

# Empire

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Rated: PG

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Summary: The events in this story take place some 25 years after the author's "Alive and Kickin'" and five years *before* Clark Kent arrives in Metropolis. Lex Luthor is no longer an ambitious youth fighting his way off the streets, but a man of considerable influence and consequence. Now in possession of a fabulous fortune, the world lays at his feet and anything he desires is obtainable. But after his greatest triumph, nothing brings him joy. Something, or perhaps, someone, is missing ...

Story Size: 15,709 words (90Kb as text)

Read the previous story: "[Alive and Kickin'](#)."

**Author's Note:** For the longest time, the relationship between Lex Luthor and my character Aykira Milan was always troubled by an obstacle or two, thus, the couple never truly had a happy ending. *Empire* is my answer to this problem.

Also, a small tip of the hat to the NBC-TV series *Timeless*. What a gem! Happily, that series got the finale it deserved, although a pity the same cannot be said for *Lois and Clark*. Oh, if only *we* could go back in time!

A big thank you to Susan, aka Groobie, what a great cheerleader and beta!

**Legal Disclaimer:** Everything in this story, except the character of Aykira Milan, belongs to December 3<sup>rd</sup> Productions.

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## Chapter One Metropolis 1989

Late October in New Troy was known for its crisp, clear evenings, and this particular autumn night was no exception. High overhead, the sapphire dark sky was scattered with stars that glistened like tiny diamonds of cold light firmly set in the heavens. Far below lay the great city of Metropolis, where its millions of busy inhabitants thriving like a thing alive. Street sounds, despite being so distant, reached up like some beautiful noise caressing and holding intently onto the night.

Lex Luthor, wearing a two-piece black tuxedo suit in a wool-silk blend, the final word in eveningwear for the billionaire, stood looking out over Metropolis from his

stylishly appointed penthouse suite's large terrace. The outside space was planned as a small oasis for during those days when the pressures of work became intolerable, and a brief respite was essential. Here in warmer weather he could relax and appreciate the lovely urban garden, plotted in great colorful urns. Unfortunately, due to the autumn chill, the hardscape was softened only with comfortably upholstered furniture, not verdant foliage.

A few hours ago, the penthouse rooms had been filled with soft, classical music, played from a cleverly concealed sound system. His 'guests' — business acquaintances, politicians, architects, reporters, assorted hangers on and his current 'lady love,' Madeline Hexum, the most popular supermodel in the country — had all had been assembled to drink champagne and eat delectable exotic foods prepared by the fantastic Chef Andre and his meticulous staff. These people, captains of industry, all wanted to bask in the reflective glory of his achievement. After all, how many men have a ninety-story, state-of-the-art skyscraper named after them?

It was at least one o'clock in the morning before the last person, munitions expert Thaddeus Roarke, departed. He assumed Madeleine had understood the 'subtle' message that he didn't want her to spend the night and probably left on the arm of her next conquest. Once the waitstaff and cleaners had silently done their tasks and departed, in the prevailing quiet, Lex contemplated his new home.

The jewel of the crown in his global business empire: a four-story penthouse.

He walked through the well-appointed abode which boasted of a drawing room, library, gourmet kitchen, ballroom, and home theatre. It was with deep satisfaction that he surveyed each room. In his youth the very word 'penthouse' meant a person had *arrived*, entering a sphere of luxury and exclusivity very few could even daydream about. Penthouse apartments burst on the scene in the 1920s, when a vibrant economy sparked by a construction boom in Manhattan filled the demand by Jazz babies, Gatsby types and the nouveau riche for sky-high luxury apartments with to-die-for views.

Such construction designs spread to many major cities throughout the country during that period and through to the end of the twentieth century. Penthouse apartments appealed to him not only because they had the advantages of a regular apartment, but also for their security and convenient location. In this particular case the apartment was situated in the heart of Metropolis. Such a location provided easy access to the best hotels, restaurants, museums, and theatres. His new home was many times larger than a typical city brownstone.

The boardroom and office were specifically planned by him, to impress visitors, proclaiming they had entered the nerve center of LexCorp. The private office displayed two of his most prized possessions: Alexander the Great's sword and a bust of Shakespeare, two symbols, respectively; the first a symbol of immense power and the second a symbol of culture. Lex Luthor held both such qualities firmly in his hands, and this newest addition to the Metropolis skyline was evidence of that fact.

LexTower, the tallest office building in the state of New Troy, after years of planning and even more years of construction, had finally been finished and was now open for occupation by elite businesses. Literally thousands of employees would come here to work each day. With features such as efficient column-free floorplates, abnormally high ceilings, extra-large windows, and incredible lighting and views, and the tower also had the latest computer technology and would house the headquarters of the international conglomerate.

The greatest caveat? Everyone in the city had to gaze upwards in order to see this shining edifice and know that Lex Luthor had built it.

Yet, now that this architectural feat was accomplished, why did he feel so unfulfilled and weary? Shouldn't the third richest man in the world be content? He stepped out onto the terrace in order to breathe in the crisp night air and think about his life.

What world ... what endeavor remained for him to conquer? Searching his mind ... and surprisingly, his heart, there was a sense that something essential to his life was absent. He always wanted to accomplish more, for what is man if he does not continue to strive for improvement, perhaps excellence? In a thousand or even one hundred years would anyone know or care that a man named Lex Luthor once lived?

There was a song by Sinatra. Oh yes, something about a good year and the man reminisces regarding his relationships with different kinds of women over the course of his life. Lex could honestly say that now his life resembled the last stanza of the song; "*riding around in limousines with blue-blooded girls of independent mean*" fit perfectly.

The only woman he foolishly allowed to get close to him and marry had been jettisoned from his life years before. Arianna Carlin was beautiful, cultured, and highly intelligent, a successful businesswoman in her own right. Sadly, too ambitious by half. Upon realizing Lex did not want to share the responsibilities of running the newly formed corporation with her, Arianna had schemed with two of his top executives to take over LexCorp. If Sheldon Bender had not overheard the trio's clandestine conversation regarding manipulation of LexCorp's stock,

they might have won. Such was a public and financial humiliation he simply could not allow to take place.

The turncoat executives: Nigel St. John and Dominique Cox and their entire support staff were immediately fired, blackballing them so they could not at work in any reputable corporation in the state of New Troy. The entire matter was swiftly hushed up. He used key persons within the financial community to quietly spread rumors that the entire group had bungled an important deal with an unnamed European cartel.

His wife? The betrayal had wounded him deeply, far more than he was willing to admit. Arianna, given a sizable settlement, guaranteed only if she remained silent about the takeover, had been packed off to London with instructions not to return to America for at least five years. Ever since then, women, especially those who fit his former wife's mode of fierce ambition, had been kept at an arm's length. Afterwards, he relegated himself to associating only with female companions with limited intellect leading to boring conversations and zero mental stimulation.

Still, he thought wistfully, there was one woman from the past whose intelligence, beauty and courage were the stuff of dreams. When they'd met, he was being soundly beaten in a back alley by his associates who had discovered he had stolen all the money from a bank job they had pulled earlier that month. Of the trio, he'd most feared Nico Zabinski, a brute of a man was too eager to use his knife.

Abruptly, a woman had appeared out of the night, and with deadly, efficient grace, she had beaten all three men in the time it took to draw in a breath. Just as swiftly, she had packed him off to a seedy motel, made certain he was safe, and then, after saying her name, departed. He had watched her walk down the street and out of his life. A grim shadow crossed his handsome features; perhaps it was the adrenaline still pouring through taut nerves, but foolishly he asked her to stay the night and 'enjoy' each other's company. The wintery cool response? He was out of *her* league.

Character assessment was one of his greatest strengths, which in this case he had ignored. She was no low-life street woman to be coaxed into a meaningless connection. It was a crude mistake, one never to be repeated. For all the years since, no woman — not even Arianna — inspired him with such a passion or the will to do and be more.

So the question remained: without such a muse by his side, where to go from here? CostMart, the business cover for Intergang, was gradually making inroads in his 'other businesses.' Perhaps taking down that interloper Frank Church would be his next challenge?

Suddenly, he heard the French doors slide open, and without looking behind, he spoke harshly, "Madeleine, I do not require your ... company this evening. Our 'relationship', such as it was, is at an end."

He sighed. Truly, the woman did not have the intellect of a gnat. Her voracious appetite for the expensive gifts he provided when she pleased him seemed to have no end. He found such insatiable greed to be disturbing in a woman so beautiful. Eventually, it would lead to other problems. Earlier, he determined it was time to put their 'romance' aside.

Unaware of his decision, Madeleine, a titan-hired beauty with sea-green eyes, had looked like a queen tonight, or rather last night. No man would have been ashamed to have such a creature accompany him to the LexTower opening festivities and the reception. But after their grand entrance to his penthouse where the after party took place, Lex had simply ignored her.

As he had spoken with guests and business acquaintances eager to gain his ear and favor, he had half-heartedly begun to look for a replacement. Sadly, tonight, no woman present had intrigued him enough to even flirt with. Apparently, since she was now on the terrace, Madeleine had not taken the hint.

Then with a start, he realized he had never given her a passkey to the building much less one to his private apartments. He needed to contact security and if necessary, have her forcibly escorted from the premises. Suddenly, on a wisp of air, he caught a delightful fragrance, which was definitely not the cloying scent of perfume Madeleine preferred. This floral aroma with slight hints of citrus smelled familiar and touched a memory. It was the unmistakable scent of a capable, gorgeous woman ... a fragrance he had not breathed in over two decades.

He turned around in utter surprise. Standing in the center of the terrace was a black woman whom he had not seen since that fateful night in Suicide Slum when his former 'colleagues' had demanded their share of the money they had stolen.

The years had been very kind to her. His eyes roved over every inch of the lady; she was tastefully dressed for the evening in a fitted burgundy gown, accented by a generous cashmere wrap of dark heather, with hints of burgundy and trimmed in gray. As the mysterious Aykira Milan had been before, so she was again, alluring, yet powerful. Not a month had passed since that night when he had not thought about her and the enigmatic words she had spoken. He was always intrigued about when he might be able to return the favor.

"Mr. Luthor." The soft voice that spoke was delicate and more cultured than he remembered. "It is good to see you again, and as expected, the promise of youth has been

greatly fulfilled."

Years of self-discipline had taught Lex Luthor never to reveal his emotions still, the inexplicable appearance of the woman who had saved his life and had on occasion entered his dreams tested a steely resolve. Nonetheless, the voice of Metropolis most prestigious citizen did not betray any surprise. "Miss Milan ... Aykira. It is an unexpected pleasure to see you again after all these years."

Her lips moved into a slow smile. "Remember, you promised to repay me for preventing those thugs from giving you a proper thrashing?"

Having regained some emotional footing, he answered with a genuine smile of his own. "Such a promise, especially under those dire circumstances, could not be forgotten. But if I remember correctly, you set the rules ... something I don't normally allow. It wasn't a thrashing they would have killed me, if a certain beauty with fine hazel eyes had not intervened."

She couldn't help but smile wider at their verbal jousting. "I am here because of the significance of this past evening and the remarkable success of your life so far. Regarding the money from that other time, it no doubt provided the barest foundation for the international conglomerate, LexCorp?"

After his contemplative thoughts of what defined a successful life, the expression on his face had been riveted firmly in place; it was the meticulous façade he presented to the world. *She knew what became of the money I took from those idiots.* It was baffling that even now, she was two steps ahead. He decided to play this game of mental chess and see what the outcome would be. "As well informed as ever, Miss Milan."

She shrugged. "In this era of the technological superhighway, information is the coin of the realm. But I am not here to discuss science, more like art and the future. Specifically your future. As a patron of the arts, no doubt Thomas Cole's series of paintings called *Empire* is familiar?"

Not certain where she was going with this, he responded carefully, "Yes."

"The overview is: A series of paintings depicts the growth and fall of an imaginary city — perhaps one of the Greek city-states — situated on the lower end of a river valley, near its meeting with a bay of the sea. The valley is distinctly identifiable in each of the paintings, in part because of a unique landmark: a large boulder is situated atop a crag overlooking the valley ..."

Luthor responded. "Indeed, there are some pedantic critics who believe this boulder is meant to contrast the immutability of the earth with the transience of man. Really Aykira, why must we discuss the matter now? Tell me who you are and why have you returned to my life."

He stepped closer to her, allowing her heady scent to complete envelop him.

“Mr. Luthor ... Lex, the night we met, you prowled among your contemporaries like a hungry lion on the southern African grasslands, ready to devour anyone who got in your way. But apparently your associates decided to put an end to such dangerous strides. As you said, if I had not interfered they would have killed you and all of this,” she gestured around, “would never have come into existence. But I did; thus, your life at that time mirrored painting number one: *‘The Savage State’*.”

He snorted derisively, and the social masque stirred ever so slightly. “A savage? Woman, do not come to my home and mock me!”

She shrugged, as if tossing his comment away. “Say whatever comes to mind Lex, but at the time, you were young and not as cultured as the man before me today.”

Dismissively, he said, “Perhaps. We all have our formative years. So my dear, humor me, where do I stand in Mr. Cole’s famous series now?”

She walked over to the wooden table in center of the terrace, pulled back a chair and gracefully sat down upon the cushions. “Oh, definitely painting number three: *The Consummation of Empire*. An excited crowd gathers on the balconies and terraces as a scarlet-robed king or victorious general crosses a bridge connecting the two sides of the river in a triumphant procession. In the foreground, an elaborate fountain, full of crystal-clear water bubbles enthusiastically. The look of the painting suggests the height of ancient Rome or perhaps Greece. The decadence seen in every detail of this cityscape foreshadows the inevitable fall of a vast civilization which has grown too far, too fast. A little bit like what happened last night. So many eager sycophants ready to shout your praises were present.”

Now irritated, Luthor allowed the cultured mask to drop and responded with anger. “Decadent? You consider *me* decadent?”

Leaning back in the chair with the easy confidence of a chess master about to overcome her opponent, Aykira invited him to sit beside her. With mixed emotions, he did so and listened carefully as the words escaped her ruby lips.

“Consider the man Lex Luthor from my standpoint. It began with one small bank robbery. But, over the years, your crimes have grown in scope. The ten thousand dollars stolen from that gang of ignorant thugs is nothing compared to the millions pilfered in the middle of hostile corporate takeovers during the 1980s. Not to mention illegal land grabs from bankrupt farmers who were sitting on mineral deposits that LexCorp strip-mined, leaving the land barren and the ecology destroyed. What about those

offshore accounts full of your personal wealth that cannot be taxed by the government? Oh yes, should I mention the number of politicians, both here and in Washington who are like puppets, ready to dance whenever you pull on a chain which ensnares them? No doubt. All of this is the mark of a decadent man at the very pinnacle of his haughtiness and financial power.”

Stunned, Luthor rose partially out of his seat, nearly sputtered when he interrupted, and said, “Woman, who told you all this?”

Ignoring the question, she continued sadly, “This list does not include your involvement with more than mere white-collar crime. There are many in the corporate world who also conceal their illegal activities. Lex, avoid having anything to do with Intergang. As dangerous as you are, they are a hundred times more ruthless and are not afraid to forcefully demonstrate that to *anyone* who gets in their way ... even if that person is the feared ‘Boss of Metropolis.’”

He laughed, a sound of genuine humor that which filled the chilled air. “Surely you don’t mean Bill Church and that useless son of his. Perhaps his new young wife, Mindy? The one who pretends to be an empty-headed blonde, but in reality is the truly dangerous one? Personally, Bill has my sympathies. I know all too well what it is to have a treacherous wife. Please rest assured, they will be taken care of before the year is out. If I am the underworld mastermind you accuse me of being, no serious criminal faction could spread its tentacles into Metropolis without my knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses.”

The dark woman nodded thoughtfully. “Well played. But let’s just say, hypothetically, if you were this criminal mastermind, rather than destroying Intergang and the Church family, why not present the evidence gathered against them to the police? If not the police, then what about an intermediary? It would be cleaner and less ... violent? There is a well-respected reporter at the *Daily Planet*, Mr. Jonas ‘Cheat’ Johnson who could write up a powerful story without naming the source.”

His previous humor vanished, and Luthor sat quietly, contemplating what she had said. He then answered briskly, “Are you mad? Give away valuable information to a man about to retire? True Johnson has a sterling reputation, but he still writes up his stories on a battered relic of a typewriter instead of a word processor. He was here tonight, with his wife and the *Daily Planet*’s managing editor, Perry White. They were talking about a promising new reporter, someone called Lane who might become his protege. Perhaps that journalist could get the assignment instead? Then the story, which should be a smashing expose of Intergang’s activities, would be treated

as a joke!”

He noticed Aykira’s eyes blink suddenly, as if surprised, but he chose to ignore it and said, “How will other criminals stay away from Metropolis? If I ... if certain actions had not been taken, this city would become as corrupt and ruined as Gotham. Even the one the papers call Nightwing is having a difficult time keeping that rabble under control.”

With closed eyes, the dark woman took in a cleansing breath and spoke, holding back the apprehension that threatened to leach into her voice. “Remember the paintings. If you do not stop this negative path, within five years’ time, the decision of who shall control – and protect Metropolis – will be irrevocably taken from you. Destruction from outside forces shall overwhelm you. Lex Luthor will be dead ... at his own hand. Everything you have ever worked for will be wiped away, forgotten ... desolate.”

The two sat, staring at each other, the night’s chilly air, which had been tolerable before, was beginning to seep its way into his flesh. A tuxedo, no matter who designed it, did not protect a man from the elements. He was mentally grappling with the abhorrent thought that all he had worked for might be destroyed and that he would take his own life. A mysterious and beautiful messenger was giving him a warning. Sooner or later one or more of his enemies would discover the truth about his other activities and reveal everything to the wrong person. But the questions remained: who was she and could he trust her?

The silent tension between them expanded and slowly drew out like a sharp blade until Lex stood, walked over to the terrace railing, and once again looked out over the city he called home. “Please leave Miss Milan. You refuse to explain who you are. What was the purpose of saving my life twenty-five years ago and now this unsolicited demand that I contact the authorities about Intergang? Why? Is this the favor or is there a deeper part of this mental chess match we are playing?” All this was said without turning back to look at her, treating her with the same disregard he had done to Madeleine earlier in the evening.

The sound of a chair moving and then expensive evening shoe heels clicking on the hard terrace pavement reached his ears, and instead of hearing the doors open and click shut, floral perfume once again filled his nostrils and the gentle touch of a hand, the heat of which came through the fabric, was laid gently on his shoulder.

“Lex, before opening the French doors to the terrace, I watched you gazing out over the city, the expression on your face was weary, even pained. It was not the look of a man elated with accomplishing a great achievement, but of someone who was experiencing deep sorrow ... even loneliness. Please be honest with me. Are ... are you

content?”

He did not look at her. “What does that have to do with you being here now?”

She studied Lex’s immovable profile; those bright, hazel eyes filled with sadness. “Everything. I have watched from a distance for a long time Lex, but no longer. My earnest request ... my favor is that you turn away from this path. I do not wish to see you die; like an avalanche rolling down a frigid snow covered mountain, ignoring me will not halt the inevitable.”

He spoke into the air, his words falling like a broken sword. “The fourth painting?”

She did not speak; he already knew the answer.

He turned, admiring as the terrace lights gave her deep amber skin a soft, enchanting glow, and using his left index finger, he caressed her beautiful face with a tenderness that surprised them both. Suddenly, Lex realized building an empire and having no one to share it with was a meaningless and empty pursuit. Arianna was the wrong woman at the wrong time. This was what he had failed to recognize earlier; he was lonely, and not all the wealth in the world could fill that abyss.

Without another thought, he gently reached up and ran his fingers through long, dark tresses and then cupped her face with both hands. He gazed into her hazel eyes which could be tender one moment and fierce the next; a man could lose himself in those eyes. He looked down at her lips, so full and sweet. Before Aykira could pull away or utter a sound, his lips came down, meeting hers. His thumb moved along her jawline as he leaned into the kiss and was happy when she responded with equal passion.

Part of him wanted to stop; if he didn’t, this kiss could lead to another meaningless physical relationship. He desired this woman yes, but not in the short-term. Aykira Milan could not, no, would not be button-holed in with Madeleine Hexum and her kind. He wanted to explore and discover who she was and what they could be together. Slowly, reluctantly, he pulled away, again gazing deeply into her questioning eyes, saying nothing.

Again the silence stretched out, and sensing the ardent interlude was at an end, Aykira stepped out of his tender embrace, turned, and, with a bowed head walked back to the French doors. The absence of her warm touch was felt, immediately replaced by a searing cold. He watched as she was about to open the glass French doors, exit through them and out of his life, this time perhaps forever.

Lex called out, “This request ... or rather the favor, will not be without consequences. If ... I do this, tell me everything about you ... stay tonight? Not to share passion, but simply to be together for I crave intelligent conversation. Because of you, I suddenly find my weariness of heart has vanished.”

Without a moment's hesitation Aykira turned and with a hint of a smile, said softly, "Yes Lex, the night is growing colder, and there is a great deal for us to talk about."

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## **Chapter Two** ***Metropolis 1989***

Aykira awoke as slender shafts of sunlight gradually filtered through the windows and brightened the living room. The neutral background wall color of light cream gave the space a bright, inviting feel, while intriguing tones on the sofas and curtains help to make the room feel intimate, and with the absence of a television, Lex could read Shakespeare or study business reports with equal ease. She was on a deeply cushioned couch, a cashmere blanket the color of gold and ivory draped over her. Lex must have placed it down while she slept, how thoughtful! Nearby he was reclining in a large, comfortable cognac colored leather chair. His tuxedo jacket and black silk tie had long been discarded, tossed into a rumpled heap on the floor.

She allowed herself for one minute to study this complex man; for the first time in their brief acquaintance, his body was relaxed, not in a state of persistent control. His head, the dark curly hair now tousled, lulled to the side, sleeping and incredibly ... snoring! Her lips stretched into a mischievous, expressive grin. Lex Luthor snores! So there are some things — like not snoring — that money can't buy. As she stood and slipped into her shoes, he did not stir. For not only did the billionaire snore, but he was also a sound sleeper ignorant of silent movement as she prepared to leave.

Last night had been an unexpected dream. Lex Luthor had played the part of the perfect gentleman and congenial host. They had come inside from the terrace and since the kitchen staff had gone home, made cups of rich dark espresso, and then sat down in the living room to talk, just talk. As Lex had stated earlier, he craved having good intelligent conversation with a woman who did not expect anything in return.

He wanted to know more about her life. They discussed art, of course, as well as literature and their favorite activities on quiet evenings. With a patience that did him credit, they gradually worked their way around to how and why she had come to be in that particular part of town late at night in the year 1973. The explanation was fairly simple. She had been looking for an apartment building where an acquaintance lived who owed her money, when she had heard him cry out from the beating his former friends were giving him.

Acting on pure — and foolish — instinct, she had run down the block, then turned into the dark and foul-

smelling alley where they had been. Seeing how uneven the sides were, she fought them with her considerable karate skills. The men did not last long, after a few well-placed moves had swiftly incapacitated them. If Nico had been armed with more than a knife she would have thought twice about taking him on.

Once Lex's attackers were gone, she had quickly gotten him out of there and into a rundown hotel only a few blocks away. It had amused her that he wanted to thank her by sharing the night together. He had been attractive, in a bad boy sort of way but this was Lex Luthor as he once was and she a specter of the what would be, her life was in Metropolis fifteen years in the future.

But then he asked her another question, one she had hoped not to give an answer to until later in their acquaintance. But as was her habit with anything regarding this intelligent man, she had been prepared with an explanation.

"How have you learned so much about my business dealings Miss Milan ... Aykira?"

"I came across your picture in CorporateWeek and was shocked to see the young man whose life I saved become a new force in the business world. Your career became of keen interest to me. At first, it was merely surface information. But as I became more involved with businesspeople on the West Coast, stories about your boardroom and back-room dealings were beginning to take on a near legendary status. People are people, and in unguarded moments, they will talk. As I moved up Bill Fences company, Nanite, as its events director, I was able to hear and collect information on several companies he had dealings with. But chiefly LexCorp."

She thought of how he had contemplated what she had revealed, no doubt wondering if there was a plan to use this knowledge of his shady business dealings against him.

"Lex, please don't be concerned; my knowledge of you is private. But we can talk of this later. Would I be so foolish as to enter the lion's den if I wanted to cause you or the corporation which bears your name harm?"

He took a sip of the espresso and said, "It makes sense, as an event planner you would be in position to see and hear things that most outside of a company would not. Am I the only captain of industry you have observed and catalogued so closely?"

Without hesitation she answered, "Yes. After all, you are the only one I ever rescued in a back alley."

Thankfully Lex had believed her, which she was grateful for since it was mostly the truth. She sighed; someday the whole truth might have to be revealed to him. That truth was so fantastic, so utterly outside the realms of normalcy, he might never accept it. Aykira hoped with all her heart that it would never become a necessity. There

were other more compelling reasons, reasons Lex must never know about under any circumstances. Now that might be the truly sticky part about revealing herself to him. But she didn't have a choice. They didn't save him from one menace only to have him annihilated by another simply because he wanted to rule Metropolis. It was time for Lex Luthor to be turned to a brighter, more fulfilling path, and this was the right time in history to do so before Clark Kent arrived on the scene.

Besides, she had promised a dear friend to remain silent. A friend who had literally changed her life in the blink of an eye.

The past ten years had also been something of a dream ... although truth be told, it had started out as more of a dreadful nightmare.

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### **Chapter Three** ***Metropolis 1978***

The next time sleet and snow was predicted in the evening forecast, she was staying home.

The weather was horrible, filthy in fact. The windshield wipers fought hard to keep up with the slushy rain as it came down, making visibility and driving at dusk almost impossible. If the gym's parking lot had not been covered with salt earlier in the day, getting the old green Volkswagen out of the tight spot would have been difficult to say the least. It would have been so much easier — and safer — to create an efficient workout routine in her studio apartment, miniscule as it was. Why had she pushed to attend Dylan's karate class when all the TV newscasters and radio weather people had predicted a heavy snowfall, starting with sleet?

Because he was the best karate instructor in New Troy, and she had a tiny crush on him. The class was half-full so he could give more personal instructions to his students, and she had finally perfected the side kick to the jaw, a move that might come in handy if anyone wanted to attack her. Right now she felt confident no mugger outside of Suicide Slum would be foolish enough to be out on a night like this.

It took brute strength to handle the Volkswagen's steering wheel, yet somehow the car moved slowly forward, slipping occasionally whenever it turned a corner, an insistent reminder about the repairs that needed to be done: a new set of tires and the heater replaced. She sighed, if she had to make a choice between tires or a heater, new tires came first. True, it was like driving in a rolling frozen torture chamber, but as long as there was a thick blanket in the back seat, she could stay warm.

So far, the evening traffic had been lighter than expected, and she only needed to inch around three more blocks to reach home. Three very long blocks, that were

usually choked in traffic at this time of the night. Then, she could put the cheery red tea kettle on the stove to boil for a piping hot cup of peppermint tea, which would go well with the chocolate chip cookies she made last night. Maybe she would pop them in the oven first to warm them up? The comforting thought of sipping hot tea and munching on warm cookies only furred her desire to be home, and she tapped on the gas pedal, urging the car forward.

Suddenly an intense blue light, like a nimbus appeared, splitting the darkness into shards. An older man wearing a heavy black overcoat and bowler hat stepped out of the center of the halo ... right in front of the car. Aykira screamed in terror and the man, seeing a moving vehicle coming toward him, mimicked the emotion and jumped to get out of the way. Instinct kicked in and she turned right to miss him and then slammed on the brakes, sending the car skidding down the street on ancient wheels, desperately trying to find purchase on the slick pavement. Before the vehicle stopped, it had slid a good twenty feet. Miraculously, the old Volkswagen hadn't plowed into any parked vehicles.

It was all over in a matter of seconds. Aykira's fingers, were instantly ice-cold despite being covered with wool gloves, and it took a moment for her to relax her clutching grasp of the steering wheel. Her waist hurt, where the seatbelt had dug painfully into her body tomorrow morning, there was going to be wicked bruising and uncomfortable soreness.

But first, she had to find out if the nitwit who stepped in front of her was all right. Fuming, yet more than a little concerned for the man, she carefully unlatched the seatbelt and opened the car door, only to slide on a patch of ice. If it weren't for quick reflexes and her hand grabbing the door, her derriere would have landed hard on the wet ground. Training shoes were designed for dry streets, on mild days, not tramping through heavy snow on slippery asphalt in what was fast becoming a blizzard.

Gingerly, she picked her way down the eerily quiet street. The wet snow was beginning to penetrate her thin canvas and nylon footwear, making it cold and wet. She scanned the street and not too far from a lamppost whose bulb was flickering, and its light a sickly yellow, found a man lying on his side. The sleet was rapidly turning into thick, heavy snowflakes, which fell around him, softening the outline of an unmoving body. If the snow kept drifting up, within an hour, no one would know he was there until the snowplows came through and hit the body.

The unbearable thought made tears of deep anguish run down Aykira's cheeks. She whispered hoarsely, "Oh God! I killed him!"

Kneeling down, she removed a glove and placed two trembling fingers on the man's neck, hoping to find a pulse. At that moment, a shattering groan was heard, and the old man, with an effort, sat up, and rubbed his face with wet woolen gloves. Then a voice with a cultured British accent said, "Fear not dear lady, this ... this mishap was entirely my own fault." Patting himself all over he said, "Aha! Happily no bones were broken. I ... I never should have allowed Andrus to set the coordinates, that ... that young man still has a great deal to learn."

Ignoring the odd comments and completely relieved that he was alive, Aykira quickly took control of the situation. "Sir ... can ... can you stand? We have to get you to a hospital. MetroGen is not far away!"

An unexpectedly strong voice answered firmly, "No. No hospitals! There would be ... complications. Is there someplace warm we can go? Perhaps your lodgings? Are ... they nearby? I don't fancy being in this miserable weather. Perhaps a hot cup of tea ... with ... scones?" As the man spoke, his teeth began to chatter fiercely.

He might be going into shock or reacting to the cold. Either way, there was no time to argue. Besides, she thought with amusement, if this weakened old man tried any funny business, she would lay him out cold with a mild blow to the neck. Cautiously, she helped him up from the ground and they supported each other while walking back to the car. Her new friend was limping badly, but he didn't complain. It amazed her that not a single car had come down the street. Apparently other drivers had listened to the weather report and wisely stayed home. Finally, they reached the car and with anxious care got him into the passenger's seat. In one swift motion, she pulled her blanket from the back and onto the shivering man. She regretted not having a larger car with heat, but at the moment, this was all there was. Quickly, Aykira got inside and turned the ignition key, and, miracles of miracles with its usual rattle and bang the ancient engine groaned in protest and then turned over.

Her companion studied the vehicle's interior, smiled softly, and said, "Excuse me, is this a ... Volkswagen ... Beetle?"

Curious about the comment, since he was obviously old enough to know what kind of car this was, she said, "Yes. A very old one, built in nineteen sixty-five."

"Bit of an antique isn't it? A ... a lot like me." He chuckled softly at the small joke.

Aykira, while still keeping a close watch on the road, quickly glanced over to him and answered with a touch of humor. "My late uncle gave this car to me before he died. He said, and this is a direct quote 'I can remember that the Beetle had four virtues and little else: it was cheap, it was easy to repair, it was easy to push out of mud and, more

importantly, snow.'"

He answered with a slight tone of alarm. "Oh dear, let's hope it doesn't stall out now! Neither one of us can push!"

Aykira decided not to mention that the car could be easily moved; unfortunately, there had been a lot of experiences doing that this winter. Wryly she said, "Yes. Especially since that leg of yours is injured."

It was dark within the car, but she detected a hint of color raise in his cheeks. But to the man's credit, he neither complained nor denied the injury.

"No, fortunately it's not my leg. But my ... ankle has been sprained ... quite severely one suspects. I ... I can actually feel it beginning to swell. Oh dear, I have grown rather fond of my new snow galoshes and would dislike having them cut off."

Hearing that, Aykira groaned and snapped, "Why didn't you tell me that sooner? We just passed MetroGen!"

He shook his head and said adamantly, "No, Miss M ... a ... doctor is out of the question."

A tiny quiver of fear went through her heart. "Ah, you aren't wanted by the police?"

He looked at her, deeply offended, as if his honor had been questioned. "Certainly not! I ... perhaps we have gotten off on the wrong foot ..." He stopped and grew quiet, realizing with chagrin what he had said.

She, on the other hand, could not let such an opportunity to poke fun at the situation slip past said, "Wrong foot? Absolutely! By the way, my name is Aykira Milan."

"Ah ... yes, yes ... I am ... Herbert Wells."

Sighing at the strange turn this evening was taking she said. "Nice to meet you Mr. Wells. Since we aren't stopping at the hospital, I must concentrate on the road ... so ..."

"My silence whilst you drive is required. Very well." His eyes twinkled.

Between the darkness and the increasing snowfall, they moved at a snail's pace, but some progress was better than none at all. Thankfully, they arrived at her apartment building, a large five-story glass and tan brick bunker-shaped structure without incident. Due to long practice, she was able to maneuver the Volkswagen haphazardly into its customary parking space, after no small amount of battling with the recalcitrant steering wheel. Aykira cut off the engine, and after an alarming agitation and slight mechanical groanings, the car was quiet.

Her companion breathed a sigh of relief and said in a small voice, "Does the 'Beetle' and all other motorcars in America always make such a cacophony of sound?"

"Not speaking for all the other cars in America, Mr. Wells, but sadly, mine does. At least now we're home.

Watch your step, there's a lot of snow here. We wouldn't want the other ankle injured!"

His bitter comment was lost as she had closed the driver's side door. He was cautious of slipping while getting out of the car. Once he stood up with Aykira's assistance, he looked up at her building. "Oh my, what a ... charming domicile."

She knew Herbert was being kind her home was anything but charming. It was built during the post-World War II period, thrown up quickly in order to accommodate the baby boom. Domicile? She thought. Lodgings? Motorcar? Herbert's style of speaking was old-fashioned, and although his age was anywhere between fifty-five and sixty-five, she reasoned that British people had probably spoken that way during his youth. But there was something about the cadence, as if his style had never evolved from that time. It was a curious quirk, but right now, she needed to get him out of this weather and upstairs. Thank goodness for elevators!

Ten minutes later, they were stepping through the door of the apartment. "Here we are, Herbert," Aykira said as she snapped on the light. "Home, from the cold and damp. Are you sure about not needing medical attention?"

"Quite certain. As a point of fact, I must contact my colleague Andrus. Barring any mishaps, he should be able to collect me in the morning. He's a capital surgeon and can attend to my ankle without me bothering the medical establishment here."

Aykira listened to this as she helped him around a wood and glass coffee table to a large green couch that had seen better days. The flea market purchase had several brightly colored pillows thrown over sections a little worn from wear. For an awkward moment, she made him stand long enough to remove his damp bowler hat, gloves, overcoat and suit jacket, and he insisted on taking his rubber galoshes off himself.

After removing her own outer garments, Aykira hung everything up in the small bathroom to dry. The brown shag carpet was going to require cleaning since they had tracked so much water in. Galoshes? When was the last time she had seen a pair of those boots with *genuine* steel buckles? Elementary school? He had mentioned in the car that they were new. Where did this man come from?

Putting that question and a dozen others aside, she brought out the red kettle, held it under the tap and started boiling water for tea. She pulled out a large blue and white Tupperware container of homemade chocolate chip cookies. Once the top was removed, the sugary aroma of chocolate, cinnamon, and nutmeg was comforting and familiar. She placed six in a shallow baking dish, put the oven on the warmer setting, and popped them in.

Initially, the thought of changing clothes with a man in

the apartment made her uncomfortable, but the faint odor of workout perspiration and the desire to get out of her slightly damp *Gi* was beginning to aggravate her. Besides, Mr. Wells was in no condition to attack her. If the older man did try to make a questionable move, the outcome would be most unpleasant and painful, and the damage would be permanent.

With that bit of mental reassurance, Aykira excused herself and went into the bathroom. It only took ten minutes to swiftly remove the offensive garments, take a sponge bath scented with floral notes and then put on her favorite black lounging outfit which hung on the back of the door. The garment was a rare indulgence, and she only wore it whenever company came around.

Feeling refreshed, she entered the living room and said while walking into the kitchen, "Sorry it took so long. Ready for something to eat?" Before Mr. Wells could answer, the teapot started whistling violently.

He put down a cooking magazine and, while looking around at the neatly arranged mismatched furniture collected from thrift shops and, in some cases the street, said politely, "Yes, something to eat would be welcomed. Your rooms are very ... different, they remind me of an artist's loft."

She shrugged, mildly irritated, and responded, "Mr. Wells, an artist's garret is a habitable 'attic' or small and often dismal or cramped living space at the top of a house or larger residential building. My home is very much like an artist's studio, minus the sloping ceiling. But right now, this is all I can afford."

He opened his mouth and said apologetically, "Oh dear. Please, forgive me! That was shockingly rude. You have been very kind, and in repayment, I have insulted your home." His face flushed red.

"No. It's true, this studio apartment is cramped. Nonetheless, the roof doesn't leak, there's light, hot water, and most of all on this particular night, plenty of heat."

"My colleagues and several young students I know have lived in such places. Their schooling was expensive; thus it was more important to worry about paying for classes and books than having a fashionable address. You must be in the same situation; I certainly understand the pain and stress of being in debt and having to make do with what's available."

Thinking about the debt made Aykira rub her neck, which had tightened from muscle strain, something that always happened when she thought about it. "While I pay off my outstanding student loan of five thousand dollars, I'm working for S.T.A.R. Labs as a lab assistant and at a small event planning company as a receptionist."

"That's a rather singular career path," he said, somewhat dubiously.

“It’s the only path open to me right now. Yes, well oddly enough, working those two jobs together pays more than working one full-time. Computer engineering was my major in college, but after two years and thousands of dollars later, I discovered it was not my cup of chai. I dropped those courses and concentrated on business instead.”

Herbert shook his head in disbelief. “In my day, it cost less than hundred pounds for a gentleman to receive a full education at Oxford.”

“Nowadays, a semester worth of textbooks, plus pencils and stationary cost twice as much! So I have at least another two years before my loan is paid off. I have no wish to live in an ‘artist loft’ for the rest of my life, so I’ve set aside money to move across the country and live in Seattle. That’s where all the emerging technology industries are located. They need administrative assistants who know how to set up events, and I want to be a part of that.”

“For a young woman, you have many ambitions.”

“When there’s only yourself to rely upon, ambition and focus are extremely important to succeed in life. I was orphaned at age ten and raised by my grandparents. They died shortly after I graduated from high school. They instilled in me a solid work ethic and how to carefully manage my finances. Otherwise, this tiny studio would have been furnished with credit rather than other people’s castoffs. I thought I wanted to be a computer engineer, and taking two years’ worth of courses for a career I did not want to pursue was a costly mistake. Business, especially event planning, is my greatest strength. That’s why I’m working at S.T.A.R. Labs with that background, the door was open the door for me to work for a high-end computer firm and use my skills from both fields.

Wells nodded respectfully, “Miss Milan, the plan is a good one. I sincerely hope you are able to succeed.”

She looked at him and realized he could have been dialing his friend while she was in the kitchen or even before she began to tell him about her financial life and employment hopes. “Oh, the phone is by the door. Sorry the cord doesn’t reach the couch. Do you mind hopping over to it? Maybe you can call Andrus and let him know where you are ...?”

Herbert looked at her, with a definite twinkle in his eyes. “That shall not be necessary, I already contacted him.”

Baffled, Aykira stepped into the living room. “How?”

He held up a device no bigger than a pack of playing cards, and with a grave expression on his face, he replied, “While you were changing, I used the Time Dimensional Writer or TDW for short. This device allows me to have instant communications with my colleagues ... one

thousand years in the future.”

The silence in the apartment grew as she looked fixedly at Herbert for half a minute as if he were a particularly unique insect, and then her face crumpled into a wide grin as peals of laughter escaped.

Herbert was more than a little surprised, and he narrowed his gaze and said, “I assure you; this is not a matter for levity. I am here on an urgent mission and now that my ankle is injured that mission is in grave jeopardy. Someone ... must take my place.”

“Time travel? You’re joking right? You sprained the left ankle ... not your brain! The next thing you’ll say is that your middle name is George.”

He looked at her and somewhat quietly said, “As a point of fact ... it is. My full name is Herbert George Wells. I was born in Bromley, Kent England in 1866 and ‘died’ of a supposed heart attack in 1946 at my home in London.”

At hearing those words, Aykira stopped laughing and became angry, so much so that breath in her lungs, already charged from her vigorous workout earlier, felt even more strained. Tonight was a complete mess; first the lousy weather, the car being as cold as ice, hitting a pedestrian and now this same person wanted her to believe he was a man dead more than thirty years. Absolutely stunned at this revelation, she snapped angrily, “No one can travel through time. It’s impossible! I don’t want to hear another word. Get out of my apartment now!”

Herbert raised both hands in a placating gesture and said. “Miss Milan please! If I can provide proof of who I am, will you listen?”

“Why? So you can tell me more fairy tales?” At that moment, the teapot started whistling again.

Herbert closed his eyes, seemingly thankful for the brief interruption. “Please, more tea and cookies? My blood sugar is still a little low ...”

At first Aykira was about to tell him limp over and get it himself, but then a vague memory about H.G. Wells’ health nagged at the edge of her memory.

“Mr. Wells ... or whoever you really are, are you a diabetic?”

Red-faced, he nodded. “Where I live now there are treatments which thankfully ended the dread disease. Unfortunately, whenever my duties require coming to either the nineteenth or twentieth century my body reacts oddly, and the disease asserts itself.”

Hearing this fact made for a miniscule frisson of fear to move across her heart, and it didn’t go away while she prepared the hot drink and more warmed cookies. All the oddities about this man were beginning to create a picture that was both frightening and wonderous. She reminded herself again that if Wells got out of hand, he could easily

be subdued. But then what? Call the police and say what? I have a time traveler in my apartment. The 911 operator would say *she* was crazy!”

From the cramped kitchen Aykira attempted to look out the window; unfortunately, in the time since they had come inside, the glass had become frosted with delicate ice crystals. Metropolis was being covered in a frozen, white blanket. The quiet and serenity of the outside was a sharp contrast to the mental turmoil she was experiencing inside. Should this strange man be allowed to remain in her home?

After another minute of deep thought, she finally decided, and handed him the plate of now warm cookies, the chocolate melted into tiny puddles of gooey richness. Herbert or H.G. must have been very hungry as he eagerly started munching ... without waiting for her. It seemed as though Victorian manners went for a hike where the stomach was concerned. After setting down two steaming mugs of peppermint tea, she sat on a chair, leaned forward, and said with a frosty tone that matched the outdoors, “It is a cold, snowy night. H.G. Wells is supposed to be an accomplished storyteller ... so let’s hear it.”

Her companion looked at her oddly and then said, “By your countenance, I surmise hearing the story will not be enough. Let me show you. Unfortunately, this machine was damaged when I fell earlier and can only provide images, not sound.”

He removed the TDW from his pocket and Aykira watched in complete fascination as a tiny dark screen lit up and then images formed showing four young men walking down a city street at night formed. Despite the screen’s size, she could tell from the overturned garbage cans, large cracks in the sidewalk, and general shabbiness of the area, that these fellows were in a disreputable part of a city ... at night. It may have been smallminded on her part, but from their body language and the way their lips moved in anger, she concluded they were up to no good.

The target of that anger was one of their group, who was well dressed, almost as if he had stepped from the pages of *Gentlemen’s Quarterly*. His face, although a little blurry, was vaguely familiar. Where had she seen him before? The other three men, their features distorted by anger, were slowly coming into sharper focus, and were becoming increasingly angry. The flashy dresser tried to ignore them and started increasing his pace.

It was fascinating to see how a device so small could produce such crisp images! She wanted to ask how this was possible yet remained silent as the ‘movie’ continued. The others started chasing their hapless companion as the argument escalated. One of the men abruptly pushed the flashy dresser into an alley, and he stumbled and hit the ground hard. Another of the group, the biggest of the trio,

picked him up as if he were a ragdoll, shook him violently and slammed him against the wall, ripping his jacket.

They were demanding something from him, but he remained silent, and then all three began to pummel his body with their fists. Slowly, he slid down the wall and onto the ground. The man who pushed him into the alley, seemingly the leader, produced a knife, and the metal gleamed coldly from the streetlamp’s light as he raised it above his head. Suddenly, the struggle ended and the other two men, realizing in horror what had just happened, ran away. The leader stood over the young man lying motionless on the ground, smiled coldly, removed the bloody knife, and walked away. The miniature screen went dark once more.

Aykira was numbed with shock from the rapid, violent chain of events, and she placed a trembling hand over her heart as she whispered, “That ... that wasn’t a movie was it, Mr. Wells? It was horrible! Those men ... they killed him!”

“You are correct Miss Milan; this is not a film. The young man fell out of favor with his companions over money they had stolen. He was supposed to hide it until the police stopped looking for it and then share the money equally. Our young man had other ideas. He decided to keep the money for himself. He had planned on moving away, but unfortunately, they found him,” Wells said while shaking his head in disgust.

“His companions were completely unreasonable, and he was foolish not to reveal the whereabouts of the cash. Who was that man? There is something about him that’s very familiar. Why kill him?” She took a long calming sip of tea; the peppermint helped to soothe her badly rattled nerves. Watching someone being killed was not the way this evening was supposed to end.

“Those images were taken several years ago, in early autumn of 1973 ... in Metropolis.”

She eyed him suspiciously and said. “That’s impossible! None of the surroundings are familiar to me.”

“That crime took place in an area of the city known as Suicide Slum. Forgive me, but it is unlikely a lady such as yourself would be found in such an environment.”

She looked grimly at him and said in a bleak tone, “At one time I had seriously considered taking an apartment near that neighborhood, and it did not have any heat! But thankfully, the job with S.T.A.R. Labs became available. Poverty, Mr. Wells, doesn’t care how nice you are.”

H.G. Wells nodded. He knew London had such neighborhoods and many of the people who occupied those places were just like Aykira determined to make a better place in the world for herself. If the proper action wasn’t taken soon, this timeline and Miss Milan’s existence would be erased.

“There are forces at work that you do not know exist. Those men that killed their associate were not originally supposed to do so. The knife-wielding scoundrel, Nico Zabinski, is a sleeper agent associated with an organization called Rittenhouse. He joined their gang just for the purpose of killing our young, albeit greedy, friend.”

Her eyes closed, and she groaned softly. “Rittenhouse? Who are they? A secret organization? No, don’t tell me ... they have their own time machine?”

“Unfortunately, yes, but unlike my organization, the Time Corps, they want to not merely change things but eradicate all that is good in the world for their own villainous purposes. That poor man must be saved and allowed to live, otherwise life as you know it right now shall cease to exist. Miss Milan, in my present condition, it is impossible to carry out my mission and it has to be accomplished soon. Rittenhouse must not be allowed to succeed.”

“So, your associate Andrus is going to go back there to save him?”

“Certainly not! Andrus was the one who, through his bungling, dropped me in front of your motorcar. He is incapable of stopping those ruffians!”

It was quiet in the tiny apartment. The occupants stared at each other. Finally, Aykira rubbed an index finger under her chin and spoke, breaking the silence said. “I see. You want me to go back in time and save him? Who is this man, a future president?”

“No. In 1973 he is young and brash and quite simply put, then and now ... is a thief. Still, he is vastly important to the future of our planet. Someday, the international corporation forged by his efforts shall become one of the main pillars that will draw mankind together. Yes, the Time Corps need you to go back there and stop Nico before he draws that knife. In my current condition, and with the TDW defense mechanism damaged I cannot fight those young men, but you with your advanced karate skills will have more than a fair chance.”

In the short time she had known this strange visitor, amazing statements no longer surprised her. She asked, “How do you know I’m advanced enough to take on three men?”

“Three reasons. First only someone truly dedicated to the art of karate would go out on a terrible night like this to take a lesson. Second, the belt around your *gi* is purple. As I understand it, the determined student who reaches the end of their time at the blue belt level begins to develop a deeper appreciation of what a black belt means. The advancement to a purple karate belt represents a moment of dramatic evolution for the *karateka* as they mature into the advanced levels of their skills. You have reached that point. Third, I have researched your background and

thankfully it is revealed you have the pluck to carry out this mission. Otherwise I would never have asked you to take on such a perilous task.”

A cold frisson of fear caused the hairs on the back of her neck to rise. Once again, he was right advancement to the next level was attractive. She whispered, “He must be vital for you and the Time Corps to go through all this trouble. Again, Mr. Wells who is he?”

“Lex Luthor,” Herbert stated flatly.

She blinked twice. Luthor was something of a hero to her ... a business model to copy. His hardscrabble rags-to-riches story was an inspiration, and as with Dylan the karate instructor, a tiny infatuation for the handsome businessman was tucked in the corner of her heart. She said, “Are you kidding? Lex Luthor a thief? He was voted by *Cable* magazine to create the first super technology conglomerate in the world.”

“After I save him from this man, shouldn’t your time traveling agency protect him so Mr. Luthor’s very existence isn’t constantly threatened?”

A curious expression crossed the older man’s face, and then he said, “No. Another team of time travelers will take care of Rittenhouse and *all* their sleeper agents. Rufus, Wyatt, and Lucy are quite an impressive lot, regardless of being rank amateurs.”

Confused, Aykira answered, “Rank amateurs? What does that make *me*?”

Herbert gave her a kind smile. “Someone whom I hope is willing to help.”

She sat on her couch and thought about this. Time Travel? It doesn’t exist. But she remembered the nimbus of light that surrounded him when he appeared out of thin air, the strange device that showed a young Lex Luthor killed before her very eyes and most of all, famed science fiction writer Herbert George Wells sitting in her tiny living room. This was the absolute weirdest night she had ever experienced. She took a deep breath, and said, “All right Mr. Wells, I’m ready.”

With infinite care, he placed the TDW in her hands. “I have already set the time, date, and place. The device will bring you back automatically in one hour’s time. If anything should happened to the device, stay in the area. We can easily return you to this place and time. Be certain to strike Mr. Luthor’s attackers, especially Mr. Zabinski, with lightning speed they won’t expect a woman to be a problem.”

She took a deep breath, thought that this was the craziest thing she had ever done, and said, “I hope you are correct H.G., or this might be a really short trip!”

Stepping through the portal that had been created by the TDW was like stepping through a doorway from a lighted room into the darkest night. She paused a second to

get her bearings. She spotted some landmarks she had seen in the video that H.G. had shown her and knew that the alley was very close. As an afterthought, she was happy that she had changed into her lounging outfit, its black color would help her to blend into the background and be almost invisible in the dark alley.

Cautiously, she approached the mouth of the alley and peered around the corner. She could see the backs of the three men who were in pursuit of Luthor and hastened after them. The alley was lit only by the glow of the halo created by the smog surrounding the streetlights nearby and was feeble at best. That and her soft-soled shoes would mask her approach very effectively.

She was within striking distance as Luthor was being slammed against the wall by Nico. His two associates were standing somewhat behind him. With the element of surprise that she enjoyed, she should be able to make short work of them.

As she got into position, she said in a clear voice that masked the fear she felt, "Am I interrupting something?"

All three of Luthor's assailants turned at the sound of her voice. When they did, the two nearest her were in the perfect position for a move she had recently been practicing. She leapt into the air, and both legs flashed out. Her feet caught each of them under the chin, snapping their heads back and knocking them off their feet. They crashed to the floor of the alley, the backs of their heads impacting the concrete, stunning them.

Only Nico remained. She came to a ready stance and waited. She hoped that the threat she posed would lure him away from what he had intended to do to Luthor. There was a metallic snick as the blade of the switchblade Nico favored snapped and locked in place.

Even in the dark, there was a faint metallic gleam from the blade, and she could see that he was an experienced knife wielder. He didn't hold it for throwing. He knew that if you throw your knife, unless you are absolutely sure of your target, you risk not only losing your weapon, but also giving it to your opponent. He also did not raise it up for a downward stroke, which had very limited use. Instead, he kept the knife in front of him, blade forward at waist level. This made it available for thrusting or slashing as the opportunity presented. He was going to be a dangerous opponent. His hands came up defensively, and she watched his face. His face which telegraphed his moves. A slow, menacing smile spread across his lips and with explosive speed and he slashed, side to side. She easily jumped back, out of range, but not so far as to stop being a threat. This time he charged her, thrusting the knife at her mid-section.

This was the move she had been hoping for. With a half spin, she took her body out of the spot he was aiming

for, and as his arm passed her, she grabbed it with both of her hands and yanked. This sent him crashing into the brick wall, headfirst, knocking the air out of his lungs. Aykira plucked the knife from his hand and then let him fall to the ground. Nico was a dangerous man, and now that she had complete control of his knife arm, she said, "Let Rittenhouse, know they have enemies." She balled her hand into a fist and punched him hard in the gut.

There was a look of astonishment, whether it was from her mention of Rittenhouse or the disbelief that this mere slip of a girl had bested him, she could never say. As he crumpled to the alley floor, his two companions recovered and, seeing what had been done to Nico, decided that they didn't want the same thing to happen to them and fled.

Knowing that she had not touched anything to leave fingerprints and the only prints on the knife would be Nico's, she left him lying on the cold ground and assisted Luthor to his feet. She then helped him to leave the area.

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Aykira eagerly stepped out of the simmering blue nimbus of light and into her apartment, everything was just as she left it. Only fifteen minutes had passed since she left as the tea kettle was still warm. The visitor H.G. Wells, if that's who he was, had vanished, leaving behind a thick manila envelope with her name written in graceful cursive letters on the coffee table.

*Dear Miss Milan:*

*Please accept my apologies for not remaining here to greet you upon returning from Metropolis in 1973. All is well within the time continuum; the threat of Rittenhouse murdering Lex Luthor has come to nothing, and his position in the creation of Utopia is assured. As was mentioned previously, the other group of time travelers have ended Rittenhouse as an organization. The time stream for all mankind, not just this tiny fragment, is permanently secure.*

*It took a tremendous leap of faith, as well as a certain amount of courage, to put your life into the hands of a virtual stranger to accomplish the task placed before you. Such valor reminds me of the early twentieth century aviator Bessie Coleman, a woman of fierce determination. We of the Time Corps will be forever in your debt for the service done this evening.*

*As vulgar as it is to speak of money, within this envelope is a savings account at Pacifica Bank in your name in the sum of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. More than enough to settle any outstanding student debts, purchase a new motorcar and begin your life anew on the West Coast. I say this because living in Metropolis there is the slender possibility of meeting Lex Luthor. Now is not the point in time for you to do so, and it shall lead to numerous complications.*

*Might I suggest working for a computer company called Nanite in Seattle? It is still a young corporation and could use a woman of your daring skills and intelligence.*

*Sincerely,*

*Herbert George Wells*

*P.S. My dear Miss Milan, please continue your studies in karate. We may have need of those skills again someday.*

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#### **Chapter Four** **Metropolis 1989**

Thanks to Mr. Wells' assistance, every aspect of Aykira Milan's life took a turn for the better. With the money he provided, all her school debts and outstanding bills were quickly paid off. She purchased a new Ford Taurus, replacing the ancient Volkswagen. Only a month after the astounding adventure in time with the remaining funds, she moved across the country to Seattle into a comfortable one-bedroom apartment. Something slightly more upscale than an artist's garret. After making the rounds with many companies, she was hired by Nanite to work in its growing marketing department. Her job was to work as the administrative assistant for the three people who ran the sub-department of event planning.

Almost immediately she learned there was a great deal more to creating events than to simply know where to place a table. An event coordinator needed to know what type of tables would be best for the number of attendees and the size of the venue where the event took place. Did the napkins have the matching color as well as the company logo embossed on the surface? Was the lighting correct? Did the location have up-to-date audio/visual equipment and was there someone on site to effect repairs if anything went wrong? Were the catering services efficient and organized, and most importantly, did they have great-tasting edibles?

Within a year of being hired, the company had grown so much that event planning became its own department, and she was promoted to project coordinator with a staff of two.

What she told Lex earlier was true. Working for Nanite was financially rewarding, but Aykira had burning ambitions of her own to fulfill. Having forged a strong reputation within the industry, after five years she left Nanite and the West Coast to start her own event planning company, *Orion Events*, specializing in upscale events for technology companies. One of the first technology companies on the East Coast to sign a contract with her was S.T.A.R. Labs. It was a wise choice, planning happenings for high-powered executives and their clients allowed sterling opportunities to learn about the latest advancements in bioengineering, communications, and

computers.

Over the years she had heard both unpleasant and encouraging tales about the man she had once admired and whose life she had saved. Lex Luthor was an astute businessman and the companies under his control reflected the attitude of its founder. True, he also contributed to many charitable organizations, the most notable of which was for cancer research. But several affluent individuals in the business world thought he did this not only because of the massive tax write-offs, but also to salve his conscience.

During a technology convention in San Francisco, she met Dominique Cox, a former LexCorp executive. Aykira made the joke of saying that someday it was inevitable that her company would have dealing with LexCorp. The older woman said bitterly, "If you set one foot out of line from Luthor's standards, that monster will try every means possible to destroy you. Avoid working for him if possible!"

That knowledge seemed to follow with other things she was hearing about him. Until several weeks later, another former LexCorp employee informed Aykira exactly why Mrs. Cox was no longer employed by the corporation. Obviously trying to steal a company from its founder would definitely be seen by the founder in an unfavorable light. It all made sense, but she was still cautious and determined to follow that advice: avoid working with and meeting Mr. Luthor.

Was it right sending her back in time to save Luthor's life, only to bring so much hurt to countless others whose livelihoods depended on the companies absorbed and then discarded by LexCorp? Repeatedly over the years, she had thought that perhaps it was time for her to approach him and call in that favor? Ask him to become the man he should be?

As H.G. had alluded to in his note, there were occasions when she had helped correct certain errors in the time continuum. In all but two situations, the memories of her involvements were kept intact. He had explained that prior knowledge about those specific missions would have detrimental effects on her own life.

A year prior to the LexTower affair, H.G. had unexpectedly appeared at her home in New York. There was nothing usual about that, but when he asked if she would be willing, with her considerable business and technology contacts, to keep an eye on certain persons in the financial world and Lex Luthor, she had been a little more than surprised. Orion Events had an office in New York, which was as close as she wanted to be to a certain billionaire, whose home base thankfully was Metropolis, New Troy. The prospect of meeting him again was intriguing; nonetheless, time travel was tricky, and it seemed like a risk to intentionally encounter him again in

the present.

At least that was her plan, until her chief of staff called her about an inaugural gala that would be taking place in Metropolis. It would be necessary to send her most talented second-in-command to handle that event, while she remained firmly in the background and kept an eye on those involved.

Orion Events had a solid reputation for planning outstanding events, and as a result, demanding politicians, actors and masters of industry always wanted her to personally run the helm of their events. She avoided extensive involvement with politicians and actors, relegating those persons to her second-tier support staff. Those were 'bread and butter' clients. It was more important to concentrate on science and technology, where her main support staff truly shined. Which was why her second-in-command, Andreas Jensen, started working with Asabi to create the most wonderful gala event for opening the new skyscraper headquarters for the corporation known as LexCorp.

H.G. had not contacted her in some time, and she wondered if their association had come to an end. Surely not, she assumed he would make contact when it suited the timeline and not a moment sooner. Now in her mid-thirties, with a comfortable bank account and stock portfolio, she wanted to step back and allow her staff to handle the major clients so she could enjoy life.

It was not long afterwards that an unexpected visitor arrived at her newly renovated brownstone, which had a gourmet kitchen, spa bathroom and home office. The visitor was a man wearing a black bowler hat. He came to present her with a mission.

It was time to save Lex Luthor again ... this time from himself.

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So many thoughts and memories raced around her mind like snowflakes in the wind on a cold, dark night. After the previous evening's easy, yet strangely intimate conversation, she hoped he would listen to reason. H.G. Wells said this precise task would not be easy, perhaps even unpleasant. Could Lex Luthor, billionaire, not realize she was trying to save his life? Not heeding the warnings they had spoken of on the terrace would lead him to disaster and like the series of paintings his time on Earth would end as did the fifth painting in desolation. LexCorp would be carved up like some gigantic pie and distributed among the most able of its executives and like Alexander the Great's empire, the pieces could never equal the whole. Without Lex's business acumen, in time, bungling mismanagement would allow the various companies making up LexCorp to be purchased by other conglomerates or simply cease to exist.

But then again, if he did listen and made sincere efforts to change, LexCorp and its subsidiaries would thrive and help mankind along the path to Utopia. How often did a man like him get a chance for redemption on such a scale? Exactly how all of this was going to take place, Wells refused to say.

When they had talked last night, she glimpsed insights to someone who had grown disillusioned of building lifeless monuments to his ego. This was a man who sought, no craved more, he wanted warmth and companionship. Perhaps even children who could carry on his name and legacy? Such dreams were right and commendable, yet much more difficult to achieve than he knew.

Also, could she allow her heart to walk down the path beyond infatuation? Delicate fingers touched moist lips, remembering the sensuous kiss they had shared on the terrace and how opulent shivers of delight tingled her very insides. It had been a long while since her last relationship. Could such a thing be seriously contemplated? Racial differences aside, there would be those in the upper echelons of society who would consider her an interloper. After all, she was an event planner. Her company served their needs. How dare she dream of dating one of the most sought after bachelors in the world? She shook her head and laughed softly to herself. Such thoughts were merely speculation; nothing could happen without him making a complete metamorphosis.

She picked up her cashmere stole from a chair and carefully wrapped it around her shoulders, the sinuously rich fabric clinging to her body, and accentuating its graceful curves.

Suddenly, a resonant male voice broke through her thoughts. "Good morning my sweet. Where are you going?"

She turned, surprised to see him awake and said, "Home. It's smart to leave before the regular staff arrives. Not to put too fine a point on the matter, but you do have something of a reputation with the ladies. Currently, no one knows about last night, and I want it to stay that way."

At first Lex was silent, then he quickly sat up, pushed aside the blanket, stood and then he spoke with earnestness. "A.J. Milan is a businessperson of the first circles. But I am asking the woman, Aykira if she could set aside a fraction of that time to be spent with me? Last night's conversation was only the beginning. We need to get to know one another on a more intimate footing and that can only happen through time. I ... I don't want to wait another decade to see you again."

She felt a shifting of something between them. The atmosphere was not one of tension, but one of new friendship and growing trust. Still, a single cautious word

slipped out. “Why?”

He moved towards her, his dark, intense eyes never leaving her face. “Because last night marked a turning point for me. You were right. I was on the terrace of a building created as a monument to my own vanity ... alone. If I were to die in five or ten years, who would be there to mourn me besides business acquaintances, accountants, and *perhaps* an ex-lover or two? My past is not something to boast about. I no longer wish to harm anyone. Now, it’s time to give back to humanity, rather than steal from it.”

A lump formed in her throat; she wanted so much to believe him, but remembering the stories about his demanding personality, she said, “Pretty words, dear one. But do they emerge freely from your heart, or are they spoken merely to entice me?”

He took her hand and kissed it, not indicating any offense had been taken by her words. “Yes. How can I prove it?”

“We discussed a number of things last night, which might convince me, but there is only one which must be considered.”

He nodded and grew thoughtful. “Taking down Intergang *legally* will be a considerably dangerous undertaking, one I cannot accomplish alone.”

“No. It shouldn’t be. Why not turn in your evidence to the *Daily Planet* reporter Cleat Johnson?”

Lex shook his head. “Cleat Johnson? Are you serious? The man is an antique!”

“If not him than perhaps ... his protégé, Lois Lane?” She said this with a touch of hesitation in her voice. She was well aware of the complex part the young woman would eventually play in Lex’s life if he did not walk a different path. A path leading to his suicide to avoid capture by the police. Suicide that would transpire because he leapt from this very building on his wedding day to the young reporter. She could not allow that to happen, yet she must be careful, very circumspect as H.G. Wells had warned her to be.

“Miss Lane is an ambitious, yet untried amateur, but perhaps with Mr. Johnson’s assistance she can learn by trial of fire. Ah well, if it must be done, let’s use the best investigative reporter in the city to lead the charge. Intergang might suspect where this information the *Daily Planet* will print is coming from and there are bound to be retaliations. Aykira, will you stand by me as well? Not publicly of course, that would be too dangerous. Still, this is a great deal to ask of a woman who has only known me for a total of twelve hours.”

A tiny mental laugh bubbled up as Aykira thought, “If only he knew! With the support of H.G. Wells and his companions, Intergang was not a factor to worry about.”

Rather than answering with those words, she stroked his cheek, coarse with the stubble of beard that held tiny flecks of gray and said in a firm voice, “Intergang does not frighten me Lex, after all, I am the woman who defeated three strong men in a back alley. I can take care of myself. This metamorphosis you are undertaking is fascinating to me. I want to stand by your side ... if you wish.”

A deep breath escaped as though he had been holding it in, waiting to hear her words.

“So, we shall be together in this adventure?” Lex asked with a hopeful tone.

Aykira cocked an eyebrow and said warmly, “Is there a better way to learn about each other?”

A genuine smile of happiness tugged at Lex’s lips. It was a clear smile, pure and without a hint of artifice. Leaning back on their old banter he said, “I know of a better way to learn at least one aspect of our personality.”

Knowing the words for the tease they were, she answered slyly, “Not tonight ... or rather this morning, Lex. There will be time enough to explore that after Intergang is put away. An exploration, I very much look forward to.”

He looked down into those enchanting hazel eyes, which drew him in like twin threads of gossamer steel. Unhurriedly, he gathered her into his strong arms, and their lips met. Aykira responded immediately, surprising herself with heightened passion. His mouth was so warm, the touch of his lips soft, yet maddeningly teasing. He tasted tentatively with his tongue, and she opened her mouth with a low moan.

Aykira felt his kiss was not at all like the first time last night, but one steeped in a fervor that burns slowly and promises more passion to come. As with the first night all those years ago, he was alive and kicking, not from a near death experience but now with the promise of a real life to come. Of a determination to forge a better future, not just for himself but for them as a couple. Perhaps ... perhaps as a family? With this kiss, they were committed and could embrace the hope of endless tomorrows.

She eagerly anticipated the days to come...

Lex Luthor gave into a mental sigh of relief. If he could have found her, Aykira was the woman he should have married years ago. Such a moral compass as hers would have righted him in the direction he should have been in all along. He had been thinking about having a proper life last night. Not one filled with well-dressed miscreants that only did his bidding or women who only wanted him for what he could provide materially, but a real partner to share time with. Aykira was correct about the Thomas Cole paintings. If he did not want his life and everything he had accomplished to end in desolation, then it was time to repay her for saving him yet again.

In his mind's eye, he could already see the type of diamond and emerald engagement ring he would have handcrafted for her by the famed jewelry designer Layne O'Neil. Afterwards, they would sit down to design the matching wedding bands, they would eventually wear.

He could hardly wait!

THE END

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### **CostMart camouflages for crime syndicate!**

*December 12, 1988*

By Cleat Johnson

It was revealed today that the international shopping chain, CostMart is actually a cover for the shadowy criminal organization known as Intergang. Hundreds of files and incriminating documents from the company were given to this reporter anonymously. Owner and founder Bill Church could not be reached to make a statement.

Story on A2.

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### **Church family charged with corruption**

*January 26, 1989*

By Cleat Johnson

with contributions from L. Lane

Today, agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation descended upon the mansion of Bill and Mindy Church, who were charged and arrested for multiple counts of fraud and racketeering. Since they are considered a flight risk, no bail has been set. Bill Church, Jr., who is the operations manager for CostMart, was also arrested in his Metropolis townhouse.

Story on A3.

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### **Intergang smashed!**

*August 1, 1989*

By Cleat Johnson and Lois Lane

After months of legal chicanery, the sensational criminal trial of the Churches has reached a verdict of guilty. All three members of the family will be sent to federal prison in upstate New Troy. The criminal organization known as Intergang, which was started by Bill Church, has been dismantled and destroyed. CostMart stocks, which since this entire debacle began have tumbled into near worthlessness were purchased today by LexCorp. The company will no longer be known as CostMart. The new name is yet to be determined.

Story on B1.

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### **Crusading investigative reporter Cleat Johnson retires**

*August 10, 1989*

Editorial By Perry White

Time to say good-bye to a good friend and long-time colleague. After a lengthy career in journalism, the well-respected reporter, Jonas (Cleat) Johnson is putting away his battered, world weary Underwood typewriter and retiring. His award winning articles have covered the gamut from the seamy underworld of horse racing to his last series of stories chronicling the fall of Bill Church and his criminal empire. Cleat's like an Elvis song, ya gotta love him.

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### **Billionaire Lex Luthor weds entrepreneur Aykira Milan**

*September 8, 1989*

By Cat Grant

Many a Metropolis socialite's mother was stunned to discover that one of the most eligible bachelors on the planet was married today. The ceremony was held at Mr. Luthor's luxurious villa on the Island of Santorini before an intimate circle of friends. The maid of honor was *Daily Planet* reporter Lois Lane, and the best man's name was Asabi. The bride was given away by an old family friend, George Wells.

Story on B1

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### **Mysterious Man of Steel arrives in Metropolis!**

*September 12, 1993*

By Lois Lane

The world was stunned today when a man wearing blue and red spandex appeared aboard the shuttle and saved it by swallowing a bomb!

That's right dear readers, a man swallowed a bomb, survived its explosion, and then without the least bit of effort, lifted the space shuttle beyond the Earth's outer atmosphere to dock with the International Space Station. Metropolis and the world are very curious about the Man of Steel!

Story on A2

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### **Hottest Team in town marry!**

*October 4, 1996*

By James Olsen

This past Saturday was a special day for two of the *Daily Planet's* best known reporters, Lois Lane, and Clark Kent. They were married in Smallville, Kansas, the groom's hometown and were surrounded by friends, family members, and several members of the newspaper's

staff including this reporter. In attendance there were also several of Metropolis' elite citizens; heading the list was billionaire Lex Luthor and his beautiful wife, Aykira, who have grown very close to the pair.

After a simple reception held at the Kents' home, the couple slipped away to an undisclosed location to enjoy their honeymoon.

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**Author's note:** The paintings by Thomas Cole and the music of Frank Sinatra were some of the inspirations for this short story.

*"It Was A Very Good Year"*

*When I was seventeen it was a very good year  
It was a very good year for small town girls and soft  
summer nights*

*We'd hide from the lights on the village green  
When I was seventeen*

*When I was twenty-one it was a very good year  
It was a very good year for city girls who lived up the stair  
With all that perfumed hair and it came undone  
When I was twenty-one*

*Then I was thirty-five it was a very good year  
It was a very good year for blue-blooded girls  
Of independent means, we'd ride in limousines  
their chauffeurs would drive  
When I was thirty-five*

*But now the days are short, I'm in the autumn of the  
year  
And now I think of my life as vintage wine from fine old  
kegs  
From the brim to the dregs, and it poured sweet and clear  
It was a very good year*

It was a mess of good years