "I don't deserve you as a friend, Clark." He cupped his hand under her chin. In the semi-darkness of the bedroom, with his enhanced vision, he gazed lovingly down into the melancholy, tear-stained face. Words came to mind, but he decided on action instead. Very slowly, he brought his lips to hers and brushed them gently in an innocent kiss. Lois' lips responded softly, almost shyly. Much as he didn't want to, Clark pulled away, whispering huskily. "That's what friends are for. Now just be quiet and try to rest. Pete will be here soon."

Lois, too tired and emotionally drained to argue, cuddled closer to Clark. Gradually her breathing slowed and she fell into a light sleep.

He held her thus for what seemed like an eternity, watching the sky outside gradually lightening with the promise of a new day.

Pepper sat quietly at the foot of the bed, his green eyes carefully watching his guardian and the other human with keen feline interest. "Meow?" The cat asked.

Clark looked down at the little animal, reached over, and scratched the fur behind his ears. "Just 'another' adventure with Lois, Pepper. It'll be okay."

Abruptly the distant sound of a car door slamming reached his ears. Clark gently extracted himself from Lois, exited the bedroom, quietly floated across the apartment and up the short flight of stairs to

the front door. Opening it, he could hear a man's heavy tread approaching. A few moments later, the powerful frame of Dr. Pete Ross came through the door.

With a profound sigh of relief Clark said, "At last! Come on, she's in the bedroom!"

The other man immediately went into doctor mode when he saw Lois's small body lying on the bed and started examining her.

"How did this happen?" the MD said as he bent to his work.

"Wait, don't tell me. She was investigating some story?"

"Pete, I honestly don't know what happened. I was sleeping when I heard her calling me. By the time I got to the door she had already lost consciousness." Clark said as he ran his fingers through sleep-tousled hair.

Clark watched as Pete worked. First, the doctor carefully removed any of the remaining fabric from the sweater stuck in the gash. Then he disinfected the deep ugly injury, swabbed the wound with antibiotics, and put in several stitches to close up the worst of the injury. Finally, he wrapped Lois' arm with clean gauze and placed the arm in a sling.

All the while, Clark watched intensely as his friend worked. It hurt him deeply that Lois would probably have an ugly scar to remind her forever of this escapade. Inwardly he sighed; thanking the heavens she was now safe, because the outcome could have been much, much worse.

The two friends stepped out of the sleeping alcove and walked into the main living area. Pete spoke with authority as he packed up the emergency kit into his medical bag.

"Lois is very fortunate; the bullet grazed the arm and hit a few veins but no main arteries. Blood loss was scary looking, but minimal and there will be no permanent muscle or nerve damage. As long as she keeps the arm immobilized and clean in a couple of days she should be just fine. She will need to take some antibiotics in order to ward off infection. I'll drop that by tomorrow."

Clark exhaled the breath he did not know he was holding and thanked his friend.

"Oh don't thank me just yet. As a doctor, I am legally bound to report gunshot wounds – even if it is just a nasty graze. Since she's unconscious we still don't know the circumstances of the shooting. As her partner, you must have some idea of what she was working on?"

Clark rubbed the back of his neck. He trusted Pete with his secret identity, but did he want to drag him into this situation? Mentally making the decision Clark said, "It could be one of three on-going investigations, Pete, but until she regains consciousness I can't be sure exactly which one she's working on. Let me find out what it is then I shall get back to you. That's a promise"

Pete nodded, and started packing up his medical bag. Clark turned on the TV intent on listening to LNN's early morning news. He was shocked to hear Gloria Campos start the hour with a burglary at the LexSolar facility in the Luthor Industrial Park. The report revealed nothing was stolen and there was some speculation of it being corporate espionage or a possibly disgruntled former employee.

As the story was about to end it was briefly mentioned that ace investigative reporter, Lois Lane, of the Daily Planet was present and tried get the scoop, but security guards and the police turned her away.

Clark groaned loudly. Pete faced him with a questioning look than said, "That was the investigation? Breaking into a corporate facility? One owned by Lex Luthor? No wonder she doesn't want the police involved. Your partner is in major league hot water, my friend."

"Don't I know it! Because there are bound to be many uncomfortable questions, especially from Perry wondering why Lois 'Mad Dog' Lane meekly left a hot story."

"Can't you write the article yourself?" Pete asked.

A voice, feeble, but determined growled from behind them. "Don't even think about it, buster!"

The young men turned around to see a disheveled Lois stumbling out of the sleeping alcove, clutching the quilt around her. Physically, she was a wreck, but those dark brown eyes flashed dangerously. Clark

knew from experience 'Mad Dog' Lane was making a meager attempt at being heard. Injury, be hanged.

"Lois, what are you doing out of bed?" Clark shouted.

"Doing what any good reporter would do... saving my story! My bag... where's my bag?" She tried walking into the living room searching for the item, than faltered, all her previous bravado drained away.

Clark ran at a speed slightly faster than human normal and gathered her flaccid body into his arms. He hoped she was too disoriented to notice. "This is getting to be a habit," he said to Pete. "She refuses to sit still!"

Pete said firmly, "Put her on the couch. The last thing she needs is to tear those stitches."

Clark eased her down onto the couch. "Where's my bag? Lois muttered again. "The answer to the Shackleton hijacking is in it."

Clark indicted to his friend that the bag was leaning just inside the apartment front door. Pete understood his meaning and quickly brought the wet bag to Lois.

"Here you go," he said, handing the wet leather bag over somewhat gingerly.

Lois grabbed it hastily and with her right hand reached inside, only to pull out a handful of soggy, ink-stained papers. Unfortunately, in her haste to leave Dr. Scott's office, she had forgotten to zip the bag closed. The torrential downpour had soaked everything inside. "No!" A strangled, hoarse cry escaped from her throat. "I risked my life and reputation, for this?"

"Please, calm down, everything will be all right." Clark begged as he sat by her side and placed his reassuring hands on to her trembling shoulders. "Let these papers dry in the kitchen. Remember, we collated Dr. Platt's notes? We can do the same here. Come on, go back to sleep, that arm needs to stay in the sling for a couple of days. I'll talk to Perry in the morning."

"But Perry will want to know what happened. I was there and didn't report it, that... that flatfoot lied to me!" Lois cried out.

Pete asked curiously, "How would you know?"

"Because I was the burglar! The only reason why I'm admitting this is because Clark trusts you." She attempted standing to pace the small living room, but her arm's pain, and sleep deprivation, was beginning to take its toll.

"Pete, as a doctor will you *please* talk some sense into her? She's got to rest," Clark said in frustration and not a little bit of alarm. She had done exactly what he told her not to do... break into Luthor's corporate facility with trigger-happy guards. He groaned internally. He wanted Lois to sleep. He wanted Pete to leave, so he could figure out what to tell Perry. He wanted this crazy night — correction — crazy morning to settle down.

After no small amount of coaxing, Lois was tucked into bed with a mild sedative. Pete bade his friend good night. He promised to stop by the apartment to look in on Lois and drop off her medicine before starting his shift that evening.

Clark laid the wet documents on various surfaces in the kitchen alcove. The sodden papers held incriminating evidence about the hijacking, important enough for Lois to risk her life and career stealing them. All Clark had to do was 'quick dry' them with his heat vision. He listened for Lois' breathing to make sure she was sleeping, then slowly warmed the papers until they dried.

Curious, Clark used his microscopic vision to 'read' the faint ink impressions remaining on the purloined document's paper. As he read the material, his interest was piqued. <WOW! She was right! There is information as to the what, where, when and how, but we need to know *who* bankrolled Dr. Scott's hijacking plans.>

Gloria Campos' voice cut through his thoughts. The TV reporter had started recycling the main stories of the day, chiefly the LexSolar break in. His mind went back to another problem. How could he tell Perry why the Lane half of the 'hottest news team in town' allowed herself to be scooped — especially since she was right there in the LIP? <More importantly,> Clark thought gloomy, <how was he going

to explain her presence in the area at 3:30 in the morning?>

After what constituted a very tumultuous night into morning Clark arrived at the Daily Plant newsroom earlier than usual. He looked into Perry's office and saw the senior editor sitting down at his desk going over copy with a red pen. He didn't even need his enhanced abilities to hear the strains of 'Are You Lonesome Tonight' emanating loudly from Perry's battered old cassette player.

Still in a quandary as to what to tell Perry regarding Lois' absence today, Clark walked determinedly down the ramp to his office. Taking a deep breath, he mustered up courage and knocked gently on the door.

"Come on in, Clark," the older man said while turning down his cassette player. "Here I thought I was the only one to come in with the chickens. What's on your mind?"

"Uh, Chief. Lois called this morning and asked me to tell you she won't be in for a couple of days. She's not feeling very well." Clark winced internally, hoping Perry would accept his word and move on.

"Uh huh." There was a momentary pause as Perry stared at the younger man suspiciously. "Son, I know she's your partner and all but, since when do you make excuses for Lois?"

"Sir?" Clark asked as he self-consciously touched his glasses and smoothed down the perfectly straight tie.

Shaking his gray head, Perry continued. "How many times do I have to repeat myself? I didn't get and *keep* this office because I can yodel. I watched LNN this morning and heard the cheap shot they took at her. They knew she didn't get the story...and it will be confirmed when it doesn't appear in the Daily Planet's morning edition."

Clark feeling his face flush was compelled to say something began, "Ah well...she -"

"Let me finish. Either she's found evidence of an even bigger story or something happened to her." Perry's facial expression suddenly became quite still. "Son, want to tell your 'ole editor what your partner was doing in the Luthor Industrial Park at that hour...in the pouring rain?"

Clark fumbled with his tie trying to think up a decent story. But, he could not lie to Perry, not about this. "She, uh... she broke into LexSolar. Apparently she thought they might have information on the Shackleton hijacking."

"Judas Priest!" Perry exploded. The older man stood up came around his desk and advanced toward Clark. "Something told me she would attempt a half-baked stunt like this! Man, why didn't you try to stop her?"

"I tried when she first mentioned it — two months ago. Remember our feud? That's what those two chilly days between us were all about. But you know Lois, once she gets something in her head..."

"...she won't let go." Perry concluded. "Is she all right?"

"Uh, that's the other thing... shots were fired and — a bullet grazed her left arm."

Badly frightened, the blood drained from Perry's face. He leaned shakily against the desk. "Good Lord. What hospital is she in?"

"No hospital. She came to my place directly from LexSolar. She was afraid going for medical attention might involve the police. I called a doctor friend of mine to tend to the injury. Her arm is immobilized for a couple of days while it heals."

Visibly relieved, Perry asked another question. "Why aren't you there with her? She might need some help?"

"Believe me, Chief, I thought about that. Imagine how suspicious it would look if *both* of us were out of the office. Besides, the sedative she was given should let her sleep until noon. I'll check back on her then."

"That's fine for now. Let's just hope Inspector Henderson or worse yet, Mayson Drake, doesn't come around here looking for Lois and asking a lot of very uncomfortable questions. Look son, tell Lois to take all the time she needs to heal. In the meantime, I'm going to finish editing one of her lighter pieces to cover her absence."

"Good idea Chief, and thanks. Lois will appreciate the help."

"Yeah well, she's going to get a 'world-class' chewing out when

she gets back to the newsroom... *especially* if she doesn't deliver the rest of this story!"

Part Ten

Brrring!

At precisely 6:30am, while Clark was talking with Perry in his office, across town a phone rang with shrill indifference to Aykira's desire for sleep. Thinking it was her alarm clock she reached out from under the blankets to shut off the offending device. Task accomplished, she rolled over and went back to sleep.

Brrring!

Realizing that it wasn't her alarm and picking up the phone, she snarled, voice thick with sleep. "Who is this?"

"Good Morning Ms. Milan...ahh... I don't mean to disturb your rest, it's Security Chief Hackett down here at LexSolar."

"This had better be good, Neil, otherwise you are fired."

"Yes Ma'am." There was a pause as the man took a deep breath.

"A break-in occurred this morning. Drs. Amundsen and Scott's department was the target. I tried to reach Mr. Luthor, but there's no answer at his place and he didn't leave another number. According to protocol, if he isn't available I need to contact you."

"Right." Aykira growled. "It should take about an hour for me to get there barring traffic. Make sure there is either strawberry yogurt or a smoothie in the East conference room when I arrive." She hung up and tried reaching Lex on his personal cell phone, to no avail. She asked the empty air "Where is that man?"

Loathing departure of the warmth of her bed, yet determined not to waste another minute, Aykira pushed back the satin sheets, donned a sensually comfortable red silk robe and walked towards the bathroom.

Within a very rapid thirty minutes, she exited her apartment and walked hastily to the elevator. Since she would be playing the role of interviewing the guards, she had dressed conservatively in a crisp heavy linen black pantsuit with a silk lavender shell blouse. It only took another moment to emerge from her building's underground garage. Aykira's silver Mercedes-Benz knifed through the streets of Metropolis, the city still in the grips of early morning slumber. Since traffic was not busy as yet, the drive time to Luthor Industrial Park was mercifully quick.

She tried calling Lex again as the car moved onto the highway. Part of her was truly worried about him. Despite his protestations of health yesterday he did not look himself. It was not like him to ignore calls from security staff, especially LexSolar. In the few past months that place had become his favorite company...almost an obsession. Of course, through clandestine investigations she knew there was a good reason why.

<All of this happened after the Shackleton hijacking. The two are definitely connected. Luthor must have hired a special team to steal the crystals off the freighter then transport them over to that facility for study and use them to power the solar panels for Space Station Lex.>

<This is a very dangerous game Lex is playing. He is a master manipulator, but eventually his machinations are going to get the better of him.>

<The only problem now, if I don't discover who is running that special team. All efforts to locate the crystals on this side of the Atlantic through 'business associates' or through my solitary underworld contact have failed. There is not even a hint as to which underworld gang stole them. It seems the closer I get to locating the crystals the farther out of my grasp they become.>

Her mind shifted to the break-in as she entered the large industrial facility's long tree-lined driveway to the main parking lot. Through the early morning, mist left by last night's downpour she could see police lights flashing. As she drove the powerful sedan closer, she could see several people milling about; a LNN TV news camera crew, reporters, police and several LexSolar officials.

"Terrific," she muttered aloud, "the media hounds are here already." She slowed down to give the guard at the gate her LexCorp employee badge and said, "Aykira Milan to see Mr. Hackett, he is expecting me."

The guard gestured to the crowd, “Mr. Hackett is over there talking with the police.”

The guard returned her badge and Aykira drove into the parking lot. As if on cue, the LNN reporter pointed excitedly toward Aykira’s car, deserted Security Chief Hackett, and started following the vehicle as Aykira parked. Before the administrative assistant could close her car door, a microphone that smelled like coffee and several cameras were shoved inches from her face. The LNN reporter, eager for a sound bite, and ignoring Aykira’s apparent discomfort, shouted questions.

Aykira, deeply offended by their unprofessional behavior, ignored the pack and strode purposefully towards the main entrance. She wondered if the reporter truly knew the level of power she wielded within LexCorp, especially since LNN was part of that organization.

Neil Hackett, LexSolar’s chief of security, ran over to stop the reporter’s harassment. “Get away from Ms. Milan!” he barked.

“Not to worry about me, Neil,” Aykira growled as more cameras appeared. The reporters acted like a swarm of hungry locusts, eager to devour any newsworthy item in their path. “Do not allow them access to the building.” Ignoring Aykira’s comment, the noisy throng moved as one following the duo toward the building’s main entrance.

The security chief swiped his cardkey into the slot and the two LexCorp employees anxiously pushed their way into the decorated lobby. Cheryl, the veteran receptionist, had not yet arrived. The hushed early morning quiet of the building was a welcome relief from outside’s chaos. The reporters, lacking a cardkey, could go no further.

<So much for the ‘graciousness’ of the Fourth Estate> Aykira thought. She kept her feelings of fuming indignity under wraps until they reached the plush and comfortably appointed conference room. On the table breakfast fare was laid out; orange juice, coffee, and freshly baked goods. Looking over the table askance, she noted the yogurt was missing. She could tolerate just about anything else, but being called out of bed at an ungodly hour to sit through a discussion about lapsed security on an empty stomach was the limit.

As the nervous security official closed the door behind them, she faced him and in a tightly controlled voice spoke. “Mr. Hackett, the level of security in this complex is a disgrace. Who permitted reporters free rein on our grounds?”

“They came in with the police. We couldn’t keep them out; it would have looked very suspicious. Besides LNN is a part of LexCorp.” He answered shrugging his shoulders. She could tell he fought hard to keep the aggravation out of his voice.

“Where are the rest of LexSolar’s security people?”

“Two of the guys are on vacation and one was out for medical leave.”

“When I arrive at headquarters later this morning, I expect a complete status report on the entire security staff, which I fully intend to turn over to Mr. Luthor for his perusal. But for now, I want to speak with those guards who allowed the thief to escape.” The volume of Aykira’s voice was low, but it had a very icy edge to it. “While we await their arrival, please call down to the cafeteria and tell them to send up either a yogurt or fruit smoothie.”

Security Chief Hackett, a former police detective only six months away from early retirement, was badly frightened. His six foot two-inch frame was taller than Aykira’s, but due to a tendency to slouch, his perceived appearance was shorter. He ran a vaguely trembling hand through his graying hair and wondered for the hundredth time that morning if Aykira was going to fire him on the spot. He had only met her on the few occasions that Lex Luthor visited the facility. She always preferred to remain surreptitiously in the background. Mr. Luthor had stressed on more than one occasion she was the one to contact during emergencies in case he was unreachable.

Despite his uncertainties, he preferred dealing with the lioness rather than the lion.

A short time later, Aykira, Chief Hackett and the two security

guards were sitting in the conference room. The administrative assistant conducted a thorough, but tense, interview.

She observed both men, who could not be more opposite if they tried. Cliff was a tall over-fed mountain of a man, who at one time would have been a formidable physical specimen. Too many years of sitting watch TV at home and security monitors at work had stolen the firmness from his once powerful body. Sadly, the brain matched the sagging outward appearance. She could not help but smell the lightest whiff of alcohol coming off his body from perspiration.

“Like we were tellin’ ya, she was fast, real fast. Like an overgrown cat... took off down that staircase like greased lightning! Scared to get caught! Tall, with blonde hair... couldn’t get a good look at her face. The flashlights were knocked out of our hands when she struck us.” The guard glanced first to Aykira, then his boss, and asked, “Anybody eating that prune Danish?”

“The assailant attacked you?” Neil snapped incredulously. He couldn’t believe the man’s complete stupidity.

“Yeah,” Cliff responded while wolfing down the pastry. “Like I said — she had moves.”

Todd the other guard was built of sterner stuff, both literally and figuratively. Ignoring Hackett’s query, he addressed Ms. Milan. “While conducting our rounds I heard the sound of a printer operating in one of the offices on the third floor of east wing. As per protocol, we investigated each office. Third floor was clear. About ten minutes into our search of the second floor I heard feet running down the main stairwell. Cliff and I ran to the staircase door opened it and saw the assailant. We told her to halt. I warned her I would shoot. But the assailant continued running and when she reached the bottom of the stairwell she turned around and attacked us.”

Listening to the story was beginning to wear Aykira’s patience thin. She checked her watch, 7:30 a.m. Soon she needed to depart and make some kind of report to Lex. <That is if I can locate the elusive man!> Pulling her mind back to the task at hand, she listened while Hackett spoke condescendingly.

“Todd, I find it hard to believe anyone – especially a lone woman — could overpower you.”

“All I know is we got downstairs to the East exit. The assailant reached the floor, turned around and attacked both of us using the smoothest Tae Kwon Do moves this side of South Korea. There’s no shame to be flattened by a master of the art,” the security guard said with no small amount of respect. “She took my swipe keycard and tried to escape. That was when I pulled out my weapon and fired. She screamed and there was not a small amount of blood on the floor. I contacted the main desk and they turned on all the auxiliary lights to the parking lot.”

“Unauthorized shots were fired? Yet the intruder wasn’t apprehended?” Hackett shook his head with gloomy foreboding. So far, he was not impressed with these two. His mind was also occupied with what was going to happen to him and his retirement plans.

“Yes sir. I squeezed off three additional rounds in all as warning shots.” Todd responded crisply.

“According to the police’s preliminary report, blood stains were found not too far from the East entrance. Apparently, those ‘warning shots’ did not convince our thief to halt.” The security chief interjected. “I’ve had my assistant contact all the hospitals within a ten mile radius. If any woman matching that vague description appears, the MPD wants to know about it.”

Aykira, quite exasperated by the security chief’s posturing in an apparent bid to save his job, decided she needed to end this interview and get back to headquarters. “Mr. Hackett, I can assure you, anyone foolish enough to break-into this facility will have a back-up plan in case they are shot. Seeking treatment from a hospital is the very last thing they have on their minds.”

“It is part of protocol,” he muttered rather stiffly.

“My concern is the final objective of the thief. What could she possibly want?” Aykira asked the room at large.

At that moment, in the hallway, an angry male voice was heard

and there was a sharp rap on the conference room door. Before Mr. Hackett could speak, a stocky powerfully built man burst in, followed by a tall, slightly balding man with a hawk nose. Aykira recognized both, a rather agitated Dr. Frederick Scott and the solar panel provisional team lead, Dr. George Amundsen.

Scott stood stiffly erect to compensate for his lack of height, and ignored the protestations of his immediate superior. The bland moon-shaped face with heavy eyelids and thick black eyebrows was flushed with anger. He turned to the security chief and snarled, "Hackett, you idiot! Why in the deep hell wasn't I informed about this break-in? Our team's research is the *key* reason for this facility's existence! It demands better protection." Looking with disapproval at Aykira he barked, "What's *she* doing here? We only answer to Mr. Luthor himself, not some glorified secretary!"

For some unknown reason Aykira wanted to laugh. Dr. Scott's pompous behavior was too much of a caricature to take him seriously. She decided to listen and give him enough rope to hang himself.

The two guards' reactions to this outburst was somewhat mixed; Cliff sat back, watched the scene with some amusement, while his partner's face reflected deep concern and not a little embarrassment. Todd was acquainted through the company grapevine with Aykira Milan's abilities and could not imagine any LexCorp employee who knew the same, publicly belittling her presence in the conference room. Although she seldom spoke when accompanying Mr. Luthor, her reputation for efficiency and fairness were common knowledge at LexSolar. Dr. Scott's reputation for arrogance was common knowledge as well, but this time he had gone too far.

"Huh, Frederick," Hackett stammered, "Why don't we talk later?" "No dammit... now!"

Dr. Amundsen, angered at his colleague's rude and egotistical behavior, said firmly. "Yes, Neil, we should probably discuss the matter now before the rest of the staff arrives."

"Agreed." Aykira interjected while staring at Dr. Scott. "Mr. Luthor will expect a full report. "In the meantime," she gestured toward the guards. "These men can leave."

"I haven't questioned them!" Scott snarled. "Where did they find the thief?"

"For the time being they have been questioned enough and can return to their posts." Neil responded with some alacrity.

When the two guards departed, the scientists sat down at the far end of the short wooden conference table. Aykira noted, not next to each other. She turned to Dr. Scott and spoke in a voice she rarely used, one of absolute authority. Under the circumstances, she needed to maintain complete control of this meeting before matters spilled out of her hands.

"Dr. Scott, allow me to clarify current matters for everyone in this room. Your genuine concerns about keeping the research and development findings within the company are much appreciated. At this instance, I speak for Mr. Luthor. As his Executive Administrative Assistant you will cooperate with me and the Chief of Security during this internal investigation. . . otherwise you can find other employment. Do I make myself clear?" Aykira hated strong-arming the man, but she needed to impress to all present her position and leverage within the company. As far as she was concerned, Scott was obstructing that purpose.

Mollified, the scientist stiffly nodded.

"Good. So far, a search by the police has availed nothing. Dr. Amundsen, is it common practice for members of your team to leave important work materials lying around? We are trying to ascertain the reason for the break-in."

"No. As part of team protocol I secure all files pertaining to our research and materials related to the solar panels in a special safe. . . every day at close of business."

Out of the corner of her eyes, she noted Dr. Scott stiffen. <Curious,> she thought, <He is hiding something. I need to look into that as soon as I leave here. But first, matters here need to be addressed.>

"Neil, hire additional security guards for this building. Not rent-a-cops this time, but former law enforcement officers and former black ops members. Tell Cliff he is on probation. Either he stops drinking and gets into fighting shape within three months or he's fired. Todd is to be re-trained."

"But he pulled a gun and nearly killed the assailant!" The Security Chief answered in protest.

"That is why he must be re-trained. He's a good man and I suspect if he had a better partner, they might have captured the intruder."

The meeting continued for another ten minutes. Aykira anxiously looked at her watch and decided it was time for her to return to Metropolis. The morning rush hour was going to be brutal. She thanked everyone and stood to depart the conference room.

"Well, I guess one good thing came out of this." The Security Chief said with satisfaction. "At least that pesky reporter Lois Lane didn't stick around early this morning. She probably would have found a way to break into our meeting."

Aykira's head shot up. "Lois Lane? What about her?"

"Oh, Todd mentioned she was there when the police showed up. Came out of the Conquistador's parking lot and drove right up to the cops. One of them recognized her and said it just a false alarm. She drove off immediately after that."

The administrative assistant's heart faltered. She knew who had broken into LexSolar and why.

Part Eleven

Lois awoke, feeling slightly dizzy and drained. Her tongue was dry, with the consistency of sandpaper and it stuck to the roof of her mouth. It took a moment's orientation to remember where she was and how she ended up sleeping in Clark's bed.

"Urgh. I feel plain awful." She groaned as she tried rubbing sleepy eyes with her left hand and was greeted to the sight of a sling and bandages.

"Meow?"

Lois jerked away quickly when she saw a furry body leap onto her side of the bed. Her arm throbbed painfully as the bandages and sling became tangled with the bed covers. "Pepper! Stupid cat! Go chase mice or whatever it is cats do!"

The little animal merely ignored her as it walked to the end of the bed laid down and went into 'kitty sleep' mode. Lois, feeling a bit foolish for yelling at the cat, got up and went to the bathroom. It took a few extra clumsy minutes working with only one arm, but immediately after washing up she felt immensely better.

It also took great effort to get into the set of old sweats Clark had laid out for her. She struggled to zip up the hoodie, and then rolled up both pants legs. Upon looking at her reflection in the mirror, she could not help but laugh at the tiny figure swallowed up by too-large clothes.

Lois wandered into the kitchen alcove, hoping desperately Clark had left some morning coffee. The carafe was half-full and still warm. <Thank you, Clark.> Lois thought, <I'll never argue with you again.>

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the purloined papers from Dr. Scott's computer lying on the counter. "Rats!" She said aloud, "We *are* going to argue. He won't ignore the little stunt I pulled last night. Especially since all my efforts were washed away by a downpour." However, her mind went back to the sweet, intimate moment she shared with Clark last night. Shaking fingers touched her lips as she remembered the 'good night' kiss. Was it her imagination or did she respond in kind?

She sighed gently, then said aloud, "That must have been my overactive imagination." Yet in the recesses of her mind, she knew the kiss to have been real. . . all too real.

Taking the ruined papers in hand, Lois sat quietly on the couch, sipping her coffee, considering how the discussion between them would proceed. Despite her referring to Clark as an over-grown boy scout, she knew the protective attitude of the man from Kansas toward her was much more than that. Once the fireworks stopped over her indiscretion, maybe an honest open dialogue could be started about their relationship and what direction it was headed.

A dialogue she desperately wanted since before this whole Shackleton hijacking began and until last night had stalled. <There I go thinking about work again when I need to focus on Clark and me. Dr. Friskin is right; this avoidance tactic must stop. When he gets in from work this evening, we need to talk about *everything*.> Lois winced internally. <Maybe he won't be too angry.>

From the far corner of the room came the sounds of insistent scratching. Searching for the source, she caught Pepper working desperately at Clark's closet. The feline was determined to pry open the door.

"What's the matter, puss? Looking for a mouse?"

"Meow!" The cat wailed. His sleek body's back muscles bunched up in a vain attempt to open the closet door.

"Honestly, you are the most contrary cat; first your chase me out of the bed, now you're attacking Clark's closet! Here, let me open the door so you can nose around to your heart's content."

Lois got off the couch and walked leisurely over to the closet. She tugged hard on the door, but it wouldn't budge. Pepper sat quietly on the wooden floor, cocked his head and watched his 'substitute staff person' struggle with the door. The reporter took note of the cat's nonchalant attitude and said, "Well, if it's not that important, I'm going back to my couch." Before Lois could reach her seat, the little animal scratched at the closet door again, yowling for all he was worth.

"What is so important about this door, Pepper? Does Clark have a stash of kitty treats?" Lois wondered sarcastically. "OK puss, I'm trying one last time, if it doesn't open and the yowling starts again... I see a balcony in your future!" Once again, she gave the door a tug, then realized with annoyance it was a sliding door. "There!" She said triumphantly, "it's open!"

Pepper happily walked inside and began roaming around, content to be exploring a new space within the apartment. Lois listened to him scratching on the inside wall. She wondered what the furry little creature could be into now, when suddenly the groaning sound of ancient hinges swinging open was heard deep within the closet. The reporter's curiosity was definitely piqued. <What's back there?> she thought.

Dashing aside all consideration for Clark's privacy, Lois pushed aside his crisp white oxfords, flannel shirts and neatly arranged suits. The groaning sound came from ancient hinges that revealed a hidden gap between the back of the closet and an unlit space. She nearly plunged into the deep, sheltered area and bumped head first into a well-known blue, red and yellow spandex costume.

Hanging neatly in the hidden space were three Superman suits.

Her mouth opened and closed twice. Speechless, her good hand felt the familiar spandex garment while a myriad of emotions flowed through her mind, crystallizing into one clear sharp thought. Her best friend of three years, her partner in journalism was the last son of Krypton – Superman. All those times he disappeared with the lamest excuses suddenly made perfect sense. Out of the blue, the jigsaw puzzle of her total relationship with him for the past three years suddenly snapped into place. As if to confirm this revelation, she heard Pepper knock something over and then Superman's voice – albeit tinny – emanated from the closet.

{Clark Kent is a friend of mine. My uniforms were hanging in his closet because he was kind enough to clean them for me. I don't have a washing machine or a place to hang my spare uniforms.}

By following the sounds, she reached up and saw a strange machine, which displayed a holographic image of the Man of Steel, his arms folded, floating in mid-air. He continued talking and once finishing the speech, took flight and vanished.

A shocked and much shaken Lois Lane gingerly removed both a suit and the holographic device from the closet. She deposited each item on the small table in the kitchen alcove as if they would render her more harm than any bullet. A combination of delayed shock from the wound, lingering aftereffects of the antibiotics and a poor night's sleep caused her rubbery legs to weaken.

Slowly, overly cautious not to hit her arm, she sat down at the

table and looked from one item to the other. This was far worse than discovering her printout sheets from previous night's break-in were ruined. Her best friend, — the one person she trusted more than anyone on Earth — was *not* of this planet. Clark had deceived her utterly! How many lies had he told to cover up his secret? Weren't they partners? Didn't he trust her? How dare he keep her in the dark!!

His dear sweet parents, the Kents, had gone along with the charade. Martha, the mother she always wished she'd had, and solid, dependable Jonathan were just as guilty as their son was. Suddenly hot tears flowed down her face, as the enormity of the entire state of affairs weighed like granite upon her heart. Too weak to look for a tissue, Lois balled up the suit and held it tightly to her face, weeping bitterly.

A half hour later Clark walked into his apartment and began to call out to Lois. His eyes immediately riveted to where she was sitting. She was looking absolutely great wearing his old sweats and sitting at the kitchen table... watching the Superman hologram his mother had recently created. Martha Kent had left the device behind thinking her son might have need of it again someday. His jaw dropped in stunned realization of what was actually taking place.

<Oh boy,> Clark thought frantically. <She knows. What can I say to ease the pain?>

Lois, her face tear-stained, looked up at him angrily while holding his Superman suit in her good hand. Pepper sat quietly by the open closet door, contently licking his paw, ignoring the byplay between the humans.

<He looks so innocent and scared,> she thought, but angry resolve would not stop her next words. "You were holding out on me... partner." Her voice was tired and hoarse from crying. In vain, she fought hard to keep the sobs from escaping her throat.

Clark ran down the short flight of steps and reached his partner's side, placing a tender hand on her shoulder. "It's not that simple Lois. I've hated keeping this from you, but the right time never seemed to present itself." His voice was tinged with bitterness.

Once the meeting had broken up, Aykira quietly asked Dr. Amundsen to walk her to her car. "In case any of those reporters are still hanging around?" George asked in concern.

The two LexCorp employees walked freely down the same corridor that only three hours before Lois had moved with such stealth. Aykira felt uncomfortable asking this, but it was her job to cover all the bases. "No, hopefully the other security guards will have removed them from the grounds by now. Unfortunately, George, I have to make a request."

"P...Please Ms. Milan, if there is anything I do. I want this situation cleared up as soon as possible so I can finish out my contract."

"...and get married to Catherine Grant?"

Smiling in a happy lopsided way, the scientist responded. "Yes. Who told you?"

"Unfortunately; it is part of my job to know these things." Aykira inhaled deeply, hesitated, then forged on, "In any case, it is your fiancé I am concerned about here. She is the gossip columnist for the Daily Planet. That could be very 'problematic' for LexCorp if the details of the break-in were made known to the public."

George's face took on a slightly reddish hue. His tall body swiftly transformed from quiet and attentive to taunt and ramrod straight with barely suppressed anger. "Ms. Milan, my professional life is professional, but my relationship with Miss Grant is most *definitely* private. Lack of privacy and life balance are some of the reasons *why* I'm leaving LexSolar after my contract ends in three months. I am pleased you have asked me to stay on as provisional team lead until the right person can be found for my position. You have nothing to fear. Ms. Grant won't know the details about the break-in or the topic of this morning's meeting."

The two people continued walking through the large building in awkward silence. Several people acknowledged Dr. Amundsen in friendly greetings as they passed. He quietly responded in turn. <Obviously he was a man well respected by colleagues and underlings alike,> Aykira thought. She regretted speaking so bluntly to the scientist. But, sadly another aspect of her job was maintaining a proper public image. The company did not need to see its name negatively reported on in a gossip column.

"I apologize for mentioning this, George; it is the nature of our business." She sighed softly, "Another matter I wish to point out. Be on your guard with Dr. Scott. The man is a loose cannon. I will see what I can do to get him off your back for the remainder of your time here."

"Thank you. Any assistance in that area is much appreciated. No matter what he does, the man seems... protected."

They reached the main lobby and Aykira signed out. She fully expected George to leave, but being a gentleman; he walked with her in companionable silence to her car. Thankfully, the media hounds had departed. After offering a slightly stiff farewell, he returned to the building.

<He is a good man. LexSolar will find a suitable replacement knowledge-wise. But as a genuinely caring person, it will be almost impossible.> Aykira started up the car and drove back to Metropolis her mind deep in thought.

"So *when* were you going to tell me?"

"It's not that simple, Lois. I've hated keeping this from you, but the right time never came up."

"The right time," his partner countered, "was five minutes *after* you thought it was a bad time! I cannot believe you *and* your parents kept this from me. All of you were like another family to me."

"I still am your friend, Clark Kent." He said softly. His warm chocolate brown eyes held hers in a beseeching stare.

<Those eyes of his, are genuine, honest. Keeping such a huge secret inside has been agonizing for him. I'll bet Martha and Jonathan were uncomfortable as well. They must have known how close we were drawing to each other. Even Martha admitted I'm family, not company.> Still, despite that happy memory, Lois refused to let him get off easily. "How can you say that? I don't know you. Who are you, Clark or Superman? Where does one man end and the other one begin?"

<Here it is. Time to be completely honest with her and pray she understands.> "Lois, Superman is the personification of all the special things I can do. Clark Kent is who I am." He said very quietly in a firm voice, which carried a hint of the Man of Steel's persona.

The poor crestfallen woman stood up and walked toward the bedroom alcove. Clark trailed haplessly behind her. Stopping as she entered the bedroom. He said the first thing to enter his mind. "Are you going back to sleep?"

"Yes," she sighed, "but not here. I need to think, to be in my own home. Wear my own sweats and sleep in my own bed. Right now, we are too close to each other. We *need* to talk, but later."

"It's okay. With your arm in a sling, it makes sense for me to drive you back."

Clark watched as she turned and looked at him with those saddened beautiful brown eyes. "No. Could you call a taxi? It's better this way."

"Sure, Lois, anything you want," he placed a consoling hand on her shoulder. "I hate to see you so upset. Are you hungry? I brought over some minestrone soup and cinnamon rolls from your Uncle Mike. He and Grace really liked the story." <I have to keep her here. We have to work this out, our future depends on it.> Clark held up the white paper bag as if it was a peace offering. Her quiet response cut like a knife.

"N...no. I do need to eat, but not here."

Lois turned and entered Clark's bedroom. Originally, she wanted to change back into her pants and sweater; she looked at the damp and ruined garments, lying on a chair. The sweater was a lost cause and had to be discarded. The pants *might* survive the same fate with a trip to the dry cleaners. Her shoes were the only thing she could salvage of her clothes and even they were still soggy. Cautiously she put them on. They still felt *squelchy* from the previous night's rain. Her anxiety to leave quickly forced Lois to roll the garments into a bundle and stuff them into the damp burglar bag. With a reluctant heart, she rejoined her partner in the living room.

"The cab should be here in a few minutes. Um, while you were sleeping last night I dried those papers you 'acquired' at LexSolar."

"Yes, I saw them before, they are a mess." Lois' face brightened a little, but Clark noted, her voice was flat.

"Yeah, they were not readable...without a little special help." This he said while tapping his glasses.

"I don't understand." She remarked, puzzlement on her face.

"My microscopic vision allows me to read the impressions on the paper made by the printer, something the naked human eye cannot perceive."

"Oh, that's a good thing," Lois said, her interest increased. "What did you find?"

"All the logistics of the Shackleton theft; contact names of the men who got the mini-submersible and the ones who did the actual stealing!" The young man carefully studied his partner's face to see if this bit of information might improve matters between them

"That's fantastic!" He realized Lois' reporter instincts had flown into overdrive. <Maybe this new information will get her to stay.> Suddenly the blaring sound of the cab's horn was heard. <Oh great,> he grumbled internally. <Never a cab around when you need one, but now when I need a few more moments one shows up.>

"Um, I better leave. Get some rest. Then maybe you and I can talk about, you know." She made a flying motion with her good arm. "I'll get these back to you." She indicated the sweats.

"Sure Lois, I'll check on you... tonight?"

"No. Maybe tomorrow; I... I need some time for all this to sink in." She was thinking, <We really need to talk, but not right now. If I don't leave soon, I'll start crying all over again.>

Clark approached a clearly mentally and emotionally exhausted Lois and cupped her delicate face with his hands. He whispered tenderly, his deep voice rumbling quietly in her ears. "I never wanted to hurt you, don't ever forget that." Than bent down and kissed her tenderly on her soft, full lips.

They parted slowly, so much was said with that kiss, but so much more was left unspoken. The beautiful brown-haired woman stared intensely into his passionate eyes, her own swimming with tears. She nodded once, gingerly picked up her bag, huddled it close and walked out of his apartment.

As the door closed soundlessly behind her, Clark Kent felt more solitary and isolated than he had ever been. His body, although invincible to harm, felt tense and drawn out from the chaotic anxiety of the preceding half hour. All his dreams of a complete life in Metropolis and on this planet had suddenly taken an appalling abysmal shift.

He wondered if he and Lois could become two people learning how to be in love without all these complications. Walking over to the fridge, he put the soup inside, wishing Lois had stayed to share it with him.

Lois let herself into the apartment with no small amount of difficulty. Juggling a bag made heavy from water and damp clothes with one hand while using the keys to open multiple locks took more lock picking skills than usual. Right now, she could surely use Clark's help.

“No! I am not going to let his name linger in my mind like a bad cold!” She walked over to her bedroom, grateful for the reassurance of soothing, familiar surroundings. The fish happily swam, unaware of the ordeal their owner had gone through the previous evening. The uncomfortable settees stiffly awaited her attention, ready to ‘bruise her butt’ yet again.

Lois strode into the bedroom, placed the black bag on a chair, and then slowly removed the sodden garments from the burglar bag. With a pang of regret, the black sweater was thrown into the trash and the pants placed in her large blue dry cleaner’s bag. She sighed. “That sweater and I have done a lot of ‘breaking and entering’.” It reminded her of the old Stephen Katz song about a faded flannel shirt. So many memories were wrapped up in the old garment to be lovingly cherished.

As Lois prepared for a hot shower, she began to feel very tired and her arm ached. <The drugs must really be wearing off now.> She thought. Upon completing her ablutions, she crawled under the welcoming covers and drifted into an apprehensive and restless sleep.

Part Twelve

Aykira arrived at the LexCorp building a little after 9:30; considering the traffic from LIP she made great time. Entering her office suite, she said to Jane. “Have you heard anything from Mr. Luthor?”

“No. He hasn’t contacted me or left any information regarding his whereabouts.”

Aykira was now well and truly concerned. Lex’s calendar and personal schedule was her domain and she never failed to keep it updated. Perhaps he was doing something he did not want her to know about. Perhaps there was a new woman in his life? Another business deal? No, there had to be more to his disappearance than that. Whatever Lex was up to, and despite their recent falling out, he always let her know his whereabouts.

“If Mr. Luthor does call I will be in my office,” Aykira said. “Can you hold all my calls, except his, for the next thirty minutes?”

“No problem.” Jane hesitated, then spoke her next words circumspectly. “Aykira, do you mind if I ask a personal question?”

Wary, as to the request, Aykira nodded her head slowly.

“Ever since the day of the *grand* breakfast with Mr. Luthor your relationship with him has ‘changed’. Is there anything wrong?”

Aykira also weighed her words. Jane Connelly had been with LexCorp for a long time and had survived a number of office intrigues, especially during the short tumultuous period when Angelica Cox was Lex’s assistant. Still she had proven herself a loyal assistant and even a... friend. A truthful answer — of a sort — was the best response.

“We have had a... difference of opinion, but it will be resolved soon.”

“Good, because I would hate to see you leave. He might hire Mrs. Cox again.” Jane barely suppressed a shudder.

“Oh, I can definitely assure you, Mrs. Cox will never return to LexCorp in *any* capacity.”

The other woman watched Aykira with a curious expression on her face. Then Jane decided it was time to be an assistant again. “Okay. Well then, I’d best get back to work. This report won’t type itself.”

Aykira left Jane to her tasks and entered her office suite. She immediately went to the desk and picked up the phone.

“IT department. I need to speak with Radames Perez, please tell him to contact Aykira Milan as soon as he arrives. Yes. Thank you.”

Radames was the best IT hacker within LexCorp... but Aykira jealously guarded that secret. She reserved him as an asset to help track down unorthodox computer use within LexCorp. Despite her considerable computer skills, Radames had an adept cleverness that far exceeded her own. Ever since she found out about the crystals theft, she had him monitor all executive computer users to discover if they were mentioned by anyone within LexCorp in general. Now he needed to narrow the search to LexSolar alone. She had an idea who was responsible for the crystal’s theft but she needed proof.

The phone rang and she snatched up the receiver. “Ms. Milan

here,” she answered.

“What happened?” Radames replied. “Did the ‘item’ show up?”

“No, but I have a definite direction to point to now. Could you please check printer output on the East wing’s third floor of LexSolar? The time sequence is from 3:00am to 5:00am this morning. Don’t bother with the administrative assistant’s printers... concentrate on the scientists. Find out what files were printed and its contents.”

“Hmmm, I don’t know ‘kira, that’s a restricted area. What if I get caught? It’s one thing to monitor LexCorp executive ‘traffic’, it’s another to hack into our own system.”

“If anyone asks questions, tell them you are working on a special project for me.” She allowed him to hear a smile in her voice.

“Besides, consider it a challenge, after all, you are this company’s ‘Prince of Hackers’.”

“Yeah, yeah. What are you trying to do? Flatter me into the job? For you, ‘Kira, no problem.”

“Thank you... I think,” she said with a light chuckle. “Please keep me informed of your progress. As soon as the file is located e-mail it over to my office.”

There was a slight pause then Radames spoke in a cautious tone. “No, I don’t think that’s wise. I’ll get the material to you, but not electronically.”

“Oh? Why is that?” she asked.

“Let’s just say, taking these kinds of precautions has helped me *earn* and *keep* the ‘Prince of Hackers’ title.”

“Very well Radames. Do whatever is necessary... but do not get caught.”

“Who... me? Not gonna happen. Talk with you soon.”

They ended their conversation and Aykira turned her attention to the more mundane aspects of her job. The foremost being a report regarding all that had occurred at LexSolar the previous evening, her interview with the guards and discussion with Neil Hackett as well as her recommendations.

An hour after Aykira had arrived at her office. Lex Luthor stepped off his private elevator and walked with confident strides into his luxurious office. The early appointment this morning at Dr. Kassaten, the neurologist, had gone without a problem. He was confident that a routine series of MRI tests would reveal what he already suspected — that the headaches were stress related. Perhaps a quick vacation to the Greek island of Santorini and time spent at the Stone Villa would do the trick, a little Boutari Santorini wine and sunshine. Possibly some female companionship if Aykira was unwilling to spend time with him?

Aykira.

No. Through a few badly chosen words, he had wrecked their out-of-office relationship. Any other woman’s presence would only remind him of what he, for the moment, had lost. Greece would have to wait until he could soften her heart and rebuild their friendship. So far, all attempts had failed, but he refused to admit defeat. She was the perfect woman for him. He knew she felt the same. A kiss like the one they shared — with all its intensity of emotion — could not be faked.

He continued walking over to his desk and saw his message light blinking. He checked the first message and noticed the time stamp. 4:30am.

The nervous voice of LexSolar’s security chief came over the line. <<Ah...Mr. Luthor, this is Neil Hackett, sir. There’s been a break-in. We’ve contacted the police and since we cannot reach you. I’m calling Ms. Milan.>> The connection broke.

Angry, but keeping it under strict control. Lex barked into his intercom for Aykira.

Within moments, she entered the office suite, looking as lovely as ever, wearing a simple black pantsuit. As she approached him, his nostrils filled with the floral notes of a familiar scent. <Ah, that woman knows how to mesmerize me!> Leaning against the heavy antique wooden desk, he put those thoughts aside and spoke to her perhaps a little too sharply.

“What’s the status of LexSolar after last night’s break-in? Was anything stolen? Why wasn’t I informed?”

His assistant arched her eyebrow and began speaking. “Check your inbox for an e-mail summarizing the situation. The LexSolar administrative assistants on Dr. Amundsen’s team are going through their most current hard files, so far nothing was taken. Our IT department is checking for recent downloads or copies of any files during the time of the break-in.”

She paused for a second than said coolly, “You were not informed because no one could find you.”

Caught off guard, Lex answered cautiously. “Well... that is quite true. I...I did not wish to be found.”

He watched as her body stiffened and prepared to confront him. Maintaining his calendar was a matter of personal pride for Aykira. Nevertheless, she surprised him with her lack of petulance. “Mr. Luthor, where you go during off hours is naturally your personal affair, but LexSolar’s research and development of the solar panels is at a critical juncture. Corporate espionage could ruin everything the team has strived for.”

“Brilliant deduction as always, Ms. Milan. I will read your report, which I trust will have its usual painstaking attention to detail.”

“Lex, perhaps I am overstepping my bounds... may I ask where you were earlier?”

“Yes, I apologize for disappearing this morning, but there were personal matters which required my immediate attention.”

“Personal matters?” Aykira asked.

He moved away from the desk and waved his hand in a dismissive manner. “Nothing to concern yourself with Ms. Milan, after all, what I do in my off hours *is* my personal affair.”

“Yes.” She responded stiffly. “If there is nothing else...?”

“No. That will be all. By the way, please handle everything on my business calendar today. I will be in conference calls until early evening and do not wish to be disturbed.”

Lex watched her. She was about to speak, but thought better of it. Instead, she turned and quietly departed the office suite.

While walking down the stairs, Aykira mentally checked Luthor’s calendar and realized he had not advised her of his recent schedule changes. She wondered briefly if her effectiveness here was at an end. <Nonsense! If Radames can discover whose printer was working early this morning I will be that much closer to discovering who stole those crystals. Lex is experiencing a bad day.>

Energized with determination, Aykira returned to her office suite and the many workday tasks ahead. There was one in particular which needed immediate attention. Upon reaching her office, she contacted LexSolar.

“Good Morning, you have reached LexSolar. Cheryl speaking, where shall I direct this call?”

“Hello Cheryl, this is Aykira Milan. Could you please put me through to Todd Stockwell in Security?”

Aykira heard the quick intake of breath and the receptionist’s voice became slightly flustered. “Oh, Ms. Milan! I didn’t realize it was you. Please hold on.”

Seconds later, she heard the quiet, measured tones of the guard’s voice.

“What may I do for you Ms. Milan?”

“A simple task really. Tell me, have the police gone and was the blood cleaned up?”

“Yes. Metro PD left shortly after you did. I have the area on monitor now. It is scheduled for cleaning later this morning.”

“Good. Are you familiar with the procedures required to collect a sample for DNA testing?”

“Yes Ma’am. I take it you want me to gather a sample of the assailant’s blood for testing later without police interference? Do you have someone in mind to make the match?”

Aykira smiled to herself. This man was definitely smarter than he looked and bore watching.

“Yes Mr. Stockwell, that’s exactly what I want. It is best we keep the DNA test in case it is needed. Can you accomplish this task without Mr. Hackett finding out?”

“Ma’am, I do not believe that will be a problem.”

“Perfect. Have the sample tested before the blood begins to degrade and bring the results to me personally.”

“As you wish, Ms. Milan. Thank you for placing your trust in me. I am sure we will catch the thief.”

“Thank you, Mr. Stockwell, with your diligent care that is entirely possible.” Aykira broke the connection.

Late in the afternoon, Clark tucked a pencil behind his ear and took a break from writing a filler piece on Hobbs Bay. Unwittingly he began daydreaming about Lois, thinking of different and better ways to reveal his secret identity rather than her stumbling upon it. He was deeply concerned that her rather unexpected discovery might end their relationship. The secret he had held so closely was to protect himself and his parents, not for the media to exploit.

He chided himself; a big story exposing everything about Superman might have been Lois’ goal when he first came on the scene. But she had changed. She respected the superhero’s privacy and now that she knew his secret, Clark was certain she could not write anything that might harm himself or his parents.

“Ah...excuse me, Clark,” Perry said sarcastically. “But we’ll never get this paper out by deadline if your Hobbs Bay piece isn’t finished and in my computer within the next ten minutes.”

“What? Oh, sorry, chief.” Clark took the pencil from behind his ear and began working on his article.

“Don’t worry son, I know your mind’s elsewhere. Have you spoken to her?” The gruff older man asked, barely concealing his concern.

“No, she really needed to rest. Her arm was hurting.”

Perry nodded gave a quiet knowing smile then said, “Okay. When you call, give her my love... but *after* that story hits my inbox.”

Clark bent to the task of completing the piece, taking care not to type so fast the keyboard might overheat. He experienced a sense of accomplishment as soon as he sent the story over to Perry’s inbox with five minutes to spare. Immediately afterwards, he picked up the phone to call Lois and see how she was doing.

“Afternoon, Lois, it’s me.”

“Oh... hello Clark,” her voice sounded small and quiet. “How are things going at the Planet? Pete Ross left here just a few minutes ago. He wanted to see the ‘patient’ and drop off my medicine. I appreciate him coming here and checking on his handiwork. Thank him again for me please.”

“Don’t worry, I will. Pete is a good guy, and a dedicated surgeon. Healing people is what he does, I told you he would be discreet.” Switching to another subject, he continued, “Oh, everyone here says hello... even Cat.”

“Wow. That’s surprising, especially considering how engrossed she’s been with wedding plans.”

Clark could not help but smile, Cat really was taking a *lot* of work time to plan her wedding. Originally, she had intended on a splashy celebrity packed show in one of the large churches downtown, but the groom had stepped in and the celebrity style arrangements toned down considerably. The guest list was trimmed from 400 to 125 and the location for both ceremony and reception changed to the Farragut Hotel, well known to many of Metropolis’ leading citizens.

“She really isn’t such a bad person once you get to know her.” He hesitated for a moment and then said. “Um... Lois can I come over this evening and talk about you know... “

She made a sharp intake of breath before responding. “Clark, I meant what I said about taking some time to wrap my mind around this whole thing. Besides, I won’t be alone tonight... “

“I see... “His heartbeat faltered slightly and he was about to end the conversation, when he heard her say.

“... yeah, Uncle Mike is bringing dinner.”

Clark immediately brightened and it poured into his voice. “Hey, that’s great! I am very envious. What culinary masterpiece is he cooking?”

“He didn’t say. It’s supposed to be a surprise. I don’t care, as long as there’s chocolate.” She laughed.

“Lois, it’s great to hear laughter from you. Work isn’t the same without ‘Mad Dog’ Lane.”

“Ha! You don’t have anyone’s copy to edit... or coffee to get.”

This last comment lacked the usual sarcastic ‘Mad Dog’ tone and was spoken very quietly.

The silence deepened between them, but, before it became unbearable, Lois chimed in, “Oh yeah, I almost forgot. Pete says in a couple of days my arm comes out of the sling. Come over for dinner on Friday night two evenings from now – we can talk.”

“That sounds great. Maybe we could play a round of chess?”

“You are on, Farmboy. Prepare to be soundly beaten.” She laughed again.

“Right, in your dreams Lane,” then he whispered gently. “Good-bye Lois.”

“Good-bye Clark. The receivers were simultaneously replaced in their cradles.

Part Thirteen

“Uncle Mike, you want me to cook... with my arm in a sling?”

“Hey, if you can cook in that condition, imagine how great the food’s gonna be with two hands?”

“But I thought you were *bringing* dinner? Or at least cooking it!”

“Yeah, but it’s not cooked. Let’s get started. Here’s all the ingredients for zucchini with tri-color penne in a cream sauce with roasted leftover chicken. Just the meal for a single gal. It’ll be great.” He pulled out a large plastic container with a grin on his face and held it out to her. “Don’t worry, pumpkin, as a reward for all your hard work... vanilla Bundt cake with Swiss chocolate frosting.”

Lois rolled her eyes in happy anticipation. “Yummy!” Suddenly, she realized what he was up to. “Uncle Mike, why are you making me cook? I thought I was your favorite niece?” Lois asked petulantly.

“You are! So now, I’m going to do you a favor and teach basic survival cooking skills. Clark shouldn’t be the only one doing the cooking in this relationship.”

Straight away on the defensive, Lois grimaced then snapped, “What makes you mention Clark?”

He looked over at his niece, mischief dancing in his eyes. “First, we cook. Then we eat. After that we talk.”

In time-honored careful chef-trained manner, Mike laid out all the ingredients in sections for each dish. He rummaged through Lois’ pantry and cabinets to find less than half of the items he needed. “How, do you survive in this kitchen? Your Grandmother, bless her heart, would have been ashamed.” Not waiting for an answer, he began to improvise with the few kitchen tools Lois did have available.

“How am I supposed to cut veggies with one hand?” She asked caustically.

“I knew a guy who can gut a fish beautifully with only one hand. Just use the fingers to hold the zucchini and red peppers, let me do the onions and garlic.”

He handed Lois a knife and had her rather clumsily chop the zucchini and slice the red peppers. The whole operation was thumb-fingered and slow, but she managed to get it done without cutting herself. Through it all, Lois muttered darkly about being untalented cooking wise, and the food was going to taste terrible.

“Your Aunt Rita said the same things when we started dating. Only she wasn’t so polite! That woman – God rest her soul – couldn’t tell a chicken from a goose! But pumpkin, as the years passed and we grew closer, cooking became our passion and helped us through some really tough times.” The older man grew solemnly quiet as he watched Lois sauté the mixture of zucchini, red peppers and onions. “Rita was an excellent cook, but most important of all, she was my best friend.” He was silent again, but it was better this time. Happy memories raced through his mind, memories that made the older man smile contently

to himself.

“Mom, let me get that.”

“No, you go help your father in the barn; he’s messing around with that smelly old tractor. This spring weather is really cooperating and he wants to be ready to plow as soon as possible. Dinner will be on the table in twenty minutes.” Martha finished taking the baked chicken out of the oven and proceeded to baste it.

“Okay.”

Clark walked out to the old barn. He loved coming to Smallville in the early evening when the sights and scents of the Earth were preparing to burst into a riot of summer colors. He listened as two squirrels scampered around the front of the barn. The small animals happily played with one another, as only the young can. Further out in the field, the sound of cows lowing for their calves reached his ears. Visiting his parents’ home and being an active part of the farm was a welcome change from city life.

Meeting Jonathan in the barn, the two men began replacement work on the spark plugs and were deeply engrossed in the project when they heard Martha’s voice calling them for dinner.

Quickly they made their way to the farmhouse and washed up at the kitchen sink. The aromas of fresh baked biscuits and Martha’s apple pie lingered in the air. This was the heart of the Kent home. No matter how many places Clark had traveled and explored, no matter how many adventures Superman experienced, the farm would always be home. A place of refuge from the busy world of newspaper deadlines, corrupt individuals bent on revenge, and a certain female journalist who held his heart and now his greatest secret.

The family sat around the table discussing events of the day, with comfort and ease. Such matters as Maisie’s adding new low fat meals to the diner’s menu and Wayne Irig’s son finally deciding to settle down in Smallville were grist for the mill. Still a sense of expectation hung over the family gathering. Clark knew his parents waited patiently for him to tell them what was on his mind.

While buttering a hot flaky biscuit, Clark began to recount the events of the day starting with Lois’ dramatic arrival at his front door.

Jonathan, clearly alarmed said, “Gunshot wounds, even grazes like the one Lois experienced, can be particularly nasty.” Turning to his wife he said, “Martha, remember how bad Wayne looked when I brought him to the hospital after he was accidentally shot while hunting?”

“Clark, it was awful. The blood was everywhere!” Martha shuddered at the memory.

The younger man nodded remembering, the event took place right after the whole Bureau 39 debacle. He could not fly home to visit Wayne; it would have looked too suspicious. Sending flowers and a promise to help around the Irig farm a few weeks later was the best he could do.

“Well, at least Pete Ross was able to come and take care of her.” Clark paused for a moment and launched into the rest of the story, knowing it would frighten and concern his parents.

“Lois knows,” Jonathan, whispered his face took on a thoughtful, worried expression.

“Oh dear,” Martha breathed. “How did she take the news?”

Clark rubbed the back of his neck. “Not well. Which I guess ought to be expected, considering she found out purely by accident. She insisted on going home and taking some time to think about the whole situation. I wanted to talk, get everything out in the open.

Unfortunately there was nothing I could do to stop her. But thankfully this evening, she’s not alone. Uncle Mike brought over one of his special dinners.”

“I don’t believe it! You blew up the mess tent?” Lois’ belly laugh rang throughout the apartment.

Mike, a big grin on his face, was laughing just as loud. “Yeah well, that’s what happens when attempting to improve a perfectly decent moonshine recipe. Don’t worry! I haven’t bothered with a still since!”

“I should hope not! Aunt Rita would’ve laced into you with both barrels! Daddy never told me that story.”

“Ah, your Dad... he has his faults, but when it comes to *that* kind of fun, he’s a little stiff.”

“Yeah, well I can’t imagine Mother being happy when she discovered her favorite soup pot was full of holes!”

That mischievous twinkle light up his eyes again, “Well now, Aunt Rita got into a scrape or two in her younger days. It’s not common knowledge within the family, but she worked undercover in Moscow during the Cold War. She took lots of dangerous chances – just like you do today.”

Lois took a sip of soothing oolong tea and nearly spilled it when she heard those words. “Aunt Rita?” An image of an energetic, petite red-haired woman came to mind. Someone who was a Den Mother for the local Cub Scout troop and painted scenery for the community theatre group? This same sweet, gentle woman was a spy?

“Yup, that’s how we met. But that’s a story for another time. One of these days, I’ll give you her journals. They’re pretty lively reading.” His voice trailed off to another place and time. A special time and place where Lois could never hope or even consider following. As if to dispel the mood, Mike quickly roused himself from the table and started collecting the dinner dishes. “You did good tonight, nothing was overcooked, and the curtains are fine. Keep it up and pretty soon cooking is gonna be easy.”

“Yeah, right. I can only ‘cook’ when either you or Clark is around.” As soon as his name escaped her lips she regretted it.

“Clark huh?” I’m surprised he’s not here looking after you himself. I have to admit, getting your phone call this afternoon caught me off guard.”

Lois winced internally. How could she discuss her rather unique relationship with Clark to Uncle Mike? Especially since she could never ever reveal the secret about Clark, the one she now shared. Yet, Mike was a perceptive man; he was not blind to the deep friendship between them and must have figured out a particularly thorny problem had recently arisen.

“Ah, we had a difference of opinion.” She said with a sigh.

“Is that how you ended up with your arm in a sling?” Mike asked innocently.

“What? No!” Lois began to get angry. “Clark would *never* hurt me!”

“I *know* that,” her uncle responded with no heat in his voice. He began running hot water into the sink and added soap for the dishes. “But neither can he stop you from taking foolish chances. He wants what is best for you, but you have to quit pushing him away and stop taking unnecessary risks. Sometimes in a relationship, we have to sacrifice some of what we want in order to preserve the whole. Your aunt knew that only too well. She left the service before we got married and never looked back.”

“Taking risks is what I do... it’s how I get the job done. What do you want me to do? Give up working at the Daily Planet?” Lois answered simply.

“No. I’m not saying you gotta go that far! Can you tone down the ‘jumping in the deep end of the pool’ bit for Clark? How important is your relationship with him?”

“Mike’s a good man. If she isn’t with you, family is the next best thing.” Jonathan said quietly.

“Oh, but honey, you two really need to talk. Maybe her finding out is a good thing. With Superman finally out in the open, the relationship you always wanted with her can now become a reality.”

He looked up at his mother, a pained expression stamped on his face, “Can it Mom? Until recently, she fawned over Superman and barely paid any attention to me. How can I be sure it’s me she *really* wants?”

“Son, I have seen the way you are with each other. That can’t be faked. The care and commitment to you is there, she just needs to realize it.”

“Dad, I hope you’re right. She means everything to me.”

“He means everything to me,” she whispered.

“This is no surprise. You’re an investigative reporter. Takin’ chances is all part of the job. Having a real loving relationship is all about takin’ chances. Give it a try, he’s worth it.”

“Are you saying that because of the piece he did on Grace’s shop?” Lois asked suspiciously.

“Nope, I’m saying it because I’ve been watching you two together for a couple of years now and it’s obvious to everyone but you what *his* feelings are. Okay, enough with the lonely hearts stuff.” Mike had finished drying the dishes. He walked over to the settee, picked up his jacket, and prepared to leave. “Now, what time should I come back for your next lesson?”

“How about Monday night, same time?”

“Yeah, that ought to work. Mondays are pretty quiet at the restaurant. Hey, this might make a good item for your paper! ‘Learning how to Cook’ by Lois Lane.”

Lois cringed. “Not on your life, Unc!”

Mike Lane kissed his niece on her cheek, opened the door and let himself out. <Maybe one of these days, I’ll say something to her about my feelings for Grace...>

“Bye honey, make sure Lois gets at least one of those brownies!”

“I’ll hold off eating them as long as I can, Mom.” He chuckled upon seeing the amused look on her face. He bent down to gently hug his mother good-bye. Clark turned and shook his father’s hand, then their son spun into the suit and soared into the late night starry Kansas sky.

The next day at the Daily Planet was ‘quiet’ and uneventful as could be in the newsroom of an internationally known newspaper. Its inhabitants were working hard to complete their assignments for the evening edition. Jimmy, locked in the darkroom, was working on developing shots for Diane’s story about the proposed urban renewal of Suicide Slum by LexCorp. She had taken over the story from Eduardo because the latter had to go to Budapest to cover a political expose. Jack was getting up to speed on some new hacking techniques Jimmy had shown him the previous evening. Even Cat spent all of her time locating juicy tidbits to be included in ‘Cat’s Corner’ and not her upcoming wedding.

Perry was in his office listening to a recording of Elvis’ Hawaii concert, ready to pounce, if anyone was slacking at his or her assignment.

Ralph, as it happened, was the only member of the bullpen’s staff not working on an assignment. He oiled his way over to Clark’s desk, perched his hip on the edge and started probing him with questions.

“So Kent, since your partner isn’t here, why don’t we have a little chat?”

Clark sat at his desk, editing his follow-up article on the earthquake tremors in California last week. He looked around and was acutely aware of Lois’ absence. Right now, he should be leaning over her shoulder editing *her* copy or getting a low-fat mocha latte for her from Java Perk rather than listening to Ralph’s banal comments. She was still healing both physically and mentally. He felt sad about the former and deeply responsible for the latter.

Looking up from his copy the younger man said, “We have nothing to talk about.” To emphasize the conversation was over, Clark turned back to the keyboard.

“Oh, but we do.” The obsequious man responded. “Where did you and the little cutie get that information about the Shackleton hijacking?”

Clark wasn’t sure if it was the ‘cutie’ comment or the ugly tone of Ralph’s voice but his normally mild persona vanished as he stood up, looked down at the shorter man and spoke loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Look Ralph, I don’t know what your game is, but my partner and

I do *not* share our sources with you. Oh and her name is Lois Lane — not ‘cutie’.”

“Okay!” Ralph backed up with his hands flying in the air. “Boy, you are really touchy these days! Must be missing your little playmate!” With that parting shot, he returned to his desk.

The rest of the bullpen staff hurried back to their regular tasks. Most of them were more than happy to pretend the entire scene had not taken place.

Settling back into writing the story, Clark put Ralph out of his mind. Within moments it drifted back to his partner. Lois had mentioned he could come over when Pete officially removed the sling, but that wasn’t until later that week. Clark grudgingly admitted to himself waiting for this particular *get together* was not going to be easy. Suddenly, his ears tingled with the distinct cries for help. Swiftly he departed for the staircase leading to the roof and this latest rescue.

In Perry’s office, the senior editor had taken note of the exchange and determined in his mind to find a way to rid the bullpen of Ralph’s irritating presence.

The emergency rescue, an explosion onboard an Alaskan oil tanker coming into Hobbs Bay, took the remainder of the afternoon and the better part of that night. When Clark arrived on the balcony, the suit was slick with oil, grease and lots of mud. The tremendous physical activity pushed his body to the limit and hence he experienced no small amount of fatigue. Grateful to be home, he carefully removed the messy suit, took a speedy shower and planned on writing up the tanker story after preparing a tuna fish sandwich for dinner. Normally he would prepare something a little more substantial to eat, but tonight he wanted something light. Perry wouldn’t be too happy missing out on such a headline grabbing article.

“Meow?” The famished feline sat by his food dish and looked up at him expectantly.

“Oops! Sorry Pepper, it’s way past your dinnertime.” Clark reached into a cabinet for a box of Whiskers cat food. “I didn’t mean to leave you alone for so long.”

The feline happily dived into his bowl, ignoring Clark’s soothing words as he enjoyed his late meal.

Clark looked down at the little animal and wondered if he should contact Mrs. Harper’s relatives and have them look after him. It was unfair to keep Pepper when his hours were so erratic, although he had grown attached to the friendly cat. As if hearing Clark’s thoughts, Pepper looked up, slinked over to him, and affectionately rubbed against his legs. He knelt down and proceeded to scratch Pepper behind the ears. “Oh, so *now* you want to show me some attention?”

“Meow!” The little animal in his own way was trying to tell Clark how he felt.

“Hmmm, since you’re content with my ‘other’ life, you can stay as long as Mrs. Harper is out of town.”

Pepper responded with a loud, contented purring sound. Then in a surprise move, he happily jumped into Clark’s arms and gently butted him on the head. “Hey!” Clark laughed, “You’re welcome!”

Unexpectedly the phone rang; Clark stepped out of the kitchen alcove, deposited Pepper on the couch, then picked up the receiver.

“Clark... it’s Lois, are you all right?” Her voice was full of concern.

A blossoming sense of delight went through his heart. “Lois! To what do I owe the pleasure of your call?”

“I saw on LNN about the super oil tanker. That was a huge fire!”

“I’m fine. There were several injuries and a few crewmen suffered minor burns. Fortunately between me and the Coast Guard everyone got off the ship safely. With very careful use of my heat vision I was able to keep a large quantity of oil from spilling into Hobbs Bay. Believe me, sealing off an outsized tear below the waterline of a supertanker without igniting the oil *inside* is no easy job!”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Lois responded her mind going into journalist mode. “But the real question, partner, is what caused the opening in the first place?”

“Funny you should mention that. I spoke with some of the crewmembers and they think...” Clark launched enthusiastically into an in-depth conversation with Lois. After several minutes of back and forth speculation on the apparent cause of the freighter’s dilemma, Clark realized the body and texture of his next Daily Planet article was taking shape. He told Lois to hold her thoughts while he grabbed his laptop and started typing up the first draft.

Within a very short time, between her input and his perfect recall of the rescue and discussions with the crewmembers, Clark completed the story and sent it to Perry’s inbox.

“The chief should be happy, that article will be ready for the morning edition. The only thing missing is a great set of pix from Jimmy. Oh, the byline will read Clark Kent and Lois Lane.”

“What, you don’t have to do that, we were just talking!” Lois said.

“After your comment yesterday, maybe it is *your* turn to edit my copy for a change! Another reason why our partnership works, Miss Lane,” he teased.

“Ha! That definitely explains how all the exclusive Superman stories fell into the lap of a certain mild-mannered reporter. I wish I had known that before...” suddenly Lois’ voice got quiet and small.

“Hey, are you all right?” Clark asked anxiously.

“Yeah,” she was silent for a moment, then spoke, a catch in her voice. “Remember the crane accident on Nordell Street a week or so ago?”

“Sure. A very close save, the crane could have killed dozens of workers and bystanders. What about it?”

“You came back from the rescue with *another* Superman exclusive. It really got my competitiveness going full tilt. Despite my apology and everything, I made plans that day to break into LexSolar and find out the whereabouts of those crystals!”

“Oh, Lois!” He groaned, shaking his head.

“Yes, and now all I have to show for my efforts is a bunch of ink stained papers, a near brush with the police, what will be an interesting scar on my arm that I can never tell the truth about and... and straining my friendship with you.” Her babble ended with a sob.

Alarmed, Clark wanted to rush over to her home, but first he spoke, very slowly. “Lois, it’s okay. Let me come over... if you want me to?”

If it were not for his super-hearing, Clark would not have heard the tiny voice on the other end say, “Yes.”

Within seconds, he floated through her window and landed gently on the floor next to one of the cream-colored settees. Lois lay on the uncomfortable piece of furniture, wearing black baggy sweatpants and a green flannel shirt he recognized as his own and black baggy sweat pants. Her head was down, shoulders shaking, crying on a pillow; the phone lay forgotten on the floor.

Clark knelt down beside her, putting his hand on trembling shoulders. The Man of Steel spoke most tenderly, “Lois, look up, it’s me.”

Lifting her head, the brunette’s luscious hair was tousled around her face. Tracks of tears stained flushed cheeks. He cupped the beloved face in his hand, then pulled her still trembling body toward him and enfolded her within strong supportive arms. The couple sat together, he giving comfort, succor, and she accepting it without resistance.

After a few moments, Clark pulled away from their embrace, pushed her hair back and asked, “How about I make us some tea?”

“I... I ran out,” she whispered.

Clark smiled and held up a bag. “Remember, I used to be a boy scout. Besides I promised Mom you could have at least one of her special brownies.”

She attempted a wan smile herself to lighten the mood. “‘Used to be’, Farmboy?”

“Let me change out of the suit, then we can have two steaming cups of oolong tea.”

A few moments later, Clark, wearing jeans and a grey tee shirt, sat across from Lois, the two friends sipping the delicate liquid and

savoring its gentle aroma. On her coffee table was a plate with brownies. They were enjoying this quiet time. The previous intensely emotional moments had drained them both, and they needed to regroup and discover new aspects of their relationship.

"I... I want you to know, crying jags is not who I am."

"It's okay, Lois. If you need to cry I'm here."

"Oh Clark," Lois whispered wiping her face on a wet sleeve and feeling contrite. "Maybe I should have listened to you and not broken into *that place* alone, look at all the trouble it's caused."

"That's putting it mildly," he quickly agreed.

"I mean, if you were with me using your super powers none of *this*..." She pointed to her sling and sighed. "This whole fiasco might not have happened."

Clark looked up from his cup in alarm. "Lois, my powers are not to be used to help with break-ins or any other corporate espionage! That is totally against what I... what Superman stands for."

All of a sudden the helpless woman, he had cradled in his arms scant moments ago was gone, replaced by the stubborn reporter. "Hey, if it hadn't been for me, that globe thingamajig of yours would still be in the possession of Bureau 39. Come on, deny that!"

Clark stared at the woman before him, suddenly all flame and passion, ready to take on anyone who got in the way of a story. He was angry with her for taking such a risk at the LexSolar facility, but Lois was also right concerning the globe. Without her drive and enthusiasm, he would still be thinking of himself as a Russian science experiment gone terribly wrong.

"All right Lois, I will give you that much, but just like with our first encounter with Bureau 39, Perry will refuse to print the story without proof. Don't you get it? Those papers were acquired *illegally*. If the information within suddenly appears as a front page story, Luthor and his deep-pocket lawyers will be all over the Daily Planet in general and you in particular. Neither Luthor nor his lawyers will stop until they get the truth as to how that information was obtained. What will you do then?"

"I have a reputation of protecting my sources!" She responded stubbornly.

"Some judge might make you a test case. Are you ready to go to jail?" He responded in kind.

"Yes!" She snapped, determined not to lose this argument.

Clark sat back, momentarily, defeated then spoke again in softened tones, "How can our relationship develop, if the person I care the most about in the universe is in prison? We just found each other, Lois, don't tear us apart."

Taken aback, she was speechless for a moment, tried to find her voice, then fell silent. She thought a moment then tried again. "There is so much for us to talk about. I don't know where we should begin. I do know I have feelings for you, Clark, strong feelings. Not a week has gone by that I didn't think about how we could be if we took a step towards being more than work partners. But the awful risks loom in front of me. What if the relationship fails? You and I work too hard and talk about all the other things in our lives except for the most important... each other."

"We are here together now. Let's talk."

"All right then — Superman. I want you to tell me *everything* about 'him'. How and why he came about. Who made the suit and why didn't you tell me about this other side of yourself?"

Clark's eyes narrowed. "I thought we were going to talk about us?"

Exasperated Lois wrapped her good arm around drawn up knees and shot back, "There is no 'us' until I understand about him!"

In the Luthor Industrial Park, the lights at LexSolar offices were burning brightly. Many of the assistants were still cataloging their files in order to ascertain if anything had gone missing during the break-in. In Dr. Frederick Scott's office, two men were closing out their final tasks of that evening.

"Okay, Dr. Scott, that should take care of the hard drive."

"What about the server, Tobin? Is there any way one of you techno geeks in IT can access that data? This is pretty sensitive stuff we're designing. I don't want to read about it on somebody's website."

Working very hard to mask his annoyance, the IT manager responded as neutrally as possible. "No sir. Like I said, all the files in that folder were cleaned off the hard drive and destroyed." Levi Tobin slowly packed up his instruments. He desperately wanted to get out of Scott's office; the scientist had made the last thirty minutes feel like thirty hours, with his condescending attitude, demands and questions.

"If there are any further problems, put in a work ticket and one of my guys will be happy to help."

"No. I don't want anyone but *you* handling this computer, Tobin!"

"Sorry, I'll be on vacation after today...uh, this evening's work. We are leaving for two weeks. You know, taking the family to the shore.

"I don't care where your family goes! What about my computer?"

Tobin, at this point, fed up with Scott's rudeness, was about to say something he knew he would regret later. He hit on an idea. "Dr. Scott, my assistant is perfectly capable of handling this machine with complete confidentiality. He's worked on Lex Luthor's personal computer several times in the past. I can have him call you tomorrow."

"Great." Scott grumbled as Levi closed the door to the recalcitrant scientist's office. "I have to break in another guy."

Levi Tobin shook his head sadly. He hated doing this to the man, but at least Radames knew how to deal with jackasses like Scott.

Sitting on Lois' unyielding couches, the couple had talked on for hours. There was a great deal to explore about each other. Finally, after covering so much ground, Lois decided it was time to bring a painful part of their history out in the open.

"Clark, I know keeping the secret was meant to protect me and your parents, but you did lie to me and it hurt. But the worst lie of all came when Clyde Barrows shot you."

She studied his face carefully and watched the pain and sadness of that horrible night sluice across his entire body as if the gangster bullets had stuck anew.

"You laid there on the floor of tha... that speakeasy and pretended to be dead. My *world* fell apart. I felt as if the gunman's bullets had struck me in the chest as well." Lois felt the tears glisten in her eyes; she sniffled gently then reached for a tissue. "That was the worst night of my life." Her voice sounded odd and distant in her ears.

"It was the worst night of my life as well. What could I do? The place was full of people who saw Barrow shoot me at point blank range. Everything I had worked so hard for vanished in a second! What kind of lame explanation could I come up with to explain surviving a gunshot wound?"

"You could have found a way to get in touch with me! We could have worked it out together!" She pleaded in a hoarse whisper.

"Lois, I made several mistakes that night. The biggest was not coming to you and explaining the whole truth about Superman." He shook his head and continued. "When Barrow dumped my body, all I could think about was you."

At hearing the word 'dumped', Lois self-controlled evaporated like the morning dew. "Oh Clark, I thought you were dead!" she cried out.

Lois felt the air currents shift as Clark raced to her side on the couch and gathered her small frame into his arms.

"I never wanted to hurt you. Please forgive me. I could stand losing everything, Metropolis, the Daily Planet, all of it... but not you. Lois, being in this friendship — no relationship, defines me better as a citizen of Planet Earth. I want to build 'forever' with you. To stay on the road we are travelling as loving companions and more. Without my best friend and partner, nothing else matters. I flew home to Mom and Dad. They said I could still see everyone — as Superman. However, that's less than half my life. Perry was so kind to my folks, he called while I was there to 'break the news'."

"The kindness Perry showed your parents? What about the

kindness people needed to show me? Clark, I felt like a widow and I wasn't even a wife!"

The import of Lois words hit him with the force of a thunderclap. He took her sweet face into his hands and spoke with all the passion his heart possessed.

"Honey...listen carefully to me. I promise from this day forward never to let anything or anyone get between us again. Nothing and no one will ever stop me from being by your side except death itself."

Lois' eyes grew large with understanding. Slowly, her heartbeat changed from excited thumping to its normal steady rhythm. "Relationships are a serious commitment." It was a statement, nothing more.

He took her small hand and laid it on his chest. "Lois, I am ready for a serious committed relationship. The question is... are you?"

She did not answer, only repositioned herself on the couch to lay her head down on Clark's broad chest. The sound of his heartbeat was a soothing balm to her soul. They lay together, intimately sharing something far stronger than friendship, but not as committed as marriage. Finally, just as it seemed they might spend the rest of the night together on her terribly uncomfortable couch she spoke.

"I have another question," she asked in a small voice.

"Name it."

"Where did the idea for the Superman suit come from?"

"Remember when I messed up my business suit after rescuing that sanitation worker? You suggested I bring a change of clothes with me to work."

Lois raised her head and squeaked, "I don't believe it! You got the idea for the Superman suit from *me*?"

"Exactly, a change of clothes *and* personality, so I can appear at rescues without anyone discovering my true identity. I've been doing rescues for years in secrecy and not a little fear. Saving the space station's colonists was just the beginning of Superman's career."

"Well, one thing is for sure, nobody looks at your face," Lois snickered with a wicked gleam dancing in her eyes.

Clark's face felt hot for a brief moment. "That was my Mom's thought as well. Hide behind a brightly hued, spandex-clad character to protect Clark Kent and those close to me. It was yet another way to hide my abilities... a talent I have been perfecting for years."

Lois chuckled for a little bit, than looked very carefully at her partner. She noticed how rapidly his face had gotten serious with a hint of sadness. "It must have been lonely hiding such amazing powers from everyone. Always being cautious of what people might think. Never allowing yourself to get close to anyone. You are a considerate person, Clark. Hiding such empathy and compassion behind a pair of glasses must have been very difficult... and painful." This last sentence she spoke softly, as if whispering some long-forgotten secret.

"Yes, but I always had Mom, Dad, to a lesser extent Pete Ross and now... you." He moved closer to her on the settee, took her right hand and caressed it tenderly. "Lois, all the adventures, crazy mishaps and newspaper articles we have written together were leading us to this moment. We don't have to get engaged tomorrow, all I'm asking is to give us a chance to know each other without me hiding behind the cape."

She tumbled heart long into those beautiful chocolate eyes, squeezed his hand, and heard herself saying. "Yes."

Part Fourteen

Clark whistled the tune "At Last" while knotting his tie, one of Lois' favorites: a wide one, with several colorful planets swirling on a black background. He went over in his mind again about the all night conversation he and his lovely partner had concerning Superman and each other. Sometimes Lois got angry thinking how he had kept her in the dark for years. She mentioned it was logical, even thoughtful, but she was still miffed.

At that instance, Clark was sure Lois might have cheerfully shot him. However, after settling down, she realized it was better to have a live partner with all his secrets revealed than a dead one.

He had reluctantly departed from her only minutes before dawn,

and despite being up all night, Clark was happy to begin a new day and a new chapter in his life. He continued whistling while preparing a raspberry banana smoothie for himself and then pouring a little fresh food into Pepper's bowl.

Mentally Clark went through a list of important things to do today. One, order flowers from the local florist and have them delivered to Lois' place. His mouth spread into a wide grin imaging the look on her face when the perfumed scent of tulips gently wafted to her nose. Two, pick-up some oolong tea for himself and a pound of breakfast blend coffee from the Java Perk. When she arrived at the Planet tomorrow, he intended to give the coffee to her as a welcome back to work present.

His mind was blissfully humming with plans for the future, involving a certain beautiful brown-haired woman with exotic eyes, with whom he wanted to share the rest of his life. Clark would no longer need to hide behind ridiculous stories and false excuses when he suddenly disappeared for rescues. Lois' knowledge about his Kryptonian heritage was no longer a barrier to their maturing relationship.

Jor-El and Lara's only son Kal-El could truly be a man of planet Earth. He began whistling again as his hands glided over the heavy wooden railing and walked up the three stairs to the front door landing.

"This is going to be a fantastic day! I'm in love with my partner and she knows my secret!"

It was all Clark could do to keep from floating as he exited the apartment.

Aykira stepped briskly into her office at 6:30 am on a crisp late spring morning. The air around her filled with the quiet swishing sound of her heavy quilted silk red jacket over a cream colored scoop-necked blouse with matching pants. True, she was here earlier than usual, but she wanted to go over a few items with Lex before the business of the day grew heavy with meetings, numerous conference calls and the inevitable deadlines.

The administrative assistant called up to Lex's office and listened patiently as the phone continued ringing. Annoyed, she decided to give him a few minutes. <He probably has 'company' and doesn't wish to be disturbed.> She put all thoughts of her boss aside and began working on materials for the Suicide Slum restoration. It was a pet project of hers: one that might take years to complete, but the results would benefit everyone in Metropolis. She sighed; hopefully, someone else would pick up where eventually she must leave off.

A few more minutes passed and she decided to call again, this time on his personal cell phone. The results were the same. Lex did not pick up. Outside her office, Aykira could hear Jane bustling about with her morning routine. She glanced down at the Rolex watch Lex had given her, it read 8:00.

Normally any overnight 'guests' were escorted out of his apartment by now; he should be in the office.

Determined to meet with her boss, Aykira gathered the Suicide Slum diskettes and materials into travel folders and then into her organizer. Some people might have thought her actions obsessive, but diskettes were sensitive devices; best to err on the side of caution. She exited her office suite and told Jane where she was going. "I don't expect to be longer than forty-five minutes. Mr. Luthor and I are having a standard morning meeting."

"Okay. See you around 9:00?"

Aykira nodded in agreement, than departed for the stairs leading to Lex's 'lair'.

As she was about to knock on the heavy oak door, when she heard what sounded like a body hitting the floor and a deep groan of pain.

"Oh my... Lex!" She burst open the door and saw Lex Luthor struggling to get up from the floor. Racing to his side Aykira tried to help him up. "Are you all right?"

Lex, although visibly shaken, tried to downplay the incident. "I was fine, until a minute ago. Another one of my stress headaches

suddenly flared up and I tripped on the coffee table leg. It's was quite clumsy of me, really. Please Ms. Milan, don't concern yourself." He looked at her with those quiet obsidian eyes, which still held traces of pain.

"Lex, I need you to be honest with me," Aykira said forcefully. "Something is physically wrong! Why insist on hiding it? I wish only to help..."

"Ms. Milan, there is nothing *wrong* with me." His voice had risen slightly and had an ugly edge. "Now, what did you come here for?"

"Remember our meeting this morning? You wanted to discuss the long-range cost and material projections for the restoration of Suicide Slum." Reluctantly, she slipped into the familiar role of administrative assistant and sat down with him to begin their meeting.

<He is experiencing headaches, slight hand tremors, and now sudden dizziness. I do not like where this is headed,> she thought, while watching him struggle to hold the papers with trembling hands. When the meeting was concluded, Aykira gathered up all the materials and put them away, except for one diskette still lying on Lex's desk.

"I need to pack up that final diskette, Mr. Luthor."

"Of course..." He tried to pick up the item, but his hands were trembling so badly the task was impossible.

"Allow me," Aykira said, in one smooth movement she had the diskette in its travel folder. She made it a point not to look at him, but it was too late.

"You need not regard me with pity!" He snapped. "My hands are working perfectly."

"No Lex, they are not. Stop trying to conceal the obvious!" She responded heatedly, tired of the game he insisted upon playing.

"When I need your expert *medical* opinion, I shall ask for it. Until then, stick to doing what I pay you to do!"

Something inside Aykira twisted. She had fought hard to keep the frustration and resentment from boiling over, but failed miserably.

"For once in your life, Lex, allow a person to help! It is not a sign of human weakness if someone gets close!" She snapped. "If anything, it is a clear indicator humanity has not departed from you altogether!"

"As I mentioned to you previously, *nothing* is wrong!" He roared back.

"Right." Her voice lowered in volume, but it rang like forged steel. "Then if nothing is wrong, you won't mind if I take a few days vacation?"

"What? Impossible! You cannot leave now!" He said, shocked at her words.

"I believe I can. If my services are still required, please contact me at home. Good day, Mr. Luthor!" Aykira placed the bulky organizer under her arm and walked briskly out of the room. Instead of closing the door quietly, as was her custom, she slammed it with all her might.

The silence in Lex's office was deafening after the resounding bang from his assistant's departure. He stared darkly at the door astounded at the sheer audacity of her behavior. "That woman!" He sputtered in anger. "How dare she leave in the middle of an argument?" He stood up slowly, the effects of this latest seizure swiftly passing. With some effort, he walked toward the terrace doors, opened them, and stepped into the morning sunshine. This morning, thankfully, the light only slightly bothered his eyes.

He thought back over their first meeting, her job interview and how she was never apprehensive with his wealth and prestige. Upon gaining the position, she had worked hard to make the job her own. Aykira cared about accomplishing her duties in the most efficient, yet productive manner possible. He had come to rely on her judgment heavily for so many things. It was almost as if she were a complement of him.

<She means so much more to me than being an assistant. Why do I keep pushing her away? I need to get her back here immediately. Who else can I trust to help me run LexCorp – and be my friend?>

He would speak to her after his appointment with Dr. Kassaten.

"Jane. I will be out of the office for a few days...on vacation."

Her assistant noticed the flush look on Aykira's face and realized her boss had had another fight with Mr. Luthor. Wisely, she chose to say nothing.

"All right. Do y'all want me to forward any important messages to your home?"

"I think not. It is a working vacation...only Mr. Luthor will be able to contact me." Jane's ears did not miss the hard edge in Aykira's voice. There was more to such a tone than a mere business disagreement. Her ears perked up when she heard Aykira's tone soften and say. "Do not worry, Jane, I am not going anywhere. You know how changeable he can be. Try and hold the fort down!" Visibly relieved, Jane smiled and promised to look after things.

Hurriedly Aykira entered her office and sent off a number of e-mails to different members of her staff, informing them of her decision to take a brief vacation. Considering Lex's behavior for the past week or so, returning to this office suite might not happen, but she wanted to cover all possible angles.

Her last e-mail was sent to Radames. Just to be on the safe side, she asked him to contact her at home if he located the particular computer item she had requested earlier that week. She checked the time... 9:22am. Lex had not followed her or sent an e-mail. <Good! He is probably cooling off as well.>

The administrative assistant stood up, filled her briefcase with personal paperwork, grabbed her purse and departed from the beautifully decorated office suite. Her heart gave a little lurch of apprehension. She hoped this would not be the last time she closed the door.

It was nearly 9:30 when Lois left from Uncle Mike's restaurant, Café Americana. After Clark flew out her window early that morning, she was restless and too excited for sleep.

How would they treat each other in the newsroom? Now work and the assignments they shared held a deeper promise of greater adventures to come.

Slowly Lois began cleaning up the cups, dishes and plates from the last night's conversation. It was difficult working with one arm hung in a sling. Once done, she experienced a happy sense of accomplishment, but now she wanted coffee. There was only one place close by and at this early morning hour where she could get a decent low-fat mocha latte, Uncle Mike's Café Americana.

Lois took a quick invigorating shower and departed for the restaurant. In a very short time she found herself perched on a comfortable chair observing the cooks and wait staff preparing for the early morning breakfast crowd.

Presiding happily over the frothing energy of his kitchen, Mike Lane bustled over to his niece holding a steaming mocha latte and a brioche, warm and fluffy, fresh from the oven. She gratefully accepted the plate and cup, eyeing their contents hungrily. She took a sip, savoring the experience of the warm, delicious liquid smoothly flowing down her throat. As she tasted the brioche she said, "Yummy, sheer perfection!" Her mouth curved into a wickedly happy smile. Thank you. If you keep this up, I'm going to have to learn how to bake!"

"Okay, next week's cooking lesson is brioche 101."

"Oh come on Uncle Mike. Are you serious? I am a disaster in the kitchen... zero talent."

"Look, pumpkin, cooking is a survival skill. Besides my suggestion still stands; tell Perry it's for a new article."

Lois stared at her uncle then rolled her eyes. "He'll never buy it!"

Mike smiled and lowered his voice. "Then cook for Clark."

Lois' face blushed a light shade of crimson, took another bite of the brioche, smiled in rapacious pleasure, then murmured, "Okay."

"What?" The older man stared in disbelief then smiled knowingly. He gave his favorite niece a hug then walked toward one of the stoves

to inspect the cinnamon raisin muffins.

Shortly thereafter, despite the caffeine and hectic surroundings of the kitchen, Lois finally grew sleepy enough to want to go home. With a happy smile and a barely muffled yawn, she bide her uncle good-bye. Mike handed her a bag containing baked goods and a grilled chicken salad for later. Slowly, in a contented mood, she made her way home and despite the sling, slept sounder than she had in weeks.

Late morning found Cat Grant sitting at a sidewalk table outside the Java Perk. The gossip columnist ignored throngs of customers knocking back paper cups of expensive lattes and espressos, while she happily sipped citrus-flavored vitamin water. Sure, she was breaking the rules not coming into the office on time, but today's column was written and George had a rare free morning. So what if her fiancé was just a little late... the Daily Planet could wait.

Cat was anxious to show George the wedding invitation responses. She looked over the names; Perry and Alice White, Jimmy Olsen, Clark Kent coming on his own. He would probably ask Lois Lane to accompany him. The handsome reporter showing up without his partner or worse yet, with another woman, was unthinkable. Besides, Clark would probably not attend if Lois had been left off the guest list. Cat could just imagine Clark ignoring the invitation and taking his partner on a night on the town, to prevent her from feeling left out. They grew real men of genteel qualities in the Midwest.

She was surprised at herself for inviting the prickly female reporter. Happily, they had reached an unspoken truce of sorts since Cat's engagement.

<Oh well.> she smiled mentally. <Only six more weeks until her name was officially changed to Cat Grant-Amundsen.>

There had been a number of changes already in her life. Since accepting George's proposal, she had focused on creating the 'perfect' wedding. Originally, Cat envisioned an over-the-top celebrity studded event — one to rival the White Orchid Ball. Her previous marriage started in a tacky wedding chapel in Las Vegas. The faded wallpaper depicted Victorian scenes of Cupid shooting arrows at hapless victims. Cat shuddered whenever she saw any pictures of the mythical creature. She also remembered that the ugly cramped room smelled of stale perfume and old cigar smoke. This time the nuptials would be elegant and classy.

Blissfully happy, Cat plunged into the time-honored tasks of planning a wedding. Soon she began making arrangements for a ceremony and reception venue, flowers, catering and shopping for her one-of-a-kind designer gown. She was giddy with the idea of experiencing 'her' triumphant day...with George of course!

Unfortunately, reality came crashing down on the gossip columnist. Between the cost of such an event and her fiancé's insistence on a meaningful occasion, Cat had to pull in her claws. Now with time getting closer, she anxiously wanted the occasion to be over and move on with their new intermingled lives... in Seattle.

Cat had already managed to get a job with the Sentinel, a sister publication to the Planet, as an art reporter for the weekend section of the paper. Naturally, it was not a plum job like gossip columnist, but Cat was not concerned. She wanted the position only as income to pay for her tuition. Catherine Grant was going back to school to finish getting her degree in European art history.

"Hey, Ms. Grant, hot out of the oven, just for you, a 'whispering eye' muffin."

"Oh Jason... I'm such a bad girl! The *last thing* my hips need is one of your dangerous blueberry muffins!"

Jason Cavatini shrugged his slim shoulders. The owner and chief baker of the Java Perk always awarded a distinctive and nonsensical name to one favored muffin each week. It was his coffee shop's trademark, a distinctive way to allow the flavored breads to stand out. "Yeah well, in Seattle there are no 'whispering eyes'. Bon Appétit!" He winked and hurried back to the kitchen.

Cat smiled after him. Java Perk represented one of many things she would miss about Metropolis, but there were always new places to

explore and people to meet.

"Hey Red!" A familiar voice broke into her train of thought.

"Hey yourself, handsome!" She answered with her trademark purr.

Sitting down with a steaming cup of Earl Grey tea, George chatted amicably with his fiancée, happy to talk about their upcoming nuptials and avoid conversation about work. Earlier that week Cat had asked him about the break-in at LexSolar, and George honestly told her the matter could not be discussed with anyone outside of work.

Cat was not pleased to hear it, but respected his request; taking unfair advantage of their personal relationship for her column was the wrong way to begin a marriage.

They continued talking until George fell silent and his eyes intently followed something or someone outside the shop.

"Babe, what's wrong?" Cat asked, following his gaze.

"Across the street," he pointed his chin toward Aykira. "Lex Luthor's personal assistant and some-time media liaison. She looks to be in a hurry." From the tone of his voice, Cat detected a mild undercurrent of concern directed at the other woman. It took all her self-control not to ask any questions. After all, Aykira was part of LexCorp and that was all part of work. No reason to get themselves bent out of shape over matters which were out of their hands. She took the scientist's face in her hands and spoke decisively.

"Earth to George. Come in George! We have seating arrangements for the reception to discuss, remember?"

"Oh... oh yes, you are so right, Red. Looking at Ms. Milan reminds me of all the reasons I want to leave LexSolar behind. Seattle and my new job at the University, working on my book and most of all building a life with you are far more enjoyable prospects. Now, where were we?"

"You got the position!?" Cat squeaked, and threw her arms around George's neck.

"Yes indeed!" he said modestly. "I set my own schedule, so work on the book will finally get some decent attention."

They talked about the future, split the wickedly delicious muffin, and simply enjoyed the pleasure of each other's company.

Aykira had decided to walk home from LexCorp. She desperately needed to clear her head after the terrible clash with Lex. Such deep emotional outbursts were unpleasant and tended to drain her mentally. This was the second time in two weeks she had threatened to quit. Perhaps this time the billionaire would take the threat seriously and fire her.

As tired feet propelled her homeward, Aykira suddenly felt the familiar, yet totally unexpected warmth on her right index finger. She looked down and noticed that the symbols on the ring glowed a faint blue color. Excited, she stopped walking and stepped into the street and began waving her arms frantically to hail down a cab. She needed to return home as soon as possible.

A Metrocab pulled up beside her. She opened the heavy car door and threw her body into the back seat she spoke breathlessly to the driver. "Please take me to the Lucerne condo building on Fortitude Terrace. The tip will be generous."

"The man's bland face split into a grin. "Done! Hold on!"

The vehicle lurched forward, its engines roaring. Aykira stomach flipped not once but twice. <Oh, no.> She thought, <Perhaps I should have offered him more to be careful!>

As good as his word, the driver pulled in front of the salmon-colored art deco designed building in under fifteen minutes. The dark woman handed over a twenty dollar bill for a five dollar fare. "Keep the change." she announced while exiting the vehicle.

"Thank you ma'am!" The driver gave a genuine salute and drove off. Aykira ran into the lobby and upon reaching the elevator instrument panel her thumb pressed hard on the up button. Her right index finger still tingled with the insistent warmth from the ring. <I don't dare miss this contact.> The high-speed elevator car arrived at the lobby, disgorging several passengers. Once inside, the car, impatiently she tapped her foot, readjusted her briefcase strap and

blew out a sharp breath. <Move it, you misbegotten piece of engineering!>

Within moments the elevator stopped on the eighth floor and the impatient woman hurried off, keys in hand and high heels digging into the foyer's thick carpet. She opened the door and stepped inside the spacious three-bedroom condo. Her movements were automatic, even absent-minded as the briefcase and purse were laid on the entry hall table and the keys tossed into a brown and black woven willow basket she had purchased some time ago in Brazil.

With rushed movements, she entered the study, which was tastefully decorated in soothing cream and sage green hues. The simple modern writing table had a black top. She removed a pencil holder, pencil sharpener and a small calendar. Lifting the edge of the desk until it stood erect and clicked into place, it had the appearance of a flat screen monitor. She removed the ring which by this time had ceased glowing, and touched it to the upper right hand corner of the monitor. The etchings on the side of the ring matched small indentations worked into the monitor; they dovetailed nicely.

The screen went from black to grey, then the hazy outline of a man's face appeared. Sounds like a voice calling from an immense distance reached her ears. A moment or two passed, and then suddenly the long serious face of a man in his late forties or early fifties wearing stylish horn rimmed glasses appeared. Aykira beamed happily at Dr. Bernard Klein, her long-time friend and partner in her plot to locate the Harmonic Crystals. His image filled the screen.

"Bern!" She breathed with a mixture of delight and relief. "It is very good to 'see' you this day." She collected herself and inquired. "Is all well? This is outside of our monthly update. But I am glad you contacted me. There is positive news, I am closing in on the person at LexSolar who should lead me to the crystals. Mr. Luthor stole them to further his ambitions of putting his own space station into orbit. By identifying his subordinate, it should be a simple matter of extracting the whereabouts of the crystals from him. It might be dangerous, but after all I have been through, this challenge is minor."

The scientist looked at Aykira with sad grey eyes. His long face only made the expression all the more somber. He started to speak thought better of it, sighed and started to speak again. "We knew your foray into this alternate universe and world was a tremendous gamble and would take time. We are very patient. But..."

Alarm crept into Aykira's voice. "Bern, did you contact me about Alexander? Is he well? The last time we spoke you assured me the neural treatments had slowed down his brain tumor's growth, correct? I thought there was more time..."

The scientist smoothed down his black tie in a nervous gesture, then ran his fingers through thinning brownish gray hair. "No... no, his condition has stabilized, the medicine is doing its job, in fact, and the tumor's growth has slowed considerably. His doctors are very pleased."

Breathing a sigh of relief and closing her eyes, Aykira gratefully murmured thanks. "Then what is it Bern? Forgive me my friend, but are you all right?"

"I am well, Aykira. I am contacting you to tell you news..."

Outside of Bern's office, happy voices could be heard; shouts of congratulations.

"What is the occasion? It sounds like a full blown party has erupted over there. I wish I could be there... with Alexander." She said wistfully.

Looking extremely uncomfortable, Bern spoke, his words forlorn. "He's the one I wanted to tell you about. His medical condition has improved so dramatically he decided to..."

The conversation was interrupted by an insistent knock at the door. Bern turned his back on Aykira and shouted, "Come back later." But whoever was on the other side refused to listen and the door swung open. A smiling tall handsome man with black curly hair and obsidian eyes entered the room; he wore a crisp white shirt and relaxed cut blue jeans. Aykira's mouth spread into a wide grin. She was about to shout a greeting at the handsome man over the link. Suddenly a petite blonde

haired, green-eyed woman raced into the room and following the tall man, slipped her hand into his.

"Bern, you really must tell this person to contact you later. The entire lab staff is throwing us an impromptu party! The only person not here from your original team is Aykira. She must really like the land of ice and snow." The blonde woman said without looking at the monitor. "Surely whatever conference this is can wait a half hour?"

"Yes, come join us," the tall man said placing a hand on Bern's shoulder. "It is not every day that a confirmed bachelor such as myself proposes to the woman of his dreams."

"I was absolutely thrilled! Imagine me... Mrs. Lex Luthor!" The blonde woman extended her left hand to show Bern a sparkling diamond.

A strangled cry of shock escaped her throat and Aykira nearly severed the link with her world. Before the happy couple realized who their fellow scientist was talking to Bernard Klein hastily shooed them out of his office. He provided the excuse that the call was both highly important and confidential. Once the office door was closed and locked, he returned to the monitor and a saddened Aykira. "Please accept my deepest apologies. I wanted to tell you myself that Alexander... Lex... is marrying Toni Baines. You have a right to know immediately, not upon returning from this mission.

Aykira fought hard to control her devastation. Such feelings must be expressed later in private. "Bern, why didn't you tell me he was seeing her?"

"At the time, I thought he was just grateful to be recovering and she was merely a distraction. Besides, you were – different — then."

"I have spent so many years in an alternate Earth waiting for the crystals to be invented, terrified of discovery at any time. Working for someone who looks exactly like Alexander, but is *not* him. All of my sacrifice and Antoinette just twists him around her finger?" She wanted to cry, but fought hard to control herself. There was more at stake than saving Alexander's life. The crystals were desperately needed as an energy source for her world.

Bern's face displayed great sadness. He placed a hand on the monitor, attempting to reach out and comfort his friend. "Aykira, I wish you had revealed your feelings for him."

"Ah yes, my silence has damned me. Bern, remember how Alexander was when he first heard the diagnosis? He was angry and in shock, if I had told him then about my feelings he would have thought I was doing it out of pity. Not love. Time, it seems, is always my enemy. Besides, at the time, my appearance was not the most desirable." She sighed, fought back more tears, not wishing to waste precious moments of tenuous contact with her own world on such a private matter. She steered the conversation in a completely different direction.

"So, my friend, how stands the energy crisis on our world?"

Bern replied, eager to move past the emotional upheaval. "As you know improper maintenance and old age has led to a large number of horrible accidents. Extensive drilling for natural gas reserves has been stepped up. Wind power has been used to great effect, but it is not nearly enough. Even offshore oil drilling is greater than before. But all this is only weakening the planet's resources. Harmonic Crystals technology is the key to mankind's future."

He continued, "We are of course addressing the use of solar panels as well, but they work best with the crystals. The research into re-discovering the crystals continues but it is a very slow process."

She nodded to herself, all had been heard before, the crystals were the key to everything. She asked, "No one besides yourself and Alexander know I am here?"

"As per our initial decision. We don't want to build any false hopes. The very fact of Alt-Earth's discovery of the crystals validates our transporting you there despite the council's orders against it. Only six months have passed here since your departure. The cover story of you working in a solar energy research station in the Alaskan wilderness is holding up quite nicely."

"Which again validates my reasoning for being the one to cross the

dimensional frontier – I am not someone vital enough to be missed. Still it has been six months on your side, Bern, yet six long challenging *years* for me. It is fortunate the people of our Earth have such long life spans. Physically, I have only aged three years. Let us just hope no one from the council requests my presence anytime soon.”

“The scientist looked very uncomfortable. Aykira, it was my fault. That miscalculation was the most costly scientific mistake I have ever made, but you have paid the price.”

“In more ways than you can imagine...,” she said bitterly.

Bern’s features molded into a desperate pleading appearance. “Come home. Let me take your place and finish the mission.”

“No.” She whispered with a watery smile. “The gesture is more gallant than practical. I have everything in place here. As I mentioned earlier, discovering the identity of Lex — Mr. Luthor’s confederates will lead me to the crystals. You would have to start at zero. Besides,” she sighed sadly. “There is no reason to rush home now.”

It was close to six o’clock that evening as Lex strode confidently into the Kepler Neurological Center lobby and announced his name to the receptionist. The older woman’s mouth shaped into a counterfeit smile and told the billionaire to go straight upstairs. “Dr. Kassaten is expecting you, sir,” she said crisply.

It took only a few moments for him to arrive at the doctor’s office suite. Lex cast a critical eye over the bland office décor and faded couch with sags in places used for seating patients. He thought brusquely. <Considering the cost of this doctor’s visit the man should invest some capital into making the room more accommodating to his patients.>

A nurse, one with a more compassionate manner, escorted him into the examining room and told him Dr. Kassaten would be there shortly. Lex looked around the room. A number of diplomas from different universities were on the wall and an impressive hand drawn ink depiction of the human brain was on the right side of the diplomas. There was a long examining table, two uncomfortable looking gray plastic chairs, but not much else to recommend the room. <I will contact Candace and ask her to give this place a design makeover. She can forward all the expenses to me.>

Lex thoughts were broken when a slight, bookish looking man wearing a white lab coat entered the sterile examination room. Dr. Kassaten’s clinical, even cold demeanor always reminded him of an owl about to attack a frightened mouse. Still he was not paying the highly trained and talented neurosurgeon for his personality. All Lex cared about was results and currently he hoped they were negative ones.

“Thank you for seeing me with on such short notice this evening, Dr. Kassaten.”

“Not a problem, Mr. Luthor. It is understandable; the anxiety of waiting on test results is easier said than done. Your personal physician, Dr. Baxter, forwarded the scans here. He wanted my expert diagnosis.”

“Yes, even though he is the best general practitioner in Metropolis, neurology is not his forte.” Lex drew a deep breath and said, “Doctor, as you can imagine I am a busy man. What... what were the test’s results?”

“The MRI scans we performed last week yielded an outcome that is conclusive Mr. Luthor. I am sorry to inform you that your brain has an astrocytoma. There are many types; unfortunately, yours is a glioblastoma, a type which is highly aggressive and remarkably difficult to treat. Without radical surgery, the chances of survival outside of a year are minimal. But with the surgery, your symptoms will be alleviated and allow you to enjoy a normal – albeit with limits – life for a couple of years longer.”

Twisting angrily in the hard plastic chair to cover his disbelief, Lex remarked. “There must be some mistake, Doctor Kassaten. I feel perfectly fine!”

“That’s the worst part about this particular type of tumor. Its ill

effects sometimes appear to vanish, leaving the patient symptom-free, but when it is least expected they return, stronger than before.”

Lex stood, so swiftly in fact, that he knocked over the chair, “Doctor, I assure you I am not some *patient*. My money helped build this place. I had intended to provide your office with a free makeover from one of the country’s best designers. But now such a favor is out of the question.” Lex, his temper frayed, voice grew louder.

“Who are you?” The billionaire sneered and advanced towards the shorter man. “I intend to get a second opinion and a third. I will prove you wrong.” Lex strode angrily past him, savagely ripped one of the diplomas off the wall and threw it to the floor, shattering the frame’s glass into several large pieces and a few smaller shards.

Dr. Kassaten stoically watched and listened to the billionaire’s tirade. He quickly held Lex by the shoulders and with surprising strength forcefully sat him back down into the remaining upright chair. Lex was in too much shock to fight back but stared at the surgeon in utter astonishment. He listened as the little man responded to his tirade in an oddly soothing manner. “I am sorry, sir, but these are the facts. If you wish to pursue another opinion that is of course your right, but the conclusion will unhappily be the same.”

Lex looked carefully into the man’s eyes and realized their genuineness. He knew without question, his life had changed forever. The billionaire; leaned back in the hard plastic chair and running trembling fingers through his hair, reluctantly accepted defeat. “Go on D...doctor. Wh...what kind of surgery is it?”

“I want to schedule neuroendoport surgery for this Friday. It is a minimally invasive procedure for deep-rooted tumors. A narrow tube or port allows me to access the gliomas through a tiny incision in the skull. Such an approach, Mr. Luthor, offers the benefit of minimal scarring, fewer side effects, complications, and a fast recovery time.”

Dr. Kassaten’s conversation turned to other matters, such as strict regimen of drugs and prescriptions. Proper diet. Plenty of the correct exercises. Complete and utter avoidance of cigars and alcohol. He wrote out three prescriptions to help Lex deal with the seizures. He informed the billionaire to clear his calendar and come in for surgery at the end of the week.

Lex heard only five words for every ten; his mind could not comprehend the affront that was happening to his body. However, there were other considerations, ones which must be addressed immediately.

“Dr. Kassaten. What if the procedure is postponed for a couple of weeks? Ten days at the most? LexCorp is a major worldwide conglomerate. I am its head. Literally thousands of people depend on me for their livelihood. It is imperative I legally put my temporary replacement in position, otherwise the financial repercussions will be considerable.”

Mr. Luthor, your conditions is quite serious. Delaying the operation would be most unwise. By rights I should be arranging for your surgery immediately.”

“Yes, yes... Doctor Kassaten, just answer the damn question!”

Shaking his head in defeat, the neurologist responded. “It is against my better judgment, but yes, ten days at the most. Nevertheless, take the medicine and avoid any unnecessary stress. My nurse will provide all the proper forms and information.”

“Fine.” Lex pointed to the pile of glass, wood and paper littering the floor. “You can bill me for the mess.”

The surgeon eyed him with unnerving composure. “I intend to.”

Twenty minutes later, Lex Luthor, third richest man in the world, emerged from the doctor’s office a broken, frightened man. All of the bravado he had displayed in the examination room had vanished. His hands shook and his eyelids blinked uncontrollably. He stepped onto the elevator, which was thankfully empty. Somehow, perhaps through sheer will alone, his body moved through the building reception area in a stiff, mechanical fashion. The indifferent receptionist, seeing his distress called out to him, with real concern in her voice. However, the billionaire ignored her question and slowly walked through the

revolving doors outside toward the waiting black limousine.

“Where to next Mr. Luthor?” the driver asked.

“What?” He looked up distracted. “Oh, it...it doesn’t matter. Take me for a drive around the city.”

<How did this happen? I ignored the hand spasms and headaches for months; thinking it was due to a build-up of stress. How ironic, I fought up through the streets to amass immense wealth to better my life and now it is about to end. Dr. Kassaten said my affliction has entered the final stages. Even with exposure to the crystals I am doomed.>

Luthor looked around the sumptuously appointed vehicle, felt the exquisite leather of its seats, one of his many possessions — it gave him no comfort. He mentally thought of all of his numerous paintings, houses, stock and bonds. He thought of all the business contacts, acquaintances and ex-lovers who had passed through his turbulent life and realized a glacially bitter truth; despite all the wealth he possessed and people he knew... Lex Luthor was the poorest and loneliest creature on the planet.

What of Space Station Lex? Would his greatest building achievement to remain undone? A most bitter pill to swallow, he wanted the space station to be the highest manmade object in the heavens. Gazers into the night sky had to think of him whenever they saw it. His own ‘Wonder over the World’ was done before it started, for who would tackle such a project once he was gone?

For the first time since his parents’ death, genuine tears sprang to his eyes and threatened to roll down freshly shaven cheeks. He fought to control this uncharacteristic, emotional tumult. Searching in his jacket pocket for a handkerchief, a meeting reminder tumbled out. Annoyed, he crushed the note in his hand, then he opened the paper. It was written in Aykira’s elegant hand.

Aykira. He wanted — needed to see her.

“Mr. Bolton,” he said to the driver. “Take me to Fortitude Terrace Drive, the Lucerne building. Ms. Milan’s apartment, I believe you have dropped her off in the past?”

“Yes sir. Right away.”

Lex eased back into the dark leather seat. He prayed she was home.

Aykira sat curled up on the plush cinnamon sofa reading in her living room about the successful Antarctic crossing of Sir Ernest Shackleton and his team. In her world, Sir Shackleton’s expedition had failed miserably. It was one of several striking differences between her world and the one she now inhabited. Light reading such as this relaxed her; it took a concerted effort not to dwell on Alexander and his fiancée. Her mind began to drift, wondering if he could be happy with such a manipulative woman, when her doorman called upstairs over the intercom.

Walking barefoot over the warm wooden floor Aykira responded. “Yes, Jacob?”

“Ms. Milan, there’s a gentleman here by the name of Lex Luthor. Shall I send him up?”

<Lex? Here? What on earth for?> Was it too much to imagine the billionaire might want to *apologize*? In all honesty she did not want to see Alexander’s doppelganger this evening. She had already dealt with too many painful emotional disruptions for one day.

Gently laying her forehead on the wall’s cool surface, she took a slight breath, than spoke into the intercom. “Yes... please send him up.”

Concerned over her messy appearance, she hastily changed from sweats to a soft navy cashmere pullover and blue jeans. Quickly she ran a comb through her long hair, checked her appearance in the hallway mirror and opened the door.

The shaken and disheveled man who entered her apartment was barely recognizable from the urbane and confident billionaire she had left at the office that morning. Lex Luthor’s eyes were red and swollen...from shed tears. However, it was much more than that. His very demeanor had undergone an abrupt transformation, as if the

invisible twin steel cables of wealth and privilege, which enmeshed, shaped and ultimately protected his life were brutally severed. With concern etched deeply across her features, she bade him sit down.

“W... would you like something to drink?” she asked, barely recognizing her own voice. Lex’s altered behavior deeply disturbed her.

“No.” Bowing his head, angrily he raked slightly trembling hands through the dark curly mass of black hair. Suddenly those hands began to shake violently. A harsh, tortured whisper escaped from the depths of his throat. “It’s all over... everything for nothing. Vanity, ‘tis all vanity; striving after the wind...” He threw himself aggressively onto the couch, sobs escaping his throat. Years of pent-up emotions burst free.

Wrapping her arms around him she pleaded, “Lex...darling, please talk to me.”

He looked up, crying. He gently took her slim brown hands in his; the ever-present engraved silver ring glistened delicately on her finger. Tentatively in a rough, frightened voice, he said. “I... I hardly know where to begin.”

Taking his face in her hands she whispered, “Then let me hold you until the words come.”

Here was a man who with a single phone call could alter lives for good or ill. But now there was only a very upset man who took a strong, supportive woman in his arms for comfort and succor. It was so much better just to hold her. To ease the emotional tumult and calm his frightened heart. Slowly his breathing became normal and the trembling stopped. “My...my behavior for the past few weeks has been odd, to put it mildly.”

“That,” she responded while stroking his hair, “is a definite understatement.”

“Yes, well that yelling match in my office this morning was definitely not the real me.” Lex smiled sheepishly and bowed his head in genuine humility.

She held her tongue, revisiting that incident would be an exercise in futility. Despite Aykira’s own painful revelation that morning, she needed to listen to him.

He spoke in halting terms about the painful headaches, which had started months ago. He had thought that they were brought on by relentless work stress. “The matter did not concern me until the seizures began in earnest. M... my hands would tremble horribly, than my legs — for brief spans were incapable of supporting me. The final straw came when my eyes grew sensitive to light...especially in the early afternoon. It was all very alarming.”

“Lex, you should have told me about it. There was no reason for you to hide anything from me. Are we not... friends...perhaps even more?”

He held her hands to his chest, drawing strength from her touch. “I know that now. ‘Pride goeth before the fall’. I thought I could handle everything... anything on my own.”

“Lex, there must be something we can do... a procedure to be tried. We cannot just give up!”

“Dr. Kassaten said the tumor has grown too rapidly for that. It is in the advanced stages; quite frankly, he’s surprised I’ve lasted this long without treatment. Even unconventional cures are out of the question.”

<Have you thought of *everything*?> Her mind questioned. She could not tell him all she knew about the Harmonic Crystals theft. What those cursed manufacturer gems were capable of? Surely he had to be aware of their medicinal abilities? Still, she hesitated. To reveal her mission would undermine everything, but letting him die? <No, there must be another option!>

“Long ago,” Lex began. “I once told a reporter that my greatest asset was character assessment. The first day we met, I saw that the qualities of integrity, strength of will, and most of all loyalty were a key part of your character. Over time, those are qualities, I have come to lean upon... and cherish. In the past few weeks after our ‘disagreement’ I missed the closeness we had begun to share. I... I did not truly appreciate the depth of our relationship. It disturbs me to

think something so precious was nearly squandered for momentary selfish, carnal gain.”

He stood up and paced the living room floor, straightening his tie and smoothing down the black wavy hair. Lex’s comportment and appearance steadily reverted to a man who had once again regained his focus and center. The captain of modern industry was steadily returning. She watched as he stopped in the middle of the floor and gazed lovingly at her face, than continued. “I carved out an empire, determined to make my own way in life. A man is the artisan of his own future. I very much want to spend that future...albeit, no matter how short, with you, dearest Aykira.”

“Lex, whatever happens, I promise you, we will face it together. If you wish for us to be together tonight...” Her voice trailed off, the full intent of her words unspoken.

He walked back to the couch, sat down and took her hands again. “I need you to be more than a mere lover, to be discarded after a night’s pleasure. There have been far too many nights like that in my life. No, I... I wish us to be more than friends. Dearest, lovely Aykira, please, stay by my side... as my wife.”

The unexpected words roared in her ears. Releasing his grip, Aykira stood up rapidly from the couch and walked away from him, her bare feet suddenly icy on the warm wooden floor.

“Marriage? I... I do not know what to say. All of this is so sudden, Lex.”

“Then say yes,” he pleaded.

Shaking her head in confusion, she continued. “Remember, it was less than twelve hours ago we were yelling at each other. In the recess of my mind I was convinced you were with another woman.”

The billionaire stood up as well. All pretense of the suave cosmopolitan was gone, leaving only a man desperate to press his argument. He walked toward her tall and straight, emanating a sense of nobility so powerful it threatened to overwhelm her. “I was mistaken to demand intimacy after our brief kiss. So many women have thrown themselves at me, wanting only what my money and power can provide. Not for myself as a man. But from the moment we met such things never mattered to you. Throwing you in with that crowd was arrogant and demeaning.”

She watched him and listened spellbound as he verbally tore down all of his defenses.

“You may find this hard to believe, but I *wanted* us to have a real courtship. That day you hesitated to be interviewed by Lois Lane, I realized the importance of having Aykira Milan in my life. If there was time, I would cherish you beyond measure. However, my sweet, time has caught me out. You once said, ‘loyalty is a commitment’, so is love, one to last a lifetime. Sadly, we only have a short here and now.”

Tears filled hazel eyes; than tumbled down her cheeks. She wiped them fiercely away; this day had been full of bitter news hard to comprehend. The confession of his love for her... and his proposal, was a happy surprise. Nevertheless, she still needed time. Taking a deep breath, she spoke. “No one should go through such a terrible ordeal alone, but Lex I must have time to meditate. Please, tonight is all I ask.”

He bowed his head in sadness. But ever the gentleman to this mysterious woman, he agreed.

“Very well. I should let Mr. Bolton know I’m coming downstairs.”

“I will be at the office first thing tomorrow morning with my answer.”

“It is all I ask.” Lex held her face in his hands and first kissed the tracks of tears away and then her warm, succulent lips. They embraced each other with a fervor that once again frightened but thrilled them. His voice whispered into a delicate ear, “Don’t ask me to sleep alone too long. I pray your answer is yes.” His lips slid down her exposed throat and gently the tip of his tongue traced the length of her left collarbone. “Goodnight, my sweet.”

Their bodies separated. Aykira’s knees trembled with the shock of denied passion. Before she realized what had happened, Lex was gone.

“Oh my...” Her voice quavered, the sound of an excited,

tumultuous heartbeat pounded in her ears.

Part Fifteen

In high spirits, Clark Kent tapped a happy shave-and-a-haircut rap on Lois Lane’s front door.

Looking through the peephole she said, “Clark, you’re here already?” With the inevitable sounds of locks turning and bolts drawn back, she clumsily opened the door and welcomed him inside. Her partner stepped into the familiar apartment and waited for her to finish getting ready, which was taking a little longer than usual with only one arm.

“Of course I’m here! Hey, this is my favorite partner’s first day back at the job. Nothing and no one is going to stop me from escorting her to Java Perk and then the Daily Planet.” Clark stepped back and looked appreciatively at what Lois was wearing. Despite the ugly blue sling holding her arm in place, his partner wore a shimmering burnt orange dupioni silk wrap jacket which looked stunning next to her creamy skin. The matching skirt was long but tapered nicely against her hips and the simple side slit displayed a hint of shapely legs. The sight of those legs caught his breath away — Lois Lane — a truly beautiful woman.

“Wow the suit looks fantastic on you!” Her partner stood transfixed at the door, thoughts were running through his mind that really shouldn’t be there....

Lois rewarded his compliment with a genuine beaming smile. He had a sneaking suspicion she really wanted to appear special today — for him. “Thank you.” She responded graciously to his compliment, not a prickly comment in sight. “It should only take a moment to get my briefcase.”

Before she could step away, Clark touched her arm and gently, oh so gently drew her to his chest. “No. Thank you, Lois, for being more than my work partner... so much more than a friend.” He surprised himself and bent down, kissing her tenderly.

After the kiss, they stepped apart, their breathing a little harder than a moment before. Lois touched a forefinger to her lips than spoke first, whispering. “I need to get my casebrief... ah briefcase.” Then she reluctantly slipped out of his grasp in pursuit of the bag.

Minutes later, they exited Lois’s apartment quietly holding hands and wishing they could spend the day with each other exploring the wonders of the world rather than heading for the Daily Planet.

Self-consciously Clark tentatively took hold of Lois’s right arm and the attractive young couple walked down the broad sidewalk of brownstone lined Carter Avenue. The tree limbs and branches were bursting with green leaves gently swaying in the morning breeze. He noticed owners of several of the houses had medium-sized colorful spring potted plants on the stairs, giving the stately old buildings a welcoming garden-like flair.

They crossed a wide main thoroughfare and walked pass stately Hyperion Avenue. The houses on this block were gracious three-story townhomes. At one time the structures had been seriously neglected, but several determined renovators were purchasing the buildings to restore these architectural gems to their splendor of a bygone era.

Clark always loved this particular part of Metropolis not just because it was where Lois lived, but because the Nayland Heights neighborhood seemed a superb place to call...home.

He felt just great, walking with Lois close by, as more than a friend or her work partner. They were finally a *couple*. This was just the type of relationship he had dreamt about for years, but many times had thought might never become a reality. Yet here they were. The young man smiled to himself thinking of the days and perhaps years to come when as husband and wife walking to the Daily Planet every morning became routine.

The stray thought came at him out of thin air, startling him so much he almost stumbled.

“Hey flyboy! Better be careful, otherwise I might need to call Superman and ask him to fly us to work.” Lois’ voice rang with merriment.

Warm chocolate eyes gazed intently at the lovely brunette and he whispered, “Someday soon I will.”

Radames Perez entered his small office within LexCorp’s IT department, ready to start the morning routine. First, he bumped the computer out of its sleep mode then checked his voice-mail. The terse message from his supervisor, Levi Tobin, caught him off guard.

“Listen, Radames, I hate to dump this job on you first thing in the morning, but check on Dr. Frederick Scott’s computer at LexSolar in the LIP. Don’t bother driving over there. Use the autopilot program to check over the hard drive wipe I performed a couple of nights ago. Apparently there are critical files in there he doesn’t want anyone to see. The idiot wouldn’t leave me alone for a second, so the defrag program might not have been as conclusive as he liked. So wipe out any sub-folders if they appear. Leave an e-mail update. Thanks partner. I owe you one.”

<Jeez, like I don’t have enough computer forensic work to do today. Let me run a quick diagnosis on this guy’s hard drive. Assure him all is well, than I can get back to my *real* work. Checking the scientist’s printer logs for Aykira.>

Within thirty minutes Radames had completed a thorough background and diagnostic check of Scott’s computer. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary he was about to wrap up when a sub-folder appeared within one of the main folders which had been missed by Tobin.

Radames was about to delete the sub-folder when he noticed the time stamp of its creation... the day before the break-in. Something told the programmer accessing this file might contain the material Aykira was looking for.

Clicking on the icon, he opened the sub-folder, picked a file marked ‘Crystal Extraction team’ at random, opened it and started reading. The man’s ears perked up and suddenly his heart beat faltered than increased with alarm. This was serious grand larceny stuff! There was a fully detailed plan for hijacking the freighter Shackleton, along with names of the men who did the crime. Not to mention a navy official who ‘loaned’ these men a mini-sub.

For whatever reason Aykira needed this file and its contents, he wanted no part of it. With practiced movements the programmer downloaded the entire file onto a flash drive, than erased it from Scott’s hard drive.

Radames used the autopilot program to skillfully erect a backdoor out of Scott’s computer leaving no trace of his efforts. If Levi Tobin asked him whether or not the work order had been filled he intended to deny it. As a member of the hacker elite, admitting to knowledge of the kind Scott was concealing could only land him in jail... or worse.

Bending down over his phone, Radames contacted a courier service and requested they send a person to his office to pick-up a package. The courier’s final destination would be provided upon arrival at LexCorp.

The programmer shook his head and thought worriedly. <Whatever special project Aykira is involved in can only lead to trouble... the kind a person does not ‘recover’ from. Perhaps I should be looking into another place of employment?>

Lois peeked hungrily into the pastry display case at the Java Perk, wondering what whimsical muffin name Jason had concocted this week. The owner put a small white cardboard sign in front of a tray of carrot walnut raisin muffins newly emerged from the oven. The orange colored ink boldly stated the name ‘Canker Holler’.

The reporter rolled her eyes and shook her head, the brunette hair flowing easily. <It doesn’t make any sense! Still it’s how the muffins taste that matters.>

“A double mocha latte with whole milk *and* whipped cream? Where is the real Lois Lane?” asked the startled shop owner.

“Jason, once a year a girl is entitled to ‘walk on the wild side’! This is my first day back at the Planet and I intend to celebrate!” A happy Lois smiled with profound pleasure while sipping the

comforting brew. “Oh, don’t forget to put the Double Fudge Crunch bars in my briefcase.”

“Your wish is my command. Good to see you back. Jimmy told me about the accident. When does the arm come out of the sling?”

<Accident? Must be the cover story Clark told everyone.>

“Probably tomorrow. My doctor has to see how the stitches are healing.”

“That’s great! Hey Clark, I’ll bet you are really glad to have Miss Lane back in action?” Jason called out to the reporter as he expertly grabbed donuts and napkins to fill out their standing order.

Clark, beaming from ear to ear with his breathtaking grin, could not contain himself. “You bet! Working solo all the time was no fun at all!” He took the crisp white bags from the Java Perk’s proprietor. He placed his hand on the small of Lois’ back and said over his shoulder. “We are both are looking forward to working together again. See you later.”

They exited the coffee shop, full of hectic early morning imbibers of the marvelous brew. The partners were delighted to be settling back into their comfortable pre-work morning routine. Metropolis looked bright and sunny, the day full of happy opportunities.

Within moments, they were entering the lobby of the Daily Planet. Lois’ stomach did happy little butterfly twirls, returning to her second home at last. Sid, the taciturn old newsstand owner came around from his traditional spot and instead of a hug, the old gentleman presented her with two Double Fudge Crunch bars. “On the house,” he mumbled, and then returned to waiting customers.

“Wow. Sid never gives me anything when I come back from sick leave!” Clark quipped as he pushed the elevator button.

“That’s because you are *never* sick... Flyboy!”

“Lois.” Her partner looked around nervously. “You might want to keep the ‘flyboy’ reference to when we are alone. Everyone knows flying planes is not something I do. Who knows who might be listening?”

At first Lois wanted to laugh at what she felt was Clark being overly sensitive. After all they were in the Daily Planet lobby, *who* was going to hear them? But then looking into his chocolate eyes, shaded with genuine worry and concern, the full import of his ‘other’ life hit her. This is what it meant to ‘hide in plain sight’ for Clark, to always be careful not to reveal who he was. These precautions were in place to protect himself, his parents and now her. Placing an understanding hand soothingly on his, she whispered, “I’m sorry Clark, I wasn’t thinking... Farmboy.” This last was said with a mischievous wink.

His beaming smile broke through the worry and they boarded the waiting elevator. “Let’s get upstairs before Perry thinks you are taking another sick day.” The doors closed and the couple folded awkwardly into each other arms; Clark being mindful of the sling and bakery bags. Despite the hindrance, it was divine to spend a few private moments sharing a warm, adoring kiss.

They enjoyed the brief respite of togetherness, than reluctantly separated only seconds before the elevator doors swung open. Smiling joyously, Lois thought, <Hello Daily Planet newsroom! I’m back!>

As Lois and Clark walked over to the ramp, the air was punctured with greetings from the newsroom staff.

“Lois! Welcome back!” the normally shy Diane shouted while giving her a hug. “Today’s lunch is on me!”

“Ms. Lane, the place ain’t been the same without you!” Steve smiled effusively.

Jimmy ran up the ramp and gave Lois a brotherly squeeze. “This is great! The better half of the hottest team in town is back in action.”

“Lane, nice of you to come around and join the rest of the civilians. That must have been some party.” Cat put in while coming from the copy room, her arms loaded with folders, plain manila and red.

“Ah, Cat, you’re just jealous because you weren’t invited!” Lois responded with laughter.

“Umph! Any party with you in attendance won’t interest me.” This was said without Cat’s former malicious edge. “Seriously, it’s good to

have you back in the newsroom. Kent seems to be glad... even relieved." This last was said while pointing her chin at Clark.

Lois looked into the other woman's flashing green eyes and was immediately aware of Cat's genuine concern. "Thank you," she responded.

"Good. Since your arm is still healing, how about helping me go through my wedding RSVP's? After all... you don't have anything else to do."

"In your dreams, lady!" Lois tossed back the comment without any heat.

"Ha! That's what's missing around here! It's a genuine news room catfight!" Ralph leered as he walked down the red staircase. The obsequious 'reporter' might have said more, but was silenced by Steve and Eduardo's matching glares.

Finally, the Daily Planet's hottest news team reached their desks. Each booted up their machines and began the day's work. Lois groaned loudly at the number of unopened e-mails awaiting her response.

Cat sauntered back to her desk and placed the numerous folders on top. With deft movements two piles were formed. The red pile was wedding related, while the manila pile contained work items. The gossip columnist was preparing a packet of materials for her replacement, whoever that might be.

Briefly, a wave of nervous trepidation moved through her body. Was she sure that leaving the Planet and an active career in entertainment reporting was a wise decision? Was getting married and moving to the left coast the right move? She thought back to the days of the Nightfall Asteroid and the deep loneliness she had experienced. George had filled that terrible emptiness and now together they were enjoying a full and loving relationship. <Nope,> she thought, <the time is right to make some changes and progress into a new phase of my life.> Glancing over at the 'hottest team in town', it was evident changes had taken place on that front as well.

She had seen the look on Lois and Clark's faces upon exiting the elevator. Their easy companionship had taken a major turn, despite the prickly female reporter's former standoffish behavior. Something had *finally* happened between them and she was secretly pleased. In a quiet inner voice, she commented. <Glad you finally woke up before it was too late, Lane.>

With a contented smile and renewed determination, the striking auburn haired beauty went back to work... on her upcoming nuptials.

Work at the Daily Planet that morning geared up to its normal routine of headlines and deadlines. Only now, the atmosphere was gently tingling with contented blissfulness between its star investigative reporters. Lois and Clark bantered, exchanged notes, checked one another's copy and generally were satisfied with each other in particular and life in general. For a little slice of time, all in the newsroom was good.

Despite having to type with only one hand, Lois furiously banged out a follow-up to the Stone and Mercantile story. She did not want to be late handing in her first assignment in nearly a week. Perry and Clark had covered for her, but Lois Lane was never known to have *anyone* pull her weight. Nothing, not even a gash caused from a bullet, was keeping her out of the action. She could do with one final quote from someone within the Bank to give the story a proper weighty conclusion. With typical Mad Dog eagerness, she picked up the phone to call her source at the bank.

As soon as the follow-up story landed in Perry's inbox, Lois began impatiently scratching the bandage. She could hardly wait for Pete Ross' exam tomorrow to give the medical release for its removal. It was an annoyance and she hated it. The reporter was so deep in her grousing the sound of Perry approaching was completely ignored until he stood between her desk and Clark's.

"Uh, can I see both of you in my office?" This was not a command, but a quiet request.

Perry ambled off towards his office the two reporters stood from their desks, exchanged mystified fleeting looks, and followed in his wake.

Ralph, glanced up from his messy desk, whined. "Check it out, less than a day back from a long absence and already the chief gives them a plum assignment! What about everybody else?"

"Everybody else already has an assignment, what about you, loudmouth?" Jack snarled from his tiny cubicle.

Ralph responded haughtily. "Mind your own business kid. I got seniority. You're just a grunt."

Unfazed, Jack responded. "Maybe so, but we'll see how long that lasts. Besides, they are *real* reporters. I'm still trying to figure out what you do around here." Without saying another word, the young researcher returned to his computer.

The older man was about to make a nasty reply at the youngster's back when he saw Eduardo out the corner of his eye and decided to look over something on his desk.

"Come on in and shut the door please."

The two reporters shared a look. Since when did Perry ever say 'please'? Something was definitely out of place. "Sure, Chief, what's up?" Clark asked as he sat down on the plaid couch next to Lois. Out of reflex, he almost took her hand, thought better of it and listened intently to Perry.

The senior editor caught that minor movement and decided to ignore it. "Huh, in light of Lois' return to the newsroom and with her arm in a sling, I thought this next assignment suited the situation to a tee."

Lois' eyes lit up with barely controlled glee and keen anticipation, fairly jumped out of her seat and asked. "What is it? The rumored downtown carjacking ring? A juicy major corporation tax fraud? Maybe an in-depth look at the proposed restoration of Suicide Slum by LexCorp? Who knows what'll crawl out from under *that* rock! Come on Chief... spill!"

Their boss smiled, this was the reason why at twenty-seven years of age Lois Lane was the best damn investigative reporter in the business. The woman had newspaper ink running through her veins! On the other side of the couch her partner stiffened slightly. Wasn't 'spill' the same word which started the ill-fated Shackleton/Harmonic Crystals stakeout?

Before Clark could voice his objections, Perry continued speaking. "Nope, sorry to say it's none of the above. You and Kent here will be attending the Metropolis Science and Energy Conference. The main topic is how energy conservation can save the Earth's environment."

The differing reaction between the two reporters was interesting to behold. One looked as if the wind had been knocked out of her sails while the other breathed a sigh of profound relief.

"Perry, you can't be serious! What's with the cream puff assignment? We are a team of *investigative* reporters! Not writers for that egghead magazine, Scientific American! This is something Applegate is better suited for, or Myers. Send either of them."

"Now hold on Lois! Today is 'day one' back from a serious injury. I'm only thinking of you, honey."

"Hey, I've suffered through worse injuries. Remember that ski trip when I broke my leg?"

"Humph!" Perry grumbled and turned to Clark. "Well! *That* little fiasco happened the winter before you started working here. I had to listen to that woman yelling the whole way down the mountain. I haven't heard such language since my days walking through Baghdad with the Military Police..."

"Never mind that!" Lois interjected. "Why are you protecting me?"

"Because I had to field a number of phone calls from MetroPD in general and Inspector Henderson in particular. He wants to know what you were doing at the hotel during the break-in and why you didn't stick around to report the story."

Suddenly Lois got quiet and said in a small voice, "Oh. Well, the

officer on duty lied to me.”

Perry gave her a very pointed look and said. “Uh huh. Anyhow, until this whole LexSolar investigation is at an end, you need to lay low.”

“I still say send Applegate. Besides, we need to keep digging into the Shackleton hijacking, which is kinda sorta directly related to the break-in at LexSolar.” Then in an offhand manner she added, “Clark discovered a new lead.”

The older man’s eyebrows shot up and fixed a stare at the younger one. “Kinda? Sorta? When did this happen? Why didn’t either of you mention it before?”

He watched as Clark, no doubt feeling acutely uncomfortable, fought hard not to squirm in his seat. The reporter faced Lois and gave her a questioning look. Then Clark turned back to Perry, and choosing his next few words very carefully, he spoke. “Hmm it’s nothing concrete, so talking about it right now is pointless.”

“Not concrete huh?” Perry studied the faces of his two finest reporters and realized neither of them would say anything without the other’s approval. <Fine, they want to play that way, so can I> “Well, if that’s the case, here are your press passes, tickets and whatnot for the conference. Give me a nice *crisp* story for tonight’s edition.”

“But Chief... “Lois’ voice took on a near wailing tone.

“No buts. This will be a good way for you to ease back into the saddle... without calling attention to yourself.”

“More like walking into ‘Perry’s doghouse’.” She mumbled as they stood, gathered up the material on Perry’s desk and departed the office.

The senior editor smiled to himself, <If nothing else it will give those two time together. More importantly, Clark can keep an eye on her.>

Once back in the newsroom Clark took Lois by the elbow and guided her into a conference room just vacated by a group of staffers. The remnants of an early morning meeting, half-empty cups of stale coffee and small white paper plates, half-eaten pastries and a still warm coffee pot, were on the table. Neither reporter paid any attention to the mess, although Lois’ nose wrinkled slightly from the coffee. The Java Perk’s excellent blend had completely spoiled her taste buds. The Daily Planet’s noxious brew no longer held any appeal.

“Lois, what were you thinking? Telling Perry I have a lead on the Shackleton case? We agreed any evidence obtained during the break-in could not be used in the story.”

“Yes, but what’s wrong with us using the information to get *at* the story? Look, I got that report from Dr. Scott’s computer, it stands to reason he’s the one who either plotted the theft or was carrying out orders from a higher authority.”

“Luthor.” Clark fairly spat out the name.

“Hmm, now I understand why you never particularly cared for him, you saw both sides of the man, public and criminal. If we go over the information together and with a little research help from Jack something is bound to turn up.”

“Good idea, it might work,” Clark said grudgingly.

“Thanks, but if my mind weren’t distracted by a certain Fly... Farmboy I might have remembered this lead a whole lot sooner!”

“Hmmm, I can send over the information to either Jack or Jimmy and have them work on it while we cover our assignment.”

“Rats!” Lois snorted acerbically while rolling her eyes. “Do we *really* have to attend a nerdy science conference?”

“Lo-is.”

“All right! But I don’t have to like it!” Lois groaned rolling her eyes again. They exited the conference room and passed Applegate on the way to their desks. The poor man wondered why Lois was giving him such an ugly grimace.

Lex Luthor awoke from a deep sleep, one filled with dreams. He had dreamt about his life. He could mentally see his hard working parents’ struggle to raise their son decently amidst crowded slum

conditions and their unforeseen, premature and tragic deaths. His own rough and tumble youth on Metropolis’ bitter backstreets and his meteoric and successful rise within the business world. So many images, some pleasant, others terrible, flooded his mind, they threatened to overwhelm him. However, it was recent memories, which presented themselves one after another, with frightening clarity.

Doctor Kassaten’s diagnosis had been grim and final. Lex had managed to put a stay on his surgery, claiming to search for a temporary head of LexCorp while he convalesced from the procedure. There were a number of good candidates, some of whom had been with him for over a decade, but only one had his complete trust. He would discuss the matter and all its legal implications with Sheldon Bender before leaving for his honeymoon... if there was one.

It was understandable such a proposal had caught Aykira off guard, but as Lex had told her, time was at a premium. He originally wanted to savor their relationship, let it mature like a Bianco delle Venezie wine sipped from the finest crystal goblets. Now *everything* had to be done at an accelerated rate.

Still there were other more pressing matters, which required his attention.

After departing from Aykira’s condo he contacted Dr. Scott at home and demanded two of the crystals be immediately delivered to his office via messenger. Naturally, the recalcitrant man argued against any of the crystals leaving his possession. He also stated the lateness of the hour. Of course, Lex prevailed and accepted no excuses. Within three hours of the phone call, a small metal box containing the precious rocks arrived. Delivered by a wound up Dr. Scott, insisting to know what Lex needed them for.

The billionaire smiled to himself remembering their quick, but heated exchange.

“I am sorry, but *my name* appears on the paychecks. Thank you for bringing the crystals over personally. Asabi will see you out.”

Scott continued to argue, “Luthor, those crystals are essential to develop an efficient power source for Space Station Lex! Within the time-frame for next year’s launch! The secret development team needs every last one of those rocks in order to complete our experiments! They are going to want to know what happened to them, especially after last week’s break-in! At least tell me how long they will be in your possession?”

“I will have them for as long as necessary. I say again. Good night Dr. Scott.”

Dr. Scott stormed out of the office. Lex could hear the man’s voice cursing long after the door had closed behind him. Still, the object of months of planning and subterfuge were in his grasp. Tonight he would sleep with them by his nightstand and perhaps the crystals might improve his strength for the days ahead.

It was a little after midnight before the billionaire retired to his bedroom and removed the impeccably tailored Saville Row suit. The box containing the faintly glowing lavender and white crystals was placed on the nightstand, allowing their emanations to bombard his flesh. Shortly after his evening ablutions, Lex slipped between fresh wine colored satin sheets. Surprisingly, sleep came immediately.

Now with the morning begun, he awoke to a hearty breakfast of eggs, blueberry pancakes and sausages, not his usual fare, but he decided to ‘live a little’. After breakfast, Lex anxiously awaited a call from Aykira. He suspected part of the reason for his dreams was anticipation of her answer. The thought of rejection never entered his mind. However, could he handle it if she did?

At precisely 8:00am the phone’s sharp ring burst out loudly, its shrill sound interrupted any further thoughts.

“Hello.”

<<<“Lex. It is Aykira. Can you clear your calendar for this afternoon? I need to talk to you outside of the office.”>>> Her voice had a sad pained quality. <<<“After hearing what I have to say, than you can decide if you wish to marry me.”>>>

Aykira’s suitor, greatly puzzled by her words responded. “Of course my dear, where do you want to meet?”

<<“As we did on our date,”>> she paused. <<“On the steps of Greystroke Museum, at 3:30, if that time is suitable for you?”>>
 “All right than... shall I wear jeans?” He strived to make his voice light.

She hesitated and responded softly. <<“Whatever you wish... surprise me.”>>

In his tiny apartment cramped with books and file folders just off Centennial Park, Dr. Frederick Scott paced up and down in his living room furious with Lex Luthor. Whatever insipid game the arrogant billionaire was playing last night could not have come at a more inopportune time. He planned to hide, than remove all the remaining crystals today. His ‘associates’ wanted them this evening. With the huge payday they planned to give him, he could kiss gambling debts and academic toadying good-bye forever.

No more working for the likes of his previous supervisor, Dr. Toni Baines. The beautiful yet ruthless director constantly plagiarized his painstaking detailed shuttle performance reports. Upon her leaving EPRAD, he tried to claim credit for the reports, but all evidence had been destroyed. The only thing his abrasive efforts got him was a hasty dismissal from the program.

Now his intelligence and abilities were again being exploited for someone else’s benefit. While George Amundsen ran the ‘legitimate’ solar panel research, Scott was secretly leading the team working on using the Harmonic Crystals as an alternative power source for the station. Whichever team succeeded could expect worldwide admiration. Ambition burned beneath the man’s bland expression. At last, his labors would be the ones handsomely rewarded rather than shunted to the side and forgotten.

It was time for him to get to work... his last day working for LexSolar.

Across town, Lois and Clark were entering the large steel and glass enclosed Coates Convention Center. Neither reporter was happy covering this event; their preference was to remain at the Planet, leaning over Jack’s shoulder. The young man was proving to be a crackerjack researcher who could wheedle information from both computers and people. They walked through the tall glass doors of the center. Perhaps he might have unearthed a vital piece of information while they listened to long-winded speeches.

The duo worked their way through the bustling crowd to the voluminous coat check area; Lois handed over her pumpkin hued wraparound jacket and took the identity medallion from a pleasantly smiling attendant. All the while, she acerbically derided Perry’s ‘editorial’ decision to send the investigative team on this particular assignment.

“Clark, this is ridiculous! Perry thinks he’s doing ‘us’ or rather me a favor, by giving me a ‘quiet assignment’! With the man who is my partner as my baby-sitter and protector. Not that I mind having you with me, but I’m an *investigative* reporter! People like me don’t do ‘quiet’. Jack might find the one critical piece of intel that links together everything we have been looking for.” She glanced with a reporter’s eye around the convention center. “Isn’t it exciting, about the possibility of picking up the scent of the guys who hijacked the Shackleton and stole those Harmonic Crystals?”

Her partner listened with happy bemusement as Lois launched into full-blown babble. It was one of the many endearing qualities about her he cherished. The expansive main entry hall displayed three signs detailing the day’s events. In the Larson Room was a cardiac surgeon’s convention; the Neill Room was hosting an astronomy meeting. The final sign listed the Science and Energy Conference in the Reeves Venue.

“Hmmm, the Reeves Venue? It figures, the other signs clearly mark the meeting location, but this sign doesn’t. Now where could it be?” Lois glanced over the directory carefully.

Clark surreptitiously lowered his glasses and looked around the convention center. “Come on, Lois, the Reeves Venue is located on the

upper level.”

Turning, surprised by his quick summation, she started to speak, looked at him and then a slow smile of dawning realization came to her face.

“You know partner, those extra special ‘qualities’ of yours are going to come in handy!”

“We aim to please, Ma’am,” He said imitating a slow Texas drawl.

The couple boarded the escalator to the upper level. After a few minutes of walking through the busy crowd, they located the main lecture room adjacent to the Exhibition Hall. The seats were set in a U-pattern around the raised lectern for guest scientists to present their latest findings and techniques in the field of energy conservation. Behind the lectern was a large screen, no doubt to display color PowerPoint presentations.

Clark stood looked around the large room filled with scientists, their assistants and several attendees. A heavysset middle-aged man wearing a tweed jacket over a white shirt and plaid tie approached the lectern. The audience upon seeing him approach began settling down to listen attentively.

“Hey Clark, let’s grab a seat over there.” Lois said in a whisper only he could hear. It amazed him how quickly she had adapted to his superpowers... especially when it came to helping them get a story no matter how mundane.

Quietly obeying his partner, Clark walked down a row of folding chairs, Lois following closely behind him. After stepping over the outstretched legs of other conference attendees already seated, they found two empty places at the end of the row. The scientist began his lecture in a dry nasal sounding voice. Only five scant minutes passed before both Lois and Clark began yawning from boredom.

“Perry wanted nice ‘crisp’ copy for tonight’s edition from this drone and groan?” Lois rolled her eyes frustration.

“I admit it’s not the most exciting lecture, but at least we don’t have to stay for the entire day. Let’s take some notes and concentrate on the highlights.”

“Clark, the only way his lecture could have highlights is if we set off fireworks under him.” This last was spoken louder than a whisper. In response, one man in front of them requested the reporters to keep quiet. Lois fumed silently, turned on her recorder, since taking notes by hand was out of the question, hoping to find a ‘hook’ for the story.

Aykira dressed slowly for her meeting/date with Lex. She had done a great deal of soul searching last night and had come to several decisions. Most of those conclusions had been reached while participating in an early morning kickboxing class at her gym. The previous day’s revelations and the resulting sorrow drained slowly into the background as her lithe body’s sinuously movements worked to relieve the tension. A quick sauna and shower after the workout further eased her anxiety as she prepared to meet Lex.

She had returned from the gym to her apartment building, as she needed to get a couple of items. As she walked into the lobby a young man approached her with a package.

“Excuse me, Ms. Aykira Milan?” The young man asked. He was holding up a photo of her.

“Yes?”

“This is a package from a Mr. Perez at LexCorp. He asked me to give it to no one but you. Please sign here and it’s all yours.” The delivery person handed over the clipboard for her signature. Aykira did as requested then returned the clipboard. The exchange completed, the young man wished her a pleasant morning and departed.

<Radames must have thought this important enough to send via messenger rather than snail mail. Let us see what this package contains.>

Two hours later a rather disconcerted but determined Aykira departed for LexSolar and Dr. Frederick Scott.

Part Sixteen

Aykira decided to treat this meeting with Dr. Scott like any other conference; organized with the proper tools, such as a miniature

recorder in her purse and a .380 automatic holstered at the small of her back under her jacket. Her recent knowledge of how he had acquired the crystals for LexSolar made such precautions necessary. Dealing with the brains behind the Shackleton hijacking meant the man was not to be underestimated. Besides, who knew what underworld characters might be behind such a man?

For once traffic to LIP was very light for early morning. The administrative assistant drove up to the main entrance displayed her ID badge, than parked her car in the nearest visitor's spot.

The lobby was quiet, only Cheryl the receptionist was present, sitting behind her console, and finishing up a phone call. Looking up and seeing Aykira, her features became puzzled and she began looking over her daily appointment book.

"Oh, Ms. Milan! Good morning! We were not expecting you." Cheryl's voice sang out.

Aykira smiled gently at the older woman, determined to set her at ease, "Please do not concern yourself. I shall not be here long. Where is Dr. Scott's office?"

"Level E-258. If you will wait here, Cliff can escort you in."

Aykira began to object but then thought better of it. Refusal to follow LexSolar security protocol, especially after the recent break-in, would only raise red flags. It also bothered her to be accompanied by one of the guards who had failed to apprehend the thief. The other guard Todd inspired greater confidence. However, she had a strong idea who actually broke into the building, yet right now her only objective was to contact Dr. Scott. She watched the ungainly man walk towards her and again felt annoyance at his incompetence.

"Right this way," the hulking man rumbled.

The administrative assistant and her escort retraced the steps she had taken only a few days before. She listened half-heartedly as the guard made feeble attempts at small talk, but her responses were terse and matter of fact.

Presently they halted in front of E-258. Cliff knocked on the door and a gruff voice remarked from within. "Go away! I'm in the middle of a meeting!"

The guard turned and shrugged his massive, but sloping shoulders, "Guess he don't want to talk right now. I'll take you back to reception. Maybe Cheryl can make an appointment for later."

Aykira looked up at the man, completely incredulous. "I think not. Excuse me." Without another word, she placed a firm hand on the doorknob, gave it a brisk turn, pushed the door open and walked inside.

Looking up from his computer, an angry Dr. Scott glowered at the security guard as if he were a particularly distasteful insect, Completely ignoring Aykira, he shouted, "What is the meaning of this?!"

Cliff again shrugged his shoulders, but hesitated to step inside the office. <Perhaps it's the only movement he really knows.> Aykira thought acidly.

"She wants to see you." The guard grumbled, as he jerked a thumb at Aykira. "I couldn't stop her."

Dr. Scott looked at her as if she too were an insect. "Milan? Why are you here?"

Ignoring the snappish comment, Aykira turned to the security guard. With a hard glint in her hazel eyes, she spoke sharply. "Dr. Scott and I will have our meeting. Once we are through, he can escort me off the premises." Without another word, she stepped into the room and closed the door firmly in Cliff's face.

Aykira turned to see Scott's expression, his mouth agape. "All right Ms. Milan, what the hell is going on here!" he shouted. "First Luthor calling me in the middle of the night and now his assistant shows up."

"Oh? Aykira said feigning innocence. "Mr. Luthor did not mention that this morning."

"Humph! I'm sure Luthor doesn't tell you *everything*." Scott snarled, although his voice had lowered considerably.

"My dear Dr. Scott, Lex has taken me into his complete

confidence. "Especially regarding," she hesitated a beat, "the Harmonic Crystals."

The scientist's body suddenly went rigid with apprehension. When he finally spoke his voice had returned to its normal tone, without a trace of condescension. "That's impossible!"

<Careful,> she thought furiously. <Scott, may be egotistical, but he is not stupid. Everything hinges on the next few moments.> With ease of movement she did not feel, Aykira sat down, crossed her long legs, leaned backed languidly, mindful of the gun's presence and began speaking. "I dislike prattle so allow me to get to the point. It is no wonder General Zeitlin, the Metropolis Police Department and even Superman could not locate the crystals. Here they are quietly ensconced in Luthor's industrial Park. On April 7th the freighter Shackleton was hijacked of several containers. The majority were microprocessors from the British firm Barontech. Two of those containers held a shipment of crystals — very special crystals originally slated to be used to power the solar panels for Space Station Prometheus 2."

"It was your task to hire an experienced out-of-the-country hijacker crew to pull off the heist. Since one of the few things LexCorp does not have its hand in are marine submersibles. It fell to you to bribe a certain submariner, a Captain Bowers, into 'lending' a mini-sub for the job. I understand Captain Bowers retired from the Navy shortly after the hijacking and has gone away to parts unknown." Aykira's eyes flashed. "That must have been quite a retirement package. Do I have your attention?"

The scientist's face registered shock, but he managed a stiff nod. Of course, he was not aware she had discovered all of this from his purloined computer files. Aykira watched coolly as his white-knuckled hand gripped the chair's armrest. With amazement bordering on stupefaction, he waited for her to continue.

"For the past three months two teams have been working on projects to perfect a power source for the solar panels. Dr. Amundsen is the temporary head of the legitimate team; he has been working with the government and from all accounts might create the perfect battery to power the solar panels. Meanwhile, 'the Crystal Team' of whom you are the leader have worked late, evenings and weekends on creating solar panels powered by the Harmonic Crystals. Am I correct?"

"Yes," he bit the word out. "You know the whole story, now what brings you here?"

"Mr. Luthor has requested a dozen crystals."

The short man stood up from his desk. "Has he gone completely 'round the bend? I gave him *two* last night. How is my team supposed to finish its experiments if he continues to deplete the supply? What does he need them for?"

Looking contrite, Aykira shook her head. "Now that, Dr. Scott, he did not tell me."

"So perhaps the relationship with him is not as close as you would like me to believe." The arrogant man stepped closer, staring hard at the visitor.

She brought together her hands in a contemplative gesture, returned the stare with equal hardness, and responded in a chilly barbed tone. "*His* name is on our paychecks. We do what he requests. Give me the Crystals. Otherwise your life, not mine will become... unpleasant."

Dr. Scott drew himself back forcefully. <Those were almost the same words Luthor had used last night.> he thought. Obviously, his request had to be taken seriously. Aykira was the only one he would trust to pick them up for him. It would not do to upset Luthor, otherwise he might send over someone less agreeable, like Asabi. Besides, after tonight he needn't concern himself with Lex Luthor's whims, there was no reason to arouse suspicions.

Scott was getting tired of the manipulative power game Ms. Milan was playing. Surreptitiously glancing at his watch, it occurred to him he needed to leave for the energy conference immediately. Intergang preferred promptness with all their 'associates'.

Cursing internally, Dr. Scott returned to his desk, picked up the phone, contacted the lab and snapped orders to a thoroughly confused lab assistant. “Set aside twelve of the Harmonic Crystals and bring them to my office immediately.” After putting the phone down, Scott looked at his visitor with a cool grimace on his face. “There. I hope you and your precious boss are happy! Say, what would you have done if I refused?”

“If you had gotten any closer to me...I would have shot you.” Aykira replied unruffled.

Sweat broke out on Scott’s forehead. For a brief moment, this quiet ‘fashion plate’ reminded him rather uncomfortably of Angelica Cox. Several tense minutes passed. The room’s occupants did not participate in polite conversation. Both glanced at their watches, each had pressing business elsewhere.

Finally, they heard a hesitant knock at the door. Dr. Scott told the person to enter and a young man nervously walked into the room with a large black metal box under his arm. He laid the box on Scott’s desk and departed as noiselessly as he came.

Without asking, Aykira stood and touched the box with trembling, reverent hands. She had sacrificed and worked so hard for this moment. Finally, it all came down to this. Lifting the lid she glazed at the contents; twelve beautiful white and lavender crystals. Keeping the raised lid between herself and Scott, she removed the ubiquitous silver ring from the index finger of her right hand. With deft movements, she held it against each crystal, verifying its authenticity. She whispered to herself, “Lex, we have the genuine article.” Whether she was referring to Alexander in her own world or Lex Luthor here, even she did not know.

After a time Dr. Scott snapped. “What’s taking so long? Don’t you trust me?”

“No. But I do thank you for these Crystals. Now please, escort me out of LexSolar.”

“Maybe I should call Mr. Luthor... let him know you’re on the road?”

Her heartbeat faltered for a second. If the scientist reached Lex before she did, the plan would be in a shambles. “Do not concern yourself,” was her flat response.

“Fine,” he growled. “Let’s go.”

“You got them! The council is going to be shocked and pleased. Aykira Milan, you are a heroine!” A euphoric Bern stared at Aykira over the interdimensional link as she displayed the opened black box, laden with its long awaited treasure. “But how? Yesterday, you said it might take more time.”

“Someday my friend,” she sighed, “over dinner and a chilled bottle of white zinfandel, I shall tell the entire story from beginning to end. Please set up coordinates on the interdimensional transport for the Crystals.”

“Certainly. Certainly. I trust you tied up all loose ends over there?”

“No.” She bowed her head than raised it. “Not exactly.”

Bern stopped working the transport device’s instrumentation and stared at the beautiful woman. A touch of sadness played across her visage. A quizzical look came upon his long face. He hesitated than queried slowly. “What do you mean by, ‘not exactly?’”

Taking a deep breath, she responded. “The crystals are coming over just as we all planned. However, after some consideration, I have decided to remain here.”

The gentle scientist looked directly into the monitor, his face stricken with dread. “But you just... can’t! The average life span on our world is different... twice as long as theirs! My dear, your lovely appearance does not match your age... early sixties is it not? In another five years it will be impossible to conceal the fact that you have not aged. What if something happens to me and return is unattainable? Life over there would be even lonelier than it is now. I would be...” With considerable effort, Bernard Klein took a moment to regain his composure, than continued. “Alexander’s impending marriage is driving you to an extremely rash decision. Please come

back. Resume your life and career on *this* world. We...we can work together again.”

Eternity passed as the two colleagues... friends stared at each other across an immeasurable gulf of displaced time and space. On her part, there was so much gratitude. Bern — and to a lesser extent Alexander — were her closet ties to the planet that saw her birth. The enormity of her mission, forced those too few communiqués to be tantalizingly brief. Yet those times reinforced in her mind the importance of the undertaking.

For himself, Aykira seemed the ultimate scientist, sacrificing her personal desires and life to save a loved one and a world. Over the months — on his side — of her departure, he strived to rework the mathematical error that had cast her adrift on an ‘alien’ shore. The incredible weight of that error for all those months taunted him.

“Yes. Alexander has a great deal to do with this decision. But my dear friend, I have *built* a life here, one which has obligations waiting to be fulfilled — paths which must be traveled. Hence I shall remain for another two, possibly four years.”

“But I still do not understand why?”

“I promise to return someday and explain everything. But now it is time for me to truly *live* my life here.” Her lips drew into a tearful smile. “Hold me to that dinner.” She placed the box along with its beacon device on the floor. “Send the beacon back after you retrieve the crystals. Oh, and Bern — one last favor?”

“Name it.”

“Please tell Alexander — I hope he and Toni are happy together. Good-bye for now my friend; be well.”

Further words were useless. Bern watched as Aykira quit her study, shutting the door firmly behind her.

When the long sought after crystals arrived in Bern’s world, Aykira Milan had departed for her rendezvous with Lex Luthor.

Lois threw up her hand in frustration. “That’s it! If another egghead talks about fossil fuels using ten dollar words I will scream! Let’s get back to the Planet!”

Her partner had to admit, the speakers were so dry and deathly boring they nearly put him to sleep. Between them, there were enough notes and recordings for three articles. With the evening edition deadline looming, it was time for them to head back to the Planet and write up the story.

Gathering their belongings, the reporters stepped over a number of disgruntled seated attendees and made their way out of the Reeves Venue. Upon exiting the venue, they passed through the main Exhibition Hall towards the escalator. Lois strode through the crowds purposefully, her partner walking beside her, his hand resting easily on the small of her back. Clark looked admiringly at his beautiful and determined partner. This might be a routine story, but she had every intention of giving it her all, it was one of the many reasons why he had fallen so deeply in love with her.

The escalator ride from level three to level one was uneventful; Clark’s vision took in the vast numbers of people walking about the Coates Center. Unconsciously he tried to listen out for any potential rescues, but the noise intensity of the busy place made it difficult. As they stepped off the escalator, Clark took in the delicious aromas wafting over from the food court, which was adjacent to the coat check area. He wondered if Lois was hungry when suddenly his partner stopped and nudged Clark with the sling. “Look, over there by the coat check! It’s Dr. Scott!”

“Dr. Scott? Who is Dr. Scott?” Clark asked while adjusting his glasses.

“It was his printer at LexSolar which provided all that information about the hijacking. Oh my, the guy with him is Cameron Axelrod, Solar Energy expert.” She nodded toward the tall, rugged looking man standing beside his shorter colleague. “He’s one of the shady scientists in Jack’s report. This Axelrod guy is definitely not in the same league as Bernie Klein. According to the background check, he is not above corporate scientific espionage purely for profit. Clark, listen in to their

conversation, maybe it'll lead to something."

"Hey Lois, this *is* an energy conference and they are scientists who specialize in solar energy. Maybe they're talking shop?"

"Yeah, when pigs fly! Come on, listen in for two minutes?" She pleaded. "Then we can head back to the office."

Clark was about to focus his super hearing toward the two men, when suddenly, a surprising third party walked up to the group. Both reporters gasped to see Lucky Leon talking quietly with the others.

"Isn't he supposed to be in jail?" they both chimed in at once.

"Last I heard." Clark muttered as he looked at his partner.

"We can talk to Bill about this later. I say we tail them. Who knows who else might crawl out of the woodwork? Hear anything interesting?" Her voice fairly tingled with excitement.

Clark face wore a mask of intense concentration, than shaking his head in disappointment he replied. "No, there's a lot of background noise. It's kind of hard to single out one conversation. Closing the distance between us and them should help."

In such a crowd of people, it was easy to move closer to the trio; still they had to be cautious. Lucky Leon might spot the reporters and warn his companions. Lois quickly grabbed a couple of free caps from a vendor's booth and placed them on their heads. The colorful caps provided excellent cover as comparable ones worn by other men and women wearing business attire similar to Lois and Clark's.

"Solar Energy Sails?" Clark said as he looked at the title written across the cap's brim than donned it.

Lois smirked than said, "Come on Clark, this *is* an energy conference, the caps will help us blend in. I'll get my jacket, it'll give you a chance to listen!"

Guardedly, the partners eased over to the far side of the coat check. While Lois handed her token to the waiting attendant, Clark focused on the trio's conversation.

"What do you mean the crystals are fourteen short? The deal was we get *all* of them." Cameron Axelrod spoke in a thick Bostonian accent with clipped, harsh tones.

Dr. Scott, looking very uncomfortable, but endeavoring to hold his own with Axelrod, responded. "Yeah, well, Luthor's money footed the bill for the original theft. If it had not been for him, we wouldn't have any crystals at all! When he and that irritating assistant of his requested them I couldn't refuse, it would be too suspicious. Besides Cam, there's plenty to go around! When and where do we meet tonight?"

Cameron, only slightly mollified for the moment pointed his chin to Leon. "First you tell us Luthor has nothing to do with this, then you say he wants the crystals. Get your lies straight! As long as we get the bulk of the crystals, understand?" Jerking his thumb towards Leon, he said. "This is the man with the answers. Where and when does the 'exchange' take place, Leon?"

"Best place possible. . .tomorrow night Metropolis Harbor's Pier 17." The Russian responded without his usual enthusiasm.

The short man glared up at his taller companion, "But that's where we robbed the Shackleton! Are you crazy! What's with the change of plans? It was supposed to be tonight!"

"Relax, Frederick! A *slight* change only! Friend Cameron has arranged special transportation for the crystals. Why worry? Police aren't going to be looking for us. The robbery was months ago. Be there with *all* the remaining crystals at nine o'clock sharp tomorrow night. Dr. Cameron and the rest of us will be expecting you." Leon placed a beefy hand on Scott's shoulder and smiled. "After all, there is much money on the table. Once the crystals are in our possession, Scott will be free of all gambling debts and can travel anywhere he wishes, no longer held back by men like Lex Luthor."

Dr. Scott's bland face slowly took on the appearance of a man who feels justified for all his actions. "Thank you, Leon. It's good to know someone understands." He looked coldly at Cameron, the last comment aimed at him.

"Fine. Fine. We see you tomorrow night." Leon slipped back into

his role of a friendly Russian teddy bear. He smiled broadly and shook Dr. Scott's hand, then sent him on his way.

"Quick Clark! Scott's getting away." Lois had been anxiously watching the exchange after retrieving her jacket and was ready to follow the errant scientist.

"Wait a second! There might be more to the conversation." Her partner strained to hear more then gave up, the two men had drifted into the sea of humanity.

Clark looked around for the scientist, but could find no sign of the man. He lowered his glasses and proceeded to scan the building. Anxious moments later, he looked into Lois' questioning face. In a disappointed voice he said, "Dr. Scott got away, all the doors and some of the walls in this building were painted with lead based paint." He proceeded to fill Lois in on the conversation among the three men.

"Great! But at least now we have a link between the crystals, Lex and his assistant Aykira. I told you she had something to do with the theft!" Her brown eyes twinkled with triumph.

Clark looked down at the excited woman before him, ignoring the multitudes of people and excessive noise. Bending down he whispered, a smile in his husky voice. "Score another one for Lois Lane's sharply honed reporter instincts."

"Yes! Now help me into my jacket please, we have to get back to the Planet before Perry starts screaming, 'Great shades of Elvis!'"

Lois and Clark bounded out of the elevator and walked briskly down the ramp. They passed a surprised Applegate who nimbly avoided the partners as they raced to Jack's empty cubicle.

"Jack!" Lois' voice bellowed into the newsroom. "*Where* is that kid?"

Diane looked around from behind her monitor and piped up. "He has to be about somewhere, its late afternoon. Maybe he went to get a snack?"

"Thanks, Diane." The reporter said as she put down her briefcase and booted up the computer. Rolling her eyes, Lois groaned inwardly <The biggest story of the year is demanding to be written and that kid is taking a break? Wait till I get my hands on him!> Outwardly, she turned to her partner and said crisply, "Right. This story for Perry needs to be written up, let's compare notes, check our facts, and knock it out!"

"Yes Ma'am!" Clark smiled his signature heartbreaking grin.

She wanted to melt whenever he did that, but right now was the time for pounding out the article. Sitting at their desks the reporters started their separate writing preparation rituals. Lois removed a fresh pencil from her box of supplies. She always felt more like a writer with a razor-sharp No. 2 in her hand. Clark removed his jacket and laid it over the back of his chair. He rolled up his sleeves, turned on the computer, and started working on a rough draft.

They walked back and forth between their desks, looking over each other's shoulder, double-checking the names of various speakers and the titles of their speeches. Like a well-oiled piece of machinery, the newspaper journalist team of Lane and Kent bent to the task of producing a first-rate article, regardless of how unimportant the subject matter was to them. In the back of Lois' mind, she pondered. <If these crystals were recovered and their abilities properly harnessed, the fear of global warming would become a thing of the past.>

In the midst of their writing, Jack came over clutching a thick manila folder in his hand. "Hey, Miss Lane! Here you go; more information on Frederick Scott, physicist. Man, I have more money in the bank than he does! Guess that's what happens to gamblers."

Clark took the folder and scanned its contents. "This is great... and scary. No wonder Scott is playing fast and loose with Intergang."

His partner read over the material and very slowly a smile, the sweetness of which only a cat with a canary could appreciate, spread across her face. "Oh boy, this story is getting bigger every minute! Let's finish this other one Farmboy! Than we can start drafting an

article about Scott and company that'll take the Planet's circulation through the roof! Thanks Jack! You're out of the doghouse."

Nonplussed, the young man replied. "You're welcome. I didn't know I was in one." His mouth quirked into a half smile, then quickly caught the 'Mad Dog' expression on Lois' face. Jack wisely did an about face and beat a hasty retreat.

A scant forty minutes after the partners had strode down the ramp; the story arrived in Perry's inbox — with a full twenty minutes to spare before the evening edition's deadline. This despite Lois' insistent determination to peck out the story one-handed on her keyboard.

"Whew! The article is done." A pleased expression of satisfaction spread across Clark's face. "Let's hope Perry doesn't give us another assignment like that for awhile."

"Yeah." Lois responded after carefully taking a handful of M&M's out of the candy jar. "With this new information the investigation into the Shackleton hijacking *and* those blasted crystals ought to get a jumpstart!"

At that instant, Clark's desk phone rang out, causing the duo to jump. Clark walked over to his desk and picked up the receiver.

"Clark Kent. Daily Planet."

<<Good Afternoon Mr. Kent. It's Captain Maynard, General Zeitlin's adjutant. Since we cannot get in contact with Superman, I once again need to call you. Anything new about the crystals?>>

"Captain, Superman talked to me only a few minutes ago regarding a lead. He plans on following up and getting back to us."

<<I see. That's all well and good Mr. Kent, but I am sure you are aware of the military and possible terrorist applications the crystals have. Those of us at the Pentagon would sleep easier knowing they have been returned where they belong.>> The captain's voice was tight with strain.

A heavy sigh escaped the reporter's body, "Yes. I can pass that message onto him." The two men exchanged closing comments and ended the conversation.

Clark rotated his shoulders in an attempt to release the tension built up from the discussion. His partner noticed and came over. Without a word, she began a one handed massage on his tight back muscles. "Poor baby," she murmured, "your back feels like a pile of rocks."

"More like steel." Her partner deadpanned.

Instantly the reporters both began to giggle like a couple of school kids sharing a ridiculous joke.

Jimmy, carrying his beloved camera, having just returned from assignment, looked over to them and smiled. <Looks like life is back to normal for the 'Hottest Team In Town'.> The newsroom had not been the same without the easy banter between Lane and Kent. He had noticed ever since CK had arrived at the Daily Planet, Lois seemed to have softened. It had been a welcome change.

At that moment, the elevator doors slid open, revealing a disgruntled Perry White and close on his heels, Inspector Bill Henderson. Lois, seeing the lanky, laconic police officer, was about to shout out a witty greeting, when she noticed the man's face was more dour than usual. The remark died undeclared in her throat. He nodded a brief acknowledgement and continued following Perry into his office.

Lois, grasped the pencil tightly in her right hand, faced her partner and said. "Um, this *cannot* be good."

The words had barely escaped her mouth, when Perry stuck his gray head out his office and called. "Lois. Clark. Can I see you for a moment?" The two exchanged looks, shut off their respective computers, and walked into Perry's office. As soon as they entered, Perry closed the door and shut the blinds. A sign to all in the bullpen — the occupants were not to be disturbed.

Jimmy sauntered over to Jack's cramped cubicle. The photographer looked at his protégé and spoke softly. "I don't like that

look on Chief's face, I've seen it before, and it's never good. Plus Inspector Henderson's in the office."

"Do you suppose it has something to do with the article they're working on?" Jack asked.

"If there's one thing I've learned since those two partnered up, it's that you'll never know what to expect next from Lois and Clark! Come on, I'll help with that last piece of research for Diane's article." Consequently, the two young men bent to the task of finishing Jack's research, putting out of their minds whatever was taking place behind Perry's office door.

Part Seventeen

Lex Luthor sat patiently, waiting for Aykira to arrive. He found it oddly comforting to sit on the granite steps of the great museum and simply observe people in small clusters going about their lives. They walked up and down the expansive entry stairs of the museum. <Was it only two days ago I felt superior to all these gentle common folk?> He mused to himself. With earnest longing, Lex wished he was like them... ignorant of their life's end.

He observed intently the traffic as Metro cabbies drove on the active street skillfully avoiding busy pedestrians rushing about the city, only concerned with the cares of their lives. Gaudily painted buses packed with tourists from every point on the globe, stopped in front of the massive building disgorging their excitedly chattering occupants. Once the task was complete, the drivers eased the large vehicles expertly through four tight lanes of traffic.

The buildings surrounding the great museum seemed to mirror its massive appearance. The area had been built during the turn of the nineteenth century. The slightly greenish hint of oxidation on the rooftops was the only indication of age on the otherwise pristinely kept buildings. One of the ancient structures boasted of an extensive garden on the rooftop. Lex knew that to be the case, as the penthouse's female owner had given Lex a tour of that beautiful garden... as well as a private tour of its interior rooms. He regretted that liaison as he regretted so much in his life this particular afternoon.

Everything around him held a new intensity of meaning; a small tow-headed child hanging adoringly onto her father's hand. A determined sweaty runner pounded his way through the crowded city street. Noisy excited schoolchildren tumbled out of a big yellow bus, under the watchful eyes of their teachers. Along the sidewalks, street artists displayed their wares; everything from drawings of the Metropolis skyline, to hand thrown pottery, to the latest fad in porkpie straw hats.

The wind blew a gentle refreshing breeze over his body while the brilliant sun of early summer shone down. He had traveled all over the world's continents, but never once took the time to appreciate simple gifts of nature. Alas, he had been far too busy chasing the next business deal or some meaningless and empty pleasure.

He mused sadly; how might his honest, hard-working parents have perceived his success? Or rather, how might they have perceived his methods of achieving that success?

The ebb and flow of life in Metropolis moved pass him, ignorant that Lex Luthor's time was running out.

He fervently searched the crowds looking for the one person who was now his lifeline. Aykira... where was Aykira? Suddenly, he spotted her moving effortlessly past a glass enclosed bus shelter displaying a museum ad extolling the wonders of 18th century Korean pottery. She looked divine in an intricately hand knitted raspberry and cream pullover and exquisitely fitted blue jeans topped off with a raspberry hued scarf loosely tied around her neck. Her black hair was done up in a twisted braid, perfect for the changeable early summer weather.

As the object of his heart's desire drew closer, one bitter reprimanding thought ran through his mind. <Why did I wait so long to reveal my feelings?>

She approached him with gleaming hazel eyes. Lex mused, <Does this magnificent creature pity me? No, I trust my abilities and could

not have misjudged her so greatly. Whatever it was the lady wants to say, I will listen with an open mind and heart. Nothing earthly will cause me to withdraw last night's proposal. Truly, for the first time in my life, love's gentle embrace enfolds me.> He touched a protective hand to his jacket pocket and smiled.

With a straightforward confidence Aykira did not feel, she walked up the expansive granite steps and smiled tremulously at Lex, as he stood and grasped her outstretched hand. By the concerned gaze of those obsidian eyes, she perceived the melancholy look on her face was evident. Determined to begin their rendezvous with a light air, Aykira spoke with wry amusement in her voice.

"Lex, black jeans and a white shirt are a dangerous combination on you."

"Thank you. Let us not dance around words, what is wrong my love?" He said as they embraced.

"A... as you were last night, so am I today. Where do I begin?"

Lex indicated an empty black wrought iron and wooden bench at the bottom of the granite stairs. Silently they made their way downward then sat facing each other, hand in hand. Lex spoke very softly, "Concentrate on the place best to begin, and then start."

Aykira nodded, took a minute to calm herself, then started speaking. "Everything I am about to reveal will sound utterly fantastic. However, if our relationship is to work, Lex, there must be complete honesty between us. To begin with, I knew all about your nefarious business dealings, both before I began to work for you and quite a few afterwards. Nigel St. John and Mrs. Cox were only too happy to provide all the information I needed, especially after the correct persuasion was applied."

Lex's mouth dropped open in stunned shock. "H... how. How did they..."

She held up a slim brown hand, requesting his silence. "Neither the ex-MI6 agent nor your former assistant had much of a choice in the matter. They were out-manuevered by someone... not of this planet... this Earth." Reading the expression of shocked disbelief on his face, she clarified her words quickly. "No, I am *not* from Krypton, but from *another* Earth, a parallel universe. A world which benignly exists side by side with this one. There are differences, some subtle, some not so."

Shocked, and not a little bit frightened, Lex snatched his hands away from her. The engaging, intimate moment between them passed. "Aykira, I do not find this amusing. It is all too much."

"Sadly, it is all too true." The graceful woman turned, staring at the man before her anxiously waiting. She pondered how much to reveal. "I came here six years ago to help my world... and save the m... everyone I love."

"My home is planet Earth... an alternative reality Earth. With the help of a brilliant invention, an interdimensional transport device, I was able to cross over from my universe to yours. My mission was to enter Barontech's facilities in Leeds, England and remove twelve Harmonic Crystals to take back to my world for study and replication. Unfortunately, the calculations were off ever so slightly, causing me to arrive in Metropolis six years and some months prior to their creation."

Gazing at Lex for the briefest of moments, Aykira paused to draw in a breath. "Yes, six very long, lonely, but productive years. Now, as you say, let me start at the 'true' beginning."

As Perry White began to have a serious dialogue with his top investigative reporting team, in his office at the Daily Planet, on a certain bench near the Greystroke Museum, a rather incredulous Lex Luthor continued listening to the strangest story he had ever heard.

"Pollution of the environment forced humanity to face the very real possibility of destroying the Earth. In an unprecedented effort, all nations banded together to discontinue using fossil fuels. The decision to utilize wind power and solar energy were sufficient for a decade or so, unfortunately, the technology could not keep up with the world's demands. It was critical to find a more efficient method of using solar energy."

"What about nuclear energy?" Lex, now thoroughly drawn into the narrative, inquired.

Aykira suppressed a shudder. "Two major nuclear accidents had occurred years before; a small city in Nova Scotia was vaporized. Our council imposed a strict quarantine immediately. The surrounding land shall not be visited, much less inhabitable for untold centuries. Another accident at a power plant in Los Angeles created shock waves that nearly caused America's west coast to plunge into the Pacific Ocean. Thankfully, the Man of Steel was able to prevent it from happening... barely. Needless to say nuclear energy shall never be seriously considered as a power source again."

"Our brightest scientists from S.T.A.R. Labs and Barontech joined forces to create a source of cheap, clean energy. Without going into extensive technical details, suffice to say after several years of experimentation the crystals were conceived and the two laboratories set up assessments by the hundreds."

"Oh Lex, those were exhilarating days! Our teams worked relentlessly on improving the crystal's ability to harness energy from the sun. A number of years passed, but at last experiments moved from within the laboratory to 'real life' tests: engine mock-ups, power trials, and finally converting established engines to accept the crystals. Each new experiment yielded fresh, impressive results. The Harmonic Crystals technology was applied to car engines, building generators and small single engine planes. Our most ambitious trial was powering a city the size of Metropolis for one hour, with a crystal the size of my fist."

Aykira watched his reaction carefully. Despite Luthor's original desire to deny her tale, hearing about such amazing feats of technology and engineering shocked him into silence. She knew he was calculating the long-term benefits, both financial and environmental, such an energy source presented.

"Our crystals were on track to permanently solve mankind's energy problems. Bern was confident the crystals could be mass-produced within five years. It was a monumental achievement."

"Who is Bern?" Her companion inquired.

Aykira broke off speaking, and understanding that revealing her world held doppelgangers of this alternative world's inhabitants might prove overwhelming, she merely said. "He is the genius behind the interdimensional transport device."

"He must be a brilliant man." Lex answered soberly.

She nodded absently and proceeded with the narrative. "It was shortly after the city trial that *all* the crystals were returned to Barontech's main physics laboratory for additional tests, when the storage facility experienced a dreadful catastrophe." Aykira stopped; her voice quaked ever so slightly. "The entire team was killed instantly. It destroyed everything: notes, exhibits, test results, and every crystal then in existence. It was an act of coldblooded corporate sabotage. I will not complicate an already outlandish story with excessive details of what happened next. Suffice to say the persons responsible were apprehended and punished to the limit for their offenses."

"Whoever planned and carried out such a crime must be insane." Lex's voice was surprisingly harsh.

He watched as she suddenly bolted up from the bench, the athletic body shaking in remembered rage and shock. "Yes, it was a crime. Against all those innocent lives snuffed out; simply because a rival technology firm could not achieve the same answers in time to please some stockholders!" It took a moment or two to compose herself; Lex arose, walked over and held her icy hand, caressing it gently.

This was no performance; he realized without a doubt, Aykira was telling the truth. Still he was a man who dealt in hard evidence. As of yet she had not provided any solid facts to her narrative. Yes, she knew about the crystals, but she could have acquired that knowledge from her position at LexCorp.

As if Aykira could read his thoughts, she smiled weakly at him, drew in a ragged breath than spoke. "I am getting ahead of myself"

again. Let me show you something.”

She removed the silver ring with the etchings from her finger and placed it in the palm of her hand. The ring began to glow than unexpectedly a picture of one of the crystals she had examined in Dr. Scott’s office appeared just above the ring.

“What is this... a hologram?” Lex asked in surprise.

“Yes. A technology that is still greatly underdeveloped here. As you can see this is a three dimensional picture of a crystal. One of a dozen... I acquired this morning.”

Perry’s office felt claustrophobic. Normally whenever Henderson showed up at the Planet, it was to share additional information *after* a case. However, today, the tension within the office was uncomfortably palatable.

After folding his tall frame like a pocket knife into one of Perry’s plaid covered chairs, the police detective, without preamble, came straight to the point. “I have to ask, Lane, what were you doing near LexSolar the morning of the break-in? The officer who spoke with you said something funny I couldn’t get out of my head. Your hair was wet and matted down... almost like a hat or wig had been on it fairly recently.

“Huh? What does my *hair* have to do with anything?” Lois replied. “For crying out loud, it was *raining!* I didn’t have my umbrella, so my hair got wet! As for why I was there, I told Perry this earlier — checking out a lead.” Her anxious eyes darted to Clark, pleading for help.

Her partner immediately picked up the ball... and ran with it. “It’s true, Bill, she was helping me follow up on a lead for Superman. After all, *he* couldn’t go into the hotel and expect a confidential source to meet him in public. Remember, the microprocessors stolen from the Shackleton over two almost three months ago?” Lois gazed at Clark in gratitude.

“Oh yeah, those mysterious crates of microprocessors owned by LexCorp,” Henderson said thoughtfully. “The ones everybody and their brother has attempted to locate. Seems like *nobody* has been able to discover the whereabouts of those things.”

“As a matter of fact,” Clark continued, warming to his subject. “I just got off the phone with General Zeitlin’s adjutant, Captain Maynard. He wanted to know if either Lois and I or Superman had any additional leads. The military is very anxious to recover those particular crates. Anyhow, Lois was in effect working for the military, so neither of us could mention it to anyone. It was on a need-to-know basis, a case of national security...” “Clark said this last with a slight shrug of his shoulder. As if, the case meant little or nothing to him. <Anything to get Bill off our scent.> He thought to himself.

Henderson’s facial expression changed perceptibly to one of relief. Regardless of how often he and Lane would scrap, there was a grudging respect for the prickly female reporter. Lois had a long history of breaking and entering into places, especially corrupt corporations and criminal lairs. Places the Metropolis Police Department would long to enter, but could not without copious amounts of paperwork. However, because she had always handed the evidence over to him, he deliberately ignored her behavior. This time it was different. Her clandestine activities might possibly come under scrutiny from groups considerably above his pay grade — especially if Lex Luthor started making waves.

The Inspector obviously could tell the inky newspaper ‘wall of silence’ had been drawn protectively around her. Especially since Lane was allowing her partner to do all the talking. He decided it was better to permit the reporters to pursue the case... for the time being.

“Humph! National security? I figured there had to be something to ‘Mad Dog’ Lane’s backing down after being told the break-in was a false alarm.” Henderson stood up and was getting ready to leave when he pointed at Lois’ arm and asked. “When does the sling come off?”

“Tomorrow morning! But, if I can see the doctor after work, tonight!” Lois answered.

“That’s good. I’d ask you how it happened, but the *explanation* might come under the title of ‘national security’. According to one of the LexSolar security guards, he discharged his weapon and apparently hit the intruder, since blood was found on the scene.” Perry’s office was plunged into guilty silence as the reporters and their boss refused to respond to Henderson’s words. The stillness was all that Henderson needed to confirm his suspicions. “When you two print up that article, I expect to hear the *whole* story... behind the story.” With a curt nod to Perry, the detective departed the office.

“Judas Priest!” Perry’s voice boomed after the door closed. “Lois. Clark. What in Sam Hill is going on around here? Bill Henderson is a good man. I hated lying to him.”

“Chief, you didn’t actually ‘lie’ to him.” Lois said, looking contrite.

“Besides we *are* assisting General Zeitlin in this investigation... since he asked for Superman’s help.” Clark added.

“That’s right!” His partner jumped in. “Anyhow, that science convention you sent us on yielded more than just a *crisp* story. We saw Dr. Scott there... with Lucky Leon!”

“Lucky Leon? The former KGB spy and Intergang assassin turned cheesy gadget entrepreneur? Isn’t he supposed to be in jail?” Perry wasn’t sure how many more surprises this conversation with his reporters could possibly yield.

“Yeah, that’s what we thought too,” Lois snorted in derision. “Urgh! Clark, we were supposed to ask Henderson why Leon is walking around free! Anyhow, Scott is the scientist whose office I... um... visited. His computer contained an extensive amount of information on the crystals. The printout revealed a lot of information, above all else, the name of the men who stole them! Dr. Scott is meeting those men at Pier 17 tomorrow for the payoff. Tailing him tomorrow night will lead us to the crystals and their underworld purchasers!”

Perry jumped out of his chair, his face flushed with excitement and started to yell, when he remembered his blood pressure. Because he tried to calm himself somewhat before he spoke, his voice was considerably lower than it would have been. “Wait a minute. Crystals? *What* crystals? I thought only computer equipment was stolen off the Shackleton? You two *knew* who stole the equipment and that slipped your minds while Henderson was here? What are you trying to do? Kill your ole’ Editor?” He bellowed, all attempts at remaining calm vanished.

“Uh, we can tell you about the crystals later, Perry? They are the real reason why the ship was hijacked in the first place.” Lois answered.

“Besides, Lois can’t admit to finding the evidence, Chief.” Clark shook his head forlornly. “The documents were completely soaked from the heavy downpour during her getaway. We were able to make out just enough information to point us in the right direction. Since she obtained the evidence illegally, no way will it stand up in court. We have to catch Dr. Scott red-handed with the crystals and Intergang’s cohorts while the transaction is taking place.”

“Intergang? That’s the group Diana Stride supposedly worked for?” Perry asked.

“No supposed about it Chief, they are real and tomorrow night we are going to prove it.” Clark’s voice was calm, but determination was heard in it rumbling tones.

The long, eventful afternoon was steadily fading away as the couple sat on the bench. The numerous vendors and artisans were packing up their stands and museum visitors began exiting the building. Aykira could sense Lex’s mind whirling as every new facet of the story unfolded. Presenting him with evidence of the ring’s ability to create holograms was the final proof she needed for him to believe her account. Nevertheless, she continued; otherwise, she could never summon the courage to speak so candidly again. “As on this world, a lab technician discovered he had a benign brain tumor. His physician and the company’s cleared him for work. With the provision,

he report in for monthly follow-ups. After three such examinations it was discovered the tumor's growth had ceased and was reduced in size. Within six months, all traces of the affliction had vanished."

"Of course all manner of neurological tests were run on the young man but everything came back within normal limits. After narrowing down the search for why this was happening, it was noted, all personnel working on the crystals never experienced headaches of any kind...except oddly enough caffeine withdrawal."

"Now that is a pity." Lex remarked dryly.

An odd little smile quirked the corners of Aykira's mouth, this narrative did have a faint touch of humor. "Yes, think how many coffee drinkers would love that! Unfortunately, it was impossible to keep such a discovery under wraps from the medical community. Neurologists with patients, some of them quite young, suffering from incurable tumors, converged on our laboratory in Leeds, England. The crystals were able to cure or remarkably slow down most cases, merely by long-term exposure. Only those m... most advanced stages cases were incurable." Words started tumbling out of her mouth in a torrent. Aykira's habitual calm wavered than crumbled. "If I had known about those damnable crystals months ago, we could have stopped the tumor, saved your life. Lex, th...this is so unfair!"

His dark eyes flashed for a moment with apprehension, remembering his upcoming surgery, however his voice revealed enormous restraint. "No, my love, it is *not* your fault, I ignored all the signs. How could you have known? Every time you wanted to help, I pushed you away. Never blame yourself." He was deeply touched by her compassion for him and once again, he regretted precious time wasted.

For some time they sat on the bench motionless. Aykira kept her head on Lex's chest, listening to the ebb and flow of his breathing. She wanted to stay in that position for hours enveloped in his warmth. Truly, she wanted to leave this hard bench behind and be somewhere quiet and safe, away from the concerns of crystals, covert missions, and wayward scientists. Their time was so fleeting, Aykira desired to be at home, warmly wrapped in the comfort of scented satin sheets — with Lex by her side.

After a few minutes, she lifted her head from his chest, wiped her tear streaked face, and began speaking again. "The explosion at our Barontech facilities contained every single crystal on the planet. Decades of research brutally annihilated within seconds. It was the height of arrogance, that we hadn't shared our research with others. As it was, only the most rudimentary notes were available in our Metropolis location. We would have to start again. By that time, another from our remaining team discovered he was afflicted with a malignant brain tumor; fortunately, it was in the early stages. However, he could not possibly survive waiting for us to reconstruct our research. Our plant's energy demands had not abated. If anything, they had increased a hundredfold. There were also the medical benefits of the crystals; countless lives were at stake."

"I'm beginning to understand the extreme desperation of your planet's inhabitants," Lex whispered. "To have the solution in your grasp and have it snatched away... incredible."

"For several years your world had been under observation by Bern and his associate... Alexander. It was more of a hobby rather than serious study. After the destruction of the crystals, Bern noticed there were similar scientific discoveries. They turned their observations to the science labs of Leeds in general and Barontech in particular. Imagine their relief upon discovering Harmonic Crystals research was taking place there as well. Bern, Alexander and I worked to conceive of a daring plan, to acquire a small number of crystals from your world for replication."

"The crystals can be duplicated?"

"Yes. However, acquiring them constituted our biggest problem. Bern's newly developed interdimensional device was our only hope. We needed someone to step into the dimensional corridor that separated your universe from ours. Since no one knew where the

'agent' might end up working. the person had to be extremely well versed in physics, computer programming, and design, specifically microprocessors, finance and office administrative duties. The agent also had to blend seamlessly with the local population. Bern wanted to go himself, but I volunteered instead. With the Leeds' team gone, Bern was our remaining chief scientist in the Harmonic Crystals research. If I did not return, the loss was not too great."

After spending a few more minutes with their harried boss, Lois and Clark walked back to their desks. Lois picked up the thick manila folder with her right hand, and said, "Care to go over this file in-depth?"

"No problem. The conference room is clear. Let's read it together." They stepped into the room and shut the door, Clark lowered the shutters and began going over the file at super speed. Lois watched bemused. <Super powers are not just for leaping over tall buildings. Think of all the hours of research time we'll save!>

"So partner, what did you come up with?" Lois asked when Clark closed the file.

"It's just as Jack said, Dr. Scott is in a very bad way financially. All of his credit cards are charged to the limit. He borrowed cash against them to pay off his gambling debts. According to this, he even owes your friend Louie, a cool hundred grand."

"Ouch! No wonder he's selling the crystals. Louie is nice to people who *don't* owe him money. After all, 'he knows guys who know guys'." She said mimicking the loan shark's voice.

"Yeah, but I don't think Dr. Scott is interested in getting to *know* any of those guys," her partner countered.

"Hmmm, Clark we should confront him now and get the crystals. He's probably scared to death of those Intergang creeps. Besides if Lex discovers he's selling the crystals, the Metropolis Police department might be his best bet."

"No, we discussed this already with Perry. Scott *must* be apprehended in the act of selling the crystals to Lucky Leon. Otherwise, the charges might not stick, then we can't convince him to turn state's evidence on Luthor. Dr. Scott is our key to this entire investigation. Look, let's call Captain Maynard and have him put a very discreet tail on the good doctor.

"Why not contact Henderson? He is our best ally in the MPD." Lois responded.

Clark shook his head, "Normally, Bill would be the first person to contact. But, this case has gone light years beyond corporate espionage. General Zeitlin and probably the NSA need to be involved. Especially now with Lucky Leon taking an active interest in acquiring the crystals for Intergang."

"Okay we'll play it that way. While you're talking to Maynard, I'm going to call your buddy Dr. Pete Ross and make an appointment to get this sling removed tonight. Than I could do with a bite to eat and *you* are buying, Farmboy."

Lois felt like a giddy teen-ager with melting insides as she watched Clark smile that sweet sincere grin of his as they departed the conference room.

The shadows of the surrounding trees grew longer as the afternoon waned on, yet Aykira continued her narrative. "Our security council did not relish the concept of stealing from another world. The plan to 'smash and grab' some of this Earth's crystals was deemed too dangerous and Bern was ordered to destroy the device and his notes."

"Sounds like politicians try to have the upper hand in your world as well as in mine." Lex said sarcastically.

"True, but the council had never gone up against us before. Perhaps it was arrogance on our part, but Bern, Alexander and I were angered by the shortsightedness of their decision. So rather than destroy the device, we dismantled it in Leeds and rebuilt it in our New Troy facility."

"What if the Council had discovered your plans and destroyed the machine while you were still here?" Lex's question hung in the air.

Aykira seemed reluctant to answer and was impatient to reach the part of her story directly involving him.

“After two months of training and studying the customs of this Earth I was ready. I stepped into Bern’s machine, wearing my beacon device to pull me instantly back in case anything went wrong.”

Luthor looked at her hands and examined the ubiquitous adornment on her right index finger. He touched it gently. “I take it this ring is the beacon device?”

“Yes, exactly! I appeared in Metropolis at night in an area not far from the Coates Center. I approached a newspaper stand and read the date. My heart sank... imagine my shock to discover my arrival was six and a half years *before* the crystals would arrive in Metropolis! Bern’s calculations were off by a mere decimal point. A tiny error had marooned me on this Earth until the right day arrived. Using the beacon device, I sent a coded message explaining my situation. Both Alexander and Bern were powerless to assist me; needless to say, I panicked.”

“Why not return home? Have this Bern correct the problem and send you back?”

“Prior to entering the device, my body’s molecular structure was attuned temporarily to your world’s environment. It would cause permanent neurological damage, should I go through the process again. Returning and then coming back was impossible, only one round-trip ticket per customer. There was no one else with the precise background to attempt my mission. Remember we were doing this against our government’s wishes.”

Aykira moved a trembling hand over her face, as if to mentally brush away unpleasant memories. “There was no safe place for me to go. My mission required me to be here long enough to steal the crystals and return home. Imagine...no ID, credit cards or driver’s license. Respectable hotels frown upon lone women without luggage, who can only pay in cash. My first night in your world was spent on the rooftop of an old brownstone I managed to break into. The rather seedy neighborhood was Suicide Slope.”

“No wonder you are so determined to see that project cleared by the Executive Board.” Lex whispered softly.

“True. What a terrible night! Crouching on a sagging roof in the midst of smelly rags, broken bottles, surrounded by mouse droppings and heaven knows what other vermin, I vowed to succeed. Frightened, shivering with cold and utterly alone, I was too terrified to shut my eyes. Lex, it may sound clichéd, but it was the most miserable night of my life.”

Lex took her hand and gripped it tightly. She had survived an incredible ordeal to accomplish her goal. Nonetheless, he certainly did not expect this turn of events. It meant traveling between her world and his was out of the question. Should she go back to her own Earth rather than marry him they would never meet again. The thought filled him with a deep sense of loss and trepidation. <Is that why she is telling me this amazing story? Does Aykira plan on returning to her world, leaving me to face my last days alone?> Lex refused to believe she intended to abandon him. It was not in her nature to be unnecessarily cruel. Once again, he touched his jacket pocket, hoping he was right.

Aykira, naturally unaware of Lex’s ruminations, continued speaking. “The die was cast, contact with Bern and Alexander was limited to short conversations every month. I was on my own, stranded in an alternative universe armed with only a rudimentary knowledge of its history and customs. It became necessary to create and establish a viable identity *without* stealing anyone else’s. The only way to accomplish that was hacking into the two main computer systems within this country: Social Security and the Internal Revenue Service. Believe me, it took several sessions from different locations to create and ‘fill out’ Aykira Milan. My records had to be flawless, able to hold up under the most rigorous computer background checks.”

Lex smiled that killer grin of his. “Bravo, my sweet. It was

flawless; you survived the extensive background check from LexCorp’s best security people.”

She returned his accolade with a brilliant smile of her own. “Thank you. Once those records were positioned, everything else fell into place: school and medical records, credit cards, driver’s license, and passport. Aykira Milan for thirty-years ‘exists’ in your world. Although certain ‘gaps’ like early school years were explained by a convenient ‘fire’ which destroyed some records. The fact that I was an orphan helped with others.”

“Wait, how did you pay for simple living prior to this? Surely the currency in your world and ours differ?” Lex inquired.

“Not as much as you might imagine, Bern provided five thousand dollars in emergency funds. Yet that was hardly enough money to support myself and finance my mission. Greater funds were required and they had to be gotten *legally*, without drawing any undue attention from the IRS. Hence, not long after firmly establishing my identity, I traveled to Las Vegas.

“Once there I drew on my mathematical knowledge to create a system for cheating at Blackjack. I moved carefully from casino to casino, playing only until I won either five hundred or a thousand dollars. It took two months ‘working’ in this manner to amass a sizable sum of money. I banked most of it, planning on quietly investing the funds later, in such things as computer, pharmaceutical and sporting goods companies.”

“Wise choice,” Lex said.

She caught the look of renewed admiration and a not a little surprise on his face. Aykira for her part blushed with embarrassment at all her mathematical knowledge going to waste as a card sharp.

“I returned to Metropolis, rented a cramped studio apartment just outside of Suicide Slum. Oh Lex, the place was a horrible pigsty! I shared it with about 3,000 different forms of insect and rodent life!” She barely managed to suppress a shudder. “Anyway, my blackjack earnings were placed in CD’s, savings accounts and some quiet investments, steadily building in case I ever needed emergency capital. With time on my hands, I decided to expand my education on the history of *this* universe by attending distance-learning classes from MIT and Harvard.”

Lex held up his hand and stopped her. “This is an amazing story. By your sheer tenacity you should be running your own company, not working as my assistant.”

She shrugged, smiled, and picked up the narrative.

“After living here in Metropolis for six months, I joined a temporary agency that had a strong relationship with LexCorp. It took some maneuvering, but eventually I was sent to work in the records section. By making myself an indispensable member of that department, I was entrusted to file very sensitive material. That place was a gold mine of information!”

“Eventually Human Resources, impressed with my performance in the records department, decided to use my skills throughout the building and hired me as an in-house contractor. I worked in several different sections on long-term assignments, progressively developing a solid standing with many department heads. A person’s reputation and good references within a company is more valuable than an impressive resume.”

Lex nodded sagely, “Your sterling record and character was a couple of the reasons why you were brought in after Mrs. Cox’s departure.”

“Yes, wasn’t that fortunate...” Aykira’s tone was at first ironic, than softened, she quickly continued. Thankfully when my studio apartment’s lease ran its course, I decided my next abode had to be owned and not rented, a permanent residence to serve as my home base.

“I take it that’s where your communication equipment is hidden?”

She looked at Lex. He knew her much better than she thought.

<Why should I be so surprised? His greatest ability is character assessment.> “Yes, with my investment earnings, I purchased a spacious three-bedroom condominium at the Lucerne. Once my living

situation was firmly established, Bern started sending over larger and more efficient communication equipment as well as the return transport device. Unfortunately, my conversations were still limited to once a month, as the energy required for such communications is enormous.”

“Living in the heart of Metropolis was an adventure. Suddenly, I could visit museums, plays, read light-hearted novels. At... home, my studies, consultation work for science publications, and a few newspapers took up a great deal of my time. My work with the Harmonic Crystals research team consumed the rest. But, here in Metropolis, although I had a mission, there was still time to learn how to enjoy life!”

Lex smiled, “Yes, I could see that from the pictures, books and artwork in your office and home. Quite the impressive library and travelogue. Please continue.”

Her earlier enthusiasm slightly dampened, Aykira nodded and said. “However, I could not keep track of the crystals’ research and development long distance. It became necessary to travel to England and spend a year working in Oxford’s Faculty of Scientific History department.”

“I did read that in your resume, at the time I thought it rather odd.” Lex said.

“My position at Oxford was extremely helpful developing contacts with the some of the scientists at Barontech. From them I was able to extract the location of the Harmonic Crystals research. “

“Hmm, that seems difficult to believe, it’s two hundred miles between Barontech and Oxford. How were such contacts established? The crystal research was under tight security, how did you find out about its initial location?”

“Most of the scientists and technicians who worked at the facility traveled to Oxford for additional research materials. Being away from home, they often went to pubs bored and lonely. A couple of friendly pints of ale with an equally bored scientific history ‘student’ and they would talk about anything.”

Aykira sensed Lex’s mind filing the information and deciding to find out which scientists and technicians were on the payroll back then. Employees with loose tongues were intolerable at LexCorp and Barontech.

“Do not concern yourself with the ones who spoke with me... I later ‘convinced’ them talking with strangers about such an important project would be detrimental to their careers. It kept them frightened and wary of chatting to outsiders.”

He believed her. “Very well, why didn’t you stay at Oxford and wait for the crystals to be created?”

“My contacts within Barontech were to keep me informed of any advancements made in crystal technology. They were also to alert me when the crystals were shipped to EPRAD. Also, it had taken too long to create and establish my American identity without having to fabricate a British one. Besides there were other more pressing matters to attend to.”

“Oh?” Lex raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

“Yes, traveling to Zurich, Switzerland to deal with your former major domo... Nigel St. John.”

Lois and Clark walked quickly to her Jeep. Her partner took the keys and opened the passenger side to let her in. Once he was properly strapped into his seat, she asked.

“So, where are you taking me for dinner, Farmboy?”

“A place where the food is great, the company better and we are both on a first name basis with the owner.”

“Uncle Mike’s restaurant, Café Americana?”

“None other! I want to try something other than take out. Besides he makes the best lasagna outside of Rome!”

“Rome? So when are you taking me there?”

“Whenever you want, Lois, but not tonight, I told Mike to expect us.”

“Sounds good to me. Besides, I need to set up my next cooking

lesson.”

“Good!” Clark said with a little too much enthusiasm.

“I heard that! What are you implying?”

“Who me? Nothing.” His partner worked hard to hide his smirk.

The rest of the drive to Café Americana was spent with Clark gently teasing his partner about her endeavor into the world of cooking.

“Yes, I wanted to know how you coerced Nigel and Mrs. Cox into providing information about me.”

“I appealed to their survival instincts.” Aykira replied grimly.

“No one can say either of them *lacks* that particular skill.” Lex acknowledged dryly.

“It was all part of my plan to become a permanent employee of LexCorp. Working in the executive offices would have been impractical as long as either of them was lurking about.”

“Why?”

She looked into his eyes not believing he could be so foolish to ask such a question and responded. “They are killers.”

Lex took a deep breath and slowly nodded his head. “True, go on.”

“Before confronting them it was essential to have as much negative information about them as possible. My investments provided me with a cash flow to hire a rather brilliant British hacker to glean material about Nigel and Mrs. Cox. Armed with files and a .380 Browning I traveled to Zurich and asked him to reconsider returning to the States and your employment.”

“He agreed? I thought Nigel might have killed you for breaching his privacy.”

“Oh Lex, he almost did.” She stood up and paced in front of the bench, shivering with the memory of that particular encounter.

“What was his response?”

“He pulled a gun on me.”

“Ah yes, dear Nigel was never one for mincing words.” Lex muttered with grudging admiration. “How did you get away?”

“Blackmail... again.”

He bowed his head in thought, “So that’s the reason he did not return to the States? Still, considering Nigel’s somewhat checkered past, he should have killed you for breaching his privacy.”

She wondered if telling Lex the entire truth about her encounter with Nigel St. John would be in her favor. It was definitely not her finest hour, but the experience taught her the important of attending every meeting well prepared and in this particular case, well armed.

She had traveled to Zurich and was staying in the trendy Plaza Royal Hotel, a location perfectly suited for Aykira’s cover, that of a corporate traveler looking to ‘obtain’ a Rembrandt for her employer. The ‘Royal’ as locals liked to call it is one of Zurich’s premier luxury addresses. Encircled by the prestigious financial institutions of Paradeplatz Square, The Royal is close to the fashionable boutiques on Bahnhofstrasse, the scenic beauty of Lake Zurich and the captivating attractions in Altstadt (Old Town), Niederdorf, the Congress Hall and Opera House.

Intent on playing the role to the hilt, she went shopping at Les Ambassadeurs for clothes she would wear here and in South America. Her favorites of the items; a chic burgundy sheath dress, and matching high heels; they made her body appear sleek, yet businesslike. The meeting with Nigel St. John had been set up by her hacker associate in London. The cover story was she needed to talk with a person of discretion who could locate a particular Rembrandt to be sold to a private collector. It was well known within the art world that St. John had a penchant for fine art. Someone of his tastes and excellent breeding could not resist such a tempting job.

When Nigel had first arrived, he was all cordiality, in the manner of a nineteenth century English country gentleman. If Aykira was not fully aware of the man’s ruthless reputation, his charisma might have put her off guard. The warm colors and wooden furnishings of the elegant suite was the perfect unperturbed and genial setting for

business associates to converse. They were taking coffee and light refreshments, cranberry currant scones and rustic tarts, in the sitting area of her suite. Effortless conversation centered on various activities available to a seasoned traveler such as herself.

“Have you had a chance to visit the Opera House, my dear? It is only a short walk from this establishment.” Nigel’s cultured voice and English accent set the tone for a very lovely conversation.

“No, unfortunately I have not. My employer is very demanding of my time. Perhaps on my next visit?” Aykira said coyly as she sipped the rich strong coffee.

“A pity. If I am still residing in Zurich, it would be an honor to act as your escort.”

“Why, Mr. St. John, such kindness is very much appreciated.”

Despite her visitor’s façade of ease, there was a shrewd watchfulness about him, the older man’s body never truly relaxed. She noted that he did not drink his coffee until she had taken a delicate sip from her own cup. Then and only then did he drink and take a bite of pastry.

Aykira tried very hard not to stare at him as the liquid slide down his throat. <At last!> She prepared for the next step in her plan.

Their rather witty and entertaining conversation continued for a few minutes more. Nigel, obviously enchanted by his hostess, had allowed his body to relax since drinking the coffee. Finally, the discussion came around to the fictional Rembrandt job she wanted him to attend to. She said casually, “Lex Luthor suggested only you could handle this particular ‘assignment’ with efficiency and dare I say, style?”

The pleasant and easygoing manner Nigel displayed previously evaporated like early morning dew. This man was not a befuddled Oxford professor or nervous Barontech scientist caught delivering secrets. He was a trained killer, a man without morals or conscience. With a swiftness belying his age, he had stood, stepped around the wooden coffee table, roughly removed her from the comfortable chair, and backed her up against the unyielding wall. A gun suddenly appeared in his hand. She was surprised! It was such a small gun looking for all the world like something a woman would carry. It took a second for her to realize that only someone truly expert with arms would trust something that small. Besides, something that small would not make a lot of noise when it was fired; this made it all the more dangerous. Soundproofing wouldn’t even be necessary. She noted all of this while he brandished it close to her face.

“Now, tell me precisely what your knowledge is of my dealings with Mr. Luthor.” His voice, previously so kind and gentle, assaulted her hearing like fallen dead leaves. Nigel pushed the black weapon in her face, the acidic smell of sulfur emanating from the barrel. Her insides turned tight with fear. Its owner had fired it quite recently, and if she did not get out of this situation or provide the right answers, he intended to employ the destructive device again.

“I told you!” She spat the words out. “Mr. Luthor gave his name as a reference! I want to use your contacts here to acquire a Rembrandt! Is this the way you treat all of your prospective employers?” Her voice sounded weak and tinny.

“Miss Milan.” He whispered in her ear, his breath felt like a snake’s caress. “I hope money did not exchange hands to bring me here. Mr. Luthor currently has exclusive rights to my employ, although that is about to change. He is not in the habit of ‘hiring out’ his best employees; especially ones such as myself. It is a question of loyalty. If you had spent any serious time with the man, you would know that. So tell me, who sent you?”

Aykira’s heart jumped several beats. Heavy beads of sweat burst onto her forehead slide down her twisted face to her throat, what could she possibly tell this man? Despite the pounding in her ears, his speech was ever so slightly slurred. She needed more time.

Ignorant of his victim’s anguished thoughts Nigel continued. “P... perhaps you are an operative from my former employers at MI6? Possibly a plant from the KGB or Mossad? No, sending such an oblivious rank amateur could only be considered a waste of time and

resources to them and an insult me.”

She watched the man’s time worn face, as he mentally seemed to be weighting factors. Fear raced through her mind and paralyzed her body. The sheer arrogance of confronting such a professional was utter madness. Anxious thoughts raced through her mind. <What if it doesn’t work in time? How do I escape? I chose this hotel because the suites are all soundproofed. That little precaution could be my undoing.>

His smooth cultured voice, devoid of pity spoke. “Come my dear, we shall take the freight elevator downstairs and then perhaps a splendid ride into the country? After all, Switzerland is known worldwide for its scenic *deep* lakes.” He turned her around, twisted her arm behind her back and pushed Aykira towards the door.

“H...how do you know someone might not be following us?” She asked working hard to keep her voice under control.

The condescending tone of his voice sounded like a schoolmaster scolding an ill-bred student, “Young woman, if you were acting with a team of professional operatives, the suite door would be in splinters by now. Whatever this game is, it can mean me no good.”

She stopped, listened to his voice again and knew the drug she had placed in his coffee was taking effect and decided to keep him talking. “Ah yes, Lex said you were the best right hand man he ever had. He is looking forward to your return.” This time, her voice *did* sound strong and confident.

“Nice try Miss Milan, but you do not know Mr. Luthor at all.

Hmm, pity that I...I shall not be returning to the states. Zurich is the perfect place for a man of my particular skills to...live quietly. Perhaps buy a small villa and grow orchids.”

Feeling confident Aykira continued as he pushed her forward.

“Nigel St. John — retire? But...but what about your exclusive contract with Mr. Luthor?”

“Yes well, Mr. Luthor shall get along perfectly well without me.

Besides he or should I say LexCorp’s corporate accounts, has provided an excellent retirement program.”

Straining against his viselike grip, she managed to painfully turn around and face Nigel; they were almost to the door leading to the outside corridor and a tall standing next to floor lamp. “It takes a great deal of nerve to steal from Lex Luthor. Despite my current situation, I congratulate you!”

Nigel looked Aykira over with eyes that reminded her of a shark. His gaze held no anger, only seeing her as a minor problem needing erasure. Any hope of talking him out of ending her life was completely gone once he admitted stealing from Luthor. As she stared at him, a fine sheen of perspiration appeared on Nigel’s forehead, his eyes blinked and the grip on the gun grew unsteady. The eyes shifted from confidence to irritation.

“Wh...what was in the coffee?” He shouted. “Tell me!” He pushed her against wall hard. He grabbed her by the throat and hooked two fingers under her pearl necklace and slowly began twisting it.

“C...can’t breathe... stop!” She begged.

“Tell me wench! What w...was in the coffee?” He roared. Even as he said it, his grip was loosening and she could see out the corner of her eye the hand holding the gun was shaking uncontrollably now. She rammed her two inch spike heel into his left ankle. He screamed in pain releasing her throat, the necklace broke, scattering the pearls across the wooden floor. Still he was not about to surrender, he reached for Aykira, intent of grabbing her throat again; and with his other hand he managed to aim the gun at her. She was looking right down that small deadly barrel and she winced as she saw him squeeze the trigger. When the gun didn’t go off she realized that his grip with his non-dominant hand and with the effects of the drug in his system kept him from gripping the weapon hard enough to close the grip safety, preventing the gun from firing. She managed to wrench his hand away, not wanting to give him a second chance.

Savagely she pivoted on the balls of her feet out of his grasp. She grabbed the lamp and slammed it hard across his forearm. The gun fell from his grip onto the floor and only a second later his body followed.

British intelligence training and years of experience came to the forefront. Stubbornly he dragged his body towards the gun, which had slid to a stop at the door.

She stepped in front of him and picked up the gun and studied it carefully. <The drug affected him so badly, he couldn't release the grip safety!> She thought.

She ripped the cord from the lamp's base and none too gently tied up his arms and legs. Drugged or not, this man was *never* to be underestimated. As the minutes passed, the adrenaline leached out of strained muscles. She remembered leaning against wall, panting and crying all at the same time. Opening the door to her suite just a crack she listened for the sound of the hotel's security detail. After three minutes had passed, she shut the door and looked down at St. John.

He was quickly regaining consciousness but he lay flaccidly on the floor, his joints and muscles unresponsive. His facial features were bland, but calculating anger and perhaps a touch of fear shone in his eyes. Speaking with arrogance she most definitely did not feel she knelt down and brought her face close to Nigel's. "Maybe retirement is a good plan after all Nigel. Ten years ago you certainly would not be bested by a 'rank amateur'! The drug simulates a stroke. I took the precaution of drinking the counter agent before you arrived so it would have no effect on me."

"What... do you... want? Who... are you?" His speech was painfully slow and labored. All evidence of the witty European gentleman vanished. In his place lay an angry wounded animal, willing, but unable to strike back.

"Information... and a promise. In exchange I will let you live."

Nigel glared at her, then with a barely perceptible nod of the head, agreed.

"Good. Oh and another thing, you owe me two thousand dollars for my necklace... those are Tahitian South Sea pearls."

Aykira paused for a moment. Recalling her confrontation with the former MI6 operative was emotionally draining, then said, "Nigel was stealing from LexCorp's corporate accounts and hiding that money in Zurich, Switzerland. It's the real reason why he departed from Metropolis on an 'extended' vacation and then decided to retire."

The billionaire faced her, his dark eyes wide in shock. "What!"

"Yes. Nigel explained the process to me after I threatened to expose his scheme."

"Why didn't you reveal this when we first met?" Lex's face grew pinched and angry.

"At the time, our relationship was not on the same footing it is now." Aykira replied dryly. "He returned the principal funds, after the proper coaxing, to all the corporate accounts. I allowed him to keep the interest."

"That's still a sizable sum of money!" Lex retorted.

She deflected his outburst by speaking calmly. "Nigel was stealing from you, but the funds were located and most of it safely returned. The man is in Zurich, where he can cause no further harm to LexCorp. Yes, this may be very hurtful to your professional pride, but I can assure you, he will never come back to the states or talk about how he pulled one over on you. Nigel is well aware of the consequences."

The billionaire gave her a strange look then sat back on the bench shaking his head in disbelief.

"It was foolish of me to go up against someone like him alone. I am very grateful I took that extra precaution. Otherwise, once Nigel had pulled his gun my life would have been over."

"It certainly explains your mania for meeting preparation."

She nodded her head and continued. "Immediately following my 'discussion' with Nigel I got on a plane to Brazil and had a meeting with Mrs. Cox."

"Angelica, I take it, was not cooperative either?"

"No — not in the slightest. But at least we did not fight over the matter."

"Well, that's something at least." Lex said dryly.

"Mrs. Cox genuinely enjoyed working for you, Lex. She fully

intended on returning to her former position when Nigel 'refused to come back'. I confronted her and suggested she remain in Brazil rather than work for you. I even offered her my investment earnings, but she laughed at me. Apparently the sum I offered was paltry in comparison to her paychecks from you."

Lex mused. "I'm pleased she was so loyal."

"Yes, loyal, but Mrs. Cox has ice water for blood, *everyone* was afraid of her. I remember hearing stories about her before arriving in the Executive Suite."

"Ah well, her manner was demanding, but she got the job done."

"Perhaps she did, however, at what price? Such methods destroyed your Executive Suite's corporate culture. Did you ever wonder why the HR department always had problems filling the positions from the inside? *No one* wanted to work with her. If she had returned, the administrative staff and some of the executives fully intended to walk out. Since I took the administrative helm, most people are content and not burned out from unnecessary stress."

Her companion was silent during this exchange. <Angelica might have been perfect to back me up in a dark alley. However, as a corporate administrator, perhaps her techniques *did* leave much to be desired.> He thought.

"In any case when Mrs. Cox had her car accident I visited her at the hospital. It did not take much persuading to convince her, this sudden 'accident' was my doing. She was quite frightened and decided to remain in Brazil as per my suggestion."

"Clever. Very clever."

She shook her head sadly, "It is not something to be proud of. With so many other lives in the balance, there was no other choice. In any case after my meeting with Mrs. Cox I returned to Metropolis and re-established my relationship with LexCorp... and you."

"Me?" He stared at her in surprise. "We met prior to your working for me?"

"Oh yes. Before leaving for Oxford, I was the event-planning director's assistant. Andreia Lopes was a brilliant event coordinator. In my eight months of working for her she taught me a great deal about that profession. Without her gentle tutelage, my first assignment planning the White Orchid Ball would not have been such a rousing social success. Sadly, although she enjoyed working for LexCorp, the demands of her family were more important."

She watched as amazed realization slowly dawned on his face. "Aykira, that is impossible! Ms. Lopes' last assistant was plump, with terrible skin; her taste in clothes was abysmal."

In tight-lipped discomfort, Aykira whispered. "Even our world has the ugly duckling tale."

He cast a serious eye over the beautiful black woman before him and shook his head in amazement.

"Lex, with my education and experience I can run rings around any of your top executives. However, considering my appearance at that time, none of you would have noticed any project I helmed. Women like Mrs. Cox always receive a male executive's attention. My appearance hindered me from going any further within the company than my tiny cubicle in the LexCorp Events Planning department.

"Traveling to England, Europe and South America, nurtured an internal desire to 'polish' myself. Working with Andreia, meeting clients, and representing LexCorp, was the essential beginnings of my metamorphosis; time spent in the gym, proper diet, learning how to apply make-up and teaching myself how to walk and dress became a part of my life's routine. After returning from Brazil, I asked to become an in-house contractor. The HR department offered me the choice of two positions: provisional head of events planning or as your assistant."

Aykira did not relate her first meeting with Lex. How utterly shocking the similarity of his appearance with that of Alexander. Two big differences, Alexander worn his hair slicked back and he loved to wear jeans when not in the office. A stark, hurtful memory of Lex walking past her in the hallways of the Event Planning Department as if she did not exist came to mind. In truth, she did not warrant his

attention, she was only a minor assistant and a plain one in the bargain.

“I... I had no idea. This story is the most incredible I have ever heard. It’s impossible to believe!”

“Why is it so difficult? In this alternative world and mine, a man *flies!* Is stepping between parallel universes so hard to grasp? In any case, my mission is accomplished. This morning before our meeting, your creature, Dr. Scott handed over to me a dozen crystals. I know he was the one commissioned by you to plan and implement the Shackleton hijacking. After the break-in at LexSolar, I used my knowledge of our computer systems to track down which computer and printer the security guards heard that night. It was a simple matter to discover which file had been printed then confront him and demand the crystals. He thought Lex Luthor had sent me over especially since you demanded two of them from him last night.”

She watched his obsidian eyes flash dangerously. Lex stood up from the bench and glowered angrily down at her. “How dare you! Those crystals are for Space Station Lex! My dream!”

She stood as well, glaring into his face, her voice hard. “My reasons were just and valid, given the choice for the people of my world. Speaking of dreams, how many *others* have had their own dashed by Lex Luthor in his pursuit of fame and fortune? Not a few, I wager.”

The two people continued glowering at each other; neither, it seemed were prepared to back down.

The sound of a throat clearing caused them to turn as one and face an elderly couple. The man wearing a very old-fashioned black suit and bowler hat spoke up in a clear British accent asked. “Ahem... excuse me. Are the two of you using that bench? My dear wife needs to sit down. Walking around the museum has quite undone her.”

“Oh yes, please, make yourself comfortable.” Aykira stepped away from the bench and beckoned the couple over. The man’s wife, also wearing clothes from an earlier time, sat down with a grace belying her years.

“Thank you, my dears.” The petite woman with quiet blue eyes smiled up at them. “Herbert and I came to have a look at the Italian art. We missed it when the exhibition was in London years ago.” She appraised Lex and Aykira than spoke crisply with all the weight of her years. “Please excuse the impertinence of an old woman, a handsome couple such as yourselves must see to it, not to allow silly distractions like arguments to harm your relationship. Youth and health only comes once. When it departs, hopefully wisdom and true friendship remain. Be each other’s friend.”

The old man smiled down at his wife, took her gloved hand, and patted it. “She speaks the truth. But then I am sure you are both aware of that.”

Tears bristled in Aykira’s eyes as the import of the old couple’s words hit her. “Thank you. My... husband and I have... much to discuss. Please enjoy the remains of the day.” So saying, she took Lex’s hand and they walked slowly away from the resting couple.

“Oh Herbert, should we have interfered?”

The old man sat down wearily next to his wife and said, “Yes, my dear. Not only for their sakes, but for the sake of Utopia.”

Lex and Aykira strolled for a time through the park as the afternoon light quietly faded, holding hands and allowing a companionable silence to envelope them. Somehow, during Aykira’s narrative they had forgotten length of years together was not promised to them. Now was the time to clear all the noise and foolishness away. Space Stations. Harmonic Crystals. Alternative worlds and crooked scientists needed to take a step back.

Lex’s respect, admiration, and love for this fantastic woman had increased tenfold since her arrival at the museum. She had the spirit and determination to do what no one else could conceive of doing. Stepping alone into a world not her own, to be a stranger in the midst of other strangers. Not only did this phenomenal creature survive, she

thrived. Turning what might have been a horrific setback to someone else into victory. Even if it might best him at his own game!

Before any more time elapsed, Lex needed to make the final arrangements with Sheldon Bender, Aykira’s knowledge and experience made her the perfect new head of LexCorp. The only obstacle, the greatest one, now that her mission was complete... would she remain in this world by his side?

A soft voice broke into his musings. “I did not mean to deceive you. Please forgive me. From the moment I meet you again at my job interview I felt the attraction between us. But unfortunately, I was torn between love or accomplishing my mission. Can we put all these other matters aside for a time and enjoy being a man and woman... in love?” Aykira looked at him, hazel eyes pleading.

All the anger had drained from Lex. “Yes my sweet. We need to put the past aside and be content with whatever time remains... for us.”

They had walked to the great stone bridge in Centennial Park. After crossing over, they came to another bench, this one weathered with the passage of time, but it held a rustic charm. He asked her to take a seat. With a flourish, Lex got down on one knee, pulled out a small cobalt box with a gold latch from his jacket pocket, and held it out to a surprised Aykira.

“Lex...?” She asked in a hushed whisper.

Slowly the man she truly loved opened the box. Nestled on a divan of midnight blue velvet, a ring sparkled. Not just any ring but one created by famed jewelry designer and merchant Layne O’Neil. The ring was a three-carat emerald-cut yellow colored diamond, in a 24k gold setting with tiny white diamond accents.

“It’s... beyond beautiful,” she gasped in surprise.

“Beside your loveliness and inner strength, it is a lifeless piece of crystallized carbon.” Lex held his breath. “Dearest Aykira Milan, I cannot ask this again. Will you...?”

Cupping her slender brown hands over his, she answered, “Yes Lex, with all my heart.”

Slowly, he slid the ring on her finger, gathered her in his arms and whispered gently. “Thank you, Aykira, for making us complete.” He bent down and brought his lips tenderly to hers and they kissed with a deliciously intense passion tempered by unrestrained joy.

Part Eighteen

Lois sat back in perfect ease after finishing her meal. Dinner at Uncle Mike’s was always fun and relaxing... especially when someone else was footing the bill. During the earlier part of their meal, she and Clark had discussed tomorrow night’s steakout on Pier 17, hoping to apprehend Dr. Scott and his cohorts. A thought came to Lois’ mind, <We are going back to stakeout the same place where this entire investigation began... Pier 17. Clark and I are together now, our relationship has grown so much since April.>

Yes, here she was with Clark, her partner and now — boyfriend talking about everything that had happened. Who would have thought when he picked her up this morning they might be on the verge of cracking the Shackleton hijacking case? Beyond the case, their friendship had shifted into something they both eagerly wished for and now the time had finally arrived to explore it.

Yes, it was also time to explore the real man behind Superman’s suit.

She listened to him talk, looking at the handsome face and those wire-rimmed glasses, which so perfectly hid Metropolis’ greatest hero. He had fooled everyone, including the Daily Planet’s best investigative reporter, but now she was in on the secret. It was gratifying, yet humbling all at the same time. This was a secret to be hidden from everyone, most definitely the media. If word spilled out somehow, it was not just Clark’s life that would be affected, but also Pete Ross’s, her own and his folks. She imagined the town of Smallville besieged by a locust swarm of print and television reporters, the sleepy little community’s peaceful existence forever destroyed. Lois fiercely resolved within her heart, no one must ever discover Clark’s secret; it

was to be guarded as carefully as she guarded her love for him.

Clark watched her, blissfully unaware of Lois' internal thoughts. He was grateful to have dinner at Mike's so he could spend a completely undistracted evening with Lois. He promised himself that tonight, other than a quick visit to Pete Ross's office she was all his. No rescues, stakeouts or villains were going to interrupt them... he hoped.

He wanted to take her to Smallville soon for dinner with his folks. It was important for her to know them on a different footing than before. There must be no more secrets between his parents and Lois; she was now a part of the family.

Just then, Uncle Mike bustled over. "How's the food tonight?"

"The lasagna was entirely delicious Mike! But I think I better stop here!" Clark exclaimed patting his stomach.

"What, no room for dessert? You don't know what you are missing! Tell him, Mike!" Lois chimed in.

Mike laid his hand on Lois's shoulder, his eyes twinkling. "My niece knows a thing or two about my kitchen. Come on, have some cheesecake, to go."

Clark laughed a warm hearty sound. "Okay. You both win. I'll take one for the road."

"There you go! It'll only take a minute to make up a bag for both of you." Turning to Clark, the older man smiled and said, "Oh, and by the way, your money is no good here." With a wink to Lois, her uncle moved off to another table before Clark could speak.

"Mike can't do that!" Clark said.

"Of course he can, Clark," Lois said. "He *owns* the restaurant. Besides, it's Mike's way of showing he approves of you."

"Glad to know it. But let's not come here too often, I don't like the idea of taking advantage of his kindness."

"Hmmm, maybe. However, as his niece I plead the 'friends and family package!'"

"Still, there are other places in Metropolis to eat." He began to name a few well-known restaurants, some a little pricey on a humble reporter's salary.

"OK, Kent. But while we're waiting for our 'to go' boxes, I have a question." Lois' eyes darted around the crowded café, edged closer to Clark, lowered her voice, and asked. "I always wondered, how you ever learned... to, you know." She made a swooping motion with her free arm.

Clark also lowered his voice and proceeded to tell her about Hutch Parlow, Ida Schultz, navigation lessons, cartography, and his numerous trips to the library.

"They sound like wonderful people. Why didn't you mention them while we were in Smallville chasing down that nutcase, Trask?"

With a quick shrug of his shoulders, Clark said, "Mrs. Schultz retired to Florida to be near her family. Mr. Parlow has been deceased for several years. Since they were not around, it didn't make sense to mention them. Besides, if memory serves me correctly, Trask had us pretty busy."

Lois' eyes twinkled with mischief. "I wonder what they might think if they knew why you *really* wanted to learn about maps."

The young man's eyes gazed off into the distance. "Mrs. Schultz — it's impossible to say, but I think Hutch Parlow was an even-tempered, intelligent man who could probably accept the idea of an alien inhabiting Earth."

"Sounds like he was a man ahead of his time," she remarked.

Clark nodded in quiet agreement and was about to say more when Uncle Mike came up to the table with two crisp white bags. "We're out of cheesecake. So, there's two Italian pastries in each bag — savor every bite." He shook his finger at Lois and said in a commanding voice. "This dessert is to be enjoyed by each of you — it is *not* to be used as payment for the local snitch!"

His niece's face flushed deep red, and she squeaked out an embarrassed, "I... how... uh sorry, Uncle Mike."

The annoyance on Mike's face vanished; he bent over, kissed Lois

on the cheek, and smiled. "No worries. Now you kids enjoy yourselves." Turning to Clark, he said. "Please make sure she gets home safe."

"I promise, Uncle Mike," the younger man responded in a playfully solemn tone.

Mike nodded at them both, said his farewells, and then once again hurried off toward the kitchen.

The couple exited into the night, taking in the sights and sounds of an early summer Metropolis evening. Clark took her hand as they walked towards Metropolis General Hospital. Pete Ross should be well into his shift by the time they arrived.

"I'm looking forward to getting this thing off and moving my arm around like a normal person," Lois said. "Hopefully, Pete won't put me through a battery of tests and then decide to make me keep it on for a few more days. After all this is just a scratch, not a real bullet wound. He can't leave my arm in a sling forever... can he?" she asked.

Clark's mouth worked hard to keep from chuckling. His partner had once again launched into full babble mode. She was definitely nervous about seeing Pete. Lois wanted the sling off and fervently hoped there was no residual damage from the bullet grazing her arm. Hence, to ward off her apprehension, she babbled.

"Everything should be fine Lois. Pete Ross is an excellent doctor. You'll see."

His partner gave him a fragile smile and quipped, "Fine! Let's get this stupid thing off my arm!"

A radiant and attractively dressed couple alighted from the Metro cab, unclasping hands; they walked into the LexCorp Tower lobby and resumed their normal behavior befitting the CEO of LexCorp and his competent assistant. Upon boarding Lex's private elevator, the ruse continued, as they were mindful of surveillance cameras.

The elevator doors opened soundlessly to Lex's office suite. They stepped into the elegantly decorated room waited for the doors to close, then fell enthusiastically into each other's arms.

"Today has been full of surprises!" Aykira murmured as she nibbled her beloved's ear.

Lex was quietly exploring the hollow of her throat, so his voice came as a low growl. "There is so much more to do, my sweet. However, I have asked Chef Andre to prepare a light supper — something special in honor of our engagement. Afterwards, we can have... dessert." His dark eyes were heavy lidded with barely concealed passion.

Her hazel eyes gazed deep into his with a knowing look. "There is only one place for us to exchange our vows, Lex, and that is on Santorini Island at your residence — The Stone Villa."

The expression on Lex's face was one of approval. "Perfect. It is my favorite place in the world, where I can truly be myself." Kissing her neck again he asked, "Shall we invite Mayor Chiros and his family? He can preside over the nuptials."

"But aren't most Greek ceremonies done in the Mayor's office?" Aykira responded huskily, her slender fingers caressing his back.

Her fiancé looked up, smiled and whispered in her ear. "Of course, he has performed dozens of ceremonies within the confines of his office. But I'm sure Spiros will make an exception in our case." Lex stopped, pulled back from her, his countenance took on a pensive look. "Aykira, I wish to keep this entire affair very quiet and private. If the media discovered we are together, much less engaged, our lives will become fodder for every bottom feeder with a camera lenses. I'm used to that sort of thing, but it will leave you open to an uncomfortable amount of scrutiny. Undoubtedly the question will arise as to why the rush and secrecy."

"Agreed." She sighed. "We can expect cameras to be snapping away from now until we return from our wedding and honeymoon. It is best I handle the arrangements myself, as if we were attending a conference in Athens." She bowed her head in deep thought then looked up at him. "My... life has not allowed me to have many friends, only acquaintances, but I wish to invite Jane and her husband

Jason. She could be my Matron of Honor.”

Lex held her shoulders, kissed her full lips gently, then, whispered. “If it pleases you, by all means do so. I was thinking of asking Asabi to act as my best man at our wedding.”

Suddenly Aykira’s body stiffened under Lex’s fingers, and she whispered softly. “Wedding... right... wedding, *our* wedding. Oh my stars! There *are* a thousand things to do!” Instead of seeing the confident and cool agent provocateur, Lex watched his fiancée change into someone completely alien and positively delightful... a bride.

“Let me see... flights, passports, the cake, alerting the staff on Santorini Island... my dress!”

The sensual celebratory mood was broken as Aykira moved away from her amorous fiancé and in the direction of the staircase. “Let me handle everything! You just worry about your clothes and our wedding rings. Please tell Chef Andre I apologize about dinner. If I call now, the Santorini staff can begin working on preparing the Villa for our arrival.” She blew him a kiss, opened the door, and ran downstairs.

Lex continued looking after at the door after she had closed it and began to hum a tune, when he heard the gentle swish of fabric, which signaled him to the quiet presence of Asabi. “May I offer my sincere congratulations? I see the future Mrs. Luthor looks quite radiant and happy, sir.”

His employer turned to him with a small smile on his face. “Yes she does, doesn’t she? A determined bride with a million details running through her mind. This time I picked a winner. You no doubt heard my request?”

Asabi bowed at the waist, “It would be an honor, sir. Are there any pressing details I can assist you or Ms. Milan with?”

“Yes, please ask the jewelry designer, Mrs. O’Neil to send over wedding band samples for myself and Aykira. Tell her I appreciate utmost secrecy. My ring will require special attention. I suspect at the rate my fiancé is going, everything will be done by this time tomorrow evening.”

Asabi nodded acknowledgement and silently departed from the room.

“See, Lois? Nothing to worry about, Pete had us out of there in under an hour. How does your arm feel?”

“A little sore, the scar won’t be as bad as I thought, but otherwise... fine. Thanks for driving me home; I’ll pick you up tomorrow.”

A companionable, but tense silence hung between them as Clark walked Lois up the front stairs of her Carter Avenue apartment building and then down the short hallway to Apt. 501. Clark took the key from Lois’ hand and opened the door. She stood quite still for a moment. The day was winding down to its inevitable end, but neither could ignore the heightened, but not unpleasant sexual tension between them.

A tremulous smile played on Lois’s lips as she looked up at her partner. “Clark, this has been a special day, you and me fighting the bad guys once again. I can hardly wait until tomorrow! Another stakeout... with my partner, best friend... and now boyfriend.”

“Oh, so I am no longer the ‘Hack from Nowheresville?’” He teased.

“Oh,” she snickered, “you’ll always be that... in a special way. But ‘boyfriend’ suits you... in so many ways.” Her voice grew soft and rich with desire; she leaned against the door and smiled saucily.

He took Lois’s face in his hands, leaned close to her and kissed first the right cheek, then the left, finally touching her warm, full lips. They had been sneaking around kissing each other whenever and wherever they could all day. Steve had caught them when he walked into the supply room. The big man had smiled, shook his head, and without missing a beat, turned around and closed the door behind him.

They were mortified, but upon returning to the bullpen, Steve treated them with the same respect as always. Clark was grateful Cat had not stumbled onto them or even worse — Ralph. Inflammatory gossip of their tryst would be all over the building within an hour. He

did not want to take that chance, especially after those ‘cutie’ comments from the obnoxious man last week.

Still, at this moment the kiss was more sincere, more sensual than any previous ones of the day. Perhaps because they were kissing in front of Lois’ apartment, with all the deliciously dangerous implications that particular location represented. The tip of his tongue teased hers; here was a kiss that began in cool springtime and ended in steamy summer. Clark could feel his heart beating with an urgency he had never experienced before; he desperately wanted to be so much closer to Lois.

“Care to... come inside?” Lois asked in a tenuously soft undertone when their lips parted.

“Y...yes. If it’s OK?”

“Oh Clark, it’s more than OK,” she whispered breathlessly as she grabbed his tie and pulled him into the apartment.

{Help! Help!} A familiar, lurching feeling overcame him and his heart slowed to a crawl. “Oh no!” He groaned aloud and his body slumped. “Lois, I have to go, there’s been some kind of explosion at Suicide Slum.”

She stepped back and made the familiar swooping motion with her newly mobile arm. “Superman is needed?”

“Desperately,” he groaned again. “I’ll meet you at the Planet tomorrow. This could be a long night.”

“Fine. Go. Oh, by the way,” she said a mischievous glint in her brown eyes. “Superman owes me an exclusive!”

“Deal... partner.” With that, Clark dashed out of the building. However, he heard Lois say breathlessly. “Somehow, I have to get used to that.”

Aykira entered her office suite to see Jane working diligently at yet another Power Point presentation. A feeling of tenderness crept into her heart watching the other woman working. <She has tried several times to be a friend as well as an assistant; here is the perfect opportunity for me to reciprocate.>

“Burning the midnight oil again, Jane? Do you not think it is time to knock off and take a small vacation, albeit a working one?”

The redhead looked up, and in a surprised voice said. “Boss, what are you doing here? What’s this talk about a vacation?”

“It is a very important assignment. One I can trust to only you and Jason. First, are your passports, yours and his up to date?”

Jane green eyes flashed with concern, “Of course. Aykira, is everything all right?”

“Everything is just fine. Lex and I need you to come with us to Greece.”

“Greece? When did this trip come up?” Jane’s face was awash in puzzlement.

“It is quite simple, really. Lex and I are getting married, and I would truly appreciate having you as my Matron of Honor and Jason as one of our guests.” As if to punctuate the statement, Aykira held out her left hand for Jane’s perusal.

In awestruck silence, Jane took the proffered hand and looked at the dazzling ring without uttering a sound. Her mouth formed the word ‘Wow’, but no other words seemed forthcoming.

Finally, a bemused Aykira could stand it no longer. “Jane, please say *something!*”

Her assistant held up her hand for silence, hit the speed dial for her husband’s cell phone number. Aykira could make out the deep voice of Jason Connelly. They exchanged pleasantries, then, Jane spoke quickly. “Jason, please tell your boss we are going on a short trip to Greece. So pack a bag for both of us. I think we’ll be leaving tomorrow evening. Honey, don’t worry, I’ll explain everything when I get home in a couple of hours.”

Aykira was about to laugh when her assistant stood up from her desk grabbed her by the hand and began pulling her into the luxury office suite, her heavy North Carolina accent more pronounced than usual. “OK. I want to hear *every* detail of how y’all managed to snare the most eligible bachelor in Metropolis, if not the whole world!”

The phone jangled noisily, just as Lois finished sliding the last deadbolt into place.

<Who could it be at this hour of the night? I probably don't need to answer it.> She decided to let the call go to the answering machine when a familiar voice rang out.

<<Hey, big sister, this is Lucy, pick-up the phone! Where in the world are you?>>

Lois made a dash for the phone before the answering machine hung up. "Hi, Lucy! How have you been?"

Lucy responded in typical Lane fashion — she babbled. <<"What's this about you being in some kind of accident? Why does Uncle Mike get to tell me news about my own sister? Why didn't you let anyone in the family know? Does this have to do with a big story? The Daily Planet is not your life. Speaking of lives, when are you going to get one? Lois, are you listening to me?">>

"Lucy! I hear Mother's words, but your voice. If you come up for air and let me get a word in edgewise, I'll tell you," her sister exclaimed.

<<"At last, she surfaces! What happened to you?">> Lucy demanded.

Lois bit her lip and wondered just how much to explain to her sister. So much *had* happened in the past two weeks, so much she could never really put in plain words. Although the sisters had had their differences, she really did not want to lie to her. She took her cue from Clark and decided that misdirection was the best alternative.

"Oh, Lucy, relax. My arm is out of the sling and I feel fine. But I did follow your advice and started seeing Clark Kent."

Absolute silence came from the other end of the phone.

"Lucy? Lucy? Hello, are you there?" Lois asked.

<<"When did this happen?">> Lucy squeaked.

"Oh, a couple of days ago, we just got back from having dinner at Uncle Mike's."

<<"Great.">> Lois could almost see the pout on Lucy's face.

<<"As soon as I leave Metropolis, all the cool stuff happens. Never mind that, what's he like? By the way, dinner at the Café Americana is *not* a date. It is dinner with family. He needs to take you to a romantic restaurant with candles and white linen tablecloths. We Lane women are *not* cheap dates!>>

"Listen Luce, much as I want to chat with you about all things Clark, it's been a very long day and I have to work tomorrow," Lois said while struggling to stifle a yawn. "Why don't we make a phone date for a little sister time this weekend... say Sunday morning?"

<<"Are you sure Clark can spare you?">> Lucy asked coyly.

"See, there you go making assumptions! Clark Kent is a man, not a Neanderthal. Of course that cannot be said for some of the guys, you've brought home! Oh Lucy, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to be cruel." Lois said in a rush, remembering Lucy's last serious relationship.

<<"Hey, it's okay! That mistake nearly cost Clark his life.">>

Lucy sighed. A brief, uncomfortable quiet came over the line. Both women were remembering Lucy's last monumental failure of a boyfriend and all the problems he caused. <<S... sorry Lois. This is awesome news about you and Clark. It's a cool change to have conversation about something else besides life at the Daily Planet!>>

"Thank you Lucy. He is a great guy." Lois yawned and continued. "I'll tell you everything soon."

<<OK. Good night, sis. Oh, wait — one question.>>

"Yeah, Lucy?"

<<Is he a good... kisser?>> Her sister barely managed to suppress a giggle.

Lois thought back to the sweet innocent kiss Clark had given her at his apartment on the terrible night of the break-in. The warm kisses they had shared today and finally the passionate, smoky searing embrace only a few moments ago outside her door. A slow minx-like smile spread over her lips as senses tingled anew with the memory.

"He's a great kisser *and* still my best friend. Good night sis."

"He proposed in Centennial Park? How romantic!"

"Yes," Aykira said. "In his heart, Lex is an old-fashioned kind of man."

"So the wedding is going to take place on the isle of Santorini? I hear that is the ultimate destination for romantic weddings on the cliffs."

"Ah yes, it is a beautiful island. Sadly, we shall not exchange vows on the cliffs. There's too great of a chance someone will recognize us and alert the media. I think our ceremony will take place in the villa itself, on the villa terrace overlooking the Mediterranean at sunset. We would like to keep everything private and small, hence the need for secrecy and expediency; otherwise the media will turn an intimate family event into a sound bite."

"Oh, it'll put a damper on the romantic aspects of the occasion all right!" Jane agreed earnestly.

"Since Lex is known for taking trips there on a whim, we thought it was the perfect location. Tomorrow, bright and early, you and I have a bit of shopping to do for our dresses and anything else we might need. There is a beautiful shop downtown called Darcy's, which specializes in one-of-a-kind items. They cater to celebrities and women who do not wish to be disturbed by the paparazzi."

Jane's face was beaming, "This is all so exciting!" She looked at her watch and said, "I better get home, Jason is probably wonderin' what's going on. Aykira, I'm honored and pleased, this is quite a privilege! Mr. Luthor has always been interested in you, but it seemed like you never noticed."

"Oh, I noticed him. But my job came first."

"What changed your mind?"

"Let us just say one very large part of my job is done." Aykira smiled, but only a little touched her eyes. "We can share the car service. At this hour, taking the Metro is out of the question."

Clark returned to his apartment around two o'clock in the morning, his suit covered in soot. The explosion itself did not cause much damage; helping with the cleanup was a greater problem. Still, among himself, Metropolis police and fire department, a speedy rescue ensued. After taking a quick hot shower and feeding a very hungry cat, Clark wrote up an account for the Daily Planet, copied in Lois, and sent it over to Perry's inbox.

After putting on a pair of black sleeping shorts, he stretched himself out on the bed, allowing sleep to claim him. However, in his mind's eye was the vision of his beautiful Lois. Despite an untimely interruption, the happy memory of her kiss lingered on. He smiled to himself; it had been a very long, but satisfying day.

"Hey CK! Good morning!" Jimmy called out to his friend. "The only thing this story of the explosion at Suicide Slum needed was a few pictures to make it sing! Next time, how about giving me a call, OK?" Jimmy ran his hand through the thatch of black hair and asked, "What were you doing on that side of town in the middle of the night anyway?"

"Clark was looking for a story like any good reporter, Jimmy," Lois interjected after taking a sip of her low-fat mocha, "instead of waiting around for one to fall in his lap."

"Ah, wait a second, Lois. I have been hanging around with Steve, Eduardo *and* Diane taking pictures of all kinds of events! But Clark always gets the really explosive stories... um pardon the pun."

"No problem, Jimmy. Look, the next time one of my sources has a hot tip, I'll give you a call. What's wrong, chief giving you a hard time again?" Clark inquired.

Crestfallen, the photographer said, "No. But, I want to be promoted to a *full-time* staff photographer. Especially since Jack is doing so great as copyboy/researcher's assistant. The only thing that's going to impress the chief is some amazing pictures. Otherwise, a promotion ain't never gonna happen."

"Don't worry Jim, Perry sees your work. Be patient," Lois said in a rare consoling tone.

“I’m patient,” the young man sighed as he walked away, “but my wallet isn’t”.

“Good bit of misdirection, Lois. Thanks.” Clark whispered.

“Anytime, partner,” she whispered back. Then in a slightly louder voice, asked, “What about our stakeout plans this evening?”

Suddenly Ralph popped up between them and smiled. “Since when do you two have to make plans? If you need backup, I’m your man!”

A look of utter disdain appeared on Lois’ face. “This is a *private* conversation, Ralph.”

“Yeah, but if this stakeout is as big as you think, another set of eyes might be of help.”

“Lois and I are fully capable of handling a routine surveillance. Please find your own stories.” Clark worked hard to conceal his irritation.

The obsequious man threw up his arms in frustration. “Humph! ‘The Hottest Team in Town’ doesn’t need anybody’s help!” He stalked back to his desk.

Clark looked after him, shook his head, and answered, “As I was saying before we were interrupted, we should be good to go. Remember, Cameron told Dr. Scott to be at Pier 17 at nine o’clock. All we have to do is wait until they show up.”

“Ooh, this stakeout is going to be great! Maybe we should bring Jimmy along. He can take pictures of the military police when they make the bust,” Lois suggested.

“Intergang photos yes. General Zeitlin’s people most *definitely* not. Any photos in the newspaper might compromise some of his Special Forces team. Those guys like to keep a low profile.”

Lois rolled her eyes in exasperation, “Fine! But right now, partner, we have a bigger problem.”

Clark looked back at her, slightly confused. “Bigger problem?”

“Yeah, it’s only nine thirty in the morning. Any other prospective outlines we have on our computer hard drives are nothing compared to this. What are we going to do until it’s time to go on the stakeout?”

Lunchtime at the Daily Planet saw Lois, Clark and Jimmy congregating around her desk, discussing the plans for that night’s activities. “What do you mean the Chief has you on assignment *already*? I thought you wanted to be in on our little night job? Besides, Clark is bringing pizza – with pepperoni!” Lois said in a coaxing manner.

“Yeah, I thought so, too, Lois, but the Chilean ambassador’s gala is presenting some big time gift to First Lady Gardener. Applegate was supposed to be Eduardo’s photographer, but he’s out sick. Perry gave me this opportunity. What could I do? Now I have to spend my lunch hour renting a tux on short notice.” Jimmy shrugged his shoulders and looked torn between his friends and his future career as a photojournalist.

“It’s OK, Jimmy this is your first chance to really show the chief what you can do. Make the best of it.” Clark said while patting his friend on the back. “Hey, talk with Sal at Maxim’s Tuxedo; tell him you know me. I’ve steered a little business his way, it might help you.”

“Smooth, CK! I owe you one.” Jimmy sprinted up the ramp, a smile on his face.

Cat, wearing a bright orange knit dress that left nothing to the imagination, eased over to the duo. “Jimmy looks happy. What’s the occasion?”

“He has an assignment, taking pictures of First Lady Gardener at the Chilean embassy gala. Lois responded. “Clark just gave him the name of the place to get a tux.”

“Maxim’s?” The gossip reporter nodded thoughtfully, “Sal will treat him well. The Daily Planet has been sending customers to them for years.” The gossip columnist swiftly shifted gears. “Speaking of events, I’m looking forward to seeing you both at my wedding. Lois, leave the ‘reporter’ at home and wear something to ‘turn up the sizzle.”

“I know how to dress for a wedding...” Lois began, a little heat in

her voice.

“Besides, Lois is going as my date, no need for her to ‘sizzle’ anyone... except me,” Clark interjected, a wide grin spread across his face.

Cat smiled slyly, acknowledging they were a couple. “*No one* could imagine either of you with anyone else. Oh, I wanted to ask a favor, Clark. George’s cousin can’t make the wedding and we need someone to act as an attendant. Could you get a tuxedo? I understand if this is a little last minute...”

“It’s not a problem. Actually, I do have one in my closet. What time should we be there?”

“Please try to arrive at the Farragut Hotel around five o’clock. The ceremony starts at six.”

“Then Lois and I will be there at four thirty. Just to be on the safe side in case anything happens.”

Cat, visibly relieved, smiled easily, a hint of her old seductress self. She wiggled her eyebrows and answered in a pleased voice. “Great! After the ceremony, you two can have a little fun! Meanwhile Diane and I need to do a bit of wedding shopping. Thank you, Clark.” Her long elegant hands lightly touched Clark’s shoulders playfully, then she walked away.

“Hah! Engagement to George *has* changed that woman, but she still has a ways to go.” Lois said, shaking her head.

“See Lois, I told you. Cat needed someone to bring out the kindness she has inside, not the sly temptress.”

Lois face softened. “It took someone like George Amundsen to perceive that kindness and bring it to the surface, just like it took Clark Kent to work past my barriers to see me. It is such qualities which make men like you and George so rare.”

All the background noise of the newsroom fell away, the couple gazed longingly into each other’s eyes and almost embraced, but the sound of Perry’s voice ringing out through the bullpen stopped them. “Lois. Clark. My office. Pronto!”

Scant moments later the duo found themselves once again seated on the ugly plaid couch as Perry grilled them about their stakeout strategy.

“Look I know you two kids are experts at covert surveillance, but this is Intergang we are talking about here. You *need* back-up.”

We asked Jimmy to come with us chief, but now he’s working that embassy assignment.” Lois said, not a little annoyed.

“Hah! I sent the kid on that assignment *because* you asked him along. Walking through Suicide Slum looking for Superman is one thing; tangling with Intergang is another. What little we do know about these guys tells my reporter’s instincts to be cautious! Frankly, if Superman were not a friend of yours Kent, I wouldn’t be too keen about sending you two out there either.”

“Perry, this is the story of a lifetime for Jimmy. He really wants to prove himself to you.” Clark spoke up in his friend’s defense.

“Hey, hey, there will be *other* assignments; the next plum one for a photojournalist of his limited experience goes to Olsen. Now as I was saying, who is your back-up? You know, just in case a certain flying man in red and blue spandex fails to arrive?”

“Captain Maynard, General Zeitlin’s adjutant and his Special Forces squad will be there shadowing us. They want the crystals back without any interference. The captain also has a surveillance team on Dr. Scott, so at nine o’clock they intend to rendezvous with us at Pier 17.”

“Military, huh? Now, that’s more like it! But look here, make sure you check in with this Captain Maynard *and* Bill Henderson. Metropolis’ Finest should be in on the bust as well. It will make up for you keeping Bill in the dark.” The Planet’s senior editor sat back in his chair smiled and said. “Well, now that that’s out of the way, I’m going to call down to Lucille’s and find out what she’s got for lunch.”

“Huh, Chief,” Clark said while nervously touching his glasses. “We didn’t say anything to Henderson. Lois and I thought we would let him know about the stakeout *after* it happens.”

The older man’s face grew flush with barely concealed shock.

Perry looked first at Clark then Lois. “Come again?”

“Well I haven’t exactly cleared myself yet with Bill about the whole LexSolar break-in either. But we promised to let him know the story *behind* the story,” Lois said in her small squeaky voice.

Their editor looked to the heavens for strength then pointed towards the door. Without further discussion, the partners beat a hasty exit.

“That went over real well. Do you suppose Perry will ever speak to us again?”

Lois did not respond, but dived into her top drawer and pulled out the two Double-Fudge Crunch Bars Sid had given her yesterday. She handed one to Clark and then viciously tore the wrapper off and bit into the other one. “Oh, he’ll cool down in an hour or so, but if we don’t deliver a whiz-bang story tomorrow morning we are officially in Perry’s doghouse.”

“Yikes.” Clark groaned.

“Your wedding dress will be the talk of Metropolis, Miss Grant! There should be no chance of either it or Miss Pallister’s dress wrinkling before the big day! Please see us again if you need any dresses for future occasions.” the salesclerk gushed as she carefully wrapped Cat and Diane’s dresses in paper and then separate garment bags. Another woman packed boxes of various sizes that contained satin sandals, jewelry and hair accessories into two large paper bags each marked with their names.

“We couldn’t be more pleased with the excellent service. Thank you again.” Cat beamed back at the young woman. Unbeknownst to either reporter, two other shoppers were trying on gowns in another part of the exclusive boutique. A part reserved for the elite customer who required private fittings, fittings without the prying eye of the media.

If Cat Grant knew the proprietor Madeline Darcy provided this special service, she would have camped in front of the store day and night for exclusives on many of Metropolis’ leading female citizens.

Blissfully unaware that the future Mrs. Lex Luthor was serenely trying on wedding gowns, Cat and Diane exited the high-end shop holding several chic looking, but nonetheless cumbersome bags. Fortunately, the gossip columnist had rented a limousine, just so she and Diane could shop without the worry of driving through Metropolis’ torturous traffic or carrying shopping bags.

Diane sat back in the luxurious Corinthian leather seating and took a cup of strawberry yogurt from Cat. “Whew! It took two hours, but we got everything! Talk about one stop shopping! Is this the place where all of your lovely evening clothes come from?”

“Yes. Darcy’s caters to dressing for the businesswoman who has no time. Unfortunately, that describes me perfectly these days.” Cat looked at her ring and smiled triumphantly. “Oh well, despite all the craziness of planning this event, I’m having a ball! After all it’s not every day that a girl gets hitched!”

“Still, it is a life-changing event, how do you manage to stay so... so calm?” Diane asked cautiously.

Cat smiled. “Easy. Diane, this is my last hoorah as *the* Metropolis gossip columnist. I want it to be memorable. Once we move to Seattle, I become a part-time reporter and student. Being a married woman, *that’s* something to be nervous about. In comparison, putting together a wedding is easy. Now there’s one last stop to make... George’s wedding present.”

“What did you get him?” Diane’s green eyes glittered with excitement.

“An antique Rolex Oyster watch. This is a rare fifties model in 14k gold case and is fit with a new black leather strap.”

“Where are you getting it from?” Diane nervously glanced at her watch. Their lunchtime was long over. “It’s one thirty. Do we have time to pick it up?”

“Yes, Mr. Mazik said it would be finished by two o’clock. We have plenty of time to get through traffic and back to work. Besides,

this shopping trip will make a wonderful article for the Weekend section. Especially since, it is ‘bride season’! So don’t worry about your boss, Mr. Leatherwood. Live a little!” Cat smiled and raised her bottle of Perrier in triumph.

“Oh! I could get used to this kind of living!” Diane gushed, then became serious. “Uh, I have been meaning to ask, why appoint me to be your Maid of Honor? Oh, we’ve worked together on the Planet and even socialized a bit, but this is such a privilege. I thought since you and Lois are on better terms, she might have been a bridesmaid? What about Jenni Reid?” Her voice trailed off.

“Jenni will be here in a couple of weeks before the ceremony. The London Times has allowed her a long vacation to ‘work’ on an assignment. It’ll be great having her in the bullpen again. When Perry finds out she’s on this side of the Atlantic Ocean, he’ll be excited and scared all at once!”

Cat laughed, then grew thoughtful. “To answer your main question, the kind of reporting I do puts me in contact with a number of very untrustworthy characters. Lying, paying off creepy sources for information, and just plain deceitfulness is a regular part of my job. After a while, being in such an environment seems normal. However, with George’s help, all of that is changing. Planning a wedding meant surrounding myself with honorable people... like you.” She paused and went a little further with her explanation. “Lois Lane *is* trustworthy. Hell, I would follow her into a volcano to get a story, because her integrity and news sense are impeccable. However, this is *my* wedding, and Miss Lane’s attention is on her yummy hunk of a partner.”

“Yeah, that is kind of obvious. Kent’s a real dreamboat. Still, I don’t know what to say except, thank you. What a fantastic adventure! George Amundsen does not know what a prize he’s getting.”

“No, *thank you* for all your kindness and patience, Diane,” Cat’s eyes flashed mischievously.

“Now before we get too serious, hand me a strawberry yogurt before I die of starvation!”

At LexSolar, an agitated Dr. Scott yelled at an equally hapless lab assistant. “Hurry up and get those two crates packed! Make sure Cliff knows to bring the SUV around the loading dock. I don’t have all day!”

The assistant promised himself that as soon as Scott drove off, he intended to hand in his resignation at the end of the week to the HR department. No job was worth this kind of abuse, special bonus be hanged!

Dr. Scott was careful to avoid walking outside on the loading dock. Ever since yesterday, he had the strangest feeling of watchful eyes scrutinizing his every move. Working for Antoinette Baines had taught him a thing or two about surveillance. As soon as his assistant packed the van and went back to the lab, he intended to sneak into the vehicle and have Cliff drive. They would hole up somewhere in Metropolis until it was time to meet Cameron and Lucky Leon.

Just like the last time Lois and Clark visited Pier 17, the weather had turned to rain. However, on this occasion, instead of the slightly chilled rain of spring, it was late summer and the air was just a touch on the humid side. Thick billowing clouds of fog swirling around the pier did not help visibility. They sat quietly in the Jeep looking over Pier 17. There were no ships in the slip, but a number of watertight, painted, standard 8x8x40 ft. shipping containers were stacked in picturesque disorder around them.

“So where is the military? How on Earth can they find us among all these large shipping containers?” Lois wondered as she tried looking for Captain Maynard and his Special Forces team.

“Oh, don’t worry, they are probably hiding in plain sight. Those guys don’t like to advertise their whereabouts.” Clark said.

“So how do we get in contact with them when Scott and company arrive?”

“I’m sure they’ll contact us. Lois, come on, relax, it’s not like

Superman can't show up at the last minute and get us out of a jam."
 "OK," she sighed, "but I still like to know where the extra cavalry is... in case we need them."

The night staff for the Daily Planet was trickling in as the regular staff began to depart for the evening. Eduardo was entering the elevator, anxious to get home to his family for dinner. Lori had promised to make his favor dessert, peach cobbler. He didn't want to arrive home late and find the dish gone cold.

Diane was talking on the phone with a make-up stylist Cat had suggested. As the Maid of Honor, the diffident reporter was eager to shine. Hanging out with Cat for the past couple of weeks had boosted her confidence so she wanted to try a new hairdo.

Steve was looking over some research Jack had pulled up for him. The young man showed promise, not just as a researcher, but with whatever task he set his keen mind to accomplish.

"Jack, this is first-rate research on that gambling cover-up. The Metropolis basketball team manager is going to have to answer a lot of uncomfortable questions when this story hits the papers." Steve smiled at the youngster. "Kent sure knew what he was doing bringing you on board."

"Thanks, Mr. Landers. I'll just put this material away in the morgue and finish up the final details in the morning."

"Great. See you in the am." Steve laid a beefy paw on Jack's back in hearty thank-you and walked up the ramp. "Good night, Diane." He purposely did not say anything to the last member of the morning team. Ralph was sitting at his desk writing a story about the Metropolis flower show. Once again, the senior editor had to put the man into 'Perry's doghouse'.

The elevator opened and Jimmy burst in and ran down the ramp, nearly colliding into Steve. He was immaculately dressed in an elegant tuxedo, his ubiquitous photographer's bag hung over his left shoulder. Diane interrupted her phone conversation and let loose with a low appreciative whistle. Steve, despite the near collision, gave the thumbs up sign in approval of Jimmy's tuxedo, while Jack shook his head and wondered what his friend had forgotten.

"Yeah, I'm looking for my wide angle lens. I took it out of my bag the other day to put on a filter. I want to get some wide shots of the crowd so that you can really see how many people were there." Quickly he rifled through his top desk drawer and found the item. "Smooth. Now all I need is a speedy cab." Seeing Ralph, Jimmy walked over to Jack and, lowering his voice, asked, "Did Lois and CK leave for the stakeout at Pier 17 already?"

"Yeah, he mentioned something about pizza first."

"OK. See you tomorrow." With that, Jimmy once again bounded up the ramp and to the stairs. Thinking he could probably make better time running downstairs than waiting for the elevator. Jack, finally let loose with a quiet laugh, gathered up his papers and went to the morgue.

Ralph glanced around the near empty newsroom. He was perfectly aware of the staff's dislike for him, but someday they would be sorry. Someday he would crack a case bigger than anything Lois and Clark had ever done. Unexpectedly the phone on Clark Kent's desk began to ring shrilly in the quiet newsroom. Sauntering over to his desk, Ralph picked it up hoping it was one of the other reporter's sources.

"Daily Planet. Clark Kent's desk."

<<Oh, this is an... acquaintance of Mr. Kent's, my name is Maynard. Is he around by any chance?>>

"Uh no. He's on a stakeout."

<<I see? Do you know his exact location?>>

"Yeah, Pier Eighteen? Anyhow, his assistant Miss Lane accompanied him there."

<<Perfect. In case Mr. Kent contacts you, we are on route and do not expect any delays. >> The phone went dead.

"Figures. Probably one of Kent's 'high end' snitches. Well, that will keep him in knots looking for 'The Hottest Team in Town'. Maybe with the guy delayed I can get that special scoop after all." Not

thinking for a minute of the damage his lie could have done, Ralph packed up his things and headed towards Pier Seventeen.

Lois and Clark sat in the front seat of her Jeep. They had eaten their pizza and talked of many things. Now all was quiet, except for the sound of mellow jazz playing ever so sweetly in the background. They both recognized it as one of Clark's favorite tunes, Etta James singing "At Last".

The partners looked out of the windshield and held hands. Since conversation had slowed to a companionable silence they appreciated the opportunity to bask in gentle serenity. More heavy fog rolled in off the water and onto Pier 17 making it particularly hard to see anything under these weather conditions. Off in the distance, the quiet reassuring sound of an ancient foghorn could be heard warning mariners within the vicinity to avoid Metropolis rocky shoreline.

"I love this song," Clark whispered.

"So does Superman," Lois answered tenderly. "We danced on air at my apartment remember? It was a special night for me, even if Mayson interrupted us."

The handsome face colored ever so slightly. "Hurting you was the last thing on my mind that night Lois. You looked so disappointed seeing me with Mayson. I wanted us to spend time together at your place. So, I came over in the suit and I couldn't help myself. It was the most natural thing in the world to dance on air with you." He smiled sheepishly.

"You know," he continued, "a relationship is a lot like a beautiful dance; long, slow and everything in between. Sometimes, one of the partners gets out of sync. But if the other one is patient, they can move smoothly back into the dance."

Lois sighed. "Clark Kent, I am not a very good dancer."

"Yes you are, all you need is practice and the right partner. Mayson Drake is a friend, nothing more; she never has and never will pose a threat to our relationship."

"It's okay, Clark," Lois whispered in a small voice. "Mayson is not the problem... it's me."

His mouth twitched slightly. "What makes you say that?"

"There are several reasons. Let me start with my father walking out on his family. My big college crush, Paul Lanahan's decision to dump me in favor of my former best friend, Linda King. Last, but certainly not least, Claude's terrible, painful and very public betrayal. Take your pick. I am not exactly the poster girl for stable relationships." Lois' hands fumbled with the clasp of her briefcase in an agitated manner. The sweet mood evaporated, as if it had never been.

"Hey, look it's me, Clark. I am not Claude and I'm definitely not your father." His eyes twinkled wickedly when he said that. Cupping her face with both of his hands, Clark spoke, his voice firm and true. "It takes two people to make a relationship work. Deep inside, Lois, you want what we have between us to work as much, if not more than I do. The first part of the job is communication, not yelling or angry silence, but communication. So *talk* to me."

His eyes watched as she reached into her briefcase, pulled out a crumpled silk hankie, and dabbed her cheeks. "Oh Clark, I make such a mess of things. We *are* supposed to be on stakeout, not exploring our feelings."

"You forget, partner, I can hear or see anything long before it becomes a problem," he said, in a gentle rumble.

"Oh, so that means I won't have to carry around these anymore?" She dived into her briefcase and pulled out her precious Zeiss binoculars.

"Only when you're going on stakeout with Jimmy... or Ralph."

He grinned as Lois made a rude noise. "Like *that* 'll ever happen!" Her mood quickly changed to contemplative again. "Seriously, Clark, relationships scare me. I am not very good at being a friend. Ask Molly Flynn or any of my previous work partners. The aftermath of my 'relationship' with Claude left a lot of damage to my personal as well as professional reputation. Working as a respected investigative

journalist has been my total focus for years simply to repair that damage. Everything else, old college friends, Uncle Mike and even talking with Lucy all fell by the wayside. Kindness and time are things to be appreciated and extended to people. I... I just don't know where to begin."

"First off, honey, just about everybody at the Planet respects how hard you work to crack a story and tell the truth. Uncle Mike loves you and knows how much journalism means to you. As for Lucy, she gets a lot of her spunk from you. Look how well she bounced back after the whole Metallo situation? Respect is a great starting foundation to build friendships... like the one we share."

"Maybe I should stop living in the past," she sighed. "Claude was another lifetime ago. It is time to build on the good people in my life today and concentrate on *us*."

"What Claude did to you was demeaning and cruel. However, a stronger woman emerged from the ashes of that unfortunate time. Anyone else might have quit rather than face the music at the Planet. Such strength of character is one of the incredible things I love about you." Clark whispered, his voice hoarse with passion. Between the strains of Duke Ellington's Rhapsody in Blue, the inky darkness of the night and the enticing scent of Lois' perfume, he was all too aware of his strong attraction to her, and her terrible vulnerability. "I won't ever leave you Lois, that's a promise. Let's be on the same road for each other — always."

Clark watched as the striking brown-haired woman nodded her head in a contemplative fashion. He hoped she was taking in all he had said, because every word came from his heart.

In a trembling voice, she asked, "Always?"

"I'm not going anywhere, Miss Lane."

As an answer, she reached over took his face in her hands and pulled him gently to her. Their lips brushed each other chastely. However, for two people so in love, chasteness was put to the test as the kiss became deeper, richer and so very passionate. Abruptly everything around them disappeared, only the rush of feelings and desire remained. Clark began to kiss her neck as Lois racked nails over his back.

"Lois we have to stop," Clark murmured as he kissed the tender flesh. "This is not right."

"Oh no," she breathed, "Its right. It is perfect. Do *not* stop."

The blood roaring in Clark's ears began to cloud his judgment. He had held back for so long and wanted to show her just how strong his love for her was. But a small voice in the back of his mind began to shout above the desire and desperate need. With all the effort of will he could bring to bear, Clark placed his hands on Lois' shoulders resisting any further touching. "No, we have to stop, this is not right. Not here. Not now. You are better than that. *We* are better than that."

"Clark... I don't understand." Lois answered a hurt tone in her voice.

He gently released her and leaned back in his seat. Slowly, he took a couple of calming breaths before speaking. "When we make love for the first time it should be right. I've waited a long time."

"Well, yes, it has been awhile for..."

"No, uh, Lois, you don't understand... I have *never* been intimate with a woman."

"You mean — you're a virgin?" she said incredulously.

"Yes." Clark said, only slightly embarrassed. "I'm a Kryptonian. Prior to our discovering the globe my father Jor-El sent in the ship, there were so many mysteries about who I was. The woman who shared my life had to be the *right* one. So I waited."

"Oh," her voice small. "That's wonderful and so sweet. I regret not having waited..."

"We can wait for each other." He touched her face tenderly. "But here in the front seat of your Jeep is all wrong."

He gazed deeply into her eyes, hoping the import of his words sunk into her mind. Being with her as a man was important to him, but their intimacy ought to be proper and beautiful, not rushed like a couple of hot teen-agers in the back seat of a borrowed car.

In an attempt to lighten the mood, Clark said, "Hey, this *is* supposed to be a stakeout. Why don't we keep an eye on Pier Seventeen? At this rate the bad guys will have come and gone."

"Right." His partner said with a slightly sullen air. She quickly straightened her clothes and once again, fished into the 'bottomless' briefcase and pulled out the Zeiss binoculars again. "Captain Maynard and his guys should be here any minute. It's almost eight thirty."

Clark's mouth corners tugged into a genuine hundred-watt grin, "I cannot imagine us striking out twice at the same place. Maybe you can pitch your cooking lessons with Uncle Mike into a story for the Weekend section?"

At first, she gaped at him in utter surprise, then playfully batted him with her binoculars. Clark cheerfully ducked, enjoying this easy time with Lois.

"That's it! Both you and Uncle Mike are in *my* doghouse."

"I am always in the doghouse... shh!" He abruptly held his hand up for quiet and Lois fell silent, although questions blazed in her expressive brown eyes.

They both listened intently. Clark activated his night-vision and began scanning the large shipping containers for any sign of life. It was entirely possible his sensitive hearing only picked up an animal denizen of the pier or one of General Zeitlin's men. Either way he had to be certain, especially with Lois so close by.

"Clark, look over there at that green container!" came the hoarse whisper. "Somebody is shining a flashlight."

"More than just one somebody. It looks like there are maybe five men walking into that green container over there and they are most definitely *not* military police."

"How do you know?" Lois asked while pulling her camera with infra-red film from the briefcase.

The temptation to make a remark about the briefcase's contents played on the tip of his tongue. But cute comments could come after they 'bagged' the bad guys.

"Because one of them is Lucky Leon. I seriously doubt if he's under Captain Maynard's supervision."

Under the guidance of Clark's night vision, Lois took several pictures of the men gathered near the crate talking. Apparently, by the way they kept looking around the pier, they were anxiously waiting for someone.

"Lois, my hearing is picking up the sound of a car; it's heading straight for the green shipping container."

"Great! Let's get some pictures of them in the act, it'll help the case. Not to mention Perry and the DA's office will love us forever!"

"OK. Careful, don't let the light go on in the car." Clark whispered softly.

"Hey! This is not my first stakeout, farmboy!" she exclaimed with an excited trill in her voice. Eager to be in on the end of the case, Lois put the camera in the briefcase and threw it over her shoulder.

Surreptitiously the reporting duo exited the Jeep and wound their way through the dark and fog-choked maze of shipping containers. The men hanging around the green container began to complain about getting wet. Lucky Leon, sheltered by a small black umbrella, unlocked the door and everyone went inside. Unfortunately, the flashlight went inside the container as well. Once again the duo was grateful for Clark's infrared vision, otherwise observing the stakeout would be impossible due to the darkness, drizzling rain, and fog.

"Achoo!" Lois sneezed. The unexpected sound caused Clark's heart to skip more than a few beats. He stared at her with a mixture of dread and surprise on his face. <When did her cold come back?> He asked himself. "Lo-is. Now is the wrong time for sneezing fits," he whispered.

"Sorry. My nose got a tickle," she answered in a small embarrassed voice. Nevertheless his hearing detected she was working hard to hold back another sneeze.

They stopped in their tracks for a few anxious moments, on tenterhooks, fearing that perhaps the Intergang members had heard the sound.

“All clear?” Lois queried.

“Yes. But let’s be very quiet.”

“I know.” She replied, irritated at herself and Clark’s pedantic request. She slipped her hand in his to keep up as they inched closer to the shipping container. Unexpectedly two identical cones of light from an approaching black SUV surrounded the container, allowing the reporters to see the entire area with ease. The SUV rolled to a stop. The passenger’s side door opened and a short man stepped out. He hurriedly walked over to Lucky Leon and Cameron Axelrod just as they exited the container. Lois smiled triumphantly.

“Perfect. A bad guy class reunion.” she whispered. Letting go of Clark’s hand, she raised the camera up and quickly snapped off a couple of shots. “Come on, let’s see those crystals, without them this is just a meeting among felons. Nothing of an illegal nature is happening that’ll stand up in court. Speaking of illegal, *where* is the good Captain and his team?”

“Shh. They’re arguing about something.”

Lois strained her ears to listen. Than glanced over at her partner. <Blast! It would be so nice to share powers at a time like this.>

She continued to watch the three men, Scott was excitedly gesturing to the SUV. Lucky Leon shook his head in disagreement while Axelrod hung back watching both men with a cool detached air of anticipation. Unless she misunderstood their body language, something very unpleasant was about to happen.

“I wonder why Dr. Scott is arguing. Why doesn’t he go inside the container?” Clark asked.

“Better yet, bring out those crystals. We need proof Scott was the one behind the theft.”

“Lois, didn’t we agree *Luthor* is the real mastermind of this whole operation?”

“Yeah, but we only have our suspicions, without evidence connecting Scott to him, we have nothing to hang Luthor with. The key to *everything* is catching Scott and the Intergang thugs with the crystals. With the way he’s complaining I’ll bet he’s got a double-cross planned.”

“Nope.” Her partner answered, as he listened to the conversation. “Scott wants more money.”

Lois rolled her eyes in exasperation. “Money? Is that all these crooks ever think about?”

The hairs on Lois’s head tingled when she heard a rough voice growl. “World peace ain’t exactly high on our list of priorities. Now, git your hands up!”

For the second time that evening, the mood took a suddenly and unpleasant shift. A burly, unshaven man wearing the uniform of a LexSolar security guard waved his gun at them, indicating they needed to start walking towards the shipping container. But that wasn’t what concerned them, they could make out the figure of a man by his side, it was Ralph, holding his nose as blood flowed like a river down his face.

“Cl...ark?” His partner looked at him, her brown eyes wide with surprise and apprehension. Lois could tell by his countenance he was calculating the time and speed required to fly her away, but such an action was out of the question. Doubly so with the Daily Planet’s worst reporter standing before them. Ralph would happily reveal to the whole world Clark’s secret identity. Thus, Clark had to be patient and wait for an opening to get her safely away from danger. “Shh... it will be all right.”

Cliff impatiently pointed his gun in the direction of the green container, and the three reporters reluctantly walked over. Their guard breathed hard and Lois could smell the faintest whiff of alcohol. By his voice, she could tell he was the same man who searched Dr. Scott’s office the night of her break-in. Cliff was his name. If she could just distract him, Clark could get away and change into Superman. She wanted to know what Ralph was doing here. His idea of a stakeout was loitering around City Hall listening to stray gossip, not walking around Metropolis waterfront on a damp and foggy night.

“What are you doing here, Ralph? Trying to be a ‘real’ reporter by

stealing our story?”

Ralph refused to answer; obviously the injury and his acute sense of self-preservation silenced him.

Clark turned his attention to Cliff. “So they have you doing guard duty while the rest of them share in the loot?”

“Nope, I was just walking back after going to the bathroom and saw this guy wandering around with a camera. I hit him and decided to bring him over to the container with the Intergang guys. Because of the SUV’s headlights, I spotted you two hiding behind the crates. I figured it was wrong for anybody to be out on a night like tonight. So you people have gotta be either reporters or feds.”

“We are Lane and Kent from the Daily Planet and we can put in a good word with the authorities if you’ll let us go.” Clark said, with a whiny plea in his voice.

“Yeah. Right. Do I look dumb or something?”

<Now that you mention it...> Lois thought with grim amusement.

“Hey you two listen to him! He’s not playing! Look at what he did to me!” Ralph whined.

The hulky guard said nothing further, only pushed his gun offensively hard into Lois’ back. She groaned in pain and stumbled. She sensed Clark’s body go tense and knew his Kryptonian reflexes were about to come into play, perhaps seriously harming Cliff. Ralph’s presence be hanged. “Clark!” She gasped out, taking his arm, “I’m all right. Don’t do anything.”

Cliff laughed a nasty barking sound. “What’s the boyfriend gonna do? Nothing as long as I have this.” He waved the weapon around like a mute symbol of his bravery and started to laugh again. As they walked closer to the light from the container, Lois could make out Clark’s features and what she beheld truly frightened her. Clark stopped, turned and spoke to Cliff, his voice low and ominous. “Touch her again and you will see what I can do. Trust me, you have no idea who you are dealing with.” The guard must have seen Clark’s face as well; he cursed loudly and pointed his gun towards the container and his captives.

“Hey, Dr. Scott! Look what I found!” Cliff shouted as he pushed the trio into the light coming from the SUV.

Dr. Scott glanced up to find his henchman pushing two men and a woman towards him. “Moron! That’s all we need are witnesses to this transaction. I’ll deal with you later.”

“Scott, these are not just any witnesses, but the famous Clark Kent and Lois Lane, ace investigative reporters for the Daily Planet. I’ve tangled before with them and it got me arrested and deported. Who is this other one?” Lucky Leon snarled.

“If you were deported, what are you doing back here?” Lois demanded in a bid for time.

“Come Miss Lane, a power source like Harmonic Crystals is too valuable to be left in hands of a bunch of nerdy scientists. It must be shared with rest of world... or our version of it.” Leon said.

“Oh great, reporters, just what we need!” Scott shouted. “Cliff, tie them up and throw them into the shipping container until we complete our business here.”

Cameron Axelrod stepped up and spoke. “Shut up. I speak for Intergang and this bunch aren’t going to be tied to anything but an anchor. But before anything else happens, where are the crystals?”

“Wait a minute.” Scott said genuine fear crept into his voice. “Nobody said anything about murder!”

“Welcome to the real world, Frederick... not that you’re going to be in it much longer.” Axelrod pulled out a gun and pointed the business end at the frightened scientist. Meanwhile an Intergang cohort disarmed Cliff. “Now the crystals if you please.”

Dr. Scott dug into jacket pocket and tossed over his keys, “In the back of the SUV.”

One of the gang members took the keys from Cameron and opened the vehicle. Inside were four very large black crates. It took two men to lift one crate out and drag it over to Cameron and Lucky Leon. Cameron bent down and opened the lid. Inside were dozens of glowing lavender and white crystals, each the size of a man’s fist.

“Oh, now will you look at that,” Cameron whispered reverently. “The ultimate power source of the new millennium. Thanks to you Dr. Scott, Intergang is going to be embarrassingly rich.”

“Since you have what you want, how about letting me go?” Scott pleaded.

“Sorry, Frederick, but Intergang prides itself on tidying up loose ends. You and your man get over there with those reporters.”

Scott started beseeching Cameron to release him, all traces of arrogance vanished. Between his pleading, the insistent rain and the anxiety of the gathering in general, the atmosphere around the shipping container became fraught with tension. Clark leaned down and whispered to Lois, “I’m going to use my heat vision to put out the headlights. When that happens, get behind me and I’ll fly you out of here. I’ll come back for Ralph in the confusion.”

Lois opened her mouth to answer when a gunshot went off, shutting off the light from the container. Suddenly the night air became filled with the ugly harsh sounds of Dr. Frederick Scott screaming shrilly. Axelrod, tired of listening to Scott, decided it was time to get rid of any witnesses, and shot the scientist.

Cliff, in a misguided attempt to help his employer, struggled with the two men holding him. One of the thugs had Cliff’s gun tucked in his belt. In the ensuing scuffle, the firearm fell out onto the ground and discharged. The security guard’s stupidity saved his life. He had neglected to activate the grip safety. The bullet lodged in the thug’s shoulder causing him to release Cliff, who turned and landed a solid punch to the stomach of his other captor. He made a swift dive towards the gun before anyone could stop him and began shooting randomly towards the men remaining in the shipping container.

Suddenly, a crisp and commanding male voice using a megaphone could be heard through the thick gloom, “This is Captain Maynard of the military special ops! You are surrounded! Keep your hands where we can see them!”

“We’re saved!” Ralph shouted. His voice was on the verge of hysterics.

“Yeah, the cavalry has finally arrived!” Lois responded acidly.

Clark realized this was his chance. He grabbed Lois, moved into the darkness, and flew away. The sounds of rapid gunfire ricocheting off the massive shipping containers, men’s frightened shouts of anger, and Dr. Scott’s screams of pain punctuated the heavy dampness of the night air.

Clark flew at super speed to get Lois out of harm’s way. He set her down by another shipping container, close enough to observe the action, but far enough away for her safety. He spun into the suit and prepared to return to the battle when he heard Lois say, “Be careful, Superman. I’ll wait here and get some great shots of you mopping up the bad guys”.

He could not help but ask, “Are you sure you’ll stay right here?”

“Yes, now go!”

The superhero glazed into her eyes; trust Lois to think about the story first, despite the danger involved. In his best stern, authoritative voice, he replied, “All right Miss Lane.” He sped back to the shipping container and disarmed the criminals and put them in the container just as Captain Maynard and his men stormed into the area.

He counted seven men, not including the still screaming Dr. Scott and unconscious Cliff. He used his night vision to locate Ralph. The coward had run away among the shipping containers. Superman decided not to waste any more time on him.

Where, in the confusion, had Cameron Axelrod, Lucky Leon, and the SUV disappeared to?

A rapid search revealed the crystals were gone as well. Somehow, in all the noise and confusion the two desperate men had managed to elude him. As the special ops team converged on the area, Superman went aloft and crisscrossed the vicinity frantically looking for the rogue scientist and former KGB operative to no avail. To come so close to locating the elusive crystals only to lose them now was unthinkable. He stopped flying and floated a few feet off the ground

shutting out all other noises of the wet foggy night. He held that position for a minute or two, listening for the sound of a powerful eight-cylinder engine.

He thought back only ten minutes ago when Cliff caught him off guard. How could he tell Lois he was so intently listening to the gangsters – and the sound of her delicate heartbeat — that he allowed Cliff to sneak up on them? It was a stupid mistake. One that almost got Lois hurt when that goon shoved the pistol into her back. She meant everything to him. If Cliff had caused her any harm...

Unexpectedly off in the distance near Pier Eighteen he heard a heavy car door slam and an angry voice loudly swearing in Russian.

“I knew it! Reporters are dangerous! They trick a professional like you! We should have forced Scott yesterday to tell us where crystals were and take them. But no, you wanted to wait for a submersible to arrive from New London, Connecticut. Idiot!”

Clark did not wait for a response but followed the sound of Lucky Leon’s voice. He arrived in time to see the two men struggling to remove a large black crate from the back of the vehicle. He landed besides them, folded muscular arms over his chest and spoke in his stern Superman voice.

“Gentlemen, I suggest putting down the box and slowly raising your hands in the air.”

“I was wondering when you were going to show up, Superman. Here’s a present for you.” Cameron Axelrod removed a slender black vial from his jacket pocket and opened it, revealing a familiar sickly green glow. Superman’s body broke out in rivers of cold sweat, shaking violently with racking convulsions. He collapsed to the wet ground as waves of nausea and sharp stabbing pains rolled through him.

The Intergang chief walked toward him, knelt down, laying the vial at his feet. Without a backward glance, he returned to his companion and resumed moving the crate. But inexplicably, Cameron turned, raised his voice slightly and spoke to the dying Man of Steel.

“Superman, did you *really* think Intergang would give Diana Stride *all* of our kryptonite? This was just a precaution in case you showed up tonight. These Harmonic Crystals are too important to our future plans to allow any interference.”

Lucky Leon grunted as he helped lift the cumbersome crate. Together the two men struggled to reach the pier’s edge. “Comrade, m...more lifting, less t...talking we need to get to submersible. Superman is no longer problem.”

His companion ignored him and continued. “Oh I don’t know. My street cred would go through the roof if Superman dies by my hand.”

“Fine. You worry about ‘cred’, I worry about getting this crate and others loaded.”

Superman lay on the ground withering in agony, as the deadly mineral’s radiation coursed through his body. His lungs ached. Each breath drawn was sharp, rasping and raw. The darkness around him was closing in and he began to distrust his vision. Any outcries of anguish would go unheeded, knowing these two men did not have a shred of mercy between them. The only thought to give him some small measure of comfort was that Lois did not have to witness him in such horrific pain.

After Clark had flown off in pursuit of Lucky Leon and Cameron, Lois fumbled in her briefcase for her cell phone and penlight. Despite the fact that Maynard’s men had secured the Intergang members, she called Inspector Henderson’s precinct and quickly told the duty sergeant what had taken place and where. She hung up, and then ran over to where Dr. Scott lay whimpering in pain, his body covered in water and blood.

“Don’t worry, the paramedics will be here soon.” She spoke comfortingly.

“Fat lot of good a bunch of paramedics are going to do me! At best, I’ll end up in jail. But I ain’t planning on going alone...” Blood frothed between gritted teeth. Before the scientist could speak again, he passed out.

Lois groaned in frustration. The rain had suddenly started coming down harder. She was thinking of heading back to the Jeep when she heard another cry of pain cut through the foggy night. <Clark!> She stood up, took out her penlight and ran swiftly towards the source of that cry, ignoring any thought of danger.

A tense five minutes moving among shipping containers passed with Lois growing more frantic by the second. The fog, rain and darkness were a serious impediment to her progress, but somehow she sensed Clark drawing her to him, guiding her through the maze of containers. As Lois scraped her hand against yet another container, she emerged from the maze and flashed her light upon Clark lying motionless on the sleek ground. Her heart broke at the sight. Off in the distance, Lucky Leon and Cameron Axelrod had their backs to him as they strained to carry a large black crate to the end of Pier Eighteen.

Fear at seeing the man she loved lying helpless motivated her into action. Murderous thoughts of vengeance against these two men for endangering him so callously raced through her mind. Pulling the briefcase over her shoulder Lois ran silently behind Cameron Axelrod, lifted the heavy bag over her head and slammed it down on his head with all her might. The man crumbled and fell wordlessly to the ground, dropping his end of the crate. Lucky Leon howled in agony as the crate landed on his foot with a sickening noise of crushed bone. He too fell, but not as soundlessly.

The reporter spun her back on the criminals and ran towards Clark. She quickly located the kryptonite vial, capped it and placed it in her now battered briefcase. <Maybe Dr. Klein can search for an antidote to this vile mineral.> she mused.

Kneeling down beside Clark, she began to shake him. “Superman, wake up. It’s me, Lois. The kryptonite can’t hurt you anymore.”

L...Lois, why did you risk your life? Cameron might have killed you.” He groaned, trying to sit up.

“Because, you big lunkhead,” she whispered wrapping her arms around him while gazing at his handsome, but deathly pale face through tears. “What are partners for?”

Part Nineteen

“Wait a minute Lane. You took out a two hundred plus pound man with your briefcase? What’s in it? Buckshot?” Henderson exclaimed.

“No, just my makeup case, binoculars, camera, etc...”

“Never mind.” Exasperated, the laconic detective raised a hand to stop her. “Kent told me about that particular bag, but I never believed him. Next time you come down to the station, leave that thing at home. Otherwise, I’ll have it registered as a lethal weapon. Hey, where is your partner anyway?”

“Uh, Clark? He’s huh..”

“Right here!” Clark slowly walked over to them. His usual easy smile was absent, replaced by a grimace. “Hello Bill.”

“Hello yourself!” Henderson looked the other man over through his glasses and grumbled in a well-meaning tone. “You look worse than the time that bum brought you in with amnesia.”

“I have felt better...” Clark began tiredly.

Lois spoke up, “Poor guy, it’s all this damp weather, he probably caught a chill. Henderson, don’t you flatfoots carry around a thermos of hot coffee?”

“No, Lane, we don’t.” He responded tersely. Turning to face Clark, he continued in a kindlier tone. “Look Kent, come down to the station tomorrow and give your statement. Let Lois take you home. Oh, don’t forget, there’s a story behind all these special Ops guys being here and I want to know what that story is!”

Grateful for any excuse to get away, Clark allowed Lois to lead him back to the Jeep. Only when he was safely sitting in the passenger’s seat did he allow himself to slump over and give in to his pain.

“I remember your previous exposures to that disgusting substance.” Lois remarked. “It’s taking an unusually long time to get over the effects to the kryptonite especially with such a small amount.”

“T...the amount of the kryptonite doesn’t matter, only the radioactivity. Cameron left it right at... at my feet. Besides... need

sunshine to strengthen... aura after an attack, otherwise it will be some time before my powers return.” Clark managed to say

At that moment, a man in paramilitary garb ran toward the Jeep, waving his hands and calling out Clark’s name. “Mr. Kent! Mr. Kent! I need to speak with you, please.”

Clark recognized the man as Captain Maynard. They waited as he came up to the passenger side of the Jeep and spoke. “I wanted to apologize for arriving five minutes late. If it hadn’t been for Superman, you and your assistant, Miss Lane, might have been killed. But even Special Ops vehicles get flat tires.” Part of Clark wanted to smile at the word ‘assistant’, but he knew Lois was bristling beside him so he quickly corrected the Captain.

“Lois Lane is my *partner*, Captain *not* my assistant. As a matter of fact, if she had not pushed to follow some very thin leads, it is doubtful the crystals might have ever been found.”

Slightly discomfited, the man faced Lois, nodded his head, and quickly uttered a heart-felt apology. “Sorry, Ms. Lane, I didn’t know. The guy that answered Mr. Kent’s phone said you were his assistant.”

Clark waited, knowing a prickly comment was coming, but surprisingly Lois’ words were cordial — even gracious — for Lois. “Apology accepted. Still, I’m surprised that a crack ops team such as yours was late at all. What happened?”

Relieved to be off the hook Captain Maynard replied. “Well to be honest, I called the Daily Planet in order to let you know we would arrive at 8:30. A man answered Mr. Kent’s phone saying he worked with him and told me the location was Pier Eighteen. That was a definite lie. Clark here would have found some way to inform us if there was a change in plans. That was when I was told you were Mr. Kent’s assistant. My team deployed, but just as we reached the waterfront district, our lead car’s tire blew out. We stopped long enough to pick up the men from that transport then headed here. The rest you already know. Good thing Superman arrived in time, otherwise the outcome might have been very different. Please let the big fella know the military really appreciated his help in this matter.”

Clark did not need super hearing, by the sound his partner’s sharp intake of breath to know she was fuming in the worst possible way. He guardedly lay what he hoped was a restraining hand on her knee to stem the tidal wave of words about to strike him and Captain Maynard. He intended to forestall her, but not before she was able to say, “Ralph! Assistant, indeed, I’ll kill that low life!”

Ignoring Lois’ outburst, Clark replied to Maynard in an even tone, “Thank you sir, I will tell him.”

“Oh... uh and one other thing,” the other man suddenly looked nervous and uncomfortable.

“Yes, Captain Maynard?” Clark sighed. He was desperate to get away from the damp surroundings and return to the warmth of his apartment.

“General Zeitlin has asked that no mention be made of the Harmonic Crystals in your newspaper account. National security concerns... you understand?”

Ignoring the reporters’ stunned faces, the Captain saluted crisply and turned back to Pier Seventeen where the military and Metropolis police were loading the Intergang members into vans.

“What? After all we went through to find those crystals for those ‘Special Ops’ guys! Now they want us to *bury* the story!” Lois exploded. She pounded the steering wheel in anger.

“O...only the crystals.” Clark said tiredly. “Look, the military knows we are the ones responsible for finding them. In the future Captain Maynard will owe us a favor.”

Lois was ready to launch into full Mad Dog harangue when she stopped and stared at Clark. They both returned to the previous topic, “Ralph.” The distasteful name rolled off their tongues in unison without hesitation.

“I don’t believe that... that weasel! Not only that, but he tried to steal our story. If it had not been for Superman, his lie could have gotten us killed!” Lois exploded.

Clark wearily nodded in agreement. Weakened from kryptonite

radiation exposure, he was in no shape to argue with Lois or defend Ralph. Through half-closed eyelids, he observed Lois start up the Jeep's powerful engine and drive in her take-no-prisoners manner. Giving in to exhaustion, he closed his eyes and tried to rest, so they drove in companionable silence. After dodging around Metropolis' late night traffic, they finally arrived in front of his apartment on Clinton Street.

"Let me help you upstairs."

"It's no... no problem, I can manage," he mumbled.

The reward for that last comment was a pair of explosive brown eyes boring into him like a laser. "Ha! I remember saying pretty much the same thing not too long ago. You need help, Kent... besides, I'm the only one around."

"Is this an indication of... the future?" Clark said in a feeble attempt to tease.

"We'll see, partner," she responded in like manner.

So saying, she parked, jumped out of the Jeep, came over to his side, jerked open the door and helped him out. He placed his arm around her shoulders and they began the slow walk toward his building. Several minutes passed as the two of them made a crazy drunken waltz to his apartment. Lois gritted her teeth and was grateful to be in shape, Clark weighed a great deal more than she imagined. Somehow, with his help, they mounted the metal outside steps. He gave her the key, and she opened the door. After more stumbling across the landing, they managed to get down the stairs and entered his cozy home. She deposited him rather unceremoniously onto the couch.

"Whew!" she gasped. "Who needs to go to the gym tomorrow? That was a workout by itself!"

From the couch, Clark nodded and mumbled. "Thanks Lois, I'm home safe and sound."

"Meow!" A flash of black, white and a little bit of brown hopped onto the back of the couch and cuddled up to Clark.

"Apparently the furball agrees with you." Lois said, smiling down at the contented feline. "Seriously, Clark, are you sure?"

She stared intently at the handsome young man. Currently he didn't look strong enough to lift up his head, much less make it to the bedroom and change into pajamas.

"Yes. I need a good night's rest and plenty of sunshine. Hopefully the rain will stop by tomorrow. Please tell Perry I'll be in late. But the 'Hottest Team in Town' the team of Lane and Kent will write all about solving the case of the Shackleton hijacking."

Lois eased herself onto his couch and picking up his legs and putting them across her knees, she proceeded to remove Clark's shoes and rubbed his feet. "Even if we can only write about part of the story as per General Zeitlin's 'request' or should I say demand?" As she finished her chore, she gently put his feet on the floor.

"Yes."

Standing up and looking down at her partner she said, "Tomorrow at the Daily Planet is going to be very interesting Mr. Kent." Lois bent down over her partner, and brushed his lips with a sweet, but brief kiss, she then stood up and walked towards the door. "Good-night Clark," she whispered softly with a hint of regret, than let herself out of the apartment.

"Urgh." Clark groaned as he looked after her. "I *hate* kryptonite!"

Clark lay outside on the terrace wearing nothing but a pair of black swimming trunks. For the past three days, he lay in the sun re-charging his powers. Although they were not returning as rapidly as from previous, kryptonite encounters, his unique physiology had already provided subtle indications of healing itself. Lois informed Perry a nasty flu bug had attacked her partner while on the stakeout. Perry wholeheartedly agreed Clark should use some of his accumulated sick days in order to recover.

Lois was over every night, making sure Clark and Pepper were properly looked after. Neither man nor feline complained.

At that moment, he was talking with Martha and Jonathan, reassuring them he would make a complete recovery.

"Now, son, we can be on the next plane out if you say so," Jonathan repeated for the second time in less than fifteen minutes."

"Dad, everything is fine. Lois takes very good care of me. We will be out there for dinner as soon as my strength comes back. No way will she miss out on a slice of Mom's German chocolate cake!"

"So, Lois is coming to visit via Superman express? You two are moving along very nicely," Martha interrupted; she tried and failed to disguise the chuckle in her voice.

"Mom!" Clark pretended to be upset, but he knew she could hear the smile in his voice. How great it was to chat about his girlfriend to them and not feel pain. It still seemed strange to consider Lois as his girlfriend. She had always been his best friend; now there was something richer and deeper between them.

"Martha, stop teasing the boy about Lois. There are more important matters to be discussed. What happened to the vial of kryptonite Lois took from that crook, Axel?"

"Cameron Axelrod. Dr. Klein has it safely hidden in S.T.A.R labs. He says the distilled kryptonite in the vial was a purer form than anything else I have encountered before. That explains why my body is not at one hundred percent yet."

"Oh dear, there's no chance of somebody else getting their hands on it?" His Mother asked.

"No. Dr. Klein assured me he is the only one who knows the vial is in his vault. He wanted to study it and perhaps – someday – find a cure from the effects of kryptonite poisoning."

"Now son, that sounds like good news. After all, until that rock showed up you were invincible."

"Yes, but with Dr. Klein's efforts I might return to that state. Although he's not exactly sure how long it will take before he can create the antidote."

Abruptly Clark heard the metallic scratching sound of a key turning the lock, then a familiar voice called out, "Clark! Are you on the terrace?"

"Yes! Come on back!" He called out. "Mom, Dad I have to go. Lois is here and from the smells of roast chicken, Uncle Mike has sent over another one of his 'care' packages."

"All right dear. Give her our love," Martha said. Again, she barely managed to conceal a happy chuckle.

"I will, Mom. Bye, Dad." Clark hung up just in time to see his partner storm onto the terrace and launch into a full-blown babble session.

"Blasted military! Who do General Zeitlin and 'Special Advisor to the President' John Cosgrove think they are making us sit on the story of the year! *We* broke this whole thing wide open. If it hadn't been for us, those crystals would be in the hands of a foreign power by now. They never had a clue! Perry *and* Franklin Stern are trying to get them to see reason, but those government types are as thick as thieves! Urgh! Sometimes I think I should just pack up my word processor and become a lounge singer!"

"Lois, what is this all about?" Clark asked in utter bewilderment.

She rolled her eyes in outraged disgust. "Honestly Clark, weren't you listening? General Zeitlin does *not* want us to write the story if we even hint at the existence of Harmonic Crystals!"

"I thought we agreed with Captain Maynard that it was a matter of national security to keep knowledge of the crystals' existence and theft out of the papers?"

"Okay, so we don't write about the theft, but the crystals' *existence*? Come on, you knew about them when Bobby first came to us with the information months ago."

"Yes, but that was within the scientific community, it is not truly public knowledge. We need to stick with our agreement with the military in general and General Zeitlin in particular."

"Oh, I hope you didn't mean that play on words, mister!" His partner shot back without rancor.

"Pretty good for a 'sick' man," Clark grinned. "Besides Lois, this article will have all the ingredients of a headline-grabbing, Kerth award winning story: International intrigue, a dangerous former KGB

operative illegally on America soil and the notorious crime syndicate Intergang involved. Hey, there's even a little romance."

"Romance? What romance?" His partner cocked an eyebrow and gave him a very odd look.

Clark stood up from his deck chair and walked over to Lois, who was all too aware of his current state of near undress. "Why Miss Lane, I thought everyone in Metropolis knew about 'The Hottest Team in Town?'" He continued to approach Lois, took her in his arms and kissed her lips ever so gently.

"My... we are feeling better, aren't we?" She answered grinning.

Slowly they swayed together, enjoying the intimacy of their embrace, when the ground gave way under them. They both looked down and noticed their feet were hovering off the terrace.

"Clark! We're floating! Your powers are back!" She squeaked in delight.

"Great! I thought they might never return!" Gently, with the ease born from experience, he lowered them to the terrace floor. "Now we can go into the newsroom tomorrow and write the finale to the Shackleton freighter hijacking case."

"Why wait until tomorrow? We can discuss the outline over dinner and start writing the article. Just like before. Only, could you put on a pair of jeans... and a t-shirt?" Lois looked amused, but slightly embarrassed.

Her partner grinned, "I'll be back in a jiffy." A gust of air blew by Lois. Within seconds Clark returned, wearing jeans and a white t-shirt.

Clark set the table while Lois opened the take out bag from Mike's Americana Café, the savory aromas of rosemary chicken lingering in the air.

"Please tell Uncle Mike thank you, but he doesn't have to do this for me. I can cook," Clark said as he reached for a bottle of German Riesling, a light dinner wine.

"Clark, my uncle likes to do this for us, especially since he knows we are going to be working on a story. Now listen, here's the update on the Intergang members, they are all refusing to talk."

"No surprise there."

"True, but the one thing they all do say is that Dr. Scott was the one who engineered the whole plot. Apparently the police search of his personal computer reveals he embezzled the money from LexCorp in order to finance the operation, and then planned to sell the crystals to the highest bidder, using Intergang as a fence."

"I take it Scott still hasn't revived from his coma? To deny or confirm what the police found?"

"No. Apparently, he went into shock shortly before the paramedics arrived and despite efforts from the ER doctors, he slipped into coma. It's not fair, Clark; we were so close to proving Luthor was behind all of this! But without Scott to corroborate what we heard at the energy conference, Luthor walks!" Lois's expressive eyes flashed in anger.

"Cameron Axelrod still won't talk?" Clark asked.

"Not a word. Except he did admit to something very strange. Evidently Dr. Scott took all the credit when things went well, but Luthor was the scapegoat in case anything bad happened. Axelrod truly believes Scott to be the mastermind behind the hijacking. Scott embezzled LexCorp funds to finance everything. This was all a desperate attempt to clear his gambling debts. That's pretty much what the police said. Is it possible Luthor is in the clear on this one?" She rubbed her chin while contemplating the matter.

"Wait a second. Lucky Leon was there!"

"Sorry, partner, more political interference where Leon is concerned, this time *another* government has announced their prior claim to the former KGB operative. General Zeitlin has him under wraps in a federal prison awaiting extradition to Russia. They want him more than we do. Let's face it, Clark. Luthor wins." She said this while filling his plate with scalloped potatoes, grilled asparagus and the chicken.

"Well, going back to your original interview with Ms. Milan, she withheld nothing from you. All the legal paperwork her assistant sent over checks out with our in-house counsel. Everything points to Dr.

Scott as our man," Clark sighed, as he poured some cat food into Pepper's bowl. Hearing the dry food hitting the bowl, the hungry feline bounded out of the bedroom alcove and into the kitchen, eager for his dinner.

"Yeah, but why not embezzle the money, pay your gambling debts, and leave town? Why get involved with Intergang in the first place? They are not known for being reasonable. Come on, let's eat dinner before it gets cold," his partner said, barely hiding the disappointment in her tone.

As if by silent agreement, any discussion of the case was on hold while they ate. Unbeknownst to them, this was to become a nightly routine. Have dinner, but stop all office discussions until the dishes were put away. In this way, they created a distinction between their lives at the Daily Planet and their new life as a couple.

The sun had sunk into the horizon and the apartment was getting dark, when Lois finished drying the dishes. She walked over to Clark's small desk and looked over his shoulder while he began typing the outline of the story.

"You're starting with our original stakeout? I don't want people to think we missed an opportunity to bag the bad guys!" She squeaked.

"Hey, the story needs a beginning. Have the reader follow us on an investigative journey..."

"Journey?" His partner responded stiffly, cutting him off. "Are we writing an article or a bestselling novel? We need to get to the facts! Let me sharpen my pencils and break out my yellow pad. I'm so glad to finally see a pencil sharpener in this apartment!" She dove into the recesses of her briefcase.

"The best conclusion to this story would have been if we had solid proof Luthor was the true mastermind behind this entire plan," Clark muttered as he typed.

"I hear he's in Greece attending a business conference with Ms. Milan and some of his staff. Isn't it just like him to be out of town when all of this blows up? The perfect alibi," Lois sighed and shook her head.

The two young men, impressed into service for that evening's activities, opened the large ancient oak double doors. The doors led to a short flight of broad white stone steps onto an expansive stone and marble terrace. In the doorway stood a graceful, but nervous, Jane Connolly wearing a very pleasing-to-the-eye sleeveless and gathered-at-the-waist ruby red gown. She carried a simple bouquet of white roses, wrapped in baby's breath.

The small gathering of seated guests, including her husband Jason, gazed upon her, smiling with approval. Asabi, standing in his place as Best Man, nodded to someone and Handel's "Water Music" began to play. With a delicate even stride, the Matron of Honor descended the stone steps and walked down the aisle toward the officiant. Behind her in the brightly lit passageway, stood the bride and groom, eagerly waiting to make their entrance.

While they waited to make their entrance, Aykira was thinking. <Has it only been three days since he proposed? It seems so much longer. I wish there had been more time to savor our engagement, but Lex is correct, time and the media are against us. Jane and I were able to get our dresses without Ms. Grant discovering us at Darcy's. There were so many details to handle and all of it under the radar. Still everything came together perfectly. This is the happiest day of my life! > A hint of sadness fleetingly moved through her heart. Despite having a few good friends like Jane and Jason, she wished Bern could have been there. But of course, that was impossible. She did wonder about one other thing, Lex's reaction when he discovered tonight would be her first time.

"Are you ready, my love?" the groom asked, breaking into her thoughts.

"Yes Lex. Are you ready?" she answered, hazel eyes shining.

Her answer triggered his own thoughts. Once more Lex thought

about the space station, former lovers and vain pursuits. <How foolish to waste precious time! I should have been pursuing Aykira, not chasing a dream of building a space station — the highest manmade object in the heavens. What rubbish! Marriage to a good woman is a better monument to my parents. These past few days have been the real dream. Aykira by my side, making plans for this day and the seven perfect days remaining to us until the surgery will be heavenly. Afterwards... ah, afterwards must attend to itself.>

Lex put any further thoughts about his surgery aside and answered by taking her slim hand in his and kissing it affectionately. Since arriving at the island of Santorini, Aykira's brown skin had deepened to a glowing bronze from exposure to the Mediterranean sun's intense rays. Her wedding gown, a luxurious, double-layered white shirred silk creation with a bodice, defined Aykira's slender waist. The details of princess seaming with corset-inspired rhinestone embellishment visually sculpted her shapely, silhouette. Her bouquet was fashioned from majestic red anemone or 'windflower' which means undying love, accented by lush wild green ferns found in the Stone Villa's garden.

Lex wore a simple collarless white linen shirt and pants with a red linen sash tied smoothly around his waist. The sash gave him an air of a swash-buckling adventurer.

She smiled, eyes glistening with unshed tears. How much she loved and cared for this man! No matter how long her life spun out, no matter what future trials they would face together, her mind would always hold today's events forever etched in stone.

Jane arrived at her place by the railing; she turned around looking back at the couple, beckoning them with a slight nod of her head. Lex took Aykira's arm in his and together they walked down the steps to the terrace where the officiant, Mayor Spyros Chiro, awaited them. He was an impressive figure of a man in his mid-sixties with a shock of white hair, twinkling blue eyes and on his upper lip a perfectly trimmed white mustache. He stood close to the black wrought iron railing, his back ramrod straight to the sea.

Aykira's breath caught in her throat by the majestic view. The exquisite Mediterranean sunset played over waning light, reflecting off the mildly sparkling azure blue Aegean Sea. In the distance, hungry seabirds cried aloud for all to hear. Light gusts of air swirled around them, filling their nostrils with the scent of fresh flowers and ocean breezes.

Aykira and Lex halted. Asabi and Jane smoothly took their places behind them. The couple then stood serenely before the mayor, listening intently as he bound their separate lives into one.

"My friends, we gather here on this day to celebrate the love and union of two people, blending their formerly separate lives into an unyielding woven tapestry of everlasting love and friendship. May they rejoice in their strengths and work with each other's weaknesses. May they provide refreshment for each other at day's end. May they remain in each other's eyes eternally as they are today, forever beautiful, forever loved. May they remember to be each other's shelter from the wind as times shall be good in their lives as well as troublesome."

The bride's eyes shone with unshed tears. Aykira thought, <How sweetly true the Mayor's words were!> They had pledged themselves to each other the day Lex gave her the engagement ring. This ceremony made it official in the eyes of God and man.

"Are there rings to be exchanged?" The Mayor asked the beaming couple.

A smiling Asabi, resplendent in a dark red silk jacket, reached into his pocket, and removed a small box, similar to the one which had held Aykira's engagement ring. This one contained two rings. One was a diamond and gold band shaped to fit up snugly against her engagement ring; the other was a man's gold wedding band, etched with a design very familiar to the bride. He handed the ring to Jane who turned and gave it to Aykira.

She looked at it and took in a quick breath; Lex's ring matched her silver beacon ring. Mute acknowledgement to the world he understood

her mission and valued the sacrifice she was making by remaining here with him. The gesture deeply touched a heart already overcome with emotion.

"Aykira, please place the ring on his finger." When she had done so, the Mayor spoke again. "Aykira Kamaria Milan, do you take this man as your companion in life — your husband?"

"I shall... with all my heart," She responded in a trembling voice.

"Good. Lex, please place the ring on her finger." With hands, slightly shaking he slipped the dazzling ring on Aykira's finger. Her delicate long bronze fingers set off the jewelry perfectly.

"Alexi Anton Luthor... do you take this woman as your companion in life — your wife?"

"I shall... with all my love."

"Then by the power vested in me by the people of Santorini and Almighty God, I now pronounce you man and woman... husband and wife. You may now kiss the bride."

They turned to each other, faces wet with tears, hearts engulfed in deep satisfaction. Lex gathered Aykira into his arms, kissing her with all of the ardor he possessed. Behind them the guests stood on their feet, cheered and applauded happily.

After enthusiastically thanking the Mayor for performing an exceptional, yet simple service, in high spirits, the radiant couple moved back into the Villa's large garden with their joyful guests to share their first meal as husband and wife.

Chef Andre's staff had outdone themselves classically decorating each guest's table with snowy white linens and red scented candles. In the center of the garden were square guest tables set in a "U" shape surrounding the bride and groom's circular table. The newlyweds' table had white linens with a red runner. Atop the linen were clear votive candleholders painted with metallic gold stripes around the base. Each was filled with aromatic white candles creating a circle in the center of the table. Within the votive center sat a low vase of white roses, their delicate scent wafted soothingly through the outdoor dining room.

As the guests mingled and looked for their seats, in the background, Mozart's "Eine Kleine Nachemusik" played softly.

On each plate lay a placard; on hers it read in flowing golden cursive script: Aykira Milan-Luthor.

"Mrs. Luthor," Lex smiled as he indicated the chair.

Lex pulled back and held the chair, than pushed it in when she sat down. Both of them were excited and nervous, like a couple of teenagers on their first date. Lex took a silken napkin from the table and lightly dabbed the tears from Aykira's face. They both wanted time to slow down and allow themselves to enjoy this evening, to imprint it into their memories to return and visit frequently.

Once the guests stopped mingling and found their seats, Chef Andre and his wait staff appeared from the kitchen holding meze appetizer platters consisting of olives, feta cheese chunks, hummus dip, carefully sliced pita bread and stuffed grape leaves. A smiling chubby young woman presented the bride and groom with a carafe of red wine and two crystal cut wine goblets. She poured the liquid with a flourish, giggled, and quickly disappeared back into the kitchen.

Several minutes later, the main course of lamb, roasted herbed potatoes and spinach salad was brought to the tables. Everyone acknowledged the sumptuous repast and soon only the sounds of silverware clinking on bone china could be heard over the softly playing dinner music. Lex turned to his wife and smiled.

"My darling, may I say you look ravishingly beautiful this evening."

"Thank you Lex. This is like a dream. I love being here on Santorini at the Stone Villa with you tonight."

He took her hands gently into his own, kissed them and whispered. "No. I should be the one thanking you. There has never been a better day in my life. I love you so much and look forward to showing you just how much..." Lex's eyes shone with desire.

Her face grew flush with warmth and not a little nervous anticipation. "We have each other and... the nights ahead." She

glanced at the beautifully decorated table, their happy guests, and the open space in the garden and smiled. In the background, could be heard the wonderfully romantic classic song from Casablanca “As Time Goes By”. She looked at him and whispered. “Would you care to dance with your wife?”

Lex’s lips pursed into a wooing smile, “You need but ask.”

He took her hand and led her onto the floor. They came together in perfect unison, moving easily to the strains of the classic song. The guests smiled contentedly and softly sang along, watching them sway tenderly. Aykira laid her head on Lex’s shoulder listening to him hum the melody in her ear. All too soon, the song ended. Holding hands, they returned to their seats.

In a turnabout of tradition, the wedding guests walked over to the bridal table, offering congratulations and well wishes. Mayor Chiros with his wife Anna and their sons, who acted as ushers, approached first. Asabi bowed deeply and clasped his hands together, profoundly moved to see Lex so at peace. Jane and Jason came next wishing them joy and a long life together. Jason wrapped a beefy arm around Jane and boomed out, “Lex, if you are *half* as happy as I am, married life will be a very good thing.”

Sheldon Bender had hung back until the other guests had spoken than came over with his wife Liz. The two men exchanged pleasantries, shook hands, and smiled. “Look after the board while we are gone, Sheldon. Let them know about my marriage to Aykira as soon as you return.”

“Of course Lex, the board shall have a number of questions. This marriage is — quite a surprise.”

“Not as surprised as they will be.” Lex smiled tightly. Even Sheldon did not know the extent of Luthor’s condition. However, Sheldon did agree... reluctantly that Aykira was the perfect solution to whom should run the corporation while Lex recovered from surgery.

“Enough with business talk!” The petite Anna Chiros shouted good-naturedly. “This man,” she pointed emphatically at Lex. “Exchanged vows less than an hour ago and already talk turns to work! Shame on both of you, now is a time for music, dancing and laughter!” She pointed to the couple. “Come now; cut the wedding cake, yes?”

“Lex, my love, a wiser mind than yours has spoken. Come.” So saying, Aykira took him by the hand and they walked over to a scrumptious white three-layer cake with delicate red piping, baked not by Chef Andre, but one of the local Santorini bakeries Lex was fond of. To happy shouts and enthusiastic applause, the couple sliced into the cake and placed thick wedges onto crystal plates, which glistened in the candlelight. They each took a plate and began serving to the reception guests. It was definitely not traditional and everyone thought it was very sweet.

Time seemed to move so rapidly. No matter how many photos they took with people, dances spun out on the floor or quiet chats with friends, the evening drew to its inevitable conclusion. Guests began to drift away, calling out their congratulations to the bride and groom. Aykira gave Jane a final hug than thanked her for all she had done. Lex had a few words with Sheldon Bender then bade his lawyer goodnight.

They walked to the bridal table. Lex bent down and took a fork in his hand, then he cut a small piece of cake and fed Aykira. She did the same to him. They laughed and gave each other a generous hug, then sat down for a moment to listen to the quiet of the evening. Lex traced the line of her jawbone with his lips. The candlelight caught a wickedly mischievous glint in her hazel eyes as she gently gasped in pleasure. “Suddenly I do not feel very hungry for cake. However... I am rather sleepy. Care to join me?”

Her husband made no secret of the eagerness he felt. “My sweet, I thought you would *never* ask.”

They stood up from the table. Lex softly blew out the candles then came around to her side of the table, took her hand in his and together they walked up the white stone pathway and entered the Villa’s master

suite. Aykira’s husband closed the heavy wooden door firmly behind them.

Chef Andre emerged from the kitchen, followed by the chubby servant girl and others. He shook his head, but smiled happily. Tonight, he and the rest of the kitchen staff would work — then feast.

After nearly four days of battling with General Zeitlin, John Cosgrove and the federal government over the right to mention the Harmonic Crystals, Lois and Clark were finally permitted to write the story of the Shackleton hijacking from beginning to end... still omitting any knowledge of the crystals.

It was galling censorship at the highest level, but everyone on at the Daily Planet involved from Mr. Stern and the Board of Directors to Lois and Clark agreed it was the only way to get the story told.

It was very early the next morning as the reporting team emerged from the elevator. With quick steps, they jauntily walked down the ramp and entered the unusually quiet newsroom. They were still intensely discussing the government’s censorship of their story.

“I still cannot believe you are so calm about this whole situation, Clark. What about freedom of the press?”

He looked at the snapping brown eyes and the flush of emotion in her voice; at times like these, she stirred his heart more than he could bear. But the conversation was one of a serious nature, not a time for romance.

“Look, it’s like this, all things should be recorded, but not all things should be reported immediately. The crystals are a completely proven energy source; unfortunately, EPRAD is afraid of adverse publicity about the new technology. The agency wishes to avoid the media embarrassment of failure.”

“You mean like the tiles falling off the old space shuttles?” Lois responded.

“Yeah, government funding might dry up if there is a problem and the public might point to the crystals as a ‘scapegoat.’”

“Maybe, but the public needs to be educated. The people have a right to know. What better way than to learn from our article?” Lois answered, completely dissatisfied with her partner’s answer.

“Is this the best way to introduce something this important? Who knows? In six months, the gag order will be off and we can have an exclusive in our laps! Remember, Captain Maynard and his boss owe us. Consider them a future source.” They reached Lois’ desk and he laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Honey, you’re not happy with this arrangement, neither am I. However, we have a story to write. Let’s give Perry our best. Show those guys on the Kerth committee a good, strong finish!”

He noticed the lines on her forehead slowly disappear as his words began to sink in. Finally, a small smile came to her lips. “Okay partner. One of these days soon, General Zeitlin, and his cronies better give us an exclusive on something worthwhile!”

“Great!” Clark said, “Now let me...”

Before Clark could finish his sentence, they both looked up to see Franklin Stern herding Ralph into Perry’s office.

“I wonder what that’s all about?” Clark said into her ear.

“Whatever it is, it can’t be good. Mr. Stern rarely comes downstairs this early for idle chats. Ralph is in serious trouble, which I doubt he can wriggle his smarmy way out of,” she said.

Putting the incident to the back of their minds, the reporters busied themselves with their early morning work routines: Lois sipped on her low-fat mocha, thinking about how to weave a number of sidebars into the main article while Clark organized his notes. In a few moments, they were deeply engrossed in constructing the Shackleton story’s final outline.

Unexpectedly the morning quiet was broken when Perry leaned outside his office and quietly – almost gently called Lois and Clark in for a meeting.

“Uh oh,” Clark said, as he nervously touched his glasses. “This could be another round of arguments with General Zeitlin and

company.”

“Yeah, but why include Ralph?”

Her partner shrugged his shoulders and gently placed his hand on the small of Lois’s back as she walked ahead of him to the senior editor’s office. Off to the side, Clark noticed a morose Ralph stood by the window, trying hard to disappear.

“Lois, Clark, thanks for coming in. This won’t take very long. Clark, glad to see that flu bug finally let you go.” Perry’s smile gently faded as he turned to the Daily Planet’s owner and publisher sitting nearby. “There’s a matter Mr. Stern and I need your participation on before we can go further with any action.”

“Sure chief. What is it?” asked Clark as he sat down in his now familiar spot on the plaid couch.

Before Perry could speak, Franklin Stern’s booming voice filled the suddenly tiny office. “Excuse me Perry, but let’s forego the delicacies. We need to get to the bottom of this situation.” Turning to the reporting duo, he asked. “Did either of you inform Ralph of a change in location for your stakeout?”

Clark watched as Lois turned, eyes dancing with fury at Ralph. Her voice steely as the angry words lanced the air. “We most certainly did *not*.”

“She’s right, chief. I never had a discussion with Ralph about our stakeout’s location.”

Perry sat back in his chair, rubbing his chin, “Well, now. Ralph here just finished telling us something very different. Care to straighten matters out, Ralph?”

The toadying man bolted from his position by the window, as if suddenly brought to life. “I thought it was Pier Eighteen, so I told this guy the same thing. I was just passing on the message. No harm. No foul.”

“But that does not explain why you lied to the caller. Captain Maynard said as much. Also, why did you show up at Pier Seventeen rather than Eighteen? Was it to possibly steal our story? If it were not for Superman and the Special Ops team, we all would be dead. Did you think about that?” Clark asked. His normally mild voice had a decided edge to it.

“Uh, well, no.” Ralph, sensing things were not going his way, changed tactics. “Besides, if it hadn’t been for that no-good snitch, Bobby Bigmouth, I would be the one with this story, not the ‘Hottest Team in Town!’” This last was said sneeringly. As if, Lois and Clark owed him something. He continued by saying, “I just wanted to prove myself you know? Maybe get a little respect, like Eduardo or Steve.”

“Wait a second. You were the one who paid Bobby with a rotten Egg Salad Sandwich?” Clark fired back, his voice filled with surprise.

“Yeah, I was in a hurry. So I grabbed a day old sandwich from the mission shelter before I met him,” Ralph shrugged, “I didn’t think he would notice...”

Clark could sense rather than see Lois roll her eyes in derision. ‘Mad Dog’ Lane was in full attack mode. She laced into him. “Ralph, Bobby may be a lot of things, but he does not lack taste buds, a keen sense of smell nor is he stupid! No wonder he called us that night.”

“How was I supposed to know? He was just a snitch!” Ralph whined.

“The first thing a good journalist remembers is to respect his sources. That ‘snitch’ in the past has provided Lois with top grade information. How do you think she got her first Kerth? From a tip Bobby gave her!” Perry shook his head. “It’s the reason why Lois and Clark are exceptional investigative reporters. It is also the reason why Eduardo and Steve are highly esteemed for what they do in their particular fields. Jimmy Olsen, while collaborating with Lois, wrote his first story for this paper during the Nightfall asteroid threat. The story needed a polish and Lois partnered with him — but despite his rocky start, he is a better reporter than you’ll ever hope to be.”

Franklin Stern sat in the big leather chair watching the byplay between the three journalists and their editor. When he spoke with his dark rumbling voice, all eyes turned to him.

“Ralph, apparently this Bigmouth fellow was treated in a rather

shabby manner. The same slipshod attitude was displayed toward your fellow reporters. That seems to be a pattern. I spoke with HR and apparently, your file lists a number of discipline and behavioral problems. At least two female reporters hinted at harassment.” Stern brought his cool gray eyes to gaze hard at Ralph. “Got anything to say about that?”

Ralph’s face grew flush and he stumbled over his words. “I... I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I see.” The big man stood up and walked over to the door with a prizefighter’s grace, belying his age. “Well, those days of pretending ignorance and sponging off this paper are over. This morning I had a little talk with your uncle. If it were not for him putting considerable pressure on Perry, your sorry butt would have been tossed out of here ages ago. He is no longer on the board of directors at the Daily Planet. I figured it was time to clean house in the bullpen as well.”

Looking to Perry, the publisher said, “The executive suite is my neighborhood, this is yours. Miss Lane, Mr. Kent, please accept my apology again for interrupting your morning. I look forward to *finally* reading the Shackleton article from beginning to end.” With those words, Franklin Stern exited Perry’s office, closing the door firmly behind him.

Ralph turned to Perry, his mouth open. “Now wait just a minute. He can’t do this!”

Perry grinned fiercely, like a hungry lion. “Oh, he meant it all right. The Daily Planet stands for decency and honor. We expect our employees, *especially* the reporters, to uphold that standard. On many occasions it has been painfully obvious you want nothing to do with those standards.”

“By willfully lying about where Lois and Clark were, they might have been killed. Then you decide to slip over to the docks with the intention of stealing their story. Again, putting lives at risk. We cannot tolerate such behavior. As of this moment, Ralph you no longer work for this paper. I intend to make sure the other newspapers in Metropolis and the state of New Troy are aware you are not worth hiring. Pack up your desk now. A guard is waiting outside and will remain in the bullpen until you leave.”

Ralph, in shock, stood trying to talk, but words failed him. Slowly, he walked in a desultory fashion out of Perry’s office. The security guard, waiting just outside the door, escorted him to his desk.

Clark let out a slow, low whistle, looked at Lois and said, “What a morning, it’s not even seven thirty yet!”

“Great shades of Elvis!” Perry crowed, “I’ve wanted to do that since the first day he walked onto the newsroom floor.”

“Obviously, it explains why he seemed to slip by all the rules. Chief, it must have been awful.” Lois said.

“Yeah, his uncle’s ‘subtle’ pressure was difficult to deal with, but now at last his meddling stops.” Perry’s face relaxed and a brilliant smile erupted. “What are you two sitting around for? Elvis is most certainly not coming into the building! We have a newspaper to run! I expect to read all about the Shackleton hijacking in the evening edition!”

Grateful to return to their work, Lois and Clark began to walk towards the door, when the sound of Perry clearing his throat stopped them. “Uh, don’t forget you two promised to tell Bill Henderson ‘the story behind the story’.”

“Right chief,” Lois squeaked in response.

“This is the best thing you two have written since... well since ever!” Perry exclaimed for the entire newsroom to hear. “Lane and Kent, the hottest team in town, does it again!” Cheers went up as the latest copies of the Daily Planet front page made its way around the bullpen.

SHACKLETON HIJACKING SOLVED! INTERGANG MEMBERS CAPTURED!

Jimmy, Eduardo and several other co-workers came over to offer sincere congratulations, followed by hearty handshakes and in the case of Diane a warm hug to Lois. Even Cat came over, generous in her

best wishes to the reporting team.

“That’s quite a coup, bagging an international criminal, four rogue scientists, and several Intergang members, all of whom have outstanding warrants,” Jimmy shrugged, trying to be nonchalant. “Just another working day in the lives of Clark Kent and Lois Lane: reporters extraordinaire!”

Eventually the noise died down, well-wishers went back to work, and the Planet’s bullpen settled down. Clark stood at Lois’ desk talking with Perry.

“The only ‘fly in the ointment’ is Dr. Scott. I wish he would regain consciousness so we could establish a link between him and Luthor.” Clark complained uncharacteristically.

“I don’t believe it!” A familiar voice shrieked.

Lois, Clark, Perry and the entire newsroom looked over to Cat, the gossip columnist was standing up, her animated face in shock. Lois responded nonchalantly. “That could cover a lot of ground, Cat. What don’t you believe?”

After her initial reaction, Cat put down the receiver and began excitedly thumbing through her rolodex... snickering gleefully. She tilted her chin to the phone, “That was Anna, our correspondent in Athens. Lex Luthor got married — *last* week at his home, The Stone Villa, on the Greek isle of Santorini!”

The entire bullpen turned around. A group normally jaded from hearing just about any kind of story. How could something so completely newsworthy slip past some of the best journalists in the business, if not the world?

A chorus of voices rang out:

“Who did he marry?”

“Congressman Gregg’s daughter?”

“Arthur Chow’s niece?”

“A stripper?”

This last comment came from Eduardo. Steve quickly shut him up by punching him in the shoulder. Diane followed by tapping him on the head. “Eduardo. That comment is so unlike you!” she snapped.

“Sorry,” he muttered sheepishly, “but with Luthor anything is possible!”

“OK, who did he marry?” Lois asked.

“Lex Luthor’s new wife is his long-time assistant... Aykira Milan.” Cat shouted in utter disbelief.

“When did they start seeing each other and how did we miss it?”

Was the consensus in the bullpen.

“Yeah, can you believe it? There was not the *slightest* indication they were dating. Hey, I’ve *got* to call my source at LexCorp. *Somebody* has the dirt on this wedding and I’m going to find it!” So saying, Cat picked up the phone and furiously began punching the number to reach her source.

“Chief, this story is way too big for a gossip columnist to handle! I interviewed Ms. Milan...uh Mrs. Luthor only a few months ago. She’ll talk to me!” Lois pleaded.

The Planet’s Senior Editor started issuing orders to the bullpen at large. “Find out everything you can about this woman!”

“Way ahead of you, chief!” Jack answered as he produced a thick file and handed it over to a grateful Lois. “This is all the research on the former Ms. Milan. Miss Lane asked me to work up the information a while ago. It should save us some time.”

“Great work, Jack!” Jimmy beamed at his young friend and protégé.

Cat slammed down the phone, stood up, pumped her fist in the air, and shouted triumphantly, “I got a quote from the new Mrs. Luthor!” She started reading from her notepad, ‘My marriage to Lex is taking us on a sojourn, a magnificent sojourn. I have found my other half in him, my friend. In him, I have found my lover, my companion. The man I was searching for.’

Jimmy whistled, “That’s quite the quote. She must really be in love.”

“Or have a great speech-writer,” Lois mumbled under her breath.

“Come on Lois, even you can tell true love, especially now.” Clark

said softly.

His partner blushed ever so slightly and placed a gentle hand on his. “I’m very surprised that Clark Kent, Lex Luthor’s greatest detractor, is hoping his marriage is a success.”

Clark shrugged his shoulders and said, “As long as he’s not trying to marry a certain beautiful reporter, I can wish him the best of everything!”

Suddenly the phone rang shrilly on Lois’ desk. She picked it up and after identifying herself, she listened to the person on the other end. Her eyes suddenly grew wide with astonishment and she grabbed a notepad and pencil, writing furiously. “She wants to meet us when? Ok. We’ll be there! Thank you!”

Lois’ smile was one of smug satisfaction. She leaned back in her chair and began to laugh very quietly. “Poor Cat. That was the new Mrs. Luthor’s assistant on the phone. Clark and I have been invited to her office for a two on one interview in a week.”

“Great Shades of Elvis!” Perry raised his clasped hands skyward and crowed, “The circulation is going to go through the roof!”

Part Twenty

Clark and Lois walked slowly down the ramp into the bullpen after a thoroughly exhausting day chasing down a lead provided by Lois’ other favorite snitch, No Knees Nolan. He had information regarding the CEO of Stone and Mercantile who was finally going to name names in a tax scandal guaranteed to send several prominent Wall Streeters running for their lawyers. Unfortunately, after cross-checking Nolan’s tip with impeccable resources within the financial world, the story did not pan out. Neither reporter was very happy about returning without even the faintest glimmer of an article.

Currently, the ‘Hottest Team in Town’ was stone cold. They both hoped the upcoming interview with Aykira Milan-Luthor yielded better results.

Lois glumly sat down in her chair, kicked off her red pumps and turned on the computer. She glanced around the bustling newsroom and was grateful Ralph’s tenure at the Planet had ended. The last thing she and her partner wanted this afternoon was listening to his needling sneers. She glanced over to Clark’s desk in time to see him open a card accompanied by a small bouquet of flowers on his desk. Curious, she spoke up, with only a tiny hint of jealous concern in her voice. “What’s that – a love note from a secret admirer?”

He finished reading the card then smiled softly, “No, it is a thank-you note from Grace Chen for the story on Rhapsody Knits.”

A puzzled expression crossed her lovely features, “But that was written over four months ago. Why is Grace sending flowers now?”

Perry leaned out of his office and boomed out happily for the bullpen to hear. “That was *before* the story was nominated for a Merriweather award! Congratulations Kent! Great way to close out the year!”

Members of the bullpen came over to pat Clark on the back with hearty well wishes. After all, being nominated for a Merriweather in the newspaper publishing business was like being nominated for an Oscar in the film industry. Imagine having two such talented persons on the Daily Planet’s reporting staff! No wonder they were the ‘Hottest Team in Town’!

“Smooth moves, CK!” Jimmy gave him the thumbs up sign.

Steve, Eduardo, Diane, and Cat came over with personal good wishes. Jack phoned from the stacks; apparently he was working on a rush research project for Steve.

Clark accepted the accolades with his usual combination of modesty, humility, and Midwestern charm. His partner stood nearby, basking in the reflected light of his glory. After all, what was good for Clark was good for her. The story was excellent, he had worked extremely hard on it and although it was laced with his touchy-feely style of writing, it was Clark Jerome Kent at his best.

Franklin Stern came downstairs a few minutes later to congratulate him personally. This was indeed a very different publisher than the previous owners, who preferred to remain upstairs and only interacted with reporters when they wanted to put — or in some cases keep —

their names out of the paper. Mr. Stern's fascination with the daily workings of a newspaper was refreshingly different. Therefore, whenever he was in town, it was unusual *not* to see him walking through the newsroom asking direct questions of everyone, from reporters to copy boys. The best part of all, Franklin Stern seriously *listened*.

The results of those direct questions produced improvements in the newsroom décor, the vending machines and especially computer upgrades. The one thing it did not change was the coffee maker — Mr. Stern loved the sludge dispensed out of the cranky old machine.

Eventually the bullpen settled back down to work, Mr. Stern entered Perry's office laughing, a good sign that peace existed between the Senior Editor and Publisher. Lois walked over to Clark's desk and sat in the visitor's chair. "Care to go to dinner tonight and celebrate... my treat?"

"Dinner sounds good, but I know this perfect little place outside of town and I hear the cook is expecting us." Clark answered in a conspirator's whisper.

"Is the cook baking German sweet chocolate cake?" Lois asked hopefully.

"She might be," he teased.

"Great! We could use some comfort food after today! Perry needs an update on one of my other stories, then we can get out of here."

Once their respective journalistic duties were complete, the energized duo raced upstairs to the roof, a very different pair from the couple that walked into the newsroom an hour previous. Clark spun into the Suit and gathered Lois into his powerful arms. They stopped for ten minutes at her apartment so she could change into jeans and a blue t-shirt. There was also a pair of crazy socks Lucy had mailed over as a gag gift. Not exactly Lois's style, but they were fun in a quirky kind of way. She opened her back window and via 'Superman Express' they lifted into the Metropolis twilight sky towards Kansas. After a brief flight, Clark descended from the late afternoon sky and gently landed on the dirt road leading up to the Kent farm.

His partner looked around taking in what few sights she could in the waning light. "This is certainly different from the last time we came out here. Instead of flying via airplanes and waiting for trains to pass, we cut out several hours of travel! Dating Clark Kent has its perks, and is going to save us a ton on airfare. Guess my frequent flyer miles won't pile up as fast as they used to!"

"Maybe not, but that means more time for enjoying things like de-stressing after the day we've had! Come on, they are waiting for us." He gestured towards the quaint farmhouse perched on the hill, the lights of Martha's kitchen — and the tantalizing smells within beckoning them.

A long happy time later, with the dinner dishes cleared and washed, Martha announced the cake still needed to cool for a while, before frosting it. The Kent men folk went out to the barn, once again to work on Jonathan's obstinate, ancient tractor. Lois and Martha sat down in the living room, serene in each other's company. The older woman took out her knitting and began to talk, "This is so nice, after nearly thirty years to be able to speak honestly with another woman about my son. You have no idea how happy he has been since arriving in Metropolis and working for the Daily Planet. Almost from the very first day and ever since, 'Lois Lane' was the name we heard the most. Having you share his secret has been like finally welcoming you to the family... officially."

"So you weren't concerned with my knowing about..." Lois made a swooping motion with her arm.

"Oh well, at first Jonathan and I were a bit surprised, but Clark needed someone special in his life to share such a secret... to have a family of his own." Martha put her knitting down and signed deeply, "Jonathan and I won't be here forever. That's another reason why we are so pleased he has such a special friendship with you."

Lois blushed. "The relationship I share with Clark is the most

precious thing in our lives, but it's not quite ready to take that final step." Feeling a shade self-conscious, her voice trailed off.

"Oh no, honey, I didn't mean to embarrass you! Relationships take time. Gosh, when Jonathan asked me to marry him I had to decide on being a farmer's wife or continue working as an administrative assistant for one of the biggest engineering firms in Kansas City."

Fascinated, Lois leaned forward very curious to hear about Martha's early life. "I had no idea you worked in a city."

"Oh, I was employed by Blaise and McCleary for three years. At the time in my life, I thought that was the place I was supposed to be. I turned Jonathan down flat three times before saying yes."

"No way! What did he do?"

"Dived right into his work, he plowed up two fields of snow!"

Laughter rocked the comfortable living room, as the two women continued talking about the men in their lives. Father and son. Husband and lover. Each cherished in their own way.

After several minutes, of listening to funny stories about Martha's 'business' life, Lois sat back wiping happy tears from her eyes. "Seriously, Martha, what made you leave the company? From the sounds of it, you were on the fast track."

"In my day we called it advancement," her eyes gleamed mischievously, but then her features turned thoughtful. "Sadly, Blaise and McCleary had what is now referred to as the 'glass ceiling'. I was passed over for promotion a number of times in favor of a man. No matter how hard I worked, some freshly pressed college boy with a crew cut took a position I was perfectly qualified for."

Lois nodded, "it still exists. Sometimes, I think it's harder than ever for a woman to break into a male-dominated field. But, that doesn't stop us from trying! So, what finally made you accept Jonathan's proposal?"

Martha grew silent, ran her fingers over the sweater she was knitting, drawing strength from its bright colors and smooth texture. Then she spoke in tones shadowed with regret and pain. "I...I wanted children. The only man I could imagine having them with was Jonathan. No job could hold a candle to that. Sadly, we know how that turned out."

Lois got up from her chair and sat next to Martha, giving her a fierce hug. "Maybe together you couldn't have children, but look at how great Clark turned out! That's better than working for some engineering company!" In Lois' mind she thought, <Did I actually say that? Spending even this short time with the Kent family has changed my attitude towards marriage and children! Imagine *me* telling anyone to be a wife rather than actively pursue a career?>

As Lois and Martha chatted, the men folk of the Kent family worked in the hushed atmosphere of the old barn. The comfortingly familiar smell of hay filled the night air as they worked diligently on the tractor. Clark's mind went back his youth, in the days when he was just discovering his powers and how their alienness frightened him. How they set him apart from all of his friends except Pete Ross. In this barn, he talked with his father, revealing his fears and dreams. It only seemed right that he continue to do so again. Now, voicing the concerns and plans of a mature man. After a time, Jonathan spoke, his calm gentle voice cutting through his son's thoughts.

"Son, it's good to see how happy the two of you are together. Hand me the channel locks please."

"Sure, here you go," Clark said as he passed over the large tool. "Being together... it feels right, Dad. She's the only woman I can imagine sharing my life with."

His father smiled indulgently, "Good, for a while there, Mayson Drake's name kept coming up. She was a pleasant enough woman, but not the right personality. Funny, she kinda reminded me of Lana — too pushy. So, when are you going to ask Lois for her hand in marriage?"

Clark answered the question with a smile as well, reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small blue and gold box. He opened it slowly to reveal a gleaming diamond solitaire ring. "We aren't there yet, but I just want to be prepared."

Jonathan shook his head laughing, the gentle blue eyes twinkled behind the wire rim glasses. “Between me and the Boy Scouts you learned well! Now son, speaking of preparation and the future, the apartment lease is going to be up pretty soon. If memory serves me correctly Lois’ place isn’t much bigger. Where are you going to live? After all, women like their closet space.”

“It’s odd to hear you say that. I need to talk with my landlady about a few things and then if matters pan out we can discuss it further.”

“Fair enough.” Jonathan’s face turned serious then said, “Son, Lois is a good woman and no matter what happens, we will always consider her a member of our family.”

“Thanks, Dad. Without your advice I don’t know where I would be by now.”

The elder Kent walked over to his workbench, grabbed a towel, and rubbed the oil and grease from his calloused hands, “Right where you should be — at Lois’ side.”

“Jonathan, Clark, come in for cake and coffee,” Martha called from the porch. The two men smiled at each other and walked to the house.

All too soon, dessert was over, and the couple prepared to depart.

“Here take some of this cake. It will be a nice snack for later,” Martha insisted.

“Mom, I still have cookies from the last trip!” Clark protested mildly.

“Oh don’t worry Martha, I’ll take it. This cake is too good to leave here! I need a couple of extra sessions at the gym anyway.” Lois gingerly took the bundle into her arms.

Effervescent but quick hugs were exchanged. Clark spun into the suit, gathered Lois up, then alighted into the night. His parents watched from the porch until the familiar sonic boom reached them and their children were gone from sight.

Lois felt a curious sense of warmth and peace while she and Clark flew back to Metropolis. On the distant horizon, she could see the smudge of the great city’s night-lights beckoning them. They were heading to their separate homes, but here at this moment she felt ‘home’ in his arms. <Where would I be tonight without this man? Sitting alone in my empty apartment; eating a melting dish of low-priced chocolate ice cream? On the other hand, I could be wasting an evening getting cheap, vicarious thrills watching my favorite soap opera, ‘The Ivory Tower’? Since Clark has welcomed me into his life, my own life has become enriched. Lois Lane is so much more than just a byline – she is a person – who has a fantastic new family!>

Suddenly her chest grew tight with emotions, chiefly being gratitude, and something akin to joy. The realization hit her with the force of a train wreck: she had found true love and acceptance at last. For that, she would forever be grateful to Clark. She tucked her head against his chest sighing softly.

The familiar rumble of Clark’s voice broke through her thoughts. “Lois, we are almost at your apartment.”

“Oh, let’s spend some time at your place; I’m not ready to go home yet,” she begged.

“Okay, but remember, we have to be at the Planet bright and early,” his deep voice caressed her ears.

“Yes sir,” she giggled, cuddling her face into his neck.

A scant ten minutes later, shoes off and seated comfortably on Clark’s couch, they enjoyed warm cups of Oolong tea. The coffee table held two plates; atop each were generous wedges of Martha’s cake. Sitting on the floor by the kitchen table sat Pepper, silently observing *his humans*.

“Mmm, eating at this hour cannot be good for my waistline! Oh well, Tae Kwon Do class is tomorrow night. But Clark, in the future, stop me from having too much rich food. Maybe your Kryptonian body can eat whatever it wants, but my earthbound metabolism can’t handle it!”

“Hmm dangerous job that, you get pretty cranky when the Double Fudge Crunch Bar supply gets low,” his eyes twinkled with humor.

“Since hanging around with a certain guy, I don’t need chocolate quite so much as I used to,” she leaned towards him.

“Do I know this guy? Who is strong enough to make the Daily Planet’s best investigative reporter give up her beloved candy stash?” Clark inched closer to meet her.

“Only the strongest man on Earth,” she whispered back. Then in a typical sneaky Lois move, she planted a kiss – on his nose.

“Hey, no fair! “He growled good-naturedly, “I wasn’t expecting that!” All discussion of cake forgotten, swiftly he gathered her up in his arms and sat her on his lap. “Now...here’s where I get even!”

“Yeah right Farmboy! You, and what army?”

“Minx!” He laughed and gave her an enthusiastic hug. The hug lasted for a moment or two longer than it should and they awkwardly separated. Tentatively Clark held her face in his hands, burrowing his fingers through delicately jasmine scented brown tresses, and kissed her sweet lips, his tongue dexterously searching her own. This time they did not separate, but lay perfectly in each other arms savoring the moment’s serenity.

This was what he always wanted, to share his life with her. It was only a matter of being patient and forever would be theirs.

A long time later, Clark whispered. “Lois, many are the times I dreamed of an evening like this. This is so much better than the last time you stayed late here.”

No response was forthcoming from his partner; her head comfortably on his shoulder, Lois had effortlessly drifted off to sleep. Tenderly, he stood, then floated her noiselessly into the bedroom. He removed the cute white socks with pictures of flying typewriters from her delicate feet. That done, he carefully pulled up another one of Martha’s knitted afghans to keep her warm.

Lois’ boyfriend smiled down as the petite figure contentedly nestling herself into the pillows. “Oh yeah, this is so *definitely* much better than the last time!” He whispered to himself.

He floated back to the living room, cleared the dishes, put away the cake and spun into the suit. Time for his nightly patrol. Hopefully, she might still be asleep when he returned. He snapped his fingers and remembered one last task.

“Pepper,” he called softly.

“Meow?” came the reply. His super hearing picked up the light-footed stroll of his feline roommate. The little cat padded over to his friend, paused, and then stood on his hind legs enjoying the petting Clark gave.

“Hey buddy, can you look after Lois for me? Try not to wake her, it’s been a long day.”

“Meow!” Almost as proof he understood the request, Pepper walked into the bedroom where Superman was assured the cat had made himself comfortable next to Lois.

Superman smiled while shaking his head. He was really going to miss Pepper when Mrs. Harper came back. The amicable feline had been wonderful company. Satisfied that his girlfriend and furry charge were safe and secure, he flew into the night.

Less than thirty minutes later Lois woke with a start. <Where am I?> Slowly, thinking backwards, her mind began to recollect the evening. She seriously considered grabbing her shoes and going home. But she was too tired and Clark’s warm scent from his bed was so comforting. Moments later she fell asleep, dreaming of her prince as if she were in a fairy tale.

A month later, on a bright and sunny afternoon in early September, a Metrocab pulled up at the LexCorp building. Inside, deep in discussion were Lois and Clark, eager to interview Aykira Milan.

“Finally, we can get to do this interview after two delays! At this rate, the Luthors’ elopement to Greece won’t even be newsworthy. Maybe we can find some way to trick them into admitting their

involvement with this whole crystal theft plot.” Lois spoke enthusiastically.

Clark shook his head. “Not likely. Scott is not showing signs of regaining consciousness. Without him providing concrete proof, we have nothing to pin on either Lex or his mysterious wife.”

“Yeah, Henderson says Scott’s work computers have been wiped clean, by an expert. But his home computer might yield something yet. I still say we should let Jimmy take a crack at it.” Lois said

“Metropolis PD had some of their best forensic technicians go over those machines. If they couldn’t find anything, no one can. Come on, let’s leave any computer work to the experts.” Clark smiled softly; his partner was still determined to prove Aykira was just as involved as her husband.

“Humph! I’ll take a desperate and determined hacker over a bored techno any day!” Lois snapped.

“Lois, what does Jimmy have to be ‘desperate’ about?”

“Not what... who.” Lois responded archly.

Looking down at the slender woman by his side, Clark knew exactly ‘who’ Jimmy would face if he didn’t provide the results Lois desired. Shaking his head in bemusement, he stepped out of the cab and they made their way towards the building.

Several stories above the two reporter’s heads in the luxurious gold and burgundy master bedroom suite he shared with his wife. Lex slowly pushed back warm satin sheets, each motion an effort to muscles still unused to the activity. After a few abortive attempts he managed to place both feet on the floor and painfully stood up.

“Asabi!” He called out with a voice he hoped was strong and asked. “Where are my clothes?”

With his usual quiet efficiency the manservant responded, “Here, sir.” He held the perfectly pressed suit on a padded hanger.

“Just the thing,” Lex muttered as he looked over the garment. “The charcoal pinstripe is always her favorite...”

“Sir, do you think it is wise to go downstairs? Mrs. Luthor said...”

“Now, don’t *you* coddle me, Asabi! We have been associates for a long time. Besides, she needs me to put in an appearance. A show of competency and strength as it were — high time for the board members to realize I am not completely incapacitated.” Lex walked slowly towards the bathroom. “Please lay out the burgundy tie, socks and white Egyptian cotton shirt. Also the...” Lex searched his brain for the correct words.”

“Gold cuff links?” Asabi said.

“Yes! Exactly right!” Lex’s cheerfulness faded quickly when he whispered. “Who am I trying to fool? My brain once devised plans to build a business empire. Now...now, I need your help getting dressed!” He moved his arm in a weak, childish slashing motion. He covered his face and wept softly, awash in the backlash of his self-pity.

Asabi bowed his head and whispered. “If you wish... perhaps I may return later?”

For a moment, Lex was about to shout at the other man, but he stopped and placed his hand on the small bandage at the base of his head. So small, but what lay hidden beneath skin and bone terrified him. Despite his trepidation, he could not allow himself to fall victim to pity and morose anger. He refused to be remembered by the ones he held dear as a sad, pathetic shell of his former self.

He studied Asabi’s face and the realization hit him... the man was more than a servant he was his friend. He deserved better treatment from him than this.

“Come,” Lex smiled at Asabi, “time to prepare for today and whatever challenges it may bring.”

The glint of understanding entered Asabi’s dark eyes, “May I assist you, sir?”

“Yes, Asabi. I think... assistance might be a very good idea.” Lex said wearily.

An hour later, with aid from Asabi, Lex completed his daily ablutions and slowly ate a light breakfast of egg whites and plain

yogurt. He went into the spacious living room to read a book of Keats poetry. Previously the space had only been used to impress guests and business associates. Since their return from Greece, his wife had artfully included some of her furnishings and photos of her travels and their wedding. He grudgingly admitted she had a talent for creating an atmosphere of warmth and welcome to any room. Since the surgery, he and Aykira had spent many a quiet evening reading poetry to one another.

The evenings had been enjoyable, only the dull throb in his brain dampened that pleasure. He was determined to hide the pain from Aykira as much as possible. Each day was a gift, every moment a precious memory — for her.

He made himself comfortable on the couch, once his mind was settled and relaxed, he would make ‘the rounds’ as it were of the executive offices. Funny, once upon a time this sort of leisure was excruciatingly boring to him, now he craved the peace of his life. He sighed heavily. There was no guarantee it would last, but he desperately wanted it to. He wanted to enjoy every moment with Aykira, and watch her mold LexCorp into something finer than what it once was. He relaxed and began reading.

Nearly forty minutes later Asabi came in carrying a tray, laden with a glass of water and his daily regimen of pills. Lex reluctantly took them, thanked the servant and sent him away. He wanted to stretch his legs for a bit, so he walked to Aykira’s small writing desk by the window. It was at that moment he saw Aykira’s red leather bound planner; the page was opened to today’s date. Lex almost ignored it until he noted who she had an appointment with: the reporting team of Lois Lane and Clark Kent.

Lex’s blood ran cold.

<What could they possibly want?>

They arrived at Aykira’s elegant office suite. Her assistant Jane greeted the reporters, beckoned them into the waiting area, and assured them Mrs. Luthor was looking forward to the interview.

“Mrs. Luthor? I don’t understand; she’s not calling herself Aykira Milan anymore?” Lois questioned.

Lois caught a look of sadness shift fleetingly across Jane’s normally animated features. “No. Her legal name is Mrs. Aykira Luthor. Old-fashioned perhaps, but it was her decision. Please, Mrs. Luthor stepped away for just a moment. She is aware you are here.” The assistant made a sweeping gesture towards the office door, encouraging them to enter.

Lois and Clark crossed the threshold into her office and Lois could not help but reflect on all the changes which had taken place in her life since the previous encounter with Lex Luthor’s assistant. The office suite’s gentle cream and blue colors drew them in with a soothing sense of welcome. Aykira’s photos of her world travels were still evident, but rearranged to make room for her wedding photo. Lois’ eyes were utterly captivated by the sweep of the picture; a very happy and serene couple gazing lovingly at one another. The photo depicted them on a rocky cliff top overlooking a whitewashed village, the blues of sea and sky blending into one another.

Lois was too enthralled with the picture to hear the door open, but Clark did. He was momentarily stunned by the incredibly beautiful black woman entering the room. Her pictures, he realized, did not do her justice. She was wearing a black Armani business suit; the jacquard jacket was fitted perfectly to her athletic body, the long skirt was a classic cut with a modest slit on the side. Clark could not help but imagine that the suit looked more like a uniform or perhaps — armor.

She smiled acknowledgement of Clark and bade him to have a seat. Her hazel eyes were filled with warmth, but at the same time extremely watchful. Again, he could not help but feel he was being observed by an armored warrior defending her ground.

“The photograph is breathtaking,” Lois whispered reverently.

“Thank you.” Aykira said as she crossed the room and stood next to Lois. “It was a beautiful day, one I shall treasure for the rest of my

life. Lex's..." she paused, smiled to herself then said, "our villa is not too far from the village of Imerovigli, which sits above the volcanic shores of Red Beach. Most days we would stroll through the village streets hand in hand, not really going anywhere, just happy to be together. There are excellent vineyards on the island, but Lex took me on a private tour of the Volcan Wines Museum and the ancient ruins of Thera along the hillside."

"He has lived there off and on for several years; hence, the people treat Lex and now me as locals, not tourists. Metropolis' Lex Luthor does not exist for them. On Santorini, he is a kind, generous landowner who happens to be wealthy — now newly married. Several of the older residents stopped by to convey congratulations and gifts. Our honeymoon was absolutely wonderful. The days went by all too swiftly." Aykira finished her narrative with the tiniest hint of wistfulness in her tone.

Lois walked over to Clark and sat beside him, smoothing out her long burgundy skirt as she did so. She felt a sense of loss in the other woman's words and wondered what that meant. With an effort, she shook off the uneasiness, remembering they were reporters with a job to do. From the depths of her briefcase, Lois fished out her notebook and started to conduct the interview.

"Everyone was surprised by the announcement of your marriage. After all, no one in town knew anything about it." Lois said.

"As you can imagine, Miss Lane, should the media have discovered our relationship, we would have had little peace. Therefore, our courtship was conducted safely away from the public eye."

"Just how long was the dating 'conducted' before Mr. Luthor proposed?" Clark asked curiously.

"Long enough to know marriage was the only right decision for us," she answered smiling.

The interview continued for several minutes, both Lois and Clark asked a number of staid questions for a standard article regarding the marriage of the fabulously wealthy. Aykira provided, for the most part, equally staid and predictable answers. Although the Luthors were far and away a more realistic couple than Tim and Amber Lake, Clark sensed the entire interview was as much a 'dead-end' as No Knees Nolan's tip from the previous month. He was about to suggest they wrap up when Lois spoke.

"Mrs. Luthor, one last question before we go. Our readers want to know what LexCorp's, or rather LexSolar's, official stance is on the charges of theft brought against one of its employees — Dr. Robert Scott?"

Clark noted the strange challenging light in Aykira's hazel eyes. She was anticipating the question. His spine tingled. From here on out he and Lois needed to be extremely cautious. This woman could quite possibly be a greater opponent than her absent husband.

After a moment's consideration, Aykira replied, "Dr. Scott is no longer employed by LexCorp. He stole valuable technology from LexSolar, replaced, I might add, at no small cost to the company. Should any person in our employ be involved in such activities they will be dealt the same hand."

"Mrs. Luthor, my partner is not referring to microprocessors, but to a new energy source... Harmonic Crystals. They were created through a joint venture between our government and the British company Barontech." Clark interjected.

"We overheard a conversation between Dr. Scott, Lucky Leon and Cameron Axelrod stating Lex Luthor paid Scott to act as his front man and steal the crystals for LexCorp." Lois said.

"What possible reason could my husband have for stealing *anything*?" Aykira answered, her tone held the barest hint of menace.

"It's a well-documented fact Lex Luthor has dreamed and worked towards sending a Space Station bearing his name into orbit. Those crystals would be the perfect power source for that station." Clark answered somewhat blandly.

"According to the article under the byline Lane and Kent,

Cameron Axelrod shot Scott, who is still in ICU and has not regained consciousness, perhaps, he may not even survive, which I am sorry for. I also understand Axelrod is not cooperating with the authorities. Finally, Lucky Leon has recently been returned to his own country to stand trial. So, it's only by your hearsay, which despite your stellar reputations, is not enough to implicate my husband. I will admit, Lex's business tactics are sometimes — manipulative. No one creates and maintains such a business empire without making a few enemies."

"Just because he is wealthy does not place him above everyone else. Dr. Scott — should he regain consciousness — will face charges, trial and jail for stealing the crystals... which he did under Lex's orders." Clark pointed out.

"Yes. A corporate crime." Aykira leaned back in the comfortable chair, placed her chin in slender brown hands, and sat thinking for a moment. "Consider this, Mr. Kent. Dr. Scott committed a federal crime when he conspired with members of Intergang to sell the crystals to a power unfriendly to the United States. A crime neither I nor Lex was aware of while we were on our honeymoon in Greece."

"But Lex was the one who ordered Scott to steal the crystals in the first place," Lois insisted.

"Oh? Where is your proof, Miss Lane? Your own paper stated Dr. Scott admitted to being the mastermind behind the hijacking, he never implicated Lex. Except in this 'conversation' overheard by only Mr. Kent — and yourself. Possibly the file printed out from his computer on the night of your disastrous break-in at LexSolar?"

Lois stood surprised, but quickly recovered and answered. "Wh... what break in?"

"The one where a 'burglar' printed out the file entitled 'Crystal Harvest' from Dr. Scott's computer. The break-in where the burglar or 'corporate spy' as LNN referred to was shot while making a rather memorable escape. The security guard Todd is an excellent sharpshooter; he *meant* to wing you. Unfortunately, the torrential rainfall of that evening covered your movements. He was smart enough to take a sample of the blood found on the floor at the base of the stairs. Care to wonder if we run a private DNA test whether it will match yours?"

For the first time in years, Clark saw his partner at a complete loss for words.

"Miss Lane... Lois, please let us stop sparring with each other." Aykira rubbed her fingers over her temples. "You want to write a story accusing my husband of this entire Harmonic Crystals theft. I want him left alone. The government does not want the crystals in the news. The effect on the oil industries alone might create widespread economic panic. What is your purpose in coming here — an interview about the newly married Luthors or a circulation-boosting expose? General Zeitlin and Secretary Cosgrove want this situation buried."

"How do you know about that?" Clark asked.

Aykira fixed him with a direct stare was about to speak when, Lois piped up. "Where is Lex anyway? It's not like him to let someone else face off with one of his adversaries."

The competent business woman's cool façade wavered; when Aykira spoke her voice trembled. "Lex's day to day involvement with the conglomerate he built has come to an end. Six weeks ago, the foremost neurosurgeon in the country, a Dr. Kassaten, operated on Lex. That is why I canceled our initial interview. The doctor says he will make a decent recovery and hopefully he will live to celebrate our second wedding anniversary."

The two reporters exchanged looks of stunned disbelief. Lex Luthor was a force of nature; it was hard to imagine him as ill, much less dying.

She turned away from Lois and looked at her partner. As if bring to bear another bargaining chip she said, "I promise to keep your dual identity a secret."

Now it was Clark's turn to be speechless. However, he quickly found his feet and said, "Mrs. Luthor, this is all conjecture. As you say, where is the proof?"

"What dual identity are you talking about?" Lois demanded.

Clark observed closely as a myriad of emotions played across Aykira's countenance. "Oh, there is so much to talk about." She sighed deeply in resignation, got up and crossing the floor stuck her out through the door and said to Jane, "This interview will require additional time. Please clear my calendar for the remainder of the day. When she closed the door she heaved a deep sigh. <This discussion is most definitely not going as I had planned.> "Please, make yourselves comfortable. Mr. Kent... may I call you Clark? Do you drink oolong tea or green chai? Lois, I know you prefer a low-fat mocha. Jane can bring the refreshments momentarily. We are going to be here for a while."

Lex walked carefully down the spiral staircase. He took at least ten minutes to calm himself after learning about the appointment with Lane and Kent. It could probably be nothing more than an interview for the masses — hungry for shallow celebrity gossip. If it were any other writing team he would have remained upstairs reading Keats.

But these reporters certainly did not specialize in soft news and most definitely *not* in celebrity gossip.

He knew all too well their involvement in the apprehension of Axelrod, Lucky Leon and the other members of Intergang. He remembered how deeply concerned Aykira's voice sounded when she read the account to him. His connections in Washington had reported on how the military and Cosgrove had silenced any mention of Harmonic Crystals and their amazing properties. His fist clenched and his knuckles grew white in anger at the thought of that gang of modern day pirates. Not a touch of subtlety or elegance in the lot of them. Once he was gone, how would his wife deal with them? If they wanted to change LexCorp both within and outside, Aykira had to be both wise enough to steer clear of them completely and strong enough to fight them back should Intergang want to move on Metropolis with their legitimate business ventures.

Two people sat back in amazement and watched as Aykira removed the ring from its place on the monitor and handed it over to Clark for his unique brand of visual examination. The two bookshelves soundlessly slid back into place, hiding the monitor.

"That's a remarkable tale, Aykira." Clark said as he passed Lois the glowing and still warm silver beacon ring. "If it were not for this ring and the conversation with Dr. Bern Klein in your world, it might be hard to believe."

"Yes it is." Aykira answered, shaking her head. "If it had not happened to me, I wouldn't have accepted it as truth myself."

"How were you able to have this equipment installed without Lex's knowledge?" Lois asked.

"Oh, that is another long story and we have spent quite enough time on my story already. Suffice to say I only use this connection in case of dire emergency. There is another unit in my former condo."

Two hours had passed since Lois and Clark entered the office of Aykira Luthor. Their beverages had gone cold while Aykira related her story. Two hours, in which their understanding of their world had in a frightening new way, been turned upside down and inside out. It was a great deal to absorb, learning about two similar worlds existing side by side, not to mention that world had doppelgangers of everyone in their Earth.

Aykira had explained that Perry White had hired her as a science consultant to assist the Daily Planet's writers of the Weekend section. It was her job to translate the amazing amount of new technologies into something the public could easily understand. She had been called in to assist Lois and Clark on several of their more unusual assignments, such as cracking cases on eco-terrorism or bio-tech corporate piracy.

"Your counterparts in my world are very similar to yourselves. It was actually thrilling to observe Lois interview some rather brilliant men in different fields of science. Often was the time an interviewee attempted to sidestep a question, but 'Bone Crusher' Lane refused to let them get the better of her." Mentioning this, Aykira smiled,

remembering a particularly unpleasant condescending computer genius.

"Working for the Daily Planet as a science consultant allowed you to observe 'Clark and I' interview people and go after the bad guys? No wonder you knew it was me who broke into LexSolar!"

"To be perfectly honest, I did more than just consult. There were a couple of nerve racking nights when I held the flashlight while you two ransacked files," Aykira said sheepishly. "For good or for ill, those skills came in very handy a few years later. In any case, I stopped consulting for the Daily Planet after Barontech hired me to work on the Harmonic Crystals research full-time. We all stayed in contact, especially after Bern became Superman's personal physician."

"The Bernie we saw on the monitor was vastly different from the gentle and absent-minded scientist who inhabits our world. Except for the balding head, this man was athletic and wore designer clothes. He is even aware of Superman's real identity! There are so many differences between your world and ours! Did *he* tell you about Clark?" Lois spoke in full babble mode.

Clark stepped in when he noticed 'Mad Dog' Lane coming to the forefront. "Uh, Lois, let's finish listening to what Aykira has to say."

"Thank you." She turned to his partner and said, "Lois, Bern brought me in because of an emergency. Superman had taken seriously ill from kryptonite poisoning thanks to Jason Trask and his mysterious agency. Lois, you had sustained injuries while trying to help him escape from those lunatics."

"S.T.A.R. Labs desperately wanted to help, but with a pack of media hounds crowding the building's campus everyday it was very hard for them to get anything accomplished without outside assistance.

"Bern needed someone he could trust to help him understand the atomic structure of kryptonite and keep the reporters at bay. I was in Metropolis and being a former employee of S.T.A.R Labs, plus my connections with the Daily Planet, made me the perfect choice to deal with the media."

"Bern did not tell me your secret identity. It did not take long with the power of deductive reasoning and observing your interaction with each other to reach the proper conclusion: that Superman and Clark Kent were one and the same."

Clark posed the question. "So you have known all the time about me and never mentioned it to Luthor?"

"Please understand, besides the four of us and Clark's parents no one in my world has knowledge of the secret. It is an important one to protect. Even though I am married to Lex, he will never hear from me about the unique relationship between Superman and Clark. Just as I trust neither of you will reveal my secret."

"Excuse me," Lois interrupted, "but did Dr. Klein in your world find a cure for kryptonite?"

"No. However, he was able to stop the poison, by burning it out of his system in a similar fashion as when Superman was kissed by Diana Stride. Bern is still looking for a cure. Oh, and the Lois of my world made a complete recovery."

"So now, there are no more secrets. In two years time or less Lex will be gone. He will have paid for whatever sins he has committed in his life." As Aykira spoke, her voice cracked slightly.

Lois stood up, walked over to the wedding picture. Lex and Aykira looked so happy, but that happiness was fleeting. She faced Aykira. "So you admit to financing Dr. Scott's plan?"

The black woman leaned back in her chair, again her chin in her hands. "I admit to nothing. But again, the only proof at easy access would also send you to jail or at the very least end your career as an investigative reporter. We are at an impasse, Lois. You do not want to go to prison and our lawyers will tie the case up for so long it will never come to trial."

"Each of us has something to lose." Lois said in a quiet deflated tone.

"The Lois Lane of my world was compassionate and understanding. Sadly, circumstances dictate we do not have the same relationship here. But since our government has demanded we keep

the existence of the crystals secret what possible good will come from bringing this to light?" Aykira's voice was tinged with anxiety.

"Mrs. Luthor... Aykira, we cannot ignore what crimes have been committed to gain those crystals. If we cannot publish, at least we can let the government know and they can take it from there. Besides, when – if Dr. Scott awakens, he will testify in court that he did everything under Lex's orders." Clark said.

The other woman's features turned hard and her voice terse, "If he ever regains consciousness. Dr. Robert Scott is a traitor to his country. All the proof leading to my husband is gone. Scott would say *anything* to save his own skin." She sat quite motionless for a time, contemplating her next words, than spoke in measured tones. "What if you tell General Zeitlin and Secretary Cosgrove that Lex stole the crystals in an attempt to heal his brain, but to no avail? If he were to have stolen them for the purpose of healing himself, they could see no evil intent in that."

Lois shook her head, no, but inside, she could feel her firm resolve wavering.

Aykira gestured to Clark and looked at Lois. "What would you do if a cure for Kryptonite was discovered, but you had to steal it?"

"That's not what happened," Lois countered, clutching her hands so fiercely, the nails tore into her flesh.

"But if it did and Clark's life rested in your hands. What would you do?"

"That's a cheap shot and you know it!" Lois snarled.

"I... I am sorry. It is all which remains for me." Aykira stood walked over to the picture window. Her posture, normally so erect looked... broken. For a long time, she gazed out, seeing nothing. "Miss Lane. Mr. Kent. LexCorp has vast international resources, what if we were to utilize those resources to help people rather than cause harm? There are many ills in this world. LexCorp and Superman can work hand in hand to right some of those wrongs. With my help, this company's Mission Statement can be rewritten for the good."

"Are you talking about some deal for Lex?"

"No. I am discussing a small means of redemption... for both of us."

Lex made his way down the lushly carpeted corridors of the Executive Suite, greeting assistants, managers and a few of the executives as he went. Some exhibited warm greetings and hopes of a speedy recovery, others suspecting the true extent of his illness expressed soothing, cautious words. All were met by Lex with charm and grace, the business mask after a long absence was now firmly in place.

Pushing the possible threat of Intergang aside, he was determined to take part in Aykira's discussion with the reporters. He remembered she had mentioned the interview, but his own cares and concerns had dislodged it from his mind. He trusted her with his life, had absolute faith in her abilities, but where those two were concerned they needed to present a united front. He did not want to face a trial. He most certainly did not want to go to prison. The time remaining to spend with his wife was too damnably short.

There must be some way to make amends without facing those rather unpleasant possibilities...

Three minutes later, Lex opened the door to Aykira's office suite and noticed Jane diligently filing some papers. She looked up at the sound of the door opening.

"Mr. Luthor! Shouldn't you be resting?"

"Good morning, Jane. There shall be time enough for that later. Please tell me, is Aykira busy with the reporters from the Planet?"

"Yes sir." Jane tried to disguise the worry in her voice, but she knew it was impossible with this man. "They have been talking for a long time."

"I see...."

Clark observed the two strong-willed women glaring at each other in emotional combat, each one in her own way fighting for the man

she loved. Aykira looked more and more like some ancient warrior woman of myth, steadily holding her ground. As long as he had known her, Lois Lane had never lost a battle, but there was always a first time...

Finally, Lois spoke; her voice had a harsh, bitter edge to it. "Nice try, Aykira, I'll take my chances with the police. Lex has to pay for what he's done."

The office was silent as Aykira walked over to one of the thick comfortable chairs and sat down in utter defeat. Clark watched helplessly. Part of him wanted to make some gesture of comfort to this remarkable woman. She, like himself, had crossed unimaginable distances to live on this Earth. Despite blending in with its people, even marrying one of its inhabitants, she still walked as a stranger in the midst of humanity. Now all she wanted to do was right whatever wrongs both she and Lex and committed. Yet at the same time, how could he allow Luthor to avoid facing charges for his crimes? In the balance, Lois might end up in prison as well as destroy her career.

Abruptly the tension was broken when the door was softly opened, Aykira gasped. "Lex... I was not expecting you until later. How are you feeling?" All color drained from her face as she raced over to reach him. The third richest man in the world stood in the threshold of his wife's office looking pale, yet steady. His hair, once thick, curly and dark brown, was completely gone. The small bandage from the recent surgery was still attached to the base of his head. Jane stood behind him; looking first at Lex then Aykira. Taking his wife's hand he said, "I feel better. Please my love, sit down." He sighed gently, "We...we might as well finish this."

Aykira looked at her assistant and said, trying to hide the tension in her voice, "Thank you, we will be fine." Jane, sensing this was more than just a routine interview, quickly closed the door.

It took only a few minutes to inform Lex of all that had transpired in her office.

He leaned against the writing table, trying hard to convey a pose of studied elegance and spoke, "Lois, it would be a pity for you to languish in prison, especially over a dead man." The billionaire strived to maintain his former social graces, but such poise was gone forever. The beautifully cut suit hung poorly on his frame and his energy seemed to leave him. Reluctantly he allowed Aykira to help him into a chair. Once Lex managed a degree of comfort, he got straight to the point.

"My wife and I, although only wed a short time, have faced several challenges. But as she has informed you, our time is fleeting. The four of us need to settle revealing everything about those crystals today." Lex paused for a breath and with his hand waved to encompass them. "We each in this room have our secrets," he gazed at Clark with intense scrutiny. "Even the gallant Mr. Kent has something to hide, I'm sure." Both reporters stared hard at Aykira, panic in their eyes. With the tiniest shake of the head, she indicated Lex did not know Clark's secret.

"There must be a way we can all come to an equitable solution that will ease your consciences and permit us to continue our lives without any chaotic and very public trials or prison sentences." Lex, turning to Aykira said, "My dear, I realize this is your meeting, but may I continue?"

"But of course," she responded.

Clark noticed immediately after Lex had sat down, Aykira's body language had changed, the shoulders were once again in perfect balance, her head held erect -the warrior's stance born anew. But most of all, he could not help but see the comfort and strength they drew from one another. It was the soothing, emotional balm of a couple very much in sync with each other's minds, deeply in love and ready to fight for that love.

"Perhaps the authorities will be further placated if I return the two remaining crystals. My excuse will be the truth; I took them in order to cure my tumor. Even a military hardliner such as General Zeitlin will believe that."

Clark's partner spoke up gently, "They might believe you. But what about the crystals Aykira sent to her world? A dozen missing crystals cannot be ignored."

Lex gave a halfhearted shrug. "I can only account for the two, nothing more. Perhaps we can say they were stolen at Pier 17 by someone from Intergang? Eventually the hunt will cease. LexCorp is a powerful international conglomerate. The economic backlash resulting from tearing it apart might give them pause. Hopefully the authorities are not so desperate to punish me that they would allow innocent people to end up on the street."

"No, General Zeitlin will never believe that. As Aykira mentioned earlier, creating LexCorp has provided a fair number of enemies for the company. They will badger first you, then Aykira for the truth, which you cannot reveal. Finally, a Senate committee will be convened to carve up, then parcel out LexCorp like penny candy." Lois said.

"I will pay whatever fines and sanctions are necessary to leave my family and company in peace. Short of going to prison," Lex's dark eyes flashed with a dangerous light. His body may be weakened, but his mind and resolve were as sharply honed as ever.

Aykira had been sitting quietly on the arm of the chair, holding Lex's hand all this time than spoke up. "Why not give them back? Any item can make one round trip through the dimensional device. The crystals can be returned."

"Won't that cause problems on the other side for Bern and Alexander?" Clark asked

"No. Do not underestimate the abilities and determination of my friends. We dismantled Bern's device and brought it from Leeds, England to Metropolis without being detected. Replicating the crystals and sending them here should be quite simple."

Lois spoke up looking at Lex, "So you will admit to stealing the crystals?"

The Luthors exchanged glances, countless thoughts raced across their faces. Lois and Clark looked on, holding their breath, waiting eagerly for the answer.

"Yes. In exchange for complete immunity, LexCorp must remain under my wife's control... otherwise life for all of us will become incredibly... complicated."

Lex felt Aykira's body stiffen in alarm. She was afraid for her husband. He took her hand and kissed it.

"You honor me with your trust, husband."

"Now you see why I *had* to marry her?" The smile on his face was filled with joy and pride.

Aykira winked at him, and then grew somber as she walked over to her desk, touched the intercom and said, "Jane. I would like you to contact the Department of Defense. Use Lex's name, get a direct line to General Virgil Zeitlin please."

Later that evening in Clark's apartment they discussed the day's events while drying the dinner dishes. "Clark, that was *the* strangest and most intimidating interview I have ever done!"

Her partner's eyes twinkled. "One great thing came out of it. Another nickname for you... 'Bone Crusher' Lane!"

"Urgh!" I'm going to forget I heard that!"

Clark nodded sadly. "This is galling our professional pride to keep this part of the Shackleton story under wraps. Think of the great addition it will make to the Lane and Kent memoirs?"

"More romance and danger, Flyboy?" she said with an arched eyebrow.

"Romance... always. Danger, maybe not so much so. Remember what I said earlier."

"All things must be recorded, but not necessarily reported. I may not like it, but there is a certain truth to that particular saying." Lois sighed as she put away the last dish and yawned.

"Sounds to me like I should take you home. It's been a very long day."

"Yeah, but promise me, the next time we have another interview

like that I want to go to Paris for dinner."

"Deal, Miss Lane." He gave her that brilliant smile then spun into the Suit. Moments later the apartment was empty.

It was close to quitting time at the Daily Planet when Jenni Reid emerged from the elevator and walked down the ramp with brisk strides. Her fashionably cut light brown hair swinging, she approached Lois and Diane and spoke, her soft Scottish accent giving a hint of the ancient Highlands. "Hullo! I understand there's a party happening tonight! Where is the bride?"

"Jenni!" Cat shouted from her desk. "You made it!"

The two women raced across the bullpen and meet in front of Jimmy's desk giving each other fierce hugs. The Daily Planet's newest full time staff photographer looked from one beauty to another.

"Smooth," he said in appreciation. The women made a striking duo — a study in contrasts. The tall auburn haired beauty wore a tiger patterned dress that clashed with her friend's classically cut light blue suit. The petite reporter from across the pond released Cat and started laughing. "When I received the e-mailed from Janet Owens telling me there was going to be a 'Girl's Night Out' before your nuptials I hopped on the first flight out! My editor, Labbie Rathbone, graciously gave me holiday."

"What are you going to do for two weeks before the wedding?" Cat asked.

"No worries, I have a couple of British Embassy stories that need looking into. Could Perry give me a desk to work from? Labbie is a great gal, but she's not sending me here on a *complete* holiday! Now, where is the rest of the group?"

"Relax Jenni, everyone will be here in time," those words were spoken by Corrina Hawk, one of the copy editors. She had emerged from her cubicle near Perry's office and given her old comrade a quick, hug. "Janet always throws the best outside-of-the-office parties! I'm looking forward to spending time with everyone; it is so seldom all of us are in the same country much less the same building!"

"The Daily Planet has several international editions, Ms. Hawk, as you are perfectly well aware! So, our reporters and contributors must be scattered across the globe. As Ms. Reid's appearance attests to! My dear, it is good to see you again!" Terry Leatherwood, the urbane editor of the Daily Planet's Weekend section, interjected.

"Great shades of Elvis, what is going on out here...?" Perry crossed the threshold of his office, looked at the newcomer to the bullpen, smiled hugely, and ambled over. "I cannot believe Labbie let you out of her London Times newsroom into ours! How long are you here for, darlin'?"

Jenni beamed at her former boss then gave him a fond embrace. "Perry! I see the bullpen is running as smoothly as ever."

"Our esteemed chief would have it no other way," Terry responded dryly. "But then he has the talents of the best reporters of the Fourth Estate to call upon."

"You bet your sweet Elvis I do!" Perry laughed.

More conversation swirled around the little group as long time staffers came over to greet the visitor.

Stacy Hunter, a young intern who wore thick lensed glasses, came out of the darkroom bearing Jimmy's latest photos; she slipped furtively over to Lois and inquired earnestly. "Excuse me, Miss Lane, what's all the noise about? Who is Jenni Reid?"

Clark also came over and sat in Lois's guest chair. "Thanks, Stacy, I was about to ask the same question."

"Oh, that's right, so many people were not here when Jenni, Janet and to a much lesser extent Cat practically ran the bullpen." Lois said with a smile. "I was only an intern then, but Jenni spent time with me, guiding me through all the interesting things regarding newspaper writing that are not taught in journalism school."

"My goodness," Stacy breathed, "they must have been something!"

"They were and still are," Diane answered, genuine respect in her voice.

“Yeah,” Lois agreed. <I guess I shouldn’t mention Jenni was the one who provided my first lesson in breaking and entering! Clark, invulnerable or not, would have a stroke!> It took some effort, to keep from laughing.

Another woman walked down the red staircase and entered the bullpen, her dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, a pencil stuck behind her ear. The Daily Planet’s Science Editor carried herself with a serious demeanor, however, Janet Owens’ friendly voice cut through the hubbub of the crowd and welcomed her old friend. “Ha! I knew a little thing like the Atlantic Ocean couldn’t keep you away from this party!” The women embraced and started talking to one another a mile a minute.

“One moment!” Jenni interrupted the gabfest. “The ring! I want to see the ring!”

“See it and weep,” Cat purred as she held out her left hand. “George did me proud.”

“I say!” Jenni agreed and whistled appreciatively.

“Hey! Hey! Hey! This is a newspaper, not gossip central! You ladies have another ten minutes before quittin’ time. I expect *all* of you to be back here bright and early tomorrow morning! No excuses. Oh and one other thing, there had better not be any phone calls from Inspector Henderson to my house! Daily Planet reporters *write* the stories, they do not become them! Janet, you are in charge.”

Janet smiled slowly, her generous mouth revealed two rows of bright teeth. “Of course Perry, whatever you say. After all... you can yodel.” Janet said sweetly.

At the sound of her voice, the Daily Planet’s Senior Editor realized too late he had made a mistake. “Oh boy, that’s like putting the fox in charge of the hen house! I don’t want to know anything!” So saying, Perry returned to his office, unbeknownst to the staffers in question, a huge grin splayed on his face.

“Poor Perry, he’s still mad at us about Anna’s Girl’s Night Out.” Diane sighed.

Corrina looked up from a sheet of copy. “Pity she can’t make it tonight, still it’s hard to hop on a plane from Athens in the middle of covering a story. Cat, she is going to make it to the wedding... right?”

“That’s what her response stated,” Cat answered. “I’m grateful she told me about Lex and Aykira Luthor’s wedding. That scoop was a pinnacle of my time here!”

“Yes, but Lane and Kent scooped you on the interview of the happily married couple.” Terry interjected.

Cat glanced over at Lois and Clark shrugged and said, “The ride had to come to an end someday!” Then she turned back to Terry, winked and said to her friends. “Ladies, I have to finish up a rather drab story about another serious ‘blockbuster film’ for autumn. The director is trying to get it in for Oscar sweeps. Soon as that’s done, I’ll join you.” Waving her left hand so all could see her sparkling engagement ring, Cat walked back to her desk.

The older man acknowledged Cat’s exit and gave her departing back a courtly bow. He then moved on to his next person of interest. “Speaking of transportation and all things modern and shiny, Diane, where is your story on Suicide Slum? I need that before putting the Weekend section to bed.”

“It’s done! Thanks to Jimmy and Jack for their research, the last paragraph was typed up fifteen minutes ago. Check your inbox.”

“Excellent. Have a superb time at the party.” He headed out of the bullpen and returned to his office.

Another female voice joined the crowd, Erin Klinger, Head of the Daily Planet’s design department, sang out. “I’m looking forward to this get together. Janet, we are still meeting at the Pen and Pencil ‘round 6:00?”

“That is the plan. The owners, Chuck and Sarah, set aside one of the smaller rooms. This is going to be a combination of party and shower. Some of the ladies will be on assignment when the real shower takes place, so this will give them a chance to be a part of the festivities.” Janet consulted a spreadsheet done on pink paper and looked at Erin. “That ought to make the head count about twenty-five

— impressive.”

“Good. After the week I have had this will be a welcome diversion!” Erin said with a snicker.

“Erin, I thought you were pleased with the sales results of your latest book? It’s doing quite well on my side of the pond.” Jenni said, happy for the success her friend was enjoying.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, I love being an author, but my first love is still reporting. However, my editor wants another book.” Janet, Jenni and Erin walked slowly towards the conference room as Erin talked of book sequels and design layout deadlines.

At Lois’ desk Stacy, Diane and Clark watched the interaction between these veteran female journalists and were completely entertained. Clark spoke first, “From the sounds of it, this is going to be some party!”

“It should be!” Diane piped up. “We have been planning it for weeks. I better check my e-mail before we leave, excuse me.” Without another word, Diane hurried back to her desk. Being caught off guard by Mr. Leatherwood was unnerving. He was an excellent and flexible boss to work for, but a ‘mean ol’ man’ when it came to wielding his editorial red pencil.

Stacy was about to return to her area that she shared with three other interns. It was thrilling to be in the presence of people she had long admired. If only her parents and siblings could see her now! She smiled to herself; the experience of working here was almost as good as winning the young writers conference last year... almost. Stacy was lost in thought when Lois’ voice cut through.

“When did the internship start here?”

“Uh, last week, Mr. Olsen... Jimmy took me on a tour of the building. He’s very nice.”

“Jimmy and Jack are great guys if you need any help, feel free to ask them. Where are you from?”

“Wyoming. I start my first year at Metro U in the fall. My English Literature teacher is an old friend of Mr. White’s... he helped me get this internship.” Stacy was too nervous to say anything else.

Lois and Clark truly looked at the young woman for the first time. She was alone and without family for possibly the first time in her life. That was exciting, but also intimidating. Lois, a Metropolis native, was always in the city she loved, yet she was aware it could be in frightening place to young newcomers. Clark, a seasoned world traveler understood what it meant to be the ‘new kid in town’. Although they might not spare this youngster too much attention, as to bring on the taint of favoritism, a little assistance could not impair Stacy’s progress. After all, they might be looking at a future Kerth nominee!

Lois could scarcely believe she was saying these words until they were out of her mouth. “Listen, if any staff member gives you a hard time, let me know. Also, come with me to the party, it’s a great chance to spend time with some of the Daily Planet’s finest. Past. Present. Future.”

“Thank you, Miss Lane!” Stacy beamed, happily, as she started back to the Darkroom.

“It’s Lois,” she called after the intern. “Now get those pictures to Jimmy, he’s probably ready to conduct a search party for them!”

Clark smiled, this was definitely something new for the woman he loved! Imagine, ‘Bone Crusher’ Lane being a mentor to a young woman during her first year of living and working in Metropolis. Abruptly the shrill sound of his phone interrupted any further thoughts. He dashed over to his desk and picked up. “Hello, Clark Kent, Daily Planet.”

<<Oh good, I caught you! Mr. Kent, it’s Janice Harper. I just arrived in town. If this is a bad time? Perhaps we can talk later?>>

“No, this is fine. What can I do for you?” Clark’s heart gave a tiny lurch. If his landlady had returned, Pepper would be moving back in with her. He was going to miss the little guy.

<<Well to be quite blunt, Mr. Kent, my mother's health has not improved and a permanent move to St. Louis is imminent. Unfortunately, pets are not allowed in my new condo, so I can take Pepper off your hands tonight and bring him to relatives there. But don't worry, as a token of my appreciation, your rent will remain the same for the next two years. Should you decided to remain in that apartment.>>

"Um, that's great! But, can we discuss this at my apartment later, Mrs. Harper? Pepper and I have become good friends. If there are no objections, may I keep him permanently? Also, regarding my lease, I was thinking of getting a bigger place..."

The conversation continued for a few minutes more. He observed Lois, Diane, Cat and a quietly excited Stacy entering the elevator. Just before the doors closed, he heard Lois whisper so only he could hear. "Good-night, Flyboy."

Bright and early the next morning Clark exited the elevator, walked down the ramp while balancing a carton containing a large low-fat mocha, his usual high caloric concoction and two blueberry muffins from the Java Perk. He had a sneaking suspicion his partner was going to need caffeine and sugar this morning. Since there were no urgent pleas last night for help from Lois or any emergency phone calls from Bill Henderson, he was guessing Cat's party was a rousing, albeit safe, success. Nevertheless with that group, it was a certainty that what began at the Pen and Pencil ended up who knows where.

He looked over to Perry's office and noticed that the older man was hard at work already. <How does he do it? Arriving so early at the Daily Planet every morning? I thought newspaper ink was in Lois' veins, Perry White has us both beat!> Shaking his head in admiration, Clark turned on his computer and began consulting his back files for story ideas.

Half an hour later, the daytime staff slowly began to arrive. Clark listened for her delicate heartbeat, but as of yet, neither Lois nor any of the other female staffers had shown up.

<Easy Clark, maybe she slept late, still, Perry isn't going to be very happy... >

Just then, a familiar heartbeat reached his ears as the elevator doors snapped open and out stepped Diane, Cat and Lois. All three women dragged themselves to the ramp, determined to get to their desks before Perry noticed how close they were to being late.

Lois, seeing the coffee and muffin on her desk, expressed profound relief. "Bless you Clark," she whispered.

Clark walked over to Lois' guest chair and made himself comfortable. It was impossible not to indulge in a bit of good-natured teasing. "So, how are the revelers this fine morning?"

"Don't go there Kent," muttered an uncharacteristically taciturn Diane.

"I'm holding up," Lois answered around a mouth full of still warm blueberry muffin.

Cat, trying to look as if she had a full night's sleep, smiled triumphantly, "We had a blast! First, the party/shower at the Pen and Pencil then a smaller group of us went on a scavenger hunt!"

"Shhh!" Diane hissed, as she noticed Perry emerging from his office. "Not so loud, he'll hear you."

"What's wrong with a scavenger hunt?" Clark asked innocently.

"I'll tell you what's wrong with that particular activity, son," Perry said as he waded into the conversation. "When Anna B got married, seven years ago, these ladies had a scavenger hunt and they all ended up in jail – for disturbing the peace. The Star — that fish wrapping rag — covered the whole fiasco! The Daily Planet was the laughingstock of Metropolis."

"Perry, be fair, we did *not* end up in jail, just in a holding cell. No charges, fingerprinting or mug shots." Cat smiled mischievously. "Besides, Jenni cracked a smuggling ring. Who knew stealing an eight ball could yield a Kerth nomination for her?"

"Yeah, but during a pool game between *two* underworld kingpins? Who were trying to decide how to carve up their criminal territory? I

still don't understand what possessed the six of you to go in there. Great shades of Elvis! Back then, Lois was just a kid!"

"It's quite simple, we smelled a story, and the scavenger hunt was the perfect cover-up." Jenni's light Scottish accent floated down to them from the top of the ramp. Flanked by Janet and Corrina, the women made a formidable trio.

"Come on, chief, we have been over this before," Corrina jumped in with her no-nonsense manner. "Rumor was on the street about the pool tournament between Dugan and Meyers. We played the part of a bunch of bored, slightly ditsy secretaries looking for a little excitement. Is it our fault they bought the story and let us into the pool hall to watch?"

"Absolutely, we warned 'em about our little scavenger hunt," Cat put in.

"While Cat distracted them, I stole the eight ball," Janet continued.

"Correct, and when Dugan and Meyers discovered the theft, they started accusing each other. It did get rather exciting... quite the night." Jenni's blue eyes flashed, recalling the incident.

"Yeah, then a whale of a fight broke out. It *took* four squad cars, including the then Lieutenant Henderson to break up the melee." Perry concluded the narrative. His face grew flush with the memory.

"Wow, that must have been some smooth party!" Jimmy exclaimed.

"Yes, but you neglected to mentioned several of the gangsters talked to each other about their plans to take over Metropolis *before* the fight broke out. I overheard the conversations and did a great deal of follow-up work with my sources to learn more." Jenni commented. "That scavenger hunt yielded quite the headline. Janet and Corrina both wrote sidebars. I always said it was a shame you went into copy writing rather than reporting. Corrina."

"It is what I do," her friend said nonchalantly shrugging her shoulders.

"Trust us, Perry," Janet assured him as she stuck a freshly-sharpened pencil behind her ear and headed for the red metal staircase. "Nothing happened on this particular scavenger hunt. We only managed to bag a male model's sneakers...no story there." She sighed, obviously disappointed. "Jenni, you can use my office while I'm having a meeting. See everyone later." With those parting words, she briskly ran upstairs. Jenni smiled and winked at Lois, than she and Corrina walked over to the coffee station.

It took a moment for Perry to compose himself than looked at the bullpen staff, who stood mesmerized listening to the story and watching their chief get his leg pulled. Perry realized it to and began bellowing orders. It took all of Clark's self-control to keep from falling out of his chair from holding in the laughter.

Eventually the ebb and flow of the bullpen returned to normal. Lois listened to the background clatter of computer keyboards, news monitors and chatter as her co-workers went about their working day. She reflected on the past six months. A great deal had happened to herself personally and to the world at large. She and Clark were together not just professionally, but privately. Their stories were continuing to help to clean up corruption in the corporate world as well as Metropolis government. Being a couple, each leaned on qualities the other lacked, which made for a better whole.

It was a crushing point of dissatisfaction Lex Luthor would never be brought to trial for his masterminding of the crystals theft. However, the conglomerate which bore his name was no longer under his control. All dreams of Space Station Lex were forever cast aside. True to their word, Aykira and Lex had met with General Zeitlin and the mysterious John Cosgrove and returned all fourteen of the missing crystals. The multinational corporation quietly paid heavy fines and had to cut costs on some of its most lucrative government contracts.

The final blow: for the next ten years the Superman Foundation would privately supervise all the company's international activities. At that last part, Lex had balked. However, regulation by the foundation was preferable to a full-out media blitz regarding LexCorp's more

nefarious activities and all the problems resulting from it.

Aykira had destroyed the blood sample linking Lois to the break-in. She had done so in front of Lois and Clark that day in her office. The female reporter experienced poignant feelings that they had not met under better circumstances. To participate in a true close friendship between them in this world, as well as in Aykira's own, would have been nice. For despite the fact that Mrs. Luthor was happily married, Lois sensed she was still a little lonely — isolated. For all her machinations, she was still a tragic figure. Being a new wife and a caregiver to her husband was a heavy load. Sincere help and compassion from loving friends was a luxury the billionaire's wife did not have.

Lois thought about last night and the fun the Planet's female employees had. Did Aykira have such friends? Even acquaintances?

It also nagged at her regarding Aykira's comment on finding a cure for kryptonite poisoning. After all, she did give Axelrod's vial to Bernie Klein in the hopes of finding a cure. Wouldn't Lois go to *any* lengths to save Clark? Possibly, even break the law. Lois sighed, painfully aware of the answer.

Perhaps she might give Aykira a phone call after work.

Two days after the big party, Cat came into the newsroom to tie up a few stories before officially turning her column over to the new gossip columnist, Peggy Becker.

After having conversations with several of the bullpen staff, she sauntered over to Lois' desk wearing, for Cat, a simple purple and gray knit dress.

Looking up, Lois could not help but notice the normally flamboyantly dressed woman wearing such a sedate outfit. "What are you in mourning? Since when does Cat Grant wear grey?" Lois asked.

Cat shrugged her shoulders and said, "Can't a girl try something different? I wanted to ask, are you free for lunch?"

Lois glanced over to Clark's desk and noticed it was empty. Her partner was in the middle of either a rescue or hunting down a source. Apparently, she was at loose ends this afternoon. "Sure why not?"

Since the night of Cat's engagement, the two women had continued to trade sarcastic comments, but there was no longer heated animosity between them. No one would ever confuse them as being the best of friends, but there was now a mutual grudging respect between them.

"Great! I'll come and get you around 11:45." Cat said.

<Now I wonder what *that's* about?> Lois thought.

The morning went by swiftly and true to her word, Cat arrived promptly at Lois' desk and the two women headed up the ramp for the elevator.

"I'm starving. Where to?" Lois asked.

"Originally, I wanted to go to that Italian deli with the grilled veggie sandwiches and salads, but there's a rumor Jason might sell the Java Perk." Cat said gloomily.

"What!" Lois squeaked, threatening to launch into full-blown babble. "He can't sell! They make the best low fat muffins in New Troy! Come on, let's get out of here!"

"Yeah, I want another 'Whispering Eye' muffin before he sells out of them!" Cat said. With a fervor usually devoted to launching a full out investigation, the reporters departed for their lunch and some desperately needed answers.

A few minutes later found Cat and Lois confronting Jason, the owner of the Java Perk, in the midst of filling orders for a famished lunch crowd.

"Tell me it's not true," pleaded Lois as she shouted over the noise of clattering dishes, waitresses shouting orders and conversations from patrons. "The Java Perk is not closing down?"

"Relax. I'm going on vacation — first one in three years! My cousin Rico will be running the place for a month. His baking is as good as mine!"

Lois turned to Cat, cocked an eyebrow and snapped. "*This* is your

idea of reporting?"

Jason, sensing the two women would be arguing about this through lunch, stepped in. "Ladies, in honor of Ms. Grant's upcoming nuptials, I declare lunch is on the house. Take these menus, look 'em over and have Gina take your order."

"Really!?" Both women squeaked at once.

Gina, another of Jason's cousins, expertly took the salad orders at the counter. She then guided the two women to a recently emptied booth. A busboy came over and swiftly cleaned off the table. Lois and Cat sat down and chatted amicably about the latter's confusion over the rumor. Jason himself brought over the food and presented each woman with a white pastry box.

"What's this?" Cat asked curiously.

"Just a little tasty going away present for you and George — two Whispering Eye muffins. Lois, I know Clark likes Morning Glory muffins so there is one for him and a chocolate chip muffin for you. Enjoy ladies!" So saying, Jason bowed to them both and returned to his accustomed place behind the counter.

Lois dived into her salad with a will; it had been a long time since yogurt for breakfast. She still wondered why Cat had invited her to lunch. It was a little late for the two of them to develop a deeper relationship. Still, the two women talked over Cat's wedding and her plans to return to school and finish her art degree.

"Since when were you ever interested in art?" Lois said.

"Always. My favorite period of study is the Renaissance. It was an amazing time. The arts, literature, science, engineering were all booming." Cat's green eyes shone with fascination.

"It was also a time when women were nothing more than breeders for the nobility." Lois countered.

"Ha! That shows how much you know. Ever heard of Isabella d'Este?"

"No. Who was she? An artist?"

"Not an artist, but a patron of the arts. The art of conversation was infinitely more appreciated in those days. At seventeen she could skillfully hold her own against those twice her age. Not to mention she could play the lute beautifully."

"After her husband's death, she ruled Mantua and was very successful. Over the course of her lifetime, she wrote over two thousand letters. The contents held information on everything from politics to war. That was the nearest any woman came to writing history at that time. As an independent woman and writer, you would have liked her."

Lois listened intently as Catherine Grant began to warm to her subject, discussing many important figures of that long ago era. Both women discovered they had barely touched their food and decided to finish eating before their lunchtime was completely over. <I'm still curious as to why Cat invited me out, now is as good a time to ask.>

"This is probably the best conversation we have ever had. Which brings me to the question, just why *are* we here?" Lois queried.

The older woman sat back in her chair and gave Lois an appraising look, the expression on her face thoughtful. She cleared her throat and began speaking. "I wanted to apologize for being so unprofessional to you over the years. We should have been working together, exchanging information, rather than being adversaries."

Lois sat up straight in her chair, obviously astonished to hear those words. "Excuse me?" she said, dumbfounded.

"Think about it. When Jenni, Janet and Corinna were reporters in the bullpen they worked together as a *team*. The story Jenni cracked from the scavenger hunt is but one example. Their unflagging support when I began working at the Planet was invaluable and I follow most of those lessons to this very day. Corinna used to go over my copy all the time. Janet always checked my information for me when it came to anything medical. Jenni expected me to back up all my little gossip tidbits with hard evidence and facts."

"True," Lois nodded. "Legal never had to triple check your stories."

"No, they didn't. Anyhow, I know it's too late to be great friends,

but as a woman in a male dominated profession I should have been as supportive to you as my mentors were to me. There were a couple of times when being the more experienced woman, I could have steered you from a... bad situation. So, I thought this lunch might help to say, 'I'm sorry'."

Once again, Catherine Grant's frankness and tact surprised Lois. She was aware of which 'bad situation' she was talking about. Claude's betrayal came at a time when her full reporter status was still fresh. Perhaps if Cat had warned her, the acutely embarrassing aftermath of that ill-fated relationship might never have happened. No, she probably would have ignored any warning Cat gave, checking the water level was just not her style.

A gentle smile played across her lips, "Thank you. I appreciate the lunch and the sentiments behind it. Honestly, George is the best thing that ever happened to you!"

"I believe the same should be said about Mr. Kent. The 'partnership' is working out better than anyone expected." Cat's trademark purr was clearly evident in her voice.

Lois looked back at her, not at all embarrassed or confused, but happy and proud of the intimate relationship she shared with Clark. It was stronger and more powerful than being alone. What started out as a bickering brother and sister rivalry had grown into something beautiful and tender. "Thank you Cat." She answered with a genuine smile.

"Just calling it like I see it. Be happy, Lois. You deserve it."

Silence stretched between the two, but before it got uncomfortable, Lois spoke, changing the subject.

"Sorry to hear Peggy Becker got your gig rather than Diane, she's really good."

"No, Diane needs to concentrate on writing hard news, not so much stuff in the Weekend Section or a gossip column. I've taken a look at her piece on Suicide Slum restoration by LexCorp — solid writing. It's a good thing Leatherwood took the assignment away from Eduardo and gave it to Diane."

"That's high praise coming from you." Lois answered.

"Yeah well, If Mrs. Luthor follows through on her plans; the area restoration is going to be fantastic. She didn't mention anything about the project during your interview?"

"Nope, she was pretty involved in other matters and did not discuss it."

"No doubt, poor woman. Imagine enjoying a whirlwind courtship, fantasy wedding and honeymoon, only to discover your husband has a terminal brain tumor." Cat suppressed a shudder. In a faraway voice, she said, "Aykira really must be deeply in love with him."

Lois, not wishing to dwell on Aykira's misfortune, looked at her watch and said, "We need to get back to the Bullpen before Perry starts bellowing."

"Yeah, I'm going to miss that southern gentleman's bellow... and his Elvis stories." Cat sighed as she gathered her things. "Do me a favor, Lois."

"Sure. If I can."

"This will be easy. Actually it's two things."

Sensing a trap, Lois looked at her former nemesis and waited for it to snap.

"Keep an eye on Diane for me?" Cat lowered her voice and in a contrite tone continued. "Be the friend and mentor to her that I *wasn't* to you?"

For the second time in an hour, Cat Grant's words had taken her by surprise. Here indeed was a different woman from the one who wanted to 'test drive' Clark in his Superman guise to ascertain if he was 'domestic' or 'imported'. Concealing her amazement, Lois replied, "That's not a problem. What's the other request?"

"Drop me a line every once in a while? Let me know how life is going in the bullpen. I know you will give me a true view of what's happening. Honestly, until just now, I did not realize how *much* I'm going to miss everyone."

"Okay, expect an e-mail from me at least once a month." Lois

replied.

"Even if Clark and you are in the middle of a super hot investigation which is sure to yield yet another Kerth?" Cat asked in a teasing tone.

"Don't push it, Grant!" Lois growled in typical 'Mad Dog' fashion.

"Oh I wouldn't dream of doing it!" Cat laughed in her full-throated manner. "Now tell me, how is your mentoring going with Stacy? You know, the bespectacled intern from Wyoming? Is there a future Kerth award winner there?"

Lois shook her head mentally. Cat may be leaving the Daily Planet, but in her heart, she was still into collecting gossip. The lunch crowd had thinned to a few patrons, so it was easy to pull Jason out of the kitchen and wish him a restful vacation. Once that pleasant task was complete, they exited the Java Perk.

Part Twenty-One

It was an uncharacteristically warm day late in September when Catherine Grant and George Amundsen's wedding finally arrived.

In his bedroom, Clark critically appraised his reflection in the mirror and nodded sage approval. He had taken great pains to look his absolute best in the elegant black and silver gray tuxedo. Today was a day unlike any other. "So, what do you think, Pepper, will I pass muster?"

The cat sat looking at his human from his now familiar perch on the foot of the neatly made bed. He cocked his tiny head to the side as if to say: 'Looks good to me!'

Clark smiled and petted the feline. He was very happy that Mrs. Harper let him keep the cat. Even Lois had gotten used to him and playfully scolded the friendly cat whenever she found him curled up on her computer or research papers during their many nights of working together. Pepper had become the unofficial third member of their partnership.

Clark hoped today might end one chapter of their lives and begin another. Between his parents, Pete Ross and himself, it had taken a great deal of work and not a little subterfuge, to finish a project started only two weeks previously. Tonight he hoped it would provide the proper setting his heart yearned for. But for now, it was time to pick up his date.

<It would be so cool to arrive at the Farragut Hotel via Superman Express, unfortunately, that would cause way too many questions. Not to mention take a lot of attention away from Cat! Definitely not a good idea, part of this day belongs to her and George. Tonight is special — for Lois and I.> He gave himself another quick glance in the mirror, trotted down the stairs and exited the building. His heart was singing as happy feet hit the pavement towards a waiting black limousine. "She is never going to believe this ride," he said aloud.

Lois studied the woman in the mirror with a critical eye; she wanted to look her absolute best. Today was a day unlike any other. Spending all morning at the beauty salon getting the full spa treatment: massage, manicure and pedicure, made her feel pampered and relaxed. Andre insisted on styling her hair in a classic upsweep to display her long neck and delicate ears, for the dress's neckline was a little more provocative than what Lois usually wore to weddings. Nevertheless, tonight she intended to make a statement about who she was to the man who claimed her heart.

Lois glanced at the clock, it read three forty-five. She thought Clark had better not be late this afternoon. In the past few weeks, he had disappeared several times. She considered the number of rescues versus his various excuses and suspected there was more to this latest odd behavior than extra patrols.

Another thing; she could have sworn that she had caught a glimpse of Martha and Jonathan in the paint department of the Station Home store last week. She questioned Clark, but he merely touched his glasses, fumbled with his tie, and said she must be mistaken.

Such obvious nervous body language from him was a *definite* tip-off something unusual — even for him — was up. Nevertheless, she

could be patient, a quality Lois had been forcing herself to develop. Being the girlfriend of Clark Kent promised to yield any number of unsuspected twists and turns. It was best to acclimate herself to them now.

A happy knocking sound on her front door put an end to further musing. “Clark, just a minute!” She called from the bathroom. Gathering up the skirt of her gown, Lois hurried to the door, opened the numerous locks, and said. “Don’t come in just yet, Clark, I’m not fully dressed,” she fibbed, then added, “No X-ray peeking!” Quick as her stocking feet could move she ran into the bedroom and slipped on the delicate strappy satin pumps. They cost a mint, but the sales clerk at Darcy’s swore they matched her dress perfectly.

Seconds later, she dabbed perfume behind her ears and wrists. The light jasmine bouquet swirled around the apartment, delicately feathering it with an opulent scent. She picked up a necklace and struggled with its clasp, then decided to let Clark fasten it. After all, isn’t that a task boyfriends... and husbands... do exceedingly well?

“Something smells delightful, like tropical flowers.” Clark’s voice called out from the living room.

“That’s because they *are* flowers, jasmine perfume to be precise,” she responded huskily. Clark, she noted with wry amusement as she entered the room, was speechless.

She simply overwhelmed him with her beauty, wearing a slightly off-the-shoulder confection of grace and timeless elegance. The dress’s dark sea foam shade looked sumptuous against her radiant skin. She held up a necklace of green stones and asked softly. “Care to put it on for me?”

Clark, at last finding his voice, gulped out, “Sure.” Lois turned her back to him, while his warm fingers skillfully worked the lobster claw clasp. She shivered with delight when he laid his big gentle hands on her graceful shoulders and tenderly massaged them. “You look beautiful. Careful, Cat might get angry – outshining the bride and all...”

“Hmm, perhaps that might not be a bad thing, Mr. Kent,” she giggled when Clark wrapped his superbly strong arms around her slender waist and gave a loving hug. He proceeded to nuzzle her neck.

“We don’t have to go the wedding,” he murmured. “Maybe we should fly to Paris instead?”

“Paris,” Lois breathed dreamily. “Ooh, so much more fun, but Cat, would kill us, after all you have attendant duties to perform.”

“True,” he sighed, “can’t blame a guy for trying.”

Lois reluctantly broke from their embrace, to collect her purse and silk wrap. <Thank goodness for Darcy’s! This dress and all the accessories were worth every penny just to see the expression on Clark’s face!>

“OK I’m ready,” Lois grinned

Clark bowed and opened the door. “Milady, your chariot awaits thee.”

The Grant-Amundsen wedding exceeded Cat’s plans for glamour and excitement. George had insisted the occasion not become some celebrity filled ‘affair’. Instead, it was a tad splashy, with generous amounts of elegance and a touch of class. Very much a combination of Cat and George, which is the way a balanced wedding and relationship was supposed to be.

George stood at the raised platform with his best man and groomsmen, wearing a crisp black tuxedo by Armani. He did not look in the least bit nervous, but assured and ready to take on this new exciting facet of his life.

Suddenly a massive drum signaling the guests to be silent thundered in the background. The pounding ceased and seamlessly changed over to the traditional wedding march, as the double doors were thrown open. The guests stood up as the bridal party members began to cross the threshold into the ballroom. Entering first was petite but glamorous Jenni Reid, whose dainty footsteps moved down an aisle sprinkled with white rose petals. She wore a black gown with cap sleeves and white side peplum. Resting in her none too firm hands was

a gloriously simple bouquet of white stargazer lilies.

Immediately following behind was Diane Pallister. The normally conservatively dressed woman had made a stunning transformation, wearing a black ball gown with pleating at the waist and a trumpet skirt. Her graceful long body held itself in serenity as each step she took kept pace with the music. She carried a bouquet of white magnolias, the scent delicately caressing all who breathed it in.

“Oh my, that’s *our* Diane?” Lois heard Jimmy gasp in a mixture of surprise and delight.

If Diane caused a stir, the bride raised the roof. The music died down once Diane reached the raised platform, then built to a gentle crescendo... then halted. All eyes pulled themselves from bridal party to the bride.

Perry White stood in the threshold of the double doorway, his carriage firm and tall, beaming with a father’s pride. By his side stood Catherine Helva Grant. Cat in any garb was an attractive, striking woman, but the one-shoulder ivory satin wedding gown proclaimed her classic Hollywood movie star looks to all present. Her glorious red hair was in a sweeping updo, held together with one delicate crystal pin in the shape of a sunburst. Totally, ‘cat’ glamorous.

As the strains of Vangelis ‘Chariots of Fire’ filled the room, Cat and Perry moved easily down the aisle. The gown’s fabric made delicate rustling sounds. Her intense green eyes focused on no one save George.

“Wow! That woman can make an entrance,” Jimmy breathed.

“George better stick to her like superglue!”

Lois ignored the comment and looked to the back of the room at Clark, who unfortunately was seating a pair of latecomers – Aykira and Lex Luthor.

<What are *they* doing here?> Lois thought anxiously, than shamefully relented. <How many events will they attend before Lex is too ill to go anywhere? I’m glad Cat invited them. Hopefully, tonight will be special for them as well.>

Putting all thoughts of the Luthors and their particular situation aside, Lois clutched the wedding program in her hand and turned around to face the ceremony. Perry was just handing Cat over to George, who was grinning like crazy. Once again, there was an overwhelming feeling of warmth and friendship towards the bride. “I wish there was time for us to be acquainted as friends, not competitors,” Lois whispered softly.

Suddenly she felt a familiar presence by her side as Clark sat down next to her.

“Aren’t you supposed to be attending and seating late guests?”

Lois teased.

“Relax, I can get back there before anyone knows I’m gone. This moment is too important to miss.”

“Well, that’s one advantage to having super speed,” she whispered so softly, only Clark could hear. They sat together, holding hands and blissfully taking in the ceremony. Cat spoke her vows, with a little catch in her voice. George spoke his without a single stumbled word. In a twist on tradition, the couple stepped back and allowed the best man, George’s brother, Aaron, to read lines of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet... with a few minor alterations:

*Catherine’s beauty would eclipse the sun as daylight does a lamp.
At night her eyes would shine so brightly in the sky that the birds
would think the night was over and start singing.*

Diane followed by a few verses from Keats, also with slight changes:

*My love for George is a thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.*

The officiant then stepped up to the platform again to pronounce Catherine and George husband and wife. Before George could kiss her, he had to borrow a hankie from Perry to dry Cat’s tears.

The guests held their breath as one. With a tenderness that only

comes from deep caring and selflessness, George Amundsen sweetly kissed his new wife.

“Oh, how romantic,” gushed one of the female guests in front of Lois.

“I hope they are happier a year from now,” whispered another.

Lois smiled to herself, <They will be. George is the most important person in Cat’s life. If she puts half as much work into her marriage as she did this wedding, next year will be filled with greater memories.>

By her side, the Man of Steel stealthily wiped the single tear as it coursed down his face. Someday perhaps he and Lois could stand before a small circle of friends and declare their deep commitment to one another.

<How touching! Who would have thought any of us would see, Cat crying at her own wedding? Remembering the look of hurt in those green eyes after refusing her company during the Nightfall Asteroid disaster is indelibly etched in my mind. She only wanted to be with someone — to feel loved and not alone. Thankfully, Cat is alone no more.>

In Metropolis’ upper circles, the Farragut Hotel had a well-deserved reputation for its traditional cocktail hour. During that respite between ceremony and reception the hotel’s superbly trained staff would magically transform the ballroom from nuptial site to reception area. The large waiting chamber outside the ballroom held the guests, laughing and talking while they nibbled on hors d’oeuvres and sipped chilled champagne from tall flute glasses. Lofty walls painted a rich royal blue had mirror panels making the space more expansive yet comfortable. In the background, fusion jazz played; the smooth music caught everyone’s festive mood and made it even more celebratory. The plush thick carpet underneath the attendees’ feet absorbed much of the joyful noise.

Several members of Metropolis elite society were present, chief among them Lex and his beautiful new bride Aykira. This was their first public appearance since their return from Greece and Lex’s surgery. He looked immensely better, even dashing in his tuxedo. His dark hair had grown back and was so artfully styled none would have suspected he had recently undergone neurosurgery.

“My sweet, thank you for getting me out of the penthouse and accepting this invitation. If I have not said it already, the burgundy silk looks delicious next to your skin.”

“Flatterer. Perhaps I can display my appreciation for your kind words later?” She whispered in his ear.

“We can leave early... if you wish.” Her husband smiled then kissed her hand. Their intimate conversation was interrupted by a business acquaintance of Lex’s. Without missing a step, they stood by a tall palm tree, amicably chatting with the man and his latest girlfriend.

“This is a lovely event. Cat outdid herself.” Alice White exclaimed. “Perry looked so handsome and proud walking her down the aisle. It is the only time he’ll have that honor since we have only boys.”

“Yeah, the chief looked real smooth and... fatherly. Elegance like this is the way all wedding receptions ought to be!”

“Why James Olsen, that’s such a sweet comment! There are the makings of a real gentleman in you,” Alice said, her eyes twinkling merrily.

Steve walked over with his wife and they chatted for a while, and then moved on to another group.

Despite herself, Lois had to agree with everyone. The entire ceremony went off without a hitch. It was a little overdone by her standards. A small intimate ceremony with close family and friends was all any couple needed. Not some over blown mega event people forget about a month later. However, no matter the size and style of the ceremony the most important thing was that the couple remain as

thrilled with each other next year as they are today.

Clark came over to her, placing his hand on the small of her back. She turned and looked up at him, knowing she gazed with certainty at the future.

“Lois, I found these chocolate mini-croissants. Care to give them a try?” He held out the tiny glass serving saucer with two bite-sized croissants drizzled with milk chocolate resting upon a white lace napkin.

“Yes! I’m famished!” She took one and bit delicately into it, her eyes swirling with delight. “Perfection,” she mumbled after finishing. <He is so attentive and loving! I was going to take a career in journalism over *him*? Martha was right, he’s the only man I want to have children with...>

Lois startled herself with this thought, so much so she coughed.

“Hey, are you OK?” Clark asked his eyes filled with genuine concern.

She stared into those warm loving brown eyes, took his hand and whispered so only he could hear, “I’m fine, Clark, better than I have ever been.”

The two were momentarily lost in each other’s eyes, when Alice discreetly cleared her throat. “The Reception Coordinator has called us in... hear the drums?”

Lois and Clark turned to Alice, nodded in agreement and made their way to the double doors Cat had passed through only an hour before. As each of the guests entered, their senses were treated to a feast. Transformation seemed to be too poor of a word to describe the ballroom. The room seemed to glow with the light of a thousand and one candles. Hanging from the ceiling, a crystal chandelier, mate to the one in the waiting area, shone down additional illumination. A fragile, telltale fragrant scent of stargazer lilies filled the air and teased the guests’ sense of smell.

Each of the fifteen tables was draped in heavy, white damask linen. Atop the linen glistened elegant china, silverware and crystal drinking vessels. The chairs were covered in black linen, each tied in place with a large matching white damask linen bow.

The ballroom had high green and cream colored walls on three sides; the fourth wall was a series of ceiling to floor windows opening onto Hobbs Bay at night. Its numerous skyscrapers glistening like polished gems, the city of Metropolis was the unwitting guest-of-honor at the Amundsen’s wedding.

“Oh my goodness,” Alice breathed. “When Catherine Grant... uh Amundsen plans a wedding, she does it right.”

Clark let out a low whistle as he and Lois walked towards the guest table to get their place cards. “No arguments there.”

“What table are you seated at?” Jimmy, bring up the rear asked.

“According to our place cards, Perry and I are at table four,” Alice responded.

“So are we,” Lois said looking at the card.

“Oh no! I’m at table six... no one is seated there yet. Can I hang out with you guys until...”

Jimmy’s voice trailed off; as he noticed a trio of pretty elegantly dressed young ladies taking their seats at table six. He clapped Clark on the back, adjusted his tie and said, “CK, forget what I just said... I’m *definitely* sitting at table six!”

So saying, he moved smoothly over to the table, introduced himself and dived into an animated discussion with the young women.

“There *is* hope for that young man yet!” Alice said while trying to keep from laughing.

“I thought Jimmy might be lost without Jack, but he’ll be fine.” Lois said shaking her head.

“Well, Cat had to cut the list somewhere and Jack simply has not been around long enough to be invited. Janet, Erin and Corrina’s spouses had to come first.” Clark said while shrugging his shoulders.

The evening passed like a dream for Lois and Clark. They slow-danced with each other under the glittering crystal chandelier as if there was no one in the world except each other. They switched

partners once or twice, Clark even ‘dipped’ Alice. Lois did a mean jitterbug with an ecstatic Jimmy. But they always came back to find each other.

“Farmboy, those ballroom dancing lessons have really paid off.” His partner whispered huskily into his ear. “Gene Kelly is the only one to match your moves.”

“So, my dancing is better than my... otherworldly abilities?” Clark asked his smile dazzling as he whirled her around.

“Let’s just say this is one of your better ‘earth bound’ ones. However, flying is always welcome,” she chuckled softly.

At the bridal table, Cat sat with George, drinking champagne and quietly laughing together. “Ready for our honeymoon, baby? By the way, where are we going? It’s kinda hard to pack beyond toiletries when I don’t know the destination.” Cat said.

“I... I took the liberty of packing for you. How does a two-week cruise of the Mediterranean sound?”

Cat gathered her husband in a huge hug and purred. “That’s fantastic! I always wanted to see the Greek isles! Mr. Amundsen, you are the best! No one else makes me hear drums inside my head whenever he’s around.” Her green eyes flashed with anticipated delight and tossed her head. “What a fantastic sound!”

“Is that why you started the ceremony and reception with drums?” He asked while arching an eyebrow.

She nodded and added with a wicked smile, “That and to remind you of our fifth date.”

Her new husband flushed a brilliant shade of red. Cat had turned him from a solitary, albeit athletic, bookworm to a man willing to explore life... and take a few risks. However, he was still concerned about one thing. “Honey,” George asked shyly, “Are you ready to live in Seattle? It’s still a big city, but not as fast paced as Metropolis.”

The former gossip columnist looked around the ballroom, seeing so many familiar faces laughing and enjoying themselves, partaking in their delight of this special day. She wanted to cling to these people, this moment to be forever held in the amber of her memory. Her time in Metropolis had been exhilarating, but it was time to turn the page.

Perry White, the senior editor, had given her a job when no one else would and she worked her fingers to the bone paying back that favor. He was more than just the Chief; he was a friend, mentor and sometimes exasperated father. Who better to give her away?

Jenni, Corrina, and Janet; three of the best friends she had ever known, each woman an acknowledged expert in her respective niche of newspaper journalism. They welcomed her to the bullpen and assisted her whenever possible. Jenni had become the sister she never had and despite the separation of continent and ocean, that sisterhood and love of a good story held them together.

Lois Lane. Funny, she had known Lois for years as difficult, feisty and ready to get the assignment done. *Almost* a fitting replacement for Jenni as a reporter, if not as a friend. Sadly, Lois always walked alone, especially after the Claude debacle. But now, Cat could no longer see the younger woman without Clark by her side, any more than she could imagine being without George.

Clark Kent. In a way, she owed all her current and future happiness to this gentle man from Kansas. After he refused to spend the last few hours on Earth with her during the Nightfall disaster, Cat took time to reconsider seriously her life’s path. She turned her back on meaningless liaisons and opened herself to something very precious and rare; an honest relationship and true love.

Jimmy ‘little cousin’ Olsen: he at one time wanted to share a night of passion with her, but once discovering they were related, she put an end to that pronto! Watching his growth as a man and as a professional had been most gratifying.

Diane Pallister was the perfect maid of honor. <Hopefully, she’ll take my advice and start doing some feature writing. She’s too good a writer to languish in the Weekend section. Lane and Kent need some healthy competition.>

Cat studied Lois and Clark on the dance floor sinuously moving to

Etta James “At Last” and smiled. “Yes George, I’m ready to move to Seattle, but we have to come back here in about six months.”

“Why?”

“Because there is no way I’m going to miss *their* wedding!” she said as she pointed at Lois and Clark.

The sleek black limousine pulled noiselessly up to Lois’ apartment. The driver jumped out, ran around the side, and opened the door. Clark stepped out first and extended his hand to Lois. He held her as she gracefully exited the car and slipped gently into his arms. They began to kiss, completely ignoring the driver, who, taking the hint, merely tipped his cap and began to walk away.

“Wait! H...here’s your tip! Thank you for driving us.” Clark stumbled over his words, totally embarrassed that he had forgotten to tip the man.

The driver, seeing the generous amount of money thrust into his hand, smartly saluted and gave Clark a toothy grin. “It was my pleasure to drive you. Have a good evening, uh morning.” Within seconds of him closing the car door, the engine came to life and the powerful vehicle moved down the street.

Lois leaned against Clark, wrapping her slender arms around his waist. “That was the *best* wedding I’ve been to in a long time. Care to come up for some coffee?”

He looked down at Lois and gently kissed her on the cheek. He pulled back and smiled at her. “Actually it isn’t that late... care to go for a walk?”

“You heard what the driver said, it’s 1:30 in the morning. Besides, it’s not exactly summer anymore. Autumn is just around the corner.”

“Is that the voice of Lois Lane, reporter extraordinaire, afraid of a little walk?” He teased.

Lois looked into the deep brown eyes of her boyfriend and smiled confidently. <No, I’m not afraid of a little walk, especially not with this particular man at my side.> Without another word she slipped her arm into his and with easy strides they began walking towards Nayland Heights. The mood between the handsome couple was one of contentment and tranquility. They had experienced a great deal in the past few months: stakeouts, crazy scientists and politicians who worked to bury their story. Not to mention the occasional argument and misunderstandings, which always led to conversation and making up. Nevertheless, through it all Lois and Clark weathered the storms.

They were stronger together than apart.

They started talking about different events from the wedding and reception, especially Perry’s wonderful rendition of ‘Love Me Tender’. What their boss lacked in vocal ability he more than made up for in style. It did not hurt that while Perry sang his eyes never left Alice’s.

“Funny, after that song, they went home. I wonder why?” Lois said with a barely suppressed giggle.

“Perry, as much as he likes to hide it, is a man in love.” Clark spoke with a slight tremor in his voice. He had slowed his pace then stopped suddenly in front of a newly renovated stately brownstone.

“Whoa, partner!” Lois blurted out as she bumped into him. “Why are we stopping here?”

“I want you to see this house. Isn’t the architecture fantastic? It’s early twentieth century,” Clark said as he gently tugged her arm to walk up the wide steps. One side of the staircase, on each step sat a colorful pot of red mums, the unofficial flower of autumn.

“Are you kidding me? In the middle of the night... while in our dressiest clothes? This isn’t like you. I don’t care what century it was built. Besides, Superman does not break into someone’s home,” she whispered.

Clark’s eyes twinkled and his smile grew dazzling bright as he reached into his pocket. “We are not breaking in. Besides, I have a key.” He dangled the burnished scrap of metal in front of her.

“What are *you* doing with a key to this townhouse?” Lois’ voice squeaked in surprise.

Her boyfriend merely continued to grin while fitting the key into the shining brass lock of the impressive glass and oak outer door. With

a wave of his outstretched hand, he motioned for Lois to enter, step through the vestibule and into the foyer. As she did so, he turned on the entry lights to illuminate the foyer, which was spacious and inviting. On the right side was an old-fashioned wooden coat rack and umbrella stand. Directly opposite sat a solid oak bench with curved legs and a rattan top. The polished wooden floors shone to a high gloss, so much so, Lois was concerned about walking on it for fear of ruining the finish. As she entered into the cream-colored living room, her eyes grew wide taking in the space. This room alone could easily contain her entire apartment with room to spare.

The fireplace had a brick surround and white mantelpiece. Inside were three huge logs ready to be lit. Just in front of the fireplace lay a carpet and on either side were comfortable red couches, the kind of couch that invites a person to sit down and read on a cold winter's evening.

To the immediate left of the fireplace were a pair of broad French doors which she thought must lead to a tiny backyard. The darkness outside did not allow her to peek any further.

"What do you think? Care to go for a tour?"

"This place is a dream! OK, buster, you have some explaining to do... after the tour!"

He led her upstairs to the bedrooms, four in all. Currently, two of the large rooms were empty and one room, which served as an office, held Clark's artwork and several mementoes from his global travels, all neatly arranged in his usual organized manner. The final room was the master bedroom suite; Lois peeked to see a stunning bedroom set a classic bungalow design perfect for the young professional in desperate need of a sleeping sanctuary. The king-sized bed was flanked by matching nightstands of polished wood. It was sumptuously covered with crisp blue and cream linens, topped off by four plush pillows.

The rest of the room held a tallboy dresser and a chair placed by the window. In front of the bed was a large wicker chest, which probably stored Martha's lovely warm knitted blankets and hand-stitched quilts.

They moved onto the bathroom with bright white tiles and the huge bathtub with claw feet. The double sinks and spacious cabinets were perfect for a busy couple getting ready in the morning. No waiting to use this particular bathroom. The room was so pristine and white it almost hurt Lois' eyes.

"Clark, I'm speechless." His partner said as they walked back downstairs. "This place is amazing."

"How can you say that? What about the kitchen?"

"Why would I be interested in the kitchen?" Lois countered.

"Good point," he mumbled.

"Hey, I don't have to have super hearing to hear that!" Lois fired back, slapping him playfully with her green beaded purse.

All he could do was smile once more, take her hand and lead Lois into the kitchen on the far right side of the fireplace. Again, the scent of cleanliness and warmth filled her as she entered the space. The eat-in kitchen and desk area were bathed in a classy palette of white and heavy cream with touches of blue, while a mixture of metal finishes provided additional layers of interest. The white New England-style cabinets were adorned with sleek polished-nickel hardware. The focal point of the room demanding Lois' attention was a glorious island made of walnut topped off with dark blue granite.

"Oh, my...", were the only words to escape her mouth.

"I'm glad you like. Now... for the 'special' room, a room only you and I will ever see." Clark said as he pushed open the swinging door, leading back into the living room."

His movements were so quick she missed them, but part of the wall to the immediate right of the fireplace slid back, revealing an eight foot deep walk-in closet with shelves, hangers, and drawers.

"What is this?" A secret chamber?" she asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Actually, it used to be a bar. This townhouse was once a speakeasy. I could probably see Pino 'Pretty Boy' Dragonetti being a patron here and making plans for all his illegal bootleg activities. If

these walls could talk, just imagine all the gangland stories they might tell."

"Hmm, after what we heard about him I wouldn't doubt it for a second. Oh well, Batman needs a place to hang his cowl. Superman needs space for his cape. Urgh! Did I actually say that?" she groaned.

"This is the ideal place to store my spare uniforms. However, this is certainly not the best part. Wait until you see the crowning piece to this townhouse." Clark said as the secret chamber was concealed once again.

"There's more?" Lois squeaked with uncharacteristic meekness as she followed behind.

"Absolutely!" He flung open the French doors, the scent of fresh autumn air tingled her nose. Not gas fumes and the other noxious scents of the city, but real floral garden fragrances. No light escaped from the area beyond the doors. She might as well have been looking into the bottom of a great canyon so inky was the blackness.

"That does it," she said striding up to Clark's tall frame and staring up into his laughing eyes. "OK, Clark, what's going on around here? Whose house is this? Why are your things here? Are you house-sitting? What about your apartment? Come on... spit it out!"

Suddenly a low quiet meow was heard from the top of the steps. Lois turned to see Pepper poking his head between the pickets of the stairwell. The tiny feline was intently observing his humans with gentle green eyes. She turned back to Clark and then turned again to the cat. "Pepper's here?"

"Well, of course he's here. He's mine."

"What is going on?" She demanded before Clark could utter another word. "I thought he was going back with Mrs. Harper? Not that I have anything against the little furball, he's a nice addition to your family."

"Well, Mrs. Harper is moving back to St. Louis in order to take care of her mother. She couldn't take Pepper with her so I sort of adopted him. She was so grateful that she – huh... sold me this townhouse at a wonderful price. It belonged to her husband, but after his death, she couldn't live here, it was so full of happy memories. Well, at least I don't have to worry about looking for a place to live." He said all this very fast with a sweet lopsided grin.

"Fantastic. A townhouse. So, that's the reason why you have been disappearing so much the past two weeks?"

"Guilty as charged. Mom, Dad and to a lesser extent Pete Ross have been helping me make all kinds of renovations." Clark took both of Lois' hands in his and said, "Thanks for the comment about Pepper. But Lois, you are an even nicer addition to my family. Come. Let me show you."

He led her to the doors, stood behind her, then gently placed his hands on her shoulders and spoke softly into her ears. "I want you to close your eyes and slowly count to five, then open them, but not until you reach five. OK?"

The beautiful brunette trembled with barely concealed excitement, then nodded her head. He could hear the sound of her heart beating rapidly. "Okay, start counting."

"One." The whooshing sound of Clark in flight filled her ears.

"Two." The smell of sulfur and the sweet aroma of wild flowers teased her nostrils.

"Three." The taste of wickedly delicious Swiss milk chocolate touched her tongue.

"Four." The touch of a warm metal band circled her left wrist.

"Five!" She felt the darkness ease and opened her eyes to a riot of autumn colors and sighs.

The garden was surprisingly large by city standards, at least fifty feet deep. Sitting on a carpet of fading grass, autumn flowers such as crocus and amaryllis were in large azure earthenware containers. Cyclamens in white and a range of pink shades, with glossy green leaves, added a welcome dash of vibrancy. The air was crisp and light, but with a hint of mystery.

A gray flagstone path was lighted by tiny in-ground lights that led to a wooden double roof ten-foot high, cedar gazebo. Inside the small

structure shone tiny lights upon several objects: a black wrought iron table with chairs, a striking unlit antique candelabra, a bottle of wine, and two glasses. Nearby lay a small colorful bouquet of red roses.

“Oh Clark, it’s breathtaking.” She whispered, scarcely able to tear her eyes away from the scene. “A secret garden nestled in Metropolis…”

He took her right hand. The fabric of her dark sea green gown rustled as they walked down the flagstone path. Upon entering the gazebo, Clark lit the candelabra with his heat vision. It was then that Lois noticed a gold bracelet etched with what she suspected was Kryptonian writing encircling his left wrist, similar to the one encircling her own.

“Wh… what are these matching gold bracelets, Clark? I just noticed them on our wrists.”

The handsome man in front of her bowed his head, took a deep breath, and spoke.

“Remember the globe we found at that warehouse owned by Bureau 39?”

Lois’ eyes lighted up. “Yes, the one that was so important to Super… you.”

“The globe told me a great deal about myself and who I am. Why my parents built a tiny craft and launched me into space. But it also taught me a number of customs, chiefly — Kryptonian marriage customs. Men and women of the nobility class wear bracelets in a color variation no other couple is allowed to copy. I… I placed that solid gold bracelet on your wrist. It is a symbol to all onlookers, our lives are intertwined. The Kryptonian script says Lois and Clark.”

“B… but that’s on Krypton,” Lois answered, her eyes brimming with tears and her voice trembling.

“Lois, life is made up of the moments, ever since that day I meet you in Perry’s office; you have given me nothing but wonderful moments. True, sometimes they were a little scary, but always full of wonder.” He reached behind the roses and picked up a small black box with gold trim. As the moonlight filtered through the rooftop, he bent down on one knee and took her hand. “Lois Lane, will you marry me? Stay on the road we started walking … forever by each other’s side?”

“Oh Clark… yes,” she sobbed.

Slowly he opened the box and inside is an elegant perfect diamond ring. He took the ring out of the box, slipped it onto her finger and smiled joyously. He gathered her into his arms and whispered huskily. “I look forward to sharing forever with you Lois.”

“Now, always and forever.” She answered.

Part Twenty-Two

Moonlight and starlight fused effortlessly and their radiance tumbled gently down over the scores of Metropolis rooftops. The silvery illumination touched majestic skyscrapers and humble shops. Some of the city’s inhabitants welcomed the moon’s brilliance while some of its more seedy denizens scorned its very existence. The evening radiance reached one particular neighborhood and then a certain townhouse, its lush well lit garden filled with vivacious guests in happy anticipation of a long awaited event. It had been exactly one year and a month since Bobby Bigmouth had provided Lois Lane and Clark Kent with the tip which set the intrepid reporting team on the fateful journey culminating in this evening.

The townhouse’s large backyard garden was the perfect backdrop for an eventide wedding. It had taken a tremendous amount of labor and planning on everyone’s part, to create an outdoor room that worked as a location for the Lane-Kent reception. All the hard work had paid off handsomely. The riot of colors and scents were remarkable, set off as they were by blazing torches and lanterns. Dark red plum tree leaves and fiery red Japanese maple leaves contrasted perfectly with the lush lavender on the pathway to the gazebo. Slender yet regal Italian cypress lined the fences, masking the wooden fence from onlookers. Jonathan chose these plants for a two-fold purpose: firstly to hide the garden from unwelcome attention and secondly because the plants displayed their fresh vibrant color for a long period.

Heady intermingled scents of lavender, jasmine and tulips wafted

through the night air, enhancing the sense of eager anticipation among the guests.

Garden scents were not the only fragrances tantalizing the senses. Mike Lane and his staff labored in the kitchen to create a sumptuous culinary feast for the guests.

Clark stood underneath the gazebo, talking with Pete Ross and James Olsen, best man and groomsman respectively. He attempted to remain calm and relax, but it was proving to be extremely difficult. Today was the day he had dreamed of ever since Lois barged into Perry’s office and forever changed his life. Now with their union so soon to be accomplished, how could he *pretend* to be a composed and patient groom?

Some of the company glanced over to the handsome trio and wondered aloud why a ‘certain person’ was missing from the group.

“Wonder why Superman isn’t here? Isn’t he supposed to be a good friend of both Clark *and* Lois?” The insistent question flowed like wine among the guests.

Clark’ hyper-sensitive hearing had picked up on the comment more than once; he tried hard to ignore it until Judge Peterson, the officiant, asked the same question.

“Huh… well.” Clark stammered.

Pete Ross stepped up to the Judge, the big blonde man towered over the older one. “Well your honor, it’s like this; Superman knows how important this day is to Lois and Clark. He doesn’t want to take any of the attention away from them. But don’t worry, he’s probably watching from an *excellent* vantage point.”

Satisfied, the Judge walked off, no doubt to inform the other guests as to the reason for the Man of Steel’s absence.

“Thanks Pete. I owe you one!” whispered a relieved Clark.

“Hmm, that tab keeps getting bigger and bigger!” his friend replied with a grin.

Jimmy looked from one man to the other, decided it was some Smallville ‘inside’ joke. He excused himself and went to talk with Jack about the music.

The guests, around forty of the Lane-Kent’s most intimate friends and family, blended freely and talked of the couple’s early days as partners and their many journalistic exploits together. Several expressed the opinion that Lois had finally met her match in Clark, while they all agreed he had bonded with his soul mate.

Six months had passed since Clark has proposed to Lois in that very garden on a moonlight night in September. Six months.

Of disappointment.

Of shattered dreams.

Of heartbreak.

The delegation of New Kryptonians had arrived scarcely a week after Lois started wearing the sweet diamond ring Clark had slipped onto her finger. The powerful trio of Ching, Zara, and his first cousin Yar-El appeared to him and Lois at the townhouse, early one evening. The New Kryptonian Council had been searching for him for years and now that Kal-El had been located, he must fulfill his destiny. They demanded his return with them to New Krypton to take up the mantle of First Lord… and marry Zara his birth-wife.

Clark was adamant he would not leave Earth. After long, intense arguments with Trey and several members of the Kryptonian High Council, Clark had won his point. As far as he was concerned the only link he had to any of them was his Kryptonian DNA. Everything, everyone he held dear, his life, home and love were all on this planet. Not someplace where the culture, languages and customs would force him to be more alone, more isolated than ever before.

The High council reluctantly decreed that his cousin, Yar-El, would take his place as First Lord. The only official act that Kal-El did was severing the marriage bond to Zara, thus allowing her the freedom to marry Ching.

It seemed that as soon as Zara, Ching, and the New Krypton throne ship departed from Earth’s orbit that another delay to Lois and Clark’s wedding cropped up. The Daily Planet became the epicenter of a long drawn out proxy fight between Franklin Stern and international

financier and media mogul, Gregory Daae.

The reporting team spent long hours working with New Troy's Financial Industry Regulatory Authority to ferret out some of Daae's questionable practices in previous fights. Nevertheless that was almost not enough to stop the proxy battle. Stern won, but only because Lex Luthor stepped in at the last minute to provide his old rival with his proxy, turning the tide against the younger man.

Lois and Clark, fed up with all the delays, determined to marry before another fiasco occurred. Both families agreed to opt for a small intimate wedding and reception at Clark's townhouse rather than a lavishly planned social event. Once the catering arrangements by Uncle Mike and landscaping per Jonathan Kent were completed, Lois and Clark could exchange their marriage vows before all those they held dear.

Upstairs in the master suite, the Lane women and Martha Kent were helping Lois prepare. Emotions were upbeat and happy, although Ellen Lane was trying to rush her daughter downstairs according to her timetable.

"Lois, come on, hurry up, everyone is waiting for you! Honestly, this is the one day a woman should *not* be late! Lucy, where is that box?"

"What box?" Lucy asked, feigning innocence as she hid a small box behind her back.

"The one you are hiding from your Mother." Martha said dryly.

"Thank you, Martha! I cannot keep these girls of mine straight sometimes." Ellen plucked the slightly worn blue and gold velvet oblong box from behind Lucy's back.

Since Lois was in the process of lowering her veil, Ellen Lane did not see the look of utter exasperation come over her face. Her mother began to launch into a long diatribe about respect for one's elders and remembering how important today was to her.

Lois asked, hoping to cease the verbal onslaught. "Mother, please! Stop dragging out the suspense... what is in the box?"

Ellen gazed at the object which she held lovingly in her hands, "My grandmother's pearls." Ellen said in hushed tones. "They have not seen the light of day since my wedding to your father. I...I thought it was time they took center stage. They were re-strung especially for this occasion."

The three women watched in respectful silence as Ellen opened the box and removed the graceful three-strand necklace from its box and reverently placed it around Lois' neck. Although the dress was decidedly a modern affair: an off the shoulders column of silvery white satin, with a wrap sash draped down the side, her grandmother's pearls gave Lois's ensemble a charming old-fashioned allure, nodding respectfully to times and persons long past.

Lois touched the pearls and whispered, "Oh mother, it is beautiful and matches my dress perfectly. Thank you."

Ellen Lane looked back at her oldest child; she smiled as tears glistened in her eyes. "Martha, you were right about the dress; it *does* make my child look like royalty. Great Grandma would have been proud of you... I know I am."

No words were spoken for a moment as the Lane women encircled themselves into a group hug. Martha looked at the trio, smiled quietly, then made to leave the bedroom. Perhaps she could give her personal gift to Lois later.

Abruptly, a rock and roll version of the wedding march blared loud and sharp from the garden below.

Ellen's head went up like a shot and her voice exploded. "Lucy! That boyfriend of yours was told *not* to play such rubbish! It should be Beethoven's "Night Music". How is Lois supposed to walk down the aisle to that noise? Honestly, with all the things I have to manage today, music ought *not* be one of them. My poor nerves are going to pieces! Martha, *please* help Lois, this wedding is running behind schedule. Lucy, come on, young woman, we are going down there and we'll straighten him out this instant!"

"But Mom, I *told* Jimmy to play that. After all, Cindy had it in her

last two weddings..."

Thankfully her mother's response was lost as Lois heard two sets of loud footsteps pounding down the wooden staircase.

She turned and looked at Martha Kent. In Martha's hands was a lovely midnight blue satin lingerie bag, the kind elegant ladies at one time used to pack their most intimate garments.

"Lois, I thought this might come in handy – for later. Uh, when you and Clark go to Hawaii." Martha placed it in the younger woman's hands.

"Oh it's wonderful! I love how it feels! Between preparations for the wedding and working in the garden, when did you have time to make it?" Lois asked.

"The night Clark told us you were engaged." Martha's eyes began to twinkle. "Look inside. You know the old wedding saying: 'something old, something new something borrowed and something blue'. Ellen provided parts of the saying. You are wearing a dress inspired from Clark's maternal grandmother, Lady Polara. Perhaps this will fulfill the rest."

Lois reached inside and pulled out a lovely wedding garter with a blue bow, and a gently faded white organza ruffle. The fabric of the bow felt oddly familiar.

"Martha...?"

"The blue is from his baby blanket which wrapped him securely during his flight from Krypton to Earth. The organza ruffle came from my own wedding gown." Martha said mischievously.

"Oh, let's put it on right now! But, the garter is not going to be part of any tacky reception 'rite'! No one is going to see this little gift except Clark – later." So saying, Lois gently lifted up the sumptuous fabric, daintily placed her stocking foot on the wooden chest at the foot of the bed and quickly pulled the garter up to her thigh. Once the delicate folds of silvery white material shimmered back into place, no one except the two women knew the garter with its mingled histories was there.

Looking at Clark's bride, Martha could not help but feel excitement, deep contentment and a touch of melancholy all at once. Time had rushed by so rapidly! Today was her son's wedding day. So many blissful memories stemmed from that amazing night in Schuster's Field. The tiny passenger of the interstellar ship had provided a great deal of joy and happiness in her and Jonathan's life. Each day with him had proved to be an adventure; first words, first steps... first flight. Now Clark was embarking on a new adventure; marrying a woman who would be his friend, helpmate, partner and so much more. A single tear slipped down Martha's face as she helped Lois with her veil.

"Are you ready, honey?" Martha asked with a catch in her voice.

The younger woman gazed down at the older one, saw the tear, and took her hand. "Yes, I am. Thank you for the gift and I don't mean the garter."

Martha's expression was puzzled and before she could speak, Lois said, "Clark is the greatest gift I have ever received, but you and Jonathan had a hand in making him the incredible person he is today."

"Thank you." Martha reached into her purse and pulled out a lace hankie. "He is a good son and you are a good daughter, together you will make an exceptional couple." No other words came as the two women embraced and happy tears cascaded down their faces.

The intensely personal moment was broken when Ellen Lane barreled into the room with a properly chastised Lucy in tow. "Lois! Look at your make-up! What will the photographer say? Lucy, get the make-up case. Honestly, I can't leave you alone for a second! Oh, did I mention Mike has done a wonderful job catering this event? Lois, Grace is a very charming lady. Although I still can't believe they are seeing one another. Oh well, maybe I can get her to make that sweater for me. By the way Martha, I think Clark wants to see you, something about taking more photos."

Martha nodded, trying hard not to laugh listening to Ellen's babble. Quickly she picked up her purse, and exited the room, leaving

Ellen and her daughters to spend a few last minutes together before the ceremony.

Thousands of miles away on the isle of Santorini, a couple sat quietly on the same terrace where they exchanged wedding vows. They were enjoying the sight of vast blue sea before them like a shimmering silken garment. The man adjusted the wide brim straw hat that covered his face, effectively shielding his eyes from the brilliant reflections of light glittering off the sea. He had just finished reading a book of poetry, Shakespeare's sonnets in a voice that had in the past been harsh and demanding, but presently held nothing but love for the stunning woman by his side.

"Your reading was beautiful. Lex, thank you." Aykira said with a smile.

"The Bard always says things in a way we mere mortals cannot." He grew quiet and reflective, and then spoke again. "It seems like time is moving faster with each day. We have been married nearly eight months, yet I feel as if we have always been husband and wife. Thank you for saying yes, my sweet."

Aykira said nothing, but took his hand. "Are you sorry we did not return to Metropolis and attend the wedding?"

"Yes, in a small way. It was kind of Clark Kent to invite us, but the relationship we have with them is still precarious. Besides, this is their day, our — or rather my — presence might be distracting."

Aykira ran her left hand soothingly up his arm; the light caught the facets of her engagement ring and wedding band. After nearly a year of wearing them, she loved to look at them and watch them glisten in the light. "Lex, they care about us. All the good work accomplished by the Superman foundation and your efforts to thwart Daae have drawn us together into something of a friendship. Perhaps, we can build on that. But I must say, being here is a restful change from the demands of LexCorp and life in Metropolis."

"Yes, it is." Once again, Lex grew silent, as if in an apprehensive mood.

They sat together in companionable silence looking out to the sea, as the waves crashed against the rocks below in an unending cadence. Presently, Aykira stood and stretched, the creamy white linen dress outlining her lithe body, and she walked over to a small table where Chef Andre had arranged a light luncheon. She returned with two glasses of sparkling fruit punch, set one on the edge of the terrace, then placed another in Lex's hand. After he took a brief sip, she settled herself again into the chair.

"All right, Lex, out with it."

He sighed and said, "How did you know?"

"It is very obvious; the brooding mood has prevailed all morning."

A brief smile tugged at his thin lips. "You know me too well, woman."

"Yes, like I know your calendar. So... what is on your mind?"

"You, my sweet."

Taken aback, she responded, "I am flattered of course, but why?"

Lex leaned back, not as a movement to relax, but as preparation for a rather somber conversation. He was not in the habit of doing something of this nature, even with her. But although it was difficult, oh so difficult, he knew it must be done. He stared at Aykira; his wife was a mystery, wrapped by an enigma held together by a gossamer ribbon of puzzlement. Again, he realized marrying her had been the wisest thing he had ever done. When he awoke from the surgery, she was there holding his hand. During every crisis, great and small she stood by his side. No one else besides his parents had ever been so compassionate and warm towards him.

A space station was nothing more than a cold metallic object hurling majestically through an endless frigid blackness. However, marriage to the right woman was the best way to honor his parents' memory. He cleared his throat and spoke.

"This is important for me to say and as you are aware, admitting to weakness of any kind is not pleasant for me. I have been meaning to speak these words before our marriage. I... I should have spoken them

on our wedding night."

"Shhh, no need my love, we were pleasantly occupied that night. Thank you for your patience and understanding, I knew so little, yet you taught me so well." Aykira smiled wickedly."

"With a body as wonderfully sensitive and giving as yours..." He smiled at her; the memories of that night still brought feelings of intense pleasure. "Yes, we were... very pleasantly occupied." He took her hand and kissed it. The sweet memories of their wedding chamber indelibly etched in his mind.

Aykira's facial expression went from teasing to one of deep concern and her heartbeat fluttered. "So, what is it? You are all right? Dr. Kassaten said..."

"No, no. Remember, our agreement, no discussion or concerns about my illness while visiting Santorini. This is *supposed* to be a vacation. We are here, living a quiet life with a few close friends and raising grapes."

Laughter bubbled forth from her throat, not a forced laugh or a painful one, but the sincere easy amusement of a woman comfortable in her life. Indeed, she loved being his wife. Yes, the first year of marriage was not without its challenges and surprises, for any newlyweds. However, she and Lex were far from being a normal couple. Oh, they had had disagreements, some quite major, but through communication and determination to make their marriage *work* the disagreements were surmounted.

Running the company with Lex's behind-the-scenes assistance had taxed her organizational and administrative abilities to the limit. Some of the board members initially were not happy to have Lex's former 'secretary' and now wife sitting in the CEO chair. A few had even tendered their resignations over the matter. It took all of her skills, not a small amount of cajoling, and much patience, but Aykira managed to convince the remaining members to trust her abilities.

The board also had to accept the uncomfortable fact that members of the Superman Foundation would be overseeing the company's major decisions for the next ten years. Superman's lawyer Constance Hunter had very high standards which needed to be met in order to keep General Zeitlin, Secretary Cosgrove and the specter of a congressional investigation at bay. But the inconvenience was to be accepted in lieu of living under the microscope of public scandal, media scrutiny and disgrace.

While all this was taking place, Lex helped Franklin Stern in his battle with Gregory Daae. Aykira had a sneaking suspicion he rather enjoyed that particular task.

After all that had happened prior to their marriage, and consider the taxing events of the past eight months, this brief respite from their Metropolis life was enjoyable. In this time of high-technology and video conferencing she could easily run LexCorp from anyplace on the planet.

"I want to apologize."

"Apologize? Whatever for?"

He sighed quietly, "There are so many reasons. For one, begging you to marry me. I...I wouldn't have had the courage to experience this frightening ordeal alone. For being the corrupt man I once was. In the park on the day of our engagement, you were right to say I had destroyed the dreams of many. There is so little time to right those wrongs. In my personal computer there is a list of persons who have suffered abysmally at my hand. Some who were once quite prosperous have been reduced to the meanest of circumstances..." He shook his head as if to clear away the dark memories than continued.

"None of these persons would accept charity from *anything* connected with me. It must be done covertly."

A tender hand caressed his shoulder. "Perhaps Constance and the Superman Foundation can be of assistance?"

He nodded his head in silent accord.

"Then the arrangements will be made as soon as dinner is over."

"Thank you my dear, your discretion is always dependable.

Nonetheless, an apology is *still* what you deserve. I should have been a better man, a better friend, rather than dance around our relationship. My greatest error in this life was wasting time with vain pursuits and associating with selfish women who cared nothing for me. Instead of being blinded by greed and ambition I should have been trying to help my fellow man rather than harm them. Aykira, can you ever forgive me? If it had not been for you, my life these past eight months would have been a hollow existence – merely waiting for death.”

“Lex, I assure you were it not for my mission, we might be celebrating our *second* wedding anniversary. There is no reason to apologize. In the back of my mind, I wanted you as much if not more than you wanted me.”

“Are you quite sure?” He asked.

“Positive. Your faults have *always* been an open book to me. Yet I fell in love anyway. My sweet darling, you are the only man for me.” She leaned from the chair and wrapped her loving arms around his shoulders.

She sat back and looked at her husband, *really* looked at him. He had changed. Oh, not just the thousand tiny changes that overtake an individual with his particular disease, but he had changed as a person. Becoming kinder, gentler, and even stronger in a way... dare she use the word empathic? Whatever shady dealings he had done prior to discovering the tumor were wrong. There was no dancing around that question. He had built an international business empire, yet had wasted his life on foolish things. No matter how many wrongs Lex would try to correct, those could now only be seen as a ‘deathbed conversion’ and those are rarely taken seriously.

It saddened her, but at the same time it encouraged her to do as much as possible to assist the Superman Foundation and LexCorp to help the people of this Earth reach their potential. Her husband’s legacy need not be a space station orbiting the planet, but an earthbound corporation utilizing its resources for mankind’s good.

During the course of the next five years she had to locate and groom her successor. No easy task this. It had to be someone with a good level of knowledge and ability tempered by compassion to bring LexCorp safely into the next century.

As for herself, there was no reason to hurry back to her own world, Bern and Alexander had given a full account of her activities in this Earth to the council. Besides, now that S.T.A.R. Labs and Barontech had the new crystals in their possession there would be no repercussions against her.

Yes, she and Lex were free to enjoy their marriage for as long as the tumor in her husband’s brain remained dormant and did not intrude on their lives. She sat close to him and hugged him tight, cherishing every moment of their life together whether on Santorini or in Metropolis. They would both have to be content with that.

“Care to go up to the house? It is getting a little chilly.” Aykira asked.

“Do you mind?” he said touching his cane.

“Of course not, lean on me.”

Aykira stood by Lex’s side and helped him up the ramp towards the villa.

“Mom, Dad can you see the gazebo from where you are sitting?”

“Yes, son. Don’t worry about a thing. Does Pete have the ring?”

“Right here Mr. Kent.” The powerfully built man walked over to the Kents and patted his jacket pocket. “Clark warned me to guard it with my life.”

“As well you should, Pete. I’m just wondering what’s keeping the bride. Sam said they were ready to begin over ten minutes ago.” Jonathan said quietly while glancing at his watch.

“Probably the bride’s mother.” Martha responded with a sigh.

At that moment, Uncle Mike walked over to them, a beaming smile on his face. “Hey everybody, I just spoke with Sam, it’s time. So the young fellas need to take their place under the gazebo.”

Pete grinned and patted his friend on the back. “This is it Clark.

Are you ready to take the plunge?”

Clark looked at his boyhood friend and answered with gentle seriousness. “If Zara, Ching and my cousin Yar-El themselves were to suddenly appear, I wouldn’t let them halt this ceremony. Lois is my wife already, but this ceremony makes it official before God and all these witnesses.”

Jonathan and Martha looked on with pride at the man they had raised, took hands and smiled.

Jimmy walked down the torch lighted path towards the group. “Man, I don’t know about you, Clark, but Lucy’s mother is *difficult*. We only wanted to hear what a rock n’ roll wedding march...”

Martha interrupted the young man’s diatribe. “James, let’s discuss this later. Is Jack minding the music?”

“Yes, Mrs. Kent,” Jimmy nodded, properly chastised.

“Good, now take your place by the French doors just as rehearsed, while the rest of us get to our seats.”

At that moment, gentle classical music filled the air and all conversation ceased as the other guests walked to their chairs. Mike Lane sat down next to Grace Chen, took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. Three seats away were George and a glowingly maternal Cat, her pregnancy evident for all to see. A surprisingly dashing and relaxed Bill Henderson and his wife sat behind the Amundsens. Perry and Alice sat next to them, thoroughly pleased this wonderful day or rather, evening had finally arrived.

Several of the bullpen gang was evident as well. Eduardo and Steve hastily sat down with their wives, having come in from the back of the garden. Apparently, Ralph had tried to take pictures of the nuptials and sell them to the National Whisperer. The two men ‘persuaded’ Ralph to hand over his film and then had the police take him away for trespassing on private property.

Diane Pallister was there sitting cozily with her date, stock fraud investigator, Zane Nelson. They had met during the whole Daae/Stern battle and were taking their time getting to know one another.

Dr. Bernard Klein, looking rather uncomfortable in a social setting, stood by the refreshment table, nursing a tall cup of strong black coffee. The absent-minded scientist had come straight from S.T.A.R. Labs after working a twelve-hour shift. He had completely forgotten about the wedding before Lois, knowing him well, had called him with a reminder.

Jack presided over the sound system, and as with all things electronic, the results were outstanding. This event marked a turning point for the young man, after several conversations with the intern Stacy; he planned to attend Metropolis University in the autumn.

Once all the guests had found their seats, the music halted than suddenly changed. Beethoven’s Night Music lilted through the air, the sounds mingling seamlessly with the scents and emotions of the evening.

“Care to take a walk with me, princess? It is a lovely night for it.” Sam Lane’s deep voice boomed as he bowed and extended an arm to his oldest child.

Lucy and Lois giggled in front of their father, as they had not since early childhood. Over the past six months, the two women had worked hard rebuilding their relationship with him and their mother. It had not been an easy task, yet the Lane family wounds were definitely healing. Lois thought, <Another gift I owe to Clark, the son of Jonathan and Martha and Kal-El, son of Jor-El and Lara.> She thought, giving homage to his extraterrestrial heritage.

Lois curtsied and responded, “Why kind sir, what a capital idea.” She took her father’s arm and stood behind Lucy. “Ok, I’m ready, she said, trying to dismiss the butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

Lucy tapped on the French doors and they opened as if by her will alone. She stood just inside the doors to allow the torchlight to awash her in soft illumination. Her pretty features, so reminiscent of her father, shone with an inner light. Jimmy’s heart swelled as he beheld the beautiful sight and wondered; if given time and patience might he someday exchange vows with the younger Lane sister?

Head held high and regal, Lucy daintily stepped out of the doorway and took Jimmy's offered arm. The photographer came into view, took a few shots, and then moved discreetly out of their path. With perfectly timed steps, they made their way down the stone path towards the gazebo covered in white gauze and delicate tea lights, just for this occasion.

As soon as Lucy and Jimmy arrived under the gazebo, the music halted, as the guests stood in anticipation of the bride. The lights around the garden were lowered among the guests. Only the footpath and the lights by the French doors remained and intensified.

Inside the townhouse, the quiet rumble of Sam Lane's voice was heard saying gently. "Everyone is waiting. Are you ready to take the first steps to a new life, Princess?"

"Yes, Daddy." Lois spoke in hushed tones.

Father and daughter stepped over the threshold into the soft nimbus of light, stood for a moment so the photographer could take a few pictures, then moved with serenity towards the gazebo.

Lois heart pounded so loudly she was certain the guests would not need Clark's super hearing to know how thrilled she was their special evening had finally arrived. She could not take her eyes off the man who in a few minutes would become her husband. Indeed, in her mind he already was.

Clark's heartbeat was so thunderous and rapid it threatened to burst from his chest. Did a groom ever die from sheer joy? The gown Lois wore fit her perfectly; she looked like a queen. In point of fact the dress was similar to one worn by his maternal grandmother, Lady Polara, when she appeared before them, her image projected from the globe. He remembered vividly how they watched in amazement as the historian talked of life on Krypton during its final days. His fiancé must have memorized it and had a seamstress re-create the gown. He was deeply touched by her consideration of his Kryptonian heritage.

He felt Pete's light touch on his shoulder, "She looks great, Clark. You are one lucky man!"

Clark nodded. "I know, my friend, I know."

All other thoughts vanished from his mind as Sam Lane handed his daughter to Clark. Two unique people stood before the officiant to express their love and devotion to one another for now and forever.

Epilogue

Fifty years after

On a clear bright spring night, shafts of moonlight shone down from the heavens onto the rooftops of the great city of Metropolis. In Nayland Heights, one of the most august and celebrated sections of the city, situated among similar townhouses on Hyperion Avenue, sat a home to a rather unique family. On this particular evening, that building's rooms rang with cheerful voices, some young and some old, but all raised in celebration of a very special and much awaited wedding anniversary. Lois and Clark Kent were entertaining numerous friends and an extensive family as they commemorated the special occasion.

Clark lifted up CJ's latest grandchild and gently propelled him through the air. The infant shrieked merrily as he 'flew' with Great-Grandpa. By the fireplace, his daughter Lara sat reading stories to the fourth generation of Kents as her husband looked on. Her brother James was in the kitchen, whipping up one of his famous meals. Lois smiled contentedly as she observed the family and guests settle into a pleasant evening of good food, sumptuous desserts, games, and stories.

Eventually, the evening festivities died down and the exhausted but happy guests departed; some through the front door, but all three Kent children and their offspring took leave from the garden — their flight covered by darkness and the Italian cypress ever-so-great Grandpa Jonathan had planted long ago. Clark and his youngest grandson Jon remained downstairs in the living room having a quiet chat before the fireplace. The young man was about to take up the mantle of Superman and wanted to take advantage of his grandfather's experience and advice. Lois stood on tiptoes and kissed Jon good

night. <He looks so much like Clark at that age!> she thought. Then she excused herself and went upstairs to her study.

As she entered the room, the first thing to catch her eye was the beautiful picture of their wedding day perched on the bookshelf. A more magnificent day she had never known. <He was so handsome! I was so nervous! Honestly, with all the barriers that presented themselves between engagement and wedding, I did not believe we would ever exchange vows!>

Nevertheless, despite all the problems and delays leading up to their special day, every detail had come together flawlessly. Lying beside the picture was a thick red leather photo album stenciled on the front: Lane/Kent Wedding.

Aged, delicate, but still strong hands picked up the photograph encased in a hand-carved wooden frame and gazed at it lovingly. She put it back in its place, only to pick up the wedding album. It had been quite a while since she had last run her fingers over its pages.

Lois sat down on the thick comfortable couch cushions, allowing them to conform perfectly to her derriere. Sighing inwardly with pleasure, she allowed the familiar sights and scents of her surroundings to relax ancient muscles.

Glancing around the study, Lois Kent remembered the different appearances of this space. On their wedding day, the room was jammed with gifts and presents from well-wishers and odd items from Lois' apartment they had not yet been able to locate a proper place for. Upon return from their delicious honeymoon in Hawaii, it had become a guest room for Clark's parents. Two years later happy, expectant parents had transformed it into a nursery for CJ and he kept the room as his own until he went to college.

For a brief span of years, it was once again a guest room as their children often brought friends over for long weekend visits.

As is inevitable with every family, the Kent children moved out, married, and had their own families.

Lois had redecorated the room and turned it into her home office, and upon retirement as Managing Editor of the Daily Planet, it became the focal point of her still-considerable energies to write biographies of famous women such as scientist Madame Curie and courageous American foreign correspondent, Marie Colvin. Those books were worlds away from her trashy "Wanda Detroit" romance/mystery stories.

Jon ran his slender fingers through long night black hair, "I want to do the family proud, Grandpa Clark. After all, following in yours and Dad's footsteps is a tall order. There are not nearly as many criminals today as in your time, but the ones who do appear are a little..."

"Intimidating?" Clark asked.

"Yeah," the young man agreed with a slight grimace.

"Each era has its own villains; Tempus, the Prankster and Mr. Gadget. Each had to be defeated in a unique way. Just as your father CJ defeated Chronos and The Prism during his long career. I had to learn by hard-won trial and error. You are fortunate having *two* generations of superhero experience to call on and don't forget your aunt, uncle and cousins. After all, this is the family business!" Clark said with a wry grin.

The younger man shook his head in amazement and deference. "Our family *is* quite unique in that respect."

"Yes, but never forget, we are only as special as the mental and emotion support we have at home. Without Mom and Dad's love and guidance, being Superman would have been extremely lonely."

"Not to mention a little bit of assistance from Grandma Lois." Jon said with a broad smile.

Clark's face crinkled into that magnificent smile he reserved for his wife and partner. "*That*, young man, goes without saying."

"Good night, Grandpa Clark. Thanks for the great advice." Jon stood.

"Anytime, remember the door is always open," his grandfather said in a voice cloaked in pride. Together they walked to the French

doors, shook hands, and then swiftly, with ease borne of practice, Jon lifted into the inky starlit night sky, waved his hand once and then vanished.

Clark stepped through the French doors, listened intently to the bones of the house as its ancient beams, and stone facade settled down for the night. The day had been filled with lovable family noises; now all he wanted to do now was sit beside Lois and soak up a little quiet time with his best friend and partner. He walked easily across the room with the assured movements of a younger man, reached the staircase, and called out, “Hey Lois!”

”In my study, Clark,” she answered.

A slight breeze caressed her face as her husband entered the study at super speed and took a seat by her side.

“How did the conversation with Jon go?” She looked up at Clark, patiently awaiting his answer.

She watched as he snuggled up to her on the plush couch. “Very well, Jon is eager to prove himself as he takes on the Superman mantle. He will make mistakes and each one shall tear at his heart, but he’ll learn.”

“Just as you did, and for a brief time, just as I did — as UltraWoman. Being a super hero is not for the faint of heart.” Lois smiled thoughtfully, thinking about her grandson and the challenges he would soon face.

Clark, sensing the atmosphere was getting a little overwrought said, “You know, this couch is really comfortable, but not as memorable as those stiff settees we used to write our investigative stories on in your old apartment. They hurt my butt!”

“Hey!” She answered, laughing. “I used to like those settees... and since when does an invulnerable man feel pain?”

“They were very uncomfortable!” Her husband responded in self-defense.

“Yeah, but we broke a lot of great stories on those things... no matter how uncomfortable they were,” she countered. “Not to mention three Kerth awards for me!”

“I, for one, am very glad they went to your sister’s new apartment and not this townhouse.”

“Well, Lucy did need furniture,” she smiled.

“I’m glad you came to the house. Pepper and I got lonely rattling around in this place by ourselves.”

“Oh, don’t mention the little furball. It’s been years, but I still miss him terribly.” She suddenly switched the subject and asked in a low voice. “Did you have a good time tonight?”

“Of course! I love it when we all get together. The grands get a little rambunctious, but that’s a big part of family life. You know, the part that makes *being* a family so wonderful,” Clark said, his eyes crinkling as he smiled.

Lois face took on a bemused expression. “I don’t remember you being so easygoing when the kids were teething.”

Her husband put up his hands in a gesture of surrender. “Guilty as charged! I see you came up to look over the wedding album?”

“Yeah, it has been awhile.”

The Kent family and a good number of close friends had been celebrating Lois and Clark’s fiftieth wedding anniversary. Not surprisingly, Lois was feeling particularly nostalgic and as each delicate page of the album came under her fingertips; decades seemed to not only roll backwards, but forwards as well. As joyful faces of the wedding guests looked up from the pages, so many were no longer with them; Perry and dear Alice were both gone, a mere ten and five years respectively after these photographs were taken. Following Perry’s death, it was on the behest of Franklin Stern’s son that she had become the Managing Editor of the Daily Planet.

Both her parents and Clark’s had also passed away, but happily not before they had had a chance to hold their grandchildren. She and Clark missed their presence deeply. Not a month had passed since than that either she or Clark reflected on some bit of wisdom or gentle

saying. Martha and Jonathan Kent might be gone, but all the memories of their loving support and wisdom came shining through the grief.

More pages passed under her fingertips, photos of Bill Henderson, Eduardo and so many others, all of whom had succumbed to the storms of time.

Michael Lane married Grace Chen six months after Lois and Clark’s wedding. The older couple had gone to Italy telling everyone they were participating in the annual wine tasting festival at Villa Bocelli. The villa is quietly nestled within an organic farm estate, set in the picturesque hills of Umbria on the border to Tuscany. Both of them had been married before. Each having experienced the joys — and headaches — of a large family wedding, it was their determination to exchange vows in a quiet, private ceremony. Upon returning from their honeymoon, Sam Lane made it a point to throw them an intimate reception in the banquet room of Arabella’s.

The quick marriage came as no surprise to anyone who knew Mike Lane; he had been smitten by his gentle business neighbor for years. However, once he had asked her to accompany him to his niece’s wedding, their own romance blossomed swiftly to its happy conclusion.

Uncle Mike had continued to give Lois cooking lessons long after his niece had mastered the art of doing more than just boiling water. The family gatherings planned around those ‘lessons’ were some of the most memorable in the townhouse on Hyperion Avenue.

Grace knitted lovely afghans for each of the Kent offspring and managed, not without some doing, to teach Lois how to knit. Somehow the intrepid reporter, wife and mother of three managed the delicate art without too much trouble. Despite occasional grumbling, Lois grew to love all the challenges and joys of the domestic side of her life

But now, sadly, Mike, with his twinkling eyes and gentle humor was gone as well as his wife.

Clark, sensing his wife’s thoughts, decided it was time to ‘lighten the mood’. “I’m so glad not all of our wedding guests have passed away; Cat and George still visit Metropolis several times a year to catch up and for George to spend time with ‘his egghead scientist friends’, as Cat would put it. Oh yeah, let’s not forget Jimmy and Lucy! These candid pictures are a hoot!” Clark continued, as he looked at a shot of them dancing the twist. “It was great to be best man at their wedding.” He noticed the watery smile tugging at his wife’s lips and stopped talking.

“Yeah, it only took *four* years before they got married. Lucy really had a hard time explaining to Mother and Daddy that they wanted to establish their separate careers without distractions before getting married. I certainly appreciate such wisdom, after all, hadn’t I developed a successful journalistic career *before* a certain dark-haired young reporter appeared in the newsroom?”

“But your Dad was funny when he said ‘It’s about time they got engaged, otherwise I might be too old to walk her down the aisle.’ Somehow, that argument just did not hold up, especially since Sam was the first one on the dance floor and the last one off at the reception.”

Lois squeezed Clark’s hand, gazing into those dark brown eyes and drawing strength from their depths of wisdom. How grateful she was to have reconciled with her parents. Images flashed in her mind of Sam and Ellen playing with their grandchildren — happily spending the last years of their lives as respected senior members of a close-knit family, not as strangers who happened to share the same name.

Another gift she owed her husband.

She emerged slowly out of her contemplative thoughts and flipped another page which brought them to several photos of Jack Verne, working the sound system while he masterfully performed his duties as DJ at the wedding. “It is still hard to believe the brash young man who had broken into your apartment and stole the globe would someday become Constance Hunter’s successor to helming the

Superman Foundation.” She laughed.

“Jack has been very fortunate, even in his choice of wife. Stacy is perfect for him, after all these years. It still surprises me she did not remain with the Daily Planet after college,” Clark said, picking up the conversational ball.

“She made a good career move to work for Earth Magazine. It gave her time to write, then polish up her novel. After all, that was her dream. Imagine, she actually won a Pulitzer Prize for it. Who knew life on a small ranch in Wyoming at the turn of the 20th century could be so compelling?” Lois smiled, shaking her head.

She had re-read the insightful novel recently and could not help but be pleased to know she had had a hand in nurturing such a tender lyrical writing style.

Clark started flipping through the pages. “The missing photographs of the people who did not attend, such as Aykira and Lex Luthor, Dr. Emil Hamilton and Molly Flynn always sadden me. Seeing their faces would have made the reception more complete.”

“Yeah, but Farmboy, we couldn’t invite everybody! Maybe it was for the best they declined the invitation, especially since Lex was in desperate need of a rest.” She recalled the couple had flown to their villa on the island of Santorini. However, Lois knew better and she understood the real reason why. Their relationship with Lex and Aykira as a couple was not an easy one, despite Lex’s resolve to change. They had never moved beyond acquaintances. Still, she had to admit because of Lex’s actions combined with Franklin Stern’s determination, the Daily Planet survived another twenty years as the leading hard copy newspaper in the world. She always lamented the loss of its hardcopy. Instead of being printed on paper the ‘newspaper’ was available exclusively on the internet.

Sad. There was something of intrinsic value about picking up a newspaper in the morning, feeling the coarse texture of paper in your hands, inhaling new ink and working a crossword puzzle with freshly sharpened number 2 pencils, ruffling the stiff pages while imbibing a low-fat mocha and nibbling on a warm chocolate croissant... flown in fresh from Paris. Both she and Clark had tried reading the news while leaning over a hard flat screen monitor. Unfortunately something was lost in the experience.

She also thought about the global events that seemed to have resonated after their wedding.

The use of Harmonic Crystals was rapidly embraced by every nation on the planet. Their existence had been acknowledged and utilized by her children as the internet had been by her generation.

With the advent of crystal technology, humanity had stepped out to explore beyond the blue sphere known as Earth. Numerous satellites and space platforms ringed the planet; flights to Mars colony were now routine. Her great grandson, Joel, was on the first mission to Europa one of Jupiter’s moons.

As humanity exploded into the solar system like champagne flowing from a bottle, so they had come to realize the serious importance of being the Earth’s stewards. Humanity as a whole had begun to take greater care of its environment and inhabitants. Through the efforts of the Superman Foundation and LexCorp, the effects of years of pollution and neglect were turned backwards; deserts had been reclaimed through skillful irrigation techniques and turned into lush, verdant farmland, oceans were once again teeming with life and through it all, there had been Superman and his descendants, who were always willing to help wherever needed.

Dear Dr. Klein had made an amazing breakthrough in the fight against cancer. Because of that success, many were able to live and realize their full potential.

Although Lois had not been there for the first part of Lex’s illness, she did contact Aykira a few months after her wedding and the two women made it a point to have lunch together every few weeks. In time, those brief get-togethers built the foundation for a warm, enduring friendship. Lois was happy to say when Lex died, she provided a firm shoulder for his widow to lean upon. In order to cope with her loss, Aykira immersed herself with work. Under her careful

guidance LexCorp had turned its mission statement around and now the corporation was a force for good. The mysterious Mrs. Luthor eventually returned to her own world five years after Lex’s death, and Lois sorely missed her friend, but wished her well.

So many changes...

Suddenly her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Clark clearing his throat. “Uh, Earth to Lois Kent!”

Lois looked up, guessed his meaning, and smiled. “Oh no, I’m fine. This has been a fantastic day. Looking over our wedding album and indulging in some very happy memories got me a little misty-eyed, that’s all. Oh Clark, has it really been fifty years?” She extended her hand to him.

He took the offered hand and snuggled beside her on the couch. “Yes, I’m afraid it has, but honey, I have loved every minute of it,” he said, his voice a gentle rumble.

“I’m so glad we travelled this road together. Imagine, of all the people... strangers on this planet, we found each other. Who could have thought it all those years ago?” Lois looked off into the distance, as a quiet expression of contentment played on her lips.

“Well, Mrs. Kent, I’m all for us staying on this road... wherever it leads ... for another fifty years.”

She moved in closer, laying her head on his broad chest. The roaring passionate fires of youth had died down years before, but there was still a strong ardor between them that was rarely denied. She ran her fingers over his chest and whispered. “No matter what road I’m on, no matter how many strangers surround me, we will always find our way to each other.”

Clark gazed lovingly into those incredible brown eyes and saw so many facets of the woman he loved; reporter, friend, daughter, but most of all he beheld his partner, wife, lover and mother of his children. Yet above all these things, the woman beside him was his best friend and complement. Without Lois there would be no Clark... no Superman.

“I love you, Lois, now and always.” He bent over, caressed her cheek, and then sweetly kissed her.

“I love you, Clark, forever.” His wife responded with a kiss of her own, sighing with contentment and deep satisfaction only she could know.

THE END