

# Awaken My Heart

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Rated PG-13

Submitted June 2011

Summary: Lois Lane travels into space as the reporter aboard EPRAD's Mission to Mars. When something goes terribly wrong, her life pod crashes in a strange land. At gunpoint, she is taken before the Supreme Ruler — Kal-El.

A/N This fic is based on a premise that is highly improbable — some might say impossible. But the Superman universe includes a man who can fly, so I hope you can get past the scientific laxness and still enjoy the story.

The recognisable characters are not mine. I have drawn from 'Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman' for themes and other details.

In the early parts of this fic, there are a couple of moments that suggest something terrible is about to happen. They are quickly resolved.

I owe a large debt of thanks to the readers who left feedback on the Lois and Clark Fanfic Messageboards, and to IolantheAlias, my BR extraordinaire and General Editor.

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## Prologue

Lois Lane was excited.

More excited than the day she'd landed her job at the Daily Planet.

More excited than the night she'd won her first Kerth.

More excited than the moment she'd known for sure that she had brought down Lex Luthor.

Eight months of exhaustive tests, nerve-racking interviews, and interminable submissions had come to this.

There was one remaining vacancy on EPRAD's Mission to Mars — a vacancy to be filled by a reporter.

From the moment she had heard, Lois's life had been wholly devoted to ensuring that she would be the reporter on the spaceship. Her focus had been unwavering, her drive relentless, and her resolve uncompromising.

The head honcho of EPRAD walked to the microphone, and the tension in Lois's stomach spiralled upwards, squeezing the air from her lungs.

He scanned the full one hundred, eighty degrees of the crowd before him, obviously relishing his moment in the spotlight. "Thank you," he said. He cleared his throat. "EPRAD's Mission to Mars is the result of many years of ..."

Lois tuned out. Her brain was already saturated with every single aspect of the Mission to Mars. She knew everything there was to know. Everything except the one detail that mattered.

A swell of anticipation rippled through the gathered crowd, and Lois's attention leapt back to the man with the microphone.

"It is my great pleasure to announce that the reporter who will be joining us on the Mission to Mars is ..."

The tension around her lungs squeezed tighter.

"... Ms Lois Lane, Daily Planet."

The world stopped.

There was time — as those around her caught up — for the reality to permeate her mind.

She was going.

She was actually going.

She had dreamed of this moment ... dreamed it, imagined it, lived it, breathed it, been absorbed by it.

Then the bubble of solitude shattered, and countless people jostled around her, hugging her, slapping her back, speaking very loudly, laughing, showering her with congratulations.

Lois grinned, incapable of anything more profound than, "Thank you. Thank you."

She was going.

She was really going.

## Part 1

Kal-El, Supreme Ruler of New Krypton, heard the soft click and looked up from the report he was reading. The red light above the door flashed, signifying someone was requesting an audience with him.

He closed the report and stepped out from the inner sanctum of his bedroom and into the more public Chambers. He positioned himself in the large seat on the raised platform. "Enter," he directed.

The door flung open and six armed soldiers stomped in.

Six soldiers flanking one woman.

She was small and petite, practically hidden by the bigger bodies of his soldiers as they hauled her forward. They stopped a yard in front of Kal.

"Let go of her," he commanded.

"Sir." The most senior soldier spoke with breathless urgency. "She's an alien." Not one of them had loosened their grip on the woman.

"Let go of her," Kal repeated.

The soldiers unhandled her with clear reluctance. Two of them raised their rifles and stood, poised, their weapons aimed directly at her head.

Kal gestured impatiently to the closest soldiers to clear the space between him and the woman. They shuffled back.

The woman's head was down. From his elevated position, Kal could see little other than the mussed dark hair on the top of her head. Then, slowly, her head lifted, and she confronted him, brown eyes steady, face set, chin up. Her dark hair hung loose across her shoulders.

Kal stared right back, careful to stifle his surprise. Very few people looked directly into his eyes. No one ever regarded him with such ... simmering indifference.

Fascinated, he studied her. He could have ended her life with one word to his soldiers. Either she didn't realise the precariousness of her situation, or she wasn't one to cower. To anyone.

"Where did you get her?" Kal questioned, his eyes still locked in hers.

"A primitive vessel crash landed beyond the city gates," the soldier answered. "We investigated ... and found *this*."

*This* was not Kryptonian, that much was obvious. Kal skimmed his eyes down her clothes — they were unfamiliar in both design and material — before settling again in the uncanny magnetism of her unflinching eyes.

Who was she? Where had she come from? Was she alone? Did she represent a threat to his people?

"Are you injured?" Kal asked her.

Her gaze flittered briefly to his mouth before returning to bore into his eyes.

"What is your name?" he said.

Not even a glimmer of understanding showed on her face.

"Your name?" he tried again.

Her mouth opened, and a string of sounds emerged. Was she trying to communicate? Kal didn't recognise any words. He didn't even recognise any sounds. Certainly, she wasn't speaking Kryptonian ... or anything remotely related to his mother tongue.

Kal swung his attention from the woman to the most senior of

the soldiers. “Take her to the Noble’s Prison,” he ordered. “Give her food.”

“Sir,” the soldier said, “we barely have sufficient food for our own people.”

“Take her to the Noble’s Prison,” Kal repeated, his tone fortified with steely authority. “Put her in one of the rooms and leave food with her.”

The soldier nodded, and the woman was thrust from Kal’s presence.

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Lois Lane didn’t appreciate being mauled by six armed men. However, they hadn’t shot her.

Yet.

Although she couldn’t be sure that wasn’t the plan.

They’d obviously taken her to a top banana — probably their leader or something. Maybe he was in charge of illegal aliens.

Lois sifted through her fragmented memories. It had happened so incredibly quickly. In the spaceship, they’d ordered her — in panicked voices and urgent gestures — to get into the one-person, cramped pod that was basically the equivalent of a lifeboat on a ship.

She’d got in. Matt, one of the astronauts, had slammed shut the lid, entombing her.

Then there had been an almighty roar, and her pod had been tossed around like a solitary snowflake in a blizzard.

She’d blacked out.

Surfaced.

Blacked out again.

Felt grossly nauseated.

Then awakened to stillness and silence.

Both of which had been shattered when the door of her capsule had been violently peeled back and the business ends of six weapons had converged on her face.

They’d hauled her from the capsule, adding a few extra scratches and bruises in the process. As they had hustled her forward, she’d gotten her first view of wherever she’d landed. It was arid ... dry, bare, and ugly. It was cold ... freezing, although she saw no ice or snow. It was dull ... as if they were in heavy shadow. And everything was tinged red. Lois looked up, searching for the sun. A bloodshot haze hung above them.

The place smelled.

Bad.

Like someone had been boiling gym socks.

The soldiers had set her before Mr Top Banana.

Lois was fairly sure there had been communication between the soldiers and the boss guy, although it had sounded so unlike any language she’d ever heard, she’d checked his mouth for movement.

Now she was in a room — stark and bare except for a small, raised platform that could have been a bed. It was cool, but definitely warmer than outside, for which she was grateful. One of the soldiers had brought a bowl of something and left it with her.

As soon as she was alone, Lois had tried the door. It was locked.

She examined the contents of the bowl. It was lime green in colour and had the consistency of thick yoghurt. She bent low and sniffed.

It didn’t really have an aroma of its own ... which meant it smelled like boiled gym socks.

Lois wrinkled her nose.

She was hungry.

She just wasn’t sure if she were *that* hungry.

Or if this was even food.

Lois sat on the platform and shuffled back into the corner where the cold, hard walls met. There was no mattress, no pillow, no bedding of any sort.

Where was she?

Somewhere remote, obviously. Greenland? Siberia?

Shouldn’t there be snow? Deepest Africa? No, the people weren’t Africans. So where was she?

Were there any other survivors from the Mission to Mars?

The men who had found her pod had seemed surprised ... although the expressionless mien of their faces hadn’t altered. But there was something in the quick jerkiness of their actions that had seemed to suggest that finding stray space vehicles wasn’t an everyday occurrence. Lois surmised she was probably the first.

How long was it going to take to get back to Metropolis? She needed to contact Perry — soon — because this story had ‘guaranteed Pulitzer’ stamped all over it.

With a heavy sigh, she realised that it was in her best interests to appear compliant. She hungered for that Pulitzer so badly she could taste it ... but being awarded it posthumously didn’t have quite the same appeal.

And she was going to need help to get home.

The door opened, and an older person walked in, holding a white garment. The person’s face was blank and pallid. It was hairless like a woman’s but held not even a hint of femininity. Lois glanced down. Under the shapeless cloak-like gown, there was the hint of a bust. She was probably female.

Lois stood. The woman held up the garment. It was a satiny dress — short and sleeveless. The woman pushed it towards Lois.

The woman said something — something totally incomprehensible. She gestured to Lois.

With a sinking feeling, Lois realised she was meant to wear the dress. They were going to freeze her to death.

Lois nodded and held the dress next to her body, trying to indicate that she understood she was to wear the dress, hoping the woman would get the hint and leave. The woman stared, unmoving.

With a sigh, Lois unbuttoned her jacket and slithered out of it and her shirt. She slipped the dress over her head, removed her shoes, pulled up the dress, and eased her jeans from her body.

The woman pointed to Lois’s thick, dark socks — socks that now jarred visually with her bare legs and the shiny whiteness of the dress. Despite the woman’s vacant expression, Lois sensed her disapproval.

With a sigh, Lois bent and removed her socks. The bare, concrete floor was cold.

Seemingly satisfied, the woman turned and left.

A minute later, two armed soldiers stormed through her door. They pushed Lois out of the room and kept her moving with regular jabs from the ends of their rifles. Lois realised she was being taken back to the building where she’d seen Mr Top Banana. As they went inside, they passed between two armed sentries — neither of whom even glanced in their direction.

They took her to the same room as before. Mr Top Banana was there, standing this time, instead of entrenched in the big, ornately carved seat.

He barked something — it actually sounded more like a dog’s bark than anything human — and the two soldiers turned and left. Obviously, he had clout. People did what he told them.

Lois faced him, her head high. He wore much grander clothes than the soldiers, lived in a guarded — and heated — palace, and had a pompous seat to perch on ... but she was going to let him know it took more than that to impress Lois Lane.

He was tall ... dark-haired ... and — despite his weird dress-and-pants outfit — not bad looking. His eyes were brown and cold ... no, not cold ... empty. His mouth moved as he ‘spoke’ — if those strange noises were supposed to be speech — revealing nicely-shaped teeth.

Whatever he was trying to say, it was taking a long time. Lois gave up trying to understand and surveyed her surroundings.

Other than the ‘throne’, the room contained very little — some shelves laden with large books and a small table. The decor — if you could call it decor — looked like brown mud smeared on concrete walls. The floor was bare — and cold.

Her attention returned to Mr Top Banana, and she tried to judge what she could expect from him. Compassion? Brutality? Justice? Assistance?

“Excuse me.” Lois cut briskly across his monologue. “Lois Lane, Daily Planet, Metropolis. I need to get home. I have a very important story to write.”

He’d stopped talking at ‘excuse me’. He considered her — his face showing neither anger, nor annoyance, nor surprise, nor any other recognisable emotion. He waited in silence for a short time and then spoke. When he stopped, he waited again. Lois figured he expected a reply. She shrugged.

He strode to the table and picked up what looked like a syringe — without a needle — containing purple gel. He approached her purposefully.

Lois held up her hand to thwart his progress. “Don’t touch me,” she warned, making no attempt to conceal her resentment.

Her body language, her tone, her words — all were completely ineffectual. He stepped closer with calm determination. Her hostility gave way to fear. “No,” she cried, backing away from him. “No.”

He followed her until she thudded into the wall. He advanced an additional step and towered over her. He was going to drug her, she was sure of it. A scream rose in her throat, but she feverishly swallowed it down as she tightly clamped her mouth.

He grasped her right wrist with his left hand. Lois kicked at him and tried to wrench back her hand. The battle was hopelessly uneven — his strength far exceeded hers. He leant his forearm across her chest, pinning her against the wall. He brought the syringe to her captured wrist and squirted its contents onto the back of her hand.

It stung, and Lois instinctively jolted back, but she was neither quick enough nor strong enough to lessen his grip on her wrist. She peered into his face, expecting anger, or triumph, or even manic cruelty. She saw none of them.

The realisation hit her with the force of a tornado — he took no pleasure from this.

Lois relaxed against the wall, and he immediately lifted his forearm from her body.

When the syringe was empty, he tossed it onto the table. Using his thumbs, he rubbed the purple gel into the back of her hand. He spread it from her knuckles to her wrist, from her thumb to the base of her little finger.

His touch was neither gentle nor rough. Lois sensed neither kindness nor malice. His actions were ... deliberate, devoid of feeling.

The stinging abated. The colour faded.

Then the door opened. Two soldiers came into the room, and Lois was hustled away.

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At gunpoint, Lois was taken to high-ceilinged, austere building. It was dingy and cold. She was forced the length of it — to the front where an old man in a white robe awaited her.

For the next few minutes, the old man droned on and on as everyone else stood silently. It appeared to be some sort of ceremony.

A pre-funeral?

Was she being prepared for death?

Offered to their gods?

Lois stood quietly, uncomfortably aware that the two soldiers had their weapons trained on her. To her right, slightly in front of her, was a large bin. Lois could feel the warmth emanating from it. She surreptitiously edged sideways, hoping to get a little closer to the heat source. The point of a weapon knocked against the

right side of her head, and she teetered back.

When the old man had finished his oration, he moved to the bin and withdrew a long iron from it. The end of the iron — the end that had been in the fire — emerged from the bin, glowing red. He approached Lois with purpose, and she gasped.

She wanted to scream, to run, to kick, to bite ... but her searing terror had paralysed every part of her body.

One of the soldiers lifted her right arm towards the old man, who pressed the end of the iron onto the back of her hand.

Lois screamed as the world reeled. She swayed. From behind, someone grasped her, steadying her.

It took what seemed like a long, long time for her brain to register that there was no pain.

The red glowing iron was on her hand — held there by the combined efforts of the soldier and the old man.

But there was no pain. Pressure, but no pain.

They removed the iron from her hand and returned it to the fire bin. Lois examined her hand. Emblazoned upon it was an irregular five-sided shape around the letter ‘S’.

A slither of logical thought struggled to surface from amidst the haze of her confusion. Why, when they didn’t use recognisable sounds to communicate, did they use a letter from the English alphabet as a symbol?

What did this ‘S’ signify?

This *had* to be some sort of ceremony. The old guy was officiating. The soldiers were there to keep her in line. Lois couldn’t shake the idea that she had just been ... processed.

Did it include her in something? Or exclude her?

Would they brand her if they intended to kill her?

And what could possibly have given them the notion that this was acceptable?

When she got back to Metropolis, someone *would* pay for this.

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Lois was taken from the ceremonial building and across a bleak courtyard to a row of parallel rooms — three on each side. She was led to the last room on the left and shunted into it.

The door was closed and locked.

Lois looked around her new room. Her first impression brought tears to her eyes. It was warm. Not hot, but warm, certainly.

And there was a bed. It had a thin mattress, a flat, limp pillow, and a thin, rough length of material that could just about pass as a sheet. Lois took it from the bed, folded it in half, and wrapped it around her shoulders.

She inspected her hand. It was red and blotchy. It looked sore. It wasn’t.

Lois gingerly prodded the edge of the ‘S’. She couldn’t feel her own touch. Clearly, it *had* been numbed.

Was that the purple stuff Mr Top Banana had put on her hand?

And exactly how much would it hurt when the numbing agent wore off?

There was a closet in the room. Lois opened the door. Her clothes were there! Her jeans and shirt and jacket. Even her socks and shoes. Two grey gowns — similar to those worn by the old woman — hung below the shelf, and ... most wonderful of all ... a long, thick coat.

Lois discarded the sheet and put on the coat. Immediately she felt more comfortable — less exposed and warmer, too.

She lay on the bed and covered herself with the sheet.

She was hungry. But there was nothing in the room that could possibly be food.

Confused. But she had no way to communicate with these strange, robotic people.

Homesick. But right now, she could do nothing about getting home.

Weary. She had a bed ... she might as well sleep.  
Lois closed her eyes, stilled her mind, and allowed exhaustion to overwhelm her.

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Lois was woken by the woman who had brought her the white dress. Before Lois could properly piece together where she was and how she'd gotten there, she became aware of the persistent throbbing of her hand. She sat up from the bed and examined it in the dim light.

The mark was red and raised.

The woman prodded Lois and gestured for her to follow. Once outside the room, Lois looked behind her for the soldiers. She was alone with the old woman.

She toyed with the idea of running away. She was confident she could outrun the old woman. But then what?

The cluster of buildings was surrounded by a high wall. Four armed soldiers guarded the gates.

With a defeated sigh, Lois followed meekly.

They crossed the courtyard — it had no flowers, nor grass, nor decoration of any sort — passed the two sentinels at the door, and entered Mr Top Banana's place.

Thirty seconds later, Lois was alone with him in his room. She faced him, waiting.

In his hand, he held another syringe filled with the purple substance. He approached Lois, and she lifted her hand to him. He squirted the gel onto the 'S' symbol, and Lois tensed, anticipating the stinging sensation.

It came, but was much milder than the first time.

Again, he rubbed it into her hand — with all the emotional connection of a man tying his shoelaces. At first, she could feel his touch, but he didn't cause her any extra pain. Then, the gel began its work, and the discomfort began to fade away.

"Why did you do this to me?" Lois demanded.

He'd heard her. His eyes lifted from her hand and to her face.

He replied — in the same guttural grunts she'd heard before — but he didn't stop working the gel into her hand. By the time he'd finished, the throbbing had completely subsided.

"Why did you do this to me?" Lois repeated angrily.

Her wrath had no effect. His face remained inscrutable. He began the noises again, but Lois cut across them.

"Why?" she shouted, allowing her fear and her indignation and her confusion to eke into that one word. "Who are you to think you can disfigure me like this?"

He stared back, not even attempting to answer her question.

She pointed to her hand, and then raised both hands, palm up in a gesture of 'Why?'

He barked something loudly, and the old woman returned to escort Lois to her room.

As soon as they arrived, she left. Lois noticed there was a metallic bowl with a meagre helping of the green stuff she'd seen in her first room. Beside it was a stick — beige in colour, cylindrical in shape, and about three inches long and half an inch wide. One end was tinged green — looking far too much like mould to be appetising.

However, Lois was hungry.

And it seemed this could ... possibly ... be food.

And as she had no way of even communicating her desire to go home — let alone actually achieving that — and as she had to eat something, she probably should try it.

She picked up the stick. It was hard — like very stale bread. She touched the end of it on her tongue. It had no discernable taste.

There were no implements to assist in eating the green gunk, so Lois dipped the end of the stick into it. The mucousy substance clung to the end of the stick like a thickened dip.

Grimacing, Lois tested it with the tip of her tongue.

It didn't taste disgusting. It had a mild flavour ... vaguely

reminding her of ricotta cheese. If she ignored the colour, it was edible.

She hoped so, anyway.

Lois ate the remainder of the green stuff. She then looked at the stick. Was she supposed to eat it too?

The end she had used to slurp up the gunk was now stained a deeper green colour and had softened.

Tentatively, she bit off part of it. She chewed, and it disintegrated into a sandy consistency. There was nowhere to spit it out, so Lois swallowed.

It was a little gritty, but other than that ... not too bad at all.

## Part 2

Kal-El lived by routines.

Every evening, between supper and bed, he dedicated two hours to the Disputes, and then one hour to researching and considering solutions to the numerous problems faced by his people.

The Disputes came first — always. He would carefully read the submissions from all antagonists, think through the issue, consult Kryptonian Law if he deemed it necessary, and then record his orders. On a good night, he could get through six Disputes.

Tonight was not a good night.

He had only thirteen minutes left, and he hadn't even finished reading the first submission from the first Dispute.

It wasn't a particularly long submission, nor particularly complex.

But he was finding it particularly difficult to stay focussed on his task.

His mind kept drifting away.

To the alien woman.

She was a woman.

That in itself was disconcerting.

It had made him realise how little interaction he had with women. All his servants were male. All his soldiers were male. All his Cabinet were male. On the rare occasion when he felt he couldn't settle a Dispute from the information given in the submissions and requested to see the antagonists, they were generally male. Even when the Dispute involved a woman, her father, husband, or brother would accompany her and speak for her.

Kal's Mistress of Concubines was female — though he saw her only rarely and his infrequent orders to her were mostly relayed via one of his servants. And she was old and worn. If she'd ever had an aura of femininity, it had withered long ago.

Unlike the alien woman.

Kal's wife was a woman.

Za, of the House of Ra, was a woman. He'd married her when he was sixteen — ten winters ago. It was his duty — as inescapable as his nightly obligation to the Disputes. Since the ceremony, he'd seen her once a year at the Nobility Convention.

He'd never spoken to her. He'd said his vows — but not to her, to the Officiator. He didn't remember even looking at her that much.

Yet it had required conscious effort to tear his eyes from the alien woman.

Kal regarded the folder in his hand, uncomfortably aware of his lack of progress. The pile of Disputes awaiting his judgement seemed to grow exponentially every week.

Again Kal forced his attention to the hand-written submission. But his mind had drifted before he reached the end of the first line.

Where was she from?

Was she alone?

Was she here by accident? Or intention?

Did she represent a threat to his people? His planet?

Kal glanced to the clock on the wall. Four minutes left. There was no way he could settle this Dispute tonight. He simply couldn't do it justice in four minutes. He waited for the time to pass and then closed the folder and returned it to the top of the large pile.

The third hour of his evening was devoted to investigating possible solutions to the seemingly insurmountable problems faced by his people. Foremost was their ever-dwindling water supply.

Then the lack of fuel for heating. Full winter was still two months away, and his people were cold already.

Kal didn't know how he was going to provide heating for his people. He didn't know where he was going to source water so they could increase their crops and manage their stock. He didn't know how he was going to feed his people.

He knew from past experience that those who were sick or weak or old — those past forty years — would almost certainly not survive the long, arduous winter.

How did her people do it?

Did they face similar problems?

Did they have solutions?

Suddenly, an idea invaded his thoughts. An idea so unconventional, his mind whirled.

The idea took root and began to grow.

There would be opposition, Kal knew that. His Cabinet would not approve. Not without weeks of congested discussion.

But the idea was justifiable.

Radical.

But justifiable.

And they didn't have weeks. It needed to be done now.

With firm resolve, Kal rose from the chair at his desk and pushed the button, summoning his servant. Seconds later, Tek rushed in. "Sir," he said.

"Arrange for the Translator to be inserted in C4," Kal ordered. "Tomorrow morning."

"We have one remaining Translator," Tek said. "And we do not have the capability to manufacture more."

"Will it still function?" Kal asked.

"It's uncertain after this length of time."

"I want it done tomorrow," Kal said. "Inform the Surgeon he is to begin immediately following breakfast."

"There will be opposition," Tek said.

"Yes," Kal agreed. "But once it is done, it is done."

"As you order."

Tek left Kal's chambers, and immediately, Kal's thoughts returned to the alien woman.

If the Translator were still viable, he would be able to communicate with her.

If he could communicate with her, he could access any knowledge she might have — knowledge that could be significant in their battles against the harsh environment.

Knowledge that could mean the difference between survival and extinction.

That was his justification.

That was why he was ordering it without consulting his Cabinet.

It was for the good of all Kryptonians.

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The next morning, Lois was awoken by the bland woman. She walked from the room and gestured for Lois to follow. As she did, Lois looked to the little table. It was bare. Apparently, she was to have no breakfast ... unless she was being taken somewhere else for breakfast.

To Mr Top Banana maybe?

Unlikely, she realised.

He was important. She could tell that by the way others brown-nosed him. And if the guards outside his building were

anything to go by, his safety was a high priority.

Either that or they really didn't want him to escape.

Lois doubted he would dine with foreign prisoners.

Two soldiers — unarmed — met them in the courtyard and each took one of Lois's arms.

She was marched to an unfamiliar section of Mr Top Banana's building and into a bare, cold room containing a large table. Two other men entered, their eyes peering out from above the masks covering their lower faces. The soldiers lifted Lois bodily and placed her on the table and then forced her to turn onto her right side.

There was something unyielding in their actions — something sombre in the atmosphere. Lois wasn't scared ... exactly ... but her heart was pounding. "What are you doing to me?" she asked, knowing it was pointless, but unable to stop herself.

They held her while three belts were tightened across her — one at her shoulders, one at her waist, and one at her knees — securing her to the table. Lois began to struggle, but the belts had no give. She reached for the belt across her shoulder and tried to push it away. One of the soldiers captured her hands and held them securely in the pit of her stomach.

Lois couldn't move.

She was trapped.

Like an animal.

There were four of them and one of her.

"I am a citizen of the United -," she began.

One of the masked men came into her vision, holding a razor blade and a sponge. Someone from behind Lois clamped her head against the table. The masked man dampened the hair above her left ear and then proceeded to shave her. The moist strands fell onto her nose and cheeks. Lois fought against the rising need to lash out. She must not move — not with the razor blade on her scalp.

What were they going to do to her?

Then she saw him — the second of the masked men. He was holding a drill.

Icy panic burned through her veins. They were going to drill into her head.

Lois screamed. She drew breath and screamed again, her control shattered.

Then above her screams, she heard a bellow.

The masked man with the drill backed away, and Lois saw Mr Top Banana. He barked something. He seemed displeased, although there was nothing indicating anger on his still-dispassionate face. The masked men studied the floor.

Mr Top Banana waited ... maybe for an answer ... but none was forthcoming. With another growl, he turned and left the room.

"Come back," Lois screeched. "Please! Come back. Don't leave me with these monsters."

The men continued staring at the floor. Lois waited, her breath ragged, her heart hurtling around her ribcage.

Finally, after what seemed like a long, long time — but was probably less than a minute — Mr Top Banana returned, holding a half-sphere attached by a tube to a bulging balloon of clear plastic. He approached the table without so much as a glance to the four men and placed the half-sphere over Lois's nose and mouth.

His brown eyes looked down on her. And then she saw no more.

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Lois gradually became aware of her consciousness. The bed beneath her was soft. She was warm.

What a dream! The spaceship crash, the strange country, the remote people, the weird food, the language of grunts, Mr Top Banana, being branded, being shaved, being threatened with a

drill to her head. Whoa!

Lane, she admonished herself, you needta eat less Rocky Road ice-cream just before going to bed.

Lois opened her eyes and gasped. She was not in the comforting familiarity of her bedroom in her apartment in Metropolis.

Instead, she was in an unknown room. The decor — brown mud on concrete walls — reminded her of the room where she had seen Mr Top Banana.

But this was a different room. And she was on ... actually *in* ... a bed.

Lois slid tentative fingertips across the back of her right hand. She traced the slight undulations of the pentagon and the 'S' inside it.

So, it wasn't a dream.

She really had crashed in a foreign country. They really had branded her.

But why was she in this bed?

It didn't seem like a hospital — not that she was expecting a hospital to be in any way like something she would be familiar with — but this was someone's bed ... someone's double bed.

Whose bed?

Mr Top Banana's?

Where was he?

And what had he done to her while she was unconscious?

Lois felt her body under the covers, relieved to discover she was still wearing the white dress.

Then other memories flooded back, and she gasped.

Had they drilled the hole in her head?

With quivering apprehension, Lois reached for her left cheek and skimmed past the protrusion of her ear. Where there should have been strands of hair, there was a small bandage. Beyond its edges, she could feel a thin strip of bare scalp.

So they *had* shaved her. And then performed some sort of procedure on ... or *in* ... her head.

The door opened, and Mr Top Banana strode in.

He gathered the chair from the desk and sat next to her bed. He scrutinized her for a long moment, his face vacuous. His mouth opened. "Hello," he said.

Lois lurched to a sitting position, disregarding the possibility of a backlash from the trauma inflicted on her head. She stared at him, eyes wide, as she hauled the bedding up to her throat.

"Hello," he repeated. His voice had a robotic tinniness.

Lois swallowed. "Hello," she croaked.

"I am Kal-El, Supreme Ruler of New Krypton," he said woodenly. He closed his right fist and thudded it into the centre of his chest.

So he really *was* the top banana. "I am Lois Lane, Daily Planet." Lois extended her right hand, using her left hand to ensure the bedding kept her covered to the neck.

He dropped his hand from his chest and stared at her outstretched hand, but didn't make any move towards her. After an extended silence, he said, "Low is slain?"

"Lo-is," she said as clearly as she could.

"Lo-iss?"

She nodded. "You're Kal?"

His shoulders straightened, and he drew back as if confounded by her question. He'd said his name was Kal. What was she *supposed* to call him? "Where are you from?" he asked.

"Metropolis, New Troy, USA," Lois answered. "Where am I? "New Krypton."

"That's a city, right?" she guessed. She'd never heard of it. It sounded vaguely Eastern European. "Which country?"

"There are no countries."

Was that a joke? Lois scanned his face, searching for amusement — no, he was serious. Was he some sort of one-world extremist? She didn't know ... didn't care ... didn't have time for

his petty agendas. "I need to get home to Metropolis, Kal," she informed him. "I appreciate your assistance."

"I have no means to get you home, even if I knew of its whereabouts."

"The United States of America," she said with disdain. "This place may be remote, but you must have heard of The United States of America."

"No."

Lois sighed, her exasperation rising. "Get me a map," she snapped.

He went to his desk, brought back a map, and handed it to her.

It was a map of one landmass — vaguely circular — an island surrounded by ocean. Lois poked at it. "What's this?" she demanded.

"New Krypton."

"Where's the rest of the world?"

"There is no rest of the world," Kal intoned. "That is our entire planet."

Great! Just her luck that when she could have crash landed anywhere in the entire world — the Caribbean maybe, or a tropical island paradise — her life-pod had honed in on a cold, dank, shut-away place run by a lunatic. "I don't know what game you're playing, Mister," Lois said, managing, with considerable effort, to keep her tone even. "But I am an American citizen, and there are international conventions regarding the treatment of benevolent foreigners. I mean you no harm. Just put me on a plane to anywhere in the USA ... actually, any civilised country will do ... and I won't bother you again."

"That isn't possible."

"Of course it's possible," Lois said. "What are you holding out for? Money? Weapons? Trade favours? You think by detaining me you can broker a deal with the President?"

"You are on Planet New Krypton," he said. "You arrived in a space capsule — from another planet. You said you were from the Daily Planet."

"That's not a *planet*, blockhead," Lois exploded. "It's a newspaper."

Kal didn't react to her insult or her tone. "You are on New Krypton," he said. His monotone was really starting to grate. "It is a planet. Not a country. Not a city. A planet. You come from a different planet. Don't you know your home planet?"

"Or course I do," she spat. "Planet Earth."

"Earth," he repeated. "I have heard of that planet."

"Whoopee doo, and give the man a toffee."

"That did not translate," he said, deadpan.

Lois rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Can I go home?" she asked wearily.

"No."

"Why not?"

"We have neither the technology nor the energy to transport you to your uncharted planet."

"It's *not* uncharted," Lois hissed.

"It's not on the map."

No arguments there. Lois sighed. What now?

A sudden explanation flared through her brain. Maybe they'd put her in the asylum. Maybe Kal was an inmate. "Is there someone else I can speak to?" she asked hopefully.

"I am the Supreme Ruler."

Delusions of grandeur ... wonderful. "You already mentioned that," Lois said, allowing her derision full expression. She looked past him, trying to assess the chances of success should she attempt to escape. They weren't good, she decided grimly. "Did anyone else from my spaceship survive?"

"You are the only one of your kind here."

Lois held her violated hand towards him. "What is this?" she said.

“The Crest of the House of El.”

He’d said his name was Kal El. “*Your house?*” she accused.  
“Yes.”

So it *had* been some sort of ceremony. Which, unfortunately, quashed the inmate theory. “Why?”

“You are my concubine.”

“Your *concubine?*” Lois spluttered.

“Yes,” Kal said with a nonchalance that detonated her smouldering hostility.

“Did you even have the common decency to enquire whether I *wanted* to be lumped with you?” Lois stormed. “Or did you imagine that because you’re pretty and because you’re the top banana you can just do whatever you want to?”

Inexplicably, his blankness got ... blander. “I am not a banana,” he said as if he were giving her helpful information.

Lois Lane was speechless. For the first time in her life, she was utterly speechless.

“It was not your choice,” Kal said. “You are C4.”

“C4?” she managed.

“The fourth of my concubines.”

That probably explained what she was doing in his bed. But had he already claimed his conjugal *rights* or was that why he was here now? “Don’t think for one moment that you’ll be getting anything from me,” Lois fumed. “Concubine or not.”

Kal pushed back the chair and rose. “I will come back later,” he said.

Lois glared as she watched him walk through the doorway. Then the thought hit her ... Come back for what?

\*\*\*

Kal-El was supposed to be checking the Government Accounts. That’s what he did during the hour prior to lunch on Thursdays.

But the neat rows of figures before him kept morphing into an image of the alien woman.

Low-iss.

What a strange name.

Was it representative of her position? Was she a person of no consequence on her home planet? Except she didn’t look like a person born into a hopeless situation ... didn’t look like someone who had known from the beginning of consciousness that her life could never be anything other than an overwhelming struggle.

Why put a lowly person into a spaceship?

Maybe her life was expendable. Maybe she was an experiment. Maybe her death was immaterial.

There was something about her eyes. Something that continually lured him back. Every time he was with her, he kept forcing his attention away, only to find himself anchored in her again.

Certainly her demeanour was different to every other person he’d known. She seemed to regard him as an equal. Even after he’d told her he was the Supreme Ruler.

She’d called him ‘Kal’.

*Kal.*

No one had ever called him Kal. Possibly his parents had, before their deaths, but he had no memory of them.

The people closest to him — his servants who had served him for a long time — called him ‘Sir’. The three Regal Nobles who constituted his Cabinet referred to him as the Supreme Ruler. All others accepted they weren’t worthy to speak his name.

Yet this person ... this woman ... this Low-iss ... an alien from Planet Earth, who would be lower than the lowest if he hadn’t taken her as a concubine, calmly called him ‘Kal’.

And she hadn’t responded when he’d put his hand to his chest to signify that he willingly accepted her into his presence.

She’d put out her hand, sideways, thumb up. Almost ... almost as if she had expected him to respond to her. But how? Was he supposed to hold out his hand too? Maybe the very ends

of their fingertips were supposed to touch. And that would signify ... what?

Kal checked the time. Another nine and a half minutes to work on the Accounts.

An idea formed — an insistent idea that had established residence in his mind before he had a chance to protest.

He could check on Low-iss before lunch.

Never, in the ten years he had been Supreme Ruler, had he ever abandoned a task before the allotted time. Not unless it was an emergency.

This was not an emergency.

But ...

Kal snapped shut the account book and walked, as unhurriedly as he could manage, to his bedroom.

\*\*\*

Lois made a speculative exploration of her head. Most of her hair was untouched. It was grimy and in desperate need of a wash, but it was still there. The bandage — about an inch square — was firmly attached above her left ear.

Gently, she probed it. It didn’t hurt. Maybe they’d put that numbing purple gel on it. She could feel a little lump under the bandage.

Terrifying though it had been, whatever they’d put in her head had given her the capacity to communicate — and for that, she felt a wave of gratitude.

She examined her hand again. The redness had gone. It didn’t hurt even when she pressed the ‘S’ symbol.

They didn’t seem to be an innately cruel people.

They had branded her and put something in her head, but both had been done ... well, humanely. Although she was convinced the doctors or whatever they were had intended to drill into her head without any anaesthetic, until Mr Top ... Kal ... had come and stopped them.

He was definitely not cruel. Distant maybe, but not cruel.

Kal had said she was his concubine ... but he hadn’t demanded anything of her.

Yet.

But she *was* in his bed.

If she was his fourth concubine, where were the other three?

Was it a time-share deal?

Lois looked around the room. It wasn’t a particularly big room — smaller than her bedroom in her apartment. If Kal were the supreme ruler, wouldn’t he have a grander, bigger room than this?

Maybe this was *her* room.

Maybe all the concubines had a room, and Kal visited as the mood took him.

She gulped.

It had taken considerable time for her indignation and frustration to subside enough to allow logical thought.

Except there was nothing logical about her situation.

The people were so different. Their total lack of emotion was disconcerting. Did they laugh, these strange people? Did they smile even? Did they cry? Get angry?

Or were they just restrained around strangers? Aliens.

Aliens.

Could it possibly be true that she was ... actually ... really ... on *another* planet?

She’d known she wasn’t in Metropolis. Known she wasn’t in the United States.

But to think she wasn’t even on Earth!

The room had a desk — bare other than a pile of folders — a chair and a small basin.

This couldn’t be his room ... it was too stark ... far too humble for a supreme ruler.

The door opened, and Kal entered. He walked to the chair and sat down, his elbows resting on his knees, his head down.

“Hello,” Lois said hesitantly.

His head rose, and Lois looked into his brown eyes. They reminded her of chocolate. “Hello,” he replied in the monotone. Was that his normal tone or was that the result of communicating through whatever they had put in her head?

There was a long silence while his attention volleyed between her face and the floor.

Lois watched him. He seemed uncomfortable. Was he trying to tell her something? Then a thought struck her. Had he come for ... well, the concubine thing?

Surely a man with three concubines and who-knew-how-many wives would simply come in and take what he assumed was his.

Kal looked up. “How do you keep warm in winter?”

Lois was completely taken aback. She was thinking about concubines, and he wanted to know how she kept warm. Unless ... what if they were thinking the same thing and this was his clumsy, Kryptonian pick-up line?

Despite everything, Lois felt a smile curve across her mouth. An image — his face when he’d solemnly informed her that he was not a banana — leapt into her mind and drove her smile wider.

Now, he was staring at her. His stock expression hadn’t changed but she thought she detected confusion. Or maybe it was displeasure. She quickly covered her mouth with her hand.

His unblinking eyes bored into her.

As if she’d grown an extra head.

Lois felt her bandage. It was still in place. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“How do you keep warm in winter?” he repeated.

Lois firmly suppressed her lingering amusement. “We have heating,” she said. “We burn gas or wood or coal. We also wear extra clothing such as coats.”

“We have no gas, and our supplies of wood and coal are extremely limited.”

“It’s warm in here.”

“This is the Regal Residence. It is kept warm.” Kal looked up from the floor. “But my people are not so fortunate.”

He seemed genuinely concerned.

“Some homes have no heating at all,” he continued. “Many people die every winter.”

There was no sorrow on his face, and his voice carried no emotion. But Lois could feel his concern. In his strange, mechanical way, this leader cared for his people.

His head was low; his shoulders slumped.

Lois experienced a sudden, unexpected impulse to reach over and touch his hand. To connect with him. To convey encouragement.

She didn’t. She didn’t move. She didn’t speak. She had no suggestions as to how this cold planet could find warmth through the winter.

And she was uncertain as to how touching him would be received.

But her gut feeling was ... it wouldn’t be welcome.

\*\*\*

Innumerable miles away, as the sun descended on another day, a mother stared into the deepening gloom, searching.

Always searching.

### Part 3

Kal contemplated the floor, regretting his impetuosity in coming to Low-iss without first formulating a plan of what to say.

He wanted to stare at her. She completely captivated his attention — but it was rude to stare at an inferior, so he kept his head low.

Lacking the advantages of forethought, he’d latched onto his original justification for ordering that their one remaining

Translator be inserted into her head. If she had knowledge, information, ideas ... anything that could alleviate the many difficulties they faced, it would be a good investment.

So, he’d asked her about heating.

And then the most startling thing had happened. Her mouth had stretched sideways. Not only sideways, but the ends of her mouth had turned up and she had bared her teeth.

If he hadn’t seen it ... if someone had described it to him, Kal would have thought the effect would be menacing ... threatening even.

Yet what he’d perceived on Low-iss’s face was ... he didn’t know ... he had no word. Good, he supposed. It was as if something inside her was good and somehow it translated to the mouth twitch.

But even more astounding was the effect it had had on him. *In* him.

It was as if something inside him had lifted. As if he could suddenly see a way to warm his people this winter.

Which was illogical, obviously.

And disconcerting.

But what was more disconcerting was how much he wanted her to do it again.

Kal had repeated his question, hoping she would respond in the same way, but she hadn’t. She’d answered him.

Then, he had sunk back into awkwardness, completely devoid of ideas about what he should do now.

What was it about this woman that made him feel like the ground beneath him kept slipping away?

He didn’t know.

Careful to avoid looking at Low-iss, Kal checked his watch. He had to leave her — it was time for his lunch. Another wild, aberrant notion exploded in his brain.

He could eat his lunch in here with Low-iss.

It wasn’t done, of course. The Supreme Ruler ate alone in his Dining Room. Not with a concubine in his bedroom.

But ... he was the Supreme Ruler.

If he chose to eat his lunch in his bedroom, no one could stop him.

Kal rose abruptly from his chair and went to his Dining Room. Tek brought in his plate of food and a glass of blue.

When the servant had left the room, Kal picked up his plate and glass and hurried back to his bedroom.

To Low-iss.

\*\*\*

Lois watched as the bedroom door closed abruptly behind Kal.

He’d come in, asked about heating, stared at the floor, and then, without any explanation, hastily left.

Lois sighed deeply. They’d put something in her head — something that meant she could understand their words — but it didn’t change that she was an alien.

Different.

An outsider.

She slipped from the bed and went to the small basin in the corner of the bedroom. There was no faucet. Would it be possible to wash her hair? How did you get water?

Before she could investigate further, the door opened and Kal entered, carrying a plate and a glass of blue liquid. He sat on the chair, put the plate on his lap and the glass on the floor. “Are you hungry?” he asked.

Lois returned to the bed and sat on the edge of it, her bare knees only inches from his. She wished she was wearing one of the ankle-length gowns instead of the short, white dress. “What did they put in my head?” she asked.

“A Translator.”

“That’s why I can understand you now?”

“Yes.”

“But I’m from a different planet,” Lois said. “Your language doesn’t even sound human.” She glanced quickly to Kal’s face, wondering if he would take offence.

He didn’t seem to, although how would she know? His expression didn’t change whatever she said. “It reads from the language processor in the left hemisphere of your brain and transmits it,” Kal said. “The Translator in my head receives it, translates it to Kryptonian, and feeds it into my brain.”

Lois checked the short dark hair around Kal’s left ear. She couldn’t see any evidence of a foreign object buried in his brain. “You have one too?”

“Yes.”

“Does anyone else?” she asked. “Will I be able to communicate?”

“Older people have them. Children do not.” He offered her one of the two sticks. “Are you hungry?”

Lois looked at Kal’s plate, recognising the same green stuff she had been given yesterday. He also had brown lumps that vaguely reminded her of meatballs.

She took the stick, but hesitated. Did he mean for her to dig into his green stuff? “What is this called?” she asked, wanting to secure a few extra seconds to try to establish acceptable etiquette.

“Vegetable,” Kal replied.

It didn’t look like any vegetable Lois had ever seen, but it was possible that was the closest paraphrase. She doubted every word could be translated directly.

Kal dug his stick into the ‘vegetable’. He looked up at her. “If you’re hungry, eat,” he said.

Lois pushed her stick into the vegetable mass and lifted a blob to her mouth. It wasn’t too bad, she decided. Certainly, it was no worse than some Earth vegetables she’d tasted.

Kal speared his stick into one of the brown lumps and took it to his mouth.

“What is that called?” Lois asked, regarding it dubiously.

“Meat,” came back the answer.

Meat! Lois picked up a lump and nibbled at it, trying very hard not to think about what animal it had once been. It tasted like nothing she had ever experienced before — a little spicy, but not unpleasantly so. In fact, it was preferable to the vegetable.

Soon the plate was empty. Her stick had softened. Lois bit off the end and chewed.

Kal’s eyes widened. His face remained a mask, but through the mask, Lois was sure she discerned shock.

His eyes dropped to her stick ... and fixated on the jagged end.

Lois’s jaw stopped, mid-chew, as realisation hit. She had chomped on the cutlery!

The pointy end of the stick ... combined with Kal’s wide-eyed reaction ... incited a gurgling ball of rampant laughter that rolled through her stomach and up her throat. Her frantic efforts to maintain control were a chance to succeed until Kal’s jaw dropped just enough to hint at his acute bafflement.

Lois swiftly averted her eyes, but it was too late. Her laughter erupted — effervescent and unruly. She slumped forward and clasped her shaking ribs.

Finally managing to wrest back control, Lois straightened her body, composed her face, and replaced the remnant of the stick on Kal’s plate. Then, she risked a glance to his face.

Kal’s eyes — deep and intense — ensnared hers. Slowly, he raised his hand towards her face and used the edge of his forefinger to lift the teardrop from the corner of her eye. He withdrew and gazed at the speck of moisture on his finger. When he looked back to her, his eyes were a mass of questions.

“It’s a tear,” Lois explained.

“A what?”

“When you laugh or cry, sometimes your eyes water.”

There was not even an inkling of comprehension in his face.

“Laugh,” Lois prompted. She laughed again, more controlled this time. “Laugh, like when something is funny.”

“What?” he asked.

“It’s funny that I ate the cutlery.” Just saying it kindled her simmering amusement.

“It’s not food,” Kal informed her, deadpan.

Lois smiled again. “I know that now,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

Kal put the empty plate on the floor and picked up the glass. He sipped some of the blue liquid, solemnly pondering her over the rim.

Cautiously, he held the glass in her direction. “Don’t bite it,” he advised sombrely.

Lois managed to sip from the glass without spluttering.

Despite its vibrant colour, the blue liquid was almost tasteless. She returned the glass to Kal.

He examined it closely.

No doubt looking for tooth marks, Lois thought, again stifling the smouldering bubble of laughter within.

He drained the glass, picked up the plate and stood.

“Kal?”

At the door, he turned to her. “Yes.”

“Where can I find water? And soap and shampoo?”

“I’ll have a bucket of water sent in. Soap and shampoo are in the cupboard under the basin.”

“Is it all right if I use some?”

“Yes.”

“Is there a shower?” Lois asked. “Or a bath?”

“Neither,” he said. “We have insufficient water.” With that, he left.

\*\*\*

After Kal had gone, Lois returned to her former room to collect the clothes from her closet. Back in the bedroom, she filled the basin with the brown-tinged water from the bucket that had appeared during her absence.

The water was cold, but she felt a lot better after she had washed her hair and body. She dried herself, using a rectangle of rough sackcloth and dressed in one of the shapeless gown-like garments.

Her hair hung unevenly. There was no mirror in the room and nothing resembling a comb in the cupboard. Lois pulled her fingers through her damp hair and tried to arrange the left side so that it covered the bandage.

Then Lois put her underwear and the white dress in the cold water and washed them. She wrung them out. There was nowhere in the room to hang them to dry, so she pushed aside the pile of folders on the desk and draped her clothes across it.

She peered out of the tiny window, but could see very little other than the red-grey mélange of hazy cloud and drab concrete. Her reflection — indistinct though it was — reiterated her suspicion that her hair was lop-sided and dishevelled.

She tried to arrange it to something more even, but gave up after a few seconds and turned away.

Lois looked around the room. There were no books, no photographs, no decorations, no window coverings, no cushions — nothing to make it more homelike.

The starkness was broken only by a small rectangular device on the wall. It displayed an ever-changing series of outlandish characters. Her best guess was that it measured the passing of time.

Lois estimated it was mid afternoon, which meant that there were many empty hours before bedtime.

The room held nothing to engage her mind. She took the top folder from the pile on the desk and opened it. It contained two pages of squiggly scrawl, not unlike the clock characters. With a sigh, Lois replaced the folder.

She wished she could go for a walk. There was a whole world out there ... a new planet, new horizons, new people, just waiting

to be investigated. It had to be teeming with stories. It just had to be.

But was it dangerous?  
 Danger had never impeded her before.  
 But this wasn't Metropolis.  
 It wasn't even Earth.  
 She hankered to go.  
 But she didn't want to be arrested. Or shot.  
 What restrictions were placed on concubines?  
 She bristled at the thought of restrictions. Restrictions that had been forced upon her without her agreement.  
 She'd never allowed herself to be intimidated ... never allowed anything to stop her chasing down a big story.  
 And this was certainly a *big* story.  
 But the reality was that even if she got the story, she had nowhere to take it.  
 No Perry. No Daily Planet. No readers. No job.  
 No family.  
 Lois slumped onto the bed.  
 No family.  
 No Mom, no Dad, no Lucy.  
 No Perry, no Jimmy.  
 They would think she was dead.  
 They would grieve.  
 They would believe they would never see her again.  
 They were probably right.  
 Lois curled into the bed, her zest for exploring the new completely consumed by the desolation of grieving for that which she'd lost.

\*\*\*

Kal was shaken.  
 The mouth-twitch thing Low-iss did had affected him a lot.  
 But the mouth-twitch thing with sound was simply incredible.  
 It was so much more than the sound ... it was what it had done to him that had him reeling. It tugged at something within him ... something unfathomable that had been bound for longer than his memories stretched.  
 There was so much he didn't understand.  
 So much about her.  
 So much about how she affected him.  
 Why she affected him.  
 Why he couldn't get her out of his mind.  
 But one thing he did know; he wanted to ... was driven to ... spend time with her. A lot of time. Minutes. Hours. Days. Weeks. Months.  
 And he wanted to hear the sound of her mouth-twitch again.  
 He wanted to see it. To hear it. To understand it.  
 To experience it.  
 That afternoon he had a Cabinet meeting. They really had to find solutions to the lack of water and heating fuel. He needed to concentrate and apply himself to the needs of his people.  
 Which wasn't going to be easy when every time he closed his eyes all he could see was Low-iss and her mouth-twitch.

\*\*\*

Kal managed to keep his mind mostly on the matters brought by his Cabinet. There were still no solutions to the water problem. Nor the heating problem.

There was a worrying development in the aftermath of the murder of the young boy last week. One of his Cabinet members — Lord Nor — suspected the boy's father and uncle were plotting a revenge killing against the family of the man who had already been executed for the murder.

Kal knew only too well how quickly situations like this could escalate. Murder trials and executions were carried out with such celerity precisely to suppress all notion of retaliation.

The meeting took every moment of the scheduled four hours. Kal had no time to detour to his bedroom to see if Low-iss was

still there. He walked to the Dining Room. Tek brought his supper and then turned to leave.

Kal cleared his throat. Tek hesitated, then turned back to Kal. "Yes, Sir?"

"How is your wife?" Kal asked.

Kal knew his question had surprised Tek. They talked about matters of state occasionally, even though Tek wasn't a Noble and had no position of authority in New Krypton. But Kal didn't aimlessly chat with him.

Actually, Kal didn't aimlessly chat with anyone.

He rarely had the time and had never felt the inclination.

But he'd begun to realise his communication skills were distressingly deficient.

"She's well," Tek said.

"When you go home to your wife," Kal said, "what do you talk to her about?"

"Our children."

That wasn't helpful. "Anything else?"

Tek thought for a moment. "Her elderly mother is unwell. I ask about that. We talk about ways to keep our children warm during the nights. We talk about what opportunities we want for our children. We talk about the future."

Kal picked up his plate and drink and hurried to his bedroom.

\*\*\*

When her stream of tears had ebbed to a trickle, Lois dried her eyes and stood from the bed.

What now?

Her old life had gone. If there were any possible way to get home, Lois meant to find it. But for now, trying to adjust to her new life seemed to be the smart option.

What was she allowed to do?

What was she expected to do?

Already, she could feel boredom infusing restlessness into her brain cells.

Not that she couldn't appreciate the irony.

Here she was — literally landed in the middle of the biggest story in the history of the earth — but she had no way to get either herself or her story home. She didn't have a computer. Or paper. Not even a pen.

Maybe she could ask Kal for -

The door opened and he came in — again carrying a plate and a glass of the blue liquid.

Lois looked up quickly — as a brook of gladness rippled through her. She was glad to see him, glad he broke the monotony, glad that, despite his stilted ways, he gave her some social contact. And a chance to get answers to some of her questions. "Hi," she said, trying to sound welcoming.

He glanced to the ceiling. "High?"

Lois felt her smile blossom and, not wanting Kal to think she was laughing at him, quickly lifted her hand to her mouth.

In a hasty movement, Kal put down his plate and glass and reached for her. Lois swayed back, startled. He carefully clasped her hand and eased it from her mouth. He released her hand and then, very slowly, placed a forefinger on each end of her mouth and with surprising gentleness guided her mouth out and up.

Then his hands dropped from her, and he stared at her intently.

Did he *want* her to smile?

Is that why he had uncovered her mouth?

He wanted to see her smile?

Lois smiled tentatively.

Kal didn't return her smile. He simply stared at her, his face blank, and his eyes intense. Until this moment, Lois hadn't realised the effort required to continue smiling at someone who showed no inclination to smile back.

After a few seconds, she could sustain it no longer. "What's on the plate?" she asked brightly.

Kal dragged the chair close to the bed and sat down on it, balancing the plate on his lap. Lois sat on the bed and looked at the food. There were more meatball lumps; weaved through them were short fat spaghetti-like threads.

On second thoughts, the short, fat spaghetti looked more like long worms than spaghetti. Lois quickly shut down that notion. Kal offered her a stick. A stick that she now knew was cutlery — not food.

Her smile leapt again. When she lifted her eyes from the plate, she discovered that Kal was staring at her. She widened her smile. “How do you eat this?” she asked.

He jabbed his stick into the food, deftly wrapped a bundle of the strands around it, and then lifted it to his mouth.

“I don’t think I can do that,” Lois said.

Kal took her stick from her and loaded it. He held it towards her. Awkwardly, Lois took the empty end of the stick, inadvertently brushing across his long fingers. She slipped the food into her mouth. If she shut down the worm connection, it wasn’t too bad. Although it tasted nothing like spaghetti — more like avocado. “Thank you, Kal.”

His loaded stick stalled half-way between the plate and his mouth. “What did you say?”

“Thank you, Kal.”

“We have no translation for the first two words.”

“You don’t say ‘thank you’?”

“No,” he said. “What does it mean?”

“If someone does something for you, or gives you something, it is polite to say ‘thank you’. It shows your appreciation.”

“Say it slowly,” he requested. “Some of the words didn’t translate.”

“If someone does something for you, or gives you something, it is polite -”

“That word,” Kal said. “What does that mean?”

“Polite?”

“Yes.”

“Good manners. Etiquette.”

He seemed to be considering that as he loaded her stick again and offered it to her.

“Thank you, Kal.”

They continued eating in silence. Every time Lois handed the empty stick to Kal, every time he returned the loaded stick, their fingers touched.

When the plate was empty, Kal offered her the glass of blue liquid.

Lois drank from it and then said, “Thank you for sharing your food with me, Kal.”

His expression hadn’t changed, but he didn’t seem quite so aloof.

Perhaps it was just her imagination.

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Kal drained the glass and put it on the empty plate. What now? He wanted to talk with Low-iss. But about what? If he didn’t say something, she would go back to her room. He had to say something. But what? What would Tek say? “How is your mother?” Kal blurted.

Instantly, he regretted his question.

It changed her face. Closed it — like a door slamming.

As he watched her, the moisture gathered around her eyes again, confusing him completely. Last time the moisture had come, she had been making the mouth-twitch sound, and he was sure that was good.

But this was bad.

Yet the moisture was there again.

He wished he could undo his indiscretion. But he couldn’t. He wished he knew how to open her face again. But he didn’t. The only thing he could do was ask another question and hope it would somehow make things better. “Do you have a mother?”

Low-iss moved her head up and down.

The moisture in her left eye overflowed and drizzled down her cheek. Alarm flooded through Kal. What was he supposed to do now? He shot a look at the clock. In ten minutes, he was supposed to start the Disputes.

But he did them in his bedroom, and Low-iss was here, and he was certain that going to his desk now would be even worse than asking about her mother.

Low-iss rubbed the dampness from her cheeks. “I have a mother and a father and a sister,” she said. “They probably think I’m dead.”

Of course they would think that. And realistically, she was dead to them because if there was one thing Kal knew for sure, it was that there was no possibility of Low-iss getting back to Planet Earth.

Unless her people came to take -

No! His reaction was swift and emphatic.

He didn’t want her to leave. Really, really didn’t want her to leave.

He could order her to stay. He was the Supreme Ruler.

But if she wanted to go ... He knew he would never force her to stay.

And of course, she would want to go.

Kal could still see the traces of wetness in her eyes. Was that how Earth people responded to tragedy? “I don’t understand ...” He reached across the small distance between them and collected her moisture on his fingertip. He held it up for her to see.

“I’m crying,” she said.

The second word didn’t translate.

“But you ...” Kal pointed to her eye. “... when it was ...” She’d told him the word, but there hadn’t been a Kryptonian equivalent. Again, he put his forefingers on the edges of her mouth and carefully shaped it.

She did a small mouth-twitch under his fingers. He jolted his hands away so he could see. “When people get emotional, they cry,” she said.

“That didn’t translate.”

“When people feel very good or very bad inside, they do this.” She waved her hand towards her eyes.

“This was very bad, wasn’t it?”

She moved her head up and down.

“Does ...” Kal copied her movement. “... mean ‘yes’ or ‘no’?”

“Yes.” She moved her head left and right. “This means ‘no’.”

“When you ate the cutlery?” he said, grappling for understanding. “That was very good?”

She did the mouth-twitch again as she dried the remainder of the moisture from both of her eyes. “Yes. That was good.”

“If someone ...” Kal pointed to her eyes. “How do you know if it’s good or bad?”

“By what else is happening. Or, if you’re not sure, you ask.”

“There is much about you that I don’t understand,” he said.

“There is much about everything here that I don’t understand,” Low-iss said.

There would be, of course. Until now, he hadn’t considered too deeply how confusing this must be for her. “If you’re not sure, you ask,” he said, aware he was copying her words.

That comment earned him a mouth-twitch.

It was like a reward. Because every single time she did it, it was as if a little burst of goodness exploded inside him. He had never experienced anything like it, but he was sure he would never, ever tire of it.

“You will answer my questions?” she asked.

Kal opened his mouth to reply ‘yes’, but then he remembered. Feeling self-conscious, he moved his head up and down.

Low-iss’s mouth-twitch widened, accompanied by a soft

rumbling sound. Not like before when it had been loud and explosive, but soft. Different, but just as good.

When the soft rumbling had stopped, Low-iss thumped her fist on her chest. “What does this mean?” she asked.

“That is how you greet someone inferior to assure them you will not harm them.”

Her mouth-twitch disappeared. “So, when you did that to me, you were telling me you were better than me, but you weren’t intending to harm me?”

“Yes.”

“So, I shouldn’t do that to you?”

“No.”

She stopped talking. Kal searched for something more to say. What else did Tek talk about with his wife? Their children. But if he asked Low-iss if she had children, that was going to make the bad moisture come again.

He was still trying to decide what to say, when Low-iss spoke. “Why did you make me your concubine?”

“To stop Lord Nor taking you.”

“Oh,” she said. She swept the sheet of her hair behind her right ear and looked away. “Are you married?”

“Yes,” Kal hesitated. “Are you?”

“No.” She looked at him directly with moisture-softened eyes. “How many wives do you have?”

“One,” he said, unable to pull his gaze from her eyes.

“Where is she?”

The question surprised him. “In her house, I suppose,” he said.

His answer surprised her, though Kal wasn’t sure how he knew. Maybe it was the way her eyebrows reached upwards. “She doesn’t live in this building?”

That question surprised him more. “No,” he said. “Why would she live in this building?”

“Because you live here,” Low-iss said. “On Earth, people who are married live together.”

“The lower classes do that. Nobles do not.”

“And you’re a Noble?”

“I’m higher than a Noble,” Kal explained. “Sometimes a lower Noble can choose his wife if the woman’s family is of similar ranking to the man’s. Higher Nobles have their wives chosen for them — which permits them to take concubines. The highest rank of a Noble is a Regal Noble. We have three Regal Nobles — Lord Nor, Lord Yent, and Lord Ching.”

“Was your wife chosen for you?”

“Yes. She is my birth-wife. We were promised the day she was born.”

“When did you marry her?”

“When I was sixteen — ten winters ago.”

“When do you see her?”

“At the Nobility Convention.”

“Do you love her?”

“I don’t know that word.”

“Love?”

“Yes. It doesn’t translate.”

“Love.” Low-iss’s hands lifted and darted around in front of her. Kal wasn’t sure why. “Love is something you feel in here.” She pointed to the middle of her chest.

That confused him even more. The only thing Kal had ever felt in his chest was his heart beat.

He noticed it most when he’d been running. Or exercising. Although ...

Being with Low-iss often had the same effect.

#### Part 4

Lois was at a loss. How could she explain love? How did you explain a concept so complex to someone who’d been married for a decade and it seemed, had neither lived with his wife nor felt

the slightest inclination to be with her?

Kal stood. “I need to do the Disputes,” he said. He took the chair to his desk and picked up the top folder from the pile.

Lois’s interest was piqued immediately. She crossed to the desk. “What are the disputes?” she asked.

“When my people have disagreements, each writes his side of the Dispute. I read all sides and make my judgement.”

Lois eyed the large pile. “Your people have a lot of disputes,” she commented.

“I have two hours a day to deal with them.” Kal said it evenly, without a trace of defensiveness, as if simply stating the situation.

“Can I help?” Lois asked. It may give her an insight into these strange people. And anything ... *anything* would be better than her mind descending back into the dungeon of grief she had battled most of the afternoon.

Kal paused. “Did you understand any of the Concubine Ceremony?” he asked.

Lois lifted her right hand, branded with the ‘S’. “When they did this?”

“Yes.”

“No,” she said. “I didn’t understand one thing they said. I didn’t even know I was being made a concubine.”

“One of the things you agreed to -”

“I didn’t agree to anything.”

“You may not have realised, but when you let them mark you with my crest, you agreed to the Rules.”

Lois decided to let that pass. Knowing the rules may help her avoid getting shot. “What rules?”

“You agreed that you will never speak of me or anything about me or anything you do with me to anyone else.”

That sounded draconian in the extreme. “OK,” she said, not at all convinced.

“So, if you read the Disputes,” Kal warned, “you can never reveal the details to anyone.”

“What happens if I break the rules?” Lois asked.

“I will no longer be able to protect you.”

Protect her? “Being your concubine protects me?”

“Yes.”

“What would have happened to me if you hadn’t made me your concubine?”

“Someone else might have taken you — and you would have been under his protection.”

That information seeped through her stomach, cold and foreboding. Would that have amounted to any protection at all? What would this unknown man have demanded of her? Did Kryptonian Law afford her any protection from *him*?

Or were all Kryptonian men like Kal?

Somehow, she didn’t think so.

With a jolt of shock, Lois realised she felt safe with Kal. She, Lois Lane — who for most of her adult life had made a point of not trusting anyone — felt safe with an alien ruler who’d admitted that he believed he was superior to her.

And without any consultation at all, had forced her to become his concubine.

Kal had opened the first folder. Lois scanned the room for possibilities. The desk was too small ... and still covered in her drying clothes ... and anyway, there was only one chair. “Hey, Kal?” Lois said. “Can we both sit on the bed?”

Kal looked as if he didn’t fully understand the question.

Lois lifted the open folder from the desk and took it to the bed. She sat down and patted the space next to her. “Come and sit here,” she said. “We’ll work on them together.”

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Kal looked at Low-iss on his bed. She did the mouth-twitch again and flicked the fingers of one hand towards herself. “Come on, Kal,” she said. “We can get through a lot of these if we work

together.”

In his entire reign as the Supreme Ruler, Kal had never done the Disputes anywhere other than at his desk. Alone. Always alone. He worked on them for two hours, every evening. Alone. At his desk.

Even last night — when thoughts of Low-iss had infiltrated his mind and rendered his efforts futile — he hadn’t broken from the routine.

They were already eleven and a half minutes late starting. But on the bed?

Low-iss held the Dispute he was supposed to be working on

...

Kal picked up the chair and backed it against the wall, adjacent to the bed. He sat down and retrieved the folder from Low-iss.

She positioned herself sideways against the wall. Then she leant forward and peered into the open folder. “Would you read it to me, please?” she asked. “The script is totally unfamiliar.”

Her face was within inches of his. He could smell the shampoo in her hair. Kal exhaled — a long breath dotted with tremors. He forced his attention to the Dispute. “My father died last winter,” he read. “I am working the family farm and looking after my mother. My brother refuses to help with either the farm or our mother. He won’t come home. I am the older brother.”

“Is that all?” Low-iss asked.

“That’s one submission. This is from the other antagonist.”

Kal picked up the second piece of paper from the folder and began to read. “My father died last winter. He granted me permission to leave the farm to marry and live with my wife’s family. My older brother has withdrawn permission and says I must go back.”

“What are you going to do?” Low-iss asked.

“The younger brother must return home,” Kal said.

“Why?”

“Because without permission from the head of his family, he cannot leave.”

“He had permission from his father,”

“His father is dead.”

“So the older brother is the head of the family now?” Low-iss asked.

“Yes.”

“What if the younger brother has already married?”

“The marriage will be annulled.”

“But what if he loves his wife?”

Kal recognised the word from before. The Translator could find no equivalent, but it was the word Low-iss had said was something you felt in your chest.

“What if the younger brother really, really wants to be with his wife?” she persisted.

“His primary responsibility is to his family.”

“But if he is married, isn’t his wife his family now?”

“Not until both of his parents have passed away.”

Kal could see Low-iss didn’t understand — but if he tried to explain the protracted history inherent to this Dispute — and just about every other Dispute that crossed his desk — he would be as unproductive tonight as he’d been last night. “What are you going to do?” Low-iss asked again.

“Order the younger brother home to his family.”

“What about his wife?”

“She will stay with her family.”

“Could you order the wife to go with the younger brother?”

“I could ... but I’m not going to,” Kal said. “Her loss would be significant to her family. She is needed with them.”

“Do the ... antagonists have the right of appeal?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Can the antagonists ask someone else to overrule your judgement?”

“Of course not. I’m the Supreme Ruler.”

“You have absolute authority?”

“Yes.”

“Could you order *anything*?” Low-iss asked. “And it would be done?”

“Yes — within twelve hours.”

“But you try to make the right judgement?”

Kal wasn’t sure if it was a question or not. Of course he tried to make the right judgement. What other possible way was there to do the Disputes? “Yes.”

Low-iss adjusted her position on the bed. She pulled up her knees — Kal could see the shape of them under her gown — and clasped her arms around them. He’d never seen anyone sit that way. She laid her head on her knees and stared at him with her soft brown eyes.

“You don’t agree,” he said. He’d always been willing to listen to the opinion of others. But, from his first days as Supreme Ruler, Kal had accepted that the right and the responsibility for the final decision were his alone.

“I think it is sad that the younger brother can’t be with his wife,” Low-iss said.

“He has responsibilities to his family. His wife is needed by her family.”

“What if there was a payment?” Low-iss suggested. “What if the wife goes with her husband and in return, his family give her family produce from their farm?”

Kal considered it. “No,” he said eventually. He picked up the pencil and jotted his judgement on the sheet, glad it provided him with an excuse to avoid looking at Low-iss. She didn’t agree with his settlement. Would she leave his room now? Would she refuse to do the Disputes with him?

He wanted her to stay ... so much. But he couldn’t make judgements based on how Low-iss would react. He had to do what was best for his people.

Kal closed the folder and picked up the next one.

When he finally braved a glance in her direction, Low-iss was watching him. “What’s next?” she said.

She was staying! He opened the folder and began to read the submission aloud.

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When Kal next checked the time, he was astounded to discover they had been working for over three hours. The pile of settled Disputes was substantial. He counted the folders — twenty-seven. Twenty-seven Disputes settled in one night.

Until now, he would not have believed that to be possible.

He hadn’t ever considered working next to his bed.

With a woman.

An alien woman from another planet.

Yet somehow, explaining Kryptonian customs and Law and how they related to each Dispute had brought clarity — possibly for her, but certainly for him. Low-iss was quick to comprehend and eager to contribute. She asked intelligent questions and didn’t hesitate to give her reasons when she disagreed with him.

Sometimes when she spoke, her hands moved. And often, her mouth twitched.

Kal had never thought the Disputes could be anything other than a laborious duty he knew would demand his time and attention for the rest of his life.

But tonight, it hadn’t been tedious. Not at all.

He had ... enjoyed it.

He had enjoyed it! He had enjoyed every moment of the three hours and thirteen minutes.

And the reason he’d enjoyed it was still sitting on his bed.

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Lois yawned and stretched.

It had been a long day.

While Kal wrote up the judgement for the final dispute, she

prepared for bed. She assumed he would leave for his own bedroom. Still dressed in the loose gown — she wasn't sure which, if any, of her clothes were nightwear — she slipped into the bed.

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Kal placed the settled Disputes in a neat pile on his desk and turned. He stopped abruptly. Low-iss was in his bed.

*In his bed.*

And looking like she had settled in for the night.

What was he supposed to do now?

Get in with her?

He'd never shared his bed with anyone.

Go and sleep in her bed in the concubine quarters?

He *couldn't* do that. The past two days, Kal had done many things that had challenged the boundaries of his established proprieties, but he was sure — absolutely sure — that he could *not* sleep in the concubine quarters.

He remembered their conversation from earlier. How Low-iss had said that if one of her people didn't understand why another was leaking moisture from the eyes, they asked why.

As far as he could tell, her eyes weren't leaking, but maybe that was what he should do — ask why she was in his bed.

Or ... maybe he should just sleep on the chair.

It would be unpleasant.

But maybe it represented the least awkward of his four options.

Kal moved the chair away from the bed and sat down. He squirmed, seeking a position that might ... perhaps ... allow him to sleep.

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Lois was very aware that Kal had not left the room. She wondered why. She still wondered about the full implications of being his concubine. Was tonight her slice in the time-share arrangement? Did he spend the evening with her and then sleep in her bed and then ...

She would not think about that.

Although ... one thing she *had* realised ... if that was what he wanted, she would have no recourse. The sobering, galling truth was that if Kal came to her bed, he could demand just about anything, and she ...

But this was Kal ...

And he had done nothing to suggest he would be anything less than a complete gentleman.

The movement in the room had stilled. Lois hadn't heard Kal leave. Cautiously, she lowered the covers from her chin. He was slouched on the chair, his eyes closed, and looking positively uncomfortable.

Did he usually sleep on a chair? Fully dressed?

Lois doubted it.

So why didn't he go to his room?

Was he guarding her? Was this how he protected her? Or was he guarding her to ensure she didn't escape?

Then comprehension swamped her like a crashing wave, and Lois felt her scalding mortification flood her cheeks.

This wasn't *her* room. This was *his* room.

Humble and spartan though it was, this was Kal's room.

Why else would the dispute folders be kept here?

Her room must be the one she'd been taken to after the concubine ceremony.

What had Kal thought when she'd calmly ensconced herself in his bed?

What was she going to do now?

Sneak back to her room?

It was dark outside, and Lois wasn't completely sure of her ability to find her way back with limited light.

She had to apologise ... and then ask him to show her back to her room. "Kal?" she said hesitantly.

He sat up. Not surprisingly, he wasn't asleep. "Yes."

"I'm sorry about taking your bed."

"I don't understand the second word."

"Sorry."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I didn't understand," Lois said. "I woke up in this bed after the translator was put in, and I thought it was my room. I didn't realise it was your room."

"There was opposition to you getting the Translator. We had only one remaining, and we have no way to produce more. I thought it possible that a rebel may try to get to you and reclaim it. I ordered that you be brought here after the insertion."

"What about now?" Lois swallowed down her rising queasiness. "Will someone try to reclaim it?"

"No, once it has been in for twelve hours, it has calibrated to you and is useless to anyone else."

Lois felt the surge of her relief. "Thank you, Kal," she said. "And I am sorry about the misunderstanding."

Kal didn't say anything.

Lois didn't know what to say.

After a long, uneasy silence, she said, "Will you take me to my room, please, Kal? I'm not sure I could find it in the dark."

Kal stood and moved to the door.

Lois slipped from the warmth of his bed and padded after him.

A minute later, they were in the courtyard. "Thank you, Kal," Lois said.

Kal turned back to his building without saying a word.

Lois's bed was cold, and her mattress was lumpy. She had no other clothes with her, and the sheet was thin. She shivered and drew it tighter around her.

The thought came ... staying in Kal's bed ... even if ...

Would it be worse than lying here? Cold. Alone.

Totally alone.

Lois's steely resolve evaporated, and her tears swelled, fuelled by the cold and the darkness and the isolation of being the only human being on the planet. Thoughts of her home bombarded her tired mind.

By now, they would know the Mission to Mars had failed. They would believe she had not survived. They would grieve for her.

As she was grieving for them.

\*\*\*

Kal slipped into his bed — into the warmth left by Low-iss.

Inside, he felt hollow — as if someone had ripped out his innards. He felt empty. He, who had never felt full, now felt empty.

Because she had left him.

Why had she chosen to leave the warmth and comfort of his bed to go to her room in the Concubine Quarters? Kal had never been in the quarters, but he was sure they would be lesser than his room. Colder, barer, less comfortable.

More alone.

By attempting to sleep on the chair, surely he'd made it clear that he wanted her to stay.

Yet as soon as she'd realised it was his room, she'd left.

Didn't she like being with him?

That was a new and very disturbing thought.

Kal had never once pondered whether he was likeable or not.

He spent time with people when there was a task to be accomplished. He did his part — usually making the final decisions and issuing the orders accordingly — without ever considering if his actions would cause people to like him.

He'd never wanted to be liked.

He'd only ever wanted to lead his people the best way possible.

But now — now he wanted Low-iss to like him. To like being

with him.

Of course, he could order her to his room.

But he didn't want to order her. He wanted her to choose.

And he had no idea how to make that happen.

Then he remembered. Her Translator bandage was due to come off tomorrow morning.

Yet another outlandish idea invaded his thoughts. *He* could do it. One of the Medical Staff usually did it — at least, Kal assumed they did.

If he took off her bandage, he would touch her hair.

And he realised, he really wanted to feel her hair. It was longer than the hair of most Kryptonian women, but what really fascinated him was that she let it hang loose. She let it dangle around her face, on her neck, across her shoulders.

More than once, he had wondered what it would be like to slide it across his fingers.

Sometimes, seemingly without any conscious thought, she tucked it behind her ear. She'd done it as they had discussed the brothers in the first Dispute.

The younger brother.

The brother who would receive notice tomorrow that he was to return to his family home.

And leave his wife.

Is this how he would feel?

Would he go to bed every night and feel this hollowness?

Kal pushed back the bed-covers and went to the desk. He pulled out the bottom folder on the 'Settled' pile. He opened it, took out his judgement sheet, crumpled it, and threw it into the trash.

He put the folder on the top of the Disputes awaiting settlement. He would deal with it tomorrow.

He returned to the warmth of his bed.

But it provided no comfort. Because it wasn't the lack of heat that had caused the ache inside him.

\*\*\*

Kal awakened early the next morning, and his first thought was Low-iss. He pushed it away. It was Friday, which meant the morning would be spent in a meeting with his Medical Staff discussing the health issues of his people.

Before lunch, he would go to the Empty Room and complete his physical exercise routine.

In the afternoon, he had a meeting with the Water Committee. Which meant they would toss around unlikely ideas that had little chance of resolving the simple fact that they were running out of water. Which meant he would, again, have to face the stark truth that, without water, his people would die.

Then would come supper, followed by the Disputes.

Which brought him right back to Low-iss.

Kal sprang from his bed. He dressed and issued an order for C4 to be brought to his Chambers. Then he put in an order for Tek to arrange a consultation with the younger brother's wife.

\*\*\*

Lois awoke feeling tired, unrefreshed, and bone-weary. Her head hurt — although she knew it had nothing to do with the translator. She'd felt no discomfort from that — nothing more than a little squeamishness whenever she dwelt on the fact they had drilled a hole in her skull and pushed a foreign object into her head.

There was tap on her door, and the bland woman entered. "You're to go to the Chambers now," she informed Lois.

"Thank you," Lois said. "What is your name?"

"Bel."

"What is your position?"

"I am the Mistress of Concubines."

"You're not a concubine?"

"No."

"What is your job?"

"I bring orders from the Supreme Ruler," Bel said. "I ensure his concubines have everything they need."

"I am Lois."

Bel hesitated for half a breath, then turned and left.

Lois rose from her bed. She had no other clothes. She needed to get her meagre supply from Kal's room. She ran a hand through her hair, trying to tidy it. She had no doubt that her face would be blotchy and her eyes puffy, but she had no mirror to confirm her suspicions, and no way of improving her appearance.

It probably didn't matter. She looked different from Kryptonian women, so Kal probably thought her strange and unattractive anyway.

\*\*\*

Lois paused at Kal's bedroom door, unsure of the custom. She'd been told to come to his chambers. Did that mean his bedroom? And now she was here, was she supposed to knock? Or supposed to wait here until he summoned her?

Her dilemma was solved when Kal arrived at the door carrying a bowl and a glass — breakfast, she assumed. He stopped abruptly as if her presence was unexpected. But he'd sent for her. Maybe it was her dishevelled look that startled him. Self-consciously, Lois pushed back her hair.

"Good morning," Kal said.

"Good morning." Seeing Kal's hands full with breakfast, Lois gestured to the door. "Should I open it for you?"

"Yes."

Lois opened the door and stepped into his bedroom. He followed. She closed the door and turned, expecting he would have continued into the room. Instead, he'd stopped and was regarding her, appearing deep in thought.

"Tan koo," he said.

For a moment, Lois stared. Then comprehension hit, and she laughed. "You're welcome," she said.

Kal put the breakfast on the desk and turned to her. "Your bandage needs to be removed," he said.

"OK," Lois said hesitantly. "Will it hurt?"

"I'll try to make it not so."

"You're going to do it?"

"Yes."

Kal stepped closer to her. He was taller than her and a whole lot broader. In fact, Lois hadn't really noticed his impressive breadth before now. A fleeting thought slithered through her mind that he would probably be even more impressive without clothes. She pushed it away.

Her heart was already reacting to his proximity.

No, she told herself firmly, that wasn't him. That was the knowledge he was about to dig around the hole in her head.

Kal reached towards her and carefully brushed back the long strands of hair from above the shaved area. He positioned them behind her ear.

Then he hesitated. She wondered if he'd seen something — blood maybe, or an infection, something to indicate a problem. Before she could ask, Lois felt the corner of the bandage being carefully peeled away.

It was a little uncomfortable, but certainly not painful.

He continued with his gentle pressure until the bandage fell away. Then Kal leant forward.

Lois felt the whisper of his breath on her bare scalp. "Is it all right?" she asked, wishing she could see for herself.

"It has healed well." Kal reached behind her ear and unhooked her hair, then arranged it forward. He stepped back and studied her.

"I guess the shaved patch looks ugly," she said.

"No."

His gaze imprisoned her. Kal's face, as usual, was blank, but his eyes had deepened and seemed to be drilling into hers ... in the most unsettling way ... as if he were reaching inside her and

touching her soul.

Then, he broke away. “Are you hungry?” he said.

“Do you want me to stay for breakfast?”

“Yes.”

Lois smiled. “I’d like to stay.” She looked around Kal’s room for her clothes. They were all — including her underwear — on the desk where she’d left them to dry. “But I want to get dressed first.”

An awkward silence followed. Lois wondered if it was permissible to ask Kal to leave his own bedroom. There was no corner in the room that would grant her any sort of privacy. Maybe she should pick up her clothes and go back to her own room in the concubine quarters.

Then, without a word, Kal turned and left.

Lois changed quickly, putting on her own clothes. She had not seen anyone in jeans, but they were comfortable and they were hers, and she figured she was going to be conspicuous anyway so she may as well be comfortable.

Once dressed, she sat on the chair and waited for Kal.

Five minutes later, he still hadn’t come.

Lois went to the door and opened it. Kal wasn’t in the chambers. She went through the chambers and opened that door. Kal was there, leaning against the wall, his hands in the pockets of his trousers.

She smiled. “Thank you,” she said.

He paused. “You’re welcome,” he said.

\*\*\*

Waiting in the corridor, Kal had been engaged in a battle. The battle not to imagine what was happening on the other side of two closed doors. What did Low-iss look like without clothes? Was she like Kryptonian women?

Kal had never seen a naked woman. Five years ago, a young man had been caught drawing pictures of unclothed women. The young man had been put in prison. The pictures had been burned.

But not before Kal had seen them.

It was only because of them that he knew how women were different to men.

It was one of the mysteries of his life. One of the mysteries he had firmly pushed to the back of his mind. There were a plethora of other issues that actually related to making a better life for his people. He didn’t need to know the secrets of a woman’s body to find fuel to heat the houses of his people or water for them to drink.

And that had been enough.

Until now.

Until this Earth woman, this Low-iss, had stumbled into his life and changed everything.

Kal looked at his door, wondering what was taking so long. Was there something about female clothing that necessitated considerable lengths of time?

And what was that black strappy thing with two half-spheres of material that he’d seen near the white Concubine Dress?

The door opened, and Kal jumped, feeling as if he’d been caught doing something wrong.

Low-iss looked at him and mouth-twitched.

He followed her inside and picked up the bowl from his desk. She sat on the bed, and he sat on the chair near the bed.

“What food do we have?” Low-iss asked.

“Oatmeal.”

Her mouth-twitch widened, causing a swirl of reactions inside him. “We have oatmeal,” she exclaimed. “At home.”

He offered her one of the spoons.

“And we have spoons,” she said.

“You can’t eat oatmeal with the chop-stick,” Kal said.

Low-iss smiled. Kal didn’t know why. It didn’t matter. He watched while she took her first mouthful, eager for her reaction. Her nose wrinkled. “It’s salty,” she said.

“Yes.” Kal didn’t know what else to say.

“We put sugar in it.”

The thought of sweet oatmeal was totally unappetising. Although it did help him realise how unpalatable his oatmeal must seem to Low-iss.

They ate in silence until the bowl was empty. “Kal?” Low-iss said.

“Yes.”

“What do you want me to do?”

Her question startled him. Did she mean now? Was she offering to clear away their breakfast? Didn’t she know there were servants for that? He resorted to what was becoming a standard response. “I don’t understand.”

“What does a concubine do all day? Am I supposed to help you, like I did with the disputes last night? Am I supposed to have a job? Am I supposed to help with food preparation? I just don’t know what you expect of me.”

“You can do whatever you want to do,” he said. “You are a Concubine of the House of El.”

## Part 5

A Concubine of the House of El.

Which meant what? Exactly?

Because it didn’t seem to mean what Lois had always thought it meant.

“You said I can’t talk about you to anyone,” Lois said.

“That’s correct.”

“Do all concubines have the same rules about their ...”

“Masters,” Kal supplied for her. “Yes.”

*Masters.* That one stuck in her craw. With considerable effort, Lois moved passed it. “No concubine can talk about her ... master?”

“No.”

“Can I talk to the people who work for you?”

“Why would you want to do that?”

“I know nothing about this planet, this people,” Lois said. “I don’t know your customs or your history or your rules or your values or what is important to you. If I’m to stay here ... and it seems I am for now ... I want to know these things.”

“You can talk to me.”

Did she sense a tinge of petulance in Kal’s monotone? His face was still impassive, but there seemed to be a shadow of displeasure there now — although Lois couldn’t have said how she had discerned it ... or even if her discernment was accurate. Was he a jealous master? “You’re busy, Kal,” she said reasonably. “You have meetings, and your people need you. You can’t spend all day helping me to acclimatise.”

“You can talk to anyone you wish to.”

Lois wasn’t sure if he were telling her the rule or granting her some sort of regal permission. “Thanks,” she said, just in case. “Yesterday, I felt like I would die of boredom.”

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The final word didn’t translate for Kal. He understood the bit about dying though. “What is that?” he asked quickly. “And how do you die from it?”

His question earned him another mouth-twitch, although he couldn’t determine why. “You don’t die of it,” Low-iss said. “Not literally. It’s just a saying. Nothing to be concerned about.”

Kal still didn’t understand. “What is it?” he repeated.

“I’m bored.” Low-iss gestured to her face, and as he watched, it smoothed of all expression as if someone had drained the life from it. “I have nothing to do,” she said. “Nothing to think about. I need *something* to do.”

Kal had never expended one single thought on what his concubines did. He ensured they were fed and clothed. But what did they *do*? “What did you do on Planet Earth?” he asked.

“I was a reporter.”

That surprised him. “You did Reports?” he asked.

“I wrote reports,” Low-iss replied. “I’d go to wherever something was happening and then write a report about it.”

“Why?”

“It would then be published in a newspaper, and people would buy the newspaper and read about what had happened.”

Some words didn’t translate, but Kal understood enough to get the gist. What he couldn’t understand was why this would be allowed. “Who is able to buy the ... writing you do?” he asked.

“Anyone who wants to.”

“You write, and then anyone can read?”

She did the up and down gesture with her head. The one that meant ‘yes’.

“What if the people you write about don’t want everybody reading about them?”

“Sometimes they don’t.”

This alarming invasion of privacy didn’t seem to concern Low-iss. “Do people ever try to stop you writing about them?” Kal asked.

“Sometimes.”

“But you still do it?”

“I did, until ...” Her hand brushed across her eye, and Kal wondered if the moisture was there. When she lowered her hand, he couldn’t see any. “Don’t you have newspapers on New Krypton?” she asked.

“No.”

“I saw paper when we did the disputes.”

“We have paper.”

“Could I have some? Please?”

“What is that last word?”

“Please,” she repeated. “It is what you say when you ask for something. Then if you get it, you say ‘thank you’.”

“Tan koo?”

Low-iss’s mouth twitched — except it was bigger than a twitch — more like a stretch. And her eyes were shining — he was sure of it.

With a colossal effort, Kal extracted his eyes from the lure of hers. “You would like some paper?”

“Yes, please,” she said, her mouth wide. “And also a pen. Or a pencil. Anything I can write with.”

“I’ll have them delivered to your room,” Kal said. Then he had a better idea. “Would you like to write at my desk?”

“Would you mind?”

Kal moved his head left and right ... and again was rewarded with Low-iss’s mouth twitch. It had become a challenge. How many times could he make her do it? And how many different ways?

“Thank you, Kal.” Low-iss reached forward and put her hand over his. She laid it there, warm and soft. He felt a burning under her hand — a burning that shot up his arm. A burning that wasn’t painful — in fact it was the exact opposite of pain.

But Kal didn’t even have a word for it.

She gave a small squeeze and removed her hand. He looked down at his hand, expecting to see it red, or on fire, or branded ... something, anything.

But there was nothing ... nothing on the outside to indicate the maelstrom of sensation swirling under his skin.

“You are a good man,” Low-iss said.

Kal didn’t know how to respond. No one had ever said anything like that to him before. No one had ever looked at him the way Low-iss’s brown eyes were looking at him now. No one had ever stripped him of his ability to think coherently with one touch.

But it was more than one touch. It was the mouth-twitch that tugged on something inside him every single time she did it. It was the shiny softness of her brown eyes. It was the way she talked to him. As if she didn’t care that he was the Supreme

Ruler. Actually, it wasn’t so much that she didn’t care, but that his position was not the reason why she talked with him. Almost as if she would talk with him even if he were lower than a Noble.

Kal had never felt that ... not with any other person.

It was all of that.

It was everything about her.

Everything.

Kal glanced to his watch. “I have a meeting.” He abruptly arose from the chair. “You will get the paper,” he said as he left the room.

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Five minutes later, a man arrived in Kal’s bedroom. The first thing Lois noticed was that he walked with a limp — not disabling, but noticeable. He was tall and lean, probably a few years older than Lois was. His hair was lighter than Kal’s and longer, too. He deposited a pile of paper and a thick pencil on the desk and turned to leave.

“Wait,” Lois said.

He turned.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Tek-Or,” he said.

“Hello, Tek. I’m Lois.”

Tek put his open hand on his chest, palm inwards. Did that mean he felt he was inferior to her? Equal? Status seemed important on New Krypton.

Just how much status did she have as a concubine? Was there status among the concubines? Was she equal with them? Or because of her johnny-come-lately status, was she below them?

Lois thought it prudent not to attempt an answering gesture to Tek. “Thank you for bringing me the paper and pencil,” she said with a smile.

Tek stared at her, but he didn’t respond. He probably didn’t understand *thank you* either. Then he jolted, as if suddenly realising he was staring. He pivoted abruptly and scuttled through the door.

Lois sat at her desk and picked up the pencil. Its bulkiness made her think of her early school days — which led to memories of her parents and sister.

Had they had a memorial service for her yet?

From the depths of her loss, Lois’s mind dredged up a detailed, uninvited image. Her father and mother, weeping and bereaved. Lucy, shocked and stricken. Perry — his gruffness overshadowed by grief breaking a heart she knew was as soft as velvet. Lois’s tears welled. She yearned to tell them she was alive.

But even if they knew, would it alleviate their pain?

Lois resolutely erased the image. She picked up the stubby pencil and then paused again as a countering wave of gratitude swept over her grief.

If her life-pod had to land on any random planet, she could have done a whole lot worse than New Krypton. And although being someone’s concubine had never been a goal in her life, it could have been so much worse.

Instead, she had Kal. Kal, who had demanded nothing and given her so much.

Including the means to write again.

But to write what?

Her novel?

Her incomplete novel that had languished on her hard drive for years?

She supposed she could rewrite it — she could try to remember the details. Actually, there would need to be some major changes. The blond, blue-eyed hero just didn’t seem so enticing any more.

No ... He would need to be dark haired ... with mysterious brown eyes.

Her novel would be a best seller ... with a subsequent movie

deal.

Who could be the male lead?

Lois considered the names of various male Hollywood stars and dismissed them one by one. None of them was right. None of them quite hit the mark.

With a small chuckle, Lois pulled her mind away. Dreaming of winning a movie deal for an as-yet-unwritten story was schoolgirl stuff.

But at least most starry-eyed schoolgirls were on the right planet!

She, on the other hand, needed something to write.

But what?

A journal, Lois decided. She would note her perceptions and record her journey towards comprehension of Kryptonian life and people.

Then, if she ever got home, the Pulitzer would be hers.

And if she didn't ... Lois didn't want to think about that. Instead, she put pencil to paper and began her first sentence.

\*\*\*

Recounting her experiences on paper had straightened Lois's perspective and brought her to a place of reluctant acceptance.

Lois Lane, citizen of Earth, reporter for the Daily Planet, daughter of Dr and Mrs Lane, sister of Lucy ... that person now existed only in her memories. She had become Lois, alien refugee, concubine of Kal-El, the Supreme Ruler of New Krypton.

And until she could unearth a possible way to get home, it seemed best to accept the unforeseen, unsought turn of events in her life.

Lois tidied her papers, noting with gratification how many were filled with her haphazard handwriting. She couldn't remember the last time she had written at such length — physically, on paper, in one sitting. Her right hand ached just a little. She stretched it — again seeing the 'S' that now had the appearance of having adorned her hand for years.

How would she explain it if she ever got back to Earth?

*I was an alien ruler's concubine on a distant planet,* she imagined herself saying. Shortly after that, she would be committed to an institution for the insane.

Lois rose from the desk and stretched. The restlessness of her mind had been appeased. The restlessness of her body had not. She decided to take her clothes back to her room.

Maybe she would see someone. Anyone.

One of her fellow concubines maybe.

Did they spend time with Kal?

How much time?

And were they concubines in the sense she understood the word?

That possibility lodged like a thorn inside her.

Lois picked up her clothes and left Kal's bedroom. She wandered through his chambers, along the corridor, past the sentries, through the courtyard, and into her room.

The small closet was no longer empty. There were two grey blankets neatly folded on the shelf. There was also a small pile of underwear. Lois examined the garments — the style was unusual, but the purpose was clear — feeling ridiculously relieved that she wouldn't have to ask Kal for them.

Hanging below the shelf were two more of the shapeless gowns — one white, one the same grey as her other two.

Lois straightened the sheet on her bed, wondering wryly if the blankets had been in the robe last night as she had shivered on the bed. She then smoothed both blankets over the sheets.

They were neither thick nor particularly soft — but they would certainly keep her warmer than the sheet alone. And Kal had said that winter was coming, so it was going to get colder.

She hung her gowns next to the two recent acquisitions, pondering if she should change out of her jeans and shirt and into

Kryptonian clothes.

What would Kal want?

He'd probably want her to be dressed like Kryptonian women. No one had said anything to her or seemed offended by her jeans, but possibly there was little to be gained from accentuating her differences.

Lois slipped out of her jeans and shirt and wriggled into the baggy grey gown. She looked down with a sigh. There was no shape to it at all. It reminded her of a sack, though the material wasn't as coarse.

Lois pulled the belt from her coat and fastened it around her waist.

She opened the door of her room and ventured into the courtyard. There was no one in sight except the two sentries guarding Kal's building. Could she talk to them? Kal had said she could talk to anyone, but these men were undoubtedly on duty.

Why not, she thought.

She approached them boldly. "Hello," she said. "I'm Lois."

There was nothing to indicate they had heard her.

Nothing to indicate they had even seen her.

With a sigh, Lois walked to the centre of the courtyard and surveyed her surroundings.

Kal's building was made of stone. It had a high balcony overlooking the courtyard. A tall, wire-mesh fence enclosed the building and the two rows of concubines' rooms. Curious, Lois looked beyond the fence. She could see other buildings — some made of timber planks, some of stone.

Did Kal's wife live in one of those buildings?

Which one?

Lois would not have appraised Kal's building as being anything exceptional — but it was clearly bigger and more durable looking than anything else in sight.

To her right were large wrought-iron gates leading to the big world of New Krypton. They were open.

Should she ...

Beyond the fence seemed deserted — silent and still. There were no children playing, no people moving around, no signs of life.

With a sigh, Lois turned away from the gates and towards Kal's building. At least she could write.

Once back in Kal's chambers, Lois hesitated at the door of his bedroom. She was his concubine. In an Earth marriage, it was the wife's bedroom as much as the husband's. But she wasn't his wife, and it wasn't her room.

She couldn't recall anyone knocking. Even Tek had walked in unannounced.

Her writing was on Kal's desk and waiting out here seemed foolish, so Lois pushed open the bedroom door.

She stopped abruptly as her breath snared in her throat.

Kal was there.

He stopped, just as abruptly.

He was dressed in his usual pants, but instead of his dress-jacket, he wore a tight fitting, short-sleeved undershirt.

Kal gaped at Lois, motionless.

Lois stared at Kal, jaw dangling like a snapped twig. His arms were spectacular! Mouth-drying, can't-drag-your-eyes-away spectacular. The sleeves of his shirt stretched taut across the billowing curve of his biceps. The chiselled definition continued along his bare forearms.

His shirt was tight enough across his chest that she could clearly see the outline of his pectoral muscles and the jut of his nipples.

Lois swallowed. "I'm s ... s ... sorry," she stammered.

Kal broke from his stupor and snatched his jacket from his bed. Turning away from her, he put it on — but not before she'd seen the sculpted planes of his back and shoulders outlined under his shirt.

He was magnificent.

Did all men from this planet look like this? Or was Kal a particularly stunning example of Kryptonian manhood?

Lois swallowed again — trying to loosen her throat and moisten her mouth.

Her heart raced on, unfettered.

She turned and scrambled out of Kal's bedroom, hurriedly shutting the door between them.

"Lo-iss!" Kal's voice came through the door — raised, flustered.

Had he ever called her by name before?

Had he ever spoken with such urgency?

Lois peered at the closed door, her heart hammering. "Yes?" she faltered.

"Are you hungry?" His voice was a little muffled, but she estimated it came from just the other side of door.

"Yes," she said.

"I have our lunch."

"OK." Lois hesitated, unsure if she should open the door, or if she should wait for Kal to do it. She reached for it and was about to grasp it when it swung away from her. Suddenly, he was there, only inches from her.

His cheeks were tinged pink — still constrained within the mask of blankness — but enough colour that she could tell he was as shaken by her unexpected appearance as she was by his unexpected lack of a jacket.

Lois smiled nervously — although fully aware that he probably wouldn't pick up her nervousness. "I'm sorry, Kal," she said. "I didn't know you were in here."

"I needed to change my clothes," he explained. "I do physical exercise."

Yeahhh ... She'd realised that.

Not even Kryptonian men could look like that without a lot of effort.

Exerting significant effort of her own, Lois hauled her mind from the lure of his arms and chest. "Did you say you have lunch for us?" she asked.

"Yes." Kal stepped back to allow her to enter.

As had become their custom, she sat on the bed and he sat on the chair close to the bed with the food on his lap. He handed her a stick, and Lois began to eat the green substance called vegetable.

They didn't speak as they ate. Lois wondered why Kal always brought only one plate of food. Was there no provision for food for her? Without his generosity, would she not eat? But if the intention was to starve her to death, why had he bothered to make her his concubine? Why put the translator in her head?

Was he hungry, suddenly having to survive on less food? Lois lay down her stick.

Kal looked up at her. "You aren't hungry anymore?" he said.

Lois shook her head. "No. Thank you."

He finished the remainder of the food. Lois watched him, trying to do it surreptitiously. He had thick black hair. What would it feel like to run her fingers through it?

He had brown eyes ... eyes she had dismissed as empty ... but, she realised, she had never seen them filled with anger or hatred or cruelty.

And they weren't empty. They were profound. Enigmatic.

Lois felt as if she could look into them all day and still believe there was more to discover.

And as for that mouth ...

Lois cleared her still-parched throat. "Kal?"

"Yes."

"Do you have time to answer a few questions for me?"

"I have some time before my meeting."

She smiled and tried to organise her jumble of questions. "I don't know what I'm allowed to do."

"You're my concubine; you have very few restrictions other than you cannot speak to anyone about me."

"Am I allowed to go out of the gates?"

"Yes," Kal said.

"Will I be safe outside the gates?"

Kal reached out and gently grasped her right wrist. He lifted her 'S'-branded hand a few inches off her knee. "You will be safe because of this," he said. Then he replaced her hand on her knee as if it were exceedingly fragile.

For the second time in less than thirty minutes, Lois's heart was thumping out of control. Was that the first time he had touched her? Touched her when there was no need?

Or was it just the first time she'd noticed how every part of her body reacted to his touch?

Lois looked from her hand to his face and saw that Kal was still staring at her hand. His throat bobbed as he swallowed. Had he felt something too?

But what?

He didn't even have a word for love.

Suddenly, a potent visual image bombarded her mind. Lois blinked, trying to settle her cavorting imagination. Somehow — she had no idea how — she had to get Kal to smile.

If his smile was *anything* like the image her mind had created ...

She felt her own smile widen. Kal's eyes darted from her hand to her face. He gazed at her mouth, and for a moment, Lois hoped he would return her smile. He didn't. His face remained blank. Except for his eyes, which were dark and piercing — and seemingly riveted to her mouth.

Lois forced her scrambled mind back to the answers she needed. "Is it all right if I leave my writing on your desk?" she said. "Or would you prefer that I take it to my room?"

"I'd like you leave it on my desk," Kal said. "It will be private. I can't read it."

Lois grinned. "Did you peek already?"

"Yes," Kal said, face unmoved. He stood. "I have to get to the meeting."

"One more thing, Kal," Lois said. "Can I come into your room whenever I want to? Should I knock? Should I only come in if you know I'm coming?"

He thought for a moment. "Maybe you should knock," he said. "It would be ... unfortunate ... if you caught me undressed again."

That was *not* undressed, Lois thought, determinedly pushing away the picture that had sprung into her head.

Kal paused at the door. "I will see you this evening."

He left, and Lois stared at the closed door. Apparently, she was having supper with Kal tonight.

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That afternoon, Lois put the coat over the frumpy gown and walked to the courtyard. She hesitated, eying the gates. She had found safety inside them, but beyond them were unknown people and unfamiliar places. With the translator, she could communicate and attempt to interact.

Yet still, she hesitated.

Lois heard a step behind her. Two women, probably younger than her, walked from the concubines' rooms and passed her without even a glance in her direction. They approached the gates. "Hello," Lois called. She hurried after them.

They turned, expressions blank.

"Hello," Lois repeated.

There was an extended period of silence.

Lois smiled her friendliest smile. "My name is Lois." They continued staring — as if she were from another planet, Lois thought wryly.

"Jib," one of them said.

"Mo," the other said.

“Would you mind if I walk with you?” Lois asked.

The women turned around and began walking. Lois shrugged and followed them. They hadn’t said she couldn’t.

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Kal contemplated the woman in front of him. Her head was down. She was shaking so violently, even the shapelessness of her gown couldn’t conceal her apprehension.

Her father stood on one side of her, her husband on the other. Kal studied both of them, but his focus lingered longest on the husband — the younger brother from the Dispute.

“I wish to speak to the woman alone,” Kal said.

Her shaking increased noticeably. Her father stepped from the Chambers. Her husband hesitated. His eyes met his wife’s and held for a fleeting moment. Then, he left.

When they were alone, Kal said, “What is your name?”

“Eb-Ur.”

“Eb,” Kal said, wondering if there was anything he could say to calm her agitation. “I want to ask you a question.”

There was no response.

“I want you to tell me the truth,” he continued.

Still no response.

Her head hadn’t lifted. Kal couldn’t see her face. He wanted to.

His mind was invaded by the memory of the last woman who had stood before him in this room.

Low-iss.

Two days ago. Only two days.

“Do you want to remain married to your husband?” Kal asked.

A sound emerged from the woman. Kal couldn’t discern her meaning.

Rising from the seat, Kal stepped down from its platform and went into his bedroom. He returned with the chair and placed it behind Eb. “Sit down,” he said.

She did.

Kal sat on the step of the raised platform. Now his head was lower than hers was, and he could see some of her face.

Strange how that had become so important.

“Eb,” Kal said. “I received a submission from your husband’s brother requesting that I order your husband to return home. Do you know about that?”

“Yes,” she mumbled.

“Before I make my judgement, I want to know what you want to do.”

She was silent for a long time. So long, Kal was sure she didn’t intend to answer. Then, low and almost inaudible, she said, “I want to be with my husband.”

“Would you be willing to go with him to his family’s farm?” Kal asked.

“Yes.”

“Is that what you want?”

Her head lifted. Just a few degrees. “I want to be with my husband,” she repeated.

Kal empathised. Completely. He wanted to be with Low-iss.

“I will order them to submit an arrangement for my approval.”

Very, very slowly, Eb’s face lifted, and she looked at him with timid eyes. “I can be with my husband?” she whispered.

“Yes.”

Eb stared at him. *Tan koo*, Kal thought. That’s what she was saying ... not saying ... They didn’t have a word for it — but that’s what she meant.

“You’re welcome,” Kal said.

There was no understanding in her face. Low-iss would have done the mouth-twitch.

Kal stood and pushed the button to summon Tek to escort Eb’s father and husband back into the Chambers. When they

again flanked Eb, Kal directed his attention to her husband. “My judgement is that you are to return to your family.”

The husband didn’t move. But Kal thought he sensed ... despair.

“Your wife is to return with you,” Kal said. “You are to protect her.”

The man’s face remained impassive. But his despair seemed to have eked away. “I will,” he said.

Kal’s attention swung to Eb’s father. “Your family will receive regular, on-going payments to compensate for the loss of your daughter. These payments will be fair to both families.”

“Yes.”

“The details of the agreement are to be submitted for my approval.”

“Yes.” Both men spoke. Eb said nothing.

“You may leave,” Kal said.

The three people turned and headed for the door. The father exited, followed by the younger brother. Eb hesitated at the door and turned, head still low, but eyes searching for Kal.

She held his gaze for a stretched moment and then followed her husband through the doorway and out of Kal’s chambers.

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As the yellow sun set, the mother stared into the distance.

Searching. Waiting. Hoping.

Grieving ... always grieving ... for the child she had lost.

## Part 6

Ten minutes after they’d left Kal’s gates, Jib and Mo stopped at a small hut and went inside. If they were aware that Lois trailed them, they gave no indication. Once inside the tiny building, they shut the door, still without reference to her.

As they’d walked, Lois had noticed the standard of the buildings deteriorating significantly. Those closest to Kal’s gates were small and untidy, but looked solid enough. Further away, the buildings became ramshackle and flimsy.

There were no flower gardens and the very few trees were spindly and gaunt. Occasionally she saw small patches of sparse vegetation that could have represented attempts at vegetable production.

They encountered very few people. Those they did pass kept their heads down. The women wore loose gowns. The men wore pants and baggy shirts. They saw no children.

Jib and Mo had not spoken to each other. Nor did they speak to — or even acknowledge — anyone they passed.

Was it Lois’s presence that froze their friendliness?

Had a warning been broadcast on the Kryptonian equivalent of a grapevine?

*Beware! The Alien is out and about!*

Or were they just the least social people imaginable?

With Jib and Mo inside the tiny hut, Lois hesitated, unsure what to do now. Although reasonably confident that she could find her way back to Kal’s buildings, she decided to wait and use the time to observe her new planet.

The smell — the one closely resembling boiled gym socks — pervaded the air. Lois was becoming accustomed to it, but it still registered as unpleasant.

It was dull; the dark mass of cloud hung above them, blocking out whatever brightness they may have received from their sun. Everything was tinged rusty red.

And it was cold. Still. Eerie. Lois realised she had never felt even the slightest zephyr of breeze on this planet. She’d never seen the shining sun or felt its warmth.

The door to the shack opened, and Jib and Mo came out. They began walking in the direction of Kal’s building.

Feeling isolated and bereft of other options, Lois followed them.

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As Lois reached the gates, Jib and Mo disappeared into their respective rooms. Discouraged, Lois looked beyond the gates. She was sure she could feel the onset of cabin fever.

Tek emerged from Kal's building and walked past her without acknowledgement. He continued through the gates. "Tek!" Lois called, her voice rising with frustration.

He turned. "Yes."

She hurried to him. "Hello, Tek. I'm Lois."

"I remember."

"How are you?"

She wasn't sure how she could read confusion amidst such barrenness, but she could. "Do you need something?" he asked.

"I'm new here."

"I know." He turned a few degrees to face her more fully.

"Do you need something?" he repeated.

"If I did, would you get it for me?"

"Yes."

Why? Because he was a nice guy? Because he was Kal's employee and she was Kal's concubine? Did he have to do what she asked? Would he be punished if he refused? "Do you work here every day?"

"Yes."

"But you don't live here?"

"No."

"Do you live with your wife?"

"Yes."

"Do you have children?"

"Two."

"Is your house cold?"

"Yes."

The shortness of his answers didn't offer any encouragement to persevere with the conversation.

Was it them? Kryptonians?

Or was it her?

Was it because she was a woman?

Or because she was a concubine?

"Do you need anything?" he asked. Lois sensed he was asking her permission to leave.

"No," she replied. "Go home to your wife."

Without replying, Tek turned and walked through the gates.

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The Water Committee meeting dragged unbearably. Kal asked the same questions he had asked a hundred times before, and they gave him the same answers he had heard a hundred times before.

The only detail that had changed was that they now estimated they were seven days closer to running out of water than they'd been this time last week.

The planet was still heading inevitably towards complete dryness. Life would be unsustainable very soon after that.

Kal felt his irritation growing. He didn't want to be here.

Sure, he wanted — genuinely wanted — to be able to supply everything his people needed. But this wasn't helping. Sure, he was interested — genuinely interested — in researching any idea that might actually find a way to supply the water they needed.

But he was not interested in listening to already-failed ideas and schemes dressed up to look new, when in reality they were not.

This was a waste of his time.

Which had never worried him before.

But now ... every minute here, was a minute he couldn't be with Low-iss.

Kal tuned out the dreary monotone of the man who was, for at least the third time, proposing they use salt water from the ocean to water their crops.

Every Scientist and every farmer Kal had consulted had assured him this would decrease the already low productivity of

their soil, and within a short time, render it unusable.

And it wouldn't produce crops anyway.

"Enough!" Kal said as he stood. "I have heard enough."

Six pairs of eyes gawked at him. Kal was very aware they had never seen him act like this.

"I am closing this meeting," he declared. "We will meet again in one week. Don't come unless you have new ideas to discuss." With that, Kal gathered his files and strode from the room.

He headed directly for his bedroom.

To Low-iss.

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Lord Nor stared into the nothingness, his mind ferreting through the clutter of possibilities for anything that could possibly be relevant.

The rest of the Water Committee had dispersed soon after the abrupt and incongruous departure of Kal-El.

Did his sudden bizarre behaviour have anything to do with the alien woman?

Was he spending as much time with her as was rumoured?

And if he was ... why?

Merely for information?

She was deplorably ugly, even for an alien species. Could it be possible that Kal-El had finally managed to comprehend that there was more to life than coddling the underclass?

If he had ... if his attention had drifted elsewhere ... surely that could only be of benefit.

Could the alien woman have anything — knowledge, intuition, abilities, understanding — anything at all that could threaten Nor's plans for the future of New Krypton?

He could not see how. His plans were too thorough, too watertight, too important.

But why now? Why had she come now — when the culmination of everything was imminent?

Nor didn't believe in a higher power. But he did believe in destiny. His destiny.

And his destiny was to rule New Krypton.

And he had no intention of allowing the chance appearance of a pariah to jeopardise that destiny.

For now, he would continue to monitor the situation. For now, he would watch and wait ... as he had waited for so long.

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Kal paused outside his bedroom door. Was she in there?

He should knock, he decided. He'd never knocked on a door in his life. As Supreme Ruler, every house, every room on Planet New Krypton was his to enter as he pleased.

But if she happened to be changing her clothes, he didn't want to go in unannounced.

That would be just too embarrassing.

What had happened this morning was embarrassing enough.

He raised his hand and knocked on the door.

Moments later, his door opened and there she was. Low-iss. She did her mouth-twitch, and it reached inside him and unravelled the tension that had been building the past two hours. "You don't have to knock on your own bedroom door," she said.

Kal felt his face warm. He hoped she wouldn't notice. "I didn't want to catch you unawares," he said.

Her mouth-twitch widened. "I won't change in your room," she said. "I'll do it in my room. So you don't have to knock."

Yet again, Kal had not come prepared. He had swept out of the Water Meeting without a thought in his head beyond seeing if Low-iss was in his bedroom. Now, he was here ... He seized the first idea that materialised in his mind. "I should check your head."

"OK."

"I don't know that word."

"It means 'all right'."

Low-iss sat on the bed, clearly expecting him to examine the

site of her Translator. She deposited her flowing hair behind her ear, revealing the shaved area.

Kal positioned the chair and sat beside her, careful to ensure that his knees didn't come into contact with her thighs. His fingers were a little unsteady; they had not forgotten the ebony silkiness of her hair. He rested them in the long strands, mesmerised by the dark softness of her hair against his skin.

He forced his attention to the wound.

"Is it all right?" Low-iss asked.

"Yes," he said, relieved the Translator wouldn't transmit his regret. Not regret that she was healing well, but regret that her question forced him to give his verdict and move away.

He did.

She mouth-twitched him again. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Has your meeting finished?" she asked.

"Yes."

"What was it about?"

"Water."

"Water?"

"We are running out."

"You're having a drought?"

Kal sighed. "It hasn't rained since we came here."

The remnants of her mouth-twitch disappeared, and a tiny line appeared just above the bridge of her nose. "How long have you been here?"

"My people have been here for twenty-three winters."

"And it hasn't rained once?"

"No," Kal said. "We only know about rain because it rained on Krypton."

Low-iss didn't reply for a moment, and Kal wondered if she had understood. "You ... all of your people used to live on another planet?" she asked.

He was about to say 'yes' when he remembered that moving his head up and down had made Low-iss do the mouth-twitch before. He did that, but was disappointed. "We lived on Krypton," he explained. "It was destroyed. A small number of our people escaped and found this planet. We call it New Krypton."

"How terrible," Low-iss said quietly. The line had deepened. Kal checked her eyes to see if they had moisture. They didn't.

"This planet had lakes and rivers when we arrived, but we have used the water and it has diminished, and now we have only enough for two months."

"Two months?" Her voice had risen.

"Yes," Kal confirmed. "I have a meeting with my Water Committee once a week, but nothing we have attempted has brought a solution."

"Do the people know?"

"Know what?"

"Know that in two months, you will have no water."

"No," Kal said. "They know we have very little water. They can see the dry lakes. But they don't know how little time we have."

"It hasn't rained once?" Low-iss asked. "Not once in twenty-three years?"

"No."

They sat in silence for some time. Kal checked his watch. There was still an hour before his supper would be served. What was he going to do?

He'd never closed the Water Meeting early. He'd never closed any meeting early.

He didn't know what to do. All he knew was he wanted to do it with Low-iss. "Do you have another meeting?" she asked.

Maybe she had more questions. Maybe she was hoping he would have time to give her answers. "No."

"Shall we do more disputes?" she suggested. "That is a pretty big pile."

Kal didn't think the pile was pretty at all. And he never did the Disputes before supper. They were done after supper.

But why? Why couldn't he do them now? With Low-iss? He did rue the lengthy periods of time his people had to wait for his judgements. "Yes," he said decisively as he rose to bring a handful of folders to the bed. "Let's do the Disputes."

He placed them on the bed next to Low-iss. Then he remembered — there should be a follow-up submission from Eb's family. He returned to his desk and removed the bottom file. He flicked it open, and realising it was the correct one, took it back and sat on the chair.

"Are we doing them out of order?" Low-iss asked.

"This is one from yesterday," Kal said. "The one involving the brothers."

"The one where you said the younger brother had to go back to his family's farm and leave his wife with her family?"

"Yes."

"Why is it back again?"

"I changed my judgement later."

"You did?"

Kal took the paper from the folder and read, "An agreement is to be tendered to the Supreme Ruler for his approval. The agreement is to incorporate the younger brother returning to his family home, his wife returning with him, and her family receiving on-going recompense for her loss." Kal sought Low-iss's face as he read the final words.

This time he wasn't disappointed. Her mouth-twitch was broad and brimming with vitality. "Do you have the agreement there?" she asked.

Kal dragged his eyes from her face, aware of how much he wanted to continue staring at her. He lifted the second piece of paper and read, "We offer ten sacks of grain every year as recompense for my brother's wife." Kal lowered that sheet of paper and picked up the next one. "We accept."

Low-iss's head tipped back, and her shoulders shook. The wide mouth-twitch seemed to illuminate her entire face. And this one had the sound too. It was such a ... He grappled for the right word. Delightful. It was such a delightful sound. He could listen to her do it all day and never grow tired of it. It made him feel so good.

When she had straightened, and stilled, her mouth-twitch was still there. Her eyes were damp. Kal looked more closely. Nothing had leaked. He wished it had. He wanted an excuse to touch her again. "What is that called?" he asked. "What is the word for it?"

"Laughter," she replied. "I'm laughing."

"What is the word when you don't make the sound?"

"Smile."

None of the words had translated, but Kal had been expecting that. "I like it when you do it."

She did it again as her eyes bored into his, holding him captive as securely as if she had him tightly bound with thick rope. Eventually, she released him, and her eyes dropped. "Why are there no names in the submissions?" she asked.

Kal wrote his approval of the agreement and closed the folder. "To ensure that I judge according to the situation, not according to the persons involved."

"They don't trust you to be impartial?"

Kal didn't know how to answer — not without giving her the long, shame-filled history of his people. The history that hovered just below the surface of every aspect of life on New Krypton.

The history that still seeped into every Dispute, every deal, every crime.

The history everyone knew, but no one acknowledged.

But, Kal realised, he *wanted* to tell Low-iss! He wanted her to understand ... his world ... his people ... him. He wanted her to know everything.

Everything?  
 Even ...  
 Even his secret?  
 He *wanted* her to know.  
 Even that.  
 But did he dare tell her?  
 How would she respond?  
 He closed down those thoughts. Now was not the time. “I know the wife’s name is Eb,” Kal said.  
 “How do you know that?”

“I summoned her today to ask her what she wanted to do.”  
 Low-iss mouth-twitched broadly. Kal enjoyed every mouth-twitch but this one had a ... spontaneity, an energy that burrowed the good feeling even deeper into him, despite it ravaging his ability to breathe rhythmically. “That was a wonderful thing to do, Kal,” Low-iss said. She leaned forward, and Kal thought she was going to put her hand on his arm. She didn’t. He wanted her to, but she didn’t. “What did she say?”

“She wanted to be with her husband.”  
 “Maybe she loves him.”

There was that word again. That feeling-in-your-chest word. Could that be why Eb had looked back just prior to leaving his Chambers? Did being away from her husband make her feel empty? Empty like he felt whenever he thought about Earth people coming for Low-iss? “Lo-iss?” Kal said.

“Yes?”

“There is a question I want to ask you, but I don’t have some of the words I need.”

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Lois smiled to encourage him, even as her stomach rolled. He was going to ask about love. And she still wasn’t sure she had an explanation he could understand. “Just say what you can, and I’ll try to work out the rest,” she said.

Kal took a deep breath and looked at the floor. “When I’m with you ... sometimes I think I know what you’re ... what’s happening ... inside you ... because your face ... changes. Sometimes ... you speak without words.”

“Yes.”

“But I don’t do that.” Kal looked up and into her eyes. “Do I?”

“No,” she said. “Not much.”

“Do all Earth people speak on their faces?”

“Mostly,” Lois answered. “Some more than others.”

“When I consulted with Eb today, her face stayed the same,” Kal said. “It was difficult to discern what she wanted, and I thought how much easier it would be if she were like you ... if her face spoke.”

Lois smiled. She wanted to reach across and touch his forearm. Then her memory fired up and plied her with an image of that arm when it was bare. She clutched her hands in her lap.

“Do you find it difficult when I speak to you?” Kal asked.

“I did at first,” Lois admitted. “But not so much now.”

“What has changed?”

“Maybe we’ve learnt things from each other.”

“That is good,” he said.

Lois realised that this was her opportunity — her opportunity to ease some of the sombreness from Kal’s eyes. He took his responsibilities as leader so seriously. And with the water situation, she was beginning to understand why.

But that didn’t mean he couldn’t smile. “Have you ever seen a Kryptonian smile?” she asked.

“No.”

Had they smiled on the old planet? Maybe he had forgotten in the midst of all the worries and difficulties of establishing life on a new planet.

Or maybe he had never smiled. Maybe it just wasn’t the Kryptonian way.

“But you like it when I smile?” Lois asked.

“Very much.”

“I’d like you to smile for me.”

Kal hesitated. “All right,” he said.

Lois grinned. This was going to be fun. “Remember when you put your fingers on my mouth and lifted the edges so I would smile?”

“Yes.”

“I would like to do that to you.”

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Kal’s heart was scuttling around his chest. Low-iss wanted to touch him. She wanted to put her fingers on his face. His mouth had gone as dry as their lakes, so he moved his head up and down to signify his agreement.

She shuffled forward and put her fingers on the edges of his mouth. Her touch caused the burning, just like when she had touched his arm. Yet it didn’t hurt. It was good. So very good.

“Relax, Kal,” she said quietly. “Just relax. Let me do it.”

Relaxing was proving incredibly difficult with her fingers on his mouth and her face so close to his he could feel her breaths whispering across his cheek. He closed his eyes and concentrated on obeying the slight pressure of her touch.

Her fingers lifted from his face, and Kal’s eyes shot open. She was ... What did she call the mouth-twitch? Smiling. She was smiling. “Can we try again?” she asked.

She wanted to touch him again. Kal nodded, glad it excused him from speech.

Again, her fingers rested lightly on his mouth. Again, her breath flitted over his cheeks. He felt the pressure increase and the edges of his mouth curve.

“I’m going to take my hands away,” Low-iss said. “Can you try to keep your mouth in this position?”

He didn’t answer. It wasn’t possible to either shake his head or speak.

Her hands left, and he tried to do as she had asked.

Her smile rewarded him. “Well done,” she said. “Now watch my face and try to copy me.” Her smile faded, and Kal let the edges of his mouth drop to their customary position. Then she smiled again. He lifted his mouth and felt his lips part — just as he had seen hers do.

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Something had sucked the oxygen from Lois’s lungs, leaving her breathless and more than a little giddy.

Kal’s smile.

It was an absolute heart-stopper.

She felt as if she had discovered hidden treasure of immeasurable value.

Never had she seen a more dazzling, more captivating smile.

On Earth, he would be able to charm an entire roomful of women — of every age — with one single smile. He’d melt them. Every last one of them. They would be defenceless.

*She* was defenceless.

Lois forced air into her flailing lungs and then slowly released it, attempting to steady herself.

“Did I do it?” Kal asked a little uncertainly.

*Do it?*

Do what? Smile? Liquefy her insides? Enchant her heart? Lure her to the very edge of the terrifying precipice called love? Beguile her to within one smile of toppling into freefall? “Yes,” Lois said, hearing the tremor in her voice. “You did it.”

Even as she said it, Lois knew she was answering all of her silent questions as well as Kal’s spoken one.

But Kal didn’t even have a word for love.

And he was married. “How often is the Nobility Convention?” Lois asked, hoping her breathlessness wouldn’t survive the translation.

“Once a year.”

Once a year. So Kal *saw* his wife once a year. Was that all they did?

The utter hopelessness of her situation clunked somewhere low in Lois's stomach. Kal was her master.

Her master.

Her master with an intoxicating smile.

Her master who had treated her with absolute kindness, and granted her his protection, and bridged her isolation with the translator.

Her master who ruled the entire planet.

With endearing earnestness.

And absolute power.

Yet, somehow, had avoided becoming harsh or arrogant or corrupted.

In fact, Lois was sure she hadn't met a less corrupted person.

She could ... easily.

So easily.

Fall ... in love ... with him.

But she must not.

He was totally the wrong guy.

Every guy had been the wrong guy, she reminded herself.

But Kal was wrong on so many levels, for reasons far more complicated than simply being an untrustworthy cad.

She could never be anything more to him than a concubine.

Just the word drove tears to her eyes. Concubine. That's what she was. And clearly, she was a particularly unattractive concubine.

He hadn't even kissed her.

Hadn't given the slightest indication he'd even considered her as a possible lover. His intention when making her his concubine had been to bring her into his protection — not because he found her so breath-takingly beautiful, he had to have her.

When she'd moved herself into his bed, he'd preferred the discomfort of the chair to sharing his bed with her.

Lois felt Kal's fingers brush against her lower lashes, sweeping away the evidence of her heartache. He stared at the dampness on his fingers. Then he drove into eyes. "Is this good moisture or bad moisture?" he asked.

She couldn't tell him the truth. He wouldn't understand. It would mean nothing to him — other than to make him uncomfortable. So, she lied. "Bad," she said. "Your smile reminded me of my family. I'm sorry I got upset."

"So I shouldn't do it?" he asked cautiously.

This was her chance. Her one chance to escape with her heart intact. To escape from the pain of loving him and never having her love returned. To avoid the anguish of knowing he could never be hers. That he belonged to his wife and his people and his other concubines. This was her chance.

But Lois couldn't take it.

She smiled, a watery smile full of her jangled emotions. "You should smile, Kal," she said. "I like it when you smile."

He did. He let go with a truly spectacular smile.

And Lois knew with sinking certainty that her battle was lost.

She loved Kal.

## Part 7

Lois and Kal worked on the disputes until it was time for him to collect their meal from the Dining Room. As they ate, Lois sat on the bed, and Kal sat on the chair. Again, they shared from one plate. Again, it was the thick wormy stuff threaded through the meatball stuff.

Lois realised that she was growing accustomed to the taste of Kryptonian food. It was edible. Better than edible.

Perhaps eating with Kal made the food taste better.

He had now eaten the last five meals with her. Did this mean anything? Who had he eaten with before her arrival? His other concubines?

"Do you have drought on your planet?" Kal asked as he placed the empty plate on the floor and picked up the glass of blue liquid.

"Yes, in some areas."

"What do your people do when they have no water?"

"I've never lived in a place that has actually run out of water," Lois admitted. "I know there are measures such as building dams — but that's more about efficiency in storing the rainwater."

"We tried that in the early years — hoping to be prepared when the rains came." Kal stared into the blue liquid. "But they didn't come."

"Have you tried drilling to see if there are underground lakes?"

Kal looked up from his glass, a smattering of interest seeping through his usual mask. "Water underground?" he asked.

Lois nodded. "I've read about underground lakes. You can pump up the water."

"Is it salty, like ocean water?"

"Not always." Lois smiled, hoping he would respond. He didn't, but his eyes were fastened on her face. "I don't know much about it," she admitted. "And obviously if the water isn't there, no amount of drilling is going to succeed. But if you've never tried it ..."

Kal offered her the glass. "I'll call my Water Committee together tomorrow, and we'll discuss it."

Instead of taking the glass, Lois curled her fingers around his hand. "I know it seems a really difficult situation," she said. "But I'm confident you'll find a solution." She squeezed his hand before taking the glass. "The people of this planet are very fortunate to have you as their leader."

His eyes dropped, and Lois saw him swallow. She suspected this was very new for him. Was it her physical contact or her words? Did Kryptonians ever touch each other if it wasn't strictly necessary? Did they compliment each other? Encourage each other? Share each other's burdens?

Or had forging a life on a new, dry planet left no time for such things? She realised with some surprise that obtaining answers meant less to her than mitigating Kal's uneasiness. "Tell me about Krypton," she said with a smile. "Old Krypton. Do you remember much about it?"

Kal's head lifted. He stretched out his long legs, crossed them at his ankles, and leant back in the chair. His broad shoulders dipped a little, and his fingers laced across his stomach. His face -

Lois felt a flurry of excitement lift her spirits. Kal's inscrutable mask had softened. She stared as if she were seeing him for the first time.

In a way, she was.

She could perceive his pride in his people. And regret. And sorrow, too.

"We were a technically advanced society," Kal said. "We were prosperous. Everyone had more than enough to eat. Our extensive infrastructure supported a vibrant and flourishing society. Our children went to fine schools. Our universities continually developed new and better ways of doing things. We had solved many of the medical questions and developed drugs and treatments to deal with all illnesses. Our crime rate was low; our rehabilitation program was eminently successful. Our planet was colourful and clean and productive. The sun shone, the rain was plentiful."

"You remember it?" Lois asked softly.

"No," Kal said wistfully. "I have studied History, seen the pictures, and spoken at length with those people old enough to remember."

"It sounds like a beautiful place."

"Yes," he said. He was silent for a breath or two. "It was a beautiful place."

Lois wondered at his hesitation. Was it grief for what they had lost? Was it the certain knowledge that leading his people would have been so much easier had they still had the advantages afforded by Krypton? “What happened?” she asked. “How did Krypton get destroyed?”

“Scientifically?” Kal said. “We don’t know.”

His reply spurred Lois’s reporter instinct as a spate of questions infested her mind. She was sure Kal’s answer had merely grazed the surface of a far more intriguing story.

She clamped her mouth. She knew only too well how the excessive application of Lois Lane doggedness could drive any story underground.

And Kal was not the target of an investigation.

He was the man she loved.

The man who had — finally — left the door to his soul ajar and allowed her a peek.

Her restraint was rewarded with the opportunity to study him — the chance to try to decipher the rudimentary clues as they flickered across his face.

He was incredibly good-looking, Lois realised with fresh appreciation. Just the shape of his mouth ... She sighed, but chopped it off half-expelled. She really didn’t need Kal asking why staring at his mouth brought a sigh to her lips.

She forced her gaze away from the lure of his mouth. She rested, momentarily, in his eyes before deciding they were just as hazardous. Thankfully, Kal began to speak, inadvertently providing her with an escape.

“We lost our home and many of our people,” Kal continued. “But we lost so much more as well — the abundant resources we had thought would be ours forever, the means to implement our technology, the brightest of our minds, much of our culture ...”

They were silent again.

Then, with an abrupt movement, Kal reached for the next dispute. Lois stilled him with a hand on his arm. “We’ve got time to talk,” she said quietly. “We can do these later.”

“You don’t mind listening to me talk of things past?” he asked.

“I don’t mind at all,” Lois said with a smile. “Is there more you’d like to tell me?”

“There’s whole lot more I’d like to tell you,” Kal acknowledged. “But we don’t speak of such things.”

“OK.”

Kal straightened in the chair, his serenity gone. The tension braced his shoulders, setting them rigid against his neck. His forearms bore down on his thighs, elbows out, and he stared at his clenched hands. When he raised his head, the mask of his face had crumbled to sadness. Lois cupped her hands around the bridge formed by his hands.

He glanced down. Then he opened his hands and drew hers into the span of his palms. His fingers tightened, enclosing her.

Lois’s heart bolted in response to the three-pronged blitz — the warmth of his touch, the surety of his grip, the earnestness of his brown eyes. She may have been able to muster a defence against one. Against the combined force of the three, she was utterly powerless.

Then Kal began to speak ... again providing her with a way of escape.

“For as long as records were written,” Kal said. “North Krypton was ruled by the House of El and South Krypton was ruled by the House of Ra. The two houses were bitter enemies, although no one could recall how the enmity had begun. Every summer, the young men of both sides met at the border and fought to advance their territory. Throughout the days of warmth, the border vacillated constantly, and by summer’s end, far too many men had sacrificed their lives to a forgotten cause.”

Kal’s face gave very few hints of the depth of his feelings — perhaps the tiniest tightening above his upper lip — but his eyes

were wells of profound sadness. Lois yearned to soothe the pain from them.

“The scientists of both sides independently discovered alarming increases in the core temperatures of the planet,” Kal said. “They began meeting secretly ... knowing that if their meetings were discovered, they would face execution for treason. Together they invented the Translator and produced many of them so that all Kryptonians could communicate. Together they tracked the gradual approach of the inevitable destruction and pursued solutions. Together they concluded that migration was the only means of survival.”

Through Kal, Lois could feel their hopelessness.

“The scientists informed my father — Jor-El, Ruler of North Krypton. He went with them to Bon-Ra, Ruler of South Krypton. Together, they agreed that the warring had to stop. If any were to survive, they had to work together.”

“So that’s what they did?” Lois asked.

“Yes,” Kal said. “They were fortunate — they had two years to prepare — much longer than the Scientists had initially estimated. My father, Jor-El, married my mother, La-Ra, and I was born.”

So Kryptonians — even the rulers — had children. Did Kal and his wife have children? Lois couldn’t imagine Kal being an absent father — allowing a child of his to grow up without his influence. But then, maybe that was the Kryptonian way. Before Lois had the chance to ask, Kal had begun to speak again.

“I was only a few months old when the end came,” he said. “But I was the hope of the future. I was the only person who represented both houses. The only person both sides would accept as their Supreme Ruler. During the two years, the scientists had developed the means to ensure my safety.”

“So you survived?” Lois said. “Even though you were so young?”

“Yes.”

“And your parents?”

His grip on her hand tightened. “Neither survived.”

“Oh, Kal. I’m so sorry.”

He looked at her with eyes that were dry, yet laden with pain. These memories hurt him; they wounded him still. Who had raised the orphaned child-ruler? Did he have anyone he could turn to when he needed support? Certainly not his wife. He only saw her once a year. Maybe his other concubines?

“Do you have any memories of your parents?” Lois asked.

“No direct memories,” Kal said. “My father was a noted historian. Much of my knowledge of life on Krypton comes from his work.”

“Your parents would be so incredibly proud of how you lead this planet,” Lois said. “Maybe, one day, you would read me some of your father’s work?”

Kal’s eyes jumped to hers.

“Only if it’s allowed,” she hurried to add.

“I would like that,” he said. “I would really like that.”

“Do people from the North and the South get along well now?” Lois asked.

“No.”

“No?”

Kal’s sadness deepened. “The rules prevent the Old War from being discussed. The words ‘Southside’ and ‘Northside’ are not permitted to be uttered. Yet so many disputes inevitably involve the old rivalries. All these years later, the hatred still simmers.”

Lois wanted to hold him. She wanted to stand from the bed and take him into her arms and hold him. She didn’t. “What about the case with the two brothers?” she asked.

“The brothers are Northside. Eb is Southside. The younger brother married into a Southside family.”

“So not everyone maintains the old hatred?”

“No,” Kal said. “But generally, those that do are the angry,

rebellious ones. The ones who still crave domination and spurn unity.”

“Is that why you hesitated to send Eb to her husband’s home?”

“One reason, yes. But the other reasons remain valid as well.”

“Are you worried her husband’s family will harm her?”

“I don’t think they will harm her,” he said. “Ostracise her, maybe.”

“But she wanted to be with her husband,” Lois said. “That was most important to her. You gave her that.” She smiled and squeezed Kal’s hand.

His body relaxed again — except for the grip on her hands. Lois waited. She still had questions, but she sensed there was more Kal wanted to tell her.

“I had a globe,” Kal said, breaking into the silence. He managed to make a vague round shape without ever losing contact with her hands. “About this big. It was a representation of Krypton. On the day of my Investiture, the globe spoke to me.”

“It spoke to you?”

“It was my father’s voice,” Kal said. “He recorded messages for me during the last hours of his life. He gave me knowledge and direction. He said I needed to understand about leading the people, about always putting their needs before mine, about courage and integrity, about the values paramount to all Kryptonians.”

Lois could so clearly see the pain of loss in Kal’s eyes. If tears had been a part of the Kryptonian experience, she was sure that his eyes would have been damp. Was it fanciful to think he was crying on the inside? That his pain had been imprisoned by years of emotional stoicism?

Kal cleared his throat. “My father finished with the words ... ‘Go well, my son. Honour the two great houses that gave you life. My people are now your people. Your mother’s people are now your people. Lead them with justice, and always pursue peace.’”

Lois felt the swell of her tears. In a strange way, she felt she was crying the tears Kal was unable to release. “What inspiring and beautiful words,” she said thickly.

His hand left hers and reached for her face, and she knew he was going to gather her tears before they fell. “Beautiful,” he repeated.

“Where is the globe now?” Lois asked.

“I don’t know,” Kal said. “When I returned to my chambers after the Investiture, it had gone.”

“Who took it?”

“I don’t know. I made enquiries, but there was never a trace of it. Trey — he was my valet then — said that perhaps I had imagined it.”

“Where’s Trey now?”

“He passed two winters ago.”

“You didn’t imagine it,” Lois said with conviction.

He stared at her — his brown eyes soft, his face solemn.

“Tank koo,” he said.

Lois smiled through her tears.

Kal smiled back, and her heart somersaulted.

They stared at each other, sharing their first smile.

“I don’t pronounce it properly, do I?” Kal said.

“Thank you?”

He nodded. “It sounds wrong when I say it.”

“Come closer,” Lois said.

Kal inched his chair closer to the bed so that their knees were side by side. Not touching, but close. Lois leant forward, her face less than a foot from his. “Watch my mouth,” she said. She placed her tongue on her top teeth. “Thank,” she said slowly and with emphasis.

Kal’s tongue protruded. “Ththank,” he said.

Lois smiled. “Good. Watch again.” She shaped her mouth into

a protruding circle. “You.”

“Ya.”

“Yooooou.”

“Yooooou.”

“Well done.”

Kal smiled.

“Try it together,” she said. “Thank you.”

“Than koo.”

“Try again. Watch my mouth. Thank you.”

“Thank you.”

Lois laughed. “Great work, Kal,” she said.

Kal smiled. “Thank you.”

Then — without ever deciding to do it — Lois closed the distance between them and kissed him.

Fully flush on his still-smiling lips.

Kal didn’t move. Hot humiliation flooded through Lois with the realisation that he’d remained completely unresponsive to her kiss. He hadn’t moved. She wasn’t even sure if he were still breathing.

She jolted back, knowing her face was a dark shade of crimson.

They probably had the death penalty for a whole lot less than the unsolicited seduction of the Supreme Ruler.

Kal brought his fingers to his lips and held them there as he contemplated her with such intensity, her heart stopped. Had she just crossed the line? Was she about to be ejected from his bedroom? His chambers? His life? His planet?

Kal swallowed roughly. Then his mouth opened. Lois awaited her sentence.

“I don’t know what you just did, Lo-iss,” Kal said. “But I’d really like you to do it again.”

## Part 8

Low-iss’s mouth-touch scorched through Kal’s veins.

Such a small touch — not more than the merest brush of her lips on his — but the effect was ... mind-blowing.

Kal wasn’t sure his legs could have supported him.

Wasn’t sure his heart would ever regain its composure.

Low-iss was staring through wide eyes. Her mouth was open just a little, her lower lip shiny with moisture. From his mouth? Or hers?

Kal frantically sorted through his mind. He needed the other word. Not ‘thank you’, the other one; the one she said when she was asking for something. He swallowed, preparing his dry mouth for speech. “Pleesss,” he said.

She didn’t move. Kal inched forward, his eyes fixated on her mouth. Then- he didn’t know if he’d moved or if she had or if it had been a combination — but then her lips were on his again.

Her hands spread across his face and slid to the back of his head. They guided him through ever-changing depths of connection. Her lips were not still, they pushed, they probed, they withdrew, they came again.

He was on fire. From her lips, she drove heat and life into him, and it surged through every part of his being, burning him, thawing him, drowning him.

Then, her hands left, and her lips had gone, and by the time Kal opened his eyes, Low-iss was half way to his door. “I have to go,” he heard her mumble.

She didn’t turn around.

Didn’t say anything else.

Just left.

Left him.

Kal again felt along his lips with the pads of his fingers.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

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Lois scurried to her room, opened the door, slammed it shut, and collapsed against it — her heart pounding like a jack-

hammer.

She'd kissed Kal!

Kissed him!

She was in love with him. And she'd kissed him. And it had been amazing.

It felt as if her body had been dormant her entire life — waiting for him.

But how was that possible? He wasn't even from her planet. He was an alien.

Or maybe she was the alien.

Either way ...

She loved him.

And kissing him had been ... the most phenomenal experience of her life.

Lois dragged her thoughts from the kiss and to the man. He'd said he didn't know what she'd done.

Had he never kissed anyone before?

She supposed it was possible that when he had married, he and his bride hadn't kissed. She had begun to suspect that the physical relationship between Kal and his wife was non-existent — but had it always been that way? What about at the very beginning? Hadn't they consummated their marriage?

But how could they produce an heir if they didn't have a physical relationship? Without an heir, what was the future of New Krypton? Were they so sure that their water would run out, an heir was deemed unnecessary?

Kal's forefathers were important. He was the Supreme Ruler of New Krypton because of them — the only one both houses would accept. So why was it not important that he have a child?

What about with his concubines?

Had any of his concubines had children?

Would those children be allowed to rule New Krypton?

Lois hadn't seen any children. None around the concubine quarters — none anywhere else. No children.

But Tek had said he had two children.

So Kryptonians must have some way to reproduce. Maybe it didn't involve kissing.

Lois crawled into the coldness of her bed. As she had expected, the moment her eyes closed, she felt the kiss again. Then her mind created the image of Kal's smile, and her body quivered in response.

It took a long time for sleep to come.

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Kal couldn't sleep.

He lay on his bed, recalling the feeling of Low-iss's mouth on his.

Why had she done it?

Had it affected her the way it had affected him?

Did people from Earth do that to ... to whom? Everyone?

Kal could not imagine a world where people did that to each other.

The world would not function — not if everyone felt like he had when Low-iss's mouth was on his ... like he was still feeling now.

Why had she left him?

Had he done something wrong? Something that on her planet was unacceptable? Was there a set response? Asking her to do it again — was that the wrong thing to do?

He hoped he hadn't been improper, but he could not regret his request.

The first touch had surprised him. The second one had bombarded his senses — blitzed them with such force that they would never be the same again.

Kal had a multitude of questions, but from the chasm of his confusion, he realised only one thing really mattered.

Would she do it again?

He wasn't sure he could survive if she didn't.

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The next day, Lois washed, dressed, and waited in her room. If Kal wanted her presence, he could send for her.

Overnight, she had tried to achieve some perspective. She didn't think there was any chance she would be punished for her rashness — he'd asked her to do it again — but Lois couldn't shake the feeling that she had been very bold with the Supreme Ruler. Probably bolder than was prudent.

Definitely bolder than was prudent.

A knock sounded on her door, and Lois's heart lurched. Kal? No. He didn't come to the concubine quarters. He would send for her.

It was Tek. With her breakfast.

Had her breakfast come to her room because she wasn't in Kal's room? Or because she wasn't welcome in Kal's room?

Tek handed it to her and seemed about to walk away without saying anything. "Tek?"

"Yes."

"I'm really confused about a whole lot of things, and I was wondering if you'd mind if I asked you some questions."

He turned so he was fully facing her. Lois took that as his agreement.

"You're married?" she questioned.

"Yes."

"How did you choose your wife?"

"She lived two doors from me."

"Did you and your wife choose to get married?" Lois asked. "Or did your parents choose her for you?"

"I am not a Noble."

"You chose her?"

"Yes."

"You have children?"

"Yes."

"You're their father? Your wife is their mother?"

Did she imagine the flicker of bemusement in Tek's impassive eyes? Lois had to admit that if their positions had been reversed, she would consider it a dumb question. "Yes," he said.

"Your wife got pregnant?" Lois used her hands to indicate a rounded fullness in front of her stomach.

"Yes."

"How did the baby get there?"

Lois was sure she hadn't imagined the discomfort in Tek's eyes. He said nothing.

"I'm sorry to embarrass you," Lois said, "but I have no one else I can ask. If I tell you how it happens on my planet, would you tell me if that is how it is here?"

"Yes."

"You and your wife connect, and then a long time later, the baby comes from the place where you connected with her. Is that how it happens here?"

Tek had definitely reddened, and his eyes were cast low. "Yes," he mumbled, not looking at her.

"Thank you, Tek."

He looked up then, clearly eager to escape.

"Does the Supreme Ruler have children?" Lois asked.

"You are not allowed to discuss the Supreme Ruler," Tek said primly. "I am not allowed to discuss the Supreme Ruler."

So, the rule extended beyond the concubines and to the servants. "Is it a secret whether he has children or not?" Lois persisted.

"No."

"Then maybe it's all right to tell me?" she said hopefully.

"He has no children."

Lois was about to thank Tek. Instead she granted him what he clearly desired most. "You can go now."

He did. He limped away with a level of relief even Kryptonian impassivity couldn't hide.

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Kal ate his breakfast alone.  
 He had gone to the Dining Room to get it.  
 Low-iss had not come.  
 He had wanted to send for her, but he had hesitated. What if she didn't want to come?  
 Of course, she had no choice if he ordered her to come. But if she didn't want to be with him ...  
 Kal had decided that he would eat his breakfast in the Dining Room. There was no reason to take it back to his bedroom if Low-iss wasn't there.

But after one mouthful of the oatmeal, he picked up his bowl and took it to his room. Once there, he pulled the chair close to his bed and settled the bowl on his lap.

His bed was empty.  
 The oatmeal tasted truly awful.

He'd ordered his cook to put sugar in it instead of salt.  
 He'd already imagined Low-iss tasting the sweet oatmeal for the first time. He had been confident she would smile. He'd been looking forward to it since he'd sent the order to his cook yesterday afternoon.

Now he was eating breakfast alone.  
 Stuck with sugary oatmeal.

It was disgusting.  
 But eating alone was worse.

He ate less than half. He drank the blue to overcome the lingering sweetness and wandered to his desk. The Disputes pile had never been smaller.

Would Low-iss help him with them tonight?  
 Would she help him speak more of her words?

He wanted to learn how to say the mouth-twitch word. And the noisy one. And 'please'.

Kal picked up the top page of Low-iss's writing.

What a strange custom. To pry into the business of others, then write about it and let everyone else read it. She'd even admitted that sometimes people did not want their events written about.

Kal stared at her writing.  
 What did it say?

Was she writing about him?

He had told her the Rule that she was not to speak about him. He hadn't told her that she couldn't write about him.

It didn't matter, of course. No one on New Krypton — including him — could read Low-iss's writing.

Kal extended his forefinger and slowly drew it across the top line of her writing. When he reached the end, he dropped to the second line and continued along the strange script.

He'd never seen anything like it.

He was sure he'd never seen anything like it.

He couldn't have.

\*\*\*

Lord Nor had not slept well.

His mind had refused to rest; refused to relinquish its obsessive preoccupation with the possible ramifications of the arrival of the alien woman.

Yet in the cold clarity of daylight, it was difficult to see how her possible impact could surpass capturing the attention of the Supreme Ruler.

And that, surely, had to work in Nor's favour.

Yet his apprehension refused to be silenced.

The plan was perfect — meticulous, all-encompassing, flawless. It was the plan of a master strategist, the consummate warlord ... Nor's father.

But a little insurance was no bad thing.

And it would grant Nor some peace from his nagging anxiety.

Yes, Nor thought with satisfaction. A little agitation was definitely called for.

And agitation was Nor's speciality.

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Lois lingered over her salty oatmeal.

Salty oatmeal reminded her of Kal.

Would always remind her of Kal.

Eating breakfast with him.

Doing the disputes with him.

Teaching him words.

Kissing him.

Kissing ...

She leapt from the bed and paced her room.

What now?

She needed to work.

Work had always been her escape.

She couldn't work — but she could write.

No, she couldn't write either — her paper and pencil were on Kal's desk.

And he had not sent for her.

She could not remain confined in this small room — she was sure she could feel the creeping calcification of her brain.

Lois stepped out of her door and saw a woman — one of the women she had followed out of the gates — about to enter the middle room on the opposite side of the quarters. "Jib!" Lois called.

Jib turned, although she didn't release her grip on the door handle.

Lois strode briskly to her, smiling, despite knowing her smile would mean nothing to Jib. "Hello, Jib," she said.

"Hello."

Lois searched for a topic ... something ... *anything* to prolong their conversation. The only thing they had in common was Kal, and the rules said he could not be discussed.

"Are you really from another planet?" Jib asked.

"Yes."

The full extent of her curiosity apparently satisfied, Jib turned the handle and pushed open the door.

"My planet is called Earth," Lois said hurriedly.

Jib glanced sideways. "Do they speak Kryptonian on Earth?"

"No. I have a translator."

There may have been a glimmer of surprise on Jib's face. "They gave you a Translator?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I think they wanted to know if I had any useful information."

"Is that why you've spent so much time over yonder?"

Over yonder? Is that how they talked about being with Kal without breaking the rule? "Yes."

"We wondered why."

So they *did* talk to each other. "You and Mo discussed it?"

"Yes. And Bel. She's the Mistress of Concubines. That's her room." Jib pointed to the first room on the same side as Lois's room.

Lois had a question, but a lifetime of conditioning made it difficult to speak it out, even for Lois Lane. She forced herself to do it. "Are you a concubine?"

"Yes," Jib admitted readily. "I am C2."

"Mo is C1?"

"No, Mo is C3." Jib pointed to the room to her left. "She lives there." She swung to the room to her right. "Ard is C1; that's her room."

"I haven't met Ard," Lois said.

Jib pushed open the door and entered her room. Before she could close the door, Lois stepped into the doorway. "Jib," she said on a swiftly expelled breath. "I don't know what is done on New Krypton, but on Earth, sometimes women like to spend time together and talk."

“Talk about what?”

“Like you and Mo talked about why I was over yonder.”  
Jib didn’t respond.

“Could I come in?” Lois asked, not caring that desperation laced her words. “Or would you come into my room? There is so much that I don’t understand, and it would be so good to know something about what it means to be a concubine and what is expected of me and what you do all day.”

“You want to talk with me?”

“Yes!”

“Why?”

“I come from another planet,” Lois said a little breathlessly. “Aren’t you even the tiniest bit curious about that? Aren’t there things you would like to know?”

“Not really.”

Lois chose to disregard the indifference of the reply. She was on a mission here. “Well, there’s plenty I would like to know about your planet,” Lois said frankly. She softened her tone. “Can I come in? Please?”

Jib moved fully into her room. Lois followed and shut the door behind her.

Jib’s room was identical to hers. It had the feel of a cheap hotel room — small, cramped, bare, utilitarian. Jib sat near the head of her bed. Uninvited, Lois sat at the foot, grasping for a question that would open a sustainable conversation.

“Do you like being a concubine?” Lois asked.

Jib didn’t answer for a long moment. “I don’t know.”

“Did you want to be a concubine?”

“No.”

“You didn’t have a choice?”

“No.”

“Do any concubines have a choice?”

“No.”

No more closed questions, Lois reflected grimly. “How does a man choose a concubine?” she asked. “What if two men want the same concubine?”

“When a woman turns seventeen years, for three days, only the Supreme Ruler can take her,” Jib said. “If he chooses not to, for the next four days, the Regal Nobles can take her. Whoever takes her first, gets her. For the week after that, the Nobles can take her.”

“And if no one takes her?”

“She is free to marry. Or not. But as long as she remains unmarried, any Noble can take her.”

“But once she’s married she’s ...” Lois wanted to say ‘off the market’, but sufficed with, “... unavailable?”

“To all except the Supreme Ruler,” Jib replied. “He can take any woman, married or not.”

Lois figured this could seem like a provocative question, but she couldn’t stop herself from asking. “What if the woman really doesn’t want to be a concubine?”

“She has no choice.”

That’s what Kal had told her. “What’s to stop one of the nobles taking every woman who becomes available to him?”

“If he takes her, he has to feed and clothe and house her.”

Did that mean there wasn’t enough food for her? Is that why she ate from Kal’s plate? “What if he chooses not to feed her? Can he keep her imprisoned? Who would know whether her needs are being met?”

“He can’t keep her imprisoned,” Jib said. “He is honour-bound to feed her. She can’t talk about anything she sees or hears or does in her master’s household, but she can say if she is not being cared for properly.”

The term ‘master’ still grated. “Did you become a concubine when you were seventeen?”

“No.”

“How old were you?”

“Twenty.”

“Why did K -? Why?”

“Mo and I were taken on the same day. She was nineteen.”

“Why?”

“Mo is my sister.”

Lois felt her frustration rise. The rule about not discussing Kal was restrictive when she just wanted to know why he had suddenly decided he needed two more concubines. Maybe she should approach it from another angle.

“Why didn’t you want to be a concubine?” It wasn’t a question Lois had imagined she would ever ask. “Were you in love with someone else?”

“I don’t understand.”

So Kal wasn’t the only Kryptonian who didn’t understand love. “Did you know a man you wanted to marry?”

“No. I wanted to stay at home with my mother. Mo did, too. Our mother has no one else.”

Lois took the time to frame her question without direct reference to Kal. “Why were both you and your sister taken if your mother needed your care?”

“Our mother wasn’t sick.”

“Was there a particular reason why she needed you?”

Again Jib didn’t speak. For a long time, she stared into nothingness. Lois waited. “My other sister had just passed away.”

Now that she knew, Lois could read the sadness on Jib’s face. Not overt sadness ... not even the hint of tears ... but more a ... shadow ... a shadow of loss. “Oh, Jib,” she said. “That is so sad. Did she become ill?”

“No.”

Lois wanted to know what had happened. It must have been some sort of accident. How traumatic for the mother — mourning the death of one daughter and having the other two taken from her.

Had Kal known about the other sister? Taking two daughters from a grieving mother seemed out of character for him. “Was it an accident?” Lois asked as gently as she could. Although she wasn’t sure the translator allowed for expression.

“No.”

“Then how?”

Lois expected another long silence, but Jib answered immediately. “She was bashed by her master.”

“She was a concubine?” Lois said, horror rising in her throat. “Yes.”

“Who was her master?” Lois asked. It couldn’t be Kal. The assertion thumped through her head like a pounding drum roll. It couldn’t be Kal. It couldn’t be Kal. Surely ... it couldn’t be Kal.

You’ve known him less than a week, a harsh voice inside her taunted.

If it *was* Kal, Jib wouldn’t be able to tell her because of the stupid rules.

But it couldn’t be Kal. She would not believe that of him.

She could not believe that of him.

“One of the Regal Nobles,” Jib said.

It wasn’t Kal. Lois had known it couldn’t be Kal. “Is he in jail? Has he been punished?”

“He’s a Regal Noble. She was his concubine.”

“But surely that doesn’t mean he can kill her?” Kal wouldn’t allow that. Surely.

“He said it was an accident.”

“But you said she was bashed.”

“Yes.”

“How could that be an accident?” Lois demanded.

“He said it was an accident,” Jib repeated. “I didn’t say we believe him.”

“Your poor mother. And then to lose you and Mo so soon.”

“The same day.”

“The same day?” Lois swallowed. Surely, Kal could have left

them with their mother for at least a few days.

“Mother wanted us to go.”

“She did?”

“Because if we hadn’t come here, we could have been taken by the master of our sister.”

The horror permeated deeper through Lois. But with it came the soothing salve of understanding. She knew why Kal had taken Jib and Mo. And with it came a fresh appreciation of his goodness. “The man who had just killed your sister could have taken you and Mo as concubines and no one could have prevented it?”

“Only someone higher and only by taking us for himself.”

“Who was the Regal Noble? What is his name? Are you allowed to tell me?”

“There is nothing in the concubine vows to disallow speaking of other masters. It is only one’s own master one is not permitted to speak of.”

“So who was he?”

“Lord Nor.”

Lois swallowed as she remembered asking Kal why he had taken her as a concubine. He’d replied with ‘to stop Lord Nor taking you.’ Then, she had thought Kal saw her as a prize — a bizarre trophy to add to his collection, taken to gain bragging rights over an associate.

But it hadn’t been like that at all.

Within hours of having her dumped on him, Kal had taken steps to protect her. Lois touched the crest branded onto the back of her hand.

Even as she had come to know Kal, to love him, a part of her had railed at being forced to permanently carry a badge of humiliation. But it didn’t represent humiliation it represented love. Kal hadn’t known it at the time — he may never know it, may never fully understand — but taking her as his concubine was an act of love.

Her love for him blossomed further.

He had saved her. He had saved Jib and Mo.

He was a good man.

A wonderfully good man.

And she loved him.

Totally.

Craved his love in return.

Exclusively.

“Jib?” Lois said slowly. “How often do you see -?” She stopped herself just in time. “How often do you go over yonder?”

“I’ve never been there.”

“Never?” Lois gasped.

“Never.”

“Do you feel bad that I go there?”

“No.” Jib stood and opened her door. “I don’t want to talk anymore.”

Lois stopped in the doorway. “Do you see your mother sometimes?”

“We visit her every day.”

Lois smiled. “On Earth when someone does something kind for us, we say the words ‘thank you’ to show we are happy about what they did.”

Jib stared, but said nothing.

“Thank you, Jib,” Lois said. “Thank you for talking with me. I hope we can talk again.”

Lois stepped outside, and Jib shut the door. To Lois’s right was her room — lonely, boring, mind-numbing. To her left was Kal’s building.

Kal.

Suddenly, she was overwhelmed by an urgent need to see Kal.

She turned left.

As Lois passed the sentries, she felt the surge of joyful

anticipation. She was going to Kal.

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The mother stared ahead.

She heard the familiar footstep behind her.

She felt the touch on her shoulder. The gentle, understanding touch of her husband.

He’d given up his hope, she knew that.

He wished she could give up hers, she knew that, too.

He believed acceptance would bring her a measure of peace.

But she could not let go.

Could not let go of the child she had lost.

## Part 9

Lois rapped on Kal’s bedroom door. There was no answering movement or sound, and her disappointment flared. She entered and scanned the empty room.

Her gaze was drawn to the bed.

Kal had slept there last night.

Had he recalled the kiss? That thought exploded inside her, pulsing streams of hot lava throughout her body. If the mere memory of a kiss could do that ...

Lois forced her attention from Kal’s bed and went to his desk. She took a fresh piece of paper and began to write the story of the murdered concubine.

The words gushed onto the page, flowing unimpeded from her pencil. When she had finished, Lois re-read it, knowing it was good — clear, concise and with the human touch just right. Enough empathy that she didn’t seem impervious to the tragedy, but not enough that she sacrificed her professionalism.

Perry would be proud of her.

He’d nagged her for years to *feel* her stories more — to delve beyond the cold detail and allow her heart a little freedom.

How strange that it had taken living in the most stolid place imaginable to release her emotions enough that they penetrated her work.

Or maybe it wasn’t strange at all.

Maybe the contrast had heightened her awareness.

After all, it had taken less than four days for her to fall in love with Kal.

Kal.

Where was he? Would he come to his bedroom for lunch? Would he be detained elsewhere? Was he avoiding her?

Lois drifted her fingers across Kal’s crest burned into her hand.

It certainly had not been her choice.

But had she known then everything she knew now — the vulnerability of a single woman in this society, the goodness and gentleness of Kal, the brutality of Lord Nor — it *would* have been her choice.

She glanced to the door. There was no movement in the chambers, nothing to indicate Kal’s approach.

Lois took a blank piece of paper and divided it with a long vertical line. Deciding that was too obvious, she ditched it and took another blank sheet.

This time, she omitted the line and wrote an ‘S’ on the top left.

Then a thought struck her. ‘S’ was for ‘South’, yet it was the crest of the House of El, which was North. Clearly, it wasn’t the letter ‘S’, but a symbol that, not surprisingly, had nothing to do with the English alphabet.

Again, Lois replaced her paper.

This time, she wrote ‘Eb’ at the top left; then on the right side, she wrote ‘Eb’s husband and family’.

Kal had said that the old conflict still pervaded Kryptonian society. If she was going to understand the people, she was going to have to understand the underlying foundations first.

Under ‘Eb’, Lois wrote ‘Nor’. She didn’t know if he was

southside, but she was betting he was on the opposite side to Jib and Mo ... and the sister he had murdered. Across the page, she wrote the names of the two sisters.

Tek? Where did he fit?

Kal? He was supposed to equally represent both sides, but he used the name of his father's house and their crest. Did those of the south resent him for that?

Lois studied the names for a few moments and then carefully concealed the page amongst those of her journal.

She returned her attention to the pile of paper. The many blank pages seemed to be issuing a challenge. What else could she write? She re-read her story of the murdered concubine, edited a couple of words and fervently wished she could take it to an editor just like Perry. She knew he would print it — regardless of the consequences, regardless of the status of Lord Nor.

Just the thought of uncovering a bad guy had teased her investigative juices out of hibernation.

Perry — her ache for home rose again in her throat — but then subsided.

She missed them.

Of course, she missed them.

She ached for their grief.

But ... right now ... if she were offered the chance to go home ... would she take it?

Would she take it knowing that leaving would mean separation from Kal?

Of course, she would go home if it were possible, she told herself firmly. It had been her objective since the moment they'd hauled her from her life-pod.

But ...

She hadn't seen Kal for fourteen hours, and she missed him. Her heart jumped at every sound that could possibly indicate he was about to walk through the door.

Could she leave him?

Knowing she would never see him again.

Knowing it would be a forever goodbye.

Lois knew that he could never leave New Krypton. His sense of responsibility to his people ran too deep.

She sighed. Right now, it wasn't her choice to make. There was no way home. She was on New Krypton and was going to be here for the foreseeable future. Kal was occupied with running the planet, and she had no guarantee he would continue to choose to spend time with her.

She needed something to do.

It was past lunchtime, and Kal had not come. The afternoon stretched long and empty in front of her.

She had to do something. If she didn't find something to do, Lois was convinced her brain cells would fuse into a sluggish blob.

She couldn't write for a paper.

There was only so much she could write in a journal.

Maybe she *should* go back to her novel. A movie script version, maybe?

But who would read it?

No one.

No one could read her language. The translator didn't extend to the written word.

Did they even read fiction on New Krypton? Did they have movies? Entertainment of any sort? She'd seen nothing to suggest they did.

Then it came to her.

Children.

They were surely not too different the universe over.

She could attempt to write a children's book — a picture book — so the language differences were less of a barrier. She could give it to Tek to take home to his children. He didn't look too much older than she was, so Lois hoped his children would

be young enough to appreciate a picture book.

She needed a plot. Her first idea involved two children going to the park to play.

Except she had not seen anything resembling a park on New Krypton.

Her second idea involved them playing with their dog.

Except she had seen no animals on New Krypton.

Although they did eat something they called meat.

But Kryptonian children may not be familiar with the concept of pets; the story of a dog may scare them.

Lois thought again.

She needed a universal concept.

Like ... generosity. Sharing.

She thought about how Kal had shared his food with her.

Then the ideas flooded into her mind. Two small boys walking ... each carrying a bag containing his lunch ... deciding to run down a small slope ... one boy falling over ... his lunch tumbling into the dirt ... both boys eating one lunch together.

Lois wrote her simple story and then edited it and divided it into six parts. She planned six drawings to accompany her words.

Art had never been an interest, and Lois wasn't confident her ability extended much beyond stick figures. There would be no colour; she had only one grey pencil.

But — it would keep her mind from certain atrophy.

She was about to begin her first drawing when she heard the door open.

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The unscheduled meeting of the Water Committee had gone longer than Kal had expected. They had thrashed out Low-iss's idea of searching underground for water.

At first, the majority of the Water Committee had been against the idea — believing it to be too speculative to justify the use of their limited energy resources.

Discussion had followed — good, productive discussion.

Poring over maps of their planet, they had dismissed the coastal areas, believing any water obtained close to the ocean would have a high salinity. Using a combination of guesswork and much-debated estimation, they had selected three possible sites.

There were, of course, no guarantees.

But for the first time in months, Kal left the meeting with hope instead of desperation.

He glanced at his watch. It was over an hour past lunchtime. Was Low-iss in his room? Had she already had her lunch?

Kal hurried to his Chambers and opened the door to his bedroom.

Then he saw her — hunched over his desk, working on something, probably her writing.

Kal felt a brightening inside him.

Maybe they had found a way to provide water for his people.

And Low-iss was in his bedroom.

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Lois's heart flipped. Kal!

Taking a deep, steadying breath, she stood and turned to face him.

He stopped, leaving the door open behind him. She found his eyes across the distance that separated them. "Hello, Lo-iss," he said.

"Hello, Kal."

"Have you had lunch?"

"No."

"I'll get it."

He wheeled around and was gone.

Lois stood there, smiling. Impatient. Excited.

Just a few minutes later, he was back — with the standard one plate and one glass. Lois sat on his bed, and Kal pulled up the chair. "Did you have the meeting with the Water Committee?"

she asked.

“Yes. It took all morning.”

“Did you make any decisions?”

“We are going to drill for water,” Kal said. “We have equipment which can be adapted to the task. We have chosen three sites.”

“I hope it works.”

“So do I.”

Lois could feel the strain generated by the years of despair. But she could also feel the smattering of hope weaved through the hopelessness. She wanted to reach over and connect with Kal. She wanted to touch his strong, warm arm; to explore the definition of his muscles. She didn't.

“Did you do more of your writing today?” Kal asked.

“Yes. Is it all right that I came here?”

“Yes. You can come here whenever you want to.”

“Thank you.”

As soon as she'd spoken, Lois regretted using those particular words.

It was exactly those words that had precipitated the kiss.

And now, it was those words that beckoned them back to its memory.

\*\*\*

So potent was the memory, Kal could still feel the imprint of Low-iss's mouth on his.

It hadn't left him all day.

Even when he'd been engrossed in the Water Committee meeting and the new and hopeful ideas, he'd been aware of the memory lurking, waiting for the opportunity to swamp his mind with thoughts of her.

Low-iss took a small mouthful of food and chewed it slowly as she stared at the plate. She didn't want to look at him — which confirmed Kal's suspicions that asking her to do it again had been a mistake.

“What was that called?” Kal asked quietly.

Her face flooded with pink colour. Kal lifted his hand towards her, mesmerised. He hovered there, yearning to glide the back of his fingers along her cheek. Should he? He wanted to. He lowered his hand. “A kiss,” she said, still not looking at him.

If anything, his almost-touch had deepened the colour in her cheeks. Her mouth-twitch had gone. “That word doesn't translate,” he said.

“I'm sorry, Kal,” Low-iss said. “I shouldn't have kissed you.”

“Why not?” he said, wishing she would look at him.

“Because it's something you don't do unless you're sure the other person wants you to.”

“I didn't know I wanted you to.”

She looked up then, and her mouth eased into a small mouth-twitch. “Why did you ask me to do it again?”

“Because it was wonderful.”

Her mouth widened, and Kal felt its goodness ease his concerns. Ease them, but not erase them. Low-iss had a word ... “I ssrr ...” Kal stopped, knowing it didn't sound right. “Teach me how to say it,” he requested.

“Sorry?” she said. “Is that the word you want to learn?”

“Yes.”

“All right.”

Kal put the still-half-full plate on the floor and moved forward so his knees were against the edge of the bed — his thighs right alongside hers.

“Put your mouth like this.” Her lips reached forward, reminding him of when she had mouth-touched him. He wrenched his thoughts from that memory and concentrated on shaping his mouth according to the pattern set by hers. “Sorry,” she said.

“Sry,” he copied.

“Sorry. I'm sorry.”

“I'm sorry.”

Low-iss smiled, and Kal smiled back. “You are an incredibly quick learner, Kal,” she said.

“I want to learn other words,” he said eagerly. “Will you teach me?”

“What word do you want to learn next?”

This was his chance to touch her. Kal put his fingertips on her mouth and fashioned a mouth-twitch.

“Smile,” Lois said, when his hands had dropped.

Kal did.

\*\*\*

Lois smiled back — it was impossible *not* to respond to Kal's smile. “Smile,” she repeated. “It starts with the same sound as 'sorry'.”

“S-orry,” Kal said. “S-mile.”

“Good,” Lois said. “What other word do you want to learn?”

“The word for smile with sound.”

Lois chuckled. “Laugh.”

“Laugh,” he said. “It is so good when you laugh.”

His simple candour was enchanting.

“Say your name,” Kal said. “I want to hear you say your name again.”

“Lois.”

“I don't say it right,” he said.

“Lois.”

“Loiss.”

“Lois.”

“Lois.”

“I am amazed, Kal,” she said. “You've mastered not only new words, but new sounds that are totally foreign to your language. I am really impressed.”

He didn't respond to her praise. Instead, his smile faded, and his eyes delved deep into hers. “Last night ...” he said. “I'm sorry I asked you to do it again.”

Lois wanted to cradle her palm along his jaw. She wanted to spread her fingers — two into the softness behind his ear, two into the texture of his short hair in front. She would linger long enough for his warmth to permeate her skin. Then she would bunch her fingers and slide along the ridge of his jaw, coming to rest under his chin. Then she would lure him closer and ...

Lois buried that thought and somehow concocted enough composure to respond to his words. “You don't need to say sorry, Kal,” she said. “You didn't do anything wrong.”

“I didn't?”

“No.”

He grinned suddenly. It wasn't a smile. It was a bona fide grin ... boyish definitely ... a little lop-sided ... and appearing to have been sparked by something within him ... something light-hearted. “Will you teach me another word?” he asked.

Lois's heart pounded, and her tongue had to be prised from the roof of her mouth before she could speak. “S ... sure,” she managed. “What word?”

Still grinning, Kal's eyes trained on her mouth, and then his forefinger followed his gaze — until the pad of it landed softly on the centre of her lips. He hesitated, then lifted it, turned his hand, and brought the same pad to his own mouth.

Lois ran her tongue along her desert-dry lips. “Kiss,” she said.

His hand dropped. “Kiss,” he mimicked. His lips parted.

Lois felt like she was being pulled into a whirlpool. She knew she had to break away. She had to speak, had to pull back from the vortex. If she didn't, she would be helpless. She would kiss him. And if she kissed him ... even once ... she ... they ... he ... “Well done,” she said, her voice low and rough.

His throat leapt. “Thank you,” he said, equally low and rough.

“You're welcome.”

Kal stood abruptly. "I have a meeting," he informed her. He picked up the forgotten plate with its cold food. "I'll see you for supper."

"I'll be here."

Lois had meant it as a something of a throw-away line, but it stopped Kal. He studied her from the doorway. "Thank you," he said.

\*\*\*

Kal walked to his meeting, dazed.

He had been sure nothing could dismantle his concentration as thoroughly as Lois kissing him.

He had been wrong.

Her *not* kissing him had infinitely greater capacity for chaos.

\*\*\*

Perry White stared out of his office. His eyes came to rest on a spot, slightly left of centre.

*The spot.*

The spot where Lois's desk had been ... until he'd ordered it to be moved out of his sight because he couldn't bear to look upon its emptiness any longer.

But he couldn't move the spot.

Her place.

Perry had known, of course, that anything ... any organisation ... any group of people ... any team would suffer if its heart had been ripped out.

What he hadn't known was how much the heart of the Daily Planet had been bound up in the little brunette dynamo.

Lois Lane.

Great shades of Elvis, he missed her.

There was not a reporter to touch her.

But it was more than that.

He missed *her* more than he missed her work.

Perry the man missed her far more than Perry the Editor-in-Chief.

He'd never told her that he thought of her as a daughter. He hadn't known himself. Until it was too late.

He knew without a doubt that he would willingly give up every word, every story, every scoop, every award from his long and distinguished career — he would give them all away to see her march out of the elevator and light up the newsroom with her vitality and fire.

Just one more time.

## Part 10

Lois spent the afternoon engrossed in her story, and the hours passed quickly. She put the finishing touches to the final picture and then reviewed the earlier ones.

They were a long way from masterpieces, but considering the limits imposed by both her equipment and her abilities, the pictures had turned out surprisingly well. Lois looked at them, enjoying the sense of achievement.

It must be nearly time for their supper. Lois stood and stretched. She rubbed her shoulders and neck, massaging away the stiffness from the hours at the desk.

Kal would be here soon. She'd seen a glimpse of a different Kal today — a man who could appreciate the lighter moments, a man who could allow a glimmer of his inner feelings to be revealed in that breath-taking grin.

She hadn't asked what he'd be doing that afternoon, but she was hoping his good humour would survive the tedium of what was probably another boring meeting.

The door opened, and Lois spun around with a happy sigh of expectation.

Kal was there with their supper.

Immediately, Lois detected his despondency.

"Hello," he said. He pulled the chair to the bed and sat down, the plate on his lap. He offered her a stick, but didn't begin

eating.

"Kal?" Lois said. "What's wrong?"

"How do you know there is something wrong?"

"You look ... down ... concerned about something."

His brown eyes found hers and simply stared for a stretched moment. "There's a worrying situation developing," he said finally.

"Are you allowed to tell me about it?"

"I have no restrictions on what I do."

His complete lack of arrogance when he spoke of his supremacy still had the capacity to surprise her. "Do you not want to tell me?"

"I have not had someone I could discuss these things with before. Not like this."

"What about your Regal Nobles?" Lois said, thinking again of Lord Nor and Jib's sister. Did Kal believe the Regal Noble's story? Did he have suspicions about the 'accident'? "As the next tier of people in the hierarchy, shouldn't they be here to help you? To support you? To take some of the burden?"

The lack of understanding on Kal's face reminded Lois of her earliest impressions of him. "They discuss the matters of state," he said.

In other words, they were no help at all, Lois surmised grimly. "If you think it would help, I'd like to listen," she offered.

Kal laid his stick on the plate, his mood evident in the sag of his vast shoulders.

Lois took the plate from his lap and placed it on the floor. She smiled at him. "Haven't you ever heard that a problem shared is a problem halved?"

"No."

She rested her hand on his for a moment and then withdrew it — before she could be tempted to linger. "What happened, Kal?" she asked.

"Eight days ago, a young boy was murdered," he said. "The perpetrator was found, he confessed, and he was executed."

"Are you sure he did it?"

"He was seen with the boy, the murder weapon was found in his house, and he confessed that he attacked the child in a fit of anger because the child refused to leave his property."

"He killed because the child was trespassing?" Lois said, aghast.

"Some of my people own very little," Kal said hollowly. "They are very protective of what they have."

Lois's impulse was to defend the child, but then she remembered the murderer had already paid for his crime with his life. Which reminded her again of Lord Nor. "The murderer was executed?"

"Yes. The next day."

"Why so soon?"

"To try to quash all thoughts of retribution."

"But?"

"But the father of the dead boy wants the daughter of the murderer executed."

"That's obscene," Lois burst out before she could stop herself. "And stupid, and primitive, and callous, and —"

Too late, she saw that her tirade had wounded Kal. "They have so little," he said quietly. "Their lives are hard. There are few children born. To lose one is an overwhelming loss."

"All the more reason to protect the life of the murderer's child."

"I agree," Kal said dolefully. "And that is what I am trying to do. I spoke with the parents of the murdered child today. I entreated them not to retaliate. But they had only one child, and he is now gone. They cannot see past their anger."

"Are the two families from different sides of the old Krypton border?" Lois asked with sudden insight.

"Yes," Kal admitted, sounding as if it represented a personal

failing. “The child was Southside, the murderer was Northside.” His hands clenched to tight fists. “The rivalry still simmers ... one spark ... one incident like this ... and ... ”

Lois covered his hand with hers, and this time she did not pull away. “Have you considered taking the child who is in danger?” Lois asked softly. “Maybe bringing her here, so she will be safe while the grieving parents get over their anger?”

Kal sighed — long and tortured — as if he had dragged it from a well of weariness buried deep within him. “Kryptonians don’t forget.”

“So her life will be in danger ... for ... ”

“A long time,” Kal said. “Possibly the remainder of her life. And she has only her mother to protect her. If she were over seventeen, I would take her.”

As a concubine, Lois thought. “How old is she?”

“Nine.”

“Have you ever wondered if executing the murderer is the best way of dealing with a situation like this?”

“I hate the executions,” Kal said. His voice shook with a vehemence that shocked her. “I hate the look in the eyes of the person about to die. But I have to be there. I have to sign the Notice of Execution.”

His fist was rigid under her hand. Lois caressed his tension with the side of her thumb.

“I hate it,” Kal repeated with no less intensity. “But if we didn’t do it, all of the murderer’s family would have been killed that night — his wife, his daughter, his sister. Then there would be counter-attacks. By his execution, I hoped to prevent civil war.”

Lois said nothing.

“You think we are a barbaric people,” Kal said with jaded resignation.

“I just ... don’t understand.”

“Do your people execute murderers?”

“Sometimes,” Lois said. “But only after a long time and many trials to ascertain guilt or innocence.”

“We don’t have a long time,” Kal said desolately.

Lois could no longer remain unmoved by his anguish. She grasped his upper arm and gently ran her hand down it, feeling the outline of bulk under his thick jacket.

His hand captured hers and held it there and then took it to his lap.

“You are a good man,” she said. “Never doubt that you are a good man. And a fine leader.”

Kal put his other hand on top of hers. “Thank you.”

Lois slowly withdrew her hand, fighting a prodigious desire to advance, not back away. “Eat your supper,” she said. “We need to work on the disputes.”

He repositioned the plate on his lap and loaded his stick with the green vegetable. “What did you do this afternoon?”

“I am writing a children’s book.”

His stick hesitated before reaching his mouth. “A book for children?”

“Yes.” She remembered the books on the shelves in the chambers. “You have books.”

“But not for children.”

“You don’t have any books for children?”

“Why would children be interested in accounts and Kryptonian Law?”

“Children’s books are about things that interest children.”

Lois could see this was a new concept for Kal. She rose and brought her story notes and pictures to the bed. She held up the first picture and read from her notes. Then she picked up the second picture and continued reading. When she had finished the story, she looked at Kal.

“When did this happen?” he asked.

“I wrote it this afternoon.”

“No, when did the boy drop his lunch and eat the other boy’s food?”

“It didn’t happen. It’s a story.”

“A ... staw-ee?”

She recognised his attempt to repeat a word that hadn’t translated in Kryptonian. “A story,” she said clearly.

“What is a ... story?”

“It’s when someone writes something from their imagination so that others can enjoy reading it.”

“You do this on your planet?”

“Yes. A lot. People, called authors, write stories,” Lois explained. “Sometimes very long and involved stories. Their stories are made into books and other people buy the book for the pleasure of reading the story.”

“But the events didn’t happen? Not ever?”

“There are some books about events that did happen, but many, many books are about events that happened only in the author’s imagination.”

“So they’re fabrication?”

“Not fabrication exactly,” Lois hedged.

“Why?”

“Because the people who buy the book know it isn’t true.”

“Then why read it?”

“For enjoyment.”

“And people write stories for children?”

Lois nodded. “If a child is too young to read, the parents read the words while the child looks at the pictures.”

Kal stared at her, looking bewildered. He shook his head slightly. “Where does the child sit?”

“When the parent reads a story to him or her?”

“Yes.”

“It varies. Often on the parent’s lap.” Lois tapped her thighs in case he wasn’t familiar with the word ‘lap’. “The parent holds the child, and they enjoy the story together. It’s a special time for both of them.”

Kal stared at her, looking like he was grappling with ideas he found incomprehensible.

“Your people can read, can’t they?” Lois said. “You told me about the schools on Krypton.”

“Yes, my people can read. Our education system now is poorer than it was on Krypton, but all children learn to read.”

“What do they read?”

“Words. Sentences.”

“But not stories?”

“Not untrue stories.”

“We don’t think of them as untrue.”

Kal straightened in his chair and loaded his stick. “I understand what you are saying,” he said. “I don’t understand the motivation for it.”

“It’s a way of ... forgetting all your problems for awhile and imagining you are in a different world. It’s like an escape — it makes the difficulties of real life easier to deal with.”

Some of the perplexity left Kal’s face and his mouth eased to a small smile. “Like being in here with you,” he said. “It’s like a different world, but it makes it easier to deal with everything out there.” He gestured to the door behind him.

Lois’s heart wanted to melt in her chest. “You like me being here?”

“Very much.”

She wanted to fly to him, put her arms around his neck, and hug him. She wanted to tell him she liked being with him.

She wanted to tell him that she loved him.

But she couldn’t do that. That would be like pushing off the top of a very steep, very long slide. And Lois wasn’t sure she was ready for the ride.

Kal looked again at her pictures. “There are no words in your book.”

"I can't write Kryptonian."

"I can."

"Would you write the words to go with my pictures?"

"If you would read it to me again."

"Of course." Lois smiled, and Kal returned her smile.

When they had finished eating, Lois and Kal moved to the desk. She dictated her words as he wrote them. Lois surveyed the end result, pleased. "All we need now is a title," she said.

"How about 'Sharing Lunch'?" Kal suggested.

Lois's natural inclination was for something a little less obvious, but she smiled and said, "Good idea." She took a blank piece of paper and gave it to him. "Would you write 'Sharing Lunch' in big letters on here, please?"

He did and then handed it back to her.

"I'll draw the front picture tomorrow," Lois said.

"I want to finish it tonight."

"OK, I'll draw the picture now."

Kal stood and offered her the chair. "Can I watch you draw?" Lois laughed, a little self-consciously. "I'm a writer, Kal. I'm not very good at drawing."

"I like your pictures."

"Thank you."

Lois picked up the pencil, unsure what to draw. She decided on a simple picture of the lunch. She drew a lunchbox containing some vegetable and meat.

When she had finished, Kal was smiling. "Shall I bind it?" he offered.

"Yes. Thank you."

Kal put the seven pages together and punched three holes along the edge. Then he threaded some string through the holes and presented the finished book to Lois. "Now, could you read it to me?" he said.

"You want me to read it to you again?"

"Yes. You said you would."

"I meant ..." Lois took the book from him. "Where will we sit? On the bed?"

Kal's eyes swung from her to the bed and back again.

"There's only one chair," Lois said. "Come on." She picked up the book and the paper with her words and took them to the bed. She sat on one side, leaning back against the wall. "Come and sit here with me."

Kal didn't move.

"Come on," Lois urged, patting the space next to her. "I won't bite you."

His confusion deepened. He took a half step towards her.

"It was a joke," Lois said. "About not biting you."

He came to the bed and sat on the very edge of it — not next to her, but facing her. "What's a ... joke?"

Again, she was stunned by his ability to master new words so easily. "A joke," Lois said. "Something not serious."

"Something not perilous?"

"Well, yes," she agreed. "But more than that. A joke is something that everyone knows isn't true, so therefore, it's funny."

"You've said ... funny ... before, but I don't understand it."

"Funny is something that makes you laugh."

Kal's face cleared a little. "I understand 'laugh'."

"It was supposed to be obvious that I wouldn't bite you — so it was a joke."

"If I were an Earth man, what would I have done?"

"You would probably have smiled at the thought of someone as small as me even thinking about biting someone as strong and big as you."

"You couldn't do it."

Lois chuckled. "That's why it was funny."

Kal smiled hesitantly. "Next time you say a joke, could you tell me? I want to understand."

"Kal, have you ever heard a Kryptonian laugh?"

"No."

"Ever seen one cry?"

"No."

There was emptiness on his face — as if he were just beginning to understand that his people had missed something of great value. An insistent impulse tugged at Lois. She ached to hold him. Not kiss him necessarily, but to hold him, to fill where he was empty, to heal where he was bruised, and to nurture where he'd been neglected.

She patted the place next to her on the bed. "Come and sit next to me; I promised I would read you this story."

He sat next to her — closer to the edge of the bed than to her.

Lois smiled and held up the book. "Sharing Lunch," she said. "By Lois Lane." She opened the first page and began to read. "One day, two boys were outside ..."

She moved through the pages, reading slowly and pausing at the end of each page. When she'd finished, she closed the book and turned to Kal. "How was that? Did you enjoy it?"

"I don't know."

Lois smiled. "That's OK," she said. "I'm going to write another story tomorrow. I'll read it to you if you want me to."

Kal didn't respond. He seemed dazed. Surely, such a simple, childish story could not have had such a momentous effect on a grown man. More than a man — a commander of his people — an intelligent, caring leader.

It couldn't be the story. His mind must have drifted back to the dangers facing the murderer's daughter. "Kal, do you know what a hug is?" Lois asked.

"No."

She'd figured as much.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because you look like you need one right now."

"I do?"

Lois nodded and rose from the bed. "Stand up," she said as she walked around the bed. Her heart was thumping, and a significant part of her brain was hammering its insistence that this was possibly a very bad idea. But Lois could not endure Kal's haunted look a moment longer.

He rose from the bed and stood — looking awkward.

Lois approached him. "I am going to hug you," she said. "If you don't like it, you can ask me to stop and I will."

"Is it like the kiss?"

"No. Not really."

"Not really?"

Instead of trying to explain, Lois stepped forward and slid her arms around his neck. She gathered him close. She felt him tense.

His hands stayed by his side.

But he didn't pull away.

Every part of her reacted to their contact. Lois could feel the taut arches of his shoulders under her arms and the firm breadth of his chest as she leant against him. She laid her head on the slope of his shoulder and waited for about five seconds, then, ignoring the protest from within, she drew away from him.

Lois glanced up. Kal's face had reverted to blankness. She didn't even want to try to guess why.

\*\*\*

Kal felt like the room had filled with hot gel and he was drowning in it.

Lois had stepped right up to him and draped her body along his.

No one else touched him. Ever.

Certainly, no one else came boldly into his space as she had done.

She'd said it was a hug.

It was over way, way too soon. When she'd backed away, she'd left him destitute.

Kal inhaled a big, ragged breath, trying to feed his lungs the oxygen they were demanding. His glance to Lois's face told him she was waiting for him to speak.

He wanted to ask her to do it again, but when he'd done that after the kiss, she'd run from his room.

He had no other words.

So he stood there, waiting for her to give him the clue about what happened next.

After moments of uncomfortable silence, she said. "Was that all right?"

It was incredible, Kal thought. "Yes," he replied. In his own ears, his answer sounded like he'd had to scrape it up his throat. That's what it felt like too. Kal swallowed again. "That was a hug?" he said.

"Yes." Her voice didn't sound completely normal either.

"Your people do that to each other?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Lois sat on the bed. Kal brought the chair from the desk and sat on it — close to the bed, but not too close. "For a variety of reasons."

"Tell me some of the reasons."

"When you are feeling bad on the inside, a friend will give you a hug — to help you feel better."

"Is that why you did it?"

"Yes."

"How did you know I was feeling bad?"

"You looked like you were hurting on the inside."

He was hurting more now. Maybe not more. But before Lois's hug, it had been a vague ache — now it was an insistent demand. He wanted her to do it again. Wanted it so badly, it hurt.

Kal stood from the chair. At the same moment, Lois stood from the bed. The next thing Kal knew, her arms were around his neck and her body was aligned with his.

He could feel her choppy breaths against his chest.

Then she withdrew, and he wanted to snatch her back.

"Can I show you something?" she asked.

Kal nodded.

Lois took his hands in hers and stepped close to him again. She manoeuvred his arms around her and then slid her hands up his shoulders and behind his neck. "Hold me closer, Kal," she whispered.

He tightened his arms around Lois's small body. His questions swirled through his mind — a mind that had been reduced to total turmoil. Why? Why hadn't she done this before now? Why did it feel so unbelievably good? And most of all, would she do it again?

He could feel Lois's fingers on the back of his neck. They felt so good his entire spine tingled.

He could feel her head resting on his shoulder. Its subtle weight birthed in him the powerful pledge to protect her always.

He could feel her body between his arms. It felt as if the missing part of him had been found — and, for the first time in his life, he was whole.

She felt so good.

And somehow, that good feeling worked its way inside him and dissolved his despair.

Lois said Earth people did this to each other when they hurt on the inside.

He knew why.

He knew that when this hug stopped, he would want her to do it again. Desperately want her to do it again. Probably even more than he wanted her to kiss him again.

He recalled the kiss. No, not more. He *really* wanted her to kiss him again.

Then an idea struck him with such force, his mind reeled.

Did Earth people ever hug *and* kiss at the same time? If Lois

were to lift her head off his shoulder and tilt her face up, she would be in exactly the right position for him to connect his mouth with hers.

She didn't. Which was probably fortunate. The air that had abandoned his lungs seemed to have gathered in his head which was playing havoc with his balance.

If she kissed him, he doubted he would be able to remain standing.

Then Lois eased away from him. Kal withdrew his arms and let them hang at his side. He looked into her face and was alarmed to see the moisture in her eyes. Tears, that's what she called them.

Were they good tears? Or bad tears?

Had he squeezed her too tightly? He had to know. "Did I hurt you?" he asked anxiously.

Lois shook her head. "No," she said with a tiny smile. "These are good tears."

"Why?"

"Because of you."

He didn't understand, but there was something else that was more important — something he really had to know. "Did you like hugging me?"

"Yes."

"So you'll do it again?"

She paused. "Yes," she said quietly.

"You don't seem too sure," Kal said.

Lois smiled through her tears. "I'm sure," she said.

"I won't bite you."

For an instant, she looked shocked. Then she smiled, and her laughter rang out.

Kal smiled. "That was a joke," he said.

Lois put her hand on his chest. "I know," she said. "It was very funny."

"Why was it funny?" Kal asked. "You said a joke is when everyone knows it can't happen. I'm big enough that I could bite you if I wanted to."

Lois took her hand from his chest and rested it lightly along his jaw. "It's funny because you wouldn't do it. And it has nothing to do with your size and everything to do with your heart."

He didn't fully understand her words. He did understand something of her meaning — he'd gleaned that from her touch. He'd never thought such a simple action — a hand on his face — could fill him with such a feeling of ... rightness ... and the very certain knowledge that he needed her ... as much as he needed air and food. "Thank you," he said, his voice gravelly.

She smiled at him and then took back her hand and stepped away. "We should be doing the Disputes," she reminded him.

Kal didn't want to do the Disputes, but Lois was right. He turned to his desk and got a small selection of folders from the pile. But he couldn't stop smiling.

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A significant number of Dispute folders constituted the 'settled' pile and the 'waiting' pile was as low as Kal had ever seen it.

It was time to go to bed.

Kal didn't want Lois to go to her room. He wanted her to stay with him. He was willing to sleep on the chair. He just didn't want her to leave him.

But how could he tell her that?

He was still trying to form the right words when Lois approached him. She put her hand on his shoulder, reached up, and kissed his cheek.

It was quick. Very quick. Too quick.

"Good night, Kal," she said. Then she walked to his door.

"Good night, Lois," Kal replied.

"See you for breakfast?"

“Yes.”

She walked out and shut the door.

She was gone.

He’d wanted her to stay.

But a little part of her had stayed with him. Her kiss. Kal could still feel the memory of her touch on his cheek.

Tomorrow morning, he decided, when Lois first came through his door, he was going to walk right up to her, put his hand on her shoulder, and touch his mouth to her cheek.

It was definitely time *he* kissed *her*.

## Part 11

Lois hurried across the courtyard, shivering as the chilly night air contrasted sharply with the warmth of Kal’s bedroom.

As she reached her door, Lois heard a noise behind her. She turned. A tall figure — her immediate impression suggested he was male — emerged from the first room on the other side. Ard’s room.

He quietly shut the door and, within a few steps, was swallowed by the darkness.

Lois crept to the end of the quarters and peeped into the courtyard. It was empty. She was sure he hadn’t gone into Kal’s building, so he must have gone out of the gates.

She wanted to follow him.

Lois Lane, Daily Planet, would not have hesitated.

But Lois Lane, unemployed alien on New Krypton, did.

Other than the ever-present, perpetually-mute sentries guarding Kal’s building, there was no one in sight. Could she ask them?

Would they reply? If the alien asked them who had been in the room of the Supreme Ruler’s concubine, would they give her the information she sought?

No, she decided. They would stare ahead as if she were invisible.

Lois turned back to her room, half-formed theories pulsing through her mind. What could a man be doing in Ard’s room?

Late at night?

Other than the obvious.

She was fairly sure that Jib and Mo were not concubines in the sense she understood the word. She was also sure that Kal’s motivation for taking them had been compassion, not the desire for more sexual partners.

But how would he respond if he knew another man had been visiting his first concubine?

*Did* he know?

Would he care?

Did the people assume Kal had intimacy with his concubines?

If this became public, would Kal be openly shamed?

Would he be forced — under Kryptonian Law — to take action?

What was the punishment for consorting with another man’s concubine? The *Supreme Ruler’s* concubine?

Lois shivered and decided to say nothing of this to Kal. Not until she knew more.

But she *would* find out more.

A whole lot more.

\*\*\*

The next morning, Kal paced the length of his room.

He hadn’t slept well.

She would be here soon.

He’d been too tense to sleep.

He was going to kiss her.

That’s why he hadn’t been able to sleep.

He was going to kiss Lois.

He’d felt like this only once before — the morning of his Investiture. He remembered the strange entanglements in his

stomach and how he’d been unable to control the propensity to jump at the slightest sound.

On that morning, so long ago, he had taken the globe from the shelf, and as he’d held it, his father’s voice had spoken to him.

Spoken wisdom and guidance and belief — words that had filled the young ruler with the confidence he’d needed to lead New Krypton.

But now there was no globe and no words from his father.

And he wasn’t sure his father would have guidance for this situation anyway.

Kal was going to kiss an Earth woman.

Had Jor-El kissed his wife, La? Did Jor-El hurt when La left him?

Or was their marriage like his to Za?

Empty and meaningless with only one objective — one objective which, so far, had eluded them.

A knock sounded on the door, and Kal’s heart erupted. It had to be Lois. No one else came to his bedroom.

He strode to the door, trying to be purposeful but not too eager. He opened it, and there she was, already smiling in welcome. Kal stilled, wanting a moment just to look at her. He could watch her all day — particularly when she was smiling — and never grow tired of it.

“Good morning, Kal,” she said.

“Good morning, Lois,” Kal replied. He moved back to allow her to enter his bedroom. When she’d passed, he quickly closed the door and — with his heart threatening to rocket out of his chest — he took the two steps needed to bring him within touching distance of her. He put his hand on her shoulder and dropped a kiss on her cheek.

His aim was a little wayward — he got closer to her nose than he had intended — but he’d done it. Now he had to wait to see if she ran away.

She didn’t.

She smiled at him.

“Was it all right that I did that?” Kal asked.

“Yes.”

His nervous tension unravelled on a deep breath. “Good.”

“If it hadn’t been all right, what did you think I would do?”

“Leave me.”

“I can’t leave you,” Lois said. “I have nowhere to go.”

Was that why she stayed? Because she thought she had no choice? “You could go to your room in the Concubine Quarters.”

“Oh, you mean leave your bedroom?”

“Yes.”

“I won’t leave you, Kal,” Lois said. “Not unless you ask me too.”

Kal smiled as he felt the last dregs of his nervousness drain away. “I’ll get our breakfast,” he said.

\*\*\*

Lois re-read ‘*Sharing Lunch*’ as she waited for Kal. She already had an idea for today’s book. Today, the story was going to be about a girl and a boy, playing a game. Somehow, she had to inject some life into this planet, and she might as well begin with the children. She began to jot a few notes.

Kal swung into the room with one bowl and one glass. He positioned the chair and sat down, motioning for her to sit on the bed.

Lois did.

He handed her the spoon, grinning widely.

Grinning as if he knew something she didn’t.

Lois studied him, reflecting on how quickly she had developed the ability to read the nuances of his expression. Maybe that was a testament to how much time she had spent looking at him.

Or maybe he wasn’t quite so inexpressive anymore. Maybe

he was copying her.

Because there was nothing subtle about this grin.

Lois smiled. "What's going on?"

His grin widened. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

"Then eat."

Lois filled the spoon, but then hesitated, again looking at Kal.

"Eat it," he encouraged.

He was trying to hide his smile! Lois could see the ripple of tension in his cheek as he struggled to keep his mouth straight.

"Eat," he said.

She didn't want to eat. She wanted to stare at him ... at his not-quite-concealed grin ... at the glint of amusement in his brown eyes. "What have you done?" she asked, knowing her attempt at severity was hopelessly lost in her enjoyment of his cheerfulness.

"I got us breakfast," he said with a level of contrived innocence that raised her suspicions and escalated her enchantment.

She took it to her mouth and sampled a little from the end of the spoon.

It was sweet! It was just like the oatmeal her mom had cooked for her. No milk, but it was close enough to be a taste of home.

Lois took the rest of the spoonful into her mouth.

"Do you like it?" Kal asked eagerly.

"It's delicious," she told him. "Did you order this?"

His grin deepened, birthing a dimple in his left cheek. "I thought you'd like sweet oatmeal."

"Thank you, Kal," Lois said. "Have some."

His grin faded fast.

"You don't like it?" Lois guessed.

"It's awful."

"How do you know?" she challenged. "You haven't tasted it."

"I had it yesterday."

Yesterday. When she hadn't come to Kal's room for breakfast. Lois groaned. "I'm sorry I didn't come yesterday."

His grin was back. "You're here now," he said as if that was all that mattered.

"Thank you, Kal," Lois said. "That is so sweet."

"Having sugar put in something always makes it sweet."

Lois chuckled. "I didn't mean the oatmeal," she said. "I meant you."

His eyebrows floated up. "I'm sweet?"

"Very," she said, smiling. "Thank you."

He loaded his spoon, but then let it plop back into the oatmeal. "Are there any other ways to say 'thank you'?"

His eyes were sparkling — almost as if his thoughts had rocketed ahead and found her answer highly amusing.

"Sometimes we shorten it to 'thanks'."

"Is there an action that means 'thank you'?" Kal asked.

"Instead of a word?"

"What sort of action?"

Kal smoothed his smile, but could do nothing about the fun sparking in his eyes. "A kiss maybe?" he suggested. "Or a hug?"

Lois grinned. "Yes, those actions can mean 'thank you'."

"We will have sweet oatmeal again tomorrow," he promised.

Lois laughed as her heart overflowed. To say she had never met anyone quite like Kal was clearly the absolute truth. To say she was more completely captivated with him than anyone she had ever met was also the truth. She loved him.

But she had no way of knowing if they had any possibility of a future. She wasn't even sure if what she felt was explainable to a Kryptonian.

And he was married.

She pushed away that thought. For now, she was sharing breakfast with the man who filled her heart. Thinking ahead to

the uncertainties of the future would only spoil the perfection of the present. "Have some," she said. "You may develop a taste for it."

"I doubt it."

"Stranger things have happened," she said.

"Yes," he agreed, his eyes shining as they settled in hers.

They shared a smile.

\*\*\*

They ate the oatmeal in silence. It was a comfortable silence at first, but then Lois sensed Kal's growing pre-occupation and his good humour diminishing with every mouthful of oatmeal.

He couldn't dislike it *that* much, surely. Lois wondered if the lurking threat of revenge killings was what had doused his mood.

"Lois?"

She looked up quickly from the blue drink. "Yes?"

"Today is the first day of the month," he said.

Clearly that was significant. "Meaning?"

"I have to present the Monthly Report."

That was another meeting? "OK."

"You have to go the Report," Kal said.

"Me?" Lois squeaked.

"Everyone has to go," Kal said. "It's in the courtyard. You must wear the long white gown. You must stand next to C3. Once the Report is over, my household leaves first. If you follow C3, you will know what to do."

"What do you have to do?"

"I give the Report."

"Is that what is concerning you?"

The tension through Kal's jaw eased. "You know what I'm feeling again?"

Lois smiled. "I know you're worried about something."

"I hope my words today will avert disaster."

Lois held out her hand, and Kal took it in his. "What can I do?" she asked.

"Once the Report is over, you will have no further official duties. It starts the hour after noon. I'll send orders to C3 that she is to go to your room and show you what to do."

"Thank you."

"Today is a long day of ceremony and meetings," Kal said.

"I'm not sure if I will see you again until breakfast tomorrow."

"I'll be fine," Lois assured him, trying to conceal the disappointment flooding through her. "I will write my new story."

"I'll have your lunch sent here. After you have eaten, you will need to go to your room to dress for the Report."

"OK, thanks."

Kal drained the glass and stood. He hesitated, uncomfortable. "You have to go now," he said self-consciously. "I have to change my clothes."

"Oh," Lois stood. "I didn't realise. Sorry."

"Come back here in half an hour to write your story."

"All right." She moved towards the door.

"Lois!"

She turned. "Yes, Kal?"

"I need you to hug me."

She stepped up to him and held him close until she felt a measure of relaxation ease through his massive shoulders. She withdrew and put her hand on his cheek. "Are you all right?"

His brown eyes were soft with sadness. "I don't want to be away from you all day."

"I will miss you, too." Lois dropped a kiss onto his cheek and left him — while she still could.

\*\*\*

Back in her room, Lois sat down to wait out the thirty minutes. She had left her paper and pencil in Kal's room, but that was all right because her mind was too full and in too much disarray to be productive. She needed to think.

Think about Kal.

He'd ordered sweet oatmeal for her.

He'd kissed her when she had walked into his bedroom. She was sure he had planned it. It had surprised her — and rattled the rhythm of her heart. His touch on her shoulder had left the fiery imprint of his hand.

She was in love with the man. With his heart, his kindness, his integrity.

But his body was driving her to complete distraction.

Holding him — gaining a full appreciation of his breadth and his strength — she felt protected and safe. And wanton. She wanted him.

But he was married — although it was a sham of a marriage.

She *was* his concubine. Whatever that meant on this strange planet.

But the harrowing reality was that he wasn't hers.

She had no claim on him. She was fifth in line behind a wife and three other concubines.

He could never be hers.

And that thought shredded her heart.

\*\*\*

Half an hour later, Lois was in Kal's room working on her new story. It was going to be longer and more involved than the first one. This time there was a boy and a girl — playing hopscotch. Lois intended to incorporate basic instructions for the game into the story. Then, if the Kryptonian kids could find a twig to draw some lines in the dirt and a couple of stones or similar, they could, maybe, have some fun.

When Tek came in with her lunch, Lois was ready for him. "Tek," she said before he had the chance to leave.

"Yes."

"How old are your children?"

"Six years and three years."

Lois smiled. Tek didn't respond. "On my planet, we make books and give them to our children," Lois said. "In the books are stories — made up tales — about other children. We read these books to our children."

His look said he didn't understand. And he wanted to get out as quickly as possible.

"Look at this," Lois said. She picked up her first book.

"Sharing Lunch," she said, as she showed him the cover. Then, reading from her notes and turning the pages, she told Tek the story of the two boys.

He stared, clearly unsure what to say.

"Can you read, Tek?" she asked.

"Yes."

Lois held the book towards him. "Take this, Tek," she told him. "Read it to your children. If they enjoy it, I will make them another one."

Without a word, he took the book and left the room.

Lois ate her lunch, still writing and editing her story.

It kept her mind from Kal.

Kal — whom she missed.

Kal — whom she loved.

\*\*\*

Kal's shoulders lifted with a deep breath.

He glanced through his speech one final time. He had five minutes before the Report was due to start.

Lois would be there — amongst his people — awaiting his appearance.

He knew there was very little chance he would see her again today. The Report was the pivotal event in a day of ritualistic ceremonies and meetings.

Kal had long wondered what they achieved.

Today, he simply didn't want to do it.

He wanted to be with Lois.

And he also wanted to check again with the parents of the murdered boy. Wanted to ensure that their thoughts had moved

past retaliation.

But instead, he was chained by the demands of tradition.

Kal heard a step behind him and turned to see Tek. "Ready, Sir?" Tek asked.

"Yes."

Tek held out his hand. It contained a small vial, filled with a colourless fluid. "This is for you, Sir."

Kal took it. "What is it?" he asked.

"It is cologne. My wife makes it." Tek took it back, removed the cork, and held it towards Kal. "Smell it."

Kal did. It was pleasant ... spicy. "I should put on some now?"

"Not now, Sir," Tek said. "Later."

"Later?"

Tek re-corked it and replaced it in Kal's hand. "The ladies like it, Sir."

Kal felt his smile begin to wander across his face and forcibly suppressed it. "Than -." He quickly chopped off the word that had sprung to his lips. "I will use some later."

With neither word nor gesture, Tek turned and limped from the room.

Seconds later, Kal was joined by the three Regal Nobles — Lord Nor, Lord Yent and Lord Ching.

Kal checked the clock.

It was time.

Yent opened the double doors.

\*\*\*

Lois stood at the end of the line — next to Mo — in the courtyard.

Bel was at the other end.

Then came someone Lois didn't know, but assumed was C1 — Ard, the one who'd had a male guest last night.

Ard was tall and had a lithe sleekness that couldn't be hidden even by the shapelessness of her white gown. She emanated an ethereal beauty that was positively mesmerising. She was stunning — a face of classical perfection, flawless translucent skin, a charming mouth, a pert nose.

Jealousy — hot and acid — burned through Lois's insides.

Could any man resist Ard's charms?

Was that why Kal had taken her as his concubine? She was C1 — she'd been taken first. How old did the Supreme Ruler have to be to take a concubine?

What about the man who had come out of Ard's room last night? How did he fit into the scenario? Was it because of him that Ard no longer went 'over yonder'?

Or did she?

Lois forced her eyes away from the image of beauty.

Next to Ard was Jib. Then Mo. Then her.

It was like being displayed.

Lois shifted uncomfortably.

People continued to come through the gates; men and women — no children, though. Lois was stunned to see so many people. Her impression of New Krypton beyond Kal's gates was of a ghost town — lifeless, deserted, and stagnant. She estimated there were hundreds here now. Possibly four hundred. Maybe more.

Yet, despite the number of people, they were deathly quiet.

There were no murmurings and very little movement other than the new arrivals as they found a place to stand at the back of the crowd. No one turned to greet anyone.

And the atmosphere was sombre.

Then Lois sensed every head lift towards the balcony above them — Kal's balcony.

The door opened. Three men emerged — men she didn't know. They were dressed as Kal dressed — dark pants and a hip-length jacket.

Then came Kal.

It took every ounce of Lois's self-control to remain standing. Her knees had turned to mush and her head was doing an impersonation of a helium balloon.

Kal.

He was dressed — from his shoulders down — in a black outfit. On his chest was a large blue 'S' — the same design as the one branded on her right hand.

The outfit was *tight*.

Body-hugging tight.

And shiny.

And very, very revealing.

It squeezed so tightly around his chest that Lois could trace the definition of individual muscles. She could see the rounded strength of his shoulders, could see the way they dipped into the bulges of his biceps. She could see the outline of his rib cage, could almost count his ribs. She could see the undulations of his stomach.

Her eyes dropped lower, and a startled gasp erupted from her mouth.

If she'd had any doubts about the Kryptonian male being fundamentally the same as the Earth male, those doubts had just been obliterated. The lower portion of the black suit clung just as tightly, just as revealingly as the top half.

Lois rammed her eyes shut.

She swallowed. Once, twice, three times.

Eventually, she recovered enough to risk another look. Kal raised his clenched fist to his chest and thudded it against the 'S' on the black suit. Everyone in the crowd — and the three men alongside Kal on the balcony — responded with an open right hand to the chest. Lois hurriedly copied.

Then, as if by an unheard, secret signal, the hands dropped. Lois's did too.

"Fellow Kryptonians," Kal began.

The silence was eerie. Lois would not have believed that so many people could maintain such silence. There was no coughing, no clearing of throats. Just silence.

"Last week, a space craft crash-landed on our planet," Kal said. His voice was deeper than normal. More distant. Official. Steeled with authority. "The space craft came from a planet called Earth and contained a single survivor. I have questioned the survivor and concluded that she represents no threat to our people. Her arrival on New Krypton was not planned. It is unlikely that any of her fellow travellers survived. She will continue to live among us."

Lois had expected people to turn to her and stare. They didn't. No one moved. Not even the slightest suggestion of a reaction to Kal's announcement.

"We have begun drilling into the ground in search of water," he continued. "You will see this machinery and hear it working during daylight hours. It is a safe procedure and will not have any unwanted side effects. You are commanded to stay at least twenty paces from the drilling operations."

Lois wondered if this was going to be a lengthy proceeding. Her throat ached to swallow. But so heavy was the silence, she didn't dare.

Her eyes had begun to sting — a result of her unblinking efforts to affix them — rigidly — to Kal's face.

"I remind you that our natural surroundings present us with very difficult challenges as we strive to build a prosperous and peaceful future for our children," Kal said. "These challenges may seem unconquerable at times, but by working together, we will overcome the difficulties and achieve the goals set by our forefathers when they were forced to leave Krypton. I implore you to concentrate on our common challenges and to commit to working together."

These people had a remarkable ability to maintain absolute stillness and complete silence.

"My wife and I have no announcement regarding an heir."

With that Kal turned, giving Lois — and everyone else — a full view of his firm, black, shiny butt. Lois gasped again. This time she was less successful in suppressing it to silence.

The three men on the balcony turned and followed Kal into the building. The double doors shut.

Still the people didn't move. Lois wondered if there was a Part Two.

Then Lois saw Ard turn and walk regally towards the concubine quarters. Jib followed, then Mo. Lois fell into line and walked past Bel, hearing Bel's footsteps walking behind her. Ard went into the first room; Jib went into the second room, Mo into the third. Lois entered her room.

Once inside, she let out a deep, deep breath.

Staying completely motionless was exhausting. Lois stretched, trying to ease the tension from her body. She changed out of the white gown and into a grey one.

How long would it take for the crowd to disperse?

She didn't dare even peek out of her room yet. She couldn't hear any movement outside, but she really didn't want to walk into the courtyard until she was sure they had gone.

Which meant there was nothing to do except think about Kal.

And that black suit.

Lois's heart roared into overdrive.

His body was sculpted perfection.

And on display.

Covered only by thin black material that instead of concealing, seemed to accentuate every curve.

Every ... breath-taking ... curve.

Was that why they called him the *Supreme Ruler*?

Lois gulped again.

Did he mind?

Was he uncomfortable?

He'd been embarrassed when she'd walked in on him and caught him jacketless. Yet this afternoon he had stood before his people with only a stretched black film of material between him and complete exposure.

Had he done it so often, he didn't even think about it anymore?

Had the clothing contributed to his tension this morning? Or had it been the importance of his message? Or simply having to face his people?

Lois thought about the final line of his speech: My wife and I have no announcement regarding an heir.

He said he'd married his wife ten winters ago. Tek had told her Kal had no children. Did that mean Kal had made that announcement every month for the past ten years?

But why was it necessary to announce it? If Kal saw his wife once a year at the Nobility Convention, how could conception be a possibility each month? And did they even make love anyway?

More and more, Lois was thinking they didn't. Hadn't. Ever.

So why announce there was no pregnancy?

Was Kal deliberately not allowing his wife the chance to conceive, yet pretending to his people that there was a possibility of an heir?

That seemed out of character for Kal. Totally out of character.

Could it be possible he didn't know how an heir could be conceived?

Surely not.

Tek knew.

Kal was an intelligent, educated man.

It wasn't possible that he didn't know.

So why did he see his wife just once a year? Yet announce publicly that she wasn't pregnant?

Were the people hoping for an heir? Did they know how infrequently their Supreme Ruler saw his wife?

Was there something wrong with his wife? Was she disabled?

Sickly? Old? Young? Had she been at the report?

Was Kal hoping for an heir?

Did he want a child?

For himself? Or for his people?

Was it his heart? Or his duty?

Did he feel he had failed his people by not providing the next generation?

If that were the case, wouldn't he be in his wife's bedroom every chance he got?

Given how he looked, why didn't his wife have Kal in her bedroom every night?

If she, Lois, were Kal's wife, there would not be separate houses.

Nor separate bedrooms.

Nor separate beds.

If she, Lois, were Kal's wife, she was absolutely certain there would be nothing left over for the concubines.

Nothing.

### Part 12

Lois spent the afternoon engrossed in her story. When Tek arrived with her supper, she was surprised at how quickly the hours had passed. She was disappointed too — disappointed that Kal had not come.

He'd warned her he would be busy all day, but she hadn't been able to suppress the indomitable hope that he would be able to find a few moments to come to his bedroom.

Had something happened?

Remembering that she was forbidden to ask Tek anything directly related to Kal, she said, "Is everything all right? Out there?"

Tek looked around to where she had pointed. "Yes."

"Did you take the book home to your children?"

"Yes."

"Did you read it to them?"

"Yes. Is there another one?"

"Yes, but it isn't ready yet."

Tek turned to leave.

"Thank you for bringing my supper, Tek," Lois called after him.

She worked on through the evening ... listening ... always listening for Kal's return.

It was only as she completed the final picture of the hopscotch story that Lois realised how weariness had crept upon her as she had worked. She tidied the desk and stood.

Kal's bed — warm, big, and comfortable — beckoned to her. It would be so easy to slip between the sheets — to be there when he returned. To be there to welcome him after a long day of separation.

Breakfast seemed so far away.

Should she?

Should she simply get into his bed and wait there for him?

Would he sleep on the chair?

Or would he get in with her?

Would he think her intrusive?

She didn't think so. He'd openly admitted that he enjoyed being with her. He'd said he didn't want to be apart from her all day.

She figured there was a good chance he would be delighted to find her in his bed.

But Kal's reaction was not the only consideration. Getting into his bed amounted to an open invitation for him to join her. Was she ready for that?

With a sigh, Lois turned from the temptation of Kal's bed and trudged to the lonesomeness of her own room.

A medley of emotions swept over her as she lay shivering in her bed. Discontentment at the limited time she had been with

Kal that day ... anticipation of the sweet oatmeal they would eat together tomorrow for breakfast ... a small filament of anxiety regarding his whereabouts ... shock — still — at that black suit.

And the aching void deep within her — simply because she was not with Kal.

She was in love.

It was so new. So unbelievable.

She was living on another planet.

Another *planet*.

Eating their food.

Learning their ways.

Communicating — after a fashion — with them, through a device they had drilled into her head.

And most astounding of all — in love with their leader.

Kal.

An alien who had no concept of love.

Except he did — he had love for his people.

But his understanding of the love between a man and a woman seemed limited at best.

And she ... Lois Lane — a living, breathing, blundering fiasco when it came to relationships — was in love with him.

Lois laughed aloud — at the irony, at the improbability, and at the sheer joy of having found — against all the odds — the man who made her whole.

She was still smiling as she fell asleep.

\*\*\*

Lois awakened suddenly, panting, her heart pounding.

She sat up, disoriented.

She was in her room — in the concubine quarters.

She had been dreaming about Kal.

A vivid dream, striking in detail. He was calling her name. She'd looked for him through murky nothingness, but hadn't been able to find him. Frantically, she had searched — her frustration and fear escalating to cold-sweat panic.

Lois sat up and tried to extricate reality from the lingering shadows of sleep.

Then she heard it — a low, intermittent groan.

She held her breath and listened.

It came again — soft and indistinct.

Lois slipped from her bed. She opened her door and ventured into the darkness.

The sound came again — barely audible. It came from the direction of Kal's buildings. She crept across the courtyard and past the sentries.

Once inside, she listened again. The sound was coming from Kal's bedroom. She moved through the chambers and hesitated at his bedroom door.

Someone was in there. Kal? Was he alone? Who was with him? His wife? Ard? Jib had said that the Supreme Ruler could take any woman — married or single.

Lois raised her hand to knock but froze as the groan sounded again.

Kal had said she could come to his room whenever she wanted.

But did that include the middle of the night?

Images filled her mind. Kal and Ard. Ard who was tall and beautiful and his first concubine.

With a jerky movement, Lois rapped on the door. She had to know.

She heard a momentary stillness and then footsteps approached the door.

It opened.

Kal.

Kal was there. Alone.

His face etched with pain.

His cheeks wet with tears.

Lois snatched him to her, wrapping him in the circle of her

arms.

His arms crushed her against his quivering body.

She held him for long moments, her fingers caressing comfort through his neck and shoulders.

Finally, Kal straightened enough that she could look into his face. His hands slipped to the curve of her hips and settled there.

Lois curled her hands across the arches of his rigid shoulders. “What happened, Kal?” she asked softly.

“They did it,” he said hoarsely.

Lois’s fingers glided across his cheeks. Did what?”

“The parents of the murdered boy — they killed my two soldiers, then they went through the home of the murderer and slaughtered his wife and his daughter and his sister. Then they killed themselves.”

“Oh, Kal,” Lois sobbed. She gathered him close again and held him for a very long time.

\*\*\*

Kal had never wanted anything as much as he had wanted Lois to be in his room when he’d finally finished dealing with the aftermath of the tragedy.

But his room was empty.

Mindlessly, he’d changed from the black suit. He’d collapsed onto his bed, his head slumped into his hands. Every time he closed his eyes, he could see the broken bodies ... the blood ... the destruction wrought by hatred.

He wanted Lois.

Ached for her.

He had tried so desperately to avert this situation. Earlier today, he had summoned the grieving parents. He had spent more than an hour listening to their pain and their anger and their desolation and their burning, uncontrollable need for retribution.

He had begged them to resist their thirst for violence.

He had threatened them with imprisonment.

He had ordered them to hand in their weapons.

Eventually, they had agreed there would be no bloodshed.

Not entirely trusting the resilience of that agreement, Kal had commanded two of his soldiers to guard them.

Now those soldiers were dead.

Nine people. In total, nine of his people dead. Nine wasted lives.

Kal had stared at the floor for a long time. He wasn’t sure when he’d become aware of the moisture spilling from his eyes — just as moisture sometimes spilled from Lois’s eyes.

He hurt inside.

More than he’d ever hurt before.

It felt like he had been torn apart.

And he wanted Lois.

He wanted her so much.

Then he’d heard the knock.

And she’d come.

And held him.

His pain was still there — still shattering him from the inside out.

But in her arms, there was comfort. There was hope. There was a place to escape from the images burnt into his soul.

So he had clung to her, sure of only one thing.

He never wanted to let her go.

Never.

Her gentle hands slid from his neck to his face. Her thumbs slowly drifted across his skin — each stroke further dissolving the boulder of pain inside him.

Then she reached up and kissed his cheek — a touch that stole away another portion of his anguish.

Kal’s thoughts moved to the long hours of darkness ahead.

Would Lois go back to the quarters? He wanted her to stay. He was willing to sleep in the chair. He was willing to do anything — if only she didn’t go back to her room.

He drew her close again. Her arms tightened around his neck. “Please, Lois,” he murmured. “Please, Lois, please, Lois, please, Lois.”

She unfolded a little from him and sought him with her soft eyes. “Please what, Kal?”

“Please don’t leave.”

“I won’t.”

“You won’t go back to the Concubine Quarters?”

“Not if you want me to stay here,” she said.

Kal released a long breath as the knotted tension inside him began to ease. “Thank you.”

There was moisture on Lois’s cheeks. Kal swept it away — as carefully as she had swept away his moisture. “I’ll sleep on the chair,” he said, already intending to push the chair as close to the bed as possible.

“No,” she said. “You have the bed.”

“You can’t sleep on the chair,” Kal said. “It is uncomfortable.”

“We could both sleep in the bed.”

He hadn’t dared to hope. “I want that so much,” he breathed.

Lois pulled back the covers of his bed and slipped between the sheets. Kal removed his jacket. He got into bed and lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. “Lois?”

“Yes, Kal?”

“Is it possible to hug when you’re lying down?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Could we do that?”

“Yes.”

Kal turned onto his side and opened his arms towards her. She wriggled into them. He bundled her closer, and her presence seeped into his exhausted body.

He closed his eyes.

The images of death had gone.

He heard — and felt — her sigh. He kissed the top of her head. It felt a little strange to kiss hair instead of skin, but he still liked it.

“I love you, Kal,” she said.

Love — there was another word he needed to learn how to say the Earth way. He would ask Lois to teach him tomorrow. Tonight — he was just too tired.

\*\*\*

A new day dawned.

Before Kal’s eyes had opened, before his mind had come to full consciousness, before he remembered the events of yesterday, he was aware of Lois wedged between his arms.

He breathed in the scent of her.

And felt her warm softness.

And knew with absolute certainty that he never wanted to wake up alone again.

No, it was more than that. It wasn’t just that he didn’t want to be alone, but that he wanted to be with Lois.

Every morning.

Every night.

Every day.

She stirred in his arms and moved away a little. Kal opened his eyes to discover she was looking at him. “Are you all right?” she asked. She looked as if she cared about his answer — really, genuinely cared about him.

“Yes,” he said, surprising himself. “Not good, but all right.”

A portion of her hair had fallen forward onto her face. Kal brushed it back, allowing the tip of his finger to skim the silkiness of her cheeks. He wanted to tell her how much he had needed her to stay with him. He wanted to tell her that she had brought solace into a situation so overwhelmingly bad, he hadn’t known what to do.

He wanted to tell her that her touch and her words and her eyes and her smile had eased the pain inside him.

But he wasn't sure he had the words to express any of that. So instead, Kal smiled for her. Because she had already taught him that a smile could say so much.

\*\*\*

Lois smiled back. Waking up with Kal was wonderful. His face still carried the ravages of yesterday, and she ached for all he had been through, but she couldn't regret being with him. "Do you want to tell me what happened yesterday?" she asked gently.

Kal turned more fully onto his side and lifted his head off his pillow and onto his flattened hand, causing the muscles of his arm to billow. Lois dragged her eyes to his face. "The wife of the murderer came yesterday morning and asked permission to offer her life."

"Offer her life?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand."

"There is an ancient Law," Kal explained. "It is rarely invoked — it has not been invoked in all my time as Supreme Ruler."

"What does it involve?"

"If a person wants something desperately and it is in the power of another to grant it, the first person offers his life in return for that favour."

"Offers his life?" Lois said. "As in ... becomes a slave? Or as in ... dies?"

"Dies."

She tried to choke back the horror that had sprung up. "Dies?" she echoed.

Kal nodded. "It is the final resort," he said. "To be used only when there is no other way."

"So the wife of the murderer offered to die in return for a guarantee of safety for her daughter?"

"Yes," Kal said, "but I denied her request. Offering your life is something that cannot be done lightly."

"Obviously."

"There can be no going back," Kal said. "If you offer your life and it is accepted, it cannot be recalled."

"What if you offer your life, get what you want, and then escape? Or change your mind?"

"There is a price on your head — a price equivalent to a year's food for anyone who delivers your body."

"So if you offer your life ... that means certain death?"

"Yes."

Kal was looking uncomfortable — as if he had perceived her repugnance of a system that allowed life to be bartered. Lois drew her hand across his unshaven jaw to reassure him. "You didn't grant her permission?"

Kal's eyes dropped. "No," he said with regret. "I hoped there was a better way. I hoped my people would choose peace instead of hostility. I was wrong."

"It isn't your fault, Kal," Lois said. "You did what you thought was right."

"It was wrong," he said dispiritedly. "I should have allowed her to offer her life."

"No!" Lois exclaimed. "That would have been admitting there was no other way out of this."

"There was no other way out of this."

"Kal, you may be the Supreme Ruler, but you can't be everywhere and you can't control everything your people do."

"I just want unity," he said, he said with a long, tortured sigh. "I just want the past to be forgotten."

"Was this a North against South thing?"

"Yes. The parents were Southside. The original murderer and his family were Northside."

Kal's sorrow and his hopelessness dissolved the last of Lois's barriers. Barriers already weakened by sharing his bed.

She leant forward and kissed him.

\*\*\*

Before Lois's mouth touched his, Kal had known she was going to kiss him.

What he hadn't known was that this was going to be a kiss like the first time — a moving kiss, a backwards and forwards, deepening, withdrawing, open-mouth kiss that burned fire through his veins.

Then she lurched away, her breath coming quick and rough.

Kal thought she was going to leave him.

Instead, she smiled.

And left him full.

But empty too.

\*\*\*

Lois slipped back to her room to allow them both the privacy to dress and then returned to Kal's bedroom for breakfast.

She took her first mouthful of oatmeal and realised Kal had kept his promise. It was sweet. But again, he wasn't eating much. "I want you to order salty oatmeal tomorrow," she told him.

"Why?"

"Because I need to learn to adjust to Kryptonian tastes."

"I like giving you sweet oatmeal."

"Then order sweet sometimes and salty sometimes."

He smiled. "All right."

"What are you going to do today?" she asked.

Kal sighed. "I need to meet with my Cabinet. I think we will call an Extraordinary Report."

"Do you like doing the Reports?"

He stared at her, his blankness reminding her of when she had first met him — and affirming how expressive he had become since then. Or maybe she'd become better at reading him. But this was blank. "I don't like or dislike them," Kal said. "I do them because they are my responsibility."

"Do you always wear the black suit?"

"Yes."

He said no more; clearly, the suit wasn't an issue for him. Or maybe it was so much of an issue that he didn't like to discuss it.

"Lois?" Kal said. "When you told me about the made-up stories, you said that they help you forget the difficulties of life."

"That's right."

"Can we read your second book? Is it finished?"

"It will be finished as soon as you write the Kryptonian words."

"Can we do it now?"

"Of course."

Kal wrote the words to her story as Lois read them from her notes. When they had finished, he said, "Will you read it now? Please?"

Lois nodded. "Where? On the bed?"

"Yes." They went to the bed and sat together, leaning back against the wall.

Lois read her story — the simple tale of two friends who played a game of hopscotch. It didn't have a moral, or a villain, or even much of a plot.

In fact, it was little more than an instruction manual for the game, dressed up to look like fiction.

When she'd finished, Lois looked for Kal's reaction. He looked uncertain. "What are their names?" he asked.

Lois hadn't named the characters. She'd figured Earth names wouldn't translate and the Kryptonian names she knew would be too person-specific. "I don't know," she said.

"They must have names," Kal persisted.

"How about ... Lucy for the girl ... and ... Jimmy for the boy?"

"Are they brother and sister?"

"No. They are friends."

"Friends?"

“Yes,” Lois said. “Lucy and Jimmy like being together, and they enjoy doing things together, and they help each other, and they laugh together.”

Kal thought for a moment. “Do they hug when one is hurting?”

“Always,” Lois said. “That’s one of the best things about having a friend.”

“Did you have many friends on Earth?”

“Some.”

“Do you wish you could go back to them?”

Did she? “Maybe I’ll make new friends here,” she hedged. “Except ...”

“Except?”

Lois glanced down at her hands. “Your people don’t seem to like me much. They don’t want to talk to me, and I don’t know if it’s because of something I do or something I say or because I’m a woman or because I don’t understand the whole status thing and I don’t know where I fit in it or if it’s just because they don’t like me at all.”

Kal looked a little dazed. “It’s nothing you’ve done,” he said. “It’s who you are.”

That wasn’t particularly reassuring.

“Kryptonians are extremely wary of anything unfamiliar,” Kal said.

“So it’s because I come from a different planet?”

“No,” Kal said. “It’s because you’re neither North nor South. That makes you ... unfathomable.”

“But you aren’t North or South either.”

A look of isolation darkened his face. “I know.”

“So we’re the only two people on this entire Planet who don’t have an allegiance to the old areas on Krypton?”

“Yes.”

Lois smiled and squeezed his hand. “Then maybe we should stick together,” she suggested. “And help each other.”

“Could we be friends?” Kal asked uncertainly.

Lois’s heart melted again. “Yes,” she agreed.

“I’d like that.” He rose from the bed. “I have to call a Cabinet Meeting.”

“Thank you for breakfast, Kal.”

“Thank you for reading your story,” Kal said. At the bedroom door, he turned. “Who’s Lucy?”

“My sister.”

“You didn’t say you have a brother.”

“I don’t. Jimmy is my friend; someone I work with — used to work with.”

Kal didn’t respond.

“Will you be back for lunch?” Lois asked.

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll stay here all day.”

“Thank you.” Still, Kal hesitated at the door.

Lois stood from the bed. “You can’t go without a hug,” she said.

“No,” Kal said. “I can’t.”

Then she hugged him.

\*\*\*

Tek brought Lois’s lunch. He handed her the plate and glass.

Lois gave him the hopscotch story.

He took it, but he didn’t move away.

“Thank you for bringing my lunch, Tek,” she said.

Still he waited.

Lois looked up from the story — the third one — she was writing.

Tek reached into the pocket of his jacket and brought out a tiny metallic container. He held it towards her.

Lois looked from his hand to his face. It gave her no clue to his intent. “Are you giving that to me?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Lois took it and removed the lid. Inside was a light blue creamy substance. She sniffed and drew back. It was strong — very strong, but also pleasant — almost flowery — strong like daphne, but sweet like a rose.

“It’s for your face,” Tek said. “You don’t need much.”

“Where does it come from?”

“My wife makes it. She swaps it for food with the other women.”

“What is your wife’s name?”

“Riz.”

“Tell Riz I like it very much, Tek.”

He turned away and left the room.

Lois dabbed a little of the cream on her face and couldn’t help smiling.

\*\*\*

Bel, the Concubine Mistress came to Lois mid-afternoon. “An Extraordinary Report has been called. You need to prepare.”

Lois went to her room and changed into the white gown and then waited for Mo to knock on her door.

\*\*\*

Again, Lois stood at the end of the line of concubines. Again, she shot surreptitious glances at Ard. Again, she was stunned by the other woman’s beauty.

Again, the Kryptonians gathered, silently.

Again, the doors opened, and the three men walked out. Lois figured they were the Regal Nobles — which meant that one of them was Lord Nor. But which one?

She had barely noticed them yesterday.

Kal emerged onto the balcony.

In the black suit.

Lois had known it was coming.

But she still had to stifle the gasp that sprang to her lips.

She forced her eyes to his face and nailed them there.

In his face — under the mask of Kryptonian blankness — she could see his myriad of emotions. Grief, determination, despair. She could see his strength. His courage. His commitment to providing the leadership his people needed.

Kal put his fist to his chest in greeting, and his people responded.

“Fellow Kryptonians,” he began. “You have heard of the tragic events of yesterday. You have heard that, despite my counsel, two of our people with the intention of evil on their hearts, took the lives of their fellow Kryptonians. We, the people of New Krypton, are poorer because of their actions.”

Lois couldn’t help but expect a response — something, anything, a murmur of agreement. There was nothing.

“Today — you must decide your destiny, your future,” Kal stated in his strong, deep voice. “I lay before you two paths — but you must decide the path we will take. What do you want for your children? Do you want prosperity and justice? Or do you want war and hatred? Do you want peace or do you want violence? Do you want a future or do you want to live ... and die ... in the rivalries of the past?”

“As a people, we face many challenges. There are many difficulties that are imposed upon us by the very nature of planet on which we live. Those difficulties threaten our survival. The only way we can overcome them is to face them together — working as one people, not two.

“When we lived on Krypton, we had abundant food and water, we had warmth and light. Because life was so easy, we filled our minds with thoughts of dominion and triumph over our brothers. Every summer ... *every* summer, we sacrificed the best of our young men to this misguided cause.”

Kal stopped. He stared ahead.

Lois knew he was fighting the rise of his emotions. She saw him swallow furiously. She saw him blink away the tears that had gathered in his eyes. She saw him take in a cavernous breath. She

saw his eyes glance to her, hover for a microsecond and then return to stare ahead.

“That was the old way,” Kal said. “If we are to live, we have to live a new way. There can be no more needless death, no more mindless violence.

“Today, as your Supreme Ruler, I am ordering you to make a choice. If you are willing to turn from the past, if you are willing to live in peace with all of your fellow Kryptonians, if you want to join the fight against our difficulties ... I want you to walk out of here now. I want you to walk out of these gates and return to your homes, deeply committed to building a future for all of us.”

Kal stopped.

The people didn't move.

Kal stood tall and straight as his eyes hovered slowly across his people.

Lois held her breath. She didn't want to think about what would happen if no one left.

No one moved.

Kal faced his people, his face impassive, his shoulders straight, his eyes roving over them, challenging them.

Then, a woman near the back of the crowd turned and walked out.

She was followed by two other people.

Then three more.

Then a group of about ten.

Then a steady trickle.

Then a stream.

Lois pulled her eyes from the departing people and looked to Kal.

His posture had not changed. He stared forward, head high.

But the very extremities of his mouth had stretched into the merest suggestion of a smile.

Lois smothered her own smile.

Then Kal's eyes flicked to her again. They bored into hers and held for less than a heartbeat.

But she felt the connection.

Him and her. Kal and Lois.

Together.

\*\*\*

From the balcony, standing the obligatory step behind Kal-El, Lord Nor observed the Kryptonian people turn and walk away.

Literally — walk away from the Report.

Symbolically — walk away from the zeal and outrage of the past.

He had misread them.

Their weakness sickened him.

He had believed that the fire still burned. Certainly, it had been a simple task to spark the smouldering hatred of the grieving parents into frenzied vengeance.

He'd also misread the ease with which Kal-El could manipulate the people.

Their malleability offended him. Obviously, those of the Northside would be tractable to a Northside ruler. But he had expected more from the fighting men of the South.

It mattered not.

Neither the favour of the people nor all of his moralistic propaganda could save Kal-El now.

In less than two weeks, there would be a new Supreme Ruler.

And then, the South would reign.

And those racketeers from the North would be subject to Southern Rule.

And unity would be a thing of the past.

\*\*\*

It had been a long day.

A long day of meetings and consultations and discussion.

A long day of tension — knowing that any knock on the door could bring the news that a spot-fire of hostility had broken out

somewhere on Planet New Krypton.

But darkness had fallen and ... so far ... peace prevailed.

Through it all, Kal had drawn immeasurable strength from knowing that Lois waited for him. When he'd done everything required of him, he could go to Lois.

She loved him.

She'd said she loved him.

But what did that mean?

Did it mean she liked being with him?

Did it mean she admired him?

Respected him?

She had agreed they could be friends.

How many friends did an Earth woman have?

And did she love all of them?

All the same way?

Or did love come in varying categories?

And if so, where did he fit?

\*\*\*

It was late when Kal returned to his bedroom. Lois had already eaten supper. Her third story — how a little girl had wandered away from her home, become lost, and was then found by her very-relieved parents — was written.

When Kal came through the door, his fatigue sat upon him like a dark cloud. Without a word, he strode to her and pulled her into his embrace.

Then they stood — for a long time — complete in their togetherness.

When Lois drew away, she couldn't resist sweeping her hand across Kal's cheek, allowing her touch to convey her love. “You were magnificent today,” she told him. “You were inspirational — strong and compelling. Your people are fortunate to have you as their leader.”

“I was very anxious when no one moved,” Kal admitted.

“You didn't look anxious,” Lois assured him. “You looked like you had absolute faith that your people would make the right decision.”

“How do you always know exactly the right thing to say?”

Lois chuckled. “Usually I don't. I have said the wrong thing many times in the past.”

Kal raised his hand and slowly slid the ends of his fingers through her hair. “Maybe it's just that you always know exactly the right thing to say to me.”

Lois grinned and pulled away. “I have an idea,” she said.

“About what?”

“Come over here, and I'll show you.”

### Part 13

Kal watched as Lois knelt in the middle of the bed. She smiled at him. “Come on, Kal.” She gestured to the space in front of her. “Come and sit with me.”

He was torn — torn between going to her and standing back so he could satisfy his yearning to gaze at her. After less than a breath, the pull of her smile was too much. He crossed the room and sat in front of her, but twisted so he could still watch her.

Lois grasped the shoulders of his jacket. “Would you mind if this came off?” she asked.

Before he had the chance to reply, she'd slipped his jacket down his arms and discarded it.

“Turn around,” she said. “And relax.”

Kal forced his attention forward. He didn't know what Lois was going to do, but he did know that he had never experienced such exquisite anticipation. Her hands gripped his shoulders; her fingers splayed along his collarbones and her thumbs pressed his shirt against his skin.

Then she began to move.

As her fingers worked towards his neck, they generated rippling streams of heat into his chest. Her thumbs delved into the

upper slopes of his back — before meeting on either side of the ridge of his spine.

Her pressure increased as her thumbs weaved a tingling journey down his back.

Her moving touch seeped through his muscles and into him — restoring him.

Kal's eyes closed, and his head dropped forward as her hands climbed the curve of his back.

For the first time since he had left her that morning, his mind was empty of his memories and free of his fears.

There was just Lois.

And her wonderfully soothing hands releasing hope and comfort and reassurance throughout his distress.

After many minutes, her hands edged upwards. With long, slow strokes, her fingers drifted up his neck. They roamed through his hair with enthralling aimlessness.

Kal heard himself groan with the absolute pleasure of her touch.

He heard Lois laugh. "Feel good?" she asked.

"Better than anything I've ever felt."

Her hands left his head, and her arms draped over his shoulders. Kal allowed her to ease him back against her body. He felt her cheek against his.

He didn't want to open his eyes.

He didn't want to move.

He just wanted to stay like this.

With Lois.

Time passed unnoticed until, eventually, she withdrew and placed a soft kiss on his temple. "Better?"

Kal forced his eyes open and turned towards her. "That was ... incredible," he said.

Lois smiled.

He wanted to thank her. He would thank her, but somehow, saying two words didn't seem enough. She had done so much for him ... not only now, not only her hands on his neck and shoulders ... but everything she had done for him ... all the new things she had brought to his life.

"Lois ... " he said and faltered.

She smiled. "Yes, Kal?"

He took her hand and placed it on his chest. "There is so much in here ... and it's all about you."

"I feel that too," Lois said.

"I ... there was so much I didn't know ... so much I had never even thought of ... so much you have given me ... taught me ... shown me. I didn't know I was so ... alone."

"You have given me so much too, Kal."

That surprised him. "I have given you nothing."

Lois laughed — a gentle laugh, full of a softness that hugged his heart. "You have given me a home and food and protection," she said. "You treated me with respect and dignity when I was a stranger."

"You never seemed like a stranger," Kal said. "From the moment you lifted your head and looked straight at me ... it was as if there was something about you ... something ... "

"Special?"

"Yes — but so much more than that. It was as if I *had* to meet you. As if ... not meeting you would have been like ... never really living."

Lois stood from the bed and turned away — but not before Kal had seen her tears. He stood behind her and put his hands on her shoulders as she had done for him, wondering if he dared move. "Did I say something wrong?" he murmured against her ear.

Lois shook her head.

"Then why are you crying?"

Lois turned to face him, and Kal reached to collect her fallen tears. "Because you make me so happy and ... "

"And?"

"And I'm not sure what happens now."

Something told Kal her words were not as simple as they sounded. She wasn't talking about right now. There was another meaning — but he couldn't determine it. "We do the Disputes?" he asked.

A tentative smile came from amidst Lois's tears. "Yes," she agreed. "We do the disputes."

Kal placed a kiss on her forehead. "I want to give you reasons to smile," he said. "Always to make you smile."

Lois wiped the remainder of her tears from her eyes and smiled up at him. "I thought of something today," she said. "I'd like to discuss it with you after we do the disputes."

Kal took her hand and led her back to the bed. Then he pulled up the chair and sat, facing her. "The Disputes can wait," he said. "Tell me what you were thinking."

\*\*\*

Lois took a deep breath, still unsure how to present her idea — and very unsure how it would be received by Kal. "How many people live on New Krypton?" she asked.

"Three thousand, five hundred, eighty-three," Kal said. He looked away, his face clouding for a moment. "As of last night."

His pain was still so very real. Lois squeezed his hand. "So not everybody was at the Reports?" she asked.

"No," Kal said. "Farmers who live too far from the city, women with children, the sick or elderly — all are exempt from attending."

"Those who don't come — how do they find out what happened?"

"They get told by others."

"Who were perhaps told by others?"

"I guess so."

"Ever played 'Telephone'?"

"No."

"What if the telling changes each time?" Lois said. "What if, by the time it gets to the last person, the story bears no resemblance to what you actually said?"

"I've never really thought about it."

"But if the farmers are being told you said things that you didn't say, that wouldn't be good, would it?"

"No."

"That's why you need a newspaper," she declared, unable to keep the note of triumph from her voice.

"So everyone can read everyone else's business?"

"No, so your words are reported accurately to all Kryptonians."

"What are you thinking of doing?" Kal asked.

"I could write down what you say. Then you could write it in Kryptonian, and we could make copies and send them out to the people who couldn't come."

\*\*\*

Kal wasn't sure about Lois's idea.

But he was totally captivated by the liveliness in her face, and the way her eyes were shining. "Can we do it?" she asked a little breathlessly.

He wanted to say 'yes'. He didn't want her energy to fade away. "You write it," he said. "I'll read it, and if I think it would be advantageous, we'll try your idea."

Her smile widened as she leapt from the bed and went to the desk. She came back with a piece of paper. "I've already written it," she announced with a big smile.

Somehow, that didn't really surprise him. Kal felt himself answer her smile.

"Can I read it to you?" Lois asked.

Kal nodded.

"Yesterday at the Extraordinary Report, the Supreme Ruler of New Krypton issued his people with a challenge — the challenge

to choose life over death, peace over war, brotherhood over hatred.

“The people of New Krypton responded. It began with a few brave individuals who were bold enough to make a stand for what they believe. Quickly, it became an overwhelming demonstration of support for the unity of New Krypton.

“The Extraordinary Report followed the tragic loss of life the previous day. That tragedy may be remembered at the last vestige of a dead planet — of a way of life that was always regrettable and is now unsustainable. The Extraordinary Report may be remembered as the true birth of a new people — a gallant and dignified and courageous people who, for the sake of their children, committed themselves to harmony.”

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Lois looked up from her paper, wanting a response from Kal. He wasn't smiling — but he didn't look displeased, either. “What do you think?” she asked, feeling a lot like she had when she'd handed Perry White her first-ever story for the Daily Planet.

Kal's smile broke free. “You're good at that,” he said. “Thank you.” Lois hurried on. “I'm hoping you will let me have a copy of what you said, so I can include a quote.” “Get a pencil and paper,” Kal said. “I'll tell you.” “You have notes?” “No,” he said. “I remember.” “All of it? Word for word?” “Yes.”

“Who wrote your speech, Kal?” The question seemed to surprise him. “I did.” “You wrote it?” “Of course. Why?” “Because I'm not the only one here who is good with words,” Lois said. “That Report — you delivered it so well, but the words themselves were ... perfect.”

“Thank you.” “You could be a writer, Kal.” “You think so?” “Absolutely.” Lois grinned mischievously. “You know, when I have this newspaper up and running, and I'm the Editor-in-Chief, I may even give you an occasional by-line.”

Kal grinned. Lois knew he hadn't understood all of her words, but he'd understood her tone and her amusement and her respect. And he'd responded to those.

Just as her heart responded to him. Every single time.

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Lois and Kal made the one sheet of ‘newspaper’. “Kal?” Lois said.

“Yes.” “Can everyone write?” “Most people can.” “Is there anyone who could make more copies of this?” “Anyone could.” “Could I ask Jib? Or Mo?” “Yes.”

So Kal *did* know the names of his concubines. But, according to Jib, he didn't know their bodies. “Have you ever been into one of the concubine rooms, Kal?” Lois asked, pretending to be engrossed in reading her notes.

“No.” So unless there was some other meeting place, Kal didn't sleep with Jib or Mo. Or his wife. Which left only Ard ... who entertained a night visitor.

Lois watched as Kal gathered the dispute folders. She moved to the bed; he moved to the chair close to the bed, and they began to work together.

But Lois found it impossible to concentrate.

Because each passing minute brought her closer to the looming decision.

The decision about where she would sleep that night.

Would Kal want her to stay with him?

Probably.

Should she?

Probably not.

Her fingers could still feel the hard contours of Kal's shoulders ... the satiny softness of his hair ... the breadth of him as he had leant against her.

Every time she remembered his groan of pleasure, her insides rolled like the swell of the ocean.

No — she could not stay.

Not tonight.

He was a *married* man.

Not any night.

Lois swallowed down her tears before they ever reached her throat. “I'm tired, Kal,” she said. “I'm going to bed.”

He looked up from the judgement he was writing. “Where are you sleeping tonight?” he asked quietly.

Lois extracted herself from his gaze. “In my room.”

“Why?”

Because you're married. Because I'm in love with you. Because your body constantly and mercilessly reminds me that I'm a woman. Because the thought of sharing with you in ways you seem to know nothing about is just too intoxicating to allow me rational thought.

And you're married. “Because last night was ... different,” Lois said.

“Did you not like sleeping with me last night?”

“Last night was different,” Lois maintained. She could see his confusion. She knew her answer was unsatisfactory. She knew he deserved a whole lot more.

“Will you come here for breakfast?” Kal asked.

“Do you want me to?”

“Yes. I want to be with you all the time.”

“I will share breakfast with you tomorrow,” Lois said as she stood. “Good night, Kal.”

“Can I kiss you before you leave me?”

He didn't mean to drive an axe through her heart. He didn't know that his words carried the power to corral her into an impossible corner, facing an impossible choice.

Kal waited — waited for her answer.

“Yes,” Lois said after a long silence.

He stepped to her, put his hand on her shoulder, and laid a kiss on her mouth. “Good night, Lois,” he said.

Lois turned and hurried out of his room — so he wouldn't see her tears.

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As she shivered in her bed, Lois realised she was listening. Last night, she had heard Kal.

Tonight, she was listening again.

Listening for him.

Then she heard a sound. It wasn't a groan, more a movement. Lois shot from her bed, opened her door, and peeked out. She saw a man coming from Ard's room. The same man she had seen two nights ago.

Except this time, she saw enough before the darkness swallowed him.

Enough to see him limp away.

Lois gasped.

It was Tek.

Tek had been in Ard's room.

Tek who was married with two children.

Tek, Kal's employee, in the room with Kal's concubine.

It seemed the more she learned about this planet, the less sure she was about anything.

Lois waited long enough for Tek to move away and then crossed the distance to Ard's room and knocked on her door.

The door opened, and Lois was again struck by Ard's beauty. With the light of her room behind her, she reminded Lois of the pictures she'd seen of angels. "Hello," Ard said.

Lois started. A Kryptonian had spoken to her! Without being coerced into it. "Hello, Ard, I'm Lois."

"It's late," Ard said. "I should go to bed now."

Was that Kryptonian for 'please leave'?

Lois looked past Ard into her room, checking, she told herself, for any signs that Ard had been hurt by Tek — or, she admitted, anything to confirm her suspicions. The blankets covering Ard's bed were unruffled — it didn't look like the stage for illicit activities.

Maybe Ard was compulsively tidy.

Then Lois noticed something else. Ard's walls were covered with pictures — pictures of trees and grass and flowers — all drawn in a childish hand.

"I like your pictures," Lois said.

Ard stepped back, giving Lois a better view.

"Who drew them?"

"I did."

Lois didn't believe her. They were clearly the work of a child. Lois stepped forward and peered at the pictures.

Yes, they had a childish simplicity, but on closer examination, they were filled with detail — and the simplicity enhanced their undeniable charm. "You drew them?" Lois said.

"Yes."

"I like them."

Ard pointed to the closest picture. "Do you like this one?" she asked.

"Yes."

Ard pulled it from the wall and held it towards Lois.

"Are you giving that to me?" Lois asked.

"Yes."

"Thank you."

Lois could tell she didn't understand. "I have to go to bed now," Ard said.

"Good night," Lois said.

Ard shut the door.

Lois took the picture to her room and examined it. It was simple — a picture of a field with a few flowers under a blue, cloudless sky. It contained only three colours — green, red, blue — with black and white for shading.

On the back, stuck to the four corners, were bits of what looked like dual-sided tape. Lois pushed it against her wall, and it stayed there. She stood back, contemplating the picture, the artist, and the nocturnal visitor.

Kryptonian life was not as unsophisticated as she had imagined. She had sweet smelling face cream that had been given to her by Tek's wife and a sweet picture, given to her by Tek's ...

Mistress?

Lois climbed back into her bed and willed sleep to come.

It didn't. It was thwarted by the image of Kal. Kal — alone ... and confused.

Twice, Lois pushed back the covers with the intention of going to Kal's room.

Twice, she sank back into her bed.

She knew she could not share Kal's bed again.

Not without going further.

And he was married.

\*\*\*

Kal stared at the ceiling.

He had slept alone every night as far back as his memories stretched.

Except one.

His bed seemed big and cold and foreign.

Lois had said she loved him.

She'd said it when she was in bed with him.

Now she'd gone back to the Concubine Quarters.

Did that mean she didn't love him anymore?

He'd intended to ask her about love today. But they'd made her story about the Extraordinary Report and done some of the Disputes, and then she had left before he'd had the opportunity to ask.

But tomorrow, he would ask.

And then ... then he would work out what he could do so that Lois would want to stay in his bedroom again.

\*\*\*

The next morning, Kal ordered sweet oatmeal.

He dabbed a little of Tek's cologne on his face.

Then he waited for Lois to come.

Determined — absolutely determined — that neither of them were leaving his bedroom until he understood exactly what she'd meant when she said she loved him.

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Lois's heart tripped unevenly as she approached Kal's room the next morning.

Would he be annoyed that she hadn't stayed in his room last night?

Did he have *any* idea why?

Would he want to kiss her?

And if he *did* kiss her, how possible was it going to be to accept his kiss and then move away without capitulating to any of the whole range of ideas that had taken up permanent residence in her imagination?

Lois knocked on his door, and Kal opened it.

He stood there, his eyes inscrutable, and his face giving her none of the answers she sought.

"Good morning, Kal," Lois said.

She perceived a softening around his mouth, but he didn't smile. "Thank you for coming, Lois," he said, somewhat formally.

He stood back and gestured for her to sit on the bed.

As she passed him, she caught a whiff of an unfamiliar, but pleasantly spicy aroma. Was it Kal? Had he worn something? For her?

He sat on the chair with the bowl and two spoons. "What flavour is the oatmeal?" Lois asked.

"Taste it."

It would be sweet. She knew from the expression on Kal's face. She tasted it; she was right.

They ate without speaking. "How is the drilling going?" Lois asked when she could tolerate the silence no longer.

"Nothing yet," Kal replied. "I will receive an update of progress today."

"I hope it is successful."

Again, silence fell.

Lois felt more uncomfortable than she had the first time they had eaten together. Back then, she had been dazed and still coming to terms with the enormity of the changes in her life.

She'd understood so little, she had eaten the cutlery.

A giggle broke free, and Kal's eyes shot to her face. "What?" he said, a sedate smile playing around his mouth.

"I was remembering how the first time we ate together, I -"

"You ate the chop-stick," Kal finished.

From the shared memory, a shared smile blossomed.

"Then you laughed," Kal said. "It was the most ... buoyant sound I had ever heard."

"I have never heard you laugh."

His eyes dropped to his oatmeal. Had he taken her last remark as criticism?

The discomfiture stretched again. They finished the food.

Lois searched for something to say, but she couldn't muster

the words to form a coherent sentence.

This was Kal, she reminded herself.

Kal — whom she ...

Trusted.

She had trusted another man once, but he had been unworthy of her trust, and she had vowed never to trust again.

Yet she trusted Kal.

He had not demanded her trust. Nor expected it. Nor even asked for it. He had simply shown himself to be trustworthy.

Lois glanced up and saw his confusion displayed so eloquently on his face. This was her fault — *she* had kissed him, *she* had agreed to sleep in his bed, *she* had refused to stay the very next night.

“Lois?” Kal’s voice scythed through the silence.

“Yes,” she said, too quickly.

“I have questions.”

“I know.”

He placed the still-half-full glass on the floor and straightened in his chair. “When you were in my bed, you said you ...” Kal gestured to the centre of his chest. “... me.”

“I said that I love you.”

“Love,” he said haltingly. “Love. Did I say it correctly?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me about love,” Kal said. “I don’t even have a word for it. It doesn’t translate. What does love mean to you? What does it mean to your people? I think it is important, but I don’t understand why or how.” He looked beseechingly into her eyes. “Please help me to understand.”

Lois took a deep breath.

How could she explain it? And how would Kal react when he understood the full implication of her declaration of love?

“You said it was something you felt in your chest,” Kal prompted. “When you said that, I didn’t understand.”

“But you know of love, Kal,” Lois insisted. “You love your people. I saw that when you grieved the loss of life. I see it in your concern for their welfare.”

“That is duty.”

“Maybe it is duty, but it is also love.”

“It is not that love I want to know about,” he said. “It is the love between a man and a woman.”

Lois had figured as much.

“How many people do you love?” Kal asked.

“Ah ... well, there’s my parents and my sister and Perry and some friends and -”

“Me,” he cut in. “You said you love me.”

“Yes.” Lois took a deep breath, trying to ward off the tremors threatening to contort her insides.

“Do you still love me?”

“Yes.”

“But you wouldn’t stay with me last night?”

“No.”

His confusion intensified. “Is all love the same?”

“No. There is love for family and love for friends and love for one special person.”

“Tell me about *that* love.”

“It’s the love between a man and a woman,” Lois said. “A love they share with each other, but not with anyone else.”

“This special love? It is felt for only one person?”

This was not the time to complicate things further. “Yes.”

“How do they get that love?”

“They meet, they fall in love, they -”

“Fall?”

“In some ways, falling in love is like jumping off a cliff,”

Lois said. “You are no longer completely in control. The feeling is amazing and wonderful, and the world is brighter, and you feel like skipping instead of walking and laughing instead of smiling. He is all you can think about — you dream about him at night

and think about him during the day. You want to be with him every moment, and when you aren’t with him, it feels like you are hollow inside because something vital is missing.”

Kal’s eyes were fixed in hers. “What happens after they fall in love?”

“Often, they will get married.”

“They choose to marry each other? They aren’t told they have to be married?”

“In some Earth cultures, the parents arrange the marriage,”

Lois said. “But in my culture, the people choose for themselves.”

“What happens after they get married?”

“They live together in the same house, they share their lives, they -”

“Do they sleep in the same bed?”

“Yes.”

“Then what happens?”

“Sometimes they have children. They become a family — a mother, a father and some children.”

“Like Tek?”

Hopefully not like Tek, Lois thought. “Yes.”

“What is it about a man that would make a woman choose to marry him?”

“At first, it might be how he looks,” Lois said. “But it has to be more than that. It’s his heart — whether he is caring and kind. Whether he is truthful. Whether he is trustworthy. Whether he treats her with respect. Whether he cares more about her than himself. Whether he loves her.”

“Do married people share everything?”

“Not everything.” Lois smiled, but Kal’s solemnity didn’t waver. “But they share all the important things.”

“Like secrets?”

“Yes.”

“They know everything about each other?”

“Ideally.”

“But they still love?”

“Yes.”

“Does a woman ever change her mind and not want to be married anymore?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “That happens. Then they get a divorce.”

“A div ...”

“A divorce. It means the marriage has broken up, and the people want to live apart.”

“Because they have no longer fallen in love?” Kal asked.

“Yes.”

“What would make a woman not love a man anymore?”

“If he lied to her. If he hurt her. If she discovered he wasn’t really the man she thought he was.”

“Hurt her? You mean by hitting her?”

“That happens sometimes and is completely unacceptable,”

Lois said. “But more often, he hurts her by lying to her. Or by telling her he loves only her when he loves someone else.”

“And that hurts?”

“Yes — it hurts so bad.”

Kal hesitated. “I know what you’re saying, but ...”

Lois searched for a way to bring clarity. Then she had an idea; a way to discover if Kal’s questions were merely theoretical or if they were growing out of his awakening perception of their relationship. “Imagine this,” she said.

Kal nodded.

“Imagine you have been out dealing with a difficult situation. And you’ve finished, and you’re tired, and you’re coming towards your bedroom, and you’re hoping someone will be here when you get here.”

“You,” he said decisively.

Lois smothered her smile. “Imagine that when you get here, I am here, but I am in your bed with someone else — another man. I am asleep with him, hugging him. How would you -”

She stopped as the hurt carved across Kal's face. "I would *hate* that," he said with such fervour, his voice splintered.

"Would it hurt?" Lois asked needlessly. She leant forward and placed her hand on his chest, right over his heart. "Would it hurt in here?"

"Yes," Kal said with conviction that shook her world. His hand covered hers and held her there — against his pounding heart. "I didn't understand hurting on the inside."

"You didn't?" Lois questioned. "But you do now?"

"Yes."

"Because of what I've explained?"

"No," Kal said. "The first night you were in my room. When you thought it was your room and you got into my bed, and I tried to sleep on the chair."

"I'm sorry," Lois said. "It was wrong to take your bed. But I really thought it was my bed."

Kal shook his head. "Trying to sleep on the chair hurt on the outside. But when you left — that hurt on the inside."

Her qualms were slowly dissolving in the warmth of his guilelessness.

She loved him so completely.

"When two people marry, do they make promises to each other?" Kal asked.

Lois slipped her hand out from under his. It just wasn't that easy to think clearly sandwiched between the softness of his hand and the firmness of his chest. "Yes."

"What sort of promises?"

"That they will stay together, they will support each other, they will help each other, they will comfort each other, they will be faithful to each other, they will commit their lives to being together."

"How do people show their love for each other?"

"By the way they speak, by touch, by caring, by being understanding of each other, by the way they act, by the choices they make."

Kal's barrage of questions stopped abruptly. He considered her solemnly for a prolonged moment and then smiled hesitantly. "I want to marry you, Lois," he said.

#### Part 14

Lois gulped. "*Marry* me?"

Kal nodded. "I want to marry you."

Lois felt her tears surge past the lump in her throat and into her eyes. She blinked them away and swallowed frantically. "Kal," she said gently. "You can't marry me. You're already married."

"No!" Kal shook his head vehemently. "No. No. No. That is *not* a marriage. I was forced into that. I had no choice. I have never spoken to her. Not once. I have never touched her. I have never hugged her. I have never kissed her. That is *not* a marriage. Not like you talked about. I want a real marriage, and I want it with you."

He stared at her, his breaths coming jagged and sharp.

"Kal, you have a duty to your wife."

"I know," he admitted. "And I will never renege on that duty, but I want to marry you."

"Kal ... we can't."

He touched her cheek with his fingertips. "Please, Lois," he begged. "Please don't say that."

"You're married, Kal. I can't marry you."

He stood so abruptly that the chair scraped noisily on the concrete floor. He paced the length of the room and then whipped around. "Everything you said about love," he said. "That's what I feel for you. Everything you said about marrying, that's what I want with you. I want to marry you. I want you to share my bed every night. I want to be with you. Always."

"Kal ... marriage is ... two people, not three."

He strode to the bed and crouched beside her, his eyes dark with desperation, his face vivid with purpose. "I have fallen in love with you, Lois," he declared. "What you said — it was like you had slashed apart my ribs and looked into my heart because you described exactly what has happened inside me."

Her tears splashed down her cheeks. Kal reached forward and tenderly mopped them away. "Are they good tears or bad tears?" he asked.

"Both," she said thickly.

"Have you fallen in love with me?" he asked quietly.

"Yes."

"But you don't want to be with me?"

"Of course I want to be with you, Kal," Lois cried. "But I *can't* marry you."

Kal put his hands on her shoulders, levelled his eyes in hers, and pinned her with his resolve. "Out there, no," he said. "I am married to Za, and I cannot change that. But in here ... in this room ... between us ... only us ... we could be married."

"No, K-"

"I can promise you all those things you said. I can promise you I will love you and help you and support you and comfort you and be faithful to you. I can commit to you — my whole life."

"No you can't, Kal. You're -"

"I won't lie to you, Lois," he promised earnestly. "I won't hurt you. I will be here when you need me. I won't ever love anyone else."

Lois put her hand on his face. "I believe you."

"So you'll marry me?"

"No."

Kal straightened, paced away again, and then turned with a new wave of fervour. "You said a woman chooses a man because of his heart. You said he needs to be trustworthy — I will protect you until my last breath. You said he needs to be kind — I will never be rough or uncaring with you. You said he needs to care more about her than himself — I don't care about myself. I just want you to be smiling."

Lois's tears welled deeply.

"You said it was also about how he looks," Kal said. "I can't do anything about how I look, but I hoped all the other things would be enough."

Her tears crashed uncontrollably down her cheeks. "You look just ... fine."

Kal crouched beside her again, one hand on her knee, the other tenderly brushing her tears from her cheeks. "Will you marry me? Please, Lois?"

Lois attempted to clear the gridlock from her throat. "What if you have to choose between your people and me?" she asked. "What if you have to choose between your wife and me? You can promise me all that, but the truth is that I can never be anything more than your third priority."

She watched as Kal's hope died, dipping his shoulders and dimming his eyes. He took his hands from her and looked at the floor, breathing heavily. He waited until the visible signs of his anguish had abated a little, and then he lifted his head and faced her. "I'm so scared you're going to leave me," he whispered.

Lois put her hand on his shoulder. "I'm not going to leave you."

"Do you promise that?"

"Yes."

"What if people from your planet come here? What if you could go home?"

His uncertainty trembled through his voice. He, the Supreme Ruler, the most powerful person on New Krypton, needed her with a desperation that laid bare his soul.

She loved him.

Loved him so much.

*She* needed him.

Forever.

Whatever.

*Whatever.*

Lois drew her hand lovingly across his cheek. “I won’t leave you, Kal,” she promised. “I love you.”

His smile was tentative. “I want to marry you.”

“I can’t marry you, Kal,” Lois said. “You’re already married.”

Kal stood and stepped away as he dragged his hand through his dark hair. When he turned to her, his hopelessness shattered her heart. “Then what are we going to do?” he asked bleakly.

“I don’t know.”

For long moments, the only sounds were the duet of ragged, broken breaths.

“Kal?” Lois said. “I have some questions.”

He sat down on the chair. “Ask your questions. Ask anything.”

“Your wife’s name is Za?”

“Za-Ra.”

“She is from your mother’s house?”

“It was decided that the first female child born on New Krypton would be my birth wife. Because I use my father’s name, El, when Za was born, she was taken into the House of Ra, so that our marriage would further strengthen the joining of the House of El and the House of Ra.”

“When you gave the Report, you finished by saying that you and your wife have no announcement regarding an heir.”

Kal nodded. “We didn’t.”

“So you are hoping to have a child? With your wife?”

“That is the primary purpose of our marriage,” Kal said. “To have a child to lead New Krypton into the future.”

“When was the first time you saw her?”

“The day of our Marriage.”

“When you were sixteen?”

“Yes. She was thirteen.”

“That is very young.”

“Yes.”

“You’ve never even spoken to her?”

“No. We make a formal appearance together at the Nobility Convention which celebrates the beginning of another year on New Krypton.”

“Is she pretty?”

He had to think before giving his answer. “I don’t know.”

“Do you wish things could have been different with her?”

“No!” Kal said without hesitation. “No. If I had loved her, I wouldn’t be able to love you. But now I love you, and I will never love anyone else.”

Lois brushed her eyes. If she dwelt on that, she wouldn’t get the answers she needed. “You’ve been married for ten years and you have no children?”

“That is correct.”

“Have you ever wondered why?”

“They say I have bad seed.”

“But Kal,” Lois said gently, “you never see your wife.” She so hoped she wasn’t going to have to explain the problem, but she wasn’t sure there could be any other possible conclusion to this conversation.

“I am the Supreme Ruler.”

Lois looked into Kal’s eyes and read his discomfort at the prospect of a detailed explanation. “I don’t understand.”

“The people have to be sure that the child is ... of both houses. Therefore when the baby is born, the two highest ranking Regal Nobles — Nor and Ching — have to be there to proclaim the child was born of that mother.”

“OK,” Lois said. “I understand that.”

“But the father ...” Kal stopped, his eyes low.

Suddenly, Lois understood. “You ... do that ... and they take ... it ... to your wife ... so they know for sure you are the father?”

“Yes,” Kal said, looking very relieved.

“And you’ve done this every month since you married your wife?”

“No. Not for the first three years. Za was too young to be a mother. But since I was nineteen, yes.”

“They couldn’t just lock you in a room together?” Lois’s question was out before her brain had caught up. “No, no,” she added quickly. “Forget I said that.” She took a long, shaky breath. “Is that how it is for the Regal Nobles?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never asked. But they don’t live with their wives.”

Lois could feel the curiosity burning through her mind. There was more to this story — a whole lot more. She opened her mouth to fire the first one, but stalled before she had uttered a word. Kal was staring at his hands, his embarrassment tangible. All of her questions could wait — except for one. “Kal, do you know how Tek’s wife got pregnant with their children?”

“Not ... exactly.”

This should have shocked her, but it didn’t. “Kal, on Earth, it is usual for parents to tell children about things like this.”

His eyes lifted slowly.

“I know your parents died when you were very young, but someone must have told you these things.”

Still, he said nothing.

“What *did* they tell you?” she asked.

“That it was my duty to provide the sample every month so Za would conceive and bear my child.”

“That’s all?”

He nodded. “Lois, until I met you, I didn’t ... I didn’t know there was so much more — so much I didn’t have. It’s like I was asleep — but now I’m awake.”

Lois slowly dropped her head into her hands and rubbed against the pounding tension across her temples. What was she supposed to do now?

The more time she spent with him, the more *awake* he was likely to become. How long before he suspected the things they had kept hidden from him?

Was there a reason why they hadn’t told him? If she enlightened him, would there be ramifications? For her? For Kal? Was there a bizarre Kryptonian Law relating to the Supreme Ruler being kept in ignorance?

But if that were the case, why was he allowed concubines?

If she said nothing, she would be complicit in their deception — in their sentencing him to live in the body of a man, with the heart of a man, and the responsibilities of a man ... but with the knowledge of a child.

Hadn’t he experienced normal curiosity? Hadn’t he ever spoken to the other boys when he’d been growing up?

Or had they kept him totally isolated?

“You’ve gone very quiet,” Kal said.

“I don’t know what to say.” That, at least, was the truth.

“Neither do I.” His eyes found hers, deep and troubled. “Will you marry me?”

“I can’t, Kal,” Lois replied. “I need to think through what you’ve told me.”

“All right,” he said sadly.

“And I need to sleep in my room tonight.”

His sadness deepened. “All right.” He stood and without glancing back, strode out of his bedroom.

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Kal felt as if his world had disintegrated beneath his feet.

He’d obtained the answers to his questions. He had asked Lois what she meant when she’d said she loved him. He’d discovered that the logical extension of love was marriage. And

beyond that was being together forever.

And that was precisely what he wanted.

With everything within him.

Everything.

He wanted to marry Lois.

He wanted to be with her.

Forever.

So he had asked her.

And she had said 'no'.

Not once, but seven times.

Seven times.

After leaving the bedroom, Kal had gone to the Empty Room, although he had no intention of exercising. It was quiet here; he was unlikely to be disturbed.

Here ... he could think about Lois.

Lois.

He loved her. He felt it in his heart — just as she had said. He couldn't stop thinking about her. Her smile, her laughter, her hugs, her kisses ... being with her ... being able to watch her ... even being away from her and knowing she would be there when he returned to his room. He wanted all of it — craved it with an irrepressible yearning that still startled him.

He was meant to be with her.

He just knew it.

Many times in his life, Kal had known things. Just *known* them. He wasn't sure how he knew them or when he'd learned them — he just knew them.

He thought that maybe the globe still spoke to him; maybe it still transmitted knowledge to him despite having been stolen.

Maybe it was his father ... reaching through time and guiding him.

There were things Kal knew that ran contrary to accepted Kryptonian thinking. Like the fact that the death of a person of the underclass was just as much a tragedy as the death of a Noble.

Even Ching and Yent didn't believe that.

And as for Nor ... Nor was a man of no honour, a man who used the good fortune of his birth to live without regard for anyone else.

All his reign, Kal had walked the tightrope between what he'd been told was expected of him and what he'd known to be right. It had brought much conflict, particularly with Nor.

Could there be anything from this hidden source of knowledge that could help him with Lois?

What could he do?

Asking Lois again would achieve nothing. She had made it clear she could not marry a married man.

Had a Supreme Ruler ever had two wives?

He hadn't heard of it, but maybe there was a precedent or an obscure law that would allow him to marry Lois.

He would research every book on Law and History.

But would that be enough for Lois?

He didn't know.

But he didn't have any other ideas.

He wished he'd been able to show her how much he loved her, how the thought of not being with her devastated him completely.

He wished Lois would stay with him tonight.

Because, if they were lying in his bed, if his arms were curled around her, if he could pull her close, if they were warm and together and relaxed — maybe his opportunity would come.

And he could tell her his secret.

His advisers in the early years of his reign — Yent, and Nor's father, Ked — had stressed he was never to divulge his secret to anyone.

They had warned that if he did, he would lose all esteem in the eyes of Kryptonians and civil war would be unavoidable.

He was never to tell anyone.

But he was going to tell Lois.

Why?

Because that same instinct that had always guided him told him it was the right thing to do.

How would she react?

Kal didn't know how a Kryptonian would react. He certainly couldn't even hazard a guess as to how a woman from a faraway planet would react.

But it scared him.

Because, for the first time, he had someone he cherished more than life.

And the thought of losing her felt like thorns being dragged through his heart.

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As the door had shut behind Kal, Lois had slumped onto his bed, hugged his pillow, and cried.

Cried until the pillow was wet and her eyes were stinging.

She'd known, of course, that loving a married man could bring only heartache. But she had never *meant* to fall in love with him.

It wasn't as if she had landed on New Krypton, crawled out of her life-pod, and tracked down the Supreme Ruler with the explicit intention of seducing him and putting them both in the most impossible of situations.

She cried for herself certainly, but she cried more for Kal. He'd had two horrific days as the leader of New Krypton. He'd seen death and hatred. He was worried about heating, water, and food for his people.

He had missed so much. Someone — her gut feeling was Nor was involved in this somehow — had manipulated Kal and taken cruel advantage of his selfless determination to do the right thing.

In some ways, if Kal's marriage had even a semblance of normality, her decision would be simpler. Heartbreaking, but simple. But Kal's marriage was a union of houses, not of people. A union meant to produce an heir.

But it hadn't.

Why?

Because of Kal?

His wife?

The process?

Or just bad luck?

How could any man live for twenty-six years, lead his entire planet with wisdom and honour, have a wife and three concubines, and never entertain even an inkling of ...

He had lived his life devoted to his people — a colourless existence of duty and service.

And now, she'd inadvertently given him a glimpse of what was possible and then promptly told him it wasn't possible.

Because of something that had been forced upon him.

He deserved so much more.

But ... to *marry* a *married* man.

She couldn't do it — but the alternatives were to live in the concubine quarters as Jib did — without ever seeing Kal — or to be his concubine, in the sense she understood the word.

She couldn't leave him ... because she'd promised him she wouldn't.

She couldn't leave him ... because that would rupture her heart.

And Kal's, too.

So her choices were to be a concubine or to be a second wife.

Lois could feel the swell of another wave of tears. She leapt from the bed, vigorously swiping the moisture from her eyes. This wasn't helping.

Lois Lane did not dissolve into an emotional mess over a man.

OK, she did — but this time the man was actually worth it.

Lois looked at the brand on her hand.

She was Kal's.

It was right there on her hand. It would be there forever.

She was his ... but he could never be hers ... not really.

Her heaviness settled on her.

But she thrust it off.

She'd had enough of slinking around New Krypton, enough of treading carefully in case she rattled someone's cage. She would not sit in her room and mope. She would build a life — and that meant getting her newspaper out to the people of New Krypton.

Whether they wanted it or not!

### Part 15

Lois rapped on Jib's door. When Jib opened it, Lois said, "Can you write, Jib?"

"Yes."

"Would you come and do some writing for me, please?"

Jib's hesitation was fleeting. "Yes."

"Would you ask Mo if she would come too?"

"Yes."

"And Ard?"

"Ard won't come."

"Do you have a pencil you could bring?"

"Yes."

"Good; get Mo, and come to my room."

Once in her room, Lois hauled the mattress from her bed platform and positioned it on the floor. She put ten sheets of blank paper on the hard surface. When Jib and Mo appeared at her door, she directed them to kneel on the mattress and use the platform as a makeshift table for producing copies of her story.

They agreed readily enough. Were they so bored that they were happy to have something to break the monotony? Or were they simply so used to following orders that anything else was unthinkable? Lois didn't have the time to speculate. For now, she was merely grateful for their compliance.

Lois picked up her story about the lost girl and went to Ard's room. She rapped on her door, and the tall, blonde woman appeared moments later. "Can you read, Ard?" Lois asked.

"A little bit," Ard said.

Lois opened her book page by page as she told Ard the story. "Would you draw pictures for these words?" Lois asked.

At first Ard didn't answer. Instead, her eyes darted around Lois's face. "I can't," she said eventually.

What had Tek done to her? "Why not?" Lois asked gently.

"I lost my red pencil."

Lois studied Ard, looking beyond her beauty, and perceived that the blonde woman had a childlike demeanour that went far deeper than her baby blue eyes and angelic fair hair. "When did you last see your red pencil?" Lois asked.

"This morning."

Lois smiled at her. "It can't be too far away. Can I help you look for it?"

"Yes."

Lois went into Ard's room and noticed that she had a desk as well as a bed. On the desk were blank sheets of paper, a few completed drawings, and a collection of half a dozen stubby coloured pencils.

Lois bent low and looked under the bed — and immediately spotted the lost red pencil. She picked it up and handed it to Ard.

Ard's response came as close to happiness as anything Lois had seen from a Kryptonian other than Kal. She didn't smile, exactly — not with her mouth — but her eyes seemed to fill with an understated gladness.

"Can you draw the pictures now?" Lois asked with a kindly smile.

"Yes." Ard took Lois's book and sat at her desk.

As Lois crossed the courtyard to her own room, she felt the

grating collision of the emotions whirring within her.

Acrid animosity towards Tek. To have an affair with the Supreme Ruler's concubine was bad enough. To take advantage of a child's innocence because it happened to be locked in the body of a woman was worse.

There was also relief because now she completely understood why Kal had taken Ard as his concubine, and it had nothing to do with her stunning looks. He was protecting her. An innocent such as Ard at the mercy of Nor just didn't bear thinking about.

And finally, there was grudging amusement. Kal had collected an odd assortment of concubines — the beautiful, but still-stuck-in-childhood Ard, the two sisters rescued after the murder of the third sister, and her — the alien from another planet.

It didn't take long for Jib and Mo to finish making the copies of Lois's story. "Do you know how we can get these to the farmers and the people who couldn't come to the Report?" Lois asked them.

"Our mother's neighbour has a son who will take them," Jib offered.

"How old is he?" Lois asked.

"Twelve."

"Will you take the copies to him and ask him to deliver them to the outlying farms?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, Jib," Lois said with a smile. "And thank you, Mo. You both did really well."

"Will there be another one?" Mo asked. "A different one?"

Was that interest? Willingness? Enthusiasm? "Yes," Lois said decisively. "There will be another one. Will you write copies for me next time?"

"Yes."

"Good." Lois collected the sheets and handed them to Jib. "Thank you."

Lois watched as the two women departed through Kal's gates. She had published a newspaper! Sure, it was a one-sheet, one-story, handwritten newspaper with a total circulation of ten, but it was a start.

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Lois went to Ard's room and found that Ard had already completed three pictures — simple, charming pictures that greatly enhanced Lois's story. "They are wonderful, Ard," Lois said, genuinely impressed. "I am very pleased with your work."

"That's good," Ard said.

"I'll come back later and see how you're going."

Ard returned her attention to her picture. Lois watched for a moment and then quietly slipped away.

She stood in the middle of the courtyard. What now?

Her almost manic need for productivity had been sated.

The paper was out, and the book was in the process of being completed. She had few options other than to return to Kal's room and face him.

And say what? No, I can't marry you because you're already married.

How could Kal understand that reasoning when his society allowed him as many women as he could afford to keep?

He wouldn't understand, but staying away from his room would confuse him more.

And, now that she had her own 'illustrator', Lois was eager to begin another children's story. She doubted Kal would be in yet — it was too early for lunch — so she would have some time to work on her new story and attempt to find clarity in the situation with Kal.

Lois knocked on Kal's bedroom door and entered without waiting for a reply.

One step later, she stopped abruptly.

Kal was sitting on his bed, surrounded by files, folders, and

three tomes she recognised from the shelves in the chambers.

“Ah ... Kal.”

He looked up. “Hello, Lois.”

“Sorry,” she said quickly. “I didn’t think you’d be here.”

“I left the desk for you,” he said, his eyes already buried back in the book.

Lois hesitated, watching him and not knowing whether to be charmed by his thoughtfulness or peeved by his apparent nonchalance.

She moved to the desk and sat down, acutely aware of his presence behind her.

She took a blank sheet of paper and forced her concentration to a new story.

Her mind remained as blank as the paper. Lois put the pencil to the paper and wrote:

*Dear Kal:*

OK, so this was not going to be a children’s story.

*I love you.*

*I love you so much, I cannot imagine living without you.*

*Right now, I should be bursting with joy. I should be so excited, so elated because, this morning, the man I love asked me to marry him.*

*The man I trust totally because I have seen the incorruptible honesty of his heart.*

*Yet, instead of joy, I feel only pain and misery.*

*I wish things were different for us, Kal.*

*I wish I could say ‘yes’ to your proposal.*

*I imagine how it would feel to agree to marry you and see your smile burst with happiness.*

*I guess no one has ever told you that your smile is spectacular. It is Kal. It never fails to warm me inside.*

*I promised you I won’t leave you, and I know I won’t. I know, that in the unlikely event of there ever being a way for me to return home, I would not take it. I would not leave you, Kal.*

*I could not leave you.*

*Because you are the man I have been looking for my whole life.*

*For so long, I thought I was hopelessly inept at the whole relationship thing. Only now do I realise that I was looking on the wrong planet!*

*I love your heart.*

*I love your openness and the beautiful simplicity you bring to everything you do.*

*I trust you.*

*I wish I could say yes to you, Kal.*

*I wish I could hold you. I wish I could hold you so tightly and assure you we will find a way to make this work.*

*But if I hold you, Kal ... Everything is going to get so much more complicated.*

*Please don’t think I don’t want to hold you, my love.*

*I ache to hold you ... but for both of us ... I can’t.*

*I will love you always, Kal,*

*Lois.*

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It had been a lot easier to concentrate on the intricacies of Kryptonian Law when Lois was not in the room.

Now she was here, Kal found his attention steadfastly fixed on her.

He was fascinated by the cloak of her dark hair as it fell against her small shoulders. He had not forgotten the soft touch of her hands on his neck when she had hugged him. Kal *really* wanted to put his hand under her hair as he held her.

His fingers had not forgotten the feel of her ribs when he’d wrapped his arms around her.

But her gown had been between them.

Her neck would have no such barriers.

He wanted to hug her again.

He wanted to kiss her again.

He wanted to feel her warm skin under his fingers.

He knew he’d become completely absorbed in her. He lived in a state of perpetual anticipation of the next time she would kiss him or hug him or smile at him or touch him. Just her hand on his face was enough to cause his insides to flounder.

Because it felt *so* good.

He’d sensed a tiny reluctance in her — not that she didn’t enjoy hugging him, but that she felt a need to ration their physical contact.

He so wanted to get closer to her.

Kal forced his attention back to Kryptonian Law.

He had found nothing to prevent the Supreme Ruler from taking a second wife. Indeed, he’d found nothing to prevent him taking as many wives as he pleased.

But Kal wanted only one.

Lois.

Now he’d had the time to reflect, he understood her refusal to marry him. He wouldn’t want to share her either.

He had to find a way to show Lois that his marriage to Za was nothing more than a political arrangement — in essence no different from his forced coalition with Nor, Ching, and Yent.

He couldn’t annul his current marriage. If he did, Za would become a social outcast. He would continue to provide for her — food and clothing and housing — but he would not be able to protect her from the stigma of expulsion from the Regal household.

He couldn’t dispose of her like an unwanted remnant of a past life.

It wasn’t Za’s fault she wasn’t Lois.

Legally, he could marry Lois without banishing Za.

But would Lois accept it?

Kal didn’t know, but he was sure that Lois was, and always would be, the only woman he loved.

He needed to show her that.

He needed to get closer to her.

But how?

Then he had an idea.

Tek!

He needed to talk to Tek.

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Lois heard movement behind her and instinctively covered her letter.

“I have to go,” Kal said. “I won’t be back for lunch.”

“All right.” He was gone before her reply had fully left her lips.

Lois pushed aside her letter and sighed as she forced her mind to focus on a fourth story.

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An hour later, Tek walked in with Lois’s lunch, and she didn’t bother trying to hide her simmering indignation as she almost snatched the food from him.

He lingered. She guessed he was waiting for another book to take to his children.

He wouldn’t be getting it!

“Where do you live, Tek?” Lois asked coldly. Unfortunately, she doubted he would discern the censure in her manner.

“House number fourteen.”

“I’m taking the new book to your children,” Lois informed him in a tone that left no room for argument.

Tek leant over her desk and picked up the pencil. On a blank sheet, he wrote a figure — it looked like an ‘x’ enclosed in a box. “That is the number fourteen,” he told her. “Turn left when you leave the gates and look for this number on the door. It is the ninth house on the right.”

Lois was a little shocked at Tek’s sudden verbosity. Was it possible he’d seen her as he’d emerged from Ard’s room and had

decided he needed to curry favour with her to keep her from telling Kal?

Or was his visit to Ard as innocent as she was?

Tek limped from the room. Lois stared after him, wondering.

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Ard handed Lois the finished book. Lois slowly turned the pages, delighted with the finished result. “Thank you, Ard,” Lois said. “You draw beautiful pictures.”

“Will there be another one?”

“Yes.”

“Can I draw the pictures?”

“Yes.”

If Lois had acquired any skills in interpreting Kryptonian emotion, Ard was happy at the prospect of having more pictures to draw. Lois felt a sudden impulse to hug her, but decided against it.

Who knew how Ard would respond to physical touch?

“Ard, I really like your pictures,” Lois said, hoping her genuine appreciation would survive the translator.

Ard merely turned back to her desk and picked up a pencil. Assuming that was a dismissal, Lois left the room, taking her book with her.

At the gates, she turned left. She hadn’t been this way before — Jib and Mo’s mother lived to the right. Lois counted the houses, and when she came to the ninth one, she saw the boxed ‘x’ figure on the door.

Lois was still several feet from the door when it opened to reveal a woman, her eyes levelled solemnly at Lois, her stance unmoving. She was darker than Tek — in both hair and skin colouring.

Lois moved towards the house, unsure if she would be welcome.

And then she smelled it.

The aroma wafted from the house and curled tantalisingly into her nostrils.

Lois stopped, closed her eyes, and inhaled deeply.

Coffee.

Coffee.

Not quite coffee but close enough that she wasn’t arguing. How she had missed coffee.

When she opened her eyes, Tek’s wife still stood before her.

“Are you the alien woman?” she asked.

“Yes,” Lois replied.

“I am Riz-Or.”

“I am Lois.”

“That doesn’t translate.”

“I smell coffee,” Lois said, realising as she said it that it was probably rude, even on this planet, but she just couldn’t help herself.

“That word doesn’t translate,” Riz said. “But what you can smell is beverage.”

“Beverage?” Lois questioned.

“Would you like some?” Riz offered.

“Oh, yes, please,” Lois said, a little embarrassed to realise that she was practically frothing at the mouth and only just controlling her inclination to push past Riz and storm into the house to ferret out the coffee.

She exerted enough control to allow Riz to enter her house first. They went into a tiny room containing a table and two chairs. Two small children — a boy and a girl — sat on the floor. They had chunks of wood and were using them to build towers.

Riz pulled out a chair, and Lois sat down and put her book on the table. When Riz put the steaming cup in front of Lois, she had to restrain herself from snatching it. She wrapped her hands around the cup, forcing herself to pause long enough to revel in its warmth and its promise.

She lifted it to her nose and inhaled deeply.

Oh, she had *missed* coffee.

Lois opened her eyes and realised Riz was watching her — probably puzzled at the strange alien custom of inhaling drinks through your nose. Lois raised the cup to her mouth and sipped. She had *never* tasted anything so good.

Sure, it was black and a little bitter, but it was close enough to coffee to satisfy Lois’s yearning. “I like it,” she said, aware it was an extreme understatement.

“They don’t have beverage inside the gates,” Riz noted.

Inside the gates? Was that another euphemism for Kal’s place? “No,” Lois said. “Why is that?”

“The Supreme Ruler doesn’t order it.”

That was going to change, Lois promised herself. “Thank you,” she said to Riz. “And thank you for the face cream.”

The two children had approached the table. There was a girl, probably about six, and a boy of about three.

Lois extricated herself from the delights of the coffee and noticed that both children were staring at the new book on the table.

They said nothing, just stared at the book.

Not at her — the alien woman — but the book.

Lois lifted it from the table and held it towards them.

They didn’t move. Riz stood behind them, a hand on each of their shoulders. “These are my children,” she said. “The girl is Dom, and the boy is Kip. He is named after Tek’s father.”

“They are beautiful children,” Lois said, realising it was true. They both had the dark features of their mother. Lois felt her anger rise again at what Tek was doing to these three people. Did Riz know? Did she suspect? Surely it couldn’t be standard practice that concubines were there for the pleasure of the entire household.

There was absolutely no way to form a question without risking damage to this family.

Dom looked to her mother and then hesitantly took the book from Lois. She stood there, her dark eyes wide. “Read?” she said.

“You must not bother our guest,” Riz said.

“Would you like me to read it to you?” Lois asked the little girl.

“Yes.”

Lois looked up to Riz. “Do you mind if I read this story to your children?”

“No,” Riz said as she sat across the table from Lois.

Lois held up the book.

Dom pointed to the front picture. “Ard,” she said.

“Yes. Ard drew the pictures,” Lois agreed. She pushed aside her inclination to ask questions and opened the first page.

Throughout the story, the children didn’t speak — their attention remained fixed on the book. When Lois finished, she held it towards them. “This is for you,” she said.

Dom took it and both children went back to the floor. They opened the book and went through it again, their building blocks forgotten.

“Is everything different here?” Riz asked. “Different from your home planet?”

“Not everything,” Lois said. “We have families on Earth — a father, a mother, and children — just like you do.”

“Children are not many,” Riz said. “Not since we came to New Krypton. Tek and I are very fortunate to have two children.”

“How did Dom recognise Ard’s pictures?” Lois asked.

“Tek brings home pictures for the children.”

So Riz knew Tek saw Ard. Riz’s gaze had settled on her children, but now she swung back to Lois. “Do you have children?” she asked.

Lois hadn’t seen Riz smile, but she was definitely more expressive than the Kryptonian norm. When she looked at her children, her face softened. Maybe she didn’t have the word for what she felt, but Riz loved her children dearly. “No,” Lois

answered. “I don’t have children.”

“Maybe one day.”

“Can I ask you something?” Lois said.

“Yes.”

“I have met other Kryptonians and most of them don’t seem to want to talk to me. They don’t ask me questions; often it seems as if I’m invisible.”

“I’m curious,” Riz admitted. “And I like to talk. When I was a child, they diagnosed me as ‘hyperactive’, but it wasn’t my body that was too active, it was my mind. I’ve always wondered about so many things — and when I wonder, I talk. I talk too much — it annoys people. When Tek told me you had come, I so wanted to meet you.”

“K- ... I have been told that Kryptonians are suspicious of people who are different.”

“That is true,” Riz agreed. “Even after all these years, separation and distrust remain. To a Kryptonian, someone who is different is a threat.”

“But you don’t feel threatened by me?”

“No. I hope you will tell me about your planet.”

“Why are you so different from everyone else?”

“I’m not completely different from everyone,” Riz said. “I seem different to the people you’ve met because the world inside the gates is contrived.”

“Why?”

“Because it suited those who were in control.”

Those? Those who had decided Kal would not be with his wife? Those who had limited his knowledge? Those who, Lois was sure, had something to do with Kal’s childlessness?

“My family was always pro-unity,” Riz said. “Even before the end of the Old War. They were so happy when I married Tek.”

“Tek is from a different side than you?”

“Yes, I am from the north; Tek is from the south.”

“Are there many ... mixed marriages?”

“Not many. Some.”

Lois wanted to ask if Tek were a good man. If Riz were happy in her marriage. If she loved her husband. “Is there opposition to mixed marriages? From other people?”

“Some,” Riz admitted. “But Tek is such a wonderful man, the opposition is unimportant.”

Lois swallowed, not knowing what to say.

“Tek has great humility and much loyalty,” Riz said.

And not a lot of honesty, Lois thought. Yet, even as the thought had sprung easily to her mind, she could feel her conviction wavering. She couldn’t ask Riz about Tek and Ard, but she could ask about someone else who very much whetted her reporter’s instincts. “Which side is Lord Nor?”

“The South. The other Regal Nobles are Ching and Yent. Ching is North, Yent is South.”

“Why are they Regal Nobles?” Lois asked.

“Because they were born to it; their fathers were Regal Nobles.”

“Regal Nobles have children?”

“Yes. Yent is married, and he has a daughter. Ching isn’t married. Nor is married to his birth wife, and he has a son.”

“Didn’t Ching have a birth wife?”

“He did, but she didn’t survive the move to New Krypton.”

“So he never married?”

“No.”

“I was told that the old enmity is no longer mentioned.”

“It’s there,” Riz said. “I wish it were not so, but it is. Not talking about it doesn’t change it.”

“Do you worry about the possibility of civil war?”

“Sometimes. But peace has been maintained for ten years. While the Supreme Ruler remains, I am confident war can be avoided.”

“What if he dies?”

“If the Supreme Ruler dies without a child who has attained sixteen years, it falls to the next in line.”

Lois felt a cold dread creep through her. “Who is next in line?” she asked.

“Nor.”

Suddenly, Lois was sure that Kal’s ‘samples’ never went anywhere near his wife. “Nor looks older than — ... He looks older.”

“He is.”

“What happens if Nor were to die before his son is sixteen?”

“The mantle passes to Ching.”

“Why was the mantle held for the current Supreme Ruler?” Lois asked. “Even though he was a child when his father passed away?”

“That was a special case. Because he is the only one of mixed blood, it was decided to wait until he attained adulthood.”

“Do you think Nor has ambitions to lead New Krypton?”

“He has never said so, but his personality is one who craves power, but has not the character to handle it.”

That confirmed Lois’s assessment. “Is Nor pro-unity?”

“On Krypton, his family were lauded as a great military family.”

“They relished the war?”

“Nor’s great, great grandfather was made a Regal Noble on the strength of his battlefield heroics.”

Or his slaughter of fellow Kryptonians, Lois thought grimly. “But Nor is from the south. Isn’t the ruler supposed to be a mix?”

“Ideally — but if the Supreme Ruler doesn’t have a child ...”

Lois felt a jolt of comprehension. Was that why Riz had sent the face cream? Was she hoping Lois would provide Kal with the child New Krypton needed? Lois wasn’t at all sure she wanted a child of hers to be coerced into leading New Krypton — not if it meant living the way Kal had been forced to live. “Do the Regal Nobles have children with their concubines?” Lois asked.

“Nor and Yent do.”

“Will those children become Regal Nobles?”

“No. They are considered the child of a concubine — not the child of a Regal Noble.”

So a child of hers could not become the Supreme Ruler? Then what was the purpose of the face cream? Lois studied Riz for a long moment. “I have been told that I am not allowed to talk about ...”

“You are not,” Riz said. “But I am not employed by the Supreme Ruler, nor do I ever go to his residence, so I am free to speak.”

Was that an offer to provide information? Explanations?

Again, their eyes met and lingered.

“It is good that you have come,” Riz said.

Good that she had visited Riz? Or good that she had come to New Krypton? “Why?” Lois asked.

Riz drained the last of her ‘beverage’. “Tek obeys the rule,” she said. “He never speaks of things inside the gates.”

That didn’t necessarily surprise Lois.

“But I hear rumours the alien woman is spending time inside the house ...” Riz mused. “And then Tek asked me for cologne, and I know he hasn’t finished his yet.”

“You gave K- ... the cologne?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because Tek asked me for some.”

“Why?”

If Riz had been given to smiling, Lois was sure she would have grinned right then ... a knowing grin. “No man should be alone.”

“He’s married.” Lois bit on her lower lip as she realised she had referred directly to Kal.

“There has been much loneliness inside the gates.” Riz stood from the table and spooned some of the powdered coffee into a small container. She held it towards Lois. “Barter,” she said. “You bring the book, you take the beverage.”

Lois took it. “Thank you.”

“Will you come again?”

“I would like to.”

“I would like that, too.”

Lois said goodbye to Dom and Kip and then left the little shack.

She wandered slowly back to the gates, her mind full.

Tek had given Kal the cologne.

Tek — and Riz — approved of her being with Kal.

Life inside Kal’s household was not quite as secret as the rule suggested it should be.

Life inside Kal’s gates was different from life outside Kal’s gates.

Why?

Why had they deliberately tried to keep Kal isolated from the real world?

Had it been just to stop the possibility of an heir?

Had they worried that if Kal had known how the common people lived, he would demand more from his marriage?

One thing tugged at her brain and refused to be subdued. Nor sabotaging the ridiculous *reproduction* process between Kal and Za made perfect sense. It would, in time, deliver Nor absolute power over New Krypton.

But Nor — from a family of warriors — did not seem like a man willing to passively wait for the death of a younger man. Not when control was so tantalisingly close.

So why had this situation not reached a conclusion a long time ago?

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Kal was not in his bedroom when Lois returned. The books were still scattered on the bed. What had Kal been reading? They looked like reference books. Maybe Kryptonian Law. Was he dealing with a particularly complex dispute?

Or was violence again threatening peace on New Krypton?

Lois went to the bed and picked up an open book. It was dusty and old. The thin pages were covered in the closely-written script. She turned the page, seeing more of the completely unfamiliar script. Would Kal teach her to read it? As she had taught him to say her words?

Mindlessly, Lois turned a few more pages.

Then her breath snared in her throat.

Amid the writing, this page had a diagram.

A very simple line diagram.

But its meaning was crystal clear.

It was a man and a woman.

Making love.

Lois gulped.

She had no doubt that Kal had told the truth when he’d said he didn’t know how Riz had become pregnant.

And equally, she had no doubt that Kal now knew a whole lot more.

Lois heard a sound in the chambers and hastily dropped the book back onto the bed. She swung around, painfully aware that if Kal had picked up any skills at all in reading body language, he would know she had seen the picture.

Kal walked in. He stepped right up to her. “Lois,” he said.

She swallowed around the impossibly big obstruction in her throat. “Y ... yes, Kal?”

“Are you writing?”

“N ... not right at the m ... m ... moment.”

“Good,” Kal said. “Because there is something I want to do with you. Something I would like us to try together.”

## Part 16

Lois could feel her heart thrashing around her chest.

Her lungs felt like they were being squeezed into a tiny, intractable mould.

“What?” she attempted to say, except it wasn’t actually possible to summon enough air to vibrate her vocal cords.

“I’d like both of us to turn off our Translators,” Kal said. “I want you to talk to me. I want to see how much I can underst-”

“Trans -” Lois swallowed, and then her air came with a rush. “Are you crazy, Kal? If I turn off my translator, I won’t be able to communicate with anyone. And what if you *can’t* speak my language? I’ll be totally isolated. And even if you *can* learn my language, it’s going to take a lot of time, and even then I’ll only be able to talk to you and that means -”

Kal placed his hands on her shoulders. “Lois,” he said solemnly. “I wouldn’t ask you to do anything that would hurt you.”

Lois eyed him, as her breath rasped unevenly.

“The Translators can be turned on again,” Kal assured her quietly.

“And still work?” Lois asked dubiously. “You know that for sure? How many times have you turned off yours?”

“I haven’t,” Kal admitted. His fingers dived into the dark hair above his left ear, rummaged for a moment, and then dropped. He opened his mouth and spoke in the guttural sounds she remembered from before they had inserted her translator.

“No, Kal!” Lois screamed. “No! Turn it back on. I need to be able to communicate with you. I can’t do this without you.”

Kal again reached into his hair.

“Kal?” Lois shrieked.

“Yes, Lois?” he said calmly.

Lois clung to him. “Don’t do that to me again, Kal,” she begged.

His arms surrounded her. As she snuggled into his chest, Lois experienced a poignant sense of having found the one place she truly belonged. She relaxed against him, relishing his closeness, his warmth, his strength.

She didn’t have — didn’t *want* to have — the willpower to back away. What she wanted to do was reach up, find his mouth, and allow her instincts the freedom of expression they were demanding.

Then she remembered the diagram.

Kissing him now — particularly kissing him the way she wanted to — she couldn’t do that unless she was prepared to go much further than kissing.

And she was.

But she wasn’t sure now was the right time.

And what she had with Kal was too good, too perfect, to risk just because her hormones had gone into meltdown over one superbly honed male body.

Lois reluctantly slid her hands from his shoulders, relishing every inch of the journey. When she reached the arch of his ribcage, she lingered, unable to force herself to sever their contact.

He glanced down, and she saw the glimmer of his smile.

Then he looked up — into her eyes — and his hands cupped her shoulders. “Lois, it is so we can always communicate that I want to do this. I want to be able to speak your language. I want to know that whatever happens, nothing can come between us.”

“You’re worried the translators will fail?” she asked anxiously.

He hesitated. “None have ever failed,” he said. “But yours was old when we inserted it, and -”

“But it’s not just that, is it?” she asked softly.

Kal took a deep breath. “I want to be closer to you. Maybe if we can speak the same language ...”

“... we can?” she prompted.

“There are things I want to tell you.” His smile faltered. “I don’t understand everything you say. Sometimes I understand your words, but I don’t understand your meaning.”

“That happens even when two people speak the same language.”

Kal released her shoulders. “I can see this troubles you, Lois,” he said. “I’m sorry. I would never force you to do anything you didn’t want to do.”

Lois caught his wrist and positioned his hand on the side of her head. “I trust you, Kal,” she said. “Turn off my translator.”

Kal hesitated. “Yours doesn’t need to go off, Lois,” he said. “If we just turn off mine, yours won’t receive my words.”

“No,” Lois said. “Let’s turn off both of them.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she said. “Let’s do this together.”

Lois felt Kal brush back her long hair and apply a little pressure around the short, spiky hair at the translator site. Then Kal lowered his hand and spoke ... completely unintelligibly.

“It’s off,” Lois said.

Kal nodded.

Then he turned off his translator.

They stared at each other, aware they had entered a new world ... together.

Lois smiled hesitantly.

Kal caressed his fingers along her smile. “Love,” he said experimentally.

He sounded different without the intervention of the translator. Lois could hear his voice — his texture, his timbre. And she loved it. She moved her fingertips to the edges of his mouth and shaped it up and out.

“Smile,” Kal responded. And then, “Lois.”

Her name on his lips was like honey being poured through her heart. “Kal,” she whispered.

He smiled again.

“You have an incredibly powerful smile,” Lois said with deep appreciation.

“Laugh,” Kal said.

“You’re really good at this, Kal.”

“Laugh,” he repeated with a little more force.

Lois chuckled.

Kal pointed to his chest, then said, “Like Lois laugh.”

“I like Lois’s laugh,” she supplied for him.

“I like Lois’s laugh,” he parroted. His arms extended wide.

“Thank you.”

“Thank you ... for everything?” Lois guessed.

Kal brushed the back of his fingers across her cheek. “Thank you for everything,” he said softly.

Lois felt the rise of her tears. Kal had been right. This was exhilarating.

His smile dazzled suddenly. “Kiss,” he said.

She had to obey. She leant forward, slid her hands up Kal’s shoulders, and touched her lips against his. She felt his hand glide up her back, through her hair and come to rest on her neck.

Sprits of heat radiated from his touch — sizzling down her spine, along her shoulders, and across her back. Then he applied a little pressure — just enough to guide her gently into deepening their kiss.

Suddenly, Lois realised that *he* was kissing her. Until now, she had determined the timing, and the depth, and the intensity of their kisses.

But she was definitely not in control now.

*Kal* was kissing her.

Exploring her with careful attention and mind-numbing thoroughness.

But only with his mouth. His tongue did not push forward. That was a good thing, Lois told herself, restraining her own yearning to delve deeper. Because she was right on the edge of

control, and ...

Too soon, he drew back and broke their contact. He rested his forehead on hers as they both dragged in deep breaths.

Kal straightened, and Lois saw the tinge of colour in his cheeks. She wondered if he were quivering inside. She certainly was.

“Thank you, Lois,” Kal said.

“Thank *you*,” Lois said. “That was amazing.”

“You ... ‘mazing.”

Lois chuckled. “So are you, Kal.”

He broke away from her and picked up a pile of paper and a pencil from the desk and offered Lois his hand. She took it, and he led her to the bed and gestured for her to sit down. He pulled the chair closer and sat, his knees butted against the bed, his thighs adjacent to hers.

He wrote three characters on the page, pointed to them, and then pointed to himself.

“Kal,” Lois said.

“Yes.” He offered her the pencil and pointed to her.

Lois wrote her name on the paper. Kal stared at it and then took the pencil. He carefully copied her name and held it up.

“Lois,” he said.

“Yes, Lois.” On the paper, Lois wrote ‘Kal’. “I’m not sure if that’s the correct spelling,” she said.

Again, he copied her word. Then he emphatically drew a wide circle around their names.

“Together,” Lois said.

“Yes,” Kal said decisively.

He stood and offered her his hand. He led her through the room, pointing at different things as Lois gave him the names and he repeated them.

Then he led her back to the bed. “Sit ... bed,” he said.

Lois sat. Kal took the paper again. He drew a woman and held it up for Lois to see.

“Woman,” Lois said. “Female.”

“No.” Kal took back the paper and drew a man next to the woman.

“Man?” Lois said, although she didn’t think that was what he wanted.

Kal drew a boy next to the man and woman.

Then Lois understood. She pointed to the woman. “Mom.” Then she moved to the man. “Dad.”

“Mom,” Kal said. “Dad.” He considered the picture for a moment and then said, “I ... like ... you ... story.”

“Your,” Lois corrected. “I like your stories.”

“I like your stories,” he said. His mouth opened and closed a few times, but no sound emerged, then he pointed to Lois.

“You want me to talk?” she guessed.

“Yes.”

“About what?”

“You.”

“My dad is a doctor, and my mom is ... a mom. I have a sister called Lucy; she is younger than I am. As a kid, I did all the usual things.”

“Usual ... you ... not ... usual ... me.”

How true. “I went to school,” Lois said. “I played sport. I liked a sport called tennis where you hit a ball with a racquet. I liked a game called chess, and I was good at math. Then I went to college and studied journalism. I -”

“Jour ... nal ... ism?” Kal asked.

“Learning to be a reporter. Writing.”

Kal nodded. “Go ... on.”

“I live ... lived ... in Metropolis, a very big city. I worked for The Daily Planet — the finest newspaper in the world.”

“How you get ... here?”

“An organisation that is involved in space exploration decided to send an expedition to the planet, Mars. They decided

there should be a reporter on the trip. I applied and won the position. But something went very wrong. I was put in the small craft and the next thing I knew, your soldiers were pulling me out of it.”

Kale stared at her, his face unmoving, although his eyes had a velvety softness that shot directly to her heart. Lois figured he was trying to make sense out of what she now realised was a lot of information. “I ... smile ... you come,” he said.

“You’re happy I came here?”

“Yes. Happy.”

“I’m happy I came, too,” Lois said, knowing it was the absolute truth.

Kal slipped from the chair and knelt next to where she sat on the bed. He gathered her hand into both of his and looked into her eyes. “I ... love ... you ... Lois,” he said.

She smiled through her tears. “I love you, too, Kal.”

He carefully brushed the dew from her eyes. “Good ... tears?”

Lois nodded. “Very good tears, Kal.”

He raised his hand to Lois’s translator and turned it on and then did the same with his own.

Lois felt a surge of panic as she had a flash of what her life would be if her translator no longer worked.

“I love you in your language,” Kal said. “And I love you in my language, too.”

Lois felt her heart flood with joy. Her translator still worked. But more wondrous — infinitely more wondrous — Kal loved her.

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Tek brought in their supper. Lois sat on the bed. Kal sat on the chair.

“I visited Tek’s home today and met his wife and family,”

Lois said after Tek was gone.

“They are very fortunate to have two children,” Kal said.

Lois wondered if she sensed a wistfulness in his tone. “Do you hope you will have children one day?” she asked, trying to keep her tone even. “With Za?”

“That is why we are married,” Kal said, his face closed and unreadable. “Did you like visiting Riz?”

“Yes, very much.”

“I am very fortunate to have Tek,” Kal said. “He is loyal and dependable.”

“He’s loyal because he brings you food?” Lois asked, trying very hard to keep the acid from her tone.

“His family has always been very supportive of unity and very supportive of the attempts to merge the Houses of El and Ra and thereby foster peace.”

“Tek is probably a few years older than you. Did you know him when you were a child?”

“I was a child during the Transition Years.”

“The transition years?”

“The years between Krypton and New Krypton.”

“How long did it take you to find New Krypton?”

“Nearly three years.”

“So for three years, your people didn’t have a planet?”

“No,” Kal said. “And then we found New Krypton. Tek’s father was a brilliant Scientist. He engineered our relocation to this planet. Without him, we would have died in our homelessness.”

“Kip? The one Tek’s son is named after?”

“Yes.”

“Is he still alive?”

“No. He died ten years ago.”

“Your appreciation for Tek stems from his father’s great contribution to New Krypton?” Lois deduced.

“Partly his father,” Kal said. “But also Tek — he is a man of honour. And a man of humility.”

Riz had also mentioned Tek’s humility. “Why?” Lois asked. “What makes Tek so humble?”

“He did not receive his education because of the Transition Years. He should be a recognised Scientist, but he doesn’t have the qualification. Therefore, he is a servant.”

“Why should he be a scientist, even if he didn’t have the education?” Lois asked. “Because his father was a scientist?”

“Kip taught Tek. He taught him during the Transition Years and also once we had landed on New Krypton, but none of it is recognised. I tried to make an Exemption to the Rules and have Tek declared a Scientist, but Exemptions cannot be made without certain exact conditions being met.”

“Such as?”

“The full support of the Regal Nobles.”

“So you made him your servant?”

“Yes. My family owes his family much.”

“His family? Tek and Riz and the children?”

“Yes. And Ard.”

Lois spluttered. “Ard?”

“C1. She is Tek’s sister.”

His *sister*. Lois felt her shame seep into her face even as relief flooded through her that she had not voiced her suspicions.

“When did you take Ard as a concubine?”

“The day I turned sixteen. The same day as my Investiture.”

“Because Kip or Tek asked you to?”

“Yes.”

So Kal’s first act as Supreme Ruler had been to protect the vulnerable daughter of a friend. Even as a sixteen year old, his inclination had been to protect those less able to protect themselves. “Did you know Ard can draw really well?”

“Yes. I ordered she be given a desk and paper and pencils.”

“How often do you see her?”

“She has to attend the Report every month.”

Could it be possible that Kal *hadn’t* noticed Ard’s beauty? “She is physically very attractive,” Lois said.

“Is she?”

Lois couldn’t contain the elation that whooshed its way around her heart. This amazing man, with such an awesome capacity to care for others, loved her — and, it seemed, he had never even noticed anyone else.

He was staring at her, smiling. “I don’t know what is funny,” Kal admitted. “But I like it when you laugh.”

“Have I said that you are a wonderful man?”

“Yes,” he said. “But I like it when you say it.”

“You are a wonderful man.”

He grinned. “We should be doing the Disputes,” he said. “I would rather talk to you, but we should get some of them settled.” He brought the folders to the bed, and they began on the first one.

When they had finished the fifth dispute, Kal stood from the chair. “I ... ah ... have to go ... ah ... somewhere,” he said.

Lois looked up in surprise. He was being evasive. A range of possibilities swarmed into her brain, but she subdued them. She had been so very wrong about Ard. “OK,” she said easily.

After he’d gone, Lois went to the desk and found the sheet of paper on which she had written the names of Kryptonians and divided them into two sides. As she had suspected, Nor was south. So were Tek and Ard. Lois added those names under Eb. Riz was north. Lois wrote her name opposite that of her husband.

Far from being an unfaithful cheat, Tek was a loving brother and a man who was making the best of the unfair breaks in life. Was he able to use his scientific knowledge in any way? Or had all of his father’s teaching been lost completely? What about young Kip? Would it be possible for him to follow in his grandfather’s footsteps?

Ching was north. Yent, the other Regal Noble, was south. The three Regal Nobles included two from the south and one from the

north.

Kal was born to be neutral, and Lois knew he would never allow himself to be influenced by the old hostilities.

But what about the others? If everything came back to the old conflict, did Nor and Yent think of Kal as North?

Kal used a name of the north and a crest of the north. New Krypton was a patriarchal society — it made sense that the child of mixed houses would be considered more his father's house than his mother's.

Was there simmering conflict amongst the cabinet — with Kal and Ching on one side and Yent and Nor on the other?

Was that why Nor hadn't been prosecuted for the murder of Jib's sister?

Because that would have split the Regal Nobles and by extension, split the planet along the old lines?

If Nor did consider Kal to be north, it explained why he would want Kal to remain childless, but it did not explain why he was willing to passively wait for Kal to die in order to wrest back control for the south.

The door opened, and Kal walked in, holding two cups.

Lois smelled it again — coffee.

Kal beamed. "I thought you'd like a drink," he said.

Lois chuckled. "How did you know?"

"Tek told me you enjoyed this drink when you visited Riz today," Kal explained. "I thought you'd like it if I got some for you."

Lois took one of the cups and inhaled the wonderful aroma.

She looked up to see Kal watching her, a small smile on his mouth. "Good?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," she replied. "I have missed this." She leaned over and sniffed Kal's cup. "You have beverage too?"

"Yes, but I have never tried it before."

"Why not?"

"I didn't know about it. I just order blue so that is what I get."

"Try it," Lois encouraged.

Kal took a sip. As he lowered his cup, a slow smile spread across his face. "That is good," he said.

"Beverage always tastes better when drunk with a friend,"

Lois said. "Come and sit with me on the bed." She shuffled back against the bed head, her legs stretched out in front of her. "You sit here," she directed Kal as she patted the place next to her.

He did. Lois took his cup from one hand and placed it in his other hand. Then she lifted his arm and nestled under it, leaning into his side.

Without needing any further guidance, Kal's arm closed around her shoulder, and Lois smiled with satisfaction. "Why did you bring two cups, Kal, instead of just one?"

He didn't answer immediately, and Lois turned so she could see his face. "Because I got the beverage for you and it seemed presumptuous to expect you would want to share with me."

Lois chuckled. "Despite the fact you have shared so many meals with me?"

"I like sharing my meals with you."

"I'd like to share my beverage with you."

Kal grinned. "So ... next time ..."

"Next time, one cup."

Lois settled against his side and nonchalantly allowed her hand to settle low on the taut ridges of his thigh. "Why do you always bring only one plate, Kal?" she asked. "Isn't there enough food for me?"

"There is enough for you."

"Then why?"

"I didn't really think about it," Kal said. "I had never eaten with anyone before. The first time, I just picked up my plate and brought it to you in the bedroom. I didn't even consider ordering another plate."

Lois jolted forward and turned to face him. "You'd *never*

eaten a meal with anyone else before?"

"No."

"But surely, when you were a child ... Didn't you live with someone? Didn't you eat with someone? A nanny, perhaps?"

"I don't know what a nanny is."

"Someone who looks after children."

Kal said nothing as he stared at his cup. His isolation had begun early, Lois deduced grimly. She could imagine a small boy, growing up without parents, without friends. A small boy who had been so alone, he didn't even have someone to dine with.

She snuggled into his side again and felt his arm tighten around her.

"I'm so glad you found me," Kal said. He dropped a kiss into her hair.

"I'm so glad too, Kal."

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Kal loved having Lois tucked under his arm. He could smell her shampoo and whenever he dropped his face against her hair, he could feel its silkiness on his cheek.

Turning off the Translators had worked well. He had not anticipated Lois's initial reaction, but they had gotten past that.

Getting her the beverage had worked well, too.

Now it was time for the next step of his plan. He gently squeezed her shoulder — loving the way it pressed her body into his ribs. "It's getting late," he said. "You should be going to bed."

He felt her body tense.

Kal slipped from the bed and offered Lois his hand. He could see she had questions, but instead of asking them, she put her hand in his. He led her to his bedroom door, through his Chambers, out of his building, across the courtyard, and to the door of her room.

Once there, he released her hand. "I would like to hug and kiss you goodnight," he said quietly. "Is that all right with you?"

She nodded.

Kal folded her into his arms and kissed her. He burrowed his hand under her hair and used his arm to deepen the contact into his chest. His plan had been for a short kiss — a kiss that would tell her he had no intention of pressuring her into anything. But with Lois's body tight against him and her mouth nimble on his, every part of him screamed in protest at the thought of backing away.

He did it — fully aware that it was probably the most difficult task he had ever demanded of himself.

"Good night, Lois," Kal said quietly. "I will think about you all night and hope that the morning comes quickly so I can be with you again."

She put her hand on his face. In the dim light, he could see a little moisture glistening in her eyes. He didn't need to ask if it was good or bad because she was smiling. He leant forward and touched a gentle kiss to the corner of her eye.

Then he turned and walked back to his room — his mind full of his plans for tomorrow.

## Part 17

The next morning, Lois was plucked from sleep by the persistent rapping on her door. She peered into the dimness and then reluctantly crossed the room, yawning. She steeled herself for what she knew would be a blast of cold air and opened the door.

Kal was there.

"Would you like to walk with me along the beach?" he asked.

The inclination for warmth, daylight, and more sleep vanished instantly. "Give me a moment to put on some warmer clothes," she said.

He grinned. "I'll wait for you."

Lois changed into another gown, put on her coat, finger-combed her hair, and applied a little of Riz's face cream.

When she opened the door, the first light of the new day had begun to perforate the dimness. Kal held out his hand, and together, they walked through the courtyard and out of the gates.

“Kal?” Lois said. “Are you sure it is wise for you to be seen so openly with one of your concubines?”

“I don’t know,” Kal said. “But I do know what you mean to me, and I have no intention of hiding it.”

“What about Za?” Lois said. “Won’t being seen with me be an insult to her?”

“The marriage of a Regal Noble is nothing like your description of love,” Kal said. “A Regal Noble does not choose his wife — the arrangement is made between the parents when the children are still babies. The marriages are usually nothing more than the strategic merging of two houses; a Regal Noble and his wife rarely associate in public.”

“What about in private?”

“They usually lead completely separate lives.”

Even when spawning children, Lois thought. “But you’re not a Regal Noble.”

“In the area of marriage, I have been expected to follow the same Rules as the Regal Nobles.”

“So Za won’t mind?” Lois asked incredulously. “I mean, if you were my husband, I would hate you being out with another woman.”

“If I were your husband,” Kal said gravely. “I would not be out with another woman.”

Lois squeezed his hand. He looked down at her, and for a moment, the diligent and conscientious leader was lost in the sunshine of his smile.

They left the dusty streets and strolled through a field of short, straw-coloured grass. The air was piercing in its bleakness, but that only served to accentuate the warmth of Kal’s hand as it enveloped hers.

When they reached the top of a small rise, the grey ocean spread out before them. Moments later, they stepped onto the gritty sand and watched as the savage waves churned the foaming water.

“I guess all that water is unusable for drinking,” Lois said.

“Yes. It has a high salt content.”

“Have you thought about desalination?” she suggested. “As a means of solving the water shortage problems?”

“Yes,” Kal said. “But our energy resources are too limited to make that a viable solution.”

“Has the drilling located any water yet?”

“No,” Kal glanced at his watch. “We have twenty minutes until the tide comes in and covers this sand.”

“In twenty minutes this beach will be under water?” Lois asked in amazement.

“Yes,” he said. “Today there is only a short time between first light and high tide.”

Lois smiled to herself. He had planned this. “Do people swim here?” she asked. “In the summer?”

“No,” Kal replied. “It is far too dangerous. There are strong undercurrents and heavy tides.”

“Is it like this all around the island? Beach with strong tides?”

“No — on the east side there are cliffs. The land has a long, moderate incline and then falls away steeply at the ocean.” Kal turned from the horizon and faced her. “Thank you for coming with me, Lois.”

“Thank you for asking me,” she said. “It was a lovely idea.”

“You smell very nice.”

“So do you.”

“Tek gave it to me,” Kal said. “His wife makes it.”

Lois smiled. “I got mine from Riz as well.”

While they had been speaking, Kal’s eyes had dropped to her mouth and moored there. His fingers zeroed in on her chin, and he tipped her face upwards. Then, he slowly closed the distance

between them and kissed her. With unhurried deliberation, he savoured her.

When he lifted from her, she could feel his reluctance. “I want to learn more of your language,” he said softly. “Would you mind if we turn off our Translators again?”

“No.”

His hand in her hair felt more like a caress than a practical task. He turned off his translator and smiled on a happy breath. “Thank you trust me.”

“You make it easy to trust you.”

Kal took her hand again, and they ambled along the beach. “What ...” He swept his arm in the direction of the water.

“Ocean. Sea,” Lois supplied. “This is a beach.”

“Your people go in sea?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “They swim. Sometimes they ride boards in the waves.”

“Not ...” Kal stopped, obviously searching for a word.

“Dangerous,” Lois said, eyeing the turbulent water that had advanced noticeably in the few minutes since their arrival.

“Sometimes it is dangerous, but some beaches are safe.”

“Why ... swim?”

“For fun. Because they enjoy it.”

“Fun ...”

Lois looked sideways at him. “You don’t understand that word, do you, Kal?”

“No.”

“It means doing something simply because you want to. Not because it’s your duty or your responsibility, but just because you enjoy it.”

Kal’s face cleared and he smiled. “Like ... now.”

Lois laughed. “Yes!” she said. “It’s fun to walk with you. I enjoy it.”

“We can do again,” Kal said.

“I would like that.”

Kal slipped his arm along Lois’s shoulder and pressed her into the warmth of his side. They continued walking along the rough white sand until the rising water threatened to rush their feet. Kal led them from the beach, through a field, and back to the more densely housed area. As they walked, Lois chatted, giving him words for the things they saw.

They crossed the courtyard and went to his bedroom. Once there, Kal turned on their translators.

“What oatmeal do we have this morning?” Lois asked, unable to subdue completely her apprehension regarding her translator continuing to function.

“I don’t know.”

Lois felt the rush of relief that she could still understand him. “You don’t know?”

“I told them I wanted anything I hadn’t had before,” Kal said. “I’d never had beverage; there might be other things I haven’t tried.”

“Kal, I feel so sad that you’ve always eaten alone,” Lois said. “That is heartbreaking. Eating together is one of the things Earth people really enjoy.”

“I enjoy eating with you.”

As they shared a smile, Tek walked in with a cup of coffee and a plate containing square, chunky slices that, despite being bare of any spread, reminded Lois of toast.

“Thank you, Tek,” Kal said.

Lois was sure she didn’t imagine the wisp of reaction that crossed Tek’s face at Kal’s words. She owed Tek an apology for her suspicions, but he wouldn’t comprehend it, and she wasn’t in any hurry to admit that she had thought he was having an affair with his sister. There was a chance he hadn’t even noticed her animosity so she just smiled and echoed Kal. “Thank you, Tek.”

Tek turned directly to Lois. “Riz said she would be honoured if you visit again, even if you don’t have a new book.”

Lois smiled. “I would like that, Tek. Riz is a very nice person. And your children are beautiful.”

Tek didn’t smile, but there was a slight crinkling in the corners of his eyes — enough to tell her he had appreciated her compliment.

“Tek, I’m thinking of writing a story about a grandfather taking his grandchildren for a walk. Would your children like that story? Or would it make them sad because their grandfather passed away?”

“They don’t remember my father,” Tek said. “They would like that story.”

Lois smiled. “I’ll write it then.”

Tek turned and limped from Kal’s room.

Lois examined their breakfast. “What do we have?” she asked.

Kal contemplated the slices. “I don’t know.”

“I think I would call it toast,” Lois said.

“Toast,” Kal said with perfect pronunciation.

“Kal, do you have any idea how astounding it is that you have picked up my language so quickly?”

“No,” he said.

Lois chuckled and bit from the ‘toast’. It was sweet, sort of like a flat crispy piece of cake. “Why did you ask me to go with you to the beach this morning?”

Kal sipped from their coffee. “Because you said you wouldn’t marry me.”

“Oh?”

“I asked you to marry me, and seven times you said you wouldn’t, so I researched Kryptonian Law and discovered there is no rule preventing me from taking you as my wife.”

“What would happen to Za?”

“She would remain my official wife.”

Lois could feel hot, indignant tears rising. “And what would that make me?”

“You would be the wife I chose,” Kal said simply.

“How very convenient,” Lois snapped. “You have your cake and eat it too.”

Kal recoiled at her tone. “I don’t know what cake is, Lois,” he said evenly. “But I can see that you still don’t want to marry me, so I will continue to work through my plans.”

“You have *plans* to coerce me into marrying you?”

“I have plans,” Kal said. “I really hope you will change your mind, but I won’t force you into anything.”

“How many dates did you think it would take for me to capitulate?” she demanded.

“I don’t understand dates.”

Lois was in no mood for a language lesson. “You’re married, Kal,” she said coolly. “Whatever your plans are, unless they involve me being your only wife, they won’t work.”

He looked crestfallen. “They won’t?” he asked.

His simple candour dissolved her annoyance like boiling water poured on sugar. It wasn’t his fault they were in this situation. “Kal, you’re *married*,” Lois said softly. “Where I come from, a marriage is one man and one woman.”

His eyes rammed into hers. “Do you think I love Za?”

Lois shook her head. “I know you don’t love her.”

“Who do I love?”

She stared into the coffee. “Me,” she mumbled.

Kal’s hand reached out and lifted Lois’s chin so that her eyes met his. “I want to marry you so much, Lois,” he said earnestly. “I don’t think I will ever have the words so you can understand how much I want a real marriage with you. Legally, under Kryptonian Law, I can marry you, but I will never do it unless you want it, too. I hope you will reconsider, but even if you don’t, it won’t change that I love you and will always want to marry you.”

“And you think early morning walks along the beach will

convince me?” Lois asked gently.

“I didn’t think it would be just one walk,” Kal said a little defensively. “But I have many other ideas.”

Lois had to hide her smile. “Such as?”

“Drinking beverage with you. Ordering more interesting food for us to share. Learning to speak your language without the Translator. Planning things for us to do together. Showing you that I don’t intend to hide my feelings for you.”

“Have you thought about exactly what our marriage would entail?”

“I know there are many decisions to be made,” Kal said. “I thought we would decide them together.”

“Tell me more about your plans,” Lois said, relishing being with someone who was willing to simply answer her questions without ducking and weaving.

“I thought I should kiss you and hug you.” Kal glanced away, before turning back with a small smile. “Although that isn’t just because I want to marry you — that is also because I really like doing that with you.”

Again Lois had to hide her smile. “Anything else?”

“I am going to tell you ... ”

Kal’s words died, and his gaze dropped to the floor. “Tell me what?” she asked.

His eyes remained low. “There is something about me ... something I have never told anyone.”

The possibilities filtered through Lois’s mind. Was he going to tell her he had never slept with his wife? “Why are you going to tell me?”

Kal lifted his head and looked at her with solemn eyes. “Because I don’t want anything between us,” he said. “And also because I understand that you feel as if you will merely be another wife to me, so I tried to think of things that are only for you and me.”

“Like sharing a secret with me?”

“Yes. You said married people tell each other everything.”

“Are you going to tell me tonight?”

“No,” Kal said. “I am going to tell you as soon as I can speak your language well enough.”

“Why is it so important that you tell me in my language?”

“Because I am very concerned about how you will react ... what you will think of me when you know, so I hope that by telling you in your language ... maybe you will understand.”

“Is it something about your marriage?” Lois asked. “About your wife?”

“No.”

Lois could feel the curiosity crawling up the sides of her brain. “You won’t tell me now?”

“No.”

“What happens if you tell me and I still won’t marry you?”

“I’ll feel bad.”

“You’ll feel bad about trusting me with your secret?”

“No, I’ll feel bad about you not wanting to marry me.”

“It’s not about what I *want*, Kal,” Lois insisted. “It’s -”

“Yes, it is, Lois,” he said quietly.

Her protest died, unspoken, on her lips. He was right. Earth, with its conventions and mores, could no longer be her frame of reference. “What if I said I can be with you, but we can’t be married?” she suggested.

“I will always like being with you,” Kal said. “But I will never stop wanting to marry you.”

Why? In Kal’s culture, marriage was not necessarily exclusive and — like the younger brother in the first dispute — could be annulled if it got in the way of family responsibilities. “Why is marriage so important to you?”

“I don’t know.” His eyes gleamed with a rock-solid determination. “But it is.”

“And if I were to say that I will marry you,” Lois said, “what

would happen then?”

“I will ask you to tell me about Earth Marriage Ceremonies,” Kal said. “I will ask Tek to officiate, and I will try to make it as close to your dreams as I can. Then ... I will do everything I can to make you happy for as long as I live.”

Lois was tempted to push aside her doubts, wrap her arms around his neck, kiss him extravagantly, and admit the truth to both of them — that she desperately wanted to marry him. That she loved him totally and had no doubts her heart would be safe if she entrusted it to him.

She could be his. In some ways, she already was.

But she wanted him to be hers. Truly hers. Exclusively hers.

“Is that what you were doing yesterday?” Lois asked. “When you had all the books on the bed? Were you researching whether you could be married to two women?”

“Yes.”

Did you see the diagram? “Didn’t you know?”

“I was instructed to read the entire Law in the months before my Investiture, and I thought I had — but I didn’t remember that bit, and I haven’t looked at that part of the Law since.”

Did you understand the diagram? “Because you weren’t interested in a second marriage until now?”

“Yes. And because there are no Disputes requiring me to research the part of the Law dealing with marriage of the Supreme Ruler.”

Have you thought about doing that? “How many wives are you allowed?”

Kal looked uncomfortable. “More than one,” he admitted.

Have you thought about doing that with me? “How many more than one?”

“Lo-is,” he said on weary sigh.

Have you wondered if I think about doing that with you? “How many?”

Kal sighed. “As many as I want.”

She should have expected that.

“Will you dine with me tonight?” Kal asked.

“Kal,” Lois said, “I eat with you every night.”

“But tonight, would you go to your room and get ready, and then wait for me to come and get you?”

“Are you going to ask me to marry you again?”

“Is that what you want me to do?”

“No, but that is what often happens on Earth,” Lois said. “A man sets up a dinner date with a woman and during the date, he asks her to marry him.”

“It is not my plan to ask you to marry me tonight.”

“Good.”

“But any time you’d like to agree to marry me, please tell me, and I will ask.”

Lois looked for a hint of amusement in his earnestness, but she couldn’t find it. “I’ll do that,” she said, matching his seriousness.

“Good,” Kal said. “We have an appointment? Tonight?”

“Yes. A date.”

“A date?”

“On Earth when a man and a woman go out together, that is called a date.”

He smiled. “We have a date.”

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Lois finished writing her story about the grandfather and his walk along a beach with his grandchildren.

There was still an hour before lunch. An hour before Kal would come.

Lois’s restlessness had been fired by the taste of life outside the gates. Tek had said Riz wanted her to visit again. Lois jumped up from her desk and left Kal’s room.

Half way along the corridor, she stopped.

She didn’t have another book ready, but maybe she could

take something else to thank Riz for her hospitality and friendship. Riz wouldn’t understand a spoken ‘thank you’ which made it seem even more important not to arrive empty-handed.

But what could she take?

Other than the corridor, the chambers, and Kal’s bedroom, Lois hadn’t been anywhere else inside Kal’s building.

There had to be a kitchen. Kal ordered food, and it was delivered. It had to be prepared somewhere.

Lois backtracked to Kal’s chambers. Further along the corridor, she saw another door. When she came to it, she could hear activity on the other side — movement and voices. Was it a meeting? Was Kal in there? Meeting with his Cabinet? Would the unexpected appearance of his concubine embarrass the Supreme Ruler?

Lois listened intently and decided there was definitely too much movement for a meeting. She tapped on the door.

When it opened, she immediately smelled the aroma of food. A middle-aged man — middle-aged for Earth, she hadn’t seen any elderly people on New Krypton — looked back at her. “Hello,” she said. “My name is Lois.”

He waited for her to continue. She needed a question, not a statement. “Do you have any cookies?” she asked.

“No.”

“Anything made with sugar?”

“We have puddings,” he said.

Puddings? She could ask what they were, but it would be more informative to sample them. “Could I have four, please?” Lois asked.

He turned, left, and came back a minute later with a plate containing four lightly tanned clusters that reminded Lois of muffins. She took the proffered plate. “Thank you,” she said with a beaming smile. “What is your name?”

“Nib,” he said.

“Thank you very much, Nib,” Lois said. “And thank you for making the beverage for me.”

He closed the door. Lois hurried along the corridor, eagerly looking forward to sharing the ‘puddings’ with Riz and her children.

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The ‘puddings’ were not particularly moist, but they were sweet and complemented Riz’s coffee perfectly. Riz gave one each to her children and then the two women sat at the table together.

“Do you mind if I ask you questions?” Lois said.

“No.”

“You said Nor is the next in line to be the Supreme Ruler. That if there was a death and no child, Nor would become the Supreme Ruler.”

“That is correct.”

“If he wanted it enough, wouldn’t it be a simple task to ... ”

“The Supreme Ruler is extremely well guarded. And the rules governing his safety are prohibitive — the murderer and his closest ten relatives are all executed.”

Lois swallowed. “Who ruled over New Krypton before ... ten years ago?”

“The Cabinet.”

“Lord Nor, Lord Ching, and Lord Yent?”

“No — the Cabinet then consisted of Lord Ked and Lord Yent. The former being Nor’s father. Lord Ching was too young, and his father didn’t survive the Transition, so their family seat was vacant.”

“The interim cabinet consisted of two Regal Nobles from the south?”

“Yes.”

“Did that work well?”

“There was a lot of violence — much more than now. The people of the north didn’t like the situation, but full-scale war

was averted because everyone knew it was temporary. We knew that as soon as Kal-El reached adulthood, he would take the mantle of Supreme Ruler.”

“So protecting ... the child ... was important?”

“It was imperative,” Riz said. “He was the hope of peace throughout the early years. Without him, there would have been no future for New Krypton. Without him — the only one of the Regal blood of both Houses — the warring sides would have fought until one side was annihilated.”

“It means *that* much?”

“To some people, yes.”

“I saw the three Regal Nobles at the Report, but I didn’t know who they were.”

“The old one is Lord Yent. He was a Regal Noble on Krypton. His family is of the least rank. The next in age is Lord Nor. He became a Regal Noble on the death of his father three years ago. Lord Ked lived until he was nearly fifty, so Nor had to wait a long time to become a Regal Noble. The youngest, and second behind Nor, is Lord Ching. He was born in the final year on Krypton.”

“How did the cabinet determine laws and make rules?” Lois asked. “Like the rule that a woman can be taken as a concubine even if that is not her wish?”

“When we arrived on New Krypton, the Law of the South and the Law of the North were merged.”

“The cabinet did this? Nor’s father and Yent?”

“Yes,” Riz said.

“Did they favour the Law of the South?”

“Not obviously. When we arrived on New Krypton, there were more people from the North than from the South. Had the Cabinet favoured the South too openly, they would have risked a Civil War with the odds against them.”

“The law they established still stands today?”

“Mostly. The current Supreme Ruler has abolished the worst of the unjust rules.”

“Such as?”

“Such as a Noble cannot be charged with the murder of someone of lower class.”

“Then how did Nor get away with it?” The question burst from Lois before she could contain it.

“The Rule was changed after that incident,” Riz explained. “The Supreme Ruler waited until the case had died down, and then changed the Law.”

“Why wait?”

“Because he understands that Civil War is in the interest of no one.” Riz rose and brought the coffee jug to the table and then refilled both of their cups. “Are women on your planet forced to marry?”

“Not in my culture,” Lois said. “And we don’t have concubines, either. Certainly not concubines without any rights.”

“Undoubtedly the concubine system is open to abuse, but it serves women well.”

Lois wasn’t sure about that at all. “How?”

“For a long time, there were many more women than men. A heavy portion of the young men died every summer in the Old War. By allowing concubines, it gave women the chance to have children and raise them in safety.”

“What does a concubine do if she doesn’t have children?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“On what she wants to do,” Riz said. “Some return to their homes during the daylight hours and help there. Some work in the hospital. Some work on the farms. Some do little other than sit around and gossip.”

“Is that why there is the rule about not speaking of their master?”

“Partly,” Riz said. “That rule was one of the last ones

instigated by the Cabinet before the Investiture.”

So was its purpose to keep the people ignorant of Kal’s isolation?

Dom approached her mother and patted her arm. Riz turned to her daughter. “Can we have lunch?” the child asked.

Lois realised she probably should leave. “I’m sorry, Riz, I have stayed too long,” she said. “And I asked so many questions, you didn’t have a chance to ask about my planet.”

“I enjoy talking with you,” Riz said. “Will you come again?”

“Yes.”

Riz went to a drawer. When she turned around, she was

holding a large, thick-toothed comb. “Barter?” she said.

Lois eyed the comb enviously. “Riz, I didn’t bring the

puddings just so you would give me something.”

“Do you have a comb?” Riz asked.

“No,” Lois admitted.

“Take this one,” Riz said. “I have two.”

“Thank you, Riz.”

Lois felt a strong inclination to give Riz a friendly hug. She didn’t — because she couldn’t predict how Riz would respond, and Lois was wary of doing anything that could possibly damage their budding friendship. So, she merely smiled.

And left ... with her comb.

As she walked away from Riz’s door, Lois noticed some indistinct lines drawn in the dirt. She stopped and examined them. They were a hopscotch grid — a grid that had been smudged by little footprints.

Grinning broadly, Lois walked back to Kal’s gates.

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Kal had attended the meeting of the Water Committee. The lack of success of the drilling operations had given rise to heated debate about whether they should continue at the same sites, move to other sites, or abandon the project completely.

Despite opposition from Yent, they eventually reached the decision to continue drilling at the chosen sites.

Kal then met with the chief of the Medical team who informed him that the bodies from the massacre had been released for burial. Kal signed the entries into the Register of Births and Deaths.

He still had half an hour before lunch. He hurried back to his bedroom. Lois had said she would be writing the story for Tek’s children. He felt the surge of his anticipation as he neared his room ... and then felt it collapse when he found his room empty.

Kal returned to his Chambers and took out the volume he hadn’t had the time to finish reading yesterday. He sat on the bed and opened it.

Mostly it expounded the Law governing the Supreme Ruler and the Taking of Concubines.

Kal skimmed the rules and sub-rules regarding the availability of the wife and concubines upon the death of the Supreme Ruler.

He turned the page and continued reading. Amongst the long-winded Law, he could find nothing outlawing him taking a second wife and nothing to stop him marrying his concubine. He turned the page again, his interest dwindling fast.

Then he saw it.

The picture.

The picture of a man and a woman.

And, like the sudden crash of an avalanche, he understood.

*That* was how other people conceived a child. They didn’t do it with samples and separate houses.

*That* was why married people lived together.

*That* was why married people slept in the same bed.

And with a revelation that squeezed the breath from his lungs, he understood something else — *this* was what he ached to do with Lois.

*That* was how he could get closer to her.

Kal closed the book with a snap and stared ahead.  
*That* would be ... There just weren't words to describe how incredible *that* would be with Lois. The inherent intimacy shattered his mind. Would she want to do *that* with him?

He couldn't do it unless she wanted to do it, too.

Would she want him? Would she want him as much as he wanted her?

Had she even thought about it?

If she married him and slept in his bed every night, would they do so much more than hug and kiss?

He hoped so.

Because that would be beyond incredible.

Kal dragged himself from his thoughts and quickly took the book back to the shelves in the Chambers.

Why had he never thought about it before?

Because, until Lois, there was no room in his mind for anything other than leading New Krypton.

Sometimes, he'd wondered in passing if life could be more than endless meetings and settling Disputes and eating alone and trying to manage dwindling water supplies and standing strong against the ever-present threat of the Old War re-igniting.

He'd wondered ... But then reality had interrupted, and he'd accepted that this was his life and his people deserved his full attention.

But now ... Now there was Lois.

Lois who had shaken his life to the core ... changed the way he thought about so many things ... shown him how bleak and empty his life had been.

Kal could feel his face heat as he recalled telling Lois about having to give the sample each month. She had not been able to hide her surprise. Had she been surprised by the method, or had she comprehended his lack of knowledge and been surprised by that?

Was that why she wouldn't stay in his bed? Because she was scared he would do that to her?

But, he was sure it wasn't supposed to be something one person did to another; it had to be something two people did together.

So ... was there *any* chance that Lois would want to do it with him?

If she deduced that he hadn't known about this, she was going to suspect his secret.

It was vital that he tell her the secret before she worked it out for herself. Then, at least he would have the opportunity to try to explain.

Would his secret shock her?

Yes.

Would it repel her?

He hoped not.

She had thought it sad when she'd discovered that he'd never eaten a meal with anyone until her arrival.

She would understand.

And she would still love him.

That knowledge filled him with joy.

Lois would still love him.

Wouldn't she?

He hoped so.

Because he knew that he couldn't go back to his old life. He couldn't go back to any life that didn't include Lois.

He needed her.

He would always need her.

## Part 18

Kal wasn't in his room when Lois returned from her visit with Riz. On the desk was half a glass of the blue drink and a plate with what looked like the meatball stuff in slice form.

Clearly, Kal had already eaten.

Under the plate was a piece of paper. Lois picked it up and immediately smiled. It was a simple drawing of a woman sitting on a bed facing a man sitting on a chair. The man had a plate of food on his lap; the woman was holding a cup with a waft of steam floating above it. Above the picture was the word, 'LOIS' and below it was the word, 'KAL.'

Lois laughed.

A note from a man who knew how to write just two words in her language, yet he had managed to convey so much.

*I was thinking about you as I ate my lunch.*

*I wish you were here with me.*

*I am looking forward to our date tonight.*

I am looking forward to it, too, Kal, Lois thought.

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Lois had intended to spend the afternoon writing her journal, but found herself distracted by thoughts of Lord Nor.

His father had been a part of a committee of two who had established the Law on New Krypton. If Kal hadn't survived, Ked would have become the Supreme Ruler and Nor would be the absolute authority now.

Kal had no parents and, as far as she knew, no close relatives.

*Someone* must have protected him.

It would have been just too easy for Ked and Nor to 'extinguish' the only person — a child — who stood between them and power.

But who?

Who had protected young Kal?

Who had wanted Kal to become the Supreme Ruler enough to ensure his safety?

Why hadn't his parents travelled with Kal? How had they died, yet he'd survived? Had they given the care and protection of their child into someone's hands?

Who?

Someone from the North? Lois looked at her list. Eb's husband, Jib, Mo, Riz, and Ching were from the North.

Ching?

No — he had been a child himself.

In the early years on New Krypton, Kal's survival was important because he represented both sides — he was their hope, Riz had said. But what about now? If Kal were no longer their leader — Lois refused to dwell on the implications of that thought — would the people accept Nor?

If Kal remained childless, would they have a choice other than to accept Nor? Would the only other choice be war?

But to destroy the samples and merely wait — that seemed far too tame for a man who had bashed his concubine to death.

There had to be more.

Nor just didn't seem like a man who left things to chance.

When it was time for Lois to go to her room to get ready for her date with Kal, she still had no answers. A lot of questions, but no answers.

But her gut told her Nor was a man with a plan.

And that plan did not bode well for Kal.

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Kal dabbed some of the cologne on his neck, hoping that at some time during the evening, Lois would wrap her arms around his shoulders and move in close.

He put on his newest coat and straightened it. He glanced around the room and tidied the already tidy pile of Disputes. He had no intention of working on them this evening.

When he was sure that everything was ready, Kal walked to Lois's room, aware of his excitement at the prospect of spending the evening with her — aware too that he was nervous, just as he had been before he had kissed her.

He really wanted tonight to go well.

He wanted Lois to smile a lot. He hoped there would be opportunity to turn off their Translators so he could become more

proficient in her language. He wanted to hold her hand and touch her face.

And, if everything had gone really well, he was hoping it would be appropriate to linger over their goodnight kiss.

He knocked on her door and waited for it to open.

When it did, his breath stuck in his throat. She had done something to her hair — he wasn't exactly sure what. His best guess was that she had moved some of it from one side to the other. It was straighter somehow, and shinier. Actually, he had no idea what she'd done, but it looked very good. "I like whatever you did to your hair," he said.

Lois smiled — smiled as if she couldn't help smiling — and it warmed him inside and settled some of his apprehension.

"Thank you, Kal," she said.

"Shall we go?" he asked.

"Yes." She stepped forward, but paused as she passed him and hesitated long enough to kiss his mouth. It was short, but there was something about it that made him think it held a promise of more to come. She smelled wonderful. Kal took her hand and walked her to his bedroom.

In his bedroom, Kal settled Lois on the bed and then went to the Dining Room for the food. He returned with a plate and a glass of clear liquid.

"What are we eating?" Lois asked.

Kal sat down, examining the plate of food. "I don't know," he said.

"What did you order?"

"I told the chef I wanted his best meal."

Kal handed Lois her stick and they both tasted experimentally. Kal looked at her, hoping she would like it.

She smiled. "I think it's a variety of fish," she said. "I don't recognise it exactly, but it tastes wonderful."

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Lois could see how important it was to Kal that she liked the meal. She didn't need to pretend — it was delicious.

But the way Kal looked — and smelled — she was confident any food would taste good. "Do you have any special plans for tonight?" Lois asked.

"Yes."

If she wanted to know his plans, all she had to do was ask. That was one of the amazing things about being with Kal. But surprises were fun, too. "Are you going to tell me your plans or surprise me?"

"Maybe ..." He grinned. "Maybe, I'll keep some things a surprise."

"What about your big secret?" Lois asked. "Are you going to tell me that tonight?"

"I haven't learnt your language well enough yet."

"You could tell me in your language."

He thought about that for a moment, and then suddenly broke into a grin. "What will you give me in return?"

Lois nearly choked on her fish. Kal was *teasing* her. His eyes were sparkling, and his smile seemed barely contained in his face. "What do you want?" she threw back.

"I could be talked into just about anything for one of your kisses," he informed her, still grinning.

Lois stared at him, incapable of articulating any sort of comeback.

"Think about it while we eat," he suggested easily. "We have all evening to talk."

Lois turned her attention to their meal, suddenly not in the least hungry for food. What she craved was more of Kal — more of his banter, more of his grinning light heartedness. He had given her the merest taste — yet it had been enough to verify that she faced a lifetime of delectable addiction. She shot a surreptitious glance at him. He seemed less troubled by her refusal to agree to marry him. He would ask her again — she was

sure of that. And when he did, she intended to find out *exactly* what he meant by marriage.

Lois sipped from the clear liquid — it was sweet, like the juice of a fruit.

When they had finished eating, Kal put their plate on the floor and relaxed back in the chair, studying her with just the suggestion of a smile.

"Have you thought any more about a deal?" Lois asked.

"Can I get a piece of your paper from the desk?" he asked. "Sure."

He shuffled through her papers and then returned with one sheet. When he held it up, Lois recognised it as her letter to him. "I noticed this writing starts with my name and finishes with yours," he said. "Is it a letter?"

She hadn't realised the full ramifications of teaching him written words. "Yes."

"To me, from you?"

"Yes."

"I can't read it."

"No."

"Would you read it to me, please?"

Would she? She had written it secure in the shield of privacy. But did it say anything that she didn't want him to know? "Why do you want me to read it to you, Kal?" she asked, buying time to navigate her way through this. "Is it because you'd like to know what I said in the letter? Or because you are worried about telling me your secret?"

"Both," he admitted.

"Why are you so worried?"

"You may feel differently about me when you know everything about me."

"Do you think that is what will happen?"

"No," he said. "But losing you would be ... unendurable."

Lois took the letter from him and placed it on the bed next to her. "I think it would be a good idea if we got it done first. I promise I will read you the letter after you've told me the secret."

He hesitated. His throat bobbed. His face and neck coloured a little.

Then Lois heard a click and the red light above the door flashed. Kal turned. "Someone wants to see me," he said, clearly frustrated by the interruption. "I am sorry. I will be back as soon as I can. Please don't leave."

"I won't leave."

Kal stood and went out the door, shutting it behind him.

He was gone for a minute. Then a minute more. Lois perused her letter, imagining reading it to Kal. He was going to ask why she wanted to hold him but couldn't. And that was going to lead to a whole lot of explaining. Lois grinned suddenly. Maybe she should go with the writer's mantra — show, don't tell.

That would be easier. And a whole lot more fun.

She hauled her mind away from that and thought about Kal's secret. What could it possibly be? That he wasn't really married to Za? That it was the Kryptonian equivalent of a publicity stunt? That he couldn't father children? That he had other wives hidden away somewhere?

Lois shrugged. None of them seemed likely, but she figured there was a good chance that whatever it was, it wouldn't seem likely.

Unless it was that he had never made love with a woman.

Kal hadn't come back. Lois could hear the murmur of low voices on the other side of the door. She stared at the door, wondering how rude it would be to attempt to hear what they were saying. It wouldn't be rude at all, she decided, not for a reporter.

And anyway, if something bad had happened — another massacre — it would give her some advance warning for when Kal came back.

She stared at the door, ears straining.  
 Then something happened.  
 Something that, had she been standing, would have caused her knees to crumple under her.  
 The door peeled back and she stared *through* it.  
 Not through the doorway.  
 But literally through the closed door.  
 Lois slammed shut her eyes and tried to reassemble her splattered wits. What had just happened wasn't possible. People did not see through doors.  
 She opened her eyes again and gave a relieved snort that she could see the door. And she couldn't see through it.  
 Then, it peeled back again, and Lois saw Kal talking with two men.

As she stared, the two men walked away, and Kal turned towards her. She watched him approach the closed door. She saw him reach for the handle and open the door.

Then he came through the doorway.

The moment he saw her, Kal hurried to her side and crouched next to her, his face concerned. "Lois," he said. "Lois. What is wrong?"

She snatched the glass from the floor and gulped some of the juice. "Wh ... wh ... at makes you think there is s ... s ... something wrong?" she asked.

"You've gone really pale, and you are shaking," Kal said. He gently extracted the glass from her grip and replaced it on the floor. Then his warm hand rested on her forearm. "What can I do?"

Lois slowly shook her head.

"I could hug you," Kal suggested.

Without waiting for her to reply, he helped her to her feet and gathered her into a close embrace. "Whatever happened Lois, we will be all right," he said. "If we're together, we'll be all right. I won't ever leave you."

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Kal could feel Lois's body shaking. He shaped his hand around her hair and eased her into the space between his neck and his shoulder.

A feeling rose in him.

A feeling he had known many times before.

The feeling of his need and his desire to protect those who needed his protection.

But this was stronger, purer, and more concentrated. This was specific to this woman. He tightened his arms around Lois. Whatever had upset her, he would do everything in his power to fix it. If it took strength or authority, he *would* fix it.

And if it took something else, he would get whatever was needed from somewhere.

He felt the surge of his love for her.

And his pain because something had upset her.

He discovered his hand on her head was moving — gliding slowly through her soft hair. It would probably untidy it, but he couldn't help it. He had to soothe her, had to comfort her, had to do something to make her world right again. "It's all right," he murmured against her ear. "It's all right, my Lois. My lovely Lois. I love you. It's all right."

He held her until her quivering had stopped. Then he gently eased her from his body and looked into her face. "What is wrong?" he asked.

She didn't respond. He carefully sat her down on the bed. He knelt next to her and took her hands in his. She was staring ahead, although it seemed unlikely that she was seeing anything very clearly. "Lois?" he said gently.

Her eyes lost their unfocused glaze and turned to him. Kal felt a surge of relief. He smiled, a little hesitantly, hoping she would respond. She gave a little twitch of her mouth. "What happened?" he asked. "Are you unwell?"

"I d ... don't know what happened," she said, her voice shaking.

"Lois, I am worried. I think I should take you to the medical room."

She shook her head. "I don't need to go to the medical room."

"You don't have to tell me what happened," Kal said. "But please, please tell me if you are going to be all right."

She managed a quivery smile. "I'm going to be fine, Kal." She took her hand from where he was holding it and touched his face. "I'm sorry I worried you."

"What happened?" he said.

"I don't know," Lois said. "But I think I just trumped your secret."

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Kal waited, unsure what he should do.

Lois stood shakily and looked around the room. Kal hovered, his hand on her waist to steady her. "Kal?" she faltered.

"Yes."

"Is it possible to move the bed over so it's in the corner against two walls?"

Kal bent low and pushed the bed into the corner.

"I want us to sit close," Lois said. "To be comfortable and to be able to see each other's faces." She put the pillows in the corner and gestured for Kal to sit there.

He sat against the bed-head. She sat on the bed with her legs folded under her, leaning sideways into the wall and facing him.

Kal smiled at her, hoping she would smile back.

She did, but it looked like she'd had to force it to her mouth.

It warmed him as her smile always did — but it wasn't enough to blunt the barbs that were twisting through his insides. He wished he hadn't said anything about his secret. Not yet. Not with Lois clearly distressed about something. He had so wanted their first date to end well.

But it was too late now.

"I guess we both have things we need to say," she said.

"Yes."

"Do you want to go first?"

"I don't know," Kal said. "Do you?"

"Whoever goes first, we should agree beforehand that we will both say the things we need to say."

"Yes."

"So who goes first?" Lois asked.

"You choose," he said. "I will do whatever you want."

"You go first."

"All right." Kal's deep breath reverberated through him, and he could feel the pounding rhythm of his heart. "What I'm about to tell you I have not told anyone before. I was told that it was my duty to never tell anyone."

"Who told you that?" Lois asked. "Ked and Yent?"

"Yes," he said. "How did you know?"

"Gut."

"Gut?"

"It doesn't matter now," Lois said. "I'll explain later. Go on."

"I've thought a lot about how I should do this. I wanted to do it with the Translators off, but I haven't learnt enough of your language yet." He enclosed her hand into both of his. "Please, Lois, if there is anything you don't understand, please ask questions until you do."

"What if I ask a question that you don't want to answer?"

"I don't want any secrets from you."

"OK."

"Please remember that I'm still Kal. I'm still the man you have come to know."

He could see he had worried her. "Is it *that* bad?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"Tell me, Kal," Lois said. "Just tell me. Whatever you say, it

won't change that I love you."

Kal smiled. "That's what I'm hoping."

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Anxiety cloaked Lois's heart as she waited for Kal to begin. This secret — whatever it was — was clearly of utmost importance to him. She tried to prepare herself for whatever was coming. He trusted her enough to tell her — trusted her enough to risk her reaction. However shocked she was, she could not fail him.

"I became the Supreme Ruler of New Krypton the day I reached sixteen years of age," Kal said. "I married Za one month after this. I began my preparation to lead New Krypton at the age of fifteen and one half years."

"You only had half a year to prepare?" Lois questioned. "That would be official preparation, right? They would have been preparing you all your life to do this?"

Kal didn't answer her question other than the merest shake of his head. "I was four months old when Krypton was destroyed."

"But they had a way to keep you safe?"

"Yes."

Something in how his hand tightened around hers told Lois they had reached the core of his secret. "How?" she asked.

"They put me in hiatus."

"What do you mean ... hiatus?"

"They made me unconscious just before Krypton was destroyed."

"So you missed the evacuation from Krypton?"

"Yes."

There was more. "And you ... missed the three years of searching for a new planet?"

"Yes."

There was still more. Something in Kal's tone told her there was more. "And?"

"And all the other years until I was fifteen and a half."

## Part 19

"They didn't wake you?" Lois shrieked. "Not for *fifteen* years?" She saw the sting of her words lash across Kal's face and took his hand in both of hers. "They didn't wake you?" she asked much more gently.

"No."

"So you have no memories of before you were fifteen?"

"No."

"No memories of your childhood?"

"I didn't have a childhood."

He said it without a trace of self-pity, but it still gouged a valley through her heart. "Oh, Kal," she said, as her tears welled. "Oh, Kal."

Kal's gentle touch dabbed the moisture from her eyes. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Lois smiled through her tears. "I'm all right, Kal. But you ... you have missed out on so much."

"It doesn't matter now — I have you."

It was a statement, but Lois could hear the shadow of his uncertainty. "Yes," she assured him as her fingers trailed across his cheek. "You have me now."

He trapped her hand and brought it to his mouth where he dotted it with a row of tender kisses. "Then nothing else matters," he said.

"No," she agreed. "Nothing else matters. But I grieve for all that was taken from you."

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Kal had tried to envision the range of Lois's possible reactions to his secret, but her transparent sympathy surprised him. "You feel sad for me?" he asked.

Lois nodded as a solitary tear broke free and journeyed down her cheek. "Of course, I do," she said. "I feel sad. And I feel

angry at what they've done to you and ... and I am so incredibly in awe of who you are despite having no parents and no childhood and no memories and no foundations."

He stroked away her tear, loving the cyclic symbolism of responding to the pain she felt on his behalf. Lois smiled, and then, with a quick movement, she shuffled forward, swung one leg over his thighs, wrapped her arms around his neck, and clasped him into her chest.

The most amazing, completely unfamiliar feeling engulfed Kal. It was as if he was being protected. He — the Supreme Ruler, big, strong, and all-powerful — felt the fierce protection coming from her — so small and so petite.

He relaxed into her embrace.

If she never moved again, he would know utter contentment.

After a long time, she unwound from him. He found her eyes and asked the question that had burned inside him almost from the moment he'd met her. "You don't think I'm weird?"

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Weird? Lois laughed. She was the alien here. And Kal — considering all he had been denied — was the *least* weird person she had ever met. "You know what I feel most of all?"

"What?"

"More than anything, I feel an overwhelming compulsion to make up for some of the many things you've missed."

His smile evolved slowly, generated, she felt sure, by a few ideas of exactly how she could accomplish that particular undertaking.

With sharp regret, Lois decided that those ideas were best left unexplored for now. "So that was how they kept you safe?" she asked.

"Yes," Kal said. "My parents ordered it because the Scientists told them it was the only way to guarantee my survival."

Was it protection from the dangers of space travel to no known destination? Or protection from Nor and his father? "Why didn't someone wake you as soon as they found New Krypton?"

"That was the original intention."

"But?"

"But we lost much of our technology, and with the limitations imposed by the new environment ..."

"And it just so happened that they got their act together right when you were needed to be the Supreme Ruler?" Lois said, unable to smother the censure in her tone.

"If I hadn't accepted the mantle of leadership the day I turned sixteen years, it would have irretrievably passed to Ked and his family."

So had Ked, and therefore Nor, believed the position of the Supreme Ruler was theirs? Had they eagerly anticipated their supremacy — only have it snatched away by Kal's appearance?

The timing was too perfect; someone had engineered it. Who? The same person who had protected the young, completely vulnerable Kal? "Who was the head scientist?" Lois asked. "Who looked after you?"

"Tek's father, Kip."

"When did Kip die?"

"Ten years ago."

"Before or after you awoke?"

"Four days after."

So Kip paid for his loyalty with his life. "They killed him?"

"It wasn't murder," Kal said. "He fell from the cliffs on the east side of New Krypton."

"Fell?" Lois demanded. "Or was pushed?"

"The official investigation returned a verdict of accidental death," Kal said. "Those cliffs can be treacherous — they are slippery and the waves are extremely powerful."

Lois wasn't convinced. Not for one moment. She forced her mind from the insistent swirl of her suspicions and gave her full attention to Kal. His lingering concerns were still evident on his

face. “Your secret has shocked me, Kal,” she admitted. “But I don’t love you any less.” In fact, with revelation had come a deepening of her love.

He let out a long, long sigh and slumped back against the bed-head. Lois followed him, her head resting on the expanse of his chest. His arms tightened around her, pulling her close.

“What is your earliest memory?” she asked.

“I remember waking up,” Kal said. “Ked and Yent were there. They told me I was born to be the Supreme Ruler of New Krypton. They told me I had much to learn and I would need to apply myself to the things I needed to know. They said I had half a year and they would teach me.”

“Did you need to learn how to walk? How to talk?”

“I could walk,” Kal said. “Physically, I was like any other fifteen year old. My Translator had already been inserted. I understood them immediately, and with the Translator, I could communicate.”

“How could you have learnt a language while you were in ... hiatus?”

“Through the Translator, I suppose.”

“That doesn’t seem possible,” Lois asserted.

She felt the tension tighten through Kal’s shoulders. “I was a very confused fifteen-year-old,” he said. “From the first day, whenever I wasn’t resting, I was studying. There was just so much to learn. I began with reading and writing, and then I learnt Kryptonian History and Kryptonian Law. I learnt Science and Math. I learnt the geography of New Krypton. I learnt where all the houses were situated and who lived in each one. I learnt every family and the name of every person.”

“Who taught you all this?” Lois said. “Ked? Yent?”

“I was taught the education by Trey,” Kal answered. “He was my valet after I became the Supreme Ruler. Ked told me some things about being a leader. I didn’t see Yent much — not after that first day.”

“Who taught you justice and ethics?”

“Ked did a little, but I didn’t always agree with him.”

“You already had a sense of what was right? Apart from what they taught you?”

“Some things I just knew,” Kal said. “I believe it comes from my father.”

“Through the globe?” she questioned. “The one that was stolen?”

“Yes.”

Lois straightened from him and looked into his still-uneasy eyes. “Do my questions make you uncomfortable?”

Kal hesitated. “A little,” he said. “Not because I don’t want you to know, but because I don’t have all the answers.” He was silent for a long time. “There is much they didn’t tell me.”

Lois felt her colour rise. “Uhhh,” she offered.

“Like smiling and laughing and joking ... and loving.” He pushed back her hair with careful fingers. “But you taught me those things, Lois.”

“What did they say about your wife?”

“When they told me I had to marry her, I asked if she would move into my residence,” Kal said. “I knew Trey was married, and I knew he lived with his wife. Ked said that was for the underclasses and any true Noble did not live with his wife. I asked if I could meet her before the Marriage Ceremony, and he said that that thought was unbecoming for a Supreme Ruler.”

“Did you ever wonder why Ked wanted to keep you away from Za?”

Kal glanced down, took a deep breath, and then faced her again. “There was so much to learn. For a long time, I felt completely overwhelmed. I realise now that I should have asked more questions — but there were so many questions about being a leader ... I didn’t ever have the opportunity to ask the questions about being a man.”

Lois buried her hands in his hair and looked deep into his eyes. “You know more about being a man than anyone I’ve ever met.”

“They didn’t tell me about the physical contact between a man and his wife,” Kal said dolefully.

“You know now?”

He nodded. “It was in the Law. In the section about the Supreme Ruler marrying and taking concubines.”

He knew. He knew the theory. But the practice ... Lois gulped. She met his eyes and perceived that his thoughts were not dissimilar to hers. Suddenly, she became very conscious of exactly how close was their contact, and she slipped hastily from his lap and back onto the bed.

When she glanced hesitantly to Kal’s face, his anxiety had been overshadowed by a relaxed grin. “You can sit on me anytime you want to,” he offered.

Lois laughed, still feeling embarrassed. “It probably wasn’t very wise.”

“I know very little about the physical contact between a man and the woman he loves,” Kal said. “But I do know I will never do anything you don’t want me to do.”

Lois smiled. She had heard less-clumsy declarations before, but she had never heard a more sincere one. “I know that, Kal.” She deliberately allowed the reporter within her to rise, knowing it would ease them from the simmering awkwardness. “Maybe they realised that the greatest chance of unity for New Krypton would be if you and Za together provided strong leadership. Maybe they realised that you and Za together had every chance of producing an heir to be the next Supreme Ruler. Maybe they realised that isolated and alone, they had control over what you knew and that would make you easier to ... manipulate.”

“I always tried to make the right choices,” Kal said earnestly. “Sometimes that meant not doing what they told me. Sometimes it meant conflict.”

“Did Ked steal your globe?”

“I could never prove it,” Kal said. “But it’s possible.”

“Why was it so important that your past be kept such a big secret?”

“The people of New Krypton think I spent those years growing and being trained to become the Supreme Ruler.”

“Obviously, you never made public appearances.”

“No, but that is usual for the child of a Supreme Ruler.” His grin flashed. “We do not have newspapers and inquisitive story-writers to publicly document people’s lives.”

Lois chuckled. “If I had been here, I would not have rested until I knew where you were.”

“That I believe,” Kal said gravely. “You would always find me.”

“Yes.” Lois met his eyes and smiled. “Is there a reason the people cannot know now?”

“Ked told me that if they knew, the people of both sides would lose all respect for me; they wouldn’t believe in my capability to lead with such limited experience and training. And also, there is the stigma of having been in hiatus.”

“Why?”

“Because it was one of the methods used by the South to deal with their criminals.”

“Oh?”

“They had conducted research into repeat offenders and believed that time in prison made the criminal more likely to re-offend,” Kal explained. “So for a time, they banished prisons. The crime-rate soared, so they deduced that the threat of a prison term was needed for preventative reasons, but that the actual prison term only served to embitter and to enable the establishment of contacts with like-minded people.”

“So they developed the hiatus?”

Kal nodded. “They experimented with the worst of the

criminals and gradually developed a method that allowed successful reawakening at the conclusion of the prison term.”

“But you weren’t being punished for anything,” Lois said indignantly. “You were an innocent baby.”

“An unexpected side-effect of the experimentation was that while in hiatus, the body becomes temporarily indestructible,” Kal said. “As Krypton drew ever closer to obliteration, they believed hiatus was the method that represented my best chance for survival.”

“Did your father plan for it to continue for fifteen years?” Lois could hear the harshness in her tone. She took Kal’s hand into hers so if he sensed her outrage, he would know it wasn’t directed at him.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “But my parents didn’t survive.”

“When you arrived on New Krypton, don’t you think Nor and his father had a lot to gain if you never came out of the hiatus?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe that is what they were hoping.”

“Had I not been at my Investiture to accept the mantle on the day I turned sixteen years, Ked would have become the Supreme Ruler.”

“What about before then? What if you had died before then?”

“Kryptonian Law from both sides says that a child ruler cannot be replaced until sixteen years have passed from his birth.”

“Even if there is proof of his death?”

“Even then.”

So for Ked and Nor, it had been a waiting game from the beginning. Had they known Kal’s whereabouts throughout those years? If they had, wouldn’t it have been a simple task to kill the unprotected child who stood between them and the control of New Krypton? “Kip must have had a way to protect you, Kal,” Lois said. “A way to stop Ked from taking your life.”

“Neither Ked nor his son ever expressed the ambition to rule New Krypton.”

“Do you think Nor is content being merely a Regal Noble?”

“No.”

“Do you think it is in character for him to merely wait until you die so he or his son can take the mantle?”

“No.”

“Does that worry you?”

“For my people ... yes. For myself ... no. Until now.”

“Until now?”

“Because now,” Kal said, “I have so many reasons to live. Before, I had only one reason — to lead my people to unity and peace and prosperity.”

Lois squeezed his hand. “Do you think Nor is planning something?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know what?”

“No.”

“Why do you think he has waited this long?”

“It is recorded that when we arrived on New Krypton, nearly sixty percent of the people originated from the North. That figure is now fifty-one percent.”

“So, over twenty-three years, more people from the north have died than people from the south?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Remember the massacre a few days ago?” Kal asked. “Nine people died in total. Six from the North and three from the South.”

“Do you think Nor organised that?”

“I think ...” Kal paused. “I think he encouraged it. But without proof, allegations only serve to destabilise our planet.”

“You think Nor encouraged the killings even though he knew some from the south would die?”

“I believe Nor has no qualms in sacrificing the lives of those from the South if it contributes to balancing the numbers. I believe that once the numbers reach fifty percent, Nor will lead the men of the South into Civil War.”

Lois gulped. “You believe that?”

“Yes, I do,” Kal said solemnly.

Lois’s heart twisted into a knot of apprehension. “What will you do?” she asked Kal. “Will you lead the men of the north?”

“No,” Kal said. “I will continue as I have always done. I will uphold unity and speak for peace.”

“Is there any way to limit Nor’s power?” Lois asked. “Any way to depose him as a Regal Noble?”

“No,” Kal said. “It is his birthright. And to challenge it would be seen as very confrontational by the people from the South.”

“Then what chance does this planet have?”

“The only chance we have is if the people refuse to fight their brothers. If, when Nor calls, the men of the South refuse to respond. If, when Nor challenges and someone rises up to lead the North, the men of the North refuse to respond.”

“Do you think they will refuse?” Lois demanded. “Or do you think they will fight?”

“I don’t know.” Kal sighed. “I think it likely Nor will tell the people about my time in hiatus, and I will lose their respect. Without their respect, they will not follow my lead.”

“If the time comes,” Lois said, “if Nor does lead a rebellion, the people will remember how well you have led them these past ten years.”

Kal sighed again. “I hope so,” he said. “I really hope so.”

“But you’re not sure?”

“No. I have never been sure. From the first day that I understood our history, I have worried that we would return to the ways of the past.”

“That’s an awful lot to put on someone who is sixteen years old with a life experience of four months,” Lois said.

“I had no choice,” Kal said. “I had to be the leader my people needed. I had to rule for all Kryptonians, and I had to stand for unity.”

Lois ran her fingertips the length of his cheek and fixed her eyes in his. “You can be sure of my love and support,” she promised. “Whatever happens, I will be with you.”

He stared at her, his throat bobbing. “Thank you, Lois,” he said. “Thank you.”

She snuggled against him, her head on the slope of his shoulder. Kal’s arm tightened around her, enclosing her. She felt so incredibly safe here with Kal.

She was safe with him.

But did their safety extend beyond *them*? Beyond the doors of this bedroom?

Her instincts screamed loud their warning.

While Nor lived, Kal would never be safe.

And if Kal wasn’t safe, neither was she.

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“Are you going to tell me what happened when I went out of the room before?” Kal’s question broke into the silence.

“Yes.”

He waited.

Lois swung away from his body and leant against the wall. “It was ... weird, and I don’t know what happened. Well, I know *what* happened, but I don’t know how it happened, and I won’t have all the explanations for your questions either ...”

Kal’s hand lay calmly on hers. “Whatever it is, Lois, we will deal with it together.”

“I saw through the door,” she blurted.

His eyebrows lifted the tiniest amount. “You saw *through* the door?”

Lois nodded. “I saw two men talking with you. I saw them walk away, and I saw you come towards the door and open it.”

“Has anything like this ever happened before? When you were on Earth?”

“No.” Lois felt her tears rising. Suddenly, she wasn’t just the alien; she was the alien with weird abilities.

Kal gathered her into his arms and slowly rocked her. “Sssh,” he said gently. “It’s all right.”

Lois backed away. “It is?”

“Of course it is,” Kal assured her with a small smile. “You find out I slept through more than half of my life, and I find out you can see through doors. What could possibly be the problem?”

Lois laughed. “I love you,” she said.

“I love you.” He hugged her again and looked at her questioningly. “Lois?”

“Yes?”

“Can you see through anything else?”

“Like what?”

“The wall.”

She stared at the wall. The brown colour faded to transparency, and she saw into the chambers. “Yes,” she said shakily. “I can see through the wall.”

“Do you have to make it happen, or do you just look at something and it’s not there?”

“I have to make it happen.”

Kal smiled, full of love. “I understand that you’re shaken, Lois, but the important things have not changed.”

Lois tried to return his smile. “What’s important?” She knew, but she needed the reassurance of hearing him say it.

“There are only three things that are important,” Kal said.

“And they are?”

“You ... me ... and us being together. Nothing else matters.”

“Thank you.”

Kal leant across the bed and picked up her letter. He handed it to her. “You said you would read this.”

Lois took it, but her lingering tears blurred the words. It didn’t matter. She had no intention of reading it to him.

Not yet, anyway.

“Dear Kal,” she said, pretending to read from her letter. “Would you please ask me to marry you again? Because my answer has changed.”

## Part 20

Lois glanced up from her letter.

Kal stared at her, eyes alight, mouth curved into the most seductive grin she had ever seen — its power enhanced immeasurably by his complete ignorance of its potency. His chin sat in the cleft of his hand, thumb along one tantalising jaw-line, fingers clustered around the other.

He showed no inclination to move any time soon.

“Did ... did you understand what I said?” Lois asked hesitantly.

His hand dropped, and his grin widened. “I understood,” he confirmed.

“Are you going to ask?”

“Absolutely,” he said with rolling emphasis. “I’m just taking a few moments to enjoy what is inside me. I have never felt this good. Never.”

Again, Lois felt the tug of sadness at all he had missed.

Kal took her hand in his and held it with great care. “Lois,” he said. “I understand why you wouldn’t agree to marry me ... and I know we have to work out many things ... but please know that even if you say ‘yes’ to my question, I will never force you into anything that makes you uncomfortable.”

“I know that.”

“Is asking someone to marry you done a particular way on Earth?”

“Sometimes ... but I’d like you to do it just the way you want to.”

Kal let out a big, delighted breath. His eyes lowered, and he examined her hand for a moment before raising it to his mouth and gracing it with a petal of a kiss.

“Lois ...” He stopped, gulped, crashed into her eyes, and broke into a nervous grin. “This is the eighth time I’ve done this,” he said. “I should know what to do by now.”

“Just do what is in your heart.”

He carefully folded her hand into a fist and lifted it level with her chest. His right fist clenched and aligned with hers. “I want you to do the greeting sign,” he said. “One clenched fist signifies the superior person, but a clenched fist from both sides signifies absolute equality, mutual respect, and everlasting good will.”

Lois felt a tear escape and stipple down her cheek.

“Ready?” Kal asked.

She nodded.

He nodded.

Their fists thudded into their chests with soft harmony. In Kal’s unwavering eyes, Lois could see the gravity and significance of this action. “Have you ever done that before?” she asked. “With clenched fists from both people?”

“No.” His hand reached forward, palm up, and she put her hand in the amplex of his. “The notion of superiority sits uncomfortably with me,” Kal said. “I believe that if one person is superior to another, it should be because of choices and deeds, not because of the accident of birth. But, from the first moment I can remember, I was told that I am superior to all other Kryptonians. They accept it ... they *expect* it, and I was too occupied with everything else to challenge it — so I went along with it.”

“Until?”

“Until I met you.”

“My culture touts the ideal that all people are born equal.”

“That is a very good ideal,” Kal said. “But it is not the Kryptonian way.” He continued caressing her hand. “With you it is different — *you* are different.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“That is a wonderful thing. The best thing,” Kal smiled.

“Lois, I love you,” he said. “Without you, I wouldn’t even know of love. With you, my heart is full of love. I know there will never be a single moment that I will not love you.” He smiled, a little hesitantly. “Will you marry me?”

Lois’s smile was carried on a tremulous breath. “Yes, Kal,” she said. “I will marry you.”

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The jubilation surging through Kal was beyond anything he had ever imagined. He had allowed himself to dream of Lois promising to marry him, but he had not been able to conjure anything close to the whirlwind of excitement erupting inside him. He leant forward and kissed her mouth. He wondered if he should thank her. He didn’t — it seemed too hopelessly insufficient. “What happens now?” he asked.

“What would you like to do?”

“I would like you to read the rest of your letter to me.”

She grinned. “It didn’t actually say the bit about you asking me to marry you again.”

“It didn’t?”

“No.”

“Was that a joke?”

“Not a joke exactly,” Lois said. “More an impulsive moment.”

“If I were an Earth man, would I understand why you changed your mind about marrying me?”

“Probably not.”

Kal grinned with relief. “That’s good, then.”

With a smile that splashed further fuel onto the fire raging inside him, Lois dropped her eyes to the paper and began to read. “Dear Kal, I love you. I love you so much that I cannot imagine

living without you.”

“I could not live without you,” Kal declared with certainty.

She smiled, even as her eyes again sought her written words. “Right now, I should be bursting with joy. I should be so excited, so elated ... because, this morning, the man I love asked me to marry him.”

“Do young Earth women think about the time when someone asks to marry them?”

Lois thought for a moment. “Most do.”

“Did you?”

“Yes,” Lois said very quietly.

“I’m sorry if my asking disappointed you. I didn’t know what you expected.” Kal saw the shimmer of her tears and knew he would never tire of watching her feelings float across her face. He realised these were good tears — they told him she hadn’t been disappointed at all.

“I never imagined a more beautiful proposal,” Lois said. Her attention again swung to her letter. “This morning, the man I love asked me to marry him ... the man I trust totally because I have seen the incorruptible honesty of his heart.”

A new feeling was added to the flurry inside Kal — a steady stream of staunch satisfaction that Lois believed him. Believed *in* him. He’d felt like this only once before — when the globe had conveyed the words of his father on the morning of his Investiture.

Lois looked up. “The next bit of the letter is sad.”

“I want to hear it,” Kal said eagerly. “I want to know everything you feel — even when it isn’t good.”

Her eyes dropped again. “Yet, instead of joy, I feel only pain and misery. I wish things were different for us, Kal. I wish I could say ‘yes’ to your proposal. I imagine how it would feel to agree to marry you and see your smile burst with happiness.”

“I thought you didn’t want to marry me,” Kal said. “It felt like you would never want to marry me.”

Her hand caressed his face. “I wanted to marry you, Kal,” she said. “I just couldn’t get past you already being married.”

Kal didn’t understand. “But ... I’m *still* married to Za,” he said. “What has changed?”

“I know about your past ... about the childhood you didn’t have. Now I understand so much more about you — about your life and all the things that were taken from you. And I felt such a strong compulsion to try to make up for some of those things — and then I realised I could.”

Kal stared at her, as the whirlpool inside him spiralled faster and faster, stealing his breath. Lois — alien woman from another planet — understood him. He had never had that feeling before.

But it was more than that. Having understood him, she still loved him. She understood his emptiness and wanted to fill him. She understood his lostness and wanted to find him.

She had already done both.

But she wanted to keep on giving to him. “I ... you ... I never ...” Kal gave up trying to find the words that could do any sort of justice to what he was feeling. He lifted her hand and tenderly kissed it, hoping Lois would understand.

She did. She smiled.

“We need to talk through exactly what our marriage will entail,” Lois said. “By saying yes to you, I am saying that I want to see what our marriage can be.”

“It can be wonderful.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “But it won’t be like an Earth marriage.”

“Why not?”

“Because you are already married to Za.”

“What will happen if we can’t work out something that is agreeable to both of us?”

“Remember what you said after I told you I’d seen through the door?” Lois said. “About how only three things mattered?”

“Yes — you, me and being together.”

“They’re still the only three things that matter,” she said.

“Together we will work out a way for us to married.”

Her certainty calmed his inner commotion — leaving a residue of wonderful contentment. “Is there more of your letter?”

Lois nodded and continued reading. “I imagine how it would feel to agree to marry you and see your smile burst with happiness.” She stopped, although she continued staring at the paper. When she looked up, her face was tinged the most delightful pink. “I wrote the next bit thinking you would never read it.”

“You don’t have to tell me.”

She smiled — a smile that felt like a hug. “But you want me to, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

She laughed and resumed reading. “I guess no one has ever told you that your smile is spectacular. It is Kal — it never fails to touch me inside.”

That was a new concept — but one so obvious, Kal wasn’t sure why he had not thought of it before. “You like my smile?”

“Very much.”

“I like your smile,” he said. “The first time you did it, it was so new ... so amazing ... and all I wanted was for you to do it again.”

“How many people have you seen smile, Kal?” Lois asked.

“One.”

“Then you’re going to have to bow to my greater knowledge and believe me when I tell you that I have seen a million smiles and there isn’t one that comes close to yours.”

Kal didn’t know what to say. So he did the only thing possible — smiled for her — for the amazing woman who had brought light to his dark world.

She smiled back. With her mouth and her lovely brown eyes — showing him her happiness.

And that was the best feeling he’d ever had — better even than his own happiness.

Again, Lois looked at the paper in her hand. “I promised you I won’t leave you, and I know I won’t. I know, that in the unlikely event of there ever being a way for me to return home, I would not take it. I would not leave you, Kal. I *could* not leave you.”

Kal felt the moisture push against his eyelids. He needed to touch her. His hand found its way to her face and brushed back her hair, simply for the pleasure of skimming across her skin. “I was so afraid your people would come,” he said. “I was so afraid they would come and take you away from me.”

Lois copied his movement — her fingers trailing down his face. “I doubt they will ever come, Kal,” she said. “As far as I know, Earth scientists don’t even know about Planet New Krypton. But even if they do, it won’t change that I want to be with you.”

His moisture erupted, and he felt it drizzle down his face. Lois smiled and brushed her hand through his dampness. “Do Earth men have tears?” Kal asked.

“The best ones do,” Lois said. “The ones who are strong enough to allow their emotions to show.”

“I can’t imagine a world where everyone laughs and smiles and has tears.”

“I couldn’t have imagined a world where they don’t.”

“You will never have to,” Kal said. “Wherever you are, there will be smiles and laughter — because of you.”

Now her tears overflowed, too. He pulled her close against his chest, loving the feel of her warm body against his. When she backed away, her cheeks were still damp and she was smiling.

“Do you want to hear the rest of the letter?”

“Yes.”

“I could not leave you, because you are the man I have been looking for my whole life. For so long, I thought I was hopelessly

inept at the whole relationship thing. Only now do I realise that I was looking on the wrong planet.”

Kal felt something stirring inside him. Something vibrant and demanding. Something that wanted release. But he didn't know how to grant that release. “Was that a joke?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“But not everyone knows it is true.”

“It was a joke because it is ridiculous to think that a woman would need to look on another planet to find the man she loves.”

He would think about that. “Keep reading,” Kal requested. “Please?”

Again, her eyes lowered. “I love your heart. I love your openness and the beautiful simplicity you bring to everything you do. I trust you. I wish I could say ‘yes’ to you, Kal.”

“I was wishing that too,” he said ruefully.

Her hand was on his face again. Her touch was so incredible. Every time, he was surprised by how good it felt when her skin touched his. “I'm sorry, Kal,” Lois said. “I could see you were upset, but I couldn't commit to something as important as marriage without taking the time to think about it.”

“I understand now that it was unthinking to ask you then — and to keep on asking you,” Kal said. “I understand now that asking you to marry me wasn't the right thing to do because I am married to Za. But when you explained about love and marriage — for the first time, I could see exactly what I wanted. It was as if there had been a big cloud around me and it suddenly lifted just like the sunny days in Ard's pictures, and I could see clearly, and I knew I wanted to marry you, so I just asked without even thinking about you.” He stopped. “I'm sorry, Lois.”

“I understand why you asked,” she said. “I even understand why you asked seven times.” She grinned and lightly punched his arm. “Seven proposals in ten minutes ... wow!”

He knew Lois wasn't being serious. Maybe this was another sort of joke.

Still smiling, she glanced down at her letter, but then her smile faded. She didn't continue.

“Is this another part you thought would be private?” Kal asked.

“Yes.”

“You don't have to read it to me,” he told her. “I'm very glad for what you have read to me.”

She still hesitated. Then, with a small smile, she said, “I'll read it to you, Kal. I don't want any secrets between us.”

“Thank you.”

She took a big breath. “I wish I could hold you. I wish I could hold you so tightly and assure you we will find a way out of this and tell you that together, we are more than enough.”

Her words ricocheted around his mind.

*Together, we are more than enough.*

“I like how you said that, Lois,” Kal said. “I like it so much. Together, we are more than enough.” He felt the tug of an impossible choice inside him. He wanted to kiss her — but he so wanted to continue talking with her.

“We will find a way for us to be married,” Lois said. “I'm not sure how, but we will find a way that makes both of us happy.”

“Because, together, we are more than enough.”

She smiled, and her eyes returned to her paper. “But if I hold you, Kal, everything is going to get so much more complicated. Please don't think I don't want to hold you, my love. I ache to hold you ... but for both of us ... I can't.”

She stopped reading and slowly looked up and into his eyes, waiting for him to respond.

He couldn't. He was trying to grasp too many half-formed thoughts. Lois had wanted to hold him. But she felt she couldn't. Instinctively, he'd known that. What he hadn't known — still didn't know — was why.

Although, from somewhere deep in his subconsciousness

came the thought that it had something to do with the diagram he had seen in the Law.

Did it? Could it be that Lois felt that if she held him, they would do that together? But if that were true, it meant she didn't want to do that with him.

He had to know.

He had to ask.

But how?

“I don't understand why ... you couldn't hold me ... even though you wanted to.”

Now he'd made her uncomfortable.

Kal smiled, trying to ease her discomfort. “Remember, Lois, together, we are more than enough.”

She gave him a small smile. “The physical contact you read about? The physical contact between a man and a woman?”

“Yes?”

“Holding, hugging, kissing — that is the beginning. The physical contact — that is the finishing.”

All Kal's good feelings were swept away on a sickening wave of dismay. “You thought that if you held me, I would force you to do something you didn't want to do?” he said. “Is that why you felt you couldn't hold me?”

“No!” Lois shook her head vigorously. “No, Kal. I know you would never force me to do that.”

“Then why?”

“I wasn't sure I would be able to stop.”

Kal felt his mouth drop open. Somewhere in Lois's words was the suggestion that she wanted the physical contact with him. But didn't want it. That thought snapped shut his mouth. “Have you thought about doing that with me?” he asked — because he just had to know.

“Yes.”

Thought about it and dreaded it? Or thought about it and hoped for it? How could he ask *that* question?

“I am very attracted to you, Kal,” Lois said. “As I've said, I love your heart, but it is more than that. I am attracted to your body. I want to get closer to you.”

Kal's throat had parched. “You ... w ... ” His voice trailed away, lost in the desert of his mouth. He swallowed desperately and tried again. “You want to do that with me?”

She nodded. “Too much.”

“Too much?” he said, because copying her words didn't require a functioning brain.

“Yes. But I don't know if it is a good idea.”

“Why?”

“Because a relationship changes when you do that,” Lois said. “It's like it moves into a new phase and there can be no going back.”

“I wouldn't want to go back,” Kal said with certainty.

Her smile surfaced for a second.

“Is it something married people do?” Kal asked.

“Yes.”

“So, once we are married ... ”

She smiled. “Once we are married, we will do that,” she said. Kal had wanted Lois to marry him. He'd wanted it so desperately, he had asked her seven times.

He had wanted it so much, he had wondered how he could survive if Lois wouldn't marry him.

But he hadn't even understood the fullness of what he'd been asking.

But now — he did.

And his mind was blown to tiny, little pieces.

Now he was wondering how he was going to survive waiting.

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Lois watched the array of emotions cross Kal's face. She could see them so clearly — wonderment, shock, desire, and yet more wonderment.

She cleared her throat and deliberately turned her mind away from the path it wanted to explore and forced it back to her letter. “But if I hold you, Kal, everything is going to get so much more complicated. Please don’t think I don’t want to hold you, my love. I ache to hold you — but for both of us — I can’t.”

She met Kal’s eyes. “I understand why,” he said quietly. “Now I understand why.”

“I will love you always, Kal,” Lois finished as she put down the paper.

“Thank you, Lois,” Kal said. “That is such a beautiful letter. I will want to read it again and again. Would you mind if I keep it? So that one day I can read it for myself?”

She offered it to him, and Kal folded it with the utmost care and placed it in the pocket of his jacket.

He hesitated. “Lois? About the physical contact?”

“Uhm?”

“I’d still like to hug you and kiss you. I know you said that hugging and kissing is just the beginning ... but I want you to know that if hugging and kissing is all right with you ... I won’t ever let it go any further than that — not until we are married.”

Apparently, they were *waiting*.

“And even after we are married,” Kal continued. “I would never do it unless you wanted me to.”

Lois smiled. “I know that, Kal.”

He took her hand in his. “Thank you for letting me see inside you — letting me see what you are thinking. I feel so honoured that you would do that.”

“You were very open with me too, Kal,” Lois said. “I appreciate that you told me something you had never told anyone else.”

“There has never been anyone like you in my life.”

Lois smiled, knowing that was true for both of them.

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Kal leant back against the bed-head, supremely content to enjoy the silence and the feel of Lois’s body pressed into his side.

He could have stayed just like this the entire night.

But it was late. Very late. “Lois?” he said quietly.

“Yes?”

“I should take you back to your room now. It is past when the evening usually ends.”

“I don’t want to move,” she said.

“I don’t want to either,” Kal said. He kissed the top of her head and unravelled from her. He offered her his hand.

She grinned at him as she took his hand. “Do your plans stop now that I’ve agreed to marry you?”

He grinned back. “Not at all. This is just the beginning.”

“I’m looking forward to your plans.”

“My next plan was for a morning walk tomorrow, but it is so late now, I think we should postpone it for a day.”

“Where had you planned to take me?”

“I thought I’d show you the cliffs to the east of New Krypton.”

“I’d like that.” Lois rested her hand on his chest. Kal loved the familiarity of her touch. He loved how it accentuated the bond between them. “What do you have to do tomorrow?” she asked.

“We have another Water Committee meeting,” Kal replied. “The interruption tonight was to inform me that one of the drills is not working. We need to reconsider our decision to continue drilling.”

“Has Nor opposed the drilling?”

“No, he has been supportive.” Kal took her hand. “Would you like me to kiss you goodnight here? Or at your room?”

“Both,” she said with a grin.

Kal felt the beginnings of his answering smile — but it didn’t have the time to develop before his mouth became fully occupied with a lingering, moving kiss.

As he kissed her, Kal understood — fully understood — why

Lois had wanted to hold him, but felt she couldn’t. Kissing her, kissing her knowing it was the beginning of so much more, was like standing very close to a raging fire. It warmed you ... wonderfully ... but you knew that, eventually, you had to move away or you would be burned.

Kal didn’t want to move away.

He wanted to be burned.

But he couldn’t do that until he knew exactly what he could offer Lois in marriage. In his heart, he was sure she would always be the only woman he would love. But she deserved more than that.

Kal brought their kiss to completion and looked down into Lois’s eyes — seeing his reluctance mirrored in her lovely brown eyes. “I have free time tomorrow afternoon,” he said. “Could we meet and begin to plan our marriage?”

“Yes. I would like that.”

“I want to marry you quickly,” he said. “Within days.”

She seemed a little surprised by that, but then her smile appeared. “Good idea,” she said.

“Once we are married, I won’t have to take you back to your room every night.”

She grinned, and it warmed him, as her smile always did. But this one brought more than warmth. It heated him — hot and fiery — and erupted the longing within him.

Resolutely, Kal took her hand and led her to the door of his room. “We *really* need to go.”

Her smile said she understood completely. “I know.”

At her door, Kal took Lois into his arms. “I don’t want to leave you,” he said.

“Neither do I.”

He kissed her, but drew back before it had deepened. “Good night, my Lois,” he said. “I want the night to hurry, because tomorrow I can be with you again.”

“Good night, my Kal,” she replied.

With a final kiss, Kal walked away from the Concubine Quarters, his anguish at leaving her mixed with his joy that very soon, this parting would no longer be required of him.

## Part 21

A cursory glance outside first thing the next morning was enough to galvanise Lois into action in the hope she could get to Kal’s room before he left for his meeting.

Ten minutes later, she knocked on his bedroom door. When he opened it, he was already smiling in welcome.

So was she — a quick peek *through* the door had confirmed Kal was in his room.

She stepped into his embrace — her arms around his neck, his arms snug across her back.

“I missed you, Lois,” he murmured against her ear. “I want to be with you. Nights away from you are lonely.”

Lois felt herself smile as she tightened her hold. “I want to be with you, too, Kal,” she said.

His mouth found hers with an intensity that carved a canyon of need through her body. Lois answered his call and moved in closer. He broke away and turned his attention to the desk. “Do you want breakfast?” he said in a voice that wobbled.

“Y ... yes,” she replied, still trying to reconcile herself to their separation when only moments before she had been fully committed to their advancing togetherness.

Kal gestured to the bed, keeping his eyes from meeting hers. “Sit down,” he offered woodenly.

“What do we have?” she asked, because food represented safe ground.

“Only oatmeal,” he said. “After such a late night, I didn’t think you would be awake early enough to share with me.”

“Salty?”

“No, sweet,” he admitted, his ‘caught-me’ smile breaking

through the moment of awkwardness.

“Why?” Lois asked. “When you thought it was just for you?”  
“Because it reminds me of you.”

He sat down on the chair, but Lois remained standing. She put her hand on his shoulder and smiled down at him. “Have I told you how much I appreciate your honesty?” she said.

Her words surprised him. “I wouldn’t lie to you,” he said solemnly.

“I don’t mean lying exactly.”

“Then what?”

“On Earth, many people hesitate to admit the full extent of their feelings.” As Lois spoke, she gently worked her fingers into the crest of taut muscle that curved from his neck. “They hide what is in their heart.”

She felt him relax under her fingers. “But I trust you,” Kal said. “There is no reason not to tell you what I feel.”

She dropped a kiss into his hair. “Thank you.”

He passed her the remainder of the oatmeal in the bowl and picked up the cup of beverage. “So,” he mused, “if I have a question, I should ask it?”

Lois said on the bed. “Yes.”

“Even if it embarrasses both of us?”

“The wonderful thing about being in love is that there is no need for embarrassment between us.”

As he contemplated her, a steady sprawl of colour crossed his cheeks and drifted to the top of his ears.

Lois figured now was a good time for the gentle application of a few investigative skills. “Is your question about something that happened last night?”

“Not specifically.”

“Do you regret anything that happened last night?”

“Oh, yes,” he breathed.

“What?”

“Leaving you in the Concubine Quarters and coming back to my room alone.”

She grinned at his reply. “Other than that? Do you regret telling me your secret?”

“No,” Kal said. “When I awoke this morning, my first thought was how wonderful it is that you know the whole truth about me.”

“Do you regret that we agreed to get married?”

His grin broadened spectacularly. “I regret that we didn’t marry yesterday.”

Again, Lois found herself smiling in response. “Do you have concerns about being with someone who can see through walls?”

“I love you, Lois,” he said with conviction. “It doesn’t matter what you can see through.”

“Then what is your question?”

Kal’s glance fell to his beverage as he seemed to gather his thoughts.

Lois leant forward and rested her hand on his. “Kal, the wonderful thing about being together and being in love and trusting each other is that we have the freedom to be completely honest with each other.”

“I don’t want to offend you.”

“Do you think your question will offend me?”

“No — I don’t think it will offend you ... more embarrass you ... and me.”

“I’m not sure what you are trying to say.”

“I am drawn to do something ... and that action may offend you ... so I need to ask you ... before.”

“Whatever it is, Kal, it will be all right.”

He shifted in the chair, his eyes scanning the room before settling into hers. “When we’re kissing ... ”

Uh oh. “Yes,” Lois said, trying to keep her tone even.

“When we kiss, and it’s a moving kiss, and it goes on for a time ... ”

Her insides clunked into a heap. “Yes?” she managed through a tapered throat.

“I keep wanting to ... respond in a particular way ... but I fear you would find it distasteful.”

She swallowed. “R ... respond how?”

His colour deepened a couple of shades. “I ... ”

Lois smiled encouragingly. “Just say it, Kal.”

He exhaled deeply, his cheeks ballooning. “I want to ... Would you totally hate it if when we kiss ... I touched your lips with my tongue?”

Lois felt her tension discharge on an explosive breath. She leant forward and placed her palm on the heated flush of his cheeks. “That would be fine,” she said.

Kal’s throat lurched. “It would?”

“On Earth, people who are in love do that.”

“They do?”

“They do.”

Kal studied her for a moment. “But?”

“But ... Remember I said that kissing is the beginning and the physical contact is the end?”

“Yes.”

“Well, kissing with your tongue is a step further along than kissing with your mouth.”

“So ... doing that ... would make it harder to stop?”

“Yes.” Lois smiled, relieved that he had understood. “So a part of me would really like you to do that and would really like to do that to you, but another part of me knows that ... ” She stopped, unsure how to word the rest of her sentence.

She didn’t need to. “I understand,” Kal said gravely.

Lois smiled. “We need to work out how we can be married and then ... ” She left the promise hanging between them.

Kal grinned. “Can we meet after lunch to discuss it?”

“I’d like that.”

“Good.” Kal stood from the chair. “I have to go,” he said. “I have scheduled a Water Committee meeting.”

Lois stood and enfolded him in a long hug. She pushed her fingers through the hair at the back of his neck and felt his hands on her shoulders. “Short kiss?” she offered with a smile.

Kal nodded and lowered his mouth onto hers with the sweetest of touches. Then, he turned from her and left his bedroom.

After the door had shut, Lois looked through it and watched him walk away.

Then a thought barrelled through her mind.

If she could see through walls, could she see through anything else?

Such as clothes, for instance?

She leant forward and looked at the lower reaches of her gown. As she stared, the material faded to nothing, revealing her bare legs.

Lois collapsed onto the bed.

She could see *through* clothes.

She spent many hours each day with the man she loved.

The man who, she already knew, had a stunning physique.

“Lane,” she mumbled to herself. “You’ve just discovered the ultimate meaning of temptation.”

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Lois picked up the beverage and willed her thoughts to anything other than the volatile combination of the ability to see through clothes and a man whose body screamed ‘look at me’.

She thought back to her visits with Riz. The latest story was ready to go to Ard. If Lois were to take it to her early enough, there should be time to deliver it to Dom and Kip before lunch.

Lois imagined the children’s eager acceptance of her new book. Dom was so cute with her dark, steadfast eyes.

Maybe Lois could read the story to the children again.

Her pleasant musings skidded to a halt.

She had read the book to Dom and the little girl had *understood* it.

Yet Kal had told her that children did not have translators. Had Dom read the words?

Possibly ... but Lois was sure there had been communication other than the reading of the story.

How was it possible for her and Dom to understand each other?

Lois put down her unfinished drink and stood with purpose. She needed to find Tek.

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Half an hour later, Lois had searched every inch of Kal's building — using a combination of old-fashioned boldness and her newly acquired skill that transformed walls into windows.

The sensation of being an oddity was quickly receding — overcome by the euphoric realisation this was indeed a truly fundamental tool for any investigative reporter.

What now?

She was confident Tek was not in Kal's building.

Was Tek sick? Had he delivered Kal's breakfast earlier and then left? Or had he not arrived yet today?

Lois couldn't remember a meal delivered by anyone other than Tek.

So where was he?

Lois strode out of the building, through the gates, turned left, and went to Riz's house.

She knocked on the door, and Riz opened it. After the briefest of greetings, Lois asked, "Is Tek at home?"

"No," Riz said. "He's inside the gates."

No, he's not, Lois thought. "Other than bringing food, what else does Tek do?" she asked.

"Whatever the Supreme Ruler needs him to do."

"Does he attend meetings?"

"He's not allowed to talk about what he does."

Oh. That rule again. Lois realised her impatience had nudged the borders of rudeness. She paused and took the time to smile.

"Sorry, Riz," she said. "When I get an idea in my head, I forget everything else, including my manners."

"I do that, too," Riz said.

"Ard is drawing the pictures for the new book," Lois said. "I'll bring it for your children later today."

"They will like that."

"Can I ask you something else?"

"Yes."

"Does Dom have a translator?"

"Not a Translator, no."

"Then how could Dom and I understand each other?"

Riz hesitated. "Have you asked Tek?"

"No," Lois said, feeling her frustration grow. "I can't find him."

"Would you like to come in?" Riz offered. "Would you like some beverage?"

Coffee was *exactly* what she needed. And the chance to ask her questions. "Yes," Lois said gratefully. "Thank you."

She followed Riz into the warm room. The children were sitting on the floor with some paper and a few pencils. "Hello, Dom," Lois said deliberately. "Hello, Kip."

"Hello," Dom responded. "Book?"

Lois smiled. "Later," she promised. "Later today."

Satisfied, Dom turned back to her drawing.

Riz put a cup of steaming beverage in front of Lois and the aroma wafted into her nostrils. "Once we left Krypton, the manufacture of the Translators was no longer possible," Riz said. "With the destruction of our planet, we lost much of the means for our technology."

Lois coasted her fingertips through the short hair above her left ear. "The last translator was inserted into my head."

"Yes," Riz said. "Those who lived on Krypton and those who had been born in the Transition were fitted with Translators so we could all communicate. But without the means to produce more, the decision was made to discontinue inserting them."

"Are the children bi-lingual?"

"Rarely," Riz said. "Those children — like Dom and Kip — who are born to mixed marriages can speak the language of both the North and the South. But those children born to a North marriage or a South marriage usually only speak the language of their parents."

"Which will be a barrier to unity?"

"Yes." Riz sipped from her beverage. "Language differences were becoming a chasm that divided the children into the old sides. Schools had different classrooms for each language. There were suggestions that we should have North schools and South schools."

"Couldn't the schools teach both languages?" Lois asked.

"Very few teachers are bi-lingual. The Translators were much needed when our people had to find a way of survival — but the long-term effect is that there is no motivation to learn true communication."

Lois felt a swell of appreciation for Kal's desire and commitment to learn her language instead of merely relying on the translators. "I understand how Dom and Kip can speak both Kryptonian languages," she said. "But that doesn't explain how Dom can understand me."

"Tek believed that if the children of New Krypton could not communicate, we would again disintegrate into two sides."

Other than turning off everyone's translators, Lois could see no solution. "So he ..."

"The Translator was the invention of Tek's father. He kept notes — for everything he did, he kept notes. Tek studied his notes and was able to adapt them and make an annex Translator."

"An annex?"

Riz called Dom from the floor, and the child came to her mother's side. Riz pushed back her daughter's hair, allowing Lois to see a device similar to a hearing aid attached above the child's left ear. "This feeds wirelessly off my Translator."

"So Dom uses your translator to understand?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I don't fully understand the mechanics," Riz admitted. "You would have to ask Tek."

"But if Dom is bi-lingual, why does she need the use of a translator?"

"When Tek had developed this, he approached the Cabinet and proposed they be fitted to all school children. Then the children could learn together, abolishing the need for separate schools."

"But the Cabinet didn't allow it?" Lois guessed.

"The Supreme Ruler was very supportive of the idea, but there was some opposition from Nor and Ching, and many parents were wary of allowing a device developed by a lay person to be attached to their children."

"So?"

"So, Tek was challenged to put the device on our children, and, if our children showed no ill effects after two years and one month, the annex would be passed as appropriate for all children."

"Who set the time period?"

"The Cabinet."

"Nor?" Lois asked, her reporter's instinct twitching again.

"Nor and Ching."

"That seems an arbitrary length of time."

"The standard trial period for any scientific advancement is two years. Nor argued that because Tek is unqualified in Science, a longer length of time was justified."

“But one month longer?” Lois asked. “That would make barely any difference.”

“I know.”

Suddenly Lois knew. Whatever Nor was planning, it was going to happen in the month following the two year trial period. That was why he had insisted on the extra time. “When is the trial complete?”

“In two weeks.”

Two weeks. Lois felt queasiness grip her stomach. Two weeks. Two weeks until what? “Tek put in them Dom and Kip?”

“They do not go in the head,” Riz said. “They sit next to the skull and work wirelessly.”

“Why couldn’t I have one, then?” Lois asked, before realising that she didn’t sound particularly grateful.

“They are not allowed to be used on anyone until the completion of the trial period,” Riz explained. “Not without the written permission of the person, or the person’s parents.”

“And I couldn’t give my permission because I couldn’t communicate?”

“That is correct.”

“Tek’s father’s notes must have been very detailed,” Lois said, with growing appreciation for the abilities of both Tek and his father.

“What have you been told about the history of Krypton?” Riz asked.

“That when the scientists from both sides realised Krypton was doomed, they came together and invented the translators as a means of communication and then oversaw the evacuation and found a new planet.”

“All in two years?”

Lois nodded.

“Did you wonder how something as intricate as a Translator could be developed so speedily that it still allowed the time to organise a mass evacuation, to prepare the means to survive between planets, to locate a viable planet, and then successfully settle in a new home?”

For the first time, Lois gained a full realisation of the enormity of what these people had achieved. She shook her head. “No,” she admitted. “I was dealing with some major changes in my own life.”

“That is understandable,” Riz said. “But the Translator was a radically new piece of technology — something Kip had been working on for two years before the problems of Krypton were discovered.”

“Why? Had he hoped for unity?”

“He always hoped for unity, but that was not his reason for developing the Translator.”

“Then what was?” Lois asked.

“Ard.”

“Ard?”

“Ard’s birth was extremely long and difficult, and she was deprived of oxygen for too long. When she was three years, she still made no indication to communicate. So her father developed the Translator for her.”

The more Lois heard about Tek’s father, the more her respect grew. “He must have loved his daughter very much.”

“That didn’t translate,” Riz said. “But I assume you mean that Kip had great care for Ard?”

“Yes.”

“Kip trialled the Translator on Ard, and she began to communicate. When Krypton’s problems became known, it was a relatively simple task to mass produce the Translators.”

“Ard was the first person to have a translator?”

“Yes,” Riz said. “And Dom is the first person to have an annex Translator.”

Kal had said that they owed a great debt to this family. Lois smiled at Riz. Then she did some quick math. If Ard had been

three when Kip had begun to develop the Translator, she must have been at least five when the problems were discovered, and seven at the evacuation and ten at the landing on New Krypton, so she must be thirty-three now. Older than Lois had estimated.

“Ard’s pictures are born from her memories of Krypton,” Riz explained.

“And she is much older than she looks,” Lois said.

“Yes,” Riz agreed. “She still looks like a young woman.”

Thirty-three is still a young woman, Lois wanted to say.

Instead, she drained her beverage. “Thank you, Riz. I appreciate your willingness to explain things to me.”

“New Krypton is your home now,” Riz said. “You are one of us. You need to know where we have come from — the good and the bad.”

Lois felt her tears well at the simple acceptance of this woman. She brushed them away and tried to think of a way to express her appreciation. “I will return this afternoon with a new book for your children,” she said.

“We would like that very much.”

Lois stood from the table, aware of a reluctance to leave the warm friendliness of this small shack. She said goodbye to the children and headed for Kal’s buildings.

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Back in Kal’s bedroom, Lois opened her journal, although her mind was buzzing with thoughts of Nor. She was sure the culmination of his plan was imminent.

Before she’d written one word, Tek arrived with her lunch. Lois looked up in surprise. “You’re here?” she said.

“Yes.” Tek placed her food on the desk.

“Where is K- ... Will I be eating alone?”

“The meeting of the Water Committee has been prolonged so I was ordered to bring you lunch.”

“Did you bring breakfast this morning?”

“Yes.”

“Do you attend the meetings with the Supreme Ruler?”

“I cannot discuss any details about the Supreme Ruler,” Tek reminded her. “But I can tell you that I don’t attend meetings.”

Lois had a few other questions she would like to ask, but on impulse, she decided there could be better ways to obtain information. “Thank you for bringing my lunch, Tek,” she said with a smile. She turned back to the desk and picked up her pencil.

As soon as she heard Tek shut the door, Lois stood and tracked him through the walls as he walked along the corridor. He left the building and crossed the courtyard towards Kal’s gates.

Was he going home for lunch?

As Lois watched, he turned right — away from his house.

Lois hurried through the chambers and out of Kal’s building. At the gates, she looked to the right and saw the limping figure of Tek.

Curbing her impatience, Lois sauntered along the dusty street, forcing her attention left and right to the rows of uneven shacks. If someone were watching, she didn’t want it to be obvious she was following Tek. Nor did she want to bring attention to the fact that Tek was not ‘behind the gates’.

Soon the closely spaced houses gave way to open fields. In the distance, Lois could see scrawny cattle-like animals and scattered patches of crops around lonely huts.

She began the gentle climb up a parched hill. The barren terrain — coarse sandy ground with occasional tufts of rough straw — made it easy to keep Tek in sight, but also would afford her no cover if he should turn around. Lois allowed herself to drop back a little.

He could move surprisingly quickly for a man with a limp.

As Lois watched, Tek reached the peak and then ... disappeared.

Lois raced up the slope. When she reached the top, she

stopped suddenly.

A few yards below her, the water of the ocean crashed angrily against the rugged rocks. The cliff continued on both sides, curling back to shape the island. Lois turned, slowly scanning the landscape. There was no sign of anyone. No sign of Tek who had been here just a few moments ago. It was as if she were the only person on the whole of New Krypton.

But Tek had been here. Just a few moments ago.

He could not have doubled back to the town — he would have passed her, and there was nowhere to hide. Lois peered over the edge of the cliff.

No one could survive being flung against those rocks.

Was this where Tek's father had died?

Is that why Tek came here? Was today an anniversary or special day? Had Tek come to pay tribute to his father's memory?

Lois's regret that she may have intruded on a private moment lasted less than a second. Where was Tek? Was he in any danger?

Was it possible he had fallen over the cliff? There was no sign of a drowning man in the thrashing water.

Lois turned her back to the water and perused the land below. In the distance, the three drilling operations loomed large above the dotted shacks. She lowered her eyes to the ground and then continued her gaze below the surface. She followed the drill through the ground and then beyond, quickly realising there was no water in the vicinity.

She checked the other two drilling operations and discovered the same thing. They were never going to be successful in discovering water — it simply wasn't there.

Lois began a sweep across the land, looking below the ground. She experimented with depths and practised controlling her new skill.

Then, she saw it.

Between two of the drilling operations, there was an aquifer. Under the ground — deep, but no deeper than the drills had already plunged — there was a large, potentially life-supporting aquifer. She pulled back her focus, identifying landmarks that could be used to direct Kal in successful placement of the drills.

Lois felt a stream of excitement flow through her. They had found water! Kal would be so relieved.

But for now, she needed to find Tek.

Lois turned back to the water. She edged forward to the cliff and peered down. The sharp rocks continued under the water, confirming her belief that no one would survive falling into the water.

Had Tek gone *into* the ground?

Lois looked into the ground. Her vision was partial, as if patches had been blotted out. But still, she could see no sign of Tek.

What should she do?

Alert someone?

Was Tek in danger?

From her left came a deafening roar.

Lois swung around, but before she had even grasped the danger, a huge wave swamped her. It swept her from the cliff and plunged her into the dark choppy water below.

## Part 22

The water enveloped her.

It seized Lois's long gown, pressing against her body and tangling her legs. It jostled her and spun her in a crazy sequence of jerky movements. Then, it lifted her as if she were weightless and slammed her against something rough and inflexible.

In the rebound, Lois was flipped numerous times, losing all sense of spatial awareness. The water stilled, giving her the chance to peer into the gloom. She could see degrees of shadowy darkness, but nothing indicative of light and air.

Air — she should need air by now.

But her lungs were not screaming for breath.

Had she died already?

Had she lost consciousness when she'd been swept from the rock?

Lois turned in a slow, controlled movement. Half a rotation later, she noticed an arc of shimmering light. Could that be the way up?

Or were the stories true about the bright light of death?

Should she move towards the light?

Or away from it?

She didn't want to leave Kal.

She *couldn't* leave Kal.

Her death would devastate him.

Lois kicked her legs and swung her arms to manoeuvre herself towards the light. She kicked again, able to maintain a straight line towards her destination despite the continually churning currents and the drag of her gown.

Gradually, the dimness of the water cleared.

Her head broke the surface, and she saw the cliffs looming above her.

Lois breathed in — not from desperate need, more from instinct.

Before she could decide what to do, a swell of water rose from below and tossed her against the cliff face. Lois saw a ridge in the rock and grasped it with both hands.

As the water drained away, Lois remained, clinging to the rock. With her foot, she searched for purchase, found it, and was able to haul her body higher.

Moments later, she crawled over the edge and slumped onto the flat ground.

She had survived. She had battled a frighteningly formidable opponent and survived.

She was wet.

But not particularly cold.

Nor in any pain.

Lois sat up and skimmed her body, but there was no evidence of injury. She didn't feel battered — or even bruised. She lifted her dripping gown to examine her legs. Nothing — no blood, no wounds, no pain. Not even a scratch.

Rolling onto her stomach, Lois inched forward to the edge and looked down into the restless ocean. A few yards below, a moving wall of water smashed into the cliff, and the spray hurtled up and into her face.

Lois sat up and attempted to dry her face with her wet fingers.

She was still sure that no one could survive the lethal combination of rocks and pounding ocean.

But she had.

And not only survived, but survived with no ill-effects other than extreme dampness.

Lois stood, moved away from the edge, and looked toward the town, sighing with the realisation that she was going to have to walk back through the streets looking like a sodden scarecrow.

She scanned, hoping to see Tek. There were some moving figures near two of the drilling operations, but she was confident Tek wasn't there. Where had he gone? Was he injured?

Did he come here regularly?

And if he did, why?

Lois gathered the skirt of her gown and wrung it out. After the flow of water had subsided to small drips, she positioned it around her legs and with grudging acceptance, began the trek back to Kal's building.

She had covered less than half the distance when she saw someone emerge from between the houses and run towards her.

"Lois!" she heard. "Lois!"

She recognised Kal and ran to meet him, her fears pounding. Did he have news that Tek was missing? That Tek had been

found dead?

Her heart cried for Riz. And for Dom and Kip.  
“Lois!”

The distance between them closed to nothing, and Kal’s arms clasped her desperately against his heaving body. Lois could hear the thundering of his heart. She pulled back and looked into his face. “What’s wrong, Kal?” she gasped. “Is it Tek?”

“Tek?” Kal asked with surprise.

“Yes,” she said impatiently. “Tek. Is he all right?”

“Tek is fine,” Kal said, still looking puzzled.

“Then why are you so distressed?”

“Because I couldn’t find you.”

“It was *me* you couldn’t find?”

Kal nodded. He carefully pushed back the clinging clumps of her hair and brushed the lingering moisture from her face with the pad of his thumb. “I couldn’t find you,” he murmured. “And something inside me was sure you were in danger.”

His fear had not left his eyes, nor had the tension eased from his jaw. Lois slid her hands along the ripples of his cheeks. “You were worried about me?” she asked softly.

“Worried!” he exclaimed on a gushing breath. “I was frantic. I knew you were in danger. I knew you needed help, but I didn’t know where you were, and I couldn’t find you ... and I was so scared for you.” He glanced down. “I was so scared for me.”

Lois ran her fingers through the dampness of his hair — the dampness that had come from her. “I’m fine,” she assured him. “I’m absolutely fine.”

He grasped her shoulders with still-quivery fingers and stared down at her. “What happened?”

Lois hesitated for a moment, considering giving him a breezy, abridged version. Quickly, she realised she couldn’t do that — she had to tell him the whole truth. “I was swept into the ocean,” she said nonchalantly, looking intently at her foot as she dragged it through the dirt.

“You went up the cliff?” he asked incredulously. “And you fell into the water?”

“Not fell exactly,” she hedged. “A big wave knocked me off the rock and into the water.”

His face held an equal mix of disbelief and horror. “You were in the water and you got *out*?”

Lois nodded.

Kal’s hands slid the length of her arms. “Where are you hurt?” he asked anxiously. “I’m taking you to the Medical Centre.”

Lois dropped her hands to the upper slopes of his chest. “I’m not hurt,” she told him. “I’m not hurt at all.”

“That isn’t possible,” Kal said. “I’m taking you to the Medical Centre.”

“I don’t need to go to the Medical Centre.”

“Lois, I’m worried,” Kal persisted. “Please let me get you the medical treatment you need.”

Lois considered agreeing, just to ease his anxiety. Except, she was going to feel acutely foolish when they diagnosed nothing more serious than excessive moisture — with perhaps a dash of recklessness. “Take me to your bedroom, Kal,” she said. “I don’t need to go to the Medical Centre.”

“Lo-is,” he said, not convinced at all.

“When we get to your bedroom, I’ll check my body, and if I find anything at all — even the smallest graze — I’ll go to the Medical Centre without the slightest argument.”

Kal still wasn’t convinced. He took his coat from his shoulders and wrapped it around her. “Come on,” he said. “You must be freezing.”

She wasn’t.

But that didn’t really surprise her.

It certainly wasn’t the most bizarre aspect of her outing to the Eastern cliffs of New Krypton.

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Kal found it impossible to drag his eyes from Lois as they walked back to his bedroom.

The fear still strangled his heart, surging periodically with sheer terror at the thought of losing her.

He hadn’t been too concerned when she hadn’t been in his room for the planned meeting about their marriage. He had figured she was probably visiting Riz and had forgotten the time.

Then he’d noticed her uneaten lunch on the desk, and his mind had conjured a procession of alarming images. Before long, it had not been possible to merely wait for her return.

He could not go back to a life without her.

His former existence had reduced him to little more than a shell methodically attending to the demands of his position.

But now he knew there was so much more.

And it wasn’t just that he yearned to keep the things she had brought to his life — the holding and the touches and the hugging and the kisses and the smiling and the laughter. He treasured all of them — but without her, they meant nothing.

So, he had run from his gates in a driven, mindless panic. Then, he’d seen her, and his world had righted itself again.

Kal followed Lois into the bedroom and shut the door behind them, his eyes fixed on her.

She turned and gave him a small smile. “I’m sorry I scared you, Kal,” she said. “It was silly to go up on the cliffs and very careless to allow myself to be caught by the waves, but I am fine. Really.”

Kal stepped closer to her. “You’re not hurt *anywhere*?” he asked anxiously.

She pulled up her sleeves and showed him her arms. Then she raised the bottom of her gown until it was level with her knees. “See,” she said. “Nothing. No scratches, no bruises, no bleeding.” She laughed. “I’m just very wet.”

“I will go and get you dry clothes,” Kal offered.

That earned him a smile. “Thank you,” Lois said.

Kal hurried to her room, his mind rife with questions. How could she have survived? He couldn’t believe it was mere luck. Was it possible it had something to do with her ability to see through walls? How could seeing through solid objects translate into being able to endure the brutal ravages of the ocean?

There were no answers — nothing remotely logical, anyway. But Kal knew he had to continue crowding his mind with any possibility — regardless of how implausible it seemed.

Because if he didn’t — if he allowed himself even the tiniest gap in his thoughts — his mind would flood with the image of how Lois’s wet gown had clung to the mesmerizing curves of her body.

And he was certain that was a path just as perilous as the cliff edge.

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Lois waited for Kal to return, her mind in overdrive.

First, there was Tek. He had walked with purpose — as if he had a clear destination in mind.

Did he go to the cliffs regularly?

Why?

How had he disappeared?

And, most importantly, was he safe?

Second, there was the matter of her survival.

She had carelessly allowed herself to get into a dangerous situation — a level of recklessness unusual even for her — and then had ... simply ... climbed out of it.

Lois shook her head.

Could she possibly be dreaming?

She didn’t think so.

Kal walked through the door and handed her a towel and a bundle of clothing. “I’ll wait outside,” he said. “Call me when you have changed your clothes.”

“Thank you,” she said with a smile.

Lois slipped the wet gown from her body and did a quick inspection to confirm what she already knew. Her body bore not the slightest evidence of having been thrown violently against a rocky cliff.

She dried herself and then unfolded the bundle of clothes Kal had brought. Deep in the innards of the rolled-up gown, she found her clean underwear. She smiled at Kal’s thoughtfulness.

When she had dressed, Lois picked up the towel and began to dry her hair. She experienced a fleeting moment of self-consciousness with regard to Kal seeing her with still-wild hair, but concluded she couldn’t look any worse now than she had when he’d met her on the lower slopes of the hill. “Come in, Kal,” she called.

The door opened so quickly, she had the impression he’d been waiting impatiently on the other side. “Did you check everywhere for injury?” he said before he was even fully in the room.

Her heart melted at his obvious concern. “Yes,” she assured him. Then she grinned. “If you ask me one more time, I’m going to take off this gown and let you check — just so you stop bugging me.”

His brief shock was quickly replaced with a wide grin. “I don’t understand ‘bugging,’” he said. “But I understood the rest of what you said.”

“Do you *want* to check?” she asked, only half-joking.

“Yes,” he said candidly. “Because I find it impossible to believe that you could get out of that water without serious injury — but I know that I can’t check, so I’m going to have to believe you.”

Lois edged closer to him. “Is that the *only* reason you want to check?” she asked. “So you can be certain I am unhurt?”

Kal tried, with very little success, to drag his grin under control. “You know it isn’t the only reason,” he said. “But for now ...” He took the towel from her hands. “Can I dry your hair?”

“Sure.”

Kal sat on the bed. “Would you sit here?” he asked, motioning to the space next to him.

She did, and Kal began gently rubbing the wetness from her hair. Lois felt herself relax under his touch. “That feels wonderful,” she said.

He continued long past the time needed to dry her hair and then placed his hands on her forehead and slowly eased back through her hair. “From when I first saw you, I was completely fascinated by your hair,” he said. “It is so dark and so shiny and so soft, and I used the Translator wound as an excuse just to touch it.”

Lois spun around. “You did?”

Kal grinned. “I did.” His hands drifted the length of her hair. “How do you get it so smooth?” he asked.

Lois went to the desk drawer and retrieved the comb Riz had given her. “With this,” she said as she offered it to Kal.

He took it and examined it. “What is it?” he asked.

“A comb. Haven’t you seen one before?”

“No.”

“How do you get the knots from your hair?”

“With my fingers when it is damp after I have washed it.”

“Is that *all* you do?”

Kal looked a little perturbed. “Yes,” he answered. “Why?”

“Because your hair always looks great.”

His grin slowly expanded. “Thank you. I’m glad you like it.”

There’s a whole lot I like about you, Lois thought. She sat in front of Kal again — keeping him out of her line of sight was less risky given her vision gizmo thing — and he began to carefully comb through her hair.

“Am I doing it right?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He worked until her hair sat straight and untangled. Then he leaned forward and kissed the top of her head. “I’ll order us some beverage,” he said.

Lois turned with a smile. “Can you ask for some ‘puddings’ too?”

His surprise quickly became acquiescence. “OK.”

“Good,” she said. “They are yummy.”

“Yummy?”

Lois laughed. “You’ll know when you taste them.”

Kal left to order their food and Lois gathered her wet things, rinsed them in the little basin, and arranged them on the desk to dry.

When Kal returned, he asked, “Are you well enough to talk about our marriage?”

“Of course.”

“As soon as Tek brings our beverage, we will begin.”

Tek! “Are you sure Tek will bring our beverage?” Lois asked anxiously.

Kal nodded. “I just saw him. He will be here soon.”

Moments later, the door opened, and Tek arrived with a cup of beverage and a plate containing two of the ‘puddings’. Lois watched him closely, but could find nothing out of the ordinary in his demeanour.

“Thank you, Tek,” Kal said.

Lois waited until Tek had left the room. “What does Tek do for you?” she asked.

“Whatever I order him to,” Kal replied.

“What do you ask him to do?” Lois persisted.

“He brings my food.”

“And?”

“And that is all I require of him.”

“Why?”

For the first time ever, Lois saw the shadow of evasiveness on Kal’s face. “Because he is a servant in name only.”

“So you ensure he has plenty of time to do other things?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know what *other* things he does?”

“Some,” Kal said. “I don’t require too many details of him. Then if the Cabinet asks me what he is doing, I can truthfully be vague.”

Lois felt her mouth gape. Kal *did* understand something of the game of politics. “He developed an annex for the translators,” she said.

“Yes.”

“What is he working on now?”

“I don’t know.”

Lois contemplated Kal and concluded he was telling the truth. His trust in Tek must be absolute. “Why does he go to the cliffs?”

“That is where his father died.”

“Is today the anniversary of Kip’s death? Or any other special date?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then why did Tek go to the cliffs?”

“I don’t know.”

“Any ideas at all?”

“Perhaps he feels close to his father there,” Kal said wistfully.

Kal’s loss — so patently displayed — stalled Lois’s line of questions. “You wish you knew more about your father, don’t you?” she asked gently.

Kal nodded. “And my mother.”

“Maybe I can locate your globe.”

“I doubt that would be possible,” Kal stopped suddenly, and his grin surfaced. “Maybe *you* could,” he said.

“Yeah.” Lois sat on the bed and offered him the plate. “Try one of these,” she suggested. “It is a Kryptonian specialty, known

as a pudding.”

Kal brought the chair close to the bed and sat down. He took a pudding and bit into it. After he had swallowed, he said, “That is good.”

Lois took hers. “Yes, it is.”

“I lived within such limitations,” Kal said. “My world was so drab and unchanging.” He grinned. “Until you dropped onto my planet.” He leant forward and kissed the very end of her nose. “That was the best day of my life.”

Lois returned his smile. “You know something, Mr Supreme Ruler?” she said. “It was the best day of my life, too.”

### Part 23

The expression on Lois’s face suggested she was joking, but Kal knew there was truth in her words, so he wasn’t sure how to respond. He could ask her for an explanation — except he *really* wanted to discuss their marriage. “You said you would marry me,” he reminded her gently.

“Yes.”

“I know there are many things we need to discuss — many aspects that require clarity before our Marriage Ceremony,” Kal said. “I have done much research, and I think I have answers to many of your questions.”

Lois smiled. “Then why are you looking so worried?” she asked.

He’d forgotten she could read his face. “Because there are things I don’t think you will like.”

“Such as your continuing marriage to Za.”

Kal felt his knot of apprehension tighten. He took a deep breath, stared at his clenched hands long enough to attempt to organise his thoughts, and then looked up and into Lois’s face. “Lois, when I first asked you to marry me, you said you wouldn’t because I’m already married. Then you agreed to marry me despite Za, and I’m wondering if you’re ... if you’re hoping that I have ... I’m worried your expectation is that I will annul my marriage.”

“You have never given me any reason to hope that.”

It was true — he hadn’t, but Kal still feared he was about to disappoint her greatly. “I cannot annul my marriage to Za.”

Lois didn’t respond. He’d wondered if she would be angry or frustrated or even if she’d cry, but he found her blankness more disconcerting than any of the reactions he’d imagined. “Legally you can’t?” she asked quietly. “Or morally, you won’t?”

“Legally, I can,” he said, trying very hard not to flinch. “But if I were to annul my marriage to Za, she would pay a very high price for our love.”

“What would happen to her?”

“Even if I continued to supply her needs such as housing and food — which I would — the shame of being evicted from the Regal household would be immense — not only for Za, but for her entire family.”

“Is her family from the south?”

“Yes.”

“Could it start a civil war?”

Kal sighed. “It could — although almost any action could be the incendiary for Civil War.”

Lois capped her hands over his. “It’s OK, Kal,” she said. “I don’t expect you to do anything that would hurt Za.”

“You don’t?” he faltered.

“No.”

He had to be sure she fully understood. “You accept that, officially, Za would remain my wife?”

Lois nodded. “I don’t like it,” she said. “And I can’t imagine another situation where I would be willing to accept it ... but in this one, I am.”

His relief rolled through him, dousing his trepidation. “Thank you, Lois,” he said, knowing his words barely began to express

his gratitude.

Lois lifted her hands from his and sat back. “What are the differences between being a wife and being a concubine?” she asked.

“A concubine usually lives in her master’s household,” Kal replied. “Whereas a wife usually has her own household.”

Her eyes sparkled. “What if I decided I wanted my own household?” she said. “Instead of moving in with you?”

This time, Kal was sure she wasn’t serious. “That would be fine,” he said blithely.

“It would?”

“Sure.” Kal grinned. “So long as I could move in with you.”

She smiled. “That sounds perfect.”

Kal took a few moments to relish her smile as he dwelt on just how perfect it was going to be.

“Any other differences?” Lois asked.

With effort, he reined in his rampaging thoughts. “Any child borne by a wife is considered to be the child of the father; any child borne by a concubine is considered to be the child of the mother.”

“What about a second wife?”

“That situation applies for any wife.”

“But if I, as your wife, were to have a child, he or she could not be accepted as your child unless we went the sample route.” Lois stared at him, her face set. “Which we are *not* going to do.”

“No,” Kal said firmly. “No, we are not.”

“Then what would be the position of our child? Legally?”

The words ‘our child’ sent a thrill through him, but it was quickly extinguished. “Lois,” Kal said sadly. “I don’t think that will happen. I don’t think I will ever father a child.”

“Because you have bad seed?”

He could feel the focus of her displeasure as it centred on him. “Yes.”

“Kal, for Za to get pregnant, your seed has to actually get inside her.”

He did know that. “Yes.”

“Are you sure it does?” Lois asked. “What if Nor destroys it or replaces it with something else before it gets to Za?”

“I have considered that.”

“And?” she demanded.

“And I don’t think he does.”

“Why not?”

Her intensity was disconcerting, but it occurred to Kal that it may not be directed at him. “Because it is not only Nor,” Kal said. “Ching oversees the delivery to Za as well.”

“Couldn’t Nor and Ching be working together?”

“It is possible,” Kal conceded. “And Nor has much to gain if I remain childless.”

“He — or his son — would become the Supreme Ruler.”

“Yes,” Kal agreed. “But Ching has nothing to gain.”

“Meaning?” she fired at him.

“In some ways, Ching still carries the thoughts of the North,” Kal said. “He opposes Nor and Yent on many issues. I don’t think Ching would agree to something that would see New Krypton under Southern rule.”

“What if they have a deal?” Lois said. “Could Nor have promised Ching certain privileges if he, Nor, rules?”

“Ching is automatically the next in line.”

“And Nor already has a child, so Ching can’t just wait for Nor to die?”

“That is correct.”

“Do you think Ching has a plan to kill Nor? And Nor’s son?”

Kal considered. “That is unlikely,” he said. “Nor is a formidable opponent. And Ching is young. And if he were caught, he would be executed.”

Lois thought for a moment. “Is it possible Nor is blackmailing Ching?”

“That is possible,” Kal admitted. “But if Nor challenged, I believe his method of choice would not be blackmail.”

“You believe he would want all-out war?” Lois said.

That’s exactly what Kal believed, but it wasn’t Nor he wanted to discuss now. “Lois,” he said. “I can tell that you’re troubled.”

Lois’s smile appeared briefly. “I get a bit intense sometimes. Call it an occupational hazard of being a reporter.”

Kal understood enough to strengthen his suspicion that her irritation wasn’t directed at him. He needed to be sure, though. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“Sorry for what?” Lois seemed genuinely surprised.

“Sorry that it is unlikely we will have a child.”

“I don’t think it’s unlikely at all,” she countered. “I think there is too much for Nor to gain by keeping you childless. I think the method you and Za were forced to use is ridiculously susceptible to interference.”

Kal was still trying to process her first sentence. “You think it’s possible we could have a child?” he said in wonder.

Lois smiled. “I’d be willing to bet we have more chance than you and Za ever had.”

“You think so?”

“Yes,” she insisted. “At least for us, the ‘sample will get to where it’s supposed to be.’”

Kal felt his face heat, but he recognised this as his opportunity to ask about something that had been worrying him. “Are you ... sure ... we will be ... compatible?”

“I can’t guarantee our ‘seed’ will be compatible,” Lois said. “But our bodies will be.”

“How do you know?” A sudden possibility snagged his breath in his throat. “Have you looked?”

“Looked?” she gasped.

“If you can see through walls, you can probably see through clothes,” Kal reasoned.

“Yes,” she said. “I can.”

“Have you looked?” he repeated.

Lois laughed, although she looked as if his question had made her a little uneasy. “Are you hoping I will say ‘yes’ or ‘no’?”

“I’m not sure,” Kal said. “But I would like to know.”

“No,” Lois said. “I haven’t looked. But I really want to.”

Kal grinned. “If I could see through clothes, I would really want to look through yours.”

Lois answered his smile. “Would you do it?”

“I hope not.” He grinned again. “But the temptation would be considerable.”

“Uhhh,” she said in a tone that said much more.

“If you haven’t looked,” Kal asked. “How do you know we will be physically compatible?”

“I’ve seen you in the black suit.”

The black suit. “Oh.”

“It doesn’t hide much.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Are you uncomfortable wearing it?”

“Less so now,” Kal said. “The first time I wore it was at the Report following my Investiture. I was very nervous about having to speak in front of all the people. And then they brought me the suit, and once I had it on, I was even more nervous.”

“Why do you have to wear it?”

“Because it is tradition that the Supreme Ruler gives the Report wearing a tight black suit embellished with his family’s crest.”

“Do you know how the tradition began?”

He did. But knowing it didn’t translate easily to saying it. “Initially ... many, many years ago ... it was to show the people the physical strength of their leader to give them comfort and security in his protection.”

“So it is *meant* to be revealing?”

Kal nodded. “That is one reason why I do the physical exercise.”

“Really?” Lois said. “I thought it was because you knew that one day a woman would drop in from a faraway planet — a woman who is particularly partial to a superbly defined chest and tautly muscular shoulders.”

Kal coughed in a clumsy attempt to cover his embarrassment. “You ... ah ... like my chest?”

Lois nodded. “Not that I’ve actually seen it, but I’ve seen enough to know it is utterly drool-worthy.”

Kal didn’t understand much beyond her approval, but he concluded now was not the time for full understanding. He tried to clear the constriction from his throat. “Maybe we should work on the details of our marriage ... so we can ... ah ... get to ... that ... as quickly as possible,” he suggested.

Lois laughed and then sobered quickly. “Have you said anything to anyone else about our marriage?”

Kal shook his head. “My intention is to call a Cabinet Meeting tomorrow and inform them I will be marrying you.”

“Nor will oppose it,” Lois said with certainty.

“Probably,” Kal said easily. “But he can’t stop me marrying you, so there is no reason for concern.”

“Kal,” Lois said. “I just can’t see Nor sitting back and allowing us to marry, knowing it could lead to the birth of a child — a child who would almost ensure that he and his family will never rule New Krypton.”

“If Nor harms any of my household, he and ten of his family members will be executed,” Kal explained. “Then, if I were dead, the mantle would pass to Ching.”

“Are you concerned?” she said. “At all?”

“The people are disappointed there has been no heir,” he said. “They may see my marriage to you as a second chance. That could be enough to keep some of the less rebellious ones from taking up arms. That may stall Nor. He will not initiate war unless he believes he will win.”

Lois didn’t seem totally convinced. “Kal, we need to decide what will happen if we do have a child.”

Kal couldn’t contain his smile at that thought.

Lois put her hand on his. “You want a child, don’t you?”

A child? With Lois? Kal believed it wasn’t possible, but ... what if it was? Kal allowed himself a moment to dream. “More than anything, I want to marry you,” he said. “But if we were to have a child — that would be incredible.”

“Do you want a child? Or an heir?”

“With Za, I wanted an heir,” Kal said. “I wanted to honour my forefathers with a new generation. I wanted to fortify the future of my planet.” He took her hand. “And with you, Lois, it is all that. But it is so much more. To have a child who is the mixing of you and me ... a child that is the result of our love ... a child that we can love together. That would be more than ... so much more than anything I have ever hoped for.”

Lois said nothing for a few moments, and Kal wondered what she was thinking. “I have never wanted a child,” she said.

Her words pierced his dream and deflated it to nothingness. “You haven’t?”

“No.” Lois’s hand gripped his more tightly. “But that was because I had never met someone I loved enough to have a child with.”

“So you would like to have a child now?” he asked. “With me?”

“Yes.”

The dream lived. Kal smiled. “Since meeting you, I have wondered so much more about my parents. I wonder if they wanted a child together or if I was never anything more than the solution to a political conflict — even to them. I wonder if my father loved my mother, or if she was merely the daughter of an enemy who had been thrust upon him.”

"It's important to you, isn't it?"

"Yes. It is important, and I don't even really understand why. I would like to think that my parents shared a love like we have, but I realise that it is unlikely." He looked into her eyes. "I guess your parents loved each other?"

He saw her face change and regretted his question. "Maybe they did at the beginning," Lois said. "But they separated when I was quite young."

"Separated?"

"They felt they were no longer in love, and they didn't want to be together anymore, so they separated."

"That would be awful," Kal said.

"It was," Lois said. "But it was probably better than the conflict and bitterness we endured when they were together." Her hand lifted to skim along his jaw. "And it's definitely better than having no memories at all."

"Did you always hope they would re-discover their love?"

Lois hesitated. "Yes," she admitted, as if she were slightly ashamed of her hope. "But I know that isn't going to happen."

Kal covered her hand and brought it to his lap. "We will never lose our love," he vowed.

Lois smiled, but only briefly. He could see her thoughts had already moved forward. "I have a question," she said.

"This sounds ominous," he said with a nervous smile.

She squeezed his hand. "I don't wish to embarrass you, Kal," she said. "But this is something we have to decide."

He nodded.

"After we are married, will you continue to give Za the sample every month?"

Kal shifted uncomfortably under her direct gaze. "You don't want me to, do you?" he guessed.

"Kal, if Za were to have a child, you would be so excited and so proud, and I know you would want to be very involved in the raising of your child. And that would draw you and Za closer together ... and I'm not sure I could control my jealousy."

"The provision of a sample is usually a short-term obligation."

"Why?"

"As soon as the heir is conceived, the obligation ceases."

"Most Supreme Rulers have only one child?"

"With his wife, yes," Kal said. "It's done to stop a younger sibling from challenging the birthright of the firstborn."

"What if the first child is a girl?"

"A suitable marriage is arranged with a high-ranking family."

"Her husband would be the Supreme Ruler?"

"Yes."

"Are there a high number of girls born to the Supreme Ruler's wife who mysteriously don't survive the birth?"

"They are not recorded," Kal said. His eyes dropped low. "But that is possible."

"Lucky you were male, hey?" Lois said grimly.

Delving into the murky history of Krypton was not going to help answer the questions about his future with Lois. "If we were to have a child, would you have concerns about a child of yours being the heir?"

"I can't see how that would be possible." Lois grinned. "Given our preferred method of conception."

"The people are eager for an heir — an heir that has blood from both the North and the South."

"With a little alien blood mixed in for good measure?"

Kal couldn't discern if Lois was serious or joking. "Just as I am accepted as the Supreme Ruler because of my mixed blood, so any child of mine would carry that mixed blood."

"You believe that if the people had to choose between no heir and a child born to your alien wife — a child without official verification of his or her paternity — they would accept the child as their leader?"

Kal nodded.

"I wouldn't allow any child of mine to live in the isolation you were subjected to."

"We would not allow that," Kal said. "We would be a family. You, me, and our child. Our child could have all the things I didn't have — the love of a mother and the love of a father ... guidance and training and stability and knowing how to laugh and to have tears and how to love."

"How would Za feel about that?" Lois asked. "It would mean that she would never have a child and that I had truly replaced her, not just joined her as your wife."

"I don't know how Za would feel," Kal said. "I have never spoken to her. I don't know if she wants a child. I don't know how she feels about the samples. She had no choice in this either. She was forced to become my wife because she was the first female baby born on New Krypton."

"Has she ever tried to contact you? Has she ever asked to meet with you?"

"No."

"What happens regarding the sample between now and when we may have an announcement of a coming heir?"

"There is provision in the Law for me to refuse to give the sample for a short time — a few months," Kal said. "Any longer than that and the Cabinet can issue a Demand for an Explanation against me."

"Could you lose the leadership if you refuse?" Lois asked.

"No," Kal said. "Not if I give an alternative method of providing the hope of an heir."

"That's going to be an awful lot of pressure on us to conceive," Lois said disconsolately.

Kal could think of no suitable reply. "I will inform the Cabinet tomorrow that we will marry the following day — is that suitable to you?"

Lois let out a long breath. "Yes, that is suitable to me."

Kal needed to get back her happiness. A discussion about their marriage should not end on such a weary sigh. He caressed her hand. "Will you marry me, Lois?" he asked. "I *can* marry you. You can have every legal right due the wife of the Supreme Ruler. Officially, you can be my wife."

Lois grinned suddenly, her gloom gone. "How about *not* officially?"

He grinned with her, relieved that she was smiling again. "*Not* officially, you will get many things — the whole of my heart, my everlasting love, my profound gratitude, everything I am."

Lois cradled his face in her hands and looked deep into his eyes. "Then that will be enough," she told Kal. "I will share you officially, but unofficially, you will be all mine."

"Yours," he agreed. "Only yours."

Her mouth moved closer, and she kissed him.

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Lois was about a second away from losing herself in the lure of Kal's kiss when she remembered the aquifer. She pulled away rather abruptly. "Can you show me a map of New Krypton?" she asked.

He covered his surprise at her swift departure from their kiss and brought the map to the bed, spreading it out.

"Where are the current drilling operations?" Lois asked.

He showed her.

Lois pointed to the eastern edge of the island. "This is the cliff face?"

"Yes."

"When I was on the cliff, I looked under the ground."

Kal's eyes sparked with new hope. "And?"

"And there is no water under any of the drills."

"Oh," he said, disappointed.

"But there is a big underground lake ..." Lois indicated the

map between two of the drills. “... right about here.”

“There is?”

“There is.”

“Is it a long way below the surface?”

“Moderately so, but no deeper than you’ve already reached with the drills.”

Kal studied the map. “It is far enough from the ocean that it could possibly be fresh water.”

“We can hope so,” Lois said.

“I will order the drills be dismantled and moved,” he said.

“You aren’t going to consult with the Water Committee?”

Lois asked.

Kal shook his head.

“You’re not feeling in the mood for consultation?” she teased.

Kal didn’t respond to the lightness of her tone. “Lois,” he said solemnly. “You know I love you, and you know I will love you whatever happens?”

“Yes,” Lois said, unsure of his point.

“And you know I am not disconcerted that you can see through things ... but maybe it would be best if others didn’t know what you can do.”

Lois hadn’t thought about that.

“Please don’t think I am ashamed of you,” Kal said. “I could never be that. But I would hate it if people thought of you as an oddity.”

“You mean even weirder than being an alien from another planet?”

Kal nodded cautiously. “Please understand, Lois. Take time to think about it ... and if you decide that your ... differences need not be kept a secret, I will support you in that. But should you decide they are best kept between us, you will still have that choice if we say nothing about how we know there is water underground.”

Lois gathered him into her arms. “That’s a good plan,” she said. “Thank you, Kal.”

He kissed her quickly. “I need to order the two working drills be moved,” he said. “Then I want to do some of the tasks from my schedule for the days following our marriage.” He flashed her a wide, bursting-with-anticipation grin and left the room.

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Lois collected her book from Ard, marvelling again over the simplistic beauty of her drawings.

“Will there be another one?” Ard asked. “Soon?”

Lois was about to tell her there would be a break of a few days when she hesitated, her mind spinning with a new idea. If she could borrow her earlier books from Riz’s children, copies could be made — copies that would extend the gift of stories to the other children of New Krypton. “Yes,” Lois said. “Soon.”

Ard returned to her desk, looking happy — as far as Lois could guess.

Lois took the new book to Riz’s home and read it to the two children.

When the story was finished, Riz placed the steaming cups of beverages in front of them and sat down. “There are rumours that you and the Supreme Ruler are becoming increasingly closer.”

Lois chuckled. Riz wasn’t one to waste time with small talk when she was chasing information. “Yes.”

“Are you going to marry him?”

“He’s already married,” Lois said.

“He’s the Supreme Ruler,” Riz said. “He can have as many wives and as many concubines as he wishes.”

“Do you think the people of New Krypton would accept an alien as his wife?”

“Some will,” Riz said easily. “Some won’t.”

Lois gulped. “Oh.”

“Many Kryptonians appreciate the last ten years of relative peace. They understand that if we are to live as a united people, it

is important that the Supreme Ruler is of blood from both sides.”

“Is it possible some people won’t accept Nor as the Supreme Ruler?”

“If Nor decides to push his claim for the mantle, I don’t think he will be particularly concerned with the wishes of the people.”

“If the Supreme Ruler were to have a child — would that be considered a good thing?”

“For the sake of unity, it would be the best thing.”

“Even by the means of an alien?”

“Yes.”

Lois paused, trying to decide if she could trust Riz. “I am going to be married in two days,” she said.

Riz smiled — not with her mouth, but with a lightening of her eyes. “That is good news,” she said.

“Will you come?”

“Do you want me to?”

“Yes.”

“I will come.”

“I’ll let you know the exact time,” Lois said.

“Tek will officiate, so I will find out from him.”

“Why would Tek officiate?”

“The Marriage Ceremony is usually conducted by a family member of the male who is being married. The Supreme Ruler has no family members, so Tek is the closest, being a member of the household.”

“That is sad — that he has no one from his family.”

“It has been sad for a long time,” Riz said. “But now, everything will be better.”

“Do you think his wife will be offended by her husband marrying another woman?” Lois asked.

“She has no course to be offended.”

“Why?” Lois asked, still struggling to accept that any wife would be unconcerned by her husband’s upcoming marriage to another woman. “Because he’s the Supreme Ruler and he’s allowed to do anything he wants?”

“Yes, but more than that.”

“More how?”

“The Lady Za has had ten years to show an interest in her husband. She has chosen not to.”

“So she deserves to lose him?” Lois said, impossibly conflicted by the weird feeling of indignation on behalf of her fiancé’s wife.

“It isn’t that she deserves to lose him,” Riz said. “But that I doubt she will care what he does. She has never shown any inclination to be close to him.”

“Is she blind?” Lois asked.

“No, she is not,” Riz answered seriously.

Lois subdued her smile. “Will she even be informed?”

“She will hear. She is probably already expecting such news.”

“It is very strange to me to be marrying a married man,” Lois said. “It is even stranger that there will be no opposition from his wife.”

“It will not be considered strange on New Krypton,” Riz said. A spark of interest showed on her face. “Can I help you prepare for the Marriage Ceremony? What does a woman do on your planet when she is to be married?”

“Often she wears a white dress and carries flowers.”

“Will you wear the concubine dress? Or the Report Gown?”

“I haven’t decided.”

“We have minimal flowers on New Krypton,” Riz said.

“That is all right.”

“What else happens in an Earth Marriage Ceremony?”

“The man and woman swap rings.”

“Finger rings?”

“Yes — worn on this finger.” Lois indicated her left ring finger. “It signifies that they are married.”

Riz swung her leg from under the table and lifted her gown a

few inches. Lois saw she wore a copper coloured band around her ankle. “This signifies I am married.”

“Does Kal wear one of those? Does Tek?”

“Tek does. The Nobles do not.”

“Oops,” Lois said with a half-formed smile. “I forgot the rule about not being allowed to mention the Supreme Ruler.”

“The Rule does not apply to a wife.”

“It doesn’t?”

“She usually has no contact with her husband, so there is nothing to tell.”

This was indeed a strange planet, Lois reflected. Strange that the regular people accepted such bizarre behaviour from those considered superior to them. She stood. “I’m sorry this is a short visit, Riz. I have lots to do.”

Riz stood and approached Lois, stopping very close to her. “I am very pleased by your news,” she said. Lois concluded she had just experienced the Kryptonian equivalent of a hug.

“Thank you,” Lois said. Then she remembered the other purpose of her visit. “I would like to make copies of the books so other children can have them,” she said. “Could I please have the books for a day?”

Riz took a pile of about fifteen books down from a shelf. She offered them to Lois.

“What are all these?” Lois asked.

“I made copies of your books,” Riz explained. “I did the writing in both Kryptonian languages, and I planned to get Tek to take them to Ard to draw the pictures as soon as I had checked it would be all right with you.”

Lois smiled. “Thank you, Riz.”

“When they are done, I intend to loan them to any child who is interested.”

“Just like a library,” Lois exclaimed.

“That word doesn’t translate,” Riz said.

“It doesn’t matter what you call it,” Lois said. “It is a wonderful idea.” Impulsively, she gave Riz a short hug and then turned to leave without waiting to see her reaction.

As Lois walked back to Kal’s gates, she felt ridiculously buoyant. Lois Lane, reporter, Daily Planet, would never have experienced such satisfaction over a few picture books constructed rather roughly from paper and twine.

And Lois Lane, Daily Planet, would never have considered marrying a man who refused to give up his current marriage.

But her life had changed — so very, very much.

And so had Lois Lane.

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Kal stared at the closed door.

He still had grave reservations about the wisdom of coming here.

He could have had Tek arrange this meeting in his Chambers. That would have been the Kryptonian way.

Actually, the Kryptonian way would be not to do this at all.

But Kal felt he should.

And he hadn’t felt comfortable about summoning her to his residence.

So now, he was here, staring at her door. He knocked — although he wasn’t compelled to.

He waited — still unsure what he was going to say.

The door opened and she was there.

Neither spoke for a long moment.

Then his wife broke the silence with the first words she had ever spoken to him. “Lord Kal-El,” Za said. “I’ve been expecting you.”

## Part 24

Kal cleared his throat. “You have?” he asked.

“There are rumours that you have a strong liking for your latest concubine — the alien woman.”

“That is true,” Kal said.

“I suspect you are here to inform me that your preference is that she be the woman who bears your heir,” Za said. “And as such, I will no longer receive your sample.”

For the first time ever, Kal searched the face of his wife. It was inscrutable — like a mask deliberately set to barrenness. Was she angry? Was she relieved? Was she feeling cast aside? Or was this the release she wanted? The clues he needed were not there.

“Would you be accepting of not receiving the sample?” he asked.

“I have not spent the years of our marriage in idleness,” Za said. “I have studied Kryptonian Law in depth, and I know I have no option other than to accept your decision — particularly as you will offer the people an alternate way to provide the heir they require.”

“But you,” Kal insisted. “How would *you* feel about it? Do you want children?”

“How I feel about anything has never been of the slightest significance,” Za said.

Kal searched her again — looking for anger ... bitterness ... hostility ... anything to help him gauge her feelings. He could discern nothing from the vacuousness. “I have failed you,” he said regretfully. “I did not understand about marriage.”

“You have treated me better than many Supreme Rulers before you treated their wives,” she said.

If she felt any animosity, it didn’t appear to be directed at him. “Are you hoping for a child?” Kal asked.

“Are you going to annul our marriage?”

Suddenly, Kal saw the way forward open up before him.

“Would you prefer that?” he asked, trying not to sound too eager.

“Then you would have the opportunity to marry someone of your choosing and raise children with him.”

“No!” Za said emphatically.

Her sudden spark of fervour shocked him. Her face remained blank, but she could not hide the anxiety in her eyes. Kal felt the beginnings of a shared rapport. She had been born into this, just as he had. “Then it will not be annulled,” he assured her.

Za studied him for a moment, her fear abating, though he saw no hint of gratitude. “Why?” she asked. “It would be preferable for you and your new wife if I had no further part in your lives.”

“Because it wouldn’t be right to do that.”

She didn’t respond for a time. “Publicly, I will be supportive of your new liaison,” Za said eventually, speaking slowly and carefully. “Although there is nothing I can do to prevent it, any suggestion of opposition from me could stir up the dissenters from the South.”

Kal felt a wave of gratitude. “Thank you,” he said, knowing she wouldn’t understand his words, but hoping she would grasp his sentiment.

“In return for me quietly accepting my diminished position, there is a petition I desire from you.”

Another layer of surprise settled on Kal. He had been *married* to this woman for a decade and had not once considered her to be anything more than a political necessity. “What is your petition?” he asked, hoping he would be able to grant it.

“Should I bear a child, you will accept that child as yours.”

The ramifications of Za bearing a child hit Kal like a volley of gunfire. From the maze of his confusion, he managed to extract the most pertinent point. “If he is not my child, he should not have the birthright to become the Supreme Ruler.”

“If an heir is born to you and your wife, that child will inherit the mantle of leadership.”

“Unless your child is born first.”

“I have waited much time already,” Za said. “I am willing to wait until after the rightful heir is born.”

“I am unsure if there will be a child born to my second marriage.”

“Then without my child, the mantle will fall to Nor or his

son.”

Kal looked into her eyes and saw — not the flare of ambition, but the flurry of deep concern. “That would mean the end of peace on New Krypton,” he said.

He saw her glimmer of agreement. “I have studied History as well as Law,” she said. “I believe that our only way forward is unity. I believe that if Nor, or his son, or anyone from his family were to become the Supreme Ruler, unity would be unattainable.”

“I believe that, too.”

“Then agree to my proposal,” Za said with a dash of feeling. “Should you and your wife have a child, New Krypton will have a Supreme Ruler of mixed blood for the next generation. If you don’t, my child would be a preferable option to Nor.”

Kal hesitated. “How do I know I can trust you?” he said. “If you were to bear a child and I accepted that child as mine, how would I know that you would keep your word and not try to dislodge my own child from the mantle that is rightfully his?”

“Legally, there will be no proof my child is yours,” Za said. “I could not prove paternity because Nor and Ching will not ratify the provision of a sample. Therefore, if you accept the child, morally I will avoid disgrace, but legally it would be a simple matter for you to overrule my child’s claim to the mantle.”

Kal hesitated again. He could see the many positives in Za’s proposal. He knew keeping Nor from the absolute authority inherent in the position of Supreme Ruler was imperative to a peaceful future for New Krypton. But to allow the mantle to fall to a child who was neither of the House of El nor of the House of Ra? Would that dishonour his family? His ancestors?

But unless he fathered a child, there could be no Supreme Ruler of mixed blood. The mantle had to fall to someone. And Nor’s family were the next in line.

And Lois? Would she see this as a possible solution?

“This is the best chance for our future,” Za said earnestly. “Not just your future and my future, but the future of New Krypton. Nor must be stopped. If you die without an heir, the South will rule and the people from the North and those committed to unity will be murdered or oppressed. We need *more* people, not less, if we are to overcome the difficulties of this planet.” She paused long enough to establish direct eye contact. “We can’t allow all Kryptonians to pay for Nor’s obsession with power.”

Another layer settled on Kal’s mountain of shock. His wife was a woman of intellect and insight. A woman genuinely committed, just as he was, to the people they had been born to lead. “You have already chosen who will be the father of your child?” Kal asked, his curiosity piqued.

“I have said nothing to him,” Za said. “I have care for him, and I believe he has care for me. But I am the wife of the Supreme Ruler, and I have not dishonoured that.”

“I appreciate that,” Kal said, realising he did.

“My only dishonour has been that my primary purpose was to provide the planet with an heir — and in that, I have failed.”

“We both failed in that,” Kal said. He paused, wanting to ask a question, but unsure how to word it. “Did ... did you receive my sample every month?”

Za looked at the floor. “Yes,” she said. “Although I had no way of knowing if what I received was the same as that which you’d given.”

Kal was sure there was no judicious response to this comment, so he said nothing.

“Every month,” Za continued, “I was disappointed that there was to be no child.”

“I was, too,” Kal said, knowing it was the truth. “If there is someone else you love ... have care for, why do you not want our marriage annulled so you are free to pursue a life with him? Is it because of the shame it would cause you and your family?”

“I would be aggrieved at causing my family shame, but that

is not the foremost reason,” Za said.

“Then why?”

“On the annulment of our marriage, I would become available to be taken by any of the Nobles,” Za said. “And Nor is the one with the first option to take me — either as a wife or a concubine.”

With deepening empathy, Kal understood her vulnerability — and his own inability to protect her — should Nor decide to take her.

“Do we have an understanding?” Za asked.

“Yes,” Kal agreed. “Morally, I will accept any child you bear as mine.”

“Then finally, our marriage has achieved something,” Za said.

She waited. Kal knew she was waiting for him to turn, so she could shut her door.

He did and walked away, his mind pulsating with a swarm of interconnecting thoughts.

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In her room, Lois went through her meagre wardrobe and withdrew the short concubine dress and the white gown she had worn to the Reports.

She hadn’t asked Kal what clothing was usual for a bride on New Krypton, but she was sure he wouldn’t mind what she wore.

And somehow, it was important that she wear white.

She had two options — neither would have been her choice had she had the luxury of a wider selection.

Lois tried to imagine herself walking towards Kal wearing the short concubine dress. Then, in her mind, she switched and clothed herself in her long white gown.

From the pushed-aside homesickness, another vision materialised. Her ... in a beautiful white dress with her father beside her. Lois’s tears surged and tumbled down her cheeks.

This was her wedding.

This was supposed to be everything she had dreamed. The dress, the flowers, the excitement shared with her friends and family.

As much as she loved Kal and as excited as she was about marrying him, it didn’t fill the cavernous hole inside her.

Lois crumpled onto the bed. She had made so many compromises — she had accepted the proposal of a married man, she had accepted the ongoing status of his first marriage, she had accepted that her wedding would bear little resemblance to her dreams or expectations.

And each compromise had taken her a step closer to drowning in her alienation.

She had told herself that Kal more than made up for all the things she had thought would be hers, but now would never be.

And he did.

But the absence of her family coursed through her like acid.

She could imagine her mom — excited ... difficult ... insistent ... probably adding stress by the bucketful — but that was how Lois had always imagined her wedding.

And her dad — proudly accompanying her up the aisle.

And Lucy — as her bridesmaid.

And Perry — gruffly trying to pretend that he wasn’t the least affected by such frivolity, but rejoicing with her in his dear old heart.

And Jimmy — giving his camera the best workout it had ever had.

Lois’s tears fell freely. She was marrying the man of her dreams. But the wedding of her dreams would never be hers.

It didn’t matter, she told herself fiercely.

It didn’t matter.

But it did.

Lois stood, and through the blur of her tears again considered the two dresses. She would wear the concubine one, she decided

impulsively. She had worn it to become Kal's — it seemed fitting that she wear it to become his wife.

As she put the long white gown on the hanger, Lois heard a knock at the door.

Quickly, she dried her cheeks and thrust away her heaviness. She opened her door.

Mo stood there.

"Mo," Lois said, trying not to allow her surprise to creep into her greeting.

"Do you mind that I came?" Mo asked hesitantly.

"No, of course not," Lois said, as she stepped back. "Come on in."

Mo hesitated. Then she thrust forward the bundle of papers she held in her hand. "I want to read you this," she said breathlessly.

Lois smiled in encouragement. "All right," she agreed.

Mo read from the papers. It was a story — the story of a little girl who had gone into the fields to pick flowers and had tried to find a flower of every colour.

When Mo finished reading, she looked expectantly at Lois.

"That is a beautiful story," Lois said.

"Is it?" Mo said, looking unconvinced.

"Yes," Lois said. "It is sweet and well written, and you describe everything on the walk so wonderfully well that I could see it all clearly."

"It isn't my idea," Mo said. "Ard told me how she would go out on Krypton and try to come home with flowers of many different colours."

"It is a great idea," Lois said. "But all great ideas need a writer to put them into words so others can share it."

"Is it all right that I did it?"

"Did you enjoy writing it?"

The tiniest spark of enthusiasm lit Mo's eyes. "When I got the idea, I couldn't stop thinking about it, and then when I had written it down, I felt very good."

Lois smiled, understanding exactly what Mo meant. "I feel like that, too."

"You do?"

"Yes," Lois said. "Are you going to ask Ard to draw the pictures?"

"Would you mind?" Mo said.

"No, of course I wouldn't mind. I think it is a wonderful idea."

"But you are the one who writes the books," Mo said.

Lois smiled. "That doesn't mean I have to be the only one who writes the books. I am very happy for someone else to do it, too."

Mo did the thing Lois was beginning to recognise as a Kryptonian smile — not with the mouth, but with a lightening of the eyes. "You don't mind if I write other books?"

"I think you should write as many books as you want to.

Clearly, you have a talent for it."

"Do you mean that?" Mo asked.

"Yes, I do," Lois said gravely.

Mo turned and walked away. She passed her own room and went to Ard's room. When Ard appeared, Mo gave her the book and explained her request.

Lois closed her door with a satisfied smile.

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Kal and Lois met for their evening meal. Tek brought the food, Lois sat on the bed, Kal sat on the chair.

"Can I turn off our Translators?" Kal asked. "I was hoping to last night, but so much else happened, there was no opportunity."

"Sure," Lois agreed, thinking again of what Riz had said about why so few Kryptonians knew a second language.

Kal gently slid his fingers through her hair and moved his hand to his left ear.

"Kal, I really appreciate your desire to learn my language," Lois said. "I was with Riz today, and she explained how the translators were so necessary when you needed a way to survive the destruction of Krypton, but how their continued use is actually a de-motivation for anyone to learn a second language."

"Dom's ear piece is good," Kal said. "But it will stop true ...

"

"Communication," Lois supplied for him.

"I wanted ... more with you."

Lois smiled. "I didn't like the idea at first," she admitted. "I was scared of being isolated if my translator didn't work."

"I want you feel safe now."

"I do," Lois said. "I cannot imagine feeling anything other than safe with you, Kal." He smiled in response, but Lois's thoughts had quickly moved on. To Nor. Nor whom she was sure had intentions to threaten Kal's safety. "Have you scheduled the cabinet meeting?" she asked.

"Yes. For the morning."

"What are you going to tell them?"

"I tell them I am to marry you the next day."

"Will you inform the people?"

"I will inform ... Report ... in the afternoon."

"How do you expect the people will react to the news?"

"I cannot tell."

Lois wished she didn't care if the Kryptonian people approved of her marrying their leader, but she did. "Is it possible I will not win their approval unless I supply the heir they need?"

"That is possible," Kal said. "Does that trouble you?"

"I am unsure of the future — for you, for me, and for any child we may have."

"Because of Nor?"

"Yes."

"Lois, I don't think Nor will try to kill me. Or you. Or the child of ours."

"He killed Mo and Jib's sister," Lois said. "And I believe the timing of Kip's death is highly suspicious."

Kal didn't disagree. "Nor had times to kill me."

"When you were in hiatus?"

"No. Not hiatus. But in the first times after my hiatus."

"Nor's father was still alive then, wasn't he?"

"Yes — Ked."

"Was Ked like Nor?"

"Yes. Like Nor, Ked did not care about what is right."

"When Tek told the cabinet about the annex he'd designed, Nor insisted on a longer than usual trial period," Lois said.

"Yes."

"That trial period is nearly over?"

"In less than two weeks."

"Why doesn't Nor want the children to be able to communicate?"

"Because he fears it will help unity."

"Then why not push for a period of three years?" Lois asked. "Or four years? Why two years and one month?"

"Yent and I spoke for either the annex or a rule for all children to learn both languages."

"So Nor accepted the annex because for him, it was less of a threat than proper communication?"

"That is my believe."

"It still doesn't explain the extra month," Lois insisted. "Kal, I think Nor has a plan. A plan that will come to fruition in the next two weeks."

"There are no moves to train or ... give weapons to men," Kal said.

"How do you know?"

"I have ... people who ..."

Lois gasped in shock. "You have *spies*?"

Kal nodded. "Spies," he said. "I have people who want unity

and peace — people Nor believes are fight men of the South.”

“And you trust these men?” Lois questioned. “What if Nor has planted them to mislead you?”

“That is possible,” Kal conceded. “But I have to trust someone. The task is to wise pick who to trust.”

“If Nor isn’t planning an armed attack, could he have another means to wrest the control of New Krypton from you?”

“How?”

Lois took a few moments to allow her brain to catch up with her mouth. “Could he call a vote of no confidence in your leadership? Could he initiate an election and have the people vote him into power? Could he have a technicality in the Law he could use?”

“I am the Supreme Ruler by birthright,” Kal said. “The people cannot vote me out. I have read the Law, and I can find nothing of use to Nor.” He placed their barely touched food on the floor and took her hand. “Please don’t be afraid, Lois,” he said. “In two days, we will be married. And together, we are more than enough.”

Lois forced a smile for him, but her instincts refused to be appeased. She was sure Nor wanted to rule New Krypton. She was sure the extra month for Tek’s annex was relevant. “Didn’t Nor’s father write the law of New Krypton?” she asked. “With Yent?”

“Yes,” Kal said. “But they could not ...” He stopped. “I don’t have words I need.” He reached across and slid his fingers through Lois’s hair and then turned on his own translator. “Ked and Yent could not legislate any Law they wished.”

“Then how did they do it?”

“Any Law common to both the North and the South is Canon. Those Laws could not be changed in any way. The Laws similar were adapted and a compromise reached. Those Laws from one side, but unrepresented on the other side, were dismissed unless there was good argument for their inclusion.”

“Were Ked and Yent accountable to anyone?”

“Yes,” Kal said. “Two experts in Law, one from each side of the border, authorised every Law not common to both sides. Both of these men were old and much experienced and learned. Both have now passed away.”

“Do you have the authority to change a Law?”

“Not the Canon Law,” Kal said. “That cannot be changed. Other Law can be modified, but the process is long and tedious and involves many steps.”

“If Nor were the Supreme Ruler, wouldn’t he have the constraints of these laws?”

“Officially, yes. But if one is willing to kill anyone who rises in opposition, there is little that can be done to stop a Supreme Ruler from ruling as his heart directs.”

“And Nor’s heart is evil,” Lois said, shivering with the foreboding inherent in her words.

“Yes.”

“The Law is written in those big books in the chambers?”

Kal took Lois’s hand and led her from the bedroom and into the chambers. He pointed to the series of volumes on the shelves. “This is the Law of New Krypton,” he said.

“Is that the only copy?”

“This is the original. There are copies available to anyone who wishes to read or study the Law.”

“Where is the law of Krypton? The law from the north and the south?”

Kal pushed against the side of the bookcase, and it slid easily to the left. Built into the wall was a door with a knob embedded into it. Kal turned the knob and Lois heard irregular clunking sounds from inside it. After a considerable time — more than thirty seconds — the door swung open. “The original Law from both sides is kept in here.”

Lois peered in, her nostrils filling with the unmistakable

mustiness of ancient paper. She could make out several piles of yellowed pages bound with tattered string.

“These books are many hundreds of years old and extremely fragile,” Kal said. “No one is permitted to touch them without good reason.”

“Does everyone know they are here?”

“The people know they are in existence, but for security reasons, their whereabouts remain a secret.”

“But you told me?”

“We have no secrets, Lois,” Kal said with a little smile. He closed the door, turned the knob, and replaced the bookcase. “The bookcase is built on castors making it easy to move,” he explained.

Lois stepped to him and slid her arms around his neck.

“Thank you for trusting me,” she said.

Kal smiled. “I cannot ask you to trust me without returning trust to you,” he said.

He kissed her, and Lois’s thoughts quickly brushed aside the tedium of ancient law and embraced the excitement of being with Kal. His thoughts had seemingly moved likewise because he backed away with a smile that was a mix of lingering enjoyment and sharp regret. “What do you plan to wear to our wedding?” he asked.

“It is traditional in my country on Earth for the woman to wear white.”

“White is perfect.”

“What do you intend to wear?”

Kal hesitated. “I am unsure what you prefer.”

Lois grinned suddenly. “Anything but the black suit.”

Kal tried to smother his grin. “You don’t want the black suit?”

“No.”

The pull of his smile deepened. “Why?”

His eyes held an ambrosial mix of love and affection and deep contentment. Lois felt her own smile being drawn from her heart and fashioned upon her face. “You know *exactly* why,” she accused.

“I’d like you to tell me,” he said.

“Because it is just possible that those levels of temptation could be dangerous to my health,” she retorted. “And yours too.”

Kal smiled and exhaled with a soft gurgling sound.

Lois couldn’t contain the small squeal that exploded from her mouth. “Kal! You laughed!”

“I did?”

“You did,” Lois confirmed. “I’ve been so hoping you would laugh.”

“You liked it?”

“Oh, yes.”

Kal looked pleased. “I like your laugh,” he said. “It always makes me feel good inside.”

“Your laugh did that to me.”

“Then I must do it again.”

“I’d like that.”

Kal’s fingertips delved into her hair, and Lois assumed he was going to turn off her translator again. “Kal, you are close to fluent in my language already,” she said. “I barely notice any differences when our translators are off.”

“I have been attempting to think in your language to enable me to learn more quickly.”

“You can *think* in my language?”

Kal nodded. “Mostly.” Instead of turning off her translator, his hand moved past it and unhurriedly slid the length of her hair.

Lois was torn between exploring Kal’s astounding ability in language and concentrating on the delicious exploration of his fingers across her scalp. “That is amazing,” she said.

“It wasn’t too difficult.”

“It would be for most people.”

“Maybe I just really, really wanted to learn.” Kal stepped behind her and swept her hair from her neck. Lois felt the touch of his lips on her bare skin next to the neck of her gown. “Your skin tantalises me, Lois,” he said. The husky resonance of his voice drifted across her neck. “I love your shoulders.” His lips, warm and sensuous, touched her, half an inch closer to her spine. “And your neck.” Again, he kissed her, this time directly above her spine. “And your ears.” He scorched a trail of kisses towards her right ear. When he reached her lobe, she felt the gentle pull of suction as his mouth closed around it.

A thrill shuddered through her body, and her knees pitched forward. Kal’s hands left her hair, and his arms fastened around her waist.

She turned in the circle of his embrace. “Only two more nights alone,” she whispered.

“Only two,” he said. “The best night of my life was the night you stayed with me.”

“The next time I stay with you, it will be for much happier reasons,” Lois promised.

“Once we are married, we can be together every night.” Kal smiled. “Every night,” he repeated as if he couldn’t quite believe it.

Lois returned his smile. “I can’t wait.”

“We should return to our meal,” Kal said. “It will be getting cold.”

“I don’t feel hungry for food,” Lois told him.

A slow smile of agreement crept across his face. “Me either,” Kal said. “But you did not eat your lunch today and then you had a ... mishap with the ocean. You should eat.” He unfurled from her, and Lois walked from the chambers into Kal’s bedroom. As she passed the door, she felt the touch of his hand on her back. “Do you think your escape from the ocean could be related to being able to see through things?” he asked.

Lois sat on the bed. “I’ve thought about it, and maybe that’s possible.”

Kal replaced the plate on his lap. “When you were on Earth, did you have any astonishing escapes?”

“I had a few close calls,” Lois conceded. “I have a tendency to ignore potential danger when I’m chasing down a story. But whenever I went too far, I would pay for it just like everyone else.”

“Did you hit the rocks today?”

“Yes. Twice.”

Kal winced. “Are you sure you have no injuries?”

“Absolutely certain.”

Kal grinned suddenly. “I should remember never to get into a physical fight with you.”

Lois laughed.

“That was a joke,” Kal told her. “I would never fight with you.”

“I could tell it was a joke,” she said, smiling.

“Was it funny?”

“Yes, it was.”

“Good.”

After they had eaten and worked through every dispute on the much-diminished pile, Kal walked Lois to the Concubine Quarters for the second to last time.

At her door, he kissed her. “Good night, my Lois,” he said. “The only thing giving me strength to leave you is the knowledge that I only have to do this one more time.”

Lois released him from her hold. “Good night, my Kal,” she said. “I love you.”

“I love you,” he said. “Whatever happens, I will always love you, Lois.”

## Part 25

Lucy Lane could feel the incongruous cocktail of emotions

push insistently up her throat.

She exhaled a steady breath and lifted her misty eyes from the flowers she carried.

Never had she experienced such joyful contentment mixed with such wretched heartache.

The melodic tones of the celebrant fell softly on her ears.

“... until death do you part?”

“I do.”

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Lord Nor glared at his half-eaten breakfast.

Kal-El had called yet another unscheduled Cabinet Meeting. Nor guessed it was about water. Yesterday, he had heard that the two working drills had been dismantled and were being re-established in new locations.

In Nor’s estimation, it represented a desperate last-ditch effort to salvage a plan that had been nonsensical from the beginning.

He didn’t care either way. If they found water, he would be saved from having to attempt to resolve the predicament.

If they didn’t, it wasn’t his failure. And as the Supreme Ruler, his personal water supply would be assured as long as there remained a drop of moisture on the planet.

The Supreme Ruler of New Krypton. Nor closed his eyes and savoured the imminent end of the years of waiting and torturous restraint.

He had intended to spend the morning meticulously finalising every detail pertaining to the execution of his plan. It was so close he could taste it.

Instead, he had to attend the Cabinet Meeting. Another one.

Nor didn’t want to go.

More than that, he didn’t want another day — not even another minute — of being subject to the whims of Kal-El.

Nor pushed aside the remains of his breakfast with surly resentment and headed for the Supreme Ruler’s buildings.

As he approached the sentries at the door, he felt his mood lift.

Very soon, it wouldn’t be Kal-El they were sworn to protect, but Nor-Dur.

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Nor watched with detached indifference as Ching and Yent settled themselves into their seats. Now they were assembled, a message would be taken to the Supreme Ruler informing him that his Cabinet awaited his presence.

The rigid hierarchical structure had always irked Nor. The clear inference that Kal-El’s time was of greater value than his wedged in his gullet like a pointy bone.

When he, Nor, was the Supreme Ruler, there would be minimal Cabinet Meetings. Nor would make the decisions and consultation would be a relic from another time.

Kal-El walked in, and Nor stood dutifully with Ching and Yent. They waited while Kal-El seated himself.

Then they sat.

As was his habit, Nor studied the demeanour of Kal-El. The Supreme Ruler had been noticeably less reserved since the arrival of the alien woman. This morning however, Nor could discern little.

He smothered a sigh. Surely even a punctilious robot such as Kal-El must be weary of the topic of water by now.

The Supreme Ruler cleared his throat. “I called this Meeting to inform you that tomorrow I will take my fourth concubine, the alien woman called Lois, as my wife.”

Nor felt his heart stumble through a beat, but he was confident there was nothing visible to signify his surprise. Tomorrow, he thought, his excitement building. Tomorrow. Could he possibly ...

“Is it your intention to annul your current marriage?” Ching asked.

“No,” Kal-El replied.

“From which of your wives will the heir come?” Yent asked.

“When there is an announcement regarding an heir, I will inform my Cabinet prior to a Report,” Kal-El said. His eyes rounded the room, pausing at each face. “My wife will be afforded all the rights and privileges that are due her as the wife of the Supreme Ruler.”

“And the Lady Za?” Ching said.

Nor felt the rise of his annoyance at Ching’s puerile naiveté.

“The Lady Za’s position will remain unchanged,” Kal-El said. He waited, respectful as always, and with the air of one who knows his authority, but it sat upon his shoulders with a confidence that was new.

It had to be that alien woman, Nor decided. Probably Kal-El had bedded her. Or more likely, she’d bedded him.

Now Kal-El planned to take her as his wife.

Tomorrow.

Unless . . .

Unless Nor chose tomorrow as the day he took that which rightfully belonged to him.

Could it be done?

Nor was confident everything was ready.

With a surge of exhilaration that did not come close to touching the set of his face, Nor decided that tomorrow *would* be his day.

Tomorrow.

His day was almost here.

A further tantalising possibility wormed through Nor’s mind. Until this moment, he’d had no plans for the alien wench. As soon as he’d concluded she could not threaten his future, he had dismissed her completely. But now it dawned on him that dealing astutely with her would be a choice way to drive home the totality of Kal-El’s downfall.

It would be fitting retribution for every wasted minute Nor had spent in these meaningless meetings.

“I feel this is an insult to the Lady Za,” Ching said.

Ching’s vexation sat unhidden on his face. The man was devoid of even the most basic understanding of tactical combat. He probably imagined he would continue to be privy to Nor’s plans . . . that he would be rewarded for his years of faithful compliance.

No, Nor decided. Ching needed to be taught a valuable life lesson. The lesson that only a fool permits himself the luxury of trust.

The meeting over, Kal-El stood. The three Regal Nobles stood. They watched in subservient silence as the Supreme Ruler left the room.

Nor hurried away without bothering to speak to Yent and Ching. He knew what they would say. Yent would spout an obscure incident from history that was relevant only in the pettiness of his mind, and Ching would again expose his callowness for all to see.

Nor had no patience for either of them.

Which mattered not, because very soon he, Nor, would be the Supreme Ruler of South Krypton.

And Ching and Yent would become the casualties of progress. Alive — assuming they had the good sense not to oppose him — but devoid of power. And, if they did not realise how very disposable they were, they and their families would disappear from the Kryptonian landscape with the necessary expedience.

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Kal returned to his bedroom, barely able to restrain his stride to anything remotely dignified. Would she be in his room?

He’d come to relish the anticipation of seeing her. It wasn’t quite as good as the actual moment she filled his vision, but the delectable hope laced with the sobering possibility she would be

elsewhere had become a drug he regularly devoured.

His joy swept him forward now — not only because he was perhaps merely seconds from seeing her, but also because very soon he would be free to spend every night with her.

Kal paused at his door. Then, unable to endure a second more of the sweet suspense, he entered his room, and the bundle of his excitement exploded into a thousand drops of pure happiness.

She stood and turned to him, and her smile intensified every good feeling within him. “Kal,” she said.

Within two steps, she was in his arms. He tightened her against him, loving her smallness and softness and the sweet aroma of her shampoo and the way her arms perched on his shoulders as her hands lay on his neck.

“I have informed my Cabinet,” Kal told her. “I will talk with Tek when he brings our lunch, and I will inform the people at an Extraordinary Report this afternoon.”

Lois withdrew enough to look into his face. “What did the cabinet say?” she asked.

“There was very little they could say,” Kal replied. “I am the Supreme Ruler. I have chosen to marry.”

“Is it really that simple?” Lois said.

“Yes.”

“Did Nor say anything?”

“Not one word.”

“Did anyone ask about Za?”

“Ching did. He asked if that marriage will be annulled.”

“And you told him it wouldn’t be?”

“Yes.”

A knock sounded on the bedroom door, and both Kal and Lois turned to it. “Who can that be?” Lois asked. “Tek usually walks right in, and everyone else signals with the light.”

“You are the only person who knocks,” Kal said. He kissed her lightly before turning his head towards the door. “Enter,” he called.

Tek walked in with their lunch.

Lois eased back as if she were expecting them to separate. Kal increased his pressure a small amount — not enough to hold her there if she wanted to leave, but enough to let her know he was quite content to be found holding her.

He felt her relax into his chest, and a smile formed on his mouth. “Thank you, Tek,” he said. “Please return after we have eaten — there is a matter we wish to discuss with you.”

“Yes, Sir,” Tek said. His attention switched to Lois. “Your name doesn’t translate easily,” he said. “But I need to call you something.”

Lois hesitated, looking to Kal for help.

“Why don’t you call her ‘Lady?’” Kal suggested.

“Lady,” Tek repeated. “Is that satisfactory to you?” he asked Lois.

“Yes,” she said.

Tek’s eyes volleyed between them. “Sir, Lady,” he said.

Before Tek had reached the door, Kal lifted Lois’s chin with a gentle upwards pressure and joined his mouth to hers. He kissed her slowly, revelling in every single trace of contact.

When he finished, she was smiling. “You don’t mind Tek seeing us like this?” she asked.

“I think the fact that he knocked for the first time ever says he is hardly going to be surprised to discover the Supreme Ruler in the arms of the woman he loves.”

Her smile widened — filling him again with the joy of her.

More than anything, Kal wanted to resume kissing her. More than resume, he wanted to go further than he ever had. There was so much he ached to do — to explore her mouth with his tongue and her body with his hands. Resisting every instinct, Kal released her and took the chair and their lunch to the bed. “We should decide how we wish to direct Tek with regards to our Marriage Ceremony,” he said.

“What is usual for New Krypton?” Lois asked.  
 “I don’t know,” Kal said. “I have attended only one Marriage Ceremony and that was when I married Za.”  
 “You didn’t go when Tek married Riz?”  
 “No.”  
 “Why not?”  
 “The Supreme Ruler usually maintains separateness from his people.”  
 “Did Ked tell you that?”  
 “Yes.”

Lois deftly loaded some vegetable onto her stick. “Have you ever wondered if that is the best way to rule?” she asked. “Have you ever thought that if the people knew you a little more as a person, as well as their leader, that could be a good situation for everyone?”

“I didn’t know me as a person,” Kal said.

He hadn’t meant to dismay her, but he saw the sadness gather in the depths of her brown eyes. “Well, I know you as a person,” she said. “And I love everything I know.”

Kal let loose a deep breath of contentment. He loved this woman so much that sometimes it hurt — in the most wonderful way. “I love you,” he said solemnly.

She responded with her smile. “In my culture on Earth, the people to be married make vows to each other.”

“Are there standard vows or does each person say words from the heart?”

“There are standard vows, but people are free to choose to say whatever they wish.”

“I would like to speak from my heart,” Kal said.

“I would like to, also.”

They shared a smile. “Once we have spoken, Tek will declare that our marriage constitutes a legal contract, and I will sign my agreement that I freely take you as my wife.”

Lois’s eyes shot up from the plate. “Do I sign?” she asked, her voice hardening a little.

“In this Marriage Ceremony, you do,” Kal declared.

“But the woman usually doesn’t?” she persisted.

“Not usually,” Kal admitted, hoping this wasn’t going to cause any problems.

But Lois’s annoyance hadn’t abated. “You know, Kal,” she said. “There are some things about New Krypton that I really hate.”

He could see that this perturbed her and decided it would be best to give her the chance to express her irritation. Certainly today was preferable to tomorrow for this conversation. “What exactly?” he probed, careful to eliminate any defensiveness from his tone.

“The way women are thought to be inferior,” she said. “The way men control their lives. The way they can be taken, just like cattle. In fact, it’s worse than cattle because as least you have to pay for cows.”

Kal waited long enough to give her the chance to continue if she wished. He took her hand in his and raised it to let his lips play over her skin of her wrist. “You know what this planet needs?” he asked.

“I have a few ideas,” she said, still snarky.

“It needs a strong, intelligent woman who has a lot of influence with the Supreme Ruler,” he said, hoping it would draw a smile from her.

It took a moment for his comment to have the desired result, but when it did, her smile was worth the wait. Kal kissed her wrist and then began a slow journey along the ridge at the base of her thumb. “Do you think there is a chance we could change some of these things?” Lois asked.

“We can try,” Kal said. “Together, we are more than enough.”

Her smile blossomed. “Yes,” she agreed. She slowly reclaimed her hand and reached for their food. “I asked Riz to

come to our marriage ceremony. Is that all right?”

“Yes.”

“Will anyone else be there?”

“It is traditional for the Regal Nobles to be in attendance, but it is not a legal requirement, so I didn’t extend an invitation.”

“Good,” Lois said. She considered for a moment. “Although I’m not totally against the idea of meeting Nor — but not at our marriage ceremony. I saw him at the Reports, but have never actually spoken to him.”

“Why do you want to meet him?” Kal asked.

“Because I want to find out more about what he is planning.”

Kal couldn’t find a non-inflammatory way to state his doubts that Nor would simply supply the details of his plan — if he had one — to Lois.

He didn’t need to. With a beguiling grin, she said, “You don’t think he’d confide in me?”

Kal wasn’t sure whether to go with honesty or tact.

Lois laughed. “It’s OK, Kal. There were plenty of people on Earth who didn’t really want to talk with me either.”

Kal sensed that Lois had found ways to discover what she wanted to know, regardless of the wishes of others.

“There will be Riz and Tek and you and me?” she said.

“Yes.”

“Do children ever go to a marriage ceremony?”

“No, never.”

“Is that a law?”

“No.”

“Can Riz bring Dom and Kip?”

The idea of children being at a marriage ceremony — indeed an official ceremony of any sort — was so new and unfamiliar, Kal couldn’t respond for a moment. “Ah . . .”

“Do you have any specific objections?” Lois asked. “As the groom, not as the Supreme Ruler?”

Kal knew he was going to have to disappoint her. “Lois,” he said, hoping he would be able to soften the blow. “I’m sorry, but we can’t have horses; none survived the Transition, and they are now extinct.”

She stared at him with no comprehension at all. “Horses?” she exclaimed.

“Grooms attend to horses,” he said.

Lois leant back, and her shoulders shook as her laughter burst forth. Kal enjoyed every second it took her to regain control. He felt himself grinning widely even though he had not the slightest notion of what she had found to be so humorous.

“I didn’t mean to make a joke,” he said when Lois’s laughter had reduced to a quiet ripple.

She wiped the moisture from her eyes and managed to snuff out the last of her laughter. “A marriage ceremony is called a wedding,” she explained, still grinning. “The woman is called the bride and the man is called the bridegroom. Sometimes that is shortened to just groom. It doesn’t mean there has to be horses.”

“You don’t mind about the horses?” Kal deduced.

“I don’t mind about the horses,” Lois said, still grinning.

“Our wedding will be wonderful.”

“Our wedding,” Kal mused, allowing the unfamiliar word to brush across his tongue. “My bride.”

She smiled. “Tomorrow,” she reminded him unnecessarily.

An entire avalanche of joy and impatience and thrilling expectation thundered through Kal. “Tomorrow,” he repeated with such longing, his voice shook.

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They told Tek of their plans, and the time was set.

Ten o’clock tomorrow morning.

In Kal’s chambers.

Lois could barely contain her excitement as she crossed the courtyard. She didn’t know the protocol, but she intended to tell Bel and each of the other three concubines of her forthcoming

marriage ceremony before Kal announced it at the Extraordinary Report.

She suspected it wasn't usual for a wife of the Supreme Ruler to maintain friendships with his concubines and other women, but Lois had no intention of locking herself away in Kal's buildings. In fact, she was determined to expand her circle of friends.

The reaction to her news was surprisingly positive. Bel offered to help Lois prepare in the morning. Ard asked if that meant there would be no drawings required of her tomorrow. Jib seemed pleased — if in a somewhat stilted manner. And Mo asked if it were permissible to write stories for adults. And could they include a marriage ceremony?

"Mo," Lois said. "Those stories are called romances, and they are some of my favourite ones to read."

"After it is finished, may I read it to you?" Mo asked shyly.

Despite her excitement at having a fellow-writer, Lois felt a well of sadness that Mo would never have the opportunity to experience her own love story. "I certainly want you to read it to me," Lois said, silently vowing to try to find a way for Mo and Jib and all the other concubines and unloved wives to have greater influence in their own lives.

Lois had wondered if she should invite them to her wedding. Had they shown the slightest interest in attending, she would have issued the invitation, but none did.

As Lois neared her own room, she had a sudden thought. She swung around and returned to Ard's room. Ard opened the door. "You have a new book?" she asked.

Lois smiled. "No, Ard, but there are some pictures I want you to draw for me."

Her clear blue eyes shone with innocent joy. "Good."

"I want you to come to my marriage ceremony tomorrow, and when you come back to your room, I'd like you to draw pictures of what you saw."

"I can draw people?" Ard asked.

Lois was unsure if this prospect pleased Ard or daunted her. "I would like you to."

"I've never thought of drawing people," Ard said. "I only thought of drawing trees and flowers and sky."

"Have you ever drawn water?" Lois asked, remembering some of the beautiful seascapes from Earth.

Ard's joy died. "Water is bad," she said.

Lois groaned silently as she reached for Ard's hand and held it with a gentle touch. "I'm sorry, Ard," she said. "I forgot about how your father died."

"How could you know how my father died?" Ard asked. "You weren't here then."

"People have told me what a wonderful man your father was and how sad it is that he died."

"The ugly man pushed him into the water, and I never saw him again."

Lois's heart stopped, bombarded by both the information and the stark sadness in the words of a daughter who still mourned the father she loved. "How do you know?" Lois asked with more gentleness than she had ever framed a question before.

"I drew pictures for my father."

"I'm sure that made him very happy."

"Yes. But he went to work before the light comes every morning."

"Did you follow him?"

"Yes," Ard said as if admitting to a transgression. "I had finished a picture for him, and I wanted to give it to him but he had already gone, so I followed him."

"And you saw what happened?" Lois asked, unable to stop herself.

"Yes. The ugly man went to my father, and they talked, and then the ugly man pushed my father, and he fell into the water."

"Have you seen the ugly man again?"

"Yes. He is at the Reports." Ard's eyes lifted towards the balcony. "But he doesn't speak."

"What did you do after your father was pushed?"

"I ran towards the ugly man to tell him he was bad, but he ran away." Ard looked past Lois, her eyes loaded with grief. "My father did not come home again."

Lois drew Ard into her arms and held her. She'd expected Ard to draw away or stiffen, but she did neither. Her arms remained at her side, but she didn't seem to be uncomfortable in Lois's embrace. Lois drew back and looked into Ard's eyes. "I'm so sad about what happened to your father."

"I am sad, too," Ard said.

"Did you ever tell anyone what you saw?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because if they knew I followed my father, I would be in trouble."

"You didn't do anything wrong," Lois said. "You did nothing wrong at all."

"I will come now and draw the pictures for you," Ard said.

"Not now," Lois said. "Tomorrow. I will come and get you, and we will go together." She smiled gently. "Would that be all right?"

"Yes."

After a quick parting hug, Lois crossed to her room. Her smouldering anger pushed aside her sorrow for Ard.

She was sure the ugly man was Nor.

He had caused so much heartache.

He *would* pay, she vowed.

She would build the case against him. She would find incontrovertible proof. She would change laws if necessary.

She would find a way to bring justice for Mo and Jib and Ard and Tek and anyone else hurt by Nor's atrocities.

She would ensure he would *never* be the Supreme Ruler.

And she'd do in ways far more explicit than merely having a baby.

## Part 26

The father stood quietly in the doorway, his eyes fixed on the back of his wife as her heaviness settled around his heart.

She was standing where she so often stood, staring ahead, seeing things he could only imagine.

Did she see their child playing?

Did she torment herself with thoughts of a miraculous homecoming?

Did she see nothing at all, blinded by the scars of her heartache?

The father didn't know.

He only knew that he wished with the whole of his heart that he could ease her anguish.

But ... he was helpless to help her.

Just as she was helpless to let go of their child.

With two quiet steps, he moved within touching distance and cupped his hand around her shoulder. "Come on inside," he pleaded gently. "It's cold out here."

She turned and smiled sadly.

Her smile was pure courage, and he loved her for her struggle to be strong for him. But her smile had not reached her eyes since that harrowing morning when they'd realised their child was missing.

The father shepherded his wife inside — inside to the silence and desolation of a childless home.

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Lois stood next to Mo awaiting the arrival of Kal to give the Extraordinary Report. Her brain knew that the most likely reaction from the Kryptonian people to the news of their leader's forthcoming marriage would be ... no reaction at all.

Not visibly, anyway.

Yet her stomach knotted with the possibilities that continually heckled her imagination. What if there was a riot? What if they all turned and left? What if they voiced their protest that she had dared to invade their planet and seduce their leader?

The door to the balcony opened, and the three Regal Nobles emerged. Lois stared at Nor. He was ugly, she realised. She glanced sideways to Ard. Her gaze was fixed on the balcony, her face devoid of expression. Lois got the impression that her mind had escaped to the freedom of her desk and her latest picture.

When Lois looked back to the balcony, Kal was there.

In the black suit.

Her eyes indulged in a slow cruise across the expanse of his shoulders.

They wandered to his chest, and she felt the weight of temptation coax them lower.

She forced her head up.

“Fellow Kryptonians.”

Kal’s voice barely dented her personal battle with the lure of the banquet laid before her.

She felt her resolve crumble and made a quick decision designed to minimise her fall. As she stared, the tight black material faded from Kal’s shoulders and upper chest.

Lois dragged in a mottled breath.

Perfection oozed from every masculine curve.

She tracked down his right arm and watched the play of muscles as his fist thudded against his chest in the Kryptonian greeting.

Lois managed to respond as propriety demanded, though her eyes could not be severed from the naked shoulders of her man.

“I have called this Extraordinary Report to inform you that tomorrow I will marry my fourth concubine.”

Lois was mesmerised by the deep vee shape of Kal’s upper arm as one muscle cut sharply into the next.

“My marriage to Za of the House of El, out of the House of Ra, stands.”

Lois traversed a diagonal path across his jutting collar bone and to the valley between his pecs. Her fingers yearned to fully investigate. Her mouth yearned to follow the trail of her fingers.

“Both women will receive the honour and respect due them as the wife of the Supreme Ruler.”

Kal turned.

Lois slammed her eyelids together.

She slowly counted to ten and then cautiously opened one eye.

The door shut on an empty balcony.

Tomorrow could not come quickly enough.

\*\*\*

On the eve of their wedding, Kal and Lois ate their supper together and then sat on the bed, reclining against the bed-head with their legs stretched forward. Kal’s arm rested across Lois’s shoulders as the rounded curve of her body pressed into his side.

The atmosphere was quiet and relaxed, although it contained an ebullient air of expectation that enticed a shared smile every time their eyes met.

“Do you realise,” Kal said, “that this is the first night ever there are no Disputes awaiting my attention?”

He felt her laughter ripple through her body. “Just our luck — they will arrive by the hundreds tomorrow, and we’ll have to spend all day on them.”

“We are *not* spending so much as a moment on them,” he declared.

Lois squeezed his hand. “Do you remember the first dispute we did together?”

“Yes. The two Northside brothers — and the woman called Eb.”

“You wanted to separate Eb and her husband,” Lois said. Any

admonishment in her words was lost in the warmth and affection they carried.

“There was so much I didn’t understand then,” Kal said.

Lois sighed with happiness and rubbed her head against his shoulder. “Do you think Nor is ugly?” she asked suddenly.

Her question surprised him, but Kal was becoming used to a sudden tangent surfacing from the stream of her thoughts. “I’ve never really thought about it,” he said.

“He has greasy hair and a cruel mouth,” she said.

“He has a cruel heart,” Kal said.

Lois turned swiftly, and her eyes cannoned into his. “Kip’s death was no accident,” she proclaimed.

Surely she had not gone to Nor and asked him, Kal thought with sudden apprehension. The mere thought of Lois anywhere near Nor unleashed every protective instinct within him. “How do you know?” he asked.

“Ard saw what happened,” Lois said. “She followed her father that morning to give him a picture she had drawn for him, and she saw ‘the ugly man’ push her father into the ocean.”

“She told you this?” Kal asked.

“Yes,” Lois replied. “She didn’t mention Nor by name, but it would be a simple matter to confirm it by asking her to identify the ugly man.”

Kal’s apprehension hadn’t diminished. He used his thumb to glide slowly across her shoulder. “Asking Ard to identify the man who was with her father could not achieve anything,” he said quietly.

She stiffened under his touch. “Because she’s a woman?”

“Ard’s testimony could not be used to prosecute because of the length of time that has passed since the death of her father.”

“And because she’s a woman, her word is unreliable?”

“Lois,” Kal said evenly. “It was a long time ago.”

“But she’s a woman and a woman with disabilities, so her claims would be easily dismissed?” Lois guessed. “Assuming anyone even bothered to listen.”

Kal could not disagree so he said nothing.

“Ard knows what she saw,” Lois said, her voice low and intent.

“I’m sure she does,” Kal said in a placatory tone. “But it would cause her much distress and achieve nothing in terms of gaining justice for Kip.”

“Did you know she saw what happened?”

“No,” Kal said.

“Why did no one ask her?”

“I don’t remember,” Kal admitted.

Lois’s eyes blazed, their fire scorching him. “Your top scientist dies in mysterious circumstances — the man who probably sustained your life from the time you were a few months old — and you don’t even remember the details of the case?” she challenged.

Kal tried not to flinch under the glare of her disapproval. “I was fifteen,” he reminded her quietly. “And I had been awake for four days when Kip died.”

To Kal’s relief, Lois’s expression softened and her hand closed around his face. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m a little irascible today. Maybe I have pre-wedding jitters.”

“But you still want to marry me?” Kal asked.

Lois smiled. “Of course. I can’t wait for tomorrow.” She snuggled back against his body, and Kal closed his arm around her again as relief doused his concerns.

“Tomorrow will be the best day of my life,” he said.

“Better even than the day a strange alien woman from another planet was dragged before you by your soldiers?” she asked.

Kal couldn’t see her face, but he guessed she was smiling. “That was like the first day of my life,” he said. “That was the day I was really awakened.”

Her hand moved to his leg and rested just above his knee. Kal stared, imagining what it would feel like to have her hand there without the barrier of clothing. He hauled his eyes — and his thoughts — away.

“Has anyone told Za about our marriage?” Lois asked.

Despite his best efforts, Kal’s eyes again drifted to her hand. “She knows.”

“How do you know she knows?”

He lifted head and forced himself to look at the ceiling. “I went to see her.”

Lois turned abruptly. “You did?” she squeaked.

“Yes.”

“When?”

Kal looked down. Her hand had gone from his leg. “Yesterday.”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

Kal managed to dispel the memory of her touch sufficiently to notice the warning ingrained in her tone. “You’re upset,” he said.

“Of course I’m upset.”

That didn’t sound good. “I don’t understand why,” Kal said. “Is it because I went to see Za or because I didn’t tell you?”

“Both,” she erupted. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t think it was ...” Kal had been going to say ‘relevant’, but something inside him signalled an insistent warning that dried up his words as he spoke them.

“Didn’t think it was *what*?”

Kal searched desperately for the least inflammatory word possible. “Necessary,” he flailed.

Her colour deepened. “You have a secret rendezvous with your wife, and you didn’t think it was necessary to tell me?”

“I’m beginning to think it was necessary.”

Before his words were out, Kal had realised they hadn’t helped. Lois looked as if she were within a couple of provocations of exploding. “You assured me there was absolutely nothing between you and Za,” she said. “Nothing. Zippo. Diddy squat. Nada. You told me that not so much as a word had passed between you.”

“There hadn’t been,” Kal said defensively. “Not until -.”

“And when that situation changed, you didn’t think you should mention it to me?”

“I was going to tell you, but I didn’t realise you would expect me to tell you straight away.”

“I expected you would tell me *before* you went,” she flared. “*We* should have discussed it.”

“I didn’t think much about going,” Kal admitted. “I just went.”

“So you mysteriously found yourself at your wife’s door — face to face with the missus for the first time ever?”

Kal was sure that anything he said would only serve to aggravate her annoyance.

“What did she say?” Lois asked coldly.

He hesitated, searching for anything Za had said that could possibly appease Lois. “She said it’s all right if she no longer receives my sample.”

“She doesn’t want a child?”

With a sickening clunk, Kal realised that his agreement with Za was going to upset Lois. A lot.

But he was in too deep to pull out now.

He was probably in too deep to avoid a whole lot of trouble.

“She does want a child,” he said quietly. “She just doesn’t want my child.”

A little of Lois’s wrath seemed to disperse. “She wants your marriage annulled?”

“No.”

“Then what, exactly, does she want?”

Kal took respite in the distant wall, but then he had to face

her. “We made an agreement,” he confessed, wincing internally even as he spoke the words.

“An agreement?” The volume of Lois’s voice had lowered, but her tone had lost none of its sting.

“She won’t incite the South regarding my marriage to you and won’t make it public that she no longer receives my sample.”

“And in return, you’ll ... what? Exactly?”

The agreement had seemed reasonable — a perfect solution — when he’d been with Za. Now, it just seemed like a disaster waiting to detonate. However, stalling was futile. “If Za bears a child, I will accept that child as mine.”

“Would you care to explain how your wife intends to bear a child if she is not receiving your sample?” Lois asked in a voice sizzling with resentment. “Perhaps further visits are a part of the agreement?”

“Further visits?” Kal spluttered.

“How else could she get pregnant?”

“Lois!” he cried. “Surely you cannot think I would agree to go to *any* other woman and have physical contact with her?”

“She’s your *wife*, Kal,” Lois said. “That’s what husbands and wives do.”

“You know that is not how it’s been with Za and me,” Kal said, trying to sound reasonable.

“I’m not interested in how it’s been; I’m interested in how it’s going to be.”

“It’s going to be exactly as you and I discussed,” Kal said. “Officially, I will have two wives. In reality, there will be only you.”

“So Za has someone on the side?”

“I don’t understand your term, but I suspect you mean she has someone else to father her child.”

“Have you thought about how when her child is born, suddenly — voila! Here is the heir all New Krypton has been waiting for?”

“Her child would not be the heir.”

“Why not?” Lois demanded. “It’s *your* child, remember?”

“Za says she will wait until after our child is born and then -”

“Firstly, Kal, we don’t have a child,” Lois said coldly. “Secondly, if we did ever have a child, its future is *not* something you can go and discuss with your other wife whenever the mood takes you, and thirdly, when did she become ‘Za’?”

Kal felt as if he were hopelessly lost in a labyrinth. He wasn’t sure there was a way out and even if there was, he despaired of finding it. “I didn’t realise our child being the heir was so important to you,” he said. “I even thought that maybe you’d prefer it if our child could avoid becoming the Supreme Ruler and everything that goes with it.”

“If you think this is about me having ambitions for my child to be the boss cocky of this planet, then clearly you don’t know me at all.”

“I don’t know what to think,” Kal said dejectedly. “It didn’t occur to me that you would have any objections to me trying to find a solution to the difficulties we are facing.”

“The difficulties?” Lois said sourly. “Have you forgotten that those difficulties are solely because *you* are married? Because you refuse to give up that marriage even though you claim you want to marry me more than anything?”

“I *do* want to marry you more than anything.”

“No, you don’t — you want to keep your current marriage more than anything. And if you happen to get me as well — that’s an added bonus.”

“Lois, you are my life.”

“You claim that you don’t understand why I’m upset, but if I snuck off for a secret meeting with an Earth man who also happened to be my husband, how would you feel?”

“If we lived on Earth, would you consult with me over every aspect of your job?”

“Huh?”

“If you had to talk to a man when writing a story, would you talk to me about it before you met with him?”

“No, of course not.”

“That’s all I did,” Kal said. “I consulted with someone in relation to my job as the Supreme Ruler of this planet.”

“You *really* think they are the same situations?” Lois demanded.

Suddenly, Kal wasn’t sure continuing with this analogy was the smartest of ideas. “Yes,” he faltered.

“I wouldn’t be *married* to someone I spoke to as a part of my job.”

“Lois,” Kal said. “When I told you I couldn’t annul my marriage to Za, you said you didn’t expect me to do anything that would hurt her. You said you understood. You said you could accept that, officially, I would be married to two women.”

“That was when Za was nothing more to you than a face you saw once a year,” Lois said. “Now she is a person — a real person with dreams and ambitions and a plan — a plan to involve you more in her life.”

“I don’t think it’s me she wants,” Kal said.

“Kal, don’t pretend that she could have a child, a child you would accept as yours, and then you would have no further input into that child’s life! What if Za were to die? Of course you, as the *father*, would be expected to take over the care of that child.”

“If we don’t have a child, Za’s child would prevent Nor from taking the mantle.”

“So this is about New Krypton?”

Kal hesitated. “I thought it was a solution that was good for Za, good for us, and good for New Krypton.”

Lois took a deep breath. “This is what our marriage is going to be, isn’t it?” she said frostily. “You will love me totally ... until your people need you, and then they will come first. Always, they will come first.”

“Lois, it wouldn’t be -”

“I’m beginning to wonder if you really want to marry *me* at all,” she fumed. “Is this just about getting an heir for your precious people?”

“Lois,” Kal said, feeling distraught. “How can you say that? You told me you trusted me.”

“I did,” Lois said. “I trusted you when you said you had absolutely no relationship with Za. I trusted you when you said it was a marriage in name only. Now all that has changed — you have memories of her, knowledge of her, and a big plan with her to keep your people from the clutches of the evil Lord Nor.”

Kal rubbed at the tension that was pulling across his temples. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“If I asked you right now to go back to Za and tell her the deal is off — would you do it?”

Kal felt pushed into an inescapable corner. There was no way to answer Lois’s question. “I don’t know,” he said.

“Then you should think about it,” Lois said. “Because until you have an answer, we have nothing further to discuss.” With that, she leapt from his bed and stormed from his room.

\*\*\*

The reverberations of the slammed door petered out long before Kal managed to drag a smattering of coherence from the chaos of his mind.

Would Lois still marry him?

Would she?

She wouldn’t, he decided, as his dread oozed downwards and congregated like a churning sea of nausea in the pit of his stomach. His mistake in going to Za had wreaked too much damage.

She wouldn’t marry him.

He’d lost her.

He stood from the bed, took a dazed half-step, and stared at

the door, willing her to return to him.

She didn’t.

He’d lost her.

Was there any hope?

Was there *anything* he could do to repair the damage?

Should he go to her?

He couldn’t. She’d said she wouldn’t speak to him until he had an answer to her question about Za.

Kal paced the length of his room, turned, paced back again.

His heart felt like it had been shattered into a million tiny scraps.

His head throbbed.

His shoulders ached.

His side — which had cradled her so recently — yearned for her return.

Kal collapsed onto the bed and plunged his head into his hands.

*Lois, his heart screamed. I’m sorry. Please come back to me. I need you.*

## Part 27

Lois cried as she had not cried since her father had stormed from their family home never to return.

She cried tears of isolation — tears for every little familiarity that had been leached from her life.

She cried tears of grief — tears for those beloved people she would never see again.

She cried tears of anger — tears for the injustice forced upon Ard and Mo and Jib and their murdered sister and every other female unfortunate enough to be born into the misogynistic society that was New Krypton.

Mostly, she cried tears of despair.

Because she recognised the fearsome power of the jealousy that coursed through her and knew she did not have the means to control it.

She loved Kal so much.

The thought of him with his *wife* had seared weeping blisters across her heart.

Lois knew her capacity for altruism did not extend to sharing the man she loved.

Not sharing him with a woman — a wife, a wife of ten years’ standing. A woman he now knew . and respected ... and with whom he had negotiated a deal for the benefit of their shared planet.

Lois knew that would eat away at her. It would feed her bitterness and her insecurities and her relentless need to right the wrongs — even if, in the process, she wronged the people in the right.

And that would mean Kal.

Kal — who, just by being Kal — had gently exposed the side of her personality that had never had the chance to flourish on Earth.

The side that had been damaged by her father’s defection from the family. The side that had been shattered by Paul and then crushed by Claude.

The side she had condemned to perennial hibernation as she had fought and spat and clawed her way up the ladder of her career.

A new wave of tears convulsed her body.

If she didn’t marry Kal, she would destroy him. Her rejection would quash the new vitality in his life and again reduce him to being merely a shell of the man he was born to be.

If she did marry Kal, she would destroy him — slowly, over time, as her jealousy frothed and reared and eroded all that was good between them.

She simply could *not* share him.

Not now that Za was more to him than a face in the crowd at

an annual festival.

He had agreed to be accepted as the father of her child.

Somehow, that was nearly as bad as agreeing to father the child.

It would humiliate her.

And if she, Lois, never had a child, Kal would be drawn Za's child. He would feel the responsibility to guide and train and encourage the child who would become the Supreme Ruler.

And then *they* would be the family — and she would be the angry alien woman.

Everything had changed.

With one conversation between Kal and his wife, the entire concept of being the second wife had become intolerable.

Would Kal ever understand that?

Lois slid into her bed — still fully dressed.

She cried until there were no more tears.

Then she waited for the hours of darkness to pass and unveil the new day.

The day she and Kal had earmarked for their wedding.

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When Lois emerged from the semi-consciousness of troubled slumber, her swollen eyelids felt like they were lined with sand. Her brain had been diminished to a waterlogged pulp.

Yet it wasn't numb enough to stifle her memories — the memories of exactly why she felt this bad.

She and Kal had fought.

She had attacked, he had defended, and they had parted in anger.

Kal.

How was he feeling?

He would be hurting — maybe even more than she was. He probably didn't even fully understand why she had reacted with such animosity.

But he would understand the damage done to their relationship.

She'd half-expected him to seek her out. But he had not come.

Today was their wedding day.

Should she marry him?

Could she marry him?

Would Kal still want to marry her?

Had he gone to Za and spoken further about their agreement?

Lois's distress drove her from her bed.

She needed Kal.

He needed her.

They *had* to work out something.

\*\*\*

Lois walked into Kal's chambers and listened for movement in his bedroom.

She heard nothing.

Most likely, he was still asleep.

He probably hadn't slept well either.

She peeked through his door and saw the shape of him in his bed.

The sight of him spawned an idea. Maybe she should go in there, climb in beside him, disengage her mind and her objections and her ideals, and allow their love the expression they both wanted. Maybe then, she would be able to accept that her portion was the faithful love of a wonderful man — a man who could offer her the exclusiveness of his heart and his body, but not the exclusiveness of his name.

Maybe his touch would be enough to dissolve her wall of jealousy.

Lois hesitated — torn.

If she went to him now, it would be incredible.

But once the euphoria had dispersed, nothing would have changed. Kal would still be married to Za — he would still have

a relationship with his other wife.

Lois needed a solution — not a quick fix.

She turned away from the enticement of Kal's bedroom door.

Her eyes fell on the neat rows of books in the bookcase.

The laws regarding an heir seemed convoluted and complex.

Was it possible there was something ... *anything* in there that could provide them with a way out? A loophole? A precedent? Anything to provide a way for Za to be honourably released from her marriage to Kal and able to pursue her love for someone else?

Kal said he had searched the law and found nothing to prevent him marrying a second time.

But had he searched for the means to end his first marriage without causing harm to Za?

Lois browsed the row of books. They were matched in design, but with differing characters on each spine. Which one had the diagram of the couple? She tried to visualise Kal's bed with the books strewn across it. Her fingers skimmed the row and paused on one that seemed more familiar than the rest.

Every page of the book was covered with hand-written script — unbroken by a picture of any sort.

Lois returned that volume to the row and chose another book. Seconds later, she came to the page with the diagram. She contemplated the unfathomable words below the diagram. What did they say? What knowledge did they give? What had Kal discovered from reading this?

Lois ran her fingers across the script. She needed to learn to read Kryptonian — not only to enable her to plumb the intricacies of Kryptonian Law, but also to establish a newspaper. And a library.

And to begin to change this society one word at a time.

After she had married Kal, she would ask him to teach her to read and write Kryptonian.

However, that was of no help now.

Then she saw them — tiny specks of paper peeking from the crevice between the pages. Lois gently eased it wider, revealing a trickle of fragments.

A page had been ripped from this book.

When?

Recently?

As recently as yesterday? Following Kal's announcement?

Had someone removed the portion of the law that allowed the Supreme Ruler to marry more than one woman?

Kal had said there were copies of the law. Were they all missing this page?

Then Lois remembered the original law of Krypton, hidden behind the bookcase.

Had it been tampered with, too?

Who would oppose their marriage?

It had to be Nor.

Lois carefully laid the open book on Kal's big throne-like seat and went to his bedroom door. She knocked. "Kal?" she called softly. "Kal? Are you awake?"

She heard the creak of the bed and then muffled footsteps.

He opened the door.

His hair was mussed, and his eyes were underscored with shadows. His pants were made of a soft, black material and hung loosely from his hips to his ankles — where his bare feet emerged. His white undershirt clung tightly across his chest and upper arms, but sat slack enough across the waistband of his pants that the slightest movement would risk revealing a sliver of skin.

Lois was sure no one had ever looked so good.

Then she remembered how they had parted the previous evening. "Hi," she offered.

Kal swallowed. "Is anything wrong?" he asked, his tone giving away nothing.

"Would you come and look at this?" He followed her to the

seat, and she picked up the book. “Look,” she said, indicating the remnants of the missing page.

Kal took the book from her and spread the pages. He ran his thumbnail the length of the crease and then looked up at her, his face serious.

“I think someone came here after the Report yesterday and removed the part that allows you to marry a second wife,” Lois said.

Kal’s eyes dropped to the book, and then he shook his head. “No,” he said. “The page has been missing longer than that.”

“It has?”

“Yes. This is exactly how it was when I read it a few days ago. The page was missing then, but I didn’t notice.”

“Aren’t the pages numbered?”

“No.”

“Could it be that whoever wrote the words made an error and removed the page — so nothing is actually missing?”

Kal considered it. “That is possible — there is no carryover sentence, no break in the text to arouse suspicion.”

“Then how can we know if something is missing?”

Kal peered at the page. “If something was written on the missing page, there should be indentations in the adjacent page,” he said. “But I can’t see anything to indicate that.”

Lois reached for the book. “Maybe I can,” she said.

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Lord Nor sipped his blue, though he barely tasted it.

Today.

He had waited and planned and waited and curbed the clamour of his natural tendencies and monitored and waited for over ten years.

Now it was here.

In just a few hours, he would be the Supreme Ruler of New Krypton.

His mind travelled back — back through the long years of restraint. Back to the beginning.

Back to when he had been a young man with his father.

“Father! Father!”

His father turned. “What is it, Nor?”

“Have you heard?” Nor asked breathlessly as he rushed to his father’s desk.

“Heard what, my son?”

“They are saying the preparations have begun for the Investiture of Kal-El. They are saying that in six months — on the day he achieves sixteen years — he will become the Supreme Ruler.”

Nor had expected his news would alarm his father. Instead, he merely said, “It is good, my son.”

“But Father, you said I would be the Supreme Ruler of New Krypton.”

“And so you shall be, my son.”

“But how, Father?” Then Nor knew. “We’re going to kill Kal-El?” he queried eagerly.

“No.”

Nor’s confusion camouflaged his disappointment. “Is he not Kal-El?” he asked. “Is this an impostor?”

“He is Kal-El,” Kead affirmed.

“How can you be sure?” Nor challenged. “He has not been seen in public since his Presentation to the People on Krypton. Then, he was but a few months old.”

“Now he is a young man,” Kead told his son. “I have seen him, and there is no doubt he is both of the House of El and the House of Ra.”

“Have you ordered medical tests?”

“Yes — but they will only confirm what my eyes tell me.”

“Where has he been all these years?”

Kead hesitated. “I don’t know,” he admitted finally. “I have scoured this planet many times, and I could not find him. But he

is here now, and that is what we must deal with.”

Nor felt the press of his temper. “You told me Kal-El was dead,” he protested. “You promised me that once the sixteen years of Cabinet Rule had expired, the mantle would fall to us.”

“I told you I did not believe the claims that Kal-El had survived the Transition and was living in seclusion somewhere on New Krypton,” his father corrected.

“You were wrong,” Nor snarled.

“So it seems.”

“He was a helpless infant when we left Krypton,” Nor said.

“His parents didn’t survive. Someone must have conspired against us.”

“Yent and I questioned Kip-Or the Scientist. He has documents that prove Jor-El gave him jurisdiction over his son before they left Krypton.”

“You’re sure they’re authentic?”

“They carry the seal of the House of El.”

“Why did he hide Kal-El away?”

Kead contemplated his son. “Probably because he believed there would be those who wanted the child dead.”

“He was right there,” Nor muttered. “If we kill him now, Kal-El will be unable to take the mantle at his Investiture, and we won’t have been outmanoeuvred by a Scientist.”

“Nor,” his father said, his dulcet tone aggravating Nor’s growing resentment. “Violence is a worthy tool of war, but it is not the only tool. It must be applied only when there is advantage. Violence, wrongly used, brings great disadvantage.”

“If we’re not going to kill him and his Investiture happens in six months, how will I be the Supreme Ruler?” Nor said, making no effort to suppress the petulance in his tone.

“There is another tool of war, my son.”

Nor pouted. “Which is?”

“Patience.”

“Patience is for the weak and unimaginative.”

“Nor, if we kill Kal-El now, we will die,” his father said.

“You must learn to read the mood of the people. They are eager to see Kal-El. His years of concealment have shrouded him in mystery. He is their hope. If we strike him down now, you will not live to be the Supreme Ruler.”

“Then what are we going to do?”

“Do you remember when you were a small boy on Krypton, I took you through the prison?”

“Yes, Father.”

“I showed you the empty cells and told you we had the finest rehabilitation program ever implemented.”

Nor didn’t reply. He didn’t want a history lesson. He wanted to know when he would be the Supreme Ruler.

“The reasons for all those empty cells were a dual-faceted program developed by our Southside Scientists.”

“Hiatus and Re-set,” Nor said with a dismissive sigh.

“Yes,” Kead agreed. “We put the criminal in hiatus for the length of his sentence — which allowed us to experiment at will in order to answer many questions about the Kryptonian brain.”

“And, when his time was up,” Nor said with patent disinterest, “we awakened him from his hiatus and, if deemed necessary, administered the drug, Re-set.”

“You learned well, my son,” Kead said. “Do you recall how the drug worked?”

“It erased the memory of the criminal.”

“And reduced his mind to a completely neutral state — clean and empty and able to be totally reprogrammed.”

“I remember.”

Father stood from his desk and unlocked a cupboard. He brought out an ampoule of clear liquid. “I went to the prison on Krypton just prior to boarding my rescue vehicle,” he said. “I took the eleven doses of Re-set from the prison safe. I destroyed ten of them — it is too dangerous to risk it falling into the wrong

hands.”

Nor’s interest surfaced above his ire. “You have Re-set?” he asked incredulously.

“One dose,” Ked said. “For such a time as this.”

“But how does that help me become the Supreme Ruler?”

“We cannot kill Kal-El,” Ked reiterated. “He will be extensively guarded; an attempt on his life would result in our speedy execution. If our attempt were successful, New Krypton would fall to the hands of Ching — another vagabond from the North.”

“There is no way to bring about Kal-El’s demise?” Nor asked despondently.

“Not without endangering our own lives,” Ked said. “But we can administer our last dose of this drug. That will wipe his mind, his memories, his attitudes, and his beliefs — everything Kip-Or has so carefully taught him. His mind will be completely void ... just like those criminals on Krypton ... ready for us to ... re-set.”

“So, we control him?” Nor said. He could taste his disgust.

“For a time, yes.”

“I don’t want to control the Supreme Ruler,” Nor wailed. “I want to be the Supreme Ruler.”

“And so you shall be, my son. But it will take t-”

“And what do we tell Kal-El when he realises he has no memory of the first fifteen years of his life? What do we tell Yent and others who have contact with him?”

“We will tell them the Scientists put him in hiatus to ensure his survival during the Transition.”

“And kept him in hiatus for fifteen years?” Nor sneered.

“We’ll blame the Scientists — tell him they conspired to keep him from his birthright ... or they lost so many of our technological advances during the Transition that they had to redevelop the method of awakening.”

“Will he believe us?” Nor asked doubtfully.

“The Re-set will leave him without points of reference. He’ll have no option but to believe everything we tell him.”

“So, we will have a Supreme Ruler who is little more than a child,” Nor mused. “I admit there is a certain entertainment value in having him as a puppet, but I want more than that.”

“And you will have more than that,” his father promised.

“How?”

“There is a little known Law — a Law that hasn’t been enacted in many centuries. A Law that says if the Supreme Ruler fails to provide an heir within the timeframe, the mantle can be removed from him.”

“How long?”

“One hundred, twenty-five months.”

“That is ridiculous.” Nor eyed his father with bitter accusation. “You assured me Kal-El would not stand between me and what is mine.”

“And he won’t,” Ked said. “But you have to accept that your time is not now.”

“Why?”

“Because the people want him. Our only way is patience.”

“I don’t have patience.”

“Then you will never be the Supreme Ruler,” Ked stated with cool certainty. “If you want it, you will have to become more adept at one of the greatest of all tools — patience.”

“And when the time has finally passed?”

“You will legally be the Supreme Ruler.”

“And how are we going to stop that half-breed, Kal-El, and his underclass wife from producing an heir?”

“Remember, son, the slate is ours to re-write.”

“So ... we ...”

“We isolate ... totally ... we teach ... selectively ... we control the process of reproduction ... absolutely ... we manipulate public opinion ... ruthlessly ... and then ... when the time is right

... our victory will be emphatic and incontrovertible.”

“And when Kal-El studies the Law and realises all he stands to lose?” Nor asked scornfully. “What do we do then?”

“It has already been taken care of,” Ked assured him quietly.

“The page no longer exists in the Law of New Krypton.”

“If it isn’t there, how can we cite it?”

“It is in the original Law of both the North and the South. It is Canon Law.”

“Will Kal-El not be permitted access to the original documents of Law?”

“He will be permitted,” Ked replied. “But they are extensive in length and fragile and scripted in the difficult language of ancient times. Kal-El will be dissuaded from risking their damage.”

“I don’t like it,” Nor said. “It is too passive.”

“You must accept that as the Supreme Ruler, Kal-El holds every possible advantage. And every advantage is supported by Canon Law.”

“I don’t like it,” Nor repeated.

“It is our best tactic,” Ked said with quiet certainty. “Once you are the Supreme Ruler, you can feed your lust for violence as much as you desire — for as the Supreme Ruler, the Law will be unable to touch you.”

“Kip-Or has made fools of us.”

“That is true.”

“So would violence be an appropriate response to him?”

“He’s Southside.”

“Yes, but when we arrived on New Krypton, the people of the South were in the minority. Using those tactics you now spurn, we have made considerable progress towards ensuring a Civil War would result in a victory for the South. We don’t need an old, irrelevant Scientist.”

Ked rubbed his chin as he thought. “He wouldn’t fight anyway; he’s always supported unification.”

“Then he is dispensable,” Nor concluded.

“Totally,” Ked agreed.

“Who else knows Kal-El was not in hiatus for fifteen years?”

“Kip-Or claims he worked totally alone — that he kept the young heir secluded.”

“And no doubt brainwashed him with the propaganda of unification,” Nor said with deep disgust.

“It won’t matter what he told him — not once we have administered the dose of Re-set. Should the Scientist, or anyone else, claim knowledge of the past fifteen years of Kal-El’s life, their testimony will not stand against a Supreme Ruler who has no memory of it.”

Acceptance was coming slowly to Nor. He’d always known absolute power would not be his until the death of his father. It was possible this would not add too many years to his time of waiting. But the fact that a mere Scientist had outwitted them chafed him unbearably. “No one should be permitted to shame the House of Dur.”

“Can you ensure there will be no trail back to you?”

Nor sniggered. “Of course.”

“Well done, my son.”

Nor sipped his blue, relishing the memory of exacting revenge on the Scientist who had dared to cross the House of Dur. Kip-Or had paid with his life.

The years had passed. Nor’s father had lived long enough to fill the void that was the mind of Kal-El.

It had been more difficult than either of them had imagined. More difficult, yet easier too.

They had erased his mind, his memories, his knowledge, his essence, and everything else that had been imparted to him during his years in hiding.

But they had not managed to bind his conscience.

His conscience. His absolute, unshakeable belief that there

was right and there was wrong, and he, Kal-El, would always do the right.

It had made him a formidable opponent at times. Formidable and unyielding. But it had also made him predictable.

Contemptuously so.

In a few hours, Kal-El would be in exile.

He would not fight the Law.

He would not fight for *his* rights.

Of that, Nor had no doubt.

Kal-El only ever fought for the rights of others.

He would accept his failure and would not dispute his disgrace.

And, within days, Nor's soldiers would have tracked him and killed him.

And the Law, which had bestowed the mantle of Supreme Ruler upon Nor, would be powerless to act against him.

His father had been right.

Patience was sometimes the most potent of the tools of War.

Nor drained his glass and stood with purpose.

Finally ... it was time to take what was his.

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Lois stared at the handwritten jumble of characters. She could see traces of impressions amidst the written script, but the unfamiliarity of the characters made it difficult to decipher with any surety. Lois switched her eyes to the diagram, and the indented spidery scrawl slipped into focus.

She turned the previous page. The script there was different to the faint impressions. There *had* been another page. "I can see some faint marks across the diagram," she told Kal. "I'll try to copy them so you can read them."

Together, they moved to his desk, and Lois picked up the pencil. She adjusted her vision and began to copy the strange figures onto a sheet of paper.

Kal watched over her shoulder. After a few minutes, he said, "I don't recognise the part of the Law you are writing. I am sure I have never read this."

"What does it say?" Lois asked.

When Kal didn't answer immediately, she turned from her task and looked at him. His face had coloured a little. "Basically it is instructions for the diagram," he said.

"Oh." Lois recovered from her embarrassment first. "But if someone didn't want you to know the details of that, why leave the diagram there?"

"I don't know," Kal said. "Can you decipher any further words?"

Lois continued writing for a few minutes and then stopped. "What does it say?"

Again, Kal didn't answer. Again, when she turned, he was looking uncomfortable.

"Well?" she asked.

He cleared his throat. "It is instructions for obtaining the sample."

"But if you never read this, how did -" Lois felt the colour flood to her face. "Ah ... forget I ... " She swallowed and returned to the task. "That makes even less sense," she said. "They *wanted* you to do that."

"Unless the initial plan was for there to be no sample — and therefore no heir."

"But someone — Ching or Yent maybe — insisted on the sample method being adhered to?"

"That's possible," Kal said. "Is there more?"

"Yes, but I've finished all the words from the diagram, and it's a lot harder to see amongst the script."

Lois felt Kal's hands on her shoulders. "You're doing a wonderful job," he said with an encouraging squeeze through her gown. "I can't discern anything at all."

She eased back into his touch and looked up to meet his eyes.

Understanding flowed between them.

Together they were more than enough.

Lois raised her shoulder and brushed his hand with a soft kiss.

Kal crouched at her side. "Lois," he said. "I'm -"

The door flung open, and four armed soldiers charged in.

They were followed by Nor, Ching, and Yent.

Kal straightened, though his hand remained on Lois's shoulder.

Nor stepped forward. "Kal-El," he said, his voice coldly triumphant. "You are hereby informed that under the Law of New Krypton, having failed in your duty to provide the necessary heir within the allotted timeframe, you have been deposed as the Supreme Ruler of this planet."

## Part 28

Two of the soldiers charged Kal with such exaggerated intent that Lois had the fleeting impression that this was a sick joke.

Except Kryptonians didn't joke.

And the barbarous gratification on Nor's face left no room for anything approaching comedy.

With a soldier clamped on each arm and two following closely behind, Kal was marched from his own bedroom.

Lois darted around them and filled the doorway of the chambers, facing them with every ounce of defiance she could muster. "Where are you taking him?" she demanded.

"Move aside," Nor barked from behind the soldiers.

She held her ground.

Nor skirted the soldiers and advanced on Lois — only stalling when he was so close she could feel the waft of his breath on her cheeks. "As the Supreme Ruler of New Krypton, I am ordering you to move aside," he snarled. "If you do not, you will be shot, and your body dragged from the doorway in a manner befitting an alien whore."

Lois heard Kal gasp. She looked through Nor and saw the anxiety ripe on Kal's face. Lois pulled back her focus and with a final contemptuous glare at Nor, stepped aside. He strutted through the doorway without glancing in her direction.

As Kal was propelled past her, Lois managed little more than a glimpse to his face. His naked anguish froze her heart and turned her blood to ice.

Yent followed.

Then Ching, his eyes averted.

They forced Kal to follow in the wake of Nor — along the corridor and into a meeting room. Lois watched through the wall as they shoved him roughly into a chair.

Her instincts burst from every pore — instincts that compelled her to go to Kal.

But she knew with certainty that her appearance in the meeting room would achieve nothing other than to compound Kal's distress.

Whom could she trust?

Lois spun away from the scene in the meeting room and sprinted along the corridor. She emerged from Kal's building as the first light of dawn crept across the courtyard. Hurrying through the gates, she turned left and sped towards the home of Riz and Tek.

At Number Fourteen, she rattled the door. "Tek!" she screamed. "Tek!"

He appeared, looking dazed.

"They've taken Kal," Lois said in a rush.

"They've what?"

"Nor and the other two nobles came to Kal's room with four soldiers, and he said that Kal had been deposed from being the Supreme Ruler because he hadn't provided an heir within the time allowed."

All colour drained from Tek's face. "Give me one moment,"

he said.

Only as he retreated into the house did Lois realise that he was wearing nothing but flimsy shorts. He disappeared through an internal door and returned seconds later wearing long pants and an unbuttoned shirt and pulling a jacket across his shoulders. He stopped briefly at the door and slipped on his shoes. “Let’s go,” he said.

“Where are we going?” Lois asked as she settled into a jog alongside Tek’s rickety stride.

He buttoned his shirt as he ran. “First, we need to ascertain if his action is supported by the Law,” he said.

“And if it is?”

“We strategise.”

“And if it isn’t?”

“We’re at War.”

Neither option did anything to ease the tightening knot of fear that had lodged against Lois’s sternum and was threatening to erupt into her throat.

“Where did they take him?” Tek asked as they passed through the gates.

“To one of the meeting rooms,” Lois said. “I can show you.”

As they approached the door to Kal’s building, the sentries blocked the entrance, their rifles poised. “I work here,” Tek said shortly.

“Our orders from the Supreme Ruler are that no one is to enter this building,” one of the sentries said crisply.

Lois looked into the faces of the previously vapid guards. She didn’t recognise them. “I am to marry the Supreme Ruler today,” she said.

“You speak of the former Supreme Ruler,” the other sentry said.

His disdainful tone snapped Lois’s restraint. She clasped a rifle barrel in each hand and pushed sideways. She felt Tek brush past her with a quick movement as he slipped through the doorway and into the building.

Lois thrust the weapons further apart and both sentries stumbled sideways. She ran after Tek.

When she arrived in Kal’s chambers, Tek had already moved the bookcase and opened the hidden door. He lifted a book from the hole and after a quick inspection discarded it to floor with a lack of care that caused her to wince. The second followed. The third, he opened and flicked through the pages.

Lois waited with brittle impatience. “Well?” she said, unable to hold her tongue a moment longer.

Tek didn’t respond. He merely continued reading.

Then he again rummaged in the hole and withdrew another volume. He laid it on the floor, crouched next to it, opened it, and scoured the pages.

Thirty long, agonising seconds later, his shoulders slumped, and Lois heard his groan of despair. “He’s got us.”

Lois’s heart stopped. “What do you mean ‘He’s got us’?” she asked frantically.

Tek gestured to the books. “The Canon Law — law from both sides — says that if a Supreme Ruler has not supplied the people with an heir within the first one hundred, twenty-five months of his reign, the next in line can initiate a Move to Depose.”

“How long since Kal became the Supreme Ruler?”

“One hundred, twenty-five months,” Tek said. “To the day.”

Lois felt the knot tighten further and inch higher. “So Nor can do this?”

“Yes, he has the full backing of Canon Law.”

“Shouldn’t this be something everyone knew before now?”

Lois screeched.

Tek lifted his shoulders with a gesture of defeat. “I have never heard of it before,” he admitted, looking shamefaced.

Then Lois understood. She scurried to Kal’s desk and

returned with the book they had examined together such a short time ago. She handed it to Tek. “They ripped out the page,” she said.

Tek inspected it. From his mouth gushed a word that didn’t translate — although Lois was sure she could have supplied a few Earth equivalents.

“What are we going to do?” she asked, dreading his answer.

Tek stood slowly from floor. “There is nothing we can do.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Tek,” Lois chafed. “There has to be *something* we can do. Nor can’t commandeer the leadership of the entire planet just because a baby wasn’t born on time.”

“You’re right,” Tek said. “He can’t *just* do it. He’s waited over ten years for this opportunity.”

“I bet it’s an opportunity he engineered by subverting the reproduction process,” she said.

“That would mean Ching has to be involved as well.”

“Why wouldn’t he be?”

“He’s North. And only a fool would willingly side with Nor.”

That was true. “What will Nor do to Kal now?” Lois asked, desperately trying to contain her escalating panic. “When will they let him go?”

Tek stepped closer to her. “Lady, you need to decide if you trust me totally.”

“I ... Kal trusts you.”

“There won’t be time for explanations,” Tek warned. “You’ll need to decide beforehand if you trust me.”

“You ... you said there is nothing we can do.”

“There is nothing we can do about Nor being the Supreme Ruler. His claim is supported by Canon Law.”

“That is so unfair,” Lois raged. “Kal has been a wonderful leader for this pl-”

“Do you trust me?”

Tek’s quiet question stalled her indignation mid-stream. “Your support for Kal is absolute, right?”

“I will do everything — as my father did — to protect Kal-El and those he cares for.”

For the first time, Lois perceived the potential price of his loyalty. “Tek,” she said. “You have a wife and two children. You can’t risk them. Even for Kal.”

They heard footsteps, and two armed soldiers tramped into the chambers, followed by Nor. “I see you have already established the legal authority of my action,” he taunted.

Tek gestured to the volume of the Law of New Krypton. “Someone removed part of the Law,” he said, his accusation clear as he eyed Nor.

Nor gave the book a cursory glance. “I think it is likely that you and the alien wench ripped that page from the book just now in a pathetic attempt to try to save Kal-El from his destiny.”

“Of course we didn’t take the page,” Lois fumed.

Nor turned to her with ominous deliberation. Time stalled as his evil eyes bored slowly into hers. “The only reason you are still alive,” he snarled, “is my anticipation of witnessing your distress as your impotent hero is finally overthrown.” His upper lip curled with evident distaste. “Bind her — ankles and wrists,” he ordered the soldiers.

One of the soldiers drew two lengths of thick rope from his belt.

Lois bit back her retort.

Nor sniggered at her silence. “After you have bound her, keep her and the servant here until you receive orders to escort them to the courtyard,” he directed the soldiers.

Nor picked up the two ancient books containing the Law from the North and the Law from the South — his ticket to tyranny — and left the room.

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Kal had watched from between the ends of two weapons as Nor had exited the Meeting Room.

Nor had filled the past half an hour with a long-winded exposé of the Canon Law as it related to what he referred to as ‘Krypton’s Great Day of Reckoning’. Each word had hammered the spike deeper into Kal’s heart.

The mantle of the Supreme Ruler had gone irretrievably. Of that Kal was sure.

Nor was not a man to make a move this significant without being absolutely sure of his facts.

And he’d had more than ten years to check and re-check his facts.

Now Nor had gone from the Meeting Room, and heavy silence consumed them.

Yent and Ching stared ahead.

Yent’s shock was etched upon his face. Kal was sure he’d had no previous knowledge of Nor’s plan.

Ching’s face was set to blank, but his eyes gave him away. They had avoided Kal with such determination, Kal was convinced Nor’s subterfuge had not come as a surprise to the young man.

Nor was now the Supreme Ruler of New Krypton.

Within Kal, sickening fear unfurled to every part of his being.

Fear for his people.

Their future had been obliterated. Every gain of the past decade had been razed to nothing. Instead of peace, there would be oppression; instead of justice, there would be anarchy.

There would be no mercy at the hands of Nor.

Yet it was easier to think of the future of his people than to contemplate Lois’s future.

She was a stranger — an alien — in a savage world. And now, she was without any protection.

Kal thought back to the moment he had met Lois — how she had looked at him without the slightest deference. One such look now — directed towards Nor — would cost her her life.

Her audacity as she had stood in the doorway had chilled him to the core. Nor would have no compunction in killing her, Kal knew that.

He swallowed down the bile that had billowed into his throat and willed his voice to submission. “Lord Yent,” he said.

Yent broke from his stupor and turned his face to Kal.

“I ask a petition of you,” Kal said.

“What is it?”

“I ask that you take my fourth concubine, the alien woman, into your household.”

“I have no desire for her,” Yent said. “She is an alien being — not even Kryptonian.”

“No!” Kal shut down his instinct to defend her and forced himself to steady speech and calm thought. “I am the grandson of Bon-Ra — the man who ruled South Krypton for over three decades. In his name, I ask that you consider my petition.”

Yent didn’t respond.

“I ask that you take her into your household for her protection,” Kal said.

A smattering of understanding seemed to touch the eyes of the older man. “If she falls to me, I will take her,” he agreed.

A helix of intermingled dread and hope twisted through Kal. *If she falls* — if she didn’t, that would mean Nor or Ching had already taken her. Or Nor had already ordered her death.

But amidst the dread was hope — the tenuous hope that he had secured a safe future for Lois. “Thank you,” Kal breathed.

Yent’s attention drifted away.

Kal’s mind flooded with every memory of Lois. They brought such sweet torture — of all that he’d had ... and all that he’d lost.

Would he have any opportunity to communicate with her? There was much he needed to tell her.

But his life was no longer his own.

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Through several walls, Lois watched Kal, her heart breaking. She watched as roughly hewn pants and a coarse jacket were delivered to him.

She watched as he put them over his sleeping clothes.

She was still watching him when another soldier stamped into the chambers and delivered the order that they were to assemble in the courtyard.

The soldier who had tied her ankles and wrists gestured to the door.

Lois stared at him, eyebrows raised, lamenting that her disdain would probably not register.

He gestured again with his weapon — more insistently this time.

Lois dropped her eyes past her bound wrists and to her ankles. “Do you intend to carry me?” she asked, her tone dripping with insolence.

He understood — finally — and crouched beside her. When the rope was loosened enough to allow an undignified shuffle, he straightened and clipped the edge of her shoulder with the butt of his rifle.

Slowly, she moved out of Kal’s chambers, wondering if she would ever return.

In the courtyard, the Kryptonian people had gathered.

There was silence.

Yet it was a silence that crackled with the raw edge of foreboding.

The soldiers spurred her forward to the line of Kal’s household. As she was positioned next to Mo, Lois glanced sideways. The faces of the four women were coagulated with trepidation. Even Ard had realised that their lives had changed irrevocably.

The trickle of people through the gates dried up completely, and the gathered mass waited.

Lois looked into the building and located Kal. At gunpoint, he was moving towards the door. Soon he would join them in the courtyard.

She searched his face, wishing it were possible for him to see her — possible for them to connect.

There was an understated gasp from the crowd when he reached the door.

His eyes sought her. Their connection came alive with a bittersweet concoction of love and relief and despair and fear — sprinkled with the essence of hope that refused to be denied now that they were together.

Kal was ushered into the courtyard, flanked by two soldiers and followed by two more.

His lips were moving. She honed in on his words.

“I love you, Lois.”

“I love you, Kal,” she mouthed back.

Before she had finished her words, they turned him, forcing him to face the balcony — and the visual link was broken.

Minutes passed — each one stretching longer than the one before it.

Nor would keep them waiting, Lois thought grimly.

She heard the murmur of words — so low it blended with the silence.

“I love you, Lois. I love you, Lois.”

His words reached inside her and pulled her tears from the accumulation of fear and anger that sat like granite in her gut.

She blinked them into submission, knowing that if they escaped, her bound hands would give her no choice but to let them slide down her cheeks.

The door to the balcony opened.

Ching emerged and stepped to his right.

Yent emerged and stepped left.

Again, there was a period of waiting as the crowd was suspended on the whims of their Supreme Ruler.

Then he stepped into sight — Lord Nor, his puny body encased in a tight black suit with an ‘E’ lying on its side across his chest, carrying the ancient books of law from the safe in Kal’s chambers.

From the depths of Lois’s stomach rose a torrent of acrid nausea. She swallowed furiously and closed her eyes as the world swayed. Mo’s hand gripped her elbow, steadying her.

Lois heard the soft thuds as the open palms of the Kryptonian people responded to their new Supreme Ruler with the greeting of acknowledged inferiority.

There was a modicum of satisfaction that her bound wrists prevented her from joining them.

“Minions of Krypton,” Nor began. “I, Lord Nor of the House of Dur, have brought a Move to Depose against the former Supreme Ruler on the grounds that he has not supplied the required heir within the stated timeframe of one hundred, twenty-five months.”

The people didn’t respond. Lois suspected they had already known the essence of Nor’s announcement.

“My claim is fully supported by the Canon Law,” Nor stated. “My position as the Supreme Ruler is incontrovertible.”

The silence was deeply disturbing.

How could they stand there so passively while this most evil of men stole their future?

Surely they could not be so naive as to not realise the coming carnage?

“Kal-El is now in exile,” Nor said. He then paused as if to indulge in self-congratulations. “As such, he is no longer permitted to keep wives or concubines.”

Mo’s grip on Lois’s elbow tightened.

“According to the Law, his marriage is hereby annulled.”

Just like that, Kal became a single man.

“As the longest-serving Regal Noble, it is the duty of Lord Yent to direct the distribution of those women who no longer have a master.”

Yent moved forward. “I call Za, formerly of the House of El, out of the House of Ra.”

Across the courtyard, the crowd parted, and a woman emerged. Lois gazed at her — the woman who, until moments ago, had been the indissoluble thorn in Lois’s relationship with Kal, but now was a fellow-refugee in their sea of uncertainty.

As she passed Kal, Za looked at him. Her face was masked, but her eyes signalled something that Lois couldn’t comprehend.

They positioned her before the balcony, and the accompanying soldiers stepped back.

Za looked up to the balcony, her shoulders back, and her stance unflinching. Lois couldn’t quash the reluctant respect she felt for Kal’s wife.

Former wife.

“This woman is offered,” Yent announced.

There was a moment of heavy silence. On the balcony, Ching stepped forward. “I will take her as my wife,” he said.

Lois saw no response from Za.

No doubt she would be disappointed with this development — no there could be no child with the man she loved.

Unless ...

Unless Ching was the man she loved.

From the balcony, Ching’s eyes lingered on Za. It was all Lois needed to confirm her suspicion.

Ching had been a willing accomplice to treason — not for power, but for love.

Za turned from the balcony and stepped to Kal. “I knew nothing of this,” she said, so quietly that Lois doubted the soldiers guarding Kal would have heard.

Lois heard it, though.

Kal didn’t respond verbally, and Lois couldn’t see his face. Za hesitated and then stepped towards the crowd.

“No!”

Nor’s voice rang across the gathering of people. Their heads lifted.

“I will take Za of the House of Ra,” Nor announced.

“I have already taken her,” Ching protested.

“I am the Supreme Ruler,” Nor reminded him. “I take her as my concubine.”

Lois saw the betrayal cut a swath through Ching’s features. He stared at Nor. Nor ignored him — offering not even the suggestion of a sideways glance.

The composure had seeped from Za’s body. She stood, a lonely figure adrift from the crowd, reminding Lois of debris left in the wake of a disaster.

Kal’s shoulders were rounded in abject defeat. Lois knew that this — the callous dismantling of his household, the dispersing of the people he had brought into his protection — would wound him deeply.

Za was shuffled away by two of Nor’s soldiers.

“Bring forth the concubines,” Yent ordered.

The soldiers herded the four of them to the space in front of Kal.

Lois twisted enough that she could make eye contact with him. He was tantalisingly close — within touching distance. Except her hands were bound.

“Lois,” he said.

His voice ... her name. It calmed her and shook her and strengthened her and rattled her — all at once.

“Lois, you cannot come with me,” Kal said, his voice suspended on the knife-edge between vehemence and despair. “My destiny is exile. I cannot protect you. I have no resources, and no recourse in the Law. I have spoken to Yent, and he has agreed to take you. He is not a cruel man.”

Lois shook her head, every atom rejecting Kal’s suggestion.

“Lois,” Kal said desperately. “Listen to me, my love. This is the only way.”

“No, Kal,” she whimpered. “I want to be with you.”

“You cannot come with me.”

Lois resisted the push of the soldier as he tried to bundle her closer to the other concubines. “I don’t care if we have nothing, Kal,” she cried. “If I have you, I have everything.”

Kal glanced away, and she saw his eyelids flutter as they battled his rising tears. But when he turned back to her, his resolve covered his face like a cold steel mask. “You can’t come with me,” he grated.

The authority inherent in his words sucked the mettle from her dissent. The soldier firmly clasped her upper arms and turned her forward.

Two men emerged from the crowd. One took Mo; one took Jib. Then a third one came forward and took Ard.

Then they waited.

Lois knew they were waiting for someone to take her.

No one moved.

“I will take her,” Yent said.

Lois broke from the grip of the soldier and rammed into Kal’s anguished eyes. “No, Kal,” she sobbed. “No.”

“I’m sorry, Lois,” Kal said brokenly. “I’m so sorry. This is the only way.”

“I don’t care if you have nothing.”

“Please, Lois,” Kal begged. “Please go with Yent. You will be protected and he will treat -”

From above them on the balcony, Nor’s voice sliced through their conversation. “I am higher than Yent,” he said. “I take her.”

“No!” Kal roared. He stepped from between the soldiers.

Standing shoulder to shoulder with Lois, he confronted those on the balcony above him. “You will *not* take her.”

“I am the Supreme Ruler,” Nor said. He considered Kal, his contempt tangible. “I take her as my concubine.”

“NO!”

“You have no means to stop me,” Nor said.

“I offer my life,” Kal said.

Nor grasped the railing and peered down at Kal. “Repeat what you just said,” he ordered.

Kal stared back at Nor, his head high. “In return for you allowing her to fall to Yent,” Kal said. “I offer my life.”

### Part 29

“NO!” Lois screeched. “No, Kal. No!”

She lunged towards him, and Kal reached to steady her. There was barely time to register the familiarity of his touch before they were torn apart.

Four soldiers crowded around Kal.

“No,” Lois sobbed, reaching for him. “No, Kal.”

The hand on her shoulder jerked her backwards, and she teetered on her bound feet.

Nor gushed from the doorway of Kal’s building and strode forward.

The sea of soldiers parted.

Kal and Nor faced each other, two combatants, a yard apart, the veneer of alliance shattered.

“I accept your offer,” Nor said smugly.

“You cannot take her now or any time in the future,” Kal said, his voice piercing the silence of the crowded courtyard. “She remains under the protection of Yent and can never be taken by anyone from your House.”

“We have agreement,” Nor said, making no attempt to moderate his swagger.

The four soldiers closed in around Kal and propelled him to the wall between the door and the balcony. Nor paraded after them like a man chasing plunder.

Kal was backed against the wall. He faced his people for the final time.

Nor spoke. “In accordance with the Law of New Krypton, you are granted one minute to speak as you wish. You are not permitted to touch anyone. No one is permitted to approach you.”

The grip on Lois’s arms tightened.

As she watched, Kal took a breath that seemed to never end. He ran his hand through the hair above his left ear.

Then his eyes centred in hers.

Through the veil of her tears, she connected with him. All else faded away. There was nothing but Kal. Kal and her. Together.

“Lois,” he said. “Lois, my love.”

“Please don’t do this, Kal,” she sobbed, knowing her words were barely coherent.

“Listen to me, my Lois,” he said gently. He stalled, swallowed, took a quivering breath. “Don’t be unhappy,” he begged. “Don’t mourn my death. Celebrate my life ... you are my life ... you are everything to me.”

“P ... please, Kal, pl -”

“They awakened my body, Lois, but my heart slept on — until you came.” He paused, and his eyes travelled her face like a caress. “Now, they will kill my body, but my heart will live on ... because my love for you will never die.”

Lois willed herself to speak. “But Kal, there sh ... should have b ... been so m ... much m ... more.”

“We have had so much, my love. Please don’t be sad. Please smile every day — just for me. Please laugh and remember that the sound of your laughter was the sweetest sound I ever heard.”

“Kal ... I c ... can’t do this.”

“Imagine I am holding you, Lois. Feel my arms surround you. Feel my mouth on yours. Feel my hands soothe you. Feel my body against yours; lean against me, and draw strength from our togetherness.”

She couldn’t do as he asked ... couldn’t force her mind to

form the images he’d tried to paint for her ... could not get past the horror of never feeling his touch again.

The heartbreak of losing him forever.

“Remember our time, Lois,” Kal said. “Remember *our* time.” He sculpted a smile, and she knew it was his gift to her. “We are together, my love. Together, we are more than enough.”

“I don’t want to live without you.”

“They can’t separate us, Lois — not in our hearts. My heart will always belong to you.”

“Time’s up.” Nor stepped in front of Kal and signalled to the nearest soldier. “You,” he commanded. “You are to do this.”

The soldier walked to a position ten yards from the wall where Kal stood.

Nor closed in on Kal. “This I want to witness first hand,” he said in a low, taunting voice. “The moment when you finally learn that a conscience is the mark of the weak, and you are the weakest of all men.” He leant closer to Kal. “You lived a slave to your pathetic need to protect, Kal-El. How fitting that it will be the death of you.”

The soldier raised his rifle.

Kal’s eyes — steady and focussed and without fear — found hers. *I love you*, they messaged. *Be strong. I love you.*

The hands that had restrained Lois from going to Kal now released her. She crumpled and, restricted by the rope around her ankles, lost balance. As she fell, she thrust out her hands to break her fall. The rope binding her wrists gave way, and she landed, hands outstretched, on the hard concrete. She looked up.

Looked for Kal.

The explosion of the bullet was like a physical assault. Lois leapt to her feet, snapping the rope around her ankles. She sprang towards Kal.

The world slowed.

She saw the bullet, whirring towards Kal with sickening certainty.

Lois chased it.

Passed it.

Flung herself at Kal.

Thudded into him.

Felt a sting on her right shoulder blade.

Behind her, commotion erupted.

“Kal!” she sobbed, her hands nimble on his hair, his face, his neck, his shoulders as she checked for injury. “Kal! Are you all right?”

His arms surrounded her, supporting her, clamping her to him.

Tek materialised beside them. “Get out of here now,” he ordered frantically. “It’s your only chance.”

“Lois,” Kal said. “You stay here with -”

“I’m coming with you, Kal.”

“I will die, Lois. I have offered my life. There is no way back from -”

“I’m coming with you, Kal.”

“Lois, you will die.”

“Then we will die together.”

“Go!” Tek implored. “Go. Both of you. Go.”

“Go where?” Lois breathed.

“House 208,” Tek said. “I will come as soon as I can be sure I’m not being followed.”

Lois took Kal’s hand, and they slipped through the crowd — the crowd that had finally ruptured from its propriety and now seethed with tumultuous disorder.

Together, Lois and Kal ran from the courtyard and into the precarious world beyond the gates.

\*\*\*

Eb-Ur’s life was good — very good.

She enjoyed working in the house with her mother-in-law. Dav’s mother had struggled to raise two sons while her husband

had battled to profitably farm the parched Kryptonian soil. Eb had lightened her burden considerably, and the early qualms from both sides had dissolved into easy companionship.

Eb enjoyed the evenings when Dav and his brother came in from the fields, and the four of them ate together and talked of the events of the day.

Most of all, she enjoyed the nights, when she and Dav went alone to their tiny lean-to at the back of the house.

Eb rested her hand on her softly rounded abdomen.

Her life was good because of the Supreme Ruler.

That thought still stunned her.

The *Supreme Ruler* had summoned her ... spoken to her ... asked what *she* wanted ... listened ... and then granted her request.

Eb slipped the puddings she had prepared into the oven. Dav, his mother, and his brother had gone to the Extraordinary Report that had been called early that morning.

Dav hadn't been pleased — he'd planned to spend a long day in the fields. Eb suspected the Report was scheduled so early because the Supreme Ruler was to marry the alien woman today.

When Dav and his family arrived back, they would be greeted by the aroma of warm, freshly-baked puddings. As they ate, they would tell her what had transpired at the Extraordinary Report.

Was it about the forthcoming marriage?

Was it to announce the long-awaited heir was imminent?

Did he care for her?

Dav didn't think so. Dav said if the Regal Nobles had any feelings at all, they were certainly not expended on their wives.

But Eb couldn't help but hope — hope that the Supreme Ruler had found someone he cared for.

Someone who cared for him.

She remembered how, as a nine year old, she'd listened as her parents had discussed the details of his Investiture. She remembered how before that, they had believed that the mysterious, never-seen Kal-El had not survived the Transition. How they had anticipated Southside rule when Lord Ked would take over from the Interim Cabinet.

She remembered their scepticism at the rumours of Kal-El's appearance and their fear when he proved to be the lost Heir of Both Houses — condemning them, as they saw it, to a life under Northside rule.

Yet, in time, even her parents had come to admit that life on New Krypton had improved under Kal-El. There was less violence and more food. For most people, the past rivalries became less important than the harsh realities of the present. There were still the rebels — people who wanted to split New Krypton and resume the war — but most people simply wanted to live in peace.

The years of peace had mellowed her parents — so much so, they had accepted her marriage to Dav and had allowed the Northside boy to live in their home.

Then Dav's brother had demanded that he return to his family home.

And they had both thought there was no hope for their marriage.

Until Kal-El had summoned her.

Eb remembered the speculation that he had been kept in hiatus all the years since Krypton to guarantee his safety. She remembered the still-lingering stories that his time in hiatus had rendered him unintelligent and aloof.

Yet there had been nothing unintelligent or aloof about him when he had given her a chair and sat on the step so she had to face him.

She had seen kindness.

And compassion.

And a genuine desire to communicate.

A sharp rap sounded on her door, shattering the peace of the lonely farmhouse.

Eb opened the door.

And stood, face to face with the Supreme Ruler of New Krypton.

"We were told we would be safe here," he said breathlessly.

It took Eb several seconds to recover enough to respond. "Come in," she said automatically. He stepped back to allow his companion — the alien woman — to enter first. Eb closed the door and stared, dumbstruck.

The Supreme Ruler was in her house.

She swallowed around her dry throat. "Safe?" she gulped.

"I have been deposed as the Supreme Ruler by Lord Nor."

Eb felt the fear and dread grip her stomach. Lord Nor. New Krypton was now ruled by a Southside despot. Dav and his family were Northside. The baby she carried would be Northside. And with Nor, there would be no mercy — of that she was sure.

"I offered my life," the Supreme Ruler — *former* Supreme Ruler — said. "They will be searching for me."

A loud, angry bang shook the door. Before she had time to fully consider the consequences of her forwardness, Eb grabbed the Supreme Ruler's arm and hustled him and the woman into her and Dav's lean-to.

\*\*\*

The door shut, and Lois was alone with Kal.

Alive.

Together.

Alive.

Vulnerable.

Alive.

She clung to Kal.

His heart boomed.

His body heaved.

His breathing rasped.

She clung tighter, wanting to get closer to him.

Wanting to be whatever he needed.

Needing him.

Needing his presence, his comfort, his strength.

For timeless moments, there was only him ... but then reality encroached on the oasis of their togetherness.

Lois adjusted her head on his chest and looked through the door.

"What is happening out there?" he whispered.

"There's a group of men at the door. They are talking to the woman."

"Are they armed?"

"Yes."

"Soldiers?"

"No. Maybe they've been sent by Nor."

"Or they've joined the hunt of their own volition."

"Ordinary people are going to do that?"

Lois felt movement above her head, which she took as reluctant acknowledgement. "Are they threatening her?" Kal asked.

"Not physically."

"What are they saying?"

"She said something like she is south from birth until death."

Kal groaned.

Lois sprung from his chest. "What's wrong?" she hissed.

His arms pulled her closer again. "That's the Oath of the South. If she is loyal to the South, we are not safe here."

"We can't leave," Lois whispered. "The entire planet could be crawling with rabid vigilantes wanting to take pot shots at us."

"We'll stay here for now," Kal decided. "Keep watching and listening."

Lois returned to the haven of his chest. Nothing can hurt us, she told herself. Nothing can hurt us if we're together.

\*\*\*

After Eb had deposited the Supreme Ruler and the woman in her bedroom, she took a moment to steady herself despite the unrelenting barrage on her door. “Who is it?” she called tentatively.

“Open up! We are here on the business of the Supreme Ruler.”

She unlocked her door and opened it enough to peer outside. Five men — civilians, not soldiers — crowded her doorway, armed with an assortment of weapons. “We are looking for Kal-El, fugitive,” one of them stated loudly.

Eb tightened her grip on her door and tried to muster enough breath to answer. “The Supr-”

“Kal-El is no longer the Supreme Ruler,” she was informed harshly.

“No one is here,” Eb said shakily.

“This is a Northside family. You would hide a Northside outlaw.”

“I am Southside,” Eb proclaimed with quiet pride. “My husband and brother-in-law are not here. I would not permit a Northside vagabond to enter this house while I am here alone.”

“But you married a Northside man,” he accused with contempt.

“The marriage was forced upon me by the judgement of the Sup ... former Supreme Ruler. It was not my choice.”

The man stared at her, weighing her words.

“He is not here,” Eb repeated. “I would not allow him in my house. If he were here, I would tell you.”

“Your loyalties are Southside?”

“Yes — from birth to death, I am Southside.”

“Why did you not attend the Extraordinary Report?” he asked suspiciously.

Eb stroked her hand over her gown, revealing her shape.

His eyes dropped, and he retreated half a step.

Another man spoke up. “He’s not here. While we waste our time with this woman, the fugitive is increasing his lead on us.”

The group turned and streamed away from her house.

Eb waited until she could no longer see them through the dust that rose in their wake, and then she shut the door. She collapsed against it, only now realising how loudly her heart was thumping in her chest.

She crossed the kitchen and opened the door to the lean-to. “You can come out now,” she said shyly. “They have gone.”

The alien woman emerged. Kal-El followed, his hand resting on her back. “You gave the oath,” he said.

“Yes,” Eb admitted.

“It’s an oath,” the Supreme Ruler said.

Eb wasn’t sure if there was disapproval in his reminder. “Mere words are not to be compared with life.”

“You would lie for us?” he said.

“I am Eb-Ur,” she said. “We have met before — when you summoned me to your Chambers.”

“I remember.”

“You gave me the chance to live as I want to live.” She rested her hand on the gentle slope of her belly. “That is more important to me than any Northside-Southside silliness.”

“Thank you.”

Eb didn’t understand his words, but his tone dispelled her fears that she had offended him with her loose allegiance to the Southside Oath. “Who told you to come here?” she asked. “Tek?”

“Yes. You know him?”

“Tek and Riz are a mixed marriage, as are Dav and I. There are some who prefer not to associate with us — therefore we associate with each other.”

The alien woman stepped forward. “I’m Lois,” she said. “You can call me Lady if that is easier for you.”

“I’m Eb.”

“Tek said we would be safe here,” Lady said.

“With Lord Nor as the Supreme Ruler, none of us will be safe.” Again, Eb’s hands floated across the contour of her swollen belly.

“We are safe for now,” Kal-El said with a questioning look to the alien woman.

Lady said nothing, but Eb sensed her confirmation of his assessment.

The question of how they could know receded as Eb was swamped afresh with the impossible reality of exactly who was standing in her kitchen. Kal-El. The man who had ruled her planet for over half of her life.

The man whose birth had handed him absolute power.

She should be trembling.

But she wasn’t. There was something about him. Something ... kind. Reassuring. And his manner towards the alien woman ... the way his eyes softened every time he looked at her ... the way his hand rested on her arm, her back, her shoulder. No one could be alarmed by a man who so clearly cared for a woman.

It reminded her of how Dav looked at her.

What an improbable coupling, Eb thought. The Supreme Ruler and an alien woman. She thought she and Dav had a mixed marriage!

Yet their togetherness just fitted perfectly.

Still, she wasn’t sure exactly how one entertained the Supreme Ruler. Even if he had been deposed. “Would you like some beverage?” Eb asked cautiously.

Kal-El seemed unsure, but Lady did a strange stretchy thing with her mouth and said, “Thank you, Eb. That would be wonderful. Can I help you?”

“No. You sit down.” Eb reached for one shabby chair and began to drag it back from the table. With a swift movement, Kal-El took the chair from her and then he did the stretchy thing with his mouth — aimed directly at her.

Eb escaped to the familiarity of her preparations, pushing the simmering kettle to the hotter part of the top of her oven and taking out the nicely browned puddings.

She had done it so often that it required no thought.

Which was good, because her mind was still trying to come to terms with the effect of the Supreme Ruler’s mouth stretch.

Her heart didn’t want to beat — it wanted to leap and spring as if it were no longer content to remain sedately in her ribcage.

The mouth stretch was amazing. The Supreme Ruler’s mouth stretch was incredible. It did something inside her. Warmed her. Made her think of Dav.

She needed to learn how to do it.

And when she had learned, she would try it out on her husband. In the lean-to. When they were alone.

Eb took the plate of puddings and two cups of beverage to the table and placed them in front of her guests. She was unsure what to do now. Did one sit with the Supreme Ruler as he ate? Or did one quietly fade into the background?

Lady pulled out the third chair. “Come and sit with us, Eb,” she said. “Those puddings smell wonderful.”

Eb took her beverage to the table and sat. This was a dream. It had to be. The *Supreme Ruler* and an *alien* at her table. She sipped from her beverage, sure that if she had a year to prepare, she still wouldn’t be able to think of one thing to say.

She didn’t need to. Lady looked at her and said, “When is your baby due?”

The question shocked Eb. Etiquette decreed that you didn’t directly refer to the ignobility of a woman’s condition. Certainly not in front of a man. “Not ... yet,” Eb said.

“You and your husband must be very happy.”

They were, but it was something they only talked about when they were snuggled together in their bed, not at the kitchen table. “Yes,” Eb said, her eyes lowered.

The alien woman brushed her fingers across Eb's hand. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable," she said. "It is such a wonderful thing that you will soon have a baby. I didn't realise you wouldn't want to talk about it."

It *was* wonderful. And Eb realised, she did want to talk about it. But maybe not now. Not with two people who, despite seeming wonderfully kind, were strangers. "We are very happy," she said.

The conversation abated to heavy silence.

Eb wanted to ask what had happened. Kal-El had been deposed by Nor. There had to be more.

Again, it was Lady who broke the impasse. "This morning, Lord Nor claimed the mantle based on an ancient law demanding there be an heir within a certain time."

"He can *do* that?"

"Yes," Kal-El said.

Eb saw his despair and wished there was something she could do to ease his distress. That was ridiculous, of course. She was a woman of the underclass, and he was Kal-El.

She was curious to know what could possibly have led to him offering his life. He couldn't offer his life to reclaim the mantle. What else did he care about enough to die for?

Eb glanced to his face. His eyes were locked on Lady as if he could stare at her all day and still want more of her.

So that was why. Someone ... almost certainly Nor ... had threatened Lady.

And Kal-El cared for Lady.

Cared enough to die for her.

Eb's respect for him soared even as the hopelessness of their situation crushed her heart. If only there was a way for them to be together.

But he had offered his life.

There was no question — he *would* die.

The only question was when the end would come.

Kal-El understood this. Possibly Lady did not. Maybe they didn't offer their lives on her planet.

She still thought there was hope.

He knew there wasn't.

Both of them were distraught.

They needed to be alone.

Eb stood from the table and collected the empty cups. "This is my time for a morning rest," she said. "Would you consider it rude if I left you alone?"

They tried to contain their eagerness at her suggestion.

It made her think of how she and Dav felt whenever his brother and mother went out and left them alone.

Eb went into the lean-to and shut the door with a long sigh.

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The moment the door shut, Kal and Lois lurched from the chairs and melded into each other's arms.

He clung to her.

Despite the superficial normality of eating and drinking, the full implications of their situation had repeatedly pummelled his mind.

They had no hope.

He was going to die.

Standing against the wall, he'd accepted that.

Now — he didn't want to die.

He wanted to live.

With Lois.

For the first time, he truly treasured life.

Yet he had to find a way to face death.

And he had to find a way to help Lois face his death.

He wasn't sure either would be possible.

But right now, he was holding her. And that was enough — more than enough.

Kal's hand gently strummed her back. "You're still watching

out there?" he asked.

"Uhhh." The resonance of her voice vibrated through his chest.

"And listening?"

"Yes. There is no one out there. We're safe."

Kal doubted she fully understood that his situation was irrevocable. Was it kinder to destroy her flimsy harbour of hope? Or kinder to allow her to cling to its treacherous reassurance?

"Lois," he said desperately. "I offered my life."

She lifted from him, and he saw her teeter between hope and despair. "There has to be a way out," she stated firmly.

But he could hear the trepidation weaved through her words. Kal shook his head. "There is no way back. Nor accepted. We have a binding agreement."

"Surely there is *someone* who can annul the agreement?"

"Not even Nor. No one can grant me back my life."

"Can't we change the rule?"

"It's Canon Law, Lois," he said. "If you offer your life, you die."

Her hands surrounded his face with such tenderness that he could feel them cradling his heart. "Kal ... " She swallowed thickly as her surging tears glimmered. "Kal ... "

He gathered her closer, wishing he could assure her they would be all right. "We are together, my love. Together, we are more than enough." He dropped his mouth to her hair and brushed a kiss into its softness.

"They *will* come, won't they?" she asked shakily.

Instead of answering, Kal gently stroked his hand across her back. He couldn't comfort her with words; perhaps he could comfort her with touch. He traced the shape of her back under her gown. Then, just below her shoulder, his fingers slid from the coarseness of the material to the softness of her skin.

He stopped and straightened.

"What's wrong?" Lois asked.

He stepped around her and saw the hole in her gown — vaguely circular and roughly torn around the edges. "Lois?" he gulped.

She reeled at the significance underpinning his tone. "What?" she cried.

Kal gingerly touched his fingertips to her exposed patch of skin. "Are you hurt here?" he asked.

"No."

"There's a piece missing from your gown."

"When I lunged at you, I felt something. I can't remember what exactly. Everything moved so quickly."

Especially you, Kal thought. "I think ... " His throat constricted with the onslaught of comprehension. "I think the bullet that was meant for me hit you."

"That's what I figured," she said nonchalantly.

Belatedly, his fear surged, squeezing his lungs with long razor-sharp talons. "Lois," he choked. "You could have been killed."

"So could you."

"That's different."

She eased from his embrace, her smile already formed. "How is it different?" she challenged, her eyes soft with affection.

It was incomprehensible that anyone would do that for him.

The spontaneity of her action — the enormity of what she'd risked for him — ravaged his ability to put words together with anything resembling cohesion. Any attempt at an explanation would be futile. "You couldn't have known you would survive being hit by a bullet," he said doggedly. "You shouldn't have risked your life for me."

"If you'd died, I didn't have a life."

Her answer razed the small remnant of his brain that still functioned. "You ... you ... I'm *that* important to you?"

She smiled through her tears, and her hand rested on his

cheek. “What did you think ‘I love you’ meant?”

“I ... I didn’t think it meant you were willing to die for me.”  
“You were willing to die for me.”

“That’s because ...” His gush of words stopped suddenly.  
She smiled. “That’s because why?”

He smiled in instinctive response, although his mind was completely absorbed with the flurry of his thoughts. “I was going to say, ‘That’s because without you, I don’t have a life.’”

She laughed on a tremulous breath. “Then you should understand why I did what I did when they tried to shoot you.”

Kal’s heart had never been fuller. Its overflow covered his fears. Everything he needed was right here. “Stay with me,” he said huskily. “Stay with me always.”

“I *told* you we had to be together,” she said with a smile that was bursting with her love.

His fears flooded back, and his sigh cut off his answering smile.

“You think they will come after you, don’t you?” Lois said.

He hated hurting her. “It is a certainty,” he said. “There will be those who just want the reward of a year’s food. It is a strong incentive. There will be others who are loyal to Nor and will want to curry his favour by presenting him with my body.”

“If they are going to kill you, they are going to have to get past me,” she said.

“No, Lois,” Kal said. “You can’t -”

“Tek said he would come,” she said. “He’ll take us to his hiding place.”

“His hiding place?”

“The day I fell into the ocean, I was following Tek. He got to the top of the cliff and simply disappeared. Later, he brought our food to your bedroom. He had to have gone somewhere.”

“You think he went ...” Kal could think of no possibilities. “Where?”

“My guess is he went into the cliff. I’m not sure how. I intended to go back and investigate. There has to be a way into those cliffs. Tek will come and take us there.”

“Lois,” he groaned. “You can’t live in a cave.”

Her hand stroked his face again. “I can live anywhere, Kal. Anywhere I’m with you.”

Her mouth joined with his, and her life flowed through him — restoring him, asserting that he still had life, filling him with hope. It was a hope that his mind knew was impossible, but a hope his heart could not be deterred from daring to believe.

She lurched from him, her alarm in sharp contrast to the elixir of their kiss. “I hear footsteps,” she said in a tight whisper. “Someone’s coming.”

“Who?”

Lois broke into a relieved smile. “It’s Tek.”

Kal gently butted his forehead against hers and sighed with relief. “You looked?” he asked.

“I didn’t need to,” Lois said. “I can hear his limp.”

### Part 30

The sound of someone’s arrival coaxed Eb from the lean-to.

Tek was there, breathing heavily.

“What’s happened?” Kal-El asked him.

“We’re in lockdown.”

“Why?”

“I have no knowledge,” Tek said. “There are many rumours and much speculation, but I quickly left the courtyard and went to my residence because I knew they would hunt for you, and I knew where they would look first.” He stopped to haul in more breath.

“Are Riz and the children all right?” Lady asked.

“Yes,” Tek panted. “Many came — both soldiers and civilians — but soon they realised Kal-El was not there.”

“What’s a lockdown?” Lady asked.

“When the Supreme Ruler commands everyone to remain where they are,” the former Supreme Ruler answered.

“Or?”

“Or risk being shot by the patrolling soldiers.”

Lady’s mouth dropped open. “So why are we going now?”

Tek straightened from his hunched-over stance. “Because if we go now, the only danger will come from the soldiers.”

“Oh,” Lady said, barely audible.

Tek looked to Eb. “Dav is safe,” he assured her. “They are together in the courtyard. As soon as the lockdown is lifted, they’ll be home.”

Eb felt her tension ease. “That is good,” she said.

Tek turned back to Kal-El and Lady. “You must come now,” he said. “We have very little time.”

Kal-El and Lady both faced Eb. “Thank you, Eb,” Lady said. “Thank you so much.”

“I ... I hope ...” Eb stopped, wondering how she could say so much in just a few words. “I hope you can be together.”

“We will never forget what you did for us, Eb,” Kal-El said, his brown eyes lingering in hers for a moment.

“Come now,” Tek insisted. “You must come now.” He went through the door. The alien woman followed. At the door she turned to Eb, her mouth slightly stretched.

“You will have a beautiful baby girl,” she said.

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Within yards of Eb’s door, Tek had settled into an uneven gait that covered the ground with surprising speed. They crossed field after field, slowing only to negotiate the scant fences. Tek led them with single-minded purpose, although his chosen path regularly deviated to avoid the scattered farmhouses.

“Where are we going?” Lois asked.

“Can’t talk,” Tek wheezed. “We have to be there in time.”  
In time for what?

The fields afforded no cover of any sort. Too easily, Lois could imagine vague shapes in the distance — shadowy figures with their weapons trained on Kal. Her eyes searched unceasingly. Her ears strained, always listening for the loud explosion that would be followed by the sickening whirring sound indelibly etched into her memory.

She stayed close to Kal, her body coiled in readiness to jump to his defence.

Eventually they reached a gritty beach similar to the one she had walked with Kal. Tek stopped, crouching in the meagre cover offered by a small sand dune. “We have to go ... via the coast,” he said, sucking in prodigious lungfuls of oxygen. “It’s longer ... but we can’t risk ... going near the town.”

“Where are we going?” Kal asked. He, too, was breathing more heavily than normal.

Lois, however, felt only impatience at the delay.

And frustration at Tek’s inability to answer her throng of questions.

“The cliffs,” Tek replied.

Lois scanned a full circle, checking everything — above ground, below ground, under the ocean, across the waves. She saw no one.

Tek stood. “Come on,” he said, his breath still ragged.

They ran along the rough beach. To her left, Lois noticed the land rising, steadily increasing the drop to the water’s edge. It gave an impression of cover — although they would be plainly visible to anyone standing on top of the cliff. She looked ahead, convinced that Tek was taking them to his hideout in the cliffs. In the distance, the sand butted into a rocky point that protruded into the grey ocean.

By the time they reached it, the last twenty yards of sand were underwater.

The shallow water didn’t slow Tek’s progress. Ahead and to their left, the rugged rock climbed five yards above the water. To

their right lay the ocean. Periodic swells swept in behind them, ramming against their calves before crashing into the rock face and then rebounding onto them.

When the water had reached their knees, Tek stopped. He was heaving so violently, speech didn't seem possible. He pointed forward to the junction where the spur of rock met the cliff face. "Through there ... tunnel, to the cave," he said. "You'll be ... safe there."

Lois could see no gap in the rock — no place which beckoned her forward. "Aren't you coming?" she demanded of Tek.

"No. Tide rising. If I go any further, I won't get out until the water drops." Tek turned back and brushed past Lois and Kal. "Go," he urged. "Go, now."

Lois locked eyes with Kal. They reached tacit agreement, and she clasped two fistfuls of the back of Kal's rough jacket. He waded forward. With each step, the swirling water climbed higher.

They rounded a protruding rock and saw the small, craggy opening behind it. As they watched, a wave sloshed into it, then, half a second later, gushed out like a mini-waterfall. "I think you should go first," Kal said. "The water is rising quickly, and I'm taller than you."

They didn't have any time to argue. Lois trudged through the now-waist-deep water until she reached the cliff face. The cavity was shoulder-height. She felt Kal's hands slide down her leg and hook her foot into the stirrup he formed with interlaced fingers. With lift from him, she heaved herself into the hole.

Lois wriggled forward and then turned to grip Kal's hand as he found unseen footholds and clambered into the space next to her. Ahead, she could see a low tunnel. "I'll go first," she said.

Kal hesitated, racked with indecision. "We have no idea what's ahead." He brushed a lock of damp hair from his forehead. "But the water will come up behind us, making it easy to slip and be swept away by the back flow."

They heard the roar of a wave as it crashed into the rock. It sprayed into the hole, drenching them.

"I'll go first," Lois decided. "You hold my ankle."

He took her ankle with a firm grip. Lois twisted onto her hands and knees and crawled into the dimness.

Progress was slow as they inched along the tunnel. Despite its upward slope, they continued to be regularly doused from behind by the unrelenting waves. The air became mustier, and the light became dimmer. After what seemed like a long time, the tunnel stopped abruptly at a ledge about two feet in height.

"What's wrong?" she heard. Kal's voice echoed, springing at her from multiple directions.

Lois looked straight up, craning her neck. The top of the tunnel rose sharply. "We have to climb up a level," she said. "Get onto the ledge before you stand up or you'll hit your head."

She scrambled onto the ledge and stood.

Before her was an open area about the size of a basketball court. The floor was sandy and dry, the walls jagged rock, and the ceiling high enough that Kal could stand comfortably. The air had a salty tang, but wasn't as stale as she would have expected.

The muted roar of the waves blended with the irregular rhythm of the droplets of water as they loosed from her gown and plopped onto the sand.

Lois felt Kal stand next to her. His hand knocked against her hip, found her hand, and pushed into it.

"Did you know about this?" she asked in a hushed voice. Even at such low volume, her words echoed eerily around the cave.

"No."

"We're safe here. The sand is dry; the water doesn't come this far."

Kal's grip tightened, and his other hand clasped her elbow.

"Lois?"

"Uhm?"

"Can you see?"

"Yes. It's dim, but I can see enough."

"I can't see anything."

She turned to him, her panic rising. "Nothing?"

"No. It's total blackness."

"You're blind?"

He cleared his throat. "I don't think I'm blind ... I think maybe you can just see really well."

"The tunnel got gradually darker?"

"Yes."

"When couldn't you see?"

"About half way along."

Lois turned to him, placed his hands on her hips, and slipped her arms around his neck. "Kal," she said, "that must have been awful. It was unpleasant enough being able to see a little. Why didn't you tell me?"

His hands slipped from her hips to her back as he pulled her closer. "You had enough to worry about," he said gently.

Lois could see the outline of his mouth in the dimness. She buried her fingers into the damp strands of hair on his neck and reached up to kiss him.

His hand left her back and ducked through her hair to land on her neck. His mouth met hers, captured it, and kissed her with rapidly escalating intensity.

She responded, meeting him, as her tongue demanded release to explore his lips. Then his fervour lessened, and she felt him smile, breaking their kiss, but not their close proximity.

"I know what you're thinking," he said very low.

"You do?"

His mouth hovered tantalisingly above hers. "I do."

She slid her tongue along the inside of her lip, tasting the saltiness. "How do you know?"

"Because I was thinking it, too."

Now she was smiling as well. "Tell me what you were thinking."

"I was remembering how you told me that kissing with tongues is further along than just kissing."

"Really? You remember that?"

He grinned at her tone. It really wasn't fair that she could see his face and he could not see hers. Then his humour dissolved, and he looked up as a long breath discharged from deep in his chest. "I remember," he said soberly.

"But this isn't exactly how we planned it, is it?"

"No," he sighed.

Lois dropped her arms from his neck and quickly undid the buttons of his jacket. She pushed it back and slid her hands between his jacket and undershirt until they crossed behind his back. She laid her head on his chest and said, "Just hold me, Kal."

His arms encircled her, and she felt his head lower onto hers. They stood for a long time, content in their togetherness.

It was Kal who spoke first. "I've been thinking."

"About what?"

"Tek obviously comes here. He knew the times of the tide. He probably can't see any better than I can, so -"

"So there must be a light," Lois concluded. She unfolded from him and pushed her hand into his.

At the far end of the cave, a head-high mass of rock protruded from the wall. Lois led Kal across the sandy floor. Behind the rock was a niche. At the end, it narrowed to a tunnel that burrowed further underground.

"Can you see anything?" Kal said.

"There's another tunnel heading away from the ocean," Lois said.

"Anything that may provide light?" Kal asked hopefully.

Lois looked back to the tunnel from which they had come. Above the ledge, hung from a projecting rock, she saw a bulky, glass-covered object that reminded her of the gas lanterns she'd seen in period movies.

"I've found something that may be a light," she told Kal. "It's on the other side of the cave."

"Take me with you," he said.

They crossed the sand. Lois removed the lantern and placed it in Kal's hands. "Does it need matches?" she asked.

"No," Kal said as his fingers moved over the glass. "There should be a switch. It's battery-operated."

Seconds later, the cave flooded with soft, muted light. Kal looked around, blinking rapidly, his smile close to the best thing she'd seen all day.

"Thank you, Lois," he said with deep appreciation.

In the light, she could see things she had missed in the gloom. Kal's jacket and pants hung loosely on him, misshapen by their wetness. "Are you cold?" she asked.

"No. Just very wet."

"Are you hurt?"

"Not really. Just a couple of scratches."

"Where?"

"My knees. And my shoulder banged into a rock."

Lois checked his pants for signs of blood. There was none. She lifted his jacket and slipped it from his body. There was a red stain on the white sleeve of his undershirt. "Aw, Kal," she said. "Can I look?"

Kal pulled up his sleeve to reveal a small gash. "It's nothing to worry about," he said with a comforting smile. "It has stopped bleeding already."

Lois perused the walls and ceiling of the cave, looking for anything else Tek might have left here. She saw nothing but rock and sand. "I'm going into the alcove at the back of the cave to try to wring some of the water from my clothes," he said. "If you want to stay here and do the same, I won't come out until you're ready."

He glanced down at his waterlogged pants. "Good idea."

"You take the light," she said with a smile.

Once behind the rock, Lois stripped the wet, clingy gown from her body. She was about to wring it out when it occurred to her that there might be more effective methods available to someone whose body had acquired a bewildering range of weird abilities since arriving on New Krypton.

She could move abnormally fast. This morning, she had overtaken a bullet.

What if she were to flap her clothing? Very fast?

She raised her arms and was about to do just that when caution overtook her. What if she shredded her gown with some over-enthusiastic flapping?

She lowered the gown, searching for other ideas.

Her mom had liked windy days because the laundry dried quickly.

What if she were to blow on her gown? That should dry it nicely.

Lois took a deep breath and exhaled energetically.

The skirt stiffened to an aberrant rigidity.

Lois poked it experimentally.

It had frozen.

Inexplicably.

Frozen.

Lois stared at it.

Wet, it was wearable.

But frozen?

She would drip for hours as the water melted.

Her composure crumbled. She'd been through too much today to be expected to cope with a stupid, unfashionable, ill-fitting gown that had frozen itself solid just because she'd

breathed on it.

It had just become the embodiment of everything that had gone wrong.

She wanted to punch it and belt it and kick it into next week.

But if she did that, it would probably disintegrate into a pile of rags, just to spite her.

So, she glared at it.

A puff of steam loosed from her gown and wafted into the air.

Before Lois could decide if this were a good thing, a small flame flickered on the sleeve — hesitantly at first — and then it flared to life before her eyes.

Lois flung the gown to the ground and stomped the flame into surrender.

"Lo-is?" she heard from the other side of the rock wall. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Kal," she said airily. "I'm ... ah ... trying something."

"I thought I smelled -"

"No ... no, you didn't." Lois picked up the gown. It now had a burn hole to complement the bullet hole.

The material had a scratchiness that probably reflected its lingering grievance at having been frozen and then rapidly reheated.

But, it was *dry*.

She dried her underwear — being *very* careful not to burn them.

Then she dressed in her warm, dry clothes, feeling more than a dash of smugness.

"Kal?" she called.

"Yes?"

"How's it going?"

"I've wrung them out, but they're still very damp."

"I'll turn my back, Kal," Lois said. "Bring your clothes, and put them at the entrance to the alcove."

She sensed his hesitation. Then she heard his bare feet skim across the sand.

"Leave them there and go out of sight," she said.

"You can turn around," he called a few moments later.

Lois turned and saw the pile of his clothing. She glared at it. Gently.

The steam began to rise. She continued with the dose of heat until the clothes looked dry. "I'll turn around again, Kal," she said. "Come and get your clothes."

She heard him pick them up, heard his small gasp of surprise at their dryness.

She heard him dress, forcing her imagination to neutral. "Are they dry?" she called.

"Yes," he replied. Then, a minute later, "You can come out now."

Lois rounded the rock a little sheepishly. "I guess you have questions," she said.

She saw him scrutinize the black-rimmed hole in her sleeve. "More powers?" he asked with an understanding smile.

She nodded, unsure whether she wanted to laugh or cry.

Kal gathered her into his arms and held her snug against his warm, dry body. "I love you," he said. "We're together. Nothing else matters." He led her back to the main area of the cave, found a relatively smooth portion of wall and helped her to sit down.

"Are you hurt at all?" he asked, as he sat next to her.

"No. How are your legs?"

"A few scratches — nothing serious."

"Do you want me to check them?"

"No."

Silence fell.

Lois took a deep breath and laid her head against Kal's arm. She felt him brush a kiss on her hair, but he said nothing.

The serenity released the dam, and her mind was deluged by a raging flood of memories and questions.

The awful moment when the soldier had raised his rifle and pointed it at Kal.

The sound of the bullet through the air.

The suspenseful urgency of their journey through the deserted fields with Tek.

The beauty of Kal's words to her. The words they had both thought would be his last — spoken in the language only they shared.

Being hit by a bullet ... and suffering only a hole in her gown.

The rupture of Kryptonian decorum that had allowed them the means of escape.

Breath that froze, and eyes that burned.

The existence of the cave. And Tek's easy familiarity with it.

Why did Tek come here?

Za and Ching — together for less than a minute.

What was Za's future as Nor's concubine?

Kal's marriage. Annulled.

Last night, they had fought because Lois couldn't accept Za's place in Kal's life.

Now, only hours later, nothing remained.

Except her love for Kal.

And his love for her.

But what was their future?

To live in a cave?

To have to be on guard every time the tide receded?

Nor ruled New Krypton.

Did the people know just how bad that would be?

Eb seemed to realise.

Nor *must* have destroyed Kal's sample. All those years, he had plotted and waited.

Now he had his dream.

And the people would pay.

When would Tek return to the cave? How long until the next low tide?

Was he the only one who knew they were here?

What if, in Nor-ruled New Krypton, Tek was captured? Or killed?

They had no fresh water. No food.

And Kal?

What was he feeling?

Thinking?

He must feel completely numb.

His mind must be racing even more than hers was.

He must be reeling. From Supreme Ruler to condemned outlaw in just a few hours. He must be shaken to the core.

Lois reached for his hand and lovingly took it in both of hers. "How are you?" she asked gently.

His chest lifted with a deep sigh. "So much happened," he said.

"And so quickly," she said. "You must feel overwhelmed."

"We both do."

She shuffled away enough that she could face him, arranged her gown over her crossed legs, and reclaimed his hand. For a moment, she caressed it, assembling her thoughts. "Kal," she said. "About last night."

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Kal watched Lois's fingers caress his hand. Her touch still had the capacity to mesmerise him. "What about last night?" he asked.

It seemed so long ago.

And so much of it was irrelevant now.

"We need to talk about it," Lois said. "I need to apologise."

He lifted his gaze to her face. "There is no need," he assured her. "I understand."

"You do?"

"Yes. It all fits together."

She contemplated him and then sighed. "Maybe I'm tired, Kal," she said. "Or maybe my brain has just had too much to deal with today, but I can't really see anything that fits together. So I'm just going to say I'm sorry for how I behaved. I said some terrible things, and I know I was unfair, and I know you couldn't have understood why I seemed so angry with you. I'm really sorry, Kal."

"I'm sorry, too," he said. "I should have told you about going to Za *before* I went."

"I was jealous of her," Lois admitted, her eyes sweeping the wall behind him. "And jealousy is such a powerful emotion — but that doesn't excuse what I said."

"You have no need for jealousy."

"No need at all," she said with vehemence. She stared for a moment at their joined hands and then drilled into his eyes. "Not after today."

"Today?"

"It was me you offered your life to protect," Lois said in a small voice. "Not Za. Not any of your concubines. Not your people. I hate that you were forced into a situation so horrible, and I still can't believe what you did ... but ... you showed your heart today ... and ..." A tear formed in the corner of her eye, poised for a moment, and then stippled down her cheek.

Kal reached with his other hand and gently salvaged her runaway tear. "I love you," he said. "I have little ... but everything I have ... every moment I live ... it's all for you."

Twin tears escaped and followed the trail of the first. "I love you too, Kal," she vowed.

"I know," he said with a surety that matched hers. "As we sat here just now, that's all I could think about ... what you said."

"What I said?" she asked. He could see she didn't understand.

"You said that if I died, you wouldn't have a life."

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Lois swallowed around her surprise.

Kal was thinking about *that*?

Not being deposed? Or shot at? Or hunted? Or condemned? Or trapped in a cave?

"You meant it, didn't you," he said. It wasn't a question — more a vocalisation of something he already knew.

She answered anyway. "Yes. I meant it."

Kal pulled in a shuddery breath. "I don't know how to explain what I'm feeling, but whenever I think about it, it amazes me. And then I think about it again, and it amazes me even more."

"Why?" Lois asked. "Why is it so amazing that I would love you?"

His eyebrows drew together as he thought. "You loving me — that was incredible," he said. "It was so new and so unexpected and so wonderful. And I never consciously thought 'Lois loves me because I'm the Supreme Ruler' because I was just so happy and grateful for everything you'd brought to my life that I didn't think too deeply about why."

"But since you said that ... I just can't get it out of my mind, and I realise that on a really deep level, I believed that because I'd never been anything other than the Supreme Ruler for all of my memory, I would never be anything more than the Supreme Ruler ever."

"Kal, you are so much more than a political leader."

"Before you came, I wasn't," he said with heartbreaking honesty. "But then you found *me* and ... it was like you introduced me to 'Kal' the person ... and because he was someone you valued ... someone you cared about ... the person ... not the position ..."

His words wobbled to a stop.

Lois loosed his hand and claimed his face as she swung onto her knees. "I love *you*, Kal," she vowed as she lowered her mouth onto his. She leant onto his thigh and felt his hands spread over

her hips. This time, there was no gentle lead-in. She kissed him with purposeful intent — wanting to inflame him, wanting restoration for both of them. He met her intensity and set every part of her afire.

Then — with a boldness that shocked her — his tongue coasted along her top lip.

Lois groaned ... and abandoned every thought she'd ever had concerning the case for restraint.

Her hands slid to the back of his head, capturing him with her dancing mouth.

His hands slipped lower and rounded to the shape of her bottom.

Her tongue ventured out to meet him ... connected ... and the wave of desire quivered through both of them.

Her hands found the top button of his jacket.

As the button slipped from its hole, she heard a loud cough.

From behind her.

From the other side of the cave.

Lois flung herself off Kal, her breath whipping crazily.

And saw Tek.

And behind him, Riz.

Both grinning — Kryptonian style.

"H ... how ..." Lois faltered.

Tek ditched two large water containers on the sand and stepped forward. "We've come to do your Marriage Ceremony," he announced.

"Our marr ..." Lois gulped.

Riz placed the bags she carried next to the containers. "You said you wanted to get married today. We're a little late, but we had a few disruptions."

"We're getting *married*?" Lois said.

"I assume you still want to," Tek said. "Because that's how it looked from here."

### Part 31

Kal didn't know where to look. He was embarrassed enough that Tek had seen him and Lois. He was mortified that Riz had seen them.

He scrambled to his feet.

He offered Lois his hand and helped her to stand beside him.

He searched for something to say.

Finding nothing, he glanced to Lois. She was watching him, her eyes sparkling with barely contained humour. She released it with an enchanting burble of laughter that dissipated his embarrassment in the wave of her delight. "That would be wonderful," she exclaimed. "Now is the perfect time to be married."

It was?

But Kal had nothing to offer her ... no future ... no security ... no protection ... no means ... nothing.

He turned to Lois, putting his body between her and the others. He turned off his Translator. "Lois," he said. "I have nothing -"

"Do you love me?"

"With everything I am."

"Do you want to marry me?"

"I'm not sure you should want to ma-"

She cut off his words by placing a forefinger on the mouth still tingling from her kisses. "Do you want to marry me?" she repeated — this time slowly and with enticing emphasis on each word.

Of course, he wanted to marry her. He'd wanted to marry her since the moment he'd understood what marriage was supposed to be. "Yes," he said. "Yes."

"Then let's do it."

"Here? Now? In the cave?"

Her laughter simmered with happiness. "I want to marry you,

Kal-El," she said. "Everything will be wonderful just because it's you."

Kal turned on his Translator as he faced Tek and Riz. "Let's do it then," he said, trying to sound casual.

"Oh, good!" Riz said. "Come with me, Lady."

"And you come with me, Sir," Tek said.

"Hold on," Lois said.

Kal felt the scrap of apprehension knock against his heart.

Surely, she couldn't have changed her mind. Not now.

"How did you get in here?" Lois asked Tek and Riz. "I can't believe you came the way we came — not with all that stuff. And you're not even wet."

Tek pointed to the tunnel at the back of the cave.

Lois afforded the tunnel the merest of glances. "It's not a dead-end?"

"No."

"It comes out? Somewhere on New Krypton?"

"Yes."

"Somewhere near the Regal Residence?"

"Yes."

"Enabling you to work in your hidden laboratory and still get to Kal quickly and easily?"

"Except when it is high tide."

Lois's questions stopped abruptly, and her zeal dissolved to a dazzling smile. Kal felt his mouth widen in response, his gaze glued to her. In full flight, she was spectacular.

She wasn't finished yet. "But we had to take the scenic route because we couldn't go close to the Regal Residence in case Nor saw us?" she concluded.

"Nor's dead," Tek said.

Two words — delivered with neither warning nor fanfare.

Two words that bludgeoned through Kal's consciousness. "Dead?" he gulped.

"He's dead?" Lois echoed.

"Yes," Tek said.

"How?" Lois said.

"He was shot."

"Shot?" Kal said.

"Bullet to the head," Tek said. "Right here." He pointed to the space between his eyebrows.

"He's really dead?" Lois asked. "Who shot him?"

"Ching is the Supreme Ruler?" Kal asked.

"When?" Lois asked. "During the lockdown?"

"Are there any indications the South will rise against him?"

Kal said.

"Did they attack the Regal Residence?"

"Was anyone else hurt? Za? Yent?"

"Has Ching taken Za as his wife?"

Tek's head bounced from Kal to Lois and back again as each question fired. He held up his hands. "Much is still unclear," he said. "Ching accepted the mantle and took Za as his wife. He lifted the lockdown once Nor's death was officially confirmed. Ching called a Cabinet Meeting that is expected to go late into the evening."

"The men of the South?" Kal questioned. "Are they rising against him?"

"Not yet."

"So there is still peace?"

"For now, yes," Tek said. "Despite this being the most turbulent day in our history — a day when we had three Supreme Rulers — there is still peace."

Kal expelled his tension on a long breath. His people had escaped Nor. They had a young, inexperienced leader, but they had a chance.

A chance for life.

A chance for peace.

"I'm glad," Lois said. "I'm glad they can be together."

“Who?” Kal asked.

“Za and Ching,” she answered.

“Ching and Za?” Kal said. “They *want* to be together?”

Lois nodded. “I think that is why Ching collaborated with Nor.”

This was almost as staggering as Nor’s death. “They *love* each other?” Kal gasped.

Lois smiled. “I think so,” she said softly.

“The Lady Za has moved into the Regal Residence with Lord Ching,” Riz said in a tone that held both shock and approval.

Lois’s smile surged. “Good,” she said. “A woman in the halls of power. That has to be a step forward.”

“Come on, Sir,” Tek said. “The tide will soon rise, and you have a Marriage Ceremony to prepare for.”

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Fifteen minutes later, Kal was clean, shaved, and dressed in his own clothes. It had been achieved using the remarkable and expansive collection of things — beginning with a razor and finishing with a bottle of Riz’s cologne — that had emanated from Tek’s bag.

From the alcove, Kal could hear the twitter of low voices as Lois and Riz worked through the mysteries contained in Riz’s bag.

Regularly, Lois’s laughter soared above the voices — and every single time, Kal smiled. She sounded so happy.

Kal stood next to Tek as they waited for the ladies to complete their preparations.

His heart was racing, but for the first time today, it was driven by excitement, not fear or apprehension.

“The ladies always need longer to get ready, Sir,” Tek said.

“Tek,” Kal said quietly. “I offered my life.”

“I know, Sir.”

“If ... when it happens, Tek ... would you look after Lois?”

Kal said earnestly. “Would you make sure she is cared for and protected?”

“You know I will do whatever I can.”

“There will be less opposition now — now that Nor is dead.”

Tek paused. “Yes.”

Kal sensed significance in Tek’s hesitation. “Do you think the South will rise?” he questioned anxiously. “Are they inflamed by the investiture of a Northside leader?”

“No, Sir,” Tek said. “The Lady Za is South. That brings balance — and the possibility of a mixed heir.”

“Then what is wrong?”

Tek glanced to where the sounds of preparation still came from behind the rock partition. He leant closer to Kal. “Your Lady has been charged with the murder of Nor.”

\*\*\*

Lois stared as Riz drew the white dress from her bag and held it up for inspection.

“Riz,” Lois breathed.

“Do you like it?” Riz asked.

By Earth’s standards, it was a simple white dress without the benefit of any adornment at all. But it totally eclipsed anything Lois had seen on Krypton. The material was soft, not coarse, the length would reach to mid-calf instead of clogging around her ankles and best of all, its design suggested at least a passing reference to the shape of a woman.

Lois took it from Riz, hardly daring to believe. “I can wear it?” she asked.

“It’s yours,” Riz said.

“Mine?”

“My friend made it for her wedding three years ago. I had never seen a gown like it. But when you said you were getting married, I took her some face cream and bartered with her.”

Lois felt her tears rise. Riz had so little — yet it hadn’t stunted her generous spirit. “Thank you.”

“Kal-El always treated Tek with much respect,” Riz said.

“You gave us your books before you knew us. I am glad for the opportunity to help you both.”

Lois slipped on the dress and turned so Riz could slide home the buttons dotted up her spine.

It didn’t cling to her curves, but it did follow them — enough that it felt like a dress and not a sack. Lois chuckled. Her delight cannoned around the cave and scuttled back to them.

When she turned, Riz eyed her with the closest thing Lois had seen to a smile. “You look very good,” Riz said. “Kal-El has much good fortune.”

“Thank you.”

Riz lifted a piece of stiff paper from her bag and showed it to Lois. It was a drawing of flowers — reds and blues and yellows — cut to the shape of a posy. “You said that on your planet, the woman to be married carries flowers,” Riz said. “We have very few flowers on New Krypton, so Ard drew this for you.”

Lois took the drawing and — she just couldn’t help it — lifted the ‘posy’ to her nose and inhaled. They smelled like paper. Riz delved into her bag and took out a jar of her face cream. She dabbed a spot on the end of her finger and smeared it on the back of the flowers.

“Smell again,” she suggested.

Lois did. The sweet aroma loosened the wad of her tears.

She had never imagined she would be married in a cave wearing a plain white dress with a cardboard cut-out as her bouquet, but she was sure that an elaborate wedding could not have filled her with the joy she felt now.

On Earth, there had been the possibility of the wedding of her dreams, but she could never have found the man of her heart — because he was here, on New Krypton.

Riz dove into her bag again and withdrew the final two objects. “I have pinking for your cheeks,” she said. “And shine for your lips.”

Make-up! Lois’s tears overflowed.

She couldn’t have planned a more perfect wedding.

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“But Lois didn’t -” Kal’s sudden exclamation rang around the cave. He controlled his indignation enough to reduce his voice to a whisper. “She didn’t do *anything*.”

“Nor was facing you when the gunman fired. He was hit to the forehead. Lady was there, Nor died. You didn’t.”

Kal remembered the hole in Lois’s gown. “That doesn’t mean she killed him,” he hissed.

“She’s different,” Tek said quietly. “Many people saw what happened today — *think* they saw what happened. No one really knows, so they speculate.”

“What are they saying?”

“That the alien woman diverted the bullet from you and deliberately aimed it at Nor.”

“She was hit in the back,” Kal said. “That’s hardly deliberate.”

“They are fearful of what else she can do,” Tek said.

“But to *charge* her?”

“Under the Law, there was no choice. It seems certain that her actions directly caused the death of a Supreme Ruler.”

From behind the alcove, Lois’s laughter rose again. It alleviated Kal’s tension and reminded him that he was about to marry the woman he loved. “They’re going to struggle to locate her ten closest relatives,” he said glibly.

“If you marry her, you’ll be the first one,” Tek said.

Kal shrugged. “So?” he said with a lazy grin. “They chase me twice.”

“I didn’t think it would deter you,” Tek said.

“It would take a lot more than a death sentence to stop me marrying her,” Kal said. He heard movement from the alcove and turned. Riz appeared and waited for Lois. Kal leant closer to Tek.

“Don’t tell Lois,” he said under his breath. “Don’t tell her yet. Let her have today.”

Lois came from behind the rock and everything else lost all significance.

She smiled — directly at him — and stripped him of the ability to breathe.

Of all his memories, there was not one that came close to this. Lois — coming to marry him.

She wore a white dress — one he’d never seen before. It hung close to her body, hinting at the shape of her underneath. It was short — he could see her ankles and the curves of her lower legs.

She carried a splash of colour that sat bold against the whiteness of her dress.

Kal’s gaze moved slowly upwards and settled on her face.

Her smile reached inside him ... just as her first smile had.

It warmed him and lifted him and made him feel so incredibly good.

She loved him. He could see it in her face, her smile, her eyes.

He loved her so much.

Around them lurked the dark shadow of uncertainty. But between them was the solid rock of commitment that would not crumble regardless of how the shadow shook their world.

That knowledge steadied him.

Lois stopped when she reached him. She looked up at him and beamed as if seeing him made her feel exactly as he felt when he saw her.

Riz stood behind Lois. Tek stood in front of them.

Kal held out his hands. Lois gave the drawing to Riz and nestled her hands in his.

She smiled at him ... a smile just for him.

Tek cleared his throat. “I, Tek-Or, of the household of Kal-El, certify that this Marriage Ceremony will be legal and binding on the planet of New Krypton,” he said.

Lois’s hands tightened around Kal’s.

Tek looked to him. “Kal-El, of the House of El, out of the House of Ra, do you wish to speak?”

“I do,” Kal said. He heard a small gurgle of laughter escape from Lois and felt a response form in his throat. He gave it breath and let it loose. She heard it — and her laughter gathered momentum from his.

Kal could listen to her and watch her forever, but he needed to pull his thoughts together. He had nothing prepared — nothing beyond a few thoughts he had planned to finalise on the morning of his Marriage Ceremony.

But he didn’t need plans — he just needed to speak from his heart.

And his heart was full. Full of his love for this most amazing of all women.

Kal turned to Tek. “I wish to speak in Lois’s language. Is that all right?”

“Yes,” Tek said.

Kal ran his hand through his hair — slowly enough to buy some time to collect his thoughts. He turned off her Translator too — just because it gave him the opportunity to touch her. He took a deep breath and found her eyes.

“I love you, Lois,” he said steadily. “I imagine men and women on your planet say that to each other when they are about to be married. But for me, it is so much more, because without you, I would still be lost in a world without love.

“Before you, I didn’t know that my life could transform — from slumber to wakefulness ... from rigid routine to freedom. I didn’t know that I could change from a shell to a heart ... from a machine to a man.”

Kal took Lois’s hand to the centre of his chest. “I didn’t know that someone could make me feel so good in here — with her

beautiful smile, and her wonderful laugh, and her loving touch ... and her incredible kisses.” He deliberately ran the tip of his tongue the length of his upper lip.

She laughed ... which was exactly what he’d hoped she would do.

“Lois,” Kal continued. “I promise you I will love you with my whole heart every day of my life. I promise I will love only you. My heart is no longer mine — it is yours ... it will always be yours ... it has been yours since I met you. I didn’t know then, but from the moment you looked at me in my Chambers, there was never going to be anyone else for me.”

She smiled at him.

She looked so happy.

Kal turned on his Translator and drifted his hand through Lois’s hair. “I have finished,” he said to Tek.

“On Lady’s planet the couple swap rings,” Tek said. He opened his hand to reveal two metallic circles. “Take the smaller one, Sir,” he instructed. “Put it on her finger knowing it will be a sign between you that the vows you make today are to be kept for the rest of your lives.”

Kal took the ring and rolled it between his fingers and thumb. He looked at Lois’s hand and had a moment of panic because he didn’t know on which finger he was supposed to place the ring. She saved him by extending her left hand and raising the finger next to the smallest one.

“Lois,” Kal said. “This is new to me, but I love the idea of so openly wearing a symbol of our marriage. Please accept this ring as a sign of my love for you. I hope that every time you look at it, you are reminded that your husband loves you more than anything.”

Kal pushed the ring onto her finger. When he looked up, Lois was crying. They were happy tears.

He knew that with certainty.

He caught her moisture with his fingertip and smiled at her. She smiled through her tears.

“Lady, of the House of El, traveller from a distant planet,”

Tek said. “Do you wish to speak?”

“I do,” Lois said. She lifted her hand and felt through Kal’s hair for the little bump attached to his Translator. She turned it off and grinned at him as her hand moved to the short patch in her own hair.

She took in a breath of massive proportions, though it did nothing to dislodge her smile.

“Kal,” she said on a rush of breath. “Kal.”

He tightened his hold on her hand — the hand that wore the ring he’d put there.

“Kal — I have never met anyone like you,” she said. “I have never known anyone with such disregard for his own happiness, such kind consideration for the needs of others.

“I love your heart. You told me that before I came, you didn’t know who you were — yet your heart could not be silenced. It spoke in the things you did — in protecting people who needed protection, in taking me — a stranger and an alien — into your care, without any thought of personal gain.

“And today ...” Lois’s chin wobbled a little and another tear teetered on her lower eyelash. “Today ... your heart spoke again — so indubitably and with such steadfast courage.”

Lois squeezed his hand before continuing. “You say I have changed you. You have changed me, too, Kal. You have such disarming honesty that I couldn’t help but trust you. You showed me that I don’t need to hide behind a façade of hostility. I feel safe with you.”

She looked around the cave and swallowed down her tears. “I’m trapped in a cave, deep underground on a planet that is not mine. I have none of the things I always believed were necessary for security — no job, no home, no money, no career, no family — and a future so uncertain, we don’t even know if we have a

tomorrow.

“Yet ... I feel *safe*. I feel safe because you’re here, Kal. And that ...” Lois swallowed tremulously. “And that is the greatest gift anyone has ever given me.”

She took Kal’s hand and slipped it about a third of the way along his finger. “Kal,” she said, “I give you this ring as a sign that my love for you will never end. I have never been surer about anything than I am about my love for you.” She pushed the ring the length of his finger. “Except perhaps your love for me.

“You said your heart is mine. I promise to care for it always. I promise to love you and honour you and trust you forever.”

She looked into his eyes with a smile that caused his heart to burst with joy.

Kal thought she had finished, but suddenly her expression changed to a wide grin.

“And since you are the only person who can understand what I’m saying, I’m going to say this. Your body drives me crazy. Your chest is magnificent. Your shoulders ... arrgh ... they are like sculptured arches that beg me to explore every flawless inch. Your arms ... those muscles ... I dream about devouring them. Your -”

“Lois!” Kal said, a little shocked, a lot pleased.

“Would you like me to continue?” she offered, still grinning in a way that made his skin tingle. “I’m a writer — words are my playthings. I’ve barely started — I have a voluminous vocabulary of sublime descriptions — and there’s certainly plenty more deserving of recognition.” She laughed — it was fluffy and light and full of fun — but something about it worked its way inside him and replayed their interrupted kiss in precise detail.

“Later,” Kal said in a strangled voice, wondering exactly how much Tek would conclude from the redness of his face and the tone of Lois’s words.

Her eyebrow lifted, and she shot him a smile he had never seen before. A smile that sizzled off her mouth and burned a trail through his body.

Kal felt the last remnants of his patience dissolve to nothing.

With a grin that said she understood exactly what he was feeling, Lois switched on their Translators, and they both turned to Tek.

He handed Kal a pencil and the official Certificate of Marriage. Kal stepped to the rock wall and signed his name and then handed the pencil to Lois. “You sign it too,” he said gravely.

She did.

Tek signed and then said, “I pronounce that you are legally bound by this official decree.”

Lois stepped up to Kal and enclosed him in the circle of her arms. “Do you want to kiss me?” she asked softly.

He did want to. Desperately. But Tek and Riz were watching. However, they’d already seen worse.

Before he could form a reply, Lois’s mouth had closed in on his, and they were kissing — a sweet kiss with a secret promise of so much more.

Conscious of the presence of Tek and Riz, Kal backed away. Lois turned to Riz, her arms outstretched. “May I?” she asked.

Riz didn’t say anything, so Lois hugged her. Then she turned to Tek and brushed the quickest of embraces across his shoulders.

Kal turned to Tek. Tek’s flattened palm headed towards his chest. Kal caught it. “No,” he said. “Both fists or both palms.”

Tek looked unsure how to respond. “But, Sir,” he said.

“And I’d like you to call me ‘Kal’.”

“That will take some getting used to.”

Kal lifted his hand, palm flat. Tek lifted his. Together, two hands thudded into the respective chest of each man.

“Thank you, Tek,” Kal said solemnly. “Thank you for everything you have done for me. For us.”

“We have to leave now,” Tek said. “When the tide is high, the

inland tunnel floods, making it impassable.”

“When is high tide?” Lois asked.

“Very soon,” Tek said. “Then you will be completely cut off until tomorrow.”

“Who else knows about the tunnel?”

“No one,” Tek said. “In all the years I have worked underground, I have never known anyone, other than my father, to come here. Until today, even my wife did not know of the location of these underground rooms.”

“Do you think we will be safe, even when the water is too low to flood the tunnel?” Kal asked.

“I believe so,” Tek replied. “But I will put across the tripwire as I do when I work down here. If anyone disturbs it, an alarm will sound. You need have no fear of being interrupted.”

“Thank you, Tek,” Lois said. “And thank you both for such a beautiful marriage ceremony.”

“Your marriage is completely legal,” Tek said. “But I won’t register it until ... until the future is clearer.”

Kal nodded.

Riz pointed to one of the bags she had brought. “You have food and drink in there,” she said. “Eb-Ur baked for you.”

They really had thought of everything.

Tek and Riz disappeared into the inland tunnel.

Kal turned to Lois.

His wife.

His only wife.

His wife who deserved a little payback for teasing him during her vows. Kal moved to the bag and peered inside. “Hungry?” he asked nonchalantly. “I’m starving.”

He bent low to investigate the food. Behind him, there was silence. Kal grinned. One to him.

Then Lois spoke. “If you so much as reach into that bag, I swear I’ll strip you buck naked with my eyes and feast on you while you feast on the food.”

One all.

## Part 32

Lois watched the tension ease from the seat of Kal’s pants as he straightened. She grinned, already anticipating the look on his face when he turned. Would it be his smile? Or that adorable slightly embarrassed look — the one he’d had when she’d threatened to catalogue his assets during their wedding ceremony?

When he turned, she saw a combination — although his smile was very definitely in ascendancy.

Kal saw her expression, and his laughter broke so naturally that Lois felt its warmth envelope her heart. He approached her and turned off their translators. “Have you looked before?” he asked.

“Once.”

“Where?”

She placed her hand horizontally on his chest. “From here up,” she said.

His hands disappeared into the pockets of his pants, and he glanced down, trying to control his hovering amusement. “Did you like what you saw?”

“Yes,” she replied. “Very much.”

Kal looked up with a quiet smile of satisfaction. Keeping his hands in his pockets, he leaned forward and nuzzled into her neck. His lips whispered across her skin as he edged slowly up her throat. “Are there rules for this?” he asked.

Lois tilted her head, granting him better access. She flattened her hands on his chest and closed her eyes. “No rules,” she breathed.

When Kal reached the lobe of her ear, one hand slipped from his pocket and brushed aside her hair so that his mouth could explore her neck. “Can I take off your clothes?” The warm breath

that carried his words gently floated across the skin that had been sensitised by his mouth.

Lois's hand drifted up his shoulder and curled around his neck. Her fingertips delved into his hair. Under her palm, she could feel the shifting of his neck muscles as he kissed along the curve of her shoulder. "Yes."

Kal allowed her hair to spill over the skin he had draped with tender kisses. His hand lifted her chin and positioned it perfectly to accommodate his clear intention. The first kiss was little more than a touch. He backed away, and her eyes shot open. His gaze was fixed on her mouth and slowly, inevitably, he inched forward again. His lips parted, and his tongue brushed the length of her lower lip. "Will you take off my clothes?"

Lois's tongue ventured forward to greet Kal's, and she felt him shudder in response. Her hands converged on the top button of his jacket. She loosed it and within seconds, the jacket hung open, granting her access to the soft, clingy material of his undershirt. Her fingertips began their exploration of the sculpted curves of his chest. "Yes."

His hands again dived under her hair and located the buttons of her dress. As he journeyed down her spine, releasing them, his fingers brushed against her bare skin, leaving a trail of spot fires in their wake. "Can I touch anywhere?"

Lois pushed the jacket from his shoulders, and his hands left her body just long enough for her to free his arms. She reached for the back of his shirt and tugged it from his pants. She burrowed under the material and flattened her palms on the plains of his back. "Yes."

Kal slipped his hands inside her dress as his mouth plied hers with escalating intensity. He brushed lightly across her back with the merest fingertip touch. "Does your gown go up or down?" he asked.

"Down," she said, not wanting to lose his mouth for even the short time it would take to lift her dress from her body.

His hands crossed her back, rose to her shoulders, and very slowly slipped down her arms, pushing the dress ahead of his touch. It made no sound as it crumpled to the sand. Kal broke their kiss and stepped back to look at her. His face filled with wonder. "You are beautiful," he said. After a long moment, he stepped to the bag, his eyes not leaving her for a second. He withdrew a large blanket and spread it on the sand.

Kal held out his hand to Lois. "Please come to me," he said. "Please come and be my wife."

\*\*\*

"Lois?"

"Yes, Kal?"

"What we just did. What is that called?"

"Making love."

He smiled. "Yes! I loved you so much ... but now I love you more. We *made* love."

"We did," Lois said with a long, satisfied sigh.

"I need you to teach me a new word."

"What word?"

"A word for how I'm feeling now."

"Happy."

"More than that."

"Amazing."

"More than that."

"Blissful."

"More than that."

"Euphoric."

"More than that."

Lois chuckled. "I don't have words more than that."

Kal gently touched her face. "I'm glad they didn't tell me about this," he said. "I'm glad I found out with you."

"Not telling you was cruel."

"Perhaps they meant it as cruelty, but I wouldn't change

anything."

"They kept you as half-man, half-child," she said darkly.

"It wasn't not knowing that kept me from being whole," he said. "It was not knowing you."

Lois reached up and swept her hand through his hair. It felt so good. Even after all they'd shared, he still appreciated the simple touch of her hand through his hair. "You say the most beautiful things, Kal," she said.

"Are there any other rules about making love?"

"Like what?"

"Like how often you can do it."

"No rules about that at all." Lois smiled him an invitation that reignited his body.

"So we can make love again now?" Kal asked.

Lois smiled. "Oh, yes please," she said.

\*\*\*

Kal wasn't wasting time with sleep.

Lois lay in his arms, her shoulder against his chest, her hip against his stomach, her legs entwined with his inside the blanket they had wrapped around themselves.

He'd never seen anyone asleep before.

Kal had wondered what happened *after*. He'd wondered if clothes would be put back on. But Lois had merely said she was tired, kissed him sleepily, and relaxed into his embrace.

Every time he looked at her, he marvelled at the depths of her trust in him.

He should be thinking ahead. He should be planning. He *had* to find a way to be with Lois for much, much longer than a few days.

He set his thoughts to finding a solution, only to discover that, within moments, his mind had again been lured away by his memories.

The memory of Lois as she walked towards him in the white dress, her face alight with happiness.

The memory of all that had happened between them after Tek and Riz had left the cave.

Every time Kal thought of it, he smiled. Or laughed quietly with just the sheer joy of being with her like this.

In his arms, he held his whole life.

He hadn't known life could be this good.

This precious.

This worth fighting for.

Lois refused to believe their future would be ripped from them.

Kal couldn't see how they could possibly have a future, but something of her belief had lodged inside him and was beginning to grow despite everything that insisted there was no way back.

Even with Nor gone, there was no way Kal could reclaim the right to live.

He had offered his life so Lois could go to Yent. The very thought of that caused Kal's arms to tighten around her. She was his, and he would fight to his last breath to keep her.

He wanted *this*. He wanted to be with Lois. He wanted to be able to lie with her tucked against his body. He wanted to be able to watch her sleep, listen to her breathe, brush back her hair from her face — even if it wasn't actually on her face. He wanted to see her smile and feel her touch. He wanted to share her laughter.

And he wanted it forever. Even a lifetime wouldn't be long enough.

He had watched her fall asleep; watched her face relax and her eyes still. Sometime later, she had moved, and he'd wondered if she would shuffle away from him. She had settled back against him. "Kal," she'd murmured, and he'd seen a glimpse of her smile. Then she'd slept, oblivious to the fact that she had again flooded his heart with love.

Tek would come. They needed to make decisions.

Except to make decisions, they needed options, and Kal

couldn't see even one possible option.

They couldn't live here in the cave. There had been a certain enchantment in being here — isolated and alone — with Lois. Particularly in the time following their Marriage Ceremony when neither of them had thoughts of anything other than being alone.

But they couldn't *live* like this.

They couldn't stay in the cave forever.

It had occurred to Kal that physically, Lois could be safe. She had survived being shot, and she had survived being swept into the ocean. But what if her sudden invulnerability was temporary? He wasn't willing to risk her life on the assumption it was permanent.

And she could be hurt because he was definitely not invulnerable. He would never forget her face as he had stood against the wall. He had to save her from that.

So they couldn't leave.

And they couldn't stay.

\*\*\*

"We should ask Tek to bring us beverage," Lois said as she ate one of Eb's puddings.

Kal smiled, although his thoughts didn't budge from his reverie. He'd told himself he needed to plan while they ate — needed to at least formulate questions to ask Tek. Yet his mind stubbornly refused to relinquish his reminiscence of being with Lois when she awoke — hungry. And not for food. "No hot water," he said absently.

"I could fix that," she said.

He shifted his attention from Lois of an hour ago to Lois of this moment. "How *did* you dry the clothes?" he asked.

"By glaring at them."

"Ouch! Unless I want to be fried, I should definitely try to keep you happy."

"Oh, you'll keep me very happy," she drawled.

The wave of happiness rolled through him again. He'd known the intimacy would be sublime. What he hadn't known was that it would immediately infiltrate their wider relationship with a simmering heat that turned something as ordinary as eating breakfast together into a sensual delight.

Not that anything with Lois was ordinary.

He was tempted to close the half a yard between them, take the pudding from her hand, and begin again. Most incredible of all was the knowledge that if he did, she would welcome him.

But it was already past when Kal had expected Tek would arrive.

And, tripwire or not, there was no way Kal wanted to risk being caught like that.

Before they had finished the puddings, a soft buzzing sound echoed through the cave. Kal hastily pulled on a few extra pieces of clothing and helped Lois do likewise. They stood together as Tek emerged from behind the rock partition, carrying a bag and another container of water.

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Lois watched Kal spring forward. "What's happening?" he asked Tek.

Tek put down the container and offered Lois the bag. "Thank you, Tek," she said as she peeked into the bag. "Did Eb cook for us again?"

"Yes."

"What's happening?" Kal repeated as they sat on the sand.

Tek took a long breath. "New Krypton has changed so much in a day," he said in the tone of one who acknowledges that what he is about to recount will be met with disbelief.

"How?" Lois asked.

"At this stage, it is mostly speculation," Tek said. "But these are things we have not even contemplated before because we believed they were not possible."

"Such as?"

"There is talk the Lady Za will join the Cabinet," Tek said.

"Yent is old, and Nor's son is a still a child so he cannot take his place for many years. Ching is young." He glanced to Kal. "Your family's seat has been abolished."

Kal must have known this would happen, but Lois saw the impact of Tek's words hit her husband. She moved closer to him, put her arm across his back and hooked her hand on his shoulder.

"Two great Kryptonian houses," Kal said sadly. "El and Ra — abolished."

Lois leant her head against his arm, wanting to console him. "I think the Lady Za is exactly what this planet needs," she said.

If her comment surprised Kal, he didn't show it. "There has never even been the thought of a woman on the Cabinet before," he said.

"There is also talk of a Register for Women," Tek said.

Lois straightened as her hackles rose. "Why?"

"The Law that women can be taken at seventeen as concubines is Canon Law that cannot be changed," Tek said.

"But that is a terrib—" Lois blurted.

Kal put his hand on her knee and calmed her with his smile. "How would the Register work?" he asked.

"A woman could register one week before her seventeenth birthday."

"Meaning she can be taken a week earlier?" Lois asked sourly.

"No," Tek said. "Meaning that if she is on the Register, she is unavailable to be taken as a concubine."

"So women could no longer be forced to be concubines?"

Lois said eagerly.

"It will take time," Tek cautioned. "But for girls like Dom, there is the possibility of a better future."

"That is good news," Lois said.

"Only one law has been changed already," Tek said.

"Which one?" Kal asked.

"The Supreme Ruler can no longer take any woman he wants. Marriage is to be honoured by all."

Lois met Kal's eyes with a knowing look. "Does Ching have concubines?" she asked.

"Two," Tek said.

"Bet he won't have them for long," she muttered.

Kal leant forward, and Lois saw the solemnity in his expression. "Is there any speculation about the law of Offering Your Life?" he said.

Tek looked at them unflinchingly, but Lois could guess his reply before he'd begun to speak. "With one retraction, the entire Law of Offering Your Life becomes meaningless," he said quietly. "As a Law, it won't function unless people know it means certain death. That is the very thing that keeps it as the absolute last resort."

Lois felt the shroud of hopelessness settle on her. She met Kal's eyes. "What are we going to do?" she asked quietly.

They both turned to Tek.

He said nothing for a long moment. His silence answered more effectively than a long-winded explanation. There was no going back.

"What choices do we have?" Kal asked eventually.

Still, Tek said nothing.

"We could stay here, couldn't we?" Lois said. "Just until things settle down."

"People have become increasingly suspicious of my movements," Tek said. "For years, I have come down here, and no one seemed to notice or care. I was just a man with a limp on walking."

"Now, they are suspicious that you know my whereabouts," Kal surmised.

"Yes," Tek agreed. "I believe it is only a matter of time until someone tracks me. Nor had support — he was the great hope of

those wanting Southern rule. They see you as responsible for his downfall, and they want revenge.”

Tek glanced to Kal, but if there was significance in his look, Lois couldn't discern it. “Staying here is not a long-term solution?” she said.

“It isn't even a short-term solution,” Tek said. “I have multiple ways to access these tunnels, and I am careful to use different entrances and exits, but every time I come here, we risk detection.”

“Could we move into a remote farmhouse?” Lois suggested. “Maybe if we disguised ourselves as Mr and Mrs Average, no one would recognise us.”

“You would last less than a day,” Tek said direly.

“You know this planet as well as anyone,” Kal said to Tek. “Are you sure there is no remote location? Another island maybe?”

“I am sure,” Tek said. “My father circumnavigated this planet from space before our arrival. He mapped it and studied it in detail. There is only one land mass.”

Lois could feel the desperation clawing up her throat. “There has to be a way out of this,” she said. “Maybe we should just move into a house in town and make an unequivocal statement that we are not scared of them and we think the stupid rule should be changed. If they try to kill Kal, they are going to have to do it through me.”

Kal's hand tightened on her knee. “Lois,” he said quietly. “You would never have a moment's peace. Every time we're apart, you would be anxious. You would worry that I wouldn't come home, you would worry that someone had found me. That is no way to live.”

He didn't go on to say that as the former Supreme Ruler, he would do untold damage if he were seen to be flouting the law. It would bring instability and probably precipitate the very war he had spent every day of his memory trying to avoid. Understanding this, Lois conceded with a small smile. “You're right,” she said. “But there *is* a liveable long-term hiding place on this planet, and we need to find it.”

“How do you know?” Kal asked.

“Because they hid you for thirteen years.”

Kal looked to Tek. “Do you know where?”

“No.”

“But it was your father who took care of Kal,” Lois said. “Your father was the one who protected him and kept Nor from killing him years ago.”

“My father was given jurisdiction over the ... over Kal ... by his parents before we left Krypt-”

“If your father could hide Kal for thirteen years — hide him well enough that Nor and Ked couldn't find him — we can hide for years as well.” Lois looked expectantly at Tek.

“On New Krypton, knowledge brings much danger,” Tek said. “The people thought Kal had died in the Transition. My father told me Kal-El was safe and would claim the mantle on the day he achieved sixteen years, but he would not tell me anything else.”

“You *must* have asked,” Lois insisted.

“He refused to answer.”

Lois nearly erupted with exasperation. “And you accepted that?” she demanded. “You just accepted that?”

“He had good reasons.”

“So when Kal just *appeared*, what happened?”

“One day, my father told me he had to begin to prepare Kal-El to be the Supreme Ruler. He said it was imperative that New Krypton have a Supreme Ruler who was not just a puppet of Ked. He said Jor-El had trusted him to equip his son for the task.”

“Did you go with him?” Lois said. “Did you see where Kal had been kept all that time?”

“No,” Tek said. “My father told me he would be with Kal-El

for an extended period. He told me to look after Ard and if anyone asked where he was to say there was much that needed to be done for the forthcoming Investiture.”

“That's all?” Lois blurted. “What did people say when he disappeared, then appeared with Kal-El?”

“Most believed Kal-El was dead,” Tek said. “They believed my father was nothing more than a crazy scientist who had lost the ability to discern reality from fantasy.”

“But then he appeared with Kal?”

“Yes. He walked through the town very early one morning with Kal. They both went into the Regal Residence. My father didn't emerge for nearly two days as Ked and Yent questioned him extensively. When he came out, I asked questions, but my father still refused to give me any information. He said the appearance of Kal-El would destabilise our planet in the short-term, but if we were to have a future, it was the only way. He said that the less I knew, the better it would be for me.”

“Kal *walked* through the town?” Lois asked, sure that must have caused a furor, even on New Krypton.

Tek nodded. “That was the first time I saw him — other than when he was a baby on Krypton. He walked with my father -”

Lois swung to Kal. “You said your first memory was waking up with Ked and Yent.”

“It is.”

“You don't remember walking through the town?” Lois said. “You don't remember arriving at the Regal Residence? You don't remember Kip preparing you in the ways of your father?”

“No,” Kal said. “The only knowledge I have of my father came from the globe and from reading the history he wrote.”

Lois turned to Tek. “What did your father say about waking Kal from his hiatus?”

“He didn't say anything,” Tek said. “A few days later, he was dead.”

Lois looked into Tek's eyes and knew he didn't believe his father's death had been an accident. She didn't either. But going over that would not help now. “You have no idea where Kal could have been kept?”

“No.”

“Have you looked?”

“Yes.”

“Under here? Everywhere under here?”

“Yes. I can find nothing from Kal's early years.”

Lois felt herself slam into the dead end. She knew the feeling — it had happened often enough on Earth when she was chasing down a story. The feeling was even less pleasant now because this time, it involved the man she loved.

There were only two people who'd been there during Kal's lost years; one was dead, and the other had no memory of it. “Then *what* are we going to do?” Lois demanded.

Neither of the men had an answer, so they both just stared at her.

After a silence that threatened to suck the oxygen from the cave, Kal cleared his throat. “Are the water-drilling operations continuing?” he asked.

Lois felt her frustration well up. She didn't want to talk about water. She stood abruptly. “I need to stretch my legs,” she said.

Without a backward glance, she strode through the alcove and into the tunnel. Half a dozen steps later, her pace slowed as curiosity replaced her aggravation.

Tek had said this tunnel terminated near the Regal Residence. Za lived there now.

Za had made an agreement with Kal. In the courtyard, she'd said she didn't know about the plan to depose Kal. She probably didn't consider Kal to be an enemy. Would she be willing to use whatever influence she had with Ching to speak for a retraction of Kal's offer?

Surely two women together could find a solution — a way to

overturn the death sentence hanging over Kal.

It was worth a try. Neither Kal nor Tek had any answers.

Ahead the tunnel veered to the right. Lois hurried along it, already planning what she would say to Za.

From behind her, she heard Kal's voice resounding through the caves. "Lois! Lois!"

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Kal sprinted along the tunnel, barely noticing the occasional scratch or bruise inflicted when he misjudged the protrusion of a rock. He had to get to Lois before she got to the end of the tunnel. His pounding heart mingled with the drum-roll echoes of his footsteps on the hard sand.

Then he saw her — coming back to him — and relief coursed through him. "Lois!"

The distance between them closed, and he looked at her, panting, as she looked at him. Was that irritation he saw on her face? Or merely a question?

"Where are you going?" Kal asked breathlessly.

"I'm going to see Za," she said.

He wanted to grip her shoulders. Instead, he plunged his hands into his pockets. "Why?" he demanded.

"I thought that, being two women, we could work out something reasonable."

"Lois! You -" Kal stopped and shook his head. "You can't go up there," he said desperately.

"Yes, I can, Kal," she insisted. "It isn't me they want and anyway, I won't let anyone see me. I'll just talk to Za and get back here without anyone following me."

Kal dragged his hand through his hair. "You can't, Lois."

"I have to, Kal."

"You can't, Lois."

"We have no other ideas," she said. "We sat and looked at each other and decided there was no possible solution to this. We have to do something."

"You can't go up there," Kal said.

Lois stepped closer, and her face softened. "You're worried for me," she said. "And I appreciate it, but Tek says this tunnel comes up near the Regal Residence. He has got in and out safely for years; I can do it once."

"Tek hadn't been charged with murder."

"What?" Lois's shriek ricocheted around the tunnel with jangling dissonance.

Kal lightly soothed his hand down her arm. "They've charged you with the murder of Nor," he said. "They believe you deliberately turned the bullet from me and onto him."

"When did you know this?"

Kal felt his last residue of good feeling drain away. He hadn't told her. He had kept information from Lois again. "Tek told me yesterday while we were waiting for you to complete your preparations."

Lois pushed back her hair and hooked it behind her ear. "I've been charged with murder?" she asked quietly.

She wasn't shouting — yet. Kal nodded.

"The sentence is execution?"

Kal nodded again.

"Are you mad at me?" she asked.

He had not been expecting that question. "I'm hoping you aren't mad at me."

"Because you didn't tell me about the murder charge?"

"Yes."

"I was about to run off to meet Za without telling you." She grinned at him, making everything all right. "Which we've already established is a bad thing to do."

Kal smiled with relief and leant forward to kiss her forehead. "If either of us has any other ideas, we should share them before acting on them."

Lois sighed. "That is *not* the way Lois Lane worked."

Kal could see that she wasn't as aggrieved as her words implied. "Perhaps marriage changes things?" he suggested hopefully.

Amusement glinted in her eyes. "Marriage certainly changes one thing," she said with a suggestive tweak of her eyebrow.

He wanted to back her into the rock wall, press his body against hers, and kiss her until they were both senseless.

"How long until Tek comes looking for us?" she mused.

Surely, she couldn't be thinking now ... here ... was possible? "Can you look?"

With a wide grin, Lois stared into the wall behind him.

She gasped. "Is Tek coming?" Kal asked.

Lois shook her head. "No," she said. "But I found something else."

"What?"

"It's round and silvery."

"What is it?"

She shuffled along the tunnel, moving her head up and down as if trying to get a better view of something. "My vision is blotchy — there are patches I can't see."

"What can you see?"

"A vehicle of some sort. Maybe a boat."

"A boat?"

She moved again and her mouth gaped. "It's not a boat," she said quietly.

"Then what is it?"

"A spaceship."

### Part 33

"A spaceship?" Kal asked.

Lois sidestepped along the tunnel, trying to work around the gaps in her vision. It reminded her of looking into the ground when she been at the top of the cliff searching for Tek.

"What can you see?" Kal said.

"It's hard to work out what I'm seeing because sometimes I'm not sure of the depth of things and how far my vision has penetrated."

It wasn't a great explanation, but Kal seemed to understand. "But there's definitely a spaceship?"

"Yes. It's in a cave."

"We need to tell Tek," Kal said.

"Don't you think he'd already know?"

Kal considered. "I don't know."

"If he does know about it, why hasn't he already told us?"

"I trust Tek," Kal said. "I think we should tell him what you've found."

"We'd have to tell him more than what I found," Lois said. "We'd have to tell him how I found it."

Kal brushed back her hair and when his hand came to rest, his fingers and thumb gently kneaded reassurance into the tightness across her shoulders. "I trust Tek totally," he said quietly.

Lois delayed her response while she allowed Kal's touch to bring release to her tension. "I do, too," she said eventually. "Let's go." With a quick smile of appreciation, she turned and headed back to the cave.

As they rounded the rock, Tek stood. "Are you both all right?" he asked.

"Yes," Kal said. He looked expectantly at Lois.

"I found a spaceship," she announced.

The colour drained from Tek's face. "You found *what*?"

"I found a spaceship," Lois said.

Tek stared at Lois, his mouth hanging. "You ... found ... a spaceship? Down here?"

Lois nodded. "Yes." She pointed behind her. "That way."

Tek lightly touched her arm to regain her attention. "Did you find your life pod?" he asked. "The one that brought you here?"

Lois considered for a moment. "No," she said. "No. It's

different to mine.”

“Are you sure?” Tek asked.

“Completely sure.”

Tek looked as if he didn’t dare believe Lois’s announcement. He took a staggering step away from her. “I didn’t think he’d done it,” he murmured. “All these years, I didn’t think it was possible.”

“Didn’t do what, Tek?” Kal asked quietly.

Tek turned back to them, his face grey with shock. “I found complete plans for the construction of a spacecraft; a personal spacecraft — smaller and significantly more advanced than the ones we used in coming to New Krypton.”

“Your father’s plans?” Kal guessed.

“Yes. But I could find no evidence that he’d ever progressed beyond the planning stage.” Tek looked around the cave as if he half expected the spaceship to appear. “I wanted to build it — the plans include every possible detail — but I just didn’t have the materials.”

“Didn’t your father tell you about it?” Lois asked.

“No,” Tek said, still dazed.

“Is it possible someone else built it?”

When Tek didn’t answer, Kal said, “It is unlikely. The most brilliant of our other scientists did not have the abilities of Kip-Or.”

Lois faced Tek. “If you couldn’t build it because you didn’t have the materials, how could your father have built it?”

“He would have brought the materials from Krypton,” Tek answered. “Advancements such as this were possible there.” His gaze focussed on Lois. “I brought your life pod here, hoping I could adapt it, or use some parts -”

“You have my life pod?” Lois exclaimed.

“Yes.”

She felt the tiny burst of possibility. “Could it get us back to Earth?” she asked. “Could it? Could it get Kal and me to Earth?”

“No,” Tek said.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s completely unsuitable,” Tek said. “And we have no means to launch it or navigate it. And it is too -”

“Can’t you build something to launch it?”

“And it is too small for two of you,” Tek said. “It is a life pod, not a spacecraft.”

The fragile glimmer of Lois’s hope spluttered and died. Kal put his arm around her and drew her into the comfort of his support.

“I searched,” Tek said. “After my father’s death — after I’d found his plans, I searched everywhere under here. I went along every tunnel; I went places we had never explored before. I discovered new caves and new tunnels, but I never found the spacecraft or any evidence of its existence.” He looked at Lois. “Will you take me to it?”

Lois glanced to Kal. Silently, they agreed — they had to trust Tek. “I can see . . . well, I don’t really know how to tell you this, and I don’t know why or how it happens, but sometimes I can see things other people can’t see, and that is how I found your father’s spaceship.”

A layer of confusion settled over Tek’s shock.

“Lois can see through solid objects,” Kal explained calmly.

“Solid?” Tek said slowly. “Like rock?”

Kal nodded. “Yes. Lois saw the spaceship. We know where it is, but we’re still going to have to work out how to access it.”

“She saw it *through* the rock?”

“Yes.”

There was silence as Tek contemplated that information. Kal tightened his hold on Lois.

“Is that why the bullet didn’t kill you?” Tek asked Lois.

“Probably,” she admitted. “I was never like this on Earth — it’s only been happening only since I’ve been here.”

Tek picked up a small stone and handed it to Lois. “Can you draw what you saw?” he asked.

Lois knelt on the sand. She had drawn only a few lines when she heard Tek gasp.

“That’s it!” he said.

“It is?” Lois stared dubiously at the result of her efforts.

“Yes,” Tek said. Again, he looked around the cave. “Where is it?”

“Follow me.” Lois stood and led them into the inland tunnel. Two minutes later, she stopped and pointed to her left. “It’s in there,” she said.

They all stared at the rock wall.

“It’s behind the lab,” Tek said.

He brushed past Lois and advanced further into the tunnel. Kal and Lois followed.

When the tunnel veered right, Tek leant his shoulder into the wall to the left. It gave easily — swinging open on slick hinges. He went in and reached automatically for a lamp.

The cave filled with bright light.

There were three long benches — sheets of thick metal on squat pillars of rock. Various tools and equipment — all unfamiliar to Lois — were strewn on the benches and around the cave.

Tek darted to a large chest, his limp barely noticeable in his haste. He opened it and withdrew a large roll of multiple sheets of paper. He cleared a portion of the closest bench and spread the papers before him.

“That’s it!” Lois said as the top sheet unfurled. “That’s what I saw.”

Tek anchored both edges of the scroll with nearby objects. He stared for a long moment, absently rubbing his chin. “He did it,” he muttered. “He didn’t just plan it, he built it.”

“Your father was an amazing man,” Lois said with sincere respect.

Tek continued to survey the plans.

Kal edged closer to Lois. “Can you still see it?” he asked quietly.

Lois nodded and pointed to the back wall of the cave. “It’s behind there,” she said. “I can’t see it totally; there are still gaps in my vision, but from different places, I’ve seen enough to know it is the spaceship from those plans.”

“Can you look around that cave for another entrance?”

“There is sand and rock and water,” Lois said. “But it gets jumbled together because I’m still learning how to interpret the depth of things.”

Kal gave her an encouraging smile. “You did a great job finding it,” he said.

“Do you think it could possibly mean anything for us?” she asked in a quiet voice.

Kal hesitated before answering. Lois knew he was trying to be honest without ruthlessly destroying her hope. “I don’t know,” he said.

Tek looked up from the plans. “Where is it?” he said.

“Behind that wall,” Lois replied.

Tek went along the wall, periodically pushing at different places. Kal moved closer to Lois. “Can you see anything in the wall?” he asked. “Anything that could be a hidden doorway?”

Lois scanned the length of the wall. “No,” she said.

“Nothing.”

Tek got to the end of the wall and turned.

“How do you think your father got it in there?” Lois asked.

He took a map and unfolded it on top of the plans of the spaceship. “It must have been at a super low tide.” He pointed to a place on the map. “This is a shelf of rock; the cavern below it is flooded except when the water is extremely low.”

“But the cavern rises as it goes deeper into the cliff, so the end of it stays dry?” Kal said.

“It’s possible,” Tek said. “This is the room we’re in now.” He indicated another place on the map. “The other side of that wall could be the far end of the chamber that opens under the shelf.”

Lois followed Tek’s hand on the map. “So that cave is inaccessible most of the time?”

“Yes. Unless it’s a super low tide.”

“When will that happen next?” Kal asked.

“First light tomorrow,” Tek said as his eyes skimmed the map.

Lois faced Tek across the bench. “If your father got the spaceship in, we can get it out,” she declared.

Tek looked up then. “We probably can get it out,” he agreed. “But then what? If we leave it on the beach, the salt water will rise and flood into it. If we manage to haul it to higher ground, I would have to guard it at all times to stop people damaging it. It would also bring a lot of attention to this end of the continent — which increases the chance of someone finding you.”

Lois’s disappointment clunked inside her. “So it can’t help us at all?” she asked dejectedly.

“The next super low tide will last a little over an hour,” Tek said. “I will go in and examine the spacecraft. I can try to determine if it is finished and if there is any possibility of it functioning.” He looked at Kal. “But Sir, you should realise this is wonderful for me — to find evidence of my father’s achievement is amazing — but it probably doesn’t mean anything for you and your situation.”

“When’s the next super low tide?” Lois asked. “After the one tomorrow?”

“Six weeks.”

“Six weeks?” Lois groaned.

“Our planet has four moons, irregularly set,” Tek said. “When they align in a particular way, we get a super low tide. Sometimes the length of time between nadirs is weeks, sometimes months, depending on the orbits of the moons.”

“You’ll only have an hour with the spaceship?” Lois said.

“And then you’ll have to leave it for six weeks?”

“Yes.” Tek glanced at his watch. “I have to go now.”

“The tide is rising?” Kal guessed.

“No,” Tek said. “I have been summoned to appear before Lord Ching and Lady Za.”

Lois felt her heart plummet with trepidation. “They want to question you regarding our whereabouts?”

“Probably.”

“What will you tell them?” Lois asked.

“I’ll lie,” Tek said. “But I doubt they’ll believe me.”

“Don’t put yourself or your family in danger for us,” Kal said.

Without answering, Tek turned and walked from the cave.

As the echoes of his footsteps died away, Lois slowly scoured the back wall.

“What can you see?” Kal asked.

She took three steps backwards and pointed to a section near the centre. “That bit looks a little thinner than the rest.”

Before Kal could respond, Lois sprang forward and crashed into the wall. The rock gave way, and she stumbled as the dust rose around her. She felt Kal’s grasp her shoulders.

“Lois?” he said frantically.

She clambered to her feet. “We’re through,” she said triumphantly.

Kal’s hands checked her shoulder and arms, his face full of concern. “Are you hurt?” he asked.

She grinned up at him. “Not at all. I didn’t feel a thing.”

He brushed the dust from her hair and swept her nose and cheeks. “Any chance you could warn me next time?” he asked. “Before you ram yourself into rock walls?”

Her grin widened. “Only if you promise not to try to stop me.”

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Lois and Kal cleared away the rock debris and crawled through the hole into the adjoining cave.

The spaceship was about the size of a family car, cylindrical in shape, with two short stubby wings and a tapered nose. Together they circled it.

“Kip made this,” Kal said with quiet reverence.

“But why keep it a secret?” Lois said. “A secret even from Tek?”

“Maybe it was his means of escape if Ked or Nor ever took over New Krypton,” Kal suggested.

Lois leaned forward and peered in. “No,” she said. “It has only two seats. Kip wouldn’t plan to leave behind Ard or Tek.”

“Unless he planned to send them and stay here himself.”

“Send them where?” Lois asked in a hushed voice.

She saw Kal comprehend the question within her question. He took her hand. “I ... Lois ... ”

“I know,” she said. “It’s at least ten years old; it is possibly unfinished; it’s probably never been tested; we don’t know how to operate it and even if we did, the chances of finding a habitable planet are a billion to one.”

“That’s a lot of odds stacked against us.”

“No more than when you stood against that wall,” she reminded him. The image of him invaded her mind, and Lois wished she hadn’t said it. She turned away from the spaceship, wanting to dispel her thoughts.

The cave was low and long and shaped like an enclosed horseshoe. Across the narrow end, the wall changed in both colour and texture. “I don’t think that’s rock,” she said as she approached it.

Kal took hold of her arm. “No charging it,” he said firmly — although she could hear the smile in his tone.

She turned to him with a matching smile. “Any objections to me *looking* through it?”

“None at all,” Kal said. He stepped up to it and ran his fingers along it. “It looks like packed sand on this side, but there could be rocks hidden in it.”

Lois looked through the sandy wall. “It is sand,” she confirmed. “It’s about a foot thick. On the other side, there’s what looks like a beach, with water in the distance.”

“Tek talked about a super low tide,” Kal said. “Perhaps a super high tide deposited this sand here. That would explain how Tek could come into the cavern and not realise there was anything behind the sand bank.”

“Which means Kip found the perfect hiding place for his spaceship.”

“So good, not even Tek could find it.”

“But why was it such a secret?” Lois said.

Kal raised his hands. “I don’t know.”

“What do you think Ching and Za want with Tek?” Lois asked.

“I don’t know that, either,” Kal said. “But it worries me.”

His disquiet melted her heart. Her husband needed ... Lois knew *exactly* what he needed. It wouldn’t fix their situation, but they couldn’t actually do anything about that now, so ... Why not? Lois went to the fractured wall and rolled a couple of rocks back into the hole.

Then she turned to Kal, who had watched her without giving utterance to the clear questions on his face. With no forewarning, Lois stripped the white dress from her body and jauntily flicked it to the ground, glad now that she hadn’t bothered with underwear when she’d hastily dressed earlier.

The questions on Kal’s face morphed into a lascivious grin. “I figure there are no rules about ‘where’ either,” he said.

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The very pleasant aura of Kal’s afterglow was abruptly shattered when Lois lurched from him. “*That’s* where he hid

you,” she exclaimed.

Kal opened his eyes, but his mind wasn't so easily revived. “Huh?”

“Kip!” Lois said excitedly. “He *didn't* hide you on *this* planet. He hid you somewhere else. That's why no one could ever find you. And he used that ...” She pointed at the spaceship. “... to get you there and bring you back.”

Kal glanced to the spaceship, his brain struggling to get beyond neutral. “You think Kip took me somewhere and left me there?”

“Yes,” Lois insisted. “Somewhere out of Nor's reach. Somewhere you'd be safe.”

“And then just came back fifteen years later and got me?” Kal said, not quite managing to cover his scepticism.

“Yes!”

Kal grinned — a lazy, supremely-satisfied grin. “Lois,” he said. “Maybe ... right now ... your wonderful, intelligent, very vigorous mind ... is just a little fuzzy. I know mine is.”

She sat up, slipped on her gown, retrieved Kal's pants, and tossed them to him. “If Kip *did* take you, there has to be some evidence. Something that says you were in this spaceship.”

Kal accepted his fate and pulled on his pants. “Like what?”

“A hair or something.” Lois slowly scanned the spaceship, using her enhanced vision. “Anything that says you were in here.”

Kal surveyed the outside of the spaceship. Its side was a smooth silvery metal. The canopy was a clear, thick plastic material that was fastened with a series of clips. He began to unfasten them. Below the canopy, the curved side was interrupted by an oval-shaped concave section about ten inches across and six inches high. Kal placed his hand into the hollow, wondering if it had something to do with aerodynamics.

He freed the last clip and lifted the canopy. Inside the capsule were two seats, side-by-side. Kal heard Lois's quick intake of breath and looked up at her. “What?” he said. “You've found a hair?”

“No,” she said elatedly. “But I did find your stolen globe.”

His globe? “Kip took it?” Kal said in disbelief. “Kip wouldn't have taken it.”

Lois reached into the spaceship, slid back a panel, and emerged with a globe. She held it up for Kal to see.

Disappointment swirled through him. “That's not it,” he said. “My globe was bigger than that.”

“Oh.” Lois rolled it carefully between her hands, fighting her disappointment. “Is it anything like your globe?”

“It is very similar,” Kal said. “But it is not my globe.”

“What happened when your globe spoke to you?” she said. “Did you hold it? Did it make a sound? Like an alarm or something?”

“I picked it up and it began to glow ... and then I heard a voice ... a voice that identified itself as my father, Jor-El.”

Lois held the globe towards him. “Take it, Kal,” she said.

He hesitated, looking from her face to her hands and back again.

Then slowly, Kal reached for the globe.

### Part 34

The globe was heavier than Kal had expected. It easily sat within his palm, sleek and cold on his skin.

He stared at it. In the silence, he heard the slow release of Lois's captured breath.

They waited, hardly daring to breathe.

The globe did nothing.

It didn't glow; it didn't move; it didn't speak.

Kal gently closed his fingers around it, willing it to life, urging it to divulge any secrets it harboured.

Each long minute stretched into the next.

Eventually, Kal swung his eyes to Lois and managed a small smile. “Maybe my globe was programmed to activate on the day I achieved sixteen years,” he said. “If this was scheduled to speak, there is every chance we have missed it.”

Lois slipped her arms around his neck, and her closeness soothed the sharp edge of his disappointment. “Perhaps Tek will be able to tell us something when he comes back and can examine the spaceship,” she said.

“Maybe,” Kal said, trying to sound more hopeful than he felt.

Lois took the globe from him, carefully wrapped it in his discarded jacket, and placed it on the sandy ground. When she stood, she trailed her fingers over his bare chest. “Do you think it will be a little embarrassing when I'm an old married woman and can still be brought to my knees by the sight of this chest?”

Kal laughed as her words and her touch worked their magic and nullified his discouragement. “Lois,” he said. “You couldn't be brought to your knees by a bullet.”

She grinned. “Ah, but that bullet had nowhere near the power of this chest.”

The last dregs of his admittedly feeble restraint buckled, and Kal took exuberant possession of her mouth as he clutched her against his body.

She kissed him for only a short moment before backing away. “Tek's coming,” she said in answer to the question he shot her.

“Arggh,” Kal said. “That man's timing ...”

She kissed his chest. “Put on your shirt,” she advised. “I'll move those rocks.”

\*\*\*

Kal waited with Lois in Tek's laboratory, hoping he didn't look too much like a man interrupted. He looked at his wife and, noticing her dishevelled dark hair, reached over and tried to neaten it for her. “How's my hair?” he asked.

“Great,” she replied.

“But does it look like I've ... you've just devoured me?”

“Pretty much,” she said with a totally unconcerned grin.

Kal quickly tried to tidy it, but Lois thwarted his attempt. “Leave it,” she said. “It looks cute.”

There was no time to put forth his case that ‘cute’ was not quite the public image he aspired to. Tek walked in and thankfully, his attention was immediately captured by the hole in the wall. “You got through?” he asked.

Lois nodded casually — as if holes appearing in solid rock warranted no explanation. Tek didn't take the time to ask questions. He dropped low and crawled into the cave that contained his father's spaceship.

By the time Kal had followed Lois through the hole, Tek was staring at the spaceship, awe scribed upon his face. He circled it; his hand lifted as if he wanted to touch it, but couldn't quite bring himself to do it. Then he became aware of Lois and Kal's presence. “I can't believe this,” he said unsteadily.

“Is it finished?” Lois asked. “Does it work? Could it -”

Kal placed a steadying hand on Lois's arm. “How about we leave Tek alone with the spaceship?” he suggested. “He'll give us the answers as soon as he has them.”

Lois nodded scant agreement, although Kal could see she was still bursting with questions. “What happened when you met with Ching and Za?” she asked. “What did you tell them?”

Tek dragged his eyes from the spaceship. “Nothing,” he replied.

“Have they overturned Kal's offer of his life?” she said. “No.”

“What about the murder charge?” Kal asked. “Have they retracted that?”

Tek gently stroked the spaceship. “No.”

“Did Ching and Za ask if you know where we are?”

Tek wrested his attention from the spaceship. “Not yet.”

“Then what?”

The spaceship forgotten for a moment, Tek's gaze settled on Kal. "They offered my family a seat on the Cabinet."

"You'd be a Regal Noble," Kal said.

Tek looked uncomfortable. "Your seat was abolished."

Kal stepped forward. "Tek, that is wonderful," he said. "I can't think of anyone I would rather take my seat."

"You mean that?"

"Of course," Kal assured him. "You are a fine man — dedicated to the future unity of our people."

"Ching said it was time my father's contribution to our colonisation of New Krypton was recognised," Tek said.

"That's good," Kal said. "I'm very pleased."

"I haven't taken it yet."

"Why not?"

"I wasn't sure it would sit well with you."

"Take it, Tek," Kal urged. "For the sake of the Kryptonian people, take it."

"I have to discuss it with Riz first." Tek's attention reverted back to his father's spaceship.

Lois picked up Kal's jacket and carefully unrolled it, revealing the globe.

"Tek," Kal said. "Do you know anything about this?"

Lois offered Tek the globe.

He took it and studied it. "I have seen others like this," he said. "Usually, they have messages encrypted in them — either verbal or visual."

"What causes them to activate?" Kal asked.

"Whatever prompt was written into the program," Tek replied. "It could be a time or a place or a person. Where did you get this?"

"It was in the spaceship," Lois said.

"It hasn't said anything?"

"No."

Tek offered it back to Lois. "It could be something," he said. "It could be nothing at all. I want to look at the spacecraft first." He uncovered a section at the back of the craft and peered in.

Lois took the globe. "We'll wait for you in the other cave," she said.

\*\*\*

"What happens now?" Lois asked Kal as they reached the main cave. She searched through the bag Tek had brought earlier. There was more food, but no beverage.

She *needed* coffee.

"I don't know," Kal said. He dragged his hand through his hair. "I know I keep saying that, and I wish I had something more to offer you, but I simply don't know what we should do now."

"Maybe I *should* go and see Za."

"No, Lois. It's too dangerous."

"I just pushed through solid rock, Kal," she reminded him. "Even if they see me, I doubt they can hurt me."

"That's true," Kal conceded. "But if they see you coming from the tunnel and they remember seeing Tek in that vicinity, the link is established, and it becomes a simple matter to hold him until they eventually starve us out."

"What are we going to do?" Lois asked. She felt like she'd asked the question a million times, and still there was no answer.

Kal slid his back down the wall and landed on the sand with a soft thud. He put a forearm on each raised knee and stared at his hands. "We can't leave," he said disconsolately. "And the longer we stay, the greater the risk to Tek and his family."

Lois heard the wretched defeat in Kal's voice and pushed aside her own feelings of despair. She sat next to him and put her hand on his arm. "Are you upset about your family losing your seat on the Cabinet?" she asked.

Kal shook his head, though his eyes didn't waver from his hands. "I knew the moment I was deposed that our seat had gone forever. Without doubt, I failed my forefathers, but as I have no

heir, ultimately it mattered little."

"You didn't fail anyone," Lois said staunchly.

He turned to face her. "I didn't provide the heir," Kal said disconsolately. "The heir that would have kept Nor from the mantle. He tricked me so easily, and I was too naive to even realise."

"Kal, you did amazingly well with the limited knowledge you had," she said.

"I never even considered Ching would work against me," Kal lamented. "I knew Nor was not to be trusted, but Ching ..."

Lois could see the wounds of betrayal on his face. "If you made any mistake at all, it was in believing the best of people — believing they were like you."

"I didn't think about it much ... about whether I was a good leader or not, but I knew that everything I did was meant to make this planet a better place for everyone."

"And you *did*," Lois insisted. "New Krypton is a poorer place because you are here and not in the Regal Residence."

"I could have done so much more."

"Like what?"

"I could have instituted the Register for Women," Kal said. "I could have involved Za. I could have been more forceful in correcting the things I knew were wrong."

Lois could hear the sting of recrimination in his voice. "You did many wonderful things," she said. "You saved Ard and Mo and Jib. You always did what you thought was best for the people. You were incorruptible, and that is an amazing quality in one with such absolute power."

"Ching has achieved as much in a day as I -"

Lois took his face and turned it to her. "No," she said firmly as she dove deep into his troubled eyes. "No. Ching has so many advantages that you didn't have. He has memories to guide him, and he has Za beside him. He doesn't have Nor there to oppose him, and he has the solid foundation of stability that you built."

"At the very least, I should have insisted that Tek be accepted as a Scientist."

"And what would have happened if you'd done that?"

"Nor would have opposed it and ... maybe the Cabinet would have split."

"And then you would have risked Civil War?"

"That was always my fear," Kal said. "But maybe I was too worried about that. Maybe I allowed it to paralyse me when I should have acted."

"You kept this planet from Civil War for over a decade," Lois said. "Without you, there would be no New Krypton for Ching to lead now."

"I hope he can be the Supreme Ruler the people need. I hope he can lead them in peace."

"If he does, it will be because of you," Lois said. "It will be because you showed the people that those of the north and those of the south could live together in peace. You showed them that a leader could rule with justice. If they pursue unity now, it will be because you showed them the way."

Kal let out a long breath. "I love you," he said.

"You know what I'm saying is the truth, don't you?"

Kal waited a long moment before replying. "Honestly?" he said. "I hardly know what I think anymore. Everything I thought I knew — about life, about leadership, about people, about justice, about loyalty, about what is possible, about the past, about the future — everything has been shaken."

"I know it seems like that," Lois said. "But don't make the mistake of looking at this selectively. You've been hurt by Ching's treachery — but you've experienced Tek's unshakeable loyalty. You were discouraged from interacting with your people — yet Eb took us into her house and lied for us. You fought for justice for all — Nor is dead. He got what he deserved — maybe not in the way we would have chosen, but for this planet to have

a future, he needed to be stopped permanently.”

Kal studied her. “Do you really believe it is possible that I was kept somewhere else?”

“Yes, I do,” Lois said. “It is the only possibility that makes any sense.”

“Knowing I’d been asleep for years and years ... that always made me feel ... incomplete ... hollow ... lacking,” Kal said.

“But I told no one, and over the years I became accustomed to it. But being on another planet ... totally alone ... that’s ...”

“Horrible,” Lois said. She caressed his face. “But don’t forget that you will never be alone again.”

“I love you,” Kal said. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too,” she said. “And I’m sure the spaceship is somehow connected with your past. Kip could not have guarded you all the time. Nor and his father would have looked for opportunities to kill you. Kip had you well hidden, and I don’t believe it was on this planet.” She took his hand in hers. “When you saw the spaceship, was there a feeling of connection? Was there anything that felt familiar?”

Kal shook his head. “Nothing.”

“What about being with Kip? Do you remember learning from him? Walking through the town to the Regal Residence?”

“Sorry,” Kal said. “I don’t remember any of it.”

Lois drew her hand lovingly through his hair. “We *will* find answers,” she assured him. “We will find answers to the past and we will find solutions to the future.”

She kissed him, and then leant forward onto his chest, feeling his arms close around her. They waited in silence until Lois heard Tek’s approaching footsteps. She straightened with a smile for her husband. “Tek’s coming,” she said. Tek rounded the rocks, crossed the cave, and sat next to them. “Well?” Lois said.

“It is the spacecraft of the plans — down to the very last detail. It is complete and as far as I can ascertain, functional.”

“It flies?” Lois asked.

“I believe so.”

Lois felt her hope rise. “I got to New Krypton from Earth,” she said. “There has to be a way back. Now we have a spaceship, Kal and I can go to Earth.”

“No, you can’t.”

“What do you mean, we can’t?” Lois exclaimed.

Tek hesitated. “The spacecraft has a navigational system that is incredibly complex and includes layers of default systems that make it almost impossible to infiltrate.”

“Meaning?” Kal asked.

“Meaning my father programmed it to a very specific destination and was meticulous in safeguarding that programming.”

“The spacecraft will only go to one place?” Kal said. “It can’t be navigated elsewhere?”

“That is correct,” Tek said.

“Can’t you reprogram it?” Lois asked impatiently.

“If I had months to decipher the code, it may be possible,” Tek said. “But we don’t have months.”

“Why would your father do that?” Lois asked, unsuccessfully trying to curb her frustration.

“My guess is that he built it for a specific purpose and wanted to ensure that if anyone did find it, they couldn’t use it for any other purpose.” Tek looked at his watch. “I have five minutes before the tunnel floods,” he said. “You have less than a day to decide whether you wish to stay on New Krypton or whether you are willing to risk the spacecraft.”

The full implications of Tek’s words hit Lois, causing her heart to thrash and her breath to flounder. “You mean you think we should climb into that spaceship, not having the slightest knowledge of where, if anywhere, it is heading and just let it take us? You don’t even know if it will actually fly, let alone find a planet, and even if it does find a planet, you can’t guarantee that

the planet your father picked from the universe is a planet that will actually support our lives, nor do you know if that planet is teeming with savages even more intent on killing us than the people of New Krypton.”

“If you stay here, you will die,” Tek said. “Kal will die,” he amended. “You will be captured, and any means possible will be used to contain you — drugs, confinement, starvation, torture.”

“But the spaceship was programmed over ten years ago,” Lois objected. “This planet ... wherever it is ... is no longer where it was then. It simply isn’t possible its navigation system could work.”

“This spacecraft has a Specific Navigation System,” Tek said. “Which is?”

“It is navigated by final destination, not by route. It searches out certain very specific characteristics of a place and -”

“What if that place has changed, or blown up, or imploded, or -”

“I didn’t say it was without risk,” Tek said quietly.

Lois shook her head. “We need to go to Ching and Za and work out something reasonable,” she said.

“That will not happen,” Tek said.

“Why?” she cried. “They’re human ... Kryptonian ... whatever ... aren’t they? How can they condone the murder of a totally innocent man? How can they -”

“It is rumoured that Ching and Za have attempted to find a legal way to allow you both to continue to live,” Tek said. “But the people are scared by what they witnessed when Nor died. They don’t know what you can do. They fear you are the first of a large army coming to invade our planet. Ching knows that if he allows you to live, there will almost certainly be a mutiny against his leadership, and New Krypton will again be in the throes of war.”

“If our situation was satisfactorily dealt with,” Kal said, “do you think the people would willingly live in peace under the leadership of Ching and Za?”

“The threat of Civil War will always be there,” Tek said gravely. “But it is my belief that most of the people would not take up arms against fellow Kryptonians if given the choice of peace.”

Kal looked at Lois, and her fear erupted as she read his thoughts. “No, Kal!” she screamed. “No. We cannot get into a spaceship of questionable reliability, and let it take us to an unknown destination.”

“We have no choice, Lois,” Kal said. “If we stay, we will die. If we stay and fight death, many other people will die, and there will be no future for any of us.”

“I am not a threat,” Lois said as angry, indignant tears began to spill down her cheeks. “I didn’t plan to come here. I am not part of an invasion.”

“I know,” Kal said soothingly. “But in saving me from the soldier’s bullet, you showed a part of yourself that has scared the people.”

“Not all people,” she argued. “Not Tek and Riz. Not Eb. If they can realise I am not a danger, others can, too.”

“Lois, I don’t think we have any other options.”

“Kal, have you thought about what happens in the very unlikely chance that we do actually land somewhere safely?”

“No.”

“Not every planet has Kal-El leading it,” she said ominously.

“I think we have to go,” Kal said.

“I think it would be suicide,” Lois countered.

Kal took her hand. “I understand, Lois,” he said with such gentle compassion that her tears exploded. “You have already lost one home. You were just beginning to think of New Krypton as a home, and now you will lose that, too. I do understand, my love.”

Lois clung to his hand, unable to speak.

“When we were married,” Kal continued, “you said you felt

safe because we were together. I am still here. We are still together.”

Lois took a deep, deep breath that sucked the essence of his love into her heart and calmed her raging fear.

She had Kal.

He didn't speak again but simply waited for her, giving her the time she needed. Lois forced a wobbly smile. "I'll be all right," she murmured.

Kal squeezed her hand and then turned to Tek. "How much confidence do you have that the spacecraft will still function? What are the chances it could land safely?"

"I am stunned by the brilliance of my father's design," Tek said. "But ten years have passed, and I cannot pretend it would be anything other than a great risk."

"More or less of a risk than staying here?" Lois asked.

"If you stay here, Kal will die," Tek said with certainty. "This ... me bringing you food ... this cannot continue. Eb was visited by soldiers today. My house is being constantly watched. The noose is closing, and I believe your safety here cannot extend beyond a day. Two at the most."

"And if they find us?" Lois said. "What will happen?"

"Kal will be shot immediately," Tek said. "He offered his life. Nothing can change that."

Kal looked down. "But that will be nothing compared with what might happen to you," he said tightly.

Tek stood. "I have to go. The super low tide is at first light tomorrow — that is our only chance to launch the spacecraft. I will be back before then, but I cannot guarantee when. You need to decide what you wish to do."

He turned and limped across the cave.

"Tek?" Kal said.

"Yes?"

"Did you attempt to start the engine of the spaceship?"

"No. If the engine is fired, the craft launches thirty seconds later."

"Automatically?" Lois said weakly.

"Automatically."

Tek rounded the rock and disappeared from their view.

### Part 35

Lois looked at Kal.

Kal looked at Lois.

"What now?" she asked.

"I thought it was hard when we had no choices," Kal said.

"Now we have one, and it's no easier."

"We have to go, don't we?" Lois asked in a voice that grated with grim acceptance.

"Yes, we do," Kal said quietly.

Lois's huge breath lifted her shoulders, but she managed a smile for Kal. "Then let's prepare the best way we can by thinking this through logically," she proposed.

He thanked her with his smile. "Good idea."

She pulled her knees high and hugged them. "Let's assume Nor or his father would have killed you when you were young if they could."

"Then Ked would have been the Supreme Ruler ten years ago when I didn't take the mantle at the end of Cabinet Rule."

"Let's further assume that Kip realised the danger to you," Lois said. "Kip was south, as were Nor and Ked. It is reasonable Kip would know them well."

"And Kip also knew that a leader of mixed blood was crucial to a peaceful future."

"So, he needed to protect you."

"Putting me in hiatus gave me physical protection."

"Yes, but only if Nor had no way to bring you out of hiatus."

"I don't know if he did or not."

"So let's say Kip had very legitimate concerns for your

safety," Lois said. "He might not have known exactly the resources available to Ked and Nor, but Kip probably knew that they had no compunction in using anything to gain power." Lois paused to consolidate her thoughts. "So Kip needed somewhere Nor could never find you."

"But another *planet*?"

"We know Kip searched for planets — he found New Krypton. Is it such a stretch that he found other planets as well? We know he had amazing expertise in space travel."

"OK," Kal said. "Assuming he found a planet. What then? He just left me there? Alone?"

"I've thought about that," Lois said. "When you woke up, you could talk, you could think, you could walk, you could eat?"

"Yes."

"Kal, I don't understand how you would know how to walk if all you'd ever done was sleep," Lois said. "Surely it would have taken time to learn how to balance, how to put one foot in front of the other?"

"I didn't think about it," Kal admitted forlornly. "My mind was filled with the need to prepare to become the Supreme Ruler."

"If you didn't think about something like walking — it had to be because you'd already walked before."

"Lois ... " Kal stopped with a shrug. "This blows my mind."

"What if they didn't put you in hiatus?" Lois said. "What if Kip took you from Krypton and put you somewhere safe? What if you grew up there, learning to walk and communicate and eat and do all the other things children learn to do? What if then, when the time of cabinet rule was drawing to a close, Kip went in the spaceship and brought you back here?"

"That would mean Ked lied to me. Right from the very first day."

"What about Yent? Did he ever say anything about the time when you were missing?"

"Yent was there when I first awoke, but I barely saw him after that. He prefers minimal involvement in the matters of state."

"If Ked told him you'd been in hiatus, would Yent have accepted that without too many questions?"

"That is likely," Kal rolled back his head and leant it against the rock. "I believed them," he said. "I believed everything they told me."

"Not everything," Lois said. "You always knew what was right and what was wrong, and they couldn't shake that."

Kal unleashed a big breath. "It never occurred to me ... "

"They must have done something to wipe your memory of the previous years."

Kal's face had gone a grey shade of bewilderment. "You think it's possible I *did* have a childhood?" he said.

"Maybe," Lois said, her heart aching at his bewilderment.

"You really think I could have had fifteen years of life — and not one memory of it?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe I did know my parents?"

"I don't know," Lois said. "Maybe Kip sent them with you. Maybe that's who looked after you."

Kal shook his head. "My father would never abandon his people."

"What if he loved someone more than his people?" Lois challenged. "What if he loved his son more than his people?"

Kal slowly shook his head. "No," he said. "If my father had survived the Transition, he would have been here, on New Krypton. He would have protected me here, not asked Kip to do it."

"You know what?" Lois said. "That doesn't make sense either. They went to such great lengths to protect you, but they were not able to save your parents."

"I was only told they didn't survive. I was never given any details of their deaths."

"I don't have all the answers," Lois admitted. "But I think the balance of probabilities is more in favour of Kip taking you to another planet than you sleeping away fifteen years and waking up as a functioning young man."

"Where?" Kal said. "Where could I have been all those years?"

"Wherever the spaceship is programmed to go."

Kal started to speak, but no words came.

Lois's imagination roared to life. "What if you had a life there?" she said. "What if Kip left you there as a young child and came back to get you years later? That means the place is liveable and someone had to look after you."

"Maybe ... I had a ... a family?"

"If you were very young when Kip left you, I doubt you could have looked after yourself."

There were long muted moments as Kal considered what she said. When he turned to Lois, his face was serious. "Lois?"

She sensed the gravity inherent in his tone. "Yes?"

"If this happens — if we get into Kip's spaceship, and we arrive safely on a planet ... a planet I have been to before ... where people know me ... where maybe I have a family ... and even a life ... although I don't remember it ..."

"If all that happened, it would be wonderful for you," Lois said. "I don't want to give you false hope, but that would be just the most amazing way out of this."

"You would still be a stranger — an alien."

"I know, but ..." She stopped as possibilities blossomed in her mind. What if Kal *did* have a life to return to? A complete life that included family? And friends? Responsibilities? Expectations? How would she fit into that life? After all this time, how would he adapt to being someone else?

Kal took her hand and rubbed across the metallic circle they had used as a wedding ring. "I want you to know this, Lois," he said. "I want you to never doubt that whatever happens, whatever I may remember, whatever life I may have to go back to ... nothing ... *nothing* will ever be as important as you. Our marriage stands — regardless of anything else."

"Kal ... " Lois stopped as a terrible thought assailed her. "Kal, what if you're already married?"

Her husband shook his head. "No, Lois, no," he said with so much conviction, his voice shook. "If we do happen to arrive somewhere I've been before, there is not one part of that life which will be as important as you. Everything I said at our Marriage Ceremony, everything I promised you — it stands. As long as I live, it stands and nothing changes that. Not the past, not the planet, nothing." He regarded her with burning intensity. "Nothing," he reiterated. "Are we clear?"

Lois blinked away her tears. "We're clear," she said.

"Please never doubt it, Lois," he pleaded. "Please never doubt me."

"I won't," she promised.

Kal kissed her, and his arms closed around her, nestling her into the expanse of his chest. When he lifted his head, he looked around the cave. "We should pack," he said.

"There was so much we should have asked Tek," Lois said. "About the practicalities. About how long the journey could take. About food. Oxygen. Water."

"Tek will have all that worked out," Kal said. "His father was the greatest space exploration Scientist we have ever known. I'm confident that Kip taught his son well."

"I hope so," Lois said.

They washed their clothes, and Lois dried them. She wore her white dress and packed her burnt, bullet-damaged gown. She added her wedding bouquet, and tried not to care that her bag was pitifully empty. "Are you going to take the globe?" she asked

Kal.

"I'm undecided," he said. "If the spaceship does have some relevance to me, it could be that the globe does, too. But it's more likely it is something Kip left for Tek. I'll ask Tek when he gets here."

They put their two bags near the alcove. They looked as desolate as Lois felt.

Kal held out his hand to her. "Will you do something for me, please?" he asked.

She wasn't sure she could refuse him anything. "Of course."

Kal brushed back her hair. "We're in love, and we have each other," he said. "We have tonight, and no one can take it from us. Let's make it special."

Lois fought against the storm of fear inside her. Was Kal trying to find the best way to say that tonight would be their last night? Was that what he really believed? She didn't know, but she saw him awaiting her answer and knew she couldn't fail him. She nodded with a tremulous smile.

"You once told me about love on your planet," Kal said. "You told me about how a woman would meet a man and fall in love and then they would choose to get married."

"Yes."

"What would they do before they got married?" he asked.

"What would they do when they still didn't know if they wanted to marry or not?"

"They would spend time together. Get to know each other. Do fun things together."

"A date," Kal said. "You said it was called a date."

"Yes, it is."

"And after they are married? Do they still do go on dates together?"

"Certainly."

"Then that's what I want to do tonight," Kal declared. "I want to take my wife on a date."

Lois loved him for his idea, but she just couldn't see how they could possibly manage a date. They were stuck in a cave. They had the food from Tek's bag, but it was hardly anything worthy of a memorable evening. They had a blanket and a lot of sand.

But Kal was looking at her with such hopeful expectation that Lois couldn't disappoint him. "All right," she agreed with a smile. "We have a date."

Kal smiled, captivating her as he looked so young and so happy and so carefree that suddenly nothing mattered except being with him. "What would you like to do, my love?" he asked.

Lois glanced around the dimly lit cave, grappling for ideas, but finding none.

"There must be something," Kal persisted. "There must be something we can do. Maybe something you enjoyed doing when you were on your planet."

"We could begin by dining," she said. "Many dates begin in a restaurant."

Kal offered her his hand. Lois crooked his elbow and slipped her arm into it. He led her around the cave. "It's a beautiful evening," he said. "And I have a beautiful woman to share it with."

Lois smiled at him and allowed herself to dream that one day this could be possible. She closed her eyes and imagined a balmy Metropolis evening. The steady hum of the cars and the regular blare of their horns blended with snatches of passing conversation. She inhaled deeply and almost convinced herself she could smell the tangy aroma of mustard from a hot dog stand. From deep within her came a giggle of delight.

"What, my love?" Kal asked. "Share your memories with me."

"We are in Metropolis," she said. "It is a busy city that is never still. We're just two of the many people who have come out

to enjoy the warmth of a late summer evening. The heat of the day has gone, but it still emanates from the buildings. As we walk, we can hear the cars and the bustling life around us ... but it is merely background because all my thoughts are centred on you."

"Where are we going?"

"Martello's," she said. "The food is Italian — creamy pastas and smooth, delicious coffee."

Kal stopped and spread the blanket on the sand. He took her hand and helped her sit down. When he had settled across from her, he said, "What is first, my love?"

"Drinks," she said.

Kal reached into the bag and brought out two glasses.

"Only one is needed," Lois said. "We share."

He returned one of the glasses and filled the other with blue. "What are we drinking?"

"French Champagne," Lois said. She took the glass from Kal and very gently blew on it. "It is drunk chilled. It has bubbles that tickle your nose when you lift it to your mouth."

"What does it taste like?"

"This one has a crispy sweetness. It is the colour of dry sand." She sipped from the glass and then offered it to Kal.

He took it and drank a little. When he'd lowered the glass, he brushed the underside of his nose.

Lois laughed. "You felt the bubbles?" she asked delightedly.

"Of course," Kal said with a smile. "What comes next?"

"The main course," Lois said. "We have ordered fettuccine with chicken and mushrooms and creamy garlic sauce."

Kal brought a plate from the bag and put the spaghetti-like slice on it. He took a stick and deftly severed a piece of slice and loaded it. He held it towards Lois. "Chicken, my love?" he said.

She took it directly from his stick and closed her eyes.

"Uhm," she said. "It is perfectly cooked — still juicy and so very tender it almost melts on your tongue." Lois took the stick from him and loaded it. She guided the food into Kal's open mouth.

"Good?" she questioned.

He smiled appreciatively. "I've never tasted better."

They continued feeding each other until the slice was gone. "Now, for the fun part," Lois said.

Kal saw her smile and answered with one of his own. "More fun than the bubbly drink?" he asked.

She nodded. "There is a food that is the perfect pinnacle of every good meal."

"What food is that?"

Lois took two pale puddings from the bag. "Chocolate," she said. "Chocolate," she repeated, because just saying the word felt like a warm stream of melted goodness across her tongue.

"Chocolate," Kal repeated.

"It is deep brown in colour," Lois told him. "Sweet and soft, and it tastes so good, it massages your tongue and just makes you feel so glad to be alive." She broke off a piece from the pudding. As she placed it in Kal's mouth, his lips closed over her fingers, trapping them. His eyes found hers and caused a feeling in her that far surpassed the sensation of chocolate.

His perfectly shaped mouth released her fingers and evolved into a smile. "I like chocolate," he said in husky tones that infused his words with infinite layers of meaning.

"I do, too."

He held a portion of pudding for her and watched while she ate it. "If I kiss you now, will I taste the chocolate on your lips?" he asked.

Lois nodded.

Kal leant forward and placed an exquisite touch to her mouth. When he withdrew, he licked his lips. "I tasted the chocolate," he said. "It is delicious ... but it doesn't taste as good as you do."

"Thank you for a wonderful meal," Lois said.

"Would you like coffee?"

Lois thought for a moment. "No," she said. "I want to savour the chocolate for a little longer."

"What would you like to do now?"

Lois searched through her memories of dates, quickly discarding most of them as unworthy. What could they do? Then, it came to her. She knew exactly what she wanted to do now. "Do you know what music is, Kal?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No."

"And you wouldn't know what dancing is?"

"No."

Lois laughed with effervescent anticipation. "Well, I'm going to teach you," she promised him.

"Now?"

"Yes. Now."

Kal helped her to stand. They moved away from the blanket and into the centre of the cave. Lois took his hands and positioned them — one on her waist and one in her hand. She put her other hand on his shoulder. "I'm going to sing a song," she said. "And we are going to move to the music. It is called dancing."

"What do I have to do?"

"Follow me until you get the idea. We move together, but remember, it is supposed to be fun, so relax. Listen to the music, and it will guide you."

He didn't fully understand, but he waited for her without comment.

"Give me a moment to think this through," Lois said. She needed the right song — something not too hard to sing. Something not too energetic because she was going to have to sing and dance. Something slow and sensuous. Something about love. It had to be something about love.

Her mind filled with memories of Perry. The visual image came so quickly and struck so forcefully that her breath caught in her throat.

"Are you all right, Lois?" Kal asked. His hand on her waist eased her closer.

She managed a smile. "Yes," she said. "I just remembered someone."

"Someone special to you?"

"Someone very special," she said. "Perry. He was the Editor-in-Chief at the newspaper where I worked. He's a great fan of Elvis."

"Elvis?"

Lois nodded, sure that she had the perfect song. "Elvis was a singer."

"So Perry and Elvis sing together?" Kal asked.

Lois laughed. "Only in Perry's dreams," she said. She took a deep breath and tried to locate the opening note. Immediately, she knew this was going to be a lot harder than she had realised. Kal took his hand from her waist and lifted her chin. "You can do it," he said. "Tonight is about the good times. Please don't be sad."

In her mind, Lois saw Perry again, this time with his wise, understated smile and kindly eyes. She took another deep breath and began to sing.

*"Love me tender;*

*Love me sweet."*

They moved tentatively through a few steps.

"Is there more of the music?" Kal asked.

"Yes," Lois said. "Are you ready to dance again?"

Kal nodded.

*"Love me tender;*

*Love me sweet,*

*Never let me go.*

*You have made my life complete,*

*And I love you so."*

Lois stopped singing, and the final note died away. Their feet stalled, although their hands stayed in place. "That was beautiful,

Lois,” Kal said.

She smiled. “There is more to the song,” she said. “Do you want to keep going?”

“Yes.”

*“Love me tender,*

*Love me true,*

*All my dreams fulfilled.*

*For my darling I love you,*

*And I always will.”*

Each line, each step had coaxed their bodies closer. Lois stopped singing, but the slow shuffle of their dance continued.

“Please sing to me again,” Kal asked quietly.

*“Love me tender,*

*Love me long,*

*Take me to your heart.*

*For it’s there that I belong,*

*And we’ll never part.”*

Lois felt Kal’s smile where his cheek rested against her temple. She didn’t wait for him to ask for more.

*“Love me tender,*

*Love me dear,*

*Tell me you are mine.*

*I’ll be yours through all the years,*

*Til the end of time.”*

“I’m yours, Lois,” Kal said, in a low, husky voice that even in a crowded room would have been just for her. “I’m yours, always — until the end of time.”

“I’m yours too, Kal,” she vowed. “Always, I will be yours.”

“Will you sing it again?” he asked. “Please sing it to me again.”

Lois sang.

And they danced, barefoot, through the sand.

When she had finished, Kal kissed her, very softly, very sweetly. “What happens now?” he asked.

“Often a couple realises that dancing is very nice, but they’d really rather be alone,” Lois said.

“So they leave?”

“Sometimes.”

“And?”

“And go home.”

Kal smiled and touched the back of his finger to the tip of her nose. “If I’d taken you on a date, if I’d eaten chocolate with you and danced with you, I know exactly what I would want to do when we got home.”

Lois took his face in her hands. “Luckily, we don’t have far to go,” she said.

Kal bent low and swept her into his arms.

He carried her to their blanket, and they made sweet, unhurried love long into the night.

### Part 36

Lois woke suddenly, her heart already pounding.

In her dream, she’d been in a noisy bar. On the stage, Perry had been singing with Elvis. Then, in the middle of a particularly boisterous version of ‘Hound Dog,’ Perry had pointed directly at her and screamed, “You ain’t no friend of mine.”

Then Lois had smelled coffee.

Her eyes flew open and rammed into Tek’s startled gaze. He said something Lois didn’t understand and scurried away.

She sank back into the warmth of Kal’s arms as steady rhythm returned to her heart. She rolled over and faced him. He hadn’t moved. She kissed his cheek. “Kal?” she said. “Kal, you need to wake up.”

His eyes didn’t open, but his smile flickered, and his hand trailed slowly down her bare back.

“Kal,” she whispered. “Tek’s here. You need to wake up. We need to get dressed.”

His eyes opened, but his grin didn’t fade. “Tek’s here?”

“Yes.”

“I was hoping you were waking me for a different reason.”

She thumped gently into his chest. “Sorry, no can do. We have a couple of minutes to get dressed.”

He sighed. “Last night was the best night of my life.”

“Mine too.” Lois pushed back the blanket and began to rise.

Kal’s hand on her arm stalled her movement. “You’ve had many dates,” he said. “Real dates with real chocolate.”

“It’s not the chocolate that makes the date,” Lois said. “It’s the person you share it with. And last night was the best night of my life.”

He smiled, content with her answer.

“But even the best of nights eventually run into a morning and we have to get up,” Lois said.

Still he didn’t move. “Lois?”

“Yes.”

“Whatever happens today, I’ll be there for you.”

She saw the sincerity of his promise. “I know, Kal. And I’ll be there for you.” She kissed him quickly. “But we still need to get up. Tek will be back any moment.”

Kal sat up and the blanket fell from him, revealing his magnificent chest. Lois’s gaze sauntered over it. “It should be illegal for you to wear a shirt,” she said.

His eyebrows lifted, his gaze dropped a few degrees, and his mouth curved to a wide grin. “Only if when we’re alone, the same rule applies to you,” he said.

Lois laughed as she stood. “Turn on your translator,” she said. “Tek said something, but I didn’t understand him.”

After Kal had quickly dressed, he went into the alcove in search of Tek.

When they returned, Kal was holding a cup. Tek approached Lois and offered her the cup he carried. “Riz thought you would like some beverage,” he said. “But it has become cooled by now.”

“Thank you, Tek,” Lois said. She turned away slightly and glared at her drink. Warmth seeped into her palm and a ringlet of steam rose from the dark liquid. Lois took Kal’s cup from him and gave him hers. He shot her a smile of appreciation.

Lois heated the second drink and breathed in appreciatively as the warmth released its aromas.

They sat down together. “How is your beverage?” Tek asked.

Had he seen her heating them? Or noticed the steam?

“Wonderful,” Lois said, trying to sound casual.

“It tastes as you would expect?”

“Yes. Why?”

“It was made with water from underground,” Tek said.

Lois looked askance at her cup.

“I have tested it,” Tek hurried to assure her. “It is free from any impurities.”

“The drills found water?” Kal said eagerly.

“Yes,” Tek confirmed. “The drills have located a plentiful supply of useable water. Early estimates are it will last us years — long enough to develop other means should we need them.”

Kal leant back against the rock wall with a sigh of satisfaction.

“Have you ever tried beverage with milk?” Lois asked.

“That word doesn’t translate,” Tek said.

“Milk,” Lois repeated. “You get it from cows. I know you have cows; I saw them the day I followed you to the cliffs. And how *did* you get down here that day? You were on the top of the cliff.”

“There are footholds down the cliff and into the tunnel you came through,” he said.

“You climbed *down* the cliff?”

“When the water is low enough, you don’t even get wet.” Tek’s eyes dropped to her cup. “You put calf food in your beverage?”

“We call it milk. It is a highly nutritious food — very good for children.”

“How do you get it?”

“You take the calf away from its mother when it’s ... older ... and then you squeeze the milk from the cow.”

“And *drink* it?”

“Yes. We boil it first to kill any bacteria.”

“But when the calf no longer needs food from its mother, the cow stops producing it.”

“Not if you keep taking it. At least, I think that is how it works.”

“And you put it in beverage?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “It mitigates the bitterness.”

“Children drink it?”

“Yes. After boiling it, keep it cold to preserve it for a few days. And you can put it on foods, like oatmeal. And use it in baking.”

“Could it be used for babies?”

“It isn’t ideal,” Lois said. “What do you give babies if the mother can’t feed them?”

“A combination of water and grain,” Tek said. “If the baby is very young, it inevitably dies.”

“You could try cow’s milk,” Lois said. “Milk is a food, not just a drink, so you wouldn’t need the grain.”

“I will tell Riz,” Tek said. “Eb’s sister’s baby died because she couldn’t feed him, and I know Eb is worried the same thing will happen to her child.” He looked from Lois to Kal. “Have you decided what you are going to do?”

“Has anything changed?” Kal said.

“Nothing that influences your situation,” Tek replied.

“Do you still believe the spaceship will fly?”

“Yes. I have checked every detail. I can find nothing that would guarantee failure.”

“But nothing that would guarantee success?” Lois asked.

“No.”

Kal looked to Lois. Lois nodded. “We’ve decided to leave New Krypton,” Kal said.

Lois searched Tek’s face for his reaction, but she could discern neither approval nor consternation. “Everything is ready for you,” he said.

“Do we go now?” Lois said. Her heart fluttered through a couple of beats. It had been easier to decide to go when there was still the buffer of time between her and the spaceship.

“No. Low tide is still over an hour away,” Tek said. “I came here in the depths of the night. It was my best chance to remain undetected, and I wanted much time to further inspect the spacecraft.”

“How are we going to get it out?” Kal asked.

“My father planned well,” Tek replied. “The spacecraft is designed to launch over either land or water. I have demolished the sand wall.”

“So we just shoot out of the cave, onto the water and into space?” Lois asked, trying to keep her tone free from the misgivings that were lapping around her heart.

“Yes,” Tek said.

“And then what happens?” she asked.

“It may be a journey of great distance,” Tek warned. “I still cannot determine your destination.”

“Will we need to conserve food? Oxygen?”

“I have attempted to cover every eventuality towards securing your safe arrival,” he said.

“Do you think the spacecraft has flown before?” Kal asked.

“At first, I assumed not,” Tek answered. “But the heat cover on the front shows evidence of entry through an atmosphere.”

Lois felt her reporter’s instinct roar to life. “So it *could* have gone somewhere *and* come back?” she said excitedly.

“Yes.”

“Kal’s missing years,” Lois said. “We think your father kept him somewhere safe — somewhere away from this planet.”

Tek’s face didn’t show any surprise. “That possibility occurred to me, too,” he said. “It does seem to fit — my father’s absence, him returning with Kal, his assertion Kal was safe, and the existence of this spacecraft.”

Lois wasn’t sure how to phrase the next question without offending Tek. “When Kal didn’t know anything about his past, why didn’t you ... ”

“Ask him what had happened?” Tek finished. “Everyone except Ked, Yent, and the tutor were kept away from Kal. I saw him only once before his Investiture. And my foremost concern was for Ard. When my father was alive, he had kept her mostly in our residence — for her own protection. After my father’s death, she began roaming, looking for him. I was worried people would notice her — worried Nor would notice her beauty.

“I snuck into the Regal Residence two days before the Investiture and told Kal I was Kip’s son. I asked him if he would take Ard as his concubine. I didn’t know then that he had no memory of his former years. I hoped he was a good man — hoped my father’s influence would mean Ard would be safe with him. It was good that Kal had read History and knew of the work of Kip-Or.”

“Once I became the Supreme Ruler and understood that Tek had his father’s teachings but no qualification in Science, I took him as my servant,” Kal said.

“When did you realise Kal had no memory of his childhood?” Lois asked Tek.

“We didn’t speak much,” Tek said. “I brought his food. He seemed distant and pre-occupied. I didn’t want to do anything that could affect the way he treated Ard.”

“Did you know he’d been told he was in hiatus?” Lois asked.

“Later, I heard the rumours.”

“But you knew he hadn’t been in hiatus,” she pressed. “You saw him walk into the town.”

“I didn’t know for sure he hadn’t been in hiatus,” Tek said. “But whether he had or not, the assumption was that he had been kept in the Regal Residence. That suited me because it meant no one thought too much about the caves as a possible hiding place. Pursuing answers might have salved my own curiosity, but it would not have assisted the future of New Krypton.” Tek looked down. “And would not have brought back my father.”

“As you got to know Kal, you could have voiced your suspicions to him.”

“To what end?” Tek asked as he faced her again. “To bring contention to a Cabinet that already teetered on the brink of rupture? To bring uncertainty to a young man who already carried a heavy load of responsibility? No, if we were to survive, we needed to look forward, not back.”

Kal smiled at Tek. “You comprehend far more of the political landscape than I realised.”

“I say little,” Tek said. “Many assume I understand little, therefore people speak freely around me.”

“Did you know about Nor’s plan to depose Kal?” Lois asked.

“No,” Tek vowed. “I knew Nor agitated the people. I knew he talked up perceived injustices to the south. I knew he tried to stir up anger and rebellion. But I didn’t know he was waiting for the passage of time to steal the mantle that was not his.”

“Do you know anything about how Ked could have wiped Kal’s memories?”

“My father was a Southside Scientist, but he was not well accepted until we needed a new home. Before that, he was ostracised because he refused to be involved in many projects he deemed unethical. It is very possible the other Scientists would have found it advantageous to have a means to cover the past.”

“Will Kal regain his memories?” Lois asked.

“I don’t know. Perhaps in an environment that was once

familiar ...”

“Have you taken the seat on the Cabinet?” Kal asked.

“Yes,” Tek said quietly. “I decided there was more to be gained from taking it than from rejecting it, so I accepted the offer.”

The men looked at each other. Tek raised his clenched fist, and Kal raised his flattened palm. With his other hand, Tek reached for Kal and folded his fingers into a fist.

“I am honoured to be considered your equal,” Tek said. The fists hit each chest as the men locked eyes.

It was Lois who broke the lingering silence. “If you’re a Regal Noble,” she asked Tek, “does that mean you can take concubines?”

“Yes.”

“Is there a rule that you can’t take your sister as a concubine?”

“No,” Tek said. “And because the man who took Ard is a Noble, and therefore lower than me, I have already taken Ard — not as a concubine, but as a member of my household.”

Lois smiled. “I am very pleased.”

“She has moved back into her room in the Concubine Quarters,” Tek said.

“She has?” Kal asked. “What about Ching’s concubines?”

“He only has two,” Tek said. “Plus there is Bel, so three rooms are vacant. I expressed my wish to remain in my current residence, so Lady Za suggested Ard return to her old room.”

“Is Ard happy about that?” Lois asked.

“Yes. The former C3, Mo, brings books, and Ard draws pictures.”

“Mo is still writing?” Lois exclaimed happily.

“Yes. She writes the book, Ard draws the pictures, and Riz makes copies and gives them to the children.”

“Mo must have a good master,” Lois said hopefully.

“Mo’s master is one of the poorer Nobles,” Tek said. “I think he took Mo more for the esteem of having a former concubine of the Supreme Ruler than any real desire for her. When he learned that Ard would be housed at the Concubine Quarters, he requested that Mo be housed there, too.”

“Mo will go back to her room?” Lois squeaked with delight. “And be able to write?”

“If Ching agrees.”

“What about Jib?” Lois said. “Is there any way you can get her back, too?”

“I’m a Regal Noble,” Tek said without a trace of arrogance. “I’ll ask Riz to find out if Jib wishes to live next to her sister, and if she does, I’ll take her.”

“Riz is all right with you taking concubines?” Lois asked.

“I will take concubines as Kal took concubines,” Tek said.

“Not for myself, but for them. Like Kal, my heart is full with one woman.”

Lois laughed, seeing for the first time that even the most abhorrent of rules could be tolerable in the hands of good people.

“There will be other changes,” Kal said. “As a Regal Noble, you will be accepted as a Scientist.”

“Yes.”

“So you won’t have to work down here anymore?” Lois said. “You won’t have to hide your work? You can have a proper laboratory?”

“I have been granted possession of the building where my father worked,” Tek said. “I can establish a new laboratory there and work on many things for the benefit of all Kryptonians. And, in future years, I can teach my son.”

“And your daughter,” Lois said.

Tek hesitated for the shortest of moments. “And my daughter,” he agreed.

“That is good,” Kal said.

“My first task will be to develop and install tidal power

generators.”

Kal sat up quickly. “You have another source of energy?” he asked.

“I believe so,” Tek said. “On Krypton, we used wind generators but there is not sufficient wind on this planet. My father believed the tides could be used in a similar way, but he hesitated because he was wary of leading people to discover the caves.”

“You think you will be able to generate power from the tides?” Kal said.

“Yes. I have always known of the possibility that the massive variation in the tides could be used for our benefit. Had our supplies become critically low, I would have suggested it — although it would have meant the end of my scientific work, because people would have become more aware of the tides and how the differing water levels change the landscape so drastically.”

“But your father was a recognised scientist,” Lois said. “He didn’t need to hide his work.”

“He lived under Cabinet rule,” Tek reminded her. “Many advancements can be used for harm as well as good. Yent showed little interest, and Ked could not be trusted.”

“And your father needed to protect the spaceship,” Lois concluded.

“Possibly,” Tek said slowly. “Although I am uncomfortable with the magnitude of the risk in having a spacecraft programmed to Kal’s whereabouts. If Nor had found the spaceship, it would have taken him directly to Kal.”

“Maybe when Kal was there, it wasn’t programmed.”

“That is possible,” Tek said. “But there are still questions. My father had to know that Kal’s appearance would inflame Nor and Ked. My father had to have known that his own life was vulnerable. I don’t understand him leaving a spacecraft as an open means for Nor, or anyone else, to invade another planet.”

Kal drained his beverage and put his cup in one of the bags. “Is it time we should leave?” he asked Tek.

“Yes,” Tek said. He stood and picked up a bag and offered it to Lois. “I brought your clothes,” he said. “The ones you were wearing when you arrived on New Krypton.”

Lois took the bag and opened it. “Thank you, Tek.”

“Do you want to change into them now?” Kal asked.

Lois hesitated. These clothes were from Earth. They represented the past. “No,” she said. “I’ll take them, but I want to keep wearing this dress.”

Kal picked up the globe Lois had found in the spaceship. “I am unsure if this is meant for you or me,” he said to Tek.

Tek reached for the globe. As his hand made contact, the globe lit from within.

An arc of light illuminated the cave wall.

And in it, an image appeared.

Of two men.

### Part 37

“That’s my father,” Tek said falteringly. “And yours.”

Lois heard the quick intake of breath from Kal. He stepped forward, closer to the image, his right hand raised. Lois slid her fingers down the inside of his left arm and took his hand.

In the image, the men began to speak.

“Have you made your decision, Sir?” Kip asked.

Jor-El turned slowly. “I have, Kip, my friend,” he said.

“You’re staying, Sir? You’re staying on Krypton?”

“Yes, Kip, I’m staying. La is too weak to travel, and I will not leave her.”

“I regret you will not be journeying with us.”

“I have lived my entire life dedicated to my people,” Jor-El said. “But now they must come second to my wife.”

“And your son, Sir?” Kip inquired. “Have you decided Kal-

*El's future?"*

*"Yes, I have." Jor-El held out the scroll he carried. "My son, I leave in the good care of my trusted friend."*

*Kip hesitated. "I will defend him with my life."*

*"I know, Kip. I know."*

*"But I worry I may not be enough."*

*"Take it, Kip," Jor-El said. "Take the jurisdiction of my son knowing it comes with my full confidence in your loyalty and abilities."*

*Kip took the scroll. "Have you determined his destiny?"*

*"His destiny is to lead a unified people — his mother's people and my people."*

*"Before that, Sir?" Kip said. "Is it your decision that he travel to New Krypton with us?"*

*Jor-El waited — waited as the silence stretched. "No," he said finally. "No, the dangers are too great."*

*"You wish him to be transported to The Distant Planet?"*

*"Yes — despite my fears for him, that is my decision." Jor-El drew an anxious hand across his chin. "To send him to an unknown place, to live amongst unknown people. The risk is great."*

*"If he were to stay within the reaches of Ked and Nor, the risk would be greater — although you know if that were your decision, I would defend him with my life."*

*"But if you were to defend him, you would become a target. And were you to die, he would have no defender," Jor-El said. "If he stays with La and myself, he will die with us. The Distant Planet is his best chance for life."*

*"I concur."*

*The men were silent for a moment, both engrossed in their thoughts. "Kip?" Jor-El said.*

*"Yes, Sir?"*

*"When the time comes, don't take him from The Distant Planet unless you believe it is the only chance for peace on New Krypton."*

*Kip looked shocked. "You would have him give up his destiny? You would willingly give up your family's seat?"*

*"Neither destiny nor power are worth ripping him needlessly from the life — and the people — he will have come to know,"*

*Jor-El said. "But should you believe my son represents the only hope for his people to have a future, then he is Kal-El, and his life on The Distant Planet must be sacrificed."*

*"As you will, Sir."*

*"I assume you have prepared for his journey?"*

*"Yes, Sir. His capsule is equipped with everything he will need."*

*Jor-El paced away and then turned. "I hope there are good people," he said, apprehension clear on his face. "I hope he finds welcome and acceptance."*

*"We can only trust, Sir. Physically, he will be similar enough that he won't be obviously alien."*

*"The parting will be traumatic for La," Jor-El said. "She is resigned to her imminent death, but relinquishing her son — sending him alone into the unknown — will be her hardest moment."*

*"I understand."*

*"You will keep a record of this conversation to give to Kal?"*

*"Yes," Kip said. "I will show this to him upon his return to his people."*

*Jor-El raised his folded fist. "This is goodbye, my friend. Journey well."*

*Kip hit his chest with his open hand. "Goodbye, Sir," he said. "It has been my honour to serve you."*

*"Not serve me, Kip," Jor-El said. "We have served together for the betterment of our people. In you, my son could not have a better example of dedication and courage."*

*Kip turned and, carrying the scroll, walked away.*

The illumination faded, and the cave congested with its lingering intensity. Lois looked from Kal to Tek. Both were staring into the nothingness where the image had been.

Then, slowly, they looked at each other.

"Our fathers," Kal breathed.

"Our fathers," Tek said. "They worked together to try to secure the future of our planet."

"I didn't sleep away half of my life," Kal said, looking dazed.

"Do you know of The Distant Planet?" Lois asked.

"No," Tek said. "It is not mentioned in all of my father's research and notes."

"Do you think the spacecraft is programmed to The Distant Planet?"

Again, the men looked at each, searching for answers.

"Surely that would seem the most obvious destination," Lois said. "Once Kip had brought Kal here, he left him with a means to return to the home of his childhood."

"Why?" Kal asked.

"Maybe he felt regret about what he had taken you from and wanted to ensure that, if New Krypton ever became stable, you would have the option to return," Lois suggested.

"My father would not leave the means for Nor to go to another planet and wreak havoc there," Tek said with certainty. "Particularly a planet where the people had cared for one of our own."

"Perhaps he didn't know he was going to die," Lois said gently.

Kal slipped his hand from Lois's grasp and cradled the globe, which had returned to its former dormancy. "Although this seems triggered by both of us, it belongs with your family," he said to Tek. "I want you to keep it for your son, Kip, who will one day be a Regal Noble."

Tek took the globe. "I am indebted to you."

"As I am to you," Kal said gravely. "And to your father."

"Because of you both, Kal has a chance at a new life — again," Lois said.

Tek looked to Kal. "There is something you need to know," he said. "Time on The Distant Planet — the past ten years on New Krypton could be any number of years there. It is likely they have counted more years than you have."

"Why?"

"Because the rotation of New Krypton has been slowing," Tek explained. "We have four moons with strong gravitational pull. That is the cause of the huge variation in water levels. It also exerts force on the surface of the planet that causes it to slow."

"Slowing how much?" Kal asked. "Enough that if I had a family, they could all be dead?"

"I have no way of knowing," Tek replied. "I merely wanted to warn you not to presume anything. The slowing of New Krypton has been more pronounced the past few years."

Kal sighed. "It doesn't matter — I have no memory of them."

"You still have no memories?" Tek asked. "Even with the knowledge from our fathers?"

"Absolutely nothing," Kal said wistfully. "Whether I was asleep or not — I'm not sure it changes anything, not for me anyway. In my mind, nothing happened."

Tek withdrew a small tin from his pocket. He removed the lid and held it towards Kal. It contained two blue tablets.

"What are they?" Kal asked.

"They will blur time," Tek said. "They will make it pass quickly and easily so that when you arrive at your destination, you will recall little of the journey."

"No."

"The journey could be long and arduous," Tek said. "This will slow your metabolism, making you sleep more. The more rested you are, the greater your chance of survival."

Kal shook his head. "No," he said firmly. "I won't take

anything that affects my mind.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Kal said. “I would rather risk dying with my memories than risk living without them.”

“These will not affect the memories you already have,” Tek said. “They will merely blur the time of your travel.”

“No,” Kal said, his tone leaving no room for the possibility that he could be persuaded differently.

Tek turned to Lois and offered her the tin. “Lady?”

“No,” she said. “I am with Kal. We will do this together.”

Tek returned the lid to the tin and slipped it back into his pocket. “We should go now,” he said.

He turned and walked into the alcove. Kal took Lois’s hand and they surveyed the cave one final time. It had been the place of their wedding and their honeymoon, and Kal’s final home on New Krypton.

Lois picked up her bag. Kal glanced to her, his face a medley of mixed emotions. Together they walked from the cave.

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Kal strode steadily along the tunnel.

These were his last minutes on New Krypton.

He was leaving the only home he knew.

Leaving for a home he had perhaps once known.

A home on the other side of the barricade across his mind.

The obstacle he couldn’t budge.

The tunnel veered right, and they stepped left into Tek’s laboratory cave.

Kal stopped. Lois’s hand tightened around his.

A small crowd of people stared at them.

Should they run?

Run where?

Ching was there.

Kal searched for the soldiers.

Were they to be thwarted? This close to escape?

There were no soldiers.

No sound of running footsteps along the tunnel.

Riz was there.

And Za.

Kal looked to Tek, searching for answers.

Tek had no answers; he looked as alarmed as Kal felt.

Za stepped forward, her head high, and her shoulders straight. “Ching and I assured Riz we mean you no harm,” she said. “Riz graciously afforded us this opportunity for a final meeting with you.” Za continued forward until she stood only inches from Kal. She looked into his face with unwavering resoluteness. “Kal-El,” she greeted. “You could never have my heart — as I could never have yours — but you have my respect and my sincere hope that you will find a home with your Lady where you will live long and be greatly fruitful.”

Kal searched for words of reply. He cleared his throat, but his words still came roughly. “I wish you well, also.”

Za turned to Lois. The women contemplated each other, neither flinching. “In other circumstances, we could have been allies,” Za said.

“Yes,” Lois replied.

“I know little of you, but the little I know leads me to believe you are worthy of the heart of Kal-El.”

Lois nodded.

Za returned to her place beside Ching.

Kal waited.

Everyone seemed to be waiting.

Then Ching moved forward. “Kal-El,” he said.

“Ching.”

The young man lifted his head and established direct eye contact. “I regret many choices I made,” Ching said. “I have gained much from those choices.” He glanced across to Za. “But I have lost much too. Much respect, much honour. I will always

live with the knowledge that I cost my people a good man and an inspirational leader. I cannot change the past — my mistakes will forever be displayed in History — but I can vow that I will try to lead the best way I know. I will try to lead as you have led.”

Kal swallowed, trying to clear the bottleneck that had swelled into his throat. He needed to speak for his people. One final time. “The people of this planet ... my people ...” He blinked hard. “Lead for them, not for yourself.”

“I will,” Ching vowed. He raised his hand, open. Kal raised his — also open. Ching grasped Kal’s hand, curled it into a fist, and then hit his chest with an open palm as Kal’s fist mirrored Ching’s movement.

Ching turned and left the cave, followed by Za.

When their footsteps had died away, Tek turned to Riz.

“What happened?” he hissed.

“They came to our residence in the deep of the night.”

“They?” Tek asked, looking shocked. “Ching? And Za?”

“Yes,” Riz said. “They said they knew Kal-El and Lady were in the caves. They said a large vigilante group of Southside men loyal to Nor planned to raid the caves, accepting nothing less than death in their crusade to kill Kal-El and the alien woman.”

“You *trusted* them?” Tek asked.

“I believed not trusting them would mean certain death for Kal-El and Lady,” Riz responded. “And possibly you.”

“You chose well,” Kal said.

“Yes,” Tek agreed.

“How did Ching and Za know about the planned attack?” Lois asked.

Riz glanced briefly to Kal, before returning her gaze to Lois. “There are many people who are loyal to Kal-El. People who do not quickly forget.”

“They told Ching and Za?”

“More than that,” Riz said. “They planned to guard the caves. To death, if necessary.”

A wave of trepidation burned through Kal. “Civil War,” he muttered.

Tek gestured to the adjoining cave. “We must prepare for your departure now.”

Riz stepped forward, her arms outstretched. She took a dazed Lois into her embrace. “Journey well, my friend,” she said. “I wish our time could have been longer, but though your stay was short, your legacy will be long.” As she released Lois, she took a folded piece of paper from the pocket of her gown. “Read this later,” she said.

Lois took the paper, her tears very close to the surface.

“Thank you for being my friend,” she said.

Riz turned to Kal and held up her palm. He also held up his straight palm and together they completed the sign of goodwill. “Kal-El,” Riz said. “You led your people with honour and distinction. Without you, my children would have no future.”

Tek stepped towards the hole, but Lois stopped him. “Will you both do something for me?” she asked.

“Yes,” Tek said.

“Say ‘thank you’.”

“That word doesn’t translate.”

“I know,” Lois said. “Could you try to watch my mouth and copy the sounds I make?”

“All right.”

“Thank you,” Lois said, slowly and clearly.

Tek made a noise deep in his throat — a noise that bore no resemblance to either Kryptonian or Lois’s language.

Lois smiled. “Try to say ‘tan koo’.”

Again, Tek uttered a guttural sound.

“Would you try please, Riz?” Lois asked.

She tried, but the sounds were no closer than Tek’s efforts.

“I appreciate you trying,” Lois said. “I appreciate everything you have done for me. For both of us.”

“We need to fire the engine,” Tek said. He crawled through the hole and into the cave that had housed the spacecraft for so long.

Kal followed. The wall had been broken and pushed back. Ahead was a long stretch of sand. In the distance, he could see the grey of the ocean. A tiny glow of light — the first natural light he had seen in two days — shimmered in the distance.

Kal watched as Lois turned to Riz one final time, and they hugged. When Lois backed away, Kal saw Riz’s eyes were shimmering with moisture.

Lois smiled through her own tears.

She turned and hugged Tek warmly. He seemed a little taken aback, but Lois didn’t notice. She took Kal’s hand and climbed into the spacecraft. Kal also hugged both Riz and Tek and then settled into the seat next to Lois. They strapped on their harnesses.

Tek leant into the capsule. “All instructions you will need are in here,” he said as he pointed to a sliding door in front of them. “I will fire the engine.”

He stepped down and disappeared from view. They heard him move to the back of the spacecraft. Kal took Lois’s hand and clasped it in his. They heard a click.

Then another click.

Then a third.

Kal turned in his seat. “Is everything all right?” he called.

“The engine won’t fire,” Tek said.

They heard another click — crisp in the silence.

Tek appeared again, his face worried. “I don’t know what to do,” he said. “I checked everything in the plans, everything in the manual, and all the indications were that the engine would work.”

There was a tense silence as Kal searched Tek’s face, willing it to solutions.

“Of course!” Lois shrieked.

Kal spun to her.

“Kip wouldn’t have made it that simple for anyone to operate this spaceship,” she said. “He wouldn’t have left a way for Nor to get to the far planet — whether Kal was there or not.”

“What are you saying?” Tek said quietly.

“There will be something on here — something stopping anyone else from using this.”

“You think it is programmed to be activated by me?” Tek asked.

Kal remembered the hollow in the side of the spacecraft. He undid his seat belt and stood. Leaning over Lois, he pointed to concave oval. “Put your hand there, Tek.”

Tek put his hand flat into the concave dip. With his other hand, he pushed home the starter. Again, they heard the click. The engine still didn’t fire.

Kal slumped back into his seat. Tek’s face appeared — his shoulders slumped in despair.

“Both of you!” Lois screeched into the defeated silence. “Just like the globe, it needs both of you.”

Both men straightened. Kal leant over and placed his hand in the hollow. Tek positioned his hand next to Kal’s and reached for the switch.

This time, they didn’t hear the click — it was overwhelmed by the roar of the engine.

Kal sat down, and he and Lois hurriedly refastened their harnesses. Tek lowered the canopy lid — shutting out the roar of the engine — and sent home the row of clips.

Riz had already gone. As Tek got to the hole, he turned one final time and looked at Kal. His flattened palm silently met his chest, and he hesitated for half a second. Then he dropped to his knees and crawled from their view.

Kal took his wife’s hand. “I love you, Lois,” he said. “Together we are more than enough.”

Lois didn’t reply verbally, but the look in her eyes said much.

She squeezed his hand.

Then they were pushed back into their seats, and the walls of the cave sped by.

Kal saw the flash of water below them as dim light showered over them. They rose steeply, and his stomach dropped. He released Lois’s hand and slid his arm across her shoulders, pulling her against him. He leant against her ear. “I love you, Lois.”

“I love you too, Kal,” she said.

### Part 38

“Kal?”

Kal turned to her with a smile. Everything had changed so quickly, but Lois was the constant that kept him from feeling as if everything was spinning out of control. “Yes?”

“You’re going home.”

“Home?” he said. “For all of my memory, I thought New Krypton was my home.”

“The Distant Planet may not feel like your home, but it’s where you spent fifteen years of your life.”

“You think Kip really did send me to The Distant Planet?”

“Yes, I do,” Lois said. “I thought that before the globe spoke. Now I’m certain.”

“It certainly seems most likely,” Kal agreed. “Except I have no recollection of it at all. You’d think that if it had happened, I would have *something* — a memory, an inkling, something other than just a vacuum of nothingness. When Kip told me I’d been in hiatus, I believed him because I had no memories — no memories of people, no memories of events, nothing that suggested I had lived. It felt like I had never experienced anything.”

Lois laid her hand over his. “The more I think about it, the more I realise how awful it must have been.”

“It was, but I didn’t have much time to think about it then. Now ...”

“Have you thought about the people who may know you?”

“It’s impossible not to think about them. But even if the time differences aren’t significant, I doubt they will recognise me, and I certainly won’t recognise them.”

“I think there is every chance you will be reunited with people you knew.”

“You do?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “Tek told us the navigation system was specific. I think that not only will it get us to your former planet, it will also take us very close to the part of the planet where you were sent the first time.”

“You do?”

“Kip had to know where to find you when he took you back to New Krypton. Even if it’s a small planet, it would be difficult to locate one specific person.”

“Unless there was something about my Kryptonian physiology that made it easier for him to single me out.”

“That’s possible, but he left the spaceship in the cave as a means for you to return. I don’t believe he would program it to go anywhere other than close to your home.”

“Home,” Kal said again. “Home — but I have no knowledge of it. No knowledge of the planet, no knowledge of the people.”

“Maybe that’s how it will be at first,” Lois said. “But I think there is a good chance that once you’re there, you will begin to remember things.”

“You once said that we don’t know whether we’re going into a situation even worse than the one we left.”

“I don’t think that anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Because Kip left a way for you to go back,” Lois said.

“Whatever he removed you from, he knew it was good. I think you would have told him about the life you were leaving as you

travelled to New Krypton together.”

“The people I left?” Kal asked. “You think they’re good people?”

“I know so.”

Her certainty surprised him. “How can you know?”

“Because I know you.”

“But I don’t remember them,” Kal said with frustration. “I’ve tried and tried, but I don’t remember them.”

“They have a lot of influence on who you are.”

“They do?”

“Well, the teachings you remember came directly or indirectly from Ked — and you are nothing like him. Someone — or maybe more than one person — moulded your life and whether you remember it or not, it’s still there.”

“My folks are good people,” he said with wonderment.

Lois chuckled delightedly. Kal wasn’t sure why, but he didn’t pursue it. He wanted to think about his family — whoever they were.

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“Lois?”

“Yes, Kal?”

“Why did you ask Riz and Tek to try to say ‘thank you?’”

Lois turned to him with a small grin. “Because they were the first words you said in my language.”

“Why were you starting language lessons as we left New Krypton?”

“It wasn’t about teaching them my words, it was about seeing if they could say them.”

“Why?”

“Because you learnt my words, and I wanted to know if they could, too.”

“They couldn’t,” Kal said. “Their attempts sounded nothing like ‘thank you.’”

Lois turned the full force of her grin on him. “Exactly,” she said.

Kal smiled — not because he understood, he didn’t — but because it was impossible not to respond to the glowing excitement in her expression. “You’ve lost me,” he said.

Lois took his hand and enveloped it in hers. “I always thought you learnt my language unbelievably quickly,” she said.

“I had powerful motivation,” Kal said. “I wanted to be able to share everything with you.”

“Even that doesn’t explain your ability to learn sounds and words and syntax so quickly. Every single time you turned off your translator, you had improved immeasurably. So much so that in the cave I couldn’t tell whether your translator was on or not.”

“Whenever we were alone, I had it off. Whenever we were with Tek, I had it on.”

She studied him for a moment as a slow smile spread across her face. “By then, you were bi-lingual,” she said. “You spoke my language; you spoke Tek’s language. You shouldn’t have needed the translator to understand either of us.”

“I still needed it,” Kal said. “If I’d spoken Kryptonian without my Translator, you wouldn’t have understood. If I’d spoken your language, Tek wouldn’t have understood.”

“But it was more than that, wasn’t it?” she challenged, her eyes pinning him with captivating intensity.

Kal felt a grin forming, but he controlled it. Lois and secrets were obviously not a viable combination. “Yes,” he said.

“Without your translator, you found it hard to understand Tek?” she pressed.

“Yes,” he admitted.

“Because before whatever they did to erase your memory, you’d only had a short time with Kip to learn Kryptonian?”

“So it seems.”

“So when they woke you, and you already had the translator, there was no opportunity to learn the language — and no need.”

“I learnt to read Kryptonian,” Kal said. “But once I began turning off the Translator, I discovered that without it, the oral language was very difficult to understand. I had to keep referring back to the written language to try to recognise words.”

Lois grinned at him.

“You keep grinning at me,” he said. “As if you know something I don’t.”

“Why don’t you just ask me?”

Kal grinned. “Because your ‘I’ve got a secret’ smile is just so cute. And it’s not like there is any time pressure.”

She grinned at him again, eyes shining.

Yep, she definitely knew something. Something that made her incredibly happy. An idea slammed into his mind. “You’re ...” Kal swallowed. “You’re not pregnant?”

Her laughter pealed through their capsule, but Kal couldn’t discern if it were meant as confirmation or not. He glanced to her abdomen, though he knew it was far too early for it to offer him any assistance.

“Are you?”

“How would you feel if I were?”

“My heart would explode with joy,” Kal said. “My head would wonder if the timing is ideal.”

She stroked the back of his hand. “I’m not pregnant,” she said. “Not as far as I know — it’s too early to tell.”

His disappointment bit sharply. He pushed it away. “Then what?” he said.

“I have a theory.”

Kal lifted his eyes from their hands to her face. “You do?”

“Yep.”

“Are you going to tell me?”

“Probably,” she said. “But you need to realise it’s only a theory. I try to think about it logically, and I realise that it’s impossible. Then I think about it again and everything seems to point in that direction. But I’m trying not to let my emotions get involved, because if I think about it for more than a few minutes, it is going to be impossible to sit still for even another hour, let alone however much longer we are going to be stuck inside this spaceship.”

Kal shook his head, smiling. “How about you just tell me the theory?” he suggested. “Because that is going to have to be simpler.”

She grinned. Real, real big. “I think I know the identity of the Distant Planet.”

“You do? You heard of it on Earth?”

Her grin widened. “I think it *is* Earth.”

“Lo ...” He swallowed as his mind struggled to comprehend the enormity of her assertion. “Lois ... I would hate for you to be disappointed.”

“It makes sense, Kal,” Lois insisted. “First, the *distant* planet may be distant, but it has to be close enough that you could be taken there and brought back. And I got from Earth to New Krypton. I don’t know how; maybe there’s a wormhole or something, but I came, so it can’t be impossible to get back.

“Second, Kip said that you would look enough like the people of the Distant Planet that you wouldn’t be noticeably alien. Just like when I was on New Krypton, there were differences in dress and hairstyle, but I still had one head and two eyes and two arms and looked fundamentally the same.

“And third, Tek and Riz couldn’t even make the sounds of my language. You could — and you learnt them so incredibly quickly, I believe you weren’t learning at all, but *re-learning*.”

“You think I was on *Earth*?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “And not only Earth, but in an English-speaking country.”

“English?”

“That is what my language is called.”

“There are different languages on Earth?”

“Yes. And many different countries.

“What if my country is different to yours? What if my country isn’t Metropolis?”

“Metropolis is my city. And, if we *do* safely make it to Earth, a tiny quibble like differing countries is going to be completely insignificant.”

Kal sank back into his seat. Now, his world felt as if it were spinning.

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“Lois?”

“Yes, Kal?”

“Tell me about Earth.”

“What about Earth? Specifically?”

“Do Earth people live in families?”

“Often they do. In my culture, one man marries one woman. They might have children and become parents. The children grow up and move out and marry and become parents themselves.”

“Tell me about your mother.”

“Mom is difficult, complex, damaged, needy, strong. When she drinks too much, her life becomes unbearable.”

“Drinks?”

“Alcohol. Some drinks become addictive. The alcohol dulls your mind and makes you feel good for a time, so people use it as an escape.”

“Your mother drinks too much — and tries to forget?”

“Yes.”

“Are you worried about her?”

“Yes,” Lois admitted. “I fear that losing me could cause her to drink too much again. I fear she will feel that she needs alcohol to cope.”

“What is that word you called her?”

“Mom.”

“Is that what people call their mothers?”

“In my country, yes.”

“What else? What word is used in other countries?”

“I think people in England use ‘Mum’. Young children sometimes say ‘Mommy’, or perhaps ‘Mama’.”

“Mama?”

“Yes. Or even ‘Ma’.”

“Ma?” Kal closed his eyes. “Ma,” he said again. “Ma.”

“Are you remembering something?”

Kal slowly shook his head. “I don’t know. I *want* to remember so badly. I want it to be there. I want to be able to grasp it. But I’m not sure if I’m remembering or if I’m imagining something that isn’t there.”

“It’s possible you called your mother ‘Ma’.”

“You think I had an Earth mother?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Why?”

“Because someone had to look after you.”

“But feeding me wouldn’t make them my parents.”

“Remember when you asked me to teach you words from my language?” Lois asked. “The first time we turned off our translators?”

“Yes.”

“You drew a family — and that family had a mother and a father and a boy.”

“What do you call your father?”

“Dad.”

“Dad.” Kal said the word slowly. “Dad.”

\*\*\*

“Lois?”

“Yes, Kal?”

“If I did *re*-learn your language, my memories were not completely destroyed. There is something there. I just have to work out how to access it.”

“I think you’ve already been accessing it. You learnt how to

smile, how to communicate more with facial expressions, how to cry.”

“Maybe I was copying you.”

She kissed him, lingering on his mouth. “You learnt so much in a short time just by being with one Earth person. Try not to stress about it. When you’re home, it will just happen.”

“It will be hard on my parents — if they recognise me, and I don’t remember them.”

“Yes,” Lois agreed. “But no harder than the years since you left.”

\*\*\*

“Kal?”

“Yes, my love?”

“Have you thought about the conversation we saw from the globe? Between your father and Kip?”

“Yes, I have thought about it a lot.”

“You once said that you’d wondered if you were never anything more than a political solution,” Lois said. “But your parents loved you. Your father agonised over making the best choice for you — even to the point of asking Kip to leave you if New Krypton could manage without you. For them, you were always a person first and a political solution second.”

“Yes. And I learnt something else, too.”

“What?”

“My father loved my mother. He gave his life to stay with her.”

“Like father, like son.”

“I didn’t give my life for you.”

“You offered it,” she said. “That’s the same thing.”

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“Lois?”

“Yes, sweet husband?”

“If The Distant Planet *is* Earth, you can go back to your old life. You can have your job back and your friends back and your family back.”

“That’s possible.”

“I’m very pleased for you.”

“I can’t have everything about my old life back,” she said.

“Yes, you can.”

“No, I can’t,” Lois said. “In my old life, I was single. Now, I’m married.” She grinned at him.

Kal took a deep breath. “If we do go to Earth ... I understand if you ... if you ...”

“If I decided that having an alien in tow might just be too much of a drag,” she finished, still grinning.

Kal returned her grin. “Well, I wasn’t going to say it like that.”

“However you said it, it would have been equally ridiculous.”

“It wouldn’t be surprising if a marriage to an alien on another planet is not considered legal on Earth.”

“I don’t care whether it is legal or not,” Lois declared, her smile gone, and her eyes glinting fire. “I am your wife and *nothing* is going to change that.”

“What if your parents and friends don’t approve of our marriage?”

“You married me, Kal, and when we thought you could be going somewhere familiar, and I would still be an alien, you went to great lengths to ensure that I knew the extent of your commitment to me. Now, I’m telling you — wherever we end up, whatever planet, whether I get back to my family, whether you find a family, whatever, our marriage remains the most important thing in my life. Always.”

“That is what you want?”

“That is what I’m demanding.”

Kal’s eyebrows lifted. “Demanding?” he teased. “So I have no choice?”

Her smile was back. “None,” she confirmed. “You’re stuck

with me.”

“That’s all I want,” he said. “More than finding a family. More than finding my memories. More than feeling some scrap of familiarity. More than anything, I want to be with you.”

She took his face in her hands and kissed him. “Well, that’s what you’ve got.”

\*\*\*

“Kal?”

“Yes, my love?”

“I’ve been thinking about your childhood.”

“What about it?”

“I never heard about an alien living on Earth,” Lois said. “There was speculation, but nothing ever came anywhere near being proven.”

“So you *don’t* think I was on Earth?”

“Yes, I do. But I think you were kept a secret.”

“Maybe my parents didn’t know I was an alien.”

“Maybe. Or maybe they did know, and they decided it was best for you if they kept your origins a secret.”

“Why?”

“Because there would have been a commotion the likes of which has never been seen before,” Lois said. “Some people would have wanted to study you. Others would have been fearful of you.”

“They had nothing to fear from me.”

“I know that. But imagine if Nor had somehow found the way to Earth, or whatever planet. The people of that planet would have had plenty to fear from him.”

“Do you think it would be better if we didn’t tell everyone that I’m from another planet? Do you think I should pretend I’m just like everyone else?”

“I think it would be best if you blended in until we know more,” Lois replied. “I don’t think you could even imagine the attention you would receive if everyone knew. Anything resembling a normal life would be impossible for you.”

“But, Lois, I won’t be able to blend in. I know nothing about Earth.”

“You know me, and together we’ll work out something.”

“You think we should lie?”

“Not lie exactly. Just omit certain details.”

“I don’t even have a name,” Kal said. “Not an Earth name.”

“You have a name, Kal,” Lois said. “Your parents would have called you something. If we can find them, they will have many of the answers we need.”

“I’m not sure how we can find them. I can’t exactly go knocking on every door asking if an indiscriminate number of years ago they found a baby who could possibly have been an alien and who then, at some later point, disappeared, possibly without any explanation.”

“If we can’t locate your parents, we will go back to Metropolis,” Lois said. “We will say my life pod landed on Earth, in a remote country. We’ll say I met you, and you helped me return home.” She glanced sideways at him. “In essence, that’s the truth.”

“OK,” Kal agreed with a sigh. “OK.”

\*\*\*

“Lois?”

“Yes, Kal?”

He took her hand and gently ran his fingers over the ‘S’. “Is it usual for Earth women to be branded?”

“No.”

“This will be hard to explain.”

Lois contemplated it, frowning slightly. “We could always say it was done as part of a ritual in that remote country.”

“Is there any way to get rid of it?”

Lois looked dubious.

“I have an idea,” Kal said.

“What?”

“Your eyes can burn. You don’t feel pain. Perhaps if you were to glare at it, the definition would be smoothed, and it wouldn’t be so obvious.”

“I’m not sure that will work.”

“Try. Stop the moment it hurts.”

Lois glared at her hand. She skimmed across the top of the emblem. When she reached the end, she stopped. The top of the five-sided shape had gone.

“Did that hurt?” Kal asked, concerned.

“No.” She continued working row by row through the emblem until her skin was clear.

Kal took her hand to his mouth and gently kissed the slightly reddened skin. “Now, you’re no longer my concubine,” he said.

Lois smiled. “It’s much more fun being your wife,” she said.

\*\*\*

“Lois?”

“Yes, Kal?”

“What did Riz give you in the cave?”

Lois took the paper from her pocket and unfolded it. “I don’t know,” she said. “It is written in Kryptonian. Maybe it’s a letter.”

“Can I look?”

Lois handed it to him. His smile exploded. “What is it?” she asked.

“I don’t think I’ll tell you,” he teased.

“Tell me.”

“Or what?”

“No more neck massages.”

Kal shrugged. “I can live without neck massages.”

“No more head rubs.”

“I can live without head rubs.”

“No more kisses.”

“I’ll read it.”

Lois grinned.

Kal’s eyes lowered to the paper. “The heading is ‘Register for Women to Become Law.’ It has been confirmed that -”

“It’s a *newspaper* story?” Lois asked, jiggling excitedly in her seat.

“Seems like it.”

“Who wrote it?”

Kal skimmed the paper. “The main story is written by Riz. There is also a smaller story by Mo.”

“They have a newspaper,” Lois said triumphantly. “They have a newspaper.”

Kal grinned. “Would you like me to read you the story?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “But it doesn’t matter what the story says, the important thing is that they have a newspaper.”

\*\*\*

The spacecraft came to a smooth easy stop on a patch of green grass.

Kal pushed open the canopy. He stepped out and turned to offer his hand to Lois. He helped her from the capsule and then stretched his achy muscles.

He turned slowly, seeing the flourishing trees and the lush grass. He breathed in, and the air rippled through his lungs. It was as if every sensor in his body had been tuned to receive at amplified efficiency. Yet the overall effect was numbing. He felt so much, yet felt so little.

To the north — past a few trees — was a road. Beyond that, there were more fields.

That was the direction.

He had to go that way.

A voice called him. The voice that was his inner knowledge — the voice that had guided him for so long on New Krypton. It was strong here.

And it was calling him.

“This way,” he said to Lois. “We have to go this way.”

“Do you recognise this?”

“Not here,” Kal said, pointing to his head. “But here.” He pointed to his heart.

His steps quickened as his feet obeyed the call to his heart. The call home.

### Part 39

Martha Kent pulled her jacket tighter and stifled a shiver as she stood on her porch, searching through the twilight dimness. Searching as she had searched every evening for so many years.

Every evening since the horror of waking to her son’s empty bed.

There were no longer tears to blur her view. Every possible tear had been shed. She was dry. Dry on the inside. Dry from yearning. Dry from hoping. Dry from grieving. Dry from imagining. Dry from not knowing.

Dry.

As only a childless mother can be dry.

She could still see the empty bed — sheets ruffled, pillow askew.

She had known immediately that something was wrong. Every morning, Clark had made his bed as his feet touched the floor. Probably before his feet touched the floor. Even on the days when he knew she intended to wash the sheets, he had made his bed.

But not that morning.

Her son had gone — as mysteriously and as unexpectedly as he had come.

Leaving her with a hollowness that couldn’t be filled — even by Jonathan’s unwavering support and understanding.

Leaving her with questions that gnawed a warren of grief through her heart.

In the distant field, there was movement. Martha straightened, her eyes flitting as she tried to glean detail. There were two figures ... running ... running towards her. “Jonathan,” she called.

Martha heard his footsteps come from the house, but she didn’t take her eyes from the two figures. “What is it, honey?” Jonathan said, his voice, as always, like a massage for her soul. His hand rested on her shoulder.

She pointed. “There are two people in the field,” she said.

Jonathan stepped forward to stand at her side. “Must be a breakdown,” he said. “But it’s strange they would leave the road.”

“They’re running,” Martha said. “It must be something important.”

“I’ll go and see what I can do to help,” Jonathan said.

Martha slipped her hand into his big paw. “I’ll come, too.”

He hesitated, and Martha knew he was going to suggest she stay in the warmth.

She spoke before he did. “Come on,” she said. “At the very least we can invite them in for a warm drink.”

\*\*\*

The further Kal went, the stronger his compulsion became.

He had to keep going.

He didn’t know why. He didn’t know where. He didn’t know how far. Or even how he would know when he got there.

But there was something inside him that could not be denied. Something that drove him forward.

Then he saw them.

A couple. A man, a woman ... large man, small woman ... hand in hand ... walking hurriedly towards them.

Kal’s heart stopped.

His eyes fixed.

His knees crumbled.

His insides swirled.

His mind froze.

They continued coming towards him.

A word formed on his lips. “M ...” His tears crawled up his throat, clogging it. “M ...”

The couple stopped.

Stared at him.

Then Kal heard a cry.

A cry so full of longing, it squeezed his heart. “Clark!”

He ran forward, his pounding feet drumming to the beat of his pounding heart.

The distance between them evaporated, and Kal swept the woman into his arms. He held her close as violent sobs racked her petite body. Her arms locked around his waist with a fierce strength that far transcended her size. When he inhaled, he was filled with aromas he could not have named, but he didn’t need names to know they smelled of nurture and belonging and acceptance.

The arms of the man drew the three of them into a tight cluster.

Kal lifted his head from the woman and looked into the overflowing eyes of the man. “Dad,” he whispered.

The man’s mouth moved, but no sound emerged.

It didn’t matter. Their eyes connected, and nothing more was needed.

\*\*\*

Martha clasped the strong, lean body of her boy, praying she wasn’t dreaming, praying that if she were, she would be granted time before wakefulness shattered the miracle of her son.

He held her with raw desperation, yet it couldn’t overshadow the underlying gentleness so innate to him. She could hear the booming of his heart. She could feel the comforting arms of Jonathan surrounding both of them.

How often in the past years had Jonathan held her as she had cried?

Times too many to count.

But this time ... this time ... her tears were different.

Her heart knew this was no dream.

This was her son.

Her son had come home.

Finally, her son had come home.

After a long time ... long enough that her tears had bled a damp patch onto his rough shirt, Martha eased back. She wanted to see him. Wanted to feast her eyes on what her heart had already savoured.

She looked from his chest and into his face.

From his face and into his eyes.

“Clark.”

The dawn of his smile filtered through his tears — the smile that had haunted her nights and strengthened her days. The smile she would have recognised anywhere. “Mom?” he said.

She nodded. “Yes,” she breathed.

He smiled again, less hesitantly, then his eyes left hers and swung to Jonathan. “Dad?”

“Son.”

Her two men — the two men Martha Kent would always love with her whole being — embraced.

And Martha’s tears surged again.

She noticed the second person — a woman dressed in utilitarian pants and a jacket — standing a few yards away, watching them.

Her cheeks were damp with the overflow of her tears.

Martha stepped closer. Without conscious thought, her arms extended to the younger woman.

She stepped into Martha’s embrace without hesitation.

When they backed away, their eyes met, and Martha knew instantly that they would be friends. “I’m Martha,” she said. “I’m Clark’s mom.”

The woman smiled. "I'm Lois," she said. "I'm his wife."  
 "Then we both love him."  
 Lois nodded. "With everything we are."  
 "Thank you for bringing my boy home."

Clark had unfolded from Jonathan and now stepped to Lois. He put his arm across her shoulders and nestled her protectively into his side. "Mom, Dad," he stated. "This is my wife, Lois." He regarded them steadily as if he were unsure of their reaction ... as if he were expecting someone to try to wrest her from him ... as if he were willing to give his last breath to ensure that didn't happen.

Martha smiled. "I know," she said. "I'm so very pleased for both of you."

Clark didn't smile. "We are married," he reinforced.  
 "That's wonderful," Martha said. "Let's take her home."

Clark's assertive edge melted under the sunshine of her approval. He looked around. "Home?"

Martha pointed in the direction of the farmhouse. "Home."

Lois took Clark's hand and smiled up at him. "Come on," she said. "We'll follow your parents."

Jonathan put his hand on Martha's arm. "I'll be with you soon," he said quietly.

She nodded her understanding and gestured to her son and his wife. "Let's go home."

\*\*\*

The short walk to the farmhouse was eerily silent. Martha had questions — a truckload of questions.

Are you all right?

Where have you been?

Why did you go?

Are you staying?

Will you suddenly disappear again?

Yet there was something in Clark's face that snagged her questions in her throat.

Once in the kitchen, he stood awkwardly, looking around, looking like he wasn't sure what to do.

Martha pushed away the visual of the little boy who had run into this kitchen so many times, always flashing that smile, always looking for food, always generous with his appreciation.

Now, he stood like a stranger.

"Make yourselves at home," Martha said. She sensed they needed time alone — time to recover something of their equilibrium. "I'll just ... I'll be back soon, and we'll have coffee."

In her bedroom, Martha looked into the mirror and tried to repair the puffiness left by her tears. The face that stared back at her was, she realised with a sigh, a face that had aged the past few years. But despite that, there was now something new — a joy, a vitality that all the lines of grief could not conceal.

She stood and bounded down the stairs.

When she reached the kitchen, they were still standing, holding each other, looking like two dazed survivors in the midst of the aftermath of a blizzard.

"Would you like coffee?" Martha asked.

Clark released Lois. "Yes," he said stiltedly. "Thank you."

Lois shot him an encouraging smile, took his hand, and led him to the table. "Can I help you?" she asked Martha.

"No, thank you," Martha said as she put the kettle on to boil.

She took out the scones she had baked that day and put them on the table. Lois's hand sat atop Clark's on the table. Martha noticed her wedding ring — it was silver and looked more like a machinery part than jewellery.

The pile of Martha's questions grew. How long had they been married? Where had they married? How did they meet? Did Lois know? Did she know *everything* about her husband?

Martha took out four cups and glanced surreptitiously to Clark. She caught the look that passed between her son and his

wife and immediately realised the questions were unimportant.

Her son loved this woman.

Loved her with all of his big heart.

And that was enough for Martha.

She put the butter, strawberry jam, and whipped cream on the table, sneaking another look at her son.

He had changed — you would expect that. Gone was the slightly gangly teenager. His shoulders had expanded to an impressive breadth. He wore his hair shorter. He wasn't wearing glasses.

His face had changed from a boy to a man. His stubble was short, but it hinted at thick black growth. There was a maturity to him that hadn't been there before.

His eyes hadn't changed.

They were still that beautiful brown, so soft and loving.

Even now, when they were also full of uncertainty.

Martha put the coffee in front of Clark and grasped the opportunity to look flush into his face. "Three sugars?" she said cheerily. "Right?"

"Three?" he said.

Martha pushed the sugar bowl closer to him. "Perhaps you should put in your own sugar," she said.

He did, hesitantly, looking to Lois for direction.

"Would you like milk?" Martha asked Lois.

"Oh, yes please."

Martha brought Lois's cup and her own to the table. Lois smiled her thanks. Martha sat down and all three sipped their coffee.

Over the top of her cup, Lois met Martha's eyes. When the cup lowered, Martha saw she was smiling. "That is good coffee," Lois said. "I missed good coffee."

"Would you like a scone?" Martha offered, again watching her son. You like them with jam and lots of cream but no butter, she added silently.

Clark reached for a scone and put it on his plate. He turned slightly in his chair, pushing it back from the table. He put the plate on his lap and looked around the table as if trying to locate something.

Lois handed him a fork. "It's a stick," she said quietly. "You don't ... you know."

He glanced to her, and they shared a smile.

Clark used the fork to clumsily break away a section of the scone. He speared the fragment and offered it to Lois. She took it and popped it into her mouth.

Martha lifted her cup and drank absently, though her eyes did not leave the young couple across her table. They seemed oblivious to her — complete in each other.

Lois returned the fork, and Clark took a small piece of scone to his mouth. He noticed Martha watching him. "Nice pudding," he said politely.

Silence fell.

Martha found herself listening for Jonathan's footsteps.

He wouldn't be here yet.

"You said you are Clark's mom," Lois said.

Martha nodded.

Clark and his wife connected with another glance. Martha sensed they had communicated something and arrived at a decision. Clark cleared his throat and looked directly at her. "You must have questions," he said.

His voice had deepened, accentuating its smooth pleasantness.

"Yes," Martha admitted. "But none of them are as important as seeing you again and knowing you are safe and well."

"There is something I should tell you," Clark said.

Martha heard the misgiving in his tone, and her heart began to beat a little faster. "Go on, honey," she said.

Before Clark could speak, the kitchen door opened and

Jonathan arrived. Martha rose automatically. His quick look in her direction communicated that he'd accomplished his task.

Martha brought his coffee to the table and placed it in front of him. She sat next to her husband and together they faced their son. "What were you going to say?" she asked Clark.

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Kal looked from the woman to the man. Out in the field, seeing them had jolted something from deep within him. As if, by looking at them, he'd seen not their faces, but their hearts — and his heart had responded.

He'd expected ... hoped ... that being with them ... coming to their home — had it been his home, too — would release a gush of memories.

But it hadn't.

The only thing familiar in this farmhouse was Lois's face.

He'd watched the woman as she'd made the coffee. He could see the hurt embedded in her face. At first, Kal had wondered if the man had hurt her. But remembering them together in the field, he had quickly realised that this man would never ... *could* never ... hurt this woman.

Then Kal had caught her looking at him with such longing, he understood. *He* was the one who had etched the grief on her face. When he'd left, he had hurt her immeasurably.

And for that, he had to give her the only recompense he could offer.

His honesty.

It would be a shock, but she had to know. And the sooner, the better.

The arrival of the man had given Kal a few extra moments to find a way to tell her. Tell them. He could see the man had not been left unscathed either.

Kal looked to Lois. She nodded, and her hand on his knee gave him encouragement.

He looked at the woman — the woman who had been his mother. "I don't remember ..." He couldn't say 'you'. "I don't remember anything," he said. "I don't remember anything before ... before I went back."

"You don't remember living with us?" the man asked.

"No."

The woman's tears gathered again. "You don't remember us?" she said, her voice quivering.

The man covered the woman's hand.

"I'm so sorry," Kal said. "I don't have any memories of anything before being woken up at fifteen years on New ... on another planet."

"You called me 'mom'."

"Yes," he agreed. "That word came. I don't know how I knew."

She took a small piece of white material from her pocket and used it to wipe away the tears that threatened to spill from the corners of her eyes. "It's OK, Clark," she assured him. "Just seeing you again — that is enough. The rest will come."

"And if it doesn't?"

"We can tell you about those missing years," she said. "Watching you grow was the greatest joy we shared."

"When did you become my parents?"

"When you were only a few months old."

"Where did you find me?"

"In a spaceship. In the field."

"And you brought me ..." Kal looked around the warm, cosy kitchen. "... here?"

"Yes," the man said. "We told everyone that a distant relative had died leaving a young son."

"And you called me 'Clark'?"

"Yes."

"Was I alone? In the spaceship?"

"Yes. It was too small for anyone else."

Kal hesitated, but decided he had to keep going. "I'm sorry," he said. "I don't know your names."

"I'm Martha," the woman said evenly. "Martha Kent. And this is my husband, Jonathan."

"Martha and Jonathan Kent," Kal said slowly, desperately hoping it would crack the barrier through his memory. "So my name was Clark Kent?"

Martha nodded. "Clark Jerome Kent."

"You raised me?"

"Yes."

Kal looked at Jonathan. "You taught me?"

"Yes."

He returned his gaze to Martha. "You fed me and clothed me?"

"Yes."

"You ..." Kal stopped. He wanted so much to know — he thought he *did* know, but he needed to hear it. "You ... loved me?"

Martha's tears bulged again, and Jonathan cleared his throat. "Yes," Martha said. "We loved you. We couldn't have loved you more if you'd been born to us."

"And then I left?"

"Yes."

"Did you know why? Did you meet Kip? Did we explain why I had to go?"

Martha's tears tumbled down her soft cheeks as she shook her head. "No," she cried. "We woke up one morning, and your bed was empty."

"That was all?"

"That was all."

No wonder the grief was carved upon her face. "How long?" Kal asked. "How long since I left?"

"Twelve years."

"How old was I then?"

"Fifteen."

"I ... I don't remember going," Kal said. "I don't remember why we didn't tell you, but I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry for all the pain I caused you."

Both Martha and Jonathan nodded. Jonathan coughed again. "Your mother ... Martha ... never gave up ... never gave up her hope that you would return ... that one day you would come back to us."

"I didn't know," Kal said desperately. "I still don't know so much. I have come back in body ... but I'm not sure if I can be the person you remember."

Martha smiled — a watery smile, but it warmed something inside of Kal. "You're the person we remember," she assured him. "Some things have changed. Twelve years is a long time — there have to be some changes, but the basics are the same. You are still Clark."

"I only remember being called Kal. Kal-El."

"Kal," Martha said. "Kal. Would you like us to -"

"No," Kal said quickly. "No. I want you to call me Clark. And ..." He wasn't sure how to word this question. "And ..."

"And?" Martha prompted.

He looked from Jonathan to Martha. Her steady gaze gave him the confidence to continue. "I can't go on being Kal," he said. "Not here, not on this planet. I'd like to go back to being Clark."

A little squeal escaped from Martha, although she tried to smother it. "You're staying?" she asked, as if she didn't dare believe.

Kal nodded. "Yes. I'm staying ... perhaps not here exactly ... I need to discuss that with my wife ... but I'm staying on this planet ... and if you have no objections ..." He laughed awkwardly. "I'm not sure how one asks if he can be a son again."

Martha ripped the white square from her pocket and dabbed

ineffectually at the stream of her tears. “Clark, you never stopped being our son,” she sobbed.

Jonathan roughly brushed his cheek with the sleeve of his shirt. “We would like nothing more,” he said raggedly. “We were proud to have you as our son all those years ago, and nothing has changed. You will always have a place in this family ... and in our hearts.”

Kal swallowed down the clump of emotions congregating in his throat. “And Lois?” he asked.

Martha’s eye swung to Lois back again. “We love you ... you love her ... she is already a part of us.”

“Thank you,” he said.

Martha gave a weak, watery chuckle. “May I ask my daughter-in-law a question?”

Kal took the hand of his wife. “Yes.”

“Are you from Clark’s planet?”

Lois laughed as she, too, dried her tears. “No,” she said. “No, I’m a local.”

“Local?” Kal asked.

“Well, not exactly from the Midwest, more the East, but this is my planet, and this is my country.”

Her statement thundered through Kal. “We are on Earth?” he asked.

Lois nodded. “We’ve both come home,” she said.

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After the scones had been eaten and the coffee drunk, Martha suggested she show them to Kal’s old room. He agreed, hoping the room would be the catalyst he yearned for.

It was clean. Uncluttered. Simple. Tidy. Homey. Welcoming. The bed was made. Kal surveyed the room, taking in the plain, solid furniture and the colourful, cheery curtains. He saw a picture — surrounded by a frame of wood — and crossed the room with two long strides. He stared at it.

“Pick it up,” Martha encouraged. “This is your room. Everything here is yours. Nothing has changed.”

Kal took the picture. There were three people — younger versions of Martha and Jonathan — and a child, a boy. He studied their faces. They — all of them — looked so happy. So content. He turned to Martha. “This is us?”

“Yes,” she said. “You were seven years old.”

“We look like we have everything,” Kal said.

She smiled tremulously. “We did have everything.”

Kal replaced the picture. “You kept my room,” he said in amazement.

“Of course,” Martha said. She moved to the bed and brushed her hand across the covers. “This bed is really too small for two people,” she said. “Would you be more comfortable in the spare room? The bed there is bigger.”

“No,” Kal said quickly. “I want to stay here.” He shrugged, hoping she would understand. “It might help me remember something.”

She smiled her understanding, and Kal felt a mixture of affection and respect. It took a lot to ruffle this woman, he realised.

Which shouldn’t surprise him — she had taken an alien baby and loved him as if he were her son.

Jonathan arrived with their bags. “Thank you,” Lois said as she took them.

“Where is our spacecraft?” Kal asked.

“I’ve hidden it under a shrub,” Jonathan replied. “When it is dark you and I will go in the truck and bring it here.”

“Where will we put it?”

“In the barn, next to the other one.”

“The other one?”

“The one that brought you the first time.”

“You kept it?” Kal asked.

“We kept it hidden,” Jonathan amended. “We always feared

what would happen if people knew too much about you. We didn’t want you to be hunted or researched or harassed.”

“Thank you,” Kal said.

“We’ll leave you to freshen up,” Martha said. “Supper will be ready whenever you are.” She turned to leave, but Lois caught her arm. “Yes, honey?”

“Could I possibly have a shower?” Lois asked.

“Of course,” Martha said.

“Do you have enough water?” Kal asked.

“We have all the water you need,” she told him. “Take as long as you like.” She turned again.

This time it was Kal who stalled her. Martha looked up at him. “Thank you,” he said. “Mom.”

Martha turned quickly to follow Jonathan through the doorway, but she wasn’t quick enough to conceal the gush of her tears.

The door shut, and Kal turned to Lois and took her into his arms. For long moments, he held her, drawing strength from the familiarity he found in her. Everything else had shifted, but Lois — Lois still felt the same in his arms.

When she backed away, she was smiling. “Wanna have a shower with me?” she said.

“You said this is your planet? Your country?”

“It is,” Lois said. “I’m not exactly sure which state, but we are somewhere in the Midwest of the United States of America.”

“So Metropolis is somewhere close?”

She grinned, and her hand floated across his cheek, past his chin and down his neck. “Relatively speaking,” she said.

“Do you want to go there now? We should find your family.”

“We will,” she said. “But tonight is for you and your parents.”

“My *parents*,” Kal said in amazement.

“They seem like very special people,” Lois said. She looked around the room. “They kept hoping you would return. For twelve years, they didn’t give up.”

“I hurt them,” Kal said with deep regret.

“You had no choice,” Lois said. “Your father, Jor-El, said you were to be left here unless it was critical that you return to lead New Krypton. I trust Kip; I trust that he would have only taken you if there were no other options.”

“I’m glad,” Kal said. “I’m glad for them that I had to leave New Krypton.” He slid his fingers lovingly through Lois’s hair. “If you hadn’t come to me, they would have spent the rest of their lives wondering ... grieving.”

Her hand had drifted lower inside his shirt, and everything except being with his wife faded to insignificance. Kal leant forward and took her mouth with burning intent.

Lois broke away and laughed at his breathlessness. “Shower first,” she told him.

“Together?”

She grinned. “Absolutely.”

#### Part 40

An hour later, Martha looked up from her food preparations as Clark and Lois walked into her kitchen. They were clean and dressed, Clark wearing the larger pieces of his former clothing — although they were stretched to the maximum — and Lois in the smaller pieces — although they threatened to swamp her completely.

Martha smiled, hoping it looked like welcome and not a reaction to their concocted outfits. “I see you found everything you needed,” she said.

“Yes, thank you,” Lois replied.

Martha’s gaze rested on her son; she was constantly drawn back to him. “Jonathan is in the barn doing the chores,” she said.

“I’ll go and help him,” Clark said.

Martha hid her smile, remembering the little boy who had

stopped in her kitchen only long enough to collect two handfuls of food before tearing outside to help his father. “Once you’re done, it will be dark enough to take the truck,” she said.

Clark nodded his understanding. He dipped to kiss Lois — fully on her mouth and with an unhurried composure that trumpeted his feelings for her. Then he stepped towards the door.

“Do you want me to point you in the right direction?” Martha asked.

Her son shook his head. “No, thanks,” he said with a smile that came aching close to the carefree ones she’d been treated to for fifteen years. “Let’s see if I can remember.”

He shut the door, and Martha turned to Lois. “We’ll have a meal ready for them when they get back,” she said.

“I’m not good in the kitchen,” Lois warned.

“That’s OK,” Martha said. “It is a joy to be cooking for more than just myself and Jonathan. You can sit, and we’ll talk.”

“I could probably do something,” Lois offered warily. “Something simple that I can’t ruin.”

Martha smiled. “No, you sit. I’m sure we have plenty to talk about.”

Lois sat at the table. “Yes.”

Martha dropped low to open the oven door and check the progress of the roast chicken. “I’m not sure how to say this without sounding rude,” she said as she straightened and closed the oven door. “But I’ve worked out who you are. I didn’t realise at first, but then the penny dropped. You’re Lois Lane, the Metropolis reporter who was on the Mission to Mars.”

Lois nodded. “Yes,” she said. “I am.”

“The news reports said something went terribly wrong and they lost contact with the Mission. After two very anxious days of waiting and hoping, EPRAD formally announced that there was no hope and they believed all on board had perished.”

Lois took a tottery breath, and her eyes glistened with tears. “My family think I’m dead.”

Martha nodded. “It was big news.”

“Did you see my parents?” Lois asked. “Were they on the news? Did they look like they were coping?”

“I remember your father gave an interview. He was shocked and distraught, but he spoke with calm dignity about his pride in his daughter. I think your mother was in the background, but she didn’t speak.”

“They were together?”

“Yes. And your sister was there, too.” Martha hesitated. “Do you want to call them? You can — the telephone is in the hallway.”

“No,” Lois said. “I’ve thought about it, and I want to go to Metropolis and see them in person.”

Martha checked the saucepans on the stove. “Are you sure?” she asked gently.

Lois nodded. “Yes. I don’t think Mom would cope with a phone call. She would probably imagine the worst and think it was a prank and that would send her into a spin. It is better that I go tomorrow. That way, I can be there to help her through the shock.” She looked at Martha. “Clark doesn’t have to come.”

“I can’t imagine Clark allowing you to go alone.”

“It will be hard for you to let him go again so soon after getting him back.”

“It won’t be hard at all,” Martha said as her joy bubbled again. “Knowing he will come back is enough.”

Lois smiled. “And I need to see Perry White, too — that also needs to be done in person.”

“You’ll fly?” Martha tossed the question over her shoulder, but hesitated long enough to catch Lois’s reaction.

“Yes,” Lois said. “It would take too long to drive. And if the plight of the Mission to Mars was big news, I imagine my face was plastered over every news outlet around the nation.”

There was nothing in Lois’s reply to give Martha any clues to

answer the question within her question. “Yes, it was.”

“I really don’t want someone to recognise me before I see my parents. And Perry.”

“He is from your paper, isn’t he?”

“Yes.”

Martha dried her hands on a tea towel. “He was also on the news reports. He looked like a broken man.”

“Perry pretends that very little penetrates that gruff exterior of his, but under it all, he has the softest of hearts. Every time I think about swinging into his office . . .” Lois stopped, her eyes dreamy with a faraway look, and her mouth curved to a nostalgic smile. Then she refocused on Martha and said, “I think this needs to be handled very carefully. I think we need to decide on the exact details of our story and then go to someone we trust — Perry — and have him help us through this.”

“I agree.”

“It’s not just about giving the Planet the exclusive. We need to realise we are sitting on the biggest story of the century, and if the wrong people got hold of it, Kal . . . Clark is the one who stands to lose the most.”

Martha felt the deepening of their bond. “We believed it was imperative that we protect his secret,” she said. “The possible consequences of it becoming public knowledge were too awful to risk.”

Lois nodded. “And you did protect him. There was never even the whisper of someone from another planet living on Earth.” She focussed on Martha, her brown eyes solemn. “I don’t think he has any concept of how total will be the invasion of his privacy if the real facts are known.”

Martha sat at the table, the meal forgotten for a moment. “Before we decide what we are going to tell the world, can I know what *did* happen?”

“My life pod landed on a planet called New Krypton,” Lois said. “The leader of this troubled and volatile planet was a tall, dark, and very handsome man who captivated my heart with his honesty, his integrity, and his humility.”

Martha smiled. Having seen them together, it was easy to imagine. “Clark was the *leader*?”

Lois nodded. “That’s why he had to go back. They needed the stability only he could bring.”

“And now?”

“Now he can never go back.”

Martha let that settle in her mind. Her son could not be taken away again.

“We need a cover story,” Lois said. “I’ve been thinking about it.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Martha said as they shared a conspiratorial smile.

“I think we should say that my life pod landed somewhere on Earth. Somewhere very, very remote.”

“Africa?”

“Perhaps. The Congo, maybe?”

“Sounds good,” Martha said. “How did Clark happen to be there?”

“What did you say when he disappeared?”

“The truth. That he was here one night and gone the next morning. That we knew nothing, had heard nothing, saw nothing.”

Lois sighed. “Oh, Martha,” she said. “That would have been so heartbreaking.”

“It was,” Martha acknowledged. “They were long and hard years. But one look at Clark today, and all that pain melted to insignificance.”

Lois reached across the table and laid her hand on Martha’s arm for a moment. “We need to make sure it’s possible for him to go on being Clark Kent, all-American farm boy.”

“Yes.”

“Let’s say he was kidnapped twelve years ago ... by ... a criminal element ... illegal importers ... drug runners ... working out of The Congo.”

“And they wanted Clark because ... ”

“Mistaken identity. They got the wrong guy and took him to The Congo. When they discovered he was not who they wanted, they abandoned him deep in the jungle.”

“So, unable to get home, he ... ”

“Met a local tribe and lived with them,” Lois said. “We’ll say the drug runners roughed him up a little; that he had a head wound and suffered from amnesia.”

“Is that a little implausible?” Martha asked doubtfully.

“Yes,” Lois said, grinning. “But it’s more plausible than saying he was abducted by aliens who took him back to their planet to rule over them because he was the lost son of their two most important houses.”

“When you put it like that ... ”

“Who can disprove it?” Lois said. “Clark *does* have gaps in his memory. He *was* missing for twelve years. He *is* back now.”

“So because of the amnesia, he was unable to come home ... or contact us.”

“That’s good,” Lois said. “Then Clark found my pod — and it’s logical that when the Mission hit problems, they would try to get it back to Earth. He took me to the tribe and looked after me. Being with me jogged his memory, and he began to remember English, and we pieced together what had happened, and some of his memory returned ... and so we came home,” she finished triumphantly.

“How are we going to explain getting back into the United States?”

Lois thought for a moment. “We’ll be vague about the detail, and we’ll say we both wanted to be reunited with our families privately before our story became public. I doubt the media will grab hold of that issue too thoroughly because, believe me, there will be plenty else for them to write about.”

“You think they’ll buy that?”

“If we hint that the authorities knew and helped us get to our families, they’re not going to disagree, because to do so would admit they had let ... ” Lois grinned. “... unauthorised aliens through the border.”

“You’ll say you and Clark fell in love?”

“Yes. We are both determined that whatever else the future brings, we are going to be together. We are married, and that has to be a part of the story.”

Martha smiled and absently folded the tea towel. “You know, I thought many times about the girl who would capture the heart of my son. I knew she would have to be someone very special — someone who could look past his differences and see his wonderful heart.”

“When I met him, he wasn’t the one with differences,” Lois said. “I was.”

“It was Clark who had to look past the differences?”

“He treated me with such consideration — more than consideration. He did everything in his power to protect me and see that I wasn’t harmed in any way.” Lois thought for a moment. “You are partly right, though. I did need to look past some differences, some things I found strange, but once I did, I saw the biggest, most loving heart I have ever known.”

Martha felt her tears rise. “That’s Clark,” she said.

“Some people on his planet were cruel to him,” Lois said.

“Not physically but emotionally. They wiped his memory and told him he’d been asleep since babyhood. They tried to mould him into what they wanted him to be.”

“Did they succeed?”

“Perhaps on the surface,” Lois said. “But they couldn’t change who he was ... who he is.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.” Martha stood and turned down

the heat under the vegetables. “I know you must be very eager to see your family — to tell them you are safe — but I’m wondering if you would like to go on a shopping trip with me tomorrow morning.”

“I don’t have access to any money,” Lois said. “My credit cards - ”

Martha leant across the table put her hand over Lois’s. “The farm had a good year,” she said.

“But - ”

“Lois,” Martha said earnestly. “You married my son. He has a bank account that is quite impressive for a fifteen year old with a part time job, but it’s not going to go far now he’s a married man.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Lois said. “Everything I have is Clark’s, too.”

“Exactly,” Martha said. “And everything we have ... If it can help our son and his wife — I can’t think of a better use for it.”

Lois still hesitated. “Are you sure?”

“You’re family now.”

“Thank you.”

Martha smiled as she sat down. “We need to buy you clothes — something that doesn’t look like it belonged to a teenage boy over a decade ago. And we can buy clothes for Clark.”

“I will enjoy that,” Lois said.

“I will, too,” Martha said. “I’ve never had a daughter. We could buy some make-up and maybe some perfume and - ”

“Chocolate!”

Martha grinned. “Definitely chocolate.”

“Clark doesn’t remember chocolate. I can’t wait to give him some.”

“We’ll buy some of his other favourite foods too — and bring them home to surprise him.” Martha felt a well of anticipation erupt inside her. “This is going to be fun.”

Lois grinned widely. “Where will we go?”

“We’ll go to Wichita. No one knows me there.”

“So we’re in Kansas?” Lois said.

“Yes. The local town is called Smallville.”

“How long since the Mission to Mars? How long have I been missing?”

“Nearly three months.”

“Three months?”

“You seemed surprised.”

“I am. But Tek warned us that the time could be different.”

“Tek?”

“Tek’s father, Kip, is the one who took your son,” Lois said.

“But he is also the one who ensured Clark had a way to come back to you. Without him, Clark would never have come to Earth the first time and would have died as a baby.”

“Why did he have to go back?”

“It’s his story to tell you,” Lois said. “But I can say that you should be very, very proud of him. And you should realise that the foundations you gave him — foundations that valued justice and peace and equality — meant that an entire planet had a chance at life.”

“We didn’t need to teach him much,” Martha said. “All we did was build on what was already there. From the time he was very young, he hated injustice; his heart was always to protect, to help, to serve.”

Lois smiled. “That’s Clark. Did he get hurt much? Did he get into fights at school? Trying to protect others?”

The door opened while Martha was still trying to determine the best way to tell Lois that Clark being physically hurt was not something she’d had to worry about. He walked in, followed by Jonathan. Clark’s eyes immediately sought Lois and lingered there, smiling his joy at seeing her again.

“All done?” Martha asked the men.

Jonathan nodded. “It’s bigger than the first one, but we got it

on the truck without too many problems.” He crossed the kitchen. “We’ll wash up for supper.”

“Can you manage without Lois for a few moments?” Clark asked his mother.

“Sure.”

Lois stood and they walked out, hand in hand, leaving Martha smiling as tears of pure happiness rolled slowly down her cheeks.

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Once they were in Kal’s bedroom, he closed the door behind them. He looked at Lois, his eyebrows lifted slightly, and his mouth shaped to a bemused smile.

“Yes?” she said.

He didn’t say anything — just looked at her, his expression drifting between humour and incredulity.

“What?” she said.

He raised his hands and then let them flop against his sides. “I have no idea how to tell you this,” he said.

“What?” Lois asked as her curiosity approached boiling point. “You remember something? You remember everything? You saw your first spaceship and everything came back?”

Kal shook his head. “Not exactly.”

“*Not exactly?* What does that mean?”

He grinned, although it didn’t dissolve his look of befuddlement. “How many times have you looked through my clothes?”

“What?!”

His grin broadened. “Just answer the question, beautiful lady. How many times have you peeked?”

“Once ... before we were married.”

“And after?”

“More than once,” she admitted, biting on her lower lip to contain her smile.

Kal grinned. “Good.”

Lois approached him and firmly grasped his shoulders. “I don’t know what you’re trying to tell me, but you’d better spit it out, or I’m going to use some of my superior strength on you.”

“Really?” he said.

“Really.”

Kal stretched his arms wide, opening himself to her. “Go right ahead,” he invited with a dashing grin. “Take your best shot.”

Lois faltered. “Kal,” she said. “You’re worrying me.”

“There’s nothing to worry about. It’s just ... well ... life on Earth isn’t going to be quite like either of us expected.”

A heavy dread settled through her. “Oh, no,” she groaned. “You *are* married to someone else.”

He laughed. “No, no, honey, I’m not married — not to anyone other than my wonderful wife.”

“Then what?”

“Well, it seems before I was taken to New Krypton ... I had developed some ... unusual abilities.”

Lois felt her mouth gape. “You can see through clothes?” she gasped.

“I haven’t actually tried clothes,” he said. “But I can definitely see through the barn wall.”

Lois stared at him as her mind scrambled to make sense of what he had said. “Can you heat things?” she asked weakly.

“I haven’t tried — but Dad says I set a few things on fire before I learnt how to control it.”

“Could you move — very, very quickly?”

“Yep.”

“And you were impervious to bullets and stronger than rock?”

“Yep.”

“With breath that froze?”

“Yep.”

“And hearing far beyond normal?”

“Yep.”

Lois sank onto the bed. “Oh, my goodness.”

Kal sat next to her. “Dad and I arrived at the spaceship — just him and me — and he said ‘OK, Son, put her on the truck.’ I looked at the spaceship and looked at the truck and thought he’d lost his grip on reality. Then he said, ‘Go on, you can do it.’ I asked him if he was joking, and he said I could have done it when I was thirteen.”

“So you ... walked up to the spaceship and simply lifted it into the truck?”

“Yep. As easy as looking at it.”

Lois chuckled. “So how many times have you looked through my clothes?” she asked.

Kal didn’t answer — not verbally. He simply leant back and did a slow scan down her body, his mouth stretching to an appreciative smile. When he reached her knees, he looked up and said, “Once — but that won’t be the last time.”

Lois stared at his chest, right where she knew there was a particularly chiselled pectoral muscle. She visually peeled back his shirt. The colour faded, and she could see his chest — although it seemed as if she were looking through misty fog.

“What are you looking at?” Kal teased.

“The sexiest chest I have ever seen,” she replied.

“Can you see just like you could on New Krypton?”

Lois shook her head. “No,” she said. “It’s not as clear.”

“I think there is something on New Krypton that caused powers in your Earth body and something on Earth that causes powers in my Kryptonian body,” Kal said.

“You think I’ll lose them now I’m back?”

“You said you weren’t like this before you left Earth.”

“No, I wasn’t.”

His eyes found hers as his fingers gently lifted her chin. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“I’m not sure I am,” Lois said. “They made me uncomfortable at times.”

“Dad said I felt like that when they first started appearing. I was worried I would hurt someone, and my vision was not exactly the easiest thing to deal with.” He stood from the bed. “So much so, my parents got me these.” He opened the drawer, took out a pair of glasses, and put them on.

“Wow,” Lois said. “They suit you — they really suit you.”

“Would you mind if I wore them?”

“No. Can you see through things with them?”

“No,” Kal said. “That was the point of getting them.” He slid them down his nose and looked over the frame. “But if I ever do this, you’ll know I’m taking shameless advantage of being a Kryptonian man who is in love with an Earth woman.” He pushed the glasses back into place and sat next to her. “There’s something else, Lois.”

“What?”

“Dad says I could fly.”

“Fly?”

He nodded.

“You mean across a field?”

“Well, yes,” Kal said. “But more than that. Just before I left, I ... ah ... flew around the planet ... in just a few seconds.”

Lois gasped. Then she laughed. “I wonder if that is what Martha meant when she asked if we would fly to Metropolis.”

“Could be.”

“Is it possible?” Lois asked. “Is it possible you could fly me to Metropolis? Without a plane?”

“Dad says I took both him and Mom flying before I left.”

“Oh.”

“We kept it a secret,” Kal said. “From everyone.”

“Well, of course. If anyone found out about this ... on top of being an alien ... your life would spiral completely out of control.”

“Dad said they were worried that if people knew about my powers, some would fear me and others would want to study me.”

Lois swept back a few strands of his dark hair from the side of his glasses. “None of this changes how I feel about you,” she said.

He rested his head against hers. “I already knew that,” he said.

“The first time I saw through the wall — you were remarkably calm and accepting about it,” Lois said. “Do you think it’s possible that you weren’t completely freaked out because you’d already experienced having powers?”

“I don’t know,” Kal said. “But it’s just one more thing that binds you and me together.”

Lois smiled. “I’ve already said that you’re stuck with me.” She stood. “Come on, we should go and eat.”

“OK.”

She paused. “There are probably a few things I should tell you before we go.”

“Like?”

“Your mom will give us a plate each, and her expectation will be that you eat yours and I eat mine.”

“We don’t share?”

“Not usually.”

A slight blush crossed his cheeks. “Oh, the pudding.”

Lois smiled her reassurance. “If nothing else, your parents are used to dealing with a few surprises from their son. I doubt they’re going to be thrown by you eating a scone with a fork.”

He didn’t look convinced.

“I know how overwhelming this is for you,” Lois said. “But I’m here to help — just as you helped me adjust to life on New Krypton. And even though all this seems so strange, it will help you remember. You’ll start feeling at home before you know it.”

“I hope so,” Kal said. “Because it’s all just a blur.”

Lois kissed him, hoping to dispel his discouragement. “Guess what food we have,” she said brightly.

“I don’t know. Even if I saw it, I probably wouldn’t be able to name it.”

“Chicken,” Lois said.

Kal gave her a small smile. “I do remember the last time I ate chicken. I was in a cave in the company of the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.”

“Tonight you won’t have to imagine.”

Kal opened the bedroom door. “Lois?”

“Yes?”

“How do you feel about calling me ‘Clark’?”

“If that’s what you want, I’m fine with it.”

“I think it’s the least I can do for them ... for Mom and Dad.”

“Does that make me Lois Kent?” she asked.

He thought for a moment. “If that’s what you want,” he said.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “But whether I’m Lois Lane or Lois Kent, it won’t change that I’m your wife.”

“Nothing will change that,” he said with a smile. “Nothing.” Together, they went down the stairs and to the kitchen.

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Clark ate chicken. And roast potatoes. And later, a thing called apple pie that his mom told him he’d eaten by the truckload when he was a kid.

Tasting it now, that didn’t surprise him. With the white fluffy stuff called cream, it was incredible.

As they ate, Clark spoke about life on New Krypton. About the threat of Civil War, about the two sides, about Jor-El and La and how they had given him a chance for life. About how he was born to lead a unified people. About how a stray alien woman had landed on his planet and turned his world right way up.

He answered his parents’ questions about food and farming and friends. They were interested, but never insistent.

So he was able to bypass his marriage to Za and the means Nor had used to depose him.

“Lois said you can never return to your planet,” Martha said.

Clark hesitated. Lois didn’t. “Someone threatened me,” she said. “Clark made a decision to protect me, but that involved giving up all of his rights — including his right to live.”

“They wanted to kill their leader?” Martha asked, clearly horrified.

Clark pushed away his empty bowl and took Lois’s hand in his. “Imagine this,” he said with a smile. “Someone has a gun trained on Lois. I’m there. The gun fires. What happens next?”

“You either move her out of the path of the bullet or get between her and it,” Martha said mildly.

“She wouldn’t be harmed?”

“Not if you were there.”

Clark felt his grin widen. “Exchange Lois with me, and you’ll know what happened.”

His mom’s hand shot to her mouth. “Lois had powers?”

“On New Krypton, yes,” he said.

“Do you still have them?” Jonathan asked Lois.

“They’re fading fast.”

Martha looked at Lois. “You saved our boy?” she said.

“He wouldn’t have needed saving if he hadn’t offered his life to protect me.”

Martha’s eyes swung from Clark to Lois and back again.

“Seems to me you’re a good team,” she said.

Clark kissed his wife’s hand. “The best,” he said.

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It was late when Jonathan and Martha retired to their bedroom. Clark and Lois hugged both of them before they left the kitchen.

“I *will* be here in the morning,” Clark promised gravely as they moved away.

Their answering smiles held such utter contentment that it warmed him inside.

When they’d gone, Clark turned to Lois.

She smiled. “You have plans?” she guessed when she saw his face.

He nodded.

“Let’s see,” she said as her fingers curled through his hair.

“Do your plans involve being with your wife?”

“Of course.”

“Alone?”

“Definitely.”

“Perhaps a little physical exercise after those long hours cooped up in the spaceship?”

“Precisely.”

“And you’d like to go to your bedroom?”

He grinned. “You got it.”

#### Part 41

Clark took Lois’s hand and led her up the stairs. When they got to his bedroom, he sorted through his closet and pulled out two sweaters. He gave her the smaller of the two.

She appraised it dubiously. “You want me to put clothes *on*?”

He smiled at her bewilderment. “Yes, please. As you said, I have plans.”

She pulled on the sweater. It was too big for her, and she looked so cute, he almost abandoned his idea in favour of staying right here with his wife.

Almost.

Except tomorrow might be too late.

Clark removed his glasses and put them in the drawer. “Walk with me?” he invited as he held his hand towards her.

She slipped her hand into his and led her through the tranquil silence of the house and outside.

It was a night of perfect clarity with air so crisp, every breath

was invigorating. Once in the field, they stopped and looked up, surveying the heavens.

“I wonder how they’re doing,” Lois said.

“I hope for the best for them.”

They continued walking, and Clark’s thoughts remained with the people he had left behind. Lois seemed engrossed in her own musings, too.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked.

“Tomorrow.”

“Your parents?”

“Uhm.”

“Are you worried?”

“Not worried exactly,” Lois said. “I’m a little apprehensive about what we’ll find.”

“Whatever we find, I’ll be there for you.”

Lois’s smile didn’t quite dispel her uneasiness. “I know that,” she said. “It’s just ... your parents are so ... *together*. My parents — they’re not like yours. Please don’t expect them to be like your parents.”

“They’re your parents, and they love you. That’s enough for me.”

Lois stopped and turned to him, still concerned. “I can’t even begin to guess how Mom will react to you. And that’s without her knowing you’re an alien.”

He laughed nervously. “It can’t be that bad, can it?”

“With Mom, it can be anything.”

“Would it be better if you go in by yourself first — let her deal with one shock at a time?”

“Perhaps it would be better,” Lois said slowly. She squeezed his hand. “But I’ve got used to doing things together.”

“Then I’ll be there,” Clark promised. “And whatever happens, we’ll deal with it together.”

“Thank you.”

He pulled her into his arms and held her until her tension subsided. “Lois?” he said. “I want to fly.”

“Have you tried yet?” she asked. “Since arriving home, I mean?”

“No. I want you to be ...” He smiled an appeal for her understanding. “I’m not sure about this ...”

She hugged him, and her touch filled him with everything he needed. “Do you remember anything about how to do it?” she asked.

“Nothing, but Dad says that when they questioned me about it, I said I willed myself to do it.”

Lois stepped back. “OK,” she said with a smile of support.

Clark stood there, feet planted, feeling foolish.

“Perhaps you could lift your arms,” Lois suggested.

He did ... and the ground dropped away. He looked down at Lois.

“You’re doing it,” she called excitedly. “You’re really flying.”

Clark drifted left and then floated right. He rose higher, accelerated, and carved a wide circle with Lois as its centre. He elevated smoothly, heading north, and then turned and flew a straight line south, five yards above Lois. He soared high — it was exhilarating. When he looked down, he saw her small figure looking up, watching him intently. He swooped, slowing as he neared her so he could safely brush her raised hand as he passed her.

He zigged left and zagged right, gaining height. He hovered and surveyed his parents’ farm and the surrounding fields. He zoomed through the darkness — revelling in the power and the freedom to move so effortlessly.

Only when he had complete confidence in his control did Clark land at Lois’s feet with a soft thud.

She threw her arms around his neck. “Clark!” she cried. “That is amazing. *You* are amazing.”

“Fly with me?” he offered.

“I’d love to.”

He’d picked her up, and her arms tightened around his neck. “Ready?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Thank you for trusting me.”

She answered with a quick kiss on his cheek.

Clark rose slowly until the ground was far below. He levelled out and flew in no specific direction. “Are you OK?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “This is incredible.”

“Isn’t it?” He smiled at her rapt expression. “Anything in particular you’d like us to do?”

“No,” she said. “Just being up here. Alone. In the dark. It feels like there is only us.”

“Lois,” Clark said. “These powers I have — I don’t know yet what they mean for us.”

“But you do know you will not be able to ignore someone who needs the sort of help only you can give.”

“How do you feel about that?”

“I won’t pretend that I’m used to the idea that my husband can fly, but I’m certainly used to the idea that he will always help whenever and wherever he can.”

“And when that interferes with *us*?”

“I’ll be able to remember times like this.”

“However this works, whatever we decide to do ... in my heart, there will always be only you.”

“I know that,” Lois said. She lovingly skimmed her hand along his jaw. “Is that why you brought me up here? To talk about how your powers will affect us?”

“Partly.”

“What was the other reason?”

He grinned. “To see if you can fly.”

She gasped, and her grip on him tightened. Then she matched his grin. “You’ll catch me if I fall?”

“Always.”

Clark held out his arms, separating their bodies. A few seconds later, she lifted from him. She looked at him, her eyebrows high with surprise. “We’re flying,” she said as if she couldn’t quite believe her own words.

Clark smiled at her expression. “We are,” he agreed.

Lois’s peal of laughter bounced across the moonlit sky.

“I thought we should do this tonight,” Clark explained. “We don’t know how long your powers will last, and the chance to fly together — like this — we couldn’t miss that.”

“Clark, it’s a perfect idea.”

They flew side by side, they strayed apart and came back together, they joined hands, they flipped and capered and laughed and tried to outdo each other with more daring and extravagant moves.

Through it all, Clark’s attention didn’t waver from Lois. He watched for signs that she was tiring, but it was more than that. Witnessing her exhilaration was as enthralling as flying.

Finally, Lois began to lose altitude, and Clark flew to her and put both hands on her waist. Her euphoria shone from her sparkling eyes and exultant smile.

“Clark,” she enthused. “That was incredible.”

He kissed her wide smile. “Dance with me?”

“I’d love to,” she said. “You can choose the song.”

He drew her very close so her body aligned with his. “You know which song,” he murmured into her ear.

He felt her smile. She gathered a couple of deep breaths and began to sing.

*“Love me tender,*

*Love me sweet,*

*Never let me go.*

*You have made my life complete,*

*And I love you so.”*

She sang; they danced.  
 Slow songs, fast songs.  
 Love songs, dance songs.  
 Time passed unnoticed.  
 Then, they went back to Clark's bedroom and tumbled into his bed.

They made love — hot, sizzling love driven by the adrenalin of having romped across the skies together.

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Clark looked up from the fence he was repairing as the car shot up the driveway and came to a stop.

He downed his tools and walked over.  
 His mother emerged from one side of the car.  
 His wife from the other.

She began to walk towards him. The sight of her hobbled his feet and stripped the air from his lungs.

She was wearing a black half-gown that stopped mid-thigh. Her legs were covered in a black wispy material that accentuated their sleek shapeliness. She wore black, raised-at-the-back shoes that he was sure somehow contributed to the exaggerated swivel of her hips as she walked — a swivel that was mesmerising.

Clark forced his eyes up, relishing every inch of leg until he again reached where the half-gown clung to her thighs. He followed as it tantalisingly rounded the contour of her hips and cinched into her small waist. The top half of her body was covered in a shiny black and white garment — a garment buttoned taut across her ribs. He leapt from button to button — and then reeled. The top button was undone, revealing the very definite suggestion of the curves that lay below.

He forced his focus to her face. She was smiling — smiling in a way that said she was fully aware of the effect she was having on him.

"Clark," she said, in a low, slightly raspy voice that melded every image in his bombarded brain and completed his total surrender to the lure of this woman.

"L ... Lois," he choked. He took a faltering step closer. "Lois?"

She grinned. "I bought some clothes," she said. "I ... I can see that."

She slowly rotated, pausing to give him the opportunity to admire the way the black material hugged her bottom. "Do you like my new clothes?" she asked when she was facing him again.

'Like' wasn't quite how he would describe what they did to him. "You look unbelievable," he said in a voice that didn't sound normal at all. He gestured helplessly towards her. "Is this how Earth women normally dress?"

"Something like this, yes." She shot him a smile. "You better get used to it, handsome, because as soon as women get a glimpse of your smile, this'll be tame compared with what you encounter."

He tried to piece together what she was saying and managed to get the bare gist of her meaning. "I'm not sure I can control what I will encounter," he said. "But I'm sure I know exactly what I'll be taking and what I'll have absolutely no interest in."

"And that would be?"

"If it's Lois Lane-Kent, I'll take everything she's offering. If it's anyone else, I'm not interested."

"You *are* gorgeous, you know," she said. "You *will* have women flocking around you."

He gestured to his wife in her new clothes. "And you're not expecting men to notice this?" he said with another smile of appreciation.

"Ah, but I've had a lot of years to practise fending them off. You, on the other hand, may need some tuition." She grinned. "We bought clothes for you, too. I can't wait to see you in a pair of jeans."

"Jeans?"

"You'll see."

She flicked one eye closed in a way that was far too much for his already weakened resistance. He stepped right up to her and lowered his mouth to her ear. "I do like your new clothes," he murmured. "But I'm most interested in taking them off."

Lois put her hand on his chest. "I'm sure you'll get a chance to take them off," she promised him. "But first you should come and see what else we bought."

She took his hand and led him to the car.

Clark followed, still not fully recovered.

\*\*\*

In Clark's bedroom, he dressed in a pair of the blue pants that Lois called jeans. She had him turn around. "Uhhh," she said.

He turned back to her. "Uhhh what?" he demanded, his grin pressing for release.

She wouldn't tell him, but remembering how much he had enjoyed her turning around in the black half-gown, he could hazard a guess.

"Which shirt do you want me to wear?" he asked.

"I don't," Lois said. "But if you must wear a shirt, try this one." She rummaged through a bag and tossed him a garment of dark blue material.

He pulled it over his head and stepped to the mirror. "The sleeves are kind of short," he noted.

Lois came up behind him and draped her arms around his neck as they both looked into the mirror. "Yeah," she agreed. One hand skimmed down his upper arm.

He turned and brushed back her shiny dark hair. "Did you deliberately buy shirts with almost no sleeves?" he asked.

"Yep," she admitted without hesitation. "I've resigned myself to two things. First, you cannot be naked all the time. Second, my ability to see through your clothing is fast disappearing. Therefore you can expect a wardrobe of tight shirts, snug fitting jeans, and short sleeves."

He grinned. "And what will you wear?"

"Not this skirt; not right now," she said.

"No arguments there."

She swatted his upper arm. "I'm changing into jeans and a tee-shirt. You have no idea how much I'm hankering for jeans."

Clark watched as Lois slipped off the skirt and peeled the flimsy thing from her legs. She took jeans from a bag and stepped into them. Then she removed the top-half garment and pulled on a white shirt very like his. She lifted her arms above her head and twirled. "Honey," he said. "I liked the black thing you came home in — but those jeans." He leant back on his elbows. "I could watch you in those all day."

"Thank you." She smiled. "We have a few moments before lunch, and your mom said she wouldn't need my help preparing it."

"Really?"

She grinned at his tone. "Actually, I was wondering if you would show me your spaceship. The one that brought you the first time." She held out her hand to help him from the bed.

"The spaceship?" he said, trying not to sound disappointed.

She continued grinning at him. "Come on," she said. "It will be our only chance before we go to Metropolis."

Clark took her hand and allowed her to haul him from the bed. He stood aside to let her through the doorway first and then followed her, his hand resting on the place where the white of her shirt met the blue of the back of her jeans.

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In the barn, Lois looked at the wall of hay bales. "Are they behind that?" she asked.

"Yes." Clark took her hand, and they rose easily over the topmost hay bale and through the gap under the roof of the barn. Once they had landed on the other side, they moved past the spaceship that had brought them to Earth and to the smaller

version behind it.

Lois peered into the capsule, and the size of it tugged at her heart. “Aww, Clark,” she said. “You must have been so small, so alone.”

He nodded. “I was so lucky *they* found me.”

“Yes,” Lois agreed. “I think your parents are exactly what Jor-El and La were hoping for when they decided to send you here.”

“Mom says there’s a box in here. She said they stored some of my things in it.”

Lois surveyed the dusty dimness of the barn. Pushed into the corner was a metal box. “There it is.”

They crossed to it, and Clark lifted the lid. He reached in and brought out a blue blanket. Lois drew her fingers through its softness. Then she noticed a pattern amidst the fluffy fibres. “Look,” she said. “Your crest.”

Clark positioned the blanket so the whole five-sided shape was visible. “Mom said I was wrapped in this when they found me.”

Lois traced her forefinger along the ‘S’, imagining the heartache of one mother as she’d prepared her son for his journey and the wonder of another mother the first time she’d taken her son into her arms.

“Lois!” Clark was leaning into the box.

“What?”

“Look.” He withdrew from the box, holding a globe.

They both stared at it expectantly.

It did nothing.

“Is this one like yours?” Lois whispered.

“Yes,” Clark said. “It is exactly the same as mine. Same size, same colouring.”

“It can’t be yours. Yours is on New Krypton.”

“But it was exactly the same,” Clark insisted. “Do you think this one has a different message?”

“Could it possibly be a copy?” Lois suggested. “Two globes, one message. One on Earth, one on New Krypton.”

“I don’t know,” Clark said. “I wish I could ask Tek.”

They continued waiting ... watching ... wondering.

“Is there anything else in the box?” Lois asked eventually.

Clark was about to hand the globe to Lois when it began to glow from within. Just as in the cave, the globe illuminated an arc that lit the dust particles in the air. Into the image came two men — a man Lois recognised as Kip and a lean, very youthful looking Clark.

Young Clark looked pale and distraught. Lois gripped the hand of the older version as they stood and watched the image together.

“Now you’ve seen the message from the globe,” Kip said. “The message from your father, Jor-El, do you realise that you have no choice?”

“My father is Jonathan Kent.” There was the slightest trace of peevishness in young Clark’s tone.

“No,” Kip said firmly. “Your father is Jor-El. La-Ra is your mother. You are the child of mixed blood. You are the only person who can lead New Krypton to peace.”

“The entire planet?”

“Yes,” Kip said. “If you do not come with me, the mantle will fall to Ked and from him to Nor.”

“If you have other leaders, you do not need me.”

“Ked and Nor are militant South. They are men without conscience. They will use their power — their absolute power — to slaughter anyone who attempts to stand against them. The men of the North will not accept Southern savagery, and Civil War will be inevitable. Our children will have no future.”

“I am young,” Clark said. “I have no knowledge of your planet, of your history, of your laws. I have no experience in leadership. Certainly, I am not equipped to lead an entire planet.

*I can’t even communicate without the aid of this globe.”*

*“All understanding needed is innate to you. The knowledge can be taught. We have technology to deal with the language barriers.”*

*“No,” Clark said, shaking his head. “There has to be someone else.”*

*“There is no one else. You are the only one both sides will accept.”*

*Clark stared ahead.*

*“You were born to do this,” Kip said. “It is your destiny and your duty.”*

*Clark closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I need to speak with my parents about this.”*

*“You can’t.”*

*Clark’s head shot up, and he stared at Kip. “You cannot be suggesting that I leave without consulting them.”*

*“I’m not suggesting — I’m telling you that they must know nothing about this.”*

*Horror swept across Clark’s face. “You want me to leave without saying anything to them? To have them find me missing and never know where I went?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“I can’t do that,” Clark said resolutely. “I can’t do that to them.”*

*“You have no choice.”*

*“You need to find someone else to lead your planet. I am not the person for this task.”*

*“The future of an entire people — your people — rests with you.”*

*Clark turned and stepped away. “I can’t leave without talking to my parents first,” he declared with finality.*

*Kip moved quickly in front of Clark and gripped his arm. Clark’s face displayed his shock as his eyes shot into those of the older man. “I am just as strong as you are,” Kip said.*

*“You’re going to force me to come with you?” Clark said with challenge in his tone.*

*“You are Kal-El,” Kip said with quiet certainty. “There will be no need to force you.”*

*“Then why the demonstration of strength?”*

*“Because you need to understand that by telling them, you place them at great risk.”*

*“By not telling them, I break their hearts.”*

*“As I have already told you, there are men on New Krypton — men of bad character, men whose hearts lust insatiably for power and dominion.”*

*“What does that have to do with my parents?”*

*“We must ensure there is no way for Earth Scientists to discover our planet,” Kip said. “We must leave no trace — no possible trace that could lead back to New Krypton.”*

*“My parents would never say anything.”*

*“I believe I have entered this planet’s atmosphere in such a way that we will not be detected, but there is no way to be completely sure. Your first spaceship will remain here. Together, these add up to risk. If any Earth person has knowledge, the risk increases significantly.”*

*“Risk to whom? The people of your planet?”*

*“No. The people of this planet.”*

*“How?”*

*“The people of this planet are still looking for life outside of themselves. Should they suspect our existence, they will attempt to contact us.”*

*“If you think my parents would go running to the media with stories of UFOs and alien encounters, you don’t know them at all. They -”*

*“I know them better than you think, and I know they did everything to protect you while you were in their care. But with you gone, that loyalty may fade. Or they could be tricked into*

giving information. Or they could be tortured into it.”

“Why is it so imperative that the people of Earth know nothing of New Krypton?”

“On this planet, you are a man set apart,” Kip said.

“Because of your differing physiology, you have advantages. Those advantages can be used for good or for evil.”

“I understand that.”

“You have the heart and the character to always choose to use them for good. Not everyone does.”

Clark’s colour faded, and his head dropped. “You think people like me could come here — come to Earth and use their powers to hurt and destroy?” he said, his voice stricken.

“Your appearance on New Krypton will infuriate Nor. If he should have any suspicion there are other peoples to conquer, he will pursue them. Nor’s heart — enabled by the powers you have — that is a terrifying proposition.”

“I can’t just leave them,” Clark said, his voice shaking with desperation.

“On our home planet, I keep all records of this planet heavily encrypted. I have shared this with no one, not even my son. Until now, I have done this partly to protect you, but also to protect the people of this planet.”

Clark said nothing.

Kip pushed home his advantage. “Should Nor come here, he will relish taking revenge on those people who cared for you and enabled you to take the mantle of leadership on New Krypton.”

“I can’t do it to them,” Clark said desperately. “I can’t do it.”

Kip laid a hand on his arm — a gentler hand than before. “I give you my word that if — after you have provided an heir to take your mantle — you should determine that your destiny lies with this planet, I will ensure there is a means for you to return.”

“An heir?” Clark gasped. “That is going to take years.”

“Yes. And in honesty, the likelihood of you ever returning is very slim. I cannot pretend the task of bringing unity is anything other than extremely difficult. And on New Krypton, your life will not be safeguarded the way it is here.”

“I could die?”

“Yes.”

“And then my parents would never know anything.”

“That is most likely.”

“I need to tell them,” Clark insisted brokenly. “I can’t just disappear.”

Kip lifted his hands. “It is your decision, Lord Kal-El,” he said. “But it is my firm belief that any information you tell them will jeopardise their lives and the lives of all people on this planet.”

Clark stared into the distance.

“Are you ready to leave?” Kip asked.

Clark said nothing. He walked away. Three steps later, he turned and looked back.

And two tears ran the length of his cheeks.

As the image faded, Lois wiped her tears from her cheeks and took Clark into her arms. For a long time, they didn’t speak. Lois replayed the words over and over in her mind, holding Clark close, her hand gently strumming across his back.

He unfolded from her and crafted a smile. “Let’s see what else is in the box,” he suggested quietly.

She halted his step away. “Are you all right?”

He nodded. “I’m glad I know. I’m glad Kip had good reasons for what he did.” Clark looked away momentarily. “I’m glad I didn’t just chase after the chance to be the leader of a planet without so much as a second thought to those I would leave behind.”

Lois felt her mouth drop. “You didn’t *really* think you would have done that, did you?”

Clark shrugged. “I didn’t know what else to think,” he said.

“Either Kip took me by force — which seemed impossible since I discovered I had powers — or I went willingly and didn’t stop to tell them.”

Lois traced through the hair above his right ear and slid down to the curve of his jaw. “If you’d told me what you were thinking, I could have told you it simply isn’t possible that you would do anything to hurt your parents without having a very good reason.”

He smiled and kissed her. “Do you want to see what else is in the box?”

She nodded.

Clark handed Lois the globe and reached into the box. He emerged with a long, shiny garment of blue and red. He held it up. It hung — about the length of him — two blue legs, two blue arms, and his ‘S’ emblazoned in red on a yellow background across the chest. Behind the suit hung a red cape. He looked at Lois. “Any ideas?” he said blankly.

She shook her head. “Other than you ... in *that* ... would be dynamite. No need for x-ray vision, that’s for sure.”

“I’m *not* wearing -” Clark stopped and examined the shiny blue suit.

“What is it?” Lois asked quickly.

“This *is* mine,” he said. “Mom made it for me.”

“Costume party?”

“I don’t know what that is. But this was ... this was meant to disguise me.”

Lois’s eyebrows lifted. “Really? Why?”

“So I could be someone other than Clark Kent,” he said as fragments of memory stumbled back.

“Why would you want to be someone -” Lois smiled with sudden understanding. “So you can use your powers and still have a life,” she concluded.

Clark smiled. “Yes. But I don’t think we ever actually used it.”

“I’m sure you didn’t,” Lois said with conviction.

“How do you know?”

“Because it would have been humongous news if someone dressed in *that* had flown in, used massive strength to fix a situation, and then flown away. The only question would have been what got the headline — the flying or the outfit.” She thought for a moment. “The flying would get the headline, but the outfit would get the half-page picture.”

Clark held it up against his body and looked at her with a self-deprecating grin. “What do you think?”

“It could be the only way known to womankind to wrest the attention from your smile.” Lois’s grin faded. “But in all seriousness, do you realise what just happened?”

“Yes,” he replied. “I remembered something about my life here on Earth.”

Lois looked at the globe in her hands. “Do you think it is this?”

“I don’t know. But I think I’ll keep it close.”

“Good idea,” she said. “Then if it does have any more messages, you won’t miss them.” She flashed him a grin. “I’ll take the globe; you bring the suit.”

“You want to take it with us?”

“Absolutely.” She took his hand in masterful fashion. “I am *not* letting my husband loose in a suit like that without having tried it out first.”

“You want me to wear it?”

“You bet I do.”

“Where?”

“In the bedroom.”

“In the -”

“I’ll do you a deal, farm boy,” Lois said. “You wear the suit. I wear the tight skirt. For the first thirty seconds anyway.”

He grinned. “Deal,” he said.

## Part 42

They ate lunch together — Clark, his parents, and his wife.

The women were still buoyant from their shopping trip. Clark continually looked from his mother to his wife, enjoying their effervescence. When his eyes met his father's, they both smiled.

"Clark?"

Lois held a plate towards him — a plate with little brown squares on it. "What is it?" he asked.

"Chocolate," she replied, grinning broadly.

He took a square and put it into his mouth. She was right, it did massage your tongue — but he had much greater reasons to be glad to be alive than a little square of melting sweetness. He looked at his wife and smiled.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. *But not as much as I like you.* Clark turned to his mother. "All the things you and Lois bought this morning — they needed to be paid for, didn't they?"

Martha nodded.

"With ... money?"

"Yes."

"I can't pay you back," Clark said. "Not yet. Not until I get a job."

Martha smiled. "I enjoyed every second of being out with my daughter-in-law. It is a privilege to be able to help you both."

"Thank you," Clark said sincerely. "But I need a job."

"Any ideas?" his father asked.

Clark shrugged. "What were my plans?"

"You planned to go to college," Martha said. "You hadn't fully decided which course."

"It's too late for college now," Clark said. "I have to work so I can support my wife."

"Hey," Lois said as her hand touched his arm. "I have a job, so don't assume that college isn't a possibility for you."

Clark shook his head. "No, I can't go to college," he said firmly. He looked at Lois. "Your job in Metropolis? Do you want to go back to it?"

"Yes, I do," Lois said. "But if we decided that that wasn't best for both of us, I'm confident I could find work at just about any newspaper in the country."

"This afternoon — after we've found your parents — I'll start looking for work."

"I have a better idea," Lois said.

"You do?"

"Remember when you gave the Reports?" she said.

"Remember how I said you were good with words?"

"Yes," he said hesitantly.

"I think that we could be a formidable reporting team," Lois said eagerly. "I could do the bulk of the writing until you catch up with written English again. Until then, I could edit your work and help you."

Clark tried to smother his grimace. "Lois," he said gently. "I appreciate what you're offering, but really, you don't need to coddle me."

"I wouldn't be coddling you," Lois said. "You won't have a job at the Planet for longer than a week if Perry doesn't believe you're up to it. But think about it Clark, your extra skills would be phenomenal. You can see things and hear things —"

"You want me to pry into the business of others?"

"Only if we think they're doing something illegal."

He was torn between her obvious enthusiasm and his fear this would lead to conflict — either now or later. "I don't know, Lois."

"Clark, I wouldn't be able to force you to look through a door," Lois said. "If you didn't think it was ethical, you wouldn't have to do it. But I'm telling you that there are some nasty characters out there and I think it's fair game to use any

advantage we have in order to bring them down."

"We find out information, and then we ..."

"Investigate. We investigate — together — and then we write up what we've discovered and hand it to Perry."

Still, Clark hesitated. Then Martha spoke. "There was man called Lex Luthor," she told Clark. "He was very rich and very influential and very generous. He lived in Metropolis and did a power of good with grants and sponsorships and gifts to the city.

"But he was a crook. Most of his money had been made through illegal deals or standover tactics or forcing people to pay him exorbitant amounts of protection money. Those who knew his true character were generally too scared to speak against him. Those who weren't, he silenced ... permanently."

"You keep saying 'was'," Clark said. "He *was* a crook. Did he die?"

"No, he's in prison."

"Someone spoke up?"

"Yes," Martha said. "Lois."

Clark spun to his wife. "Lo-is," he hissed. "You took on a murderer? You could have been hurt. Didn't you think about —"

Lois's touch on his arm deepened, and she smiled serenely. "See," she said. "I *told* you your powers would be very handy."

"The point is," Martha said, "that without Lois's investigation, without her drive and courage and skills in uncovering the truth, Luthor would still be enjoying his reign of terror."

"It's not about prying into someone else's business," Lois said. "Well, not always. It's about finding the truth. There *are* papers that will print anything — scandal and accusations without so much as a breath of evidence. But the Daily Planet is not like that. Perry White is not like that. Without hard evidence, he won't print anything. Getting the story is a lot of work — legwork, research, and chasing down leads that go nowhere."

Clark felt like he was being manoeuvred — in the nicest possible way — by a formidable combination. He glanced to his father. Jonathan offered him nothing but a smile partly hidden by his large hand. "You really think we could do this together?" Clark asked Lois.

"To be honest," Lois said, "I've never had a partner before. Perry suggested it once, and I threatened to resign. But I think in you, I've found the perfect partner — not only in life, but also in work."

"If I'm not up to standard, I would want you to be honest and tell me," Clark said.

"I wouldn't need to," Lois said. "You'll know."

"We could ask, I suppose," Clark said.

"There's something else to consider," Lois said, pushing home her point. "If you're serious about donning that suit and helping out wherever you can, there are going to be times when you need to make a hasty, unexplained exit. If you're working with anyone else, you're going to have to come up with endless excuses for walking out. If you're working with me, you can go and do what you need to do and I'll make up the excuses." She grinned at him. "Being blunt, I'll probably be better at it than you anyway."

Clark leant back on his chair and let out a deep breath. "Lane and Kent," he said. "Reporting team, Daily Planet."

Lois grinned with triumph. "Sounds good to me."

\*\*\*

Lois and Clark stood together on the busy streets of Metropolis.

Busy. Noisy. Crowded. Smelly. Harried.

Clark held Lois's hand.

She seemed oblivious to the commotion that played out around her.

He wished he could fly away — wished he could take Lois and escape to the quiet fields of Kansas.

Ahead was a tall building. Not the tallest he had seen in this city, but five times taller than anything on New Krypton.

"This is Mom's apartment building," Lois said.

They stood there, heads back, eyes squinting against the brightness that reflected off the wall of windows. Clark tightened his hand around hers and drove away his inner turmoil. "Ready?" he said quietly.

When she faced him, he saw the mix of her emotions — excitement tightly twisted with apprehension. "Yes," she said.

"I know you're concerned," he said. "I know you said your mom can be difficult, but I'll be with you. We'll be all right."

"I know," Lois said. "But we are dumping a lot on her without any warning. Me — not dead at all, but right here in Metropolis and married. Whatever she says, however she reacts, can you please try to remember she is going to be dumbfounded?"

"Don't worry, honey," Clark said. "It'll be OK."

Lois stepped forward purposefully. At the door to the apartment block, someone exited, and they slipped through the lobby and into the elevator.

On the fifth floor, they left the elevator and walked along the corridor, stopping at a wooden door. "This is it," Lois said, taking a deep breath. She raised her hand. Her knock sounded uncomfortably intrusive in the silence.

Clark heard footsteps on the other side of the door. They blended with Lois's thumping heart. A woman opened the door, saw them and glared. "What do you want?" she snarled.

Lois recoiled, bumping into Clark. He put his hands on her shoulders. "I'm looking for Ellen Lane," Lois said.

"Who?"

"Ellen Lane."

"Never heard of her."

"She used to live here," Lois said. Clark could hear the alarm in her voice.

"I live here now."

"How long?" Lois asked. "How long have you lived here?"

"Two months."

"Did the former occupant leave a forwarding address?"

"No," the woman barked. "All I know is that I enquired about an apartment here, and the super told me there was nothing. Two days later, he called me and said something had unexpectedly become available."

Clark felt the tension pinch the muscles of Lois's shoulders. "You don't know anything else?" she said.

"Nothing. Is that all?" Without waiting for their reply, the woman slammed the door.

Clark twirled Lois into his body and held her close. She was shaking. He didn't know what to say — didn't know how to help her.

She backed away with a brave smile and marched towards the elevator.

Clark hurried to catch up to her. "It could be anything," he reasoned. "Maybe she found a residence she liked better."

"But why leave so suddenly?"

The elevator doors opened, and they stepped in. "What are you most worried about?" Clark asked.

"That she went back to the drink," Lois admitted. "That she couldn't cope with my disappearance and probable death and found solace in alcohol."

"And if that had happened, where would she be now?"

Lois faced him with eyes that were bleak with fear. "Worst case — on the streets. Best case — in a hospital or a rehab centre."

The elevator doors opened, and they walked back into the warm sunshine. "Where now?" Clark asked.

Lois hesitated. "To my father's, I suppose."

"Perhaps he will know your mother's whereabouts."

"I doubt it," Lois said dolefully.

Clark took her hand. "Shall we try his work or his home?"

"His work. He won't be at home. Not on a week day."

Clark smiled, hoping to lift her spirits. "Is it close to here? Should we ... you know?"

"No, not here. There are too many people around. We'll take a cab."

Lois took one step onto the road, put her fingers in her mouth, and let fly with the most piercing whistle Clark had ever heard. A yellow car pulled up, and they both got in.

"You *have* to teach me how to do that," Clark said with admiration.

She grinned through her anxiety. "Bet you already know how to do it," she said.

The cab took them to an obviously wealthy area and stopped outside a doctor's clinic. "Your father works here?" Clark said as he took in the overt opulence.

Lois nodded as she paid the driver.

"It's very impressive," Clark said as they got out of the cab.

She shrugged dismissively. "It's all he has to show for thirty-five years of addiction to his work," she said. "It should be impressive."

Clark brushed her hair back from her face. "Do you want me to come in with you?"

"No," she said.

"OK, I'll wait here."

"No," Lois said, looking more uncertain than Clark had ever seen her. "Would you go in?"

"Of course. If that's what you want."

"He might be at the hospital," Lois explained. "I really don't want to go in and have to wait and endure them all pointing at me and whispering."

"What should I say?"

"Tell them you need to see Dr Lane urgently and ask for an appointment today. They almost certainly won't give you one, but try to find out if he's in today."

"OK," Clark said, trying to sound more assured than he felt.

"I'll wait here," Lois said.

Clark walked into the big airy room. There were people sitting in clusters, some reading and some staring blankly ahead. He crossed to the counter. "I need to see Dr Lane," he said.

"Could I have an appointment today?"

The woman smiled at him. "I'm sorry," she said. "Dr Lane has no appointments today."

"Could you check, please?" he asked. "It is very important that I see him. Today."

"He is unavailable today," she said. "Can I make an appointment for -"

"Is he here?" Clark cut in.

"No. He's -"

"Where is he?"

"He doesn't work on Thursdays."

Clark felt the disappointment sweep through him on Lois's behalf. "Thank you," he said and walked away.

"Is he there?" Lois asked as he exited the clinic.

"No," Clark said. "I'm sorry, Lois. They said your father doesn't work today."

"He works every day."

Clark felt a wave of helplessness wash over him. How could they find anyone in a city this big? This crowded? "Maybe we should go to his home," he said. "Even if he's not there, someone might know where he is."

Lois didn't look convinced, but nodded her agreement.

"We'll walk," she said. "His house is only a few blocks away." She led him along leafy streets with large houses set back behind neat, colourful gardens. Lois stopped at a gate. "This is it," she

said.

“Your dad lives here?” Clark asked, eyeing the grandeur and size of the building.

“Yeah. He’s a doctor — a very-well-paid doctor.”

As they walked up the imposing steps, Clark felt the surge of his apprehension. Lois’s father was a doctor and by all appearances, a very successful one. How would he feel about his daughter marrying the son of Kansas farmers?

They rang the bell, and Clark heard the chimes resonate through the building.

A minute later the door opened, and a woman appeared.

“MOM!” Lois lunged forward and hauled the startled woman into her arms. “Mom,” she sobbed.

Clark could see the shock and disbelief on the woman’s face. After only a few seconds, she backed away and stared. “Lois?” she said hesitantly.

“Yes, Mom,” Lois said gently. “I’ve come home.”

The woman continued staring. “We ... we thought ...”

Lois held her hand. “I know what you thought, Mom, but it was just a horrible mistake.”

Her mom’s face stretched to a wide smile as her tears tumbled free. “Lois,” she said as she pulled her daughter into her embrace again.

After long minutes, they broke apart, although Lois didn’t loosen her grip on the woman’s arms. “Mom,” she said. “What are you doing here? Why aren’t you at your apartment? Where’s Dad? Are you all right?”

Lois’s mother took a moment to recover from the barrage of questions. She stared, open-mouthed. “What are you doing here?” she managed.

“I came to see Dad,” Lois said. “I went to your apartment but you weren’t there.”

“I left that apartment.”

“Why?”

“Because I got married.”

“You got married?” Lois squealed.

“Yes.”

“Who to?”

“Your father.”

Lois swayed, and Clark grasped her waist to steady her. “You married Dad?” she spluttered.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I fell in love with him again.”

“Why? How? When? Are you sure?”

“We spent so much time together after your dis- ... after the Mission to Mars failed and there seemed to be no hope. He was such a tower of strength — so loving and considerate. When he suggested that we try to put our lives back together again — for both of us and for Lucy, too, I realised that was what I really wanted.”

The women stared at each other for a long moment.

Then, as if compelled by the same force, they came together in an all-encompassing hug.

When they drew apart, Ellen’s attention moved to Clark.

“And who is this?” she asked her daughter.

Lois turned to Clark, her grin impossibly wide, and her eyes sparkling through moisture-dampened eyelashes. “This is my husband,” she announced ecstatically. “I got married, too.”

Ellen looked him up and down, her face devoid of everything except shock. “You -” She swallowed roughly. “Why?”

“Because I fell in love,” Lois said.

Ellen’s face creased to a smile. “I guess I can’t argue with that.” She held out her hand to Clark. “I’m Ellen Lane,” she said.

“Clark Kent,” he said as he gently took her hand. “I’m very pleased to meet you, Mrs Lane.”

“Come in,” she said. “Sam and Lucy have gone to get fresh

bread to go with the soup I made.”

Lois stopped her with a hand to her shoulder. “You made soup?” she said incredulously. “Dad went shopping for fresh bread? Lucy is here?”

Ellen nodded. “Three months is a long time. A lot can change.”

“So I see.”

“Particularly three months when you learn that what you have can be taken away in a moment. Three months when you reassess everything and decide what is really important.”

“You reassessed?”

“Everything,” Ellen said. “Sam did, too. He only works three days a week now. And Lucy moved back home and seems much more settled.”

“So you really are a happy family?” Lois said in a voice filled with longing.

Ellen smiled sadly. “Not happy, no. Surviving, desperate, unified, grateful for what we still had ... but not happy.” She smiled as she looked at her daughter through welling tears. “Not with our girl missing.”

“Well, I’m back,” Lois declared.

Ellen shook her head and brushed the tears from her eyes. “From the moment you first drew breath, you were full of surprises, girl.” She leant forward and kissed Lois’s cheek. “Now we’re all together again, now we can be happy.” She glanced up to Clark. “All five of us.”

Lois grinned, but it was cut short by a squeal from behind them.

“LOIS!!”

“LUCY!!”

Lois rushed past Clark and into the arms of her sister. Clark faced the tall man who was eyeing the girls with an expression that didn’t dare believe. Clark held out his hand. “I’m Clark Kent, Sir,” he said. “I’m Lois’s husband.”

Lois’s father’s gaze moved slowly from his daughters and to Clark. He took Clark’s hand in a firm hold. “Sam Lane,” he said. “Thank you for bringing my girl home.”

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Just once more.

Perry White forced his attention back to the feature he was supposed to be editing for the weekend edition. The paper was put to bed. He should go home. There was nothing to keep him here. He stood, a little tentatively. He could feel advancing age creep through his body. Again, he thought about retiring.

It was a recurring thought these days.

He’d lost other reporters. They’d left the Planet, or — on two occasions — had passed away — and he had continued on. Missed them, yes, mourned them, but life, the paper, had gone on.

Now, he didn’t have the strength to go on.

Or the desire.

Or the energy.

Not without Lois.

The escalator dinged, and Perry looked up, expecting the cleaner.

A woman emerged.

She looked around the empty bullpen.

Before her gaze had travelled more than a few degrees, Perry knew.

He rounded his desk and tore out of his office.

“Lois?” he gasped as he crossed the floor at a speed he hadn’t reached in many years. “LOIS!”

Her head spun towards him, and Perry saw her face light with joy. “Perry!”

She flew down the stairs and leapt into his arms.

He held her.

Lois.

She had come home.

When she drew back, her eyes were shining with tears. “Perry,” Lois said tremulously. “Oh, Perry. I missed you.”

He held her, saying nothing. He, a man of words, could find not a single word. So he just held her.

Lois broke away with a teary smile and gestured to the tall young man who had followed her. “This is my husband, Clark Kent,” she said.

Perry would always feel a little abashed that the moment he had met Clark Kent, he’d had tears streaming down his cheeks.

But he’d barely glanced at the young man. Could not recall if he’d acknowledged him in any way. He simply couldn’t take his eyes from Lois.

She had come home.

“We have a great story for you, Chief,” she announced.

Yep, Perry was sure she did.

“And we’re wondering if you need another reporter.”

\*\*\*

Clark Kent walked into the bedroom he shared with his wife in their tiny apartment. He removed his jacket and loosened his tie. He took his wallet from his pocket and opened it.

Money.

The first he had earned since he was fifteen years old.

And despite how many things they really needed, he knew exactly what he intended to do first with the money from this paycheck. He heard movement behind him and threw his wallet on the bed. He turned to greet his wife. “Everything OK?” he asked.

She smiled at him and put her cell phone on the bed.

Her ability to turn a still-fairly-limited array of working clothes into endlessly different outfits fascinated him. She looked amazing — every single day.

He was a lucky, lucky man.

She smiled, infusing him with good feelings — feelings he hadn’t even suspected were possible until he’d met her. “Everything’s perfect,” she said. Her tone caused him to stop. Study her. She was grinning that ‘I know something’ grin.

He gestured to her cell phone. “Who called?”

“Someone following up on something I did this morning.”

She added her bag to the bed and took him into her arms. She kissed him with enough vigour to make him wonder if they really needed to get to their booking on time. “Friday,” she said. “And we have the whole weekend off — our first weekend to spend together.”

“Any plans?” he asked.

She smiled him the smile that fired his body every time. “One or two.”

“I have plans for tonight,” he told her.

“I bet you do,” she said.

“I have plans before that,” he said.

“Really?”

“I have a booking at Martello’s.”

She smiled. “Chicken and chocolate and -”

“And the bubbly drink.”

She didn’t agree as he had expected. “Clark,” she said, her grin wider than ever, her eyes dancing.

“Yes, honey?”

“I have something to tell you.”

“Go on,” he said, knowing it was something good. Something better than good. “Tell me.”

“You’re going to be a father.”

Clark looked from her grinning face, down her body and back up again. “You’re pregnant?” he breathed in disbelief. “We’re going to have a child?”

She nodded, looking more beautiful than he’d ever seen her. “Yep,” she said. “We’re going to have a child.”

His first instinct was to crush her to him and spin her around

and around. He controlled that and made do with tenderly brushing back her hair. “Lois,” he said. “Aww, Lois.”

“So, no bubbly drink for me — not for a few more months.”

“I won’t have any either,” he said, not caring about bubbly drink or anything else. Lois was going to have his baby! “We’ll have it together after our baby is born.”

“Our baby,” she said.

He took her into his arms, and they drifted gently off the floor. “Are you happy?” he asked.

“Happier than I’ve ever been.”

“Me, too.”

### Epilogue

Martha Kent stood on the porch of her farmhouse, gazing at the lengthening shadows caused by the descending sun.

Her eyes filled with tears.

She lowered her cheek onto the soft head of the baby she held. Her arms tightened protectively around the tiny bundle as she remembered the days long ago when she had held this baby’s father.

In the distance, Martha saw a couple.

She smiled, and the first tear splashed down her cheek.

They walked hand in hand, their complete happiness evident. It radiated across the fields and filled Martha’s heart with overflowing joy.

She heard footsteps behind her and felt the gentle touch of her husband on her shoulder. “Is she asleep?” Jonathan asked.

“Yes.”

“You’ll miss her when they go back to Metropolis.”

“I’ll miss all of them,” Martha agreed. “But I’ll be forever grateful that Lois chose to come here for the last weeks of her pregnancy and the first weeks of little Elra’s life.”

“She wanted to give you a little of what you missed with Clark.”

Martha glanced into her husband’s face. “She’s perfect, isn’t she?”

“Lois?” he said. His big fingers brushed softly over the downy hair of his granddaughter. “Or Elra?”

“Both of them.”

“Clark has the world,” Jonathan said. “Three beautiful women to share his life.”

“And what about you, Mr Kent?” Martha said. “Those three women love you, too.”

He smiled, though she could tell his tears weren’t far away. “I have the world too.”

“We won’t miss them much,” Martha said. “They’ll be regular visitors. Even though Lois can’t fly any more, Clark is so darn proud, I don’t think he’ll miss any opportunity to show off his family.”

Jonathan dropped a kiss on the soft head of Clark’s daughter. “I wonder if this little girl will fly,” he murmured.

\*\*\*

Clark Kent — Kal-El — could see the shape of his daughter’s little body cradled into his mom’s arms. He could see his father hovering over both of them. He focussed his vision on their faces and saw their absolute contentment.

Lois’s hand was embedded in his. “Are you sad about leaving your parents?” she asked.

“We’re not really leaving them,” Clark said.

“Of course we’re not. We’ll see them a lot.” Lois grinned up at him. “You can fly us back whenever we want to escape Metropolis.”

Clark looked at his wife. His love for her grew every single day.

“Do you miss New Krypton?” she asked.

“Sometimes.”

“I guess whenever someone has roots in two places, he can

never fully feel at home.”

“Maybe,” Clark said. “Though not for me.”

Lois smiled. “Why not for you?”

“Because I only have one home.”

“Smallville?”

“No.”

“New Krypton?”

“No.”

“Metropolis?” Lois said with surprise.

“No.”

She grinned. “Then where? Where is your home?”

“Wherever you are.”

She smiled with evident happiness. “Then you’ll always be home.”

“That’s my plan.”

“I love you, Kal.”

Sometimes, when they were alone, she called him Kal. It reminded him of how she had come into his life.

Taught him.

Comforted him.

Loved him.

Taken his cold heart and warmed it with her smile.

Her laughter.

Her love.

Her body.

Everything that was her.

“I love you, Lois,” he said. Clark stopped walking and turned her to him. “I was the Supreme Ruler of an entire planet, but I had nothing compared with what I have now.”

Her hands stroked his face the way he loved.

“I didn’t even know how little I had ... until I found you.”

Her hands caressed her love, filling him, overflowing him.

“Until you came and awakened my heart.”

THE END

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