

The Wedding Crashers

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Rated PG

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Summary: It was supposed to be the happiest day in her life. Little did Lois suspect the upheaval it would bring into her life instead. Find out more in this crossover of two climactic episodes of Lois and Clark...

Hi FoLCs!

This story is my Ficathon contribution for SymbolicAngel. I hope you enjoy :)

I'd like to thank Mellie for brainstorming the requests, my betas Mona, Kmar, and Carol for their fabulous help while I wrote this, and NearlyNoelNeill for the last-minute polishing before it got posted to the archives. And before you ask, no, I didn't ask Carol *just* so I could do the evil thing better ;) You guys are a great support team and thanks so much for making sure I didn't stumble into the plot holes along the way.

FoLCs, I know this story will use some of the more... questionable characters of Lois & Clark, but I promise that I did it all in good faith and the hopes to use them in ways never imagined by the creators of the show. Mona even mentioned that I managed to give them a purpose beyond dragging out the happily-ever-after thing.

So I hope you will enjoy this tale and if you'd like to leave me a comment or two, please feel free to post in the Fanfic-board (http://www.lcficmbs.com/cgi-bin/boards/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic&f=6&t=001501) or just send me an e-mail. It is always appreciated,

Michael :)

Disclaimer: The recognizable characters and settings in this story are the property of D.C. Comics, Warner Bros., December 3rd Productions, and anyone else with a legal right to them, and I have no claim on them whatsoever, nor am I profiting by their use. It's just the original stuff, that would be mine, written down to bring some entertainment to other FoLC.

It's an episode crossover but I won't say more up here because it would spoil the surprise.

Blocks in <> are literal thoughts by the character or telepathic communication.

"We have reached Earth's orbit, Milady," the ship's captain informed his lone female passenger. He wore a simple black bodysuit; the only decorations were bright blue cuffs adorning his wrists.

"Thank you, Ching," the Royal Lady Zara acknowledged her bodyguard stoically. She was clad in a bodysuit similar to that of her companion and wore a sleeveless black overcoat above it. The outer garment was adorned by a crimson collar that dissolved into crimson lapels running all the way down the open front of the coat. "Have you determined the landing coordinates of Kal-El's ship?"

"Yes, Milady." Ching directed the, by now cloaked, vessel

into a geosynchronous orbit over a large landmass. "His ship is said to have landed on this part of the planet." He pointed out the green surface below them on the display screen.

"The records are correct, Ching," Zara informed her pilot. "I can sense my bond-mate, if weakly."

There was a flicker of emotion marring the aloof man's features before his mouth settled back into an expressionless mask. "I can feel a Kryptonian presence as well, Milady." Ching pointed toward the coastline to the east of the landmass. "He must have traveled since he arrived."

"Of course, he traveled, Ching." Zara barely suppressed a chiding tone in her response. "He arrived here as a newborn, and there is no reason why he should have kept to this place alone."

"Of course, Milady." Ching bowed his head slightly in deference. "But his long stay with the inhabitants of this world also means we will have to determine if he is capable of becoming the First Lord of Krypton." "You mean, if he is worthy of formalizing his union with me?" the statuesque woman inquired.

"Milady," Ching replied noncommittally before he looked over to her, his eyes having taken on a worried look.

"I can sense it, too," Zara acknowledged her companion's concerns. "Kal-El is in pain."

"Yes." Ching stared at the large display in front of him, showing a panoramic view of an expansive settlement located on the eastern coast — their destination.

"We have to help him." Zara stood up and moved behind her lieutenant's chair, her fingers folding over the backrest until her knuckles turned white.

"Milady," he replied forcefully, "we do not know the circumstances of his plight. We must not react in haste."

"He is the heir to the throne of Krypton; we will determine the circumstances of his plight *after* we have ensured his safety." Her strained voice grew somber. "Or all may be lost."

"Yes, Milady." Ching bowed his head, looking properly chided as he lowered the spherical vessel towards the settlement. "I will look for a suitable landing location in the outer sections of this settlement. We will walk from there."

"Very well, Ching," Zara distractedly accepted the proposed plan as her eyes continued to scan the visuals on the display while her mind listened in on her bond-mate's struggle. She closed her eyes and focused her mind.

<Kal-El? Can you hear me, Kal-El?> Zara snapped out of the conversation when she felt a wave of pain seeping over the telepathic connection and down into every cell of her body. "We have to hurry, Ching!" she commanded her travel companion, the fear audible in her trembling voice. "Kal-El is in great pain."

"I understand, Milady," he replied, his voice distant.

Zara tore her eyes away from the settlement and looked out through the forward display; the yellow sun of this lush world was just rising above the horizon.

The hunter perched in its little transport vessel, stealthily monitoring the scout ship of its master's enemies as it disappeared from the screens. Its master's enemies had activated their cloak. It did not matter. Casually, the hunter brought the infrared sensors' readout to the front and continued to observe the other ship. Only now it focused on the heat signature left behind by the other vessel on its descent in the strange world's atmosphere.

Clark groaned in pain as he lay curled up on the cold stone floor deep within Luthor's lair in the heart of Metropolis. The air around him glowed in a sick green, and he pulled the seams of his cape tighter around him in an attempt to keep himself a little bit warmer. He still couldn't believe his own stupidity for walking right into the trap set by his sworn enemy. He had terribly

underestimated his adversary, and now it looked as if he was going to pay for it with his life. He would die, and Lois would marry the man who had killed him. It was the bitterest of ironies.

<Kal-El?>

The female voice was distant, and it was using his Kryptonian name.

<Can you hear me, Kal-El?>

His mother, his biological mother, was calling to him from the grave. It was either that or he was finally losing it from the intense pain that seared through every fiber of his being. Clark pushed himself up and fell back down to the ground as another wave of pain moved through him.

Okay, so maybe he wasn't going to answer the call just yet.

The two Kryptonian visitors walked down the stony pathways of this strange metropolis. Ching had landed their scout ship amidst a mass of scrap metal that seemed to have once been this world's form of transportation. They had both changed out of their Kryptonian clothes and adopted dark gray suits in a fashion similar to what they had observed in their flight over this settlement, courtesy of their ship's replication facility.

<I sense Kal-El in this direction.> Zara pointed east to where the buildings rose high into the sky.

<Yes, Milady,> Ching replied telepathically as well, having chosen to keep those near them from noticing that they did not speak the native tongue.

They reached a crossing over a body of water that separated them from their goal.

<Kal-El is on the other side of this river,> Zara stated.

<Good,> Ching's thoughts came over their mental link.

<Maybe the inhabitants have chosen to separate themselves from the loud and smelly parts of their world...>

<Ching,> Zara chided. <It is not proper to speak in such terms.> She looked around, taking in the frenzied activity. The natives' transport devices moved past them at high speeds, and the drone and smell was enough to remind her of the time when she had inspected the metal processing facilities on New Krypton.

<I understand, Milady.>

Zara suppressed a remark of her own, and they continued silently on their path to the other side of the river. There the activity seemed to even increase. Apparently, Kal-El was being held in the bustling center of this settlement.

As more and more of the indigenous people moved around them on foot, Zara let her mind wander and touch the thoughts of those around her, picking up the occasional tidbit of the language spoken on this planet. She knew that Ching was doing the same.

<This would be much easier if we could communicate with Kal-El.> Ching remarked, his voice showing a bit of frustration at the confusing chatter around them. <Their minds are in such uproar, it is hard to find useful information.>

<We do not know the state of Kal-El's health, Ching,> the lady chided her bodyguard. <And I do not wish to risk his health unnecessarily with the strain of telepathic communication.>

<Yes, Milady.>

Zara threw Ching a scornful sideways glance at the exasperated tone of his thoughts. She understood his frustrations and concerns, but this did not give her companion the right to such disrespectful behavior. Maybe this world *did* have a negative influence on them, she mused. And in that case they might not like what they would find once they reached her bond-mate.

The Kryptonians continued on their way, each one silent as they focused on familiarizing themselves with their surroundings.

Zara let her eyes wander to the left, and she noted a large, transparent viewport in one of the buildings. It displayed clothing in styles similar to that of the indigenous population hastening

past them. It was flashy and immodestly cut, causing her to avert her eyes. Such garments were suited for concubines, not for nobility. There was one combination in particular that did not even cover the knees and showed all of the mannequin's arms. It was scandalous! Her eyes wandered back, and she took in the way the attire accentuated the mannequin's hips and breasts, making sure every man knew what he could expect from the wearer. She swallowed and averted her eyes again. She was Zara of the House of Ra, bound to become the First Lady of Krypton; such garments were not made for her.

<Milady!> her bodyguard's voice intruded into her thoughts, and she looked for him. He had managed to move a couple of steps ahead of her, standing in front of the next viewport. This one showed devices that offered them a specter of moving images. Display screens.

Zara closed the distance to him and looked closer at the screen to which Ching pointed. Her breath hitched in her throat, and she looked closer still. There was a man on display, wearing a suit that resembled that of the royal house, only it was immodestly colorful and sported a... *cape*. And yet, right on the chest there was the crest of the House of El. <Kal-El...>

<Yes, Milady.> Zara could feel the shock reverberating in her companion's thoughts. <He looks like the court jesters from the days of Old Krypton.> He paused as the image changed. <And he's...>

Ching's thoughts became distant, and Zara completed the sentence for him, <...flying.>

<How can this be?> Ching sounded confused in her mind.

<I do not know, Ching.> She paused and took a breath before continuing, <And it doesn't matter right now. Kal-El is still in pain, and we need to find him. We can ask our questions later.>

<Yes, Milady.>

Zara nodded towards the high rising buildings and quickened her pace as much as was appropriate for her status.

<At least he is well known...> Ching's thoughts spilled into her mind. <It should not be too difficult to find him now.>

<Ching,> Zara sent him a warning reprimand, her patience starting to be affected by her companion's continuous criticism.

The hunter continued to follow its master's enemies through the city. It had observed the weak creatures that populated the streets and imitated their appearance. They looked just like its master's race, but the hunter could sense their inferiority as they brushed by. The hunter reveled in their complete ignorance of the fact that it would just take one command from the hunter's master to snuff out their unimportant lives. But their lives would be spared. They were not the hunter's target. No, the hunter's master had been quite specific. Only the son of Jor-El, Kal-El, was to die on this day. And its master's enemies would lead it right to him.

Clark heard buoyant footsteps coming down the stairs and he strained his neck so he could see who had arrived in his prison before he let his head fall back to the ground. There was only *one* person who would come to visit him here.

"Good morning, *Superman!*" the cheerful voice of his captor greeted him. "I hope you had a restful night's sleep? After all, it was your *last* night on this very planet of mine." Clark couldn't help but notice the utter mockery in Luthor's voice as the sociopath unlocked the cage and stepped inside. "No?" Luthor crouched down beside Clark's face and continued to gloat. "Well, that's too bad." He got up again, and Clark tried to grab for his leg, but Luthor simply danced out of the way. "I, on the other hand, had a wonderful night's sleep."

His arch enemy continued to walk around the cage, flattering himself and his cunningness while Clark tried to collect his strength so he could move against him. It was Luthor's one weakness, his overconfidence, his need to show off his perceived

superiority.

“And I can assure you, *tonight* I will sleep even better.” Luthor paused. “Or, maybe, not at all,” he continued with a thoughtful smirk.

Clark gasped in pain as he felt the tip of Luthor’s shoe harshly connecting with his back, right below his left kidney.

“Because tonight..., tonight I will *finally* have conquered the most glorious prize in this battle of ours — Lois Lane.” Luthor stepped around Clark’s feet until the captured superhero could see him once again. “Oh, don’t get me wrong, I do love Lois, I really do. But to know that you’re lying dead down here while I’m with her up in the clouds; it is poetic, isn’t it?”

“Luthor...,” Clark groaned, horrific images of Lois and Luthor flashing in front of his mind’s eye.

“Yes, *Superman*?” Luthor crouched back down beside him, the monster’s face sporting wild eyes and a joyful sneer.

Clark tried to reach out and grab him, but Luthor simply twisted his thumb back until Clark howled and rolled onto his back, pain shooting from his mishandled digit all the way into his back. “You... will... never...,” he panted, and Luthor released his hand. “Lois..., she... will... never...”

“Oh, but I think she will,” Luthor replied jovially before he grew thoughtful. “But..., I guess you do have a point. Lois does have a lot of independence. A lot of... spunk,” he droned on sardonically. “Don’t you agree?” Luthor stepped back. “But worry not, my blue-clad friend. I’m sure she will learn her place before long. And if not,—” The once carefree voice became contemplative. “-well, it’s tragic, the accidents that can happen even to the famous and beautiful...”

Clark’s eyes widened in shock, and he tried to grab for Luthor again. This time the shoe hit him right in the other kidney, and Clark rolled to the side, retching helplessly against the cold, hard floor.

“Ah ah ah, *Superman*,” Luthor chided him scornfully. “We can’t have you ruining my tux.” His voice changed again, the scorn replaced by cheer. “That reminds me...” Luthor unrolled two cummerbunds, one red and one white. “Which one? The red or the white? Red for *passion*—” Clark thought he could hear Luthor practically growl at the word. “—or white for purity?”

Clark glared back at his nemesis, but his eyes would not inflame the fabric.

“Yes, you’re right,” Luthor went on, seemingly oblivious to the fact that his opponent hadn’t answered, “Definitely the red.”

Luthor bent down and drew the white cummerbund around Clark’s neck, pulling it tight just enough to strangle him a little.

“Luthor...,” Clark managed to squeeze out as he fought to draw a breath into his lungs and clawed with his fingers at the fabric around his neck.

“How strange, to hear you say my name like this, with what could easily be your dying breath.” He paused and relaxed his hands around the ends of the makeshift garrote. “But no, that would be too quick. And you still need to be alive when I put the ring on Lois’ finger.” Luthor pulled himself up and checked his pocket watch. “Until later then, *Superman*.” Luthor stepped outside the cage and threw the door shut with a decisive push, locking it behind him.

Clark managed to twist his neck until he could watch Luthor pocket the key and retreat to the stairs. Luthor tipped his right hand to his head as he turned towards the cage and then bounced back up the stairs. A moment later, Clark could hear the door fall shut, and he was alone again in the wine cellar below Lex Tower, locked into a cage and surrounded by Kryptonite. His day surely couldn’t get any worse.

Zara gasped as she felt a particularly pronounced wave of pain flooding her mind.

“Are you all right, Milady?” Ching asked his mistress aloud,

his worry clearly visible on his face as he steadied her with an outreaching hand.

Zara took a calming breath and looked around, but none of the passersby seemed to have noticed Ching’s slip into their native Kryptonian. <Yes, I’m fine,> she sent to him before urging him on. <But we need to hurry. Kal-El is in grave danger.>

Ching fell in step beside her. <Yes, Milady.>

Their path took them deeper into the settlement, and the buildings’ architecture became vaster as they plodded along their path.

Zara continued to fortify her mind against her bond-mate’s suffering; she did not need the distraction and she was unsure how Ching would react to further displays of weakness, on Kal-El’s part... or hers.

She finally halted in front of a towering building and gazed up, her eyes following the intricate designs decorating the exterior. The structure appeared to be enormously high, but she could still make out the patterns and shapes almost all the way to the top. Zara shook her head at the optical illusion and looked back at Ching. It seemed as if he wasn’t even the slightest bit out of breath, despite the fact that they had hiked through this alien metropolis at a very fast pace since just after sunrise, and now the planet’s sun was sending its rays down at them from well above the horizon. And if she thought about it, she was not sweating either...

<We have found Kal-El,> Ching’s thoughts prompted her.

<Not yet, Ching,> Zara cautioned as she looked at her companion and then back at the building. <For now we have only found the place of his imprisonment.>

Ching took a closer look at the building himself, and Zara could see him frown. <Yes, Milady.>

Zara closed her eyes for a moment, trying to locate Kal-El’s presence within the building in front of her before Ching touched her arm.

<There seems to be an entrance around this corner.> Ching pointed beyond the side of the building where a large plaza separated the front of the building from the pathway they had followed on their way there.

Zara could see a hubbub of the planet’s inhabitants moving about, entering and leaving the building and winding their ways past several stone pillars planted in front of the gold-framed portal. Apparently, admittance to the building was not being monitored by guards, but that did not automatically mean they could just walk up to Kal-El and take him with them.

<We have to find out what to expect,> Ching mused as he stepped forward and then paused to turn towards her. <Please, Milady, stay here.> He indicated the front portal and looked back at her. <I will scout out our target and return here.>

Zara nodded, and Ching made his way through the throng of aliens until he stopped in front of the building and looked at the edifice in closer scrutiny. She took note of a yellow transportation device stopping and watched as a woman emerged from it. The stranger attracted her attention as she was wearing an elaborate garment in a very faint reddish hue that reached just past her knees. The right side of her chest was adorned by a large, white plant and her blond hair was covered by a transparent veil. She seemed to be an important person and...

<Ching!> Zara exclaimed when she saw her lieutenant move towards the new arrival. <What are you doing?>

<What is necessary, Milady,> he responded calmly before moving into the path of the woman.

Zara continued to listen in over their telepathic link as Ching greeted the stranger in the native’s tongue and hurried to his side in time to catch the end of her reply.

“...told you, I do not need an escort.” The woman seemed to be annoyed at Ching’s presence.

“Please, Milady, this is a most important matter,” Ching

implored the older woman, his arms folded behind his back and looking for all intents and purposes like a member of her household staff welcoming a guest into her home.

“Look, I can understand that my daughter’s fiancé wishes to present himself in the best of manners, but this does not mean I have to be waited on,” she resolutely stated, and Zara was surprised she could understand so much of the reply. The woman seemed to have a particularly determined mind that overshadowed that of the general populace rushing by.

“Please,” Zara started and leaned forward. “There seems to be a misunderstanding. My... friend here is not associated with your daughter.”

“Then what do you want from me?” She tried to push past them, but Ching reached out and placed a hand on her right shoulder, stopping her. “Let go of me,” she snapped.

Zara shot her companion a warning glance and a telepathic message to step aside. “Please, we are only trying to find Kal-El.”

The woman was on her way past them when she paused. “What?” She looked at Zara with surprise.

“Kal-El,” she repeated. “You must have heard of him. I have seen him on the... display screen earlier, flying.”

“Wonderful.” The woman rolled her eyes. “On the day of my daughter’s wedding I happen to run into a bunch of religious zealots trying to tell me about their angels.” She continued on. “I don’t have time for this nonsense.”

Zara felt herself growing desperate. The woman obviously knew something but thought their motives were impure. “Please.” She reached out and rested a hand on the strange woman’s forearm while using the other to pull out a pendant shaped in the crest of the House of El. “He is my bond-mate, and I have traveled a long way to find him.”

The woman’s eyes fell on the silvery pendant and then rose to look into Zara’s face. “*Superman* is your angel?” She let go of a deep breath. “And here Lucy always says *Lois* is his greatest fan.”

“Lois?” Ching asked from the sidelines.

“Yes,” the woman answered. “Lois Lane?”

Zara looked at Ching, who shrugged and so did she.

The woman laughed a little. “My god, someone who has not heard of Lois Lane.” She looked them up and down and her eyes narrowed. “You people are not from around here, are you?”

“No,” Zara replied.

“Europe?”

Zara chose to simply nod her head and Ching stepped closer. “Where can we find this... Lois Lane?”

“My daughter?”

Zara looked to Ching, who simply stared back at her, offering her the mental equivalent of a shrug. “Your daughter is this ‘Lois Lane?’” she tried.

“Yes, I thought I’d said that,” Lois Lane’s mother answered impatiently.

Ching frowned, and Zara could feel his wariness as he asked, “And she is in this building.”

“Yes,” the older woman replied.

<Ching...> Zara warned her bodyguard to remain calm.

He shot her a quick look and then asked his next question in a clipped voice. “What is your daughter’s relationship with... Superman?”

“I told you, she’s his greatest fan...” The woman paused for a moment. “Oh, right. His greatest... friend?”

Zara could feel Ching relaxing, and she let go of a breath herself. “Please, you have to take us to her. This is a very important matter.”

“I... don’t think that would be a good idea right now...” She backed away a little from them. “You see, she’s going to walk down the aisle in two hours, and I very much doubt that she would appreciate the interruption.”

Ching closed the distance again. “This is a very grave matter to us.” He now towered over the other woman, being a head taller than her. “I would very much appreciate it, if you would bring us to her.” His voice took on a threatening tone. “Now.”

“I... I... I really don’t feel comfortable with this,” she said as Ching gripped her arm.

“Never the less, you will lead us to your daughter,” Ching informed her forcefully.

“*Ching*,” Zara chose to intervene. “I don’t think this treatment is necessary.” She looked at the mother of this Lois Lane and implored, “Please, excuse my companion’s behavior.” She shot Ching a look and he dropped his arm away from Lois Lane’s mother. “Maybe we could ask this Lucy instead?”

“Lucy? She isn’t here.” The older woman started to become agitated. “And can you believe this? Her *sister* is getting married and Lucy is off on some *spiritual* trip in Malibu.” She shook her head. “If this is all? I have a wedding to attend to...”

Zara smiled and shot Ching another warning glance. “Yes, thank you.”

She was afforded a glare and Ching didn’t fare any better, and then the woman pushed past them.

<Milady, why did you...?>

<Ching, not everything can be solved in open conflict.> She smiled at him. <Sometimes you need hidden allies to win a battle.> She nodded towards the other end of the building. <If you would follow me?>

The hunter watched the prominently colored prey as it retreated from its master’s enemies and sought refuge in the high building. Apparently, this particular prey held ties to Kal-El, and the hunter would make sure to use this to its advantage.

Lois was comfortably sitting in a plush chair in front of the vanity and watched the hairdresser work her hair into an elaborate style when the door was pushed open after a short knock. She turned towards the door and enjoyed the fresh breeze wafting into a room where the air was thick with the fumes of too much hairspray. Her wedding dress was still hanging over a mannequin in the corner of the room, and she was clad in a simple shirt/jeans combination.

“Ms. Lane?”

Lois turned her head towards the door and saw another nameless aide enter, followed by her mother.

“Your mother is here,” the aide told her in a sweet voice.

The bride-to-be suppressed the urge to add a ‘Candy’ to her ‘Thanks’ and focused on her mother. The older Lane woman looked slightly flustered and carried herself with a notable stiffness. Lois closed her eyes and worked hard to stop herself from screaming. Her mother was drunk again. Today was her *wedding day* and her mother was *drunk*. Again! Her father hadn’t even bothered to show up. Her sister was off in California, cavorting in the sun with the Malibu beach boys. And her mother was drunk. Only *her* family would conspire to try and ruin what was supposed to be the happiest day in her life.

She sighed silently, pasted a smile on her face, and finally decided to greet her mother, if a bit icily. “Good morning, Mother.”

“Yes. Good morning, Child.”

Lois furrowed her brows. She would have suspected a slur marring the older woman’s words, but aside from the odd greeting, she seemed quite in control of her voice. Maybe her mother had only had a small bottle of vodka with her morning coffee...

“I’m glad you managed to come,” Lois added and pointed towards a seat. “Please, why don’t you sit down for a while? Do you want...”

Lois looked towards the aide who promptly answered,

“Cindy.”

“... ‘Cindy’ here to fetch you a nice, strong cup of coffee?”

“Yes.” Her mother moved to the indicated sofa and looked down at it for a moment before lowering herself onto the soft cushions.

“It will only be a minute, Mrs. Lane,” Cindy confirmed and left them alone with the hairdresser — Lois worked her mind — Jacques. Yes, that sounded about right. Jacques, the hairdresser.

Stifling another sigh, Lois ignored her mother and concentrated on the upcoming event — her wedding. She still couldn’t believe this was really happening. Just a few short weeks ago she had been single and loosely dating the most — second most — eligible bachelor in the world, and now she was about to marry him.

And none of her friends were here. Clark had been the first and had left her in the cold because of his sick jealousy. And Perry and Jimmy had just followed suit; why, she still could not understand. And in less than two hours she would become *Mrs. Lex Luthor*. This time she couldn’t manage to completely stifle the sigh that escaped her lips.

Jacques was just starting to remove the curlers when the telephone rang. Lois bent forward and picked it up. “Yes?”

“Mrs. Luthor,” the voice of Lex’s ‘assistant’ came through the speaker.

“What is it, Mrs. Cox?” Lois answered coldly. She just didn’t like that woman. Mrs. Cox had always reminded her of a cross between a high-priced hooker and an assassin. And come to think of it, that seemed to be a very good combination if she was specializing in the rich and famous.

“There are unexpected guests down here, Mrs. Luthor.”

<Clark?> Lois heart-rate sped up. “Clark?” she exclaimed hopefully.

“No.” Mrs. Cox’s voice seemed to have dropped and was now downright chilly. “A young woman and a man claiming to be your sister, Lucy, and her *close* acquaintance.”

“Lucy?” Lois asked in surprise. Had her sister really come to her wedding despite her ‘timeout’ in California? Of course, she still had to bring a boy toy with her, but Lois wasn’t going to frown upon that now. And besides, this was a wedding and people *did* usually bring dates to a wedding. “I thought she’s in California...”

“Yes, that was my understanding as well. But apparently they flew in from...” There was a pause and then Mrs. Cox’s voice returned. “...Malibu. They ask to see you.”

Lois couldn’t help but smile. “Well, send them up.” She hung up and beamed at her mother. “Would you believe it? Lucy has come all the way across the country to attend my wedding.”

“Yes. This is... good news.”

Her mother’s tone told a different story, and Lois frowned again. “Is there a problem, Mother?”

“No, of course not,” she responded flatly.

Remembering her mother’s often voiced criticism at her daughters’ chosen lifestyles, Lois added, “And she’s bringing company. So could you *please* just let it go? At least today?” Her eyes implored her mother to follow her pleading.

“Of course, Child.” Her mother rose and placed the cup on the coffee table before she turned towards Jacques, who was in the process of removing another curler. “Could you please... leave us alone?”

Jacques looked from Lois to her mother and back to Lois again. “Mademoiselle Lane?”

“Please, do as my mother asks.” Lois reinforced her mother’s suggestion, unwilling to bring the Lane’s family business out in front of a virtual stranger. “My hair is almost done anyway.”

“Oui, Mademoiselle Lane.” Jacques placed the comb back on the vanity and bowed slightly. “Please, do not hesitate to ask for

my assistance when you require it.” He paused. “I... do not wish to mar Mr. Luthor’s wedding by bad hair, oui?”

Lois rolled her eyes and nodded. “Thank you, Jacques.”

A few minutes after Jacques had left, Lois heard another knock on the door. Again, it was pushed open without so much as an invitation. Lois sighed as she watched Mrs. Cox enter the room, followed by two strangers, a man and a woman, both dressed in charcoal gray suits. The man looked to be about the same height as Superman and had thick, wavy hair. The woman was somewhere between her and Clark in height. Her partially braided hair was of the same brown color as her companion’s and fell well below her shoulders from what Lois could see. She also wasn’t wearing any make-up, Lois noted with surprise. And most importantly, she was *not* Lucy.

Nonplussed, Lois sharply stated, “Okay, what’s the joke?”

Her mother seemed to be surprised as well, as she rose from the couch and stepped closer to the door.

“I beg your pardon?” Mrs. Cox asked, her voice barely hinting at the surprise Lois could see in her eyes.

“*That’s* not Lucy!” Lois pointed towards the woman.

The woman raised her hand. “Please, let me explain...”

Her companion looked towards Lois’ mother, and there was a strange look on his face. Her mother seemed to be quite edgy as well.

“I think, I’d better call security,” Mrs. Cox stated forcefully before Lois was startled by her mother crashing a left hook into the side of Mrs. Cox’s head.

“Mother!” Lois gasped in surprise before the woman who had obviously posed as her sister started to draw the door shut and the man directed a martial arts kick towards her mother. Then her eyes widened even more when her mother fought back with four-inch *claws* and her rose-colored dress started to shimmer and darken. The female imposter moved closer to Lois, and the startled reporter chose to employ her knowledge of Tae-Kwon-Do to quickly send the stranger to the floor with a well-practiced throw. Next, Lois picked up a bronze vase that was about the size of her forearm and turned back to the melee in front of her. She wanted to help her mother, only there was no trace of the older woman to be found, and in her place Lois could see a... creature dressed in light brown garbs that looked like leather. The creature was clawing at the man, and Lois decided to go with her gut.

There was a resounding ‘clunk’, and then an eerie calm settled over the partially trashed room. The creature was lying in front of her and not moving. The vase sported a large dent as it was lying right next to Lois’ victim. The stranger was gasping and slowly drawing himself up on his arms. His female companion slowly crawled to her feet, muttering something that sounded like ‘gin’, and Mrs. Cox seemed to be out cold as well. Lois couldn’t help but feel a satisfied twinge in her stomach at the sight of the cut and the bruise developing just below the right eye of Lex’s ‘assistant’.

Still panting for breath after the unexpected exertion, Lois straightened herself and assumed a defensive pose. “Okay, let me ask this one more time before I call the cops. Or Lex. Or—” A malicious smirk crept onto her face. “—*Superman*.”

The strange woman froze in place, her eyes widening. “Superman. Yes.” Her breathing sounded a bit strained, but she seemed to have recovered extremely fast after the way Lois had sent her to the floor.

Maybe she needed to tone up her martial arts technique, Lois mused before she shot back with a raised eyebrow, “You *want* me to call Superman?” She folded her arms as she regarded her opponent, who was now slowly getting to her feet. “You *do* know he’s not going to like *this*—” Lois indicated the jumble of bodies on the floor. “—one bit, do you?”

“No.” The woman shook her head, and Lois couldn’t help but

feel a satisfied twinge at this more normal reaction of a crook when faced with the prospect of coming face to face with the Man of Steel. “Help Superman.”

“What?” Lois blinked, genuinely shocked. “What do you mean by ‘Help, Superman’? That’s *my* line, you know?” she quipped, her voice rising in pitch.

The woman was now standing, and her eyes darted back and forth between Lois and her companion before she let loose in some really strange language. It sounded like a combination of Chinese and an Eastern European dialect. Or something.

Lois watched the exchange for a few more seconds, and realizing that the woman’s companion was also on his way to getting back up, she decided to take the situation firmly back into her own hands. Luckily, there was a second bronze vase standing on the ledge. “Okay, I think that’s enough,” Lois informed her uninvited guests uncompromisingly while brandishing her makeshift weapon. “I want you *both* to *sit down* while I call Henderson.”

Before Lois could reach for the telephone, the woman had turned to her and both her hands were outstretched in a warding-off gesture. “No. Please. You have to listen.”

Lois snorted derisively and reached to pick up the phone when the next sentence stopped her cold.

“Superman is in pain.”

“What did you just say!?” Lois snapped as she whirled around to face them fully. If they were holding Superman captive and hurting him, she was going to make sure they would pay a *very* dear price. “I swear, if you hurt Superman...”

“Not us.” The woman looked back to her companion and then again to Lois. “We want to help Superman.”

Lois frowned and took them in a bit closer. They didn’t look all that impressive, and they most definitely didn’t look like they were government agents. Not that she trusted the *government* to look out for Superman. So what could they do to help Superman? “You’ve got *two* minutes.” Lois held up her left index and middle finger while her right hand still brandished her impromptu club.

The woman looked a bit confused but then she shrugged and started her tale. “My name is Zara of the Royal House of Ra.” She indicated her companion. “This is Lieutenant Ching, my bodyguard and adviser.”

“You people sure don’t believe in excess weight, huh?” Lois sniped offhandedly while her mind tried to process the information. ‘Royal House of Ra’? What in the name of the King was that about? And why was she suddenly starting to quote Elvis? She really missed her friends...

The man, Lieutenant Ching, chose to add to the conversion. “No, we do not have any resources to spare.”

“Ching.” The woman, Zara, silenced her bodyguard with a sharp snap.

Now *that* was something Lois could familiarize herself with, given how she liked to be top banana as well, or simply ‘on top’, as Clark had paraphrased so many months ago.

“We have come here from New Krypton...”

“Krypton!?” Lois interjected again, her voice high in surprise. “That’s where Superman is from...” What was going on? And why did she *always* attract the loonies...?

“Yes.” Zara nodded. “We are... his people.”

“Yeah, right,” Lois grunted sarcastically, her eyes narrowing. “I think this conversation is over.”

“No, please.” Zara reached into her jacket and pulled out a silvery object. “This is the crest of the House of El. Kal-El... Superman’s house.”

“Kal-El!?” Lois was befuddled. These two loonies seemed to have made up an entire *history* of facts about Superman. Although, giving him a name seemed kind of elaborate and easily thwarted once he stated his real name to the press, meaning her.

“Yes. Kal-El. The name given to him upon his birth by his

father.” The woman looked apologetic. “I do not know why he chose to name himself ‘Superman’ on this world.”

Lois blushed at that but decided to remain silent. After all, Superman surely had had more reason than simply not wanting to correct her in public for keeping the alias she had given him.

“Okay, fine. Let’s just say I believe you for the moment. Not that I do, but let’s just assume I do, okay?” Lois took a deep breath. “That still doesn’t explain why Superman — excuse me, *Kal-El* — is in pain.” And with that, she hoped she had the conversation back to where she needed it, on the potential danger to her... to Superman.

“Yes.” Zara looked thoughtful for a moment. “We do not know *why* he is in pain. We only know he is.”

Lois snorted. “How?” She held up her right hand, the makeshift club horizontally in front of her face. “Don’t tell me. You can ‘feel his pain’, right?” she asked, derision dripping off her voice as she finger-quoted with her left hand.

Zara looked startled. “You know about our telepathy?”

<Okay, *what* now?> Lois was taken aback to say the least. “Telepathy?” Her voice was beginning to sound squeaky. “Are you guys for real?”

“Please, forgive us.” The Kryptonian, if that’s what she was, looked confused. “I had thought you had said...”

“Look, Lady, I was being sarcastic,” Lois sniped. “But I mean, sure, telepathy, why the hell not?” She started to wave her arms around in agitation. “After all, Superman can fly and stop bullets with his bare hands. Hell, he even lifts *spaceships* into orbit.” She paused and got a dirty look on her face. “Oh, yeah, and can use his vision gizmo to peep at... unsuspecting women. So I guess telepathy isn’t *that* farfetched.” Then she realized that this probably also meant he had listened in on her most *private* thoughts about him and suddenly felt a deep blush creeping into her cheeks.

Zara drew in a sharp breath and the man, Ching, was standing with his mouth agape. “Please excuse me, but you said he did what?” Zara looked genuinely shocked.

“What?” Lois was confused. “Don’t tell me you don’t know about his powers?” Lois rolled her eyes. “I mean, come *on*. If you’re playing the family reunion bit, the least you could have done was check up on Superman.” Lois opened her arms in an exaggerated gesture. “Every *four-year-old* with a television knows what Superman can do.”

“We...” Zara appeared to be at a loss for words. “We have only just arrived here. We do not know about Kal-El’s powers.”

“We did see an... image of him flying, Milady,” Ching added.

“Yes.” She nodded. “But this is not important now. Kal-El is here, in this building, and he is in pain.”

Suddenly Lois felt the desperate need to sit down, and the plush sofa two feet behind her seemed to be just fine for this task. She flopped down with an audible gasp. “Could you repeat that, please?” she whispered after a few heartbeats and looked into the eyes of the woman who had identified herself as Zara.

“Kal-El, Superman... He is here, in this building.” She grew somber. “Of this there is no doubt. And he is in great pain.”

“But Superman is invulnerable...,” Lois muttered, her thoughts running wild. There was just *no* way Superman could be here, in Lex Tower. The *entire* building was owned and operated by Lex. There was simply no way the government could have hidden a secret lab here. Lex would never allow it. He knew how much she felt for Superman. She paused in her thoughts. Well, Lex knew what a good *friend* Superman was to her. So Lex would never allow the government to use his facilities for such nefarious purposes. And besides, how *could* anyone hurt Superman. Unless... “Kryptonite...” Lois uttered almost inaudibly.

“Yes?” Zara asked.

Lois looked back up at the two strangers who looked distinctly worried at the moment. “There is a substance, a green, glowing crystal that is said to be harmful to Superman.” She snorted. “It’s a myth, sprung from the delusional mind of a fanatic.” <And published by me,> Lois added silently to herself with a feeling of utter remorse.

Zara and Ching shared a look, and then the woman closed her eyes, her brows furrowed in concentration before she gasped. “Kryptonite!”

“Huh?” Lois uttered.

“Kal-El, he confirmed it. He says there is Kryptonite everywhere.” Zara looked shell-shocked.

“Are you for real?” Lois felt the lump in her throat plummeting deep into her stomach before she asked the next question, her voice very small, “Who would do this?”

The odd couple shared another look and after Ching nodded, Zara closed her eyes again. This time Ching had to steady her when she reopened them. “Luthor?” she asked weakly.

Lois only managed a strangled gasp. Either this was a very elaborate scheme by Clark to discredit her fiancé or these people had just told her that her fiancé was trying to murder Superman.

She looked to the two unconscious persons over by the door. There was the creature that was just about the ugliest guy she had ever seen, including the beaten-up boxers from when she had hung out at Menken’s Gym. With fingernails that resembled claws, claws that had been quite sturdy while he had attacked Ching, given how they were still intact.

Her gaze wandered to Mrs. Cox, and she remembered another oddity from a couple of days ago. ‘Series K’, a project whose details were ‘confidential’. Series K, as in *Kryptonite*. But it *had* to be a coincidence, right? After all, Lex was a *good* person and the only one who had *ever* voiced mistrust had been Clark. Well, and Perry and Jimmy after Clark had gotten to them.

Lois suddenly sprung to her feet, startling her ‘guests’. “*BASTARD!*” she screeched and hurtled the bronze vase across the room, right at the vanity where she could see the reflection of her wedding gown. At least until the mirror shattered and her tears clouded her vision. She sank back down onto the sofa and let the salty streams wash the dust from her eyes.

“This woman is crazy,” Ching stated in their native Kryptonian while staring in shock at the crying woman in front of them. “This whole *planet* is filled with crazy people.”

“Ching!” Zara decided to cut him off. “Must I remind you of your position?”

“No, Milady,” he answered abashedly.

Zara suppressed a sigh at her companion’s outburst. He was always so formal, so pressed for protocol. And yet, he was also her closest confidant and most trusted adviser. And... maybe more; to say that their personal situation was frustrating would be an understatement. Of course, it did not help that her position demanded she marry a man she did not know, a man for whom she did not harbor any feelings at all. And a man she still had to rescue. Her eyes fell onto the woman in front of her. These aliens did not know how easy their lives were...

A groan from the door startled her. She looked over and saw the assassin begin to reawaken. “Ching.”

“I see it, Milady.” Ching quickly looked around the room and his eyes settled on the device sitting next to the shattered mirror. It sported a long, curled wire that would hopefully be strong enough to restrain the vile creature. She watched as Ching worked as quickly and efficiently as always when he ripped the cord from the device and proceeded to tie the assassin’s arms, wrists, and legs behind his back. “This should hold him,” he stated while using some cloth he had found to gag the assassin’s mouth.

Zara nodded. “At least for now.” Her eyes traveled over the

bound creature’s form. “Do you think that...?”

Ching turned the assassin on his back so they could have a better look. “I believe so...”

“Hel-lo?” The female voice came from behind them, and Zara needed a moment to realize the address was not in Kryptonian, but in the native’s tongue.

“Is this a private conversation?”

Zara turned around to the earth woman, Lois Lane.

“Because, you know, that... *thing*—” The woman indicated the assassin. “-did a very... *inspired* portrayal of my mother, and I’d really like to know-” Lois Lane stood up and went over to her, her voice at once very combative. “-what the hell happened to my *real* mother!?”

Zara’s eyes widened a bit as she took in her new acquaintance’s change of behavior. Gone were the tears that had offended Ching so much, and in their place Zara could see a quite intimidating fire.

Before she could answer, Ching chose to intervene. “*This*—” He nodded to the floor. “-is a creature known as Tez among our people. He is an animal. A vicious killer in the pay and service of Lord Nor.”

The earth woman looked back between Zara and her companion. “Nor?”

“A... political rival,” Zara elaborated carefully. It would not do to explain Kryptonian power struggles to such an agitated audience, especially given their designs for Kal-El.

“Political rival?” The Earthling snorted and rolled her eyes. “Here on this world, politicians don’t usually send out assassins.”

“Lord Nor is not a... typical politician on our world either,” Zara couldn’t help but add smartly. Conversing with this woman was just so... different from the endless debates in court.

“I’ll bet,” Lois Lane rolled her eyes before growing more serious again and focusing on Ching, who took a step back, Zara noted. “So, what has this... Tez done to my mother?”

“To the best of our knowledge...” Ching paused. “Nothing.”

“Then where is she?” The other woman glared at Zara’s bodyguard, and she could sense his discomfort. Perhaps this encounter would teach him some respect for the indigenous people of this world.

“Is your mother a fighter like you?” Ching surprised her with his response, and Lois Lane raised an eyebrow as well.

“No,” she muttered distractedly. “What’s that got to do...”

Ching didn’t let her finish. “Then Tez will not have killed her.”

“Huh?” The woman furrowed her brows. “And how can you be so sure of that?”

“Tez does not kill randomly.”

“You just called this Tez a ‘vicious killer’, and now you’re telling me he didn’t harm my mother because she wasn’t his *mark*?” Her voice had started to rise again.

“Yes.” Ching shot Zara a look and a mental request for approval to which she acquiesced. The mission was what was paramount. “She will most likely be tied up somewhere, perhaps unconscious.” Ching straightened his back. “There is no reason to assume she has been... seriously harmed.”

“Good.” Lois Lane glared at Ching and then at Tez. “Then ask him-” She nodded towards the assassin. “-where he put her and let’s get going.”

Ching shook his head. “That will not be possible.”

“Excuse me?” She stared at Zara’s bodyguard in shock.

Zara chose this moment to actively enter the conversation. Obviously, Ching was not very eloquent when it came to dealing with headstrong women. In fact, she seemed to be the only one able to handle him. “Tez has failed in his mission. He will bring his life-force to an end once he wakes up and finds himself bound and unable to assassinate Kal-El.”

The other woman snorted and folded her arms defiantly.

“Then *we* will *look* for my mother!”

“And risk capture?” Ching confronted her. “That will not be prudent. Kal-El is our priority.”

“Then *you* go find Superman, and *I’ll* look for my mother.”

“There is still the question of the... ‘Kryptonite’,” Zara added as she remembered the searing pain transmitted over the telepathic link. “Is it also...”

“Rats!” Lois Lane seemed to deflate at that. “If you guys really are Kryptonians like Superman...” She shook her head. “This is not good. This is *so* not good.” Her eyes looked back to Ching, and Zara thought she could see them glistening. “My mother really *is* okay?”

“Ching?” Zara prompted her bodyguard.

“Yes.” He nodded. “To the best of my knowledge, Tez will not have harmed her,” he elaborated seriously.

Lois Lane sighed and stepped to the door, grabbing a short jacket made from the same blue material as her pants. “Then let’s go. But if I find out you’ve lied to me...” She did not finish the sentence, and the glimmer in her eyes told Zara that she didn’t want her to finish the sentence, either.

Clark rolled onto his stomach in an attempt to get up. It had not been long since he had heard the voice for the second time. He no longer thought it was his mother, but he had no idea who or what it was. Maybe the Kryptonite was finally driving his mind over the brink, in addition to his body.

He shivered but it didn’t matter. He just *had* to get up. Clark had no idea how long it had been since Luthor had paid him his diabolical visit, but he knew he didn’t have any time to waste. He just *had* to get out of this cage. He just *had* to prevent the wedding. He couldn’t let Lois marry this monster.

By now Clark was on his hands and knees, the air rasping loudly through his lungs as he tried to suck in more oxygen.

<Kal-El!>

Clark paused; the ethereal voice was back. “Y-yes?” he managed to ask the empty room.

“Where are you?”

Was it Death? Was Death a woman? But why would Death need his help in finding him? Was it because he an alien on this world?

“Who are you?” Clark asked the air around him.

<I am Zara.>

She didn’t sound like she was Death. And he didn’t think that Death had a name...

<Kal-El, I have come to rescue you. But I need your help.>

<Rescue?> His wracked mind tried to understand. “Lois!” A violent cough shook his body but he tried to steady himself. “Save Lois.”

<Lois Lane is with us. Where are you?>

Clark froze at that. He must be hallucinating because whatever this entity was, Lois couldn’t be with it.

“No. Lois.” He took in a deep breath. “Save Lois.”

His words must have worked, because the mirage stopped its words, and Clark dropped back to all fours. Lois was safe. That was all that mattered.

<Kal-El.>

“Go away!” Why couldn’t she just save Lois and leave him to die...?

<Superman! Lois wants to know where you are. She will kick your caped butt if you keep silent.>

Clark froze at that. Either he was completely gone now, or Lois was really a part of whatever *this* was. “Wine cellar,” he answered automatically before another cough let his body spasm. “Luthor’s wine cellar.”

<Thank you, Kal-El. We will come for you now.>

“No! Get Lois *out!*” Clark drew himself to his feet and reached for the door. The moment his hands touched the bars, he

let go of an inhuman scream, the Kryptonite burning into his skin as he rattled the door. A moment later, he fell away from the bars as if he had been electrocuted and crumpled onto the floor in the middle of the cage. Then everything went black.

Lois watched from their hiding place down in the hallway as Zara ‘spoke’ with Superman.

“The wine cellar,” the Kryptonian woman informed them after Lois had given her a special message for Superman.

Sometimes Superman could be *really* dense. Put him into a suit and give him a pair of glasses, and he would be almost as bad as Clark... She shook her head over the notion and told her companions, “Thank god. At least he isn’t in some secret room somewhere.” Lois started to plot the best way to get to her friend when she noted that Zara had grown stiff. Or more stiff than usual. “What?”

Zara looked like she was going to be sick, and after a moment Ching answered. “Zara has lost contact with Kal-El.”

“What?” Lois felt a cold fist clenching around her heart. “What do you mean, ‘lost contact’?” She glared at the other woman.

“There was intense pain.” She took a deep breath. “And then he was gone.”

“Nonononono, this can’t be happening now...” Lois felt tears welling up in her eyes. “He can’t be dead.” She gripped the lapel of Zara’s suit jacket and pulled her along. “We *have* to find him.” She had to find a servant, a cook, or someone. Anyone who knew the way to the rat-bastard’s wine cellar. And this was a wedding. There was bound to be staff all around, and she had two Kryptonians at her side. That should be enough to confront an army...

The hunter slowly drifted in and out of consciousness. It still had trouble understanding what had happened. One moment, its master’s enemies had come into the room, together with one of the creatures that populated this world. It knew that it had no choice but to attack. They would realize that it was the hunter. And then it had awoken to find its limbs bound and its mouth gagged. It had failed and got ready to terminate its existence. Then a flash of memory surfaced. Kal-El, its target, was held by the creature that was called ‘Luthor’. And the other creature, ‘Lois Lane’, was associated with it.

“Status!” Lex snapped into the walkie-talkie as he rushed down the hallway to his fiancée’s dressing room.

“Sir,” the distinguished, British accent of his butler Nigel came steadily through the speaker. “It appears that the future Mrs. Luthor and Mrs. Cox have been attacked as well. The future Mrs. Luthor appears to be mostly unhurt but was tied up with a telephone cord. Mrs. Cox is still unconscious.”

Luthor paused for a moment, taking a deep breath. “Thank you, Nigel.” He readjusted his tie and walked down the long hallway at a more appropriate pace. “I will be there momentarily.”

“Very well, Sir.”

He continued on his way, mentally reviewing the events of the past few minutes. First, Lois’ mother had been found bound and gagged in the ladies’ room, and then it had taken his staff a full *two minutes* before they had informed Nigel of the situation. His butler had, of course, performed to his usual standards and immediately gone to look after his fiancée. Lex made a mental note to find out the names responsible for this disgraceful faux pas in security. And then Nigel would see to it that they would be properly dismissed.

“Right this way, Sir,” Nigel greeted him at the door to the dressing room. “The future Mrs. Luthor is awaiting your arrival.”

Lex barely nodded at his butler as he strode into the room.

One look told him there had been quite a struggle. The mirror on the vanity was destroyed, several vases were lying on the floor, and a member of his staff was providing first aid to Mrs. Cox, who wasn't yet recovered. Lois was sitting on the futon, an older, blond woman beside her, holding her hand. Her mother, obviously.

"Lois, my dear," Luthor greeted her with his best smile. "I'm inconsolable that this has happened." He lowered himself to Lois' other side, resting an arm around his fiancée. "On your wedding day, no less." His voice grew hard. "Let me assure you, I will not let those responsible escape justice."

Lois turned to look at him and so did her mother.

Lex rose from the futon and bowed slightly. "Lex Luthor, Mrs. Lane. I apologize this meeting has to be under such unfortunate circumstances."

"Yes, well. What can I say, Mr. Luthor," the older woman blustered.

"Lex, please." He afforded his future mother-in-law his best smile.

"Mr. Luthor,—"

Apparently Lois' mother was still a bit distant. He had of course heard about the unfortunate incident where she had declined the use one of his limousines for arriving at the wedding. This was a matter he would have to address at a later point in time.

"—I find it *very* disturbing that I was mugged *inside* your building."

"As I said, Mrs. Lane, I'm inconsolable about this horrific breach of security." His voice grew hard, and he looked back and forth between Lois and her mother. "Unfortunately, my assets, and Lois, have recently become the focus of criminal attacks. Apparently, the heinous attack on the Daily Planet—" Lex made sure to squeeze Lois' hand reassuringly. "—had only been the start of a very broad-based conspiracy against my beautiful bride and myself."

Mrs. Lane simply glared at him.

Lex took a calming breath and focused on Lois while his mind tried to come up with potential names for the intruders. He was sure that Lois would not have ended up unconscious if her partner had been a part of this coup. Kent was a wimp. A wimp with an unhealthy infatuation for his fiancée. It didn't matter. Kent would be joining the fish in Hobbs River soon enough.

"Lois," Luthor started again, "are you still up for the wedding or should we postpone?"

"No." Lois shook her head. "Lex." A timid smile was on her lips. "I want to be with you."

"Thank you, my dear." Lex brushed a kiss against the corner of her mouth. "This is the Lois I love," he whispered while he pondered if the hairdresser had left a spot of hairspray or some other chemical on her skin. "Never letting yourself getting drawn under." Lois smiled back at him as he cradled her cheek. "Then I won't keep you." He rose. "I will see you in front of the minister." There was no need to spoil the surprise that the Archbishop would perform the ceremony.

Lex strode towards the door and looked at Nigel. "Make sure my fiancée is ready for the ceremony on time. I do not wish for this to become part of today's gossip column."

"I understand, Sir."

"Good. Good." Lex nodded his head towards the hallway, stepped outside, and was closely followed by his butler, who looked expectantly at him. "I want those responsible found and... dealt with." His quiet voice left no opportunity for misunderstanding. "Silently."

"I shall make the appropriate arrangements."

"And Nigel?" Luthor eyed his butler with piercing eyes.

"Our... guest needs to be checked upon as well."

"I shall personally ensure he is still secure."

"Good." There was an edge to his voice when he spoke his next words. "And no more mistakes."

"Certainly, Sir." Nigel nodded his understanding and went towards the freight elevator that was located around the corner on the far end of the hallway, talking into his walkie-talkie about security and assistance for the future Mrs. Luthor.

The master of Lex Tower nodded and turned back towards the reception area. It was time he entertained his guests until the wedding could commence. He did not doubt Nigel's efficiency, but given the upheaval, Lois might not make it on time after all... something he would have to take into account for in future arrangements.

Lois watched as Ching looked out into the hallway through the slightly opened door. She had mentioned it to her companions, but they had not yet mastered x-ray-vision.

"There is an older man coming," Ching whispered. "He appears to be talking into some form of communications device."

"Let him pass," Lois whispered back. "We don't need the risk of someone reporting in on an interrupted conversation."

Ching nodded and let the door close a bit more.

"I'm headed for the wine cellar and will be out of reach until I return."

Lois knew that voice. Her eyes narrowed and her breathing sped up. Could it be this easy? She continued to watch with a racing heart as Nigel St. John walked past her, clipping the walkie-talkie onto his belt. "Ching, can you grab him? And make sure he doesn't use the walkie-talkie." She reached out a hand to steady his arm. "And be careful."

The Kryptonian nodded and together they watched until the older man had walked past the door and was pressing the call-button for the elevator. Then she saw Ching rushing out the door without as much as a whisper. He wasn't a blur like Superman, but he still moved faster than any human she had ever seen.

A moment later, Ching beckoned them closer; the butler was firmly restrained by one arm around his arms and waist and the other around his mouth. It was obvious that the Englishman was trying to free himself, but it was to no avail.

Lois slipped out the door and Zara followed. The elevator was just a few feet away, and Lois saw the eyes of Luthor's manservant grow wide as he took her in. Lois simply eyed him coldly, and they waited together until the elevator arrived.

"Which floor," Lois snarled when the doors closed behind them. St. John continued to glare and Lois followed-up on her first question, "I know that you have Superman locked up in the wine cellar, and I want to know which floor. You can either tell me, or my friend here will become *very* unpleasant."

Ching seemed to get the hint, and she saw the older man's body stiffen as the pressure around his kidneys continued to build. Finally, St. John nodded, and Ching loosened the hand he had over the other man's mouth just a little. "Basement One."

"Thank you." Lois turned around and pressed the appropriate button. "Now, are there guards down there?"

This time the butler seemed more cooperative and shook his head. "Key. Left pocket."

"See, I knew we could come to an understanding." Lois smiled coldly and reached into the older man's pocket for the key. "I'll make sure to tell Henderson how cooperative you've been."

St. John tried to struggle harder but Ching continued to restrain him. "Is his assistance still required?"

"No..." Lois mumbled absentmindedly as she played with the key in her hand. "I think we can..." She didn't get a chance to finish the sentence as the Kryptonian rammed Luthor's right-hand-man headfirst against the wall. Hard. "What did you do that for?" Lois snapped as she eyed the lifeless body Ching was now lowering to the floor.

"He is only unconscious, and we cannot risk him notifying

his superiors,” Ching justified his actions.

Lois couldn't believe this! Her eyes found Zara's who looked startled but not upset.

“Lieutenant Ching is responsible for the safety of this mission,” the Kryptonian woman stated. “And I believe you threatened this man as well.”

“That's different!” Lois was flabbergasted. “You can't just go around, knocking people out like... like...” Those people might have Superman's powers but they surely lacked his moral compass. She could only hope they would leave after freeing him, because she did *not* want to have two loose cannons flying around in Metropolis. Or anywhere else, for that matter. The fake Superman had been bad enough.

She did not have time for more as the elevator dinged to announce their arrival. Ching moved in front of the door and was out first, making sure there was no one lying in wait for them. By now Lois was halfway glad they didn't meet anyone because she feared what would happen to them at the Kryptonians' hands if they did.

They found themselves in a utilitarian corridor without any of the usual decoration she had come to associate with Luthor's home. Even his ‘Ark’ had looked more polished. She shuddered at the memory of the apartment Luthor had had ready for her. Apparently, only the servants used this part of the tower.

Lois looked around. There was a set of doors to the left and as she moved closer, she could see a label on it, stating ‘Cleaning Supplies’. She let go of the breath that she had been unconsciously holding. Now they just had to walk down the corridor until they found the wine cellar. She turned around to look at Ching. “Leave Nigel in the door. That way the elevator will be blocked.”

Ching did as he was told and Lois ran down the corridor closely followed by her newfound associates. She reached a big set of sliding doors and read the words she had been looking for — ‘Wine Cellar’. Her hand gripped the heavy handle and she remembered the key still in her right hand.

Lois held her breath when she pushed the key in. It fit. She turned the small piece of steel in the lock and heard a distinct ‘click’ before she pulled on the handle and started to push the door open. There was a green glow emanating from the inside and she heard two gasps behind her. It took Lois a second to catch on, and then she pulled the door shut again with a forceful shove.

Turning around, she looked at the two, suddenly very pale, Kryptonians. “You guys better head back towards the elevator.” Zara and Ching nodded in agreement, and Lois waited until they were several yards away before reopening the door.

She peeked her head inside carefully. There were racks upon racks of wine bottles, some tools, and a few white lab-coats hanging alongside one wall. A big set of wooden doors stood halfway open, letting the ominous green light shine into the outer room. Apparently, there was more to this wine cellar than just a storage room.

Lois carefully stepped into the next room and gasped. It was huge. And when she said ‘huge’, she meant *huge*. The walls appeared to be made of rough-hewn stone and the ceiling was easily twenty feet above her. There were casks everywhere. Small ones. Large ones. And even one that had to be the size of a swimming pool.

But all this display of excess didn't matter right now because the prominent centerpiece of the room was a cage, about ten feet long and wide. The bars emanated a sick, green glow, and in the middle she could see a familiar blue and red shape lying on the floor. Superman. He wasn't moving.

She didn't notice the sob that escaped her throat as she rushed over to the cage, looking for the door. “Superman!” she called out. “Can you hear me?” She rattled against the bars and when

she finally found the door, Lois fell to her knees in front of it, taking a closer look. It wasn't a modern cylinder lock, but instead looked like a classic warded lock. “Crap!” Warded locks might be easier to pick, but one still needed a button-hook lock-pick and hers was back at home together with the rest of her investigation equipment.

Lois gave the door a frustrated shake before she looked around frantically. She could see tons of wooden appliances associated with the age-old art of making wine, a couple of candleholders, and several paintings, but nothing that she could use to crack the door open. Her eyes finally traveled up the stairs and she saw a fire axe hanging there.

“It's worth a try,” Lois mumbled to herself as she rushed up the stairs and pulled the tool from the wall. The handle was longer than her outstretched arm and the whole thing weighed at least six pounds, if not more. Gritting her teeth, Lois hastened back down, holding onto the axe with both hands.

“Okay, Superman,” she told the lifeless figure while resting the blade against the lock. “Here goes nothing.” And with those words, Lois lifted axe high above her head and slammed it back down with all the strength she could muster. She felt the impact vibrating through her body as the axe jumped back from the metal and crashed to the floor.

“Oomph!” Lois exclaimed and drew in several breaths before she eyed the door, looking for possible damage. The box holding the lock was barely bent out of shape and the biggest damage she could discern was the gleaming scratch that now ran down the front of the lock.

“Dammit!” She kicked the axe lying on the floor and rested her head against the cage, her left hand running through her hair. She found a hairpin on the back of her head and pulled it free. Her eyes lingered on the thin, bent wire before she sent it into a dark corner with a disgusted snip of her fingers. What she needed was a sturdier piece of metal than a simple hairpin. Something like a...

“Coat-hanger!” The word had barely left her mouth before she rushed back to the outer room where she homed in on the lab-coats. She tore one off its hook and liberated the simple wire coat-hanger before she made her way back inside, her bounty clutched against her chest.

Back in front of the cage, she eyed the bent wire closely while she compared it to the keyhole. The wire seemed to fit and she moved on to contemplating her next problem — cutting up the coat-hanger and bending the wire into shape. Her eyes fell onto the axe again and Lois decided to give it a try. She crouched down, placed the coat-hanger into the gap between the cage's door and the stone floor, leaving only the rounded corner exposed. Then she picked up the axe and drove it home. The softer metal of the wire gave way to the steel-edge of the blade and the small piece of metal jumped away.

Lois didn't care and quickly turned the wire around, ready to repeat the procedure on the other end. Again, she gripped the axe close to the blade so she had more control and rammed it down next to the door, severing the other end of the coat-hanger.

Satisfied with the first step of her plan, Lois picked up the straight piece of wire that remained from the coat-hanger and got to her feet. Now all she had to do was bend it into shape. She tried out the gap between the door and the frame and found it would satisfy her need for a makeshift vice.

Soon the wire was bent into a U-shape, the bottom end less than half an inch long and connecting to long, straight wires. Lois bent back down and slipped the wire over the door's lower frame, one ending above and one below the steel. Next, she picked up the axe one last time and carefully aimed for the doorframe, snapping off most of the exposed wire. This completed, Lois pulled the wire back out and took a close look at her masterpiece; one end now sported a small hook. Satisfied, she quickly bent the

other end into a handle, again using the gap between the door and its frame as a makeshift vice. Now that she had her lock-pick, she set to work on the lock.

A minute later, the door swung open and Lois rushed inside, dropping to the floor next to an unmoving Superman. “Come on, Superman, you can’t be dead,” she pleaded, trying to find his pulse before she dropped her ear to his chest and listened for his heart when she couldn’t find the beat on his neck. Her own heart stopped as she held her rasping breath in an attempt to be as silent as possible. Then she finally heard it. It was faint and weak, but it was a heartbeat. “Thank god,” she breathed out and felt the tension leaving her body. “Thank god, you’re still alive,” she whispered as tears streaked down her cheeks.

After about a minute of catching her breath, Lois got back on her feet and reached for Superman’s arms. “Come on,” she went on. “I’ve got to get you out of here.” She tugged at his outstretched limbs. “This cage is killing you.” Lois managed to move Superman a foot or so before she had to pause to take a deep breath. “Boy, you really are heavy, aren’t you?” She turned so she was facing him and with the door now right behind her, leaned back in the hopes of using her body weight to help pull him. Superman suddenly moved another two feet, and Lois landed flat on her behind, causing her to swear loudly and obscenely.

“Is there a way we can help you?” Zara called again.

“Not really...!” Lois called back. “Unless you want to come in here and get knocked out by that stuff as well.” She pulled herself back to her feet and pushed a sweaty lock of hair from her face. “And *then* I’d have to get *your* heavy butts out of here, too, in addition to your stupid cousin’s.”

She took a deep breath and reached for the blue-clad limb before her eyes fell onto the red cape. “I wonder...” she mumbled as she began to examine the fabric. The red cloth didn’t appear to be sewn onto the suit but rather held in place on the inside. Lois started to tug at the cape, working it out from underneath Superman’s heavy body. “Why did they have to use steel, hmm? Why can’t you be made of Kevlar instead?” she muttered as she worked to roll his body to his side and partially lift it until the cape was completely freed from his body.

“Okay, good,” she exclaimed as she wiped her arm across her forehead to get rid of the sweat running down her face in heavy droplets. The jeans material scratched over her skin and she decided to discard her jacket. Thus relieved, Lois picked up the cape and gave it a sharp yank. Apparently, whoever had designed the suit knew what she was doing as the entire getup seemed to be holding.

Lois crouched down again and carefully adjusted the cape underneath Superman’s head before she took two steps back and wrapped the bottom end of the cape around her hands. Then she started to pull the fabric taut and steadily increased the tension until the heavy body of the superhero started to move.

The fabric tore into her arms and wrists and each foot gained was accompanied by very inappropriate curses. That was, until something suddenly gave way and Lois stumbled onto the floor in an ungraceful heap. “What now!?” she spat before she crawled back to her feet, rubbing her offended *derrière* in the process. One look at the cape told her the story. Apparently, the material hadn’t been as sturdy as she had thought and was now torn off almost completely.

“Great!” Lois exclaimed with a heavy sigh. She looked around. There were still several feet between her and the door to the storage room. Shaking her head, she bunched the cape together and placed it on Superman’s chest before she grabbed his arm again. “I just hope your shoulder is stronger than your cape...” Then she started to pull once more on his limb.

Finally her back bumped against the wooden door and she paused. “Okay, you stay right here while I get this door out of the

way,” she told the unconscious superhero. Then she turned around and started to swing open the second half of the heavy oak door so she didn’t have to drag Superman around any more corners than necessary. “You ready to leave the room?” Lois asked Superman and resumed her combination of cursing and dragging.

Superman finally rested inside the storage room and Lois kneeled beside him, looking at the heavy doors again. “I wonder...” She pulled herself to her feet and dragged the doors closed before she called out into the hallway through the open sliding door, “Hey, Zara, Ching! Do you still feel the Kryptonite?”

There was the sound of footsteps and a moment later she heard Ching’s voice. “It is bearable.”

“Good!” she called back. “Then why don’t you come in here and help me with your cousin.”

“Excuse me?” Ching sounded confused.

“Superman!” Lois rolled her eyes. “Get in here and drag him out because I’m about to faint myself, okay?”

Lois heard something that sounded like the garble language from earlier, and she assumed it was Kryptonian. Only, it also sounded distinctly unpleasant. Then Ching’s head appeared around the corner and the rest of his body followed. He nodded at her and picked the limp form of Superman up without saying another word.

She let go of a relieved sigh and dragged herself out into the hallway before she reached for the door handle and yanked it shut. This task accomplished, she felt the adrenalin leaving her body and collapsed against the cold metal, the exhaustion finally getting the better of her.

After the first confusion and the chance to make contact with the creature named ‘Luthor’, the hunter had found itself in the middle of a frenzy. Creatures had rushed about and pulled at its imitated hair and guided it into the white cloth the hunter had noticed earlier. The colorfully clad prey it had imitated before continued to prod it with questions about its health and the hunter had begun to consider violating its contract if it meant silencing this particularly annoying creature.

And then the frenzy had stopped and the hunter was being led down another passageway and into a grand room filled with more of the weak creatures. It had not been sure what to do, but had been told to move past the creatures and to the front. At least, there the creature named ‘Luthor’ was waiting. Hopefully it would soon get the chance to be alone with this creature and inquire about Kal-El.

Once Lois had managed to catch her breath, she slowly followed Zara and Ching to the elevator. Ching had placed his charge on the floor next to the unconscious St. John and was apparently checking on Superman’s health.

“Will he be okay?” Lois asked weakly as she eyed the still unconscious Superman. His hair was tousled and sweat-soaked, and his face was pale and glistened from perspiration.

Ching looked up from where he was kneeling. “Yes. Kal-El’s vital functions appear to be stable, if weak.”

Lois closed her eyes and sent a short ‘Thank you’ to whoever was listening out there before her mind returned to the practical aspects of their escape. “We’re not home free, yet.” She looked at Superman’s brightly colored suit. “And I don’t think it’s a good idea to advertise that Superman is out of it right now.”

Ching simply stared back at her, and Zara’s look was pretty blank as well.

She closed her eyes and took a calming breath. “We need to disguise him.” Lois pointed towards St. John. “Ching, help me strip off his jacket and pants so we can pull them over Superman’s suit. That should hide him from the eyes of nosey

reporters when we get outside.” She paused for a moment as another thought hit her. “Oh, and I think it would be good to tie him up.” She indicated St. John using the tip of her foot.

This time Ching nodded in understanding and started to look around before he grabbed the bunched-up cape still lying on Superman’s chest. He yanked sharply and tore it off completely before he proceeded to rip it into strips. “This will do.”

Lois nodded and got to work on St. John’s belt. Soon the English ‘gentleman’ had lost his jacket and pants, leaving him in his white dress-shirt and fine-rip underwear, complete with black socks that reached halfway up to his knees.

Ching then lifted Superman far enough so Lois and Zara could start pulling the grey suit-pants over Superman’s red boots and blue spandex; the pants were wide enough to be pulled over the boots. The jacket was next, and Lois stood up to eye her masterpiece critically. “Well, I guess that should work, unless someone takes too close a look.”

Nodding, Ching turned towards St. John and began tying him up. Then he moved Superman into the elevator and pulled the tied-up butler inside as well.

“Ching, can you hold Superman up?” Lois asked the Kryptonian. “You know, around his waist and with an arm dragged over your shoulder, like he is just drunk or something.” “Drunk?”

Lois rolled her eyes. “Yeah, you know... Too much alcohol?” She only earned herself more confused stares. “Geez, do you people not party at all?” She pointed towards the sitting form of the superhero. “Get him to his feet, I’ll show you what I mean.” Some prodding and pulling later, Lois nodded, satisfied with the outcome. “Good, at least now only the gossip columns will have something to write about.” She turned around and pressed the button for the ground floor. “And now we just have to walk out the door. How hard can this be...”

The elevator was slowly rising to the ground floor level and stopped. Again, a soft ‘ding’ announced their arrival, and Lois took a deep breath, steeling herself for their escape. She expected that she would have to spin a tale to some unsuspecting guard about how she was discreetly escorting a drunken guest off the premises. The doors opened and she found herself staring into about half a dozen muzzles.

“Freeze!” a harsh voice filled the elevator. “MPD!”

Lois felt her companions grow rigid beside her, Zara to her right and Ching with the still unconscious Superman to her left. Slowly, she raised her hands and peeked past the wall of policemen in front of her until she noticed the fiftyish man with tinted glasses standing a few feet away. “Henderson? Is that you back there?”

“Lane?” the inspector asked, his voice clearly reflecting his surprise. “What are you doing in a freight elevator?”

“Trying to escape from Lex Tower!” she called back. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Serving an arrest warrant, if you don’t mind?”

“Luthor?” she asked, still a bit breathless from the shock of being ambushed by the police.

“Yeah. Amongst others.”

“Good.” She slowly lowered her hands. “Could you please tell your boys here that they can put their guns away? There are no conscious crooks in here.”

“Sir?” one of the officers turned his head towards his superior.

“Put the gun down, Sergeant.” Henderson stepped closer, looking again at Lois. “And what do you mean by ‘conscious crooks’?”

Lois lowered her hands the rest of the way and stepped aside, allowing Henderson to see the tied-up and half-naked butler lying in the back of the car. “You don’t by any chance have a warrant

for Nigel St. John, do you?”

“Christ, Lane!” Henderson exclaimed. “Any other surprises?”

“No, not really.” She stepped outside, beckoning the Kryptonians to follow her. “And just so there’s no misunderstanding.” She shot Henderson her best Mad Dog Lane glare. “I get the exclusive on this.”

“Now, Honey,” a deep voice with a southern accent came from somewhere to the left. “I’m not sure Clark would agree to this. After all, it was *his* lead first.”

“Perry!” Lois turned and saw her former editor standing safely outside the danger zone. “Oh god, Perry, I was so...” She wasn’t going to say ‘stupid’. That’s what might describe it the best, but she certainly wasn’t going to say it out loud. Lois raced across the floor and flung herself into the older man’s arms. “Thanks for coming.” She held on for dear life as she tried to suppress her tears. And she almost succeeded. “Luthor... He’s such a... a...”

“I know, Honey.” Perry patted her back. “I know.”

Someone tapped her on the back of her right shoulder. “Lane? I know this is an emotional reunion and everything, but you still have some explaining to do.”

Lois sniffled and tried to look composed as she turned back towards Henderson, who was using his left hand to point at the elevator. She noted that Zara and Ching had moved to the sidelines while two officers examined the unconscious form of Nigel St. John. “Well, my... friends and I were just trying to... get out of the building... when we happened to run into Nigel here,” Lois answered evasively.

“Uh huh...”

“Sir, look at this!”

Lois shifted her focus to see one of the officers holding up the red cloth that had at one time been Superman’s cape. The yellow crest was still distinctly visible.

Before Lois could come up with an excuse, Henderson had taken a closer look at the Kryptonians and the sort-of incognito Superman. His eyes widened noticeably. “That’s not by any chance Superman back there, is it?”

“Uh...” Lois squirmed under the intense gaze of the policeman. “Henderson, can you keep him out of this?” She looked back at her unconscious friend. “I’m sure you have enough on Luthor as it is...”

Henderson’s eyes narrowed and he studied her companions in greater detail before he raised an eyebrow. “Yes. I think I can do that. But only because I owe your *partner* for this coup.”

“Thank you, Henderson.” Lois reached forward and hugged the policeman before she realized what she was doing and disentangled herself again. “Thanks..., Bill,” she mumbled sheepishly.

The inspector smirked and shook his head. “You should thank your partner.”

“I will.” Lois smiled. And she really meant it. Clark really *did* deserve her thanks. And her apologies. Or, well, maybe she wouldn’t bite his head off instead for stealing her exclusive on Luthor’s arrest. She looked around and then turned towards Perry. “So, where *is* Clark?” When she couldn’t find him immediately, she added with a smirk, “Returning another book to the library?”

Henderson choked and Perry stepped closer. “Um, Lois...” His voice grew somber. “Clark has been...” He looked past her and raised an eyebrow just like Henderson had done earlier, then he engulfed her in a bear hug and whispered, “But I guess that’s not an issue anymore. Just take care of him, and I’ll make sure you get the exclusive that the two of you deserve.” Before Lois could say anything in return, Perry pulled back and looked to Henderson. “Do you think you could give them a ride to Lois’ apartment?”

“Sure, Mr. White.” Henderson raised his right hand and indicated one of the officers that had been standing in the back.

“Jones, would you give Ms. Lane and her friends here a lift to her apartment?”

“Perry!” Lois was starting to feel more than a little bit antsy. What weren’t they telling her about Clark? “I can’t...”

“Lois, listen,” Perry barked at her in his best editor-voice. “You need to get Superman some rest and then you and Clark can talk about everything.” He pointed his right index finger at her. “And I still want that exclusive when this whole mess is over.” His eyes narrowed. “Got it?”

Lois felt the cold fist around her heart relaxing at those words. Perry had just told her that Clark was okay, right? After all, she couldn’t write the story with her partner if he were dead. “Got it.” She grinned back before another thought penetrated the haze that had enraptured her mind in the past few minutes. “But where are we going to print it?”

“Let me worry about that, okay?” her editor reassured her. “I didn’t return from retirement just so I can slink back to Florida when this whole mess is over.”

“Thanks, Chief.” Lois turned towards the representative of Metropolis’ Finest. “Henderson?”

“What else, Lane?” Henderson answered. “And make it quick because I still have a fish to fry.”

“My mother,” Lois replied seriously. “She’s still locked up in this building somewhere...”

“Don’t worry,” the cop reassured her. “We’ll find her.”

Lois closed her eyes and nodded.

“Ms. Lane?” The young officer Henderson had indicated earlier touched her arm. “Are you ready to head to your apartment?”

“Yeah, thanks,” Lois mumbled and nodded towards the Kryptonians who had silently observed the entire exchange. “Let’s go.”

“I now pronounce you husband and wife.” The archbishop smiled benignly at Lex and Lois. “You may now kiss the bride.”

“My dear?” the new husband looked at his bride before he raised the veil and lowered his lips for an appropriately chaste kiss to the sounds of festive organ music.

Lois had been a little bit stiff during the whole ceremony, and Lex wondered if the events of this morning might have been too much for her. After all, she *was* just a woman, despite her illustrious career.

His bride pulled back after a few moments, and Luthor ran his tongue over his lips. She definitely tasted strange this morning. “Are you all right?”

“Yes.” Lois’ voice was just above a whisper. “You are in control of everything here, yes?”

“Of course, I am.” Luthor forced a smile to his lips. “Is this about earlier this morning? Because I can assure you, there is no need for worry. Nigel has the situation well under control.”

“He also controls Kal-El?” Lois continued unperturbed.

Lex stiffened. “What are you talking about?”

“Kal-El.” Lois looked thoughtful for a moment. “The super man.”

He was about to choke. How could Lois suspect about Superman? Lex turned towards his assembled guests. “My friends, I’m terribly sorry but my lovely bride and I need to retreat for a few minutes. The stress of this morning’s events has taken a toll on her.”

There were a few chuckles from the assembled crowd in addition to some halting applause. Obviously, his statement had been taken as a double entendre, just as he had intended. After all, what better excuse is there for a virile groom and his blushing bride to excuse themselves after the wedding ceremony? His eyes found his new mother-in-law, and she nodded in understanding as she knew *exactly* about what events he had just spoken of.

Lex turned back to his wife and pressed his fingers a little

deeper into her right biceps. “We will discuss this in my study,” he told her icily as he dragged her off towards the side door, trying to give the watchful eyes of his guests a very different impression of the state of their relationship.

“Up the stairs, Darling,” he told her when they had reached the corridor.

“Are you taking me to Kal-El?”

Lex suppressed the urge to fling his backhand across her face as he rushed her on. Maybe he should grant Lois her wish and take her down into the wine cellar so he could show his wife *her* ‘Kal-El’. And then he would show Superman his dominion over his *wife* before he ended the existence of the pathetic freak once and for all. “Shut up,” he hissed instead through clenched teeth.

Soon they had reached the doors to his private office, and Lex pushed Lois inside, not caring if she stumbled to the ground. He turned around and locked the door. “So, you want Superman, yes?” he snarled. “I had really thought that your wedding vows meant more to you than that.”

“You have Kal-El?” Lois asked him and he was surprised to see her still standing. She was obviously more agile than he would have expected.

“Is that what you call this freak?” he spat at her and stepped closer, looking down on her slighter form. “You told me you wanted to wait till our wedding night.” Lex raised his hand. “Did you also tell that to *him*?” he snapped as his hand swung down for a well-aimed blow against her cheek.

Only, the blow never connected, and Lex found himself now staring down Lois’ arm as she held him by the throat. “I want Kal-El.” She pushed him back a little. “You will take me to Kal-El.”

Lex tried to pry her fingers from his throat but couldn’t. “I... will... make... you...”

He never got to finish his sentence as suddenly the doors burst open and two members of the Metropolis police department stumbled into the room. Next, several more followed, and then he saw Inspector Henderson enter as well, brandishing a folded piece of paper. “Lex Luthor, I have a warrant here charging you with arson and other crimes too numerous to...” He trailed off. “Lane? I thought you were...”

Before Henderson could say anything else, Lex felt himself being hurled against the assembled cops while his completely out-of-control wife jumped towards the window front.

“What is this!?” Lex raged, kicking and pushing against the shell-shocked cops. “How *dare* you break into my *private* office when I’m about to...” Henderson grabbed for him again but the younger man could see that the cop was distracted and threw him against the door before rushing after Lois. This time, he didn’t waste a second and landed a right hook underneath her chin right as she flung her hand across his chest. He felt a sharp pain and looked down to see that his tux was ripped open and Lois was bowled over on the floor, her face to the ground. “You cut me, you...”

“That’s *enough*, Luthor!” Henderson barked, and Lex could see several guns pointed at him. “You are under arrest. You have the right to remain silent. You have the right...”

Lex didn’t listen to his rights as the cop detailed them to him. He didn’t care. Picking up the telephone he shouted back. “I will not have this. I’m calling the governor! No, the *president*!” He glared at Henderson and then dropped behind his desk, the phone clattering onto the table. Lex reached up and retrieved the small revolver hidden underneath his desk and reached around his wife’s neck with the other, pulling her in front of him as he got back up.

A moment later he felt her elbow smashing against his ribs and yelped at the sharp pain and cracking sound that accompanied it. Ignoring the pain, he crashed his free hand against her head, the metal butt of the gun knocking her out. “I’ll

have your head for this, Henderson!” He fired in the direction of the cops and they ducked, unwilling to shoot at his hostage.

“There’s no escape, Luthor!” Henderson shouted from behind a chair. “You can end this now.”

“You’re right about that, Henderson!” Lex pushed through the open glass doors and onto the balcony. “And you can tell your friend *Superman* that he has lost!” He felt the balustrade behind him. “If you find him in time, that is,” Lex added with a snort.

“Superman is safe!” Henderson called back.

“Oh, yeah?” He leaned back, dragging his wife with him. “Too bad his little *playmate* isn’t.” And with those words he pushed back and pulled the lifeless form of his wife with him. They got separated in mid-air and Lex shouted out into the late morning air, “Superman! I still win! You will *never* have her now!” His eyes returned to his wife and he could finally see her face.

Only it wasn’t Lois’ delicate features that stared back at him, but instead an ugly mask of pale skin, bloodshot eyes, and protruding teeth. The dress was hanging loosely around her suddenly not so feminine body and her outstretched arms sported long claws.

Screaming and cursing against everything and everyone, Lex never felt the impact as his body completed its tumble towards the pavement in front of Lex Tower.

Lois was sitting in the front of the police cruiser while Zara, Ching, and Superman occupied the backseat. Thankfully, Officer Jones wasn’t a talkative guy and a much better driver than the cabbies she normally had to deal with. All this left her free to actually think about everything that had happened during the past three or so hours. Or, maybe, the past three or so months since she had started to date Lex Luthor.

She hated to admit it, even to herself, but Luthor had had her completely fooled, and it was *no* consolation that the rest of Metropolis had been fooled just like her. <The great philanthropist,> Lois snorted. <The failed savior of the Daily Planet.> She rolled her eyes before they became hard as stone. That alone should have tipped her off. Luthor *never* failed at anything, so *why* would he let a bombing come between himself and his wishes? Just because it would cost more to rebuild the building than the insurance would cover? Lois shook her head. No, if Luthor had actually cared about her career at the Planet, he would not have let it crumble underneath his fingers. He might just as well have blown the building up himself...

Suddenly, Lois found it hard to breath. Luthor might just have blown the Planet up himself... She dragged a labored breath through her open mouth and exhaled again. She had never been happy at the position Luthor had found for her at his news station. Another breath rasped through her throat. She had been cut off from her friends since she had accepted his proposal. Before that, really. And Luthor had been *so* understanding in her need to talk to them. “*BASTARD!*” she screamed again as her fist hit the dashboard. “You damn, sick *bastard!*”

“Ms. Lane,” Officer Jones addressed her from the left. “Are you all right?”

“No.” She sniffled. “Yes.” She looked over into his concerned face. “I mean, hey, I was just about to marry the biggest bastard in the entire city.” She shrugged as she hugged herself. “Why wouldn’t I be alright?”

Jones nodded, and she heard Zara’s voice from the backseat. “Lois Lane, this ‘wedding’. Does it trouble you that it did not happen?”

Lois froze for a moment and then looked back. The Kryptonian woman was sitting there between Superman and her bodyguard and asking her if she was sorry that she hadn’t married Luthor? It was too much. “No!” Lois started to giggle. “No, of course not!” The giggle turned into almost hysterical laughter,

and she turned back to the front so she could give her chest some room to heave as the spasms shook her body. “You don’t know... what a wedding... is, do you?” she managed to press out in between gasping breaths.

There was only silence from the backseat, and Lois took it as an affirmation. “It’s what we call... the ceremony when... two people get married.” Still no response but Lois was too occupied with laughing to elaborate further.

“It’s when two people join their lives together,” Jones added.

“Oh, a bonding ceremony,” Zara mused.

“Yeah, a bonding... ceremony,” Lois pressed out as she tried to calm her breathing down.

“Lois Lane, I understand why you are happy about this not happening.” Zara’s voice grew somber. Well, more somber. “In our world, unions are often arranged as well.” There was a pause. “So, what will happen now that you will not be united with this Luthor?”

“What do you mean?” Lois’ laughter had died down and she turned her head back again. “What’s supposed to happen?”

“There will not be upheaval and chaos?” Zara asked. “Was Luthor not an important lord on your world?”

Lois snorted. “No, that’s not it.” She wetted her lips. “You see, here in this *country*, we don’t marry to fulfill some medieval traditions.” She cast her eyes down. “I just... I had thought Luthor was a good person, a person I could share my life with.” She looked up again, her eyes hard. “Well, I had been wrong about that, apparently, and now all I have to worry about is how I’m going to pay my bills.”

Zara nodded and her face softened for a moment. “You are a very fortunate woman, Lois Lane.”

“Unit 316, Unit 316,” a female voice came through the radio. “Inspector Henderson wants to talk to you, Jones.”

Jones picked up the microphone. “Jones here. What’s going on, Inspector? You got the slime ball?”

“We did.” Lois thought the voice was unusually grave. “Is Lane still with you?”

“Yeah, she is. Why?”

“Oh, thank God the Almighty.”

Lois thought she would choke on a gulp of air at that. Henderson *never* invoked God’s name like that. Like he *actually* meant it. She reached over to Jones. “Hey, can I talk to him?”

The officer paused for a second, then shrugged and handed the fist-sized device over to her. “Henderson, what’s going on?” she inquired worriedly.

“Lane?” The older cop sounded extremely relieved. “Do you know anything about a double attending the wedding in your spot?”

“A double?” Lois’ head was spinning. “What are you talking about?” Then she remembered. “Rats!” She looked back to Zara and saw the woman was nodding her head. “Yeah, Henderson. That’s possible. But I would really not want to get into that over the air.”

“What aren’t you telling me, Lane?”

“A lot, Henderson. A lot.” Lois smirked. “But you should know that already. And as far as the double is concerned... He was sent to kill Superman.”

“Sent?” Henderson’s voice clearly showed his surprise. “Kill Superman? What is this, a superhero free-for-all?”

“No, just a really crappy day.” Lois paused. “Just... make sure my double is locked away really safely. He... is really dangerous.”

“Don’t worry about that. He won’t go anywhere anymore.”

“He’s dead?”

“Yeah. Took a dive from Luthor’s balcony. Together with your ex.”

Lois let out a whistle, and she heard suspiciously relieved sounds from the backseat, too. “Let me guess... You were

worried about me, weren't you?" Lois asked sweetly with a big grin on her face.

"Nah, of course not," the hard-bitten cop immediately refuted the absurd claim. "So, you said he was there to kill Superman? Sent by whom?"

"Ah..." Lois bit her lower lip. "That's a long story."

"I'll bet." Henderson grew serious. "I guess I shouldn't send his body into the city morgue, then, huh?"

"No, I guess that wouldn't be a good idea."

"Is there something about him that could be dangerous to Superman?"

Lois looked into the rear again and Zara and Ching shook their heads.

"Tez is from another... place than we are," Ching qualified.

"No," Lois answered. "Just make sure you don't vanish together with the body. I'd hate to have to come to Nevada and break you out. Might bring me the Pulitzer, but the hassle... Oh, the hassle..."

"I understand, Lane." Lois thought she could actually hear the wink in his voice. "Thanks."

"You're welcome, Henderson," she replied with a little smirk before turning serious, "Did you find my mother?"

"We did," the cop told her and her heart jumped in relief. They might not get along, but she was still her mother. "Would you believe it? Your mother was actually right there with the rest of the wedding party. She's giving her statement to Sergeant Zymak as we speak."

"Thanks, Henderson," Lois answered him gratefully.

"It's my job, Lane. I'm just glad she isn't living in Metropolis, because it seems you Lane women are trouble magnets."

Lois snorted at that. It probably really *was* a good thing her mother didn't live in town. And not just for the sake of Henderson's mental health. She was her mother, but that didn't mean she wanted her around all the time.

"Now give me Jones again," the inspector told her in his version of a heartfelt goodbye.

"Roger, Henderson. Lane, out." Lois handed the microphone back to her driver with a relieved grin on her face. Luthor was dead. The crazy alien hit man was dead, too. And Superman was safe and sound with her. More or less. But she would make sure he would get to fly again soon.

"Jones here."

"Listen, young man." Henderson's voice was an odd combination of joyfulness and seriousness. "You'll get Lane and her friends home and then... forget about this talk we just had. Got it?"

"Yes, Sir. Unit 316, out." Officer Jones put the microphone back on its hook and looked into the mirror. "So, you guys aren't from around here, are you?" he asked with a dead serious voice and a twinkle in his eyes.

Zara and Ching didn't answer, and thankfully Jones dropped the issue after that, leaving Lois to think in silence until they reached her apartment a few minutes later. And just as they arrived, she heard a groan from the backseat. Lois looked back and couldn't help but grin. Superman was moving and holding a hand to his forehead. Things were definitely looking better and better.

"Let's put him in the bedroom," Lois told Ching as she led her guests into her apartment. Superman had faded out again on the way up, giving Lois another shock before she had realized his breathing was even and relatively strong.

"Your bed chamber?" Zara asked doubtfully.

"Yeah." Lois rolled her eyes. "Unless you want to place him down on the floor in my living room?"

Zara looked at the two loveseats, one on each side of a small

coffee table, and then to Ching. "I believe the bed will be better suited to his recovery."

Ching nodded and followed Lois deeper into her apartment, Superman still propped up against his body. When they reached her bed, Lois motioned Ching to sit Superman onto the soft surface. Then she went to work on the jacket, pulling the garment off Superman's shoulders. "Well, that was the easy part," she stated and looked at Ching. "I guess you better get his pants, huh?"

Ching shot her a strange look but laid Superman fully onto the bed and stripped the gray pants off, revealing once again the bright blue spandex.

"Thanks." Lois afforded Ching a small smile and dragged the covers over the sleeping superhero. She bent forward and pressed a timid kiss on his cheek. "Rest, my hero." Then she stood back up and noted that Ching was staring at her wide-eyed. "What?"

Ching simply shook his head and went back into the living room where Zara had chosen to sit down on one of the loveseats.

Lois followed him right on his heels and decided to get the ball rolling. "So, anyone want some coffee?"

"Coffee?" the Kryptonian woman asked.

"Right," Lois mumbled. "It's a hot beverage," she explained to her guest.

Zara thought for a moment before nodding her head. "Thank you, Lois Lane."

Lois sighed. "And just call me 'Lois', please?" Her eyes traveled to Ching. "What about you? Want some coffee?"

Ching shook his head and went to stand behind Zara, his arms folded behind his back.

"Suit yourself." Lois shrugged and went to putter about, preparing the coffee as she started her interrogation. "So, Zara, what *exactly* brings you here, besides rescuing Superman from the clutches of a vile gangster?"

"Kal-El," Zara started. "We have come to... meet with him."

"Meet with him?" Lois started the coffee maker and went over to the other loveseat while the machine took care of brewing the dark stimulant.

"Yes." The other woman seemed quite hesitant in her elaborations. "There is a lot we have to discuss."

"Such as...?"

Zara sighed. "Kal-El has been away from our people for a long while."

"Yeah, I know." Lois leaned back against the backrest. "He made his debut here almost a year ago."

"A year?"

Lois thought for a moment before she spun her finger clockwise in the air. "One cycle around the sun."

"Oh." Zara seemed surprised. "I see." She looked back to her companion before focusing on Lois again. "And what has been his... purpose here during this year?"

Smiling widely, Lois answered a bit dreamily, "He flew in and saved the day."

"Saved the day?" This remark came from Ching.

"Yep. Right from the start." Lois picked up a throw-pillow and started to play with its corner. "You see, Superman, he used his... gifts to make this world a better place."

"A better place?" Zara inquired.

"Oh, you know..." Lois got up and moved to the open kitchen. "Stopping crimes. Helping with disasters. Saving people's lives." She shrugged. "Superhero stuff."

"Why did he do this?"

Ching's question stopped her cold and she turned around, a scowl on her face. "What do you mean, 'Why did he do this'?" she asked angrily. Ching didn't seem willing to elaborate further, which only incensed Lois more. "He's helping people because he's a good person." She had started to walk back towards the loveseats, her right index finger raised menacingly at the

Kryptonian. “You know, I have *no* idea how things work on *your* planet, but here on Earth, *some* people do things just out of the goodness of their hearts.” A new thought entered her mind and exited her mouth. “Is that why he left Krypton? Because he couldn’t deal with a planet full of unemotional, infighting egoists?”

Zara raised her hands. “Please, ‘Lois’, that is not it.” Zara paused, obviously looking for the right words to appease the reporter. “Kal-El. The reason that he is here, it was not his choice.” She held up her hand, preempting Lois’ next outburst. “And it wasn’t ours.” Her voice grew sad. “He was sent here so he would be safe. Only now his absence is endangering our own world.”

“How?” Lois whispered as she gripped the back of the loveseat opposite Zara.

“You remember my assumption about the unions in your world?”

Lois nodded, her mind absorbing every bit of information she could get on Superman’s ‘family’.

“In our society, political stability is ensured by unions between ruling houses.”

“That’s archaic,” Lois couldn’t help but mutter at the thought of arranged marriages. It was bad enough when you made your own bad choices, but to live without even the *chance* to make the right choice? She mentally shook her head.

Zara ignored her comment. “It has ensured stability on our world for generations.” Her eyes became downcast. “Only now, there are only two suitable candidates for the throne of New Krypton.”

She paused, and Lois straightened herself. “Well?”

“One is Lord Nor...”

“You mean the creep who *sent* the *killer* after Superman!?” Lois exploded, her arms waving around in agitation. “How can a *criminal* be a suitable candidate for the throne of your world?”

“Because it is his birth-right,” Zara said. Lois thought she could hear the defeated sigh. “Through his lineage, Lord Nor is second in the line to the throne.”

“Ah-ha!” Lois exclaimed. “*Second!*” She started pacing. “So, he doesn’t really have a chance for the throne at all, does he?”

Lois turned towards them. “I mean, I assume the first in line would be the better candidate, right?”

“Yes,” Zara confirmed.

“This remains to be seen,” Ching muttered at the same time.

“Ching!” Zara silenced him. “You see, nobody on New Krypton would want Lord Nor as our ruler. Except for his followers, of course. Men just as corrupt as he is.”

“Now that’s a concept I’m familiar with,” Lois quipped, thinking of various dictatorships on her world. “But I guess that doesn’t matter, since you apparently have a better alternative.”

Zara nodded.

“So, why are you here?” Lois’ fingers traced the backrest of her loveseat as she paced behind it. “And why are you looking for Superman...” She stopped and turned to Zara. “And why is this Nor trying to have him killed?” Lois’ eyes grew wide as the missing piece fell into place. “Unless he’s the one standing in his way...”

“Yes.” Zara rose to her feet. “Kal-El. He is the legitimate heir to the throne of Krypton.”

“You haven’t just come to meet him, have you?” Lois asked weakly as she felt her knees soften. She quickly went around the sofa so she could sit down again. “You’re here because you... you want to.” She couldn’t suppress the lone sob. “-take him with you...”

“Yes.” Zara now stood next to her, and Lois looked up, refusing to let tears enter her eyes. “It is his destiny.”

Lois choked back another sob. “And he would be a good choice, right?”

Zara didn’t answer, but Ching chose to add his opinion. “Kal-El has shown that he lacks inner strength. He has allowed himself to be captured, and look at him!” The Kryptonian pointed towards her bedroom. “The way he dresses. That is not a leader.”

Lois snapped. “Now wait just a second, *Buddy!*” She jumped up and marched towards the Kryptonian at full speed. “Superman is the most caring person I’ve ever known. He’s not a leader? He doesn’t *want* to lead. And tell me,-” Her eyes blazoned as she pushed her right index finger into his face. “-would you *really* want a man who uses his powers to subject those weaker than him to his will? Is *that* the person you’d want as a leader? Because from what *I* understand, you could just as well have Nor and leave us alone!”

Lois felt a hand on her shoulder. “Lois,” Zara spoke. “Please. Lieutenant Ching is simply trying to make sure I make the correct decision.”

Lois squinted and glared at the man in front of her before turning to Zara. “You? How is it *your* decision? I thought there was a lineage to be followed.”

Zara looked down for a moment. “Kal-El, he cannot rule alone. The throne of New Krypton requires the union of two houses. The House of El and the House of Ra.”

The big picture suddenly became clear. “You’re to become his *wife*.” It wasn’t a question.

Zara nodded. “It is our way.”

“And you’re going to take him with you.” Another statement.

Zara nodded again.

“You know, he has never told me that...” Lois turned away muttering more to herself than to her guests. “But I guess it makes perfect sense...” She bent down and picked up another throw pillow. “He has always been so distant. He has never allowed me to become truly close to him.” She punched the innocent piece of decoration and whirled around until she faced the Kryptonians again. “I don’t really have a choice, do I?”

Zara shook her head. “No, I am afraid not. And neither do I.”

She snorted. “You know what? I really need that coffee right about now.” Lois turned towards the kitchen and got two cups from the cupboard. “You still want one, right?” she called over her shoulder.

“Yes.”

“You really do know how to pick ‘em, don’t you, Lane?”

Lois muttered under her breath while she grabbed the nonfat creamer and the sweetener. “First you find out you’re about to marry into the mob, and *then* you lose Superman to a woman who isn’t even from this world...” She sighed and pasted a smile on her face as she turned back towards her guests. “You know, a month ago I would have thrown you out on your ears. Superpowers or not.” Lois smirked. “And I *did* send you on your fanny earlier today.”

“Excuse me?” Zara asked.

Lois started to add creamer and sweetener to both cups, thinking the Kryptonian would have to trust her judgment either way. “Well, the thing is, I had quite a crush on your future husband.” There was a gasping sound, and Lois valiantly tried to suppress a smile. “Yeah, but don’t worry. He made it perfectly clear that I had no chance with him.” A tear collected in the corner of her eye. “He just never told me why...” Lois rubbed against the unwelcome wetness and then picked up the cups, walking back to her guests. “So, here’s your coffee.”

“Thank you.” Zara accepted the cup and sat back down before she started to sip the steaming liquid.

“Hey, be careful!” Lois exclaimed. “It’s still...,” she trailed off as she saw her taking bigger sips. “-hot. But I guess that’s not an issue for you, hmm?”

Zara looked up, her eyes showing her confusion.

“Invulnerability?” Lois prompted, retaking her earlier place opposite from Zara.

Zara shared a look with Ching and then turned back to Lois, smiling. “It appears so.”

“So, how is this going to happen?” Lois asked next, blowing on her own coffee a bit before she started to take small sips.

“What is going to happen?” Zara asked, her confusion evident in her voice.

“Right. Alien...” Lois put the cup down. “How are you going to take off from here? Do you have a ship, or are you just going to have Scottie beam you up?”

“Our ship is waiting for us on the other side of the river,” Ching stated.

Lois nodded. “How did you get here?” She eyed them critically. “You obviously don’t know how to fly, yet.”

“We walked.”

“But that must have taken *hours!*” Lois exclaimed.

Zara elaborated, “It allowed us to become more familiar with your world.”

“Makes sense...,” Lois mused. “But you can’t walk back with Superman.” She became more animated. “Unless you wait until he’s fully recovered?”

“No, I do not think this will be opportune,” Ching disregarded the option. “Every day we are away from New Krypton allows Lord Nor to instigate more intrigues.”

“Ching is right.” Zara leaned forward. “We have to leave soon, now that we have found Kal-El.”

“So, what do we do?” Lois asked matter-of-factly. Now that she had decided to let Superman go, she didn’t want to make it any more difficult — either for her heart by keeping him around, or for his people by delaying their departure.

“The roof of this building, it is flat, yes?” Ching asked.

“Yeah, why?”

“Our ship, it is small, and it is equipped with a cloaking shield. I could land it on this building, and we could take Kal-El to the roof.” She would have sworn that Ching looked smug at this boast.

“Hmm...” Lois worried her lip. “You would still need to get back to it first.” She jumped to her feet and marched over to her cupboard, searching through the drawers. “Ah, there it is!” Lois turned around, holding up a map of Metropolis. “Ching, do you think you could pinpoint your landing place on this map?” She unfolded the map on the coffee table.

“Yes. But why...” Ching had started to study the outlines of the landscape.

“Because if you can show me where it is, I can call you a cab and have you taken to it.”

“A cab?” Zara asked.

“Yeah, it’s like the police car we used to get here.” Lois grinned. “Only you have to pay for it and the driver has never heard about traffic regulations.”

“I understand...,” Zara said quietly.

“Here.” Ching pointed towards South End, across from Hobbs Bay. “I landed the ship in an area where a large amount of scrap metal was located.”

“Hmm, a junkyard?” Lois studied the map. “Yeah... That should be it. Jenkins Road Sixteen over in New Stanton...” She looked up at her guests in surprise. “That’s almost seven miles from Lex Tower.”

Zara and Ching looked at each other and shrugged almost imperceptibly.

“Okay, tell you what,” Lois said as she went to the phone. “I’ll call Metro Cab and have them take you there.” She paused and looked back at Zara. “Will I ever see him again?”

The Kryptonian’s face fell and she shook her head. “I am sorry. I do not believe so.”

“Crap...”

Lois walked into the bedroom after she had seen Ching to the

cab. Zara was still sitting in her living room as Lois had asked her for some alone-time with Superman so she could say goodbye.

Her friend was lying on the bed, the covers pulled over him, but he stirred when she sat down next to him. “Hey, you...,” Lois whispered when he opened his eyes after a minute or two.

“Lois...” Superman’s voice was coarse and a perfect match for his pale skin. “Where am I?” She gripped his hand and he tried to sit up. “Luthor!” he exclaimed suddenly, his eyes wide in horror.

Lois rested her left hand against his shoulder, pushing him back down. “Is dead.” She could see his face falling a bit at that and scowled. “You’re not sad the creep is dead, are you?” she asked him more forcefully than she had intended.

His fingers tightened around hers. “Every life is precious.”

She shrugged and tried to keep her disgust for her ex-fiancé from surfacing. “He tried to kill you. He has blown up the Planet. He was a criminal. I’m sorry, but I can’t...”

“It’s okay, Lois.” He looked away as he settled back down. “It’s just the way I was raised.” His eyes found hers again. “How...? How did he die?”

“He jumped from his balcony on Lex Tower.” She caressed the back of his hand. “There was nothing you could have done.”

“And you...?” Superman’s voice faltered. “Did you...? Were you two...?”

Lois suddenly understood. “No. I didn’t marry him. Never even made it in front of the altar.” She smiled a listless smile. “I had something more important to do...”

“What?”

Now her half-smile turned into a real one, and she leaned forward to press a kiss on his forehead. “Saving *you*,” she told him when she pulled back.

“Lois...”

She stopped him with a finger to his lips. “Don’t say it. I understand now that *us* has been a fantasy. I had no idea who you were. You tried to tell me and I wouldn’t listen. Well, I met someone today who has opened my eyes to the truth.” She sniffled. “And it’s okay. Really. But I’m still going to miss you.”

“I’m not going to stop being your friend.”

“Thanks.” She squeezed his hand. “And I’ll be *your* friend. Forever.” A quick smile came to her face. “But I’m still going miss you up there,-” She nodded towards the ceiling. “-flying around and saving the day.”

“I’m not done saving the day,” he quipped back.

“No, I guess not.” Her voice hitched. “But it will be different, I guess.”

His eyes cleared a bit. “My powers...”

She shook her head. “You have been pretty out of it.”

“Oh...” He turned his head to his side. “Well, now you have your ordinary man.”

Lois froze and turned his chin back to her. “Superman,-” Her eyes bore into his. “-you will *never* be an ‘ordinary man’. It doesn’t matter if you’re here or on Krypton.”

“Or Kansas...”

<What?> Lois decided to just go with it. “Yeah, or Kansas.” Then she froze. “Clark!” She slapped her forehead and felt the heat rising in her cheeks. “You still need to talk to Clark.” She looked at her watch. “But I doubt he’s home yet.” She sobbed. “I’ve made a mess. Again.”

“Don’t.” Lois felt Superman pull her hand to his mouth, pressing a small kiss on her knuckles. “Clark will understand.”

“But... But he’s your best friend and now that you’re...” She couldn’t complete the sentence.

“Clark has known for a long time that this was a possibility,” Superman elaborated quietly. “He will understand.” Playing with her fingers, he continued. “And he still has *you*.”

“But I have been so horrible to him,” Lois pressed out before a tear slipped out of the corner of her eye. “And he has been

right.” She let go of a quiet sob. “The whole time. And he never gave up.”

“He loves you,” Superman told her quietly.

“I know,” Lois mumbled.

Clark felt himself drift, only anchored by Lois’ voice and her hand firmly clasped in his. He still couldn’t believe that Superman was gone. Ever since his first encounter with the Green Poison he had feared this would happen. And now, apparently, it had. He had been in Luthor’s cage for more than a day, constantly exposed to the radiation.

And yet, he felt free. The responsibility of being Superman was gone. He was just Clark Kent. Or he would be once he could go home and change. And Lois hadn’t married that monster, had, in fact, seen behind the mask. Now, if only she would love him as Clark as much as he loved her.

“You know,” Lois’ voice drifted to him. “I should get a few lines from you.”

“Hmm...,” he murmured absentmindedly.

“About your farewell...”

He opened his eyes and saw her smile.

“After all, I wrote your introduction...”

“Lois,” he told her softly, “You *invented* my introduction.” He smirked. “I’m sure you can find the right parting words...” He winked. “And if you have trouble with the touchy-feely stuff, I’m sure Clark will be able to help you.”

“Hey!” Lois pulled back a little before she softened again.

“Yeah, you’re right. And I guess it is only fair that he gets a say, too.”

He smiled at her and drifted back to sleep.

It wasn’t long after that when Zara stepped into the bedroom. “Lois?”

Lois startled a bit and turned towards her guest. “Hmm...?”

“Ching has arrived.” Zara looked toward the living room.

“He will be down shortly.”

Sighing, Lois pulled herself to her feet. “I guess this is it, then.” She walked back into the living room and opened the door as she waited for the male Kryptonian to return to her apartment. Suddenly there was a big lump in her throat.

She didn’t have to wait long as the dark-clad man emerged from the stairwell and strode past her into her apartment.

“Milady,” he addressed Zara gravely, “there is news.”

Lois closed the door and waited for Ching to relay his message to Zara. “Several of Lord Nor’s followers have been noticeably absent. There also seems to be fewer members of his household guard visible.”

“It appears our time is running short,” Zara said as she looked back towards the bedroom. “We have to secure the throne before Lord Nor can make his move.”

Ching nodded and strode towards the bedroom, returning a minute later with Superman, still asleep and now cradled in the other man’s arms. When Lois hiked an eyebrow, Ching simply stated. “This is more practical.”

Lois nodded and opened the door, letting Zara and Ching into the hallway before she grabbed her keys and pulled the door shut. They took the stairs and soon Lois found herself staring at the empty rooftop. “Well, where’s your ship?”

“Cloaked,” Ching stated matter-of-factly before Zara reached out and a doorway appeared out of thin air, complete with a short gangway.

Lois tried to peek inside but she could only see a few struts that accentuated a softly glowing surface. “So, that’s a U.F.O...”

Zara turned towards her. “Thank you, Lois Lane.” She bowed slightly. “New Krypton will always be in your debt.”

Lois nodded as she could feel the tears prickling in her eyes, and she quickly stepped forward and cupped Superman’s cheek.

“Goodbye, Superman.” Then she turned back towards Zara.

“Take good care of him,” she told her sternly.

“We will.”

Ching simply nodded towards her and stepped inside the ship, taking Superman’s sleeping form with him.

Lois turned away to wipe a tear from her left eye without them noticing and when she turned back, she saw Zara standing in the doorway, staring back at her. Then the gangway dissolved and the doorway vanished, leaving only an empty space behind. “Goodbye, Superman,” Lois whispered again before she turned towards the stairwell. Her fantasy was over. It was time to get her life back on track.

Lois continued to walk through the streets of Metropolis. Her feet carried her to the ruins of her former workplace and she looked up at the spot where the Daily Planet globe used to hang above the entrance.

Here she had had her greatest successes. Here she had found good friends. And her best friend. Clark. He had confessed his love for her and she had asked him to fetch her Superman. And he still had done his best to prevent her marriage to a criminal.

She shook her head. Her best friend! If only she had been *his* best friend as well. She swiped at her eyes, tears threatening again. She really needed her best friend right now. She needed to tell him how sorry she was for the way she had behaved. She needed someone to hug her.

Slowly, Lois walked towards Clinton Street, her mind continuing to reevaluate the past month since the Daily Planet had closed its doors. Perry had said he would find a way to have them reopened, so maybe she could even get her partner back. And then, maybe even his friendship.

The stairs to Clark’s apartment seemed steeper than before. Or maybe it was just that she was getting closer to facing her partner... her best friend... Clark again. Provided he would still talk to her. Superman had told her that Clark loved her. But was that before or after she had behaved so abhorrently?

Lois reached for the door, knocking quickly before she stood back while she gnawed at her right thumb. She hadn’t been this worried since she had interviewed for the intern position at the Daily Planet. Her first meeting with Perry White...

The door swung open and Lois was faced with her former boss. “Lois?” He sounded surprised. “Why don’t you come inside?”

“Hi, Perry,” Lois mumbled timidly. “Is Clark here?”

“Uh... Lois...” Perry scowled and eyed her skeptically before his face cleared. “Jimmy and Jack aren’t here. They needed a timeout after the stress of the past days, so it’s just us.”

“What?” Lois felt like she was missing something.

“So, how is Clark?” Perry asked, his concern clearly audible in his voice. “I didn’t want to say anything in front of the others, but he had looked pretty out of it before you took him home.” He placed an arm around her shoulder and led her into the apartment.

“Home?” The strange feeling continued to build. She really *hated* to feel this way.

“This morning?” Perry settled her onto the couch. “After you managed to get him out from whatever Luthor had done to him?”

Lois felt like she was floating in empty space. Had Perry lost his mind or had she? They had rescued Superman this morning, not Clark. She had taken Superman back to her apartment, not Clark. Superman and Clark were not the same person. They didn’t even *look* the same. Except for the hair color, the strong chin, the muscular body, the same eyes... Yes, that was it. Clark and Superman were *not* the same person, because that would mean she had just sent her best friend off to marry some alien princess on an alien world where an alien sociopath would be preying on him.

“Perry?” Lois asked with a shaking voice as she looked at

him. “Are you trying to tell me that you have found out that Clark and Superman are the same person?”

Her former editor nodded. “Seeing him in Nigel’s suit gave the game away. I think Henderson knows, too.”

“Oh, crap...”

Clark was beginning to wake up again. The last thing he remembered was being in Lois’ apartment — in Lois’ bed — while she told him he had lost his powers. Only now he was somewhere else. The bed was harder. The lights were colder. And there was a strange humming-noise in the background. He propped himself up on his elbows and looked around. He seemed to be inside a cabin of some sort. He noticed a door. “Hello?”

A moment later a strange woman appeared. She was clad in black with red and blue accents adorning her wrists, neck, and down the front of her robe. Her hair was of a lighter brown than Lois’ and she was a bit taller. “Are you feeling better, Kal-El?” she asked, and he thought he could hear concern in her voice.

“You know... my name.” His mind reeled. Only his parents knew his Kryptonian name. “Who are you?”

The woman eyed him for a moment before she answered. “I am Zara of the House of Ra. Your... wife.”

“Holy...”

THE END

To be continued in the — as of yet unnamed — sequel...

So, in case you haven’t guessed it already, this story is a crossover between the season finales of Season One (‘House of Luthor’) and Season Three (‘Big Girls Don’t Fly’).

Three things I want in my fic:

1. Revelations!!! Lois finds out that CK=Superman, and so does someone else.

2. A love triangle involving L & C (Superman doesn’t count! LOL)

3. L or C thinking the other is dead for a brief time (No TOGOM — something new)

Preferred season(s)/holiday [if applicable]: No Christmas! I’d love anything in seasons 1 or 2.

Three things I do not want in my fic:

1. Christmas

2. L & C getting married/having kids

3. Dan Scardino