

An Unexpected Visitor: Part One of the Visitor Trilogy

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Rated: PG

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Summary: This is a story tying together some of my previous vignettes: *Ants at a Picnic*, *A Lovely Smile* and *The Ring*. There is also a brief mention of a character I created for *Stranger in our Midst*. In this story, Lex Luthor had a brief flirtation with Lois, but she saw through his façade and married Clark instead. For that reason and many others, the billionaire was determined to permanently remove Clark from the landscape of his life.

But there is someone from Clark's past who clearly has a problem with Lex's machinations...

Author's Note: Thanks to my trio of betas; Andreia, Bobbart and KenJ. Andreia has been a consistent and helpful cheerleader ever since I began writing in this fandom. Bob points a sharp stick when I wander out of POV. But I have to give a special shout out to KenJ for his able assistance in *all things* regarding ordnance and medicine. Special Honorable mention to Anti-K, she looked at the rough draft and got it back to me ASAP, despite a tight work schedule.

Legal disclaimer: Most of the characters in this story are property of DC Comics, December 3rd Productions and Warner Bros. No copyright infringement is intended. I have merely borrowed the characters for a small bit of time to play in their universe.

And now ...

Part One — Gun Shot

It was a pleasant summer afternoon; Lois and Clark were sitting in a large wood and glass atrium auditorium within S.T.A.R. Labs' vast complex of buildings. Copious amounts of sunshine spilled into the space, thanks to ten-foot-high windows. The light was necessary to create an outdoor environment for the hundreds of lush plants and flowers softening the auditorium's hardscape. The air was fresh and sweet, laced with the fragrance of flowers, they had been invited by Dr. Klein to a lecture today by Professor Abrihet Senai, the Nigerian princess who in years past had taught Clark the deceptively simple art of ballroom dancing. But this afternoon she was utilizing her talents on a decidedly different stage; as the Sorbonne's guest lecturer on sword metallurgy and its application to modern science.

Abrihet, the Assistant Professor of French Medieval Metallurgy Studies at the Sorbonne, had accepted an invitation from Bernard Klein to present a lecture at S.T.A.R. Labs on her research and the intriguing theories that had resulted. She and Dr. Klein, over the course of several lively conversations, realized they had a mutual acquaintance. She had mentioned knowing Clark Kent years before in Paris. One brief call by Dr. Klein reunited Abrihet with her former student and arrangements were made to meet for an early dinner following her lecture.

<<Please, bring your lovely bride, Monsieur Kent; I want to

know who it was that captured the heart of my best pupil.>>

Clark's laughter came softly over the connection. "It's been years since we were teacher and student! Please, call me Clark."

<<Très bien! I am Abrihet.>> Madame Senai's personality fairly bubbled over the phone. It was good to hear the gentle tones of her voice, overlaid as they were with Nigerian and French accents. Her compassion and patience had been essential in encouraging him to learn to dance ballroom style. The consistent discipline required had helped to smooth out the last of his adolescent awkwardness and hone his super abilities.

It seemed that her congenial personality and brilliance had also managed to captivate Bernard Klein. The bashful scientist had called Clark later that evening wanting to know what men's shop to visit in order to purchase a reasonably priced suit, fashionable enough to wear at a scientific lecture and perhaps a private dinner for two?

Bernie had taken the advice of both Clark and the clothing salesperson to heart, hurrying down the aisle just as Abrihet took her seat with other lecturers on the stage. Gone was the rumpled white lab coat, stained tie and worn tan loafers. In their place were garments that would make a Wall Street banker nod with appreciation. He wore an expertly fitted charcoal suit with a finely textured white dress shirt all neatly pulled together by a paisley-green tie — which just happened to match the beautiful jacket and skirt Abrihet was wearing.

Bernie's co-workers as well as the Kents looked at him in equal parts amazement and respect. The gentle scientist blushed up to his ears; unless the subject was of intense interest to him, he rarely attended on-campus lectures, preferring to sit and listen in the privacy and quiet of his office while eating a chicken salad sandwich on whole wheat toast. He quickly sat down next to his friends and paid respectful attention to his colleagues and other guest lecturers. Warm sunshine spilled over Abrihet when she finally stepped up to the lectern. She was a handsome woman in her late forties, who worked hard to maintain her dancer's figure. Bernie leaned his long body forward in his seat, eagerly taking in every word.

"... and that mesdames et messieurs concludes this afternoon's discussion on the ancient techniques of sword making and their impact upon France's industrial infrastructure today. Thank you for letting me share a brief moment of..."

The unexpected tinkling of broken glass and a sharp cry of pain from one of the members of the audience was closely followed by the muffled report of a rifle at some distance sounding like a car backfiring. What happened next was a maddening cacophony of sound, motion and panic. Members of the audience, hearing the shot ran like frightened geese for whatever protection or egress they could find.

The central rear exit doors burst open. Two overweight guards, shocked out of their normal complacency by the noisy alarm of the guests, ran into the room with their weapons drawn, frightening more people and adding to the general disorder.

Lois' hands moved quickly to her ears, in an effort to protect them from the terrible sounds. She turned to Clark, fully expecting to see an empty chair and hear the familiar *whoosh* as Superman flew into action. But instead a shocking sight assaulted her eyes. Her husband of barely two months lay supine against the chair, a bright red plume of blood splashed against the white of his favorite shirt expanding eerily across his chest.

"Clark!" she screamed. Despite her trembling hands, Lois attempted to pull Clark's still form to her side before his limp body could slide to the floor. It was a near-impossible task, his body mass was heavier than it appeared.

Bernie, standing a few feet from Lois gestured wildly to the guards. Once he got their attention he pointed at Clark. "Call the police and an ambulance! This man's been shot!"

She had managed to lay Clark's head in her lap, hot unshed

tears obscuring Lois' vision to the point that she could not make out who was standing near her.

"Lois ... honey, tell the guards ... no ... doctor. The bullet must be made of ... Kryptonite. It's gotta come out ... we ... we ... have to trust Dr. Klein to do ithere." he said, his voice was feeble and reedy, before collapsing and sliding into unconsciousness.

She nodded vigorously, which forced the tears to flow ever faster down her face. She tried twice to speak to her husband, utter some words of encouragement, but nothing ushered past her lips.

Abrihet made her way from the stage and through the thinning crowd toward the little group surrounding Clark, clearly frightened. Her dark eyes were riveted to the red stain on his chest. She knew this was impossible, after all, he was Superman, an invincible being from another planet. Ordinary bullets should have no effect on him. She spoke, barely recognizing the strained tones of her voice. "Lois, mon amie ... Clark?"

Lois, aware she had to protect Clark's secret, said the first thing that came to mind, "We ... we have been getting threatening phone calls lately because of a corporate expose Clark has been working on. Oh, Abrihet, he's alive but the slug ... it has to be removed. Please don't let my husband die!" She then turned from Abrihet and looked at Bernie beseechingly, communicating that as Superman's 'physician', he had to do something.

Bernie, normally a retiring person, took one look into Lois' frightened eyes — gone red and swollen from tears — and stepped outside his safe cocoon. He was completely surprised at the sharpness of the commands that issued forth from his mouth. Turning to one of the guards he said, "Matthews, does your security station have a complete S.T.A.R. Labs-issue medical kit?"

Matthews, a man with large cauliflower ears and hands the size of meat hooks, was a little taken aback by the normally reticent Dr. Klein's crisp demand, and merely nodded his head.

"Good. Bring it here immediately." The man did not have to be told again — he ran up the aisle as fast as his bulk could carry him without interference, the atrium now empty save for the tiny knot of friends surrounding Clark's body.

Fusco, the other guard, named looked up from his radio and said. "The police and paramedics will be here soon."

"Very good. Now let's move these chairs back, I need room to take out that bullet."

Fusco stared up at him, a quizzical look on his round face and said, "Why not wait for the paramedics? They'll be here in a few ..."

Bernie ignored anything else the guard said, his mind focusing on other matters. His heart pounded so wildly, he was sure Clark, despite being unconscious could hear it. While he waited for the kit to arrive, Bernie evaluated the wound. Lois was correct; the slug had to have been made of Kryptonite in order for it to have harmed Clark. Opening his shirt, he saw the location of the wound and realized that an inch or so lower and slightly to the right and the shot would have been instantly fatal. <There isn't enough blood to indicate that the aorta had been hit and the color is too dark for it to be a lung.> Looking up, he saw where the bullet had pierced the atrium window. It was high up in a curved section of glass. <Either the bullet was deflected slightly when it passed through the glass or the distortion caused by the curvature of the glass threw his aim off.> It was problematical if he could do it without more Kryptonite, fortunately that would not be necessary. He would have to use the entry wound as his access.

This entire situation was unnerving; the last thing he wanted to do was use a scalpel on another human being. There was a strong reason why he did not practice medicine. But his friend's

life — and his secret identity were hanging in the balance. He had to try. Pushing painful memories from the past aside, he turned to the guard. "The paramedics will never get here in time. That horrible piece of metal has to be removed now! Ah, here comes Matthews. Let's move these chairs." Without another word, Dr. Klein pulled off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves.

Quickly, the aluminum and plastic chairs were moved and Clark was eased off his chair and placed on the carpeted floor.

Matthews huffed out, "Whew! He's a lot heavier than he looks!"

Before Lois could say anything, Abrihet intervened, her voice unusually sharp. "Mr. Kent lifts weights, his muscle mass takes up less space, but weighs more than fat."

Both guards took that as an indirect jab against them. Fusco, getting a little pale, turned to Bernie who was opening the med-kit and looking over the instruments. "Ah, Doc, you don't need us anymore, do ya? Maybe we should wait outside and ... guide the cops and EMTs in here?"

Without looking up from his task, Bernie muttered, "That's an excellent idea. Please take Professor Senai with you."

The black woman shook her head, the elegant braids swaying slightly, "Nonsense! I will assist you in removing the bullet. After all, this procedure will be done without anesthesia, Lois needs to hold him steady. Her husband is a rather unique individual with very specific needs." She glanced from Lois to Bernie, letting the full meaning of her words sink in.

Momentarily shaken, Lois understood her meaning, nodded. "She's right, Bernie, let her stay. We ... he is running out of time."

The guards, relieved not to watch such an operation, hurried up the aisle leaving Dr. Klein to his task.

As soon as the door was closed behind them Lois whispered, "Abrihet ... how did you know?"

Abrihet smiled a little sadly, her golden earrings tinkled. "He and a certain 'High Flyer' share a rather lovely smile. But we can speak of that later. Years ago, I escaped from Nigeria with the aid of a few trusted friends in order to avoid a detestable arranged marriage. My betrothed was a powerful man; if it became known they had helped me, he would have been very hard on them. Their identities, even today, cannot be revealed. So you need not fear, his secret is safe as well."

Through fresh tears, the young woman looked into the older woman's dark compassionate eyes and saw more than a former dance teacher and professor; she saw a woman who had forged her own path rather than travel night dark roads others had planned for her. She had escaped the ordeal and emerged intact. This was someone she and Clark could trust with their lives. Abrihet reached out a hand and Lois grasped it tightly, despite the fact that it was smeared with her husband's still warm blood. When she spoke, her voice was soft, yet strong, "Thank you ... thank you from both of us."

Just then Bernie let out a disgusted snort as he reviewed what was in the kit. This was not the S.T.A.R. Labs issue medical kit that all security guards were supposed to have at their stations. The contents within only held supplies suitable to bandage a minor burn, an abrasion or minor cut, it would be wholly inadequate to his needs. He was going to have to improvise. He pulled out some foil-wrapped prep pads. At least they would be useful for sterilizing what he would have to use. Reaching into his pocket he pulled out a Swiss Army Knife. With its multiplicity of blades, of all things he pulled out the saw blade. Looking around he saw Lois' ever-present caramel-colored briefcase on the floor. He asked, "Lois, do you have a pair of tweezers in that thing?"

A question in her eyes, Lois brought herself back from where she had gone in her worry for Clark and said, "Yes ... yes, I do. Why? They aren't very big."

"As long as they will open half an inch, they'll do. Pl ... please get them out."

As she reached for the bag, Abrihet said, "If you do not care, allow me to retrieve them. You must look after your husband." Following several seconds of rummaging around in the bag, she handed the requested implement to Bernie.

He wiped it down with the alcohol pad, then took a deep breath, wiped the beads of sweat that formed on his upper lip, "Okay, here we go."

Using the tip of the saw blade he gently probed the wound. When he felt something solid he moved the blade around until he could feel the edge. He pushed the blade in farther along the side of the slug. Once he felt that the blade was resting next to the slug, he turned it slightly so that the teeth of the saw were against the slug. Gently, trying not to hurt Clark any more than necessary he used what little purchase he had on the slug with the teeth of the saw to coax the slug out. It was a tedious process but he could feel the slug slowly moving back out the way it had gone in. Eventually it was close enough to the entry wound so that the green glow could be seen through the blood.

He heard Lois sharp intake of breathe and Abrihet's gasp of amazement, but firmly pushed those sounds from his mind, determined to focus all of his considerable concentration on Clark's reaction to this wildly unexpected surgery. Surprisingly, despite undergoing an extremely painful procedure; the young man did not make a sound.

Bernie continued to pull with one hand while he reached with the tweezers in the other hand, plunging them into the wound and finally grasping the end of the slug with them. Between the saw and the tweezers, Bernie finally managed to extract the slug. Once this was done he grabbed a square of spongy gauze and slapped it over the wound to staunch the flow of blood.

Part Two — Interrogation

Just outside the auditorium, a tall man, wearing a classic tan trench coat, his close-cropped black hair shot with hints of gray took in the tense scene before him. A brief, sharp stabbing pain had lanced through his body when the bullet cracked the window. Feeling that pain, and knowing its source, was *one* of the reasons he did not enter the atrium. The other reason? After so long a time, he lacked the raw courage to do so. The stranger's silvery-blue eyes were riveted to the sight of the wounded young man on the carpeted floor.

The vision rent his heart and fueled a stab of anguish, but he brutally thrust the thought away. He shifted his gaze through the high windows, one of which had a small hole in the center of a spider's web of cracks where the bullet had drilled through. Noting the position of Clark Kent's chair in relation to the hole in the window, he followed the bullet's trajectory back to a building across the street and pinpointed the exact floor of its origin. His sensitive nose picked up and held the lingering reek of chemical fire, a vaguely different smell, yet one he was all too familiar with; it signaled the reek of battle, the repugnant stench of death.

Instinctively his head cocked like a falcon scrutinizing its prey, shutting out all the sounds careening about him, listening for a particular set of footfalls and accelerated heartbeat, calculating the human's weight, height and physical condition. The assassin would be apprehended; it was impossible for him to escape. Again his eyes turned into the auditorium, now almost empty, the only people remaining surrounded the victim. He swallowed hard as Clark's beautiful mate wiped her husband's brow with trembling, blood-smeared hands.

The stranger in the trench coat briefly split his attention from the assassin and listened while the one called Dr. Klein worked to remove the projectile. With such expert care his patient's chance of survival increased; this was not an active battlefield. Barring any further mishap ... but it would be a near thing.

His eyes, which only moments ago were stark, questing and

haunted by terror, now were shaded by the deep regret of disappointed expectation. The heart demanded he remain with this small knot of friends and family offering what aid and comfort he could. Yet the brain insisted the person responsible for this tragedy must be dealt with first. It required every erg of self-control in his possession not to sacrifice himself to rage. Control was the key in conquering this opponent, as in all things he who is patient shall gain much. Drawing in a cleansing breath, the tall man turned, and in an instant, vanished.

Bernie had the Kryptonite slug out and inside the medic kit before the paramedics arrived so Lois knew that they wouldn't have to face questions about *that* at least.

Almost as if they had materialized from her thoughts; the security guards Matthews and Fusco noisily entered the atrium, leading the emergency response team. Behind them were a couple of grim-faced uniforms from MPD and a middle-aged detective she did not recognize. The newcomers went about their duties briskly; the uniforms on their radios communicating with dispatch and asking for additional back-up. The detective who identified himself simply as Trent gently asked Abrihet and Bernard questions.

Eventually he came to her, his voice solicitous, "I am sorry to ask you these questions Mrs. Kent, but is there anyone who might want to cause your husband harm?"

If it were not for the direness of the situation, she might have found his question to be downright humorous. "Detective Trent, my husband and I are *investigative* reporters ... someone is *always* threatening ..." Her voice broke, without warning, as she watched the paramedics check Clark's vitals. His color was slightly better, but his breathing was still shallow. Did Bernie miss a piece of the green rock? She attempted to speak again, but the words refused to come.

Bernie came over and placed his arm gently around her shoulder, "Please, Detective Trent, can't your questioning wait? The paramedics will be taking her husband to the hospital and Mrs. Kent needs to be by his side."

The other man looked at them as if weighing their words, then at the man lying on the floor. "Okay. Later" He was about to say more when his radio signaled him. He nodded to them and walked toward one of the officers examining the window.

"Thanks, Bernie, for stepping in just now," Lois said with a watery smile, "I never thought I'd say this, but where is Bill Henderson when we need him?"

"True. At least our favorite peace officer is familiar with your misadventures. Obviously, this fellow is not."

At that moment the paramedics moved Clark to a stretcher. It was a good thing the two men were on the muscular side, otherwise they would have definitely noticed their patient's additional mass. They elevated the stretcher to table height and moved Clark from the building to the ambulance. "Please ... I want to ride with him!" Lois pleaded.

"Of course, Mrs. Kent, that's standard protocol, the paramedic said gently. "Your husband has sustained major injuries. From what Dr. Klein says he was able to get the bullet out. But this kind of 'battle field' surgery requires us to take another look. Once we get him to the ER we can stabilize him and take X-Rays."

Expecting her request to be denied, the paramedic's easy acquiescence was a pleasant surprise. Nodding her thanks, Lois took a place beside the stretcher, gently holding Clark's cool hand as they moved outside to the ambulance. The paramedics moved to the two sides and releasing a lock lowered the stretcher back to its lower level and then they coordinated the lift to put the stretcher into the back and locked the wheels in their bracket. The lead paramedic turned to Lois and offered his hand, "Please, let

me help you up."

As she climbed in, the steady voice of Dr. Klein filled her ears. "Lois, Abrihet and I can drive to Metropolis General. I'll contact Dr. Pete Ross and inform him you are on the way. His ER team will make certain to take excellent care of him. We can wait to hear the outcome of the X-rays there. I am certain the results will be *normal for a man in his condition.*"

Lois understood completely what he was saying; Pete would make sure of Clark's privacy. She nodded her agreement and then said, "Thank you again for helping Bernie, this means a lot."

Reaching into the ambulance, Abrihet handed Lois her briefcase and then gave her hand an encouraging squeeze; her beautiful, melodic accented voice was gentle and soothing. "Lois, cheri, take courage, your husband is a *special* man with great strength. He shall survive. How can he not with a woman as extraordinary as yourself to stand by his side? Obviously my former *élève* has made an astute choice of wife, a woman who keeps her head under ominous, unforeseen circumstances. Go, Bernard and I shall see you soon."

The paramedic had already gotten into the ambulance and went about prepping Clark for the ride to Metropolis General. Lois gave her friends a wan smile and then took her place by Clark's side. The driver firmly closed the doors and ran to his place in the cab. Within seconds, with lights flashing and sirens screaming into a once-tranquil day, the ambulance raced down the street.

Bernie watched as the sound of the sirens faded into the distance, this was definitely a day very much outside his normal orderly existence. He wondered if Christiaan Huygens or Madam Curie ever had days like this? Come to think of it, since the beautiful Lois Lane and then her daring partner entered his life *nothing* had been ordinary. Working with them was always gratifying but sometimes a tad on the nerve-racking side. Feeling suddenly very tired, he turned and walked back into the building. Abrihet, puzzled, followed him and asked, "Where are we going? Should we not meet Lois at the hospital?"

"Soon but first, I ... I mean we have to deposit this Kryptonite fragment in my lead lined office vault for safekeeping. 'Superman' will want to destroy it as soon as he is able." He said patting the medic kit. "Perhaps the reason Clark hadn't regained consciousness is because this wasn't surrounded by lead." He grew reflective and said, "Abrihet, I pray to God circumstances like this never come up again. Performing surgery on a person — even a superhuman one is ...taxing, especially when I have to do a 'MacGyver' and improvise my instruments."

They walked on towards his office together in companionable silence; the only sound in the now deserted corridors was the dull, hollow cadence of their footsteps.

"You are a kind friend, Bernard and a gifted scientist. I watched your hands tremble as they worked. The muscle memory remains, but the aspiration to perform surgery has vanished. It took much courage to remove that scrap of métal."

He smiled sadly, "More than you know. But Lois and Clark are my friends ... I ...I had to help. They have together and individually assisted so many others" He stopped, turning to her and said, "By the way, it's a bit of a drive to MetroGen in afternoon traffic. It might be some time before you return to the Lexor."

Trying to lighten the moment, Abrihet smiled in return and answered. "So? I make a bargain with you, mon ami, something to pass the time while we drive through the streets. Let us trade stories as to how we 'found out' about our mutual friend."

"That's sounds like an excellent way to pass the time. Not with dinner at *Le Cirque* as I had originally planned but an acceptable exchange, my dear ... friend." Bernie, no longer felt tired, but gallant and bowed low to offer her his arm. She bowed her head prettily and accepted his arm gladly. Together the two

scientists walked down the long corridor, which now did not seem quite so hollow and deserted.

The visitor had left S.T.A.R. Labs and moved to the building where the gunshot originated from. He rapidly ascended the stairwell. Apparently his quarry was prepared for interference and as he reached a landing, a gun materialized in the partly-open doorway and prodded into the side of his neck. His reaction was instinctive apropos of his military training, his right arm swiftly swung up and around, brushing away the weapon. As his arm came over the top of the arm, it turned so that his assailant's arm would be caught in the crook of his elbow and between that and his body. When he lifted his arm suddenly there was a piercing scream of pain from his assailant simultaneous with the loud crack of bones breaking. The gun which his attacker had been gripping in his now-useless left hand fell to the ground and the visitor pulled him through the door, onto the landing. The case he was carrying in his right hand fell to the floor with a dull clatter of metal wrapped in heavy fabric.

The visitor propped him against the wall and held him there with one hand on his throat. The would-be assassin quailed under the glare of those silvery-blue eyes. When the stranger spoke, his deep, rich voice was surprisingly soft and held a decidedly unfamiliar accent. "Who sent you?"

The assassin, a balding, middle-aged man with a lifetime of hard scrabble living stamped on his face, firmly pressed his lips together, preferring painful silence to betrayal.

When he refused to speak, his captor closed his hand slightly, cutting off the assassin's air supply. "I know that you shot that reporter. I could tighten my fingers ever so slightly and you will simply cease to be." He loosened his hand somewhat and the assassin took a gasping breath, yet still refused to answer. The stranger spoke for a second time, "Again, who sent you?"

"N ..." As soon as the first tone was past his lips, the powerful fist on his throat closed again.

"I am quite capable of ending your miserable existence. The only thing that will keep you alive is answering my questions."

After several strangled breaths the killer looked at his captor with a curious mixture of anger, pain and fear in his eyes, finally he said, "I ... I can't ... tell you! He'll kill me!"

His captor gave him a shake like a terrier dog rattling a squirrel and said in a deadly calm, threatening tone, "Your death is assured if you do not."

Finally, more fearful of this individual than anything his employer could do to him, he said, "It won't do you any good. My boss is ... Lex Luthor. He said that the reporter was going to write an expose and he wanted him dead. He gave me this special ammo. He said it would prevent his friend Superman from helping him."

The other man shook his head, searching his memory, "The name sounds familiar ... " he muttered.

Despite his pain the other man gasped out, "You've ...never heard of Lex ...Luthor? Your accent is strange, but most people on the planet know who he is."

"I am a foreigner ... new to the ways of your ... country. Tell me where may I locate this ... Lex Luthor?"

"He lives on the top floor of the tallest building in Metropolis! He owns the building!"

A far-off expression appeared on the visitor's face and then he murmured, "Ah, his fortress, the base of his power ... that I understand. Thank you. Rest well."

The visitor changed his chokehold on his victim's throat, directly constraining blood flow to the brain, causing him to pass out.

He rifled through the man's pockets and found a cell phone and a wallet with identification. The driver's license said Eli Snow. Next he knelt down and examined the case that he had

dropped. In the case were the disassembled parts of a sniper rifle. Fortunately, the magazine had been wrapped in lead foil. Having taken the precaution of keeping the foil between him and the magazine, the stranger opened it a bit. Between the green glow and the now familiar sharp stabbing pain, he was aware of the contents. Swiftly he wrapped it up again and stuffed it into his pocket. The authorities would simply have to do without that additional evidence. There were others who might find the mineral a worthy — if not utterly necessary — study.

He propped the assassin, into a sitting position against the wall, his left arm hanging at an unnatural angle.

Standing up, the man in the trench coat flipped open the unwieldy gray cell phone he had removed from Snow's pocket and after a few moments learning to operate the piece of equipment he dialed 911. "Awkward communication device," he murmured under his breath.

A brusque, but professional voice answered, "This is MPD 911 operator, please state your emergency."

After a brief hesitation the visitor said, "The man who shot *Daily Planet* reporter Clark Kent is unconscious and has a broken left arm. The security forces will locate him on the landing of the fifteenth floor stairwell of the Graybar building directly across from S.T.A.R. Labs complex."

Perplexed, the veteran 911 operator asked, "Sir, this person is highly dangerous. Did you find the suspect injured and unconscious?"

"No. When I found him, he was uninjured and awake."

Stepping outside of his scripted behavior the operator queried. "How did you subdue the suspect?"

"He was not as fast as I am," the man responded, his soft raspy voice as flat as slate.

"Sir, I don't recognize your accent. Are you from outside the United States?"

Irritated with this conversation, the man replied, "I am a concerned citizen trying to help my ... a good man. Please send someone to collect this ... individual." He kept the phone open to allow the operator to locate him and then tossed it into the assassin's lap.

Speaking to the prone form the man said, "Thank you Mr. Snow for providing the name and location of your employer. I apologize for the injury; here I am still learning the extent of my abilities. Be grateful my interests lay with the 'mind' behind this operation and not the 'hands'."

The stranger turned away and moved with fluid grace down the stairwell. His early military training had come into play while dealing with the killer. Such talents — necessary as they were — after all these years still frightened him, he was a man of peace on a mission of peace. Yet now his deadlier abilities — abilities he wanted to forget — were called into play. Before reaching his true objective he had one more necessary task to complete before fulfilling that mission. He had traveled too great a distance and overcome numerous obstacles to allow a would-be assassin to prevent him from his goal.

Part Three — Confrontation

Later that evening, high atop the LexCorp building Lex Luthor stood on his terrace and looked out over the glittering mosaic that was the city of Metropolis. The night sky had grown menacing and heavy with thick, black almost purple storm clouds. The wind had begun to pick up ever so slightly; the air gently ruffled his wavy black hair as he poured a glass of excellent aged vintage cognac and smiled triumphantly to himself. On the table he studied the evening edition of the *Daily Planet*, the bold, print headline stated:

DAILY PLANET REPORTER CLARK KENT SHOT BY MYSTERIOUS ASSASSIN

Evening Edition — Monday, July 11th

By James B. Olsen

A peaceful science conference at S.T.A.R. Labs was disrupted today when an assassin attempted to kill well known investigative reporter Clark Kent. Mr. Kent, was rushed to the hospital with a gunshot wound and remains in guarded condition. His wife, Lois Lane-Kent, has been assured by trauma specialist, Dr. Peter Ross that if no complications arise, he should be able to return home within a week if not earlier. More on A2.

<Pity,> he thought, <Mr. Kent aka Superman has cheated the Grim Reaper. Due to Dr. Klein's last-minute interference, my long-range plans for this fair city have been put on hold ... yet again. Ah, but not for long.>

Lex raised the heavy glass tumbler to his lips and sipped the cognac, the rich and full-bodied flavors of licorice, dried plum and apricot, danced seductively on his palate. It was disappointing not to be celebrating the superhero's demise, as he had hoped.

Nonetheless he could appreciate the opening act of Mr. Kent's 'real' death. Soon the media exposure of his secret identity would irrevocably put an end to his privacy, not to mention the safety of his family and friends.

Ah yes, his family and friends

His wife and partner, the fair Lois would have to cease working for the newspaper as an investigative reporter and live in seclusion with her alien lover. For a woman as passionate about journalism, especially one so determined to reveal the truth, living in such an isolated manner would be akin to death.

If she had not walked away from him, he could have molded her latent talents and laid the world at her feet; unerringly elevating her from the anachronistic world of print journalism into LNN's fascinating and influential newsroom. Hers would have been the face to greet first Metropolis then the nation and eventually the entire planet. To the public their union would have become a living symbol of unity, integrity and strength.

Privately he and sweet, delectable Lois would have shared tantalizing, intimate pleasures beyond either of their wildest imaginations.

But sadly, it was not to be. His mind drifted back two years to the fateful day that she chose to align herself with a man who garnered less money in a year than his London tailor did in three months. It was at the *Daily Planet's* Annual Fundraiser for Journalism Scholarship which took place in Centennial Park. He remembered Lois wearing a simple green linen blouse and white cotton shorts, but they might as well have been made of the finest silk, she was so beautiful.

The day was warm and sunny; the kind ideal for wooing a young woman. His eyes took in the sight of her sitting on a rough, old blanket reading some romance novel and drinking ordinary lemonade. He immediately drew her into a private conversation; one which he had hoped would convince her to alter the course of her life forever.

But two things happened simultaneously to end the discussion and irrevocably derail his plans. Clark Kent interrupted to ask her to participate in an insipid three-legged race and then a nasty horde of fire ants attacked Lois' delicate feet.

Kent did not allow him a chance to react; he interfered by carrying Lois to the medical tent. There Klein had seen to her wounded feet and he refused to leave her side for the rest of the day.

Come to think of it, the good doctor had interfered on that occasion as well. He needed to do something about *Bernard* very soon.

Afterwards, he had tried to coax Lois to see him again, but nothing worked. If he had not been distracted by Intergang's aggressive attempts to move in on his territory and Mrs. Cox's betrayal, he would have dealt with the matter sooner.

Eventually, the woman he had desired to share his name — and his bed — ended up dating her partner and the rest as they

say is history. Lex shook his head in bitter disbelief when he saw the pitiful little ring Kent had given her from Lazer's excuse for a jewelry store. The engagement ring *he* had chosen was fit for an empress!

The bitterness evaporated when he thought of the days to come. In a matter of hours, Lois and her "husband" would be the subject of the story rather than reporting it — a high price to pay for marrying that insufferable glibet.

"Imagine, something so fragile and straightforward as a videotape destroying the Man of Steel." He picked up a black VHS cartridge and tossed it like a child's plaything into the air. On the label written in heavy black ink were the initials CK=SM. Tonight by special courier he would send over the footage, shot by a third-rate freelance photojournalist, of an unsuspecting Clark Kent changing into Superman in the back of a grubby alley near the *Daily Planet* building.

The photojournalist — Rickes or was his name Wickes? Realized all too well what he had in his possession and decided to come immediately to Lex. For a substantial amount of money the man handed over the footage. Lex would have cheerfully paid twice that much to possess proof of the alien's true identity. What a delicious thought, destroying both his rival in love and his nemesis on the same day!

Thanks to one of Asabi's skillful associates, the greedy photographer had met with an untimely automobile 'accident' on his way to the bank. Lex hadn't wanted to take the chance that the fool might talk to another media outlet; either *The Star* or the *Dirt Digger* editors would kill to possess such information. After all, LNN had paid Rickes (Wickes?) dearly for the exclusive.

Tomorrow morning, while janitors and executives were drinking bad coffee and lattes with stale bagels and over-priced muffins, the story of the century would be broken by LNN's '*Morning with Metropolis*' reporter Linda King. Another sweet little bit of irony he arranged for dear Lois' sake. He was well aware of their rivalry and this was a flawless opportunity to exploit it. He could imagine the frantic phone calls fielded by *Daily Planet* staffers once the news broke. By lunchtime, thanks to the fledgling internet, the entire world would know the truth.

It was a proper revenge against his main opponent and his lovely bride. Sooner or later the game had to come to an end; and of course, only he could be the victor.

He felt a minuscule cold drop of rain splatter on his face, how cool and refreshing it was! Reluctantly, he finished the remains of the cognac, picked up the tape and newspaper and then went inside his dark office. Very quickly the tiny drops multiplied into a torrent, the hard pelting sound of water slapping against the pavement filling his ears. As the terrace door slid closed he felt a puff of wind move past and it gave him a slight chill.

Once the sliding door was closed, Lex turned and laid the items on the imposing, antique wooden desk. The large room was more than an office; it was the very seat of his empire. His business dealings were vast and, like a demanding mistress, constantly required his attention. He reached out to turn on the lights when a flash of lightning filled the room, and he was startled by the figure of a man wearing a slightly damp classic tan Burberry trench coat sitting on the couch. Before his brain could register the intruder's presence a loud clap of thunder pealed through the room, just as abruptly the room plunged into inky darkness. Suddenly another burst of lighting briefly illuminated the space and now the intruder stood in front of Lex's desk.

Momentarily startled, but maintaining his composure Lex fumbled for a switch on the desk's surface. The room lights came on and Luthor was able to look at this extraordinary visitor. He was middle-aged, tall, over six feet and he carried himself with the gracefulness of an athlete, yet there was something of his bearing which spoke of a military background. Coal black hair, beginning to grey at the temples, was cut short; the handsome

face, with angles so sharp they could cut diamonds was maddeningly familiar. His visitor's most striking feature was eyes, a blue like none he had ever seen, like round fragments of silvery cobalt. Residing within those eyes burned depths of wisdom and sadness. Here was someone who had witnessed more than his fair share of pain and tragedy.

Luthor spoke first, refusing to be intimidated by his visitor's sudden appearance, "Who are you?"

The man continued to graze at him a phantom of a weary smile flitting across his lips. He spoke with a soft, raspy voice; the accent was unfamiliar, even alien to Lex's ears. "For a man of such power and consequence you frighten easily when faced with the unknown. I am simply a visitor ... a traveler if you will." The tall man studied the room taking in the archaic weapons, statues, paintings and overdone furnishings. He said simply, "This is a chamber dedicated to the complete acquisition and maintenance of power. Tell me Mr. Luthor, are you married?"

Caught off guard by the man's innocent question, Lex said, "No, not anymore." He gave himself a hard mental shake. Why did he mention his brief, ill-fated marriage with Arianna? This man, despite his congenital manner was an enigma — an annoying one at that! Quickly, cautiously he pressed a button under the lip of the desk, activating the silent alarm.

The visitor shook his head in silent acknowledgment of the action. Unbeknownst to Lex, the wires leading from the button had been destroyed seconds before. "Of course you are no longer married, someone who created and works in a space such as this is too busy to share his life with *any* woman ... much less a woman of quality and spirit. It would mean revealing your inner self and being vulnerable ... something an 'empire builder' such as yourself could never relax his emotional control to do."

Luthor opened his mouth to answer, but the visitor continued speaking in a low voice, as if the billionaire were not standing in the room with him.

"Please forgive me, my manners are lacking, this is, after all, *your* office and I am merely a ... guest. Let us sit down Mr. Luthor and converse." He turned and indicated the two comfortable leather chairs in front of the fireplace. Lex walked past him and took a seat, confident that his trained security guards would soon burst into the room and extricate this stranger from his home.

The tall man made himself comfortable as the fine leather of the chair surrounded his body; he had removed the damp Burberry trench coat before sitting and was wearing an impeccably tailored black suit with a cream-colored shirt and black tie. He looked like a Wall Street investment banker or influential stock broker. Yet Lex had the distinct impression that this man was vastly more than what he appeared.

The visitor leaned back, appearing to Lex's eye to study him with those cool silvery orbs. If someone were to walk in on them now they would merely see two executives having a civilized conversation about their latest acquisitions, but one of them was a trained killer, coiled and ready to attack.

The visitor spoke, his voice still controlled and relaxed. "Let me tell you a story Mr. Luthor. The one your news agencies call 'Superman' is referred to as the lone survivor of a planetary disaster. His parents desperate to save their newborn child placed him into a vessel and launched it into blackest space. Quite a narrative, but unfortunately the young man could not have related the *entire* story."

Lex's ears perked up. "Superman? Yes, his origins always struck me as 'unfinished', for lack of a better word. How did he become part of our conversation?"

"I shall tell you. For millennia we knew our world to be in danger of destruction from the planet's core and after much debate, took aggressive steps to preserve our ancient culture. Leading astronomers scanned the known galaxies searching for a

new planet we could call home. It took nearly two centuries, but a suitable world, one with a breathable atmosphere revolving around a red sun was finally found."

"It took years to build a fleet of ships, immense enough to carry all the technological, medical, agricultural and personal needs of several large colonies. Those ships held the very best and brightest our world had to offer. It was their responsibility to forge a new homeworld for our people. I believe your scientists use the term ... 'terraform.' For our purposes the planet would be altered to sustain life for us."

Lex nodded. "It is a science we have unfortunately not been able to perfect as yet, but give us time. Please continue."

"I was assigned to be aboard one of those ships, the lead scientist in my field, but foolishly, refused to join the first wave of technologists and agricultural engineers. Would that I had ... so much of the sorrow I experienced in later years leads back to that fateful decision."

"The planet as a whole rejoiced when that intrepid group of one million individuals was launched into space's black embrace. For several months the population held its collective breath and waited to hear of their arrival. When our satellites received the signals that they had landed successfully and were pursuing their objective, the planet-wide celebrations were indescribable."

"Unfortunately, our scientists' calculations as to precisely *when* the final disaster would occur were not accurate. Who would be egotistical enough to foretell the day of a planet's demise? Krypton's death tremors came upon us much sooner than any of us considered possible. The fateful day the infant Superman had been launched into space his parents were convinced all was lost. Indeed, untold millions were killed in the geological cataclysm. But only minutes *after* the tiny craft had cleared Krypton's atmosphere the massive tremors ceased and the planet was silent once more."

The man ceased speaking and long, elegant fingers briefly touched his forehead, as if the memories of that horrifying event gnawed at his memory like a ravenous beast.

"The final death tremors did not occur again for another ten years; during which time the grim vestiges of our space agency built an even larger fleet of ships, great enough to transport nearly twenty million of our remaining citizens to New Krypton. A far lower number than was originally projected.

When the initial colonists had departed from Krypton years before, our world was still lush and vital. The first wave of voyagers was saddened by the knowledge they would never see their homeworld again. But this last armada of ships was filled with frightened, and in some cases, unknown to the ship's medical officers, dangerously ill survivors desperate to quit the world they once called home.

In the meantime we had tracked the tiny ship with its infant passenger through the heavens toward this planet. Even when it landed on your continent in a place called Kansas, we continued observing the infant's progress. It is how I have learned your language and much of this world's culture."

Lex, plainly astonished by the traveler's tale, asked curtly, "If Kryptonian technology was so advanced, why not go after him?"

The stranger lifted and dropped his shoulders in a weary shrug, "The needs of one grieving family could not be put ahead of millions. Besides his father was burdened with duties to his new world; he was one of the last survivors of the ruling house of Krypton."

The visitor refrained from mentioning the series of calamities that prevented him from sending a team to effect the infant's retrieval from planet Earth. Slowly and then abruptly the memories of the past twenty-five years unfolded like a beautiful flower — covered in thorns.

Only three months after the second wave of colonists safely landed on New Krypton, a mysterious plague spread like wildfire

throughout the populace. Half a million people were stricken by the disease and of that number, half died. It took all the talents in the medical arts field to put an end to the scourge.

A year later his beloved wife presented him with a strong, healthy son — one of many children born on New Krypton. Five years after his birth, the First Lady of New Krypton died from massive injuries sustained during an accident while driving a harvesting machine. Unfortunately his wife lay in the field for nearly thirty minutes before she was discovered by another worker. She was placed into stasis and swiftly brought to a healing unit at the nearest med-center. But the damage had been done and despite all valiant efforts by the medical staff, could not be reversed.

At one time a member of the ruling family would never dirty their hands with manual labor, and now everyone from the nobility to the lowliest house servant works in as many jobs as possible. Their new homeworld was a wild planet which demanded much attention if it was to be tamed and cultivated into a world fit for the survivors of Krypton. Many of the upper houses complained that if the work was handled by minions as it had in times past, their First Lady would still be alive, able to rule by her husband's side and raise their son, the future First Lord, to manhood.

Part of him wanted to agree with Jen-Mai, Nor and many others, but he knew this was a new world and the old ways simply did not fit.

A moonround** after his wife's state funeral, he returned to the same field where she died and began planting seeds. It was a gesture meant to encourage all Kryptonians, noble born and poor folk alike; that work must be done by all if they were to survive.

The Council of Elders felt that after a proper period of mourning he should wed. After all, his young son needed a mother as much as his father required a consort. The leader of their world needed to be a family man, one who could lead their population away from the warrior tendencies that previous First Lords were inclined toward. They felt he needed to marry someone similar to his first wife, only more docile — a fitting model for other wives of noble houses on New Krypton to emulate. Of late their taste for independence had deepened. If the First Lady of New Krypton was submissive, the other ladies would fall in line.

When he told them of his decision to take Josca as his new life mate they were surprised. She seemed to them to be a strange — even insulting — choice.

Josca was born to the house of Ra, daughter of a concubine and a younger son. Since traditionally such offspring were not considered of importance, especially the females, they were allowed to chose whatever profession they wished as long it did not permit them entry into the noble houses.

On the date of Josca's sixteenth year, rather than be bartered off in marriage to some tradesman she joined the agricultural guild. In time her unique grasp of the challenges New Kryptonians faced cultivating this planet propelled her into the influential circles of the upper houses, where she eventually met Jor-El and, through a respectful friendship, love grew. In his mind, Josca, with her gentle manner and quick wits was a perfect match.

Regrettably, the council's feelings were not the same.

"Take her as a concubine as her station permits. Not as a wife!" Jen-Mai shouted in objection.

Trey, as per usual spoke calmly to dispel the unrest. "My Lord, perhaps you could choose someone of a more *suitable* background.

"What better background could she have? New Krypton is a wilderness, one which must be tamed by strength of hand and heart. Josca will stand at my side, not only as a warrior, but as an

agricultural scientist. Together we shall lead our people and bend this planet to our will so it may become a world we can be proud of. She is *my* choice.”

Later he approached Jen-Mai privately and informed him, “Should you ever consider Josca as a ‘concubine’ again … it shall be the last time words will ever come from your mouth.”

He was not proud of threatening the councilman, but under the circumstances, unavoidable. He would not be dissuaded and by the end of four moonrounds, Josca became his life mate. By the time of their tenth year she had borne him a son and daughter.

During those years many challenges arose, chief among them the short, yet destructive civil war led by the traitor Nor-Ur who desired to wrest control from the Council of Elders. He had long wanted to twist the remnants of Kryptonian society into a distorted image of their distant ancestors. Kryptonians were once a passionate — almost warlike people, but the terrible destruction to one of moons by the tyrant Jax-Ur* centuries earlier had cooled their collective ardor. Some, like Nor-Ur, did not acknowledge that example and wanted to rule New Krypton in the style of his rejected predecessor. The grim, bloody battles between Nor’s followers took time away from building the strong communities New Kryptonians needed to survive. The illogical waste and loss of life resulting from that civil war would haunt him for the remainder of his days.

It was only after he personally captured and executed Nor-Ur that the rebellion came to an end. All the secondary leaders and their lieutenants were executed as well. Some of the younger officers, were spared and given small tasks to keep them under watch by loyal officers rather than execute them.

Unfortunately since Jen-Mai became one of Nor’s followers, he also paid the ultimate price for his treachery. True nobility knows its responsibility to the people they serve and does not allow for such hubris.

The visitor broke free of his deep thoughts and said to Lex, “If you are an example of this world’s nobility, it is no wonder he is needed here.”

“Who is needed here?” Lex answered sneeringly. He was beginning to wonder where his security guards were.

“The one your communications outlets refer to as Superman of course. It was a coward’s mistake for you to attack him in front of his wife and friends. Among my people if we wish to extract revenge we do it directly … but in private. No need to embroil others in the dispute. But due to his ethics and current physical condition, Kal-El is powerless to fight you; thus as is *my* right, I must do it for him.”

Startled, Lex said, “His real name is Kal-El? How did you know that?”

Ignoring the question, his visitor pointed to the desk and said, “That ‘tape’ which would expose his alter ego and destroy the life he has so painstakingly constructed shall not leave this chamber.”

Lex looked at the VHS cartridge and before he could grab it, watched a solitary black curl of acrid smoke ascend as the cassette imploded and fused into a pile of charred, blackened plastic. The sight frightened him, there was only one person on the planet with that ability and currently he was in the hospital recovering from being shot with a Kryptonite tipped bullet. He turned back to the tall man and noticed with horror that the cobalt eyes were twin orbs of malevolent scarlet. He was also wearing the trench coat again. When had he put it on?

Lex although frightened, snarled, “Who are you!?”

He spoke again in a deceptively soft voice. “I have traveled a long way to see my son. I am Jor-El, First Lord of New Krypton, son of Yar-El and father of Kal-El.”

“You … you are Superman’s father? The ruler of *New* Krypton? That is impossible!” Lex cried.

All pretense of civility forgotten, Jor-El stood his lean, yet powerful form tense with restrained rage. “As First Lord, it is in

my power to adjudicate, convict and punish wrong doers, but in this instance, I shall work with our Council of Elders. For the attempted murder of my son, we Kryptonians view such a crime as a matter of state against a member of the nobility. As for evidence of who I am …”

The visitor removed the trench coat again, instead of the perfectly tailored dark suit; he wore a black jumpsuit, where the familiar S symbol of Superman was emblazoned on the chest in gold.

“Before I can reveal myself to Kal-El, *any* threat to his family must be neutralized.” Jor-El seized Luthor and moved him to the side of the room. “Come Mr. Luthor, it is time for you to stand trial.”

Lex stepped back, his voice shaking with trepidation. “Wh … where are you taking me?”

Jor-El opened the palm of his hand and seemingly from thin air materialized a small circular device, he touched a button and suddenly a brilliant ray emanated from the device and where it touched the wall an aperture appeared. “You shall be sent directly to New Krypton, there your fate awaits.”

Fear of a kind that Lex had never known, traveled through his body like a sharp spike through a pine plank. The man before him was most decidedly *not* Clark Kent or his alter ego Superman. Superman *did not* kill. By Jor-El’s admission his hands — no matter how justified — were not clean of bloodshed.

“Surely there is something I can do to alter your … decision?” Lex said, trying to maintain his dignity. Jor-El looked down on him, his sharp features hardening with tightly controlled anger. It was the only time during their conversation his voice had risen from the soft rasp of a man discussing business. “Why should I? On this day you tried to murder my eldest *son*. Failing that you determined to destroy his life, no matter who else suffered the consequences. You deserve death. I should execute judgment myself!” He raised his fist to strike and brought it down hard, only to stop a millimeter from Lex Luthor’s face.

Realizing the fatal blow had not stuck him, the look of shock on Lex’s face twisted into an arrogant mask of disgust. “Just like your son — too spineless to take a life!”

Jor-El grabbed the billionaire by the front of his shirt — ripping the fabric in the process and threw him bodily through the portal.

Lex’s furious scream was cut off when the portal sealed. Again the lighting flashed, followed by an ear-splitting clap of thunder and when it ceased, Lex Luthor had vanished as if he had never been.

Jor-El stood in the office for a moment, trying to calm his anger and contemplate what he had done. This person who intended to destroy all that his son had built would be permanently contained on New Krypton. Perhaps he had not been there to help his son grow into a man, yet this action might make up for it in some small degree. He looked up and realized the portal had opened again. Another figure, a petite woman with long, wavy hair as black as a raven’s wing stepped through the gateway, towards him and reached up, wiping away a lone tear as it streaked down his face.

The gentle tones of her voice flowed over his fevered heart like refreshing waters, cooling the warrior’s rage which had overcome him so suddenly. “My Lord, General Ching and his guard have the defendant in custody. The council applauds your … self-restraint.”

“Good.” He took a quick breath. “I … I wanted to kill him. I almost did. Josca … my hands are steeped in blood. After Nor and his followers were executed … I made an oath never to kill again. But he taunted me …”

She took his face in her hands and spoke soothingly, in a gentle voice he could easily hear despite the loud thunderclaps. Her large blue-brown eyes filled with loving concern for her life

mate. "Such thoughts are unworthy of you. No, sparing his life was the proper course. As I had mentioned to Trey before coming here we as a people must strive to return to the days of reason, compassion and love. As First Lord and Lady, is it not our duty to guide them on the correct path, no matter how many obstacles we come across along the way? You cannot enact ancient tradition and kill him yet he cannot be allowed to remain here and disrupt Lord Kal-El's life." She was silent for a moment and said thoughtfully, "Our appearance will be disruption enough ..."

"True. What shall I say to Kal-El? I have watched him from afar all these years and now we will finally meet. The message I sent along with him was as a man of peace. Since that time he has revered that image. How can he possibly accept the warrior I have become?"

She touched his hand and spoke firmly, "Jor-El the rebellion is finished. Who knows what might have happened if Nor-Ur had lived? Perhaps he would have killed us and our children and then demanded Zara as his wife, where would that leave her mate Ching? Dead at Nor's hands."

He knew Josca was correct, but not a day passed where he did not wish there could have been a peaceful solution rather than plunge their people into two years of bloody civil war. "Yes, you are right."

"Nor's arrogance would have pushed him to come to Earth and kill Kal-El, Kal-El who is an Earthman, *not* Kryptonian. Would it have been fair to rip him from his life and all he loves? Talk to him and explain everything. He is your son, I have no doubt given time, that one day, he shall understand."

"I hope you are right. Let us go, I want to see my son, know truly what kind of man he is... know his life mate."

She wrapped her arms around his waist and said, "Then, let us go."

Part Four — Hospital

The last place Lois Lane-Kent expected to be that night was jammed into a phone booth reassuring her father-in-law that his son was completely recovered from the gunshot wound he had sustained earlier that day. Good Lord what a day it had been! After Abrihet's lecture they were supposed to be dining at *Le Cirque* with her and Bernie, instead of sitting in MetroGen's family waiting area in the facility's new state-of-the-art Intensive Care Unit. She fingered the fabric of her favorite suit, elegantly tailored of rich blue silk, now rumpled after the long ambulance ride from S.T.A.R Labs.

It was also covered in blood — Clark's blood. Something she would not have ever imagined not even in her wildest nightmares. Yet, only hours before her world had been upended when her husband lay on the floor, bleeding as the result of an assassin's Kryptonite bullet. Now he was in a hospital room, safe and thank God, invulnerable again!

"Jonathan, he's doing better, but Dr. Ross wants him to stay another day to 'make certain everything is OK'. But he's going to wear a sling on his left arm for two weeks afterwards appearance's sake."

Through an electronic signal that pulsed across miles of rolling mountains and amber fields of waving, sun-ripened grain; Lois could hear her Father-in-law's shuddered breath — a happy sign of relief. "Thanks, Lois, Martha and I were plenty scared when Perry called us. We knew our boy would recover, but what about the secret? If it hadn't been for Dr. Klein ..."

A familiar voice broke in, "Yes dear, please thank Dr. Klein and Pete for both of us!" Martha's voice was raspy from the effects of a bad cold.

"I will. Talk to you both soon." After saying a chorus of good-byes, the Kents hung up.

Lois slid open the phone booth, her gaze resting on the other people who were also waiting for news about their family member or dear friend. She carefully schooled her features to

match those of a deeply worried spouse. It would not do for these unfortunate people to discern her husband was now out of danger. As she exited the waiting area, she appreciated that it was very different from the usual sterile hospital design. Several large chairs were comfortably padded and covered in a combination of warm, golden sand tones, sage green, smoky aqua and misty plum. The walls painted in soothing green and creamy beige were surrounded by rich cherry woods throughout the facility. Lois suspected the colors were selected to reflect the many regional community gardens surrounding the hospital.

The gentle palette of colors had had their desired effect; she was much calmer now than she had been when they had brought Clark in. He had still been very weak from shock and blood loss. But she worried that if his invulnerability had kicked in too soon they would discover his secret. Thankfully, Pete Ross was waiting in the ER and took care of Clark personally.

She entered the ICU section and walked down a corridor done in glossy white tile, with cheerful artwork placed at precise locations on the walls, so different from the traditional white-tiled antiseptic medical facilities she was accustomed to her parents working in. A muscular man, looking more like a professional wrestler than a policeman, stood guard outside Clark's room. He moved his head almost imperceptibly when Lois gave him a gentle smile. "Officer Danes, is anyone inside?"

"Yes, Mrs. Kent, Dr. Ross is checking your husband's vitals."

After thanking him, she opened the door. Again her eyes were greeted by the warm combination of colors which flowed from the corridor to Clark's room. They made a stark contrast to the unattractive cold steel and arctic white machines arrayed against the wall. In the center of the room sat the bed, no matter how colorful and comfortable the blankets appeared the metal contraption her husband lay in looked horribly out of place. Apparently, Clark felt the same; he was in the middle of a heated discussion with his long time friend Dr. Pete Ross.

"It's time I got out of here!"

"No, you will not leave this hospital until tomorrow afternoon and that's final." Pete shot back.

Lois stepped into the room, shutting the door noiselessly behind her. In hushed, anxious tone, she said, "Will you two lower your voices! Honey, you're supposed to be recovering from a *gunshot* wound, not bellowing at Pete."

Her husband's voice although lower was uncharacteristically peevish. "I hate hospitals! I keep wondering if someone is going to put me to sleep and start dissecting me like a frog. What if some nurse barges in and tries to change my dressing?"

Lois rolled her eyes in equal parts amusement and frustration. <Steady girl,> she thought, <at least he is here for you to be amused. Jonathan has said that so many times, he *really* believes it!>

Pete's voice broke into her thoughts. "As the 'victim' of an assassination attempt Inspector Henderson has issued orders that only Lois, Dr. Klein, Jimmy, Perry or myself are allowed in this room. Nursing staff is *not* included." He paused. "Look buddy, I'm *trying* to protect the secret. By tomorrow afternoon I will release you from the hospital's care. Until then, stay put! Man, I forgot what a lousy patient you were when we were kids! If keeping the secret under wraps wasn't so important, I'd kick you out now!"

"Not to mention Pete had to bend several rules to keep the nurses away, Lois said. He even lied and told them you were an acquaintance not an old friend. He can get into a lot of trouble with MetroGen's administrative board for that!"

The expression on Clark's face changed to one of consternation, "I know, honey. But whoever is responsible for this is running around loose. Everyone I care about with the exception of my parents lives in Metropolis." They are all in grave danger. If they could get to me, they can get to them!"

"Lois is staying here under the watchful eye of the MPD and Jimmy contacted his dad, who sent over a couple of his best agents to keep an eye on your parents' place. Personally, knowing the folks of Smallville and how they are about strangers, I'm a little concerned about the agents!" Pete said with a chuckle

"Yeah, Maisie can swing a mean skillet." Clark responded with a touch of dry humor, before turning to Lois. "Where are Bernie and Abrihet?"

A glint of bemusement danced mischievously in Lois' brown eyes. "They waited around for a couple of hours and then Bernie decided to take Abrihet out for a quiet dinner. I don't imagine we will be seeing much of them for a few days. After all, she's leaving this Saturday ... if she doesn't change her ticket."

He cocked an inquisitive eyebrow at the pleased expression on Lois' face. "Oh, I see. Bernie's fallen pretty hard. Abrihet is a fascinating and highly intelligent woman. She is bound to keep him on his toes. I can't believe something as simple as my smile gave me away. As Superman I'll have to be more careful about that in the future."

At this point, Lois had made herself comfortable in a chair by the bed, the stress of the past few hours seeping into her voice. "Yeah flyboy, speaking of being careful you need to follow doctor's orders."

Before Clark or Pete could reply, a quiet knock on the door was immediately followed by a familiar voice. "Hey guys, it's me, Jimmy. Can I come in?"

Clark slid down under the covers, looking like a wounded man on the mend. Once he was settled Lois cried out, "Come in!"

Jimmy entered the room with a rolled-up copy of the *Daily Planet* stuck under his arm. He approached the bed cautiously, as if heavy footfalls would somehow harm his friend, and spoke in hushed tones, "Hey, CK, how's it going?"

"Good. With Lois here, how could anything be wrong?" Clark made his voice sound strained and tried. He hated acting like a sick man, but it was for Jimmy's safety and everyone else he cared about.

"Jim, is that the late edition?" Lois asked. "Could you let me see it? We have both been cut off from the world in here."

The younger man looked sheepishly at the newspaper and held it out for Lois to read. "Oh, actually, this isn't the late edition, I wanted you guys to see tomorrow's headlines. Perry thought that since the first article went over so well he gave me the go-ahead to write a follow-up story."

A stock photo of Lex Luthor taken at the previous year's Man-of-the-Year ceremony accompanied the story.

"MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF BILLIONAIRE PHILANTHROPIST LEX LUTHOR"

Evening Edition — Thursday, July 13th

By James B. Olsen

"Lex Luthor, the third wealthiest man in the world, disappeared without a trace Wednesday night. There is no evidence of foul play although a pile of charred plastic was found on his desk. It was so badly damaged that reconstruction was impossible, but from the shape and weight it appears to have been a video cassette." Story continues A2.

Lois put down the paper, and gazed at her friend with a puzzled expression. All traces of exhaustion had been neatly pushed aside; Mad Dog Lane was on the hunt. "Lex disappeared? Why? How?" What about the guy who shot Clark? According to this article, he's being held in protective custody."

"Why is the shooter under wraps? Something doesn't sound right, about this man — Eli Snow — who shot Clark. Did he give a reason?" Pete asked.

Before Jimmy could answer, Lois scanned the paper again. "No. None. He hasn't said a word. The police want to know who broke his arm and gave his location to them. But he refused to say. I'll bet all my Korth awards that Luthor's fingerprints are all

over this situation. He's probably behind Clark's shooting."

The three men shared incredulous glances, but it was Clark, who mumbled from the depths of his blankets and put those thoughts into words. "Honey, isn't that quite a leap ... even for *your* intuition?"

With a shrug of her slim shoulders she said, "This is Lex Luthor we are talking about, *nothing* is impossible."

Making a show of clearing his throat and then bouncing on his toes the young man spoke up, "Speaking of impossible, ah ... there's more to that article than what I printed."

Arching an eyebrow, Lois stood up from the chair, took Clark's hand, "Since when do you hold out on your friends and the *Daily Planet*'s readers, Jimmy?"

The young man shook his head, "It wasn't my idea, and Inspector Henderson told me 'off the record' that Eli Snow is singing like a canary. He says Luthor paid him \$500,000 to kill Clark. He was paid via a Swiss bank account, half now and half when the job was done."

A low sweet whistle escaped Pete's lips. "That is a lot of money for a hit. This Snow guy must be one of the best."

Jimmy pressed on. "He may be one of the best in the business, but he's not afraid of Luthor which is odd, because word on the street says that Luthor is not someone to be crossed."

"All of this doesn't make any sense," Pete said. "Luthor is a hard-nosed businessman, not a mob boss."

An empathic look passed between Clark and Lois unfortunately, they possessed an intimate knowledge of the Luthor behind the flashy suits and broad smile. "No disrespect, Pete, but the worlds that Lois, Jimmy and I have to occasionally enter are incredibly different from MetroGen," Clark said, struggling to remain under the covers.

Jimmy continued, "Yeah well there's more to the story; apparently some dude in a trench coat and black boots attacked Snow before he could escape. He said the man was extremely strong and lightening fast, with a weird accent and eyes a shade of blue he had never seen before. He's scared to death of him."

"Why is that?" Clark was intrigued. "Most assassins-for-hire are pretty cold-blooded."

Jimmy took in the concerned faces of the people around CK's bed, "This assassin's blood is definitely warmer. Bill Henderson let me see pictures of him, his neck has black and blue marks in the shape of a man's hand. Snow came as close to getting strangled as could be without being dead."

The hospital room went quiet after Jimmy finished his story. Pete, Lois and Clark exchanged glances. Who was this stranger?

The following afternoon Clark was placed in a wheelchair, as policy dictated, and moved to the lobby before he and Lois departed the hospital. With Bill Henderson personally supervising the discreet police escort, they returned to their brownstone on Hyperion Avenue.

When friends stopped by to visit during the day, Clark wore pajamas and a very classy navy and burgundy robe given to him by Martha his left arm in a sling. It was all for appearances sake. He continued to make his evening patrols as Superman in order to keep the criminal element in line. The serendipity of this struck both Lois and Clark. Clark Kent had been shot and had his arm in a sling, while Superman was out on patrol. How could they be one and the same? It only helped protect the secret.

He and Lois also spent the next few days working from home to ferret out additional information about the disappearance of their nemesis. Now that Luthor was missing, people on the edge of the underworld started to talk with them, providing enough evidence to keep at least two grand juries working for six months. Late one evening an employer of LexCorp who refused to reveal his name said the executive offices of LexCorp were filled with frightened businesspeople who had no idea what had befallen the

owner and CEO of their company.

The LexCorp Board of Directors planned on holding an emergency meeting to elect a new CEO.

Finally, after extensive research, fact-checking and discussions with Bobby Bigmouth and sharp dressing Wall Street analyst, Eugenia ‘Legs’ Diamond, they wrote a story that shook Metropolis to its heart.

The story was accompanied by a picture of a male silhouette, with the features erased and a large question mark. Under this picture was the caption “The Boss”. Then there was an equal sign and then finally, a picture of Lex Luthor.

“MYSTERIOUS UNDERWORLD BOSS IDENTIFIED”

Morning Edition — Monday, August 20th

By Lois Lane and Clark Kent

“While the MPD investigated the disappearance of Lex Luthor, several more documents and additional evidence linking Luthor to numerous crimes in and around Metropolis, as well as internationally have been uncovered. This evidence indicates that Lex Luthor was the mysterious ‘Boss’ of the Metropolis underworld. For Luthor associates, Nigel St. John and Dominique Cox were apprehended at Larson Airport after warrants were issued for their arrest. It is believed that St. John and Cox will cooperate with prosecutors and give testimony in order to have a lighter sentence. The investigation continues and additional arrests are anticipated.” Story continues A2

Epilogue

A gentle breeze tousled leaves on the dignified trees lining the wide neighborhood streets. A pleasant summer evening had fallen in the up and coming Nayland section of Metropolis. Despite being in the middle of a bustling city, the air smelled sweet with the mingling of flowers such as white lilac blossoms. Several other flowers and plants had been potted and situated in large earthenware pots, adding a welcome dash of color to otherwise dull front steps. The renovated brownstones reigned supreme on Hyperion Avenue. Their presence reassured the inhabitants that they had ‘arrived’ on the first rung up Metropolis’ social ladder. Many of the residents walked slowly home after a long day at work. Parents with young children strolled to the local ice cream shop for a sweet, chilly confectionary as an after-dinner treat.

These buildings claimed some the city’s eager young professional elite as residents. One house in particular was home to the Kent family. The newlyweds had settled into the area so effortlessly that it seemed as if they had lived there for years. Across the street from their home, there was a narrow, dark alley located between two townhouses, having functioned in times past as a passageway to the carriage houses that were behind the townhomes. These days, the alley led to waste receptacles and maintenance sheds.

As if from nowhere, a bright light and sharp gust of wind whipped up the scraps of trash on the ground into several mini-tornados which flew across the alley, only to be replaced by two motionless figures and concealed by the inky, black shadows that stretched like stalactites across the passageway. A weary sigh escaped the man’s lips. “It seems inconceivable that after all this time and distance, I cannot move a step further,” he murmured.

“Cannot? Why speak so?” the petite woman at his side asked her voice awash with puzzlement.

The tall man pointed his chin towards the three level structure made of muddy colored material. “Look at the place where he resides, it is alien to us, but to him is comfortable and inviting. He is contented with ...” The strange name came haltingly to his lips, “Lo — is and ignorant of my existence.”

Josca shook her head disapprovingly, “We have discussed this Jor-El ...”

Their conversation was interrupted when they saw two young humans walking towards them.

“We can visit Lois and Clark tomorrow. I promised Mr. White I would drop these proofs off at his house. Stacy, do you, uh do you want to come with me?”

“I ... I would like that Jack.”

One side of the young man mouth pulled into a crooked smile, shyly, he took the hand of a pretty dark-haired girl, with stylish glasses. Thus joined, the couple did not walk so much as float up the block, unaware that the birth father of their friend stood behind them.

The First Lord of New Krypton stepped back further into the shadows. He wanted to avoid detection from any of this planet’s inhabitants. Josca studied the young ones carefully; they were blissfully inattentive to everything around them. Including two strangers surrounded by darkness.

“He is better off without my interference in his life.” Jor-El said. “If Nor-Ur were still breathing threats and murder, Kal-El would have been a target. Then it would make sense for us to be here, but to suddenly appear in his life after so much time ...”

Josca, with her newly enhanced senses could see, even in the darkness of the alley, that Jor-El was running slender fingers through his graying hair. Not only was he her husband, but he was the First Lord of her people, a title to be held in honor and respect. Unfortunately even infinite patience such as she possessed could be worn gossamer thin. She gently grabbed Jor-El’s well muscled arm and pulled him towards her. She looked up at him, her large blue-brown eyes sparkling with determination. “Nor-Ur is no longer alive nor is Kal-El in danger! We have placed Trey as provisional head of the government until your return, given our children into the care of good friends and crossed countless light-years of space to meet this lost son of Krypton. Barring any further interference, tonight you *will* be reunited with your son!”

He looked at her, momentarily startled by the uncharacteristic outburst, Jor-El’s face broke into what Josca always thought of as a beautiful, heartbreaking smile, “Trey and the late Jen-Mai were wrong, you are *precisely* the woman I need. Come, Wife, we have family business to conclude.” He extended his arm to Josca, which she took immediately by placing her arm upon it, her palm on top of his hand. Mindful of the evening traffic, with purposeful strides the couple walked across the street.

Behind the wall of the brownstone, Lois Lane-Kent was completing a very happy phone conversation. “Oh that’s great news! This is the perfect time to visit Paris! Are you kidding? Of course I’ll tell him. Take care!” Lois hung up the phone and went into the kitchen, a wide, cheerful smile on her face. The sweet, aromatic scents of fresh garlic, basil and oregano danced through the air. Clark was preparing a colorful, delicious Italian repast of homemade spinach pasta, yellow and orange peppers and freshly caught shrimp, while their cat Pepper looked on from his perch on top of the gleaming white refrigerator.

Clark continued chopping the flathead parsley. Without looking up, he said “You certainly sound happy, who was that?”

“Bernie Klein. We — or rather Superman will have to do without the skills of his ‘physician’ for the next two months.”

Surprised, her husband looked up from the cutting board with a concerned expression on his face. “Why?”

Drawing out the words, Lois announced, “It seems he will be gone for two months to give a series of lectures at the Sorbonne.”

A smile tugged at his lips, as he could guess the rest, “Oh? Pray tell, who arranged that?”

“Do you have to ask? His lady friend, Professor Abrihet Senai of course!” she shouted with glee.

“Wow,” Clark responded. “It sure looks like Bernie has finally found the right woman. Of course, she would reside in Paris — not Chicago or New York. It’s going to be fun to watch this long-distance courtship.”

Warming to the conversation, his wife said, "Isn't it fantastic? Bernie has fallen *completely* in love. I intend to put him in touch with a first-rate travel agent, one who can tell him how to rack up frequent flyer miles without breaking the bank." Lois chortled. "Pity he can't use 'Superman Express'!"

"Yeah, it *must* be love; the man hasn't been out of Metropolis in years. I hope they are happy together. Now, Lois, we mustn't rush them, but *if and when* the time comes there's this great diamond store in the Topaz district I'll send him to. Mr. Lazar will give him a good deal." Clark said.

Lois wrapped her arms around Clark's waist and their lips met, allowing them to shamelessly indulge in a kiss that was full, loving and deep. When they parted, she sighed contentedly. "Oh Clark, I'm so happy we're married! If Abrihet brings *half* as much joy into Bernie's life as you've given me, who could ask for anything more?"

Clark hugged her tight; the attack had made him more aware than ever of the precious moments in life. He wanted all the time that he could get with the beautiful woman in his arms. Almost all of his early dreams of life in Metropolis were complete. The only thing that remained was to have a family — children — of their own.

The tender moment was broken when they heard a firm knock at the door.

Lois stepped back and wiped the lone tear that moved down her cheek. "Oh that must be Jack; he said he'd drop by this evening. Put on your sling, just in case he wants to step in for a minute."

Using super speed Clark dashed upstairs to their bedroom and slipped the ugly blue and black contraption on his left arm. Once the sling was secure, he turned to go downstairs when the *thump-thump* sound of Lois' accelerated heartbeat reached his ears. Fearing the worst, he quickly moved to the staircase and ran down calling out, "Lois! Who's at the door?"

"Clark, there are some ... people here to see you." His wife stepped back, her lovely face pale from shock as two people entered the room. He could sense there was something about them and the way they were attired. The woman was olive-skinned and petite wearing a dark sleeveless blue coat over a black jumpsuit with black boots. Her beautiful face was framed with wavy black hair that seemed to gleam under the foyer light. Peeking out from the sleeve, a silver bracelet with an almost Byzantine design on her left wrist caught his eye. The tall middle-aged man by her side wore similar garments; except his long sleeveless coat was deep red, but he also wore a bracelet of the same design as the woman.

Clark's eyes darted to a bracelet on his wife's left wrist, the mate to the one he wore, also on the left wrist. He had given the bracelet to Lois on the night of their engagement. To everyone else it was a gift shared between two lovers. Lois and Clark knew the bracelets were an acknowledgment of a Kryptonian wedding custom. Only the nobility wore such jewelry, in a pattern and color variation no one else was allowed to copy.

Clark removed the sling and dropped it to the floor; somehow sensing that for these people the subterfuge was unnecessary. His steps slowed as he studied the man's face. It was still a strong, handsome face, but the man before him was older, the weight of responsibilities almost too heavy to bear having taken its toll. An oddly accented voice he recognized as having heard before when he listened to the messages from the globe filled his ears. The tall man spoke a name, "Kal-El?"

With each tentative step towards the man and his companion, the years scrolled backwards, taking him to the days as a young child huddled under blankets that did not give him any warmth; a comfy feather-filled pillow that was damp with hot tears. Even Bosco, his care worn, brown teddy bear, provided scant comfort. He had been silently weeping, his tiny young heart ached and

wretched with sorrow. Jonathan and Martha Kent had revealed the painful truth that he was not their biological child. Whoever his real parents were, for whatever reason they either could not or —more painfully — *did not* want to raise him as their own.

That thought opened a well of dark sadness and his small frame shook with a new round of sobs. With the exception of Martha and Jonathan, he was abandoned and alone.

In the days and months that passed Clark often dreamt of his real parents, imagining they would drive up the long dirt road to the solid old farmhouse, bearing gifts, begging to see their long-lost little boy. He would throw himself into their arms, happy to be found. But as with all childhood dreams softly, gradually like a flower petal in the wind they float away.

Over the years, Jonathan's gentle manner and Martha's comforting words helped the young boy to realize he had been blessed with the best, most loving parents in the world. They were there to calm his fears when his 'abilities' began to manifest themselves. He and Jonathan spent hours in the fields honing his talents and his knack for hiding them so they would not proclaim to the world that he was not a child of Earth. Martha talked with him in the kitchen when he made the decision all on his own to not speak of those abilities to anyone, save his parents. For these reasons and countless others, Clark Jerome Kent could ask for no better mother and father.

When Clark's feet landed squarely on the foyer's solid wooden surface and looked slightly upward into the man's silvery-blue eyes he recognized himself in those features. This was no dream nor was it an imagined gift, this was a miracle.

A single word crossed Clark's trembling lips that he had spoken countless times before but to a man who shared neither his bloodline nor planet of origin. The word came hesitantly and suddenly his heart was ready to burst like that young child. "Father?"

In an instant the two men crossed the space between them and wordlessly embraced. Lois watched as jubilant tears ran down her face. Josca stood back, wearing an expression of profound relief mingled with joy, allowing father and son a moment to benefit from their reunion.

Clark was the first to pull away and look at Jor-El, a torrent of words spilling over his lips, "How ... how did you get here? Are there other Kryptonians on Earth? Are you staying here? Wh ... where is my mother?"

He noticed the older man wince at the last question. Suddenly an awkward silence enveloped Jor-El; he looked to Josca, who cast her eyes down.

Lois caught the exchange between the two visitors, and although she wanted to speak, thought better of it. She realized whoever this woman was to Jor-EL, she was *not* Clark's mother. Somehow Lois found her voice and asked, in an echo of Martha Kent, "Have you eaten yet? Clark is making Italian." as if it were the most natural and normal thing in the world for his Kryptonian father to appear on their front steps.

Josca cocked her head and looked at Jor-El, speaking for the first time. "Italian?"

He took her hand and answered, "It is a country located in the Mediterranean Sea." Turning to Clark, he said, "I ... I am certain we can enjoy the same foods as yourself."

Those words, spoken with a mixture of humor and seriousness, somehow lightened the tension and all four people laughed. As they walked past the living room, into the kitchen the room filled with the mouthwatering aromas of Clark's cooking. Lois set two more places at the table while her husband nervously plated the food. Jor-El and Josca sat down on sturdy wooden chairs, and for the first time in his life, Clark broke bread with a blood relative.

After dinner they gathered in the living room. Clark's father and Josca sat on one couch and Lois and Clark on another, at a

distance perfect for conversation. The air was thick with questions, all of which Jor-El endeavored to answer. "A journey begins with a first step. This discussion must begin with a first question. Please, Kal-El, ask what is in your heart."

Clark's brown eyes brimmed with unshed tears, "My mother ... is no longer living?"

Jor-El stiffened ever so slightly and swallowed before he spoke, his voice roughened, "Yes, Lara is dead."

Clark took Lois' hand as he freshly mourned for his mother, not moving to wipe away the tears as they rolled down his cheeks, "S ... she was killed when Krypton was destroyed?"

"No, she died in an accident ... on New Krypton."

"Excuse me, did you say, *New Krypton?*" Lois said in near disbelief.

"Perhaps I should give greater details from the beginning. But first, you need to know that you are not an only child. Dear Lara presented me with another son — Yar-El — named after my father ... your grandfather." He took Josca's hand, "Josca is not just my traveling companion. She is your step-mother and mother to your half-brother, Sor-El and half-sister, Kirana."

Sadness was swiftly replaced by joy, an inner brightness lit Clark up inside like a super nova and that lightness bubbled forth with unerring enthusiasm. "What? I have *two* brothers and a little sister?"

Josca bowed her head and whispered with profound humility. "Thank you, my lord Kal-El. But my children are your *half* siblings..."

"Half or whole ... it doesn't matter!" Clark said gently. "Until a few hours ago, my family consisted of my wife and my parents. Suddenly I have a whole new family!" He turned to her husband, "I ... I'm sorry, Dad ... Jor-El. I don't know what to call you. Please. Please continue."

"There is time. We both need to get to know each other. It would not give dishonor to the years the Kents have spent raising you. I would very much like to meet them. But while we are on this planet, to avoid problems, call me 'John.'"

Lois' sharp ears caught the meaning of 'while we are on this planet' and her heart skipped a beat. Were these visitors planning on taking her husband back with them to their world — to become some kind of prince? Without a further thought, she asked, "Are you and Josca staying here for awhile or is Clark going back with you to New Krypton?"

Jor-El exchanged a startled glance with his wife. "With the help of our long-distance transporter device we come and go to Earth at will. Please, Lois, understand I do not wish to disrupt the life Clark has here. He is free to visit New Krypton as much as he wants; however, if you wish to join him, special arrangements will need to be made due to the difference in gravitation."

Clark's brown eyes grew wide with bewilderment. "Visit?"

The hours passed as Jor-El explained how Kal-El, son of the First Lord of New Krypton, managed to grow up on a planet light-years from the one that had seen his birth.

It must have been close to one o'clock in the morning by the time Jor-El had completed his narrative. Lois was the only non-Kryptonian in the room, but she was wide awake and listening eagerly. Pepper had jumped onto Josca's lap, startling her, but she allowed the friendly cat to curl into a ball and purr contentedly.

When his father finished speaking, Clark shook his head.

"This is fantastic! I feel so much better knowing my Kryptonian family is not that far away. Everything would be perfect if we didn't have to worry about our nemesis, Lex Luthor. He's out there somewhere planning something terrible. I'm worried about him harming my family."

"There is no need for concern, Kal-El; Mr. Luthor is now on New Krypton, in a specially designed prison where he shall remain for the rest of his days. Like Krypton, New Krypton is a giant world circling a red giant sun. If he were to try to escape, he

would find it very difficult, very difficult indeed, to contend with the increased gravity. As soon as he stepped out of his cell he would be incapacitated by his own weight. There is, therefore, no possibility of his escaping Kryptonian justice. That is why I said special arrangements would need to be made if Lois wished to accompany you on a visit."

This time, both Lois and Clark looked at Jor-El in downright shock. The memory of everything Jimmy said about the assassin, Eli Snow, and his story about a powerful man with an unusual accent came rushing back. Suddenly like a giant puzzle, the supposedly different events of that fateful day clicked into place.

Clark said, "Jor-El, did you confront Eli Snow minutes after I was shot?"

Josca laid a hand on his arm and said in a gentle voice, "Let me enlighten them as to what transpired on the staircase and in Mr. Luthor's office. I can do it without ... emotion." Jor-El nodded in assent. Another thirty minutes went by as Josca-El told her audience what happened to the shooter and Metropolis' former crime boss. During the narrative, Pepper, hopped from one person to another until he finally settled himself on Lois' lap.

"So you were the stranger Eli Snow spoke of. Jor-El, he is a man hardened by his chosen profession. Without the benefit of Kryptonian reflexes, the outcome would have been very different." Lois said in a concerned voice as she stroked Pepper's soft fur.

There was silence as Jor-El mulled over his daughter-in-law's words. He answered simply. "Dear Lois, my enhanced abilities were the *only* reason why this Snow person survived. If this had been the New Krypton of ten years ago, I would have executed him immediately as is my right as Kal-El's father."

Horrified at his father's blunt explanation, Clark said, "But Jor-El ..."

"No, my son, this man was evil, as was the one who sent him. On Earth you are acknowledged as its protector. On New Krypton, my position represents upholding the law and some of our most precious traditions. On this planet, my strength and abilities are far beyond what I have at home. During my encounter with Snow, those abilities stood as a reminder to obey the laws of your world. Lex Luthor made a mockery of your laws when he sent another man to kill you. You are my son. What kind of father would I be if I did not stop both Snow and Luthor?"

Clark nodded and said, "Thank you ... Father."

A contemplative silence filled the room. There was much to be discussed in the days ahead, a bridge needed to be erected between Earth and New Krypton to understand the customs and traditions of both. The Kents and the family El — had much to learn.

The moon was beginning to disappear over the brownstones of the Kent's neighborhood when Jor-El and Josca took leave of their hosts. Arm in arm they walked across the silent street, empty now of traffic and back to the shadowy passageway. No one but Lois and Clark watched as a bright shaft of light momentarily brightened the space and then darkness shrouded the area once more.

As they prepared for bed, Lois said, "Wouldn't you just know it? The story of the century and we can't write about it. Lex Luthor finally received the punishment his crimes deserved, but not for all of the lives he ended or ruined here on Earth it was for attempting to kill the son of the ruler of New Krypton and it was New Kryptonian law that delivered the sentence and punishment. His disappearance will have to remain a mystery, but we know we won't ever have to worry about him again."

"I hope so. I'm looking forward to spending a little time with Jor-El, Josca, and my brothers and little sister."

After turning out the lights, Lois, wearing a pair of pink silk boxer shorts with a matching tank top, slipped between the covers and moved to the center of the king-sized bed. She was

silent — too silent.

Clark donned black sleep shorts, got under the covers and wrapped his arms around Lois' waist and pulled her gently to him. She laid her head on his bare chest, breathing in the comforting familiarity of his scent. The uncomfortable silence dragged on in the darkness until Clark could bear it no more. He turned on the lights and said, "Lois, honey, what's wrong?"

Her doe-like eyes shimmered with tears, her lips stretched into a watery smile, "I ... I am so happy your Kryptonian family has found you. This is something you've always wanted was a father and mother, just like the rest of us. Maybe I'm being a little selfish, but I don't want you to be so enticed by that society you'll"

Clark wiped a tear from her eyes, smiled and finished her sentence, "... want to leave you, Mom, Dad, and all my friends and life on Earth to become *Lord Kal-El*? No, I am Clark Kent." He tenderly kissed her forehead and pulling back, whispered in her ear. "I am Kryptonian by birth, blood and rank. But my heart and life are irrevocably tied to *this* planet and the beautiful woman by my side. I belong here, not a million light years away. If I go to New Krypton on a visit, you are coming with me, that is a promise."

His wife sighed happily, "Good. Now please turn out the light, I'm not tired and we are *still* newlyweds."

A merry chuckle escaped his throat and then he said, "Yes ma'am!"

THE END

"LEXCORP HEADED IN A 'NEW DIRECTION'"

Evening Edition — Monday, August 15th

By Diane Pallister and Eduardo Friaz

Aykira Milan, newly elected CEO to the beleaguered company, promises the investors and the public a new direction for the global conglomerate. A graduate of the University of Pennsylvania's, Wharton School's MBA program, Ms. Milan made good on her promise by requesting and swiftly receiving, the resignations of several highly placed executives. In a statement released to the press, Ms. Milan said, "Moving forward, our company will be completely transparent and shall not tolerate involvement of any kind with the underworld. Those who commit illegal acts will be dealt with immediately."

Earlier today, Inspector William Henderson arrested LexCorp's lawyer, Sheldon Bender, who for some time has been suspected of taking part in Luthor's criminal activities. Story continues on A2.

* See the book, *Last Days of Krypton* by Kevin J. Anderson

** One Month.