

Contractually Bound

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Summary: They say that the first year of marriage is the hardest. No statement is ever truer than when Kal-El, Prince of Krypton, is forced into a marriage that he never knew about. But it may just be the best thing that has ever happened to him, if he only lets it be. An alternate universe story.

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Author's Note: This plot bunny was spawned by a discussion on the Lois and Clark fanfiction message boards, speculating on what might happen if Lois and Clark were forced into a marriage for some reason or another. Of course, my muse immediately rubbed her hands gleefully together and went to work on the idea. For this story, please imagine Krypton as resembling Earth, but as being way more technologically advanced. Their society, however, is more archaic, with lords and a common class, and one Supreme Lord of the planet.

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Prince Kal-El strolled down the worn dirt pathway, hands swinging slightly at his sides. A gentle, warm breeze caressed him as he walked, and the fresh smell of rain-washed soil filled his nostrils. He breathed deeply, enjoying the scent, and a smile crossed his lips. Trees lined the path to either side, forming a sort of green, leafy tunnel for him to walk through. Some sunlight filtered through the branches above, dappling the ground with patches of shadows and light. Birds chirped all around, their myriad voices bringing another smile to the prince's lips. He began to whistle a little tune of his own.

The attack came without warning.

Two figures jumped from the trees as Kal passed beneath a strong oak and a sturdy maple. The prince planted his feet, instantly assuming a battle stance. He had two attackers. He could do this. In fact, he shouldn't have any real problem with this fight. Not against these two, at any rate.

The first man came at him. Kal sidestepped at the last second, ducked, and rushed headfirst into the gut of the other man. He caught the man off guard. His attacker doubled over, the wind knocked from him. Kal spun to face the first attacker. The man ran at the prince again. Kal let him come. At the last moment, Kal shifted his position. Instead of crashing into Kal, the man found himself caught in the prince's grasp. Kal used the momentum to flip the man. The attacker hit the ground, flat on his back. A grunt escaped him as he hit the dirt. The second man had recovered by now and the prince spun to meet him. The man brought his arm back to slug the prince, but Kal was aware of his intentions. He

deftly caught the fist in his palm, squeezed tight, and twisted the man's wrist until he yelped in pain. Kal swept his foot around in the same instant, bringing it behind the man's knees. The man stumbled and fell as Kal released his grip on his fist.

Kal grabbed a low hanging branch from the maple tree. He swung his body back and forth, until he had the momentum that he wanted. With a final push forward, he launched himself at the younger of the two attackers. His feet firmly collided with the man's chest, sending him flying backwards. The man hit the ground with a heavy thud and a groan. The older of the two men threw himself at Kal's legs. Kal fell forward, hitting the ground face first. He kicked hard, trying to shake the man. His right foot caught the man in his shoulder, and the man grunted with pain. It was enough to break the man's grip on Kal's legs. Kal scrambled quickly to his feet. He was about to launch another attack when a deep voice spoke out.

"End simulation."

The world around Kal and his attackers shimmered and vanished. Kal and the others froze in their tracks, breathing hard. They were no longer in the sunny outdoors. Instead, they found themselves looking at the stark gymnasium in the basement level of the Supreme Lord's palace. Beyond the walls, thunder rumbled in the night and rain lashed at the high windows. A flicker of lightning briefly illuminated the night. All three of the men looked up to see the Supreme Lord of Krypton, their father, Jor-El. He was watching them intently, but no expression showed on his face.

"Dad?" Kal asked as he reached down to help his older brother, Ching, from the thick black mats that lined the floor. Ching took the proffered hand as he hauled himself to his feet. "We were just having a little fun."

"I know you were. And I dislike interrupting. But, Kal, I need to speak with you," Jor-El said simply. His voice gave nothing away. "Get yourself cleaned up and meet me in my chambers."

"Is everything all right?" Kal asked, concerned.

He could usually tell from his father's voice if he was in a good mood or not, but this time, he had nothing to go on. It worried him more than if he knew for a certainty that his father was mad.

Jor-El nodded. "There is a matter which I need to discuss with you. I would rather not get into it here. I know that you'll probably tell these two as soon as we are finished speaking. You always do. But I'd rather that you and I discuss things in private first."

Kal nodded in return, swallowing around the sudden lump of fear that had formed in his throat. "I will be there as soon as I can."

"Thank you."

Jor-El turned and swiftly exited the room. Kal turned to his younger half-brother, Jai, and helped him to his feet as well. Jai dusted himself off and rearranged his shirt, which had twisted around his body somewhat in the fight. He grimaced as he watched Jor-El's retreating form.

"Wonder what Dad wants," Jai said, wondering aloud. "I couldn't tell if it was something good or bad."

"Me neither," Kal sighed. "And that worries me."

"Well, better you than me," Jai said with a grin, trying to lighten the mood.

Kal laughed despite himself and slapped Jai on the back. "Thanks a lot."

"Anytime." Jai winked at him.

"Best not to keep him waiting," Ching said, rubbing his shoulder where Kal had kicked him. "Let's hit the showers."

Together, the three brothers exited the gymnasium and meandered through the rest of the gym facility. Only a few machines were still in use this late in the evening. A few of the Council Elders still remained. Ken Tai was busy with a set of

weights while Trey leisurely strolled on a treadmill, his gaze fixed on one of the video monitors that hung from the ceiling. A couple of the palace security guards were talking idly while they worked their arms and legs on some of the other machines. Kal didn't care to look and see who else was there. His mind was a hundred miles away. What could his father possibly want to speak with him about? He sighed softly and followed Ching's lead to the locker room. As if on autopilot, he barely registered as he unlocked his private locker, gathered his things, and headed into the shower.

"You pulled a few good moves in our fight, Kal," Ching said approvingly over the splash of the water.

"Thanks," Kal replied, lathering his ebony hair with shampoo, then rinsing it out again. "Told you I could take you both on and win."

"I'd *hardly* call that winning," Ching said, his voice echoing from the neighboring shower stall.

"I had you both flat out on your backs," Kal said, defending his victory. "We've always agreed that disabling the attackers constitutes winning."

"I agree with Ching," Jai said, from the stall on the other side of Kal. "If Dad hadn't come in and stopped us, we would have beaten you. I still had plenty of fight left in me."

Kal snorted slightly to himself in amusement. The way he saw it, he'd had both of his attackers on the ground. Had it been a real fight, he would have simply knocked them both unconscious and fled the scene, or he would have found some way to bind them tightly and have the palace security or perhaps the army take them away. He'd have to schedule another mock battle with his brothers soon, he decided. Then he'd prove them wrong with a decisive victory. Though all three had served in Krypton's military, Kal was by far the strongest of them, though not the most aggressive. He'd actually been relieved when a knee injury two years ago had forced his early release from the military. He still trained his body like a soldier, and although his knee had since healed, too much stress on the joint still occasionally gave him some trouble with it.

"Just you wait," he said, his voice a teasing promise. "Next time there will be *no* dispute over the winner." He reached for the soap and tweaked the temperature of the water so that it was as hot as he could stand.

"Fifty gold coins say that Ching and I wipe the floor with you," Jai said. Kal could just picture the big, goofy grin plastered on Jai's face.

"You're on," Kal said with a laugh. "Easiest fifty coins I'll make."

Kal kept his voice as light and airy as he could manage. Inside, though, he was nervous. He kept hearing his father's voice in his mind, the words replaying over and over. His eyes barely saw his surroundings. Instead, he saw only Jor-El's expressionless face. A deep sense of foreboding pervaded Kal's entire body as he decided that his father couldn't possibly be waiting to give him any sort of good news. If he had, there would have been at least a hint of a smile or sparkle in his eyes. Kal would have heard the laughter coloring the edges of Jor-El's words. No, Kal was certain that bad news was coming. He just wished that he could figure out what that news might be in regards to, so that he might be able to prepare himself.

Kal gave his body a final rinse, then turned the water off and swiftly dried and dressed. Moving out of the shower room, he scrutinized his appearance in a mirror. He finger combed a few locks of hair into place and smoothed down a small crease on his shirt. A fine shadow of stubble had sprouted on his cheeks and chin; he'd get to them in the morning. He wasn't sure that he trusted himself with a razor blade at the moment; his hands were shaking ever so slightly as he worried over his imminent meeting with his father. Finally satisfied, he made ready to leave the

room, throwing his sweaty clothing into the laundry chute and relocking his locker.

"Hey," Jai said, poking out from the shower room and towel drying his hair. "You'll let us know how things turn out, right?"

Kal couldn't help but to smile at his half-brother. "Don't I always?"

"Good. You know you can talk to me any time, day or night. My door is always open." He paused. "Except for tonight. I've got Nita coming tonight."

Kal shook his head. "Another concubine? Jai..."

"Hey," Jai said, a little defensively, "just because you and Ching choose not to partake of the professional care services, doesn't mean that I have to follow suit."

Kal shook his head again. It was no use arguing with Jai; he and Ching had already had this same argument with their brother numerous times, and had never gotten anywhere. Although Jai himself was son of Jor-El and one of the concubines, a Mia O'sen, Jai had never seen anything wrong with taking full advantage of the women that the palace kept on staff for the lords' pleasures. At least, Kal thought to himself, his mother, Lara, had taken Jai in like one of her own after Mia had died birthing the half-prince. Kal smiled wistfully at the memory of his mother. Sometimes, he still couldn't believe that it had already been twelve years since her own passing.

"I know. I know," he said, placating his brother. "See you in the morning then."

The prince made good time as he set a quick, purposeful stride through the palace. It was far better just to man up and face whatever his father had to discuss with him. Stalling for time would only make things worse for him in the long run. Before long, he reached the door to his father's private chambers, on the uppermost level of the palace. He hesitated for a long minute, trying to quell the butterflies in his stomach. Finally, he gathered up enough courage and knocked resolutely on the door.

"Enter," he heard his father's muffled voice say from beyond the thick wood.

Kal took a deep breath, steadied himself, and released the breath again. He firmly grasped the handle and pulled the door open. Holding his head high, he crossed the threshold into the Supreme Lord's living quarters. Jor-El sat before him in a plush, high backed armchair, in front of his large fireplace. A cheerful fire blazed merrily in the hearth. As Kal watched, his father gently closed the book he'd been reading and set it on the side table next to his chair. Jor-El sighed and Kal thought that his father seemed to have aged in the thirty or so minutes since he'd requested that Kal join him in his quarters. Concern gnawed at Kal's mind and heart.

"I came as quickly as I could," Kal said, bowing slightly. Never before had he felt so awkward in his father's presence. Jor-El managed a weak, nervous smile, and Kal recognized the uncertainty behind it. That unnerved him even more. "Is everything all right, Dad?"

Jor-El nodded absently, searching for the words to begin. "Everything is fine, Kal. I'm sorry if I have worried you. I've been debating how best to approach this with you, and nothing has seemed right. Please, sit."

The prince did as he was bid, and Jor-El poured him a glass of rich, dark wine from a bottle that stood on the table with his book. He passed the glass to his son. Kal swirled the liquid around and inhaled the heady scent. His eyes widened a little as he recognized the rare bouquet.

"Aged one hundred years," Jor-El said, in response to his son's questioning look. "Some of the finest wine ever produced."

"This must be quite the discussion that you have planned," Kal said guardedly.

The Supreme Lord sighed and nodded. "Kal, do you remember when you were very young, and Ching came down

with a case of the Red Fever?”

Kal shook his head. “I’ve heard stories of that time, but I don’t have any memory of it. My professors used to say only that it was one of the worst epidemics ever to sweep across this planet. Hundreds of thousands died. Millions were infected before Dr. Lyne found a way to treat and cure the disease.”

Jor-El nodded. “Not *one* of the worst. *The* worst. It doesn’t surprise me that you don’t remember it though. You were just barely two years old at the time.”

Kal grew more concerned. “Is...there isn’t another outbreak, is there?”

His father shook his head. “No. Nothing that dire.”

Kal breathed a sigh of relief, but shook his head. “I’m afraid that I don’t understand what the Red Fever has to do with anything then.”

Jor-El’s gaze focused to some point that was a hundred miles away as he lost himself to the memory. “Ching was only six. Such a tiny child. He somehow caught the virus towards the end of that epidemic and he grew weaker by the day. I was terrified that I would lose him and that you or Jai or Lara would catch it as well. I summoned the best doctors to his aid, but none could help, though they had tried from the very first to find a way to cure the disease. I even tried to find a cure myself, but the Fever was beyond my skill to heal. Desperate to find a way to save the planet, I pleaded with Samm, though we had always been rivals. I begged him to find a way to save my boy. I begged him to find a way to save our planet. He agreed to do all that he could. He admitted that he’d already begun trying to find a cure, but that he didn’t have the resources that he needed to be of any real use. So I furnished him with a lab and all the equipment that he could possibly want or need. I pulled every able-bodied scientist and doctor to assist him. And I promised him that if he succeeded, he could have anything that he wanted. He had only to name his price, and I would gladly pay it. It took him two long, sleepless weeks, but he finally isolated the germ that was causing the illness, and found a way to kill it. Your brother was the first to receive the cure. Within a day he was as healthy as ever and was able to come out of the quarantine that we had been forced to keep him in.”

Kal nodded warily. “I don’t think that I’ve ever heard that story before.”

Jor-El continued as if Kal hadn’t spoken. He seemed completely lost to his memories. “Samm and his assistants worked around the clock to produce enough of the cure to treat all of those who remained alive. But the damage had been done. Hundreds of thousands had succumbed to the virus. When it was all over, I swore to uphold my end of the bargain. Samm could name his price. He must have known what he wanted from the very start. He never hesitated to name it when I approached him. We drew up a contract that very evening and never spoke of it again. Until now. Now the time has come for me to pay what I owe.”

Kal’s brow crinkled in confusion. “And what is it that you owe him?”

“You.”

Kal choked as he swallowed a sip of the exquisite wine. “Me?”

“At the time of the Red Fever, Samm and his wife, Elle, were expecting their first child, a girl. He wanted the child to have the best possible future. She would need to be betrothed to some noble lord’s son for that to happen. You know that the Lyne family isn’t well off, even as far as the lesser noble houses are concerned. And, I admit, I saw a personal gain in the matter. Samm had always been my rival in every way. Politics, professional matters, even in dueling matches. Lesser noble or not, he had the ear of many of the Elders. And so, I saw an opportunity to make him my ally. I did not balk at his price. We

arranged a marriage between his unborn daughter and you.”

“What?” Kal asked, blinking in surprise, his mouth agape. “Why have you never told me about this?”

“I guess...I guess I always assumed that you would anticipate having a marriage arranged. It is the way of things among the nobility.”

“Yes,” Kal agreed, a hint of venom in his voice. “It *does* seem to be the way of the nobility. Selling their children into marriages just to improve their own business dealings.”

“Kal...you don’t understand.”

Kal shook his head, becoming angrier. “Oh, I understand perfectly well. Your back was against the wall, and since Ching was already bound to Zara since birth, you only had one son left to give away. Well, one trueborn son. You couldn’t promise away Jai. Only *half* his blood is royal, after all.”

“Kal...”

“But there’s something else that I just don’t get. Until tonight, I never even knew that Dr. Lyne had any children, let alone that I was to marry his daughter!”

Jor-El sighed. “He has two girls. Lois and Luci. He has no sons, a point of shame to him, as I understand it. Marrying off the girls to noblemen was his only chance of securing them a comfortable future.”

“And which am I to wed?” Kal asked in a bitter voice. He couldn’t believe that this had been kept a secret from him for so long.

“Lois.”

“Lois,” Kal said, trying the name out. It came out sounding more like a death knell than a name.

“Son, I know that I should have told you sooner. I just never really knew how to bring it up.”

“Why now?”

“Our contract stated that Lois would need to turn twenty-one before the marriage could be valid. That was today.”

Kal put down his glass of wine when he realized that his grip on it had become so tight that he was in danger of shattering the delicate crystal. He’d hardly touched the wine, and although it was one of the best that he had ever tasted, he found now that he had no desire for it. He stood and crossed the room to the large windows that overlooked the gardens. Not much could be seen in the pounding rain, though the occasional flash of lightning offered fleeting glimpses of the rain-slicked trees and shrubs. A heavy silence blanketed the room, punctuated only by the rumbling of thunder and the rain lashing the glass of the windows. Kal thought that the raging storm fit his mood perfectly.

“Mom knew of this?” Kal finally asked in a quiet voice.

Jor-El nodded, though Kal was not looking at him. “Yes.”

“And she never said anything either.” It was half a question, half a statement of fact.

“I asked her not to. I don’t think she would have known how to tell you either. She was never happy with the circumstance surrounding the contract. She felt as you do. She felt that I had all but bartered your life for Ching’s.”

“And you? Do you agree?”

Jor-El sighed as he thought. “Yes and no. I regret that things happened the way that they did. But I do not regret the match. I have met the girl you are to marry a few times when I have gone to visit with Samm. She is a rare beauty and a sweet girl. I think this match is a good thing.”

Kal snorted. “Right. Because all that matters is what the girl looks like.” His voice was hard and cynical.

“Kal,” Jor-El gently ventured after a moment.

“I want to see this contract,” Kal said, acidly cutting his father off. He turned to face him, his features hard in his anger.

The Supreme Lord nodded. “I thought that you might.”

He handed the prince a slim, leather bound folder from where

it sat beneath the book he'd been reading. Kal took it and flipped it open. Just two pages were inside, written in Trey's neat script. Kal would recognize the Elder's handwriting anywhere. At the end, he recognized his father's neat but sprawling signature, Dr. Lyne's tight, spidery script, and the signatures of two of the Elders who'd borne witness to the contract. Kal turned back to the window and silently read the contract to himself, using the light of the fire to see by. He read it over three times to himself, looking for some loophole to get himself out of this undesired situation. But his heart sunk lower at each reading. The contract was iron-clad. No loophole existed.

"Kal, please say something," his father prodded him. He sounded genuinely nervous at Kal's silence.

"I had always thought that maybe my situation might be different," the prince said, his back to his father as he gazed out at the storm. His voice had lost some of its venom and had turned soft and low. "I had always hoped that when it came time for me to marry, that it might be to a woman of my own choosing. Someone that I would love. I don't want this, Father."

"You *will* marry her," the Supreme Lord said, his voice brooking no argument. "You have no choice."

"And if I refuse?" Some of Kal's anger began to seep back into this voice.

"Kal, I have never needed to order you to do anything. Please, don't make me start now. You *will* marry the girl, and I will *not* hear any further arguments. Is that understood?"

The prince sighed and dragged his fingers through his now dry hair. "If it pleases you, I will take my leave now, Father."

"Go," Jor-El said, sighing in his turn, and waving towards the door. "I'm sorry, my son. Please believe that."

Kal nodded his acknowledgement as he left the windows and came around the armchairs. He dropped the contract on the side table as though it were a poisonous snake. He stared at the flames that were dancing in the fireplace for a long, thoughtful moment.

"One last question. When will this happen? Or am I to guess at that as well?"

"In two weeks' time."

"*What?*" Kal asked, incredulous.

"In two weeks, Samm and his daughters will arrive and the ceremony will be held. I already have the palace staff on alert to make this an event to remember."

Kal swallowed hard. He had thought for sure that he would have more time. Two weeks was hardly anything. And it seemed that he would not be given a chance to meet his bride-to-be beforehand. It was all very disturbing to the prince. He shook his head in a silent protest, then squared his shoulders and exited the room without another word. Jor-El watched him go, a look of pain crossing his features.

Through sheer willpower, Kal kept his head held high as he made his way to his own living quarters. He opened the door and entered into his living room, then shut the door behind him. His shoulders slumped as he leaned against the solid wood. All of his energy seemed to drain from his body, leaving him feeling exhausted. He leaned the back of his head against the door for a few minutes and closed his eyes. His father's words echoed in his mind. His heart was heavy. True, it wasn't as though Kal had his heart set on marrying another. He hadn't yet met a woman special enough to give his heart to. But to be ordered - no, sold! - into a marriage with someone he'd never met, let alone knew existed, hurt beyond words.

"I'm the second son," he whispered to himself. "Ching should have been the only one to be matched like this. I'm only the second son. Maybe that makes my life worth less than Ching's?"

He pushed himself from the door and moved to the bedroom where he stripped out of his clothes. He carefully put them aside and then slipped into his sleep clothes. Sighing, he moved to his

favorite recliner in the living room. He glanced at the cold hearth, considered lighting a fire, then decided against it. The darkness matched his mood all too perfectly. He sat heavily in the chair and watched the storm as it continued to rage beyond the floor to ceiling windows. He sat forward in the chair and rested his head in his hands.

How had this happened? One minute, he'd been living his life exactly as he'd wanted it. He'd been carefree and happy. In the next, he'd discovered that his life had been sold for the life of his brother. He'd instantly been saddled with a life that was no longer under his own control. He didn't regret that Dr. Lyne had been able to save Ching. He didn't regret that the whole planet had been saved. He regretted only the price of that salvation. But what could he really do? His hands were tied. He couldn't make a liar out of his father. Running away from the palace to pursue some anonymous life would never work. His father would employ every spy and member of the planet's military to find him. And he couldn't embarrass his father by refusing to show at the ceremony. Kal simply had no choice. His fate was sealed. He hoped only that being married to this stranger would be bearable.

Kal barely slept that night. He spent most of the night staring out of the windows, the same bleak thoughts churning over and over in his mind. He watched as the storm came to a raging peak, then as it tapered off and eventually died. When he did sleep, his dreams were dark and fitful.

Finally, just after dawn, he gave up on trying to sleep. He threw on some comfortable clothing and went for an early walk in the sprawling palace gardens. His brothers often teased him for spending so much time among the flowers, but Kal found the gardens to be one of the most relaxing places on the entirety of the palace grounds. He smiled a little as he left the palace and stepped into the growing sunshine. The morning was cool and crisp. It was refreshing and seemed to recharge Kal, even lifting some of the heaviness in his heart. He jogged down the footpaths to one of his favorite spots - a gently sloping hill ringed by ancient trees, though the hill's crown was utterly bare. The green grass was springy beneath his feet as he left the stone path. He could hear and feel the mud squishing beneath his running shoes, and the scent of the damp soil invigorated him.

At the crest of the hill, he paused to look around, though he was barely winded. He threw his head back and studied the rain-washed blue of the sky and the thin white rags of clouds that were lazily drifting past. After a few moments, he continued on, making his way to another one of his favorite spots, and the place where he really wanted to be this morning. His long legs made swift work of the small distance. In no time, he found himself in the midst of the rose gardens. Roses of every color, shade, and variety grew in this section of the gardens. His mother, Lara, had been the one to plan this section, and had personally seen each bush planted. Roses had always been her favorites, and, as a result, they had also become Kal's favorites.

Kal found a dry bench and sat. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply through his nose, savoring the sweet scent of the flowers. As always, it was almost overwhelming as memories of his mother came flooding back to him. Her gentle smile. Her light, airy laughter. Her kind way of speaking. Her reassuring nature. The way that her eyes had always sparkled with a love of life and of those around her.

For the next hour, Kal sat in silence, listening to the songs of the birds nearby and breathing in the perfume that was lingering in the air. In his mind's eye, he saw himself and his two brothers as very young children, walking with their mother or sitting on benches as she read to them or told them tales from memory. Those had been happy days. And the memories of them never failed to bring a bittersweet smile to his face. He sighed softly.

"What am I going to do, Mom?" he lamented softly, his voice barely audible, even to his own ears. "In two weeks, I'll be forced

into a marriage with a complete stranger. I don't want this. But I don't know what choice I have. I feel so betrayed. I feel so lost. I don't know how to be a husband to someone I've never met. What if we don't get along? What if I can't love her? What am I going to do?"

But if Lara knew, she was silent. Kal hung his head. Often, he found that he could come to this place with his problems, and could almost hear his mother's voice in his mind, helping him. But this time, Kal did not feel reassured. He could not imagine what his mother would have told him, if she could have.

"Kal?" Ching's voice rang out in the morning air. "Are you here?"

"Over here," Kal called out miserably. Ching would find him in a moment, regardless of if he spoke up or not, he knew.

Kal's memories faded like so much mist. He no longer saw the ghosts of what had once been. Instead, he saw the solid flesh and bone of his brothers as they advanced towards him, side by side. Both of them looked concerned, with twin creases across their brows. When they reached Kal, they sat on either side of him on the bench.

"I thought we might find you here," Ching said, looking at the roses surrounding them.

The storm had ripped some of the flowers to shreds, and their petals were plastered to the drying stone footpath. Kal's eyes were fixed on a section of scattered red petals that lay like a pool of blood not twenty feet from where he sat.

"Congratulations. You found me," Kal said with a sigh. He was not in a mood to joke with his brothers. He was still mourning the loss of his freedom. He stood, preparing to leave. "Now if you'll excuse me..."

"Sit," Ching commanded him.

Kal shook his head. "I'd rather be alone."

"Well that's too bad," Jai said, grinning impishly. "Because we intend on sticking with you today."

"Guys..."

Jai shook his head. "Whatever Dad said to you last night must have really bothered you. What kind of brothers would Ching and I be if we let you suffer alone?"

"Yeah, it did upset me," Kal admitted, sitting back down. "How'd you know?"

"You weren't in your room when we came to ask what happened last night. We checked your usual haunts and found you here. Do you realize that you have certain places that you visit when you are in certain moods?" Ching said, shrugging. "When you are upset, we usually find you here."

"I'm really that predictable?" Kal asked, surprised. He'd never really stopped to think about any patterns that he might have fallen into over the years.

Jai nodded. "You have no idea."

"There's a lot of happy memories here," Ching observed. "It's a good place to try to forget your troubles, even if only for a little while."

Kal nodded. "It is. This might sound weird, but I feel close to Mom here. Sometimes, that's all it takes to get over things."

Ching nodded in return. "I know exactly what you mean."

"So," Jai said, swinging his legs a little. "What's the trouble this time and how can we help?"

Kal shook his head. "This time, there's nothing that either one of you can do."

"There's got to be something," the younger man pressed.

"Not this time," Kal repeated. "What Dad told me last night..." He shook his head. "I'm...getting married."

"What?" the two brothers said with one voice.

"That's what Dad wanted to talk to me about last night. He has this contract with Samm Lyne to marry me with Samm's oldest daughter."

"Samm has children?" Ching asked, surprised. "I didn't

know."

"Apparently, not many people do," Kal said, folding his hands on his lap. "Dad says that Samm has two daughters, but no sons, and is supposedly ashamed of that fact. So he doesn't talk much about his family. And you know that he and Elle haven't been happy together in years now."

"Right," Jai said, nodding thoughtfully.

"Dad's never spoken of an arranged marriage for you before," Ching said, troubled.

"I know," Kal said, casting his eyes downward to study the stone footpath.

"But why would he keep a birth-wife secret?" Ching continued, confusion written on his face. "It's not like it's a rare practice or anything. And he was always upfront with me about Zara. It doesn't make any sense."

"That's just it," Kal said. "Lois *isn't* my birth-wife. Dad wrote up a contract to arrange this marriage when I was two years old. He promised Samm anything he wanted if only he could find a way to save you from the Red Fever. Samm wanted a good match for his unborn daughter. You were already promised to Zara. And Jai is only half a prince, no offense. So I was the one chosen to pay the price."

"I'm sorry," Ching said, putting a comforting hand on his younger brother's shoulder.

"A marriage isn't so bad," Jai said, trying to make Kal feel better. "I mean, look at Ching and Zara. They're happy together. Nauseatingly so, in fact."

"We *are* happy," Ching said, nodding.

"I know you guys are," Kal said glumly. "But you grew up *knowing* Zara and that someday you'd be married to her. I'm getting thrown head first into this. I never knew of this marriage. I've never met the bride. I never even knew that the bride *existed* until last night. I feel like the whole world has gone upside down. And I have no idea what to do about this."

"There's not much that you *can* do," Ching said gently. "You just have to make your peace with the situation. And try to stay open-minded. The El family has a long history of arranged marriages that worked out well. Zara and me. Mom and Dad. Our grandparents. And so on through the line."

"That's all well and good," Kal argued. "But there are plenty of arranged marriages that haven't worked out. We've seen them fall apart. Samm and Elle. Lux Uthor and his late wife." He shrugged. "Uncle Dav and Aunt Mille."

"Kal, you're one of the most open, caring people that I know," Jai said, looking his older brother in the eyes. "If anyone can make this work, it's you. I'm not just saying this either. I truly believe it."

Kal managed a weak smile, though Jai's words did little to make him feel better. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"You're welcome. Now, when should we schedule the bachelor party for?" Jai's grin overtook his entire face.

Kal shook his head and laughed, despite himself. "Oh no. Not on your life."

The three stood and began to walk back to the palace for breakfast.

"Come on! I'll get you a few of the concubines. They can show you some tricks," Jai pressed, grinning. "Catira always asks when I'm finally going to convince you to seek out her services."

Kal shook his head again. "No thanks. I'll pass. You can keep the concubines to yourself."

"Fine," Jai huffed in mock indignation. "Go ahead and disappoint your wife on your wedding night. I *won't* be held responsible for your lack of knowledge. I tried."

Kal chuckled a little at Jai's words, though they brought to mind another uncomfortable thought. The wedding night. How was he supposed to fulfill his marital duties with a woman that he didn't know? It wasn't that he didn't know what to do. He just

knew that he was already uncomfortable thinking about doing such things with a complete and utter stranger, no matter what label was given to her. He suppressed a groan of dread and followed his brothers through the palace to the main dining hall.

Jor-El was already there, speaking with Trey and some of the other Elders. Kal greeted them all by force of habit. He really wasn't aware of what he was saying or who he was saying it to. He took his seat and kept his eyes downcast. Servants came bearing silver trays of food, and set them in front of each of the noblemen. Kal didn't eat very much. He spent more time pushing the food around his plate with his fork. What he did eat, he barely tasted. He only had the most fleeting of impressions of scrambled eggs, thick slices of pan-fried toast, crispy bacon, and strong black coffee. The coffee was the only thing that he finished entirely. The hot beverage warmed him and seemed to take away some of the emotional chill that he was feeling. He kept his eyes downcast for the entire meal, and mercifully, Jor-El kept the Elders in conversation. No one had a chance to try to speak with Kal or notice his melancholy. That was just fine by the prince. Although the conversation at the table never ceased, Kal did not hear a single word of it.

When he could no longer pretend any interest in his food, he took his leave of the table and headed back to his rooms. Once there, he paced like a caged animal, though he took comfort in the fact that Ching and Jai hadn't followed him just yet. Finally, he could stand being indoors no longer. He grabbed up his portable music player and strapped the small device to his left bicep. Popping in the ear buds, he swiftly made his way back outdoors. He nodded to various members of the palace staff as he went, nobles and servants alike.

Once outdoors, he chose one of his favorite playlists, then cranked up the volume and began to run. He forced out all of his thoughts and concentrated only on his breathing and movements. He let the music crash over his body and fuel his movements as though it coursed through his very veins. The old trick never failed him. It was not long before he lost himself to the music that was blaring in his ears and the slow burning of his leg muscles as he made laps through the gardens. His pace varied as he went, ranging from a slow trot when he needed to calm his heart and lungs, to a ground eating sprint after each period of rest. Soon, the prince was cloaked in a fine sheen of sweat and his clothes clung wetly to him. Mile after mile he ran, until at last his damaged knee began to protest. Regretfully, he slowed his pace and returned to the palace. But the run had done wonders for his mood. He was still unhappy at the situation he was facing, but at least he didn't feel quite so depressed anymore. Jai's words lingered in his brain. Could they be true? Could he make this forced marriage work?

Kal shook his head, trying to dispel his thoughts. He simply didn't want to think about his impending nuptials. His mind, however, kept turning to his looming marriage regardless of his wishes. One thing in particular kept bothering him. Samm had often visited with Jor-El at the palace. Kal had known the good doctor all of his life. And never once had Samm ever let it slip that he was a father. Was he truly ashamed of only having girls? Kal couldn't fathom ever being ashamed of any future children of his. Boys or girls, Kal was certain that he'd be Krypton's proudest daddy, if and when the day ever came. It seemed heartless to feel any other way. And yet, Dr. Lyne had always seemed to be a genuinely nice guy. Kal enjoyed his visits. There *had* to be some other reason why Samm never spoke of his daughters. Kal just wished that he could figure out what that other reason might be.

"There you are!" Jai exclaimed as he and Ching ran into the prince in the palace hallways. "We were looking for you."

"I went for a run," Kal shrugged, tucking the earphones into the collar of his shirt.

"So we can see," Ching said, a hint of a smile on his lips.

"It helps me clear my head. You guys know that."

Jai nodded. "We do. But we would have gone with you."

Kal shook his head. "I needed to be alone for a while. But thanks."

"Feeling any better?" the half-prince asked.

"A bit, I think. I'm not really sure," Kal said, speaking honestly. "I still don't like this whole thing and I'm still coming to terms with it. But I have no choice. It might be a different story if I could at least get to know Lois a little before we're thrown into a marriage together."

"Well, I can't help you with that," Ching said with an apologetic smile. "But, Jai and I are going to go into the city to have a little fun. Care to join us? It might do you some good."

Kal nodded. "Sure. Give me twenty minutes."

Ching grinned. "Make it fifteen, little brother."

"Twenty-five," Kal said, grinning as they fell into their old game.

"Ten and not a minute more."

"Twenty and I'll buy the first round of drinks at the bar."

Ching snorted. "You were buying the first round anyway."

Kal chuckled and walked off, heading back to his quarters. He showered quickly and dressed, choosing comfortable clothing that was still fit for the Supreme Lord's son to be seen in public in. He rejoined his brothers and together they rode into the city, taking Kal's understated vehicle. The short trip was made in relative silence.

"Here," Kal said, to his personal attendant and driver, Jak, once the vehicle came to a stop. He handed the young man a couple of gold pieces. "Have a good afternoon. My treat."

"Thank you, my lord," Jak said, his eyes wide.

Kal was always generous with him, but never before had the prince dropped any amount of gold in his hands. Usually, it was a handful of coppers or a few silvers. In any case, it had always been enough to treat Jak to a movie, some drinks, or any number of things that he might want to do, buy, or see. This much gold could entertain him for several months, if not the entire year.

"Don't mention it," Kal said offhandedly. "You know that I appreciate your services."

Jak nodded. "Have a good afternoon, my lord. Just call when you are ready to leave." He patted his right pants pocket where he kept his phone.

"Thanks," Kal said with a smile.

He turned with Ching and Jai, and together the three brothers entered into their favorite bar. Kal waved at the bartender as they took their regular table in the far corner. This early in the afternoon, the place was pretty quiet. Since the place also served pretty decent food, a few people sat enjoying an early lunch. The presence of royalty in the bar earned them a few interested glances, but no real surprise. Kal and his brothers had long ago started making their presence in the city known. They had agreed that it was better to walk among the people and see the world that they lived in first hand. How could they ever hope to lead Krypton effectively if they stayed locked behind the walls of the palace? Kal, in particular, enjoyed being among the common men and women that they ruled over. He made it a point to acquaint himself with as many of them as possible. Ching thought that was taking things a little too far. It was one thing to interact with the commoners. It was quite another to become overly friendly with them.

The manager approached their table as soon as they sat. The three gave their orders; they hardly ever veered from their usual sandwich and drink requests. The manager scurried away to fill their order, bowing profusely at the three young lords as he did so. Kal glanced around at the familiar bar, feeling relieved to be beyond the palace walls. It was always a breath of fresh air for him to be among the common people. Though his father afforded

Kal and his brothers as much freedom as he could, life in the palace was sometimes far too formal and stuffy for Kal's liking.

"Feels good to get out of the palace," Kal said, voicing his thoughts.

Ching nodded. "It does."

"Zara didn't want to come?" Kal asked.

Zara sometimes liked to come along on the brothers' excursions into the city. She didn't always accompany them, but it had been a while since she had last tagged along. Kal didn't mind either way. He loved Zara well enough, but sometimes it was nice just to have some time alone with his brothers.

"She...thought it best that...just the three of us go together this time," Ching said, choosing his words carefully.

"You told her, didn't you?"

Ching nodded warily. "I *had* to, Kal. The palace staff are already starting to prepare for the ceremony and feast. I thought it would be better if she heard the whole truth, not the half rumors that are floating around."

Kal sighed. "You're right. So...what then? She sent you two to provide me with some sort of distraction? Is that why we're in the city today?"

Jai and Ching exchanged an uneasy glance. Kal did not miss the look and nodded in understanding.

"Are you mad?" Jai asked.

Kal sighed again. "No. In fact, in a way, it's kind of nice to be distracted."

Jai grinned widely. "So...what should we do first today?"

"I don't know," Kal said, shrugging. "I don't mind just wandering. Anything to take my mind off what's to come. I mean, what if I don't like her? What if...what if she hates me?"

"Why would she hate you?" Jai asked, surprised at Kal's concern.

"Well," Kal said, searching for the right words, "she's being thrown into the same situation as me. She's never met me. What if...I don't measure up to her expectations?"

"You're a prince," Ching said, shrugging. "She'll probably feel privileged to have been chosen for you."

"I don't know about that..."

"Look, Kal, I'm not saying that I agree with this," Ching reassured him. "You know that I hate the idea of arranged marriages as much as you do. Still, you have to admit, the Lyne family might be well regarded, but for a noble house, they aren't that well off. Your future wife...Lois...will be better off married to you."

Kal made an exaggerated grimace, but did not reply as the manager approached their table again. The portly man quickly placed each of the lords' orders before them on the table, then retreated to collect payment from two other men who had finished their meal. Kal swirled his glass of wine absent-mindedly before taking a sip. It wasn't the refined wine served in the palace, but it was about as good as the barkeep could afford, and Kal liked it well enough.

"You know," Jai said, swallowing a bite of his lunch, "you have a real gift for worrying. And aside from what Ching said, you're forgetting the obvious."

"And that is...?"

Jai spread his arms as if to embrace the room. "We are three *very* good looking guys. Now, *sure*, I'm the best looking one, but that's beside the point."

Kal nearly choked on his wine as a burst of laughter seized him. Jai grinned widely and Ching slapped Kal on the back.

"Jai-EL, the modest," Ching laughed.

The rest of their lunch was spent talking of happier things. Kal felt himself relaxing a bit as he and his brothers joked around. Some of his worries seemed to melt away. When he had finished, Kal stood and paid the bill despite the barkeep's insistence that the meal was on him. Jai and Ching were into their

second round of drinks, and playing a trivia game that appeared on the video screens placed around the room. Kal knew that he had at least forty-five minutes before his brothers would be ready to leave the bar, and longer if they opted for a third round of drinks. He wanted some time alone to wander the city, so he waved off Jai's request that he stay and have another drink with them.

At last, he managed to leave his brothers behind. Exiting the bar, he lost himself among the throngs of people rushing from place to place. His pace was swift and purposeful. He was, he thought, a man on a mission. The passersby barely gave him any mind as they swirled around him to either side. A few openly stared at the prince as he walked by them. But most were too wrapped in their thoughts and private affairs to even notice the royalty in their midst. Kal barely noticed the stares. His mind was fixed on his goal. It had taken root in his mind when Jai had mentioned his gift for worrying, and had steadily grown and flowered in his mind as he had eaten his lunch. Why not try to break the ice with his bride-to-be with a gift? At first, he had been at a loss. What could he possibly give his future wife that she might like? Finally, it had hit him. How could he possibly go wrong with a piece of jewelry?

Suddenly, he found himself at the shop that he was looking for. As he entered, a small silver bell rang, alerting the owner to the presence of a customer. The owner was a tall, thin, and balding old man by the name of Len Shan. He bowed deeply when as he recognized Kal. Kal offered the man a friendly smile as he approached the counter.

"My lord, you honor me with your presence. How may I serve you today?" Len said as he bowed.

Kal took a moment as he swept his eyes around the room. The sheer volume of things to choose from was overwhelming. Gems of all shapes, sizes, and colors sparkled beneath the pristine glass cases that lined three quarters of the shop. Did he want a ring? A bracelet? A necklace? Earrings? Did Lois even *have* pierced ears? What about an elegant watch? An ankle bracelet? His head was already swimming, and he felt like he was in danger of drowning at any moment.

"I'm not exactly sure," Kal admitted. "I'm looking for something special."

"Might I be so bold as to guess that it is for the lady you are to wed?" Len asked, his eyes downcast.

Kal chuckled. "Word *does* spread quickly. But yes. That's why I am here. I want something elegant, but unique. Something that isn't overly flashy. Understated, yet brilliant and beautiful." He sighed. "Sorry. I don't think I'm being very helpful. In fact, I think I'm making myself even more confused than I was a minute ago."

Len looked Kal in the eyes and smiled. "Ah, but you *have* been helpful, my lord. I think that together, we can find this special piece. I have many fine and rare items. Let me bring some of them out for you to see."

Kal nodded, and the thin man began to breeze around the shop with the air of one who knows exactly where everything is. Rings, necklaces, earrings, and bracelets all appeared before the young prince with a speed that seemed incapable of coming from the aged man. Kal inspected each one of the pieces in turn. All were beautiful, but none seemed to really speak to him. One by one, he ruled each of them out. A look of apprehension flickered in the shopkeeper's eyes. Kal sighed inwardly. This was the one thing that he disliked about being in the city. Everyone seemed to be afraid of offending the princes, as though they might order them into the city jail if they displeased the brothers.

Kal shook his head. "I'm sorry. None of these feel right to me. I thank you for your time anyway."

Len frowned and thought. Kal turned and made ready to leave the shop.

“Wait!” Len exclaimed. “My lord! Please! I had forgotten. A new shipment of items just arrived yesterday morning. I have it in the back. I haven’t had the chance to put any of it on display yet. Perhaps there is something in that shipment that might interest you.”

Kal had turned back at the man’s call. He nodded. After all, Len Shan had a reputation of being the finest jeweler in the city, and of carrying the most unique pieces on the planet. If he didn’t have the right piece, what hope did Kal have of finding it elsewhere? Encouraged by Kal’s nod, Len swept away to the back room. A moment later, he reappeared with a heavy box. One after another, he popped open the boxes held within and placed them on the countertop before Kal. Still, nothing seemed right to the prince. He sighed lightly, becoming discouraged. Finally, Len brought out the final piece. He opened the small box and placed it before Kal for his inspection. Kal’s breath caught in his throat as he gazed upon the piece. He knew in an instant that this was what he’d been looking for all along.

Nestled within the black velvet box was a multi-rayed star of pure white diamond. The multitude of facets caught the bright store lights and reflected it back. It seemed to flash and glow with the white fire of an actual star, plucked from the heavens and cooled into an icy crystal. It was not a huge gem, but it was all the more beautiful for its simple, petite elegance. A slender chain of the finest silver supported the tiny star. Kal nodded, breathless.

“This is it,” he finally managed to say. “It’s stunning. I’ve never seen anything like it before. I’ll take it.”

“An excellent choice, my lord,” Len said, a relieved smile spreading across his face. “This particular piece is the very last thing that the designer made before his death. Truly a one of a kind item.”

Kal nodded again and paid the store owner, thanking him sincerely for his help and his time, as well as his patience. Then he slipped the box into the breast pocket of his jacket, close to his heart. He only hoped that his future bride would love the necklace as much as he did.

The days flew by too quickly for Kal’s liking. But at last, the day of his wedding arrived, bright, sunny, and warm. It seemed that the last of the colder, rainier late spring weather had been chased away by the early summer. The bright, shining sun did little to improve Kal’s mood though. He’d never quite made his peace with being sold in marriage to Dr. Lyne’s daughter. But the bitter disappointment had boiled down to a nervousness that would not relent. For several days now, the prince had been on edge. He could barely sleep. And when he did, his dreams were fitful and dark. It left him somehow more exhausted than when he’d initially laid down to sleep. He found himself able to eat even less than he was able to sleep. His stomach roiled and lurched each time he sat down to eat. It was as though a flock of millions of butterflies had taken up residence within his abdomen, and they were restless, fluttering about every second of the day. Kal counted himself lucky if he was able to eat more than a few bites of food at any given meal. He felt as though he was surviving on coffee alone.

But that seemed like nothing compared to the nervous energy that now gripped him. The day had arrived. No amount of brooding or complaining or self distraction had managed to postpone the inevitable. He stood now in his chambers, staring at his reflection in a full length mirror. For what felt like the thousandth time, he adjusted the ceremonial robes he was wearing. He frowned and shifted the material back the way it had been sitting, then shifted it again. He was painfully aware of his appearance. Every eye on the planet would be fixed on him and on his soon-to-be wife; if not in person, then on every video monitor in every public place and private home. And, more importantly, his wife would be seeing him for the first time as the

man she would be bound to for life.

He took a deep breath in an effort to calm himself, but found that it did little to help. He picked up his comb and fixed his hair for the fifth time that hour, brushing back the small curl of ebony hair that lay draped on his brow. He frowned, liking the look of it pushed back even less. He shook his head in frustration, and the stubborn lock of hair fell forward again. He decided to leave it be. Why should he pretend to be something he wasn’t? And slicking back his hair made him feel like a liar. Never before had he ever worn his hair like that. He combed out the look and styled it to his usual way.

“Let Lois see me as I am,” he mumbled to himself. “She deserves better than to be lied to in any way on this day.”

A knock sounded on his door. Kal took a deep breath.

“Enter,” he said after a moment.

Jai and Ching entered a second later. Both were dressed in their finest clothing, from their crisply pressed shirts, ramrod straight ties, tailored jackets, and freshly purchased pants, all the way down to the proper shine on their shoes. They were in gray, the perfect medium that tied them to the groom in black and their father in the white robes that he would be wearing. Kal was mildly jealous that they got to wear a normal shirt and pants combination, instead of the robes that made Kal feel slightly ridiculous.

“How are you holding up?” Ching asked him, as Kal fidgeted with his robes again. He leaned against the wall with his left shoulder.

“About as well as can be expected,” Kal replied, fixing his collar. His shoulders slumped for the briefest of moments. “It’s really happening, isn’t it?”

Ching nodded. “I’m afraid so.”

“You’ll do just fine,” Jai said, giving his brother a reassuring smile. “And you look great.”

“Thanks,” Kal said, sounding more confident than he felt.

“It’s not so bad,” Ching said, trying to be helpful. “Trey will do almost all of the talking. You just have to stand there and let him perform the ceremony. The most you’ll have to do is repeat the vows after him. Then we’ll all just move onto the feast. Just try not to look so depressed. Everyone expects this to be a happy occasion.”

“Right,” Kal nodded. “This is the easy part. The hard part will come tonight when all is said and done, and Lois and I are left trying to figure out how to make this work.”

“You’ll do fine,” Ching said, echoing Jai’s words. “You’re a great guy. I’m sure Lois will love you.”

Kal looked dubious. “Easy for you to say. Zara’s been in love with you since you two were both children.”

There was another knock at the door. Jai opened it, admitting Jor-El into Kal’s chambers. Their father was dressed in the crisp white robes of the Supreme Lord’s office, the El family crest proudly emblazoned across the chest in a muted silver. It somehow seemed to compliment his strong features and salt and pepper hair, and gave him a commanding, but benevolent, look. He was a stark contrast to his son, dressed all in his black ceremonial robes. The three young princes greeted their father, though Kal’s distraction was obvious. Jor-El glanced at Ching and Jai.

“Might I have a word with your brother in private?” he asked.

“Of course, Father,” Ching said. He gave Kal a squeeze on one shoulder. “Good luck, bro.”

Jai slapped Kal lightly on the back before he went. “Best of luck. See you at the feast. And don’t forget to smile.” He pointed his fingers to the corners of his mouth and moved them upwards as he demonstrated a huge smile for Kal.

Kal chuckled at his little brother’s antics. “Oh, thank you so much,” he said dryly. “It’s a good thing I have you here to show me what a smile looks like. I don’t know *what* I’d do without

you.”

Jai grinned impishly. “You’re welcome!” he shot back with a laugh, swiftly closing the door behind him as he exited Kal’s chambers.

“Kal,” Jor-El said simply.

Kal didn’t respond. For two weeks now, he’d barely spoken with his father. At first, he’d been too angry to speak to him. It had been a struggle for him to keep a cordial tone when he’d spoken to Jor-El whenever they were in the presence of the Elders. But as the anger with his father had subsided into an unhappy acceptance of his actions, it hadn’t gotten any easier to talk to him. Kal found that he simply didn’t know what to say. He found himself all but speechless. Now, he merely readjusted his robe’s collar again. Jor-El stepped around him and shifted the robes until they sat perfectly on his son. Kal sighed and shut his eyes for a brief moment.

“I haven’t had to fix your clothes for you since you were a little boy,” the Supreme Lord said softly as he shifted the fabric.

Kal nodded. “Yeah. I remember that. I think the last time was when Mom died.”

Jor-El smiled gently. “Between you and your brothers, you three always had a tie half coming undone, or a shirt twisted in some odd direction. I never could figure out how you’d manage to do that so quickly. I’d look at you and you’d be in perfect order. I’d turn away for a moment and when I’d look back, it was like you’d been through a hurricane.” He shook his head in amusement.

Kal chuckled quietly. “I remember that too. It used to drive you and Mom nuts.”

Jor-El laughed and shrugged. “You three were kids. It was to be expected.”

“Dad...”

“There,” Jor-El said, as he smoothed down a slight crinkle in the robes. “Perfect.”

“Dad,” Kal repeated, his eyes pleading with his father. “Must I go through with this? Is there no way, no loophole...?” He knew in his heart what the answer was, but he still couldn’t resist one final attempt.

Jor-El shook his head. “I am sorry, my son. But you must marry the girl.”

“What if... what if this marriage doesn’t work? What if Lois hates being married to me?”

“I have faith in you, Kal. I know that you’ll find a way to make it work.”

“Great. You and my brothers have more faith in this than I do.” Kal’s shoulders slumped again.

“Try to keep an open mind about this,” his father said, placing both hands on the prince’s shoulders. “It will be far easier to make the transition that way. Believe me.”

“I’m trying to.”

“Good. Now come. It’s time.”

Kal loosed a heavy sigh of regret. He dejectedly followed his father through the palace, down to the chambers where the Council of Elders held all of the important ceremonies. Each step forward felt like a step made towards some intangible prison. Kal felt his heart sink as the time slipped away and the distance between himself and his fate steadily closed. Reaching the doors to the chambers, Kal forced himself to take a deep breath. He held it for several heartbeats, then slowly released it. He squared his shoulders and forced the sadness from his features. He determinedly affixed a passable smile to his face. He knew that it didn’t resemble his usual, genuine smile, but he hoped that the inconsistency would be chalked up to the nerves of a groom on his wedding day. Kal took another deep breath and pushed open the doors to the chamber.

All of the Elders were in attendance, as well as many of the noble families. Kal’s eyes swept the room from one side to the

other as he entered the room. He wasn’t surprised by the turnout. No doubt they all saw this marriage as one of the happiest occasions for the royal family since Ching’s marriage six years prior. Kal’s heart sank as he recognized the irony of the situation. Today was the happiest day on the planet for everyone except for himself. And possibly for Lois. Still, he stepped into the room with his head held high, a fake sense of calm collectedness masking his true feelings. He nodded politely at the various lords and ladies, friends and Elders, even to the few servants who were in attendance. His stride was purposeful and confident, his bearing fit for a prince and reflecting the authority that he carried. Finally, he made his way to Trey, each step feeling heavier than the last, until his legs felt absolutely leaden. In a soft voice, Kal greeted the Chief Elder, then turned and waited for his bride to enter the room.

Several long minutes passed. Kal began to half hope, half fear that Samm Lyne had decided against the marriage for some reason. But all thoughts were banished in the next instant.

The door slowly opened. Samm and Elle Lyne entered the room, followed by a young woman, the bride’s sister, Luci. The three swiftly made their way to their seats and sat. All eyes were riveted on the door as the figure of a second young woman came into view. A low murmur coursed through the room before silence took hold again. Kal wondered briefly if any of them had ever known of Samm’s daughters. The woman advanced, dressed in crisp black robes, similar to Kal’s. As she steadily drew nearer, Kal got a better view of the woman. He felt certain that his eyes were growing wider with his bride’s every step closer. His father hadn’t been lying to him when he’d said that Lois was a rare beauty. Kal didn’t think that he’d ever seen a woman so beautiful before.

She was a slender, shapely woman with dark hair and soft brown eyes. Though she did not make eye contact with Kal as she walked, he felt his heart skip a beat. At least one of his fears was laid to rest. He’d worried that he’d never come to even be remotely attracted to his wife-to-be, let alone find a way to turn this forced wedding into a functional marriage. But he definitely felt an instant attraction to his bride. He only hoped now that her mind and personality were as alluring, as blindingly beautiful, as the outside. At last, she finally took that last, vital step and faced Kal. Her eyes locked onto his, and Kal felt his heart melt. But Lois’ eyes were unreadable. Kal only hoped that she found his own looks to be pleasing. New worries seared through his mind. Were his robes sitting perfectly on his frame? Did his hair look all right? Should he have gone with the neater, slicked back look?

“My lords and ladies, we are gathered here on this most joyous day to bear witness to the union of Prince Kal of the house of El, second son of the venerable Supreme Lord Jor-El, to this woman, Lois of the house of Lyne, firstborn daughter of the esteemed Dr. Samm Lyne.”

Kal swallowed hard. This was it. The moment that he’d been dreading for two weeks. As Trey began the ancient ceremony, Kal’s fate was sealed. He felt as though he were locked in some impregnable cage with the stunning stranger before him. Kal tried to force such thoughts from his mind. He tried to focus on what Trey was saying. And for the most part, he was successful. But even so, there were a few moments when the Elder’s voice faded from Kal’s mind as new fears, new questions occupied his thoughts.

What was Lois like? Would she like him? Would he like her? What would it be like to share his living quarters with this woman? Could they make this marriage work?

“My lord, please repeat your vows after me,” Trey said, pulling Kal from his thoughts, as he bound Kal’s hand to Lois’ with a length of exquisite silk. “I, Kal, of the house of El, hereby do solemnly pledge myself to thee, Lois, of the house of Lyne. From this moment, henceforth, until my dying day, I commit

myself to you as your husband. I promise to always honor you and protect you, in sickness and in health, in times of happiness and times of turmoil, in times of bounty and times of wanting. There shall be no others that shall take your place in my life and in my heart.”

Kal solemnly repeated the words, knowing in his heart that he meant what he was saying. Not only because he found his bride beautiful, but because the union of marriage was a sacred oath to him, regardless of the path that had led him to it. He noted, however, that the wording of the vows was not quite fair. Nothing was said about giving his fidelity to the woman standing before him, though he knew that Lois’ vows would require her to make that oath.

“My lady, please repeat your vows after me,” Trey said, shifting his gaze from Kal to Lois. “I, Lois, of the house of Lyne, hereby do solemnly pledge myself to thee, Kal, of the house of El. From this moment, henceforth, until my dying day, I commit myself to you as your wife. I promise to always honor you and support you, in sickness and in health, in times of happiness and times of turmoil, in times of bounty and times of wanting. I pledge my eternal fidelity to you and promise to bear your children; sons to carry on your name and daughters to brighten your days. There shall be no others that shall take your place in my life and in my heart.”

Lois spoke the ancient words, and Kal was captivated by her voice. It brought an ache of joy to his uncertain heart to hear such a beautiful sound. He wondered what was going on in her mind, behind those incredible eyes of hers. Did she feel as he felt? Did the vows mean as much to her as they did to him? Or was she already plotting some way to try and get out of this marriage? For the first time since he’d learned of the contract that bound them, he hoped that Lois would give this marriage a real chance. If she was as beautiful on the inside as she was on the outside, he could imagine himself falling for her.

“My lords and ladies, honored guests, it is my deep pleasure to pronounce this union complete. I now present to you your newest royal couple, Prince Kal and Princess Lois. May their marriage be long, happy, and blessed with many children.”

The room exploded into thunderous applause as Trey made his announcement. Kal and Lois were untied from one another, and they turned to face the gathered nobles who’d witnessed their union. Together, they endured the applause for a long moment. Then, as soon as it was socially acceptable, they strode from the room, Lois trailing Kal by the customary two steps. Kal stubbornly kept the fake smile plastered to his face, though inwardly, he was disgusted by the archaic tradition that forced his new wife to walk behind him.

Behind the newlyweds, the rest of the guests began to file out of the Council’s chambers, as soon as Lois had cleared the door. Kal led the way through the palace to the grand ballroom where the elaborate wedding feast would be served. He could scarcely wait to get to his destination. At least then, he might be able to have a word with Lois. Plus, it would afford him a chance to slip a little out of the spotlight as the guests mingled with one another. So it was with a sigh of relief that he entered the ballroom.

Kal led Lois to the dais that had been set up for them, then turned to his wife. He gave her a shy smile but before he could speak a word, his brothers converged on them. Kal sighed inwardly. Normally he’d be happy to be rescued from a moment like this, but now, it felt more like an intrusion.

“Kal! Congrats, bro!” Jai said, reaching him first. He drew Kal into a back-slapping hug.

“Uh, thanks.”

“Congratulations, little brother,” Ching said, approaching with Zara.

“Congratulations,” Zara echoed.

“Thanks,” Kal said. He leaned in and hugged Zara, and

placed a kiss on her cheek. “You look great, Zara.”

Zara blushed and smiled. “Thanks.”

“Lois,” Kal said, turning to his bride. “I’d like you to meet my older brother, Ching, his wife, Zara, and my younger brother, Jai. You’ll be seeing a lot of them, now that we’re...family.” He shifted his weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other, his face going scarlet as he lost the battle to suppress an embarrassed blush.

“A pleasure to meet you all,” Lois said, looking uncomfortable.

“Welcome to the family,” Ching said, smiling brightly.

“It’s so good to have another woman around,” Zara said with a grin. “Trust me, these guys are all very sweet, but it will be nice to have another woman to talk with and hang out with. I look forward to getting to know you.”

“I’m sure that you two will become great friends,” Ching said, smiling at Zara. He gave her a quick kiss on the head. “Kal, Dad’s coming.”

Jor-El quickly crossed the room to where his sons and daughters-in-law stood, talking in a loose circle. A few times, he stopped to briefly greet a nobleman or noblewoman, including Lux Uthor, the third wealthiest nobleman on Krypton. But, still, Jor-El steadily drew nearer to his sons. When he finally closed the distance, he greeted Lois with gentle familiarity. His smile was soft and genuine as he spoke with his new daughter-in-law.

“Lois, my dear. You look stunning,” he said.

“Oh, uh, thank you, my lord,” she said. It was clear that she was growing more uncomfortable by the moment.

Kal couldn’t really blame her. He was uncomfortable enough; he could only imagine how Lois felt in such a new and overwhelming setting.

Jor-El smiled warmly. “No more of this ‘my lord’ business. We are family now. Jor is fine. Kal, may I have a word with you, in private?”

Kal nodded. “I’ll be right back,” he promised Lois.

He turned and followed his father off to a secluded corner of the room, until they were standing before a series of floor to ceiling windows that commanded a view of the immense river that ran past the palace to the west. It was nearing sunset, and the sky was painted in bold reds and gold, with puffy pinkish clouds. The red sun hung low in the sky, a suspended ball of fire that turned the peaceful river into molten gold. Night was coming.

Specifically, Kal thought with a mental shudder, his wedding night.

He both looked forward to it, if only to put this day behind him, and dreaded it, for he’d be alone with Lois. He knew in his heart that he’d never be able to follow through with his expected marital duties. He just couldn’t bring himself to lay with a complete stranger. But what would Lois think? Would it be a relief to her as well? Or did he risk insulting her? He ran his hand through his hair. It was a habit that he’d had since he was a child. Whenever he was ill at ease, or even embarrassed or deep in thought, his hand forever found itself raking through his hair. He’d tried to break the habit several times before, but it was so deeply ingrained in him, that he’d never been successful. Jor-El finally faced his son.

“Kal,” he said, looking his son in the eye, “I know that this has been a rough day on you. But I am proud of the way that you have handled yourself thus far. And I am grateful for your cooperation. I had feared that you might do something rash to try and get out of this marriage.”

“I wanted to,” Kal admitted, casting his eyes down at the floor, “but I knew that there was nothing I could do. Anything that I might have done would have only brought shame and would have eroded your reputation of being a man of your word. I couldn’t do that to you, even if it meant my unhappiness.”

“And are you unhappy now?” Jor-El asked gently.

Kal shrugged. “I’m not sure. I’ve barely gotten to say two words to Lois. I have no idea what she’s like.”

“Is she not attractive though?” his father asked knowingly.

Kal chuckled. “Very.”

Jor-El’s chuckle matched Kal’s. “I thought that you might agree. Now go. Enjoy your feast.”

Kal wanted to argue. It *wasn’t* his feast. It was his *father’s* feast. Kal just happened to be the one that everyone was celebrating. If the prince had had his way, there would have been no wedding and no feast this day. But he couldn’t say it. He couldn’t start the same argument with his father all over again. It was too late anyway. So, instead, he just nodded.

“All right.”

And yet, he still wanted to say more, to express his fears to his father. But now was not the time. So Kal squared his shoulders again and waded back into the thick of the feast. He wanted desperately to have a moment alone with Lois. But fate, it seemed, had other plans. For the rest of the evening, he found himself pulled into one conversation after another. Every single guest wanted their moment with him to express their congratulations to him, and their wishes for a long and happy marriage. Several of the nobles monopolized his time, and Kal found it hard to break away from them to move on to speak with others. Much of the conversation Kal barely heard, even when he was speaking with his good friends, Ruce A’ne among them. His mind was elsewhere. He tried to keep an eye on Lois, looking for an opening to speak with her. But she was in the same predicament as he was. She was never alone for a moment. Kal was grateful to see that someone was always with her, to introduce her to the vast array of lords, ladies, Elders, and other honored guests. At least she wasn’t being thrown to the wolves all on her own. He only wished that he could be the one at her side.

Hours passed. The brilliant sunset faded into the bruised purple-black of twilight, then into the deep black of night. Countless stars flared into life in the sky above and the twin moons rose, full and bright. Kal counted himself lucky when each new course was brought out, and the guests left him alone for a short time so that they all could eat. But even then, he was never alone with his wife. Servants constantly bustled about, driving Kal nearly crazy. Only once did he get a moment to speak with her briefly, just before the dessert course was served.

“I’m sorry about all of this,” he said to her, his voice barely loud enough for her to hear over the low roar of the feasting nobles. “It wasn’t my idea for this huge...production.”

“Oh...it’s okay,” Lois said, groping for words.

“After dessert, I think we’ll be able to slip out of here, if you’d like to.”

“I, uh...”

But Lois wasn’t permitted to finish her statement. Servants came and placed their desserts before them, then Jor-El stood to toast the new couple. Kal sighed in frustration. It just wasn’t fair. He had been trying all night to break the awkward ice between Lois and himself, but each time, his efforts had been thwarted.

At last, the toasts and the dessert course was finished. Guests began to leave and Kal finally saw his opportunity to slip out of the feast unnoticed. He nodded at Lois and she nodded back. A look of worry was on her face, mixed with relief that it was finally time to leave the feast. Inwardly, Kal’s feelings reflected the same warring emotions. He led her out of the ballroom, deftly avoiding the pockets of guests who were still celebrating. Lois followed behind him, dutifully keeping the traditional two steps behind him. As soon as they were in the hall and alone, Kal stopped and turned to Lois.

“Lois?”

“Yes?”

“I, uh...would you mind walking beside me?”

“That...wouldn’t be proper. Tradition clearly states...”

“Hang tradition,” Kal said, smiling gently. “You are my wife now. I will not have you treated as if you are beneath me.”

“As you wish,” Lois replied.

“Thank you,” Kal said.

With Lois by his side, Kal took them through the palace. He supposed that he should point out the various rooms and wings that they were passing. But he felt drained of all energy. He could take her on a tour in the morning. So he took the quickest route back to his own chambers.

“Here we are,” he said, upon reaching the doors to his own rooms. “Home sweet home.”

He pushed open the door and allowed Lois to enter first. Kal’s cat, an orange tabby, came rushing to the door to greet them. The cat cheerfully meowed at them. He wound himself around Lois’ legs, rubbing and purring.

“Looks like Fasa likes you,” Kal said, for lack of anything else to say. Now that he was totally alone with Lois, he found himself shy and uncertain once more.

“Fasa?” Lois asked. “Like the hunter-turned-hero of the old myths?”

Kal nodded and closed the door behind them. “It’s always been one of my favorite stories. Well, here we are. These are our living quarters. Everything I have is now yours. I hope you’ll be comfortable here. Please, make yourself at home.” He moved through his chambers as he spoke, until he was at his bedroom.

Lois nodded but said nothing. Kal searched for words, but found none. To busy himself, he went to his dresser and pulled out a sleep shirt and pants. He ducked into the bathroom to change. Once behind the closed door, he let out a quivering sigh. This was turning out to be more awkward than he’d anticipated. What should he do now?

“Break the ice,” he whispered to himself. “But how?”

Still pondering his situation, Kal finished changing and reentered the bedroom. Lois was stripping out of her robes. She paused and swallowed hard, facing Kal, and let the material pool around her ankles.

“Wh...what are you doing?” Kal asked. He tried not to stare and averted his eyes. He toed the carpet of the room self-consciously.

“I...thought...you’d want to take what is rightfully yours.”

Kal shook his head. “No. Please, get dressed.”

“Am I not pleasing to you, my lord?”

Kal shook his head again. “It’s not that. You’re beautiful. In fact, I’ve never seen anyone as beautiful as you.”

“Then I’m afraid I don’t understand.” Still, Lois bent and pulled the robes around her body once more.

“Look, Lois, you don’t...belong...to me, or to anyone. It wouldn’t be right for me to just...take...what you’re offering. I’d like it if we got to know each other though. Here...I have something that I’d like to give you.”

Kal crossed the room and went to his dresser. He opened the top drawer and rummaged for a moment. Finally, he found what he was looking for. He pulled out the small, black velvet box and handed it to Lois. She took it after a moment’s hesitation. She opened the lid and sucked in a breath when she saw the multi-rayed star necklace that lay within.

“What? Why?”

Kal shrugged. “I thought that you might like it. I wanted this marriage to start off on a good foot. I hoped that it might help...”

Lois cut him off, her brown eyes flashing with anger. “You thought what? That you’d buy my affections? That you’d make one gesture and I’d fall into your arms? Well, you’ve got another thing coming. The *only* reason I am here is that I had no other choice.”

“Lois, neither one of us had a choice in this.”

Lois nodded. “And just because we’ve been forced into a

marriage doesn't mean that I have to like it. My father might be thrilled with this match, but I'm not. If it were up to me, I'd be off doing my own thing. I'd rather be a working commoner than a princess stuck in a marriage with you. So you can just keep your little gift. I will not be bought!"

She snapped the lid of the box shut and hurled it at Kal. He moved one step to the side a second before it would have crashed into his forehead. His jaw hung slack with disbelief. He'd meant the gift to be a gesture of his good will and his willingness to give this marriage a fighting chance. How had the tables turned on him so quickly? He bent and picked up the box from where it had landed, his heart sinking. He placed the box on the top of his dresser and shook his head. He went to his closet and pulled out an extra blanket and pillow.

"What are you doing?" Lois demanded.

"You can take the bed," Kal said, disgusted by the turn of events. "I'm going to go sleep on the couch. Come, Fasa."

With a meow, the cat followed Kal out of the bedroom and to the living room. Kal lay on the couch on his back. Fasa jumped up and lay on his chest. Hot tears of sadness and frustration pricked at Kal's eyes. He fought them back and stroked the cat's back. Though he was exhausted, Kal found sleep to be elusive for a long while.

The next morning, Kal woke early. He followed his usual routine of caring for his cat and getting himself ready for the day. And yet, he felt lost. What was he supposed to do today? There would be no council meetings that he could lose himself in, of that he was certain. He'd seen many of the Elders imbibe a bit too deeply at the wedding feast. He was sure that most of them would be spending the day sleeping off their hangovers. He imagined that the case was the same for Jai; he had still been partying heavily when Kal and Lois had snuck out of the affair.

Kal frowned as his memories surfaced. Last night had not gone well with Lois. In fact, it had been nothing short of a disaster. He'd hoped to have a little of Jai's humor to distract him from the catastrophe that had been his wedding night. His frown deepened when he realized that he'd soon have to face Lois. What was he supposed to say to her? He feared to further fuel her anger with him. It would only make it that much harder to try to fix things between them. Would she allow him to even *try* to fix things? She had made it quite clear to him the night before that she wasn't in the least bit interested in being married to him.

"I don't really blame her," Kal said aloud, sitting on the couch and scratching Fasa behind the ears. "Neither one of us planned for this marriage. I just wish that I could find a way to make things right. Any ideas, buddy?"

Fasa stared at him and blinked, then yawned widely. Kal smiled at his furry companion.

"Thanks," Kal said, giving the tabby a final pat on the head. "You've been a big help."

Kal began to pace before the large windows of the room. The day was overcast. Huge black clouds hung heavily in the air, threatening a storm. A stiff wind had picked up. Kal could see the trees in the gardens swaying mightily. His stomach growled as he stopped to watch the trees. A thought crossed his mind and he smiled. He strode from the chamber, leaving Lois to sleep. He swiftly made his way through the palace and down to the kitchen. The palace was eerily quiet, even for this early hour of the day. Usually Kal saw or heard at least a few Elders around, or a courier rushing off to deliver a message. But today, there was no one. Kal wondered if he was the only one, aside from the servants, who was awake.

When he reached the kitchen, a pleasant warmth and delicious smells greeted him. He slipped inside, listening to the jangling and clinking of dishes, the bubbling of various pots, and the hiss of meats cooking on the wide stovetops. The cooks bowed to him respectfully and he greeted each of them by name.

But there was one in particular that he was looking for. Kal smiled as he finally caught sight of the man that he sought; an older man with graying hair and a drum of a belly.

"Kal!" the man said, smiling when he saw the prince. "My sincerest congratulations to you and your new bride."

"Thanks, Jon," Kal said. "My sincerest compliments on the feast that you and your staff prepared last night. People will be talking about it for years to come."

"Thank you," Jon replied. "Marthe said that the event was something to behold."

Kal nodded absently. "Oh? Was she there? I didn't see her."

Jon nodded. "She wouldn't have missed it for the world, though she didn't stay long. You know that we both love you and your brothers like you were our own."

"If only that could be the case," Kal said, as he ushered Jon to a more private area, where they could speak without being overheard. "I'd trade in all the comforts of my life in a heartbeat for the freedom that comes along with being a commoner."

Jon frowned. His prince had never really spoken like this before. Sure, he'd sometimes vented his frustrations to Jon when he was having a bad day; things that he hadn't felt comfortable discussing with his father. And he knew that Kal often confided in Jon's wife, Marthe. After all, Marthe had been the prince's nursemaid since their births. In fact, Kal had become so close to them both that the Kens felt almost like he was the child that they had never been able to have on their own. But never before had Kal sounded so depressed, so defeated. It worried Jon.

"What's wrong, son?" Jon asked. He'd been calling Kal "son" for years as a sign of his affection for the young prince.

Kal sighed as he slumped against the wall. "Married life is hard."

Jon nodded and smiled, suppressing a chuckle. "It is. But you've not even been married a full twenty-four hours yet."

Kal grimaced. "I know. And already my marriage is a disaster."

"Want to talk about it?"

"Not really. But Lois and I haven't started out on a very good foot. I think she hates me."

"I'm sure that's not the case. But it's going to take you both some time to adjust to the situation," Jon assured him.

"I know."

"So what are you doing here then? Hiding out? Trust me, it never works."

Kal smiled a little at Jon's light teasing. "I'd hoped that you could fix me up with some breakfast. I want to bring it to my chambers as a surprise for Lois. Sort of a peace offering, I guess you could call it."

Jon chuckled. "*That*, I can do. I can send it up to your rooms, if you'd like."

Kal shook his head. "Thanks, but I'd rather bring it up myself. I don't want Lois to see me as some spoiled little rich boy. I want her to see the person that I really am."

"That's a good idea," Jon said, nodding. "Let's get you a couple of plates, shall we?"

"Thanks, Jon," Kal said, brightening for a second.

Together, the two men planned out a breakfast. Kal loaded a tray with scrambled eggs and bacon, sausage and hash browns, bagels, butter, and various types of jellies. He added a couple of dishes of fresh fruit slices and mixed berries. Coffee he could make in his own small kitchenette within his chambers. He hesitated a moment as he surveyed the breakfast that they had compiled. He felt nervous about returning to his rooms. Would Lois be awake? Would she think that he'd abandoned her in his rooms?

"Go," Jon urged him. "Nothing will get accomplished standing around here all morning. Unless, of course, you want the food to get cold."

Kal smiled gently and laughed. “Yeah, I guess so. Thanks again, Jon.”

“My pleasure,” Jon said, waving Kal back out through the kitchen. “And good luck.”

Kal nodded and hefted the tray so that it rested on his shoulder and the palm of his hand. From behind, he would have looked like any one of the servants who worked in the palace. He easily made his way back to his living quarters, as though the tray of food weighed nothing. He slipped quietly back into his rooms when he reached them, then quickly set the table in his dining area. He didn’t often get much use out of the dining set, but today he was glad for it.

He poked his head into the bedroom, but Lois was still asleep; only the top of her head was visible beneath the sheets. He didn’t want to wake her, so he set the hot food into a food warmer for the time being. Then he settled himself on the couch, lay on it lengthwise, and picked up the book that he was in the middle of reading. He found his place in the book and began to read, with Fasa coming to rest on his legs as he stretched out. About an hour later, Lois entered the living room. Kal was instantly on his feet, shutting the book as he moved.

“Good morning,” he said, as cheerfully as he could against his thudding heart.

Lois groaned. “We’re still married, aren’t we?”

“Yes...” he ventured, hesitantly.

“Then there’s nothing good about it.”

Kal ignored the remark, though it cut him like a knife. “Hungry? I brought us some breakfast.”

He moved to his small kitchenette and took the food out of the warmer, and started the coffeemaker. He set the food out on the table before Lois could answer. She looked warily at it, then to Kal. She seemed to be analyzing the situation and Kal’s motives, and her brow crinkled. Kal held his breath, awaiting Lois’ reaction. A spark of hope flared in his heart as she eyed the spread, and he allowed himself to feel pleased with what he had done.

“So...what? Am I not good enough to join everyone in the main dining room? Are you that ashamed of being married to me? Just what *is* it with you? You know, I thought my father was bad, but at least he allowed me to dine with other people. This is just plain insulting! Kept locked out of sight like I’m some sort of animal or something!”

The venom in Lois’ voice stung Kal’s feelings. His heart sank and the breath was driven from his lungs, as though he’d been physically hit. The hope in his heart came to a sputtering death and he felt absurdly ashamed of the breakfast he’d brought to his rooms. Once again, his gesture had backfired. What was worse, was that he didn’t understand *how* that had happened.

“No!” he sputtered. “I just thought that you might be more comfortable eating here. That it might...take some of the pressure off. Besides, no one else seems to be awake just yet. I think they must have partied too hard last night.”

“Oh,” Lois said, though her tone was not apologetic. She hesitated for a moment, as though deciding something. “I guess I could eat.”

“Great,” Kal said, trying to muster up some enthusiasm. He’d lost it all at his wife’s outburst. “Please, have a seat.”

Lois slowly approached the table, as though it or Kal might bite. Kal let her come at her own pace. He thought that he’d seen wild deer that were more trusting than Lois was, and a lot less skittish. He contented himself to taking his seat and pouring himself a cup of coffee. His mind raced. What could he say to her? He felt certain that if he said anything, he’d inadvertently offend Lois again. To give himself a reason not to say anything at all, he took a sip of his coffee. He winced, added another spoonful of sugar, and took another sip. Lois finally took her seat across from him.

“Can I pour you a cup of coffee?” he asked, doing his best not to let his nervousness show.

Lois nodded. “Please.”

With a mental sigh of relief, Kal took Lois’ mug and poured her drink for her. He watched as she took the mug and prepared the drink, committing the amounts of sugar and cream to memory. In the future, perhaps he would surprise her by preparing her coffee for her in advance. He kept his silence, but soon the quiet began to grow too uncomfortable for his liking.

“So...” he started to say, groping for words, while swallowing the blackberry he was eating.

“So...” Lois said back, just as lost for words.

“I, uh, thought that maybe you’d like a tour of the palace today. This is your home now, and I want you to feel comfortable here.”

Kal mentally kicked himself. That hadn’t come out exactly the way that he’d wanted. He waited for Lois to explode. But instead, she only nodded.

“I guess that’s probably a good idea,” she said, swallowing a piece of bagel. She sounded almost resigned to her immediate fate.

“Great,” Kal said, feeling a small smile crossing his lips. “Look, about last night...”

“Forget it,” Lois said, cutting him off. “What’s done is done. For better or worse, we’re stuck together. I don’t like it. And I’m sure that you don’t like it either. All we have to do is keep up this facade until we can figure out some way of getting out of this thing.”

Kal shook his head, his heart sinking once more. “I don’t know if that’s possible.”

“It has to be. You’re the prince. Throw some of your authority around. I’m sure that the Elders will race to do your bidding.” Some of her earlier venom had crept back into her voice.

“That’s not...I don’t...”

“Make it happen,” Lois said, her eyes narrowing. “I don’t intend on living out my days in some loveless marriage.”

“Do you think that I find this situation ideal?” Kal asked, the embers of his own anger finally stirring. “I didn’t ask for this either. If I could have gotten out of this marriage, I would have done so two weeks ago when I found out about it. I would have saved us *both* the time and aggravation. But there’s nothing that I can do.”

He drained the last of his coffee and set the mug back on the table, a little more forcefully than he’d intended. He shifted his eyes to stare at the far wall and took a moment to calm himself again. Getting angry would serve no purpose. And he didn’t want to start a fight with Lois. He finally softened and turned his gaze back to her. He was surprised that she hadn’t yelled back at him. He’d been more than certain that she would. But she simply sat there, staring at him with a cold look of disgust on her face.

“I’m sorry,” he said at last. “I didn’t mean...I shouldn’t have gotten upset. It’s just that this whole situation is stressful...for both of us.”

Lois said nothing. She only folded her arms across her chest. Kal was certain that if looks could kill, he’d already be a smoldering pile of ash. He shook his head again. He couldn’t even *begin* to imagine what he could say or do now that might help to smooth things over. His hand raked through his hair. Then he stood and began to clear the dishes from the table. When he was done, he gathered his courage and addressed Lois again.

“Lois?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry. I’m trying. I really am. I just have *no* idea of what I’m doing here. Please, be patient with me?”

Lois nodded slowly. “Okay.”

Kal breathed a sigh of relief. “So, do you still want that

tour?” He knew that his voice sounded timid, but he didn’t particularly care.

Lois rewarded him with a tiny smile. “Sure.”

“And you’ll walk by my side?”

“What if someone sees?”

“Let them,” Kal said, shrugging. “I’m not exactly known for being a stickler for tradition. Drives the Elders crazy. Besides, no one cares much about that outside of the most formal of occasions.”

“Okay,” Lois agreed.

Together, they made their way through the palace. Kal showed her every nook and cranny of the place, from the deserted gym in the basement to the Supreme Lord’s chambers on the uppermost level. They did not enter every place, but at least Lois would know where the places were located if she ever needed or wanted to go to them. A few times, they came across servants busy at their various jobs. Kal stopped each one and introduced Lois to them by name, greeting them all with warm familiarity. He silently hoped that Lois didn’t think he was putting on some kind of act to impress her. They also came across a few Elders, and Kal introduced Lois to them as well. He took a special delight in introducing Lois to Marthe and Jon Ken. Of all of the palace staff, he’d grown extremely close to them both. Lois politely spoke with each person that Kal introduced to her, though by the end of the tour she looked as though her head was spinning.

“These chambers here belong to Ching and Zara,” Kal said, gesturing to the doors. “I hope that you and Zara can become friends. She’s really great and I think it’ll be good for you both to have another woman to talk with. I know that Zara wasn’t kidding when she mentioned needing another woman around. She’s been saying that for the last few years now.” They moved on down to Jai’s chambers. Kal pointed them out. “These are Jai’s rooms.”

“He lives here? In the palace?” Lois asked, genuine surprise in her voice.

“Well, sure. Where else would he live?”

“Well, it’s just that...I’ve always been told that...half-blooded sons and daughters of the noble houses aren’t usually afforded the same luxuries as the full-blooded children.”

“Jai is my half-brother,” Kal said, nodding. “But my father loves him just the same as Ching and myself. I can’t speak for the other noble houses. I know that many of the nobles force their concubines to terminate any pregnancies that arise. Others send both mother and child out from their estates in exile. Others might allow the child to remain. I can only speak for my father. And he affords Jai every possible comfort. He can never assume the throne, of course. The law is quite clear on that, though Ching and I disagree with many, if not most, of the laws. But in all other ways, Jai is our equal and his bloodlines make no matter.”

They had paused before Jai’s doors. They opened unexpectedly and Catira G’rat stumbled out of the chambers, holding her slender heeled shoes in one hand. Jai was right behind her, clad only in a thin pair of pants. He was holding his head and looked quite ill. With his free hand, he was gripping the doorframe as a way to remain standing.

“Morning, Jai,” Kal said brightly.

“Sssshhh!” he slurred. “You’re making my head hurt.”

“I am not,” Kal said, smiling. “But the ridiculous amount of wine that you consumed last night is.”

“Well, *someone* had to party it up,” Jai said, squinting against the bright lights of the hall. Behind him, the chambers were dark, the shades drawn tight against the daylight. “Oh heyyyy, sis! How’s my big brother treating you?”

“You’re still drunk,” Kal said, shaking his head. “Go back to sleep.”

“I’m not as drunk as...as...as...yeah, I’m still drunk.”

Kal gently smiled. “To bed.”

“That’s where I just came from...” Jai began to protest.

“Okay...go *back* to bed. *Alone*.”

Jai grimaced and put his hand to his head again. “I guess.”

“Sleep well,” Kal said, and ushered Lois down the hall before his brother could say anything else.

“Jai is, uh, charming,” Lois said coolly.

“Please don’t judge him based on what you just saw. He just needs to sleep off the wine. He’s not usually like that.”

Lois snorted her distaste. “Who was that woman?”

Kal hesitated for a moment. “One of Jai’s...luxuries,” he said at last.

Lois nodded in understanding. “So it’s not enough that he’s a concubine’s son. He needs to lay with them too. Do you two share the same pool of women? Or does the royal house of El keep enough women on staff so that you each have your own harem?”

Kal gaped. How had he once again become the recipient of Lois’ anger? He hadn’t done anything wrong! Jai was the one who’d invited a concubine in to share his bed, not Kal. But Lois was taking it out on him anyway.

“I don’t have a harem,” he said, defending himself.

“Uh-huh.”

“I swear! Ching and I don’t believe in the practice. He’s very devoted to Zara. And I just find the whole idea abhorrent.”

“Riiiiight.”

“I’m telling you the truth!”

“And why should I believe anything that you have to say?”

“Lois, why would I lie to you?”

“To placate me. To make yourself feel better. Look, I don’t really care. You could father a child with every woman on Krypton for all that I care. Just stay away from me.”

Lois took off down the hall in the direction of Kal’s rooms, leaving him standing stunned in the hallway. His fists balled up as he struggled not to scream out his frustration. Everything had finally started to smooth out while he was showing Lois around. And now, the peace had been shattered like a plate of fragile glass. And it had all been because he’d had the bad luck of nearing Jai’s chambers as his brother had sent one of the concubines on their way. All hope for getting on Lois’ good side vanished from Kal’s heart. He turned away from the direction that Lois had gone and strode from the palace, out into the howling wind. He jogged quickly to the rose gardens, collapsed on a bench, and let his pent up tears fall.

Kal remained in the rose garden until late in the afternoon. The usually comforting setting did nothing to alleviate his grief. He kept thinking about Lois. It was clear that she hated him. And Kal had no idea how to change her mind. She didn’t have to love him, or even like him. But he wished that they could at least find a common ground; a place where they could both be on civil terms. He hated the fact that he kept inadvertently making her mad. But what was he supposed to do? Not talk at all? Kal hung his head as fresh tears stung his eyes.

He didn’t hear anyone approaching. He didn’t see the figure as it rounded the corner and entered the boundary between the lilies and the rose gardens. He was far too wrapped up in his own feelings of utter despair and hopelessness.

“Kal?”

The young prince groaned. The last thing he wanted to do was to talk to anyone, least of all his father. His father was the reason why he was in this mess to begin with.

“Son, what are you doing out here?”

Kal quickly wiped away the evidence of his crying as his father came nearer. His tears made him feel like a child. He didn’t want his father to see them; it was far too embarrassing. He cleared his throat and moved over so that Jor-El could sit on the bench as well. Kal sighed as Jor-El sat.

“Son? What’s wrong?” The Supreme Lord placed a comforting hand on Kal’s back.

“Everything,” Kal admitted in a voice so soft that it could barely be heard above the sound of the leaves rustling in the wind.

“That’s quite a lot,” Jor-El said gently. “How about we narrow it down a bit?”

“Lois hates me.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

“It *is* true, Dad. I can’t seem to do anything right by her. Everything I say and do makes her mad. I don’t know what to do.”

Jor-El nodded. “You need to be patient. Remember, it’s not just your world that changed overnight. Hers changed too, and even more dramatically. She’s living in a new place where she doesn’t know anyone. She’s had to leave both family and friends behind.”

“I know that. And I’ve been trying to help her adjust. But it’s like she doesn’t *want* me to do that. It’s like she prefers to stay mad at me, even though this wasn’t my fault. She’s already asked me to find a way out of our contract.”

“I see.”

“This is a disaster, Dad.”

Jor-El smiled tenderly at his son. “It may seem like that now, but give it time.”

“I’m trying to. I really am. But...we’re both miserable. I’m sorry, Dad. But I agree with Lois. Is there a way to get out of this? Some way that we can pretend at a marriage for some acceptable length of time and then quietly end it? Some way that won’t bring shame to either of our Houses?”

Jor-El shook his head. “No. I’m sorry, son, but the law is the law. All marriage contracts between noble houses are unbreakable. You know that as well as I do.”

“Then I wish I was a commoner. At least they have some freedom to marry who they wish.” Kal’s voice was harsh and bitter.

“Well, like it or not, you are a prince of Krypton and nothing can change that.” Jor-El’s voice sounded weary, as though he too, was shouldering Kal’s grief.

“The price of privilege,” Kal sighed. “Just...tell me. What am I supposed to do? Tell me how to fix this and I will do it.”

Jor-El sighed as well. “I don’t know. Every woman is different. Zara could hardly wait for the marriage ceremony that bound her to Ching. Your mother and I had only met a handful of times before our wedding day. She came to me as a shy young woman. It took her a few months before she was at ease living in the palace. Perhaps Lois just needs some time.”

“It’s not that Lois is shy,” Kal said, remembering full well the depth of her angry rants. “I think she honestly hates everything about this situation.”

“You must learn to ignore the anger. Look past the words that she says. Find out what it is that she really wants and needs.”

“She wants her freedom.”

“She is no prisoner.”

Kal shook his head. “There may not be chains or bars holding her here, but this marriage might as well be a prison, to both of us.”

The Supreme Lord seemed to have nothing to say to that. A silence fell between father and son. Only the wind and the rustling leaves made any noise. Even the birds had gone mute before the impending storm. Kal wasn’t sure whether to be grateful for the silence, or if it made things even worse. He stared into the distance, trying to figure out what to do next. Finally, he could take the quiet no longer.

“So, were you looking for me?” Kal asked. “Is that why you came out here?”

Jor-El shook his head. “No. But like you and your brothers, I

sometimes come here when I want some time alone to think. Your mother’s spirit is strong in this place.” He quickly gestured to the surrounding section of the gardens. “How I wish she were here now.”

“Me too,” Kal agreed. “I feel like she would know what to do. And I miss her.”

“So do I. She would have been very proud of the man you’ve become, Kal. I hope you know that.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. You remind me of her in a lot of ways. Your smile is hers, as is your gentle nature. She was just like you in the way that she dealt with the palace staff and the common people. She knew each of them by name, and that of their families. She’d stop a courier to ask how his wife and infant child were, or she’d visit the kitchen to check on the cook whose mother was ill.”

“I remember a little of that,” Kal admitted. “There’s so much that I never really paid that much attention to, back then. I wish that I had. But I remember everything from the times when it was just Mom, Ching, Jai, and me, out in these gardens. Mom would read to us or tell us stories. I remember thinking how lucky we were. I knew that other children of nobles often didn’t get to spend much time with their parents. They used to tell us how their nursemaids were their sole caretakers in many cases. There was always a lot of resentment behind that. In fact, I think that’s why Lord Nor is so...intense. So I was always grateful that you and Mom spent as much time with us as you possibly could, and that Marthe was only there to help you raise us, not to do the whole job for you.”

A light drizzle began as Kal finished speaking. He looked up and squinted against the drops as he examined the sky. The clouds looked even blacker and more ominous than they had that morning. He frowned. He’d have to go back inside, and that meant facing Lois. Had she cooled off by now? He hoped so. He wasn’t sure that he could handle another one of her angry tirades.

“We’d better head indoors,” Jor-El said, as he too studied the sky. “Unfortunately, I have work to attend to. I’ll catch up with you and Lois at dinner. I hear that Jon is making your favorite meal tonight.”

Kal nodded, but he inwardly dreaded the meal. Things were awkward enough between Lois and himself. He could only imagine what a family dinner was going to be like. He knew that he wouldn’t have to worry about keeping up appearances before the Elders. They had been given the day off, and would not be dining with the royal family that night. Kal was infinitely glad of that fact.

The prince dejectedly walked through the white marble halls of the palace, slowly working his way back to his own rooms. He groaned as he caught sight of Ching and Jai walking together. They were coming his way, and Kal had no opportunity to avoid them. Jai, at the very least, was looking much better than he had a few hours ago, though he did not look quite back to normal yet. Kal knew from the smiles on their faces that they were going to stop him to talk. He wasn’t in the mood, but at least it would delay the inevitable. Anything was more welcome than facing his wife at the moment.

“Kal! You dog! How was the wedding night?” Jai asked him, slapping him on the back and with a suggestive wink.

“Not good,” Kal said, shrugging out of his brother’s touch.

Jai frowned. “I *told* you that you should have gotten in some practice with Catira. How badly did you disappoint your bride?” His tone told Kal that he was trying to crack a joke, but it fell flat on Kal’s depressed mood.

“Jai, stop,” Kal snapped, his voice a little harder than he’d meant it to be.

Jai sobered a little, as though Kal had physically slapped him. “What happened, bro?”

Kal quickly filled his brothers in on the rough start that he

and Lois had made of things, though he didn't go into too much detail. They both nodded sympathetically as he briefly recounted his plight. Ching sighed.

"That's rough," he told Kal. "Anything I can do to help?"

Kal shook his head. "Nothing that I can think of. Unfortunately, this is one thing that I need to handle on my own. I just don't know where to begin."

"Well, hanging around here won't get anything accomplished," Ching said.

Kal frowned. "You sound a lot like Dad sometimes, you know that?"

Ching shrugged. "Yes, actually. I believe that you and Jai have made that quite clear to me in the past."

"Ching's right though," Jai offered. "You should go talk to her. And, Kal, good luck. I mean it. I hate seeing you upset."

"Thanks," Kal said, nodding. "I appreciate that. Well, here goes nothing."

With that, he strode off down the hall. He did not look back at his brothers as they stood there watching his progress. When Kal finally reached his own rooms, he hesitated for a moment before the door, then resolutely grasped the knob and entered. Fasa came running, meowing a greeting as he came. Kal smiled a thin little smile and picked the cat up. He kissed the tabby's head.

"Hey, buddy," he said to the cat. "Miss me?"

Fasa only purred in response and rubbed his head against his master's chin. Kal bent back down and placed the cat on the floor again. He wandered into the living room, and found Lois on the couch. She had a small selection of trunks around her and she was going through them. She looked up and fixed Kal with a cold stare as he entered the room.

"Have a nice time with your concubines?" she asked, as she pawed through a trunk filled with books.

"I told you. I don't believe in the practice," Kal said, sighing. He padded over to the other side of the room and sat in an armchair. "I don't want to argue about it. You can believe me or not. But I'm telling you the truth." He paused for a moment before adding, "What's in the trunks?"

"My father's servants brought some of my things up while you were...doing whatever it was that you were doing."

"Did you need..." Kal paused and corrected himself. "Did you want any help unpacking? I made some space for your stuff in my closets and dresser. And there's plenty of room on my bookshelves."

"No," Lois said, closing the trunk of books. "I'm leaving most of this stuff packed. It'll cut down on what I need to repack when I figure out a way to get out of this marriage."

"Lois," Kal said, his voice gentle and pleading. "I was in the gardens this morning after we...separated in the hallway. While I was out there, I talked with my father. I begged him for a way to end this. There is no loophole, no way, to put an end to this. I'm sorry."

"Don't give me that. He's the Supreme Lord. He can do whatever he pleases."

"No, he can't," Kal said. "The law is the law. The Elders will never let him change it. They have to approve of major changes like that. He can't just write a new law, or erase an existing one, just to suit his own needs...or those of his children."

Lois glared at him and said nothing.

"I'm sorry," Kal said after a moment, fully aware that he was repeating himself. "I really am."

"Sorry for yourself, I'll bet."

"No," Kal replied, shaking his head. "For you."

"What do you mean, for *me*?" Lois' voice had an edge to it that warned that Kal was treading on dangerous ground.

"I can't stand seeing people be unhappy. And usually I can try to find a way to change that. But this time, there's nothing that I can do. I want to see you be happy. And I don't want you to hate

me."

Lois sighed and leaned back into the couch cushions. "I don't *exactly* hate you."

Kal blinked in surprise, but Lois refused to elaborate any further. He cleared his throat.

"Well, for the record, I don't hate you either," he offered.

Lois nodded, but said nothing. Kal sighed softly. Fasa jumped up on his lap, purring. As the orange tabby settled himself down, Kal stroked the animal's back in a thoughtful manner. At least, he thought wryly, the cat still liked him. Lois hadn't admitted to liking him at all, but not *exactly* hating him was a start, he supposed.

"So what's the deal with the cat?" Lois asked, a few minutes later. "Did you buy him hoping that it would make you seem like a nice guy? Because a guy with an animal can't possibly be a bad guy?"

Lois' question felt like a slap in the face.

"Of course not!" Kal said, offended. "Fasa's been my buddy for almost five years now."

Lois arched her eyebrow and Kal pressed on.

"My brothers and I were in the city. We make trips in quite often. Well, one summer day five years ago, we were kind of wandering aimlessly when we came across this alley and Jai made us stop. He said that he thought that he heard something. We listened, and after a minute, Ching and I could hear it too. These little plaintive meows were coming from behind some crates. We went over to have a look and found three little kittens weakly crawling around their mother. She was dead. It looked like she'd been gone for a day or so. The kittens weren't weaned yet. In fact, they were so young that they had probably only just opened their eyes within the week. I picked up Fasa."

Kal scratched the cat behind his ears. Fasa contentedly closed his eyes and continued to purr.

"He was dirty and half starved, and he was covered in fleas. But it was his eyes that really got to me. They seemed to be pleading for help. I decided right there to take him home and nurse him back to health, with every intention of keeping him around. I was instantly in love with him. My brothers felt the same way about the other two kittens. Ching took the grey female and Zara named her Thalia, after the mythological warrior woman who'd overcome incredible odds. She said that it was a fitting name for a kitten who'd lost her mother so young. Jai chose the male calico, and named him Zarthax, after the giant of the old tales, because he was the smallest kitten of the group. Like my brothers, I've always had a thing for the stars and the stories that go along with the constellations. And I've always been partial to the tale of Fasa, so the choice in names was easy for me."

"So you found a couple of kittens and decided to make yourselves feel good by rescuing them. Then I guess you dumped them on some unsuspecting servant to care for them until they were well enough. Well, aren't you the big hero?"

Kal gaped and shook his head. "Not at all. We cared for the kittens ourselves. For weeks we were all short on sleep, waking every few hours to feed them until they were old enough to eat on their own. And, well, for the last five years, we've been rewarded a thousand times over by the affection these cats have given us in return. I couldn't imagine my life without Fasa. He's kind of like my child in a way."

"Yes, well, I'm sure these cats are very lucky and all. But there are thousands more out there that you *haven't* saved."

"Lois," Kal gaped again. "Why are you trying to make me out to be the bad guy here? You're the one who asked about my cat. And yes, I know that I can't personally save them all. There are plenty of cats and dogs and all sorts of animals out there that need help. That's why Ching, Jai, and I got our father to increase funding to the planet's shelters. But I guess you wouldn't

understand that. You seem to only want to see the negative side of things.”

Kal stood, placing his cat on the floor as he did so. His hand passed through his hair as he turned away from the beautiful, infuriating woman sitting on the couch.

“Where are you going?” Lois demanded.

“To get freshened up for dinner. My father expects us both to be there.”

“I’m not going,” she said determinedly.

“You know what, Lois? That’s fine. I don’t care. You do whatever you want.”

Kal strode to the bathroom and locked the door behind him. Fresh tears pricked his eyes and he wiped them angrily away. Why did this woman affect him so deeply? If another nobleman or noblewoman had spoken to him in such a manner, it would have rolled right off Kal’s back, like drops of rain water. But everything was different with Lois. And he was starting to hate that fact. So he vented all of his frustration into the hot tears that spilled out of his eyes and raced down his cheeks until he had no more left to give. Then he washed his face and straightened his clothing. His eyes were a little red from crying, but he thought that he looked passable. At length, he squared his shoulders and exited the bathroom.

When he emerged, he found that Lois had changed into clothing more fitting for dinner. She had combed out her dark, shoulder length hair and was sitting in the living room in one of the armchairs. Fasa was on her lap, and she absently stroked his back. Her gaze was fixed to the windows. Beyond the glass, the rain fell in a light, silver sheet while the heavy black clouds raced by overhead. Kal sat in the other armchair, opposite from Lois. She did not break her stare. She did not speak to him. That was just fine with Kal. He sat in silence, listening to the patter of the rain on the windows. Silence was better than facing Lois’ wrath.

Eventually, it came time for them to make their way to the dining room. Kal silently guided Lois through the halls. Dinner was even more uncomfortable than Kal imagined it would be. Lois said next to nothing, and when she did speak, it was not to him. She wouldn’t even look in his direction. Kal felt himself growing ever more withdrawn from the conversation. Even Jai was subdued, as he still battled the last remnants of his hangover. When the meal was finished, Kal wasn’t sure whether or not to be relieved. On the one hand, he was out of his family’s scrutiny. On the other, he was once again alone with Lois. He was determined not to say anything. If he didn’t speak, she couldn’t twist his words on him.

Not another word passed between them for the rest of the evening. Lois went to bed early, taking along one of her books. Kal made up the couch for his bed again and turned his video monitor on. He put the sound as low as he could while still being able to hear it, and tuned into his favorite sport. He silently cheered on his favorite team, the Red Suns, though they did not win the game, losing by a paltry eleven points. It was late when Kal finally crawled beneath the sheets and slept, with only Fasa to keep him company.

Lois awoke before Kal did. She quickly dressed herself for the day and carefully applied her makeup. She knew that she would be expected to attend the meals and that the Elders would be there. As a result, she would be expected to look her best. From all that she had been told in preparation for this sordid marriage, the Elders and the Supreme Lord rarely stopped working during the day. Even meal times were utilized to discuss matters of the utmost importance. Satisfied with the way she looked, Lois padded to the living room.

Kal was still asleep on the couch. The blankets were half hanging off him and he lay sprawled on his stomach. His head was turned to one side, though the pillow had fallen to the floor. Fasa was laying stretched out on Kal’s upper back, and his head

was resting on Kal’s exposed cheek. Neither of them stirred at Lois’ presence in the room. Fasa’s paw twitched once or twice, as did his nose, but he was only engrossed in a dream.

Despite herself, Lois cracked a small smile. She couldn’t deny that the sight was heartwarming. And any man that would allow an animal to sleep on his face like that couldn’t be all bad, could he? At the very least, she was now sure that Kal hadn’t lied to her. It was obvious that the cat hadn’t been some ploy to get her to trust him. And yet, it wasn’t enough to change her mind about things. She still had every intention of finding a way out of this marriage.

And she still found herself funneling her anger towards the prince. Some part of her recognized that she was being a little unfair. He was simply the only accessible target that she had. She couldn’t take out her anger on the Supreme Lord. And her father was now miles away, wrapped up in his laboratory work; of that, she was certain. Did he even miss her? Lois doubted it. He’d barely acknowledged her existence when she’d been living at home with him. He was always too busy with his work and his mistresses.

But, as she stared down at the sleeping man on the couch, a thought came to her. Perhaps she would watch Kal more closely. Perhaps he wasn’t the spoiled little rich boy that she had anticipated being married to. Though she hadn’t known him long, he hadn’t actually done or said anything that remotely matched what she would have considered a spoiled prince to do. She knew, however, that it could all be an act. Time would tell. He would either remain the same cordial young man she’d been exposed to thus far, or he would grow bored of the act that he was putting on and show his true colors. She knew that she had all the time in the world. She could sit and watch and wait.

Kal began to stir and Lois quickly back-pedaled out of the room. She had only enough time to see Kal smile in his half awake state and reach up to pet Fasa’s head. She fled to the safety of the bedroom and took a seat in the plush reclining chair that stood by the window. Lois nervously picked up her book and pretended to read. A few minutes later, she heard Kal shuffle to the doorway. She looked up when he knocked on the open door.

“Good morning,” he offered, as politely as he could. He rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes and yawned.

“Good morning,” Lois said, keeping her voice flat and neutral.

“Sleep well?” Kal asked.

“Well enough.”

“I just need a minute to grab some clothes,” Kal said, scratching the back of his neck.

“Oh...go right ahead.”

“Thanks.”

Kal quickly grabbed an outfit and went off to get changed. As he pulled on his shirt, he couldn’t help but to feel a little hopeful. He and Lois had just had a small conversation and she hadn’t taken her anger out on him. Granted, it hadn’t been much of a conversation, but it was a start. In his mind, he could hear his father’s voice. The Supreme Lord was fond of the saying “on the long road, take small steps.” And a lifetime of being married to Lois was certainly going to be a long road. Even a baby step like the successful conversation that they had just shared was a step in the right direction. Or, at least, Kal hoped it was.

He took his time as he shaved and then dressed for the day. His thoughts kept spinning back to Lois. How could he ensure that they continued to have peaceful exchanges? Would breakfast be any less awkward than dinner had been the night before? Had there been some turning point for Lois, where she had decided not to act as if Kal was the bad guy? He shook his head as he stared at his reflection in the mirror. He simply didn’t know. And that held a certain amount of uneasiness for him. He wished he knew how to handle this situation.

Finally deciding that he could no longer hide out in his bathroom, Kal exited and knocked on the bedroom door again. Lois set aside her book once more. She looked at him expectantly.

“Can I come in?” Kal asked.

Lois shrugged. “It’s your room.”

“No,” Kal said, shaking his head, “it’s not my room anymore. It’s yours.”

He wanted to add that maybe one day it would be *theirs*, a place that they shared equally, but he held his tongue. A thought like that would only infuriate Lois. Lois looked at him a moment, as though trying to determine if he was making a joke.

“Come in,” she said at last.

Kal did as he was bid. He sat shyly on the edge of the bed, facing Lois as she sat in the chair. He ran his hand through his hair, looking for a place to begin.

“I, uh, thought you might like to know what will probably happen today,” he said finally, dropping his eyes to the room’s thick beige carpeting.

“Oh?”

Kal nodded, encouraged when Lois failed to explode at him. “We’ll be expected to have breakfast in the main hall. The Elders will most likely be there. There will probably be some discussion about some matter or another. Then my father, Ching, and I will go to the main receiving hall. Once a week, we hear petitions from the commoners and lesser nobles. Depending on how many we have, we could be there all day. So I won’t see you for lunch. We’ll all be together again at dinner, then the rest of the night we’ll all get some free time.”

“So...I’m expected to do...what, exactly?”

“Nothing,” Kal said. “You’ll have all day to yourself. I can arrange for Jak, my personal attendant, to take you into the city if you’d like. Jai and Zara won’t be hearing the petitions, so they’ll be around if you want some company.”

“Why won’t they be hearing petitions?”

“Jai isn’t a full-blooded prince, and therefore can never ascend to the throne. The law doesn’t explicitly forbid him from hearing petitions, but the Elders frown on his presence. So he almost never sits in with us. And Zara is a woman. The law actually *does* forbid her to sit in on the petitions.”

Kal saw Lois’ color rise in anger even before she spoke. He held his breath, knowing that she was about to explode.

“That’s ridiculous!” she said, fairly fuming. “She’ll be the Supreme Lord’s wife one day, when Ching ascends the throne.”

Kal nodded, surprised that, for once, she wasn’t finding a way to blame him. It was true that Lois’ voice had risen and that she was angry, but he could tell, just by the way that she held herself, that she was furious at the situation, and not with him. Grateful for that fact, Kal pressed on.

“I know. And I agree. But the way that the laws are now, Zara will never have any true power. Ching and I both hate it. Our hope is to one day change the laws. We’d like to see equality... for men and women, for trueborn children and those who aren’t.”

“I thought you said that the Elders were pretty stubborn.”

“That’s true, but Ching and I hope to influence future decisions on who else is initiated into the Council. If we can do that, we can hopefully find others who believe as we do. If we can successfully fill enough positions with like-minded individuals, then we can one day amend and change the existing laws. It’ll take us probably all of our lives, but we feel *that* strongly about it.”

“Why...why are you telling me all of this?” Lois looked at Kal as though she thought his confessions suspicious.

“I...just thought that you’d like to know. I didn’t want you to think that I was abandoning you this afternoon. And that...well...the circumstances aren’t exactly as I would like them to be.”

“That isn’t what I meant.” She shook her head. “I mean, why

tell me about all of your future plans?”

Kal shrugged. “You’re my wife, whether you and I like this marriage or not. You are my equal. From the moment that I said my vows, I also pledged to withhold no secrets from you. Lois, I want you to know everything there is to know about me. I don’t want you to feel like there’s a part of me that is hidden from you. And, I need you to know all of my plans, my thoughts, my beliefs, my hopes for Krypton’s future. There is a very real possibility that we’ll never find a loophole to get out of this contract that our fathers forged. And one day, I *will* be helping Ching run this planet. I can’t do that without all of the support that I can get. My hope is that we can be friends, and that I’ll have your support when I need it. You’ve proven to me just now that you hold some of the same ideals that I do.”

Lois nodded, thoughtful. She glanced at the clock on Kal’s bedside table as she sought something to look at. She wasn’t sure that she wanted to look at her husband at the moment. She wasn’t sure that she even *could*. For Kal’s part, he kept his eyes fixed on the floor.

“I guess we’d better get going,” she said at last, her voice sounding somehow uncertain in the wake of all Kal had just divulged. “It wouldn’t be proper to show up late.”

Kal nodded silently, though he wondered what Lois felt about his confession.

Once more, they walked through the palace halls together. Kal’s spirits were much higher than the previous day. Though Lois had become angry when he’d explained things about Zara and Jai, she hadn’t directed her fury at him. It was a huge relief to him, though he dared not hope too much that things would soon be patched between them. He’d actually been thrilled that Lois had been upset over Zara’s lack of power. He felt the same way over the disparity between the way that Krypton treated its men and women. Though Kal knew that he’d never ascend the throne, it had become one of his personal projects to one day influence a change in the laws. In some ways, he actually enjoyed the challenge that it presented.

Kal found himself more intrigued by his wife than ever before. Before, he’d only found himself attracted to her looks. Now, perhaps, he could find himself attracted to her mind too. He wanted to tell Lois this. He really did. But he couldn’t find the words. And it was too soon for him to know much about the stranger who shared his living quarters. He knew that he’d have to find some way of breaking past her defensive walls and getting to really know her. He just had no idea how he might accomplish that.

They were the last to arrive at breakfast. Already, Jor-El and the Elders were deep in conversation about a potential new trade route with a distant planet. Kal personally didn’t like the idea. The Algonians had products that might be useful to Krypton, but he just didn’t trust the people. They were a harsh, warlike race of beings. Kal feared that accepting them as trading partners would make the planet vulnerable to them. He found himself lending his opinions to the discussion, though it put him at odds with several of the Elders, including Trey. Kal shook his head to himself. Trey was a good man and extremely intelligent, but far too trusting sometimes. One day, his blind faith would cause trouble; Kal was certain of that.

After breakfast was over, Kal only had a few minutes to speak with Lois in private. She declined his offer to go into the city, even though Zara offered to go with her. Kal sighed. Lois was still resisting any inclination that she might have towards growing more comfortable with her situation and surroundings.

For her part, Zara did her best to try and engage Lois in conversation, but Lois claimed a headache and headed back to her rooms. Kal only hoped that Lois would change her mind. He thought that perhaps Zara had the best chance of getting his wife to open up. Wasn’t that part of what female friendships were

about? Telling each other things that they would never tell a man? Helping one another through their personal problems? Kal chewed his lower lip in thought as he followed his father and the Elders to the main receiving hall to hear the week's petitions.

Once in the wide, long room, Kal barely glanced at the various marble busts and rich tapestries that adorned the walls. He didn't take note of the thick red carpet that ran down the center of the room, or of the exquisite details that were worked into it with gold and silver thread. He simply took his seat at Jor-El's left hand, while Ching sat on the right. The Elders took their seats in a series of raised benches off to the left side of the room. A silver bell was struck, and one of the young servants entered the room. He bowed before the Supreme Lord and the two princes, then begged permission to bring in the week's petitioners. Jor-El nodded, and the young man hurried to open the wide doors to allow the nobles and commoners in.

As usual, the noblemen and noblewomen were the first to have their petitions heard. Kal always disliked this part of the process. All of the nobles had such petty problems. This lord broke his oath to send money to that lady's cause. This lord accused that lord of cheating while dueling. This lady sought a way to ensure that that lord pledged his son to marry her daughter. It disgusted Kal. He felt it to be a waste of time. The commoners were the ones who usually truly needed the help. There were always disputes over land boundaries or those seeking justice against some thief. Occasionally, there were impassioned pleas for work. One of those arose this morning.

A young man of perhaps fifteen presented himself to the Supreme Lord. His parents, he said, were dead, and he had a twin sister to look after. He'd tried in vain to find work, but no one would give the young orphan a chance. Was there any way that the Supreme Lord could help them? Jor-El rubbed his chin in thought.

"You look like a strong boy," Kal offered.

"Thank you, my lord. I am. I can work hard."

"How old are you?"

"I'll be sixteen in two months, my lord."

"We could train him to join the palace security," Kal said to his father. "You know that Bilan Hend'son could always use more on his staff. He's forever mentioning it."

Jor-El nodded. "A wise suggestion." To the boy, he said, "Do you believe that you could handle the responsibilities that are inherent in such a position?"

The young man nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, my lord. Thank you, my lord. I will not let you down. I swear it."

"That is good. Report to my Chief of Security. Gen Arry here will take you to him."

The young man bowed deeply, still uttering his thanks. He did not stop until Gen Arry, one of the top security officers, led him from the room to report to the Chief of the Palace Security.

Another petitioner stepped forward. Kal tried to pay attention. But as the hours progressed and the line of petitioners continued to move, he found himself losing focus from time to time.

He wondered what Lois was up to. Had she changed her mind? Was she spending time with Zara? With Jai? He doubted that she was with his younger brother. She'd looked positively furious when she'd discovered that Jai opted to utilize the services of the palace concubines. He decided that she was probably avoiding Jai. Or had she possibly changed her mind about going into the city? He'd given her Jak's number so that she could contact him if she chose to spend the day out. Or was she holed up in his...*their*...personal chambers?

He wished that he could go to her and possibly continue the process of melting the titanic block of ice that was between them. But he couldn't leave, not even when the silver bell rang again, indicating an hour's break to eat lunch. There just wasn't enough

time. Instead, Kal distractedly munched on his sandwich.

"You seem to be in slightly better spirits today," Jor-El observed.

Kal shrugged. "A little."

"Things getting better with Lois?"

Kal shot a look at the Elders, but the men were all deeply engrossed in their own conversations. He shrugged again.

"Not much," he said, choosing his words carefully. "We talked a little today and didn't wind up in a fight. So...I guess things are a little better."

"That's better than nothing," Ching said, trying to be helpful.

"I know. I just wish that things could get better, faster."

"Patience," Jor-El reminded him. "On the long road..."

"...take small steps. Yeah, I know."

"She didn't seem all that keen on getting to know Zara," Ching said, thinking aloud.

Kal nodded. "I think she's trying to make herself dislike everyone and everything. She doesn't have another outlet for her frustrations."

The young prince went silent as his own words echoed in his mind.

Was that why Lois kept lashing out at him? Was she forcing herself to hate him just because she felt as though she had no other power in their relationship? Was it because he was the safest, and only, attainable target? Perhaps he should stop feeling sorry for himself. Perhaps he should stop taking her anger personally. Maybe she would grow tired of trying to hate him and come to be more open to forming a potential friendship with him, at the very least. He thought that he could live with that.

"Kal?" Ching asked. "Hello? Krypton to Kal...are you there?"

Kal shook his head, scattering his thoughts. "Huh? What?"

"Are you okay? You just completely spaced out on us."

"Sorry. I got lost in my own thoughts," Kal apologized.

"Let me guess. It was unfamiliar territory?" Ching teased him.

Kal laughed, and gave his brother a light punch in the arm. "You would know about that better than I would, bro."

Jor-El tolerantly shook his head as he watched the antics between his two oldest children.

Soon, the bell rang again and more petitioners entered the chamber. Kal once again did his best to keep focused, and for the better part of the afternoon session, he was successful. But as the afternoon wore on, he once again found his mind wandering. He was almost eager to see Lois again. He still wasn't sure what he could say or do to help her get more comfortable around him, but he was determined to find some way of doing that. When the last of the petitioners had been heard, dealt with, and escorted back out, Kal breathed a sigh of relief. He stood and stretched, working the kinks out of his body from having sat in one position for too long. That was always the worst part of the process for him. He'd much rather be on the move - working out in the gym, or walking in the gardens, or any number of other physical activities.

He wished that he had time now to take a quick walk, but it was almost time for dinner. He would only have enough time to try and find Lois. He walked through the palace with Ching, glad for the company. They spoke together in low voices, subdued from the long hours of sitting at court. Ching offered his brother a smile as they reached Kal's chambers.

"Good luck," he said, knowing that Kal and Lois still had plenty to work through. "See you in a bit."

"Thanks."

Kal opened the door to his living quarters. As always, Fasa greeted him at the door, rubbing against his legs and meowing. Kal bent down and scratched the cat behind the ears, then straightened.

“Lois?” he called out.

“In the living room,” she said.

Kal swiftly covered the distance and found Lois alone. She was watching the video screen. A very old movie was playing and Lois did not shift her gaze from it. Kal flopped into one of the armchairs, watching Lois. The movie came to an end and Lois turned the screen off. She seemed indecisive as to whether or not she was going to speak. Kal rubbed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. Sometimes, sitting in the main hall and listening to the petitions felt like it drained his energy. Today had been one of those days, as there had been a few particularly hairy situations to deal with.

“So,” Kal asked, cautiously, “what did you wind up doing today?”

“Nothing much,” Lois said in clipped tones. “I watched some old movies that I haven’t seen in a while.”

“Alone?”

Lois fixed him with a cold stare. “No, I invited all of Krypton to come in and watch with me.”

“I just thought that maybe you would have wanted some company, that’s all.”

“I wasn’t in the mood, okay?”

Kal put his hands up in a pacifying gesture. “Okay. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

But Lois’ anger seemed to have been once more fueled. It was as if she was trying to make up for lost ground from the civil conversation they had shared that morning. Kal’s heart sank again. His plan to find some common ground with Lois was dashed before he could even figure out how to implement it. He waited for the inevitable, and Lois didn’t disappoint.

“No, don’t give me that. You meant something by that remark. So, come on. Man up and spit it out.”

“I really didn’t mean anything by it. I just thought that maybe you were... I dunno. A little lonely? I mean, you’ve been uprooted from everything that you knew and stuck here. That can’t be easy. I know that I would be feeling lonely, if it had happened to me.”

Lois’ eyes flashed in anger. Kal slumped his shoulders in defeat. Before she could argue back, he stood and crossed to the windows. He looked out over the gardens that he so dearly loved and wished again that his mother was still around. Maybe she would know what to say or do to help smooth out his relationship with Lois.

The wall clock chimed softly. Kal looked up and sighed. It was time for dinner. But his appetite had fled.

Lois was quiet at dinner, as she had been at every meal so far. So was Kal. He spoke very little, even though his brothers did their best to pull him out of his shell. Ching, in particular, looked worried at the sudden change in Kal. Kal ate even less than he spoke. He felt badly about how things were going with Lois. It made him feel slightly ill, if he were to be perfectly honest. He pushed around the food on his plate. Finally, dinner was over and he could leave the dining hall.

He was grateful when Lois went to bed early. Then he swiftly changed into his workout clothes. He again strapped his music player to his left arm, put in the earphones, then blasted the music to drown out the rest of the world. Straight down to the gym he went, nearly running in his desire to get to that sweet haven of his. He’d always found working out to be a great way to funnel his frustrations into something proactive. It was as though the more sweat that poured from his body, the lighter he felt emotionally, as though it purged both physical and mental toxins from his body. It helped him to focus his thoughts when he needed to, or transported him away from his problems, depending on how he channeled his thoughts.

On this night, Kal simply focused his anger and frustration into movement. A well-worn punching bag received some of his pent-up frustration. He wasn’t a violent man by any means, but it

felt good to work his muscles and focus only on his movements and the sensations that his body felt in response. It felt good to feel the burning in his muscles as he worked them. For three long hours, Kal moved from machine to machine, working every part of his body until his entire being was exhausted and his bad knee was on fire. He staggered back to his rooms, threw himself into the shower, then promptly passed out on the couch.

What he did not know was that Lois heard him when he returned. She hadn’t been sleeping all that well in the unfamiliar setting, and had been jarred awake when Kal slipped into the room to grab some fresh clothes, though he’d been as quiet as possible. Her curiosity was peaked. Just where had Kal been? She thought it likely that he’d been visiting the concubines. For some inexplicable reason, the idea infuriated her. True, she knew that she had told him in no uncertain terms that she didn’t care who he invited into his bed, or whose bed he climbed into. But that hadn’t really been the truth. She wanted nothing to do with the prince, but yet, she also didn’t want anyone else to be able to lay any sort of claim to him. Was it just possessiveness on her part?

She admitted to herself that it might be. But she also knew that it also stemmed from the anger she’d always held towards her father. Not only had he traded her life away for a chance to climb the social ladder, but he’d never been a faithful man to his own wife. Lois blamed him for her mother’s depression and drinking problems, though she knew that the latter had started even before Samm had begun his affairs with some of the other lower born noblewomen. It simply galled her that the young prince was so like her own father. She wanted to cry, but she refused to allow herself to do so. A better idea formed in her mind instead. She’d trap Kal in his lie that he never visited the concubines. She’d keep an eye out. If Kal continued to disappear, she would start to shadow his movements at night and expose him for that cad that he was. Smiling to herself for the first time in weeks, Lois dropped off to sleep.

The very next day, Lois began to keep a careful watch on her husband. She discreetly watched every move that he made when she was around him, from the way that he cut his food to the way that he spoke to the people around him. His clothing, the way that he carried himself, the hand motions that he used when he spoke - Lois scrutinized it all. And she kept a running tally of how many times he disappeared at night. Her fears were confirmed when she realized that he snuck out more often than not. She decided that the time had come for her to begin to shadow his movements around the palace.

Still, she had to admit that the more that she watched Kal, the more he surprised her. He was so unlike the spoiled, rich brat she had anticipated being married to. He was, instead, friendly and warm to everyone that he came across, even the lowliest of the palace staff. He had no airs to him. Lois saw him on more than one occasion rush to help one of the hired staff. She had watched as he ran ahead to open a door for a woman whose arms had been full with an overflowing basket of neatly folded laundry. She had watched him as he had stopped a courier when the young man was rushing through the palace, and offered to deliver the messages the man had for Ching and Jor-El. Lois had even seen Kal help the kitchen staff as they unloaded a truck filled with food. She had watched in awe as he’d slung a bulging sack of flour over his shoulder as though it weighed nothing. When some of the white powder trickled out of the bag and onto his black shirt, Lois had been sure that Kal would get angry. Instead, he had only laughed and brushed it from his clothing with a smile on his lips. Then he had joked around with Jon, the master chef.

When Kal was with his brothers and Zara, Lois saw a whole other side to him. Any sort of formality fell away to reveal a man who was quick to laugh and possessed a wry sense of humor. His smile came easily when he was with them - a devastatingly bright

and wonderful thing. Lois found it hard not to be affected by it. When Kal was with the others, he seemed to be the eternal optimist, always trying to find a good spin on things, even when circumstances were less than ideal. He had a sharp, quick wit, and Lois envied how easily the jokes flew from his tongue.

On a couple of occasions, Lois had joined Kal, Zara, Ching, and Jai when they went into the city. It had surprised her when they had entered their favorite bar and ordered a round of food and drinks. Lois had anticipated that they would be going someplace fancy. The place wasn't exactly run down, but it was clear that it was in need of some work. But none of them seemed to notice. If anything, Lois thought that the group relaxed even further while they were there.

At first, Lois had thought that maybe Kal had chosen the place to subtly prove a point about the kind of man that he was. But she dismissed the thought when she realized that no one was staring at the group of young royals, and because the barkeep so familiarly brought over a set of darts after the meal was through, in anticipation of the rounds that they usually played before leaving the establishment. It was more than obvious that they often frequented the place. And when they had wandered through the city, Lois had watched Kal's polite and attentive interactions with those who were bold enough to approach him. It was hard for Lois to hide her smile when Kal stopped to sink a basketball into a hoop when they passed a small park and the children within had called to him.

At meal times in the palace, Lois kept her eyes and ears open. She watched every move that Kal made, considered every word that he said. She grew more surprised as she listened to Kal as he spoke with his father and the Elders. His words were always thoughtful and he always seemed to weigh them in his mind before he spoke. It didn't make him the most talkative one of the bunch, but it made his words insightful and well planned. And as Lois began to *really* listen to what he was saying, she caught even deeper glimpses into Kal's heart and mind. Always, his thoughts seemed to be focused on what would be best for the common citizens of Krypton. He was mindful of the nobles as well, but his real concern lay with the lowest members of society. It often put him at odds with the Elders, but that never seemed to bother or sway Kal at all.

But when he was alone with her, Kal was a different person entirely. He became shy and withdrawn. He spoke very little. His smiles were scarce. His sense of humor vanished. Lois knew that it was mostly her fault. Kal remained ever cordial to her, but she often loosed her anger on him. She knew that what she was doing wasn't fair. But anytime she felt herself growing attracted to the man that she was married to, she remembered his disappearances at night and the fact that she had not chosen this marriage. Then her ire would rise and she'd verbally attack Kal. Each time, she would see the hurt in his eyes, and he'd grow somber, cold, and distant again. Any progress that he'd made in loosening up around her would be lost in a flash. After a time, it seemed that he stopped trying to get on her good side altogether. His disappearances grew more frequent, and grew much longer in length. And Lois grew angrier each time.

True, some nights, Kal chose to stay within their chambers. Lois was able to discreetly watch him from the hall each time that he chose to stay in for the night. Most of the time, she watched as he settled in to watch a game on the video screen. He kept the sound as low as possible, mindful that Lois was supposedly sleeping a few doors down the hall. His cheers were hushed whispers and fist pumps into the air whenever the Red Suns scored. A few times, Kal invited his brothers in to watch with him, and Lois was impressed that even *they* were mindful of keeping the noise level to the barest minimum.

Other times, Kal simply relaxed with a glass of wine or a cup of coffee and settled in on the couch or an armchair with a book.

He seemed to devour them. In the month that they had been married, he'd plowed through at least six sizable books that Lois was aware of. Still other times, Kal sat with his computer on his lap, typing the night away. Lois was curious as to what he was doing on it. Was he writing up proposals to bring before his father and the Elders? Was he making his plans to meet with his concubines? Lois simply didn't know and it drove her crazy. During the days when Kal was busy with his royal duties, Lois tried to find out. But, she just couldn't get past the password protection on the machine.

A few of the nights, Kal merely lay on the floor, playing with his cat. Kal would dangle a toy for the cat to attack or use a tiny red laser to make Fasa run about the room. At first, Lois thought it was cruel of Kal to do that. After all, the cat would never capture the miniscule red dot on the floor. But as she watched, she grew to understand that the cat looked forward to these playtimes, and got excited whenever Kal neared the drawer of the side table where he kept the small device. Fasa would attentively sit before Kal on the floor, golden eyes wide and expectant until the laser appeared.

It didn't take a genius to see that Kal was devoted to the little animal, and that the cat was just as devoted to Kal. It was not a rare sight for Lois to see the two snuggled up together on the couch or in a chair. Oftentimes, Fasa would wedge his head beneath Kal's chin and go to sleep, while Kal quietly stroked the animal's back and watched the video monitor or read. It was a heartwarming sight, and even Lois couldn't find a way to twist that back on Kal in some negative light.

Lois found herself becoming closer to Zara as the days marched on, despite her best efforts to stay as aloof as possible. She thought that Zara was a sweet woman, and envied the fact that the other woman had not been forced into a loveless marriage. And, she had to admit, Kal had been right when he'd guessed that Lois was lonely. She missed her sister terribly, at any rate. In some ways, it was nice to be away from her mother and father's incessant fighting and verbal brawling, though now she was living a similar situation with the young prince. Instead of being a bystander of the verbal warfare that she'd grown up in, she was now an active participant. So to ease some of her loneliness, she sometimes spent time with Zara, and as a result, a friendship started to form between them. It helped Lois to have another woman to talk with, even if she studiously avoided talking about Kal with her.

As the days turned to weeks, and the weeks turned to a full month since their wedding day, Lois noticed something interesting. The days when she and Kal managed not to fight were usually the nights when Kal stayed within their chambers. But if they fought, Kal was almost guaranteed to sneak out of the chambers at night once he thought Lois was asleep. Lois was certain that Kal was drowning whatever sorrows he had in some concubine's bed. At least he had the decency to go to them, she thought often, though not without disgust. At least he wasn't bringing them back to his chambers and forcing Lois to wander aimlessly while he lay with another woman, or worse, doing so while she was in the chambers still. It was enough of a thought to make her stomach roil and her anger rise.

After the first month was up, Lois grew bolder. She began to follow Kal whenever he slipped away in the night, hoping to catch him in his lies. She would go to bed and pretend to sleep, listening intently for Kal to make his move. When he would finally slip away, she would follow from a distance, hiding behind whatever she could, just in case Kal ever turned to look back. But he never did, always being either too distracted to notice his second shadow, or with his music blasting in his ears, making him oblivious to all else that was around him. Lois was thankful for that, and for the fact that Kal always chose to slip away at late hours when the whole palace seemed to be asleep.

No one witnessed her attempts at sleuthing out the truth.

For two months, Lois followed Kal, but she never caught him meeting with any women, or men, for that matter. The thought that Kal might have different tastes had crossed her mind on more than one occasion as she pondered why he refused to even bring up the topic of their marital duties, even when they were getting along.

Instead, she found herself following Kal either out into the gardens or to down to the gym in the basement level of the palace. In the gardens, he merely walked, usually with his portable music player strapped to his arm. Sometimes he jogged, using only the small pools of light from the lights that lined the pathways to see by, along with moon and starlight. Lois did not follow him the first few times, but then began to wonder if his little trysts were taking place deep within the gardens under the cover of darkness. So she began to follow him through the gardens whenever he went out into them. And still, she found him to be doing nothing more insidious than taking a late night walk or run. Sometimes, he would break from his jogging and lean against a tree, looking up into the vast expanse of stars above. He would stay like that for a long while, sigh, and then go back to his running.

Whenever the weather was bad, and sometimes even when it wasn't, Lois followed Kal down to the gym. The first time, Lois had wondered with disgust if Kal's women were meeting him there, but even she had to admit that the idea was pretty farfetched. And yet, she liked it best when he sought refuge in the gym. For in that place, she found that luck was with her. The gym had one wall of sound-proof two-way glass. Lois was able slip into the room behind the glass, and watch to see what Kal was up to.

He would disappear only for a minute or two, and reemerge with a towel around his neck and a plastic bottle of water. Then he would speak aloud, activating either the video screens to watch his favorite team play or turning on the music system. Lois didn't recognize a lot of the music, but it almost all had upbeat tones that she figured would be a great motivator to work out to. Some of it even had her tapping her toes, despite her efforts to remain neutral and her desire to stay annoyed. Some of the music she recognized as being classical, though it had been reworked as rock and roll, with swifter, heavier beats. Those were the ones that she liked the best, though she never stayed for very long. Kal gave her no reason to stay. He'd hop on a treadmill or another machine and lose himself to his workout. And his visits to the place almost always lasted for an hour or better, most often closer to two hours.

Lois had no real reason to mistrust that he was only working out when he was there. She watched as his body grew even leaner, tauter, and more muscular over the course of the two months that she spied on him. She had to admit that he'd been in top physical form when she'd first met him. That hadn't been too difficult to notice. But somehow, he became even more toned and stronger as time went on. Had the circumstances been different, she might have even allowed herself to admit that he was attractive. He was, in fact, the most attractive, most handsome man that she had ever seen. And when they weren't fighting, he was one of the most decent men that she'd ever known. His personality made him even more attractive to her eyes.

Three months had now passed since their forced marriage. And Lois had failed to find anything suspicious about Kal. She found herself unsure of whether she was relieved about that or not. On the one hand, Kal seemed to be genuine. He hadn't lied to her. He wasn't cheating on her with anyone else. On the other hand, it meant that she had been wrong about him. And Lois *hated* being wrong.

She was annoyed. Annoyed that Kal was a good man. Annoyed that she had misjudged him. Annoyed that there was no

way out of this marriage. Annoyed that, despite her best efforts, she found herself falling under his spell. And she took it out on Kal.

One fine, sunny morning, she erupted in savage fury at Kal for no good reason. She wasn't even sure why. But it was her worst outburst yet. Kal actually paled as he stood in the path of her wrath, looking for all the world like a stricken animal. She had even seen a glimmer of a tear form in one of his soft brown eyes. Chocolate eyes. Like the chocolates he had brought her. The very gift that had caused her to explode.

Kal had not been in their rooms when Lois had awoken that morning. She had been a little taken aback by that. They had just had three days of relative peace between them. Kal hadn't snuck out of the rooms at night. He'd even begun to open up around her a little, though he seemed to attempt to keep as much distance as he could. But within fifteen minutes of Lois climbing out of bed that morning, he had returned. A pleased smile had been on his lips and he had handed her a red velvet box filled with expensive, rich chocolates. Lois had been touched by the gesture, but instead of thanking him, she'd gone on a twenty minute rant. She had accused him of all sorts of horrible things, including that he was trying to buy her love.

When she was done, Kal's shoulders had been slumped in defeat and lines of misery marred his face. He'd left without another word. Perhaps he had been too stunned to speak. Perhaps he'd felt on the verge of saying something that he would regret, and had left in order to not voice it. Lois had simply watched him go. She hadn't tried to stop him.

Now, sitting alone in their chambers, Lois slowly cooled off. She began to even feel a little guilty about her outburst, and more than a little sorry for having snapped. She wondered what Kal was doing, what he was thinking. She wondered if she ought to apologize for her behavior. After all, Kal hadn't actually done anything wrong. But he never returned to their chambers, nor did he attend the meals in the main dining hall. Part of Lois worried that she had really crossed the line this time.

Late that night, Kal finally returned from wherever he'd been all day. He was only in their rooms for a few brief minutes to check on Fasa, then he left again just as quickly. He did not speak. He did not even look at Lois. But Lois looked at Kal. There was still a world of pain in his eyes and an air of depression around him. As always, Lois made the decision to follow her husband. This time, however, the motivation was borne of a desire to make sure that he was all right, rather than a gnawing suspicion of what he might be up to.

As silent as any shadow, Lois followed Kal through the white marble halls of the palace. She knew Kal's route well enough by now. She knew even before she saw him exit the building, that he was heading out into the gardens. Lois did notice, however, that he wasn't dressed in his usual loose-fitting jogging clothes, nor did he have his music player with him. She bit her lower lip in thought as she followed him out into the night.

A heavy fog had fallen as the night had rolled in. It was thick enough to obscure everything around her. Still, she knew Kal's path. She had to follow extra closely, to ensure that she didn't lose him in the thick white fog. But, she reasoned, the same fog would also help to hide her from his eyes as well. So she pressed on. As she anticipated, Kal made a beeline for the rose gardens. But instead of standing in place or beginning to run as he always did, this time Kal found a bench and sat. Lois quickly hid herself behind a tall, full hedge. She was close enough to hear Kal's heavy sigh, though it sounded somehow muffled in the blanket of fog. When he began to speak, Lois nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Mom," Kal sighed. "I've all but given up. I wish you were here to tell me what to do. I've tried everything. I've tried talking to Lois. I've tried giving her gifts. I've tried giving her some space. Nothing has worked. I'm out of ideas. I don't know what

to do anymore. It's killing me. I want to make her happy. I really do. But...she hates me." Kal's voice was soft and low as he spoke aloud to the air around him.

A chill ran up Lois' spine as Kal spoke to the empty garden. She suddenly felt very guilty about having followed Kal out here. Clearly this was a very private moment for him. Lois felt like an intruder. And yet...she couldn't pull away, not just yet. She was curious as to what else Kal might have to say.

"This marriage...I've failed at it," Kal continued. "What's worse is that I'm ruining Lois' life as well. Dad says to be patient. I've tried that. Nothing is working. You know what, Mom? I have never envied Ching before in my life. He's the firstborn son, and the heir to the throne. I've never envied the pressures and responsibilities that go along with being the crown prince. He was betrothed since his birth, something that I once thought that I had escaped. But now...now I find myself envying his marriage. He loves Zara, and she loves him. Part of me has fallen for Lois. But she'll never feel the same way. She's made that clear enough."

Kal paused and took a breath. When he continued speaking, his voice was thick with unshed tears. "I don't need her to love me. But I can't bear to be bound to someone who won't even allow a friendship to sprout between us. I just...I don't know how I can live my life like this. How can I make Lois live the rest of *her* life like this? It's not fair to her. I just don't know what to do."

Lois swallowed around a lump that had taken up residence in her throat. The misery in Kal's voice had broken through every defensive wall that she'd constructed. And what was more, she was stunned to realize that even after all that she had said and done to him over the last three months, he was still concerned about her, maybe even more than he was concerned about the state of his own heart. And Lois had to admit to herself that his heart couldn't possibly be in any worse condition right now. She'd repeatedly torn it out of his chest and stomped all over it.

But yet, he was concerned with *her* feelings, *her* heart. He'd admitted it, out loud, though he hadn't known that she was listening. He'd been genuinely remorseful over Lois' unhappiness. He'd said that he wanted to make her happy. And what had she done? She'd been cruel to him, throwing salt into every wound that she managed to make. It was now her turn to feel badly.

"Please, send me some kind of sign, Mom," Kal begged the night air.

Lois heard the absolute despair in Kal's voice. She heard the quiet sobbing coming from the man. He sniffled a little, and Lois peeked around the hedge. Even through the fog, she could see his dark silhouette framed by the small pathway lights. She could see that his head was in his hands. She could see the shaking of his shoulders as he released his pent-up grief. In that moment, her heart sank.

She had done this to him.

He'd been nothing if not kind and accommodating towards her. He'd never forced himself on her. He'd been respectful of her space and her privacy. He'd tried to give her gifts. He'd tried to talk to her. And the only times that he'd grown angry and argued back with her, she had goaded him into it.

Perhaps it was time to make amends. Perhaps it was time to stop punishing him for something that was never his fault to begin with. Perhaps it was time to sit down and talk to him.

But not now.

Lois felt badly enough that she was spying on Kal right now. She certainly didn't have the nerve to walk up to him and admit that she'd eavesdropped on such a private moment. She could always talk to him tomorrow. She turned and fled the gardens, as silently as she could. Tears were in her own eyes, now that she had seen the extent of what she'd done to Kal.

Back through the palace she breezed, until she was safely back in Kal's chambers. Once there, she stripped out of her damp clothing. She was chilled to the very bone, so she took a hot, but quick, shower, and then changed into dry things. Her husband was still not back when she slipped into the large bed.

She tried to sleep, but it remained elusive. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw her husband's defeated form. Though Kal had spoken so quietly in the gardens, his words echoed in her mind, growing louder with every repetition until it seemed as though they had been screamed in her ears. She tossed and turned, though she could not shake the guilt that she felt, until she at last fell into an exhausted asleep.

Her sleep was anything but restful. She awoke often from her troubled dreams, which kept putting her back in the gardens over and over again. In the last of these dreams, she came upon Kal, not as a living man, but as a corpse swinging from a tall, sturdy tree. Around his neck was a sign that said simply, "Forgive me, Lois."

She awoke with a heavy heart but a grim sense of determination. She would talk to Kal. She would hear him out and see what he had to say. And above all, she would not take her frustrations out on him. She only needed to find some uninterrupted time so that they could both get things out into the open and start clearing the air.

She swiftly got herself dressed and ready for the day. But she had slept later than she anticipated, so the prospect of speaking with Kal before breakfast was dashed. She accompanied him down to the main dining hall, but her courage had left her. She kept silent as they made their way through the palace and all throughout the meal.

After breakfast was finished, Kal, Jor-El, and Ching went to hear the week's petitioners. Lois had forgotten about that. In the past, she had secretly looked forward to those days. It meant that she had no chance of running into the prince during the day. But today, the prospect of not seeing Kal until dinner time bothered her. Now that she had come to the decision to try to make amends, she wanted to get it over and done with as quickly as possible. She wasn't used to admitting that she had been wrong, but she knew that in this case, she had to take that first, frightening step.

Dinner wasn't the proper time to approach Kal either. Instead, Lois pushed the food around on her plate, eating very little. She noticed that Kal didn't eat much either. Was he still troubled over their fight the previous day? Lois imagined that he was.

Once dinner was over, she walked in silence with Kal back to their rooms. Several times, she tried to gather up her courage to speak. But she wasn't sure of where to begin. Each time, the words died in her throat before she could utter a sound. Once back in their chambers, she sat on the couch in the living room. Kal settled into one of the armchairs and began to skim through the channels on the video screen. He finally settled on a documentary about one of Krypton's very first scientists, though Lois could tell that he was distracted and wasn't really paying attention.

"Kal," she finally said.

In an instant, his eyes were on hers. There was a wealth of apprehension swimming in those twin chocolate pools. But before she could utter another word, there was a knock on the door. Kal looked torn for a split second.

"Yes?" he asked her after a moment.

Lois sighed, her courage gone again for the moment. "Nothing. You'd better get the door."

Kal looked uncertain but nodded slowly. He stood from his seat and went to answer the door. Lois heard the door open and Jai's voice wafted through the rooms. She frowned. Of course one of Kal's brothers would have to come calling on him just as she was about to have an important conversation with him.

“Hey,” Jai said, and Lois could hear the smile in the younger man’s voice, though she couldn’t see him. “I’m kind of bored. I was thinking of heading down to the gym. You want to come and spar with me?”

Kal hesitated for a second. Lois wondered if he was thinking of what she might have been about to say to him. But his indecision was over almost before it began. Lois knew that he was terrified of another fight with her. She also knew that he’d be willing to do anything to avoid having another fight.

“Sure,” he said at last. “I could use some exercise.”

“Great. I’ll meet you down there,” Jai said.

“See you in ten minutes,” Kal promised.

He shut the door as Jai departed, then ducked into the bedroom. A few minutes later, he reemerged dressed in his workout clothes. He was out the door before Lois could turn around to even look at him. For a while, she debated whether or not to go down to the gym and discreetly watch. She ultimately decided not to go, but after nearly two hours had passed, she grew more and more anxious. Finally unable to stand it any longer, she left the rooms and went down to the gym.

When she arrived, Jai was just leaving. From the room behind the two-way glass, Lois surveyed the gym and wondered if she should hurry back up to the rooms before Kal could return. But as she debated, Jai left and Kal turned to one of the various machines. It appeared that he was going to stay for a while longer. Lois pulled up a chair and turned the volume up in the room so that she could hear what was going on next door.

“Night,” Jai threw over his shoulder as he made his way out.

“Night,” Kal said back as he adjusted the weight stack on the machine he was sitting at. “And thanks. I really needed that.”

“I know. That’s why I came to ask you to join me, instead of asking Ching to come.”

“So good to know that I wasn’t your first choice,” Kal quipped.

“Sorry, bro, but he’s better with a drei than you are.” Jai shrugged.

“And I’m still better than you are,” Kal said, grinning, though it seemed forced.

Lois wondered if he was still fretting over their near conversation from earlier.

“See you in the morning,” Jai said.

“See you,” Kal echoed. “Sleep well.”

After Jai had gone, Kal commanded the computer system to play some music. Lois recognized it instantly. He often played this particular playlist when he worked out. Kal stretched and began to pull down the bars of the machine, working the muscles of his arms. Lois watched in fascination. Even through the material of his t-shirt, she could see the muscles of his body rippling and flexing with his movements. She had watched him at the gym before, but she’d never taken too much of an interest in what he was doing. She had always been too focused on whether or not he was meeting with other women. But now she watched him in rapt attention.

When he’d completed several sets on the arm machine, he wiped his brow with the red towel that was hanging around his neck. It perfectly matched his shorts, though those both clashed with his blue shirt. Lois had the fleeting impression of one of those superheroes on the shows that she had seen as a child. They had always had odd looking or strangely matched outfits.

As she watched Kal, he peeled off his sweat-soaked shirt and headed to one of the treadmills. He started to walk, but soon increased to a jog, then a fast run. Lois thought that his body was a thing of beauty as he easily kept up the pace that he had set. She watched as he ran and the music played, one song blending into another until she was unsure how many had played since Kal had first stepped foot on the machine. She watched as he slowed and wiped his sweaty brow. She watched as he took the white and red

water bottle and took a few mighty swigs from it, never breaking his pace, never faltering in his steps. Then he sped back up again.

Lois wondered how many miles he covered as he legs ate up the distance. Five perhaps. Maybe a little more. But at last, Kal slowed and stopped. He hobbled over to one of the benches in the room, facing the two-way glass. Lois panicked for one split second, wondering if he somehow knew that she was watching. But in the next instant, she let out a shaky laugh. Of course he couldn’t see her. Kal wasn’t even looking at the mirrors that were on his side of the glass. He was methodically rubbing his knee, as though it pained him greatly. After a few minutes, he seemed to be feeling better and he stood again. He paced a little, testing the joint. Apparently satisfied, he gathered his belongings and made ready to leave the gym, powering down the music system with a few verbal commands.

Lois scurried out of the observation room and outright bolted back to the chambers that she shared with Kal. As she fled down the halls, she was thankful that there was no one to watch her progress. She reached the rooms and let herself in, then took a seat on the couch. For a minute, she struggled to calm her breathing and to compose herself. After another perhaps five or ten minutes, she heard Kal enter. She stood, steeling her nerves.

“Lois?” Kal said as he entered the living room. “I thought you’d be asleep by now. I was just down in the gym.”

He was still shirtless. Reflexively, he held his sodden blue shirt against his chest. Lois wondered if he was shy or if he was worried that his partially undressed state would offend her. Or perhaps he felt as though clinging to the shirt would somehow protect him from her usual wrath.

“I know,” Lois said gently. “Kal? Can we...talk? I...have some things...that I really need to speak with you about.”

Kal looked caught off-guard. His eyes grew wide and distrustful, as though he were trying to decide if he had done something wrong. Lois thought that he resembled a cornered animal. A terrified, cornered animal.

“Please?” Lois added, hoping to alleviate some of his fear.

Slowly, Kal nodded. He swallowed hard. “All right. But...I should probably get cleaned up first. Is that all right?”

“Of course,” Lois said, giving him a small smile. “I’ll be right here when you’re done.”

Kal quickly ducked into the bathroom and shut the door behind him. His heart was racing, not from the time he’d spent in the gym, but in fear of the conversation that was now looming. He pressed his back to the wooden door and sighed. He’d thought for sure that Lois would be asleep by now. He stripped out of his sweat-drenched clothing, shoved it down the laundry chute, and turned the shower on as hot as he could stand. The hotter the water, the cleaner he felt.

As he stepped beneath the spray of water, his mind whirled and his stomach clenched. What could Lois possibly want from him? He was pretty sure that he hadn’t done anything wrong, at least not today. He’d barely even had time to say two words to Lois. Unless...was she angry that he’d chosen to go with Jai earlier when she’d tried to talk with him? Kal grabbed the soap and scrubbed his body angrily. Why had he done that? Mentally, he berated himself. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. But now, he was certain that he’d be on the receiving end of Lois’ wrath once more.

He began to rinse the soap from his body. He took a moment to enjoy the sensation of the hot water on his tired muscles. As he stood there, appreciating the relief that it brought, another thought occurred to him. Lois hadn’t actually sounded mad. She hadn’t commanded him to speak with her. She hadn’t demanded that he sit down and talk right as he got back into the chambers. She had actually *asked* him if they could talk. She had said *please*. She had even sounded a little unsure of herself. It was almost enough to make Kal hopeful that maybe he *wasn’t* going

to be subjected to another one of Lois' verbal assaults.

Kal lingered in the shower as long as he could, then slowly dried, shaved, and dressed. He knew that he was stalling, and knew that Lois probably knew it as well. He combed his damp hair, then sighed as he stared into the mirror, leaning against the countertop. It took all of his nerve to finally exit the room and walk back to where Lois awaited him in the living room. But at the last moment, his courage abandoned him. He headed to the kitchenette instead.

"Do you want a cup of coffee?" he asked her, still stalling.

"Sure." She sounded just as scared to get into whatever discussion she had in mind.

Kal nodded absently, and prepared two mugs of steaming coffee. He fixed Lois' cup first, remembering how she had made it on their first morning together. She'd never varied the amounts of sugar and cream, so he felt confident enough to make her drink for her. Then he fixed his own. With a mug in each hand, he entered the living room again. Lois had started to rise to go and fix her drink, but Kal handed her the one that he'd made for her.

"Thanks," she said, sounding surprised.

"You're welcome."

He started to sit across the room in one of the armchairs, but Lois shook her head.

"Come sit on the couch with me?" She patted the empty cushion next to her. "Please?"

"I...all right," Kal stammered, his heart hammering in his chest.

He moved across the room to the couch. After a second of indecision, he sat as far from Lois as he could. The middle cushion of the couch was both exceedingly small a space, and as wide as an ocean, all at the same time. Kal sat sideways on the couch, drawing his legs beneath him. His eyes dropped to his lap. He tried desperately to think of something to say. In fact, they both seemed to be struggling for a place to begin. They both took a sip from their mugs as they thought.

"How...how did you know how I like my coffee?" Lois asked after the first sip.

"I watched as you made it that first morning when we had breakfast in these chambers," Kal said, staring into the depths of his own mug. "I thought that knowing how you like your coffee might...I don't know...come in handy one day. I just haven't had an opportunity before now to fix you a cup. Or the nerve. Is it okay?"

"It's perfect."

"I'm glad." He brightened a little inside.

They both lapsed into another silence. Once again, Kal found himself at a loss as to what he could say. Part of him was desperately curious about what Lois wanted to talk to him about. The other part of him dreaded it. He took a thoughtful sip of his drink, and savored the hot liquid as it coursed down his throat.

"Kal," Lois said, breaking the silence for him.

"Look, Lois...I'm sorry," he said, the words coming out in a rush. "You wanted to talk earlier and I left with Jai. I'm sorry. You must be furious with me. I promised myself that I wouldn't do anything to make you mad. At least...not intentionally."

"Kal," Lois said again, effectively silencing the prince. "You don't need to apologize."

"I don't?" Surprise flooded Kal's voice and his eyes briefly flickered up to look at Lois.

"No," she said. "If anything, I'm the one who should be apologizing. That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"I don't think I understand," Kal said, scrutinizing her features, as though they would clue him in. "You haven't done anything."

"Sure I have," Lois said. "I've been horrible to you. I'm so sorry for that. I know that it doesn't sound like much. But it's true. It's just...this marriage...this whole situation...I haven't

taken to it very well."

"Is it really that bad being married to me?" Kal asked in a small voice. He spoke so softly that Lois almost didn't hear it.

"Oh...no, of course not," she tried to reassure him, sliding a little closer to Kal. "You haven't done anything wrong. It's all been my fault. I've been frustrated and angry at this situation, and I've been taking it out on you. It wasn't fair of me. You've been nothing but a gentleman and I've been...atrocious. I can't believe that you've put up with me for this long."

"It hasn't been ideal," Kal admitted, feeling uncomfortable. "But, well, I don't blame you for being mad. And I don't blame you for wanting to fight back. I haven't enjoyed the circumstances surrounding this marriage either. But...what changed your mind? And why now?"

Lois sighed and shrugged. "I'm a little embarrassed to admit this. But...I've been watching you these last three months."

"Watching me?"

Lois nodded, her face flushing. "I've watched how you interact with people, to try to see what kind of man you are. I've even...followed you...when you've left the chambers at night. At first, I wanted to prove to you...and to myself...that you were a louse and that you deserved my scorn. I was so sure that you had lied to me about never bedding any of the concubines. I *wanted* to catch you in a lie. But, after a while, I realized that you hadn't lied to me. It made me furious to see that you were doing nothing more sinister than taking a walk or spending a few hours at the gym."

Kal arched an eyebrow, more amused than anything at Lois' admission.

"And now?" He gave her a tentative smile.

She returned his smile with a small one of her own, one of the very first that Kal had seen from her, and one of the first that she had directed at him. She looked relieved that he wasn't angry over her confession.

"Now, I'm *glad* that that's all that you were doing. And I admit that I was wrong about you," she said, her voice going soft. "Can you forgive me for all of the horrible things that I've said and done?"

"There's nothing to forgive," Kal said gently. "We've *both* done said and done some things that didn't help matters. That much is true. But...I have no hard feelings towards you. And I'm willing to give this a second chance, if you are. I'd like for us to be friends, at the very least."

"I'd like that," Lois said, brushing a lock of her dark hair behind her ear, like a shy young girl.

"So...friends?" Kal asked, sticking his hand out towards Lois.

She took his proffered hand and shook it. "Friends."

It was the first physical contact they had had since their hands had been bound at the marriage ceremony, and the first time they had touched under their own power. The sensation sent a bolt of electricity through the prince. He wondered if Lois had felt it.

Kal's smile bloomed on his face as the last bit of his pent-up worries left him. He could do this. He could make a fresh start with his wife. For the last three months, he'd been craving the opportunity to put the fighting behind them and to give friendship the chance to take root. Now, it seemed that his prayers had finally been answered.

"What a mess this whole thing has been," he said after a while, chuckling lightly and shaking his head.

"What do you mean?"

"Well," Kal said, shrugging, "up until two weeks before our wedding, I didn't even know that your father had any children, let alone that I'd been promised to one of them. And now look at us."

Lois' eyes clouded for a moment, and Kal worried that he'd said something wrong. "My father rarely tells anyone about Luci

and me.”

“Why not?” Kal was instantly attentive and frowning, all traces of his amusement gone.

“He’s always been ashamed that he never had any boys. The only thing he ever felt girls were good for was arranging marriages that would help him climb the social ladder. I can only imagine how much it must have thrilled him to have a clear opening to unload me on the Supreme Lord’s family.” Lois’ voice had turned bitter.

“I’m sure that’s not…”

“It *is*,” she said, cutting him off, though her ire was not directed at him. “And the thing is, it’s partly my fault. Despite tireless efforts from my family, I was never a proper young lady, as I’m sure you’ve guessed. I’ve always been loud and opinionated, and that drove my father crazy. It’s no wonder he would never allow you to meet me before the wedding. He was probably afraid that you’d run off rather than be stuck with a woman who can’t hold her tongue and who’d rather climb a tree than learn how to sew.”

“That just shows you how little your father knows about me,” Kal said, with a shy smile.

Lois looked at him quizzically. “What does that mean?”

“For the last three months, I’ve admired how unlike other women you are. Okay, so I haven’t enjoyed being on the receiving end of your frustrations, but I’ve *liked* that you question and challenge things. You’re not content to just take things as they are. I respect that. In fact, I’d always hoped that the woman I’d end up marrying would have a mind of her own. A mind like yours, to be perfectly honest. It’s pretty refreshing. You have no idea how boring it is being around noble young women who are more interested in playing the part of a proper young lady than in showing any sort of real personality. It’s like a slow death.” He grinned at her. “And, for the record, I have no use for a woman who sews,” he added in a teasing tone. “Now, a woman who will accompany me for a run, or out horseback riding, or in finding new issues to bring to the Elders’ attention…that’s the kind of woman I prefer.”

“You’re taking awfully well to the fact that I’ve just admitted to being the black sheep of the Lyne family,” Lois said, though she could not hide her grin.

Kal shrugged. “Well, in case you haven’t noticed, I’m not exactly your standard, garden-variety noble lord.”

Lois laughed, and Kal thought that he’d never heard so beautiful a sound before in all of his life.

“I’ve noticed,” she said.

“My father is okay with that, but it drives the Elders absolutely crazy.” Kal grinned, and his eyes sparkled. “Add to that fact that Ching and Jai are both like me…”

“That Elders aren’t big fans of that, huh? I mean, from what I’ve seen, they seem sort of…exasperated by you sometimes.”

Kal shook his head. “Yeah. The Elders have mostly stopped trying to discourage our behavior, but once in a while Trey or someone will try to talk us out of becoming too friendly with the commoners, or from going into the city without an armed escort, or roll their eyes when they catch one of us climbing a tree or something. It galls them that we never listen.”

“Why don’t you?”

Kal shrugged. “If the Elders had their way, my brothers and I would live in a protective bubble, never truly experiencing life. Our mother never wanted us to live like that. And neither does our father. That’s why he allows us as much freedom as he can.”

“That must be nice.”

“It is.” He nodded.

“My father was a lot more strict. I think that’s why Luci and I always resisted becoming proper young ladies. Well, at least, I did, a lot more than Luci did.”

“Well, if it’s any consolation, I really am glad that you’re *not*

one.”

Lois grinned. “I never thought I’d hear *that*.”

“It’s true!”

“I believe you.”

“So…can I ask you something?” Kal asked, hesitantly.

Lois nodded. “Sure.”

“You said before that you followed me to see if I was going to the concubines. That really bothers you, doesn’t it?”

Lois nodded again. “It does. My father…he’s only a lesser noble, and he’s never had his own women on staff. But that has never stopped him from having affairs with some of the other lesser noblewomen. I thought…”

“You thought that I was just like him,” Kal said gently, finishing her thought.

“Yeah,” Lois said, nodding. “I know that I had no right to be mad, even if you *were* seeking them out. It’s part of your…privileges as a lord.”

Kal snorted his disgust at the idea. “If it was my decision, the practice would stop altogether. I believe that two people should be faithful to one another when they marry. Of course, I also believe that these arranged marriages should also stop. It isn’t right to, for all intents and purposes, sell people in exchange for the chance to better your own social network, or as a way to secure better business dealings. Your father sold you in marriage to try to provide for you. Mine sold me as a way to ensure that Ching lived. In both cases, we paid the price for our fathers’ business dealings.”

Lois smiled at him. “You know what? The more I get to know you, the more you surprise me.”

Kal smiled back. “In a good way, I hope.”

“In a very good way. In fact, I think this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

“Well, that’s good. Because we have a lifetime together to be friends. I want you to know, Lois, that you can talk to me about anything. You can ask me anything. I’ll never lie to you. I swear it. You deserve better than that.”

Lois was quiet for a couple of minutes before she ventured another question. “Kal…about that necklace you gave me on our wedding night. What was the real reason you gave it to me?”

Kal dragged a hand through his hair and his face flushed a little. “The day after my father told me that we were to be wed, I was in the city with my brothers. I was pretty upset over the news, and mourning what I saw as the loss of my freedom. I mean, I had always known that it could be a possibility, that’d I’d wind up having to wed whoever my father chose for me. But, I had begun to hope that I would be free to marry a woman of my own choosing. Anyway, they were sort of teasing me, trying to get me out of my bad mood. I was saying that I was worried over how we’d both take to this marriage. Jai said that I had a gift for worrying. That gave me the idea to get you something. I wanted to give you a gift to show you that I was open to giving this a shot, and that I hoped we could get along. I wanted to find something completely unique for you. I didn’t want to get you something that was so common that you’d see it everywhere. I wanted you to know that you’d be very special to me, no matter what happened or what the circumstance of our marriage was.”

Lois dropped her eyes to her nearly empty coffee cup. She began to fidget with it. “And I went and threw it at your head. Wow, did I ever make a good first impression.”

Kal smiled a little and shrugged. “I’ve had worse things thrown at me.”

Lois gaped. “You’re the prince! Who would have dared to throw something at you?”

Kal chuckled. “Okay, maybe not thrown at me, but the summer when I was eighteen, Ching and I went fishing. Ching caught a fish and hauled it to shore so fast and so enthusiastically that it went flying backwards and hit me right in the face.” Lois

laughed as the image flashed before her eyes. “It took months before Ching and I could see a fish without bursting into a fit of laughter.”

The prince adjusted his position on the couch, shifting so that he could bring some relief to his knee. He knew that he’d been pushing himself too hard in the gym over the last couple of weeks. There had been times where he’d visited it two or three times in the course of a day. He rubbed the joint absently.

Lois nodded towards his knee. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” Kal said, still rubbing the joint. “I’ve just been pushing myself a little too hard lately. And that has been causing my knee a little bit of pain in the last week or so.”

“If you have pain, why continue to push yourself?”

“It’s a little hard to explain,” Kal said with a shrug. “But, I find the gym to be kind of a haven of sorts. I can work out my feelings there - if I’m stressed or upset or just have a lot on my mind. I’ve just overworked my knee, that’s all. If it gets bad, I can ice it or take a painkiller. It’s no big deal.”

“What happened to it? If you don’t mind my asking.”

Kal sighed. “My brothers and I have all served some time in Krypton’s army. I was participating in some training exercises one day. I’m still not entirely sure how it happened. We were getting a lesson on the different types of explosives and how to handle them safely. One minute everything was fine. The next minute, things were going off. Everyone started to run, including me. There was a lot of fire, and smoke, and noise. I happened to look back and saw one of the guys laying on the ground. He’d been thrown by the force of one of the explosions. He was burnt badly, and he was dazed, but he was trying to get up. I was the only one who saw him, so I turned back. I was helping him get to safety when another explosive went off. The shockwave threw us several feet and I landed the wrong way on my knee. It was the only real injury that I suffered, thankfully. But it was enough to end my military service early. I don’t usually have any issues with the knee, unless I really put a lot of stress on the joint or it suffers a blow when my brothers and I spar.”

“And the other man?”

Kal shook his head sadly. “He didn’t make it. His burns and other injuries were too severe. He lived another two days, then died as an infection spread over his wounds, despite the doctors’ best efforts.”

Lois’ hand flew to her mouth. “That’s terrible!”

“Yeah. He was a good man, and my friend.”

“I’m so sorry,” Lois offered.

“Thanks,” Kal said sincerely.

The prince drained the last long swig from his coffee mug and grimaced. The liquid had gone cold as he had talked. Across the couch from him, Lois did the same. Kal was silent for a moment before he spoke.

“Would you like another cup?” he asked.

Lois shook her head. “No, but thanks. I’ll never sleep tonight if I have another one. I’ll be bouncing off the walls.”

Kal grinned playfully. “You know, that might be fun to watch. And certainly different from the Lois that I’ve seen so far.”

Lois laughed a little. “Yeah, not going to happen.”

“Can I ask you something?” Kal asked after another minute.

“Sure. It’s only fair.”

“Well, I don’t mean to sound offensive or anything. But... your name. It’s not Kryptonian, is it? I’ve never heard that name before.”

“It’s not,” Lois confirmed. “But my father is obsessed with the culture of some obscure little planet called Earth. He has been, ever since he first started as a research assistant before he moved on to becoming a doctor. In fact, he’s the one that got your father interested in the planet, from what I understand. Lois is some Earth name that he liked.”

“It’s a pretty name,” Kal offered, giving her a sincere smile.

“Really? I’ve never been all that fond of it.”

“Really. I like it. It’s unique and it seems to fit you somehow. There’s no other woman on Krypton like you, that’s for sure.”

Lois arched her eyebrow, trying to decide if that was a compliment or not. But Kal was smiling and he looked like he was telling the truth. Lois nodded her acknowledgement. A companionable silence fell between them.

“Can I ask you something else?” Kal asked after a couple of minutes. Embarrassment was in his voice and his face was flushed.

“Absolutely.”

“Well, I know that you told me about why you view the concubines so... coldly. And I know you hate being forced into this marriage. But there’s something I still don’t quite understand.”

“What’s that?”

“Well,” Kal said, swallowing hard, but plunging ahead. “That first night. Our wedding night. I went to get changed for bed and came back out to find you... offering yourself to me. Then, the very next day you told me to stay away from you. It just doesn’t make any sense to me, whatsoever.” He shook his head for emphasis.

Lois sighed and frowned. She hadn’t thought of the mixed signals that she had likely sent out.

“All my life,” she finally said after a long pause to think, “I’ve been groomed to be your wife. I’ve been told what to do, what to say. It’s been drilled into my head what was expected of me, as the wife of a nobleman. That I’m supposed to walk two paces behind you. That I’m supposed to offer myself to you so that you can take your pleasure and so that I can produce your heirs. That first night... I was scared. All I could do was remember the lessons that had been driven into me for my whole life. I figured that you would be angry if I didn’t fulfill my end of the wedding night duties.”

“You were scared?” Kal asked, surprised. “Could have fooled me.”

Lois hung her head, ashamed. “When you told me to get dressed, I sensed that you were unlike what I had anticipated from a noble lord. And when you gave that necklace to me, I lashed out because I didn’t want to acknowledge that you seemed like you might actually be a decent guy. In fact, every single time I fought with you, I did it for the same reason. And, I’m embarrassed to say, you were the only target I had to vent my frustration and anger about the whole situation to. I wanted to hate you. I wanted to hurt you. Not because of who you are. But because...”

Kal cut her off with his soft voice. “...you had no other way to fight back against the situation.”

Lois nodded. “Exactly.”

“Oh, Lois,” Kal said, his voice soft and low. His heart was breaking for the breathtaking woman before him. “I’m so sorry that you had to go through that.”

“You’re sorry?” she asked, incredulous. “I’m the one who should be sorry. And I am. I’m not proud of the way I handled things.”

“Hey now, no more apologizing,” Kal said gently. “What’s done is done. It doesn’t matter anymore. We’re giving this a fresh start, remember?”

Lois brightened. “True.”

Beyond the windows of the room, the twin moons had long since set. The night was growing old. Kal stretched and yawned mightily, despite his best effort to hold it in.

“I’m sorry,” Lois said, shaking her head. “You must be exhausted.”

“I’m okay,” Kal said, rubbing his eyes.

“You are not,” Lois said, a half smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. “I should let you get some sleep. It’s getting late

anyway.”

“I’m fine. I can stay up if you still want to talk,” Kal pressed.

“Like you said, we have a lifetime to talk.” Lois rose from the couch. She hesitantly, but tenderly, cupped his cheek in one hand. The gesture only lasted a second, but it set Kal’s heart to soaring. “Goodnight, Kal.”

“Goodnight, Lois.”

Kal watched as Lois moved off to the bedroom. His heart was aching in his chest. But this time, the ache was a good pain. Lois didn’t hate him. She’d talked to him. She’d been open to his questions and had taken an interest in him. She had apologized for their rough start to their marriage. And not once had they fought.

The change in her attitude made her even more beautiful to his eyes. He shook his head and made up the couch so that he could sleep. He crawled beneath the blankets and sighed to himself. In the span of two hours, his dark little world had suddenly been flooded with light and promise. He could scarcely wait for the morning, for then, he would have another chance to be with his wife. Already he knew that even if she never grew to love him, he had begun falling for her.

Kal awoke with a smile on his face and a cat on his back. The little creature was curled into a ball and purring even in his sleep. Kal yawned and Fasa woke at the sudden movement and sound. He stretched and left as Kal shifted on the couch. After a moment, Kal wiped the sleep from his eyes and pushed himself up off the couch. Standing, he worked a kink out of his neck from sleeping in a bad position, then moved off to the kitchenette to start the coffeemaker.

Peeking into the bedroom, he saw that Lois was still asleep, so he quietly grabbed some clothes from his closet. He dressed quickly, then made his coffee and settled down at his computer. He drank slowly as he checked up on the current news before making a move against his brothers in a game that he had going with them. It was still very early when he finished, took care of Fasa’s needs, and slipped out of his chambers.

He wasn’t sure where he wanted to go. He simply let his feet take him where ever they wished. He felt like singing and dancing, his heart was so light. At least, he *hoped* that Lois wouldn’t change her mind when she awoke. His heart faltered for a moment as the possibility crossed his mind. He shook his head to clear his thoughts. Lois couldn’t possibly take back all the things that she had said last night, could she? No, Kal was fairly certain that she wouldn’t do that. They had made so much progress last night.

He kept walking, even as he was lost in thought. When he finally broke from his inner reflection, he found himself in the rose gardens. He smiled and stopped walking. As usual, the gardens were deserted at this early hour. He sat on his usual bench and breathed in the clean scent of the flowers. For a long time, he was silent, just enjoying the early morning sunlight and the warm breeze that seemed to caress him.

“Mom,” he finally said, “I don’t know if you had anything to do with Lois’ change of heart last night. But if you did, then thank you. I really do want this to work out. I’m...I’m starting to fall for her. I know that sounds crazy. We’ve only known each other three months, and we’ve only just started to get along. But I think that I might be falling in love with her. I think you’d like her. She’s got such a fiery, independent spirit. She reminds me of you in that way. And she’s beautiful.”

Kal stood, squinting up at the sky. He knew that he should return to his rooms. He wanted to be there when Lois woke up. The whole day was his to do with as he wished. And he planned on spending every available moment with his wife. He quickly retraced his steps back inside. As he neared his chambers, he saw Ching and Jai approaching. They were talking in low tones, but their laughter was evident in the smiles that they bore. Kal waved

and hurried his pace to meet them.

“Hey, bro!” Jai grinned at him.

“Good morning,” Kal greeted them both, unable to keep the smile off his face.

“You’re looking rather...happy this morning,” Ching observed, grinning from ear to ear.

Jai’s eyes widened. “Did you and Lois *finally*...?”

“...come to an understanding?” Kal finished for him. “We did. The fighting is behind us.”

“How did you manage that one?” Jai asked, his jaw slack in disbelief.

Kal shrugged. “I didn’t do anything. It was all Lois. She changed her mind about things. We wound up having a good, long, productive talk last night once I got back to my chambers after you and I sparred, Jai.”

“I’m happy for you,” Ching said, clasping his younger brother on the shoulder. “It’s good to see you looking so relaxed again. It’s been far too long.”

Kal nodded. “I know. Believe me, I know. It’s good to feel like my old self again.”

Jai nodded as well. “Yeah, for the last few months, you’ve been walking around looking like you were carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders. You had me really worried about you.”

“Thanks.” Kal chuckled a little, unable to contain his mirth now that he didn’t have to fear Lois anymore. “It felt that way.”

“We’re going into the city later with Zara. Do you want to come?” Ching asked.

Kal shook his head. “Normally I’d say yes. But I think I that I want to spend the day alone with Lois. No offense. Maybe next time though.”

“None taken,” Ching assured him. “You should enjoy some time with your wife.”

“I don’t blame you,” Jai said with a wink.

“Thanks,” Kal said. “I better get back inside. I’ll see you guys at breakfast.”

With that, Kal strode away to his chambers. Lois was just coming out of the bedroom as he closed the door softly behind him. He smiled sheepishly, as though he’d been caught doing something wrong.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Good morning,” Lois said. “Sleep well?”

“I did. You?”

“Fine, thanks.”

“Coffee?”

“Sure,” Lois said, moving to sit on the couch.

Fasa jumped up on the couch next to Lois and lay down. He looked at her expectantly, and she scratched him behind the ears. He began to purr and closed his eyes, completely content. A minute later, Kal was at Lois’ side, handing her a steaming mug of coffee.

“So,” Lois said, nodding in the direction of the door.

“Where’d you go this morning?”

Kal noted with immense relief that there was no animosity, no accusation in her voice. He breathed a mental sigh of relief. Feeling confident, he lowered himself onto the other end of the couch.

“I was up pretty early, so I took a walk. I just couldn’t really sit still. I ran into my brothers in the hall. They wanted to know if we’d like to go into the city with them today.”

“Oh? What did you say?”

Kal dropped his gaze, feeling slightly embarrassed. “I said that I wanted to spend the day with you.”

Lois nodded. “I think...I think I might like that.”

A relieved smile spread over Kal’s face and he released the breath that he hadn’t even realized that he’d been holding. “I’m glad. I’d like to take you on a little tour, if that’s okay with you?”

“Um, didn’t we already do that?” Lois arched her eyebrow at him playfully.

“Yeah, but that was the boring stuff. I’d like to show you my favorite spots.”

“That sounds lovely.”

“Great,” Kal said. “Let’s go down to breakfast, then we can spend the rest of the day together, just the two of us. After my tour, we can do whatever you want.”

“Okay,” Lois agreed.

They both stood. Kal noticed as Lois moved that there was a glimmer of light at her neck. As he took a second look, he saw that she was wearing the necklace he had purchased for her. For three months, the box containing it had sat on his dresser, unmoved since he had placed it there on their wedding night. To see Lois wearing it now made his heart soar. She truly had decided to give their marriage and budding friendship a real try, hadn’t she?

They walked to the main door to the chambers. Kal opened it and held it wide for her to pass through first. She was about to step into the hallway when Kal spoke again, stopping her in her tracks.

“Lois?”

“Hmm?”

“Thanks again...for giving me a second chance. You have no idea what that means to me.”

Lois shook her head. “I should be thanking *you* for giving *me* another chance. I know that I didn’t deserve one.”

“Of course you did,” Kal countered.

He gave her an encouraging smile. He had the fleeting thought that in the last twelve or so hours, he’d done more smiling than he had in the slightly more than three months since he’d learned that he was betrothed to a complete stranger.

“Come on,” he said gently, nodding towards the hallway. “Let’s get some food.”

That morning’s breakfast was shared just between the royal family. The Elders had the day off, as it was the weekend. Kal found that his unburdened heart had led to a loosening of his tongue. For once, his comments were not few and far between. He joked with his brothers as easily as he had before his marriage.

Jor-El noticed the change in his son. For the last three months, the young prince had been sullen and withdrawn. He had rarely smiled and his laughter had become scarce. But now, it was as if some miracle had restored his son to him. The Supreme Lord said very little, but was content to sit back and watch. A small, satisfied smile crossed his lips as he did so. Nothing escaped his watch. He saw the way that Kal prepared Lois’ cup of coffee. He heard the way that he spoke to her. He watched his son’s subtle body language. All of Kal’s tension had melted away and been replaced with his former, easy confidence. All of his pessimism had fled, allowing his sunny, optimistic nature to shine through once more.

Kal knew that his father was silently appraising the situation. He caught Jor-El’s eye once during the meal. He subtly nodded his affirmation that, yes, things were beginning to get better. Jor-El shot his son a wide smile that Lois missed, as she had turned to speak with Zara.

When the meal was over, Kal took Lois back through the palace. He took her straight to the gardens. He began his tour with the gently sloping hill ringed by trees. Together, they crested the small rise in the ground. At the top, Kal took a deep breath, and turned his face to the sky. He closed his eyes against the bright, hot sun, then turned again to Lois.

“Like it?” he asked.

“Like what?”

“This spot,” Kal clarified. He gestured widely.

Lois looked around and shrugged. “It’s nice, I suppose.

There’s not much here though.”

“Ah, but you haven’t seen it at night,” Kal said, grinning. “It’s my favorite spot to come look at the stars.”

“Do you do that often?”

Kal nodded. “I do. Or at least, I try to. I’ve always been fascinated by the night sky. Haven’t you?”

Lois nodded. “In a way, yes. When I was a kid, I used to look out of my bedroom windows at night. I’d see the stars and wonder about what was out there, in space. I’d wonder if there was some other little girl looking out of *her* window, wondering the same thing. And I’d wish that I could go out among the stars, exploring. I yearned for the freedom that would bring. Silly, huh?”

“No,” Kal said, shaking his head. “It’s understandable. I think we all yearn to escape our lives once in a while.” He fell silent for a moment, then spoke again. “I’d like to bring you back here tonight. There’s going to be a meteor shower, and the weather is supposed to be perfect for viewing it.”

“I’d like that,” Lois said, giving him a shy smile.

They began to walk again. Kal took Lois to the rose gardens. She hadn’t yet ventured to them during the daylight hours. Her breath caught in her throat as she looked upon the vast, orderly rows of rosebushes. She drifted away from Kal, moving from bush to bush, looking at the flowers and stopping to inhale their unique scents.

“This place...it’s beautiful,” she said at last.

She delicately fingered the petals of a tangerine colored rose. Kal approached her to stand at her side.

“My mother planned this section of the gardens,” he said softly. “It was her favorite place. And it’s become one of mine too. It’s peaceful here. I find that it’s a good place to think. I sort of feel like my mom is still close to me when I’m here.”

“Why are you showing me this?” Lois asked. “Don’t get me wrong, I appreciate that you brought me here. But it seems like a pretty personal place.”

The prince shrugged. “I just thought that you might like it here. And, well, I figured that if it is a good place for me to unwind and relax, it might be the same for you as well.”

“Thank you, for sharing this place with me,” Lois said, giving him a sincere smile.

“I’m glad that you like it.”

“I really do,” she assured him. “So...do you have favorites here?” she asked, gesturing to the vast array of blossoms.

“Those pink ones there, and these orange ones here. They were Mom’s favorites,” Kal said, pointing to the flowers in question. “I guess that’s why I like them so much.”

“I like them too,” Lois admitted. “Your mom had good taste.”

Kal chuckled. “That she did. You know, I think she would have really liked you.”

Lois blushed deeply. “Really?”

“Absolutely. She would have loved the same things about you that I told you that I like about you. Your spirit. Your mind. Your unwillingness to just go along to get along.”

“I wish I could have known her,” Lois said in a quiet voice. “Me too.”

For the rest of that day, Kal took Lois around, showing her his favorite places. He took her to the palace library and showed her the little nook by the western windows where he enjoyed reading sometimes. After grabbing a few slices of bread from the kitchen, he took her to the pond that was well stocked with brightly colored fish. Lois delighted in crumbling the bread and tossing it to the fish, their shiny, almost metallic looking scales flashing in the sunlight.

“I’ve never done this before,” she admitted, as she crumbled her first piece of bread.

“Really?” Kal couldn’t hide the shock in his voice.

Lois nodded. “Proper young ladies don’t stoop to feeding

fish. At least, that's what my dad always said. He was always so afraid that I would grow up to disappoint my lord husband by seeming...uncivilized."

"That's really sad," Kal commented, his voice a soft murmur.

"I always resented that, even as a very young child," Lois sighed. She took another slice of bread from Kal's hand and threw little pieces to the fish. "I always felt so...restricted. So...suffocated."

"Well," Kal said, "if it makes you feel any better, you'll never have deal with that again. Whatever you want to do, you can. And whatever you don't want to do, I'll never force you to do."

"Thank you," Lois said, giving him a brilliant smile.

"You know," Kal said, thinking aloud, "I think I have something that you might really like."

"What's that?"

"Something your father would never have approved of in a million years," Kal answered with a sly smile. "Come on."

He took her to the stables and introduced her to the men who worked there, and showed her the horses that the building housed. The stable keepers were all very polite and Kal spoke with them with gentle familiarity, as he did with all the palace staff.

"So, what do you think?" he asked Lois.

"Well, you're right. Dad never would have approved of my visiting a stable."

"That's not all," Kal said. "I want you to choose one of the horses here and it will be yours."

"I...what?" Her jaw dropped open.

Kal grinned. "The last eight horses in here don't belong to anyone specifically. Choose any one of them and that one will be yours."

"Why?"

"You can't very well accompany me out when I go riding without a horse of your own," Kal grinned. "Well...I guess you could if we shared a saddle. But I think you might have more fun with a horse of your own."

Lois laughed. "My father would be having a fit right about now, if only he knew."

Kal chuckled. "I know." A mischievous smile crossed his lips.

"So...which is yours?"

Kal walked to the midnight black stallion that stood in his stall not thirty feet away. "This is Chief. He's been mine for the last ten years, ever since he was born. His father was Metro, my first horse."

"He's beautiful," Lois said sincerely, admiring the horse.

Lois took her time looking over the other horses in the stable. She reached out and petted the heads that eagerly poked out from behind the doors to investigate her. Kal handed her a couple of carrots, and she broke them and fed them to each of the beasts. But she kept gravitating to a roan stallion, Kent. Kal smiled when it appeared that Lois had made her choice.

"Kent's a good choice," he commented. "He's got a very even personality. And he's one fast horse. He's about the only one here that can keep up with my Chief."

"He sounds perfect," Lois said, stroking the horse's nose.

"He's all yours. My gift to you."

The smile that she gave him was blindingly beautiful, and Kal found himself falling deeper and deeper under Lois' spell.

"Can we take them out now?"

"Absolutely. Do you know how to ride?"

Lois shook her head. "No."

"Oh. Right." Kal's cheeks colored. "Proper young ladies don't ride horses." His voice was rich with sarcasm.

Lois laughed. "That's about the size of it." She looked a little embarrassed.

"We'll start small," Kal said, giving her a smile in return.

For the next hour, Kal showed Lois how to get the saddle and bridle on her new horse, how to mount, and how to use the reins to control the animal. He noted, with immense satisfaction, but no huge surprise, that she was an extremely fast learner. He felt confident that the next time they took out the horses, she would probably be able to keep pace with him and Chief without much of a struggle. And how he looked forward to that!

After the lesson, they continued their tour. Each time they left one of Kal's favorite places, he asked Lois if she wanted to do something else. He didn't want to make the day all about him. Each time, she refused. She admitted to enjoying the personal look into Kal's world, a look she seemed to crave, now that she had come to trust him. And Kal couldn't deny that he enjoyed showing her such personal glimpses into who he was. He wanted her to know all there was to know about him. He needed her to see every nuance of his heart. And as he unfolded his world before her, he was rewarded with glimpses into Lois' heart and mind.

By the end of the day, Kal was certain of one fact. It made his knees weak, his head spin, and his heart pound. He'd never experienced such feelings in all of his life. He'd never thought that he ever would. But it was true. Impossible, perhaps. But true.

He was in love with his wife.

Late that night, Kal led Lois back to the gently sloping hill. He was carrying a large blanket in one arm and a small basket in his other hand. Lois matched him, stride for stride. She wondered at Kal as she threw furtive glances over to him. The weak moonlight was just enough to highlight his strong features. No weariness showed on his face, though she thought that surely he must be getting tired. He'd been up and about longer than she had been. And while she had taken a quick power nap after dinner in preparation for the long night ahead, she knew that Kal had not. He'd headed to Ching's rooms for a while to watch a game on the video screens. But Kal still looked as eager and alert as ever. She smiled in the dark.

They quickly reached the small hill. Kal set the basket down and unfolded the blanket. He smoothed down a couple of wrinkles and gestured for Lois to sit. As she sank down onto the faded blue blanket, Kal did the same. Lois sighed in contentment and looked towards the heavens. Above, the sky was a vast, deep black portal amid the surrounding trees. Stars glittered, innumerable, and with lights that rivaled the gem clasped at her neck.

"I...don't see anything," she said after a while, disappointment evident in her voice. She looked over at Kal and scrunched her brow. "Why aren't you looking?"

Kal chuckled. "It won't start for a little while."

"Oh."

"I thought that maybe we could make a toast though," the prince said.

He reached into the basket and pulled out a slender bottle of deep red wine. It was one of the most vintage bottles that he could get. In fact, it was of the same rare bouquet as the wine that his father had served him on the night when Kal had found out that he was to be wed. The prince had begged a bottle from his father after the game had ended and he'd left Ching and Zara's rooms. Jor-El had only smiled and happily had one of the bottles retrieved from the wine cellar. They had talked as they waited for the wine to arrive, and Jor-El had expressed how relieved he was that Kal and Lois were finally starting to get along. Now, Kal easily uncorked the bottle, even in the dim lighting, and poured two glasses of the strong, heady liquid. He handed one to Lois.

"What should we toast?" she asked.

"How about...new beginnings?" the prince answered with a grin. In the next moment, he'd turned serious. He stared intently into her eyes. "Lois, the fact that we've been able to overcome our rough start to this marriage means the world to me. The

moment I first saw you, when you walked down that aisle towards me, I thought you were the most beautiful woman on all of Krypton. And I knew, in that same instant, that I wanted us to get along. I knew that I would do whatever I could to make you happy. Thank you, for giving me that chance.”

He raised his glass and clinked it against Lois’. They both took a sip of the rich wine.

“Kal...I...” Lois’ voice faltered and broke as she groped for words. “Today has been one of the happiest days of my life,” she confessed after a moment. “Today, for the first time, I felt like I was worth something. Like I was someone special. Like I was something more than a tradable commodity. I know that my parents love me, but it was hard growing up in a household where my parents seemed more concerned with keeping score in their fighting than with what their daughters were up to. And, from a young age, I was more of Luci’s mother than her sister. But you...you’ve treated me like a true person, for who I actually am. You’ve...encouraged me...to be who I really am, not who society says I should be. You’ve opened up my whole life for me, in a way that I’d given up hope could ever happen. Thank you for that. And for giving me another chance to make things right between us.”

“Today was only the beginning,” Kal promised her, his voice a solemn vow. “I will spend the rest of my life proving to you how special you are. I...” His voice trailed off.

“What is it, Kal?”

“Nothing.” He was grateful for the darkness that hid his blush.

“Please?”

“It’s just that...I don’t want to scare you, Lois,” he relented after a moment.

“Scare me?” she repeated. “I’ve been blindly thrown into a marriage. I’ve had to leave behind everything and everyone that I knew. And I’ve survived that. I don’t think anything could possibly scare me now.”

Kal took a deep breath and slowly released it in an effort to calm his nerves.

“Today was one of the best days of my life too,” he admitted. “Lois, I think...I know...I’ve spent the day falling in love with you.”

His words were quietly spoken, but they might as well have been a bombshell. Lois had to struggle not gape in surprise. She blinked rapidly, trying to process what her husband had just said. But there it was, a naked, heartfelt confession that she could not - did not - want to ignore. She smiled gently at him and reached for his hand. They both felt a sudden jolt of warmth and electricity at the contact.

“I think that I spent the day doing the same thing,” she finally said.

Kal’s face exploded into a smile. Lois had the fleeting thought that his smile brought about the noonday sun to the night. She smiled shyly at him in return.

“Lois, you have *no* idea how happy I am to hear that.”

“Oh, I think that I have an idea. Knowing how you feel...I’m just as happy to have heard that from your lips.”

“Speaking of lips...would it be all right if...I kissed you?”

Kal’s voice was soft and uncertain. Was he pushing things too fast?

“I’d like that,” Lois nodded.

Slowly, Kal set aside his wine and moved towards Lois. He desperately wanted to kiss her, to feel her lips on his own, now that he had surrendered his heart to her. But he was afraid. He’d never found a girl worth kissing before. What if he messed it up? What if he kissed too softly, or too roughly? What if there were no sparks to speak of between them when their lips finally met? What if Lois thought that he was a horrible kisser? Would she change her mind about him? Would he revolt her?

Stubbornly, he tried to push aside his doubts. He slid closer to his bride, and gently cupped her cheek with his hand. In an instant, her hand flew up to cover his own. Kal’s heart stopped beating for second, until he realized that she wasn’t going to pull away. Her touch was gentle and accepting, a simple gesture of encouragement. Feeling bolder, Kal leaned in, his lips seeking those of his wife. His eyes slid shut as the distance between them steadily closed, then vanished altogether.

Their lips touched, and all thought left the prince. He was aware only of the sensations that coursed through his veins. He’d worried about sparks. It was as if every firework on Krypton had suddenly been set afire and exploded in the night sky. His lips caressed Lois’, and to his surprise, he felt her responding. What had begun as a shy meeting of flesh soon turned hungry and passionate. It was only when they were both in dire need of air that they reluctantly parted.

They were both flushed and breathing heavily. Kal felt as though his flesh, bones, and blood alike had been kindled with some wildfire. His heart was pounding so heavily that he felt like it might burst from his chest at any moment, and go flopping into the springy grass beyond the edges of the blanket. He felt lightheaded and giddy, as if he were drunk. The sensation staggered him. He’d never known before that a single kiss could be so powerful, so sensual, so soul-shatteringly beautiful, so utterly life-changing.

“Wow,” Lois breathed when they parted.

“Wow,” Kal echoed.

“That was...”

“I know.”

“I never knew...”

“Me neither.”

They both laughed a little, a light but slightly embarrassed and uncertain sound. They both knew that some invisible threshold had just been crossed. Neither one was quite sure where things would go from this moment. Each secretly hoped that things would only somehow get even better from there on out.

To give themselves something to do to avoid talking, they both reclaimed their glasses of wine and sipped slowly. Kal drained his glass, then set it aside. He lay back on the blanket, folding his hands beneath his head and looking up into the sky. Above, the twin moons were beginning their descent in the west and the stars lay scattered about like so many unreachable diamonds. Kal felt a deep contentment overtake his body. Ever since his childhood, the stars had offered him a sense of comfort and peace. Over the years and as he had grown, the constellations had become his friends. He enjoyed watching as each new season bid farewell to some of them and welcomed in others.

Beside him, Lois set down her empty glass. She, too, lowered herself to lay upon the blanket. She gazed up at the stars, only inches from Kal’s body. She was content to lay there in silence, listening to the songs of the night frogs and crickets. She felt at peace, though Kal’s kiss still had her blood on fire and her heart thumping wildly in her chest.

“Do you know the different stars?” Kal asked after a while.

Lois shook her head. “Some, but not many. My father wasn’t interested in teaching me much about the stars. But I can tell you almost everything that he knows about Earth.” There was a world of derision in her voice.

“You and your father...don’t get along, do you?”

“It’s not really that,” Lois sighed. “It’s just...I never really got to know him well enough to decide whether or not we got along. He was always so busy with his work. Luci and I never really got to see him all that much. And when we did see him, he usually wound up fighting with Mom or trying to enforce rules so that Luci and I grew up the way that he wanted us to. The few times that none of those things happened, all he could really talk about was his work and his fascination with Earth. I used to wish

that I could find a ship that would send me to that planet just to get away from life here on Krypton.”

“I’m glad that you didn’t,” Kal said. “Otherwise, I would have been robbed of the opportunity to get to know you.”

Lois blushed. “Now that I know you, I’m very glad that I couldn’t run away to Earth. Can you tell me about the stars?” she asked hopefully.

Kal nodded. “Of course.”

For the next hour, Kal pointed out the various stars and constellations to Lois. He added in the old myths, the stories that he had memorized as a young child. Zarthax, the giant, after whom Jai had named his cat. Thalia, the warrior woman of legend, who Zara had named the kitten that Ching had rescued for. Harond, the blacksmith, who myth said made armor that could withstand any beating without taking dent or scratch. Ragnok, the stalking lion. Othon, the winged horse of Thalia. And of course, Fasa, the hunter-turned-hero, who was Kal’s favorite since childhood. He pointed all of these constellations out, as well as some of the lesser stars that ruled the night sky.

With his free hand, he reached out to Lois. Fingertips met and heat was kindled. Lois’ smaller, slender hand slipped into Kal’s large one, and their fingers entangled of their own accord. Both smiled at the effortless contact and at how right it felt.

The first streak of light flashed across the sky. Lois squealed in delight, pointing excitedly. Kal laughed at Lois’ childlike reaction, though inwardly, he felt the same excitement. More shooting stars followed the first. Soon the sky above was scarred with one white hot flash after another, each light flaring into life and dying into darkness again in less than a second.

“It’s so beautiful,” Lois commented after a time.

“I know,” Kal agreed.

“Is it always like this? My father never allowed Luci or I out of doors after dark, except for rare, special occasions.”

“No,” Kal answered. “Showers like this happen only once a year. Why didn’t your father allow you outdoors at night?”

Lois sighed. “He said it was for our protection. I think he wanted to ensure that we couldn’t take advantage of the dark to run away from home.”

“Would you have?”

“Part of me would love to say that I would have. But probably not. I wouldn’t have known where to go or what to do. But my father only saw a willful, wild child who did whatever she wanted. So he tried to control whatever he could.”

“Wild child?” Kal tore his gaze from the sky and looked at Lois. One eyebrow was arched in skepticism.

Lois nodded and smiled mischievously. “Mmm- hmm.”

“Tell me?”

“I don’t think you really want to know. The stories aren’t that interesting.”

“I really do. Come on. Please?”

Lois hesitated. “Okay. When I was five, my cousin got married. Ten minutes before we were supposed to leave for the ceremony, I found a patch of mud and destroyed my dress. When I was twelve, my dad invited your father to our house to share some research data. He called me in to say hello, figuring that your dad would be interested to see how his future daughter-in-law was doing. I’d decided that it was a fine day for climbing trees. I’d gotten a little stuck on the way down and tore my clothes. I think I even had twigs and leaves sticking out of my hair. I must have horrified your father. I know that my father was absolutely appalled.”

Kal snorted a laugh. “It’s pretty hard to shock my father. He’s got three sons who’d sooner spend the day at a soup kitchen than attend a feast filled with decadent foods and wines.”

Lois giggled a bit. She had no doubts that Kal spoke the truth. Another companionable silence fell between them. Their hands remained clasped, their fingers intertwined. Kal’s thumb stroked

the side of Lois’ hand, as though it had a mind of its own. Above, the meteor shower continued, becoming even heavier before it began to taper off once more. After a while, only the barest hints of shooting stars still raced across the sky. Kal yawned and looked towards Lois.

“Kal,” she said, her eyes leaving the sky and peering at his face. “Thank you for sharing this with me.”

“Thanks for coming with me. It means the world to me that I can share this kind of stuff with you.”

“Is that the end of it?” she asked, flicking her eyes back to the sky for the briefest of seconds.

“Yeah,” Kal said. “Oh, there might still be a few that will continue until dawn, but the main attraction is over, so to speak. Are you ready to head back inside?”

“I think so.”

They disentangled their hands from one another, both silently mourning the loss of the contact. They stood, and Kal quickly gathered up the wine and glasses. With nimble fingers and deft hands, he folded the blanket and tucked it under his arm. He grabbed the basket with the wine in the same hand. His free hand sought out Lois’ as they headed back into the palace. Now that he’d made contact with her - had touched her, had kissed her - he craved as much of it as possible. Being apart from her, even by a scant few inches, set an aching, longing feeling in his heart.

The feeling surprised him, as did the fact that it had all happened so quickly. Not two days ago, he’d felt like his marriage had ended his life, destroyed his happiness, with no chance of ever reclaiming the person that he was. But now, he could not imagine his life without the woman at his side. He hoped with all of his being that she felt the same way about him.

When they reached their chambers, they reluctantly released one another’s hands. Kal quickly put away the items that he carried, while Lois prepared herself for bed. She rejoined him in the living room, where he was tapping away at his computer. Fasa watched from a nearby chair, his yellow-orange eyes half closed. Kal looked up and shut the lid as Lois approached.

“What were you writing?” she asked, genuinely curious.

“Just...some personal stuff.”

“Like a diary?”

Kal chuckled. “No.”

A mischievous grin overtook Lois’ mouth and eyes. “I’ll bet it is! ‘Dear Diary, today I kissed my wife.’”

“Watch it. Or I might have to do it again,” Kal mock threatened.

“I might have to let you,” Lois replied, her brown eyes twinkling.

“Be careful what you wish for.”

“Oh, believe me, I am,” she almost purred. She let the words sink into Kal’s mind. After a moment she spoke again. “So... what were you really doing?” she asked, deftly changing the subject back.

“Just writing.”

Lois raised one eyebrow questioningly. Kal felt all of his defenses melt away.

“I like to write,” he said, by way of explanation. “Sometimes messages to friends, sometimes proposals that Ching and I want to present to the Elders. But mostly, I just like to come up with little stories. They aren’t anything great, but I enjoy it.”

“Can I read them?”

Kal’s face flushed in embarrassment. “They really aren’t that good.”

“I don’t mind.”

Reluctantly, Kal nodded. “Okay. Anytime you want, you can just access Kal Docs 2 on the computer. My password is Fasalot.”

“Fasa...lot?”

Kal blushed a little again, his face going crimson. “One of my little nicknames for the cat.” He paused and yawned widely.

“We should get some sleep,” Lois said, letting him off the hook for the time being.

Kal yawned again, then blinked rapidly. “I guess you’re right.”

He stood and grabbed the blankets that he used for his makeshift bed on the couch. Lois came to his side and placed one warm hand on the bare flesh of his arm. Kal stopped dead in his tracks. He looked questioningly at his wife.

“What are you doing?”

“Making up my bed,” he answered, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world, though confusion clung to the edges of his words as well.

“Would you...like to...sleep in your own bed?”

“What about you?”

Lois smiled shyly. “I meant, would you come share the bed with me...like a normal husband and wife.”

Kal’s mouth opened and worked for a moment, but no words issued forth. After a minute, he tried again.

“I don’t want to pressure you, Lois. I don’t want you to feel like we’ve had one perfect day together, and that now I expect... certain privileges. I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable.”

“It won’t. Trust me, if I didn’t want you to share the bed with me, I wouldn’t have asked.”

Kal had to admit that there was a certain logic to that.

“Okay,” he said after a moment. If anything, he looked forward to a whole night of having Lois less than an arm’s length away. He’d been silently dreading spending the night in a whole different room from her.

It did not take him long to prepare for bed. His energy was fading fast, and he looked forward to climbing into the familiar comfort of his own bed. His couch was comfortable enough, but so far, in the three months that he’d been sleeping on it, he’d rolled right off it a good five or six times as he’d dreamed, one time smacking his arm on the coffee table so hard that he’d borne a large bruise on it for a week.

When he entered the bedroom, Lois was already tucked beneath the sheets. She smiled somewhat nervously as he approached, pulled back the blankets, and slipped beneath them. He smiled back, a self-conscious curving of his lips. He leaned over and kissed Lois again, and the sparks that flew were more impressive than the thousands of shooting stars that they had seen that night.

“Thank you for the perfect day, and the perfect night,” Lois whispered to him as he shut off the bedside lamp.

“I love you, Lois.”

“I love you too, Kal.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

Lois snuggled against Kal as she settled into her pillows. She sighed contentedly and sleep took her. Kal lay awake for a time, marveling at the feel of his wife’s body pressed against him. His mind traveled back over the events of the day. With a tentative, trembling hand, he lay on his side and wrapped his arm around Lois. She murmured in her sleep, but they seemed to be happy sounds, and Kal took them as encouragement. He wished he could stay awake all night, basking in the warm, happy feelings that had replaced all of his prior sadness and despair, and which had suffused his body with a joy that he’d never known was possible. When sleep did finally take him, he had a smile on his lips, and in his dreams, he and Lois still lay beneath the starry sky in the gardens.

The remainder of the summer passed by too quickly for Kal’s liking. He’d always loved the summer, for he enjoyed being outdoors as much as possible, as well as the long hours of sunlight that went along with the warm weather. Fall came on swiftly, crisp and cool most days. Kal and Lois took advantage of

the fair weather as often as they could. Some days, they strolled in the gardens, hand in hand. Other days, they mounted their horses and took off beyond the walls of the palace, tearing across the countryside, racing each other across vast, grassy fields. And still other days, they wandered the streets of the city with Zara, Ching, and Jai.

The five had become a tightly knit group. Lois even found herself overlooking the fact that Jai took full use of the palace concubines. She found his wit and sense of humor to be a breath of fresh air. She decided that she would have loved to have had a younger brother like him. With Zara, a true sisterhood had been forged. Where once Lois would have spent her free time away from Kal alone in their chambers, she found herself now rarely ever choosing to be on her own. Days when the men were busy with their royal duties were days that Lois and Zara spent together. And as for Ching, he was often the most stoic of the group. But Lois often got to see the wealth and depths of his mirth come bubbling to the surface. Lois found herself loving Kal’s family, and wishing that her own had been like his.

Kal found himself increasingly entranced by his wife. Her beauty smote his heart. And her mind intrigued him. Once she let go of her anger, he found that she was often quick to laugh, swift to make a joke, and always ready to smile. He was, quite simply, at his happiest when he was with her. And during the times when they were apart, he found his thoughts straying back to her constantly. He still fulfilled all of his duties as prince, but he no longer took any real joy in them, not to the same degree that he once did. What he wouldn’t have given to have Lois by his side as he did so!

Where he’d once enjoyed, and even looked forward to, the days when the petitioners came to court, he now nearly dreaded them. They had once been a safe haven for him, a legitimate excuse to avoid Lois and her wrath. Back then, the days at court had seemed too few and far between, and had seemed to pass by in the blink of an eye. Now that Lois and Kal had come to love one another, however, it felt like those days came far too often and dragged on for several lifetimes. He missed Lois during those hours, and would have done anything to have her at his side as he listened to the pleas set before him. He still gave his full attention to the people that had traveled to state their case before the Supreme Lord and his sons, but he could not help the moments when his mind did actually stray for a moment.

And as the months passed and the seasons turned, Kal and Lois fell deeper in love.

In one thing only did they hesitate. They had not yet consummated their marriage. Though they both wanted to, they each also felt that they were still learning about the other. They were both still learning what this new love meant. And so, they had not yet dared to cross that line. It left them both sometimes very frustrated. Kal had spent many a night awake in their bed, yearning to be one with his wife. But still, they were mostly content to explore their relationship at a pace that made them both feel comfortable. Neither one wanted to risk the progress that they had made by rushing into things.

The leaves on the trees had fully turned to vibrant shades of reds, blazing orange, shocks of yellow, and deep, bruised purples by the early autumn. It was then that Krypton held its annual dueling tournaments, in homage to the sun-god, Rao. The tournament was to be held beyond the palace walls, in a large field where there would be room enough for all the spectators to gather.

For weeks, the field was prepared. The ground was inspected to ensure that it was level, so that no one combatant was at an advantage or disadvantage against another. Stadium seating was installed to meet the demands of the hundreds of thousands that would flock to the event. Fencing was put into place to protect the fighters and the spectators alike. Video screens were attached

to high poles, so that those sitting back too far back from the field might be able to see better. At the north end of the field, a raised viewing box appeared, so that the royal family might enjoy the event in every comfort. Around the field, in strategic locations, others took place for the highest of the noble families on the planet.

Anticipation grew heavier with each passing day. The common folk looked forward to the week-long holiday. The nobles grew restless as they practiced their moves at their own estates. Not even Ching and Jai were spared from the sense of expectancy that settled over the planet. Lois and Kal rarely saw the two men, starting a couple of weeks before the event was to begin. They were almost constantly sparring with one another down in the gym or in the clean, cold, outdoor air. Kal sometimes joined his brothers, for it was expected that all three of the princes would participate in the event. But for the most part, he neglected his practice, and instead spent his days with Lois.

“Don’t you want to get in any practice?” Lois asked him as they strolled through the rose gardens, late one afternoon. Her arm was linked intimately with his. “The tournament starts tomorrow.”

“Not really,” Kal said, shaking his head.

“That confident, are you?” Lois teased him.

Kal grinned. “Nope. But I know what I am capable of. Wearing myself out today won’t make a difference.” There was a note of disinterest in his voice.

“What’s the matter? Don’t you enjoy dueling?”

“It’s not my favorite thing,” Kal admitted with a shrug. “I don’t mind it, per se. But I’ve seen too many people get hurt over the years at these things. My father, however, loves the tournament. In his youth, he was all but undefeated. I think your father beat him on a couple of occasions.”

“But it’s not for you.”

“Exactly. I like sparring with my brothers in hand to hand combat sometimes. It’s a great way to keep fit and to blow off a little steam now and again. But the duel...” He shrugged again and let his voice taper off.

“You do it for your father, don’t you?”

“Exactly.”

“I guess... we’ve both done things in our lives for our fathers,” Lois said. “Even though they haven’t been what we would have chosen for ourselves.”

Kal smiled gently at her. “Hey now, I told you. You never have to do anything for your father again. Not if you don’t want to.”

“I know. So, this duel...”

Kal shook his head. “My father has always wanted to see one of his sons win,” he said with a sigh. “But none of us ever has. He’s not ashamed of it. But I think, deep down, it is still a little disappointing. It’s like he wants to relive the glory of it through us.”

Lois let the subject drop. She could see that Kal was less than thrilled at the prospect of what the next day would bring. To distract him, she pulled him into a fierce kiss. He eagerly returned her show of affection. Time stood still and all thought ceased to exist. There was only them. Sky and ground, sun and wind - everything vanished. There was no reality but their kiss. Nothing else held any meaning. When they eventually parted, they both felt as though a roaring wildfire was surging through their bodies.

That very night, they finally united fully as husband and wife.

They took it slowly at first, getting to know one another’s bodies fully at a leisurely pace. And though Kal had gotten a fleeting glimpse of his wife’s body on their wedding night, when he’d entered the bedroom to find her slipping out of her robes, nothing had prepared him for the feelings that flooded his veins now. On their wedding night, she had been ready to submit

herself to him, as unwilling and frightened as she was. But now she trusted him, loved him, and he in turn loved her, with every fiber of his being. It made all the difference in the world to him.

But the longer they spent getting to know each other’s nakedness, the greater the fires roared within them. They abandoned their slow worship of one another and joined together hastily. Both were somewhat embarrassed by the quickness of their union, and so, twice more that night, they made love again. Both times, they deliberately kept their pace slow, drawing out the sensations, enjoying every single moment together. Each time, they unwillingly parted in order to recharge themselves, wrapped in each other’s comforting embrace. It was late indeed when they finally both fell asleep.

The next day dawned bright and fair. There was a crispness to the air that was diluted by the warm shafts of sunlight that poured down from above. Neither Kal nor Lois wanted to move from their comfortable positions in the bed. Lois was snuggled against Kal’s side, resting in the crook of his arm with her head on his chest. Kal cradled her against his bare flesh with one arm. The other was tucked behind his head, trapped between his ebony locks and soft pillow. His cheek rested against the top of Lois’ head. He placed a tender kiss in among her own dark tresses.

“Do we really have to go?” Lois asked, her voice more a sigh than anything.

“I’m afraid so,” Kal said, just as softly, with more than a hint of regret. “Believe me, I’d much rather spend the rest of the day just like this.”

“All right,” Lois grumbled as she pushed the blankets aside.

Kal chuckled and slid out of the bed on the opposite side from Lois. They both dressed quickly. Kal dressed in his dueling clothes - a pair of fine black pants and a matching short sleeved shirt. Upon the breast of the shirt was the El family crest, wrought in silver thread, large and imposing across the muscled hardness of his chest. Both garments had built-in padding to protect his body - a light, thin, flexible layer of effective armor that Lois’ own father had developed some thirty years prior. A specialized pair of low-cut boots went with the ensemble, the soles specially designed to have the maximum grip on the grass and dirt of the dueling field. The outfit fit rather tightly, minimizing the wind resistance and giving the combatant the freedom to move as swiftly as possible. There was no slack for the drei to get caught on, no extra material for a competitor to grab as they fought. The entire effect was sleek, purposeful. All of the fighters would be wearing the same regulation uniforms, each with the sigil of their own house, noble and common alike.

Lois eyed his outfit appreciatively, causing Kal to chuckle again.

Kal, for his part, could not stop staring at his wife. She was wearing a simple, but elegant dress of palest yellow. It contrasted nicely against the spill of her long dark hair, but complimented her creamy skin perfectly. The neckline of the garment plunged just enough to be sexy, but without baring too much. As she had every day since they had put an end to their bickering and begun their romance, she wore the multi-rayed star necklace about her neck. Kal had since commissioned a matching set of earrings, which now almost always adorned his wife’s ears. Her rings matched the color of her dress.

An involuntary groan escaped Kal as he gazed upon the woman that he loved.

“What?” she asked, knowing full well what thoughts were occupying his mind. Similar thoughts were coursing through her own mind.

“I think we’d better take my own, separate vehicle,” he said. “I want to be able to make a quick escape as soon as it’s socially acceptable.” He wiggled his eyebrows at her.

Lois laughed and shook her head. “You are incorrigible.”

“You have no idea.”

“Imagine the scandal if people realize!” Lois teased him in mock horror.

Kal grinned wolfishly. “Let them talk,” he said, his voice a low, husky growl.

Three hours later, they had eaten their breakfast and Jak had driven them out to the field of battle. The rest of the family was already there when Lois and Kal arrived. They arrived to find that most of the seats on the erected benches had already been taken. And already, some verbal brawls had broken out as people squabbled over who was sitting where, who could not save seating for missing relatives, and who had gotten up and therefore forfeited their place. Most did not take note as the royal family filed into their viewing box and took their seats.

“So, who do you think will win today?” Ching asked as he settled into the chair on Kal’s left.

Kal shook his head. “I don’t know. But Lord Nor is always a good bet.”

“Nor?” Lois asked, from her place at Kal’s right side.

Kal nodded. “Nor Uthor, son of Lux Uthor. He’s one of the best duelers on the planet.”

“He’s ruthless and cold-hearted,” Zara put in. “I don’t think he’s ever faced an opponent yet that he hasn’t hurt in some way.”

“And he’s allowed to continue fighting?” Lois asked, truly horrified.

Kal nodded. “It’s all part of the risk taken when you step out onto the field.”

“Are you defending him?” Lois asked, incredulous.

“No,” Kal said, shaking his head. “If anything, I despise Nor. Zara wasn’t kidding when she said that he’s ruthless.”

“What do you mean?” Lois asked, her brow scrunched in confusion.

Ching cleared his throat. “We can’t prove anything,” he reminded his brother.

“That doesn’t mean that he’s innocent.”

“Prove what?” Lois asked.

Kal sighed. “In the past ten years or so, two of the Uthor household servants and six concubines have gone missing. Nor has a terrible temper and a short fuse. We think that he may have...”

“...killed them?” Lois finished for him.

Zara and Jai nodded.

“The Uthor family says that the girls - it’s always the women - ran away from their estate,” Jai said, his voice dripping with disgust. “All we know is that they never turned up again.”

“Can’t you do something?” Lois asked, aghast.

Ching shook his head. “How? We have no evidence to prove any wrong-doing.”

“If we had anything to go on,” Jai assured her, “we would.”

“In a heartbeat,” Kal added grimly.

Beyond the walls of their viewing box, a hush settled over the crowd. Trumpets blared in the late morning air. The princes grew silent and attentive as the Master of the Tournament took the field. He raised his hands for complete silence. The spectators happily gave the man what he sought. He began to speak, his voice echoing over the field via the speaker system that had been put into place that morning.

“My lords and ladies, may I direct your attention to the Supreme Lord, our most beloved Jor-El?”

Jor-El stood as a cacophony of cheers broke out over the assembled spectators. A smile crossed his lips and he endured the applause for a moment before he raised his own hands for silence. It took a full minute for complete silence to fall. He cleared his throat before speaking.

“My lords and ladies, nobles and commoners alike, I bid you welcome to this tournament. Each year, around this time, we celebrate the most ancient of our traditions. We duel in the spirit of friendly competition. We celebrate the last of the mild weather

before the cold of winter sets in. And we honor our heritage. So it is with deep pleasure that I declare this year’s tournament officially underway.”

Another roar of thunderous applause and cheering broke out. The Master of the Tournament patiently waited until most of the noise had died down. Then he spoke again, announcing the first of the match-ups. He held a small square device in his hands, and it randomly generated the pairings for the matches. The first set of competitors took to the field to the delight of all. The tournament had truly begun.

For the rest of the afternoon, pairing after pairing took their turns battling it out. There was no break. Kal and the rest of his family ate their lunch in their viewing box. Lois noted that Jor-El and Ching watched the fights with great interest. Zara, too, looked as though she was somewhat enjoying the event. Jai was grinning from ear to ear as he and Kal commented to one another on the various techniques that the fighters were employing. But for the most part, Kal eyed the event with polite disinterest. Oh, he applauded the victor of each round. But he looked, for the most part, like he’d rather be anywhere else.

Lois found herself feeling much the same as her husband. The duels were interesting in their own way. And a few times, she found herself holding her breath as the fighting got close. But she would have preferred to be doing just about anything else. The only saving grace was that Kal was with her, his hand often in hers. He frequently bent his head to hers and whispered in her ear. Each time, a little thrill shot through her body. She found herself wishing for the day to end so that she could return to the palace to be alone with her husband.

She got her wish when the last pairing of the day was announced. Since none of the El family had been called to fight, Kal and Lois were able to slip away. None of the spectators would notice. Everyone’s eyes were riveted on the field. Kal had Jak take them back to the palace with all speed. As the vehicle ghosted over the land, Kal seemed to relax.

“So, what do you think?” he asked his wife.

Lois shrugged. “There were some moments of excitement,” she admitted. “But I can see why you aren’t really a fan. I do hope that young commoner is okay though.”

Kal nodded. Lord Nor had been set against one of the common people. Though the man had fought valiantly, Nor had proven to be the stronger fighter. He’d broken the man’s left arm and had knocked him unconscious. Dr. Bard K’lin had rushed onto the field to tend to the man’s wounds. It had been the only thing that had stopped Nor’s attack.

“Lord Nor really *is* brutal,” Lois continued.

“He is,” Kal agreed unhappily. “I almost wish that he would do something against the rules of the tournament so that he could be barred from it.”

The rest of the trip was made in silence. Kal and Lois went directly back to their chambers upon arrival. Kal could not wait to get out of the tournament attire. Though the uniform wasn’t terribly uncomfortable, it still wasn’t Kal’s first choice in clothing. He sighed as he realized that he’d be forced to wear the uniform for the rest of the week, or at least until he lost a match and was thereby eliminated from the competition. If honor had allowed for it, he would gladly have taken a dive in one of the rounds to escape further fights.

The following day passed in a similar manner. Kal and Lois took their own separate vehicle to the tournament, in hopes of finding an opportunity to sneak away early. Lord Nor was chosen to fight another duel in the midmorning. His competitor fared little better than the man had the day before. This time, the fighter in question hit the dirt hard and spit out a tooth. Nor was declared the victor of that round.

Kal was called to fight towards the end of the afternoon. He easily outmatched his opponent, one of Lord Nor’s brothers, an

ugly man by the name of Drull. Lois could see that Drull was strong, but not very smart. It seemed that Kal effortlessly stayed three steps ahead of the man. Kal's victory was enough to ensure that he would be called again to fight.

The week dragged on. Each day passed in the same way. Kal and his brothers were now called to fight daily, sometimes more than once. Jai was knocked out in his third round. Ching made it seven rounds, but was ultimately defeated by a young lord named Ruce A'ne, a close friend of the El family, and the second richest man on the planet.

The match-ups continued and the eliminations progressed. Kal managed to stay in the game, winning each of his fights. Some he won easily. Others were close calls. Eventually, on the final day of the tournament, only two fighters remained. Kal-El, prince of Krypton, and Lord Nor, son of Lux Uthor.

Lois' heart sank as the match was declared. She'd seen the damage that Nor had dealt to his opponents over the course of the week. He was even more brutal than Kal and his family had said that he was. The fact that Kal was to face him chilled her down to the very marrow of her bones. She looked worriedly at her husband as he stood from his seat and strapped on the elbow and knee pads that would protect the sensitive joints.

"Kal," she whispered, as she caught him by the door to the viewing box. "Don't. Please. Nor scares me."

"I'll be fine," he said, giving her a smile and a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder.

Her hand flew up to cup his cheek. "Promise?"

"Promise."

He pulled her gently into his embrace and kissed her deeply, passionately. After they parted, he rested his forehead against hers.

"I love you," he whispered. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck. I love you."

With that, he was out the door. He strode confidently onto the battlefield, accepting the drei that Jak held ready for him. He twirled it before him with ease. Though he did not care for dueling, the weapon was an all too familiar extension of his own arm. From the opposite end of the field, Lord Nor stepped towards him. There was a grim determination on the man's face. Kal didn't think he'd ever seen the man smile, unless he was beating someone in the duel. The prince set his jaw, determined to win this fight. He would do just about anything to keep Nor from becoming the victor. Besides, Kal was well aware of the amount of money that the victor's purse held. He intended to win it so that he could send it to various parts of the planet where it was most needed.

"Ready," the Master of the Tournament said from the safety of the sidelines. "Set. Begin!"

Kal had adopted a defensive stance, his feet planted firmly on the ground, his knees flexed. He'd been watching Nor duel since they were both children. He'd often thought of Nor's style as lacking the finesse of a charging bull. That didn't mean that Nor wasn't cunning. But he was almost purely an offensive fighter. He took little interest in defense. Kal knew that he could use that knowledge to his advantage. He wouldn't even have to goad Nor into his blindly offensive fighting style. He was already there, having been worked up by his fight earlier that afternoon. Nor raced straight at Kal, his drei raised before him.

Kal waited until the last possible second. Then he sidestepped, neatly avoiding Nor's attack. At the same moment, Kal twisted his body. The drei arced before him, and landed heavily across Nor's back. Nor roared in rage as Kal scored the first hit. The crowd roared in delight. Nor didn't miss a beat. He whirled to meet Kal. For a second, the two didn't move, and silently regarded each other. Then Nor attacked again; the drei whistled as it cut through the air. Kal only barely managed to avoid being hit as he nimbly jumped back. He struck out, but Nor

avoided it this time.

Nor rushed Kal again, sweeping the weapon before him. Kal wasn't quick enough this time. The rounded end of the drei crashed into his arm with brutal force. Kal's upper arm exploded into pain, despite the protective padding that was built into his uniform. He barely had time to react before Nor was on the move again. Kal leapt out of the way, ducking into a roll as he hit the ground. Instantly, he was on his feet again, looking for an opening. But Nor wasn't inclined to give him the slightest edge. He struck again, knocking Kal straight in the chest. The force drove the air from the prince's lungs and doubled him over. He staggered backwards, clutching his chest. He could practically feel the bruise sprouting on his flesh already.

Kal gasped and sucked in a lungful of air. A determined look settled over his features. He advanced towards his rival. Nor had a grim smile on his face. Clearly, he was pleased with how the battle was going thus far. Kal took only a few steps forward, then stopped and waited for Nor to make his move. He didn't have to wait long. Nor came at him. Moving quickly, Kal ducked into a low crouch as the drei whistled in the air above his head. In the same fluid movement, Kal struck. His drei caught Nor directly in his knees. The man stumbled forward and crashed to the ground. Kal was instantly up again, always moving. Nor struggled to his feet before Kal could land another blow.

Blind with rage, Nor struck out. Kal brought his drei up defensively, effectively blocking the blow before it could hit him. The clash of the two weapons rang out as they met in midair. A low murmur rippled through the crowd. Nor tried again, to the same result. A third time, Nor attempted to hit the prince. Kal parried the blow easily, then saw an opening to make his own attack. He feigned a blow to Nor's right side, then swiftly pulled out of the maneuver and struck his rival's unprotected left side. The rounded end of the drei crashed into Nor's side. But Kal had made a critical error when he made his move. Nor saw the switch coming and let Kal strike him. Instead of defending his left, Nor arced his drei before him. Kal was too late in trying to ward off the attack. Nor's weapon struck him full in the face.

Kal was sent reeling backwards. He lost his footing and went down on his backside, hard, though he had somehow retained his grip on his weapon, keeping him in the game. His head rang from the force of the hit. It had been hard enough to jar his teeth. His lower lip was split wide open. Blood gushed from the wound and Kal could taste the salty, metallic tang as some of it flowed into his mouth. Kal shook his head, as if to clear it. His left eye began to blacken and swell. He gingerly brought his hand up to his face. His nose was mercifully unbroken, though blood flowed from his nostrils, like some bizarre form of war paint. He brought the back of his hand to his busted lip, then pulled it away to examine the warm, sticky red fluid that marred it. Kal rolled his head from side to side as he stood, working out a knot that had formed in the muscles when he'd been struck.

The spectators were roaring riotously now. The sound was one rolling, crashing wave without beginning or end. It simply was, as though it had always been and always would be. It wasn't possible to tell if they were shouts of outrage at the less than honorable move on Nor's behalf, or if they were shouts of pleasure as the fight took on a new, serious turn. Kal suspected that there was a mixture of both in the tumultuous noise. He was aware of only two things - the young lord before him and Lois, whom he could see just over Nor's right shoulder. She was standing in front of her seat, yelling, though he could not make out the words. But he could see the worry etched in her face. He nodded to her, trying to reassure her that he was all right.

Nor shifted his stance and blocked Kal's view. Kal couldn't tell if Lois had seen his gesture or not. The other young lord was sneering at him, pleased with the blood that was flowing from his opponent. Kal's hands clenched tighter on his drei. He could

almost feel his knuckles going white from the force of his grip. His head was buzzing with pain, but he tried to push the sensations from his mind. He simply refused to lose to Nor.

Nor gave a bestial roar as he charged. Kal stood his ground, his weapon held defensively before him. Nor and his drei crashed into Kal. The two weapons sang at the collision. Kal was pushed back a couple of feet, though he did not lose his footing. Two drag marks marred the ground, marking where his feet had scraped. Kal used Nor's momentum against him. Before his rival could pull away to launch another attack, Kal pushed with his drei, forcing Nor back a step. In the same motion, he twisted his drei into Nor's stomach. Kal lifted, his muscles straining. Nor's feet lifted a few inches off the ground. But before Kal could flip the man, he twisted out of Kal's trap. Nor hit the ground once more, but he was momentarily stunned. That was all the opportunity that Kal needed. He jabbed with his drei. The rounded end connected first with Nor's stomach, doubling him over. Then, as fast as a striking snake, Kal jabbed again, this time hitting Nor square in the chest. Nor stumbled and fell, going to one knee.

From his position on the ground, Nor made his move. He swept his drei at Kal's legs. Kal saw the move too late. The heavy staff crashed into the back of his knees, setting Kal's damaged knee into a volcano of agony. He went down even as Nor stood before him. Two quick steps later, and Nor was upon him. He swung. Kal caught the drei in his chest as Nor jabbed with it, and was laid flat on his back.

Immediately, he tried to rise. Nor loomed over him, grinning malevolently. Kal stuck out with his drei, blindly hoping to make contact with his opponent. It smashed into Nor's inner thigh, close to his groin. A look of pain crossed the young lord's features and the drei fell from his nerveless fingers. He crumpled to the ground. Kal jumped to his feet, quickly struck Nor in the chest, and laid the man out on his back. With a swift kick, he sent the drei out of the man's reach, then planted the end of his own weapon in the middle of Nor's chest. Around the two fighters, the onlookers exploded into cheers.

Their prince had won the fight.

The Master of the Tournament announced the prince's victory, though his voice could barely be heard over the cheers and whistles of the gathered crowd. Kal handed his drei to Jak once his personal attendant reached him, giving the man a grateful smile as he did so. Then he reached his hand down, offering it to Nor. Nor looked contemptuously at the proffered hand. He roughly pushed the prince's hand aside and then pushed himself up out of the dirt and grass, wiping his palms off on his pant legs as he stood. Kal shrugged. He hadn't really expected Nor to take his hand, though he knew that offering to help his opponent up was the proper thing to do. He bore no ill-will towards the man for what had happened in the fight, though his head still hurt and it was becoming difficult to see out of his puffy, blackened eye. But Nor, he knew, held too much pride, too much arrogance to take the hand of the man who'd bested him. The two men had never gotten along before, and Kal knew that his victory on this day would only further fuel the numerous grudges that Nor held against him.

Kal turned and limped towards the sidelines. His damaged knee was aflame from the beating it had taken when Nor caught him in the legs with his drei. He flopped down into a chair, somewhat ungracefully as the knee buckled and gave out. Dr. Bard K'lin was at his side so quickly it was almost as if he'd materialized out of thin air. In a flash, he was checking Kal's wounds. A small, pencil thin metal tube was in his hands, which emitted a beam of yellow laser light. As the light hit Kal's broken skin and lip, the bleeding came to an abrupt stop. The doctor gently applied a clear, soothing salve to the wounds to promote the rapid healing of the areas, including the skin around Kal's

black eye. Then he gave the prince a small, white pill to swallow, which would help to kill the pain that was buzzing throughout his entire body. Kal swallowed the pill down with a large swig of water. Then he was on his feet again, half limping, half striding, back to the center of the playing field.

The Master of the Tournament once again announced Kal as the victor. He hung a small, gold medallion around Kal's neck, and handed him a large, red velvet satchel filled with gold and silver pieces. Kal held the winner's purse up with both of his hands, so that the assembled spectators could see. Then he lowered it and spoke, his voice ringing clear over the sound system. The crowd immediately quieted, so that they could hear what he was saying.

"My good people of Krypton, this winner's purse I give back to you. Every coin in this satchel will be spent on various projects to improve your quality of life. This I promise you." He paused for effect, knowing the next portion by heart. It was the winner's duty to announce the end of the tournament. "I thank you all for coming to this year's tournament, and sincerely hope that you have enjoyed yourselves. Now, go forth. Eat, drink, and be merry. And may the winter to come be a gentle one for you all."

Kal tossed the sack of coins to Jak, who stood a few steps behind him. Jak caught the item with a muffled "oof." Together, they left the field. Kal headed directly back towards the viewing box where his family awaited him. Lois was the first out to meet him, heedless of proper etiquette in her worry for him. She flung her arms wide as she drew close. In a second, she had cleared the distance and was wrapped in Kal's strong embrace. She hugged him back as tightly as she dared, and his hand stroked the back of her head.

"Kal, oh Kal," she said, her voice still heavy with worry for him. "You're hurt. Is there anything that I can do?"

"I'm fine. A little sore though."

Lois instantly relaxed some of her grip on him. "Oh. Sorry."

Kal chuckled. "No, you're fine. You aren't hurting me."

Encouraged, Lois stretched on her toes and kissed him gently. "My hero," she murmured against his lips.

"Ow," Kal whispered, once her lips left his.

"Oops."

Again, Kal chuckled. "Actually, pain never felt so good before," he said, winking at her.

To prove his point, he bent his neck to kiss her again. This time, the kiss was not gentle. It was deep and full of passion, and promises of more to come when they were finally alone. The sound of a throat being cleared forced Kal and Lois to break their kiss. The rest of Kal's family stood behind Lois, waiting their turn to congratulate their champion. Lois obligingly slipped out of Kal's arms and stepped to one side, though she remained nearly within an arm's reach of him.

"Bro! That was amazing!" Jai crowed. He pulled Kal into a back-slapping hug. "The way that you took out Nor. It was a thing of absolute beauty!" His eyes sparkled with excitement. "You have *got* to start practicing with me more often. I thought for sure that Nor had you beaten like ten times in that fight. But *man!* You pulled it *off!*"

"Jai's right," Ching said, grinning from ear to ear. Unlike Jai, who looked unable to stand still, Ching was composed. "You certainly pulled it off. But you're rusty, little brother. You could do with some practice." He winked at Kal.

Kal snorted good-humoredly. "I stayed in a lot longer than either of you did. I'd say that makes me better than you guys."

Ching snorted in return. "Just luckier."

Kal chuckled. "I had to fight *Nor*. How was that lucky?"

"Well, you escaped him without any broken bones," Zara teased. "I'd say that's pretty lucky."

Kal tried to grimace, but his laughter twisted the look into something else entirely. "Easy for you to say. *You* didn't get hit in

the face with a drei.”

Laughter broke out among all the young royals. Jor-El approached, having gotten side-tracked by speaking with Dr. K’line. He silently eyed his son up and down for a moment. But his smile lit up his entire face.

“That was well fought,” he finally said approvingly. “You certainly did not face an easy opponent. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Kal said, smiling widely. The move made his split lip throb in protest, though it did not begin to bleed again.

The Supreme Lord gave his son a hug, then patted his shoulder. He smiled at the young prince again, and fingered the gold medallion that hung against Kal’s chest. He inspected it for a long moment. Then he smiled again, this time wistfully.

“I have always wished to see the day when one of my sons would win the duel, as I did in the past. Tonight, we shall feast in your honor.”

“Dad...I...you don’t have to do that.”

“Of course I do. My son was victorious in a battle against a very worthy opponent. This calls for a celebration.”

“I’d really rather just get some rest,” Kal protested, shifting his weight uncomfortably.

“There will be time enough for rest before the feast. Dr. K’line says that you are more than fit for a celebration tonight. Besides, you know that it’s tradition for the winning house to take a feast.” He paused for a moment, and assessed the way that Kal stood, noticing that the prince still somewhat favored his injured knee. “How does your knee feel?”

“Better than before,” Kal admitted. “The pain pill is starting to kick in. Nor just caught me off-guard, that’s all. I’ll be fine soon enough.”

In truth, the raging inferno it had been not long before was now closer to a cozy campfire. It still hurt, but not as badly. Kal knew that within the hour, the pain would likely be nothing more than a hazy memory. He was eager for that moment to come, so that he could stand and walk in comfort again. He only hoped that the feast his father had planned would be a small affair. He was exhausted from the fight. It hadn’t been easy to stay ahead of Nor. All Kal really wanted at the moment was some time alone with Lois, and possibly a nap.

“Come on,” Kal said, wrapping his arm around his wife’s slender waist. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Sounds great,” Lois said, eager to be alone with him.

“Ching,” Kal said, pulling his brother aside and whispering confidentially to him. “Make sure that Dad keeps this feast as low key as possible. Please?”

“I’ll do what I can, but you know how Dad is when he gets an idea into his head.”

“Yeah, I know.” Kal sighed. “Try anyway.” He glanced at Lois and a thought came to him. “Oh, and make sure that Dad invites Lois’ parents and sister.”

None of the Lynes had been present at the tournament at any point during the week. Three extra chairs had sat empty in the royal viewing box each day. And each day, Kal had seen disappointment flood Lois’ features, though she had admitted that she wasn’t surprised in the least. Samm almost never took off from his work, and he had always felt it inappropriate to have the women in his life view the sport.

Still, Kal knew that she hadn’t seen them since the wedding. At first, she hadn’t *wanted* to see them. She’d been too furious with her father for the arranged marriage. She’d been relieved to be away from her mother’s incessant complaining, belittling, and drinking. She’d even been too upset to want to see her own sister. And ever since she and Kal had put aside their feud, she had been too busy failing in love with, and getting to know, every aspect of her husband. But now, Kal knew that she was beginning to miss her family terribly. He only hoped that they would show up to the feast.

Kal and Lois made their slow way back to their vehicle. Jak met them there, having rushed off to the hovercraft as soon as he saw that Kal wouldn’t be needing his assistance. He knew that his lord would want to leave for home at the first available moment. Kal still limped a little, as the fire in his knee still burned, though now the campfire had died down to smoldering coals. He waved to Jak as he approached.

“My lord!” Jak said, grinning widely. “What a well-fought victory!”

“Thanks, Jak,” Kal said, as he let go of Lois so that she could get into the vehicle. He clasped the man on his shoulder in a friendly gesture.

“The people can’t stop talking about your win,” Jak said, as he slid behind the wheel of the vehicle. He often acted as a source of information for the prince, filling him in about things that he might otherwise miss.

Kal settled himself into the back seat, and hugged Lois to him. “Oh?” he asked, only half interested.

Jak nodded. “I overheard a lot while I was making my way back here. The people are glad to see you as the champion.”

“Lord Nor isn’t well loved,” Kal said with a sigh.

“No, he isn’t,” Jak agreed, shaking his head. He put the vehicle into drive and guided it over the land. “The people aren’t blind. There are many who are upset over the way he fights. Many are saying already that he should be barred from the event in the future, for the sole reason of hitting you in the face like that.”

Kal shrugged. “It wasn’t an honorable move, I’ll admit that. But it’s not technically against the rules either.”

“Okay, I have to ask,” Lois cut in. “What exactly *is* against the rules? Because it seems to me like the fighters can get away with just about anything.”

Kal shrugged again. “Well, killing your opponent for one.”

“How civilized,” Lois retorted.

Kal chuckled. “Continuing to hit your opponent after they yield. Hitting an opponent after a match is decided by the Master of the Tournament. Attacking the Master of the Tournament. Attacking one of the doctors as they try to help a fallen or injured fighter.” He sighed. “Not much, is it?”

Lois shook her head. “No.” She looked again at the handsome face that was now marred with bruises and streaked with blood and dirt. “He really did a number on you.”

“I’ll be fine,” he assured her again. “Nothing’s broken, so that’s a good start. For now, just consider them as...battle wounds.” He grinned at her.

Lois couldn’t help but to laugh at her husband’s playful look. “It’s a good thing that I love you,” she said, shaking her head in amusement, and patting his cheek gently.

“Hear that, Jak? The lady loves me,” Kal teased as he sank deeper into the supple leather seat.

Jak didn’t respond. He merely chuckled and shook his head.

It didn’t take long before they found themselves back at the palace. By then, the fire raging in Kal’s knee was fully extinguished. He was once again able to walk without favoring the injured joint. Silently, he thanked the rapid healing effects of the medication that Dr. K’line had administered to him. But his posture and gait spoke of the weariness that went straight down into his very bones. He slowly made his way back to his chambers, Lois at his side.

They were both thankful to be the first ones back at the palace, for even the palace staff had been given each day off from their labors so that they, too, could enjoy the event. There was no one to stop them to talk as they made their way through the white marble halls. No one was there to comment on Kal’s victory. No one was there to ask him how he felt about his win. Kal was more than grateful for that fact. He wanted nothing more than to lay down for a while before the feast and the onslaught of questions,

comments, and back-slaps that he was sure would be coming his way.

They made their way back to their rooms with no incidents. Once inside, Kal stripped off his tournament uniform and shoved it unceremoniously down the laundry chute. He was immensely glad that he would not be seeing it for another year. He paused for a moment to look at his reflection in the full-length mirror that stood in the bedroom. He inspected the bruises that covered the vast majority of his chest, and the injuries that he had sustained to his face. It wasn't a pretty sight, but he also knew that it could have been much worse. Having battled Lord Nor, he truly was lucky that nothing had been broken or fractured. Still, he knew that he'd be sore for days.

With a sigh and a look of longing at his bed, Kal stripped out of his underclothes and headed into the shower. The hot water soothed his aching muscles and drained some of the pent-up tension that was still coiled like a spring within his body. He could not, however, shake the memory of Nor's look of absolute contempt when Kal had offered to help him to his feet. He knew that Nor had always hated him, as well as Ching and Jai. But Nor's eyes had been almost murderous when Kal had kicked away the drei and, in doing so, claimed the victory.

Easing himself out of the shower once he was finished, Kal gingerly tended his wounds. He had a small tube of the salve that Dr. K'lin had used on the wounds on his face, and he reapplied it to the broken skin. It tingled a bit at first, but it was a good feeling that felt as though it was working right away on making the skin repair itself. Kal slowly dressed, his muscles feeling too sore to move quickly, and his bruised chest feeling somehow tight. Finally satisfied, Kal exited the bathroom and collapsed on the bed. He was asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow, though he felt guilty about that. He desperately wanted to be with Lois - to hug her, to kiss her, to make love to her. But he simply wasn't able to keep his eyes open any longer. He couldn't summon the strength to call to her, though she was only just down the hall in the living room.

Fasa jumped up onto the bed, and attempted to climb onto Kal's chest. He gently shooed the cat away towards his feet. The last thing he was aware of was feeling the cat's warm, light frame laying across his ankles before he drifted off to sleep. The rhythmic purring deep within the cat's chest was soothing.

Kal slept deeply and dreamlessly. When he awoke, it was a scant three hours later, though he felt as refreshed as if he had slept all night long. He sat up and stretched, then winced as his chest protested the sudden movement. A glance out of the windows told him that the feast had to be drawing near. The sun had already gone down, and only the very brim of the horizon still held any of the bright reddish orange of the sun's last rays. Kal looked around, and frowned when he didn't see his wife. He'd hoped that she would have come into the bedroom while he slept.

"Lois?" he called out.

His frown deepened when he received no response. He pushed himself up out of the bed. Fasa meowed unhappily at being forced out of his nice, comfortable spot. He skittered to the opposite side of the room, his tail twitching in annoyance. Kal had forgotten that the little fur-ball had been using his ankles as a bed.

"Sorry, buddy," he apologized to the cat.

Fasa looked at him, his tail still whipping back and forth. Kal chuckled and headed to the living room, but the room was empty when he arrived. Lois was nowhere in sight. There was a faint smell of coffee coming from the kitchenette, but the leftover brew was cold to the touch when Kal laid his hand against the glass pitcher. Lois must have made herself a cup right after he had fallen asleep, he reasoned.

But that still didn't tell him where she had gone. He yawned

and rubbed the last remnants of sleep from his eyes. His hand moved to rub the back of his neck as he stood in the kitchenette, lost to his thoughts. Should he look for her? Should he prepare for the feast? Had her family arrived? Was she with them now?

As he stood there, trying to decide what to do, the door to his chambers opened. His head instantly perked up from where it had been resting against his chest. He could hear Lois' soft laughter.

"Lois?" he called to her.

"Kal?" Lois' pace quickened when she heard his voice.

He stepped out from the kitchenette and into the living room, meeting her there.

"Feeling any better?" she asked, as she examined his bruises through the undone buttons on his shirt.

"A little. Sorry that I fell asleep before."

She offered him a soft, loving smile. "It's okay. You needed your rest. Even Marthe said so."

"Did she now?" Kal teased, before planting a kiss on Lois' forehead.

"Oh yes," Lois said as she gave him a kiss on the lips.

"Hmm...and when did you two become such good friends?"

"Right around the time I decided to stop making you my punching bag," Lois said, winking at him. "We had a long talk about you right after I fell in love with you. She told me all sorts of stories about you."

"Oh really?"

"Mmm-hmm," Lois nodded. "She's got a million of them."

"Well, obviously she didn't tell you anything that managed to scare you away," he teased.

At the sound of her name, Kal's old nursemaid had appeared in the doorway. A knowing, contented smile was on her face as she watched the prince and his wife interact. Kal's face lit up to see the older woman, though he was so focused on Lois that he hadn't realized at first that Marthe was in his chambers. It had been too long since he'd last had an opportunity to really speak with her or Jon. He crossed the room with eight long strides and engulfed the woman in a gentle hug.

"Marthe!" he exclaimed joyfully. "What are you doing here?"

"Lois asked me to stop by. She said that you took quite a beating in the tournament today." She eyed the wounds on his face as worriedly as any mother would.

"Yeah," Kal said, somewhat sheepishly. "It could be worse though," he insisted.

"She also told me that you won."

Kal nodded.

"Well, congratulations."

"Thanks. You and Jon didn't make it to the tournament?" He was a little surprised.

Marthe shook her head. "There was a chance that Jon would need to prepare for a feast tonight. And you know that I've never been too much of a fan of the duels. I've seen too many people get hurt."

"You and me both," Kal said with a grin.

"Kal, I asked Marthe if she had any ideas of what you could do for the bruises that you suffered."

"I have the salve that Dr. K'line gave me."

Lois nodded. "I know. I just feel like maybe there's something else that we can do to get you healed quicker. Is there anything that you can do for him, Marthe?"

Marthe didn't answer right away. She pulled the open fabric of Kal's shirt away from his chest and eyed the ugly yellow-purple skin of his chest. She winced at the sight, knowing how much it must have pained her surrogate son. Then she inspected Kal's injured face for a second time. She nodded thoughtfully.

"I have a soothing bath salt that may do the trick," she said after a moment. "You can soak in it each day, then apply the doctor's salve when you are done. I won't swear that it will speed things up for certain, but it can't hurt. Let me run down to my

quarters to get it.”

“All right,” Kal relented, catching a glimpse of Lois’ face.

He could tell just by looking that she wanted him to try the home remedy. And really, who was he to say no to the woman that he loved? he wondered to himself.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” Marthe promised him, before bustling out of the room.

Kal listened as the door to his chambers opened and then shut again. He gazed at Lois, opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again. He shook his head and smiled a little at her.

“I told you that I’d be fine,” he said softly. “You didn’t have to search out Marthe.”

“Sure I did. You see, I have this amazing husband, and he’s hurt. And I would do anything in my power to see him made whole as soon as possible.” She grinned playfully at him while trying to give him a sultry look to let him know just *why* she wanted him to be pain free so quickly.

Kal chuckled and was about to speak when the intercom in the room buzzed. Lois crossed the room to it, almost tripping over Fasa as he streaked past, batting a green stuffed mouse across the floor. Nearly breathless from the close call, Lois answered the intercom.

“Hello?”

“Hey, sis!” Jai’s voice was peppy over the device. “Just thought I’d let you know that your family just arrived. Also, tell Kal that he needs to hurry up and get down here soon. Almost everyone is here now, and we can’t start the feast without the guest of honor. And some of us are starving!”

“Will do, Jai. And tell my family I’ll be right there?”

“You got it!”

The intercom clicked as Jai hung up his end. Lois turned to Kal.

“Go on,” he encouraged her. “I’ll be down in a bit. I’m just going to get changed after Marthe gets back. I can’t wear this down to the feast. Besides, it’s been a while since you’ve seen your parents and sister. You should probably have a little time alone with them.”

Lois nodded. “All right. But don’t take too long.” She crossed to him and kissed him deeply.

Kal groaned as their lips parted, regretting that they actually needed to show up to the celebration.

“Love you,” he whispered.

“Love you too,” she whispered back.

With one last glance backward, Lois left the chambers. Kal flopped onto the couch and waited for his old nursemaid to return. He settled himself deeply into the cushions, enjoying the opportunity to relax before the onslaught that he was certain the feast would bring. But, in the sudden silence caused by Lois’ departure, he felt profoundly lonely. He laughed a little at the thought. Half a year ago, he’d thought that his life was over when he’d discovered that he was promised to a stranger. And now, he felt that his life had only truly begun once he and Lois had fallen in love. His life would only ever be over if Lois was not in it.

A few minutes later, Marthe reappeared, a small, round canister in her hands. She delivered it right into Kal’s waiting hands and smiled at him.

“Thanks, Marthe,” he said, smiling back.

“My pleasure,” the woman replied. She continued to grin at him.

“What?” he asked, curiously.

Marthe shook her head. “Nothing. It’s just...”

Kal raised his brows, now completely confused. “What?”

“You and Lois are adorable together.”

Kal chuckled. “You think so?”

“Absolutely. It makes me very happy to see you so much in love. I was so afraid, when I saw how unhappy you were just after the wedding. My heart broke for you then. But now...” She

shrugged as her voice trailed off.

“It was so hard, at first,” Kal confessed. “But now, I couldn’t imagine my life without her. I love her, Marthe. More than I ever knew it was possible to love someone.”

The words tumbled out of his mouth, yet he felt no shame in admitting them. Not to Marthe. She had always been like family to Kal. In a way, he’d felt as though she and Jon were a second set of parents to him. They had always been there for him, had always offered advice, had always loved him like he was their own.

Marthe smiled at him knowingly. “I’m thrilled for you, honey. I really am.”

“I guess Jon told you about my little...discussion...with him the day after the wedding?”

Marthe nodded. “He did. And about the other visits you had with him.”

Kal sighed at the memory, though he was unsurprised. He’d been so devastated by Lois’ reaction to his gift, and towards him in general, on his wedding night. It had felt good to talk with Jon the following morning, brief though the conversation had been. He’d also sought out Jon on a number of other occasions, fleeing to the safety of the palace kitchens where he knew Lois would not think to look for him. Jon had always lent a sympathetic ear to him, and had freely offered his advice when Kal asked for it. Most of it had backfired, however. Lois had been too strong-willed in her campaign to hate everyone and everything in the palace. It seemed like ages ago, or even a different lifetime altogether.

“Ancient history now,” Kal said, shrugging, as if to cast off his memories of those trying first three months.

“I’m glad,” Marthe said with another gentle smile. “Well, I’d best be off. You have a feast to attend.”

“Yeah,” Kal said with a sigh. “Unfortunately, I do.” He hefted the canister of bath salt. “Thanks again.”

“You’re welcome.”

The prince pushed himself off the couch and gave his old nursemaid another hug. “You’ve always been the best,” he said with a smile.

“I’ve always had the best to look after,” Marthe said with a wink.

With that, she swept out of the room. Kal heard the door to the chambers shut behind her, leaving him, once again, utterly alone. He took the bath salt to the bathroom and set it down on the rim of the tub. Then he got himself ready for the feast. It didn’t take long, and he soon found himself making his way to the grand ballroom. The room exploded into applause as he entered, and it was all Kal could not to grimace.

Once again, his father had gone overboard. At least three dozen of his father’s closest friends and other high ranking nobles were in attendance, as well as the entire Council of Elders. Kal lost the battle not to blush, and he felt the heat rising in his cheeks. He’d never been very comfortable with being the center of attention. But, he endured the attention as best he could, his eyes sweeping the room until they locked with Lois’.

She was standing by the windows. He could see Samm, Elle, and Luci standing with her. They seemed happy enough. He could see Lois laughing at something that her sister had said, while Samm and Elle grinned. Kal wondered what the joke had been, but he was immensely happy to see Lois enjoying herself.

Suddenly, Kal realized that he wasn’t sure how he felt about the Lyne family. At least, he wasn’t sure how he felt towards Samm. Kal had grown up admiring the man, and had always been on good terms with him. But after learning how thoroughly Samm had tried to suppress all the magnificent aspects that made Lois the incredible woman she was, Kal was unsure how to approach the man. He didn’t resent the good doctor. He knew that Samm had only done what he’d done in an effort to make his

daughter fit the mold of what society expected of a noble young woman, even one of a lesser noble house. And yet, it bothered Kal to no end that his precious Lois had been limited in what she had been allowed to do. It angered him that Samm had found his daughter to be such a source of shame that he'd hidden her away, and never once spoken of her. It was as if Samm had simply pretended that Lois hadn't existed. And that was inexcusable in the prince's eyes.

It was an effort for Kal to keep the frown from showing on his face as he made his way over the threshold and into the heart of the ballroom.

As he walked, he decided that he could at least try to be happy around Samm. He could try to pretend that the man hadn't done the things that he'd done. For Lois, Kal would slap on a happy face and do his best to interact with her father as normally as he could. It didn't mean that he'd have to forgive Dr. Lyne's actions. But he could be civil to his old friend.

Congratulations poured in from every side as Kal strode through the room. He gave his polite thanks to each well-wisher as he walked, never slowing his pace. At last, he found himself before his wife. His hand reached out to take hers. As they connected, it suddenly felt to Kal as though he could finally breathe again. All was right in his world. He could face this feast, so long as Lois was by his side. He lovingly placed a kiss on her forehead.

It was funny, he mused to himself. Before Lois had entered his life, he'd relied on the presence of his brothers in situations like this. They had been a source of comfort for him. But now, he wasn't even aware of where they stood in the room, or if they were there at all. He felt as though he needed only the woman to which he was wed. Having her by his side would make this event tolerable, maybe even slightly enjoyable.

"I missed you," he whispered to Lois.

"I missed you, too."

"Samm," Kal said, cordially sticking out his right hand. Samm took his hand and shook it. "Good to see you."

"And you," Samm said pleasantly. "That was some fight this afternoon. I had it on the video monitor as I was tending to my work," he explained as Kal's brow crinkled in confusion. "Lord Nor is not an easy opponent to best."

Kal chuckled, despite himself. "You're telling me."

"That's quite the shiner," the doctor said, his gaze flicking to Kal's black eye.

The prince shrugged. "It's not so bad."

In truth, Kal could feel the effects of the salve already working on the bruised flesh and broken blood vessels. Already, some of the swelling seemed to have fled. It was getting easier to see out of the eye. With any luck, Kal figured that it would be back to normal in two, maybe three days, without the slightest hint that it had ever been injured.

Samm seemed to appraise the way that Kal stood with Lois. The prince's arm was now wrapped around his wife's waist. She was pressed into his side, a comfortable, happy smile on her face. A small smile touched the doctor's lips. Kal did not miss it as it flared into life.

Was Samm pleased that Lois hadn't embarrassed the family by acting the part of a proper young woman? Was he contented to see that she was happy with the choice in her husband? Was he thrilled that Kal was happy with the woman that he'd been wedded to? Was it merely just a look of relief that he'd accomplished his goal of unloading his daughter on the royal family? Kal wondered which reason had caused the doctor's smile. His gut told him that perhaps it was all of these things.

"My daughter was just telling me how happy she has been here," Samm offered.

Kal smiled, planted another kiss on Lois' temple, and hugged her a little tighter to his side. Lois' arm encircled Kal's waist in

response, and she sighed ever so softly. Her eyes fluttered blissfully shut for a brief moment.

"I'm glad," Kal responded. "She's made the palace so much the brighter with her presence. I want you to know that I love her deeply, Samm."

Samm nodded. "I am pleased to hear that. I had been worried that..." He stopped and groped for the proper words.

"That...?" Kal prompted.

"My daughter...well...she can be a handful, sometimes."

Kal was thunderstruck. Was Samm *really* getting into this, here and now? Was he *really* saying this right in front of Lois? He frowned and made the instantaneous decision to cut off the good doctor before he could say more.

"Samm, I assure you that I love *everything* about Lois.

Especially all of the aspects that set her apart from all the other noble women that I have ever met. It's refreshing to see a woman with a mind of her own and a determined, free spirit. My hope is that you encourage Luci to be the same way." His voice was cordial, but with an underlining hardness to it, in an effort to close the discussion before it could progress any further.

"Krypton could use more women like Lois. It would be a much better place."

Lois looked up at Kal's face in astonishment. She wasn't surprised at Kal's words. She wasn't shocked that he had defended her. His tone, however, had been unexpected. She'd rarely heard her husband put anyone in their place like that before. And she'd never seen her father shocked into silence.

For his part, Samm seemed to be at a loss for words. Elle gave her husband a smug look, one that all but said that she had told him to keep his mouth shut. And Luci wore a half-concealed smile of encouragement, which she extended to Kal.

"Please, forgive my husband's misguided tongue," Elle said, shooting Samm another reproachful look. "He rarely thinks before he speaks. And never before he acts."

"I didn't..." Samm said after a moment, groping for words.

"That is...I never meant any disrespect." His words were hastily spoken, in an effort to appease both his wife and Krypton's prince.

Kal nodded, at a loss for words himself. Samm's entire face and neck had gone scarlet with embarrassment at Kal's rebuke. Samm's hands moved restlessly, as though wrestling with the words that lay caught within his mind. A minute passed before the doctor seemed to find the correct wording.

"It's just...well...I've done some things in my life that I regret," he admitted, hanging his head. "I've tried to be a good father. I've tried to raise my girls to be what society expects of them. And maybe I was wrong to do that. I can't take back the past."

"No, you can't," Kal agreed gently, feeling some, but not yet all, of his disappointment in the doctor fading away. "But you can try to be better in the future."

"And I will," Samm said, nodding.

Samm was saved from further embarrassment as the first course was served. Kal guided Lois to the long banquet table that had been set up in the center of the ballroom. He found himself seated at his father's left side, near his dear friend, Ruce A'ne. He was grateful for that, and soon lost himself to easy banter with the man. Ruce was a couple of years older than Kal was, closer to Ching's age. But the two had a strong friendship, to the point where they considered each other as brothers of a sort.

As they talked, Kal's eyes swept the length of the table. He was surprised to see Lux Uthor at the feast, though it didn't surprise him that the man was alone. His sons, Nor, Ran, and Drull, had apparently opted not to attend the celebration. That was perfectly fine with the prince. In fact, he preferred it that way.

The celebration lasted long into the night. Kal politely

chatted with each of the Elders and visiting nobles. Lois was almost constantly at his side, though he encouraged her to spend some time with her family. He even managed to hold another conversation with Samm, late in the evening. They did not discuss Lois, simply because neither of them felt like getting into an argument, though Samm did apologize again for his earlier remarks. Instead, they spoke about Samm's work. He had a new theory that those with Kryptonian genetics would possess a host of powers in the presence of a yellow sun, like that of Earth. Kal listened respectfully, but found the idea to be slightly farfetched.

Kal did find himself able to spend some time talking with Lois' sister. He took an immediate liking to the girl. In many ways, she reminded the prince of his wife. She had the same eyes; twin brown pools of endless depth that held so much fire and intelligence within them. He loved the fact that, like Lois, Luci wasn't afraid to speak her mind openly to him, though she was, perhaps, a little shier than her older sister. Still, it was refreshing to see that, despite Samm's best efforts, he hadn't succeeded in squashing everything that set his daughters apart from all the other women Kal had ever met.

Kal was mildly surprised when Lux Uthor approached him between the main course and dessert. The noble lord heartily congratulated the young prince on his victory in the tournament. Lord Uthor seemed genuinely impressed with the way that Kal had handled himself in the fight, and apologized for his sons' absences. Kal waved the lord's concern away. He understood that none of the men would have the desire to attend the feast.

Dutifully, Kal made conversation with everyone, but his mind stayed with Lois. There were times throughout the night when she was not with him, instead, holding private conversations with her family. He could see the happiness on his wife's face, could see just how much she had missed them, despite everything else. He noticed too, that they were just as happy to see Lois. Elle became so involved in catching up with her daughter that she never reached for a single glass of the expensive wines that were freely flowing that evening.

Luci was often at her sister's side, and Kal could see just how much the two had missed each other. Constant touches between the two imparted friendship and love between the siblings. And once their smiles blossomed, they did not fade so long as the two were near each other. Once or twice, he could even see Lois babbling excitedly about something or another, but he was too far away to hear what it was about.

At last, the celebration began to wind down. Lords and ladies alike took their leave, dispersing in small groups. Kal felt a rush of relief flood his body as the room began to clear. It was well after midnight when the last family, the Lynes, finally bid the royal family farewell. Kal could see the conflict in Lois' eyes as she said goodbye to her family. On the one hand, she loved them and missed them. And on the other, he could see that she was relieved to have that comfortable separation from them so that she could fully be herself again. Kal took her hand in his once the Lyne family was gone, and led her back to their chambers.

Winter came on strong that year. Almost weekly, storms dumped their heavy loads of snow upon the planet, turning the landscape into a white and crystalline world. And though the weather didn't allow for many walks in the gardens, it did lend itself to nights spent cuddled before the fireplace in Lois and Kal's chambers. Sometimes, they spent the nights alone in their rooms. Lois would snuggle into Kal's side on the couch, watching a movie with him, or reading a book while he read one of his own choosing, or making love with him before the roaring fire in the hearth. They savored each one of those nights, wondering how they had ever survived the long, dark winter nights alone.

Other times, they played games with Ching, Zara, and Jai.

They switched off which of them would host the game nights, and Lois was struck with how differently each of the brothers' chambers were decorated. Kal's rooms had always been comfortable, neat, and orderly; though the assortment of trinkets wouldn't have otherwise meshed together, had they been displayed in anyone else's home. Ching and Zara's rooms were decorated in a similar fashion, though the crown prince collected military paraphernalia. And Jai's rooms were a nearly chaotic mess of out of place objects - a sweater thrown over the back of the couch, a book left in the kitchenette next to the coffeemaker, a mug of cold tea left on a bookshelf.

Each time they assembled, the men would bring their cats, so that they could play with their siblings. Lois delighted in watching the fur-balls interact, wrestling on the floor or chasing each other from room to room. It was impossible to tell which cat was the biggest troublemaker.

When they gathered together for game nights, Lois saw even further differences between the Supreme Lord's three sons. Ching was an absolute expert at games of strategy. Lois and Kal both excelled at word games, though occasionally Lois' choice in words came into question. Zara proved to be a card shark and Jai was a wealth of random trivia. A number of times, Jor-El even joined them, and Lois was surprised when she saw the Supreme Lord arguing over whether or not a "barn cat" counted as a farm animal in one of their games.

Lois found herself enjoying the company of Kal's family more than ever. It had been nice to be with them during the summer months. Yet she had always preferred being out and alone with Kal. Now that the weather forced them indoors, she still loved every moment of the time spent alone with her husband, but it was wonderful to have the others around to help pass the time, and to prevent her from going stir crazy. Still, there were scattered days when the bitter winds stopped blowing and the temperature was warm enough for her to venture outdoors with Kal. On more than one of those fine days, the others had joined them as they went out to enjoy the sunshine and the cold, fresh air.

On one such day, though it was barely above freezing, Lois and Kal decided that they needed to get out of the palace. It was too cold to go far, but they could at least stroll the palace grounds. They bundled up in thick, warm clothing, and headed out of the palace walls. They met Zara in the halls as they walked, and invited her to join them. Before long, all five of the young royals were walking in the gardens. Steam rose into the air at every breath. Snow crunched beneath every booted step. Conversation and laughter soon rang over the snow and ice-encrusted landscape.

At one point, Kal found himself trailing his brothers. He looked at Lois and put a finger to his lips, signaling for her not to speak. She frowned at him in confusion for a moment. Kal winked at her and she nodded, still unclear as to his intentions. Then the prince stooped low, scooping up a handful of snow. He quickly balled the white, powdery stuff and lobbed it at the back of Ching's head. The toss went wide, however, and struck Zara instead. The snowball made a soft *thunk!* as it struck the hood of her coat. She wheeled around and fixed Kal with a look of mock annoyance. Then she gathered some snow to make a retort.

Kal put his hands before him, in a placating manner. "Now, Zara," he said, feigning fright. "Don't make any rash decisions here. That wasn't meant for you."

"Oh, really?" Her eyes twinkled in merriment.

"That was meant for your husband."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" she teased.

"Well...yes," Kal shrugged.

Zara laughed and launched her snowball. It struck Kal in the center of his chest.

"Of course, you know, this means war," Kal said in a

dramatic voice, bending to collect more ammunition.

“Hit me if you can,” Zara taunted him.

Ching grinned widely, stepping up to Zara’s side. “Don’t you hit my wife, Kal. I’m warning you.”

“Ooh, I’m scared now,” Kal said, unable to keep the laughter out of his voice. He made himself shake a little as he taunted his older brother.

“I’m warning you,” Ching said again, quickly grabbing some snow and forming it into a ball. He bounced it lightly in the palm of his hand.

Lois also grabbed a handful of snow. Having watched a couple of the snowballs being made, she mimicked the motion and soon had a hard packed projectile in her hands. It brought back a very distant memory to her, of having done this with her own flesh and blood sister, once long ago.

“You’ll have to go through me to get to Kal,” she offered, stepping before her husband.

Ching considered for a moment. “That’s fine by me,” he grinned. “I bet you throw like a girl anyway.”

“Hey!” Lois said, in mock indignation at Ching’s gentle teasing.

No offense had been meant, she knew, and so she took none. She was all too familiar with Ching’s sense of humor.

She reared her arm back and tossed the snowball. It arced through the air before her, cutting through the space between Ching and herself. Ching attempted to sidestep the attack, but the ground beneath him was slippery with half buried patches of ice. The snowball exploded against his chest half a second before he slipped. He went down hard, landing on his backside in the snow. He erupted into laughter.

“What an arm!” he praised Lois. “You’ve got better aim than Kal. Not that that’s all that difficult, mind you.”

“Hey!” Kal said.

“The truth hurts, baby brother,” Ching retorted with a shrug, as he pushed himself up out of the snow to stand. He brushed some of the white flakes from his coat with one gloved hand.

“Guys, guys, can’t we all just get along?” Jai said dramatically, stepping in between his two older brothers.

A glance passed between Kal, Lois, Zara, and Ching.

“No!” the four said with one voice.

Four snowballs struck Jai. One took him in the chest, another in the legs, another in the middle of his back, and the last in the back of his head. That was all that it took. An all out war ensued. There were no alliances. It was every man for himself, one lone warrior facing four powerful foes out in a frozen wonderland.

Snowballs whizzed through the air, some hitting their targets, some missing by mere inches. Dull *thwacks!* and *thuds!* resounded as the snowballs hit their marks. Peals of laughter rent the brittle air, causing a few nearby icicles to shake loose, fall, and shatter into hundreds of shining pieces. Good-natured insults and teasing were tossed as easily as the snowballs. Tears of laughter were frozen on every face, and every eyelash turned to crystal. Muffled “oomphs!” occasionally blended into the chaos.

At one point, Kal found himself under attack from all four of the others. He wasn’t quite sure how that had happened, and he muttered good-humoredly about the unfairness of the situation. Then he promptly launched a wad of snow at his wife. It struck her in the upper arm. She responded by tossing a lightly packed snowball at him. It was so loosely packed together that it began to break apart in mid-flight. Kal started to make fun of it, but then became glad that it had been structurally weak as it whacked him in the face. His open mouth was instantly filled with snow. The finger he’d been pointing at her with drooped in defeat. He gently wiped away the flakes from his eyes and spit out the excess snow in his mouth. Lois was standing not more than ten feet away, her hand to her mouth in genuine horror.

“Kal!” she exclaimed. “I’m *so* sorry. I didn’t mean to hit you

in the face like that!”

Kal nodded. Then he grabbed up a large handful of snow. Lois backed up two nervous steps. Her hands flew up before her chest, as if to ward off the coming blow. But Kal wasn’t balling up the snow. Instead, he launched himself at her, snow spewing from behind his feet as he dashed towards her. Lois squealed and tried to flee. But Kal’s long legs easily covered the distance faster than Lois could manage to move. He tackled and landed atop her. Cold from the snow instantly soaked through the thick layer of their clothing. A mischievous gleam was in Kal’s eyes and his mouth was twisted up into a roguish smile. The hand filled with snow made its slow way towards the opening at the neck of her coat.

Lois saw the move and her husband’s intention. She instantly grabbed his wrist and twisted, trying to force it back closer to Kal. Her strength was no match for his, but he allowed her to make some headway regardless. Or perhaps he was just distracted by the close proximity to her. With a final shove, Lois forced his hand back. The snow dropped from his palm back down to join the rest on the ground. As quick as lightning, Lois scooped up a handful and shoved it down the neck of Kal’s coat.

“Gah!” he cried out at the unexpected turn of events, twitching at the sudden onslaught of cold.

Behind him, Zara, Ching, and Jai burst into a fit of laughter. Ching helped Kal to his feet, as Kal twisted and tried to shake the snow out of his coat. Jai went to Lois, offering his hand to her. She gratefully accepted, and once she was on her feet, he clapped her on the shoulder.

“That was *awesome*,” he said with a smile.

Lois laughed and brushed a now wet lock of her hair from her eyes, tucking it behind her ear. “Thanks, Jai.”

“No problem, sis. It’s just so great to see someone getting the best of my dear big brother.”

Kal shivered a little as the snow melted and seeped through his clothes. “You’ve done this before, haven’t you?” he asked Lois, a little surprised by her maneuver.

“Once,” she admitted. “I guess I was about ten and Luci was about six. It was my first and last snowball fight. Until today, that is.”

“Let me guess,” Kal said, zipping his coat up higher to cut the wind that was slinking its way beneath the heavy waterproof fabric. “Your father found out?”

“What else?” Lois said with a shrug.

“And proper young ladies don’t roll around in the snow,” Kal sighed, unhappily giving his best guess as to what Samm’s words had been.

Lois nodded. “Exactly.”

Kal shook his head and his fists balled, independent of his conscious mind. He gritted his teeth, effectively biting back the scathing comment against Samm that was burning on his tongue. The muscle in his jaw ticked. Lois did not miss that, and she moved to Kal’s side. She rubbed his arm soothingly.

“It’s okay,” she said in a low voice.

“No, it isn’t,” Kal growled. “Lois, since the moment I started to learn about you, your father’s actions have bothered me. It isn’t right that he tried so hard to stifle your nature.”

“Kal, I appreciate that you feel that way. And I love you for it. But that’s all in the past now. Now, I have you and this wonderful life of freedom that you’ve opened up for me.” She smiled at him as his own smile ghosted over his lips. “Come on, let’s go inside. I’m freezing.” Her teeth were chattering ever so slightly.

Kal nodded. “All right.”

The others murmured their agreement. They were all covered from head to toe in a thick, crusty layer of snow. Their clothing was sodden from where their body heat had melted some of the snow. Jai was shivering visibly and Zara was blowing puffs of air

into her gloved hands. Ching's hair was plastered to his head from a mix of melted snow and sweat from the exertion of the fight. With one last look back at the battlefield, the five young royals headed back indoors.

At the door, they brushed as much snow as they could from their coats and clothing. But they still managed to drag some indoors with them. The heat that greeted them seemed unbearably high after the frigid outdoor temperature. Instantly, they felt as if their frozen faces and fingers were beginning to thaw. An ache set in as their bodies adjusted to the warmth, but it was a good feeling. Droplets of melted snow dripped from their clothing, leaving behind small pools on the marble floors; a visible trail of their passing. The soles of their boots squeaked too loudly as they walked, each one heading to their own chambers to get changed into warm, dry clothing.

Later that night, Kal and Lois relaxed in their own chambers. Kal lit a fire in the living room's large hearth. Fasa settled down before the blaze and dozed off on the soft carpeting. Lois and Kal snuggled together on the couch, clutching steaming cups of hot chocolate. Kal held Lois close, completely content to watch the dancing flames while outside the snow began to come down once more. He'd dreamed of moments like these, back before he'd ever wed. He'd envisioned the peaceful quiet and comfortable embraces before a roaring fire while the snow fell beyond his windows. He had just never been able to picture who the woman in his arms would be. But now, Kal could not imagine it being anyone besides Lois.

The next morning, Kal awoke before Lois. He groaned as he rolled from his back to his side. It was so tempting to just close his eyes and go back to sleep. He didn't want to leave the warmth of the blankets, nor did he want to leave Lois' side. But, he had a plan to stick to. And in order for him to have enough time to do what he needed to do, he was going to have to get out of bed. With a sigh, he pushed the blankets away and swiftly dressed. He bent and placed a kiss on his wife's head. Lois murmured contentedly, but did not otherwise stir. Kal was glad of that. He wanted to surprise her when she awoke.

He shuffled off to the living room, still more asleep than awake. First things were first, he reasoned, as he changed his course. He ducked into the kitchenette and made a strong cup of coffee for himself. The caffeine seemed to rejuvenate him almost instantaneously. He drained his mug quickly, enjoying the hot beverage as it slid down his throat. Then he padded softly over to one of the largest closets in his chambers. He rummaged for a few minutes, looking for the boxes that held what he was looking for. Finally, he found the ones that he wanted. He piled them on the coffee table in the living room, then brought out a ladder.

As the sun rose in the east, he began his work.

Three hours later, he was still going strong, though he was nearly finished with his task. He hummed various tunes as he worked, ascending and descending the ladder with ease, as if his body knew no fatigue. He was so engrossed in his work that he never heard Lois enter the room.

"Kal?" she said softly.

The prince had been climbing the ladder again. Lois' voice took him off guard. He missed the next step, lost his balance, and fell. Luckily, he'd been close to the floor, but the maneuver still caused him to fall on his backside. He chuckled after hitting the floor and shook his head at his own clumsiness. He rubbed his lower back and backside absently.

"Morning, Lois!" he said cheerfully.

"Morning. What... what is all of this?"

The room was completely bedecked in snowflakes of every size and shape. Some were made of crystal, others of colored glass of every hue. Strings of multicolored lights hung about the room. Kal had been tacking up a string of them when she'd entered the room. Fasa was happily playing with the end of the

strand, batting it with his paws. He meowed at Lois as she moved further into the room, then went back to playing with the lights, testing a blue one to see if it was edible.

"They're decorations for the festival of Winter's Deep," Kal said, standing. "Didn't you ever...?"

Lois nodded as old memories surfaced. "I think when I was really young, my father used to decorate. Not as elaborate as this, of course. A few lights here. A couple of snowflakes there." She gestured absently. "But then he got so focused on his work that traditions like this one fell to the wayside. Mom was always too tipsy to climb any ladders. After a while, I guess I just sort of forgot about it. And since Dad was always too busy to take us into the city to see the displays and join in the festivities, it's never been big on my list of priorities."

"Please, tell me that your parents at least exchanged gifts with you?" Kal pleaded.

Lois nodded again. "Yeah, that we always did. Nothing huge. Just small tokens really."

"Good," Kal said. "We do the same thing. Most people would think that we probably go all out for the holiday. But we just exchange a few tokens. My brothers got me a rare signed, first edition copy of my favorite book last year. And Jai got all of the cats new laser pointers."

"You give gifts to the cats?" Lois asked, surprised. She looked at Kal as though he'd suddenly sprouted a second head.

Kal chuckled. "Well, sure! They're people too."

"You are one *weird* guy, Kal-El."

"I know." He laughed again, grinning from ear to ear. "So... do you like it?" Kal asked, spreading his arms as if to embrace the entire room.

"I love it," Lois answered, a huge, loving smile curling her lips. "Did you do all of this just for me?"

"Yes and no," Kal admitted. "I wanted to surprise you by having it all done before you got up. I almost made it, too." He gestured to the last strand of lights that he had been hanging when he'd fallen from the ladder. "Winter's Deep has always been my favorite holiday. I love that the whole planet takes the week off from work. I love going out and finding the perfect gifts to give. I adore going into the city to see the various displays, and the huge celebration on the last night." He grinned widely. "There's a certain magic to this time of the year."

"I've never really felt that way," Lois said in a small voice.

Kal crossed the room and cupped her cheek with one hand. He gently tilted her head to look up at him. "That's because you've never celebrated it with me," he assured her. He kissed her lightly on the lips.

"I'm already starting to like this holiday a little more," Lois said as their lips parted, her eyes still closed.

"I thought you might."

"Just one thing, Kal."

"Yeah?"

"You *do* know that the festival of Winter's Deep is a month away, right?"

Kal laughed lightly. "Of course. But it was my mom's tradition to decorate early. As soon as the Harvest Festival was over, she would start pulling out the boxes of decorations and getting them ready for Winter's Deep. She loved having the decorations and lights up for a long time so that she could admire them. It was her favorite holiday. The same goes for my dad as well. I guess I've just always been sort of programmed to follow in the traditions that they've set down. I guarantee that when we go out into the rest of the palace today, it will be fully decorated."

"Your whole family is so unlike anything I ever imagined growing up," Lois said, sitting down in an armchair.

Kal shrugged and ascended the ladder. "We get that a lot, actually. The problem is, people expect the ruling family to have to be formal and...I don't know...uptight all the time. The truth

is, we're no different than anyone else. Oh, we have more responsibilities than any other noble house, but we're exactly the same in every other way."

He began to tuck up the dangling strand of lights. Fasa meowed up at him as the last section moved beyond his reach. Kal descended the ladder, moved it, and went back up. He repeated the cycle until at last the lights were fully up. Fasa paced at the foot of the ladder, disappointed that his toy had been taken away. Kal bent, scratched the cat's orange head, then reached over to a puffy red ball. He threw it, and the tabby bolted after it, making happy little noises as he ran.

As Kal had predicted, the rest of the palace had been transformed overnight. Every hallway, every room was tastefully decorated. Lois could scarcely believe that it had all been done in one night. She imagined that the palace staff must have worked the whole night through. She stopped Kal often to admire the work as they moved through the palace.

She even sensed a change in Jor-El when the family gathered together that morning for breakfast. He seemed to be happier, lighter-hearted, and more mirthful than he'd ever been before. True, she had seen a different side to the Supreme Lord ever since she had first come to live at the palace. But there seemed to be an extra twinkle in his eye, an extra bounce in his step now that the holiday decorations had popped up all over the palace. She decided instantly that she liked the changes that she was seeing in the royal family.

Still, the world did not stop just because the holiday was approaching. Kal was still kept busy. There were still meetings for him to attend. There were still projects that he was working on, spreading out the last of the money that he'd won in the duel a couple of months prior. There were still petitioners to be heard each week. Whenever he could, Kal tried to work from his own chambers, drawing up proposals and figuring out the logistics of how best to achieve his goals. Almost every time, he asked Lois to sit with him. She became his sounding board for ideas and he looked to her for help, listening to her ideas and incorporating them whenever he could.

Lois busied herself as best she could when Kal wasn't around, often spending her days with Zara, plotting with the other woman on what they could buy for the rest of the family for the Winter's Deep gift exchange. Days flew by in the blink of an eye. Nights flew by even faster. Weeks rushed past as if they were merely hours.

At last, the first day of the holiday week started.

As always, the holiday began a week before the shortest day of the year, and culminated on the solstice, when the night was at its longest and the sunlight was at its weakest, most fleeting time. Lois found herself growing fonder of the holiday with every passing day. Since the entire planet was at rest from their usual labors, that meant that even the ruling house could step back and take a much needed break. And Kal utilized every possible free moment to be with his wife.

The week passed by in the span of a heartbeat. Lois felt that it had barely begun before the solstice arrived. The day was clear, not a single cloud marring the sky above. It was a welcome change from the steady, but light, snows that had been falling sporadically throughout the previous week and a half. As the early sunset flared into the sky, the Supreme Lord and his family left the palace. They headed into the heart of the city, to participate in the grand festival that was held there each year. Lights of every color shone in the gathering darkness, from the silver-white of the distant stars to the deep red of the Kryptonian sun. Soft greens, vibrant oranges, icy blues, regal purples; the vast array of colors dazzled the eye, and gave the illusion of casting a cheery, physical warmth to the icy outdoor air.

As they wandered through the crowds, Jor-El took his leave of his children. He waded through the mass of people, seeking

out his old friends. Kal glimpsed his father starting up a conversation with Lux Uthor, Jen Mai, and Lord Ra, Zara's esteemed father. The prince smiled. It was always good to see his father unwinding at this time of the year. He knew what pressures usually weighed so heavily on the Supreme Lord's mind, so it was a relief to see his father having the opportunity to relax a bit. The pressure of ruling was one of the greatest reasons why Kal was glad only to be Ching's heir - and only until his brother and sister-in-law produced a son of their own.

Inwardly, Kal wondered if that would ever be the case for them. Though he knew that they had both been trying, and though they both deeply desired children, it seemed fate had other plans. Four times now, Zara had miscarried early into her pregnancies. One pregnancy had actually proven itself to be filled with hope and promise until it ended in a stillborn son born months too early. It broke Kal's heart to know of the pain that Ching and his wife harbored in their hearts. He stopped at the wishing well in the center of the park where the festival was being held, dropped in a coin, and wished for an end to Ching and Zara's sorrows.

Draping his arm around Lois, Kal strolled with his brothers and sister-in-law through the festival. Booths of every type had sprouted up all along the perimeter of the park. Some merchants sold trinkets. Others were selling food and drink of every kind. Steam rose into the air as meats cooked on portable stove tops or over open barbeque pits. Kal's mouth watered at some of the delectable odors that hung thickly in the frigid air. He purchased sample-sized portions at a number of the vendors, both because he desired to taste as much as he could, and so as to not favor one common merchant over another. Lois followed his lead, thrilled to be experiencing such a wide variety of food.

As they wandered through the festival, they stopped and talked with many people. Most were common folk who desired to express their wishes for a happy Winter's Deep and for the new year that it kicked off. Some added their sincerest thanks for the work that the royals had done to better their lives, directly or indirectly. Others were nobles who they were friends with. Kal greeted them all graciously, stopping to chat with each one for a few moments, and wishing them well for the upcoming year.

For a long time, Ruce A'ne walked with them. Lois noted to herself that the young man was very much like Kal and his brothers. It was no wonder that they had become such close friends. And yet, she had to admit that he was more like Ching than like Kal. He had the same sense of formality to him that underlined even his most playful of moments. Still, he was a good man, that much Lois could see. He had the same sense of concern for the common people that Kal had.

After a while, the group grew cold. Not even their heavy coats seemed able to cut the chill of the air. Zara began to tremble a little in the cold. Ching lovingly wrapped his arms about her, but it didn't seem to be enough. Lois pressed into Kal's side and he held her tightly. When she also began to shake, Kal smiled at her.

"Want to go back home?" he asked her, nuzzling his frozen nose into the top of her hat.

Lois shook her head. "I want to stay. I'm enjoying myself. I'm just cold."

A smile crossed Kal's lips. "Stay here with the others."

"Where are you going?"

"I think this calls for some hot chocolate," he replied with a grin.

"You buying?" Jai piped up, suddenly interested in Lois and Kal's conversation.

Kal laughed. "Of course."

"Great! Make sure mine has marshmallows," the younger man said. "The little ones. Not the big ones. Ooh, and whipped cream too."

"Ruce? You want one too?" Kal asked.

“Sure.”

“Okay. I’ll be right back.”

“Hurry,” Lois said. “I’ll miss you until you’re back.”

“You won’t even notice that I’m gone,” he promised her.

Kal turned from the group and headed through the crowd, already missing his wife’s presence. It was only slightly more than two hours before midnight now, when the fireworks would be shot off to ring in the new year. Still, he knew that something else was happening this night before that would happen. His father had refused to tell him just what was going on, but had assured him that he would be very pleased indeed once it struck ten o’clock. Whatever it was, Jor-El had been excited about it, and Kal was nearly at his wit’s end as curiosity ate at him like a hungry, insatiable beast.

Kal carefully but swiftly made his way to the closest booth selling hot beverages. Unfortunately, half the city seemed to have the same idea. Kal craned his neck in every direction, looking for a booth that was less crowded. He finally spotted one, way back towards the entrance to the park. He quickly jogged towards it. Only a few people were in line, so he joined the back of it, pulling his hat down tighter around his ears to keep the cold at bay.

Meanwhile, the crowd’s attention was riveted to a raised stage that stood some thirty feet above the ground. At the stroke of ten, spotlights clicked on, illuminating the metal causeways and multi-tiered platforms. A roar of excitement swirled through the gathered mass of bodies. A peal of an electric guitar rang out, inciting the crowd even further. Cheers and whistles grew to a deafening level as the music group took to the stage. As the guitar riff faded, Kal’s smile grew. So that was what his father had planned.

Back with Kal’s family, Lois smiled. She knew, even before the band’s name was uttered, that the group on stage was Kal’s absolute favorite. Their music was what her husband often worked out to. And, Lois had to admit, she had grown fond of the group as well.

Par Whyt, the Royal Public Relations Manager, announced the group to the screaming crowd below. Lois had met the kindly older man a handful of times, and liked him well enough. Then another riff of the electric guitar shattered the brittle air and the concert began. Lois found herself entranced by the clear sounds and tapping her toe in time to the beat of the drums. Ruce, Ching, Jai, and Zara were all swept up in the music as well, though she knew that none of them loved the band as much as Kal did. The music swelled and grew, louder and more feverish as each minute passed; an entire ocean of sound crashing around them, drowning them in a sweet embrace and obliterating the rest of the world. Nothing existed except for the music that surrounded them, pushed and pulled at the crowd, beats that could be felt deep within one’s chest and which forced hearts to beat in tune with it.

No one was aware of the black-suited figures as they slipped through the crowd.

Since Lois and the rest were towards the back, almost no one saw as the attack was launched. Needles flashed, coldly reflecting the numerous lights that were strung in the area. Ching, Jai, and Ruce fought hard. But there were simply too many of them. A blow to the back of Ruce’s head knocked him out. He fell to the ground and one of the masked attackers kicked him to one side. Another jabbed a needle into Ching’s neck. In the next instant, the Supreme Lord’s heir crumpled to the hard packed snow, his eyes rolling in his head. Zara and Jai were the next ones down, though Jai managed to hit a few of the attackers. Lois heard the muffled “oomphs” as the half-prince made contact with the others. Lois did the only thing that she could think of. She started to scream for help, hoping to attract attention.

Several of the closest onlookers finally turned in the direction of the royal family. But the attackers were prepared. Five of them

opened up canisters that had hung from their belts. Smoke immediately issued forth from the breaches. Then they threw the shiny metal containers into various parts of the crowd. People began to choke on the gas.

Panic ensued.

The screams changed from an enthusiastic cheer for the band into blood-curdling screeches of fear. Bodies began to run in every direction. The music came to an abrupt halt. Lois pounded on the chest of one of the attackers who was trying to subdue her. She clawed at him, trying to escape. A hand twisted in her necklace, choking her. A second later, she felt the sharp sting of a slender needle as it punctured the skin of her neck. Blackness engulfed her and she knew no more.

Kal, meanwhile, had finished obtaining the hot chocolate that he’d left to get. He heard the change in the screams and began to rush back towards where his family was, the cardboard tray of drinks clutched tightly in his hand as though it would help in some way. He fought his way back through the crowds as they swirled around him in a blind panic. Finally, he reached the spot where Lois and the rest of his family had been. They were gone. Ruce was starting to come to, miraculously not trampled by the crowd. Kal dropped the tray he was holding. Hot chocolate exploded in every direction as the cups hit the ground. He ignored it, though some splashed onto his pants and burned his skin. He bent down and helped Ruce to his feet.

Something glittering on the ground caught Kal’s eye. He bent again and retrieved it.

Lois’ necklace; the chain snapped.

“Lois?” Kal cried, twisting this way and that, desperately looking for his wife. “Lois?”

He knew instinctively that the attack had been to kidnap her and the rest of his family. If it hadn’t, he was sure that Ching and Jai would have gotten Lois and Zara safely to one side, and then would have plunged back into the crowd to help. They never would have just turned tail and ran with the rest of the crowd. The simple fact that he did not see his brothers, or the women, confirmed his worst fears.

Ruce shook his head as he stood. “No use,” he said, wincing against a sharp pang of pain. “They’re gone.”

“What happened?” Kal demanded of his friend. “Where is everyone?”

“We were attacked,” Ruce said.

“By who?”

Ruce shook his head again. “I don’t know. They were all hooded and masked. I couldn’t see...”

“Which way did they go?”

“I don’t know.” He gingerly shook his head again. “They knocked me out before they took the others.”

“Did anyone else see what went on?”

“Maybe,” Ruce said, biting his lower lip in thought.

“Everyone was caught up in the music though, at first.”

“Kal!” Jor-El’s voice cut through the frigid air.

The last of the crowd was finally dispersing. Security guards were getting the stragglers under control. Others were approaching the gas bombs, though they had since stopped releasing their contents. It had been a precise, surgical strike. Kal had no illusions about that.

“Dad!” Kal called back as the Supreme Lord rushed to his side, Bilan Hend’son hard on his heels. He waved to his father, hoping to convey with the gesture that he was unharmed.

The Chief of Security jogged past, never stopping, though Jor-El did. Instead, Bilan continued on, rushing to speak with the members of the band who had been on stage. From their vantage point, it was possible that they had seen something of use, including which way the kidnapers had fled.

“Are you all right?” Jor-El asked, engulfing Kal in a relieved hug. Then he pulled back, concernedly looking over his son for

any obvious signs of injury.

"I'm fine," Kal assured him. "I wasn't here when it happened. I was getting drinks for everyone." He gestured to the trampled ground around them, the once white snow now flecked with splotches of brown from the spilled drinks. "I heard the screams and ran back, but I was too late. They were already gone."

"They left me behind," Ruce said thoughtfully. There was a hint of an apology to his voice, as if he could have done more.

"Maybe they were only after my family," Kal said, looking down at the diamond star necklace in his hand.

He sighed, unzipped his coat, and put the gem in the breast pocket of his shirt, close to his heart. The organ gave out an ache of sadness at the motion and Kal's breath caught in his throat for the briefest of moments. Then he zipped up against the cold once more. He shoved his hands into his pockets as the realization settled in.

Lois was gone. His brothers were gone. And so was Zara.

Kal had no doubts that he would have also been taken if he hadn't left to get drinks. Only dumb luck had saved him from that fate. Part of him wondered if he should consider himself lucky for that, or if it would have been better if he had been taken with them. He finally settled on lucky. At least, by being free, he could do something to find his family's kidnappers. He swore to himself that he would find a way to get them all home safely.

Jor-El shook his head sadly, helplessly looking around. "I've always feared this."

"Dad..." Kal said gently, putting his gloved hand on his father's shoulder.

"I've always been terrified that one day my children would be targeted. But I trusted too much in how stable and quite the planet is. And now, my family is paying the price for my naiveté."

"Dad, we don't know exactly what the reason is for this." Inwardly, however, Kal had to admit that his father was probably right. Someone had targeted the house of El. But for what reason?

"I can imagine well enough," Jor-El said regretfully.

"Ransom." It was not a question.

Jor-El nodded. "Most likely."

"Then we have time," Ruce said, trying to be helpful.

"He's right," Kal said, nodding. "If it's ransom they're after, they won't dare to hurt them... whoever *they* are."

Bilan approached the Supreme Lord and the prince. The band members followed him in a tightly packed group, some of them still clutching their instruments, as though the various guitars, drumsticks, electric violins, and other items were a part of their own bodies. The Chief of Security waved over his lords to the side, away from the scene of the attack. As Kal, Ruce, and the Supreme Lord moved, security took over the area, carefully beginning the process of looking for evidence. Kal shook the hands of each of the band members in turn. The thought flashed in his mind that he'd always wanted to meet them, but he had never thought that it would be in a scenario like this.

"My lords," Caff, the lead guitarist, said, his voice infused with sadness. He bowed deeply to them. "I am terribly sorry for what happened here tonight. We will do anything we can to help."

"Thank you," Jor-El and Kal both said as one.

"Did you see anything?" Kal asked pleadingly.

Caff shook his head. "Not much. The lights are somewhat blinding up on stage. But when we noted the change in the crowd's mood, I saw about a dozen or so men dressed all in black far in the back. They were running, carrying bodies between them. I called out, but I'm afraid that even with the microphones, my voice got lost in the uproar."

Kal nodded. It had been impossible to hear anything above the panicked roar of the crowd.

"Which way did they go?" the stoic Chief of Security prompted. His voice held a note of deep impatience.

Caff pointed. "Straight out of the park. They were moving as fast as they could, I think. It was hard to tell from so far away. And then the crowd erupted into a panicked flight and I lost sight of them. But they definitely were heading out towards the streets when I last saw them."

"They could have gone anywhere with a vehicle," Kal sighed. "There's no way of knowing."

Since all of the vehicles on the planet had switched to hovercraft technology over two centuries prior, there would be no tracks to follow. There would be no impressions in the snow to distinguish any one vehicle from another. Kal's heart sank as his thoughts broadened.

Not even a boot print would be recoverable to help in identifying the culprits. The entire area was trampled into an indistinguishable mess. Kal's head drooped to his chest for a few seconds. He steeled himself, then looked back up at his favorite band. Using sheer willpower, he kept his voice even, pushing aside the tears that threatened to manifest in his speech.

"Thank you," he said. "You've been most helpful."

"Is... is there anything that the gang and I can do? Anything else at all?" Caff looked as heartbroken as Kal felt.

Jor-El shook his head thoughtfully. "At the moment, no."

"We can get the word spread around," Caff said with a shrug. "See if anyone else has any information that they can come forward with. Although, you undoubtedly have better resources than we do."

Jor-El thought for a long moment before replying. "Not just yet," he finally said. "I need time to think. But I'm most grateful for the offer. And I may yet take you up on it."

"We're here for you if you change your mind, my lord," Caff said, nodding. By some unspoken agreement, it seemed that he was the spokesman for the group, just as he always was when the band performed. "Please, let us know if there is anything further that we can do."

"We'll keep it in mind," Kal promised, forcing a smile onto his lips. "Thank you again."

"Our pleasure, my lord," the guitarist assured him.

The group turned and took their leave. Kal stood rooted in place, completely numb. He no longer felt the cruel bite of the wind. He no longer felt the stiffness in his freezing fingers and toes. He no longer even saw his surroundings. He knew only the shattering of his fragile heart as it lay torn and bleeding within his chest. His shoulders slumped in despair. He tried to force his mind to work, but it was as if it had frozen solid.

"Kal?" his father asked. The worried tone suggested that the Supreme Lord had called his name more than a few times already.

"Huh? What?" Kal said as he broke from the daze that had crept over him.

"I said let's reconvene at the palace," Jor-El said gently. "There's no more that we can do here."

Kal shook his head. "No."

"Kal..."

"I want to stay. I want to help Bil and the others look for clues."

Jor-El frowned. "I can't allow that."

"But..."

"Kal, no. We don't know who else might still be in the area looking to snatch you away as well. I won't risk it. I *can't*." His voice was desperate, terrified.

"I'll be fine," the prince began to protest. "There's a ton of security guards here."

"No." The Supreme Lord's tone brooked no argument. Then, after a few seconds, he softened. "Let Bil and his team work. They are the best. I'm sure they will find something." There was

confidence in the Supreme Lord's voice, but his haunted features belied the feigned poise.

Kal knew his father well enough. Arguing would be a fruitless venture. Nothing would change his father's mind. He hated when Jor-El so stubbornly made up his mind.

"Ruce?" Kal asked, looking towards his old friend for help.

The man nodded, knowing the unvoiced question immediately. "I'll come with you."

"Thanks." Kal shot a pleading look at his father.

"All right," Jor-El relented. "Come on."

"I'll report back as soon as I have more information," Bilan swore.

Jor-El nodded his assent. Then, trailed by Kal and Ruce, he left the area. As they retreated, Kal threw a forlorn look over his shoulder. Bilan's team was diligently combing the area, looking for the slightest clue. Many were on their knees, attempting to make some sort of sense out of the trampled mess of snow. Kal trusted them completely. And yet, he would have given anything to be with them, helping. He felt utterly useless, knowing that he was headed back to the palace to await further word. He knew that the waiting would be one of the hardest things that he would ever have to do.

An hour later, Kal found himself back in the palace. He was in his father's private study, pacing before the large windows. A nervous energy gripped him, though he felt bone-weary in every way. He could not force himself to sit still. He was a caged animal, a stalking wildcat, though no bars imprisoned him. On some primal level, he felt as though sitting down would somehow bring him further and further away from finding his family's abductors. He knew the idea was ludicrous, and yet, he could not shake it. He looked towards his father and lines of concern creased his brow.

Jor-El was standing before the rightmost window. His right shoulder was pressed into the window's frame as he leaned against it and gazed out into the black night beyond. The twin moons had long since set. But stars twinkled overhead, a multitude of distant diamonds set into the heavens. Kal had always sought comfort in the familiar sight. Now, they seemed cold and unfeeling, oblivious to the pain in his heart. Jor-El held a cup of tea in his hand as he absently stared out into nothingness. The drink had long since gone cold, but he clutched the mug as though it were his only lifeline. His finger tapped incessantly against the side of the black mug. It was the only move that the Supreme Lord made. The rest of him was alarmingly still, as though he were nothing more than a disturbingly lifelike sculpture.

To the side, Ruce sat slumped in an oversized armchair. The red crushed velvet seemed to swallow up even his muscular form. His eyes were riveted to the deep red carpet on the floor. His right hand stroked and rubbed his chin without pause. He looked every bit as haggard as Jor-El did. He looked every bit as terrified as Kal felt.

No one spoke. It was as though they had all gone both deaf and mute. The very air in the room seemed somehow heavy and oppressive. Kal felt as though it was a physical weight against his body. And though the room was more than spacious, he could not help but to feel claustrophobic. That set his pacing to an even greater urgency. At every pass of the wall clock, he glanced over to check the time. All the while, he had to bite back the terrified tears that had taken up residence in his eyes. Every once in a while, he would nearly lose the battle. His vision would become obscured as he tried to see through a prism of unshed tears, and he'd have to wipe them away with a trembling hand.

Two hours later, there was a soft knock on the door. But within the study, it was so dead quiet that the knock sounded as loud as gunfire. All three men in the room started at the unexpected noise; so accustomed they had become to the uneasy

silence. Each rap of knuckles against wood brought simultaneous hope and dread to Kal's destroyed heart. He stopped his pacing in mid-step. He glanced over at his father again. The Supreme Lord had the same dueling emotions of hope and fear written on his face. He stared at the door, but did not move. He looked incapable of speech. Kal dutifully moved to the door and opened it.

A disheveled and exhausted looking Bilan Hend'son entered the room along with Par Whyt, the Public Relations Manager for the palace.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, my lords," the Chief of Security apologized. His gaze did not meet theirs. "I know it is late."

Kal's heart bled anew. This was not good news, he instinctively knew.

"Nonsense," Jor-El said, his voice thick with dread and exhaustion. "What have you found?"

"Nothing yet, my lord," the man said, his voice slightly quivering with his unease.

"Nothing?" the Supreme Lord repeated, as though unable to comprehend the word.

Bil shook his head. "I'm afraid there's no trace left behind. At least, none that we've been able to uncover yet. It may be that we might have better luck once the sun is up. My men have their orders. We've cordoned off the entire area so that no one can enter and tamper with the scene. I've posted guards to ensure that no one comes near to the place, as unlikely as that prospect is. We'll start fresh at first light, if it pleases you."

"Yes, yes. Of course."

Bil hesitated for a moment. He looked ready to say something else, but it was clear that he was biting his tongue.

"Yes? What else is there?" Jor-El asked with a sigh. He looked nearly ready to collapse.

Bil and Par shared a brief glance. But, though the look lasted only a second, an entire conversation took place within it.

"My lord, I know that it is late. I know that you must be exhausted. But we must give thought to how we are going to handle this," Par said gently. "The public will demand an explanation for what happened during the festival."

"We need an official story," Kal said, understanding immediately.

His tongue felt leaden as he spoke the words. He slumped into a second overstuffed armchair, across from Ruce. He felt completely drained, now that Bil had admitted to finding no evidence of who had stolen the prince's loved ones. His stomach twisted into knots and he fought down the taste of bile in the back of his throat.

Jor-El took a seat on the black leather couch in the room. He motioned for Bilan and Par to do the same. The two men did as they were bid. They both wore looks of apprehension on their faces, though the Supreme Lord had never once done anything to cause them to fear him. But, Kal knew, never before had the two men been in such an extraordinary circumstance.

Jor-El seemed to be weighing his words, and everyone waited for what he would say. "I'm torn," he finally said.

"Torn, my lord?" Par asked.

Jor-El nodded. "We need to tell people the truth of what happened. I'm just torn on how much we should actually say."

"Dad?" Kal asked. "Shouldn't we admit the whole truth?"

"I'm not sure that is the wisest course of action," his father replied thoughtfully. "We will let the people know there was an attack during the Winter's Deep festival. Word about that will have spread by now, regardless. We will give them the details on what happened - that it took place as the music began, that gas canisters were thrown into the crowd, and that black-suited and masked suspects were seen at the time of the attack."

"And what about the fact that they abducted your children?" Ruce asked gently.

The Supreme Lord sighed wearily. "I'm not sure if it is wise to let the planet know about that."

"What?" Kal demanded, aghast. "How could it possibly be a bad thing? Maybe someone saw something. Maybe someone knows what happened. Shouldn't we be spreading the word and encouraging people to step forward with any information that they have?"

"Yes," Jor-El admitted. "But there are risks to that. What if we get inundated with false leads? We'd be wasting precious time."

"That's better than sitting here spinning our wheels fruitlessly," Kal argued. "Right now, we have zero leads."

"What if we cause the kidnappers to get spooked?" Jor-El said softly, his eyes dropping to his lap.

"What do you mean?" Kal asked.

"I mean, what if asking the public for information scares the people that have Ching, Zara, Jai, and Lois? What will they do? Will they panic and hurt...or kill...them? I'm not willing to take that chance."

"What if they do that anyway, Dad? Are you willing to risk their lives?"

"Of course not." Jor-El sighed again. His hand raked through his salt and pepper hair, in a perfect mirror to his son's habit.

"Both are risky paths, my lord," Bil said gently. "But we must decide on a course soon. We should get the information out to the public in time for the morning's news reports."

"What course would *you* take, if it was *your* child's life on the line?" the Supreme Lord asked, looking and sounding as vulnerable as a child himself.

Bil sighed and thought carefully. "I think...I think that I would put the information out there. But I would word it carefully. I wouldn't use the word abducted...at least, not yet. Whoever has your children must want something from you. Let us be patient and see what it is that they want. Sooner or later, they will seek us out. I'm sure of that."

"I won't just sit here and wait to have demands made of me," Jor-El argued. "Too much is at stake."

"It may be our only choice," Bilan said sympathetically. "We may not find any clues at the scene of the attack, even with daylight on our side."

"So what *would* you say then?" Kal asked, growing impatient.

Bilan looked towards Par. The Public Relations Manager squirmed uneasily in his seat.

"Well," Par said after a moment. "We could say that the young lords and ladies went *missing* in the attack. I think Bil's right in reserving the word abducted until we know more. We could ask the public to keep an eye out and to report anything that they might have seen to us."

"The military will help," Kal swore, his mind racing. "I'll talk to a few of my buddies to make up a plan to search for them. Send them the gas canisters. I'm sure someone must know something about them."

"Yes," Jor-El said, looking determined once more. "Tell them they have my permission to tear apart the entire planet if they need to. So long as they find my children."

"We can't use them all," Ruce said thoughtfully. "We can't leave the palace undefended. What if this abduction is part of some greater plan?"

"You think it's a diversion?" Kal asked, the thought taking him off-guard.

Ruce shrugged and shook his head. "I don't know. It's possible."

"Good point. I'll have the First through Fifth Legions put on protection detail."

Jor-El nodded his approval. "Exactly what I would suggest," he said. "Par, I want the information posted in every public place

and delivered to every private home by dawn. Can you do it?"

Par nodded determinedly. "It'll be a close one, but my staff can do it."

"Good. Let's get started," the Supreme Lord said.

"I won't fail you, my lord," Par swore, taking his leave.

"My lords, you've been through a lot tonight," Bil said, his usually stoic voice thick with pain for the Supreme Lord and prince. "Let me contact the military leaders for you. You have enough on your minds."

"I'd appreciate that, my friend," Jor-El said.

"We'll find them," the Chief of Security vowed.

"I hope so," Jor-El replied, his gaze shifting to the windows, out into the darkness beyond the glass. "I can't lose them."

Bil stood and silently made his way out of the room. Ruce also stood. He crossed to Kal's side and put a hand on his friend's shoulder. With a gentle squeeze, he tried to reassure the prince. Kal looked up at him, his brown eyes glossy behind a sheen of unshed tears. And yet, despite his pain, there was genuine gratitude held within those soft brown orbs.

"Kal, if there's anything I can do, don't hesitate to call me. Day or night, I'll be there for you. Even if it's in the middle of the night and you just need a friendly ear. You know that, right?"

"Of course I do," Kal said, managing a weak smile for his friend. "And thanks."

"Anytime," Ruce assured him.

With that, the young noble exited the room, leaving Kal and his father alone. Kal ran his hand through his hair and sighed in despair. The silence in the room was oppressive, making Kal more uncomfortable. Part of him wished that Ruce had stayed. And yet, the greater part of him was grateful to be alone with his father. He'd tried so hard to keep his tears in. Now, perhaps, he would finally have the opportunity to shed some of them in private.

The Supreme Lord stood from his seat and paced to the window. As he had before, he leaned into the window frame, looking out at the sleeping planet that he ruled over. Kal watched in silence, looking for something to say. But every time he tried to open his mouth, a lump formed in his throat, rendering him speechless.

"Kal," Jor-El said, his voice sounding years older than he truly was.

The prince was instantly on his feet and at his father's side.

"We'll find them," Kal said, echoing Bilan's promise.

"My son. Oh, my son," Jor-El said, hugging Kal close. "I'm so glad that at least you are safe. My heart couldn't bear it if you had been taken too."

"I'm here," Kal said, holding his father close and rubbing soothing circles on the older man's back. "I'm here. I'm safe."

"I'm terrified for your brothers," Jor-El said. Kal felt the first of his father's tears splash onto his neck as they fell. "And for Zara and Lois. I've failed them."

"No," Kal said, a hitch in his voice. Only once before had he ever seen his father shed tears, when Lara, his one great love, had passed away. It unnerved Kal to see the strong, gentle ruler of Krypton reduced to a sobbing, heartbroken man. "You haven't failed them."

"I *have*," Jor-El said, clutching his son still. "I should have done...something. Anything to prevent this from happening."

"You couldn't have known," Kal said gently. "None of us did."

He knew that Jor-El had a tendency to blame himself for things, even when they were not his fault. He knew also that until Ching, Zara, Jai, and Lois were found, his father would obsess over what he saw as some failure on his part. As though he should have been able to see into the future to prevent this tragedy from happening. As though he were some sort of superhero that should have been able to swoop in and save the

day.

With a sudden start, Kal knew this to be true of himself as well.

He felt as though he should have been there. He felt that he never should have left Lois' side. He'd failed to keep his wife safe. He'd failed to protect his brothers. He'd failed to defend Zara. Shame burned Kal's heart. Logically, he knew that he should believe the very things that he was telling his father. Logically, he knew that there was probably nothing he could have done to alter the outcome of events. Being with the others would have only gotten him captured as well. It was a struggle to remind himself that his freedom now gave him the ability to find out who had taken his loved ones. And when he did find where they were, he would rescue them. He would make sure that the guilty parties paid for their crimes.

But for now, he had to be a rock for his father. He had to be a pillar of strength for the Supreme Lord to lean on. He was the only one that Jor-El had now.

"What if we don't find them?" Jor-El said, unashamedly airing his fears. "What if something happens to them?"

"We'll find them," Kal said again. "We've got to."

His voice broke as his own tears finally began to fall. For a long time, they both stayed as they were. They clung to one another, each the other's only lifeline to the world. Both men let their tears flow, unchecked. Neither one spoke another word. They didn't have to. They didn't have the strength to.

It was just before dawn when Kal finally collapsed into the armchair in the study and fell into a troubled sleep.

Kal awoke screaming. His eyes snapped open of their own volition even as his lungs emptied the last bit of air they carried. After a long moment, his scream trailed off into nothingness and died. Gulping for air, Kal looked around the room, for the moment disoriented. It took him a full half a minute to realize that he was in his father's study. He allowed himself to close his eyes again, trying to calm himself. He was covered in sweat and his broken heart was pounding so violently that it was fairly smashing itself against his ribcage.

A few minutes later, his breathing finally evened out, his chest no longer heaving with the effort to suck in enough air. His pulse slowly began to go back to normal. But the ache in his heart only grew.

He'd hoped beyond hope that his dreams had been just that; figments of his overactive imagination. He'd hoped to find himself within his own chambers. He'd hoped to find himself entwined in his wife's embrace. But now that he was awake, he knew that his nightmares had been undeniable truths. He was not in his own chambers. He was in the chair in his father's study; the same one that he had finally passed out in late the previous night. He wasn't in Lois' arms. The embrace that wrapped his body was only from a throw blanket that he'd somehow become entangled in as he'd slept. And Lois was still missing.

Kal groggily disentangled himself from the blanket that cocooned his body. Glancing around, he found himself alone in the room. There was no trace of his father, or anyone else, for that matter. For that, he was glad. No one had witnessed his scream. His body was sore and his neck was stiff from falling asleep while sitting upright. But it was the pain in his heart that bothered him the most. It was unbearable. A lump formed in his throat, and he tried valiantly to swallow around it.

The door to the study opened, taking Kal by surprise. He jumped a little at the nearly inaudible sound, then turned to it to find himself looking at his father. Jor-El looked worse than he had the night before. Kal wondered if the man had slept at all. But the Supreme Lord's head was held as high as he could manage, though he looked hollowly at his son.

"Dad?" Kal asked. "Are you all right?"

Jor-El sat on the couch and Kal sank back onto his chair.

"No," Jor-El confessed.

"Did you at least sleep at all?"

The Supreme Lord nodded, a shallow bobbing of his head. "A little and not at all well, I'm afraid."

"Me too," Kal admitted. "My dreams..." he let his voice trail off.

"Mine too," his father agreed, understanding what had been left unsaid.

"Any news?" Kal pleaded.

A shadow crossed Jor-El's face, darkening his drawn features even further. Pain and fear danced in his eyes.

"Nothing yet," he finally said. "I was just speaking with Bilan. He's had a fresh team out working since dawn."

Kal leaned his head back against the chair and let out a quivering breath before speaking. "What about leads?"

Jor-El shook his head, ever so slightly. Kal nearly missed the movement altogether.

"Not yet. But Bil assures me that it is still early. Most people aren't even awake yet." Jor-El sounded completely unconvinced.

"There's got to be something we can do," Kal pressed, fisting his hand and hitting the chair's arm in frustration.

"Par has suggested that we make a live statement over the video screens this morning. I was coming to let you know that I agree. We're shooting it in two hours."

Two hours. It might as well have been a lifetime to Kal. And yet...

It afforded him some time. Time that he needed. Time to make himself look presentable. Time to compose himself. Time to figure out what he might say, if he could force down the bile that lay ready in the back of his throat, waiting for the chance to come rushing to the surface.

"Good," was all he managed to say.

"Go," Jor-El said gently. "Go prepare yourself. I need to do the same."

"You'll be okay?" Kal asked, concerned.

"I'll be fine," his father replied, though his voice was thick and tired, and not at all convincing.

Kal nodded and stood regardless. He knew, just by looking at the man's face, that Jor-El wanted a moment alone. Unable to say another word, Kal left the study. Stepping out into the hallway, he made his somber way to his chambers. He felt incredibly alone, as though he were somehow shut off from the rest of the planet. His head hung to his chest as he walked; he was barely aware of anything more complicated than the marble floor beneath his feet.

Reaching his chambers, he took a moment to steady himself. Then he opened the door and stepped over the threshold. Fasa greeted him instantly, meowing and weaving himself around Kal's legs. But the prince couldn't even manage a false smile for the cat. The tabby sensed the shift in his master's usual mood and cried up at him again, as though in an attempt to alleviate some of Kal's hurt, or perhaps asking how he could help. Kal finally squatted down to pet the animal, and Fasa nuzzled against him. But Kal took no joy from it.

He was all too aware of how empty and lifeless the chambers were. In the months since he and Lois had fallen in love, the sounds of her voice and her laughter had nearly always filled the rooms with warmth and comfort. Her gift of gab had never ceased to brighten Kal's world. Even in those early days, when they had so often been at odds, the rooms had been filled with life somehow. Now, without Lois, the place seemed cold and dead. In an instant, the familiar series of rooms was no longer Kal's home. Kal felt incredibly bereft and his heart ached with renewed agony.

Knowing that there was nothing else he could do, the prince moved to the bedroom. He stripped out of clothing that he'd been wearing the night before, and shoved it down the laundry chute as though it burned his hands to touch the fabric. He set aside the

star necklace, which had resided in his shirt pocket, against his heart, and made a silent vow that he would find Lois and return it to her. Then he headed into the shower. Methodically, he washed and dried himself. Wrapping a soft, white towel around his hips, he stared into the mirror. He barely recognized the face that stared back at him from within its depths. His cheeks and chin were dark with a layer of stubble. But it was his own eyes that Kal didn't recognize; they actually scared him.

His soft chocolate eyes were bloodshot and lifeless. It was partly due to the fact that he'd only slept about three or four hours, he knew that. But he also knew that the greater reason was his absolute terror for his missing loved ones. Beneath his reddened eyes, large, dark bags lay, making him look haggard. Tight lines of worry had been carved into his features. It was as if he'd turned into one of those undead zombies that ambled about on screen in some of the horror movies he'd sometimes watched with Jai. He certainly felt the part; more dead than alive.

With a sigh, he carefully began to shave the stubble from his face. But his mind wandered as he worked at his task. Were his brothers safe? Were Zara and Lois safe? Who had taken them? Why? Was it truly some pathetic attempt at ransom, as his father seemed to believe? When would they know for sure? What would the demands be? How much longer would it be before Bilan found a lead? Would he even be *able* to find one? What if his loved ones were hurt? Was Lois scared? Could she take any comfort that the others were with her? What if he never saw his loved ones again? What if he lost Lois? How could he ever hope to live without the woman he so completely loved?

A bubble of near panic grew within Kal, distracting him from what he was doing. He ran the razor over his skin again, nicking himself in the process. A bright spot of blood welled up over the broken flesh. Kal sucked in a breath at the sudden sharp sting of pain and was instantly shaken out of his tumultuous thoughts. He tended to the small cut, then finished shaving the rest of his face. When he was done, he rifled through his medicine cabinet until he found a small vial of eye-drops. He squeezed two drops in each of his eyes, then squinted against the cleansing burn the drops caused. When he opened his eyes and blinked several times to clear his vision, he saw that the drops had been largely successful in eliminating the redness they had held just moments before.

With a sigh, he left the bathroom and ducked back into the bedroom. He carefully selected his clothing, mindful of the fact that he and his father would soon be making a public statement. He finally settled on dull gray pants and a matching shirt. It fit his mood without being overly mournful. He would not - could not - envision his brothers, sister-in-law, and wife as anything but alive.

As he was tying a tie about his neck, there was a soft knock on his door. He strode to the main door to his chambers and opened it. Jak stood in the hallway, his grief over the situation unashamedly written on his face for all to see. He bore a tray in his hands; Kal could see the food piled high on it.

"My lord," Jak said, his voice rough with his own sadness. "My sincerest condolences to you. I can't imagine what you must be going through."

"Thanks, Jak," Kal said with a weary sigh. "Come in, please."

"Is there anything that I can do for you, my lord?"

Kal shook his head. "Not at the moment." He ushered the man into the living room and nodded at the tray that Jak held. "Did my father send you to ensure that I eat?"

Jak nodded, embarrassed. "He's worried about you."

Kal sighed. "Is anyone making sure that *he's* eating?"

"When I left him, he was sharing a bite to eat with Bilan Hend'son."

"Good." Kal stood in place, looking lost. At last, he strode

over to the kitchenette. "Care for a cup of coffee?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Please, my lord," Jak said graciously.

It wasn't the first time that he had accepted a drink from his prince. Despite their vastly different stations in life, the two were fairly good friends.

Kal came back into the living room a moment later, two cups of steaming coffee in his hands. He handed one mug to Jak, then settled down onto the couch next to him. But he found no words to say. Jak seemed to understand, and he focused his attention on the glass coffee table before him, as though it held the secrets of the universe within it.

"Eat something," Kal said after a long moment. "Please."

"My lord, you need to eat as well," the man gently returned. "You have to keep your strength up."

"I'm not hungry," Kal said, shaking his head.

Jak gave him a sympathetic look. "My apologies, my lord, but I have orders to ensure that you eat something."

Kal sighed resignedly. After a few minutes of indecision, he finally reached for a warm, flaky pastry. He tore it absently with his fingers, shredding it down to small pieces which he could easily pop into his mouth. The food turned to ash on his tongue, despite the sugary sweetness it held. It was an effort to swallow. He found himself taking large sips of coffee to wash the sticky treat down his constricted throat. His stomach protested every bite, threatening to send the food back up his gullet and out of his body once more. It was a battle to force the food to stay down, while his stomach twisted into cold knots of fear for Lois, his brothers, and Zara.

Once he and Jak finished their breakfast, they parted ways. As always, Jak had his phone with him, standing by, ready to carry out his prince's every request. Now more than ever, he knew that Kal needed his aid.

Kal strode back through the palace, the stark white halls cold and unwelcoming. The festive decorations adorning the palace made a mockery of his dismal mood. For the first time in his life, Kal loathed the cheerful lights and elegant snowflakes. He tried not to think about them as he made his way back to his father's chambers.

The rest of the morning passed in slow motion for Kal. And yet, when he tried to think on what had taken place, it all seemed a blur, each moment indistinguishable from the next. He had an overwhelming sense of vertigo and he could not seem to remember any details, even as the events unfurled before him.

He and his father broadcasted a message across the whole of Krypton, once again giving the details of the attack and stressing that the young royals had gone missing. Jor-El pleaded for information - any information - about where his children were. But what words were used, Kal couldn't say. They barely registered in his racing mind as he stood there, rendered mute by the lump that stuck fast in his throat. It was all Kal could do to keep a concerned, yet stoic, mask affixed to his face. It simply would not do to show his absolute desperation.

After the cameras clicked off, Kal finally allowed his mask to crumble into nothingness. Once again, he felt his muscles tighten in worry while others seemed to relax into numbness. He sat heavily on his father's couch, even as his hand flew up to rake through his raven hair. Across from him, Bilan Hend'son and Par Whyt stood.

"That was well spoken, my lord," Par said approvingly.

"And that will replay how often?" Jor-El asked, nodding his thanks.

"Every hour."

"Good. What is our next move, Bil?"

"We wait," the Chief of Security said, his voice weary.

Kal wondered if the man had had any rest since the attack had been launched. He looked tired enough to drop right in his

tracks. Kal felt a twinge of remorse for the man's exhaustion.

"I can't just sit here and do nothing," Jor-El complained, getting up from his seat and starting to pace.

"I know it's difficult, my lord," Bil said, his normally detached demeanor melting away to warm compassion. "But we have no choice now. My hope is to have some information on the gas canisters soon, at the very least."

It was an effort for Jor-El to acknowledge that Bil spoke the truth. Kal could tell by the way that the muscle in his father's jaw ticked. But, after a moment, the Supreme Lord nodded again, and his shoulders slumped in a defeated manner.

Kal couldn't blame his father. He felt the same way. He would have done anything - given anything - to be doing something proactive. Instead, he was reduced to aimless pacing whenever he grew weary of sitting. His fists constantly balled and relaxed again. The muscle in his jaw ticked, a perfect mirror of his father's. His hand raked constantly through his hair. Tears of sadness and frustration constantly pricked at his eyes; Kal felt that most of his energy was spent keeping them from spilling down his cheeks.

Time dragged by slowly. Every heartbeat took a year to complete. Every minute was a lifetime. Every hour, an eternity.

A knock sounded on the door of the study. Kal's heart leapt to his throat, lodging up against the lump that had yet to dissipate. The sensation nearly choked Kal. With a great effort, he stilled his relentless pacing and stuffed his hands into his pockets. Bilan crossed to the door and opened it. Kal's breath caught as the door swung open.

An extremely distraught Trey stood beyond the threshold, wringing his hands before him. He was flanked by a low-ranking security officer. Bil ushered the two men into the room.

The Elder was clearly not well. His watery eyes and red, runny nose gave that away all too well. His left hand clutched a crumpled white handkerchief.

"Trey," Jor-El said, greeting the man politely enough. Kal did not miss the well-hidden kernel of disappointment in his father's voice. "What are you doing here? You should be resting."

"Yes, my lord. I know." The Chief Elder's voice was nasally. Kal could hear the congestion that clogged the man's chest and head. "But I may have some information on your missing children. It isn't much. But it may help."

The words hit Jor-El and Kal both like a physical blow. This was it. The first possible lead they had on where their loved ones had vanished to. Father and son both staggered to chairs and sat down shakily. At a nod of encouragement, Trey took a seat as well.

"Well?" Jor-El demanded eagerly. "Out with it. Please."

The Elder let out a mighty sneeze that he caught with the handkerchief he had with him. "Excuse me," he apologized.

"Please, Trey, tell me that you know something," Jor-El pleaded.

Trey sighed, a heavy, congested sound. "Only this. And I don't even know if it means anything. But, I was thinking about the events that occurred yesterday. And well, it seems to me that whoever abducted my lords and ladies had to have known exactly what the sequence of the festival events was going to be. But we change that every year, to keep the celebration fresh and exciting."

Bil rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "And very few people know what the exact order of the events are."

"Right." Trey nodded. A fit of coughing seized him and he struggled to catch his breath. "I was in charge of setting the event up this year. But with this virus that I've caught, I wasn't able to oversee it."

Understanding flooded Kal and a tiny spark of hope ignited deep within his soul. "Who did you tell, Trey?"

The Elder took a deep breath and almost sighed out his next

words. "Jen Mai. I entrusted the event to Jen Mai."

Kal's attention snapped to Bil and the security officer who had escorted Trey to the Supreme Lord's chambers. "Where is Jen Mai now? I want him brought here *now*."

The officer shifted his weight uncomfortably from one foot to another. Kal noted the man's unease and hesitation.

"What is it?" he asked, dread creeping back into his voice once more.

"Begging your pardon, my lords, but..." the man stopped and cleared his throat. "Jen Mai has gone missing. We looked for him as soon as Trey told us his tale. No one remembers seeing him after the attack happened last night."

"Missing? *Missing*?" Jor-El roared, though Kal knew that his father wasn't blaming anyone. He was distressed over the situation. "*Find him*. Bring him to me. I don't care what you have to do to make that happen. Just make sure that it does."

The officer bowed deeply. "As you command, my lord." He made an abrupt turn on his heel and hurried to carry out his orders.

Jor-El closed his eyes briefly. He pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a deep, controlled breath.

"I didn't mean to yell," he said after a moment, looking in the direction that the low-ranking security officer had fled. He sighed heavily. "Bil, have the military look for Jen Mai as well. We need him found so we can question him."

Bil nodded, pulled out his phone, and spoke rapidly into it. Kal didn't hear a word of what was said. His mind was a thousand miles away. Jen Mai. Kal might have known. He felt that he *should* have known. The Elder had always unnerved the prince. There was just something about him that Kal had never fully trusted. But because he'd never been able to put his finger on it, he'd never been sure if he'd been imagining things. And now, his family was paying the price for his silence.

But what did Jen Mai want? Kal couldn't quite figure out what the man's motives could possibly have been. As one of the Elders, the man had a sacred duty to protect the royal family and the planet. To do anything else was treasonous, and punishable by death. It would take courage to turn his back on those duties. Courage that Kal had never seen the man exhibit before in his life. Jen Mai rarely did anything unless he was sure that he had the backing of someone else.

Kal frowned as the thought struck him. Jen Mai wasn't working alone. He was working with someone else. Or, he thought as his frown deepened, he was working *for* someone else. Someone that he trusted. Someone powerful. Someone that Jen Mai fully expected to come out on top of this situation.

But who that was, Kal couldn't begin to guess. The Elder was a well-connected man. He knew every noble man and woman on the planet. Even narrowing down the list to Jen Mai's closest companions wouldn't be of much use. That list was almost as large as the entire population of nobles living on Krypton. Several of Jen Mai's friends weren't even Kryptonian; he'd secured close working relationships with many of the alien races Krypton was allied with.

"Bil," Kal said suddenly, before he'd even realized that he was speaking.

"My lord?"

"I need you to ground every ship on Krypton. I want this whole planet on lock-down mode. No one leaves. No one enters. No shipments of trade goods, no transports full of people. Nothing leaves the ground. Nothing lands. I want only our military aircraft in the sky."

"We keep Jen Mai on *this* planet," the Chief of Security said, nodding.

"Check with the military," Jor-El said, picking up where his son left off. "Find out every ship that has left this planet. It should not be many, with the holiday grounding most flights to begin

with.”

“Consider it done,” Bil said. “Passenger lists. Destinations. If Jen Mai fled this planet, we’ll know the when and where. And we’ll dispatch our own men to bring him back.”

Another knock sounded at the door. Kal didn’t dare to hope that someone had already stumbled across Jen Mai. He wasn’t naive. He waved down Bil as the man started to rise. Instead, Kal went to the door himself. He opened it to find Jak behind the door.

“Jak?” Kal asked. “What’s going on?”

The younger man was pale. It was clear that he was in shock. A crumpled piece of paper was clutched in his hand. He held it out to his prince, his hand trembling violently.

“My lords,” Jak finally said, his voice gone hollow. “You’d better see this. I found this affixed to the front gate. The security cameras didn’t pick up anyone, according to one of the guards I spoke with. They went offline for the span of a minute. Short-circuited. By the time the guards went out to see what had happened, there was no one around. I just happened to be walking with my friend, Dani, when we came across the note.”

Kal took the paper from Jak’s tight grasp and unfolded it. He read the words swiftly. There wasn’t much to read. There was no elegance to the words, but they were the most powerful that Kal had ever read, and they sent him crashing to his knees.

“Kal?” Jor-El called, instantly at his son’s side. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“It’s...it’s the ransom note we’ve...been expecting.” It was an effort to choke out the words; his throat had gone bone-dry and tight as a drum.

“What do they want?” Jor-El asked, as he helped his son to his feet.

Kal couldn’t look at his father. “Everything.”

“What do you mean, everything?” Jor-El asked, gently taking the note from Kal’s hand.

“Everything,” Kal repeated. “They want us to surrender everything to them. They want us to disband the Council of Elders. And they want us to abdicate our right to the throne. If we don’t comply,” Kal swallowed hard, “they say that they will...”

“Will...?” Bilan gently prompted him.

Kal swallowed hard once again. He could barely speak the next words. “They will kill one captive per day.”

The prince barely made it back to his seat before his rubbery legs gave way beneath him once more. His mind was reeling. He felt sick to his stomach. He knew exactly why his family’s kidnappers wanted the Council disbanded. Only the Council had the authority to try the abductors with treason, once they revealed who they were. But if the Elders had no power, they could not sentence the kidnappers. There would be no official charge of treason. The traitors would escape death.

Looking at his father, Kal saw all the color drain out from the Supreme Lord’s face, leaving him stark white. Kal had seen his father in almost every mood. He’d seen Jor-El happy, sad, playful, mischievous, contemplative, indecisive, loving, confused, ill, angry, and even scared. But pure terror was something that Kal realized he’d never before seen cross his father’s features, at least, not until that very moment. His heart broke for his father.

“What do we do?” Kal quietly asked, not just to Jor-El, but to the entire room.

“The note says we have twenty-four hours to make our reply over the video screens,” Jor-El said. “Until then, we utilize every possible second.”

“I agree,” Kal said. “But...what if...?” He couldn’t bear to voice the rest of his question.

“We’ll do what we need to,” Jor-El said. “If stepping down is what we have to do, we’ll do it. I don’t want to. I don’t want to leave the people of Krypton in the hands of some monster. But I

don’t see another choice. I will not knowingly condemn my children to death.”

Kal shook his head. “Normally, I’d agree. But I don’t trust this. What’s to stop whoever has Ching and the others from killing them after we abdicate?”

“We can try to work out some exchange,” Bil offered.

My lord,” Trey stammered, his mouth working overtime, though barely any sounds issued forth. “You can’t be serious!”

“Serious?” Jor-El said, reacting as though the word held some unknown meaning.

Trey blushed deeply. Clearly, he’d said the words before he realized he’d been speaking. “You cannot abdicate the throne. You cannot give in to these demands.”

“The lives of my children are at stake here, Trey,” the Supreme Lord argued impatiently.

“I know, my lord,” the Chief Elder replied in a placating tone. “And I cannot even begin to imagine what you are going through. But, clearly, whoever took them is insane. Are you so willing to hand over the rule of the entire planet to a lunatic? At the risk of sounding indelicate, my lord, you still have Kal. You still have an heir to the throne.”

Jor-El sighed deeply, seeming to age right before Kal’s waking eyes. “I know,” he said, his voice only the barest whisper. “I know. I know that the planet should be my first priority. I know that I can’t just hand over my power to a madman. But...how do I condemn my children to death? How do I ignore that? How can I possibly live with myself, if I do nothing while they are murdered?”

“By knowing that you did the right thing,” Trey said.

Jor-El shook his head sadly. “Is it the right thing? Is it the right thing to turn away and let die the people who you are sworn to protect?”

“I don’t have the answers,” Trey admitted gently. “All we can do is hope that you will not be forced to make your decision.”

“We’ll utilize every moment to try to find your children. We’ll get them back,” Bil swore. “Until then, I’ll run this note with my guys. There has to be some clue within it that we can use to track down whoever sent it.”

“That’s Jen Mai’s handwriting,” Jor-El sighed. “That much is clear to me. But do what you must.” He handed the Chief of Security the paper. “Leave us for a while,” he added, gesturing in the same moment for Kal to stay.

Everyone filed out of the room, respecting their lord’s wishes. Only Kal remained, rooted to his chair as though he had become a part of it somehow. Jor-El said nothing. Perhaps he had no words left to him. Kal’s own tongue refused to work. He was desperate to alleviate as much of his father’s pain as he could. He just had no idea what he could do or say. He merely sat there, hoping that his presence was a comfort to his father.

Kal leaned his head against the high back of his chair. His entire body felt numb and heavy. All of his energy had bled out of his body the second he read the ransom note. The demands were ridiculous; Kal was well aware of that. And yet, he would gladly pay any price to ensure that the others were safe. He’d give his own life if he had to. But, in this situation, he had the nagging gut instinct that this was a trap. Something told him that the abductors did not mean to follow through with their end of the bargain.

Kal closed his eyes in thought, the lids feeling too weighty to keep open. And though he did not mean to, for a short time, he dozed. He dreamed a little, a series of nightmarish flashes that seared through his fear-drenched brain like jagged bolts of lightning.

He was back at the tournament. Jak handing his drei to him. Lord Nor standing opposite him, battle-ready and hungry for Kal’s blood. Dreis clashing in midair. Explosions of pain as Kal’s body suffered blows at Nor’s skilled hand. Fighting back and

gaining the upper hand. Nor laid out on his back in the short green grass. Kicking Nor's drei away. The Master of the Tournament declaring Kal the victor. Kal reaching down to help Nor to his feet. The murderous look of hatred held within Nor's eyes. No. More than just hatred. *Vengefulness*.

Kal's eyes snapped open, the tattered remnants of his nightmare clinging to the edges of his mind. He gulped in a large lungful of air, calming his racing heart. But he knew. His dreams had not been just dreams. His subconscious mind had been showing him what he had missed so many months prior.

In an instant, Kal knew, without a shred of doubt, who had plotted against his family.

Lois gradually came to consciousness, though patches of fuzzy blackness still clung to the edges of her mind and vision. As her mind slowly became capable of focusing, she became aware of various truths. The first thing that she knew with absolute certainty was the pain in her head. A deep, throbbing ache had settled in behind her eyes; a concert in her brain that was comprised entirely of drums. It made her a little nauseous. She had to take slow, deep, and controlled breaths in order not to vomit.

The next thing that she knew was that she was staring into the face of an ugly, greasy man. She felt like she ought to know who it was. She knew that she'd seen him before. But where? She analyzed every part of him, trying to place him. The shoulder-length blonde hair. The deep set, malevolent eyes. The sinister twist to his mouth. But her head was too fuzzy to think straight. She thought that Kal would know the man instantly, even if his head was ringing the way hers was.

Kal.

In a flash, she could see the scene in her mind. Kal was on the tournament field, facing the final opponent of the games.

Lord Nor.

That was who she was facing now.

She groaned, partly in pain. But the greater part of the groan was born from the knowledge that she was staring into the face of such a cruel, sadistic man. An involuntary shudder ran through her body as she tried to shrink away from the man's stinking breath.

"She's awake," he said, speaking over his shoulder to someone Lois couldn't quite see. He sounded oddly relieved.

"You're lucky that she survived," another voice growled, coldly neutral. "That was a risky amount of tranquilizer."

"I couldn't take any chances," a third voice said, sighing heavily, as though he had explained it all before. "She got the same dose that the others did. It can't be helped that she didn't react to it in quite the same way."

More of Lois' vision cleared as the three men talked. She was conscious now of where she was, but she almost wished she could have remained blissfully unaware. She was in a dank stone room that was only just above freezing. She was propped up against one rough gray wall. The cold seemed to seep right through her coat and into her very bones. She tried to move away, and panicked when she realized that her entire body was paralyzed. Only her head and neck seemed capable of movement.

"I knew I shouldn't have trusted you with this mission," the second man complained. "You really screwed this up, Thark."

"Begging your pardon, my lord, but how did I screw it up? She's alive."

"Barely," a new voice said. "Another outburst like that, however, and I will cut out your tongue and feed it to the dogs."

Lord Nor stood up and put his back to Lois. He swiftly stepped away from her, widening her field of vision. She could see now that she was in a cell. Heavy metal bars imprisoned her in her own separate cage. Next to her, on her left, was Zara. And across the room, directly before her and Zara, were Ching and Jai

respectively.

Nor stepped out of the cell and swung the door shut. The metal protested with a slight groan, the hinges in dire need of oil, though the metal was shiny and new-looking. In the next moment, the door clanged tightly shut. Lois heard the lock click as the key turned within it.

"Tell me again," Nor said, his voice dangerously calm, "why there are only *four* here? *Where is Kal-El?*?" The words hissed from his mouth as though he were a poisonous snake.

Lois watched as the young man, Thark, blanched. He was no older than her sister. Lois almost felt sorry for the kid. Almost. Perhaps she would have felt bad if she didn't know that he had something to do with her abduction. But hope flared in her heart. If Nor was asking about Kal, it meant that he hadn't been taken. He was still free. And she knew if that were true, he would find a way to rescue her and the others.

Thark wrung his hands together, clearly distressed. "My lord, I'm sorry. The other prince. He wasn't there when we made our move."

"Where was he?" Nor demanded.

Thark shook his head in a desperate plea. "Begging your pardon, my lord, but I don't know. All I know is that we followed our orders. We waited for the music to begin. Then we made our move. He just... simply wasn't there when we attacked."

"Useless excuses!" Nor growled. "You had orders to bring me *all* of Jor-El's children!"

"What do we do about that?" one of the other men asked Nor.

Lois could now see the two other men who were in the room with them. Nor's brothers, Ran and Drull. She hadn't yet had the displeasure of meeting the two, but she had seen their handiwork in the tournament, months before. They had struck her as less intelligent than their older brother, Nor, but just as brutal. It was Ran who had spoken.

Nor sighed heavily and waved dismissively at his brothers. "Kill them all."

"B...b...but, my lord!" Thark stuttered. "It wasn't our fault!"

Nor rolled his eyes. In the next second, he produced a knife, from where, Lois couldn't tell. The steel flashed coldly in the overheard lights—a bright, shining silver. Nor deftly brought the edge to the man's throat and slashed through the fragile skin. Silver steel turned to sickly crimson as Thark's lifeblood spilled from the open gash. Nor grabbed the man by the collar of his shirt, wiped the blade clean on the jet black material, then allowed the body to collapse to the floor. Thark thrashed about for a minute or two, but every frantic beat of his heart only forced more of his blood out onto the floor. His movements grew ever more feeble until at last, he expelled one final, shuddering breath. His body gave one more involuntary jerk and then lay still.

Lois would have turned away if she had been able to. But her body was still incapable of carrying out her wishes. Instead, she tightly squeezed her eyes shut, hoping that Thark's blood wouldn't creep into her own cell. She wasn't sure she could handle that.

"Clean this up," Nor instructed his brothers. "And kill the others. You know what to do. I want no one left alive to turn on us. And I want no evidence."

Lois kept her eyes shut as tightly as she could. But she couldn't block out the sounds. She heard the other men pleading for their lives; perhaps a dozen or so different voices reached her ears. She heard the charging sound of the brothers' energy guns. She knew the distinctive sound well enough. Her father had used smaller, similar versions of the guns in his laboratory work, though the ones that he had used had channeled the energy into thin, precise lasers. The guns emitted a beam of pure energy that was capable of causing even steel and stone alike to simply cease to exist. It would easily vaporize flesh and bone.

Dull, pulsing sounds bounced off the stone walls as each man

was shot. The stone room magnified the sound, amplifying it beyond anything that Lois could have imagined. She felt the shock waves that rippled through the surrounding air as they rocked her body. She felt the reverberations thrumming in her chest.

After a long while, she finally ventured to open her eyes again. Ran and Drull were gone. There were no bodies in sight; not even Thark's lifeless corpse lay on the floor, though the sticky puddle of dark red blood still lay congealing where it had gathered.

A terrifying numbness still cloaked Lois' body. She could feel the cold as it bit through her coat, but none of her limbs would obey her commands. She tried to call out to the others, but she found her vocal chords to be just as unresponsive as her body. That terrified her even more. She'd always relied on her voice when all else failed.

From the looks of things, the others were in the same situation. No one moved. No one spoke. Lois closed her eyes again, unwilling to stare at the pool of Thark's blood any longer. At least, she thought, it hadn't made its way into her cell, though it had come close.

After a while, Lois dozed off, the effects of the tranquilizers still running through her veins. She didn't dream. She was merely enveloped in a thick, black oblivion. When she awoke once more, she groaned as she found herself still confined to the cell. She hadn't really expected to be anywhere else. But, she had hoped that her imprisonment had only been some sort of horrific nightmare. If it had been, she would have allowed herself to cry on Kal's shoulder, while he held her, rubbed soothing circles on her back, and murmured calming words into her dark tresses.

There wasn't a single thing in all the world that she wouldn't have given to find herself safely back in her husband's strong arms in their chambers at the palace.

Thinking about Kal brought a stab of longing to her heart. She missed him fiercely. Ever since she had fallen in love with him, he'd been her rock, her strength. He'd given her a reason to find hope and beauty in the world around her. He'd become her life, her heart, her very soul. To be apart from him had become painful, even if he was merely down the hall watching a game in Jai's room, or hearing petitioners in the main receiving hall.

To be separated from him now tore at her heart with savage agony. She wished that she could see him, or, at the very least, hear his voice. She could have taken comfort in that. It was a struggle to remind herself that she should be grateful that he *wasn't* with her.

Kal was safely out of Nor's grasp. He was free. And he would be looking for her. He'd be searching for his brothers. He'd be trying to find Zara.

Lois knew that when Kal wanted something, he'd move the heavens and Krypton alike to achieve it. There was no doubt in her mind that he would find them. The thought was comforting, but in a distant, abstract way. She wished that he could be there *now*, rescuing them all from the bleak, frigid prison they were being held captive in.

An itch began to plague Lois' nose. Without thinking, she moved to scratch it with a gloved hand. As her protected fingertips touched the cold flesh of her nose, she suddenly realized that she could move again. Her body was no longer paralyzed. A wave of relief rolled over her. Immediately, she pushed herself away from the icy cold stone wall, though she could not escape the freezing floor. Her legs still felt rubbery and her whole body trembled, though if it was more from the cold or from the drugs that still half lingered in her body, she could not tell.

"What happened?" Lois asked finally, glad that her vocal chords were also cooperating.

Zara breathed a sigh of relief. "Lois, thank Rao. We were

getting worried about you."

"Worried?" Lois repeated, confused.

Zara nodded. "Your body reacted particularly badly to whatever drugs Nor's men used on us. The rest of us have been able to move and speak for a while now. And you wouldn't wake up when we called to you. I even shook you a little."

"Where did Nor and the others go?" Lois shot a fearful look around the room.

"They left us for time being," Jai said, leaning against the bars at the front of his cell. "They said something about delivering a message."

"What do they want?" Lois asked, crawling to the front of her own cell.

Ching shook his head. "We don't know. Ransom, I expect."

"Ransom?" Lois scrunched her brow. "What could they possibly want? The Uthors are the third richest noble house on the planet. It doesn't make sense."

"I know," Ching agreed. "I've been trying to figure it out myself." He shook his head again. "There's a deeper motive here. I just wish I could figure out what it is. My head's still sort of... fuzzy from the tranquilizer. It has to be about power though. I'd bet my life on that."

"Kal's still free," Lois said. "He'll find us." She hoped she sounded convincing.

"I hope so." Ching's eyes slid over to the drying blood that stained the gray stone floor. "I hope so."

"He will," Lois said, mustering up all of her conviction into those two words.

And yet, she still harbored a healthy amount of trepidation. Lord Nor wasn't known as a man of patience, by any stretch of the imagination. What if he grew bored of whatever sick game he was playing? What if he killed one of them? What if he killed them all? What if Kal was too late to save them? What if Kal came looking for them and got captured himself? What if Kal got himself killed while trying to save them?

Lois knew that if Kal died, she'd never be the same person again. If he died and she somehow managed to live, life as she knew it would be over. She didn't want to live in a world without Kal. She needed him, as much as she needed air to breathe. And if he died trying to save her, she would never forgive herself for as long as her heart continued to beat.

Tears of panic began to well in her eyes and she roughly wiped them away with the back of one gloved hand. The small beads of moisture rolled off the waterproof surface, making the dull material suddenly glossy where the wetness had been streaked. She hugged her knees to her chest, in an attempt to make herself feel more secure. It was a habit of hers ever since she was a child, huddled in her room, listening as verbal warfare raged between her mother and father. But the technique failed her now. It only made her heart ache all the greater for Kal's solid, loving embrace.

After a time, Lois heard footsteps coming down a flight of steps that lay off to her right hand side, though she couldn't see them from the angle of her cell. But she could hear the heavy tread of boots as they descended the metal steps. Each one sounded as loud as a crack of lightning, and made her heart thump in terror. And yet, when the owner appeared before her cell, he didn't acknowledge her or the others. Instead, the man got on his knees and began to scrub away the dark stain of dried blood that marred the floor. Lois' nose crinkled at the acrid smell of the various chemicals as the man worked.

The manservant did his work without pausing. He never once looked up. He never once spoke. He simply focused on the grisly task set before him. When he was finished, he packed his supplies back up into the small bucket that he carried with him, and swiftly made his way back out of the dungeon.

"Who was that?" Lois ventured to ask, once she was sure that

the man was out of hearing.

“His name is Rygel,” Ching said, spitting the name out like a curse. “He’s Lux Uthor’s right hand man.”

“If Rygel’s around, you can bet that Lux has a hand in this kidnapping,” Jai added, his dark eyes flashing with rage. “I’d hoped that maybe Nor and his brothers were doing this on their own.”

“Why?”

Lois was pretty certain that she didn’t want to know the answer to that question. But she couldn’t help asking it nonetheless. Sometimes, she thought of her curiosity as some strange form of curse. She bit her lower lip as Ching sighed.

“Nor, Ran, and Drull are all muscle,” Zara said in a hushed whisper. “They’re thugs, brutes. Nor has a slippery tongue, that’s true. But Lord Uthor is smart.”

“So if he’s the one behind this…” Lois said, her thoughts whirling at a dizzying pace.

“You can be assured that whatever the plot is that he’s cooked up, it will be hard for my father to find a loophole.” Ching frowned. “He won’t make it easy for anyone to find us.”

“Kal will find us,” Lois repeated, though her heart had sunk considerably at Ching’s words.

To give herself a purpose, Lois began to test the bars that made up her cell. She tried twisting them, pushing on them, pulling at them, all in a vain attempt to find a loose one. She tried to shake the cell door, with no real hope that the lock might give way. But she was unwilling to rule out any possibility. She instructed the others to do the same, all to no avail. Finally, she curled her knees to her chest again, reluctantly giving up for the time being.

Silent tears welled up in her eyes again. She managed to hold them back only by sheer willpower. She felt utterly powerless, utterly helpless. And that frustrated her beyond words, enraged her, truth be told. In the time that she had known Kal, even before she had come to fall in love with him, she’d never had such feelings before. She had been powerless to prevent her arranged marriage, that much was true, but she had found a way to fight back, by trying to hate her new husband. When she had fought with Kal, he’d allowed her to have all the power. He’d rarely ever fought back, except to defend himself against whatever untruths she had flung at him. And from the moment that she’d made amends with him, he’d surrendered all of himself to her. He’d empowered her. He’d done everything in his ability to give her every sense of freedom and power that he could. To suddenly lose control of everything angered Lois, and soon her ire rivaled the intensity of her fear.

She was so lost in her own thoughts that she never heard the footsteps coming back down the steps into the dungeon. She wasn’t even sure of how much time had passed since she wandered down the dark paths of her bleak thoughts. Instead, she was startled when Lux Uthor and his sons appeared before her cell.

Krypton’s third wealthiest man stood in the center of the room, surveying the four cages with a cold eye. He peered into each cell, appraising the occupants silently, the same way that a person might view a commonplace animal in a zoo. He nodded to himself, as if in response to some inner monologue. Then he turned to his sons.

“You stupid fools,” he said, his voice deadly calm, showing no emotion. “Four out of five isn’t good enough.”

“I know,” Nor agreed.

“It’s not our fault the men that got sent out were incompetent,” Ran argued.

Lux frowned. “Of course it is, you idiot. You chose the men for the job, didn’t you?” He sighed. “What’s done is done, I suppose. There’s not much that we can do about it now. We’ll have to make do.”

“What *do* we do now?” Drull asked.

“We stick to the plan,” Lux replied. “We improvise if need be.”

“But with Kal-El still free, will Jor-El bend to our demands?” Nor asked, crossing his arms before him as he leaned against one stone wall, just to the side of Ching’s cage.

Lux nodded confidently. “Oh, I think he will. That fool won’t look at it from a logical perspective. He won’t count himself lucky that he still has one trueborn son left to carry on his bloodline and right to rule. He’ll only see that he’s missing the rest of his family. He’ll want these four back as well. That will be his undoing. He will bend to our demands, and then we’ll have him. Krypton will be ours for the taking. The reign of the Els will be over.”

“And when Jor-El abdicates? What do you want us to do with these four?” Nor asked.

“Kill the men, if you wish,” Lux shrugged dismissively.

“Take Zara for a concubine if you so desire. At least you know that she’ll never bear you any half-blooded mongrels.” His voice hit a note of disgust as he referenced Zara’s failure to produce a living heir to the throne of Krypton.

“Touch my wife and I will kill you,” Ching growled.

“And the other?” Drull asked, ignoring the crown prince entirely, eyeing Lois as though she were a piece of meat.

Lux looked her over. “Don’t even think about it,” he said, smacking the back of his youngest son’s head. “Once Jen Mai is set up as Chief Elder, I plan on having him annul the marriage between her and Kal-El. That is, of course, if I don’t decide to just kill the boy.”

“You mean…?” Ran asked, letting his voice trail off. He blinked stupidly at Lois.

Lux smiled evilly. “Boys, say hello to your new mother.”

Lois worked hard to stifle a shudder of revulsion. The thought of being separated from Kal and of being forced to marry Lux made her feel sick to her stomach. She flinched away as Lux bent down and took a closer look into her cell.

“I’ll never marry you!” Lois asserted defiantly. “My husband will find you. And you’d better watch out when he does.”

Lux laughed, his vile eyes dancing in amusement. “Let him come. Let him challenge me. It’ll save me the effort of having to hunt him down myself.”

“He’ll break you in half,” Lois said contemptuously.

“I think not,” Lux replied evenly. “For all of Kal-El’s physical prowess, he’s too gentle a soul to ever prevail in a *real* fight. He doesn’t have the guts to go for the kill.”

“You don’t know my husband very well,” Lois shot back.

She knew that she was bluffing. She knew that Lux was right. Kal was a force to be reckoned with in a fight, that much was true. But he *was* a gentle soul. He’d never go for the kill, even if a fight demanded it. He’d try to find a way to subdue his opponent without causing them harm. And in a fight against someone like Lux or his sons, that would be Kal’s undoing.

His gentle heart would cost him his life.

Lux wasn’t fooled by Lois’ boasting. “Ah, but I *do* know your lord husband. Quite well, actually. There isn’t *anything* he can do that I haven’t already anticipated.”

Lois spit at the man, the action seeming to happen independent of her brain. Her body simply reacted to the man. Some of it hit his right cheek. Lux wiped the spittle off his flesh with one finger. He clucked his tongue and shook his head.

“Now, now,” he said, his voice smooth and eerily calm. “You really ought to behave yourself. I don’t know what vile behavior your precious prince allows, but I will not stand for such things.”

Lois backed away from the man as he spoke, until her shoulder blades connected with the freezing, solid wall behind her. The threat in Lux’s voice was unmistakable. She had no doubts in her mind that he would not hesitate to kill her if she

ever displeased him. As the knowledge sunk in, she wondered if Lux's late wife had met a similar fate. She wondered if that was what had happened to the missing members of his household staff. Kal and the others had said that the girls had never turned up. Lois knew now, for a certainty, that Lux possessed the technology needed to make a body simply vanish into thin air.

Nor cleared his throat. "And if Jor-El *does* hold out?"

"We stick to the plan," Lord Uthor said, straightening back up and stepping away from Lois' cell. "We cannot afford any moments of weakness. We will carry through with our threats."

"Yes," Nor agreed, nodding his head. "But which one do we kill first?"

"That one," Lux replied, flicking his hand casually at Jai's cell. "The half-prince. If Jor-El is stupid enough to test me, I want you to send the boy's head to him. Understood?"

The three young lords nodded. "Yes, Father," they said, their voices blending into one.

"Good," Lux said, his voice deadly calm. "Now then. I have things to attend to. Drull, I want you to keep an eye on the video screens. The second the Supreme Lord makes his statement, I want to know about it. Ran, I want you to come find me if anyone comes sniffing around. I don't care if they are selling cookies. I want to know about it."

The two men in question bowed, then scurried off to attend to the duties their lord father had set before them. Nor stayed behind, awaiting his orders.

"And me?" he asked, when Lux failed to speak. "What task would you have me do?"

Lux thought for a moment before speaking. "Arrange a security detail."

"I'll lead them myself," Nor swore.

"No," his father said, shaking his head. "I want you with me. We have work to do. You have one hour. Then I want you in my study."

"As you wish," Nor said, bowing stiffly.

The two men turned and started back up the stairs. Lois heard each footstep, each one sounding like a death knell. She let her defiant mask fall from her face as her insides turned to jelly. Doomed was the only word that came to her mind. Doomed to lose Kal if he tried to save her. Doomed to lose Kal if he didn't, though Lois knew that would never be the case. Doomed to be forced into marrying a monster. Doomed to be killed with a careless word the second she displeased that same monster.

"Man, that was gutsy," Jai said, giving Lois an approving, though unsteady smile. "Talking back to Lux like that, I mean."

"Thanks," Lois mumbled. She tried to give Jai a smile.

But the young man was pallid white. Lux wanted to kill him. He'd so casually pointed at the half-prince as the first one to kill, should his ransom demands be ignored. He'd given the decision less thought than he would which piece of fruit to eat at breakfast. Lois' heart broke for the youngest son of Jor-El, even as she was gripped with terror for him.

"You'll be okay," Lois tried to reassure him. "He won't hurt you. Your father and brother will see to that."

Jai didn't look reassured in the least. He still gripped the bars of his cell tightly. His whitened knuckles matched the bloodlessness of his face. His eyes were wide and staring, not seeming to really see anything.

"I swear," he said in a small voice, more to himself than anyone else. It was, perhaps, a prayer to any benevolent force that might chance to hear him. "If I live through this, I'll never touch another concubine again. I don't want to die. I'm too young to die. I haven't even lived yet. Please, don't let me die."

"Jai," Ching said, carefully threading his hand through the cell bars, until he could touch his brother's shoulder. "Snap out of it. You have to focus now. Okay? Falling apart won't do any of us any good. All right? I'll do whatever I can to keep you safe.

Okay?"

Jai finally seemed to focus on his older brother. He tremulously nodded his head. "I'll try."

"Good man." Ching gave him a smile and a squeeze on the shoulder. "We need a plan."

"Plan?" Jai repeated, as though the word was foreign. "Plan for what? We're stuck inside *cages*."

Ching sighed. "I know. But there has to be something that we can do."

"Like what?"

The crown prince sighed again and shook his head. "I don't know yet. But I'm working on it."

"Ching..." Zara's voice was pained and frightened as it cut through the freezing air of the dungeon.

Lois' head snapped around at the sound. Zara was doubled over, clutching at her abdomen. Her face - what Lois could see if it - was drawn into a roadmap of pained lines and pinched flesh. Moans escaped her lips and tears wetted her cheeks. As Lois' eyes swiftly assessed the other woman, they came to rest on her groin. A dark, red stain had bloomed there; blood seeped through the woman's light colored pants as if from some horrific, open wound. Lois felt her own blood turn to ice in her veins.

"Zara?" she squeaked out, the sound entangling itself in her vocal chords, as though it feared to come out into the open. "What's happening?"

"No," Ching said, his voice a ghostly, hollow whisper. "No."

"Zara?" Lois repeated. "Ching? What's happening? I can't help if I don't know what the problem is."

"There's nothing you can do. I'm..." Zara said, her voice rough as she struggled against the severe agony that had overtaken her body. "I'm...having a..." she groaned again. "Miscarriage," she finally uttered, through gritted teeth.

Lois' heart stopped beating for the slightest moment as the fragile organ shattered into a thousand bloody pieces. Zara's pain suddenly became her own, though Lois could only imagine a fraction of the other woman's distress. Lois knew that she could not possibly understand a tenth of the emotional anguish that her sister-of-the-heart was experiencing. Sympathetic tears pricked at Lois' eyes.

"What do I do?" she said, asking Ching and Zara both in the same breath.

The usually cheerful crown prince looked mournfully at his wife. Tears were racing down his cheeks. Lois realized, in that moment, that she'd never seen the man upset before. And now, she was looking into the face of heartbreak itself.

"There's nothing you can do," he said, repeating his wife's words. "She needs a doctor. Oh Zara, I'm so sorry."

"I...I...didn't know that you guys..." Jai stammered.

Ching shook his head. "We didn't tell anyone. It was too early. Only five weeks along. We wanted to be sure this baby would survive."

Lois wished with her whole heart that she could trade cells with Ching. He needed to be near his wife. And Zara needed her husband at her side, to take whatever comfort she could from having him at hand. Lois felt strangely inadequate to be of any source of solace for the grieving couple.

"I'm so sorry," she offered, feeling as though she was failing them somehow by offering such simple words. "Truly, I am."

She reached her hand through the bars that separated her from Zara. The other woman took her hand, grateful for the small bit of consolation that it held. She held on tightly, as if it were her only lifeline, her only way to stay connected to the world. Lois let her, taking a small amount of comfort in the contact as well, though the very thought made her feel guilty. She felt she had no right to take any comfort from the heartbroken woman. She was supposed to be *giving* support, not taking it.

"Help!" Lois shouted, in an effort to attract attention to the

emergency that was unfolding. “Somebody help! We need a doctor! Is anyone there?”

But the dungeon was empty, aside from the four young royals. The dull stone of the room flung her words back at her, mocking her. They echoed as they bounced off the walls; a small chorus of derisive voices. If any of the sounds penetrated the thick walls, Lois never knew. No one came to see what the ruckus was about. No one summoned any aid for the bleeding princess. No one even came to the door to tell them to be silent.

After a while, Zara’s pain seemed to lessen. Her grip on Lois’ hand loosened. She no longer moaned in agony. But she continued to hold Lois’ hand. It still remained her lifeline. Her moaning did not cease. But the sound of it changed. It was no longer born of excruciating cramps. It was the mournful, soul-chilling sound of a heart shattering, of dreams snatched cruelly away, of hope dying.

Lois could not help but to allow her tears to match those of Zara and Ching.

“That’s it!” Kal said, his voice taking on an excited edge as he tried to shake off the images his dreams had stirred up. “That has to be it.”

But the room around the young prince was empty. His father was nowhere in sight. He stood and stretched, wondering where the Supreme Lord was. Kal felt himself suddenly recharged, however. His depleted energy levels had been topped off while his dreams had shown him what his waking mind had been blind to. The steel-stiffness of his depressed body fell away. Adrenaline pumped through his veins, powering his limbs in a way that he’d only ever felt in a battle before.

He knew that Lord Nor had his family; knew it with absolute certainty, though he had no hard proof. And Kal was determined to get them back.

He needed a plan in order for that to happen though. And he needed help. This was one battle he knew he could not fight alone. He began to pace as thoughts surged through his racing mind. He could almost feel the rapid firing of his synapses as he tried to slow his thoughts enough to make sense of them all. Pacing didn’t seem to help any. If anything, it only seemed to fuel his brain into an even greater frenzy.

He knew that he needed to find his father. Needed to find Bilan. Needed, perhaps, even to seek out the friends that he had in Krypton’s military. But would anyone believe him?

In the next moment, Kal left his father’s study, completely focused on what he had to do. He stalked through the halls of the palace, like a wildcat searching for prey. His mind was entirely fixed on the knowledge that Nor had been the kidnapper. And, Kal knew, in all likelihood, so were Ran and Drull. The three brothers were rarely apart. What one did, the others almost always did as well.

His eyes saw nothing except Lord Nor’s murderous, vengeful eyes. His ears heard nothing except distant echoes of sound from those he passed in the halls. As if spoken through layers of heavy cotton, the words directed at him were muddled and muffled until they were no longer intelligible and no longer had the power to divert his attention. He was only dimly aware that he was no longer on the tournament field, though his mind imprisoned him back on the field on that fair fall afternoon. He nodded distractedly as he walked, some tiny part of his mind registering the servants he was passing.

He was only pulled to full attention when he came across Gen Arry, one of Bilan’s most trusted security officers. The man was on a patrol of the palace when Kal found him. He bowed when he saw the prince making a beeline for him.

“My lord,” Gen said respectfully.

“Gen,” Kal said, trying to muster up a smile for the man and knowing that he was failing miserably. “Have you seen my

father?”

Gen nodded. “I saw him not ten minutes ago heading to the main receiving hall.”

“The main receiving hall?” Kal echoed, wondering aloud. “For what?”

“Begging your pardon, my lord, but I don’t know.”

Kal shook his head. “Thanks, Gen. You’ve actually been a great help. I appreciate it.”

The royal prince quickened his step as he changed course, picking out the swiftest route to where his father would be. As he rushed through the palace, his mind began to work anew. What could his father want in the main hall? Had he chosen to give in to Nor’s demands?

He shook his head again. His father would never do that without having Kal at his side. And although Jor-El feared what might happen to his children if they failed to comply with the ransom demands, Kal felt sure that the Supreme Lord was resolute on allowing Bil’s team more time to try and find Ching and the others.

After what felt like a year of half-walking, half-running through the halls, Kal was finally in sight of the main hall. He reached the doors in record time, throwing them wide as he burst into the room, breathless. What he saw stopped him dead in his tracks. He wondered why that thought hadn’t occurred to him before.

Jor-El stood talking with a small group of people. Kal needed only a split second to identify them. Lord Ra, Zara’s esteemed father. Samm, Elle, and Luci Lyne, Lois’ family.

It made perfect sense, Kal thought to himself, as he forced his legs to propel him forward once more. Why wouldn’t the women’s loved ones be with them now? Kal had been so preoccupied with his own worries that he’d quite forgotten Zara and Lois’ families. The thought shamed him.

Still, he kept his head held high as he crossed the room. Jor-El broke off whatever he was saying to Lord Ra as soon as he heard the doors to the chamber open. He waved Kal forward. It was all that Kal could do to retain a dignified pace. He wanted to run screaming through the room that he knew who had their loved ones. But now that he had found his father, the idea seemed absurd to him; that a dream had given him the answers his waking mind hadn’t been able to figure out. And yet, as bizarre as the idea now sounded to his mind, he knew that his father would listen to every word. He knew that his father would take him seriously. He only hoped the others would as well.

Luci Lyne broke away from the loose group of nobles. She headed straight towards Kal, for in the few brief times that they had met, the two had instantly gotten along. Samm Lyne called for his youngest daughter to come back, but the girl was heedless of her father’s wishes. Kal picked up his pace to meet her, and engulfed her in his arms as soon as the distance between them had vanished. Luci was crying; tears stained her cheeks and her eyes were red and glassy. Boldly and unashamedly, she hugged the prince tightly and sobbed on his shoulder.

“Kal,” she worked out between heaving sobs, “I’m so afraid.”

“Me too,” he admitted, his voice a whisper in her ear as he held her. “But I promise, I will do everything in my power to make sure that your sister is found, safe and sound. All right?”

“Who could have done this?” she replied, sniffing.

Kal knew the question hadn’t been directed solely at him. Luci’s tone suggested that she was asking anyone and anything around them. He rubbed her back a few times, trying to impart some fraction of comfort to her.

“That’s what we’re going to find out for certain,” he vowed.

Luci pulled back and studied his face. “Thanks,” she said, giving him a trembling smile.

Kal returned the smile with a tiny one of his own, hoping the gesture would further console the girl. Then he crossed the rest of

the room, Luci by his side.

“Samm. Elle. My Lord Ra,” he said, greeting each of them in turn. “We need to talk.”

“I’ve just been telling them all that we know,” Jor-El said, “little though it is.”

“Can we sit down?” Kal asked, looking around the room. “Not here. Somewhere more private.”

“Is something wrong?” Jor-El asked, noting his son’s unease.

“I think I might know who the abductors are,” Kal replied in a hushed tone. “But I don’t want to speak of it in the open. We already know that Jen Mai was a traitor and a spy. I don’t know who else might be.”

There was no one else in the room except for their small group. But that did nothing to alleviate the prince’s sudden worry.

“My private chambers then,” Jor-El said, nodding. “A wise call, Kal.”

Kal could only nod back as his mind started to race once more. Together, the group of lords and ladies cut a path through the palace to the Supreme Lord’s private living quarters. Jor-El bid them all to take a seat in his large living room. But Kal’s nervous energy refused to allow him rest. He paced before the floor to ceiling windows, though he never once looked out over the view it afforded him of the snow and ice covered gardens, once so beautiful to his eyes but now seeming grotesque and misshapen.

Jor-El quietly closed the door to his chambers, after alerting one of the palace security guards that they were not to be disturbed unless by Bilan Hend’son himself. The guard nodded his understanding, then moved off down the hall to patrol. Satisfied, the Supreme Lord turned, crossed the room, and lowered himself into his favorite chair.

“Now then,” he said, clearing his throat. “Who is it that you believe did this, my son?”

Kal took a deep breath, like a diver about to plunge into a deep pool, then slowly released it. “Lord Nor and his brothers.”

“Nor?” Jor-El repeated, as though unable to believe his ears. “Nor Uthor?”

The prince nodded. “I’m almost positive.”

“How?” his father asked. “Have you come across some new evidence? Did Bil tell you something that he didn’t tell me?” His voice was desperate, imploring Kal for some solid shred of evidence that could be used to justify a full-scale search of the Uthors’ estate.

“No...not exactly,” Kal stammered, now even more aware of how ludicrous his theory sounded. “I sort of...dreamed it.” His face went crimson as he uttered the words, and he rubbed the back of his neck self-consciously.

“A...dream?” Jor-El asked, his prior hope deflating before his son’s very eyes.

“I sort of...fell into a light doze earlier,” Kal said, feeling ashamed of the admission, as he sank into a chair. “And I feel awful about that. I feel like I should have been doing...I don’t know. Something more proactive. But when I was asleep, I kind of found myself back at the tournament that was held a few months ago. I could see the whole thing so clearly, in a way that I hadn’t at the time. It was like the whole event was unfolding in slow motion. When I defeated Nor in the final duel, the way that he looked at me...I thought it was just hatred at first. But I know now that there was vengefulness in his eyes.”

“So...my daughter is missing because...Lord Nor Uthor is upset with you for besting him in a duel?” Lord Ra asked gently, trying to puzzle out all of the pieces. He did not sound convinced, but his tone did not condemn Kal’s words as fanciful imaginings, the way Kal had feared they would.

Kal shook his head. “No. At least, that’s not his whole reason, though it wouldn’t surprise me if it *was* a part of it. Nor holds grudges like you wouldn’t believe. He’s always hated that his

father isn’t the Supreme Lord. He’s always despised the fact that there are no daughters in this family that he could have been promised to, thereby granting his family a toehold into the ruling family.”

“And what of Lord Uthor himself?” Zara’s father asked. Kal couldn’t be sure if Lord Ra believed him yet, or if he was merely humoring him. “Do you believe that he is also involved?”

Kal shook his head again. “I don’t know. Maybe. Maybe not. Lux has always been friendly with our family. He’s even a friend of yours, my lord. I just don’t know. And I won’t know, until we bring in the whole family for questioning and search their estate.”

“Lux can’t have anything to do with it,” Samm said with certainty in his voice. “He wouldn’t dare harm Lois. His son, Nor, is promised to Luci.”

Kal couldn’t help it as his jaw crashed to the floor. He stared at the good doctor, wide-eyed and unblinking. His entire body went rigid as his blood turned to ice and froze in his veins. A ghostly, imagined dagger stabbed at his heart and twisted there, causing further agony. His mind skidded to a halt and, for once, he was incapable of forming a single thought. With an effort, he closed his mouth again.

“*What?*” he asked, hoping that he’d heard wrong somehow.

“I’m not proud of it,” Samm admitted sheepishly. “You see, Nor’s birth-wife died in the Red Fever epidemic. For whatever reason, Lux didn’t arrange another one right away. But when we were expecting Luci, Lord Uthor approached me and offered his son up as Luci’s birth-husband. I saw a good opportunity to secure a prosperous future for her, and accepted the contract that Lux produced. I realize now that I made a mistake. And I wish to Rao that I hadn’t done it. But the contract is iron-clad, the same as yours to Lois. I can’t undo it. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

Kal felt himself growing ill at Samm’s confession, felt as if the entire room had been slanted to one side, felt himself sliding closer to some vast, ominous abyss. He couldn’t blame his old friend. There couldn’t have been a way for Samm to know that Nor would grow up to be a sociopath. But his stomach roiled all the same. His head rang with phantom warning bells; a clamor of alarm and fear and an intense desire to protect the young girl seated before him.

“I’m sorry,” Kal uttered, unsure if he was expressing sympathy to Luci, asking Samm’s forgiveness for opening that particular can of worms, or merely speaking as a way to hold onto his tenuous grip on reality.

“Kal,” Jor-El said, looking his son in the eye, and jarring him back to the present. “These are serious accusations. You are accusing the Uthors of treason of the highest level. This isn’t something we can treat lightly.” There was no reproach in his voice, only an earnest hope that Kal knew the gravity of what he was saying.

“I know,” the prince returned evenly and with all seriousness. “You know that I would never say anything unless I was more than one hundred percent certain. I know I don’t have any actual, physical proof. And I know how absurd it all sounds. I can’t explain it. But I know that I’m right. Please, you have to believe me.”

“I do,” the Supreme Lord sighed gently. “I know that, in your heart, you believe that you’re right.”

“I *am* right,” Kal insisted. “And we’re wasting time sitting here discussing it when we should be coming up with a plan to get our loved ones back.”

“What did you have in mind?” Elle asked. She hadn’t yet said anything, but now that she did, her words silenced the young prince for a long moment.

He shook his head again, trying to loosen his tongue, now that it had gone leaden. “I don’t know yet. We could send a contingent of military officers to the Uthor estate to check things out. But without hard proof of wrongdoing, Lux has every right

to turn them away. And I don't want to risk tipping Nor off that we're on to him."

"That's even if Nor has them stashed on his father's estate," Lord Ra said thoughtfully. "The Uthors have more than one estate and several buildings scattered all over this planet. And, they have Jen Mai on their side. He has far too many contacts. Who knows who else might be enticed by the thought of an easy victory?"

"Another good point," Kal conceded.

"But..." Elle said thoughtfully. All eyes turned to her.

"Wouldn't it look strange if they suddenly just took off to one of their other homes, just as the royal family is abducted?"

"It would," Jor-El nodded, a tiny flicker of hope skittering over his features.

"What if we sent someone to the Uthors' estate?" Luci asked. "Someone innocent looking. Just to check things out."

"We can't risk them knowing that we're on to them," Lord Ra said, sounding much more inclined to listen to Kal's theory now. "They may hurt our loved ones...or worse."

"If they're even the ones to have them," Samm added gloomily.

"Luci's right though," Kal said after a moment. "We *could* possibly send someone over there...under another guise."

"Like what?" Jor-El asked.

"I don't know. Maybe someone looking for Lord Uthor's help in the search." He ran his hand through his hair as he thought.

"Or maybe someone in *disguise*," Luci offered. "Someone to poke around right under their noses, without the Uthors being aware they are even there."

Kal's entire face lit up. "That's not a bad idea. In fact, it's a *great* idea."

Jor-El looked dubious. "Breaking and entering?" he asked quietly. "It would be one thing if we had any sort of hard evidence..."

"It's not breaking and entering if the Uthors allow them to walk inside their estate," Elle offered, shrugging.

"Exactly," Kal said, nodding excitedly. He stood and began to pace again, and his hands flew as the words tumbled out of his mouth. "Lord Uthor always has a security detail patrolling his estate, ever since that group of drunk commoners tried to break in...nine or ten years ago. All I would need to do is disguise myself as one of the officers, and I could slip in unnoticed. I'm sure of it. Meanwhile, we can station some of our guys a discreet distance away. One call for help, once we have proof, and we'll have them."

"No." Jor-El's voice was soft, yet it rendered every tongue stiff and every vocal cord mute.

Kal shook his head. "No?" he asked after a long moment.

"No. This plan of yours...I admit that it has merit. So much so, that I am inclined to follow it through. But...you will not be the one to do this."

"I *have* to be the one," Kal insisted grimly. "I've been in the Uthors' manor before. I know my way around it. How many of our security officers can say the same thing?"

The Supreme Lord shook his head. "I said no. There must be another that we can send to do this task."

Kal balled his fists. "I *need* to be the one," he said again. "I won't ask someone else to put their life on the line for my family."

"And I will not allow you to put *your* life on the line," Jor-El said, his temper flaring in his worry. "If all is as you say, then Lord Nor isn't to be trusted. What if he discovered what you were up to? If he is capable of kidnapping my children and threatening me with their deaths, do you really think he would hesitate to harm or kill you as well? Look at how badly he wounded you in the duel, under what should have been friendly circumstances." His voice softened a notch. "I can't lose you, Kal. I just can't."

Kal opened his mouth to speak, but quickly shut it again. He could hardly breathe around the lump that had suddenly formed in his throat. His father was pallid white, all of the blood drained from his face. Never before had his father been so scared before. The look on the Supreme Lord's face went beyond terror to some new dimension of fear, so vast, so uncharted, so unexplored that there was no word for the depth of fright that was written in the man's features. Kal's heart bled anew for his father.

"Dad..."

"No," Jor-El firmly repeated. "I will not lose you. I will speak with Bilan, and ask him to find someone well-suited to the task."

"How soon can we get this going?" Samm asked, fidgeting in his seat. "Kal's right about one thing. We're wasting valuable time."

Jor-El nodded thoughtfully, though distractedly. Kal knew his father was still worried about his insistence that he be the one to go undercover into the Uthors' estate. Kal avoided his father's gaze, and instead, studied the plush crimson carpeting on the floor.

The Supreme Lord rose from his chair even as Kal sat back down in his. With a few long strides, Jor-El crossed the room. He picked up his phone and had Bil on the other end just a few short heartbeats later. He instructed the man to come to his chambers, alone, and with all speed.

Bil must have been close by, for less than fifteen minutes later, there was a soft knock on the door. Jor-El admitted the man into his chambers. The Chief of Security looked even worse to Kal's eyes than he had that morning. It seemed a miracle that he was still on his feet. His eyes were bloodshot and half drooping, staring at everything but seeming to see right through the world. His hands twitched and trembled. Kal guessed that Bil's jitteriness came either from a lack of sleep, far too much coffee, or a twisted combination of both. As he had earlier, Kal felt a stab of sympathy for the man.

"My lords and my ladies," Bil said, greeting them all in a voice that was thick, tired, and heavy with worry.

"Bil," Jor-El greeted him. "Come in. Come in. Take a seat."

Bil did as he was bid, taking Kal's seat after much prodding from the prince. The Chief of Security sank down into the overstuffed armchair with a sigh. Kal wondered when the man had last sat down. He looked bone-weary and on the verge of collapse.

"I don't have many new updates to report," the man said, casting his eyes to the floor. "I am so terribly sorry. But we did track down the gas canisters."

"And?" Jor-El asked, his entire being perking up the slightest bit.

Bil shook his head. "There isn't much to go on. They were stolen from the armory. It must have been last night, before the festival. We tracked down everyone with access to it, but they all still have their key cards."

"And can we account for where these people were when the canisters were stolen?" Jor-El asked.

Bil nodded. "Unfortunately, we can. Everyone was either at the festival or at their own homes surrounded by guests. Every single one of them has an alibi."

"So someone...short-circuited the locks?" Kal asked.

Bil nodded again. "Only long enough to take what they wanted. The locks were reset afterwards, which is why no one thought to check to see if anything was missing."

"And they only took the canisters?" Samm asked, unable to hold his tongue.

"It looks to be that way," the Chief of Security confirmed. "I'm sorry that I don't have better news."

The Supreme Lord shook his head. "I know you've been working hard," he said, his voice gentle and understanding, despite the fleeting look of disappointment that flashed across his

features. “We all appreciate your efforts. But my son thinks he may have a lead.”

Bil’s exhausted eyes snapped open, wide and staring. “Oh?” he asked.

Jor-El nodded. “Tell him, Kal.”

Encouraged, Kal related his entire tale from the start. Bil listened intently, all his focus on the prince’s words. He nodded thoughtfully as Kal spoke, though he did not interrupt to ask questions. He simply waited until Kal was done speaking, then carefully examined each piece of information that had been offered up. Once Bil was certain of all that Kal had said, the prince laid out the tentative plans they had come up with.

“It’s a risky plan,” Bil finally said, rubbing his chin, after a long silence blanketed the room. It had taken him a few minutes to digest everything that had been discussed. “But... I like it. We can get this going right away. I’ll need some time to assemble a team, and to get the logistics down. But... we should be able to get this done tonight.”

“It *must* be done tonight,” Jor-El countered. “We’re running out of time. The note that was sent to me... I do not wish to see if they are bluffing. I *won’t* risk my children’s lives.”

“And we’ll need time just in case Nor, Ran, and Drull *aren’t* the abductors,” Lord Ra said, shooting Kal an apologetic look.

Kal nodded back, not offended by the man’s remark.

Although he knew in his heart that he was right about Nor, he also knew he had to be open to the possibility that he could be mistaken.

Jor-El stood and moved to one of the bookshelves that lined the far wall of his living room. He reached out, almost blindly, and plucked a map from the cherry-colored wooden unit, so familiar he was with his books. He brought it to the coffee table, unfolding it as he walked. He placed it down, smoothing out the creases where the paper had been folded. Bil studied the map silently, though he nodded to himself, in response to some inner dialogue that he did not share with the rest.

Kal tried to be patient. But every second that Bilan did not speak was pure torture, like a knife thrust into his guts and twisted around, tightening them as it continued to move. It was all Kal could do to remain still, standing just behind the man’s left shoulder, looking at the map as Bil’s finger lightly traced a line here or tapped a spot there.

At last, mercifully, Bil spoke. “This will work,” he declared, the faintest hint of a pleased smile tugging at the far corners of his mouth. It was, Kal thought, the happiest look he’d ever seen on the overly stoic man’s face before. “I’ll place troops here, along the eastern edge of the Uthor estate. This line of trees and brush will conceal them a bit, though it would be better if it wasn’t winter and everything was in bloom. Still, we can make this work. I’ll have some men patrolling here in the south as a decoy. To draw their eye elsewhere. We’ll send in one, maybe two men to have a look around.”

Jor-El nodded his approval, a slight look of relief ghosting over his face. He let out a heavy sigh that spoke of how glad he was to be doing something proactive. Kal’s feelings matched those of his father.

“Do it,” the Supreme Lord instructed.

“At once,” Bil said, standing. He seemed to be completely recharged by the turn of events, all prior weariness gone from his body, as though it had never been.

“If they find nothing...” Jor-El said, letting his voice trail off.

“We’ll pull the men out of there right away,” Bil agreed, finishing his lord’s thought.

“And if they *do* find something?” Samm asked.

“We’ll have the men secure the area while we move the rest of the troops into position. We’ll take Lord Nor and anyone else we find, place them under arrest, and question them until we can sort this whole mess out. In the meantime, the rest of the men that

we have will continue to search other places, just to cover all our bases.” He stopped and cleared his throat. “For the time being, my lords and ladies, I suggest that you stay within the confines of the palace. There is no telling what else may happen.”

Jor-El nodded. “I want you to arrange a security detail to guard each of our personal chambers. I’ll have the staff prepare the guest rooms for you,” he said, looking at Lord Ra and the Lynes. He shifted his eyes back to Bil. “Ensure that a careful watch is kept on my son’s chambers. He is not to leave them for any reason.”

“Dad!” Kal sputtered in disbelief.

“I’m sorry, Kal. But until this threat is over, you are confined to your quarters. I want to be extra careful that you stay out of trouble.” He gave his son a knowing look.

“I want to help!”

“This isn’t up for discussion,” Jor-El said sharply. “I cannot lose you.”

Kal reluctantly nodded. The stark, naked fear on his father’s face was like a bucket of ice water thrown directly into the prince’s face. Jor-El was terrified that Kal would find a way to put himself in danger. The Supreme Lord was petrified of having all three of his sons taken from him. So he was exercising the only power that was left to him, mistrustful that the headstrong young prince would ignore his wishes.

“As you... wish,” Kal managed to choke out, remorse peppering every word.

Jor-El sighed. “Thank you,” he whispered.

Unable to speak, Kal only nodded, then quietly left the room. Bil was on his tail as he went, stopping only to instruct two of the palace security guards to escort the prince to his living quarters. Then the Chief of Security turned down a different section of hall, all but running in his haste. Kal, on the other hand, walked slowly. His limbs felt sluggish, as though he were attempting to walk through some vast, unseen wall of syrup. The very air around him seemed to protest his every footstep even as it crashed against him, threatening to squeeze out the very breath from his lungs. Anger and fear dueled within him. He felt a cold knot twist in his stomach and he could taste the coppery tang of it in his mouth, like that of blood.

He was aware of the looks that the staff gave him as he passed; glimpses of pity and raw fear laid unashamedly open on every face. No one tried to stop him to offer a word of condolence. No one made so much as a halting step forward. Kal sighed inwardly. He couldn’t imagine how grim and pained his face must have looked. And his security detail wasn’t helping things. He tried to remember when the last time had been that he’d had security tailing him, but remained unsuccessful. Krypton was such a stable planet. There had never been fear of any rebellions, uprisings, wars, or takeovers from neighboring planets, not for at least a thousand years or so.

Kal frowned as he reached the corridor where he and his brothers had their chambers. He slowed his step, then halted before Jai’s door. Behind him, the two security officers took two more strides that blended together, then stopped and waited for his lead. Kal gulped around the lump in his throat, then reached out and touched the shiny brass doorknob that led to his younger sibling’s chambers.

“I’m going to take care of my brothers’ cats,” he informed his escorts, without so much as a backwards glance over his shoulder.

He knew that he was stalling for time. His brothers’ personal attendants could always step into the chambers to ensure that the cats had enough fresh food and water. But Kal would have done anything to prolong being shut up in his quarters. He took a deep breath, twisted the knob, and stepped over the threshold into Jai’s rooms.

He made his work short, aware that if he took too long, his

guards would, in all likelihood, come looking for him. And Kal didn't want that. He wanted a moment alone. When he finished, he moved on to Ching and Zara's rooms and repeated the same series of tasks. Scooping a generous helping of dry food pellets into the cat's dish. Dumping out the water and replacing it with fresh, cold water. Cleaning the cat's litter box. Petting the animal so that it didn't feel so lonely.

It was eerie, to be in his brothers' quarters without them there with him. The rooms were too quiet, too still. It made them all but unrecognizable. A chill ran up the prince's spine and an even greater heaviness settled onto his already squashed and struggling heart. He wondered distractedly if it was possible for so much emotional weight to cause the overworked organ to literally falter and pop like an overripe fruit or overfilled balloon.

When he could no longer put off heading to his own chambers, Kal did so with his head hung, his chin resting on his chest. He saw only his feet as they plodded the remaining distance to his rooms. The resistance in the air was a force that threatened to turn him back. Every step forward left Kal wondering how on Krypton he'd managed to make any headway. His fingertips brushed the knob to his chambers and his stomach flip-flopped in his abdomen. Dread suffused every part of his mind and body. There had been a time, in the early days of his marriage, that the same feelings had washed over him every time he had reached his door. But never once had it been so soul-crushingly difficult to summon the willpower to grasp the handle and open the door.

Kal bit back the anguished cry that had begun to form in his throat. He fought off the shudder of dread that threatened to wrack his entire body. He inched his fingers forward so that their loveless caress of the metal allowed his palm to come to rest on the doorknob. He took a deep, calming breath and gathered his courage, aware, so painfully aware, of the eyes of the two security guards on his back. Their gazes were unwanted additions to the already overwhelming amount of weight he was carrying within his tattered heart and shredded soul. With an effort, he opened the door to his chambers, slipped inside, and shut the door behind him.

The silence within his chambers deafened him, staggered him, almost brought him to his knees. Kal leaned his back against the solid wood, glad, at the very least, for the barrier it provided between himself and his security detail. The closed door turned his chambers into a refuge and a prison simultaneously. He felt instantly relieved and claustrophobic, the two emotions fighting each other for dominance. In the end, loneliness won out, and fear. He sank to the floor, his back still to the door. He felt both drained and bursting with an overabundance of energy. He was lost, adrift on some immeasurable, volatile ocean of raging emotions, with no lifeboat, no driftwood to cling to, no life jacket to keep him afloat. And he was sinking, as surely as a stone tossed into a lake made its rapid descent to a permanent, watery grave.

Fasa sauntered over to him, stopping to yawn and stretch just before he was within Kal's reach. The cat meowed at him, eyes searching his master's face, as though he could read the emotions written upon it. The tabby came closer, until he finally climbed onto the prince's lap so that he could nuzzle Kal's face with his head. Kal obligingly scratched the cat behind his ears and under his chin, eliciting an immediate start to the cat's purring. But Kal took no notice, no joy, no comfort from the tabby's presence. He wanted only to know that his brothers, his sister-in-law, and his wife were safe. He wanted only for this nightmare to be just that, a nightmare relegated to the past, unreal and lacking the power to hurt him and his family in any way.

How long he sat there, propped against the wooden barrier between himself and his guards, Kal couldn't tell. Minutes, hours, days - time lost all meaning, all influence on his life. But

eventually, he stood, letting Fasa scamper away from him as he did so. It amazed Kal that he hadn't shed a tear while he sat there. He wanted to, needed the sweet release that it offered, needed to unburden some of the painful weight that sat on his heart and in his chest, crushing him, driving the air from his lungs, slowly killing him as he struggled against it. But none would come, as though his entire body had gone completely dry, making it physically impossible for any moisture to pool in his eyes to spill wastefully down his cheeks.

He moved to the living room and began to pace before his windows. The short winter day was coming to a close beyond the massive windows. Only the barest rim of the horizon was still awash in a bold orange that stood defiant of the encroaching purple-black of night. Kal gave up pacing when he found that it only made him feel even more trapped than before. He looked after Fasa's needs, though the distraction was far too brief. He attempted to read, but after reading the same line ten times and still not knowing what it said, he gave up. He flipped through the channels on his video screen, but found the sudden influx of sound to be unsettling without Lois' presence to offset it. He flicked the monitor off again and tossed the remote to the far end of the couch. He went back to pacing.

He was trying to obey his father's wishes. He was attempting to place his faith in Bil and his team. He was doing his utmost to keep to his word that he would do as his father commanded - to stay within his chambers until the threat was over and the abductors brought to justice. But every moment spent doing nothing was agony, torture unlike anything that Kal had ever experienced. It clawed at him from the inside out, tearing his guts and organs into bloody shreds. It made him want to scream out in frustration, in hurt, in terror. It filled him with such adrenaline that made him feel as though he could move mountains, divert rivers, tear down walls, and fly into the heavens to snuff out the stars.

He tried to rationalize with himself. He tried to convince himself that Bil and his team would be successful. He tried to make himself see that there was nothing that he could do that the others could not. And yet, he knew, even as he thought these things, that they weren't true. His gut instinct told him that *he* was the one who needed to explore the Uthors' manor. He'd been there before. Not many others had. Lux was very particular about who he allowed into his home. Kal felt certain that his foreknowledge was an advantage that would mark the difference between the mission being a success or a failure.

Resolve grew in him. It washed over his body; a cleansing wave that took away his fear, took away his depression, took away his feeling of being hopelessly lost. It gave him a purpose, a reason to continue to fight. He knew what he had to do, though the knowledge filled him with guilt.

"I'm so sorry, Dad," he whispered to the empty, lifeless room around him, his voice barely audible to his own ears.

He crossed the room, then picked up his phone. His fingers glided easily over the buttons, without him even needing to guide them with a conscious thought. He listened as the phone sprang into life, dialing the one person he could trust. After a long moment, the other end picked up and Kal let out a soft sigh of relief.

"Ruce? It's me, Kal. I need your help."

Half an hour later, Kal swallowed the last of his sandwich, which he'd whipped up from a few items he had in his modest pantry. He wasn't hungry, and the food tasted like dirt in his distracted, fearful state, but he knew that he needed the fuel it would afford his body. He'd eaten so little since the night before, when he'd been blissfully unaware of the attack that had been waiting for his family. He unceremoniously drained the last sip of water from his glass, then washed it in the sink in his kitchenette.

He knelt down, petted Fasa on the head, and enjoyed the sensation of the cat's deep, rhythmic purring for a moment.

"Be good," he whispered to the feline. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Kal zipped his thick coat up to his neck, stepped over to the windows in his living room, and opened it. He stepped out into the frigid night air and closed the sliding door behind him. From his vantage point on his narrow balcony, he watched the palace security patrols; dark shapes moving against a slightly less dark backdrop. Timing his movements so that he would not be caught, he dropped a length of rope down to the ground after securing the top to the railing. As he slowly and silently descended to the frozen ground below, he was infinitely glad that he still had some of the items he'd used in his brief military career, though he hadn't made it much past the training stage before his injury had forced his withdrawal from the force.

Once on the ground, Kal tugged on the rope enough to dislodge the hook he'd used to bind it to the railing, then he quickly coiled it and placed it into the pack he carried on his back. Luckily for him, the night was clear. Only a few shredded rags of thin clouds hung nearly motionless in the sky, outlined in silver-gray from the moonlight. The twin moons were close to full and threw down more than enough light to see by, but the light was cold, distant, and unfriendly to his upturned face. With a quick glance around to ensure that no one was in the vicinity, Kal hunched his shoulders against the freezing temperature and quickly headed off to the small, rarely used, and all but forgotten servant's path along the outermost rim of the gardens. The path was badly overgrown, and branches from various trees and hedges reached out towards him with groping fingers, begging him to stop and take note of them. He shouldered them aside, trying not to make any noise that would give himself away.

At last, he was far enough along the path. He stopped and looked around, trying to find what he needed. He chewed his lower lip absently as he searched. Then he saw it. One of the trees nearby was perfect. The branches started fairly low and grew out at almost regular intervals. It would be easy enough to climb. Kal would barely have to exert himself. And one thick, hopefully sturdy, limb reached out enough to kiss the top of the high stone wall that encircled the gardens; that ancient sentinel which protected the palace, though there had never been an attempt to breach the palace grounds, not for more than a thousand years.

Kal quickly made his way to the tree, then jumped up to grab a low branch. Using his upper-body strength, he easily pulled himself up into the tree. Carefully, he picked his path through the tangle of limbs and branches, testing each hand-and-foot-hold before fully committing his weight to them. The limbs were heavy with snow and slick with ice in places. A few times, he had to scramble to hold on as a hidden patch of ice appeared beneath his booted feet, despite his great care and the specially designed treads on the bottoms of his footwear. But at last, he made it to his target. Slowly, and with deliberate care, he eased himself out onto the limb, crawling across it on his belly, using his hands to grip the bark ahead of him and his toes to propel himself forward.

The limb groaned beneath him, so laden as it was with its heavy load of snow. Kal only hoped the added stress of his body weight would not cause the wood to crack. His hands reached forward, grabbing with fingers that were swiftly going numb. He wished desperately that he could put on his gloves, but the thick material was too ungainly for such a delicate operation. His feet pushed him forward, the rough bark sliding beneath his stomach as he moved. The limb let loose another agonized grunt.

"Just a little further," Kal whispered; to himself or the tree, he wasn't quite sure. "Almost there." It instantly became a mantra. "Just a little further." Reaching ahead, grabbing the bark. "Almost there." Pushing ahead with his toes, inching his body forward.

At last, Kal was at the wall. With infinite care, he lowered himself to the top of the stone wall, going so slowly he hardly felt he was moving at all. He crouched there, atop the wall, for a long moment, looking out, searching. Then he finally saw it, headlights moving in the distance, coming ever closer. Kal held his breath, hoping the approaching vehicle was the one he sought. As the hovercraft neared the wall, it slowed to a crawl. A small smile curled the edges of Kal's mouth for what felt like the first time that day. He'd recognize Ruce's vehicle anywhere.

Kal reached into his pocket and withdrew the small flashlight from within the confines of the thick material. With fingers too numb to feel it, he pressed the button, aiming the thin beam of light down to the snow-encrusted ground beyond the gardens. Ruce saw the signal. He edged the vehicle forward, throwing it into park ten feet from where Kal was. Kal put the device away, then eased his rope and hook from his pack once more. He drove the hook as deeply into the snow and ice as he could, then tugged on the line to see if it would hold. It looked steady enough, so he tossed the line over the side and began to slowly let himself down. The line was about five feet too short, so Kal released the rope once he reached the end, and allowed himself to fall the rest of the way. He landed feet-first in the snow, then quickly retrieved his rope once more.

He opened the passenger door of Ruce's vehicle, tossing his pack over his shoulder into the back seat as he sat. The heat within the hovercraft was more than welcome, and Kal pressed his frozen fingers to the vents before him, sighing gratefully as the warmth seeped into his digits.

"Thanks for coming," he said to his old friend. "I owe you one."

Ruce nodded. "Like I said, anything I can do to help, you can count me in. So...where to?"

"Your place," Kal said without hesitation. "I'll explain what I need to do on the way."

"Next stop, A'ne Manor," the young lord said with a grin. He put the vehicle into drive, guiding it over the frozen landscape with all speed.

As they moved further from the palace, some of the tension within Kal began to unfurl, slowly at first, but more swiftly as he grew closer to A'ne Manor. The farther they got from the palace, the more Kal felt his emotions changing. Despair gave way to hope. Fear fled before a sense of determination. Powerlessness bowed down to purposefulness. Restlessness became calm collectedness.

In only one thing did he still hold any reservations. He'd deliberately disobeyed his father's wishes. He felt horrible about that. He had never done a thing like this before. Oh, sure, he'd climbed a tree as a young boy when his father had told him not to. He'd snuck out into the gardens at night as a teenager to visit with the stars when his father had thought him fast asleep in his bed. But this wasn't the same as a boy pushing the envelope to see what he could and could not get away with. This...this was an outright betrayal. And it was eating away at Kal's conscience, like some vast, hungry beast that could not be sated.

He sighed to himself and then steeled his emotions once more. There would be plenty of time to beg his father's forgiveness once his brothers, sister-in-law, and wife were safe. Any punishment that Jor-El might deem necessary to dole out would be well worth it, if only Kal knew that the people he loved were safe and sound. He would spend the rest of his life apologizing for betraying his father's trust, for utterly defying his command, if only he could hold his wife in his arms again. Kal had heard a saying once, though he could no longer recall where he'd heard it. "Better to ask forgiveness than permission." Kal hadn't agreed with it at the time, at least not totally. But in this one, dire situation, he found himself siding with the saying. In his heart, he knew he was doing the right thing.

Ruce cast a concerned look at the prince, and Kal realized belatedly that he'd been silent for a long time. Clearing his throat, Kal began to speak. As quickly and concisely as possible, he filled his friend in on his plans. Ruce nodded thoughtfully as he drove, peppering Kal with small questions and concerns as the prince laid bare his intentions.

"Of course, you realize, I'm going with you," Ruce said, after Kal lapsed into silence once more.

Kal shook his head. "No. I need to do this alone."

Ruce shook his own head in return. "You don't get a choice in this."

"I'd say that I do. This is my family, Ruce. I won't ask you to put yourself in danger for them."

"Well, then, it's a good thing that you don't have to ask. Kal, look, you know that you and the others are like family to me. You guys are all I have, ever since my folks died. I have every right to help you in this. And, let's face it, you need me."

"Ruce..."

"No, Kal," the young noble said, cutting the prince off before he could argue. "You *do* need me. One person alone isn't going to be enough. What if someone's hurt? You need a second set of hands in this."

Kal sighed and slumped in his seat. He hated to admit it, but his friend was right. He *would* be better off with someone else at his side. It would be for the best if he had someone to watch his back, to ensure that this desperate rescue attempt did not fail. He sighed again and consigned himself to his fate.

"Okay," he finally said, nodding. "You win. You can come."

Ruce nodded, but did not speak. He crested a small hill and there it was before them; A'ne Manor, in all its glory. The young lord quickly brought his hovercraft around the back, to one of the numerous garages that held his collection of vehicles. He pulled into the empty spot that stood waiting for them, then put the vehicle into park and killed the engine. Kal grabbed his pack from the back seat and followed his friend through the door that connected into the manor itself.

As quietly as any mouse, the two men raced through the halls, unwilling to attract the attention of any of the staff. Kal knew that Ruce's manservant, Alph, would likely inform the Supreme Lord that his fugitive son was in the manor if he caught sight of him. But at this hour, the entire place was subdued; even the kitchen was eerily silent as they passed it.

They made it to Ruce's living quarters without incident. Kal breathed a sigh of relief as the door shut behind them, releasing a breath he hadn't even realized he'd been holding. He followed Ruce into the living room, shedding his coat as he walked, then sank into the dark brown leather couch. He took a deep, calming breath. He'd made it this far. He was out of the palace. He was at A'ne Manor. He was approximately a third of the way through with his plan already. He even felt slightly ahead of the schedule he'd concocted in his mind.

"Stay here," Ruce said. "I'll see what I can do as far as disguises go."

Kal nodded his consent and dropped his head into his hands. He did not watch as Ruce left the chambers. He was absorbed wholly within his own thoughts. Were his brothers okay? Had Nor hurt them? Would he truly kill one of them if Jor-El failed to turn over his throne to him? Was Zara okay? Was Lois okay? Was she scared? Had either of the women been hurt or...violated? Kal shuddered at the thought. He wasn't a violent man by any stretch of the imagination, but he would make Nor and his brothers pay if they had laid so much as a finger on either of the women.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when Ruce spoke from behind him, so lost to his thoughts he had become. He'd never even realized how much time had passed.

"I think I found just the ticket," the man said. He came around Kal's right side and dumped a bag onto the coffee table.

"What do you think?"

Kal carefully picked through the items. He studied each one as if it held the secrets of the universe, turning each object over to explore every angle. Most he placed into a pile of what he found useful. Others he disregarded. He felt bad about being overly critical, but it was absolutely vital that he was certain of every single item.

"These suits look great," he said, holding one of the black shirts up, inspecting it with a pleased, but critical eye. "Nor won't be able to tell the difference between these and the ones his own men wear."

"We don't have any of the medals or anything that the Uthor family's guards wear," Ruce said unhappily.

Kal shook his head. "It doesn't matter. The very newest of the Uthors' security guards don't have any. And I happen to know that Lux just added to his ranks about three weeks ago."

"Lucky for us."

"Well, *something* had to go our way," Kal said, trying to convince himself that his plan was foolproof. He gestured to the various make-ups and prosthetics that lay on the table. "You sure you know how to apply this stuff?"

Ruce made a face at Kal. "Of course I do. A'ne Endeavors created these. Now, be quiet and sit still. I'll do you up first."

Kal slid to the edge of the couch. He clamped his mouth shut over the light retort that was burning on his tongue. He closed his eyes and let Ruce get to work. As his friend's hands swept over his face again and again, Kal tried to picture what the final product would look like. The prosthetics felt odd against his flesh; not quite cold but not warm either, heavy on his skin though they barely weighed anything at all. Ruce worked with an efficiency that Kal hadn't quite expected, before the prince remembered with a jolt that Ruce almost always personally tested out the products his company created. Of course he would be familiar with applying the assortment of fake scars and pockmarks.

Kal tried not to think of how much time was slipping by as he and Ruce prepared themselves for the next leg of their mission. But at last, Ruce declared Kal to be finished. Feeling relieved, the prince took the rest of his disguise into the bathroom to change. He fought the impulse to examine Ruce's handiwork in the mirror. He wanted to get the full effect once he was dressed. Quickly, he changed his clothes, then looked in the mirror.

A stranger looked back at him.

A thin, pinkish scar ran down the center of his left eye, the surrounding flesh still puckered as it healed, old though the wound appeared. A similar wound sprouted from the corner of his mouth, twisting it down to a permanent half-scowl. Raised red acne had magically popped up all over his face. His nose was a different shape altogether, longer and more bulbous. Kal smiled to himself, and watched as the stranger in the mirror did the same. He slicked back his hair, hoping to further transform himself, then slipped on a false pair of glasses.

"Perfect," he said, seeing no trace of his former self in his reflection.

It took Ruce slightly longer to get his own disguise into place. Kal gaped as he looked at his friend, once he emerged from the bathroom. Ruce was not recognizable. The twenty-seven year old looked closer to fifty, with gray hair at his temples and old battle scars randomly appearing on his face and neck. He sported a thin line of a mustache above his upper lip and a neatly trimmed, graying goatee on his chin. Some extra padding to his suit made him appear heavier than he truly was.

Kal shook his head. "Incredible," he breathed.

Ruce shot him a wry smile. "I know I am."

He knelt on the dark green carpet of the room and tied on a pair of boots before helping Kal store things into some of the extra deep pockets of their guard-suits. Kal shoved a couple of

silver pouches into one pocket on his left leg; experimental energy-boosting drinks that Ruce's company was developing. A strong, slender pocket knife went into a different pocket. Ruce stuffed a small electronic device into his own pants pocket. He clipped a stun gun in a holster to his belt and handed another to Kal.

"Here," he said, as Kal took the weapon. "This dial here is the setting. A three will take down almost anyone without killing them." He gave the dial on his own gun a demonstrative twist. "A five is lethal."

Kal frowned as he looked at the weapon in his hand. He didn't like it one bit, but it was a necessary evil. With a sigh of regret that things had to be this way, he checked the setting, then holstered the gun. He promised himself that he would not draw the weapon unless it was absolutely necessary. But he also admitted to himself that he would need the weapon just to complete his disguise, if nothing else.

A few minutes later, the two men finished storing away everything they might need in their mission. Kal checked the battery life on his phone and set it to silent mode, then slipped it into his right pocket once he was satisfied. He nodded at Ruce. A nod passed between the two; the time had come. The next leg of their rescue mission was officially underway.

Back through A'ne Manor they went, hearts in their mouths. They slunk from shadow to shadow as they went, though not a single servant was to be seen. At last, they were back in the garage. Ruce selected one of his larger vehicles, one which would accommodate everyone once they freed the captives. As soon as they were clear of the garage, the young lord jammed his foot down on the gas. The hovercraft shot forward faster than Kal would have believed possible, though the new engine technology that A'ne Endeavors had created made the vehicle no louder than a baby's sigh.

"Ruce," Kal said after a moment, as his friend expertly guided the vehicle through the black night.

"Yeah?" he replied, somewhat distractedly.

"Thank you for this. You have no idea how much I appreciate your help." The words almost stuck in his throat as emotion swept over him.

"You're welcome. You know I'd do anything to help."

"I know. You've always been there when I've needed you."

"So have you," Ruce said quietly.

It did not take long to reach the Uthors' estate, Lux Manor. Ruce put the car into park half a mile away from the place, behind a screen of trees and a slight rise in the ground. It didn't fully hide the vehicle from sight, but it was the best they could hope for, and the hovercraft's dark paint job blended neatly into the night. And, more importantly, it was not in the vicinity of where Bil planned to station his team.

Out they trudged, into the bitter cold of the night, as the wind began to pick up. Kal could not get over how far the temperature had plummeted in the brief time since he had slipped out of his chambers. He wondered briefly if his absence had yet been noticed. But the thought didn't last long. It was only one searing flash across his mind, and it faded faster than the shooting stars he'd shared with Lois on the night they had fallen in love.

But the biting cold did have one distinct advantage. Not many guards were outdoors. Kal and Ruce were able to slip onto the Uthors' estate grounds without any difficulty. Finding a well-worn path of hard-packed snow indented with the impressions of numerous boot soles, they quickly blended into the patrol that was braving the elements. The few times that they passed other guards, they were given no more than a cursory glance. Such was the misery of being stuck out in the snow on duty.

As they rounded a corner of the estate, a commotion broke out. Guards went rushing out into the night. They were all yelling, but Kal couldn't make out what any one person was

saying. At last, coming around a tall evergreen hedge, Kal could see a small knot of bodies engaged in a fight. He longed to know what was going on. His heart ached for whoever was on the receiving end of the punches that were being thrown; he could tell even from that distance that it was only one, maybe two, against many. He took a step towards the ruckus, then stopped as Ruce grabbed his arm.

"We can't," Ruce hissed under his breath.

"We can't just leave whoever that is."

"We *have* to," Ruce insisted. "This is our chance to get inside. It may be our *only* chance."

Both men clamped shut their mouths as Lord Ran Uthor rushed past them, his coat half hanging off in his haste. He pulled on the dangling sleeve as he went, never stopping to give Ruce and Kal so much as a sideways glance. He shouted to the guards involved in the fray, but Kal wasn't listening to what was being said. Ruce was right. This was their chance to get inside. Still, it was not without regret that Kal turned and swiftly made a beeline for the door.

The warmth of Lux Manor slapped Kal in the face like a physical blow. It was almost unbearably hot inside. He quickly pulled off his hat and unzipped his coat. He couldn't just dump the items; he'd need them again when he and the others would make their escape. Assuming he could find them. Assuming that his certainty of Nor's involvement was not misguided. He would have to make do with wearing the bulky coat indoors.

"And just *what* are you doing here?"

The voice came from behind them and Kal started at the unexpected sound. He turned slowly, swallowing hard as he did so. He knew the voice well, would know it in any circumstance, even if he could not see its owner. He sent out a quick prayer that his disguise would hold up. This was it. The true test had finally come. He forced down his features so that they would not reflect the node of fear that had crept back into his guts and found the familiar place it had been occupying since Lois and the others had been taken.

"Sorry?" he asked, pitching his voice deeper than it was. It sounded forced and stupid to his ears.

Jen Mai sighed in exasperation. "It's sorry, *my lord*," he reminded Kal, as though he'd done so a hundred times before. "I thought Lord Uthor ordered you new guards to safeguard the prisoners?"

"Oh, right," Kal said, dramatically bowing in apology. "We were just on our way. My lord."

Jen Mai arched a skeptical eyebrow and pointed. "That way," he said, shaking his head. He gestured to the opposite direction from which Kal and Ruce had been facing.

"Right. Sorry, my lord," Ruce said, coming to Kal's aid. "We got a little turned around."

"When will Lord Uthor hire people who know what they're doing?" the Elder complained under his breath. "Down the hall. Take your first two right turns. And *try* not to screw up anymore today."

"Yes, my lord," the two men said, bowing.

They turned from Jen Mai and hurried down the hall, trying to maintain a dignified pace even as they escaped the scrutiny of the Elder's gaze. It was difficult for Kal not to throw a glance backward. He wanted to know if the Elder was watching their progress. His breath was held within his lungs, despite his best efforts to remain calm. Seeing Jen Mai had caused his heart to seize up in his chest. He knew now that his instincts had been correct. Jen Mai was working with the Uthors, though Kal still couldn't be sure if Lux was directly involved. Though the Elder had mentioned "Lord Uthor," he could have easily been discussing Nor, Ran, or Drull.

Only sheer willpower kept Kal's body from turning around to see if the man was still watching them. From where the

willpower had come, the prince couldn't say. He hadn't thought himself capable of keeping his calm collectedness, not in a situation like this. This wasn't some prickly political issue to solve. This wasn't the heat of battle, when his body seemed to act almost independently of his thoughts. This was desperation at its very worst, where Kal's mind seemed to have enough time to question his every movement.

The hall before him seemed to stretch out into eternity. Every step forward seemed to make the distance between himself and his goal become somehow torturously longer, not shorter. So, it was with immense relief that he finally reached the first right turn and moved out of the possibility of Jen Mai's watchful eyes. The new section of hall seemed a veritable sanctuary, and his aching lungs finally spilled out the breath they had been holding. They passed a few patrolling guards, but no one stopped them. There was nothing notable about the two brand-new guards, and so there was no reason to bother with them. Before long, Kal and Ruce reached the second right turn and froze in their tracks as they rounded the corner.

Lux and Nor Uthor were emerging from behind a hidden door. Their backs were to Ruce and Kal as they shut the door behind them. Kal backed up one step before he realized his feet were moving. He forced himself to stop and watch the two lords before him, memorizing where the door was before it faded into a perfect camouflage with the surrounding wall. The thought occurred to him that he should flee to the safety of the hallway he'd just left. Fresh worries seared through his mind. Would his disguise hold up? What if Nor and his father stayed around the area? How would he and Ruce find a way to get to the captives then?

As the prince debated these things in his mind, the two men turned and saw Kal and Ruce. Lux fixed them with a cold stare. Kal felt as if his entire disguise was stripped away, leaving him naked and vulnerable before the powerful lord. Powerful and evil, Kal knew now. The simple fact that he'd seen Lux emerge from a hidden door with his son confirmed for Kal the unhappy knowledge that the man was also in on the kidnapping and extortion plot.

Kal didn't turn away from Lux's piercing gaze, even as he heard the pounding of feet coming from behind him. To turn was to admit fear. To turn was to admit wrongdoing. And he refused to blow his cover for any reason.

The squeaking of wet boot soles on the marble seemed painfully loud to Kal's ears, but at least it served to divert Lux and Nor's attentions. Both men's heads snapped up to look at the guard that came running up.

"My lords," the man said, breathless from his sprint through the immense mansion.

"What is it now?" Lux growled in annoyance.

"We've been breached!"

"Breached?" Nor asked. "Explain."

Kal's heart nearly stopped. Had someone noticed them? Had the dots been connected? It was a fight to keep his features neutral, on the chance that the man was *not* actually speaking about Ruce and himself.

"Two of Jor-El's security guards tried to sneak onto the estate. And there is a small contingent of their men snooping around to the south."

"What?!" Lux roared, his dark eyes flashing with unrestrained fire. Kal had rarely ever seen the man lose his temper before, and now that he was witnessing it, it sent a jolt of fear into his heart.

"My men apprehended the two trying to sneak in from the east side. They were disguised as our own."

"They must know... or at least, suspect," Nor muttered to his father.

"It would seem so." Lux sighed as his composure returned.

His gaze flickered from his son to the security guard again.

"Where are they now?"

"The main hall," the man said. "They were only just brought in now. We are awaiting your command."

"Very well," Lux replied evenly. "Let's see just what they thought they were doing. Have them brought to my study."

Nor nodded. "You two!" he snapped, pointing at Ruce and Kal. "Don't just stand there staring!"

"Yes, my lord," Ruce said when Kal failed to speak. "What would you ask of us?"

"Guard this hall," the man all but spat at them. "No one comes down here, period. Kill anyone who does. I don't care if it is one of your own. Do you understand me?"

"Of course, my lord," Ruce said, bowing his head slightly.

"Good. If you fail me, I will have your heads."

"Yes, my lord," Kal said, finally finding his voice, despite his parched mouth. "Of course." He only just barely remembered to put on his feigned deeper voice.

Not another word was said to them as Lux and Nor followed after the guard who had sought them out. Kal watched them as they disappeared around the corner, and strained his ears to listen to their retreating footsteps. When they were truly gone from the area, he allowed himself a small sigh of relief.

"That was close," he whispered to Ruce. "I thought for sure they recognized me."

"I thought so too for a second there," Ruce admitted. "Now, how do we get this door open?"

"There has to be a switch or something," Kal said, examining the wall before them.

The short hall branched off to a T intersection before them. And in the center of it lay the hidden door, though it was so expertly placed that it was nearly impossible to tell that it was there. Kal approached the wall and ran his hands over the expensive cherry-colored wood. He knew the wood had been imported from the furthest planet that Krypton had trade routes with, and that it cost close to ten times more than any other wood because of how hard it was to come by. Most of Lux Manor used the same type of wood, and Kal calculated that the wood in just this hallway alone cost more than most commoners made in a year.

"It has to be here somewhere," he mumbled to himself, growing more anxious by the moment. "Come on. Come on. Come on. Where are you?" He was talking to the wall now, as if pleading with it would magically make the door spring open.

His questing fingers glided over the decorative pieces that had been carved into the wood. As they caressed the image of a majestic stag, the antlers gave way beneath his touch. There was a soft, but audible click, and the door silently swung open towards them.

"Nice work," Ruce commended him. "What did you touch?"

Kal showed him the secret switch he'd accidentally discovered. "Let's go."

"After you."

Lights shone beyond the doorway, illuminating a metal staircase leading down to some underground area. The stairs were so crude, so stark and unadorned, that it was hard to conceive of them being part of Lux Manor at all. Kal took a deep breath and crossed over the threshold. Down the stairs he went, while Ruce followed, shutting the secret door tightly behind him. Exquisite wooden walls gave way to naked stone, and the almost summery warmth of the mansion was quickly vanquished by a frigid iciness that rivaled the outdoors. Kal shivered a little as he descended the steps, but he did not slow to do so much as pull his coat tighter against his body. Every footstep set the metal beneath his toes ringing, and the surrounding stone threw the noise back at him.

At last, he reached the floor. A wall ran along both of his

sides, but the left side quickly opened up and spilled into another chamber. A chamber filled with cells. Four were occupied. One stood empty. The closest of the imprisoned bodies were huddled with their backs to him, trying to share body heat as best they could between the bars that separated them from their neighbors. At his approach though, four heads snapped up to peer at him, eyes wide and wondering what new indignities they would be forced to suffer.

Kal's knees nearly buckled in relief when he recognized his loved ones.

He had to grip the bars of Lois' cell to steady himself after stumbling forward. Instantly, she was on her feet, her dark eyes flashing. She punched his fingers as hard as she could and Kal's mouth dropped open in surprise, as he momentarily forgot his disguise.

"Get away," she said, her voice as hard and cold as the stone and metal that held her prisoner. "Just get away from us."

"Lois," he said, his voice going soft as the fear in his body started to once more uncoil. "It's me."

"Me," she sneered, obviously not impressed by his eloquence. "You all look the same to me. Just as mean and stupid as the men you work for."

"Lois," he said, trying again. "It's Kal. By Rao, I've been so worried about you."

Lois seemed to recognize his voice this time, though she looked dubiously at him. "Kal?" she finally ventured to ask. "Is that really you?"

"It's really me," he said, giving her a lopsided grin. He removed his false glasses, hoping she'd recognize him a little better.

His wife's face broke out into a huge smile. "It is you! Oh, Kal, I knew you'd come."

"Are you okay?" Kal asked, looking her over for any outward signs of injury. "Did they hurt you? Did they touch you?"

Lois shook her head. "I'm fine. But Zara needs a doctor."

"Zara?" he asked, looking over to the next cell, where Ching's wife lay on the floor, looking up at him with wide eyes. He could not miss the dark stain of blood covering the front of her pants. "Oh no. Was it...?"

"Another miscarriage," Zara said, her eyes brimming with unshed tears as she looked away from him. Her voice sounded calm, but hollow to Kal's ears; not quite accepting of the situation, but somehow resigned to the fact that she had lost another baby.

"I'm so sorry, Zara." Kal's gaze swept over the cages. "I've been going out of my mind with worry for you guys. So has Dad." His eyes moved again to Lois. "I've missed you so much."

"I've missed you too. I was so relieved when I realized Uthor's men hadn't gotten you too."

Kal pressed against the bars of Lois' cell and she did the same. A second later, their lips met in a deep, desperate kiss. Kal felt life returning to his destroyed heart, felt the fragile, jagged pieces reassembling themselves within his chest. Just seeing, hearing, feeling his wife was enough to erase all the sorrow he'd been carrying. He could feel Lois' hot tears as they rolled down her cheeks and met his own flesh. He raised his hands to cup her face through the bars and gently wiped the salty droplets away.

"Sssh. Sssh. It's okay," he whispered against her lips as they both broke to take a breath. "I'm here now. I won't let anything else happen to you, I promise."

"Oh, by the way," Jai said from his cell, his voice edging towards panic, "the rest of us are just fine, thanks for asking."

"Ruce and I will get you out of here," Kal swore, reluctantly stepping away from Lois.

"Good to see you, little brother. But Lux has the keys," Ching said, standing at the door of his cage, gripping the bars with white-knuckled intensity, though his eyes were solely fixed on his

own wife.

"Figures," Kal said, eyeing the locks on the cells and replacing the frames on his face.

Of course Lux had gone with old fashioned lock and key setups for the makeshift prison. Most people had stopped using such antiquated technology centuries ago. Key cards had been all the rage for a long time, and many still used that system, though biometric readers had recently come into vogue. Kal found himself wishing that Lux had used any of the electronic systems to lock the doors. Ruce had a number of small devices on him that were capable of short-circuiting such systems. It would have allowed them to open the cages within seconds.

"Can you get us out?" Jai asked, his face stark white in terror. Kal couldn't even begin to imagine what had spooked his baby brother so badly.

"I'll find a way," Kal assured him. "In the meantime, here." He withdrew the small silver pouches that he'd stuffed into his pockets. He handed each of them one. "It's an energy drink. I'm guessing you need it."

In truth, they each looked haggard. Kal imagined they probably hadn't gotten much, if any, sleep, not in such dire cold conditions. And there was no evidence that they had been fed either. He knew the energy drinks would be just what they needed. It would afford them enough energy to get out of Lux Manor and back home to the palace, where they would properly be cared for. Plus, it had the added benefit of warming a person from the inside out, though A'ne Endeavors had deemed that a flaw with the formula, and was still actively working to fix what the company saw as a major problem.

Ruce took out one of the small devices he'd taken with him. He went first to Zara's cell. A wide blue laser shot out from the device, and he quickly scanned her body. A few seconds later, he read the result on the tiny screen, then moved on to the next cell. He nodded thoughtfully as each reading flashed on screen.

"No injuries," he announced to Kal. "Some trace amounts of a powerful tranquilizer in their systems. Not enough to be of any concern now. But Zara needs to get to a doctor regardless."

Kal nodded absently, still eyeing the locks. He hadn't planned for this. He'd anticipated electronic ones. But it made sense, in a weird, twisted way. Lux loved technology, and was often one of the first people to try out a new product. But he also had a fondness for antiques. And the locks Kal was looking at now certainly counted as antiques.

Finally, a thought occurred to the prince, and he reached for his pocket knife. Flipping it open, he inserted the blade into the lock on Lois' cell. For five long minutes, he worked at it, trying to find the sweet spot that would allow him to unlock the inner mechanism. His heart thudded so loudly against his ribs that he was certain the entire manor must have been able to hear it.

With one final attempt, he twisted the knife and was rewarded with a satisfying click. In the next instant, Lois had the door open and was in his arms. He held her tightly to himself, and felt all his inner darkness fading away with the sunlight she brought to his life. Judging by the way her arms tightened around his neck, he was certain she felt the same way.

After a long moment, he disentangled himself from his wife's embrace. Ruce had followed his lead, and already had Zara's door unlocked. The young lord stepped inside the cage and helped the princess from the floor, allowing her to lean on him as she stood. Kal didn't stop to watch. He began to work at Ching's lock, his hands shaking and clumsy from the cold in the room and from trying to work too fast. He was all too aware of how long it had been since he and Ruce had discovered the hidden prison chamber.

"Easy, Kal," Ching said, trying to calm his younger brother's nerves. "Slow and steady."

Kal shook his head. "We've only got a very short window of

time to get you guys out of here. There was a plan to send in a couple of Bil's men to find you, but they got caught. Lux and Nor went to interrogate them. Who knows how long that might last? We have to move *now*."

Another frenzied shove at the lock finally opened it. Kal sighed in relief. In the next second, the door to Ching's cell swung open and he was crossing the distance to Zara. Kal watched as his brother embraced his wife. He saw the tears flowing anew from Zara's eyes, and his heart broke once more for them. Ching held Zara tightly to him, his hand stroking her head, trying to impact some comfort to her - comfort she'd been denied as they had sat in their separate cells. Kal heard Zara say something as she buried her head into Ching's chest, but it was too muffled to make out over the rapid beating of Kal's own heart.

"I know," Ching murmured, his voice barely audible. "I'm so sorry. Sssh. Sssh. It's okay. I'm here. I've got you."

Zara moaned in anguish, a soul-twisting sound. Kal could see the shaking of her shoulders as she wept.

"I promise you," Ching said, rubbing her back, "we *will* have a healthy baby one day. I'll find a way. Some treatment. Something. I promise."

His heart breaking for the couple, Kal forced himself to look away. He had to stay focused. Time was passing by. The longer they stayed in the dungeon, the greater the chance was that their rescue mission would be discovered. And that was a chance they could not afford to take.

"How are you doing over there, Ruce?" Kal asked, a hint of impatience creeping into his voice, despite his efforts to tamp it down.

"Almost there," the man replied.

Ruce was already working on Jai's cage, as the man inside paced restlessly. Kal knew that something was wrong, something deeper than just their confinement, based on Jai's erratic movements and colorless face. He wanted to ask. He really did. But he had to keep Jai focused on their escape. Ruce swore under his breath as he worked at picking the lock until it finally opened. The door to the cell swung open with a loud groan.

"Thank you," Jai said gratefully. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

"Jai," Kal said, taking his brother by the shoulders and shaking him gently. "Jai, look at me. I need you to focus now, okay? We need to get out of here. I need you to help me now, all right? Can you do that for me?"

Kal discreetly shot a look at Ching. An unspoken message passed between the two brothers in that glance. Ching nodded his head slightly.

Jai's eyes finally focused on Kal. The man swallowed hard and nodded. "Okay. I'll try."

"Good. I want you to help Zara, okay?"

Kal knew that he needed to get Jai to focus on a task, any task. He needed to stop fixating on whatever had so badly unnerved him. Helping Zara would give Jai something to do. And, Kal knew, if it came to a struggle, he would need Ching free to fight. He was a much better fighter than Jai was, and the best shot with a gun out of the three of them.

"Okay," Jai said again.

"Good man. Let's get out of here."

Ruce led the way back up the metal stairs, this time going slowly so as to minimize the noise they were making. Zara leaned heavily on Jai, in pain or from her grief, Kal couldn't tell. Lois followed the pair, then Ching, with Kal bringing up the rear. At the top of the stairs, Ruce cautiously opened the door a crack, just enough to be able to survey the hallway. Kal knew it to be utterly abandoned as the man pushed the door open further, then slipped out into the hall.

"Hurry," he whispered back, the sound bouncing off the stone

walls. He waved them on with one hand for emphasis. "The coast is clear."

Like silent ghosts, they all slipped out into the hallway, one by one. Kal closed the door behind him, sealing off the hidden chamber as though it had never been. Ruce led the group down to the first intersection, then cautiously checked the hall it connected with. He glanced over his shoulder, his gaze sweeping over everyone. Then he nodded, unwilling to make a single unnecessary noise. As a unit, they all moved forward, hearts in their mouths.

The trip back down this section of hall seemed somehow impossibly longer to Kal than it had been when he'd been trying to find his family. He flexed his fingers, brushing them against the grip of the gun hanging holstered at his side. His nerves were balanced on a knife's edge as they rounded the corner and began to traverse that last, vital section of the hall. After that, they would be out in the open. Kal only hoped luck would favor them and that no one would be there to witness their escape. The hall had seemed to stretch into eternity earlier, when Jen Mai had sent Ruce and Kal on their way. Now, it felt as though it took only two short steps to reach the end. Ruce stopped and peered out into the open expanse of the mansion's sizable entranceway.

"Guards," he whispered back. "Let's wait a moment."

Kal could hear voices speaking out in the main chamber, but he could not see who spoke them. Ruce pointed; the men were off to the left, hidden behind the wall. Kal tried to listen to what the guards were saying, but he could not make it out as the voices echoed in the vast, open space, the sounds tumbling over one another until they knotted into an unintelligible mess. Another voice cut in, barking orders Kal couldn't quite catch. He heard the squeaking of wet boots on the floor as the men began to move.

"They're being sent out, probably to deal with Bil's men in the south," Ruce whispered again. "Let's go, while there's still time."

They moved out from their meager shelter, darting across the open floor. With great care and all speed, they made for the door that would take them outside, hopefully beyond the gaze of any of the guards, though Kal didn't hold much hope for that. Chances were great that the watch on the estate grounds had been doubled, now that Bilan's men had been discovered. He wasn't naive enough to believe that all the guards had been sent to the southern end of the estate.

Kal also knew it was only a matter of time before someone noticed what was going on.

They had almost attained the door when Lord Nor came striding down the grand staircase in the middle of the room. He gave a bestial roar as he caught sight of the fleeing captives. Kal's hand shot to his weapon. He drew it from its holster and pressed it into Ching's hand, along with his phone.

"Kal? What are you doing?" the crown prince asked.

"Take it. You need it more than I do. Get them out of here, Ching. Please, make sure Lois stays safe. And...tell Dad that I'm sorry."

Ruce opened his mouth to speak, to take Kal's place as the diversion. But before he could, Kal pushed the gun and phone firmly into his brother's hands. Then he ran. Away from his family. Straight towards Nor.

A yell erupted from Kal's throat as he rushed towards his foe. All of his focus was aimed at the young lord before him. He pushed all thoughts of his family from his mind. He needed a clear head for this battle, more than he'd ever needed it before. Kal ducked his body at the last moment, bending at the waist, and plowed his shoulder directly into Nor's midsection, driving the air from his lungs. He crashed into Nor with all the force he could muster, and succeeded in sending the man sprawling.

Kal chanced a look back, and saw his family watching,

mouths open. “Go!” he ordered them. “Get out while you can!”

Ching seemed indecisive for a split second, but then he nodded and ushered everyone towards the doors. Kal breathed a sigh of relief before turning back to face his old rival.

“*You*,” Nor said, staggering to his feet and wheezing out the words furiously. “I don’t know who you are, but I will *kill* you for this.”

Kal opened his mouth to make a retort, but did not get the chance as Nor aimed a blow at his face. The prince barely missed receiving a punch to his jaw. But Nor’s fury had been stoked to levels Kal had never before seen, not from Nor, not from anyone. It made the man even more volatile and unpredictable than normal. Kal recognized that fact too late. But it didn’t matter to him. What mattered was that he keep Nor busy. What mattered was that the people he loved got to safety. Looking at the fire burning in Nor’s eyes, Kal knew it would be nothing short of a miracle if he survived this encounter. He was oddly at peace with that knowledge. He would happily lay down his own life to ensure that the others made it home, safe and sound.

Nor lunged, striking Kal in the center of his chest. The prince staggered back three steps, reeling from the force of the impact. His body exploded into pain from the hit but before he could even wonder if anything was broken, Nor was on him again, tackling him to the ground. The prince felt his bad knee pop and twist into an excruciating position. He could not stifle the sharp cry of pain that bubbled up into his throat and out passed his lips. Kal rolled, trying to get off his back, trying to pin Nor to the ground to subdue him, but the pain in his leg hobbled even that simple movement at first, until Kal funneled all his efforts into it.

The two men tussled on the floor, rolling one over the other again and again in an effort to gain the upper hand. Nor shouted for back-up, but he’d misjudged the placement of his guards. Most of the men had been sent back out into the cold night to keep a lookout for any further intruders. No one came to his aid as he yelled.

Rolling Kal once again onto his back, Nor took advantage of his position to slug Kal in the face. The right lens of the false glasses cracked into a spider-webbing of thin fractures, though it did not shatter. It was the only thing that protected the prince’s face from taking the hit. Nor growled and ripped the frames from Kal’s face, throwing them halfway across the room. His hand flew up to the prosthetic scar above Kal’s eye, hoping to deal some damage to the wound. As his fingers reached the phony scar and touched the rubbery “flesh,” a look of surprise crossed the young nobleman’s face. In the next moment, he was ripping the scar from Kal’s face, heedless of the fact that some of Kal’s actual skin was being removed along with the false skin.

“Kal-El,” Nor said, smirking, as the prince’s face started to become recognizable. “What a pleasant surprise. At least I’ll get to kill *you*. In fact, I think I’ll kill you last, once my men recapture the rest of your pathetic family. I want you to watch as they suffer and die at my hands.”

“Touch my family again and I’ll rip you apart with my bare hands,” Kal spat back, muscles straining as he sought a way to break Nor’s vice-like grip on him.

But Nor was too strong, even for Kal, and he had a better vantage than the prince did at any rate. He forced the prince’s head up, then smashed it against the marble floor. Stars exploded before Kal’s eyes and his head rang. He managed to reflexively kick out, his knee colliding with Nor’s body, right in his stomach. A look of pain shot across Nor’s face, and Kal took the opportunity he had been given. Shoving aside his own pain, Kal struck out. His fist crashed into Nor’s jaw with a sickening crunch. Both men heard the snap of bone, and Kal wondered if he’d broken his own knuckles in the process as pain shot up the entire length of his arm.

Still, the injury barely slowed the prince’s rival. Despite

himself, Kal was, in a strange, remote way, impressed. Nor grabbed Kal by the throat, his grip like steel around the soft, vulnerable flesh. Kal blindly tried to reach for the pocketknife in his pocket, but his angle was bad and he could not reach it. That did not stop him from continuing to try, and Nor was too distracted to notice.

“I could crush your throat right now,” Nor gloated over him. “It wouldn’t take much.” He spoke through gritted teeth against the shattered bones of his lower jaw. His grip tightened a notch to prove his point. “But that would be *far* too easy on you.”

Again and again, Nor smashed Kal’s head into the hard, solid floor. Kal’s head erupted into a steady stream of agony and his vision faded to flashes of Nor interspersed with flashes of white-hot, searing nothingness. Time seemed to stand still as he tried to fight the abuse his body was suffering, though part of him knew he’d been fighting Nor for only a minute or two, at the most. Kal kept striking out with his fist, pummeling it against Nor, in the man’s face, in his chest, wherever he managed to land a blow, while his other hand kept questing for the knife he had hidden away in his pocket. Darkness encroached on the edges of Kal’s mind. It was a fight just to remain conscious.

At last, Kal worked the pocketknife free and flicked the blade open. With a roar that matched the burst of strength he had worked up against Nor, he pushed his assailant back enough to stop the next attempt to hurl his head into the cold, solid floor. But his vision was hazy with hurt and the darkness that beckoned him to surrender himself. He relied on instinct alone as he slashed with the weapon. It took Nor across his cheek; Kal was rewarded with a hiss of pain, a sharp curse, and a line of torn and bleeding flesh on Nor’s face. Kal stabbed, and only just missed impaling Nor’s left eye.

Nor roared in response to Kal’s actions. With a backhanded swing, he sent Kal’s knife flying. The weapon raced across the smooth floor, spinning as it went, like a child’s toy gone wrong. In the next instant, Nor pulled his own knife. The blade inched closer and closer to Kal’s exposed throat. Kal reached up and grabbed Nor’s wrist, making his grip as tight as he could while wrenching it from side to side, in a desperate attempt to break free from the deadly position he was in, though his vision began to swim in and out of focus. He forced his feet into Nor’s midsection, and attempted to flip the man off him. But his damaged knee buckled at the movement, and Kal bit back a cry of pain.

The prince gave one final twist to Nor’s wrist. He must have hit a nerve, for the lord’s fingers suddenly released their grip on the knife. Nor made an attempt to grab it with his other hand, but Kal was faster and knocked it away to join the pocketknife several feet away on the floor. He didn’t want to use the weapon; the chance was too great that Nor might somehow wrest it from him to use on him again. It wouldn’t take much, as Kal tenuously held on to his rapidly fading consciousness. Again, Nor forced Kal’s head into the marble floor. Kal only just barely held on to consciousness, blacking out for a second before he pulled himself to alertness once more. He managed a weak punch to Nor’s already shattered jawbone.

The punch took the last remnants of Kal’s energy. His injuries were getting the best of him. Nor’s grip fastened about his throat and Kal found that he did not have the strength to fight, though he dearly wanted to. But suddenly, Nor lurched forward. His grip relaxed and his eyes rolled up into his head. His mouth went slack and he keeled over to one side.

That was the last thing Kal saw before his eyes closed and nothingness washed over him.

Above Nor, Lois stood rubbing her elbow. The sheer force she’d used to smash into the back of Nor’s head had been hard enough to jar her entire arm and most of her body. A stinging pain bloomed. But she did not stop to tend to her pain. She bent and

retrieved Nor's gun from where it hung at his side. She trained the barrel on Nor's unconscious form, just in time. Lux Uthor came rushing down the stairs, mercifully unarmed, Lois could see. She placed her finger on the trigger, and swiveled her eyes back to Lux's son.

"Not another step," she threatened. "Or I'll blow his head off."

Her voice quavered the slightest bit as she spoke. Her heart was thudding faster than she had ever thought possible. It had been, ever since she had thrown a glance back at Kal, seen him struggling, and made the split-second decision to run back to his aid, before Ching or any of the others noticed her absence. Now, however, her concern lay solely with her husband.

"Kal?" she called to him. "Kal? Come on, answer me. Please, answer me."

He did not answer, did not stir. Lois fought down the bubble of panic that rose within her. She chanced a glance at his unmoving body, and was relieved to see that his chest still rose and fell with breath, labored though it seemed. Her eyes flickered back to Nor.

"Come now," Lux said, his voice as smooth as the finest silk. "You don't really think that you have the guts to pull that trigger, do you? Do you really think *I* believe it?"

Lux took another measured step forward. Lois met his eyes, her own blazing.

"Care to test that theory?" she said, her voice as cold as the ice and snow beyond the walls of the mansion.

Lux's hands went up in a gesture of pacification. But he also stopped moving, much to Lois' relief. She tried to tell herself that she really would kill Nor if she had to, but wasn't so sure Lux was incorrect in his assessment. She wasn't made of strong enough stuff to take a life, was she?

"I'm sure we can talk this out," Lux said. His voice was still soft and steady in an attempt to appease her.

"I'm sure that we *can't*," she shot back.

On the floor in front of her, Nor groaned and began to stir. His eyes flickered open and his hand automatically flew up to touch the tender spot on the back of his head. Lois redoubled her grip on the gun.

"Don't move," she hissed. "Not unless you want to die today."

Nor twisted his head ever so slightly to look at her. He stopped cold when he saw his weapon in her hands and the hardened look on her face. But his eyes were calculating. Lois could see that much at least. She wished Kal would wake up. She needed his help. She felt certain he would know what to do. But he still wasn't moving at all, his breathing the only outward sign that he was still among the living.

Footsteps sounded behind her. Lois' heart seized up with dread. This was it. She was about to die, along with Kal. She hadn't even had the chance to tell him one last time that she loved him. She hadn't been allowed one final kiss, one she would have committed to memory in every single way. She hadn't been afforded a farewell. She hadn't gotten to make love to him one last time. She'd never had the chance to start a family with him. She would never know what it would be like to grow old with him.

All of these regrets seared through her mind in a flash. And yet, she was grateful for all the time she had been given with Kal. She was thankful for the love she'd found with him. She was happy she'd given him a second chance. She was thankful for the way he'd accepted her, as she was, and for all the encouragement he'd given her to be herself.

An involuntary shudder ran up her spine as she listened to the pounding footsteps behind her. But she did not pull her gaze away, did not close her eyes as she awaited the inevitable. She merely moved her vision from Nor's face to Kal's. If she was to

die, she would do so looking at the man who held her heart; her husband and her best friend.

"I love you, Kal," she whispered.

"Nobody move!"

Lois' knees nearly gave way beneath her as she recognized the voice. Bilan Hend'son. She'd only met him a few brief times, but she would know that voice anywhere. Her heart leapt in her throat. They were saved, if indeed it was not too late for her husband.

Kal felt himself slogging through a wasteland of darkness that tried to hold him back, as if he were stuck in some thick, invisible sap that weighed down every movement he attempted to make. He was amazed as he completed each step, and simultaneously wondered if he'd have the strength to take another. Yet step after step, he moved forward, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, that gave him the slightest impression of where he was. In fact, the monotony was so intense, so completely uniform that after a while, he began to wonder if he was actually moving at all, or if he was somehow stuck in place, like some unseen treadmill.

Sometimes, he thought he could hear voices in the dark, both male and female alike, but they echoed terribly, like souls shrieking in torment. He thought that he could recognize them, but always, as soon as he got close to remembering where he'd heard them before, the memory would slip away faster than sand through his spread fingers. It frustrated the prince, possibly more than the heaviness that had settled into his limbs, and which threatened to stop him in his tracks. Somehow, he knew that he couldn't stop. To stop was to admit defeat. To stop was to die.

And he desperately didn't want to die.

After a while, some of the syrupy thickness in the air seemed to let up. His movements came easier, and he allowed himself a chance to take a deep breath of relief. But he felt so tired from the long battle he'd fought to get to that point. And yet, he could not stop, could not allow death to catch up to him.

For a long time, he wandered in the dark, still lost, still trying to find his way home. He pressed on, searching for any sign of a way out, silently pleading for some shred of evidence that his loved ones were safe. He wasn't sure how long he waded through the darkness. Hours? Days? Weeks? He couldn't be sure. Time had no hold in that place. He was aware that time had to have been passing by, but it seemed almost unimportant somehow.

Eventually, he felt his entire body grow lighter, and his feet seemed to lift right off the ground, though there was no way of knowing for sure. No ground could be seen, just as there was no sky, no roof, no indication of what lay above. He felt as though he were floating, up, up, and away to whatever was above him. Kal had one fleeting moment of panic, and he fought the impulse to yell out. But he did not fight the sensation as his body rose. Instead, he found that the higher he rose, the more at peace he felt. He felt relieved too, as if his body were floating to the surface after spending too much time underwater. Up and up he went, faster and faster until at last he felt that surely he could not go any higher. He felt himself break through some invisible barrier, felt it as surely as he would have felt himself coming to the surface in the palace pools during a swim.

Slowly, Kal opened his eyes. He had to blink several times to dispel the haze that lingered before his field of vision, obscuring everything. He found himself looking straight up at a plain white ceiling that seemed oddly familiar, despite the fact that it could have been anywhere. For several long minutes, he merely studied the blank canvas before his eyes, trying to get his bearings. The last thing he remembered was Lord Nor's ugly face scowling down at him as he repeatedly smashed Kal's head into the cold marble floor of Lux Manor. Another surge of panic bubbled in his chest and seized his heart, but after a few calming breaths, he

came to realize that that wasn't where he was now. Gradually, he became aware of the feather softness beneath him; a warm, comfortable bed. The faint trace of laundry detergent still clung to the sheets gently draped over his body. He took comfort in that knowledge. It meant he wasn't in immediate danger of being killed, or dying some horrible, painful death.

Kal slowly moved his head to his right, trying to decipher where on Krypton he was. He was greeted with a tightly balled mass of purring orange fur. Kal smiled. Fasa. Which meant that he had to be home, in his own chambers. A wave of relief washed over his body, loosening some of the tension that had been steadily building back up within him.

Beyond the sleeping cat, Kal could see the large windows in the chamber. It was the dead of night, that he could see at first glance. It had been dark when he and Ruce had implemented their prison break plan. But as Kal continued to look, he noticed that something was off. The night didn't look quite right to him. The moons were the wrong shapes. And the stars were in the wrong positions. There was no way this was the same night.

Gingerly, Kal moved his head to the left. Pressure was building in his skull, making it feel as if it were stuffed full of cotton, and there was a deep, dull ache that seemed to emanate from the very center of his brain. His head felt enormous, as big as the very palace he lived in. He shut his eyes against the sensation, even as he lolled his head to the side. After a moment, he opened his eyes again. His heart caught in his throat.

Lois.

His wife was sitting in a chair that was pushed up against the bed. She was slumped forward, her upper torso sprawled across the thick emerald green comforter. Her arms were crossed beneath her head and her face was turned towards him. A lock of dark brown hair spilled over her face, obscuring one closed eye. She was breathing evenly, fully immersed in the realm of sleep, her lips slightly parted. But even in sleep, there were lines of worry creasing her face, though Kal thought he'd never seen so beautiful a sight in all his life.

A huge smile curved Kal's lips and the last bit of fear his heart had been harboring vanished instantaneously. Lois was safe. She was home, with him. And she did not appear to be injured in any way. Gently, Kal moved his arm, noticing for the first time the various intravenous lines and wires that ran into the back of his left hand and his inner elbow, with one running down to his finger to a device that was monitoring his heart rate. He chose to ignore the tangle of plastic that was attached to him for the time being. He needed to touch his wife, needed it as much as he needed air to breathe.

Slowly, delicately, he raised his hand, keeping it only an inch or two above the bed sheets, and reached out to her. At last, he attained his goal. His hand brushed her soft cheek, felt the warmth of her perfect skin. At his touch, Lois stirred sleepily. Her eyes fluttered open even as her brow crinkled in confusion over what had awoken her. As her eyes focused, her gaze unerringly found his and a smile erupted over her face.

"Kal!" she breathed, her voice barely above a whisper as the fear and tension melted out of her features. "Thank Rao! I was so afraid I was going to lose you."

"It'll take more than a fight with Nor to get rid of me," he said, smiling at her.

"I'm so glad you're awake," Lois said, as if repeating the words would somehow convey just how relieved she was.

"Me too," Kal said. "What happened? Are you all right? The others...?"

"Everyone's fine," she assured him. "I'm fine."

She was on her feet in the next second, moving ever closer to him. Carefully, she threaded her arms around his chest and pressed her lips to his. Over and over they kissed, unable to get enough of each other. Fear and sadness died in those kisses,

resurrecting hope and happiness in their wake. Kal gently enveloped Lois in his own arms, holding her as closely and securely as possible. He never wanted to have to let go again, never wanted to stop kissing the woman who was his soul mate.

"I love you," he murmured, over and over, against her lips and between kisses. "I love you."

At last, however, she pulled away from him, needing a breath. Kal groaned at the loss of her lips on his. Lois cupped his cheek in her hand for a minute, studying his features as if in disbelief that he was awake. Then she smiled again, slipped her hand away from his flesh, and hurried across the room to the doorway.

"Hey!" she called, sticking her head out into the hallway. "Everyone! He's awake! He's awake!"

Kal winced against the volume of Lois' cry. He'd had headaches before, but none quite like this. He wondered how badly he'd been injured in the fight with Nor. At the very least, his right hand was wrapped in a soft cast, and his chest ached with every breath he drew. But his thoughts scattered as, one after another, his family entered the room. Jor-El, Ching, Zara, Jai, even Samm Lyne and Lord Ra. They all filed into his room, each of them looking as though the weight of the world had just been lifted from their shoulders.

"Kal!" Jor-El cried, rushing over to engulf his son in a relieved embrace. "Oh, Kal. I was so worried about you."

"I'm okay," Kal said, trying to reassure him. "I'm fine."

Jor-El did not immediately pull away at Kal's words. Instead, he continued to hold his son to him. Kal could feel the man's entire body trembling, could hear the hitch in his breathing as he sought to master his emotions. He patted his father's back with his good hand, trying to dispel the last of the Supreme Lord's worries. For a long time, Jor-El merely held him, not saying anything, until at last, he pulled away, allowing the others to hug Kal as well. Kal could see that his father's eyes were wet with unshed tears.

"Zara," Kal said, as the woman bent to hug him. "Are you feeling well?"

"I'm fine," she said, though Kal could see the flicker of sadness in her eyes at the thought of the child she had so recently lost. "The important question is, how are you feeling?"

Kal tried to shrug, and winced a little as pain shot through his body. "Sore," he admitted. "And like my head is splitting in two."

"Here," Samm said, offering him a small white pill. "Take this. It should help some."

Kal took the proffered tablet and swallowed it down with a gulp of cold water from a glass that Ching handed him. The iciness of the water stung his parched throat, but the pain was more than welcome. He drained the glass with five large gulps, then handed it back to Ching, giving him a grateful smile.

"How long was I out?" he finally ventured to ask, thinking back to the odd placement of the stars beyond his windows.

"Four days," Samm said, gently breaking the news to him.

"Four..." Kal closed his eyes and let his voice trail off. He knew that if he'd been unconscious for so long, his wounds must have been grievous indeed. He opened his eyes again. "What happened?"

"Your skull is fractured," Jor-El said, sitting down in the chair Lois had been sound asleep in. He looked weary enough to fall down where he'd been standing. "And some of the ligaments in your knee were torn."

"You also managed to fracture some of the bones in your hand," Samm said.

"Something about slugging Nor so hard that you broke his jaw," Jai grinned. "Nice work on that, by the way."

"Uh, thanks. I think."

"And you have three broken ribs," Samm said, shaking his head at Jai's obvious delight in the blow Kal had landed against

Nor. “You are one injured young man.”

“We were so worried when you didn’t wake up,” Ching said, and Kal swiveled his eyes to look at his brother. “We thought we might lose you.”

“The injuries to your head are very severe,” Samm continued in a grave voice. “It took us quite a while to stabilize you enough to get you out of Lux Manor. All the scans I did couldn’t tell us much, in terms of whether your brain had suffered any injuries itself. I looked for the obvious signs, and didn’t see any, but sometimes the scans don’t show us everything. And the longer you slept, the more worried we became. It looked more and more like you were going to slip away from us.”

“I’m sorry I put you all through that,” Kal said, his voice sinking to an embarrassed whisper while his cheeks reddened. “I never meant to scare you like that.”

“We’re just happy that you’re okay,” Jai said, patting him on the foot. It was the closest body part within his reach.

“And I’m just happy that you guys made it out of there safely. What happened? I don’t remember anything beyond fighting Nor.”

Kal struggled to sit up a bit, despite the slight incline of his body as the pillows propped him up. But his strength hadn’t yet fully returned, and his limbs turned to liquid as he tried to push himself up. His broken ribs protested the movement as well. Samm put a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

“Easy,” he told the prince. “Try not to move too much. You need to rest up and heal.”

“Okay,” Kal relented, trusting the man. After all, he *was* a well-respected doctor.

“Well,” Ching said, clearing his throat. “Jai, Ruce, Zara and I all did what you told us to do. We made a beeline for the doors. I didn’t want to leave you behind, Kal, believe me. I’ll regret that for as long as I live.”

“I told you to go,” Kal said, placing the blame for his condition squarely on his own shoulders, where he felt it belonged. “I needed you to get everyone to safety. I thought I could handle Nor on my own.”

Ching nodded. “I knew you were right. I knew Ruce needed my help in clearing the way for Jai, Zara, and Lois to get out of there. I had planned on making sure the coast was clear, then coming back for you. But someone must have raised the alarm, or maybe it was because Bil’s men had been captured. I’m not sure which. The grounds were swarming with guards. Ruce and I wound up having to seek cover while we traded gunfire with Uthor’s men.”

Kal slightly paled. “Are you... were you hurt?”

Ching shook his head. “We’re fine. Ruce took a bullet in his shoulder, but he’s fine. He’s been calling here about every two hours to check on you.”

Kal groaned. He couldn’t believe he’d gotten his friend hurt. “You’re sure he’s okay?”

“Absolutely. Dr. K’lin has been tending to his wound, and Ruce says that Alph is practically hovering over him. It’s driving him crazy, of course. But he’s fine.”

“That’s good,” Kal sighed, giving the tiniest of nods. His head didn’t feel like it could handle any greater movement. “I should call him... let him know...”

“Later,” Samm said. “It’s the middle of the night. And you shouldn’t be exerting yourself in any way.”

“But, it’s not...” Kal began to protest.

“Anyway,” Ching continued, clearing his throat and effectively cutting Kal off, much to the obvious relief of Samm. “Ruce called for backup at that point, knowing that Bil’s men were waiting for our own spies to call them in. In no time, our men had overwhelmed Uthor’s guards. As soon as we could, we went back for you, but Nor had already knocked you completely out. You’re only here right now because of your wife.”

“Lois?” Kal asked, wonderingly. “What do you mean?”

Lois blushed a deep crimson. “He’s exaggerating.”

Ching shook his head. “I’m not,” he told Kal.

“It really wasn’t that big of a deal,” she protested.

“Are you kidding?” Zara asked, beaming proudly at her surrogate sister.

“Your wife slipped away from us during the frenzy,” Jai explained. “She took advantage of the fact that we were preoccupied with sneaking out of the place. We didn’t notice she was gone until we ducked for cover during the gunfight.”

“I couldn’t just leave you to fight Nor all on your own,” Lois said, her words spilling out in a rush.

Kal arched his eyebrow at her. “What did you do?” His voice held only curiosity, mixed with a pinch of amusement, but no real surprise. He didn’t think Lois could do *anything* to surprise him anymore.

“I went back for you,” she admitted. “I knocked Nor out before he could kill you.”

“She did more than that!” Jai proudly crowed. “She took his gun and trained it on him. She threatened to kill him if Lord Uthor made any attempt to get near you.”

“Jai!” Lois admonished, clearly uncomfortable.

“Aw, come on,” Jai whined. “Take credit for what you did. You’ve got guts, sis. Real, hardcore guts.” He gave her a brilliant grin and patted her shoulder affectionately.

“I probably wouldn’t have actually pulled the trigger, you know,” Lois shot back gently, still unsure if that was actually true.

Jai shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. You made Lux believe you would, long enough for our guys to get in there and make the arrest. Face it, sis. You’re a hero...or...heroine, I guess is the correct word.”

“Lois,” Kal said, shaking his head with infinite care, so as not to aggravate his wounds. “You shouldn’t have done that. You could have been hurt...or worse.”

Lois shrugged. “I didn’t really make a conscious decision to do it,” she confessed. “I just sort of...reacted. I couldn’t bear the thought of losing you.”

Kal sighed. “I couldn’t bear the thought of losing you either,” he said. “Any of you. That’s why I snuck out of the palace to come and rescue you.” He closed his eyes for a brief moment, collecting his energy. He was so tired, but he had so much more to learn and say. He simply refused to sleep again, not just yet. He’d slept for days already. “What about Bil’s men? Did they... did they get out safely?”

Samm and Jor-El exchanged a weighted look. Neither one seemed willing to speak.

“They were hurt,” Zara finally said, stepping up to the plate when no one else spoke. Her voice took on a low, soothing tone, so as not to upset her brother-in-law.

“How badly?”

Zara swallowed hard, uncomfortable now. “Worse than you. But they’re alive and they’ll heal.”

“It’s my fault,” Kal whispered.

“No, it isn’t,” Jor-El said, taking his son’s hand tenderly in his own, and giving it a small, gentle squeeze.

“Yes, it is,” Kal insisted. “It was *my* plan, to send people in covertly. And I was right there when Bil’s men got caught. I should have done... I don’t know... something... to protect them, or to get them out of there.”

“No,” Jor-El said again, smiling softly at him. “If you had, you would have been captured too, and then where would we all be? Hmmm? You would all be prisoners...or worse.”

Kal shook his head silently, guilt and shame welling up within him. His father might have been right, but the prince was unable to feel anything but responsible for whatever injuries the other men had suffered. He had been right there. He’d wanted to

help. But he hadn't. It was as simple as that, to his mind.

"You have an incredibly brave daughter, Samm," he said instead, trying to force his thoughts away from the dark, brooding place they were heading.

"I know," the older man said, nodding. "I'm proud of her." His hand was resting atop Lois' shoulder in a loving manner.

The admission brightened Kal's dark mood considerably. At least Samm had changed his mind about how he viewed Lois, and the unconventional actions that she so often committed. He hoped the change in Samm would promote some healing between father and daughter. He thought that maybe it already had, as he saw Lois fairly beam with pride at her father's words.

"Where are Elle and Luci?" Kal asked, noticing for the first time that the two women were not present.

"In the guest chambers, sound asleep," Samm said. "Neither one has gotten much sleep since the abduction. And when you were brought in with such grievous injuries..." he shrugged. "I thought it best if they sleep now, since they were finally able to. I'll let them know that you are awake soon enough."

Kal nodded. "All right."

"Speaking of sleep, you need to rest," the doctor added.

"I will," he promised. "But not just yet. Samm? Do I really need all these wires and whatnot anymore?" He gestured helplessly at the tangle of tubes and wires, and the various machines they were attached to. "I feel kind of like a robot."

Samm nodded, then proceeded to remove most of the plastic that was attached to Kal. Only one intravenous line he left in, as it was delivering a steady dose of medication to the prince's beaten and battered body. Kal felt better and better as the lines vanished from sight. He'd always had a healthy hatred of needles and medical machinery.

Kal sighed, relieved that he only had the one small needle in his flesh now. "Thanks, Samm."

"You're welcome," the doctor smiled.

"Could you guys give me a few minutes alone with Dad?"

Heads nodded and Kal heard various murmurs of agreement. One by one, everyone left the room. Lois was the last to go, throwing a glance over her shoulder at him as she went, as if he might disappear in a puff of smoke if she took her eyes off him even for a second. He gave her the slightest of nods, letting her know that he wanted her to come back to the room when he was done speaking with his father. Now that he had her back, he was unwilling to let her leave his sight for long.

Jor-El remained seated at his son's bedside, his features still taut with his lingering concerns for Kal. Kal gave him a little smile, hoping to alleviate some of that worry. But now that he was alone with his father, the prince found himself lost as to where to begin. He groped for words in his mind, which was still slightly foggy with a persistent haze of pain, though the pill Samm had given him had already done wonders for him. His head was no longer splitting in two. Now, only a concert of drums was playing within the walls of his skull.

"So..." Kal said after a moment. It was a weak way to begin, but he could find no other words. "I guess I have two questions. How mad are you? And... when did you discover that I was missing?"

Jor-El sighed quietly, expelling one long breath in a thoughtful manner. "It was probably about an hour and a half, maybe two hours after you went to your chambers. Word had spread around the palace that we were in lock-down mode. Marthe went to your rooms to bring up some food for you. Your guards knew she was cleared to enter your chambers, and when you did not answer after she knocked, she knew something was wrong. She and the guards went into your rooms, only to find that you were not there. She came to me in a panic."

"I can't imagine what you must have thought," Kal said guiltily.

Jor-El smiled wryly at him. "Call me crazy, but I knew immediately what had happened. I knew in my heart that no one had snuck in to smuggle you away. I knew you'd gone to help. I should have known better than to trust that you'd stay in your chambers, from the very beginning. But I was so wrapped up in... everything that was going on at the time. I never stopped to think about how stubborn you can be when you are set on a goal."

"Am I that predictable?" Kal asked, mildly surprised that Jor-El was blaming himself for Kal's actions.

The Supreme Lord nodded. "Only when you are *that* committed to a cause. It's an admirable quality, and one I hope you never lose."

"Dad," Kal said after a moment of silence. "I'm so sorry. You gave me direct orders to stay within my chambers. I went and deliberately disobeyed you. You were right to want to try to protect me. It was selfish of me to go out there... to risk leaving Krypton without an heir to the throne. To risk leaving you childless. But... I couldn't just sit by, doing nothing. I mean, I tried. I really did. But I couldn't do it. I never meant to worry you. You must be furious with me. And disappointed."

"Disappointed?" Jor-El asked, genuinely puzzled.

"Well... yeah," Kal said, confused over his father's calm reaction thus far. "I almost got myself killed out there. I didn't save Bil's men when I had the chance. And I flat-out ignored your warnings not to go on the rescue mission myself."

"Oh, Kal," Jor-El said, shaking his head, a smile playing across his lips. "It's true I was terrified for you. But, I think that, all things considered, you did what you needed to do. What we *all* needed you to do. It doesn't mean that I'm thrilled with it. Far from it. I wish only that I could have protected you. But, you were right in saying that Bilan's men probably weren't the best suited for the mission. They acted rashly and they got themselves caught. But, if it hadn't been for you... you and Ruce... maybe the others wouldn't be here right now. They told me all about Lux's plans," the Supreme Lord continued.

"Plans?" Kal asked. "I didn't... there wasn't enough time to ask. Does that have anything to do with how scared Jai was when I got to him?"

The Supreme Lord nodded. "It is. Lux and his sons never planned on letting Ching and Jai live, even if we had surrendered our claim to the throne. You were right about that. But they still planned on holding their lives above us, if we failed to allow them to bully us into submission. Lux ordered Jai to be the first one killed if we didn't relent our positions."

"That would explain it," Kal said thoughtfully. "And Lois and Zara?"

"Zara was to be given over to Nor as a concubine... or killed. It was left up to him," Jor-El said, frowning. "And Lux planned to kill you and take Lois as his own wife."

The words slapped Kal like actual blows to his face. He fought down a surge of bile that rose unexpectedly into the back of his mouth. To imagine that... that sadistic criminal being married to Lois was enough to make Kal ill.

"No," Kal said, horrified. "No."

"It's all right," Jor-El said soothingly. "Lux and his sons are safely locked away in the city jail, under heavy guard. They cannot so much as sneeze without us knowing about it."

"And Jen Mai?" Kal asked. "He was there, at Lux Manor. I saw him. Did we get him too?" He feared that the Elder might have somehow gotten away. One of the man's strengths was slipping away, unobserved, whenever he needed to fade into the background.

Jor-El nodded. "We got him too. He made a bargain with Bil to give us as much information as we could possibly want."

"In exchange for...?" Kal knew the man was up to something. Ever the opportunist, Jen Mai wasn't likely to give

away anything without looking for something in return.

“Life,” Jor-El said. “He knows he’ll be charged with treason. And he knows he’ll be facing a death sentence.”

“So he gives us all the information he knows, and in return, he gets to live out his days in prison,” Kal said, finishing his father’s thought.

“Exactly. Provided, of course, that the rest of the Elders are willing to be lenient during the trial and sentencing.”

“What’s there to know that we don’t already?” Kal asked. He could not fathom what other information the Elder could possibly have. “Was there more to the Uthors’ plot?”

“Not exactly,” his father said. “But Jen Mai was privy to a lot of Lux’s dealings. He says that the missing women from the Uthors’ estate were killed, and their bodies vaporized.”

“Which is why we never found them,” Kal said, understanding immediately.

“Right. He also swears that Ara Caln did not die of natural causes. He insists that Lux poisoned his late wife.”

“But the medical reports stated...” Kal began to protest in confusion. He wondered at himself for a moment. Had he actually almost *defended* that monster?

Jor-El nodded. “I know what they said,” he said quietly. “But remember, there are toxins out there that can simulate a heart attack and can dissipate to nothingness within minutes. They are rare, and incredibly expensive, but, well, that was never an issue for Lux.” There was regret in his voice, at having been duped so thoroughly over the years of Lux’s feigned friendship. There was sadness mixed in his tone and features as well.

Kal nodded ever so slightly at his father’s words, mindful of his head injuries, as the puzzle pieces all slid into place in his mind. It made sense, on some twisted level, that Lord Uthor had murdered his own wife. Ara Caln had always been an independent, opinionated woman. It was the reason why her marriage to Lux had fallen into shambles so easily. And, Kal realized with a shudder, it was probably what had gotten her killed. Lux *hated* to look bad in any way. And Ara had, on a few occasions, argued with him in public, throwing less than flattering light on some of the proposals he’d made.

With a sinking feeling, Kal knew that everything he loved about Lois would have gotten her killed as well, if Lux had taken her for a wife.

“So...what now?” Kal asked, carefully steering his thoughts away from the path of what might have been.

“There will be a trial, of course,” Jor-El said. “We didn’t start it just yet because I could not bear to be parted from you. And neither could the others. We’ve barely left your chambers since you were brought home.”

“So...you guys have been camped out in my living room this whole time?” Kal asked with a playful grin.

Jor-El laughed. “Basically, yes. I think your cat has enjoyed the company though. At least, he hasn’t made any complaints.”

Kal laughed at that. He reached over and petted the tabby’s head. Fasa stirred, opened one eye, looked at Kal, and promptly yawned before going back to sleep.

“Now that you are on your way to recovering, we can figure out when to hold this trial,” Jor-El continued, easily switching gears to a more serious note again.

“Right,” Kal agreed. “Of course.”

He was in no hurry to see the trial begin. He knew exactly how it would play out. He knew exactly how it would end. Lux and his sons would be found guilty of high treason; there was no way they could prove that what they had done *wasn’t* treason. They would have to be insane to even try. And they would be sentenced to die.

Kal had seen it before, on two or three occasions when there had been a need to try murderers, for the sentence was exactly the same. The convicted men would be placed in a machine that

would break down their bodies, and their molecules would be dispersed over the universe, and to all of the countless galaxies held within it. It wasn’t a pleasant way to die, if indeed there *was* a pleasant way for one’s life to be cut short.

And as much as Kal despised the Uthor family, he did not wish to witness their execution. He never wanted to bear witness to anyone’s life coming to such a horrid end, no matter what they had done to warrant the punishment. But he also knew that even if he were to petition for a sentence of life in prison, the Elders wouldn’t likely agree to it. He would try, if he could. At the very least, he could try to convince Ching or Jai to petition the Elders on his behalf, though he wasn’t sure how much luck he might have with that. Though both of his brothers hated the use of the death penalty as much as he did, Kal wondered if their stance on the matter might not have been skewed now that their own lives had been in peril. In fact, Kal felt his own conviction about the death penalty slipping ever so slightly from his normally staunch position on the subject.

“You don’t have to attend, if you aren’t up to it,” Jor-El said, frowning as Kal went silent.

Kal shrugged. “We’ll see,” he answered in a non-committal way.

“Kal,” Jor-El said again, his voice going soft and low. “I want you to know something. I want you to know how very, very proud I am of you. And...I’m sorry. More than you will ever know.”

“Sorry?” Kal gaped, caught off-guard. “I went and did everything you told me not to do. *I’m* the only one who needs to be sorry here.”

Kal could hardly believe what he was hearing. He’d expected to spend the rest of his life trying to make up for the shame and terror he’d put his father through. And now, with the dust of his betrayal settling, his father was instead *praising* him? Kal couldn’t have been more shocked if his father broke out into a song and dance routine right there in his bedroom.

The Supreme Lord nodded. “It’s true that you went against my commands. And I wish it hadn’t needed to happen that way. But, I should have listened to you, when you first told me of your plan.”

Kal shook his head, just barely enough for the movement to be seen. “No, you were right.”

“No,” Jor-El said, “I wasn’t. If I had listened to you, I could have ensured that you went in there with the proper backup. If I had, perhaps you wouldn’t have been hurt. I should have anticipated that you’d find a way to sneak out.”

“Dad...”

“There is something else,” his father gently cut in.

Kal raised one questioning eyebrow. He couldn’t begin to guess at what else his father might have to tell him. At least, he reasoned to himself, it couldn’t possibly be any more shocking than what Jor-El had already told him. Could it?

“I thought you should know...before I approach the Elders. But...Kal, I plan to invoke a very ancient law. One that has not been used in well over five hundred years. I see no reason why the Elders would seek to block it with what power they wield.”

“Dad, what are you talking about?” Kal asked.

He tried to think of every obscure law he knew of, but his head felt too cloudy to think straight. He could only force himself to be aware of the fact that Krypton *had* laws, but he remained unable to call to mind anything more complicated than the most basic of them.

“I plan to name both Ching *and* you as my heirs. Officially. When I die, you will *both* be raised to the role of Supreme Lord,” his father said in a solemn voice.

Kal’s mouth opened, but he could not speak. He felt shell-shocked. Dimly, he wondered if he had heard right. It couldn’t possibly be. He was the second son. He was never meant to be

the Supreme Lord. His role was to subtly support Ching when *he* became the Supreme Lord.

“Does Ching know?” Kal finally asked, his strangled voice coming out an octave higher than was normal. For some reason, that was the only one of the thousand questions that were swirling around his clouded mind to actually make it onto his tongue.

Jor-El nodded, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. “He does. If it were up to him, he would have already brought the matter before Trey and the rest of the Elders.”

“I’m...I’m not...really sure what to say,” Kal stammered, groping for words as he went. “I’m not really sure that I’m right for the job.”

“Kal, I have watched you grow from a helpless newborn into a strong, kind, and compassionate man,” Jor-El said gently. “I know, without a doubt, that you are perfect for leading this planet. A good leader leads not through commands, but by example. You have never asked anyone to do anything that you yourself would not do. A good ruler doesn’t favor one tier of society over another. You care not just for the nobility of this planet, but for all the people, down to the lowliest of the commoners. A true leader doesn’t always do the popular thing. He does the *right* thing, no matter what. He listens to both his head *and* his heart when making important decisions. I have seen all these things in you. Trust me, Kal. You will be one of Krypton’s greatest leaders. Ching will be as well, but I believe that you will surpass him.”

“Even if that were true,” Kal started to say.

“It is,” Jor-El gently cut in.

“Even so,” Kal tried again. “Is it really wise to have two Supreme Lords?”

“It’s true that not many rulers have chosen to invoke that law,” his father said, running a hand through his hair. “But I believe the planet will benefit from both of you stepping up to the role. You and Ching are so likeminded, it’s as if you share one brain.” He smiled gently at Kal. “And, just as importantly, you bring balance to one another. Ching is a lot more...well, ‘by the books’ than you are, though you’re more opened-minded attitude is sometimes exactly what is needed. Your rashness is tempered by Ching’s sometimes too restrictive self-discipline. Your brother has a mind for the more of the specifics of the law and for the logistics surrounding a situation. You are more likely to listen to what your heart tells you. And that is sometimes what needs to happen in a situation. Remember when that young kid came looking for a job? The one you sent to train for the palace security staff?”

“Of course I do. But what does that have to do with anything?”

Jor-El smiled again. “Ching admitted to me later that he’d be concerned with whether or not we really needed another member of our security staff. But you...you saw not only the chance to placate Bil, but also the opportunity to give someone the chance they so desperately needed. Krypton needs people like you and Ching to lead it. And...there is one other thing.”

“What?”

“There is a bond between you and the people, unlike any I’ve ever heard about. Oh, I hear the buzz and the gossip, the pulse of this planet. The people love Ching, that is true enough. But they have an affinity for you that goes beyond their love for Ching. You’ve never held back anything when dealing with the masses, especially with the commoners. So, yes, I think that having two Supreme Lords is just what Krypton needs.”

“I...I’m honored,” Kal said, his voice choking up slightly. No other words came to him.

“You should rest now,” the Supreme Lord said, standing.

“You need to let your injuries heal.”

“I will,” Kal said, feeling himself growing ever more tired,

though he shoved the feelings away. “Can you tell Lois to come in, please?”

Jor-El nodded, unwilling to deny his son anything. Kal desperately needed to rest, that much was true. But, he had only just returned from where he had been teetering on the brink of death. The Supreme Lord would not - could not - ask Kal to wait to have a private word with his wife.

“Absolutely,” he said, smiling at his son.

He turned to leave the bedroom, but Kal stopped him before he could take more than three steps.

“Dad?”

“Yes?”

“Can you hand me Lois’ necklace, please?” He gestured vaguely to where he’d left it before he’d went on his rescue mission. “I promised myself that I would return it to her once I found her.”

Jor-El smiled. He quickly scanned Kal’s room until he saw the diamond star sitting atop the dresser. He crossed to where it was, plucked it gently from where it was resting, and placed it in Kal’s waiting hand.

“Thanks,” Kal said.

Jor-El nodded, but did not speak. Instead, he turned and quietly left the bedroom. Kal sighed as he subtly shifted his body, settling himself deeper into the pillows that were supporting him as he lay in his bed. He closed his eyes for the span of four heartbeats, enjoying the sensation of being home, in his own chambers, knowing that his loved ones were safe and sound, knowing that the threat to them was truly over. Kal felt that he could not be more grateful, nor could he ask for any greater gift.

Taking a deep breath, and fighting off the sleep that was steadily encroaching on him, he opened his eyes. A moment later, Lois appeared in his doorway. Kal smiled at her, encouraging her to come closer. His wife’s face blossomed into a smile as well, and she swept into the room, until she was at his bedside. He patted the mattress when she made a move to sit in the chair. She took the hint and sat instead on the bed next to him. Kal shuffled over slightly, allowing her to have more room. The movement jostled Fasa, who blinked unhappily at his master before indignantly jumping down and leaving the room. Kal chuckled and carefully threaded his left arm around Lois’ waist, mindful of the single intravenous line that snaked out from his skin.

“Hey,” he said, smiling gently at her.

“Hey yourself,” Lois smiled back.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” he said, the words catching in his throat. “You shouldn’t have attacked Nor.”

“I had no choice,” she protested, though her voice was soft and low. “He was going to kill you, Kal.”

“I know,” he said, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “I’m grateful that you saved my life. I really am. But...well, if he had hurt you, I never would have forgiven myself. Still...thank you, for saving me.”

“Hey, we’re even,” Lois teased him gently. “I seem to remember you risking your life to break me out of that cell.” She shuddered involuntarily.

Kal gave her a shallow shrug, and winced at the slight stab of pain that ran through his broken ribs. “Funny thing about that. It seems that I don’t take well to having the love of my life kidnapped.”

Lois giggled at him, a light, airy sound that melted Kal’s heart. “Hmm. That *is* interesting,” she teased again.

“Shocking, I know,” Kal grinned. “But, in all seriousness, I need you to know something.”

“What’s that?” A line of concern flickered across her brow.

“You didn’t just save my life when you attacked Nor. You saved my life the moment you entered it. I was nothing before I met you. You’ve given my life meaning. You’ve given me a reason to believe in love. Thank you.”

“Kal,” Lois breathed, her voice hitching in her throat. “I don’t know what to say. Except...you did the same thing for me. From the moment we met, you’ve encouraged me to be who I am. You’ve empowered me. You’ve given me a reason to love life. You’ve given me a reason to trust in love. For so long, I didn’t believe that love truly existed. I mean, look at the family I came from. I thought it was the normal thing, for two people to barely tolerate each other. But you proved to me that that is the exception to the rule, and not the norm. So, thank you, for saving my life, in every single way.”

“Here,” Kal said, placing her necklace into her hands, after his words once again threatened to fail him. “I promised myself I would return this to you.”

Lois’ face brightened even further. It was clear she hadn’t realized Kal had been in possession of the piece of jewelry. But then again, it had been half-buried among various vials of what Kal could only assume were the medications Samm had been administering to him.

“My necklace!” Lois exclaimed, breathlessly. “I’d thought for sure it was lost forever.”

Kal shook his head, the movement the barest minimum needed for it to be seen. “It was on the ground right where you and the others had been standing, out in the snow,” he explained.

“Thank you,” Lois said, tearing her eyes from the gem to meet her husband’s gaze.

“We’ll have to get you a new chain,” he said, gesturing to the broken silver links.

“It can wait,” Lois replied, brushing a lock of Kal’s hair from his brow. She placed a soft kiss in the exact spot she had just cleared. “First, you have to get well. Oh, Kal, I can’t even *begin* to tell you how afraid I was that I might lose you.”

He smiled gently, and reached up slowly to brush his fingertips over her cheek. “I’m fine now, really. A little worse for wear, but I’ll be fine. Your father has made sure of that. All of this,” he gestured vaguely to his wounds, “is only temporary. What matters is that you and I are here...safe, and happy, and together. And that we always will be.”

“Daddy’s barely slept since you were brought home,” she said, nodding.

“And I’m thankful for all he did,” Kal agreed, pulling his hand from her face and dropping it wearily back down to rest on the comforter.

“The whole planet has been in a state of near-mourning,” Lois confided in him. “Ever since that night.”

Kal’s brow furrowed. “Really?”

His wife nodded. “Word got out about the rescue and your involvement, almost as soon as Bil’s team made the arrests. Your father was forced to make an official statement, to dispel the rumors that were flying about. People have been keeping vigil over the palace, as though just by being here, they could...I don’t know. Will some strength into you, maybe?”

“Wow,” Kal said, floored.

He hadn’t expected that. Some part of his mind wondered what *other* surprises the night would bring. He wasn’t sure he could handle any more, at least not until he had some rest.

“Here, let me show you.”

Lois picked up a small, portable video screen. She fiddled for a moment with the device, until she brought up the closed-circuit security cameras. Squinting at the numerous boxes that appeared on screen, she finally selected one which showed the view outside the palace walls. Then she held it up so that Kal could see.

Thousands of people stood beyond the walls, a sea of faces so densely packed it was difficult to see where one body ended and another began. Some were holding their children close to them. Some had their heads bent to one another, their lips moving in unheard conversation. Some, Kal thought, appeared to be wiping

at their eyes. Most were silent, gazing intently at the palace where their injured prince lay.

Entire legions of military officers stood at attention, their silent, stoic presence keeping order without the need for words. And cutting the crowd, in three spots that Kal could see, long aisles stood open wide. Kal watched as a family of six made their way down the open walkway, all the way up to the very front of the crowd. There they stopped, and each one of them lit a candle before placing it reverently on the ground. The youngest, a girl of perhaps four or five, placed down a single flower as well.

Intrigued, Kal reached towards the small screen, and selected a different view of the crowd.

His breath caught in his throat as he sucked in a rush of air. Stretching out in every direction, the scene at the walls and gates was the same. Lit candles and small tokens lay there, the merry flames lighting up the night. If fire truly *could* cure injuries, Kal felt certain that the amount of candles standing vigil in the dark would have easily cured every hurt anyone had ever experienced in all of Krypton’s history.

He was instantly humbled at the outpouring of support that he saw on the screen. And yet, it made him uncomfortable at the same moment. He was more than content to be the man in the shadows, the one who stayed to one side while others basked in the limelight. Being the center of attention, even in a scenario like this, always made him ill at ease.

“Wow,” he breathed again, trying to form a coherent thought. With all he’d learned that night, he felt as if his head was about to explode. “Please, no more,” he begged. “No more.”

Lois obliged in turning the device off. “The people love you, Kal. Not that it’s so hard to see why.”

Kal shook his head. “Those people should be home, where it’s warm and comfortable. Please, have Dad tell them I’m all right, so they can stop their vigil. I appreciate the support, but they shouldn’t be milling about in the cold.”

“All right,” she agreed. Then, it seemed a new thought struck her. “Are you hungry?” she suddenly asked.

With a start, Kal realized that he hadn’t eaten in days. Even before he’d been injured and lost to the black void he’d wandered in as he’d fought to live, he’d barely touched any food. His stomach let out a low rumble in response, but he was getting so tired now that he didn’t think he’d be able to summon enough energy to chew. And, he suspected, one of the bags hanging from the pole with his intravenous line had to be providing his body with some form of nutrition.

“A bit,” he answered truthfully. “But I’m more exhausted than anything. I don’t think I could chew anything.”

“What about some soup?”

Kal nodded again, a smile playing on his lips. “Yeah. I think I could do that.”

“I’ll be right back,” she promised him, as she slipped out of his embrace.

In another moment, she was gone, out of the room. Kal felt lonely as he waited for her to return. Involuntarily, his eyes closed, and he dozed for a short time. But it was a light sleep, and before long, he fully reawakened as he heard Lois coming back into the room. She had a small tray in her hands. Kal inhaled deeply through his nose. He smiled when he caught the unmistakable aroma of his favorite soup.

“Hey. Did I wake you?” Lois asked.

“Not really,” Kal replied. “I was sort of in a light doze. Besides, I’d rather be awake and with you. I can sleep any time. Being with you is *far* better medicine.”

“You’re sweet,” she said, smiling at him.

She brought the tray over to the bed, then carefully climbed back up to sit atop the comforter. She placed the tray on her lap, and a healthy plume of fragrant steam wafted up past her face. She dipped the spoon into the broth, then brought it to Kal’s lips.

Kal eagerly ate what she offered up, savoring the comforting taste of shredded meats and vegetables before swallowing it down.

"I could get used to this," he smirked at her, causing her to laugh. "A beautiful woman, tending my every need..." he let his voice trail off as he winked at her.

Lois snorted back another laugh. "You don't need to be hurt in order to have that," she retorted with a wicked gleam in her eyes.

Kal chuckled. "That's true." He ate another spoonful of soup.

The food was quite good, one of the tastiest renditions Jon Ken had ever created. Although, Kal thought to himself, he couldn't be sure that wasn't just because he was happy to be alive and able to eat anything at all. Or if the added layer of flavor didn't come just from the fact that his wife was there, tenderly feeding it to him as he recuperated from his injuries.

He accepted spoonful after spoonful from her. After savoring the first few mouthfuls, his appetite exploded and he all but wolfed down the remaining food. Finally feeling somewhat sated, he sighed and lay his head back, gingerly, so as not to aggravate his injuries. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Lois stood and set the tray off to one side.

"You should sleep," she said, bending and kissing his forehead, his cheeks, his lips.

"Stay with me?" Kal asked, when she started to move away from the bed. "Please?"

"All right," she said, just as unwilling to part from him.

Carefully, she lowered herself back down to lay beside him on the bed. Delicately, she arranged the intravenous line that was hooked into his arm so that it would not be in any danger of being tugged loose as she snuggled up beside him. She finally lay still, her body pressed tightly against his, and she let out a sigh. Kal echoed her as his world was finally fully put right again, like the final piece of a vast, complicated puzzle being locked into place. His wife was once more at his side, safe and unharmed. He took comfort from her even breathing, and his hand grasped hers. As always, their fingers intertwined without the need for conscious thought. His thumb ran over the side of her hand, reveling in the soft touch of her flesh.

"Kal?" she said softly.

"Hmm?"

"I love you."

"I love you too, Lois." Kal's grin overtook his entire face.

"I can't wait until you're healed completely," she murmured.

"Me too," he agreed. "On the upside, however, I'll probably be able to take some time off from my duties around the palace."

"Probably?" Lois asked, her voice taking on the same wry edge he had taken.

"Well," Kal began, now turning serious. "I guess Dad didn't tell you the news, huh?"

Beside him, Lois shook her head. "What news?"

"Dad's planning to officially name me as his heir. Along with Ching," he clarified.

"So one day..."

"Ching and I will both be Supreme Lord. And you'll be Supreme Lady."

"That's..." she fumbled for words, her mouth open in shock. "Congratulations, Kal. You'll be an excellent ruler. I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks," he said, still feeling somehow unworthy of the appointment. "But, well, I'll only be a good leader because I'll have you at my side. You've helped make me the man that I am, Lois."

She shook her head again. "No, that's not true. You were a 'one in a billion' kind of man well before I ever met you."

"No, Lois," he said, speaking earnestly. "You've changed me, ever since the day we met. I'm a better person because of you."

"I think the medicines are affecting your mind," Lois teased

him.

Kal chuckled. "Despite the fact that my head feels stuffed with cotton, I've never thought so clearly before."

Lois twisted in his arms, flashing him a brilliant smile. She kissed his lips, and he responded, almost hungrily. As their tongues danced to that most ancient of tunes, Kal felt as though Lois' love alone would cure his ailments. He felt stronger already.

After a time, they broke from their kisses. Kal's entire body was abuzz with the warmth and comfort that Lois' show of love had infused his body with. He lay back into his pillows, feeling breathless from the intensity of their kisses and the powerful emotions they invoked. Next to him, Lois settled back down, and Kal silently encouraged her to snuggle closer. She obliged and laid her head on his shoulder, while he wrapped his arm carefully around her body. She sighed in contentment, and Kal did the same, closing his eyes and savoring the moment.

Completely at peace for the first time since Lois and the others had been captured, Kal surrendered himself to the realm of blissful sleep.

Months passed by, each one bringing Kal further and further from his injuries. Lois' family stayed on at the palace for a long time, with Samm fretting over the prince's health, despite the fact that Kal only got stronger with each passing day. Normally, Kal would have complained about the constant worry over his recovery. But not this time. This time, he willingly submitted himself to Samm's daily check-ups without a word of protest. Head injuries were not to be taken lightly. And, more importantly, it appeased Lois, who fussed over and worried about his wounds even more than the good doctor did.

Once Kal was feeling stronger, he had undergone an operation on his severely damaged knee, with Samm correcting the problems within the joint. The recovery process was slow, leaving Kal frustrated that he couldn't do all of the physical activities he enjoyed - sparring with his brothers, going for a run, playing sports. And yet, he still did not complain. He was alive. His family was alive. And that was all that truly mattered to the prince. His temporary discomfort and limitations were a small price to pay for that knowledge. Besides, Samm had been able to correct some of the lingering issues from the previous injury to his knee. And once the joint was fully healed, Samm was all but certain that the knee would no longer trouble the prince, no matter how hard he worked it.

Lois seemed to enjoy the fact that her family was around - a stark change to how she normally seemed to view such close proximity to her parents. But, ever since Kal had come out of the coma he'd slipped into at Lux Manor, he'd noticed a dramatic change in the Lyne family dynamic. Samm no longer attempted to control anything his daughters did or said. Kal even saw him encouraging them on a few occasions. Elle had mostly stopped her criticisms, from what Kal could tell, though she still rivaled Lois in her ability to speak a mile-a-minute without pausing for breath. And Luci had become rather close with Jai, forming a close friendship with the half-prince.

Kal smiled to himself as he thought of his younger brother. Jai had become almost another person since the abduction. He'd become more serious, more attentive to ruling the planet. Whereas the half-prince had once avoided the main hall on the days when petitioners came to the palace, seeking help and justice, he now regularly attended. The Elders hadn't been thrilled at first, but a sharp word from Jor-El had silenced any further grumbling. Jai never spoke much during those long hours at court, but he had admitted to Kal that he was still getting used to all that went into those days.

And, Kal knew with certainty, Jai had forsaken the palace concubines. That had been the biggest surprise out of all of the changes he'd witnessed in his brother. Though Lois had told him

of Jai's half-pledge, half-prayer while locked way in Lux Manor, Kal had harbored his severe doubts that the half-prince would ever truly stick to his promise. But Jai had done it, and Jor-El had dismissed the women the palace had once kept on staff. Ever since Lara's death, the Supreme Lord had taken no joy in the professional care givers, and now that none of his sons sought out their services, there was no reason to continue keeping them on staff. Most of the women had gone on to work for other noblemen. Some had taken the opportunity to pursue other careers. Nita, one of Jai's favorites, had gone on to marry one of the young chefs who worked in the palace kitchen, and now worked alongside her new husband. Catira G'rat had gone on to work for Arta Ch'w, who had recently become the third wealthiest nobleman on the planet, now that Lux Uthor no longer held the title. Kal had even heard rumors that the two had hit it off so well, that it looked likely that Catira might soon become Lady Catira Ch'w.

Kal sighed as he looked out over the gardens from his perch high above. He leaned against the railing of his balcony, enjoying the warmth of the early summer sun. Even from that height, the fragrant smell of the various blossoms below wafted up on the warm breeze. He inhaled deeply, closing his eyes in contentment, letting his mind wander freely.

And yet, as he thought back over the spring and winter months, he still could not help but feel slightly uneasy. He had, out of duty, attended the trials of Lux Uthor, his sons, and all of the members of the Uthor household who had been instrumental in the abduction, as well as that of Jen Mai. The former Elder had proven himself forthcoming with as much information as he knew, his cowardly colors once again showing as he betrayed the Uthors in an effort to save his own life. He had offered up every detail of Lux's plot - how Lux had come to him, how he'd offered to make Jen Mai the Chief Elder once the planet was under his control. He had admitted to knowing for years of how Lux and his sons had been responsible for the deaths of the women who had worked for them, and had named Nor as the main killer, which had not surprised Kal in the least. Jen Mai had also confessed to being the one to suggest to Lux the poison which had taken the nobleman's late wife's life, though the former Elder swore he had had nothing to do with obtaining the rare, deadly concoction.

The former Elder had been stripped of his title and sentenced to die. Truth be told, Kal had been surprised at the sentence. He had thought for sure that Trey and the other Elders would have opted to spare Jen Mai's life. Bil had promised Jen Mai that he would speak on his behalf, in exchange for the man's cooperation in the proceedings. But the former Elder's actions at the end had not made the Council lenient towards him, not in the least bit. On the one hand, Kal was bothered by the look of absolute betrayal Jen Mai had worn when the sentence was passed. On the other, the man had been so crucially instrumental in the abduction of the royal family that if his life had been spared, it would have left Kal permanently on edge, even if Jen Mai never had contact with another person in his entire life. Only one comfort was afforded to the disgraced former Elder. His body was not broken down to the molecular level. He was allowed to choose his death, and he had opted for a poison which stopped his heart less than a minute after he'd swallowed it down.

Lux and his three sons had all been charged with high treason, as well as the murders of their household staff. Lux had faced the added charge of Ara Caln's death as well. Their trials had been short and they had all predictably been found guilty and sentenced to death. Lux had made a desperate attempt to grab for Bilan's gun, but the Chief of Security had been watchful for such a move and easily foiled the attempt. The whole time, Lux had threatened that he'd take his own life before allowing the Elders to disintegrate his body down to the molecular level. Kal didn't

doubt that Lux had spoken the truth. The nobleman had always wanted to live and die by his own rules. But, in the end, Lux's life had ended in the cylindrical chamber that made up the molecular disbander. The only saving grace, the only small bit of comfort that Lux had been granted, was that his life was cut short before that of his sons. He hadn't needed to watch his children vanish into nothingness. And Kal had to believe that even a man as evil as Lux had to harbor some love in his heart for his children.

Not even Rygel, Lux's manservant, had been spared. He too had been found guilty of treason, for it was he who had stolen the gas canisters that had been used in the initial attack on the royal family. His was the last life the Elders had put an end to. Most of the guards the Uthors had used to keep watch on the estate had been blissfully unaware of what had been going on behind closed doors. Many had simply attributed the increase in security to nothing more sinister than a fear that if the princesses and princes could disappear, then who was to say that no attack would be made on the third wealthiest family as well? They had been spared, but others had been aware of the situation, and were found guilty of treason as well.

The sentences for all the men had been carried out right there in the Council's chambers, as soon as the verdict had been declared. Kal hadn't planned on witnessing their deaths. It made him sick to the very pit of his stomach. And yet, he had stayed. He had resisted the almost overwhelming urge to rise from his seat and exit the chambers when it came time to carry out their sentences. He had forced himself to watch as the men were put into the molecular disbander and witnessed as they slowly became transparent, then vanished altogether.

Kal hated to admit it, even to himself, but there was a small part of himself that had been glad that he'd forced himself to watch. Seeing, with his own eyes, each of those lives end had reinforced only one thought in his mind. Never again could they threaten his family. It was the only thing that allowed Kal to sleep soundly at night. It was the only thing that chased away the nightmares which had plagued him from the time he'd come out of his coma until the trials had concluded.

A darkness descended on Kal's mood almost as surely as a raincloud would blot out the sunshine. Shaking his head to scatter his thoughts, Kal forced himself to return to the present, at least for the moment. The sun was still shining brightly, and the warm rays soaked into his skin, dispelling the last of the mental chill that had gripped him. He sighed softly to himself and idly scratched an itch on his left forearm. But despite his efforts to remain in the present, his thoughts once again followed their own paths.

Once the trials had come to a close and the public outrage towards the Uthors had subsided somewhat, Jor-El had approached the remaining Elders. He had laid out his proposal to them, to name both of his trueborn sons as his heirs, so they would both be raised to the role of Supreme Lord upon his death.

Kal hadn't been privy to that conversation, nor had Ching. But their father had filled them in on all that had been said. There had been some astonished murmuring within the chamber, so rare it was that a Supreme Lord called upon the ancient law which made it legal to do such a thing. But there had been very little discussion about Jor-El's request. All of the Elders had been in agreement that naming both Ching-El and Kal-El as the crown princes was the best thing for Krypton. As with all other formal occasions, the announcement had been broadcast over the entire planet that very same afternoon.

Kal still hadn't been able to get around very well at the time, and had mostly been confined to the palace. But Jak had been his eyes and ears, reporting back to his prince nightly on all that he heard and saw. He had provided Kal with insight into the mood of the people, and all the feedback had been positive. The people

loved their prince, and were eager to see Kal named as the Supreme Lord's successor.

The ceremony itself had been postponed until after Kal's head injury had made significant progress in healing, and after the surgery on his knee. The event had taken several hours, as Trey led the Elders through the ancient rituals that governed the ceremony. Kal had been grateful for the fact that it happened so close to his knee surgery. It had meant that he'd been able to spend the majority of the ceremony seated in a comfortable chair. And while that hadn't *actually* lifted any of the attention from him, it had made him feel far less self-conscious than if he'd been forced to stand before the people who had gathered to witness his coronation. It had also given him the perfect excuse to have Lois at his side for the entire event, as she aided him whenever the need arose. As a result, his good hand had been in hers for nearly the entire event, save for a few brief times when he'd been forced to interact with the Elders, when he'd sworn his oaths upon the Book of Law and the ceremonial Scepter of Rule. Still, Lois' presence had made the long-winded event tolerable, and Kal had taken comfort and strength from her as she silently sat beside him, gently squeezing his hand every now and again to send a message of reassurance to him.

Sometimes, Kal still couldn't believe that he was now officially heir to the throne. True, he was one of two heirs, but it still occasionally stunned him to know that he would one day truly be in charge of the planet. No longer was he his brother's heir, in the event that Ching never had a son of his own. The responsibility weighed heavily on Kal's mind whenever he dwelled on that fact, even though he knew he'd always taken his perceived role as Ching's future advisor just as seriously as he now took his role as the future Supreme Lord.

But it *had* helped to focus him a bit. He now took his duties as prince far more seriously than he ever had, and even found some of his faded joy in doing those tasks returning. He still missed Lois terribly on the days when he was at court hearing petitions, but he found his mind straying less and less as he listened to pleas and helped rectify the injustices set before him. And, Kal had to admit, it felt good to be doing those things once again. After he'd woken up in his chambers, after the fiasco at Lux Manor, he had been forced to take a step back from his duties as he healed.

At first, his fractured skull had been the greatest source of concern. Samm had fretted over every move Kal had made, and had requested that Kal spend a great deal of time in bed. Kal had obliged the good doctor, but only because his confinement was made bearable by the fact that Lois was constantly at his side. Although, Kal thought with a smile, Samm *never* would have approved of most of the activities the bed-ridden prince had engaged in while he'd recuperated. At least, not while he was still on the mend.

Then, once his head had healed enough so that Samm wasn't continuously clucking his tongue over Kal's every movement, he had undergone the surgery to repair his knee. At first, he'd been in fits of pain after the procedure, even with the painkillers Samm provided to him. He simply hadn't been able to concentrate all that well the one day he'd attempted to sit at court with his father and brothers, and that had put an end to that experiment. Later, he had been kept busy with rehabilitating the joint, which forced him to miss more of the petition days.

But now, life was *finally* starting to settle back down for Kal. And that was a very welcome breath of fresh air for him.

Kal smiled to himself as he continued to lean on the rail of his balcony, still enjoying the warm shafts of sunlight that were slowly tanning his exposed skin. He watched as a pair of birds lazily flew by, wings outstretched but unmoving as they drifted on the thermals high above.

All in all, Kal reasoned to himself, he'd gotten off easy with

all the minor inconveniences and adjustments which had so recently thrown his life into turmoil. It could have been worse. He could have been permanently disfigured or disabled. He could have lost his life. He could have been too late to save his loved ones.

He knew that Ruce was having a much harder time with the recent adjustments to his own life. Some weeks after the ceremony which had officially named Kal as Jor-El's legal heir, the Council of Elders had met to discuss the gaping hole in their number, now that Jen Mai was no longer one of them. A replacement had been needed.

Kal hadn't even been aware that the Elders had begun to discuss the matter, not until they had fully debated and voted on the issue. Ruce had almost unanimously been chosen to fill the empty seat on the Council. Kal had heard whispered concerns that the man was far too young to be raised to the prestigious title of Elder, but that had been the only real concern. No one doubted that he had proven himself worthy and loyal with his actions in aiding Kal's efforts to save the rest of the royal family from Lux Manor.

Kal had been, and still was, ecstatic over the decision. Ruce was a perfect choice, in his mind. He was devoted to helping the poorest citizens of Krypton, and was capable of remaining fair, no matter what the circumstances. He was also devoted to seeing justice prevail over the planet. And, if Kal were to be completely honest, having Ruce on the Council was the first step in changing the outdated and unfair laws, as he and Ching had always hoped to achieve. Still, it meant that Kal hadn't seen much of his friend, for Ruce's time was now spent committing each of Krypton's laws to memory. The prince didn't envy that at all. He'd agonized over learning them throughout his entire life, until each one had imprinted itself into his memory in some way, shape, or form, though he was by no means an expert on all of them.

Kal watched the birds until they moved beyond his sight. Then he pushed himself away from the railing, rubbing his forearms where his weight had forced the stone to make little indentations in his skin. He squinted as he looked towards the sun, shading his eyes with one large hand. It was getting late in the afternoon, though the sun still hung somewhat high in the sky. Still, Kal felt that he'd dallied enough out on his balcony. He had work to do, and he had every intention of finishing it by the end of the night. With a contented sigh, he tore his eyes from the nearly cloudless sky and turned. Inside his chambers, on the opposite side of the glass, Fasa lay on the floor, attentively watching Kal's every move. When he realized that Kal was looking at him, the tabby stood and plaintively meowed at him. Kal chuckled, opened the door, and reentered his chambers.

Fasa wound himself around Kal's ankles, begging for attention. Smiling, Kal bent and scratched the cat's head. Fasa purred and closed his eyes as Kal's finger moved to scratch behind the tabby's ear. After a few minutes, Kal stood and went to his computer, where it sat waiting at his desk. He settled himself down into the leather chair, then flipped open the computer's lid. A document was already open on it, waiting for him to finish what he'd been working on before he'd taken a break out in the sunshine.

Kal paused for a moment, re-reading some of the things he'd written, absently chewing his lower lip as he did so. He nodded to himself as he read, pleased with the wording he'd chosen for the proposal he had been crafting for the last two weeks in fitful starts and stops, utilizing what little spare time he'd had. Reaching the end of the document, he paused and thought for another couple of minutes, getting himself back into the right frame of mind before he laid his fingertips to the keyboard. He began to type at a nearly furious pace, the words springing to mind at a thousand miles a minute. He felt he could barely keep pace with his own thoughts, which often seemed to be the case

for him as he wrote, when he thought about it. It was, for him, a completely natural process, like he'd been born to write.

For another two hours, he worked diligently, typing at a frantic pace in between periods of re-reading and editing. But at last, he felt like he'd said everything he wanted to say, had clarified everything that seemed even remotely ambiguous. Reading the entire document again, he felt very good about it. He'd have Lois take a look at it when she got back home from spending the day in the city with her mother and sister. Kal wondered how late it would be when she would finally return. He missed her, though she had only been gone since just before lunch.

As if on cue, Kal heard the door to his chambers open. He stood from his desk and stretched mightily, rolling his shoulders to work out a kink that had formed as he'd inadvertently hunched over his computer. He yawned mildly, realizing only now how long he'd spent staring at the computer screen, and he rubbed his eyes with the back of one hand. In another moment, Lois entered the living room, a couple of bags dangling from her forearms. She let them slip off her arms to fall in a heap on the floor as she rushed to Kal.

"Hi," she said, as she flung herself into Kal's waiting arms.

"Hi," Kal replied, barely getting the word out before pressing his lips to hers.

As he always did, Kal felt his heart skip a beat at the contact with her soft, inviting lips. He moaned a little into her mouth, unable to help the feelings that were running through his body. Lois responded, kissing him back with an even greater intensity. When she finally pulled out of their kiss, they were both breathless and slightly flushed.

"I missed you," Kal said, resting his forehead against hers.

"I missed you too," she said, her arms threaded around his neck.

"Did you have a good day in the city with Luci and your mom?"

Lois nodded. "I did. Although, it would have been even better having you there with us. You know, Mom's...different...now that she isn't drinking so much. I still wish she would stop completely."

"Well, she's making progress," Kal said encouragingly. "At least she's *making* the effort."

"True. But, Kal, I have to say it. I *hate* the extra security that's around now. I feel like I can't even go to the bathroom without someone watching my every move. It's creepy."

Kal shrugged a little. "Dad's terrified that someone else might try what the Uthors did. Give him some time so that the paranoia can wear off. I don't like it any more than you do. But it's the safest thing right now."

"It's the *creepy* thing," Lois asserted once more.

Kal chuckled and gave her another light kiss.

"It's *so* good to be home," Lois sighed. "No watchful eyes. Just you and me. Alone." Fasa meowed as he ran by, batting at one of his toys. Lois giggled and rolled her eyes in amusement. "Okay, make that *almost* alone."

"So...did you buy anything good?" Kal asked, briefly removing his flesh from hers as he nodded at the small pile of bags, effectively changing the topic.

Lois shrugged. "A couple of things."

"Care to tell me?"

She shook her head. "Nope."

"Not even a hint?" he teased back, putting on his best puppy-dog face for her.

"Nice try."

"Aw, come on. Please?" He put a small, feigned whine into his voice, and enjoyed the smile that crossed his wife's lips.

"Later," she promised him. "How did your day go?"

She broke from their embrace and settled on the couch. Kal

sat beside her, snaking his left arm around her waist and pulling her close.

"It was all right," he said, shrugging. "The petitions didn't last as long as I thought they would. It was kind of a nice surprise, if you want to know the truth."

"I thought you *liked* hearing them," Lois teased, smiling at him.

"You know I do," he replied, grinning. "But, well, fewer petitions is always a good sign. It means no one is really having any problems. Plus, it gave me some free time, which was nice."

"And...you used your time to beat Ching and Jai in a game or something?" She winked at him playfully. "Down in the gym perhaps, now that your knee is getting better?"

Kal chuckled. "Are you kidding? Your dad would kill me. I did, however, finally finish writing up our proposal to bring before my dad and the Elders."

Lois' eyes widened. "You did? That's great!"

Kal nodded. "It took long enough, I know. I'd like you to give it a read before I send it to Dad though. You're good with catching my mistakes."

Lois nodded. "Of course."

"I still think it's a great plan," Kal said. "You are one smart woman, Lois." To drive home his point, he kissed the side of her head.

It had been Lois' idea to install video equipment in the more remote and poorer sections of the planet, ones that would be linked to a similar set up in the palace. That way, on petition days, the poorest of the common folk could set their pleas before the Supreme Lord and his sons, without having to travel the distance to the palace. Many of them could not afford to take the time away from their livelihoods, nor could they afford the expense of such a trip. And, it would promote job growth in those areas, as there would be a need for extra guards to watch over the gathered crowds as they waited for their turn to speak. Kal had fallen in love with the idea immediately, and together, they had laid out the plans and worked on the document that Kal had finished writing that afternoon.

"I know," Lois shot back at him, still teasing him. "And you are one smart guy for recognizing that." She grinned as Kal chuckled.

"The proposal is still up on the computer," Kal said. "That is, if you want to have a look now."

Lois hesitated. "Maybe later," she said after a moment. "I just want to sit and relax with you for a little while."

"Okay," Kal nodded. "No objections here."

He leaned back into the couch, content, for the moment, just to be sitting there, one arm wrapped about his wife. He sighed slightly, completely at peace, and looked out of the windows. The sun was beginning to set, and the unseen painter of the heavens was busily at work with a palette of reds, oranges, pinks and golds. Beside him, Lois fidgeted on the couch before slipping out of his embrace.

"Something the matter?" he asked, as she stood from the couch.

She shook her head. "No. But I have a gift for you. I was going to give it to you tonight sometime after dinner, but well, I've never been very good at being patient with stuff like this. So, you're getting it now. Unless...you want to wait?"

"Whatever you want, honey," he said, surrendering to her sudden babbling.

Lois bit her lip in thought. "Well...I guess now is better. I mean, I'd hate to slip and say something to ruin the surprise."

"Ooo-kay," Kal said, dragging the word out. There were still times when Lois completely baffled him. He tried to guess at what Lois might have bought him, but came up blank. He couldn't even begin to imagine *why* she'd gotten him a gift. It wasn't a holiday, and his birthday had been several months prior.

Lois continued talking as she crossed the room and began to root around in her pile of shopping bags. Kal heard the bags crinkling as she rifled through them, instantly rejecting some of them, and delving into the depths of others before setting them aside.

"I *finally* got a chance to slip away from Mom and Luci late in the day. You know, I think Mom's becoming an even bigger coffee addict than she ever was with her alcohol. Now where did I put...? Anyway, she went to get a cup of coffee and Luci wanted one of those sticky pastry things that you like. And I was able to slip away to get you...ah! There it is!"

Lois triumphantly held aloft a wide but slender object. It was wrapped in cheerful yellow paper with blue and green swirls. She grinned, crossed the room, and handed it to Kal. He stood as he accepted the gift, meeting her partway across the room, her sudden explosion of energy prompting him into motion. He smiled at her as he examined the paper.

"Sorry," she apologized, "that's all the wrapping paper that they had at the store. It's kind of tacky, if you ask me."

Kal chuckled. "Only *you* would worry about that," he teased.

Lois shook her head. "No, that's not true. I watched you obsess for twenty minutes about using blue or red paper when you were wrapping Jai's Winter's Deep gift."

Kal laughed again. "Okay, you got me on that one."

"I always do," Lois grinned. "Well, come on. Don't just stand there. Open it." She eagerly gestured at the gift he was holding.

Kal stifled another laugh that was dancing in his throat, and set to work carefully unwrapping the item in his hands. His finger slid between the paper and the tape, easily breaking the bond that held the two together. Then he peeled the paper away. He was curious to see what lay beneath, but he kept his movements deliberate, mostly because he was enjoying watching Lois bounce up and down on the balls of her feet in impatience. He bit back an amused smile, and instead, pulled the rest of the paper away.

Within the wrappings was his favorite childhood book. His own had fallen apart years ago, and he'd regretfully parted with it. He'd never replaced it, having grown too old by that time for the silly stories and rhymes held within its tattered pages. But now, Lois had bought him a replacement.

"Thank you," he said sincerely, oddly glad to see the book again.

"Open it," Lois encouraged him again, still grinning proudly at her gift to him.

Kal did as he was bid, and opened the front cover. There on the title page, he saw Lois' neat, tight, elegant script. He read the words, then read them a second time as his brain worked to process them.

Daddy,

Will you read this to me, when I arrive?

Love,

Your baby

Kal's knees buckled as the words finally broke through the paralysis that had overtaken his brain. He took a step backwards, his calves connecting with the back of their couch. He gripped the piece of furniture with one hand, steadying himself, forcing his body to remain upright. His entire world shifted crazily on its axis, and he felt a sense of vertigo.

He'd felt that sensation in such a wonderfully positive way only once before in his entire life. That had been the day when Kal had fallen in love with his wife. He had thought then that he would never again experience such a rush of joy, such unbridled love, such complete and utter shock and awe. He had been wrong. This news, if his sluggish mind and half-formed thoughts were correct, rivaled the intensity of that fairy-tale night nearly a year before, when Lois and Kal had kissed beneath a starry summer sky.

"Lois," he breathed, surprised that his voice was working when the rest of his mind seemed to have shut down. "Are you telling me...?"

Lois' grin widened even further and she nodded. "You are going to be a daddy," she confirmed for him. "In about eight months." She lightly patted her still-flat stomach for emphasis.

That seemed to kick-start Kal's frozen thoughts. His smile exploded onto his face, blinding Lois more than the horizontal shafts of sunlight that were spilling into the room from the departing sun. The cheerful wrapping paper slipped from his fingers and drifted to the floor, where Fasa immediately investigated it. The book itself worked its way free of his other hand, and fell to the couch cushions with a ruffling of pages. Kal barely noticed these things as his body suddenly galvanized into action.

He stepped to Lois and grabbed her about her waist, drawing her into a fierce hug. He easily lifted her off the floor and spun in a tight circle with her. Pearls of his laughter escaped his lips, unchallenged as they bubbled up out of his chest and throat. He kissed her deeply.

"That's incredible!" he finally managed to say, putting his wife back down so that her feet reconnected with the floor. "I can't believe it! A baby!" His grin grew even wider as he imagined the little person growing within his wife's womb.

"Well," Lois said, laughing a little herself, "we *have* been married for more than a year now."

"It's just...I never thought...we haven't been trying..." Kal sputtered, finding himself incapable of completing a coherent sentence.

Lois placed one finger to his lips, silencing him. "I know. But sometimes, things happen when we least expect it. Like when I fell in love with you."

Kal shook his head, still attempting to force his brain to get back up to its normal speed. "I'm so happy," he finally managed to say. "I've always wanted to be a daddy."

"I'm happy too," Lois said, her hand fluttering back to her stomach for a moment. "You know what's weird? A little more than a year ago, the thought of being your wife...and the future mother of your children...it terrified me. But now," she shook her head, smiling. "Now, I can't be happier. And I can't wait to meet this little person."

"Me too. I can't believe I have to wait a whole eight more months to meet this little one. But, I have to ask. When did you find out?" Kal finally said, impressed with his ability to think clearly.

"Yesterday. I saw Dr. K'lin right after he checked on the progress you are making with your knee. You had that meeting with the Elders."

"Right," Kal said, nodding. "I remember."

"Well, after you rushed off to your meeting, I asked him to stay. I had taken a home test that morning, before you woke up, and it was positive. But, I wanted to be sure. So, Dr. K'lin ran some tests and confirmed it for me. I didn't want to say anything in front of you. I wanted it to be a surprise if I actually was expecting, so I could find some creative way of telling you."

Kal nodded. "Sneaky," he said, grinning.

"No one else knows," she assured him. "I wrote the inscription in the book when I was out today, then had Jak take it to the checkout for me. He might suspect something's up, but that's about it. Still, Kal...I'm worried."

Kal's smile immediately faded. "Why? Is something wrong? What did Dr. K'lin say?"

Lois shook her head, reached out, and rubbed Kal's bare forearm soothingly. "Oh. Nothing. That's not what I meant. I'm fine. The baby is fine. It's just, well...I don't know how to break the news. To Zara and Ching, I mean. They've been trying...and they've had such lousy luck."

“Hey now,” Kal said gently, lifting her chin up so that she looked at him, instead of down at the carpet, where her gaze had dropped. “It’ll be okay. They aren’t going to be mad or anything.”

“I’m not worried about them being *mad*, Kal. I just don’t want to upset them. It’s hard for them. Last week, when Zara and I were out, she couldn’t stop sighing every time we passed a family with kids. She thought I didn’t notice, but I did.”

“I know,” Kal admitted. “I know how much she’s hurting. Ching too. That last miscarriage was the hardest one yet, I think, for both of them. But, well, I have a little secret to confess.”

“Oh?”

“Ching keeps asking when you and I are going to start our family. He’s told me at least three times how much he wants a niece or nephew. And forget about Jai. I think he wanted us to get pregnant on our wedding night.”

“So...you think Zara and Ching will be okay with this?”

Kal nodded gravely. “I do.”

Lois breathed what sounded to Kal like a sigh of relief. He guided her back to their places on the couch, then pulled her into his embrace once they were settled. His hand moved to cover her stomach, and he marveled at the fact that there was a life hidden beneath the layers of skin and muscle. He was astounded that something so wonderful could be created. It rendered him nearly speechless to know that their love had made a new little person come into existence. It was almost overwhelming to him. He sat in stunned silence for a few long minutes, never moving his hand from its protective guard of his wife’s midsection.

“Incredible,” he murmured, unsure if he was talking to himself or to Lois. Then, directing his voice at her, he spoke again. “I love you, Lois.”

“I love you too, Kal.”

“And thank you.”

“For what?”

Kal grinned at her. “Where do I start? For giving me a baby. For being my wife. For everything that makes you who you are.”

“My sweet prince,” Lois returned, kissing his forehead.

“Thank you for being who *you* are. My husband. The father of my child. My best friend. And my soul mate.”

“I still can’t believe this,” Kal said, shaking his head a little.

“I can’t believe how much I already love this child.”

“I know. I feel the same way. It’s amazing, isn’t it?”

Kal nodded, then fell silent for a moment, lost in thought. He frowned before pulling his phone from his pocket and quickly dialing the familiar number. After two rings, Jak picked up.

“Hey, Jak,” Kal said brightly into the mouthpiece. “Do me a favor, please. Cancel my appointments for tomorrow. All of them. Yes, even the meeting with the Elders. We can reschedule them for the same time next week. Sure, sure. Sounds perfect. Thanks. Goodbye.”

Kal ended the call and put the phone away.

“You just cancelled some *very* important meetings,” Lois pointed out to him.

Kal shrugged. “*Nothing* is as important as going out tomorrow and buying stuff for the baby’s room.”

Lois giggled a little. “Kal, sweetie, we don’t know if it’s a boy or girl yet. And we won’t for some time.”

Kal grinned. “Oh, it’s a boy. Definitely.”

Lois laughed. “Oh, really?”

“Yep.”

“And how could you possibly know that?”

“Father’s intuition,” he replied with a sly smile.

“It could be a girl,” Lois retorted playfully.

“It could be. And that would be just fine by me. But it’s a boy for sure.”

He was teasing her now, and she knew it. She whacked him playfully on the arm, which only elicited another laugh from her husband. Kal had a hundred witty responses waiting for her, all

jockeying for the leading position on his tongue, but he swallowed them all down. Instead, he kissed Lois deeply, and gave his tongue a new mission of exploring her mouth. She pushed him backwards and crawled on top of him, never once removing her lips from his. Kal’s embrace tightened around her as he lay there on the couch, kissing his wife, his hands roaming up and down her back and through her hair.

For a long time, all they did was kiss, heedless of the passage of time, heedless of their own need to breathe, it seemed. But eventually, they parted, and Kal was astonished to see how late it had gotten. They were expected at dinner in only ten minutes’ time. Lois seemed to realize it as well as she looked at the clock and sighed. Kal fidgeted with the buttons on his shirt, which had mostly come undone as they’d kissed, though he had no memory of it happening.

“We don’t have to go down,” he said, in response to Lois’ look of disappointment. “I can have Jon make us up some plates so we can eat here.”

Lois hesitated for only the most fleeting of seconds before nodding. “I’d like that. I’m not sure that I can hold in this secret, and I’d prefer to talk to Zara and Ching privately when we tell them. Besides, it’s been *far* too long since you and I have had the chance to sit down to a nice, quiet meal, just the two of us.”

“You read my mind,” Kal said, grinning from ear to ear. “Let me just call down and...”

“Dinner can wait,” Lois replied, gently cutting him off.

She rose from the couch, taking Kal by the hand as she did so. Kal willingly followed her lead. His heart was bursting with love for the incredible woman he was married to. It only made sense that he follow her as she led him to their bedroom, where that love would take physical form. And as he trailed behind her, his hand in hers, he had only one thought.

He was *truly* the luckiest man on all of Krypton.

“Kal, sweetie?”

“Yeah?”

“Where are you?”

“Down in Kel’s room, *trying* to get him ready.”

“*Still?*” Lois asked, sounding amused, even in her impatience. “We have to be downstairs in twenty minutes.”

“I know,” Kal called back, sighing. “Try explaining that to our son.”

Kal heard Lois’ light footsteps coming closer as she made her way down the hall. He tried once more to get the shirt he was holding onto his squirming, protesting two and a half year old son. But the boy wasn’t having any of it. It had been all Kal could do to wrestle his son into his tiny pants and shoes.

“Come on, please?” Kal pleaded with his child.

“Noooooo! I want moooooommmmmmy!” Kel wailed around the drool-covered fingers that were shoved into his mouth.

Kal sighed, feeling all but defeated. Kel could be just as stubborn as his mother, when he wanted to be. And today, apparently, he wanted to be stubborn. Normally, the prince didn’t mind it. But today, he just didn’t have the time. He needed Kel to cooperate. Kal looked helplessly at Lois as she strode into the room, shoeless and still putting on one of her earrings.

“Help me,” Kal pleaded.

Lois chuckled at the sight of her husband. He was on his knees, one strong arm wrapped around the waist of their son, while the child thrashed and squirmed, drool dripping down the hand that was half-shoved into his mouth. She laughed even harder at the look of absolute desperation on Kal’s face. The man could broker peace between feuding lords - she had seen that first-hand on numerous occasions - but he was totally lost when it came time to persuade an unwilling child away from the dangerous edge of falling into a full-blown tantrum.

“Mommy!” Kel said, brightening considerably at the sight of

his mother.

“Hi, sweetie,” Lois said soothingly, kneeling as Kel broke free of his daddy’s grasp and rushed into her arms. “How come you won’t let Daddy get you ready?”

“Want you,” Kel said in injured tones.

“Sorry,” Kal said, apologizing to his wife. “I really tried.”

“It’s all right,” Lois said, accepting the shirt that Kal held out towards her, like a drooping white flag of surrender. She slipped the garment easily over Kel’s head and helped him pull his arms through the sleeves, now that he was suddenly being compliant. “There, that’s not so bad, huh?” she asked him.

Kel rigorously shook his head, emphasizing that no, it really wasn’t so bad after all.

“Thanks,” Kal said, with a relieved sigh. “You are a miracle worker, you know that?”

“I try. But, weren’t you going down to Jai’s room for a pep-talk?” Lois asked.

“Yeah,” Kal said, standing and nodding. “I was.”

“You still have time, if you want to go.”

Kal shifted his weight and awkwardly scratched his left ankle with his right foot. “I don’t know,” he managed to say, sounding as indecisive as he looked. “I wanted to give you a hand around here, so you’d have enough time to get ready.”

“Oh, that’s okay. I’m mostly ready.”

Kal hesitated for a moment. He really did want to see Jai before his brother walked down that aisle to be wed. But he also knew that Lois had her hands full. Then a thought struck him.

“Kel,” he said, looking his son in the eye. “Want to go visit Uncle Jai with me?”

Kel grinned widely. “Uh-huh!” Then, he paused, thoughtful for a moment. “And Lin too?”

Kal nodded at his boy. “Sure. Your sister can come with us.”

“Okay!” Kel bounced in place for a moment. He was about to race out the door of his bedroom when he suddenly turned and ran past his father instead. He went to the miniature armchair and grabbed a well-worn, well-loved, tan and white stuffed dog, affectionately named “Woof.” He hugged the stuffed animal tightly. “Can Woof come?”

Kal chuckled. “I wouldn’t dream of leaving him behind.”

Kel gave a squeal of excitement and hugged the toy even tighter. Kal affectionately ruffled his son’s hair, careful not to make it messy.

“Come on,” Kal said, “let’s go get Lin.” He looked at Lois. “She’s ready to go?”

Lois nodded. “All set.”

“Great. I’ll meet you down in the Council’s chambers. I won’t be long,” he promised her.

Lois chuckled and patted his arm. “I know. And thanks.” She stretched up on her toes and kissed him lightly on his lips.

Kal nodded, then left the room, heading to his daughter’s bedroom, Kel trailing him. Lin was laying on her back, staring sleepily up at the mobile hanging above the crib. Kal smiled down at her, making cooing noises. Then he reached in and gently picked her up. She was only six weeks old, and Kal marveled at how tiny and perfect she was as he nestled her against his chest. He held her close, her head resting on his shoulder. He kissed the side of her head, then turned to his son.

“Ready, buddy?”

Kel nodded and took his father’s free hand. Together, father and son left their chambers and walked out into the halls of the palace. Kel was relatively subdued as they walked, which Kal took as a blessing. He wasn’t sure he could juggle a hyper two and a half year old *and* a six week old at the same time. Not without Lois. Or at the very least, Marthe.

Kal smiled inwardly at the thought of Marthe. His old nursemaid was now nursemaid to his own children, whenever he and Lois were both occupied, or just wanted a little time to

themselves. They didn’t utilize her services often, loathe as they were to be parted from their children, but it was nice to know that she was there at hand if they needed her. And, Kal thought to himself, a kinder, more trust-worthy woman could not possibly be found. She had told the two proud parents on more than one occasion how much she loved to watch over the little ones. Kal knew that it stemmed, in part, from the woman’s own, never fully realized, desire to be a mother.

It took only a few minutes to get to Jai’s chambers, and Kal let his son do the honor of knocking on the door, an honor that the child seemed to take very seriously. After a brief moment, Jai came to the door, already dressed in his ceremonial robes. He grinned when he saw who his visitors were and immediately picked his nephew up. He tickled Kel quickly, causing the child to shriek with laughter.

“Unca Jai!” Kel laughed.

“Hey, kiddo,” Jai said, smiling brightly. “Hey, bro,” he said, looking at Kal. Then he kissed his niece’s head.

“Jai!” Kal grinned, slapping his brother on the back with his free hand. “Looking good!”

“Thanks.”

“Big day! Are you nervous?”

“Nah! I’m good...I think. You guys just missed Ching though.”

“Ah,” Kal nodded, stepping into Jai’s chambers, and following him into the living room. He was shocked at how neat and orderly the place was. Kal didn’t think he’d ever seen Jai’s rooms without some element of chaos to it before, and for a split second, he wondered if he’d wandered into the wrong chambers by accident. “Did he come for a pep-talk too?”

“Yeah,” Jai said, sitting on the arm of the couch.

“Oh. Well...want another one?” Kal teased.

Jai snorted a laugh. “That’s funny, Kal. It seems to me like *you* were the only one of us who needed a pep-talk on his big day.”

Kal’s face darkened for only the slightest of instants. He still felt badly about how he’d handled his own wedding day. He still felt guilty that he’d once viewed that day as the worst day of his life. He knew now that his marriage had been the true *beginning* of his life, not the end of it. He glanced quickly at his son, looking to see how much of this he was listening to, but the boy was crawling on the floor, making Woof investigate Jai’s bookshelves, engrossed in a conversation with the stuffed toy.

Jai’s grin faded. “Kal, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to dredge up...”

Kal shook his head and shifted Lin’s weight a little. “No, it’s fine,” he said, gently cutting his brother off. “I *did* need the support you and Ching gave me that day. I’m still grateful for it. Knowing you guys were rooting for me, and that you were so confident I’d find a way to make my marriage work meant the world to me. It still does. Anyway,” he said, waving the air vaguely with his free hand, “that’s not why I’m here. To rehash the past, I mean. How are you holding up?”

Jai’s smile returned. “Just fine. Except, well, the waiting is *killing* me. I can hardly sit still. I just hope I don’t flub the few lines I have to say.”

His older brother laughed. “You’ll do just fine.”

“You really think so?”

“Of course I do,” Kal assured him. “Trust me. I’ve been through it before. It’s easy.”

“I guess that’s true,” Jai smirked.

“You’re a lucky guy, Jai. She’s a good woman.”

“I know,” Jai nodded thoughtfully. “And to think...this almost would have been impossible, if her birth-husband hadn’t...”

“I know,” Kal said, cutting him off again. “I know.” He sighed heavily.

He didn't like to think about the circumstances which had opened the door for the romance that had blossomed between Jai and his wife-to-be. He didn't like to dwell on the idea of what might have been. It still made Kal very uneasy, still threatened to freeze the blood pumping through his veins, still sent chills racing up his spine.

Luci had almost been wedded to the late Lord Nor Uthor.

Promised to him from her birth, Luci would have - should have - become Lady Luci Uthor. And, Kal reflected somberly, it was likely that she would have wound up becoming another one of Nor's victims. She had too much of the same fire that Lois had; the fire that Kal so dearly loved but knew Nor never would have tolerated. The only thing that had saved Kal's sister-in-law from that fate had been Nor's execution. Kal felt a wave of guilt wash through him as he once more felt grateful for the fact that Nor's death had set Luci free from the contract that had once bound her to the sociopath.

Beside him, Jai must have been having similar thoughts. He sighed heavily, dropping his eyes to his hands, which lay folded in his lap. A silence fell between them, neither one quite sure what they could say now to disperse the lingering darkness of those thoughts. In the end, Kel was the one to break the silence.

"Unca Jai?" he asked, wandering over, his deep brown eyes wide. "Play with me?" Then, with a glance at his father, he added, "Peeees?"

Jai chuckled along with Kal, and just like that, the heaviness in the air was gone. "I wish I could, buddy."

"But..." the little boy protested.

"Kel," Kal said gently. "Today is a big day for your Uncle Jai. He's marrying your Aunt Luci. Isn't that exciting?"

Kel enthusiastically pumped his head up and down in a fierce nod. Then he promptly went back to playing with his stuffed dog. Without looking up, the boy furrowed his brow, a perfect copy of Kal's look when he did that. "Aunt Luci play too?"

"Soon," Jai promised the child. "Very soon. I promise."

"Okay," Kel said solemnly. If his Uncle Jai made a promise, that seemed to be good enough for him.

"Man," Jai said after a moment, fidgeting with collar of his robes. "I don't know *how* anyone can stand these robes. I feel like the collar is choking me."

Kal laughed, bit down a teasing retort, and nodded sympathetically. "I know just what you mean. Anyway, I'd better get going. I promised Lois I'd meet her down there. And besides, I'm sure Dad will be here any minute to check on how you're holding up."

"Thanks, Kal," Jai said. "It means the world to me that you popped in here before the ceremony."

"Hey, my baby brother is about to take the most wonderful, most life-changing step in his life," Kal grinned. "How could I *not* stop to make sure that you're still in one piece? Or fleeing from the palace in terror?"

"Wait, I thought *having children* was the most wonderful, most life-changing event," Jai replied, a teasing edge to his voice. "I'm quoting you directly here, from two and half years ago when my favorite nephew was born."

"That's true," Kal conceded with a laugh. "But, well, one step at a time, bro. One step at a time."

Jai chuckled, then stood. Kal did the same. The two brothers embraced in an awkward hug, careful not to crush Kal's newborn daughter between them.

"I'll see you at the feast," Kal said, smiling brightly and patting Lin's back with infinite gentleness. "Remember, you'll do just fine. Kel? Come on, we need to let Uncle Jai finish getting ready."

"Okay," the boy said, running to his daddy's side.

"Say bye to Uncle Jai," Kal said, smiling down on his son.

Kel turned and waved one small hand. "Bye, Unca Jai!"

"Bye, kiddo," Jai said, waving back.

Kal took his young son's hand and led him out of Jai's chambers. They passed Jor-El as he neared the same door they had just exited through. The Supreme Lord gave them a smile, but he looked preoccupied with ensuring that the event to come went smoothly. He was always a bit on edge when it came to large events, especially those that the entire population of Krypton would be viewing on their video screens. Kal offered his father a winning smile, then patiently took his children down to the Council's chambers.

Heads turned as he entered, his daughter now fast asleep on his left shoulder, his son grasping his right hand. The boy looked a little overwhelmed at the sheer number of people in the chambers, but he was all smiles. Kal thought that one day, his son was going to be quite the little heartbreaker, as the child began to wave at the people he passed.

Kal, however, felt slightly awkward as he walked up the center aisle, just as he always did when he found himself at the center of people's attention. The gathered lords and ladies openly stared at him; he could feel their eyes on him even without looking. He knew they were all curious to catch a glimpse of the new little princess that had been born to the royal house of El, despite the fact that Lin's perfect little face had been splashed across the planet's news right after her birth. That too, had made Kal slightly uneasy, even through the immense pride he had in his expanding family.

It was with a sigh of relief that Kal found his seat, up at the front of the room. Lois was already there, sitting next to Zara and Ching, quietly chatting with them. Kal slipped into the row, and Kel launched himself at his mommy. Kal smiled and greeted his brother and sister-in-law, while Lois easily lifted her son into her lap. She bopped Kel's nose lightly with one finger, and the child laughed, his eyes sparkling. A second later, Kal leaned in a gave his wife a chaste kiss on her lips.

"Miss me?" she asked, teasing him.

"Always," he replied sincerely.

Ching rolled his eyes good-naturedly. "Are you two *ever* going to leave the Honeymoon Stage?" he teased.

"Well, that depends," Kal retorted. "Are you and Zara ever going to?"

His brother laughed. "Well played, Kal. Well played."

Ching shifted a little in his seat, adjusting the couple's four month old daughter, Tara, in his arms. Like Lin, the girl had found the events of the day to be more than exhausting, and was passed out on his shoulder. Kal leaned over and kissed the baby on her head, inwardly smiling at how much Ching doted on his daughter. No child could ask for a more grateful, loving set of parents, Kal thought to himself. And no two people had ever been more deserving of the beautiful little girl. Kal's only regret was that Tara was destined to be an only child.

Zara had not wanted to conceive again after the miscarriage she had suffered as Lux Uthor's prisoner on that terrible Winter's Deep, a few short years prior. The loss had been too great. In fact, it had nearly broken her and Ching. So they had stopped trying for a time, preferring to step back and take some time to heal. Zara had even admitted to being ready to stop trying altogether, and simply live out her days childless; that had been the depth of her wounds.

But, as fate would have it, Dr. K'lin had begun to experiment with a relatively new treatment. Kal had never pried to find out just what was involved with the actual treatment, but it had something to do with simulating the energy of a yellow sun's rays, and had been based on the theories set forth by Dr. Samm Lyne. Zara and Ching had debated about trying it for several long months, before finally deciding that it was worth a shot. Within a month after starting to work with Dr. K'lin, Zara had once again been with child.

Dr. K'lin had overseen the entire pregnancy, treating Zara often twice a week with the specially developed lasers Lois' father had fabricated. And somehow, the treatment had worked. Zara had managed to keep the pregnancy. But it had been a rough nine months, and she had been confined to bed rest for nearly the entire time. She had never once complained, and Kal gave her a lot of credit for that. Being confined to his bed when he'd been recovering from his fractured skull had nearly driven him up the walls, even with Lois constantly at his side. And yet, whenever he'd asked Zara how she was doing, she had only ever been all smiles and gratitude for the child that had been growing within her.

It had been the delivery which had proven to be the most difficult. She had managed to go into a natural childbirth, and they had all thought that the worst was over. But fate had pulled one last, cruel trick. Complications had arisen as she went through the last stages of labor, and Zara had nearly died as she struggled to bring her baby daughter into the world. In the end, Dr. K'lin had had to cut the girl from Zara's womb in an emergency surgery.

Zara had never once regretted it, but the damage to her body had been done. Severe bleeding had occurred, and there had been no choice but to remove Zara's womb. It had been a heartbreaking development for the new parents, even as they celebrated the birth of their child. Kal knew Ching had always envisioned himself surrounded by many children. But he also knew that his older brother could not possibly love his daughter anymore fiercely than he did.

Tara was, quite simply, the center of Ching's universe.

"How's my favorite niece?" Kal asked, gazing at the child.

"She's doing well," Ching replied, beaming at his daughter. "You were with Jai just now?"

"Where else?" Kal asked, grinning. "He's chomping at the bit to get down here."

Ching laughed. "I know. It's good to see him so excited about this. You know, there was a time when I never thought I'd see the day when Jai would be in love. Let alone getting married."

"I know." Kal nodded his agreement. He paused for a second. "I passed Dad in the hall when I was coming down here. He looked stressed out."

"Well, you know Dad. He always worries when it comes to these huge events." Ching made a half-hearted shrug, careful not to disturb the sleeping baby on his shoulder.

"Exactly. I offered to help him with the planning, but he refused."

Ching gave him another half-shrug. "He told me. But he didn't want anything to distract you from the impending birth of your daughter."

"Yeah," Kal sighed. "I know. And I appreciate that, but I wish I could have taken some of the stress away from him."

"He wouldn't even let *me* help." The man sighed. "So, how's life with two kids treating you?" Ching asked, winking at him, and changing the subject in one smooth move. He asked Kal that same question on a regular basis, always in a teasing manner. "Getting any sleep yet?"

Kal chuckled. "I got a full four hours last night," he grinned back. "My daughter is a night owl."

He lightly rubbed the infant's back in a soothing manner. He didn't mind the interrupted sleep in the least. Tending to his daughter was worth it, and made the sleepless nights bearable. In fact, Kal enjoyed the moments alone with her in the small hours of the night, while Kel and Lois remained blissfully wrapped in their own dreams. Kal loved holding the girl, soothing her, rocking her, and talking to her until she fell back to sleep, safe and tiny in his strong arms.

Ching snorted a laugh. "Tara's becoming one too. Aren't you, sweetheart?"

Tara's only response was to suck on her thumb, her breathing deep and even as she slept. Kal smiled at the baby and nodded.

"Great," Lois said, never taking her eyes off her son. "They'll be well prepared for sleep-over parties when they get older."

"Hmm, aren't we rushing things?" Kal asked, gazing at his daughter with such love that he felt his heart would surely have to burst open. "I thought we agreed that we want her to stay this tiny for as long as possible."

Lois giggled a little at her husband's joking tone. "Well, if we do that, we'd probably be too busy to have any *more* babies," she said, winking at him.

"More?" Kal squeaked out, his eyes going wide as a slow grin spread over his face. "I *do* like the sound of that."

Still, he felt guilty even as he said it. He always felt badly about his ability to have more children, when Zara and Ching could not. But a quick side glance at his older brother reassured him that there were no hard feelings. In fact, Ching looked quite amused as he watched Kal and his wife interact.

In Kal's arms, Lin started to fuss in her own dreamland. Carefully, he shifted her so that she no longer rested against his chest, but lay, instead, in his arms on her back. Kal quietly rocked his body from side to side, humming almost inaudibly. It wasn't a specific tune, just one that Kal made up on the spot, though it had notes of familiar children's lullabies held within its folds. Kal stifled a grin as the thought struck him that not even in this one simple task was he ever one to be a conformist.

For a few long minutes, Lin continued to fuss, until, at last, Kal's efforts soothed away whatever dream or discomfort she was experiencing. Her breathing evened out and she grew quiet and still once again. Kal ran a finger over one of Lin's tiny pink cheeks, then brought it to her dainty, petite hand. Even in her sleep, she instinctively grabbed hold of it with a tight grip. And, as always, Kal's heart absolutely melted.

A few minutes later, Samm and Elle Lyne entered into the room. They swiftly made their way to the same row as Kal and his family. Both smiled at the sight of their two grandchildren. Kel's small face broke into a huge lopsided grin, one that so perfectly matched his father's. Samm scooped the boy into his arms for a few minutes, before setting him back down on Lois' lap. Then he fondly bent to kiss his granddaughter.

"How are my grandkids?" Samm asked, never taking his eyes off Lin.

"Doing well. How are you guys?" Kal asked, his eyes flickering up to Samm and Elle briefly, before resting back on Lin's face. She had a sort of hypnotic effect on him, he thought wryly. Both of his children did.

"We're well, thanks," Elle replied.

"Congratulations, by the way," Kal said, still rocking Lin in his arms. "I'm so thrilled that Luci and Jai..." his voice trailed off as Lin started to wake and cry. "Shhh..." he tried to soothe her. "It's okay. Daddy's got you. It's all right."

Lin quieted down again as Kal bounced her in his arms. She stared up at him, her eyes a perfect copy of her mother's. Next to Kal, his son was staring attentively at his baby sister.

"Lin?" he asked.

Kal smiled at his son. "She's okay, buddy."

"Sure?" he asked, looking dubious.

Kal chuckled. "Positive. See? She's fine."

"Okay," the boy grinned.

Kal grinned right back at his son. Another minute later, Jor-El finally slipped into the empty seat that was waiting for him. He reached out his arms, eager to have one of his grandchildren filling them. Kal dutifully handed his father Lin. The Supreme Lord's face positively lit up, and all of the tension in his features that had been there earlier melted away as he cradled the infant.

"Hi there, baby girl," the Supreme Lord cooed. His voice grew lighter as he talked to the baby princess, warming the hearts

of everyone who could hear him.

“Daddy?” Kel asked, breaking Kal out of his thoughts.

“Yes, pal?”

“Up?” the boy asked.

“Sure!” Kal beamed as his son practically took a flying leap off Lois’ lap and into Kal’s.

In a second, he had the boy settled on his lap, his son leaning back into his chest, seemingly completely content. Kal kissed the top of his son’s head affectionately.

Nearby, Samm chuckled and Elle’s smile grew wider. Samm looked about ready to say something, but as he opened his mouth, the doors to the chambers opened. A hush settled over the gathered crowd as Jai stepped confidently into the room. Kal could see that his brother was having a hard time maintaining a dignified pace, so eager he was to begin the ceremony. Everyone in the room stood as he entered, and Kal picked up his son, resting the child’s weight on his hip. Kel snuggled into his side and rested his head against Kal’s neck. Once more, the prince’s heart swelled with pride and love as he held one of his children close.

Jai strode to the front of the room. Kal could see his brother’s lips moving as he quietly greeted Trey. Then Jai’s eyes swiveled out over the crowd, taking stock of the lords and ladies who would bear witness to the union between Luci and himself. He saw his family in the sea of faces, which wasn’t hard, as they were sitting up front, and he nodded at them. Kal nodded back reassuringly. Jai looked a little nervous to Kal’s knowing eyes. His little brother was still obsessing over whether or not he would trip over the words when it came time to recite his vows.

A moment later, the doors to the chambers opened a second time, this time admitting Luci into the room. Just as Lois had been, a few short years prior, the young woman was dressed in the black ceremonial robes the occasion demanded. In his mind, Kal was instantly transported back to his own wedding day. Lois had taken his breath away then, with nothing more than her stunning looks. Later, she had proven that her mind was just as alluring as her body. And once they had learned to get along, Kal had instantly been under her spell as he fell in love with her personality. It hadn’t been hard at all for him to fall in love with his wife, once they had put aside their injured feelings over being sold into a contracted marriage by their fathers. Everything about Lois was so beautiful, so wonderful, so ideally suited to his own personality.

As always, Kal felt a surge of love and gratitude well up within his chest as he thought about the woman he was married to. He knew, in his heart, that no more perfect match could have ever been made for him. And he found himself thankful for the contract that had been forged when he was younger than his own son was now, which had bound his life to Lois’. That didn’t mean that Kal had suddenly taken a liking to the archaic tradition of arranging marriages between children and unborn babies, not in the least. But, in this one instance, he found himself thankful for it.

Kal rocked his son absently as he watched the marriage ceremony begin. Now and again, he found himself rubbing circles on the boy’s small back. Kel stuck his fingers in his mouth and silently endured the ceremony, clutching his stuffed dog the entire time. Once or twice, the child became so quiet and still that Kal was sure he’d fallen asleep. But each time, when he peeked down to check, the boy was wide awake, looking about the room with wide, curious eyes.

Before long, the ceremony drew to a conclusion. Kal blinked in surprise at how fast it had flown by. He had been so terrified on his own wedding day. And he’d harbored so much dread for the unknown element that his wedding night had held, that the ceremony had seemed to take the better part of a year to get through. But Kal now realized that it had only taken about an

hour.

After Jai and Luci departed from the chambers, Kal stood again, and walked down to the feast with his family at his side. His free arm was around Lois’ waist; the other was holding Kel close. A quick look at Zara and Ching revealed an exact duplicate. Side by side, the two couples walked through the halls, in flagrant defiance of the traditions which demanded that the women trail the men by two steps. Kal caught a few shocked looks as he passed some of the other nobles, but they mostly attempted to hide it. Only Trey looked at the princes with patient resignation, if not acceptance that they would never change.

Once at the feast, Kal sought out Ruce. It was good to see the man, Kal reflected. He hadn’t seen his friend since the day after Lin had been born, when he’d come to welcome the new baby into the world. For a long time, the two men chatted, Ruce’s new wife joining them for a short period of time before drifting off to speak with Zara. Kal liked the woman a lot, and thought that Ruce had chosen his wife well, though Kal still could not believe that his friend had somehow managed to escape a birth-marriage. At last, Kel grew restless in his father’s arms. Kal smiled patiently at the boy, then took his leave of Ruce. He set Kel down on the floor, and the boy happily scampered off to play with some of the other young children who were in attendance. The prince took comfort that Marthe’s watchful eyes never strayed from the child.

For the rest of the evening, Kal made small talk with the other lords and ladies. Most of them politely asked how his young family was doing. A few of the more brazen lords attempted to forge marriage contracts between their children and Kal’s. Kal shot down each offer as politely as he could, which earned him more than one frown. And, from the looks of things, it seemed Ching was in the same position. A number of times, Kal saw his brother shake his head emphatically, and reflexively clutch Tara even tighter. But both brothers were resolute in their staunch refusal to sell their children into marriages. Each child would be given the chance that neither brother had ever had: the chance to grow up free to love and marry whoever they deemed worthy. And for Kal, that meant that his children could choose another noble or the poorest commoner. It made no difference to him, so long as his kids grew up happy. So long as his kids had the chance to love someone as wholly, as fiercely, as purely as he loved Lois.

The feast itself was a rather nice event, Kal thought as the night wore on. He hadn’t enjoyed his own at all. He’d barely tasted the food that night. He’d barely touched the expensive wines that had so freely flowed. He had barely been able to exchange two words with Lois that night. And the thought of the festivities ending had filled Kal with terror, because it would leave him alone with a total stranger. He hadn’t felt ready for that, not in the least.

But tonight, everything was different. Kal sampled every single dish that came out. He savored every bite of food, delighting in the tender meats and steaming vegetables, the rich pastries and cakes, the savory seafood. Jon had well out-done himself, and Kal planned on letting him know that, first thing in the morning. Throughout the night, Kal took the opportunity to sample several of the wines that were being passed around, never drinking much, but enjoying the ones he did try. Several of the wines were newly imported from other planets that Krypton traded with, and it was anyone’s guess as to when Kal would next be able to sample them. He made a mental list of the ones he would attempt to purchase at a later date.

But best of all, the thing Kal loved the most, was that this time, Lois was almost constantly at his side.

That knowledge set the prince’s heart to soaring. Every time he touched her, every time he looked at her, his heart did a flip-flop in his chest. It made the entire event more than enjoyable. It

made it actually a pleasurable experience, which took Kal off-guard when he realized that fact. Of course, there was the added bonus that he wasn't the center of attention, and could slip out of the spotlight to the comfortable sidelines as much as possible. Jai was the center of attention, the one everyone was honoring. Well, Kal thought, Jai and Luci. Kal was more than thrilled that that was the case; that the two of them had gotten together and had formed a loving bond that seemed as solid as the one he shared with Lois.

And, he thought wryly, this time, he looked *forward* to retiring to his chambers at the end of the feast. He looked forward to putting his children to bed and then climbing into his own, with Lois. Perhaps, if either one of them still had any energy left, they would join together and make love. A slow smile spread over his lips at the thought, and he shot Lois a discreet glance. But she was thoroughly engrossed in a conversation with Zara, each of them holding their respective daughters close to their chests, each swaying as they talked, rocking the girls ever so gently.

He was slightly disappointed that Lois missed the look he'd sent her. But, in the same moment, saw Jai finishing a conversation with Lord Ra, so he took the opportunity to saunter over. He hadn't had a chance yet to speak with his brother since he'd visited Jai in his chambers, hours before.

"Congrats, bro," Kal said, thumping his baby brother on the back in an affectionate manner. "Welcome to the better side of life."

Jai flashed him a thousand watt smile. "Thanks, Kal."

"And you didn't even flub your vows," Kal teased him.

"No, I didn't," Jai laughed. "I almost cut off Trey as he was speaking them though, when I went to repeat them."

Kal chuckled. "Yeah, I noticed that. I saw the look Luci gave you when you did that too." He shook his head in amusement.

"Aw, man. You saw that too?" Jai groaned good-naturedly. "I'm never going to live this down, am I?"

Kal shook his head again, laughing. "Nope."

"Good to know."

"What are we teasing Jai mercilessly about *now*?" Ching asked, coming up alongside Kal.

"His race to repeat his vows before Trey finished speaking them," Kal said.

"Ah," Ching replied, raising his eyebrows in his humor and shrugging. "Got it. I can work with that." He winked at his youngest brother.

"Oh, man," Jai groaned again.

He looked ready to attempt a retort as Lois wandered over, holding a fussing Lin in her arms. She was flanked by Marthe, who was ushering a toddling Kel over to his daddy.

"Hey, guys," Lois greeted them in one fell swoop. "Jai, congrats again." She leaned in and gave her brother-in-law a quick peck on the cheek. "I'm so happy for you."

"Thanks. Are you heading out?" Jai asked, shooting a glance at the clock.

The feast still had at least another hour. Possibly even longer, judging on how deeply the gathered lords and ladies were still imbibing. Only a few scattered handfuls of people had already left.

Lois shrugged slightly, patting the baby's back gently, trying to soothe her. "Sorry, Jai. I really am. But this little one needs a diaper change and a feeding."

Jai nodded in understanding. "By all means then." He leaned in and kissed his niece's head. "Night, sis," he said, looking again at Lois.

"See you in the morning," she assured him.

"Maybe," he winked at her. "Depends on how well the wedding night goes."

Lois shook her head, amused at Jai's incessant antics. "That's

my *sister*, Jai," she said, in mock admonishment.

Jai grinned and shrugged. "And, your point is...?"

Lois playfully slapped his shoulder. "Goodnight."

"Are you taking Kel too?" Kal asked.

"Yeah. It's way past his bed time."

"Nooooo!" the child protested, rubbing his eyes with the back of one hand. "Not sleepy yet!" He stifled a yawn.

Kal smiled at his son. Then he bent and picked the child up.

He smiled at Marthe. "I'll take it from here."

Marthe shook her head. "You should stay and enjoy yourself. I can help Lois easily enough."

"Thanks," Kal said, shaking his head. "But I don't mind."

Marthe nodded, a knowing smile on her face. "All right."

"Aw, you're taking my favorite little man away?" Jai complained good-naturedly.

Kal nodded. "He's tired. He needs to go to sleep."

"Nooooo! Wanna stay up!"

"See? He wants to stay and party," Jai argued.

Kal chuckled. "You are a bad influence," he said, a teasing tone on his tongue.

"Of course I am. I'm cool Uncle Jai!"

Kal exchanged a look with Ching. A mischievous grin appeared on both men's faces.

"Just you wait," Ching said.

"Wait? For what?"

"We are *so* going to influence *your* children," Kal finished for Ching.

"Children? Hey, give me a break here guys. I'm only a newlywed!" Jai paled a little as he spoke the words. Clearly, he hadn't yet given much thought to the inevitability of starting his own family.

"Doesn't matter," Ching said, shrugging.

"Aw, not cool, guys. Don't freak me out like this."

"Freak you out like what?" Luci said, slipping to her husband's side.

"Oh, nothing," Kal said, the mischievous look still dancing in his eyes. "We were just heckling Jai a little, that's all."

Luci raised her brows in a perfect imitation of Lois. "About?"

"Babies," Jai offered, gulping around the word.

Luci nodded thoughtfully. "I see. Kal, am I going to have to tell my sister that you are scaring the wits out of my new husband? On my wedding night?" She put her hands on her hips, though Kal could tell she was at least half-joking.

"Uh...no," he stammered, rubbing his son's back as the boy yawned again.

Ching snorted a laugh and Luci turned to him. "You know, Zara and I are pretty close too," she warned him.

"And on that note, I'd better get my son to bed," Kal said, effectively disentangling himself from the conversation. "Congratulations again, Luci. I'm thrilled for you. Come on, Kel. Say goodnight to your aunt and uncles."

Kel frowned. "Night."

"Night, buddy," Ching said, ruffling the boy's hair.

With that, Kal turned and left the feast, stopping only to bid his father goodnight. Then he entered into the hallway. As the doors shut behind him, cutting him off from the festivities, he was enveloped in a blissful silence. His body sagged the tiniest bit with relief to be out of the public's eye again, and from the lords and ladies who had been trying all night long to match their children with his own. He shifted Kel's weight on his hip, then quickly made his way back to the chambers he shared with his family.

Once inside, he quickly got Kel ready for bed, getting him changed into the child's favorite pair of pajamas and tucking him into his bed. As soon as the boy was settled, Fasa jumped up and curled into a ball, guarding Kel's feet. Then Kal sat on the edge of the small bed and picked up the book that Lois had given him

on the day he'd discovered that he was going to be a daddy. He thumbed through the book and found his favorite short story - a tale about a puppy who wanted a boy to love, and who had a few adventures before finally finding the right child to befriend. Kel was sound asleep by the time Kal finished reading the second page, so he gently set the book aside, kissed the boy's forehead, and headed into his own bedroom.

Lois was there, sitting in the rocking chair she'd set up by the windows. She was gently rocking in it, humming a lullaby as she nursed their daughter. A slow, peaceful smile unfurled over Kal's lips as he gazed upon the woman he loved and the tiny girl who had him wrapped around her little finger. He quickly crossed the room and kissed Lois' head, causing her to smile up at him.

She didn't speak. But her humming morphed into a low, whispered singing. Mesmerized by the sound of her voice, and the love he had for her, Kal sat on the edge of their bed. But before long, Lin had eaten her fill and fallen asleep. Lois started to rise from the chair, but Kal silently stood, reached for his baby, and whisked the girl off to her own room. He gently kissed her head, then laid her in her crib, before heading back to his own bedroom. Lois was already beneath the blankets when he entered, a loving, inviting smile on her face as he stepped into the room. Kal beamed a smile back, closed the door, shed his fine clothing, and joined her in the bed. They made slow, gentle, deliberate love that night.

When they were done, Lois curled up into his side, laying her head on his chest, just above his heart. Kal's arm tightened around her, pulling her even closer as he lay on his back. His pulse was still racing, but he was completely at peace. Lois' free arm draped across his stomach, and she squeezed his body in a tight hug. She breathed a sigh of contentment and her eyes fluttered shut. Kal could not hold back the smile from crossing his lips, and he leaned his cheek against the top of Lois' head. His own sigh matched her own.

"I love you, Kal," she murmured sleepily as he stroked her dark hair.

"I love you too, Lois," he replied, "so very, very much. You are the best thing to have ever happened to me."

Kal lay there for a short time, still awake, marveling at his life. He was more than lucky, he knew. His father had managed to arrange his marriage to the only woman on Krypton Kal could ever possibly give his heart to. Though their life together had started on a difficult note, they had both learned to look past the anger they held. And what they had found hidden behind each other's defensive walls was nothing short of a beautiful, blinding, heart-altering, life-changing love they could share with one another.

In Lois, Kal had found his partner, his best friend, his love, his family, his very heart, and his home.

THE END