

A Wedding in Paris — Part Three of the Visitor Trilogy

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Rated: PG

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Summary: This is the final installment of the “Visitor Trilogy.” Time to tie up all the loose ends, see a few old friends and then attend a lovely wedding in Paris! It’s been a year since Jor-El sent Lex Luthor to New Krypton and had him imprisoned. Much has happened since then; UltraWoman has returned and Dr. Bernard Klein has a new project at S.T.A.R. Labs; one which will have far-reaching effects on our favorite duo. Meanwhile Dru-Zod, the man who is Lex’s jailer, has sinister plans of his own.

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Thanks to Andreia, MikeM, KenJ and especially Sydney whose intimate knowledge of Paris and how to get married in that city makes this fic — although a lovely fantasy — so much more realistic. Hats off to Bobbart who encouraged me to keep going, thanks Bob!

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 little while. Love this playground!

This story is a continuation of “[An Unexpected Visitor](#)” and “[Autumn in Paris](#).”

Chapter One

Metropolis: Hyperion Avenue

Lois sat at her vanity and carefully dabbed on the last touches of make-up. She stood up to survey the results in her mirror. The graceful black dress she had gotten from Darcy’s last week fit her silhouette to perfection. So nice to know she didn’t have to diet anymore, which was one of many perks having Kryptonian DNA bestowed. Her afternoon had been spent tracking down a source from a venture capitalist company’s internal espionage story which took the better part of a day, but it was worth it. Due to her enhanced abilities she managed to finish up the research in record time and have the story typed up for the evening edition.

A familiar voice interrupted her thoughts. “Not bad for an old married lady.” Her husband said from the doorway, with a mischievous lilt in his voice.

“Old married lady?” she snorted playfully. “I will have you know, Mr. Kent; I can *still* turn a few heads, especially tonight. The Kerth Awards will be attended by several gentlemen of the Fourth Estate who appreciate a woman with ‘classic good looks.’”

Clark laughed. “Let’s hope they value our efforts on ‘The Boss of Metropolis’ series. It would be great to finally share a Kerth award.”

“Has it been a year since we wrote those articles? Wow. Time flies. We have seen a lot of changes both professionally and personally,” Lois said.

“Yeah, the new addition to the Kent household in the form of

Ultra Woman came as quite a surprise.”

“Hmmm, not to mention purchasing our townhouse came at just the right time. Good thing that special room behind the bookcase can hold your costumes *and* mine. I’ll bet, ‘Pretty Boy’ didn’t think his old speakeasy would be used in such a way.”

His brown eyes twinkled “I don’t know, sharing my closet, home and bed with Ultra Woman is kinda sexy!”

“The Newtrich sisters certainly didn’t have that in mind when they used Red Kryptonite on you. What a relief that your powers came back and I *kept* mine! Now I can help you with rescues.”

Clark looked at his watch and said, “Much as I’m enjoying this conversation, we’d better get going. Perry is Master of Ceremonies this year which means . . .”

“It’s going to start on time!” Lois said.

They walked downstairs, Clark picked up his keys from a small multi-colored wicker basket he had picked up in Brazil and Lois slipped a violet-fringed shawl over her shoulders. She said, “Honey, since it’s been a year, don’t you think we should do a follow-up article on LexCorp? To show everyone how the company is faring since Luthor’s disappearance?”

Her husband nodded thoughtfully. “It might make for an appealing story. The business world in general is very pleased with the surprising turnaround. Especially considering the owner and chief stockholder was the criminal mastermind behind most, if not all, of the biggest rackets in Metropolis.”

“The stockholders voted in the right woman for the job. Aykira Milan has worked hard to steer the company towards legitimacy,” Lois added.

“Maybe Ms. Milan will grant us an interview?” Clark said as they walked down the brownstone’s steps, a gentle September evening breeze caressed their faces. He couldn’t help but look at his lovely wife as they strolled towards the car. Was it possible she had become more beautiful since the day they wed? Yes, he thought with a happy inner smile, she was and no more so when she was starting a new investigation. The exciting prospects seemed to light her up from the inside and tumbled out in the form of boundless energy.

“She’s had time to grow into her role as CEO and with her organizational abilities she was able to pull the company back from the brink of disaster. Lex’s *extracurricular* activities nearly destroyed the corporation,” Lois said.

They reached the Jeep, so Clark opened the passenger side door for her and she slipped inside and waited until Clark was behind the steering wheel before continuing. “Okay, whether we win a Kerth together or not, let’s write another article on LexCorp, Aykira Milan’s accomplishments should be the focus.”

They were both silent for a few moments while Clark deftly steered the Jeep from their quiet street into Saturday evening traffic.

Lois sighed and said, “Imagine public reaction if they discovered *where* Lex has been for the past year. It would make a fascinating story: attempted murder, family reunited after nearly three decades apart, corporate misdeeds and finally a criminal brought to justice.”

“Kryptonian justice,” Clark said flatly, his tone implying he still had mixed feelings about Lex Luthor living out his days on New Krypton. He would have preferred that Lex stand trial for his crimes on *this*, his home planet. But considering the thorny problem of the fact that Lex knew Superman’s real identity, the former billionaire had to remain on his family’s new home world forever.

Lois took his hand and squeezed it gently. “Jor-El did what was best for all of us. The First Lord of New Krypton was not about to let anyone harm his son. It’s what parents do honey, protect their children.”

He returned her touch with a gentle squeeze of his own. “I

know,” he whispered softly.

Since reuniting with his father Jor-El, Clark had made frequent visits to his family’s home. His stepmother Josca, his brothers and adorable little sister Kirana made him welcome. He had met members of the council and visited the many farms and industries the New Kryptonians were creating to survive on their new home world.

The New Kryptonians had also welcomed him — if not with the same enthusiasm as his family, at least with the warmth of a prince returned to his people. There was some speculation that Zara would be forced to end her marriage to General Ching and wed Prince Kal-El. There was also the question as to whether Sor-El would have to give up his right of succession now that his older brother had returned.

Jor-El quickly put a stop to that. After conferring with the Council of Elders, he made a planet-wide announcement that although Kal-El was of the royal line he had renounced all claims to the title of First Lord. He was a citizen of Terra, therefore Sor-El’s accession was assured and in view of his marriage to Lois Lane, a Terran, the birth marriage to Zara was annulled.

Of course to make everything completely right in the eyes of Kryptonian law, Trey had insisted Lois and Clark exchange Kryptonian marriage vows in front of the nobility of New Krypton. This would put an end to all speculation that Clark would lay any future claims to his brother’s position since he had chosen a human as his lifemate.

Afterwards, Clark, with Lois at his side, made visits to New Krypton at least once a month. Once she acquired the powers of Ultra Woman, the need to wear light weight armor in order to survive New Krypton’s harsher gravity was no longer necessary.

It was an adjustment for Clark to refer to the tall, intense scientist/soldier/statesman as his father. Over the course of the past year the two men worked to develop first a friendship and then to become father and son.

The one thing Clark did not do was visit Lex Luthor. Each time he had stepped into the blue light and made the journey across countless light years he wanted to but held back. Somehow visiting the former billionaire in his lavish prison accommodations seemed wrong.

“Earth to Clark. Earth to Clark, come in!” A familiar voice brought him back to his adopted homeworld.

“Sorry, my mind was wandering again.”

“Let me guess, on New Krypton?” his wife asked.

The Jeep stopped at a redlight; he turned, gazing into Lois’ brown eyes. The happiest day of his life was when she blew into Perry’s office during his interview, all fire and determination. Since then they had become best friends, partners and eventually husband and wife. Understanding each other so intimately that each always sensed when the other was troubled.

“Yeah, I was thinking about Luthor.”

“Ah, thought so,” Lois said, nodding her head sagely.

He sighed deeply and said, “Yeah, let’s not dwell on it tonight. This evening is to enjoy and *hopefully* to celebrate.” He gave her hand an encouraging squeeze. The mood lightened considerably within the Jeep and both of them relaxed.

Lois was smiling as she said, “Speaking of celebrating, it completely slipped my mind, Bernie called with good news; he went to Lazar’s Jeweler’s and picked up Abrihet’s ring.”

All thought of Lex Luthor’s imprisonment vanished from Clark’s mind and a warm, sunny grin brightened his face.

“Really? When is he flying to Paris?”

“Tonight. He’s planning on asking her to marry him as soon as he can think of a place that’s romantic enough; it seems that, the Eiffel Tower doesn’t even make the list.” Lois said, barely suppressing a giggle.

“The Eiffel Tower is not *romantic* enough? Please don’t tell me he’s going to propose in one of the Sorbonne’s laboratories or

even worst, a conference room!”

His wife gave up and started snickering. “Don’t underestimate conference room proposals, my friend Jocelyn received an eloquent one while pouring her boyfriend’s coffee. Bernie’s been very patient, he’ll pick an excellent locale and it’ll be romantic enough for both of them.”

Paris

“Thank you for flying Air France.” the flight attendant said over the plane’s PA system. “The captain informs me we shall be starting our descent to Roissy-Charles de Gaulle Airport in twenty minutes. Please return to your seats.”

Bernie strapped himself into the seat and for what seemed like the thousandth time, touched his breast pocket. The simple black box was where it had been only minutes before. Again, he breathed a sigh of relief. Yesterday, Mr. Lazar had presented him with the ring. It was the perfect representation of the jeweler’s art. With its precise geometrical cuts it was not unlike a mathematical formula, just the thing for his purposes.

This trip to Paris would be quite different from any other he had made over the past year.

Hours later after a picnic lunch of grilled chicken sandwiches provided *dans un bistro*, Bernie and Abrihet strolled arm in arm on the Pont des Arts Bridge, the soft echoes of their footsteps against the wooden planks touched their ears. Bernie struggled to keep any trace of nervousness or excited anticipation out of his voice. The sun had just started in its afternoon descent; he might have felt the effects of an early autumn chill were it not for the excellent sweater Abrihet had knitted for him last year.

He had chosen this bridge because of its well-earned reputation as one of the most romantic in Paris. They had joined street performers, painters, and other loving couples to stroll to the middle of the bridge to take in the view of the Louvre, the Île de la Cité, and Notre Dame from one of the most quixotic vantage points in Paris. He was certain his beloved would never suspect a thing.

Suddenly Abrihet said, “Sometimes on beautiful, clear days like this, my thoughts wander to my home city ...”

“Have ... have you ever wanted to return to Lagos?” Bernie asked, a dance of fear going through his heart. Surely she was not thinking of leaving him and returning to Nigeria?

Silence, warm and nurturing as an embrace, caressed them as they walked. Abrihet wrapped her arms around the mustard-colored jacket he had picked out for her and answered, “Have I ever wanted to go back to stay? To see old friends or to experience a shortcut in time and become the young girl who loved Shakespeare and books? No. Going to university opened the world of science and art like a delicate rose. Despite a lack of many things, such as a steady supply of electricity, suddenly my academic life was without limits. The beckoning of those worlds and the burning desire to explore them gave me the courage to break tradition and defy my family’s wishes. But it still does not mean I do not miss my home city.”

She seldom spoke of her past like this before. He was keenly aware that it gave some pain. For her to speak of it now took an inner strength most individuals lacked.

“*Vrai*. Although some of my family are now willing to speak with me, returning home is still out of the question. My parents are still... disappointed in me. Nonetheless, my life is full here, but one must ever be willing to take on change. My twin passions, science and dance, sustain me wherever I go.” A loving expression played over her dark features as she took his hand and squeezed it. “As well as a certain shy scientist.”

A rush of excited anticipation tapped Bernie’s heart. He thought, *my boy, there will never be a better moment ...live it!*

He stopped in the middle of the bridge, carefully placed his

left hand on the railing and gingerly bent down on his left knee. With his other hand he took Abrihet's who was too startled to speak. The words were of course in French, but this was not a practiced speech, but words that flowed like a rushing white-capped river from a loving heart.

"Pendant longtemps, j'ai été un homme de science, et parfois je ne m'intéressais à rien d'autre. Jusqu'à ce qu'une femme, une belle femme, dont la peau a la couleur profonde de l'ambre, vienne éclore dans ma vie comme une fleur exceptionnelle, m'apportant chaleur, lumière et aventure. Elle m'a fait découvrir la peinture, la sculpture et la musique ... des formes d'art à adorer. Toutefois, aucune peinture à contempler, aucune sculpture à toucher, aucune musique à écouter ne sont aussi précieuses que l'amour qu'elle a apporté dans ma vie"

"For many years I have been a man of science, sometimes to the absence of all else. Until a beautiful woman with skin of deepest amber bloomed like a rare flower into my life, bring warmth, light and adventure. She introduced me to paintings, sculpture and music ... art forms to be adored. Nonetheless, no painting can I see, no sculpture could I touch or music to hear can be as precious as the love she has brought into my life."

He removed from the pocket of the burgundy sweater a small black box and opened it to reveal a square-cut sapphire surrounded by small white diamonds and a quarter-carat diamond on each side in a yellow gold setting.

"Maintenant, mon amour, laisse-moi me joindre à toi dans la valse de nos vies. Je t'en prie, accepte-moi pour mari! Et toi, veux-tu être ma femme?"

"Now dearest, let me join in the dance of our life, please accept me as your husband and you ... will you be my wife?" His voice cracked at those last words.

"Oui, Bernhard! Oui!" Abrihet began to actually giggle like a young girl so great were the feelings that thrilled through her body.

Before either of them knew it, Bernie had carefully slipped the engagement ring on her finger. The gems sparkled in the light of the afternoon sun's rays, brilliant with promise.

A few hours later, back in Bernie's apartment the couple sat on a large, cushiony russet-colored couch sipping strawberry tea and talking merrily.

"When do you want to get married?" Bernie asked.

"Soon. I will contact the administration office and let them know of my future change in marital status. If they do not allow me to be a guest lecturer, I will hand in my *démission* effective immediately. A transoceanic relationship is one thing, but a marriage cannot survive the stresses long distance creates. We should share our lives every day, not one week every two months. Can you see us asking either of our super friends to ferry us across the Atlantic whenever possible? How long can that last?"

Bernie sputtered in amazement, he thought that surely she would want to remain in Paris and continue teaching at the Sorbonne. "But ... but on the bridge you said your life is here."

She played with the ring, only two hours on her finger and already it had become an integral part of her. *"Vrai. I live in Paris, but my heart and mind are with you.* Hopefully the administrators will allow me to become a guest lecturer just as you did. It is not yet time for the students to return so the class transition can be handed over to another. There are several good candidates for such a position."

"I ... I don't know what to say. No one has ever given up so much for me," he said quietly.

"Yes, but I've contemplated this matter quite deeply over the past two months and one of us must be willing to make the adjustment. I loved Lagos and my feelings for this city are the same, but change can be good. Besides, Metropolis holds its own attractions; being away from the demands of teaching will allow

me to finish my book on *Medieval Metals* and I can write there without *scholarly* distractions."

Her fiancé wiggled his eyebrows and teased, "Oh? What about *other* distractions?"

"Ah oui! There is an exception to every rule, mon cheri!"

Bernie cupped her face in his hands, again marveling at the contrast in their skin colors. A year's time had only served to deepen his love, respect and desire for this brilliant woman. Their lips met, he tasted the strawberry champagne tea on her tongue, as she returned his caresses in kind. His arms wrapped around her body and he held her, wanting, daring for more. They broke the kiss and looked at each other, eyes darkening with passion.

"We are getting married at the end of October!" they said simultaneously and then burst into fits of laughter.

"Since we both live near the Sorbonne which is in the 5^{ème} *arrondissement* we should be married in the *Place du Panthéon* at the townhall," Abrihet said excitedly.

Bernie got up and consulted his leather-bound planner. Since his relationship with Abrihet had began this simple book held the structure of his life. Flipping pages he said, "I should check with the townhall's schedule, but if they are fine with Saturday, October twenty-fifth then that is the day we exchange vows!"

"Perfect. La publication des bans must be posted on October fifteenth."

He looked at her with a quizzical expression. La publication des bans?

She nodded. "Oh yes that is right, there is still so much you do not know about certain wedding customs in France. The bans is a publication posted on an official sign in front of the *Place du Panthéon*. It must be posted ten days prior to the wedding date."

He mused in happy contemplation; this was just the beginning of his education in French wedding customs and marital laws. He kissed her again and said, "Great! We should start calling people! Sweetheart, I have never been happier!"

Metropolis: LexCorp

A stylishly dressed black woman sat at a reproduction of a French writing desk in Lex Luthor's former office. The room was now painted in a dark shade of azure blue with accents of fresh gray. A few key pieces brought from her former office in Kansas City such as her desk, cream-colored leather chair, and white floating shelves transformed the masculine den into a business woman's efficient, yet comfortable work space.

Previously, the room had been decorated with antique weapons such as guns, Alexander the Great's sword and armor from numerous European estates. As no one really knew what happened to the billionaire, and since she could not abide working in such a museum, everything was given to the Metropolis Museum on loan.

Almost everything except, Alexander the Great's sword remained on display as well as a bust of Shakespeare. These items were a constant reminder of how quickly one's life circumstances could alter. One minute Lex was leading his global empire, the next he had vanished. Leaving behind a bewildered and badly frightened Board of Directors to clean up the negative media storm that had arisen once the *Daily Planet* accused Luthor of plotting to assassinate one of its top reporters.

The only problem for Lex should he return, his possessions, business and life were no longer his to artfully conceal from the public eye. He would be sitting down and enduring long conversations with government officials and the Metropolis police just for starters, and then in-depth interrogations with the FBI and Interpol. He would be fortunate to emerge from those confrontations with a pencil to call his own, much less priceless art treasures

She turned back to the monitor, studying the latest version of the annual report to be presented to LexCorp's Board of Directors

at the end of the week. The report would show everything she had accomplished since taking over the duties of the international company's day-to-day operations.

One year.

One year since the empire builder Lex Luthor had just vanished prior to his being discovered as the criminal mastermind of Metropolis. A global manhunt had ensued which yielded nothing. None of his bank accounts, stocks or investments had been touched. The luxurious villa on the isle of Santorini remained empty. The mysterious billionaire had vanished into the ether as if he had never existed. Like the infamous disappearance of Judge Crater, it was an enigma that would baffle law enforcement agencies — and the underworld — for years to come.

Aykira Milan contemplated the events which brought her to this point.

One year since the Board of Directors plucked her out of the Recycling and Waste Management division in Kansas City to run LexCorp itself. Lex sentenced her to that division as punishment because she had turned down the offer of becoming his lover. Dominique Cox took that station and promptly betrayed him to Intergang. It never ceased to amaze Aykira that Lex allowed that woman to remain in Metropolis. As matters turned out it would have been wiser for her to leave. The police pulled her into their dragnet as an accessory to a number of Lex's criminal activities.

The exile turned into a blessing in disguise. Within two years she had taken a division which had been a financial embarrassment and turned it around and made it a powerful profit center. She had rooted out the corrupt management staff who embezzled funds, the employees who were taking up space and replaced them with people who knew their jobs and wanted to work.

It was precisely for those reasons that she was back in Metropolis. She was untainted by Lex's corruption and had a proven track record for getting the job done. LexCorp was in the center of a public relations nightmare, who better to take over the helm than someone who had suffered from Lex's treatment only to come back stronger?

Her only regret was leaving some really good people in Kansas City, especially her buddies — Kendra Parks, a lawyer and Helen Voss, a CPA. From the moment she had arrived, the trio hit it off. The three of them had closed more than their fair share of discos and dance spots. Since her return to Metropolis, not a week went by when they did not talk to one another or send lengthy e-mails. They had been her unofficial sounding boards when it came to her corporate rescue strategies.

Thoughts of the immediate moves she had put into play came to mind: a carefully crafted PR campaign, vetting of some of the company's old guard and becoming completely transparent were the tip of the iceberg. LexCorp had paid out millions in SEC and government sanctions and for the next five years was under the scrutiny of the Superman Foundation.

She sighed and said, "If he hadn't been so greedy and demanding, his empire would not be in this precarious situation and eventually I would have come to him on *my* terms." Lex had a certain dangerous charisma that was wildly attractive to her, despite his arrogance. "Who knows where we would have ended up if he had practiced a modicum of patience?"

Her thoughts on the ultimate fate of her former employer and his past actions was blown aside as if they were soap bubbles. The here and now had more than enough matters to keep her occupied. Perhaps when the report was finished she would go to the gym and take part in a fencing class, her back and leg muscles were getting tight from sitting too long.

Her slender brown fingers flipped open a green folder, within was the proposal to change the name of the company. Names as diverse as PhoenixCorp to something called Paragem. She shook

her head in annoyance thinking that the last one sounded more like a disease than a company. Best to shelve the idea for another time when the suits in legal start pushing for it.

Right now she needed to contact her old friend and new department head of IT. Radames Perez was the only person in the section she trusted when it came to sifting through Lex's old e-mails.

New Krypton: Lex Luthor's Quarters

Lex sat in his favorite chair and thought, it has been a full Terrayear since I have been here, three hundred and sixty-five days. What a strange, terrible and wonderful year indeed.

His first days had been strange, filled with anger and frustration. The only faces he saw were those of his jailers. The chief warden Zod was of course an irritant, always demanding they talk about the planet's defenses. He sold weapons and defense systems to the United States Department of Defense, but he had no idea what happened to them once they departed the warehouse.

As the days marched on, living in the elegant apartment and learning about Kryptonian civilization became more than a mere pastime. He developed a healthy respect for the culture and what they had achieved over the past two thousand years. When Mansa Musa built his grand palace in Timbuktu, around the Terrayear 1325, Kryptonian spacecraft were just beginning to pierce the barriers of their solar system.

Their medicine was so advanced that Lex now considered Terra doctors to simply practice the medical arts on much the same level as a kindergartener practices watercolors. His best example of that was his suit: originally a clunky, articulated armor he rarely put on, yet in a matter of weeks, it had been slimmed down and although rough at the joints made forays outside of his apartments comfortable and even enjoyable.

Terrible was the time when Zod, or rather Dru-Zod as he insisted on being called, guarded him. At first his warden played cruel mental games or used his superior strength to strike him, knowing full well Lex was powerless to strike back. His ability to make character assessments told him Zod could be useful in helping him to escape. It was essential to be the model prisoner and tell the soldier whatever he wanted to know.

Even if some of the information was sometimes a lie to throw him off the track.

Dru-Zod wanted to overthrow the House of El and establish his own kingdom in its place. But to do that he wanted to get to Planet Terra, subdue its people and use them to eventually overrun New Krypton.

First they had to kill or capture the First Lord's son and daughter-in-law.

The warden was always a little vague as to how he intended to do that. No matter how carefully Lex couched his words even the vaguest outlines of a plan were kept strictly hidden away. One conclusion Luthor did reach: Captain Dru-Zod had no clue as to the existence of Kryptonite.

After three months the spacious silken quarters, no matter how luxurious, began to constrict and became what they were... a cage. He needed something beyond Kryptonian history data crystals and stilted conversations with his warders to keep his mind sharp and alive. As chief warden, such a complaint would be lost on Zod, so he pleaded with one of the younger guards if it would be possible for him to have something to do outside his quarters.

The response to this query surprised him. Within a few days Jor-El, the First Lord himself, entered the chambers wearing a black jumpsuit emblazoned with the familiar El family crest. This was the first time they had met since he had thrown Lex into the blue light aperture which sent him to New Krypton.

He felt soiled and unkempt in his stiff brown coverall, a far

cry from the meticulously tailored Savile Row suits he previously wore. Originally he kept his hair cut short in the style of Terra. But in time Lex allowed his dark brown hair, now streaked with gray, to grow long in a style similar to his warders. It suited him, especially since he had nowhere to go.

But standing in front of New Krypton's ruler it was a stark reminder of all that was forever beyond his grasp.

Jor-El sat down on a chair, invited Lex to do the same, set his cool silvery blue gaze upon him and without preamble said, "What is it you want Mr. Luthor? Are we not providing you with comfort and ease?"

Months of redundancy caused him to speak with more emotion than he wanted, "This enforced idleness will drive me insane, my life must have purpose!"

Unruffled, the other man said, "What do you wish me to do?"

Lex stood and advanced on him, the Sapphire guard that accompanied Jor-El stepped between the two men, brandishing a large sword. He stood still, took a deep breath and remembering the man before him held his life in his hands and spoke with the eloquence of language favored by the nobility. "My Lord Jor-El, I request a duty, task or job, something ... anything to occupy myself."

Jor-El regarded him unperturbedly, "Josca has kept me informed of your progress in learning our ways. She is most pleased, as am I. New Krypton is twice the size of Terra and yet the population is no more than one hundred million people. Everyone is needed to perform labor or develop a skill. In truth, keeping you under constant guard like this is a waste of manpower."

The relief on Lex's face was genuine. "I ... I can leave this polished dungeon?" Then that relief vanished. "But how? The gravity of this world will kill me."

With an easy wave of a hand Jor-El said, "Wearing a special suit with goggles and breather such as my daughter-in-law Lois once wore will allow freedom of movement. There are a number of 'tasks' which require an extra set of unskilled hands."

"Wait, Lois Lane-Kent *used* to wear a suit that allowed her to survive here? How often has she come to New Krypton? What happened to change that?"

The First Lord was at first baffled and then realized the prisoner was not kept aware of the goings-on of the royal family. "Several months ago, she acquired superpowers like Kal-El's and is now biologically a Kryptonian. Hence, the suit is no longer required. It is a very good thing too. Lois was unhappy living within such constraints, if she is unhappy then Kal-El will not visit as often. So it was a relief for all of us when Lois went through this unexpected metamorphosis."

"I see," Lex said softly. Now two super beings roamed Planet Terra.

"Now, let me be perfectly crystal about this change in your status Mr. Luthor. No matter how well you perform the job, no matter how much goodwill you accumulate among your workmates, they will in effect be your warders; returning to planet Terra and your former life is impossible. This is home now."

The prisoner scoffed. "Escape? I don't even know how I got here!"

An enigmatic smile played softly over Jor-El's lips, and he said. "How indeed. Consider the situation, prudently. On Terra you have committed dozens of crimes, both great and small. According to Kal-El, there is considerable evidence that a man named Nigel St. John was your personal assassin. These crimes are punishable by death if you returned."

Lex bowed and said with the barest hint of mockery, "Yes, well I have you and the Council to thank for my continued existence."

Jor-El's eyes narrowed, the stern voice which escaped from

his throat belied his compassion. "I have not forgotten about the man Snow. Do not test my patience otherwise you will remain in this prison forever and even the guards who watch you shall be gone, replaced by electronic servers."

They held one another's gaze for a time, silver blue steel studying obsidian depths. Then Lex Luthor, once famed captain of industry, lowered his eyes and nodded, acknowledging his defeat. "I ... I would not wish that my Lord Jor-El."

"Good. Arrangements have been made for you to work on a farm. Be ready at first light." With that Jor-El stood, turned and exited, the Sapphire guard falling behind him, not giving Lex a backwards glance.

When the door closed and the locks slammed into place, Zod stepped out of his hiding place. "Good, Lex. I especially like his 'witty' comment about the servers. Jor-El likes to think of himself as a fair man. The first part of my plan is in motion. Getting that suit will allow you to survive long enough to get to the transport beam."

"When shall we leave?" The meeting with Jor-El had been unnerving, Lex was eager to get off New Krypton and back to his own world.

"Patience, Mr. Luthor, patience. Time must go by before we can make our next move. There are matters which require my attention in order for my plan to take shape and it is important for *you* to acclimate yourself to the suit and develop goodwill."

"Goodwill? Those Sapphire guards are the elite and the gray guards that watch me have never slackened their hands. How long before enough 'goodwill' accumulates for that to happen?"

Zod smiled, an expression that both assured and sickened Lex. Was that how he once was? A man so sure of his destiny he trampled on the rights of others without a thought? "New Krypton is a planet of small cities and farms. There is no doubt our esteemed leader will send you someplace that is isolated from the large population areas. But close enough to your quarters that transportation will not prove to be a problem. You my dear Lex, are going to learn about grubbing around in the dirt. Isn't it ironic? Jor-El's son was raised by farmers and now his greatest enemy is going to become one."

Tired of Dru-Zod's bravado, Lex said wearily, "Will this plan of yours succeed?"

"We shall succeed because we were meant to! The people of New Krypton must branch out to other worlds if they are to survive."

Lex responded in a laconic manner. "Don't you mean that the people of New Krypton will conquer new worlds, under **your** command?"

Thinking back over those days Zod had been right. The warders eventually eased their watch over him. Now it was simply a matter of time before Zod's plan came into play. Except now after nearly a wonderful year of working on the farm among native Kryptonians, Lex's thoughts and emotions were in chaos, making him reluctant to leave.

Chapter Two

Metropolis: The Daily Planet

The squeal of happiness that escaped Lois's lips actually *hurt* Clark's sensitive ears. Usually he was able to tune such noises out, but when they emanated from his wife it was impossible. Members of the *Daily Planet's* bullpen also turned to watch as Mad Dog Lane morphed into a giggly teen-ager and wiggled in her seat with glee. Even when *The Hottest Team in Town* was nominated for a Kerth award for best investigative series she had not been so animated.

"He got down on one knee and proposed on a bridge? Not too far from the Louvre? Oooh, how romantic!" Another squeal filled the air.

Jimmy looked up from his desk and groaned quietly. Lois

Lane-Kent was bound to tell Lucy and then it would put more pressure on him to make *his* wedding proposal unique. For crying out loud, how was he supposed to compete with a proposal in Paris? Oh well, there were still six more payments to make on the ring. He had plenty of time.

But just in case he couldn't come up with anything wildly different, he reached for the phone and dialed Brio Tuscany, one of the most exclusive Italian restaurants in Metropolis, to put in for a dinner reservation in six weeks.

Lois, unaware of Jimmy's situation continued talking. "Wait ... you're getting married in *six weeks*? Is that enough time?" A pause while Abrihet responded, then Lois answered much slower this time. "A Nigerian seamstress named Jarawu is making your dress? What's her address? Wait a second ..." Lois dug into her briefcase, pulled out her day planner, yanked a sharp No. 2 pencil out of the drawer and began scribbling frantically. "Yes, got it!" Another brief pause for response. "Oh, can I supply names of real estate agents who specialize in townhouses? Ok — ay, if that's what you and Bernie want then Clark and I will pitch in on this end." The conversation continued for a little while longer than the two friends said good-bye and Lois hung up.

Swiveling around to look at her partner, Lois said, "Clark, honey, you heard? This is so fantastic, a wedding in Paris!"

"Yeah, he did and so did the rest of the bullpen!" Diane's voice floated up from her cubicle.

Cat joined in. "So the Egghead is finally going to marry her? It's about time!"

Lois laughed, happily ignoring her co-workers' comments, walked over to her husband's desk, sat down in the visitor's chair and then launched breathlessly into full babble mode. "The wedding date is set for Saturday, October twenty-fifth. They want us to be there at least two days in advance to help them with preparations. Abrihet says they are flying here next week ... something about finding a bigger place to live. So maybe we can give them the name of your realtor. The wedding is going to be in the evening. They want it to be small, but elegant. I've got a million things to do! But first I have to call Darcy's and tell them to hold that lavender sheath dress, matching sandals and bejeweled clutch. Absolutely perfect for an October wedding in Paris."

The shrill ring of Clark's phone halted Lois' rapid-fire babble. He picked it up and said, "Hello?"

Dr. Klein's hurried voice came over the line. "Good! I caught you. Clark, may I make a request?"

Clark realized that the Klein/Senai nuptials were in full swing. Chuckling softly, he said, "Sure, what do you need for the wedding?"

"Since Abrihet's younger sister Kuma will be the maid of honor. But it's ... that ah, would ... could you stand up with me when Abrihet and I exchange vows?"

Deeply touched that the shy scientist considered him such a friend, Clark said, "Bernie, it would be an honor."

"Th ... thank you. It is just that I am closest to you, Lois and your family. It makes sense, like a perfect equation." Clark heard Abrihet's voice in the background, then Bernie came back on the line. "Uh, sorry, I need to get going, thanks again. We'll see both of you in a week. Oh, by the way, congratulations on winning the Kerth for best investigative series. *Au revoir!*" The line went dead.

Before Clark could tell Lois what happened, the familiar rumbling southern accent of Perry White reached their ears. "Lois, Clark."

"Yes, Chief?" they said together.

The big man ambled over to their desks and said, "Didn't I tell you two before that the *Daily Planet* is a newspaper, not a match making service for your relatives and friends?"

"Aw come on, Chief, Bernie and Abrihet are *engaged!* Isn't

that great news?" Lois said with a chuckle.

A dry voice cut through the conversation, it was Eduardo, coming down the ramp, back from another one of his globetrotting adventures. "Did I hear right? Dr. Klein is engaged? That *is* great news, especially since S.T.A.R. Labs has provided so many answers for the *Daily Planet* when it comes to science questions."

"Hey, Chief, a little free publicity would be a great way to pay S.T.A.R. Labs back for all the good they have done for us!" Jimmy chimed in.

"A picture of the wedding gown might go nicely in my column." Cat said

"Oooh, Lois! Can you let me see pictures of the gown? Ms. Senai has great taste in clothes!" Stacy said.

From the base of the red stairs, Janet Owens added her two cents to the conversation. "Yeah, we should put a little mention of it in the Science section this Tuesday. After all, Bernie is an award-winning scientist and his bride-to-be is a leading voice in her field. What do you say Perry?"

Throwing his hands up in defeat against the onslaught of the bullpen, Perry said, "Yeah, it's great news for them, but unlike Priscilla and Elvis' engagement, that doesn't make headlines for us." He turned to Lois and Clark. "Don't think that new Kerth award makes a difference. Elvis and the Colonel didn't rest on their laurels, neither should you two. Got anything for today?"

They had stories for that day and the next; however they both knew what Perry was fishing for, serious front-page articles.

"Ah, nothing that would produce a big headline Chief, but Lois and I were thinking about pursuing a follow-up to the 'Boss of Metropolis' series."

Lois jumped in. "Right! We wanted to interview the CEO, Aykira Milan, see how the progress on re-building LexCorp's reputation is doing. A lot of people were hurt by Luthor's machinations, both within and outside of the company."

"With all this talk of engagements, wedding announcements in the *Science section* and flights to Paris, when were you two planning on getting the Milan interview?" Perry asked.

"As soon as possible," Clark said, knowing how much the Chief hated to drag information out of his reporters.

Perry nodded and replied drily, "Well, it'll be good for the *Daily Planet's* Business section, but not a big beautiful headline in 38 point font. Get on it, but first bring me a story I can sink my teeth into!"

"Yes, Chief!" they responded together.

Perry gave them a double take, shook his head and then walked away muttering, "Is this a great metropolitan newspaper or *Metropolis Bride?*"

"Poor Perry, he's been looking at us both strangely since I got my powers." Lois spoke so softly only Clark could hear.

"We're bond mates and as the saying goes ..."

"Great minds think alike!" Lois finished his sentence.

They broke into a fit of the giggles as some of the bullpen looked on and then decided to chalk their behavior up to them being "old married folks", despite being married for less than two years.

Once Perry had gone back into his office, they tried to discuss their separate conversations with Abrihet and Bernie when they both heard the sound of a helicopter's engine begin to sputter over Hob's Bay. The pilot's frantic radio mayday calls hammered in their ears.

As quickly as possible, Clark pulled open the top desk drawer and grabbed a tape recorder and Lois reached for her briefcase and then threw it over her shoulder. Together they raced towards the staircase. No one in the bullpen paid them the slightest attention, after all, this was Lane and Kent; they probably forgot to meet a hot source.

"I'll handle this! Cover for me with Perry," Clark whispered

as he tugged at his tie.

Amazingly Lois could keep up with him, despite wearing killer red heels. “No way Farmboy! It’s *my* turn to be the hero!” she hissed back.

“This is no time to argue! Somebody’s got to stop that ‘copter!” Clark said.

“I knew you would see it my way!” Lois kissed him on the nose, took the stairs two at a time and then opened the door leading to the roof. Seconds later the familiar sound of Ultra Woman’s sonic boom was heard.

Jimmy looked up from working on his camera and shook his head, the faintest smile played across his lips. Lucy was the love of his life, but Ultra Woman was in a class by herself. Besides, she said he was cute!

Clark went back to his desk wearing an amused expression, that was Lois, his little tornado! Of course, now that she was super, he did not worry about her nearly as much as in the past.

Lois raced to the roof, threw open the heavy, old metal door and leapt into the air. The pilot’s voice grew frantic as he continued to talk with the control tower at Larkin Airport. She increased her speed just in time to hear the cargo helicopter’s engines shut off and what was normally a heavier-than-air craft that actually flew had now turned into a brick hurtling down into Hob’s Bay. Swiftly she got underneath the machine and with delicate balance of strength and agility caught it in mid-air.

Sighs of relief and happy cheers reached her ears as she flew the helicopter and its human cargo towards the airport. It was such a rush to help people in distress, to know that the crew would be going home to their families tonight in the same condition as they departed that morning. Suddenly, a prickly sensation fluttered over her body. It lasted for but a moment and then the numbness faded away. It happen so quickly she thought it was a result of catching the aircraft. After all it had only a few months since she received these powers and they were still strange and new to her.

Once the vehicle was safely landed on the tarmac and she had ascertained that the crew had not sustained any injuries, Ultra Woman flew off.

Now that the crisis was over, the crisp, mid-morning autumn air cut across her body and cleared away any lingering numbness. Like a mischievous child Lois indulged in doing a few loop de loops. How she thrilled at the power of flight! Once, before they started dating, she and Clark chatted on the terrace of his old apartment. They had mused about which of the two powers was better, invisibility or flight?

Clark naturally chose flight. At the time it seemed like he made that decision because of hero worship for Superman. She thought being invisible was preferable, secretly entering all the doors that heretofore had been barred from her entering. That was before she discovered flying with Superman and then the ability to do it on her *own*. Of course flying was so much better.

As she drew closer to the Daily Planet building, an outline of the nearly doomed cargo helicopter account formed in her mind. Perry would have an exclusive headline for the evening edition, in 38-point font of course!

She also needed to talk with her husband and find out if numbness was ‘normal’ after catching something moving so rapidly in the air. After all, he was the undisputed expert in that arena! There had to be a reasonable explanation for her body’s reaction to the feat. When Bernie arrived from Paris it would be time for Ultra Woman to pay her “physician” a visit. But by the time Lois arrived in the bullpen and she started to write about Ultra Woman’s helicopter adventure, all thoughts of the strange sensation fled her memory.

Metropolis: S.T.A.R. Labs.

A week later Abrihet and Bernie were in his large personal work area at S.T.A.R. Labs. It was five o’clock AM in Metropolis, but their bodies were still on Paris time. Since they were morning people, it was a simple matter of coming to work early to take care of a few tasks before they began house hunting. Bernie put on his light blue lab coat and handed a smaller one to Abrihet which she took gratefully. This was the first step towards them working together as a team in the laboratory.

“It is good Mike Lane opens Café Americana early; otherwise *Le petit déjeuner*

would have been a stale granola bar from one of the snack dispensers.” Abrihet said as she sipped her coffee, flavored with dash of cinnamon. “Bernard, *se’il vous plaît*, take a bite of this bagel, the salmon and cream cheese is delightful!”

He exited a large vault that held some of his more important and secretive experiments carrying a bulky black metal container. The most significant being a large chunk of Kryptonite and the strange metal that had been recently brought to him from a cavern in upstate New Troy.

Bernard accepted the piece of bagel from her hand and took a bite; he made a happy sound of appreciation while his fiancée stared at the container and with a puzzled expression on her face said, “The contents of this *boîte* (box) are why you were excited about arriving early?”

Swallowing, he said, “Yes, S.T.A.R. Labs Board of Directors wants me to give this metal a thorough examination. It’s not a priority, but apparently, it is very rare.”

“Rarer than Kryptonite?” she asked cocking an eyebrow that insatiable curiosity for all things metallic piqued.

Bernie was so mesmerized by this mystery he simply mumbled, “Yes ... um maybe.” After slipping on a pair of heavy black rubber gloves, he removed a sizable chunk of coiled reddish-gray metal from the container and set it on the plastic white-topped examination table in front of her. “I thought with your understanding of rare metals you might have some insight on this ... whatever it is.”

She studied the twisted lump, made a face and said, “Have you contacted Dr. Irons? My specialty is metallurgy and sword making techniques from the Middle Ages. Exotic rare metals such as this would be more in his field of expertise than my own.”

“John is working on another project with EPRAD; otherwise he would be the Board’s first choice.”

“Ah well, studying this metal shall give us a chance to work together.” She stole a look at her watch. “This will take some time. When do we meet Lois and Clark for *le déjeuner*?”

“Lunch? Around one o’clock. Nonetheless we have to remember they are reporters and could be working on the lead for a big story and might be a little late.” He shrugged his shoulders. “It happens sometimes. If they cannot make it, we can grab a salad and then I’ll drop you off at the hotel. By then our jetlag will certainly have kicked in.”

“*Oui*. This is a good plan and might work in our favor. Now, where is the metallograph?” Abrihet said looking around the room.

The morning hours flew by. Before their return to Metropolis, a technician had been given a piece of the metal for preparation; it was ground flat and polished to a mirror finish. Abrihet etched on it to reveal the microstructure and macrostructure of the metal. Once that was complete, the sample was examined in an [electron microscope](#), and the image contrast provided details on the composition. As she studied the sample, she noted there were several aspects of the metal she had never seen before.

Bernie looked over the sample as a far-off expression shaded his face. “There is something disturbingly familiar about the structure of this metal. We need to run a crystallography to be sure.” Bernie said.

“What do you suspect?” Abrihet asked.

He muttered more to himself than answering her, “Science is not a guessing game. No need to run to the wrong conclusions.”

She nodded; most people might have taken offense to his remark, but she knew this wasn't being patronizing. Whatever his suspicions were they would remain hidden until he was fully ready to reveal them. “Crystallography test it shall be.”

Crystallography allows discovery of unknown materials and reveals the crystal structure of the sample. Quantitative crystallography can be used to calculate the amount of phases present as well as the degree of strain to which a sample has been subjected.

“The results should give us some kind of idea as to what kind of metal this is.” Bernie again mumbled, now submerged into full research mode.

Bernie went inside the vault again and removed a heavy lead box. He set it on the examination table and opened the lid. The familiar sickly green glow emanated from the metal container. Swiftly he ran the green Kryptonite through the same battery of tests.

“The crystal properties are similar to Kryptonite. It *must* have come from Superman's home world of Krypton,” Bernie said

Abrihet looked up from her own figures and sighed, “But how did a piece of metal reach New Troy and not Kansas? Wasn't there a theory that a quantity of Kryptonite followed Clark's spaceship to Terra?”

“Yes, but let's remember that there has never been a full-blown excavation of Smallville and its surroundings. Which leads us to the question; where did this metal come from? If that theory is correct, *everything* that followed Cl—uh Superman's tiny spaceship should be bathed in green Kryptonite radiation,” Bernie said, scrutinizing the prepared sheet of metal. “This metal is inert ... does not glow and has no radiation our instruments can detect, while green Kryptonite is active and deadly to our friends. Therefore an infinitely tiny molecular shift between these two metals causes a difference. What could it be?” Bernie's mind slipped into deep thought when he heard a sharp gasp escape Abrihet's throat.

“Bernard ... the green Kryptonite is changing!”

Like a piece of white-hot glowing coal removed from its source of heat and light, the small knob of Kryptonite's signature sickly green glow faded into a hard lump of ashy blackness.

The laboratory went silent as the two scientists stared at the phenomenon.

“*Mon Dieu!* How could such a thing happen? One moment the Kryptonite was glowing, the next it is inert!” Abrihet exclaimed in alarm while staring at the once-radiant rock.

Bernie rubbed his chin and said, “Yes, almost as if someone shut off the lights or covered the rock over with a sheet of lead.”

“It is as if this *Metal X* formed an invisible barrier over the Kryptonite, one that is more comprehensive than lead?” To act on her suggestion, Abrihet hastily placed the dead lump into the box and then put it back in the vault. She waited for a few moments and then noticed that once the influence of *Metal X* was removed, the Kryptonite flickered and became engulfed with its normal green glow.

“My love, I think this is the solution to Ultra Woman and Superman's biggest problem!” Abrihet said, her eyes twinkling with excitement.

“True. But it is imperative we run more *essais*.” He was studying the deadly crystal, as if looking at it alone would help reveal its secrets.

His fiancée walked over to the phone and began dialing. “No, we need to cancel lunch with the Kents *and* our rendezvous with the realtor. This process of discovery shall take uninterrupted time. It is illogical to rush; we can find a townhouse anytime after our wedding. Understanding the properties of Metal X must take

first priority for our friends' sake.”

Abrihet stopped talking when Lois came on the line, explaining they were tied up in the lab. Bernie smiled his approval. Here was the perfect woman for him, who else would appreciate the importance of the labors ahead? Quickly he moved to his leather planner and flipped it open. He found the number for *Café Americana* and called for a lunch order of salmon with lemon and capers for two to be delivered around 12:00PM. Something told him they would be pulling a rather long day, jetlag be damned.

Before this last trip to Paris he had looked at purchasing a new living room set in the elegant, yet comfortable style Abrihet preferred. He did buy a number of items for their use before and after their marriage; such as an espresso machine, a new set of king-sized sheets of Royal blue and since her last visit a make-over of the bathroom. Over the past year they had been dropping off items in each other's homes, adding little touches of their personality to the spaces.

Since their plans to purchase a townhome were put on temporary hold, they determined it was time to redesign his bachelor apartment into the home of a married couple.

Six weeks. Only more six weeks to wait. After all the years of singleness, he was greatly looking forward to being married.

New Krypton: Om Agricultural Station

“Many thanks for your assistance Lex-Er.” Vax-Om, a compactly built man with a ready smile and easy manner, waved to the black-clad figure that stepped off the Kryptonian version of a harvester. He had completed a two-hour task, removing crops from the fields. The rays of a blazing red sun beat down upon him as fat rivulets of sweat trickled down over skin and newly formed hard muscles. Besides harvesting, he had taken part in various manual tasks, such as weeding, feeding the animals and plucking eggs with yellow shells from a creature that looked suspiciously like a chicken. Wearing his special armor had made these chores painfully difficult at first, but gradually his body had adjusted.

Performing such menial tasks in the past would have been beneath his dignity, but now he welcomed the daily challenges of farm life. Actually this was not a farm, but more like an agricultural station; experiments were conducted on various seeds to discover which one survived best in its adopted soil.

The farm was several thousand acres in size and required the combined efforts of over one hundred people to run it efficiently. To Lex's mind it was in some aspects like fiefdoms of the Dark Ages, yet superior in many ways. He could foresee a time when the overseers of these stations would someday soon hold a significant place in New Kryptonian society. It only required the right man to introduce a few changes and his overseer; Vax-Om might be the man. Only time would tell.

It was a certainty Vax-Om was keenly aware Lex was someone the Council wanted to keep an eye on and that doing so in a competent manner could only improve his reputation in their eyes. From the beginning Lex was treated as an equal, despite his outré appearance. He entrusted him to work among not just the field hands, but their young children as well. To find such trust in an alien made him ashamed of his previous attitude towards Prince Kal-El. Yes, he now thought of Superman not by his Terra name, but that of his Kryptonian heritage.

This alteration of psyche and heart was a far cry from his days of stock manipulation, intimidation of subordinates and empire-building. Living among people of goodwill had brought this about. Not simply because it was preferable to the mind-numbing boredom of his cell — no matter how beautifully appointed.

The strange name of *Lex-Er* given to him by the inhabitants of the farm was a shortening of his official title: *Lex Luthor, former Terra dweller*. Originally, the name felt more like a brand

of servitude; anyone who called him that, he ignored. But like the suit, he grew accustomed to the Kryptonian name and accepted it as a part of his new life.

Kryptonian. For years the word held no meaning for him, it was simply another aspect of his super-powered nemesis' life. But now everything was different. This place and these people were starting to become his home.

At first the field hands — who were so much more than that — avoided him. It was not within their purview to concern themselves with an alien in a bulky, black articulated atmosphere suit. They were scientists working to reshape the soil of this world to grow food. It had taken time and numerous experiments with soil samples to find the right plants of Kryptonian origin that could germinate in soil compositions, different from their homeworld.

When Lex had first appeared on the farm, Vax-Om explained that when the original wave of colonists had arrived, their first crop yields had been small, the food unappealing. Years of diligent effort and innovation were required by the agriculturists and many others. The group had performed miracles to increase not only the crop yield, but the substance of the food as well.

Noting the others reluctance to interact with this being from another star, Vax-Om, as head of this particular farm, taught Lex-Er how to use the planting and harvesting machinery and during mealtimes brought the strangely garbed man home to share repasts with his family. Vax-Om's wife, Eyner, a slender woman with a face like a blunt hatchet, was an excellent cook whose compassionate nature made him feel welcome.

The very act of consuming food outside of his prison was awkward for Lex; nonetheless he discovered that being around such simple folk — even aliens — was preferable to the loneliness of his “home”.

Loneliness.

The time spent with Vax-Om, Eyner and their children was where his metamorphosis began.

The generous and nutritious meals were extremely important; the back-breaking labor nearly killed him. He had not worked like this since his days as a youth on the docks of Hobs Bay. But he silently persisted, mastering first one task and then another.

Over time, the field techs, which were their proper titles, ceased being suspicious and observed this stranger in their midst. Lex's increasing understanding of the crops, machinery, his growing strength and his determination not to quit was appealing. Slowly they began to accept him as a fellow worker. One who was willing to do whatever it took to get the tasks accomplished in an organized and timely manner. Several began to approach him and helped in areas where he needed a little assistance. Their respect, once grudgingly given grew with each passing moonround.

At the end of each day's work, he was collected by a gray guard and returned to the empty sumptuous space he called 'home'. It was devoid of voices and sound outside of his breathing. Some of the guards would ignore him and some he had grown almost friendly with. But they were rotated every month and as soon as one would thaw they were gone. Only Dru-Zod remained. One evening the grim-faced captain entered the apartments and spoke with him, the taunts were barbed, yet truthful.

“Lex-Er! I hear that's what those ground grubbers call you! Is that such a name for a man who once ran a Terran financial empire? Are you so desperate to leave this compound you are willing to accept it? I wonder what your former minions would think of you *now*?”

He refused to answer. Over the long months of his imprisonment, Dru-Zod had tried to belittle him in every way possible, using psychological methods to mold him into a tool for his own use. Lex's character assessment of a person's psyche,

even an alien like Zod kept him sane and purposeful, eventually he would use that to his advantage.

“So,” Dru continued, “the ‘steward’ of spice fruits and grain refuses to answer? Never mind, what would Lex *Luthor* say to a chance to return home and be a leader of men again?”

Home.

He snatched at the word like a thirsty man lost in the desert grasping for a cup of icy, cold, fresh water. He desperately wanted to return to Terra. It was his deepest hope. A hope he had cast off months ago. Memories recorded by his senses came to mind:

A yellow sun beaming seductively down on the golden sands of Waikiki beach, with blue water lazily lapping against the shores.

Hearing the electronic clang of the bell, an eager crowd of LexCorp employees and SEC officials standing behind him as he opened the New York Stock Exchange.

He remembered taking long, pleasurable walks along the majestic cliffs of Santorini in Greece, inhaling the fragrant, tangy sea breezes. The wines and foods were excellent and flavorful.

The soft touch of Aykira Milan's lips pressed against his own.

He startled, why did his mind bring up the Director of Recycling in Kansas City?

Perhaps he thought, because she was the last decent woman he had spent time with before coming to this place? He wanted to seduce her and make her yet another conquest, but she had a refreshing blend of courage and kindness. He remembered that the last reports from that money pit were showing promising results.

Still he pushed those memories away, returning to Terra was beyond his reach. A man like the First Lord does not alter a decision and allow an enemy to return to his home ground. There was also the fact that he knew Prince Kal-El's true identity. No way on the nine planets could Jor-El let him loose to wreak havoc on his eldest son's life. He would shove aside any prior reservation and put him to death first.

He had gained so much on this world, Vax-Om and Eyner trusted him. He had made real friends. Still the thought of moving around outside *without* armor was tantalizing, like eating a piece of juicy ripe fruit. Captain Dru-Zod had him. Lex wanted to put his head down and weep. “What.” He measured his next words with extreme care. “What do you want me to do?”

Metropolis: S.T.A.R. Labs.

It was late, Bernie and Abrihet sat at the examination table, and staring at the rock they coined Metal X.

“It needs a final test,” Bernie said bitterly.

“Oui, but that would be cruel.” Abrihet's voice was tired and extremely sad.

“No, it would be *crueler* if Superman and Ultra Woman were denied the perfect protection because of our timidity. All our tests point to the fact that Metal X somehow protects them from the deadly effects of Kryptonite radiation.”

Warm hands massaged his slumped and tired shoulders, beseeching words escaped her lips. “Bernhard. They are our friends. Clark is to be best man at our wedding!”

Breaking contact, he rounded on her, fists clenched tight. “Don't you think I *know* that! Years ago he and I discussed the possibility of developing a vaccine, one which provides immunity against Kryptonite's effects. Now that he and Lois are both Kryptonian it is even more important to me to find a cure. Someday they will have offspring. The last thing they need is to worry about someone using their children's vulnerability to Kryptonite against them.”

Abrihet's eyes widened, it was an impassioned speech. He wanted to help people, which he had through many of his inventions. But now that his — their — skills could rid their dear

friends of their only affliction he was frightened to test a possible solution on either one of them.

“Your fears match my own?” she whispered.

He sighed deeply, “Yes, what if Metal X in conjunction with Kryptonite *removes* their powerspermanently?”

“What shall we do?”

Bernie turned, his eyes red with unshed tears and said. “Tell them ... and let them decide. Sweetheart, forgive me for shouting. This is an incredible discovery yet ...”

He took a deep breath and sighed again; Abrihet gathered him in her arms and held him close. “If only there was another Kryptonian we could experiment on ...” she said with a wistfully.

Metropolis: The Daily Planet

“For a couple who were in such a hurry to get their affairs in order so they can marry Bernie and Abrihet have been sticking awfully close to S.T.A.R. Labs.” Lois said from her desk.

“Honey, they have *a lot* to get done in six no, five weeks, especially Bernie. Now that Abrihet is on a six-month sabbatical from her teaching position to work on another paper, he’s the main breadwinner in the family. Don’t worry, she’s picked out a dress already? What else does a bride have to do? Oh by the way, Bernie sent me to Johan’s to be fitted for a tuxedo ...”

The expression from his wife’s face that greeted Clark was one of utter shock. Getting a dress was one of the first things a bride had to do and then the list grows exponentially. But this last comment about a tuxedo. “Bernard Joseph Klein sent you to Johan’s for a tuxedo? Clark, a basic suit there *starts* at \$1500.00! What does he think, that investigative reporters — even award-winning ones — are made of money?”

Gleefully hoping the Kents were having a fight, Ralph Lombard sauntered over to Clark’s desk and said, “Hey buddy, if you can afford to shop at Johan’s, how about slipping me a few bucks until payday?”

“Scram Ralph, this is a private conversation between my husband and I.” She snarled

The reporter was about to come back with a snarky remark, saw the hard look on their faces and decided it was better for him to leave.

It wasn’t until Ralph was seated and out of earshot at his desk that Lois spoke. “Now, as I was saying this fancy tuxedo is too expensive. That’s more than our monthly mortgage.”

Clark looked both ways then whispered. “It doesn’t matter, I’m not paying for it, Bernie is.”

A squeak escaped her throat. Since when does he have that kind of cash? Three years ago during that whole ‘Bad Brain’ Johnson fiasco with Tim and Amber Lake he was afraid those crazies were going to terminate his grant money.”

“That was *before* his inventions in the field of medicine and space science began to take off. Our friend and Superman’s physician is now quite wealthy. It doesn’t hurt that his fiancée has taught him a thing or two about clothing. Think of it like this, with all the rubber chicken and high society events we attend, it’s not a bad thing for me to have a custom-made tuxedo.”

Sufficiently mollified, Lois said “Good point, a new tux would definitely come in handy. Just one question Farmboy.” The seductive gleam in her eyes was unmistakable.

“Yes, Mrs. Kent?” Clark said, wiggling his eyebrows.

“How does it look on you?” Her voice became as soft as velvet when she said, “And how long will it take to get it off?”

He was about to answer when the phone on his desk rang. He picked up the phone, his voice suddenly all business and said, “Clark Kent, City desk.” A big grin spread over his face. “Bernie! We were just talking about you. Are you guys finally free for lunch or dinner?” He waited a minute while Bernie spoke; the look on his handsome face slipped from one of humor to worry. “Sure, we’ll be there as soon as possible. ’bye.” He hung up the

phone, his expression, dubious.

“What’s wrong?” Lois asked.

“Bernie wants to see us immediately, if not sooner. He says there’s something important we need to see and a important decision has to be made that can only be done by us.”

Metropolis: S.T.A.R. Labs

“Dr. Klein and Prof. Senai are waiting for you in the Metallurgy laboratory. This way please,” the intense young lab assistant said. As she led the duo down a series of well-lighted corridors neither of them were familiar with.

“I thought we were going to his personal lab?” Lois queried.

The young woman allowed a raspy sound to escape her throat which might be considered a chuckle. “Dr. Klein is a scientific jack-of-all-trades. His expertise is in demand by a number of companies. Just about all the labs in this complex he has free access to.” She stopped at a heavy steel door marked

METALLURGY, knocked once, waited a few seconds and then opened the door to let them inside. “They should be at the far end of the lab. When you are done, they will lead you out of S.T.A.R. Labs.”

Lois and Clark were impressed as entered a large room with glaring lights over head and walls painted deep blue. The space was filled with computers, machines, examination tables and several devices they did not recognize. At the far end of the room they saw Abrihet and Bernie bent over what looked like a large lump of molten reddish metal, their expressions apprehensive.

Lois thought, it was normal for Bernie to be serious and even a little tense while involved with a project; outside of work he was warm and congenial. Abrihet was usually very positive and upbeat. What could possibly have their friends so worried? In an attempt to lighten the mood, she called out, “Hey, you two! We’re here!”

Bernie came over to greet them while Abrihet made adjustments to her instruments. His voice was hesitant and tense, he said, “I ...that is we are glad to see you both. Please have a seat.”

Lois and Clark each sat in a hard orange plastic chair, they both felt like errant school children waiting in the principal’s outer office.

“Wh ...what’s going on, Bernie? Is everything all right?” Clark asked trying hard to mask the nervousness in his voice.

Bernie took a sharp breath and blurted out, “We think we might have found the cure for Kryptonite radiation poisoning. However— ...

His next words were lost amidst whoops and shouts of joy. Clark picked up Lois by her slim waist and swirled her around the room. Neither noticed their friends did not join in their celebration.

The jubilation died down when Clark set Lois to the floor and he said, “What’s with all the gloom and doom? This is great news!”

Abrihet stood by Bernie and slipped her hand into his; one could not help but notice the stark contrast in their skin tones. But what mattered most was their deep love and devotion to each other; a devotion which encouraged them to help their friends, even if the solution to the problem could prove to be not only unpleasant, but devastating.

Abrihet said, “Make yourselves comfortable and sit down *mes amis, s il vous plaît*. We have much more to tell you.”

Together, they explained about the discovery of *Metal X* and it uncanny capabilities. Bernie said, “For the past week we ran a full range of tests on this metal and examined it under perfect lab conditions; unfortunately we need a test subject. It’s the only way to be certain that the *Metal X* will render Green or any other color Kryptonite harmless.”

Clark stood and despite wearing his regular street clothes his

body language and voice were that of Superman. “There’s no debate. That test subject will be me.”

His wife stood up immediately and glared up at him, her brown eyes flashing. “Why you? Now is not the time to be all noble! My body is just as Kryptonian as yours. Jor-El tested my DNA to confirm it.”

Startled, Bernie said, “Jor-El? Your *biological* father? I thought he perished when Krypton exploded?”

Lois closed her eyes and groaned. “Oh no!”

Realizing there was no way to hide this fact, Clark answered, “It’s a long story, one we should have told you about last year, but we didn’t want to burden you with another one of our secrets. Let’s get back to that later; what is the down side to the effects of *Metal X*?”

“We are unsure if exposure for any length of time to both kryptonite and *Metal X* will cancel out your powers temporarily, permanently or not at all,” Abrihet said

“Clark, let’s do this together,” Lois said softly.

He wrapped his arms around Lois and held her close, his voice firm yet confident. “No. Earth needs at least one super hero.” He released her and walked over to his friend. “Come on Bernie, let’s get this over with.”

The men walked over to the tall vault door, entered it together and then with a loud clang closed the door firmly behind them. Lois tried to use her X-ray vision to see into the vault, but it was lead-lined. She paced back and forth, muttering darkly, wondering what was going on.

“How long does it take to run an experiment like this? They’ve been in there long enough!”

“Patience, Lois.” Abrihet began.

Tears sprang to her eyes, “I know, I know, we have to take this chance, but Abrihet. Clark was born with these powers. Being Superman is what he was born to do. I ...”

Abruptly her husband’s voice broke through the quiet. Fearing the worst, Lois zoomed to the vault at super speed, leaving a trail of papers, pens and overturned chairs in her wake. She was about to rip the door off its hinges when first Bernie, then Clark stepped through, the latter wearing a wide grin on his face.

“It works! Whenever *Metal X* is close to Kryptonite it becomes inactive and does not hurt me at all. My powers remain!”

Once again, he gathered up Lois in his arms and this time he flew around the room laughing with joy.

When he put her down, Lois grabbed Abrihet and hugged her. “Thanks to you and Bernie we no longer have to fear Kryptonite! It’s time to celebrate that and your engagement! Lemme see the ring!”

The two men beside them looked at each other in amazement, only moments before Clark faced excruciating pain and possibly the permanent loss of his super powers. Now the special women in their lives were only concerned about a tiny piece of jewelry which sparkled brightly on Abrihet’s finger.

Abrihet answered Lois by holding out her left hand, allowing her friend to see the square cut sapphire surrounded by diamonds. “Oui, these are things we must celebrate, but what about this new information regarding Clark’s father?”

Chapter Three

Metropolis: Jarawu Basil’s Seamstress shop

“A long wedding veil *le rouge* (red)? At my age? Jarawu, I think not,” Abrihet said with a stubborn shake of her head.

A curvy woman in her late sixties moved around Abrihet with an elegance of character and strength that made a mockery of her age and size. Jarawu Basil said, “So, a perfect complement to your long hair, will it be worn in braids or out?”

“Braids *tout petit*, (tiny) straight down my back.”

“Then the veil need not cover the face, an effortless long red veil shall cascade down your back and stop below the knee. I should also weigh how much beading will be in the headdress. The very thing to balance the off-the-shoulder jacket, the golden thread embroidery will be on the cuffs and the edgings. The long skirt will have a simple train and similar needlework on the hem.”

Abrihet shuddered. “Off the shoulder? Veil *le rouge*? No. No. I cannot be wed in that! I am a scientist, in my mid-forties! Such a garment is for a young woman fresh out of university.”

A warm hand patted Abrihet on her shoulder, “As your *couturière* (seamstress) trust what can be accomplished! Such radiant skin color and muscle tone are beautiful and should be celebrated! But as you wish, the veil shall be white. Bernard Klein will forget you are a scientist and will only have eyes — and lips — for the woman.” Mischief glimmered in her dark eyes. “Now ... there are beads which need to be chosen for the necklace. I shall be right back.” With that, Jarawu bustled out of the fitting room.

Lois chuckled and thought; a woman can be many things at this dawn of the twenty-first century, but when it came to picking out a wedding gown, she was putty in the hands of her seamstress.

She remembered her own gown, a sweet confection of lace and satin, who would have thought of hard-edged, Mad Dog Lane being a romantic bride? She had spent three weekends snooping through vintage dresses at consignment shops, quaint boutiques and even the local flea market for the perfect find.

The gown was finally located by Jade Phillips, owner of the upscale woman’s store Darcy’s. She knew about the romance between Lois and Clark and was determined that when Lois walked down the aisle rocking that lace creation so gracefully it would make Jane Austen shout, “You go, girl!”

Now Lois watched as her dear friend made the same journey.

The black woman began to blush darkly with embarrassment after Jarawu departed. Not wearing a red veil was another tradition being put aside. Yet, it was not the first time she had abandoned the traditional marriage customs of her people. Running away from prearranged marriage was the first of many. As the fitting continued, some of those customs came to mind.

She smiled sadly, the Introduction Ceremony most definitely would not take place.

It was customary that prior to an engagement, the families of the bride and the groom become acquainted through a formal ceremony. The groom’s family usually travels to the home of the bride’s family and presents a letter requesting the woman’s hand in marriage. Traditional dances and the offer of a dowry are part of the process to persuade the bride’s family to accept the letter. This ceremony often occurs only a few days before the wedding.

Bernhard’s parents were deceased and she had not spoken to her father and mother since escaping from a most imprudent forced match with a man many years her senior.

The evening before the wedding day, the groom’s family visits the bride’s family again. This visit is to hear the response to the letter that was presented during the introduction ceremony. If a positive response is given, both families are formally introduced to the guests. Friends and family celebrate the engagement with food and drink. Often the groom’s family provides traditional foods such as palm wine, yam, sugar and drinks as well as offering the bride’s family a suitcase packed with traditional clothing, bags, shoes and jewelry. The officiating elder, the person who transferred the messages between the couple’s families, drinks from a cup of palm wine and may also invite the bride and the groom to share the drink. When the ceremony has ended, the bride remains at her father’s house to

prepare for the actual wedding ceremony.

The Engagement Ceremony was of course out of the question since the only member of her family to attend would be her youngest sister Kuma. No tribal elder to officiate or feast provided by the family. There would be a wedding presided over by an official at the Town Hall in her arrondissement. Following immediately afterwards a fun-filled reception at Restaurant Maison Blanche, she tried to imagine Bernard drinking palm wine with her relatives and the officiant and she decided he would have done very well indeed.

Jarawu Basil was the most talented Nigerian *couturière* living in Metropolis and with her skillful hands the perfect gown would be created for Abrihet's wedding day. She intended to wear imported Indian fabrics as well as a decorative coral-beaded headpiece and an elaborate necklace, to accompany the white veil. She would not have her father attend her at city hall or have a noisy live band. Nor would she return to her father's home to change out of her wedding attire. Bernard would not arrive with his family to claim his bride and as part of a newly married couple, depart to begin their new life together.

No, many of the old dreams she had as a young girl had vanished, but she was eternally grateful for the new reality she and Bernard planned to share.

Lois' words broke into her thoughts. "From where I stand, Abrihet, you are going to be a beautiful bride!"

"Thank you. But right now I would happily settle for a hazelnut coffee. Standing around waiting for Jarawu to shape this plush fabric into a gown is exciting, but tiring." Suddenly she beamed, all thoughts of weariness vanished. "Imagine, mon amie, a mere *cinq semaines* (five weeks) remain!"

"Yeah, we are trying to get everything done on our end as well. I'm glad Bernie was able to find the perfect townhouse yesterday and with the able assistance of his realtor will be able to close within the week. That's a huge item off the list. But once the bans are read, the wedding arrangements must be set," Lois said as she looked over the peach and gray fabric that would be used for the maid of honor's gown. Abrihet's sister, Kuma had flown over from England to be fitted for the dress. She had also helped Abrihet with a dozen other little things before returning home. Lois thought the younger woman was beautiful and would do the gown justice.

"What about the interview with Aykira Milan? Didn't you want to get that done before leaving for Paris?" Abrihet asked.

Lois groaned. "We are still playing phone tag with her assistant. Ms. Milan is one busy executive! After a year, she's *still* putting out smoldering fires from the days when Luthor ran the company. But the stock prices reflected well from LexCorp's Board of Directors annual meeting. For the most part that's been a huge factor on getting the company back on course. As long as Luthor doesn't pop up, Ms. Milan should have no further troubles with the SEC or any government officials."

Abrihet lowered her voice and said, "Is there any possibility of him returning?"

"Not if my *other* father-in-law has anything to do with it!" Lois said with a snort.

METROPOLIS: LEXCORP

A slender woman, sporting a perfect blonde bob haircut, with a brisk New Jersey accent went over Aykira's calendar, "That's everything for today. Radames Perez sent over the latest projections for the company-wide computer training. With him at the helm, our company will be well ahead of all the others over the Y2K situation."

"The new century is not that far off, we need to be prepared," Aykira said in agreement.

"One more item; Lois Lane-Kent called again, asking about doing that interview. There's some time in the business calendar

for them next week."

"Tara, get them in here this week ... tomorrow night if necessary. After the success of the yearly summit, LexCorp needs all the positive media coverage we can get. Getting that PR from the reporters who brought down the House of Luthor will be an ironic touch."

"Okay, let me make a few phone calls and shift a meeting or two around." She tapped the pen to her cheek and said, "You can see them before your fencing lesson. That ought to give you at least an hour with them."

With a quick shake of her head Aykira said, "Make it forty-five minutes. The Kents understand what company issues I'm dealing with. That amount of time should allow them to write a strong article and not a useless puff piece. Besides I need time to dress for my lesson with Joachim and then drive to his building."

"Okay, I'll put in the call later today." Tara rapidly jotted down something in her appointment calendar and then left.

Once the door had shut behind her assistant, Aykira draped an amber-colored, silk-and-linen hand-knitted cardigan over her shoulders. She opened the large French doors and stepped out onto the terrace. The breezes of early evening swept over her like a cooling embrace, eliminating the fatigue of the day. Truth be told, she really only took over Lex's former office because of the terrace. She had overseen the install of lavender and jasmine plants placed in large earthenware pots in a variety of colors. Other plants, such as hosta, dogwood and coleus were going into autumn slumber, but the smell of fresh Terra and floral scents so far from ground level was a welcome change of pace to the city's unpleasant odors, a small, outdoor haven tucked away from the rest of the world.

She sat down on a teak-and-steel chair and looked over the city contemplating the thought of using the *Daily Planet* reporters to help her achieve the long-term goal of consumer confidence in LexCorp. This was yet another step in improving the brand. Sure, the stockholders were happy with the gains they had made in the past year, but an independent research firm had corroborated her suspicions that the man-on-the-street still distrusted the company.

LexCorp had a long way to go to regain that confidence. As a whole the corporation had reached a watershed period, it's most dangerous yet. If they continued to turn their energies towards positive actions such as stepped up efforts in cancer research, recycling and education not only would the company benefit, but so might the entire planet.

Nonetheless for all her efforts, not a day went by that thoughts did not meander to the disappearance of the company's founder and where he might be.

Sharp memories crashed down, like majestic blocks of ice breaking from a glacier of them dining together on this very terrace when he asked her to leave her current position as director of LexSolar and become worldwide head of marketing. Her spine tingled when Lex took her hand and suggested they take dessert inside. Chef Andre's staff had set up a table and atop crisp white linen beside a silver tea service were two chilled dishes of vanilla ice cream, homemade no doubt and a bowl of Oreos cookies.

Somehow, Lex had discovered her favorite dessert! The fact that he knew her so well was a bit frightening. Still she reasoned, it is a poor general who does not know the strengths and weaknesses of his commanders. Lex thought to relax her by playing the role of the common man. Rather than using spoons they scooped up the delightfully cold confections with the cookies, laughing like children.

The mood went from innocence to much more as over china cups of chamomile tea; Lex began to segue into her additional 'personal' responsibilities to him. As honeyed words flowed from his lips to her disbelieving ears it seemed impossible that he was aware of her concealed feelings for him. Like a fool she exposed those feelings when he drew her close to him and they shared the

first of many silken kisses that night.

Wisely, before heated emotions overshadowed good judgment, she told Lex that mixing business with pleasure was not what she wanted. Before he could manipulate her emotions any further, she fled the penthouse.

The next morning upon arrival at her office, a note was on her desk, announcing that the marketing position had been given to another executive — a man. She was being promoted to LexCorp recycling facilities in Kansas City, effective immediately.

Swallowing her anger, Aykira went to the Midwest and made the most of a wretched situation. Again, Lex knew her weakness. Since a brutal car accident had taken both parents, her maternal grandparents were taking care of her two younger brothers; they were depending on her salary to help raise them.

Lex, as the corporate general, understood and used her weaknesses, yet at the same time completely underestimated her considerable strengths. The LexCorp Board members were impressed enough that when Lex disappeared they looked to her to fill the CEO role. The man was arrogant enough to think he would live forever and so never groomed anyone to be his successor. Aykira was a rare commodity within LexCorp — far away enough not to be a threat to Lex and yet talented enough to be on the board's radar.

Involvement with Lex Luthor at that time would have tainted her, eventually forcing her to seek employment elsewhere when the series of *Daily Planet* articles appeared. A bittersweet smile of victory pulled across her lips. Now she was the one in control and fully intended to do some measure of good with all the resources he had provided.

The very last thing that LexCorp and Aykira Milan needed was the return of Lex Luthor.

New Krypton: Lex's Quarters

Lex entered his rooms through the airlock and was proceeding to remove the black gravity armor when he heard a familiar, detested voice.

"Back from your grubbing chores, Lex-Er?" the warden said snidely.

Sighing, Lex stopped removing the garment and walked into the main room and saw Dru-Zod standing with a satisfied look on his face. Weariness of body from his long day at the collective overcame Lex; he did not have the strength to tolerate the arrogant man this evening. He gazed briefly at the corridor leading to the bathroom, realizing a long, deep soak in the hot tub would have to wait and asked. "Why are you here?"

Dru-Zod sat down on the sofa and stretched out his legs. "It is time to discuss returning to your world. Unless such a conversation does not interest you?"

"Of course it does, but you mentioned that last week and thus far, all your words mean nothing. Now unless there is something important for me to know, I am rather tired after 'grubbing' all day and would like to take a bath. So if you will excuse me." Lex moved towards the bathroom.

Dru-Zod's next words hit him like a thunderbolt. "Lex-Er, be prepared to leave this prison tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Shocked, his tongue fairly stumbled over the word.

"Yes, one of the Transfer Beam technicians shall render our cause some assistance. He will be waiting to send us and a few 'friends' to Terra. Make sure to be ready. After your chores are completed tomorrow, one of my men will pick you up from the collective and bring you to Jor-El's laboratory." Reading the expression on Lex's face, Dru-Zod said, "Don't concern yourself; my followers have this situation well in hand.

Beneath the warder's confident exterior, Lex sensed tension, perhaps his plans were not as well laid out as he presented them

to be.

New Krypton: Om Collective

The end of year moonround was upon them. Om Collective's harvest yield had exceeded all expectations. Several people had asked Lex-Er to join them for dinner and a glass of golden spice wine, but Lex-Er had smiled congenially and waved them off. He was working on next year's grain projections, an important project for Vax-Om and he wanted to complete it before returning to his quarters that evening. As a consequence his plate had been pushed aside, the food untouched.

Lex looked up from the tablet when he felt a gentle hand on his shoulder. "The food is not to your liking?"

Startled, he saw Eyner with a concerned look on her plain face and said with a genuine smile, "No. Not all! Your cooking is one of the best parts of working here."

She nodded her head from side to side, a movement unique to her that meant she understood. "Just so. Tonight, dessert is fresh *maka root*."

He started to salivate in anticipation of the delicacy which tasted like a baked apple with hints of cinnamon and nutmeg. "You spoil all of us with that treat! Especially me, it is my favorite. Thank you."

"Spoil?" She thought about that for a second and then a tiny smile curled over her lips. "Ah! A human expression. Thank me by eating it." She patted his shoulder again. "Working muscles need to be fed!"

She moved off to help one of the other servers. The noisy common hall was filled with people this evening. All extremely proud of their achievement, the soil was now giving its yield freely for all New Kryptonians. As he watched, it amazed him that she and her husband did not sit down to eat until the field techs had been fed first. Such selflessness had been a marvel to him. In his old life as a man of wealth and position he would have demanded to be served first.

His old life.

It seemed like a dream, returning to Terra. To step outside without the need to don armor — no matter how light weight and flexible.

The question remained in his thoughts, what would the people of Terra think when he returned with a host of super-powered individuals? He wondered, had they discovered it was he who ordered the hit on Clark Kent? Probably so, no doubt Jor-El would tell his son and Lois everything he knew. They in turn would carefully craft a story in the *Daily Planet* decrying Lex Luthor's activities.

Surprisingly he was not bitter about the First Lord's actions; it was what any leader would do for his people. Protect them from all possible threats, no matter how great or inconsequential.

It was what any father would do to protect his son. No matter that he had not laid eyes on that son in nearly thirty years.

Another question came to mind: who was running LexCorp? Carstairs? No, he was a numbers man, great for accounting, but terrible when it came to working with people. Huntington? Never, a born organizer, but she lacked charisma. Gianni? A good choice, sadly he was nearing retirement and wanted to start living the good life before his golf swing gave out. Sheldon Bender might endeavor to swing the board in his favor, but he rather doubted it. Bender's strength was manipulation behind the scenes; the obsequious lawyer had no stomach for the constant face-to-face confrontations life as LexCorp's CEO provided.

Even if his underworld activities were discovered he still had several off-shore bank accounts that only he knew were in existence. There was the spacious home in the Australian outback perfectly suited for his needs. All he had to do was return to Terra and survive any treachery Dru-Zod planned to bring into play.

A grimace marred his features when he thought about the

arrogant warder. He would use him until he managed to get back to Terra, then there would be a surprise waiting for him and all of his followers. The real trick was surviving *until* he reached Terra. Once there Zod might not have any use for him and “dispose” of his services. That was something Lex Luthor would have done, but Lex-Er? No that was something he could not do.

Being among these people who trusted and cared for him without the fabulous trappings of wealth had planted seeds of transform into his heart. Seeds which had taken root and showed promise. Just as this harvest encouraged the colonists. Could he return to Terra and be cold-hearted Lex Luthor again?

Before he could mentally answer that question, one of the gray guards, all gleaming metal and sullen arrogance incidental to youth came and said, “Lex-Er, Warder Zod wishes for you to return to your quarters.”

Vax-Om, seeing the exchange came over and spoke. “It is early yet, surely Lex-Er can remain for a few hours more? Please friend, sit down and have a glass of ginger wine.”

The guard, who did not expect any resistance, especially when extended so congenially, was at a loss for words. But stubborn resolve hardened his features and he said, “Zod wants the prisoner to return to his quarters.” That statement was to remind both that no matter where or whom Lex worked for, he was there at the good graces of the First Lord, Jor-El, whom Dru-Zod must answer to.

Lex sighed and stood, he was choking back the twin prods of anger and irritation. The chief warder was once again displaying his mastery over Lex as if he were a flesh-and-blood marionette for the soldier’s amusement. But he could only be so angry, once, not so long ago he would have behaved the same. Time to put his duties on the collective aside and become a prisoner again.

He stood, bowed slightly to his friend and said his voice colored with reluctance, “Thank you, Vax-Om. But my guard is correct. I must return to my ... cell.” Not wishing to throw any suspicions towards Zod because of this change in routine he added. “I will see you tomorrow. Please thank Eyner for the superb meal.”

Vax-Om nodded and said, “Good, there is something of importance I wish to discuss with you tomorrow. It will be very much to your liking.”

A smile, a genuine one sprang to Lex’s lips. “Well, it sounds very promising, I look forward to hearing it.”

Vax-Om watched as the black-clad human, departed with his guard. Vax-Om failed to notice, Lex had neglected to return the tablet to its owner.

METROPOLIS: The Daily Planet

Lois ran her fingers over the dark fabric of the expertly tailored suit, admiring its feel. “The fabric this tuxedo is made out of is simply scrumptious! I’m glad we picked it up from Johan’s.” She looked at the price tag, shuddered at the amount and quickly replaced the suit back in its black garment bag made of a durable water-proof fabric, not the cheap plastic that off-the-rack suits are covered in. “I’m also glad Bernie is paying for it and not you.”

Perry walked by Clark’s desk, stopped, turned and looked at the monogrammed garment bag. “How?” the editor asked

Clark, seeing the look on his boss’ face, decided it was time to clear up any misconceptions. No reason for anyone to think he and Lois had not just fallen into a pot of gold. “It’s a gift from Bernie Klein, for his wedding in Paris.”

“Boy, being one of the slide rule guys hasn’t hurt him any!” Perry said with wry amusement and then moved off.

“Do you think maybe Bernie could spend a few bucks on me? After all, Lucy and I are going to get married someday. I could use a sharp new tuxedo for the occasion.” Jimmy said sheepishly.

Cat Grant said as she passed Lois’ desk, “You aren’t the best

man Jim.”

He responded weakly to her retreating back, “What about the best *friend* of the best man?”

Lois rounded on him and asked with more than a hint of Mad Dog Lane, “What’s this about *my* sister?”

He was about to answer when the phone on her desk rang. Before picking it up she said, “Don’t go anywhere Olsen, this discussion is not over.” She picked up the receiver and in a crisp professional voice said, “City Desk, Lois Lane speaking.”

While Lois talked, her husband looked at Jimmy and shook his head in amusement, “Don’t try to hide, she’ll find you eventually and it’ll only be much worse.”

Suddenly Clark’s phone rang and he picked it up. He spoke very briefly with the person on the other line then hung up. Before Jimmy could leave, Lois put down the receiver, a look of triumph spread across her face. “That was Tara Zaynold, Aykira Milan’s assistant. She will see us *tonight* at 7:00PM to discuss future steps LexCorp will be taking for the coming fiscal year.”

“Looks like we better crack open that file of questions we wanted to ask her along with the back-up materials. How much time is she giving us?” Clark asked.

Lois’ brow wrinkled, “Only forty-five minutes, apparently we are being squeezed in, between appointments.”

“Forty-five minutes? That’s not a lot of time; doesn’t she want this to be more than a puff piece?” Clark asked.

“An interview sandwiched between business appointments? Hey, when does Ms. Milan ever sleep?” Jimmy said.

“She doesn’t, not if she wants to keep the resuscitation of LexCorp on track.”

Leaning back in his chair, Jimmy folded his arms and said, “Lois, she might be winning the fight in some quarters, but most of my friends who invest their money still don’t trust LexCorp. If she really wants to make a splash the name has to be changed, so that people — especially the little guy — will start to forget all the bad things that name is associated with,” Jimmy responded.

“Oh are those the words of wisdom from your long years of playing the stock market?” Lois answered with a smirk.

Jimmy shrugged and responded, “Just saying...”

Lois was about to respond when Clark interjected, holding up a file. “Hey partner, let’s take our materials into the conference room. We have a lot to go over before tonight.” Together they gathered up what they needed and entered the conference room.

Before Clark opened the door, Lois turned back and said, “Don’t think I forgot that comment you made about marrying Lucy!”

The photographer had learned a thing or two since his early days working with Lois. “Sure, I’m ready to talk when you are!”

Lois gave him quizzical look, his calmness had certainly thrown her off, then followed Clark into the conference room.

As soon as the heavy wood-and-glass door closed behind her she asked, “Did you want to zip through this material? With our abilities it will only take us seconds to memorize it all.”

“Sure, but first, that was Bernie who called. Abrihet has fashioned special rings for us to wear ...”

“Created from *Metal X*?” Lois said excitedly, finishing his sentence.

“Exactly. They are rings with a matching contour design with a ruby in the center we can wear them only as Superman and Ultra Woman.”

Lois nodded. “Makes sense. The media has linked us together as husband and wife ever since Ultra Woman’s return. Matching rings will put an end to the speculation. Why a ruby?”

“According to her it is to symbolize Krypton’s red sun,” he said.

“I can imagine those rings might make a hit on New Krypton. Whenever does that woman have the time to do all these things? It’s almost as if she has the super powers!” Lois mused.

Her husband chuckled. “Abrihet has accomplished a tremendous amount of work since coming to Metropolis. Putting together a wedding in six weeks — especially when that wedding takes place in a foreign country is pretty impressive.”

“Take it from me buster, when a bride needs to get her wedding done, she doesn’t run from the job, she gets *determined*,” Lois said.

“Yeah well she created these rings, on top of everything else she has to do. Like moving Bernie’s things into the new townhouse and decorated to work with both their tastes. I had no idea she was so talented.”

Lois smirked. “A jack-of-all-trades, just like her fiancé. We should probably get them at lunchtime.”

“Not ‘we’, me.” Clark said with a smile, “It’ll give me a chance to pick up some treats from our favorite Parisian bakery.”

“Sounds yummy! Oh, when you go to Chez Morel, tell Amandine, hello for me.” Lois brown doe-like eyes glittered with delight.

With that the two reporters settled down to go over their respective questions for the Milan interview.

New Krypton: Lex-Er’s Quarters

“Ah! Lex-Er! You have arrived! It is time for us to put our plan in motion. We are leaving for Jor-El’s laboratory now.”

Dusk was beginning to fall; Lex was expecting they could accomplish the deed under cover of full darkness. “Now? But won’t someone see us?”

“Rolf, the young guard who had brought Lex from the Om Collective, said,” “This is the perfect time. The entire royal family will be attending a feast in honor of the harvest yield.”

Dru-Zod said derisively, “The technicians and field workers are like children, any excuse for a social gathering and they are content. Most of the scientists and nobles shall attend as well. Only our man will be at the Transfer beam. Come, it is time we were on our way.”

Lex said, “Could I at least change? This particular suit is dusty; if anyone sees me it will be hard to explain my presence and being dirty at the Conservatory.”

Annoyed at the delay, but appreciating that Lex was correct, the warder barked, “Yes, that’s a very good idea Lex-Er. In fact, wear the original articulated suit. Considering the fact that going from Krypton to Terra gravity might be a strain. But be quick about it! My plans cannot be destroyed because of a little dirt and sweat!”

Minutes later Lex returned from his bedroom, wearing the black articulated suit. Quickly the three men exited the building and Lex realized he had mixed emotions about leaving the lush quarters. Rolf, at Zod’s command, handcuffed Lex and brought him outside. The last of the red sun’s ray were dipping under the horizon and he shivered ever so slightly. In the short time he had been inside the heat had dropped a good ten degrees. Rapid fluctuations in New Krypton’s temperatures were one of the few things he had never adjusted to.

A large black hovercraft silently came up to them; the vehicle’s darkly tinted privacy windows reminded Lex of his own fleet of limousines. Two more men, all powerful and muscular, joined them; they bundled inside the machine and moved off.

New Krypton: The First Lord’s Laboratory

Lex watched through the windows and noticed as the quiet forest of his home gave way to city streets which were practically empty; apparently most of the capital city’s populace was enjoying the festival. The appearance of the neighborhoods became more affluent, the homes grander, some made his home on Santorini look like a tumble down shack. The car entered a long well-lighted driveway which led to a grand park filled with tall trees, verdant shrubbery and what looked like flowers.

This was the ten-mile-wide woodland that separated the capital city of Nyanglagore from the Royal family. Eventually they came to a series of modern angular buildings, the hovercraft slowed and stopped in front of the main building, an imposing five-story structure built of light blue metal and glass. The structure was awash with what could only be security lights giving it an ethereal sheen. But Lex looked over the outside walkways and there appeared to be no guards on patrol.

In a voice that held a stingy trace of admiration, Dru-Zod said, “Jor-El’s laboratory is certainly not as well set-up as the one he had on Krypton. That one was truly magnificent! It was built into the side of a mountain of black volcanic rock.” In a lower voice he said, “I miss so many things about our native homeworld. Rolf, remove the handcuffs, we wouldn’t want Lex-Er to return home in chains.”

Moments later they entered a dark room with a slate floor, here the security lights were replaced by stark moonlight that shone throughout that gave the room a patina Lex would have never seen on Terra. On one side there were several machines and in front of them sat a rather tall man with sandy brown hair. By the stiffness of his posture, Lex knew he was ill at ease, but to his credit, the man tried to hide it. He stood, walked over to a wall and threw a light switch, illuminating the room in a soft, almost comforting light.

“Captain Zod. According to the plan I ... I thought you were coming later?”

Dru-Zod went over to the man and placed his hand heavily on the other’s shoulder. “That’s the beauty of plans, Quist, they change. Now just as we discussed, send us to Terra before Jor-El returns.”

“There are currently two settings for that planet ...” Quist began

Dru-Zod waved one hand languidly, bored with any technical information the man had to provide “Yes, yes. Send us to the location closest to Kal-El’s in Metropolis.”

“After this, my family will no longer have to fear being harassed by your men?”

Patiently, the warder answered, “Yes! Yes! Now can we get to it?”

The technician immediately sat down and set to work. Within moments an aperture of cool, blue light appeared in midair. Lex stepped back, he knew only too well what this particular light meant, having seen it on the night his life changed forever. Before anyone noticed what he was doing, Lex touched a stud on the collar of his armor.

Quist turned to them and said. “The aperture is ready to be used. But I suggest only one at a time. There is a danger of collapse if too many people step through at once.”

“Excellent! Rolf, please help Lex *Luthor* to return home,” Zod said.

Rolf was strong, and for all of the sheer physical strength Lex has developed over the past year, he was no match for the younger man. Thus with the same lack of ceremony he experienced with Jor-El, Lex was thrown into the aperture, its blue light engulfing him like a ravenous monster.

Metropolis: LexCorp

Aykira stood up, signaling the interview was finished. Coming around from her desk, she shook first Clark’s hand and then Lois’s. “Thank you both for coming in at such an odd hour. Has this interview provided enough material to write a proper article for the *Daily Planet’s* Business section?”

“There are a lot of surprises coming from LexCorp — uh I mean MetroCorp.” Lois said.

Smiling coyly Aykira said, “Ah well, that’s not the *official* name just yet. The Board has to approve it. But as your last question pointed out, the average consumer thinks of us as a

crime syndicate, not a legitimate company. Changing the company's name and logo, will be another step away from that."

Clark said, "This article will be in the Business section on Monday. It should go a long way towards proving to everyone what kind of a company this is now."

"I look forward to reading it, thank you both. I hate to rush, but my fencing lesson is in an hour and my instructor demands punctuality from his students. Good night," the CEO said pleasantly as they approached the door. Once it had shut behind the reporting duo, Aykira leaned against it and sighed. With this chore complete, she could finally relax and enjoy the remains of her evening with a fencing lesson.

Minutes later she emerged from her dressing alcove wearing the white garb for fencing. She adjusted the plastron on her weapon arm, made sure the jacket was on straight and the breastplate was properly positioned. Finally she made a careful inspection of the mask, to be sure there were no nicks, dents or tears. Once satisfied her clothing was in order, she opened the sword case and examined the two gleaming swords within. The sword guards were securely tucked on the side of the case ready to be placed on the tips.

Memories of fencing tournaments past came to mind. She missed those days and looked forward to taking part in them again once the demands of MetroCorp settled down.

At that moment she lifted her head up, the very room had suddenly shifted as if the electrical power of lightning filled the air. The sensation was so overwhelming, breathing seemed impossible. In front of the fireplace the air shimmered and for lack of a better word ... opened.

The sword slipped from Aykira's nerveless fingers in shock as a point of blue light abruptly appeared in the middle of her office. It rapidly expanded and then wonders of wonders a man in black armor fell through and landed heavily on the floor, leaving deep scratches in the highly polished Brazilian hardwood.

Lifting his head up the man drew in a deep breath, casually looked around the room, and then at her. Aykira's hazel eyes opened wide in shocked recognition. The last time they were in this room he was wearing a precision-cut, gray double-breasted Saville Row suit, his person expertly groomed. A Wall Street master skillfully practicing his craft. Now she watched as he picked himself gracefully up from the floor, running agile fingers through his longish salt-and-pepper hair. He had always taken care of himself, but wherever he had been for the past year she could see that his time away had apparently been put to good use. Despite his body armor, it was obvious his body was more agile and stronger than she remembered.

His lips, which at one time she thought of as sensuous, moved slowly into a glorious, triumphant smile — a joyful smile, very different from what she remembered, because the joy reached his eyes without a hint of artifice. This was a man who was thrilled to be home. "Not my taste, Ms. Milan, but I like what you have done with the place."

Her voice sounded uncertain and a little frightened to her ears. "Lex?"

Suddenly as if remembering where he was, the carefree expression vanished. His eyes scanned the office, searching for something. "No time for questions! Where is the bust of Shakespeare?"

Dumbfounded, Aykira pointed to the heavy bronze image of the great writer that stood beside the sword of Alexander the Great.

He began to stride towards the bust and said, "Excellent. I must open the back and take out a little present for my 'friends'. Then you contact Superman!

Aykira, having quickly gained her composure and remembering the long-standing feud between the two men answered, "Why? Do you want to cause him harm?"

"I don't want to kill him. We need him and Ultra Woman in order to save our world."

"What are you talking about? Lex, you have been gone for a year; no one has heard anything from you! Now you are telling me to get in contact with Superman and his wife? Everything is happening so fast. Give me a moment to catch up!"

Frustrated with her insipid prattle, he growled, "There are other super beings coming from his world and they will destroy us."

Before Aykira could speak, another aperture of blue light appeared in the middle of her office, four men wearing gray armor almost as outlandish as Lex's stepped out. As soon as their feet hit the floor, a noise, like the shattering of a thousand crystals slammed against her ears. Then abruptly the aperture instead of closing down as it had previously, splintered and hundreds of shards of blue light scattered throughout the room. As suddenly as the weird display, began the light vanished.

"Oh my Lord," she whispered, "what just happened?"

A tall man with saturnine features, encased in gray armor, separated himself from the group and approached her; there was something about his person which radiated malevolence. Aykira backed up, her heart pounding in fear. Whoever he was, this man meant her no good will.

"Quist, that fool, sent us to your *former* residence and not Kal-El's home! I hope that bomb tore him to a million fragments!"

"The transport beam has been destroyed? But ... but how will you return to New Krypton?" Lex asked. This particularly cruel turn of events was completely unexpected.

A smile played out on the warder's face, the sleekness of it made Lex's stomach twist and squeeze in revulsion when he saw it and knew matters had indeed worsened.

"A change of plans, Lex-Er, or should I say Lex Luthor? Since we are back on your homeworld? Instead of enslaving the populace of this world to take over New Krypton, I have decided it is better to remain here. After all, what can any of your kind do to us once Superman and his mate have been disposed of?" Dru-Zod gestured to his followers. "Here I shall be the First Lord!"

Aykira spoke. "First Lord? Lex, who are these men?"

As if noticing her presence for the first time, Dru-Zod said, "Why is this woman here? We have matters of importance to discuss."

Lex swallowed, he knew perfectly well what this mad man was capable of. "She is nothing ... a minion who served me before I was sent to New Krypton."

Rubbing his beard, Dru-Zod said, "She must mean something to you Lex-Er. Otherwise, why would she be in here? After all you have been gone for over a year."

How could he explain to this man that she was an employee. Suddenly it hit him and despite the danger of their situation, the question rolled off his tongue before he could stop it. "Why are you here Ms. Milan?"

Aykira looked at him, marveling at the inquiry. "The Board voted me to the position of CEO, I now run LexCorp."

"You run my company?" Lex said, in not a little shock.

Before Aykira could reply, Dru-Zod laughed. "A woman! This world is truly backward to let a woman command such holdings! No matter, that is one of the things to be fixed."

Rolf and the others laughed as well, the sound of their voices mockingly derisive.

Zod walked around Aykira, appraising her. "Still, she is a beautiful minion." He picked up the sword she had dropped on the desk and examined it carefully. "A female who is in a position of authority is unusual, but to find one that apparently knows how to use a sword ... how refreshingly different." He spun around and faced Lex. "To me loyalty is important, sometimes it is the thing that holds all else in the balance." Handing the sword to

Lex, he said with the quiet of an assassin about to slide a sword from the scabbard, “Prove yours to me. Since this woman means nothing to you *and* she stands in the way of regaining control of your empire, fight her to the death.”

Aykira opened her hazel eyes wide in horror. “Lex. He ... he can’t be serious?”

Lex’s eyes flashed with anger, but quickly he hid the emotion and spoke, his words heavy with regret. “Sadly my dear, I am afraid he is.” Without another word he picked up the fencing sword from the open case and tossed the other one to her which she caught with practiced ease. She walked around the desk and faced him, he bowed gracefully and not surprisingly, she did the same.

“En garde!” Lex shouted and with a clash of steel the swordplay began.

Chapter Four

Metropolis: LexCorp

Large blue elevator doors opened to the brightly lit car garage without a sound. The Kents exited and walked through the cavernous structure, the echoes of their footsteps on the hard concrete banging about their ears. They held hands as they walked towards the Jeep. Despite widespread illumination that chased away gloomy shadows and discouraged unsavory characters, the garage’s atmosphere hung with an air of desolation now that most of the LexCorp employees had gone home.

Clark said, “Not a bad way to spend a Friday night. This story is much better than I thought it might be. Aykira Milan was very forthcoming and helpful with all the extensive changes and plans for LexCorp.”

“Yeah, soon to be called *MetroCorp* of all things. It will take some getting used to, but Jimmy’s friends were right, the name change has to happen. This decision will go a long way towards making people forget the company’s founder.”

“Honey, it’s going to take a lot more than a name change and a splashy publicity campaign for folks to forget Lex Luthor. Although I have to admit, Aykira Milan’s efforts are not going to be ignored,” her husband said with a sigh as he opened the Jeep’s passenger door and helped Lois inside.

“Maybe, but right now I could go for some sushi. You buyin’?” she said while wiggling her eyebrows mischievously.

“Sushi Dai in Tokyo? Good choice. They should be just getting ready to open about now.”

“Great! Let’s go home and craft the bare-bones of this article.” Lois was about to start pulling out her notebook when she snapped her fingers and said, “Drat!”

Puzzled, Clark looked over and said, “What’s wrong, honey?”

“I forgot my pen. Must have left it on the desk ... “

“The one given to you by foreign correspondent, Marie Colvin*?”

“Yeah. She’s one of the reasons why I *got* into journalism in the first place. Ms. Milan shouldn’t be gone yet, let me go upstairs and get it.”

Clark shrugged and pulled out his own notepad and pen. “Sure, why not? I’ll start composing the story outline while you’re gone.”

Lois exited the Jeep, made her way to the elevator and hurriedly pushed the button. To her surprise the doors slid open, it was late, so the car must not have moved since she and Clark had exited. As soon as the car’s doors closed, she was overcome by a wave of nausea. The same feeling that hit her when she caught the helicopter weeks ago. She snorted and said aloud, “This is ridiculous! When did I ever suffer from vertigo? I need to tell Bernie about this, but it can wait until after the wedding.” She put the feeling aside as the elevator swiftly made its way upwards.

Aykira was stunned. This oddly dressed stranger was commanding that she and Lex fight, to the death. Between the men guarding the door and her former boss ready to duel, there was no way for her to escape. Lex was in great shape, but how could she take up a sword against him? Lex — except for the fact that he lacked a helmet with a visor — looked like a medieval knight stepped out of the pages of a modern fairytale, the black knight. The armor he wore was made of a dull black metal that seemed to simply absorb light. There was absolutely no reflection from any surface. It was articulated like a knight’s suit of armor. She realized that it had to be in order for him to be able to even move. But why on Terra was he wearing it?

She knew immediately that she was at a distinct disadvantage and cast about furiously for anything that would give her a chance to level the playing field. She drew a complete blank and bowing to the inevitable she slipped her fencing helmet on and at Lex’s sharply spoken word, ‘En garde’ assumed a fighting stance.

The first passage of arms told Aykira everything she needed to know. She was careful to go at the first pass with supple wrist as opposed to strong wrist and that was her saving grace. The force with which Lex blocked her blade snapped her wrist aside. If she had been strong wrist it would now be sprained. She was actually surprised that her blade wasn’t snapped with the impact. She immediately backed away. As she did he followed, but she remained beyond his reach.

Lex, for his part, hated Dru-Zod and what he had commanded. This woman had been among the few that had rejected his advances and she still intrigued him. He really was attracted to her, but if he didn’t obey the warder’s command he knew just what Dru-Zod could and would do to him so he had to play the charade out. Perhaps something would happen that he could turn the tables on him. He just hoped ...

Aykira had backed half way across her office and started to circle because she couldn’t afford to be backed against a wall. That would limit her movements too much, make her too vulnerable. That thought triggered something in her mind, vulnerability ... what were Lex’s vulnerabilities in that suit of armor? As she circled she looked closely at his armor and a glimmer of hope sprang into being. If she was careful and accurate she just might manage to survive this encounter.

Lex was casting about for a way to end the conflict by making it look like he had killed Aykira without actually doing so. He looked around the office for something to use. Her office occupied the same space that his had on the top floor of Lex Tower. It was a pleasant evening and the glass doors to the balcony were open.

Aykira now had a plan of action, but how to implement it was the problem. She continued backing and circling, looking for an opening. It came unexpectedly. As she had been looking at Lex, examining his armor, Lex had been looking around her office as if unconcerned at her efforts to fight him. Apparently he was confident in his ability and his armor, perhaps a tad over-confident.

Seeing that he was distracted she took two quick steps back, increasing the distance between them.

Lex, seeing her move, and now having a plan, needed to close with her in order to put his plan into effect. Utilizing the extra strength afforded him by his armor he flexed his legs and leaped for her. Unfortunately he wasn’t used to handling the extra strength under the lesser gravity of Terra and he overshot. His spring turned into a leap. The ceilings in the office were ten feet, but his leap was such that he hit the ceiling with his unprotected head. This stopped his forward momentum and he dropped to the floor, dazed.

“Get up, fool! Surely a mere woman cannot beat you!” Rolf taunted.

Behind him he heard the laughter of Zod and his companions. He was dazed by the impact, but even dazed the sound made him angry, but now was not the time to give into emotion. He had to remain clear-headed and in complete control, his plan depended upon it.

Aykira saw Lex set up to spring at her and prepared to parry any thrust he might make and was taken by surprise when his spring turned into a leap. She was taken aback by the strength exhibited. It was closely akin to the abilities that Superman exhibited. Again the thought flashed through her mind, why was he wearing that armor and where did it come from?

Seeing him take to the air, she ducked and spun so that she would be facing him when he landed. She was amazed at the result of his leap. She saw him hit the ceiling and fall like a rock. He was sprawled on the floor, shaking his head as if to clear it and slowly trying to get to his feet while those looking on taunted him.

Before he could rise though, Aykira saw an opening — literally — and sprang into action. She had determined that these were the only vulnerabilities Lex would have. The only chinks in his armor, his only weakness, were the articulation at the joints, therefore when she sprang forward she aimed the point of her sword at the gap behind his left knee.

Her blade struck home and Lex screamed in agony as her sword pierced his thigh. Seeing his blade coming toward her in a wide arc she yanked her sword free and sprang back, pleased with herself. She had struck home and scored first blood. Maybe she had a chance to win this duel after all, on points. She really didn't want to kill anyone.

Lex felt the searing pain in his left thigh and lashed out, swinging wildly just to force her back. The pain had cleared the fuzziness that hitting the ceiling had created. Stiffly, he climbed back to his feet, but when he did his left leg was almost useless. Reaching down he slid a collar over an articulated arm locking the articulation. It would keep his leg straight and hamper his movements, but at least it would keep his leg from collapsing. She was turning out to be a worthy adversary. He wished there had been some way to tell her that he didn't want to kill her and that he needed her help to complete his plan. Unable to communicate his intentions he simply needed to control the conflict and use her the way he was using his rapier, another implement in his tool chest.

Aykira watched, warily as Lex made an adjustment to his armor. She smiled when she saw that he would be stiff legged on the left as a result of her strike. That made it a little more even. He might have the strength, possibly the skill, but she had the agility and the determination to stay alive.

She continued to follow her strategy of backing and circling. Now she circled to his weak side, trying to take advantage of that additional weakness.

Her circling eventually took her out through the glass doors onto the balcony.

Lex lurched after her and his stiff leg threw him off balance at a critical moment and he staggered to the side, crashing through the glass of an unopened panel. The glass shattered and shards of glass fell everywhere, bouncing off of his armor, however as he passed through again his unprotected head became his downfall. A sliver of glass in the top of the frame dug a furrow in the top of his head.

Crying out in pain again, he reached up with his hand to brush the glass away. He stared in shock at the gloved hand, red and warm from his own blood.

When he did that, Aykira saw another opening and instantly sprang into action. Her right foot advanced as her left leg pushed, her right arm straightened in a classic thrust. The point of her rapier penetrated the gap between the shoulder and arm pieces, skewering his shoulder joint.

Yanking her blade back she sprang away as again he lashed the air where she had just been standing. Her sudden spring jarred her fencing mask and it fell away.

Dru-Zod had been immensely amused by this battle. Lex-Er was not being as effective as he had thought he would be. In a way it disappointed him and generated some respect for this former minion of Lex-Er's. She was putting up a valiant fight, surprisingly bold for a woman. Now that her features were revealed more plainly, Dru-Zod was taken with her beauty. A bold beauty with her ability made an attractive combination. It would be very interesting to see the final outcome. Should Lex-Er die, he decided that he would keep the woman around for awhile.

Seeing that Aykira was back in the office, Lex decided that he needed to put an end to this conflict. His left arm was now useless as was his left leg, but he needed to accomplish his plan and nothing she did would stop him. He needed her to continue what she had been doing, backing away from him, but he needed to control the direction. When he needed her to move to his right he would thrust to her right, moving her to her left as she continued to move backwards. In this way he moved her right or left as he needed until he had her lined up properly.

Aykira kept her eyes on Lex, watching his every move. She saw his dark eyes and they were actually looking past her. She easily avoided his thrusts almost any of which could have ended the conflict, badly for her, but he didn't thrust her through.

They had been moving around so rapidly that she temporarily lost her bearings when suddenly she felt her back bump into something. Flicking her hazel eyes around quickly she saw that it wasn't the wall. The pillar with the bust of William Shakespeare, one of Lex's pieces of artwork that she had decided to keep rather than give on loan to the museum.

She tried to slip around it, to put it between herself and Lex, but he prevented her from doing so by thrusting to that side as she started to move. She realized, belatedly that Lex was not treating this as a proper fencing match, but as a predator toying with its prey. He had guided her to this spot unerringly and now he had her just where he wanted her. Her mind darted back to their discussion before these men arrived. He was walking towards the bust. Lex mentioned something about a present for his "friends".

Lex had Aykira exactly where he wanted her, against the pedestal on which the Shakespeare bust rested. He smiled in anticipation of the trick he was about to play on Dru-Zod and his companions.

Aykira saw Lex smile and prepared for the worst. She surveyed the damage she had already done to him and tried to decide where best to strike one final blow.

Before she could prepare though, he struck.

White-hot searing pain engulfed her left side. She felt the blade go in and through and out her back as she toppled over backwards knocking over the pedestal. The human mind is always a mystery. At times some of the most inconsequential thoughts can become dominant. Aykira's last thought as she lost consciousness, because she heard the crash of the bust, was, *I've broken it.*

The twisted grimace of pain on Aykira's face as he felt the sword enter her body sickened Lex.

As Aykira toppled over after his thrust, he quickly withdrew his sword because he didn't want to injure her any more than necessary. His thrust had been precisely positioned, low on the left side so that he would miss any vital organs. She would bleed, profusely, but with proper care she would recover.

More importantly, he had achieved his aim. The bust was broken and the little lead box had fallen unnoticed by Dru-Zod and his comrades for his use. It was time to turn the tables on them. His injuries were such that as he moved forward, toward

that tantalizing box, his locked knee joint caused his leg to move stiffly. He used this to disguise his real intent. Exaggerating his limp, he fell face forward on the floor. As much as it hurt to do so because of his injured shoulder, he brought his left arm up, as if to cushion his fall, but really it was so that when he fell, his left hand came down on the lead box. Dru-Zod and his companions were completely taken in by the move and when he finally struggled to his feet he had the lead box clasped in his left hand. He gave a small bow to Dru-Zod and said, “My lord, Dru-Zod, I apologize for my clumsiness. That woman’s sword thrust has wounded my knee . . . “

The familiar voice of Dru-Zod crackled with glee and struck his ears like the rasps of a saw. “Marvelous! Now I know you are loyal to me Lex-Er! Come, let us conquer this city and then the planet.”

Infuriated, Lex wanted to answer the bellicose man, but he knew if he did he might irritate him and then Aykira Milan would not be the last to suffer from his machinations. There was yet another consideration; he needed them grouped closely together.

As the elevator rose to the penthouse Lois stood still for a second, her super-hearing picked up the sound of metal clanging against metal. A bizarre thought entered her mind, could it be the sound of swords clashing? Aykira mentioned taking fencing lessons this evening, but she was supposed to meet her instructor at his school. Just to be on the safe side, using her X-ray vision she looked up through myriad barriers of blue-black steel girders, dusty elevator cables, ventilator piping and gray concrete and saw something that in a thousand horrid nightmares she never expected her eyes to behold.

Standing over the supine body of Aykira Milan, her pristine fencing whites stained with her own blood was Lex Luthor. He was clad in black body armor that was strikingly similar to the one she used to wear — body armor also splashed with blood. He bowed his head as if in pain, but for all she knew, the madman could be laughing about getting rid of the CEO of MetroCorp.

As she watched, he fell to the floor.

Not ten feet away from the grisly scene were four men wearing the grey uniforms of New Kryptonian guards. One of the guards seemed to be advancing towards Lex. Had Luthor gotten away, transported himself back to Terra and somehow attacked Aykira and these men were trying to stop him? If that was the case *where* was Jor-El or at the very least members of the Sapphire Guard? It wasn’t like the First Lord to leave something like this to second-tier security, no matter how accomplished. Luthor’s very presence on Terra was a blatant threat to her and Clark’s private lives.

A feeling of helplessness stuck and she wanted to tear through the steel confines of the elevator and stop Luthor before he caused any more deaths. But this was the express elevator to the penthouse; the police would need it in order to conduct an investigation later. She might not be able to get up there quickly but someone else could.

Lois called out. “Clark! Get up here! Lex Luthor has escaped from New Krypton! He’s injured Aykira Milan!”

A millisecond later, a familiar blue and red figure flew out of the garage, streaked up into the night sky and landed on the balcony all before Lois even finished her message. He strode through the French doors and surveyed the wreckage of Aykira Milan’s office. Furniture turned over, pictures knocked from the walls and twisted within their frames. Several important documents lay scattered and torn on the floor.

Above their heads was a cavity in the ceiling with large spider cracks radiating out from the center. But in the midst of the destruction, stood his former enemy over Aykira Milan’s body with a rapier in his hand.

“Luthor! What have you done?” Clark said between gritted

teeth.

“Not me, Kal-El. Look to my warder, Dru-Zod. He is the architect of this madness.” Luthor snapped as he took deep breaths.

Clark spun around to face the four men in gray uniforms. He gave them a hard look and said with a scowl to the man with the beard, “Dru-Zod? Captain Dru-Zod? The one who heads the guard detail in Luthor’s prison?”

The three men with Dru-Zod each stepped back, allowing their leader to take the full brunt of the Prince’s anger. Dru-Zod replied, “My lord, Prince. The prisoner escaped from the collective where he works. We managed to track him to your father’s laboratory where he forced the technician to send him back to Terra. Unfortunately, once he had what he wanted, he killed the tech.”

“That’s a lie!” Lex said clutching his fists. “You said Quist was killed *after* Rolf threw me into the aperture.”

Dru-Zod ignored Lex as if he were an annoying flea. “As soon as he emerged from the aperture he saw this female and they fought. I overheard something about her taking over his empire. We stepped through the aperture to follow, but not in time to prevent him from harming her.”

Once again Lex realized by observing him what kind of a man he once was and the thought made him ill. With a snarl, he stepped forward and after dropping the rapier and making a fist delivered a crashing blow to Dru-Zod’s chin as he said, “So much for ‘loyalty’.”

Thanks to the power boosted strength the armor gave him, the blow snapped Dru-Zod’s head back and staggered him, but he recovered quickly and with a sweeping blow hit Lex in the chest. Lex staggered back and fell to the floor, barely conscious, but he managed to retain his hold on the lead box. If it were not for the articulated armor he wore the hit would have been fatal.

Suddenly a stiff breeze filled the room, followed by a streak of turquoise and pink and suddenly Ultra Woman appeared. Before saying a word, she immediately went over to Aykira. “She’s breathing! The wound is bad, but if I get her to a hospital immediately she should recover.”

Dru-Zod said with a shrug, “She is a female. Beautiful, but it would not be a tragedy if she died.”

Disgusted by the man’s callousness, Lois ignored him and turning to her husband said, “Clark, who are these guys?” Lois asked, looking at the other men.

“They are part of the New Krypton’s police force,” Clark said. “But what policeman would allow an innocent woman to die just to save our secret?”

Coming back around, Lex spoke using the speech style of a New Kryptonian. “My Lord Kal-El, they are traitors and you would be greatly amiss to listen to them! Dru-Zod insisted that I kill Aykira to prove my loyalty to his cause. But I only wounded her to gain time . . . “

“Cause? What are you lying about now?” Lois interrupted. “I’m taking Aykira to Pete Ross at MetroGen where she can get the proper care.”

Turning to Ultra Woman, Lex said, “Please, you must believe me! I would never harm Aykira. She is a good person and . . . and the world would be a sadder place without her. Examine her wound. It was precisely placed to avoid any vital organs.”

Not a little taken aback by Lex’s intensity, Lois re-examined the wound and found it to be exactly as Lex had described, which planted the seeds of doubt in her mind about Dru-Zod. She turned to look at him as she spoke to Clark, “What Lex says is true. The wound was precisely placed to avoid being fatal.”

Clark turned to Dru-Zod and said, “All right. The truth this time. Why are you here!”

With a snarl, Dru-Zod launched himself at Clark. After having spent a lot of time in the last year in Lex’s prison under

Terra gravity, Dru-Zod had some idea as to the strength and agility that he would have on Terra, but he did not know the full extent of the powers a Kryptonian had under the yellow sun. He also did not have years of experience in handling the powers.

Rolf used super-speed to go around Lois and struck Lex in the chest, hoping to finish the job Dru-Zod had started. Once again the Kryptonian-forged armor saved him, but he was knocked near senseless.

Lois had benefitted from Clark's tutelage and even though she, super-powered as she was, was, — still weaker than a male superhero had an edge. She was a super heroine with a brown belt in karate and she used that advantage.

With the exception of Rolf, Zod's followers hadn't had the opportunity that Zod had had to be in Lex's prison, thus they were totally unaware of what they could do under Terra gravity and stood rooted to the spot as Dru-Zod launched himself at Kal-El. Ultra Woman moved at super-speed to intercept his underlings. With a series of super-powered, super-fast chops and kicks she was able to prevent them from joining in Dru-Zod's assault on her husband. Even super-powered, invulnerable individuals are susceptible to equally super-powered kicks and chops, when delivered to vulnerable area, such as the ears.

Seconds later, the three men — seasoned guards of New Krypton — lay on the floor unconscious, bested by a mere female.

Kal-El and Dru-Zod were trading blows, each being staggered by the other, but neither really gaining the upper hand.

In the midst of all of this, Lex was ignored. While Kal-El and Dru-Zod tussled like a couple of wrestlers, he came out of his stupor. Looking around he saw what was happening and struggling to his knees, said, "I'm sorry, but this is for your own good." Opening the lead box he revealed a chunk of crystalline Green Kryptonite which is the most virulent form and Dru-Zod suddenly lost all interest in the conflict. With expressions of pain contorting his features he fell to the floor, writhing in pain. To Lex's utter surprise, Lois and Clark remained standing.

He gasped out, "How is this not affecting you?"

Clark stepped over to him and relieved him of the lead box and the Kryptonite before he said, "I'm afraid that will have to remain our secret." He looked around at Dru-Zod and his minions and closed the box.

Gradually Dru-Zod stopped writhing in pain, but he didn't rise up straight away. Clark addressed them, "From your actions I begin to believe that Lex was telling the truth. You will not recover your powers for a while and before you do I can expose you again so don't even think about trying to escape. It is time for the truth. Why are you here?"

Dru-Zod tried again, his once-arrogant voice now sounded weak and reedy. "I told you. We ... we followed the escaped prisoner."

Clark looked at Dru-Zod and said this time in a quiet voice that held all the backing of centuries of Kryptonian royalty, said, "You will answer me!"

With a scream of rage, Dru-Zod tried to rise and attack Kal-El once more, but just as he did the room was flooded with a turquoise glow.

The glow was caused by the aperture that formed in the air. Seconds later Jor-El, General Ching and several members of the Sapphire Legion, fiercely bristling with weaponry, stepped into the shambles of Aykira's office. It was a good thing that Clark had not opened the lead box again.

Jor-El's eyes unperturbedly surveyed the scene, then speaking to General Ching he said, "Have your men take the traitors into custody." Silently the members of the elite guard moved to do the First Lord's bidding, applying shackles first to the unconscious men on the floor, whom, without consideration to their comfort or injuries, were dragged through the aperture.

Dru-Zod said with a sneer, "I have other followers Jor-El, they shall free me!"

A shudder went through Lois' body when she heard the words that escaped her father-in-law's lips. "That is unlikely, otherwise why would you destroy the transport device? Still, if there are any cohorts of yours remaining, I doubt their determination for conquest will survive after you and the three who came through the aperture with you are executed for treason."

The former captain grew silent as heavy shackles were snapped around his wrists. He offered no resistance as he stepped through the aperture.

Mystified by these rapid events, Clark said, "Father, welcome. Then it is true? These men are traitors?"

"Yes. They came here with the intent of subjugating this world. In order to do that, they would have had to eliminate you, a member of the royal house. Thankfully I received a message from Lex-Er; he was pretending to be in connivance with them."

Lois stared at her father-in-law in shocked disbelief and said. "How? I thought he was under heavy guard? Also, how did you get here if the main transport device was destroyed?"

Jor-El looked at the former billionaire who was once again inside the building that bore his name and said, "He actually hacked a tablet used for agricultural use and sent a message to the Sapphire guard. He also activated a homing device in his armor for us to track. We reached my laboratory and discovered the damage Dru-Zod's bomb caused. But that was not the only device."

"No, it wasn't. When I arrived on New Krypton a year ago, it was in an... underground chamber?" Lex said hesitantly.

"Very impressive, Lex-Er; both with your memory and electronic skills. A year ago such loyalty to my house and a fellow human were 'alien' emotions for you." Jor-El said this with a raised eyebrow.

Stiffly, Lex made a small, respectful bow, "Thank you for your confidence in me. Life on New Krypton has not been idyllic at the start for me, especially because of Dru-Zod. Nonetheless the people I have come to know outside my prison are like ... " He hesitated over the strange word and then said, "A family to me. Destroying the society that everyone has worked so hard to achieve was wrong."

Lois was about to speak when a small groan of pain reached her ears. "Aykira! We have to get her to the hospital!"

"Zara has been apprised of the situation. She and her medical team will be in position when we arrive," Ching said.

Lex walked stiffly toward the younger man and said, "Thank you Ching, We must do everything we can to spare Aykira. She is an innocent in all of this. But what about this office," he said, gesturing around the room. "The last thing LexCorp needs is to have another CEO disappear, especially amidst this disaster."

"Kryptonian medicine is far in advance of Terra's medicinal arts. Allow us to take her. Two standard Terra days in a re-gen chamber should be sufficient to heal her injuries. We can have our technicians duplicate everything in this room. My son, will you and Lois assist?" At Kal-El's nod, Jor-El continued, "Make it so Ching." Jor-El said

"By your command my Lord." With those words, Ching gently lifted Aykira turned and entered the aperture. A moment afterward, they vanished.

More Changes for LexCorp

By Lois Lane and Clark Kent

Business Section — Sunday, October 15, 1998

This month marks the one-year anniversary for LexCorp CEO, Aykira Morro Milan, who recently delivered the corporation's annual report to an understandably concerned group of stockholders. The results of the reports were exciting. Story continues on page B2.

Metropolis: Bernie Klein's (and soon to be Abrihet's) New Townhouse

A week later found Lois and Clark sitting in the living room of Bernie Klein's new townhouse. Coming from a sunny, but cramped apartment in a conservative part of Metropolis he was a bit apprehensive about relocating to more informal surroundings. But Abrihet had convinced him that this location would work for them. Still as a couple, they wanted to retain something of their uptown/Parisian lifestyle. They were faced with an old design problem. How to spruce up an old house for contemporary living without losing sight of its history or sacrificing the charm? Considering their tight timeframe the best answer to keep the process simple: strip it down, update the essentials, and invest in handsome furniture.

They eased the transition into townhouse living by keeping some furnishings from his old apartment and Abrihet's finds in Metropolis, such as a large mocha-colored comfy sofa they could stretch out in after a day's work. Mixing these and several other items into the new setting made them feel more at home, although Abrihet still stayed at the Lexor.

"It's funny, last year at this time, I was wondering why both of you were so closed mouthed about what happened to him. Now the truth is known." Bernie said.

Aykira set a tray of four delicate blue and white cups filled with hot strawberry champagne tea and four cannoli stuffed with mascarpone and sprinkled with bits of chocolate onto the wide coffee colored leather ottoman. "What a frightening experience! How is Ms. Milan?"

After taking an appreciative sip, Clark said, "Zara managed to heal the wound without even leaving a scar. She was returned to her office later on Sunday. No one knew she was missing."

"What about your secret identity? Is it still safe?" Bernie asked with a hint of anxiety in his voice.

Lois and Clark exchanged looks that only two people in love and in a close marital bond could ever exchange. Her face was a mixture of embarrassment and consternation when she cleared her throat and muttered. "Ah, yes and no. Aykira was not completely unconscious; she overheard me when I called 'Superman', Clark and when Jor-El addressed me as Lois."

Before either scientist could comment, Clark spoke up. "Aykira had a long talk with both my father and Lex. She had no intention of saying anything about what happened in her office. The last thing LexCorp or rather MetroCorp needs is any adverse publicity."

"Besides, who would believe her? There's no proof to back up her story. It's amazing how that team of technicians came in and cleaned up all the wreckage from the swordfight," Lois said with a shrug, nonetheless still nettled about her slip of the tongue. Under other circumstances it could have proved utterly disastrous.

"*Mon dieu.*" Abrihet leaned back into the couch and said softly. "What a relief!"

"You're not kidding!" the Kents said in unison.

Bernie laughed, took his fiancée's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "You two are *really* a married couple! Abrihet and I have a lot to look forward to." He turned serious and said, "What has Jor-El's experiments regarding Green Kryptonite and Metal X revealed?"

"So far his conclusions are in line with your own and Abrihet's. He's very concerned and puzzled that Metal X doesn't prevent the radiation from harming Kryptonians."

Abrihet cleared her throat as if in apology and said, "We have discussed this matter at length and the only explanation we can come up with is that Clark's living on Earth all your life, your body has developed an affinity with the planet. The same theory applies to Lois. Green Kryptonite will not harm you as long as

Metal X is around you. But the New Kryptonians bodies are different. The food, air, and soil, even the sunlight is different."

An expression of deep thought shadowed Lois' face. "In theory, would ... would that work on a human?"

"It's a ... possibility. But without a subject, proving the hypothesis might be something of a challenge," Bernie responded hesitantly, he had an uncomfortable sense where this conversation was going.

As if reading his mind, Abrihet immediately grasped his thought and spoke. "Monsieur Luthor's body at the molecular level is altering to become *Kryptonian*? That would mean he and any human who remains on New Krypton for a long period of time will eventually become invulnerable if they were to return to Earth? After all, Lois is now invulnerable."

Three sets of eyes turned and stared at Bernie waiting for an answer.

He swallowed, took a deep breath and began, hoping his words would put their fears to rest. "No. There are several factors that caused Lois to become Ultra Woman. One. She has been in close contact with Clark's aura for over three years before they started dating. Two. Your physical intimacy as a married couple only increased that contact. Three. The exposure to Red Kryptonite caused part of Clark's aura to 'spin-off' and became a part of you. As long as you live, you are now physically a Kryptonian."

"Yeah, but Lex is surrounded by Kryptonians! Remember how Dru-Zod struck him twice and both times he recovered rather quickly," Lois reminded him.

"Ah, but consider this, Aykira stabbed him at key points in his armor and he bled. His armor was protecting him from Dru-Zod's blows. It was forged on New Krypton of New Kryptonian metals. Lex Luthor has no more super powers than I, nor will he ever acquire any."

The atmosphere in the living room immediately lightened, the last thing anyone wanted was a super-powered Lex Luthor on the planet. His attitude and personality may have adjusted, but the temptations of such power might turn him back to the man Jor-El had originally thrown into prison.

"Aykira is an amazing woman. She thought on her feet in the midst of a swordfight. I'm glad she's on our side. Hmm, I wonder what might have happened if she and Lex had met under better circumstances?" Clark mused.

A gentle laugh escaped Lois' lips, "You mean like in an alternative universe they marry and with her help he guides LexCorp into being a kinder, gentler corporation? You Clark Kent are an incurable romantic, which is why I love you so much."

Lois leaned over and pecked her husband on the cheek.

Bernie said, "Speaking of *amour*, let's remember why we are here."

Abrihet broke in, all smiles. "*Oui!* It is time to put super adventures, mysterious metals and genetic hypotheses away and talk about our wedding in Paris which is going to take place in less than two weeks! Lois, I must ask a favor, since Amandine has agreed to make the cake, could we fly to France for a tasting ...?"

Chapter Five

The pleasure of your companionship is requested at the marriage uniting

Abrihet KELE Senai

to

Bernard Joseph Klein

Saturday, October 25th 1997

Place du Pantheon

Paris

at Five o'clock in the Afternoon.

A Champagne reception will follow immediately

afterwards at *Maison Blanche*.

Paris: Bernie's Apartment

Bernie stepped in front of the full length mirror Abrihet had installed in the large, comfortably decorated bedroom meticulously studying his image. A hand, manicured the day before, checked the bowtie made of a colorful Nigerian pattern. Satisfied, he put on a pair of shiny black wingtip shoes; they fit perfectly over the black merino wool socks Abrihet had knitted for him. When, he wondered between everything else in preparations for this day, had the woman had time for *that*?

He slipped into the tailored black tuxedo jacket which to use a French expression, *lui allait comme un gant*. He then adjusted his boutonniere, composed of a spritely piece of green holly, a beautiful white rose contained in a spiral of pale-peach-and-gray silk, that Clark had retrieved from the fridge and attached to the jacket's buttonhole earlier that morning.

The final piece of the outfit was his great-grandfather's antique, silver pocket watch, handcrafted well over a century ago in Zurich, Switzerland. Before leaving Metropolis he had taken it to Lazar's Jeweler's to be professionally cleaned and set expressly for this occasion. He looped the silver chain through the bottom buttonhole of his waistcoat, than tucked it carefully into the left hand pocket. He wondered if the presents that had been sent over to his fiancée's apartment arrived. One would be very much appreciated, like a perfectly balanced medieval blade forged from intriguing metals.

Now the other, he was fairly certain the *other* would be a complete and rather welcome surprise. Abrihet deserved this particular gift — one without price.

Hoping he looked like a proper groom, Bernie stepped out of the neatly arranged bedroom that in a few hours he would *finally* be sharing with Abrihet and walked down a short hallway and into the living room.

"Ready?" Clark asked as he looked his watch, himself immaculately turned out in a striking tuxedo.

"Uh? Ready for what?" Bernie said absent mindedly as he entered the kitchen to make a coffee.

"To get married, Bernie!" his friend answered with amused exasperation.

The older man sat down carefully. The tuxedo fashioned by Johan's head tailor was one of the most expensive garments he had ever worn besides a radiation suit and he had no desire to get it creased before Abrihet saw him in it. Rather than answer Clark's question directly he shook his head in bemusement and said, "Surprisingly, France, the country renowned throughout the world for love and romance, makes getting married somewhat of a chore. The personal documentation I had to provide was extensive to say the least. It was even a surprise to me that you and Kuma are not considered the best man and maid of honor, but simply official witnesses to the ceremony. Abrihet and I won't be legally married until you two sign the certified document," he said holding up a substantially packed manila envelope that was previously on the coffee table. "Thankfully everything was in the *Se marier à Paris*, yet I still felt like I was gathering material for a master thesis!"

Clark smiled. "Oh this isn't so bad, you should have seen what Lois and I had to put up with when Councilor Trey insisted we renew our vows on New Krypton. We had to wear black robes and have a silken fabric wrapped around our wrists to legalize our marriage on New Krypton. Apparently, it had something to do with me renouncing all claims to the title and powers of First Lord."

The older man nodded his head slightly. "As a member of royalty, despite having lived your entire life on this planet, that puts you outside of the normal list of rules and regulations, hence the ceremony and repeating of Kryptonian vows. In France the

marriage vows must be said by the mayor or his assistant, otherwise it is not legally recognized. We are not permitted to change a single word! At the conclusion of the ceremony, we say '*Oui*' instead of 'I do.'" Bernie rubbed his bald head. "Don't get me wrong. I love France. But if Abrihet was not determined to wed here, I would rather have gone to City Hall in Metropolis."

"No, taking part in a cold city hall wedding is not your or Abrihet's style. When Ellen Lane started to drive us both crazy with the endless wedding details I suggested the same thing to my wife."

Interested in this tale, Bernie leaned forward and asked, "Oh, what did Lois say?"

"'Not on your life, buster!' With those words she shot the whole idea down. Women — and men for the most part — like weddings. It's a way of bringing families together."

Bernie shook his head in wonderment. "To be honest, I always shied away from attending them. Your wedding was the first I had gone to in a few years. Of course, once we are married, Abrihet and I will be there when James exchanges vows with Lucille. That is, if we are invited."

Clark cocked an eyebrow and chuckled. "One of these days he'll ask her to marry him. But I don't think it will be anytime this year."

Looking a little confused Bernie said, "Actually, James called before we left. He wanted some suggestions as to how he should propose to his lady. If all goes according to plan, by the time you return to Metropolis, he and Lucille will be engaged."

"What? Why didn't he ask me?" Clark said, somewhat taken aback. He had known Jimmy longer than Bernie. Besides, since Lucy was his sister-in-law, it seemed the natural choice to ask him.

Looking a little embarrassed Bernie responded, "Could you keep such happy news from your wife? Young James shouldn't have any problem, as long as his knee does not lock up!"

"No, you're right, Lois would figure out something was up." Clark looked at his watch again, a touch of concern creeping into his voice. "When was the limo supposed to get here?"

At that moment the phone rang. Bernie hastened to pick it up. He listened for a moment, frowned, answered crisply in French and then put the receiver down.

"Everything all right, Bernie? Was that Abrihet?"

"No. Everything is most decidedly not right. That was the driver; apparently he got stuck behind an accident, traffic is backed up so he called from a nearby café. There are no other limousines available to pick us up. He will try to drive around and met us at Town Hall. Thankfully, Abrihet's driver is there at her apartment building already." He grew thoughtful for a moment, looked through the large picture window at the scene outside, then said, "My friend, it's a magnificent early evening in autumn; the air is as sharp as my old slide rule! Why don't we grab our coats and *walk* to the ceremony?"

"Walk?" Clark couldn't quite keep the surprise out of his voice. "Bernie, it's at least fifteen minutes away."

"It's four o'clock; we will be there in plenty of time. Can you think of a better way to work off the nerves? Besides, now that I think about, it the traffic around the *Mairie du 5ème arrondissement* might be a bit thick. Optimistically, the bridal party will be leaving soon."

It only took a moment for Clark to consider it and realize his friend was right. Deftly plucking the *Se marier à Paris* off the coffee table and securely tucking the sheath of documents under his arm, he turned around and said, "Okay, as best man it's part of my duties to get you there on time and in one piece." He opened the hallway closet, pulled out a couple of trench coats, handed the camel-colored one to Bernie and put on his own. "Come on *Monsieur Klein, votre femme vous attend* (your lady awaits)." With purposeful strides, he walked towards the door, opened it

and with a deep bow gestured for Bernie to exit. His friend returned the bow, struggled into his own coat, determined not to wrinkle his new tuxedo, and then stepped over the threshold, taking the first steps towards his new life.

Paris: Abrihet's apartment

A mere ten blocks away, in Abrihet's apartment the only word that could be used to describe the activity taking place within was controlled chaos. Under normal circumstances the apartment was spacious enough for even five people, but now the living room was crowded with what seemed like an army of specialists assisting the bride and maid of honor. Only moments before, Kuma had ushered out some of Abrihet's colleagues from the school. They had come to wish her well and promised to talk to her at the reception.

In the living room, a make-up artist, hair stylist and nail technician sporting a shock of wild pink hair were packing up after working on Abrihet and her sister Kuma.

In Abrihet's bedroom, Lois stood by, already beautifully dressed in the lavender outfit purchased from Darcy's weeks ago, waiting to provide assistance to the bride. Abrihet, who wore a blue silk robe, looked at the glorious gown hanging from the closet door, gave her head with its cascade of braids a dubious shake and said, "How does one wear *une œuvre d'art*? (a work of art)

"Put the skirt on first, shoes and then the sheath jacket," Lois said with a shrug.

"Are you quite certain?" Abrihet responded.

Looking over a sheet of paper, Lois answered with a giggle, "These are the instructions Jarawu put in with the gown."

Abrihet said a little dubiously, "She designed it and so I will follow her directions carefully. Oh yes, many thanks to Clark for letting you spend the night with Kuma and I. It was truly enjoyable." Her expression grew thoughtful as she said, "Oh! I wish my mother was here! This gown is so delicate, I am certain to tear it —"

A knock on the door interrupted Abrihet's comments. Kuma entered the room, wearing a glorious peach-and-gray gown fit for a young princess. She was quieter than her sister, but had the same warm smile and gentle demeanor. Behind her stood a woman wearing an intricately tied, golden headdress called a *gele* and dress to match. She cleared her throat and said merrily, "Here is someone who can assist with your gown and ... many other things."

Lois looked up from studying the paper and saw an older version of Abrihet. At one time, this woman had been breathtakingly beautiful.

There was the briefest moment of silence and then Abrihet crossed the room and gathered the newcomer in a tight embrace. A single word whispered in her native tongue and Lois knew she need not wonder further as mother and child beheld each other after twenty years estrangement.

When they parted, Abrihet started speaking rapidly, a mixture of Yoruba, French and English tripping over her tongue. "*Iya*, (Mother) how did you get here? Who told you when I was getting married? Is Father here?"

Her mother smiled through her own tears, displaying an array of beautiful white teeth. "Kuma contacted me on the same night that you told her of your engagement and explained everything. I was determined to end this separation between us. Twenty years is twenty years too long. Unfortunately, your father was not willing to come. But have patience, someday he will understand. Now, what is this about having some difficulty getting into your gown? Even in Lagos, we have heard of the talented seamstress Jarawu Basil. I have no doubt anything she created shall be easy to put on and wear."

"Excuse me, *Iya*, but what about Bernard's gift?" Kuma said

as she held a small blue cloth bag in her hands.

"Ah, how forgetful am I!" Taking the bag, Mrs. Senai bowed low to Abrihet and reverently placed the bag into her oldest daughter's hands.

None of Abrihet's childhood dreams had come true; there would be no Elder of the village, letter exchange or palm wine to be drunk, yet none of that mattered Her mother was here! She reached inside the bag and removed a long black box marked with a silver L. With hands trembling from equal parts nervousness and anticipation she opened it. Inside, lying on a cushy bed of crimson velvet was a delicate bracelet made of diamonds and sapphires, designed to match her engagement ring.

"*Magnifique*," Abrihet whispered.

The four women looked at the bracelet and made appreciative comments as it was passed around.

"It appears the man you are about to marry has more than excellent taste in other things as well as in his future wife," Madame Senai commented.

"*Iya* and I helped him pick it out," Kuma said shyly. "He wanted to get you an ugly letter opener in the shape of a sword called the cutlass. Bernard said something about it being a 'scholar's' choice." She groaned, "How completely unromantic!"

"Unromantic to the average bride, but not to me!" her sister said with a dreamy smile. "That man knows me so well!"

Madame Senai sighed, "Surely you wouldn't take the letter opener over this jewelry?"

Abrihet shrugged, Kuma groaned again and their *iya* smiled, content to be with her daughters this day.

When Lois took the bracelet into her hands, she marveled at the precision of design and it's pleasing-to-the-eye shape. She remarked, "This is so much better than a letter opener. Good work Kuma!" Glancing at her watch, she said, "Its twenty minutes past two, time to put the dress and veil on and get you married!"

The insistent sound of the phone ringing cut off further conversation. Kuma picked it up, listened carefully and thanked the caller. Her face flushed with anxiety.

"*Mon Dieu!* That was the driver. He has arrived early and says Bernard's car did not pick them up due to an accident in front of him. Abominable was the traffic tie-up. He spoke to Bernard; unfortunately, he does not know how they are getting to the Place du Panthéon. But he promises to be at the *Mairie* (Town Hall) in time to take us to the reception at Maison Blanche."

Before Abrihet could allow her sister's concerns to affect her, Lois said, "Clark'll make *certain* Bernie arrives at the ceremony *on time*." She emphasized the last two words, covertly reminding her friend just who the best man really was.

The three women were starting to chat about how unforeseen occurrences can throw off any event when they heard a loud clap. Surprised, they turned to Madame Senai she held up her hands, and then gesturing to the gown said, "Just so, my dear. We must prepare you. It is very rude to keep your husband waiting."

"*Iya*, we are not yet married," Abrihet said as she removed her gown from its covering.

The older woman shrugged her shoulders and responded, "He has given you his heart and an engagement ring. You are leaving Paris, the city which has been home for nearly two decades. This means you are his and he is yours. Having the mayor say a few words only makes it legal. As your *iya*, I am happy to be here and witness the event. But it is also my job to hurry you along."

Abrihet's and Kuma's eyes started to water, it was so good to have their *ma'a mi* (mom) with them!

Her mother took the gown from Abrihet's hands and laid it gently on the bed, her eyes also getting a little misty. "Lovely gown, not as colorful as is tradition, but it suits you — a wedding gown which is a mixture of African and French design."

Lois stood quietly on the side lines as Abrihet's mother and

sister carefully dressed her for the wedding. It was a precious time for all three women, reconnecting after so many years apart, chatting in a cheerful mixture of three languages as they discussed people and memories from days long past.

Finally, Abrihet was properly arraigned in her wedding attire; the gown, veil and jewelry made her look like a queen. As a last touch, Madame Senai carefully put the diamond-and-sapphire bracelet on her daughter's wrist and secured it.

Recollections of her wedding to Clark could not fail to come to mind. The lovely, intimate time the Lane women shared made her smile. Ellen had been in her element, telling people what to do and how best to do it. Only Mike Lane stood up to her when she tried to remove Martha Kent's rosemary biscuit recipe from the reception menu. Despite that one hiccup, it was a fabulous day, one she would cherish no matter how long she lived.

A small secretive smile came to her lips; she and Clark shared a bed for the first time that night, coming together as husband and wife. Their marriage had allowed them to enjoy so many intimate moments, soon they would be sharing a great deal more.

A loud knock at the door intruded on her thoughts, she exited the bedroom, x-rayed the door and discovered that Monsieur Bechard the photographer had arrived with his assistant Jules. She checked her watch again; it was now a quarter to three. Taking the photos shouldn't absorb too much time; they had to leave here by no later than four thirty if they were to get to the place of ceremony without a lot of fuss. Quickly, she exited the bedroom and crossed the now empty living room and opened the door to let the two men inside. It was going to be close, but she had every confidence they would leave on time.

PARIS: Mairie du 5ème arrondissement

Dusk had fallen and the air was slightly cooler as they walked towards the *Place du Panthéon à Paris*, Clark, sensing that Bernie was getting a little nervous, began speaking, providing his own walking tour of the place where his friend would marry. "Here we are walking towards The *Panthéon*, which is an early example of Neoclassicism, with a Greek-cross plan and a massive portico of Corinthian columns. Its ambitious lines called for a vast building 110 meters long by 84 meters wide, and 83 meters high. The crypt is equally vast."

"The *Panthéon's* façade is modeled on that of the *Pantheon* in Rome, surmounted by a small dome that resembles that of *St. Paul's Cathedral* in London. Located in the *5th arrondissement* on the top of *Montagne Sainte-Geneviève*, the *Panthéon* looks out over all of Paris.*" Clark stopped talking once they reach the *Mairie*. (Town Hall)

Bernie chuckled softly as they continued to walk. "Thanks for the impromptu tour, it's helping to settle my nerves. Even though our engagement has not been very long, time has moved by so *gradually*, it seems more like six months than six weeks."

All Clark could do was smile as they walked up the wide granite steps of the town hall; he opened the door to let his friend inside. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust from the low lights of dusk to the bright lights of the interior. "That may be true, but your wedding day has finally arrived. Come on, I think the chamber is this way."

Several well-dressed people came into the neoclassically designed large space, took their seats and began to converse with their neighbors, waiting for the officiant to arrive and perform the Klein/Senai ceremony. The small crowd seemed to be dwarfed by the high ceilings, impressive iron-and-glass chandeliers and substantial columns, but as a group, they ignored the massive beauty of the surroundings. Only happy anticipation seemed to race from one guest to the other and swirled effortlessly through the air like the colorful falling leaves outside.

A contingent of people from S.T.A.R. Labs, friends of

Bernie's entered next. The Americans were quietly awed by the beauty of their surroundings, but as to be expected of scientists, they quickly recovered from the aesthetics and began discussing the mathematics of creating the building. Eventually they found their seats, but pulled out their calculators to re-check their mental calculations.

From a side door, a tall spare gentleman, with a slight paunch and fringe of gray hair surrounding his head, entered the room carrying an air of grave dignity all about him. Mayor Calixte of the *5th arrondissement* wore the symbol of his office: a blue, white and red sash over a black suit paired with a white shirt and green paisley tie. He stood in front of the bust of Marianne, the symbol of the Republic and waited, the faintest whisper of a smile on his lips.

Not too far away four musicians — three violinists and a cellist — played classical wedding music. They were friends of Abrihet's and from the sweet and easy sounds of their ensemble effort, very comfortable playing together. The hum of conversation tapered off and ended when the audience noticed two impeccably dressed men — the groom and best man step — through the main entrance. The mayor watched as Bernie and Clark entered the room, walked up the long aisle and took their places just in front of him.

Bernie nervously took out his pocket watch and said, his voice strained, "Its four forty-five and three-quarters. *Where* is she?"

A sleek white limousine pulled up to the front steps of the *Mairie*. Abrihet looked outside and noted that the crowds which usually surrounded the place had thinned considerably. They had made it a point to be the last couple to be wed today. It cut down on the possibility of having stragglers interrupt the *cérémonie*.

Her iya's voice broke into her train of thought. "Abrihet, are you ready?"

"*Oui*. Still, I do not see Bernhard's limousine." A note of worry fluttered in her voice. "How will they get to the reception? For that matter, I don't know if Bernhard and Clark have arrived as yet."

Lois placed a reassuring hand on her friend's arm and winked a silent reminder of what the best man was capable of.

"Perhaps we should have Monsieur Bechard go inside and let him know we are here?" Kuma suggested.

Madame Senai nodded her head in agreement and Kuma was about to open the door and exit the vehicle when another white limousine pulled up behind them. It was the other car which should have brought Bernie and Clark.

The phone rang, the driver picked it up and began talking in low tones and nodding his head. They heard a brief conversation take place between the two drivers, than her driver opened the partition and spoke in French to Abrihet. Lois noted the look of relief on her face, happy the second driver was telling them what happened to the guys. It might have been easier for her to listen in on the conversation, but she had decided long ago to avoid doing that sort of thing. It was rude and this was not a life and death matter.

Abrihet turned to her mother in order to translate. Kuma spoke French and Lois of course was already familiar with the language.

"The other driver apologizes and says Bernie told him he would make his way to the *Mairie*. I have no doubt he is probably here already and getting nervous about us!"

A touch of Mad Dog Lane surfaced in Lois, "I hope this transport service gives you a discount!"

Her companions chuckled at her comment and then decided it was time for all of them to leave the vehicle. The driver got out, stepped around the large car, opened the door for the ladies and extended his hand to each as she alighted from the limo.

By the time Abrihet gracefully excited the limousine, despite the darkness and slight chill in the air, a small crowd of well-wishers had gathered. Respectful applause and cheerful shouts of *Félicitations!* and other words of congratulations reached her ears. She smiled nervously, took a deep breath and allowed Monsieur Bechard's assistant, Jules, to take her picture while his boss entered the building.

Jules had quickly taken a final group shot with a special flash. Now Madame Senai, Kuma, Lois and Abrihet climbed the steep, ancient gray steps. Kuma was mindful to watch the simple train of her sister's gown, to make certain it did not catch on anything.

A reply to Bernie's question was about come from Clark's lips when he recognized Monsieur Bechard, the photographer; he walked over them and said the bridal party was outside. Bernie visibly relaxed when he heard the news. Bechard took his camera and stood just in front of the door so he could take pictures of the bridal party as they entered the chamber.

Lois came into the hall, walked down the aisle with all the style and no-nonsense pace of a world-class investigative reporter, hurrying to get to her seat before the ceremony began. Seeing his wife in the lovely lavender dress, her dark brown hair spilling down her back filled Clark's chest with joy and pride. Lois seemed lit up from within, shining with a glow that was greater than when they married. He grinned at her like a love happy fool, but he didn't care. She gave him a triumphant smile and saucy wink, then wordless took her seat. This was the prearranged signal that they could begin the ceremony.

Clark nodded to the quartet who started playing Canon in D by J. Pachelbel.

The doors opened and Kuma entered the fabric of her gown made delicate swishing sounds, like the lapping of water against an untouched, sandy shore. Tentatively, her head a little bowed, she stepped down the aisle. Once she reached Clark and Bernie she stood on the left side and then turned to watch the bride make her entrance.

Both doors opened again and Abrihet stepped into the chamber with her *iya* by her side, a slight murmur went throughout the small group as they took in the sight of this elegantly dressed woman wearing a shimmering garment. In her hands was a bouquet of white and pink gardenias, the purity of their passionate scent perfumed the room. Softly, gradually the two women walked down the aisle. Bernie's eyes grew misty with excitement and his throat went dry as a vision of beauty and love moved closer to him. Yes, love. A deep love that had beaten the mathematical odds, despite great distances and their manifold outward differences, he could no more be apart from Abrihet than Galileo from his telescope or Madame Curie from radium, she was his heart and home. At last she stood by his side, an expression of deep contentment on her face. As he took her hands in his and impulsively kissed both cheeks in the French manner, Bernard knew he was finally home.

From her seat, Lois watched as the ceremony unfolded, like a spool of glistening thread, the first of so many whose final products was not simply a ceremony, but the first stitches of a strong, joyful marriage. Mayor Calixte began with the reading of various portions of the civil code related to marriage. She could see her friends exchange amused glances as the mayor spoke. There was no doubt in her mind that although he had performed this particular duty many times, each couple brought something new and different to the occasion. It was up to him to make the day special for them, so it would live happily in their memories as the years rolled by.

Once the code had been read he nodded at the couple and invited them to stand as they said their vows.

With a gentle clearing of his throat, the mayor spoke.

"Bernard, voulez-vous prendre Abrihet pour légitime épouse?" (Bernard, do you take Abrihet to be your legitimate wife?)

With a clear, firm voice Bernard Klein answered, *"Oui."*

"Abrihet, voulez-vous prendre Bernard pour légitime époux ?" (Abrihet, do you take Bernard to be your legitimate husband?)

Looking deeply into Bernard's eyes she said just as loudly for all listening, *"Oui."* Abrihet leaned a bit closer and said quietly enough that only he could hear, "With all my heart."

The mayor indicated the bridal party should approach the table in order to sign the register; Kuma gathered up Abrihet's train and held it as her sister walked. First Abrihet carefully signed the register and handed the pen to Bernie, who added his name besides hers. Next Clark and Kuma in their turn took the pen and quickly affixed their signatures to the state document. With a bow and graceful gesture of his hands the mayor said, "Are there rings to be given?"

Clark and Kuma stepped up, each handed a ring to the couple. They exchanged rings; Bernie's was a simple thick band of gold, while Abrihet's was a gold-and-diamond contour band. Both rings were engraved with their initials and wedding date.

The mayor, after watching the ring exchange like an expectant parent, smiled triumphantly and turning to the audience said, "May I introduce to those present, Bernard and Abrihet Klein!" He turned to Bernie said in a stage whisper, *"Monsieur; please ... kiss your wife!"*

His arms wrapped themselves around her slender waist as she raised hers about his neck; Bernie touched his lips to her forehead, her temples and then her cheeks, his very skin tingling in anticipation as his lips felt the moist sweetness of hers.

Abrihet was sure she heard the happy tumult of approval as friends and family applauded and cheered, but then at further reflection, it was actually the melody of her heart finally and completely beating in perfect harmony with that of her husband's.

PARIS: Reception at Maison Blanche

The Maison Blanche was like a highly polished gem sitting in the jewel box that is Paris at night. Perched on the top of the Champs Elysees theatre, the restaurant was the perfect place to view the Eiffel Tower and other sites of interest. The Kents had taken meals at many an impressive restaurant, but this one was in a class set apart.

Even though they were both invulnerable to temperatures, it was important to maintain appearances. They checked their coats and followed the rest of the guests to the winding stairs leading up to the Mezzanine which offered a better view of the cityscape. Lois looked over the table holding the seating placement cards; stately affairs done in perfect calligraphy with black ink, and noticed they were seated at table three with some of Abrihet's co-workers. They settled down and waited for the bride and groom to enter.

The white linen-covered tables were strategically set up to comfortably accommodate not only the forty guests, but also provide enough room to dance afterwards. The bridal table decorated with a peach tablecloth, white linen napkins and glassware and plates so dazzlingly bright they hurt the eyes, had the best view in the room.

Clark shook his head in amazement. "How did Abrihet manage to pull together such a reception in the timeframe she had?"

Lois smirked. "Once a woman makes up her mind to get married, *nothing*, not even the sticky problem of where the reception is to be held, will get in her way." She snickered and then added, "It doesn't hurt that this restaurant had a wedding reception set for today, but at the last minute the couple decided to get married in Cannes instead. The management was so happy they gave Abrihet a discount!"

The quartet had assembled at the far end of the room and played classical music gently in the background while other guests entered the Mezzanine level and took their seats. Once Madam Senai and Kuma were seated at table two, a medium-built, dignified Nigerian gentleman wearing a colorful robe called the *agbada* — a traditional garb worn by men for formal occasions over a pair of *sokotos*, loose-fitting trousers — stepped onto the dance floor, a microphone in his hand. Suddenly the atmosphere in the room changed to happy anticipation as the lights were dimmed, the man began to speak.

“Bienvenue, mes amis! My name is Professor Abani and I have known Abrihet Senai ...” He stopped, embarrassed by his tiny mistake and continued, “Excuse me, Professor Senai-Klein for a few years. Never have I seen her as radiant as the day she introduced me to Bernard, who has brought much sunshine and peace to her life. He is the richer for having her as his wife and we are the poorer for losing her to a new life in America. So, let me introduce to all gathered here, Monsieur and Madame Klein!”

As soon as he stopped speaking, the sound of jubilant applause and shouts of felicitations punctuated the air. At the top of the stairs, stood Abrihet and Bernie, their fingers interlaced as they stepped into the mezzanine level. Monsieur Bechard took numerous photos, the flash lights and sound of the shutters going off from his camera and several other cascaded over them like a silvery, thunderous waterfall.

They were a striking couple, a study in contrasts; the black tuxedo with its crisp white shirt made Bernie appear taller, debonair with shoulders back and head held high. No one would suspect he spent long hours in the laboratory, for he appeared to be a man perfectly at home in formal occasions such as this. His wife, the beautiful dark woman by his side fairly glittered as the spotlight shone on her off-the-shoulder white gown with its meticulously stitched, cream-colored accents. The dazzling metals of her necklace and headdress made soft tinkling sounds as she moved.

Bernie bent down and whispered in his wife’s ear, “*Es-tu prete, ma cherie?*” (Ready my darling?)

Abrihet looked up at him, a radiant smile showing brilliant white teeth. How one’s heart could contain such happiness! “*Oui!*” was her only reply. Gathering the skirt of her dress, they took to the floor in their first dance as husband and wife, a charming, flawlessly executed waltz. Seeing how graceful Abrihet was surprised no one. But to watch her new mate glide across the floor like a latter-day Fred Astaire was something of a shock to the guests from America. Especially the Kents who had no idea he *would* dance at his reception, much less waltz!

“Wow! Talk about impressive!” Lois turned to a middle-aged woman, one of Abrihet’s colleagues, and said, “Madame Allaire, were you aware that Bernie could dance so well? How long have they been practicing?” Lois asked

An older woman with gray hair done up in a perfect chignon spoke, her voice clear and melodious despite her years. “Abrihet tells me he was quite resistant at first. Nonetheless, he wanted to be able to share this part of her passion ... the dance. As we can see the results are *magnifique!* They move together as one, as if they were dancing together for years. The passion they have for the dance is nothing compared to the passion they have for one another.”

Lois and the rest of the wedding guests quietly observe the couple step in perfect time with each other the sight was mesmerizing. They danced as if they were the only people in the room — with eyes simply for each other. Lois found herself in total agreement with Madame Allaire’s comment.

Clark thought back to the shy young man who years ago came to her dance class, apprehensive as to what to expect. Despite his father’s assistance and discipline he was still unsure

of how to touch or hold people, particularly those he occasionally rescued. Too much pressure at any given time and the injuries could be disastrous. He needed greater control of his physical abilities. Football in college had taught him about balance and being light on his feet. The martial arts were appealing, but not what he wanted to study at that time. Dancing would teach him how to hold a person using just the precise amount of strength.

Through Abrihet’s patient tutelage the raw potential which were Clark Kent’s amazing abilities bloomed with the knowledge and application of ball room dancing. So to watch his former teacher waltz effortlessly with a man who always swore he had two left feet was not as much of a revelation as it would be to Lois or Bernie’s other friends. The new Mrs. Klein had in the past worked — without her knowledge of course — with a much more dangerous partner.

Once the bride and groom finished dancing and sat down at their table, the first course began which was a delectable fresh garden salad or onion soup. A white-gloved waiter brought a tray laden with covered plates and with the help of an assistant laid them down in front of each guest. Everyone dived into their salads or soups. Soon the sounds of silverware clinking against the dishes and gentle conversations in three languages filled the air. But the excellent food didn’t prevent several guests from going up to the blissful couple and saying felicitations.

“The salad is delicious! What kind of dressing did they use? Take notes, Clark, we have to try and duplicate this at home!”

“Don’t worry, I am!” He took in a breath, catching a familiar aroma. He sighed happily, with his x-ray vision he peeked into the kitchen and said so quietly only Lois could hear, “Ah! The staff is plating coq au vin! If it tastes even half as good as it looks we are in for a treat!”

Hearing that, Lois’ mouth began to water. “Oh, yummy! Chicken frickasee cooked in red wine with mushrooms and garlic. That other couple’s change of mind worked out well for our friends! This food is so rich. Thank goodness for our high metabolism! Otherwise we would have to run for at least a month to work off the calories! By the way, where is the cake? I’m a little surprised not to see Amandine’s creation, especially after all the hard work she put into it. Shouldn’t it be on display next to the bride and groom?”

Overhearing the comment, Madame Allaire broke off speaking with her husband and asked, “Ah, Madame Kent, this is your first time attending a Parisian wedding?”

Lois nodded and said, “Yes.”

The older woman’s lips tugged into a smile and her eyes twinkled with mischief, “Then you are in for a treat!” Not saying anymore, she turned back to her meal.

Lois glanced at her husband with a quizzical expression on her face. His only response was to wiggle his eyebrows and turn back to his own plate.

Additional courses followed until they reached the coffee and cake stage. As the waiters moved from table to table pouring coffee from silver pots, another man followed behind distributing to each guest small sticks that reminded Lois of Fourth of July sparklers.

Again, Lois was the only one at the table who was completely in the dark about what was going on. Her husband leaned over and whispered in her ear, “When I tell you to, light up your sparkler, this is part of the cake presentation.”

Mystified, but willing to follow Clark’s lead, Lois agreed. Moments later the quartet abruptly ceased playing, lights went out and the glass side of the building with its backdrop of Paris at night and the gloriously illuminated Eiffel Tower in the middle was all any of the guests could see. Once again Professor Abani’s voice called out in the darkness. “*Le gâteau! Le gâteau!*” (Cake! Cake!)

“Ok honey, light up your sparkler!” With those words, she

took a match, struck it and proceeded to light up her sparkler which sizzled like hundreds of tiny, white hot diamonds into glorious life. Together the entire table joined in shouting for *le gâteau*.

The rest of the guests followed suit, lit their sparklers and took up the chant, waving the sparklers as the shouts became louder. Amid the fanfare, doors to the kitchen opened and the head pâtissière and his assistants carried out the cake decorated with icing, chocolate, sugared almonds and candy ribbons colored peach and cream to the couple.

Clark said, “This particular wedding cake is called the *croquembouche* a tower of cream-filled, puff-pastry balls that was piled into a high pyramid and encircled with caramelized sugar. This sugar is what gives the dessert its name — *croquembouche* loosely translates to “crunch in the mouth.”**

As the sparklers died away, Bernie and Abrihet each broke off pieces of the puff-pastry ball and fed a few bites to each other. The cake was then whisked away to be cut, plated and served to the eagerly waiting guests.

The quartet played while everyone enjoyed cake, then they packed up their instruments and since they were friends of Abrihet, joined the guests. A mixture of classical music and smooth jazz, recorded for the occasion, filled the air and then some of the guests began to slow dance, among them Madame Senai with Professor Abani, and Kuma showed Jules a few moves she picked up in London. Meanwhile Abrihet and Bernie walked around thanking their guests for coming.

“Lois! Clark! We can’t thank you enough for all the background assistance you’ve provided over the past few weeks. It would have been impossible without your help!” Bernie said when he came over to their table.

“Your wife had a huge hand in planning this celebration; imagine pulling together a wedding and reception in six weeks. I can tell you right now, we needed six months to pull off our wedding!” Clark said with a generous laugh.

As the men clustered together around the table for a moment, Lois took Abrihet aside and asked. “So, where are you going for your honeymoon?”

“Italy. Bernie has arranged for us to stay at a charming farmhouse in Tuscany. The location will be central for day trips, we especially want to go to Pisa and see the leaning tower. We look forward to sleeping until noon and then taking a few bike rides. After all the excitement of the past few weeks, it is just what we need. But tonight we are staying at his — our place and will depart for the airport around noon.” The romantic look in Abrihet’s eyes was very familiar to Lois; she had seen it more than a few times when she caught Clark looking at her.

As the evening festivities wound down and everyone began to take their leave, Lois and Clark took to the floor for one last dance. Clark hummed a gentle tune in her ear as they swayed with increasingly sensuous movements across the floor. They watched as Abrihet hugged her mother and sister good-bye and then took Bernie’s hand, picked up her train, ran down the stairs and disappeared into the night.

The music ended, and hand in hand they walked back to the now-deserted table. Lois sensuously whispered into his ear “The bride and groom are gone. Are you ready to go home — to Metropolis — Mr. Kent?”

Her husband and lover responded, “No, Mrs. Kent, I’m not ready to leave for home quite yet. This is Saturday; Perry does not expect us back until Tuesday. Maybe it’s time we went on that second honeymoon?”

Surprised, she looked at him and said, “Oh? Just what exactly do you have in mind?”

“There is a small tropical island in the Pacific I would love to show you. It has a sparkling beach with warm white sand, a crystal blue waterfall and most of all ...”

“Yes?” Lois said in anticipation.

“The dress code strictly forbids clothing,” her husband said with a wickedly delicious gleam in his eyes.

Lois leaned next to Clark and gently nipped his earlobe with equally deliciously wicked dexterity, in a voice low and husky she said, “Oh, I like the way that Kryptonian mind of yours thinks. Lead on, sweetheart!” With that the most unique couple in the world gathered their things and disappeared to a romantic, intimate place only they could fly to.

Epilogue

Paris: Midnight

Bernie took his new wife’s hand and together they exited the toasty, happy atmosphere of Maison Blanche and into the chilly October night. Avenue Montaigne, a mythical axis with great fashion houses near the Champs-Élysées avenue and the river Seine, boasted many trees that were still laden with golden leaves decorated in the height of autumn fashion. The neighborhood which had witnessed numerous famous designers come and go would have it no other way. Pedestrians of all walks of life took notice of the attractive couple as they stood waiting; the older men tipped their hats while ladies of a certain age smiled knowingly at them.

The stars above that had witnessed the lives of Galileo, Copernicus and Armstrong shone brightly overhead against the blackness of infinity. The Kleins were quietly overwhelmed by the city of lights as they looked up at the Eiffel Tower glittering above as if to assure them; now was the time for lovers.

He wrapped his arms protectively around Abrihet as she shivered ever so slightly while they waited for the limousine to pull up. Her gown, as beautiful as it was for the wedding ceremony and reception was ill-suited for the sudden temperature drop they were experiencing. A gust of wind lifted her veil and caressed her face; in the light of the streetlamp she looked mysterious and very, very lovely. Every inch the Nigerian princess and beloved friend. He touched the veil, ready to lift it off and touch her lips with a kiss, when some of the guests exiting the restaurant called out congratulations. They came over and surrounded them; some of the women kissed Abrihet on both cheeks and the men enthusiastically shook Bernie’s hand.

Just as another round of guests approached, their car pulled up soundlessly beside them. The driver jumped out, stepped around and opened the door allowing them to enter the sleek and spacious vehicle. As soon as the chauffeur hopped in they were about to kiss but they were prevented when the driver started expressing apologies and congratulations. He was talking so much the privacy partition was never closed. They wanted to be alone, intimate with one another, but the driver refused to be quiet.

The kiss — not a public one, but one that would express how deeply they felt about each other — would have to wait. They exchanged amused glances and with so many feelings running through them they both began to laugh so hard that tears of joy ran down their cheeks.

One adventure had ended, a lifetime of others fervently beckoned. For these two scientists, marriage was no longer a theory to be randomly guessed at, but a reality ready to be explored.

Abrihet laid her head on her husband’s shoulder; she slipped her left hand into Bernard’s and gave it a tiny squeeze, which he returned it with an answering pressure mimicking her own. The golden metal of her engagement ring and diamond wedding band felt comfortable and right together. She closed her eyes and breathed in the scents around them, hints of Bernard’s masculine cologne, a not unpleasant aroma of freshly cleaned leather from the seats and her own perfume, the classic Parisienne’s signature; Chanel N°.5.

What a delirious elixir! What a perfect *nuit* (night)! She smiled seductively to herself; the *nuit* was only just beginning.

It took scant minutes to reach Bernie's apartment. Once again the driver stepped out and smartly opened the door. Bernie slipped a small envelope out of his jacket pocket and placed it in the man's hand. Blessedly silent, he smiled and bowed, wishing the newlyweds felicitations, got back into the limousine and sped off.

The Kleins paid no attention; they hurried into the building as quickly as Abrihet's strappy white sandals allowed and eagerly walked up the stairs to their apartment. It was the work of a moment to unlock and open the door. Abrihet was about to walk in when she felt Bernard's hand gently lay on her shoulder, he whispered delicate words into her ear and like an innocent schoolgirl, she blushed. Seconds later, her feet dangled prettily in the air as Bernie lifted her up and carried this much-desired woman over the threshold of their Paris home.

Nervous giggles filled the air as Bernie closed the heavy metal-and wood-door with a firm kick of his foot; it locked with a satisfying click.

His footsteps mingled with the laughter as he walked through the living room, but he did not stop until he reached the spacious bedroom. They had decorated the room as a joint project, although Abrihet added a few definitely feminine touches, such as the large mirror. It was a fun exercise; a way for the two of them to work together that was outside of the laboratory. By sticking to cool colors for everything in the space from bedding accessories to wall accents such as dark teal, charcoal and neutral tones, when Bernie came home from a lecture that was trying he could escape to a serene place. Now he was holding Abrihet in his arms, she could share this oasis with him.

He gently let her glide from his embrace allowing her feet touch the floor. The resonance of amusement slipped away like cool water over stones in a small brook, only to be replaced by heated words of love and passion as Abrihet swiftly removed Bernie's black tie from around his collar, opened the buttons and laid her hands on his chest. Carefully, he lifted the white veil from her head and ran long fingers through silken, black braids.

No more barriers, interruptions or hesitation, they kissed with a searing hunger and desire they had denied themselves for too long.

"Bernhard, I love you!" The words tumbled from her lips like a gift.

"Abrihet ... " he breathed, than eager lips covered hers and no further words were spoken.

Suddenly flirty white fabric edged with cream-colored threads, mingled with sober black broadcloth on the upholstered teal bench at the foot of large, comfortable welcoming bed.

Bernard and Abrihet Klein were finally at home, spending the night together.

Somewhere in the Pacific Ocean

Ultra Woman and Superman flew with ease over the Pacific Ocean to their tiny island getaway, named *Kandor* after the famous city on Old Krypton. It was about noon there, the dazzling sunlight caused the white, sandy beaches to shimmer brightly, as if welcoming the unique couple to the island. A Wandering Tattler with its long beak was seen moving over the beach in search of a noon meal. The air felt crisp and clear, moving ever so gentle with the tropical winds, carrying with it the sounds of the island

Clark held back, permitting Lois to land first, he hoped she liked the special present he and friends and now a few family members from New Krypton had built. With a gentleness which belied the strength she possessed, Lois feet touched down on the sand. She walked just beyond the shore and entered the dense

thicket of foliage which had concealed the simple but serviceable hut she and Clark inhabited during their previous visits.

Rather than seeing the bamboo supports and palm-covered roof, surrounded by a lush garden of tropical trees and plants instead at the base of a hill sat a beautiful, spacious bungalow, with large picture windows that allowed copious amounts of sunlight to wash over the rooms, while keeping out the tropical winds which sometimes made accomplishing simple tasks tricky.

The tops of other bungalows peeked out among the palm trees. Vaguely, she wondered what these other buildings might be.

"Oh my!" she whispered in shocked surprise.

He came up behind her, wrapped his arms around her waist and said, "Welcome to our second honeymoon, Mrs. Kent."

They entered the house, Lois walked through each room, it was a tropical island retreat without the prepackaged feel of a hotel.

The double doors leading off the patio permitted quick passage between the kitchen and the patio, making for relaxing mornings cozied up outdoors with a generous cup of Oolong tea and Clark's yummy blueberry scones. The kitchen was spacious, paired with neutral granite countertops with deep-hued cabinetry to create a classic, transitional look. In the center of the kitchen was an island, hewed from planks of old barn wood and topped with granite, this piece, Lois suspected could have been crafted by no one else except Jonathan Kent. The floor was of wood, but the feel was different from any earthly wood Lois had ever seen or touched.

The master bedroom faced the eastern side of the island, allowing them to see the sun peek over the horizon each morning. A large ceiling palm fan turned lazily overhead, not that they would need to worry about the temperature, but it was a nice touch just the same.

In the center of the room was an elegantly appointed large four-poster bed, draped in exotic, colorful fabrics. The walls were painted a soothing ocean blue, which nicely matched the vaulted ceiling with exposed wood beams. Again, the wood's grain and greenish red hues spoke of something not of this Earth.

"Lois, honey, do ... do you like it?" he asked nervously

She turned to see her husband's face, a mixture of bemusement and concern; she couldn't help but gush, "This place is incredible! How did you build it? When did you have the time?"

Looking a little sheepish Clark said, "I had some help from my family and friends from New Krypton. My brother Yar-El is quite the adventurous architect, he came up with the plans, and many of the materials are from the El Collective. I asked Dad if he could build an island for the kitchen. He and Mom really like the place."

"Wait a second, Jonathan and Martha have been here?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, I wanted them to enjoy a little quiet time on Kandor, especially since the weather is good for their joints. They stayed in one of the guest houses for about a week, after everyone else went back to New Krypton."

Looking around the bungalow Lois could now appreciate how special and precious this place would become for them all, a getaway to recharge after spending long hours at work or on rescues. This island, with its well-constructed buildings, would be a perfect, secluded place for a unique family on vacation.

"This was very kind of Jor-El. I have to thank him and everyone else the next time we go to New Krypton." she said softly.

Clark drew his wife to him and they sat down together on the edge of the bed. "Jor-El wanted to make this a safe and *private* place for all of us to meet as a blended family. Eventually, especially in Smallville, the El family's presence would be noticeable. It's also a form of apology."

A puzzled expression crossed Lois' face. "An apology?"

"Yes, he's sorry for the rather high-handed way he treated the Luthor situation, trusting in ancient Kryptonian law rather than Earth's. Apparently our former nemesis has made a number of personality changes since being sent to New Krypton. Jor-El is giving him his freedom ..."

"Lex is coming back to Earth?" Lois asked, a little taken aback

"No, that's one thing my father will never consent to. He is in exile, but will be free to roam the planet without guards. He's also going to have additional duties besides working on the Om Collective. Jor-El wouldn't elaborate as to what those duties might be."

Lois nodded, considering how tight-lipped the First Lord became whenever Lex's name was mentioned this was a change indeed. Perhaps his eldest son's gentleness was beginning to rub off on him? Those thoughts could be revisited when they returned to Metropolis, right now she wanted to spend time alone with her handsome husband. Slipping her fingers into his hair she whispered, "Speaking of rules Mr. Kent, don't you think it's time we follow the rules of Kandor?"

The rumble of his deep voice filled her ear, "Oh and what rules might that be?"

Her brown eyes fairly danced with mischief, as she rubbed his broad chest. "Oh, you know, the one which strictly forbids clothes, there's a white, sandy beach with a sparkling blue ocean in front of our bungalow that's too beautiful to resist. Let's go skinny-dipping!"

He wrapped his arm around her supple waist and pulled her completely onto the bed. "Okay, we can go in a minute ... " he said huskily as their lips met.

Only their senses went swimming ...

New Krypton: OM Collective

Lex-Er sat on a grassy hill, his back leaning against the equivalent of what on Earth could only be described as a majestic oak tree. The strong scores in the tree's bark rubbed comfortably against his back. It was the breezy part of the day; he gazed over the fields of gently waving grain, lavender tinted heads fit to burst, ripe for harvesting. The glare of the red sun cast an unusual light, but as with everything else on this planet, he was growing accustomed to the differences from Terra. He was contemplating the jagged course of his life and how the numerous regrets were heaped up like mismatched stones in a deep water-filled quarry.

Instead of luxuriating in the privileges and power of being the third-richest man on planet Terra, he was now, thanks to turning in Dru-Zod and his followers, something altogether different. As of yesterday Jor-El had changed his status within Kryptonian society. No longer a criminal, he was now officially the house steward to the Om Collective. Apparently reports his administrative efficiency was not lost on Jor-El. Vax-Om was greatly pleased, knowing the trust he had placed in the Terran had been rewarded. A man whose total personal wealth amounted to less than what Aykira Milan made the entire time she worked in Kansas City. Yet and still that Vax-Om's trust was more valued than all the other high-powered executives and political leaders Lex had worked with in the past.

A year ago he would have considered this an intolerable state of affairs, indeed on some levels of his mind it still was. But as they say, "that was then, this is now".

Still despite the strange alteration in his life he was content here, as much as a man could be living on a world where he would always have to wear a special suit of armor when going outdoors. Oh, there had been many improvements to his gear. Due to adjustments in his diet, now he could move about without wearing a facemask and breather, but that was only for a few hours each day. Perhaps someday Jor-El and his band of

engineers and geneticists would find a way for a Terran to survive on New Krypton without all the fuss of special clothing and living quarters.

He knew that such a technological feat would never occur in his lifetime.

Nonetheless, life here was not as bleak and boring as it had been when he first 'arrived'. Since drawing closer to Vax-Om and his family, he had started to develop a few friendships, especially after his actions against Zod and his followers had been made public.

Being around families, — large, happy noisy ones — he contemplated the chance he missed of having a family of his own. To be with a woman who could not only share his dreams, but have ambitions of her own. Not the simpering models, actresses and social climbers he had known on Earth, they were only takers — parasites. Not the kind of people who appreciated the importance of having someone to converse with at the end of the day.

In this regard he sorely envied Vax-Om. Eyner may not possess the greatest of looks, but her kind heart, razor sharp mind and culinary skills were much appreciated by his benefactor.

What woman in her right mind — Kryptonian or Terran — would put up with living in what amounted to a perfectly decorated 'bomb shelter'?

Aykira, her name slipped into his thoughts like a gentle hand into a kidskin glove. If there was any woman who had stood up to him, it was her. Twice she had proven her quality in vastly different arenas. Years ago he royally botched the opportunity to get closer to her, what a stupid, stupid mistake.

As he mused on these thoughts, he sensed a subtle shift in the air currents and turned to see Jor-El walking up the hill ... alone. On the few instances since that rainy night in his office, Jor-El had always been accompanied by a guard, what made today different? As always the First Lord's face was unreadable as the back end of a stevedore's shovel.

Tense moments passed as Jor-El drew closer, another surprise, he was wearing worker's coveralls. Apparently he had come straight from his own collective's fields; harvest time puts its demands on everyone, commoner and nobleman alike.

When Jor-El reached Lex-Er, he felt the other man's scrutiny while he studied his son's former nemesis as if he were looking at an extraordinary and challenging new life form. Without preamble he spoke with that quietly deceptive voice, the one that caused the hairs on the back of Lex-Er's neck to rise ever so slightly. "Vax-Om said you could be found in this isolated place."

Without looking up Lex-Er said, "Yes. Now that my movements are no longer controlled by Dru-Zod, I come here to think about things."

Jor-El nodded gravely then did something completely out of the norm: he sat on the ground an arm's length away from Lex-Er. "It is your right, especially after informing me of Zod's plans."

"I did not inform you until it was almost too late. Surely that counts against me?"

The First Lord did not answer; for a time all that could be heard on the hill was the sound of the wind blowing over the crops. Finally he spoke, "Recognizing where your loyalties lie is important. But you spoke when the time was right. If you had done so sooner, keeping quiet would have been difficult and Dru-Zod would have sensed it."

Silence came over the two men as Jor-El's word sunk into his mind. Rather than allowing the quiet to stretch out Lex-Er said, "The trial ended this morning. What were the results?"

If it were possible, the impassive face became even more masklike. Again he spoke in that maddening calm voice, "Once the final verdict was announced, Dru-Zod and all of his followers were executed shortly thereafter. As you Terrans say, 'Mission

Accomplished’.”

Lex-Er nodded, he did not expect anything less from the Council. He said with a tiny trace of dry wit, “Careful, Jor-El, after all that is a Terran saying.”

“Using such phrases are bound to happen, especially since my eldest son was raised on Terra, is married to a Terran woman and soon his ties to her will be even stronger.”

“You mean ...”

“Just so,” the First Lord said, the mask-like persona alleviated with a hint of a smile and a nod.

“Lois Lane-Kent will handle this latest development as she has with everything in her life ... with grace and composure. You have my congratulations sir.” Abruptly he changed the subject. “What of Aykira Milan? She might be aware of who Superman truly is.”

Again time stretched out as Jor-El seemed to contemplate his next words. Finally he spoke, “The woman Aykira Milan — she is of importance to you?”

“Yes. Why do you ask? Do you think she will be of some *use* to you?” he asked, with a hint of scorn.

Jor-El turned and gestured to the winding path leading up the hill. “Ask her yourself.”

Lex-Er turned and following the same path through the field that Jor-El had taken, saw a figure clad in gray armor walking up the hill. Despite the armor he knew her body’s movements as one would know the movements of a valued and trusted ally or a dangerous opponent.

Panic welled up in him like a cold spring. Lex-Er looked hard at Jor-El. He knew the man was capable of many things, but this was an act of cruelty *beyond* locking him in a cell with that madman, Dru-Zod as a warder. “Is Aykira to be banished here as well? I am ready to pay for crimes committed on my homeworld *and* for attempting to murder your son. But this woman does not deserve such a fate. Send her home I ... I beg you.” At this last, his voice unexpectedly cracked.

Jor-El sighed. “Exile Aykira Milan here on New Krypton? I should think not. No, she is an honorable woman, like my wife and daughter-in-law.”

“But ... but why is she here?” Lex’s voice trailed off.

“I am not completely without feelings, Lex-Er. You need a friend, one who thoroughly understands Terran customs and speaks your language. It will make your existence easier. Aykira has agreed to keep Kal-El’s secret, that being said she has free access to New Krypton.” Jor-El hesitated, and then spoke again, his voice earnest. “In our time on Terra, Josca and I realized how many items our world lacks. When we came here we brought much with us, but due to the unrest we experienced a few years back, we have lost much. Aykira Milan has access to resources my son does not.”

Picking up the threads of Jor-El’s thoughts, Lex said. “Are you speaking of setting up a trading agreement of goods between our two worlds?”

For the first time in their acquaintance Lex-Er noted a hint of amusement in the other man’s voice. “Precisely right, you are as ever the businessman. It will be several years before your world will learn of our existence, yet I believe we can assist one another. We can also provide certain items for Terra ... in a limited quantity of course. New Krypton is still building a business and manufacturing infrastructure. Ms. Milan will need some assistance, as liaison with her you could discuss which items Terra might want in trade. Naturally, this work would not interfere with your duties to the Om Collective?”

Lex released the breath he had been holding, relieved to know she would be free to pursue her life on Earth and still return to New Krypton to work with him. He stood straighter, the task before him with all its myriad challenges was invigorating. “I will strive to make sure it does not.”

“Good. Now I believe it is time for me to return to the El Collective, otherwise Josca will chide me for not doing my share of the harvesting.” Jor-El stood and dusted off the seat of his coveralls.

“My Lord, something puzzles me, in the past you have always seen me with at least one guard, today there are none. Why is that? Surely you did not believe I could harm you in that cell?”

Jor-El tilted his head in that maddeningly angular way of his, silver-blue eyes gleaming like a stately bird of prey studying its next victim. “When we met for the first time you were a well-respected captain of industry on Terra. That title did not give you the experience I have borne as a leader and a warrior. Sometimes — even now the emotions of warrior eclipses the man I once was. It is a constant struggle.”

Looking out over the fields of the collective Lex-Er nodded agreement. “True, I do not have the experience you have, but I can learn. By your own decision Terra — Earth — is lost to me. New Krypton is to be my home and through my working to continually maintain your confidence, it will no longer be a prison.”

The First Lord stood, but did not look at Lex-Er, but his words were chilling nonetheless. “Never betray my new found trust in you Lex-Er; otherwise the warrior will appear. To answer your question, the guard was not there to protect me from you, but to protect **you** from **me**. Until today, I did not trust myself from blasting you from existence.”

With that, the First Lord of New Krypton turned and walked down the hill, leaving an utterly perplexed Lex-Er staring after him. Aykira nodded to the First Lord when they were about to pass each other, Jor-El stopped, spoke to her for a moment, looked back at Lex-Er, fixing him with an appraising stare and then resumed his walk.

Lex-Er’s eyes never left Aykira’s form as she steadily worked her way towards him. Words, so many words came to his mind and were rapidly discarded. They were inadequate to express his profound relief. Years before guided by his sheer physical attraction, he tried to maneuver her into becoming his lover. Failing that, he exiled her to the back ends of LexCorp. Now he was the one in exile striving to prove his worth.

How ironic.

Their roles were now reversed; she was LexCorp’s leader and he the subordinate. Considering the circumstances, he wouldn’t have it any other way.

Now she walked towards him, her expression unreadable. When she stood no more than five feet away, he spoke. “Aykira, it is good to see you.”

A perfectly tweezed eyebrow arched upward and then she said in a moderate scolding tone, “You almost didn’t. Being stabbed with my own sword is not a laughing matter — regardless of the circumstances.”

“It was the only way to save your life.” He said quietly.

“That is true, nonetheless, since that evening, I’ve been a little reluctant to take up the sword again. My fencing master is not too thrilled with me. But given time, I expect to be back on my mark.”

He smirked, “There is little doubt in my mind that a minor wound could stop you.”

Aykira did not respond, only cocked an eyebrow and said, “Can we sit down? I’m still getting used to wearing this armor and quite frankly, it tires me. Besides, we need to talk.”

Lex-Er nodded, despite the fact that Zara had healed Aykira he was concerned about a mental wound from their swordfight, theirs was a complex history — injuring her, no matter what the reason, only added another tally in the negative column. He decided to change the conversation to something they were both comfortable with, a discussion of LexCorp. He was eager to

know what was happening with the company he had built. They sat down at the space he and Jor-El had recently vacated.

The change of subject proved to be a good idea. Aykira visibly relaxed as she updated him on some projects that were in various stages of development before his departure. Some had finished, others were on hold and two had been stopped completely when it was discovered how meager the results were after pouring millions into them. Lex-Er discovered her decisions were strong and fiscally responsible, decisions he would have made himself. He was about to say as much when her voice cut through his thoughts.

“Vince Zeleski was the right choice for the Marketing Director position.” Aykira stated flatly.

“Excuse me?” He was momentarily taken aback by Aykira’s abrupt change of subject. He was reluctant, even embarrassed to be drawn into this discussion, but he knew they had to face their past if there was any hope of them working together in the future.

She continued, “Vince had the contacts, experience and first-hand knowledge of all the key people in marketing. He was the best person to put in the director slot, not me. Even today, he is an invaluable member of the Board.”

Surprised, he looked at her. “Zeleski is on the Board of Directors?”

“Yes. When I was asked to take on the position of CEO, there was the small matter of the board’s integrity; four members had to resign or were terminated, they are all serving prison sentences or awaiting trial.”

Lex-Er, his mouth set in a hard line nodded grimly, she did not have to name who they were. The men happily shared in the fruits of the underworld activities of ‘the Boss.’

“Vince turned that division around. My being ‘sent’ to Kansas City was the best thing for me. I learned how to run a business from top to bottom. Not the textbook kind of experience that I learned at Wharton, but how to deal with union people and finding the best way to recycle a product without harming the environment. Those years taught me how to work at a higher level, although being exiled is not the way I would have wanted it to happen. In the end the shareholders were willing to ask me to come back and it is most gratifying to know I am now the right ‘fit’ as the CEO of MetroCorp.”

“MetroCorp?” Lex said in disbelief.

She shrugged, notwithstanding the armor’s weight; the movement was a graceful one. “It was the best name. Lex, the original was tainted, as a corporate entity it had to be done. Besides the corporation did have its start in Metropolis. I always wondered why you didn’t move everything to New York City once LexCorp was established.”

“As you said, New Troy and Metropolis ... was once my home.”

Hearing the pain in his voice, Aykira’s tone became softer, her eyelashes fluttered and the exhalation that escaped her body was filled with sadness. “I wish life on Earth had worked out differently for you.”

He dreaded saying the next words, yet they lay between them, like an architect renowned for creating soaring edifices who due to hard times must now build the meanest of dwellings. So he must build a new truth between them. “I ... I wish I could return with you ...” The words hung in the air and then he continued. “Perhaps if I had met a woman with fine hazel eyes years ago ...”

There were a lot of things she wanted to say to Lex Luthor and she wasn’t going to let his contrition change her mind. Not unkindly she said, “Four years ago you tried to seduce me and when that did not work, you had me exiled to Kansas City.”

He nodded, she had every right to state the facts, but it hurt to understand finally the hubris of his actions.

“The next time we met you were wearing this suit and at the

orders of a madman tried to kill me.” Shaking her head she continued, “Not the best way or most romantic path to a lasting relationship. Jor-El will never allow your return to Earth. As for me being what you once wanted me to be, I ... I doubt that is possible. My family, friends and everything I love are on Earth, I cannot give up my entire existence there to be your lover here. There would be ... complications.”

Lex-Er sighed mentally, the disappointment stuck him like a shaft of hot metal, he should have realized this would happen. He felt a hand on his shoulder; the touch was kind and regardless of the armor, warm.

“Could you be satisfied having me as a good friend?” Aykira said wistfully.

For an answer, Lex-Er placed his hand on hers. The armor, no matter how fine a mesh was a barrier to their flesh joining. But it was of no consequence. There was much work and many serious conversations ahead of them. But for now it was a time to contemplate and perhaps to dream. A gentle breeze stirred the air as the grain swayed to and fro. Together they sat in silence watching the red sun make its lazy descent below the horizon.

THE END

*This information came from *the Pantheon Paris* website.

**This information came from *the Good Life France* website

**Marie Colvin (January 12, 1956 — February 22, 2012) was an American journalist who worked for the British newspaper The Sunday Times from 1985 until her death. She died while covering the siege of Homs in Syria.*