

# Battle Scars

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Rated: PG-13

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Summary: An alternate universe story in which Clark went to New Krypton with Zara and Ching to fight for peace but was captured by Nor. Now he is home again, but he bears scars in body and mind. Torture warning.

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This is NOT an Alt. Clark story. This is merely a “what if” set with “our” Clark, Lois, and time.

The House of Zod and General Zod are borrowed from Superman II, although I have altered what the General looks like.

Breaks in the text indicate the different chapters.

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~~~~~ Superman ~~~~~

Clark Kent trembled violently in his sleep. He screamed out, a primal, animal sound that was pure pain and fear. He jarred himself from his nightmare in the process. Beside him, Lois' eyes snapped open. Clark was a mass of sweat. He was breathing hard. He still shook with the tattered remnants of the memories turned nightmare. Lois sat up and switched on the lamp. She glanced at the digital clock across the room. It was well past midnight. Every night since Clark had come home a month earlier, the same scene had replayed itself night after night. Lois didn't know what Clark dreamed about; all he would say about his nightmares were that they were connected to the time he had spent on New Krypton. She reached over and rubbed his arm affectionately. He stared his hands atop the bed sheets, tears rolling fat and heavy down his cheeks as he struggled to quiet his ragged breathing.

“That same nightmare?” she asked.

Clark wouldn't meet her gaze. “Yeah. I thought for the last few nights that it was getting a little better, but this time it was as bad as I've ever had it.”

Lois winced. “It's ok. I'm here,” she said, patting his arm.

“Thank you,” was all he could say.

He stood from the bed and stripped off his sweaty clothes until he was only in his boxers, tossing the dirty clothes in the hamper. He took a moment and rifled through his dresser, pulling out a new pair boxers, black basketball shorts, and socks. With a heavy sigh, he strode from the room and a few moments later, Lois heard the shower turn on. She rose from the bed and quickly changed the sheets, since Clark's side was sodden. It was odd, how this same series of events were now routine. She'd hoped that, by now, Clark would have started to get better. She couldn't fathom what had happened to him while he was on New Krypton. She'd respected that he didn't want to talk about it. It was too hard, he'd told her. Too hard to relive the memories. Too hard to force himself to face whatever had happened to him. But whatever it was, it was clear that whether or not Clark wanted to think about what had happened, his mind wouldn't let him hide from it.

Slipping Clark's pillow into a fresh case and smoothing down the wrinkles, she slid back into the bed, the light scent of laundry

detergent drifting into her nostrils. She used to love that smell. But now that Clark was returned to her, she couldn't get enough of his musky scent. Some part of her feared that he would be taken from her again, so she savored everything, every moment, every trace of Clark.

She could still hear the shower splashing. Clark often took long, cold showers after particularly rough nightmares. She propped herself up on her pillow and thought about her husband-to-be. She thought about the events that had led him to the dark place he was in now.

A little more than three months prior, Zara and Ching had come to Clark with news that he wasn't the only survivor of Krypton's destruction. There were at least a thousand more. Those survivors had founded a new home on a new planet, which they had dubbed New Krypton. They had told Clark that he was of noble blood — of a Ruling House, to be exact. He was, in fact, King. And they had told him that Zara was his wife through ancient traditions that bound them since birth. Clark had also been told that civil war was imminent, and they begged him to return with them to prevent the bloodshed. He hadn't wanted to go but after a long, grueling self-debate, he had agreed to go, agreed to do what he could to prevent war, and return. Lois gave him her blessing to go, hating that he was being so unfairly taken away from her — both physically and in matters of the heart. He couldn't marry her. He was already bound to another. Still, she had had no choice but to let him leave. He felt obligated to help his people, felt obligated towards a long-dead planet that had given him life, felt obligated to try and honor the sacrifice that his birth parents had made when they had sent him to Earth to save his life. And so, with breaking hearts, Lois and Clark had said goodbye. She'd given him her unworn wedding band to remember her by and he gave his assurances that he would return as quickly as he could manage and that he'd find away to unbind himself from Zara. He'd promised to come home to Lois and marry her.

They'd had to tell Jimmy and Perry about his alter-ego. They hadn't known how long Clark would be gone, or even if he'd be able to return. There would be no way to cover Clark's absence from the paper this time. And Clark had wanted to leave a support system behind for Lois to lean on. Both men took the news surprisingly well — at least the news that Clark was Superman. Jimmy had called it “the coolest thing ever.” But the news of his leaving left both men pale and saddened. They both loved Clark. Jimmy and Clark were more brothers than friends and Perry had a nearly father-child relationship with the three of them.

Superman had called a press conference and told a tearful world that he needed to leave, needed to save the people that shared his blood. He told them that Earth was the only home he wanted to know, how he considered humans to be his true people, and promised to return as soon as possible. With that, he was gone. Lois had stayed behind in the newsroom, tears streaming, watching the window that he'd flown out of, as though if she looked hard enough, Clark would return. But the hours had passed and Clark didn't miraculously come back. Day turned into a sleepless, painful night. All Lois could do was to think of Clark. Was he already on New Krypton? Was he still flying through space with Zara and Ching? Did he miss her as much as she missed him? Would he be forced into preserving his marriage to Zara?

Days had passed. Clark did not return. She saw him often in her dreams though, when utter emotional exhaustion forced her to rest. Her waking hours were filled with torturous pain and grief. She mourned his loss, mourned as though he'd died. She mourned for herself and the future that she'd lost with him. She couldn't function in the beginning, couldn't force herself out of her pajamas, couldn't force herself to go to work. Perry had been

understanding. Jimmy often came by after work to bring her takeout and to keep her company. On the second week after Clark departed, she finally made herself reenter the newsroom. It had been a nearly shattering experience. Clark's desk stood empty. A new sense of loss had washed over her.

Another month had passed. Lois refused another partner, but sometimes took Jimmy along when she covered stories. She stayed away from most of the hard news stories, opting, for once, to take the fluff pieces that Perry gave her. She covered only enough hard news to keep her carefully cultivated reputation intact. She knew that the newsroom was abuzz with theories. Several times she heard rumors that Clark had dumped her or that Lois Lane was burning out from pushing herself so hard for so many years. She responded only to defend Clark, giving the same story that they'd concocted before he'd left. Clark's father was laid up with a bad back and the Kents were struggling on the farm. So he'd gone to help them, but there was no telling when he was returning to Metropolis. It pained her to know that she couldn't tell people how truly selfless Clark was being. Privately, she gave up her apartment, opting to live in Clark's. She needed to be surrounded by his things. She needed to feel his spirit around her. Her own apartment felt cold and alien to her now.

And then, one night, as she'd prepared for bed, Clark had come home. Lois had cried with joy as all of her pent up fears fell away. They'd hugged and cried together, clinging to each other as if to life rafts on a stormy sea. Clark wouldn't speak much about what had happened on New Krypton. He would say only that the threat of war was over and that the Kryptonian people would have to solve their own problems from there on out. He returned her wedding band to her and begged her to postpone their wedding. He said that he wanted to marry her but that his experience on New Krypton had shaken him and that he needed time to heal. He'd annulled his marriage to Zara, he told Lois, and had never consummated it. Lois gathered from his scattered ramblings that Ching was now Zara's husband. Clark said that he had freely abdicated his throne, wanting nothing more to do with New Krypton ever again.

Lois had seen right away that Clark was a changed man. Scars streaked his body, some livid red and others white and faded. Hurt was in his eyes. Dark circles ringed those soft brown eyes. His cheeks were sunken in. And he was thin — painfully thin. If Lois had been honest with herself, she would have called his overall body condition as nearly skeletal. His formally cheerful, optimistic self had been stripped away, leaving a solemn shell behind. He no longer laughed or smiled as he once had. The only thing that remained constant was his love for Lois.

In those first two weeks back, his powers had returned in fits and starts. Sometimes he could fly, sometimes he couldn't. Sometimes his super hearing came back so powerfully that it left him clutching his ears in pain. Sometimes, his strength failed and he truly couldn't do so much as open a jar of pickles. The only thing that had come back to him immediately was his invulnerability. For that, Lois had been glad. But those weeks had passed and Clark's powers had returned in full. He'd been able to control them again. But Superman had yet to appear in public. In fact, Clark had not been out of the apartment at all since his return. Slowly, he'd been putting weight and muscle mass back onto his body. He was still thinner than when he'd left, but he finally looked healthy.

Lois remained by his side. He'd begged her to stay in his apartment with him. He feared to be alone. She had agreed, desperate to be there for him in his time of need. He'd offered more than once to sleep on the couch, but Lois wouldn't hear of it. They were both adults; they could share a bed and control themselves. Besides, she wanted to be within an arm's reach of him when his nightmares plagued him. He'd seemed almost relieved when she told him as much. She left him only to cover

the stories that she was assigned. Her writing was done at Clark's dining room table on her laptop. She'd tried to get him involved in her writing, asking him to read her copy before she emailed it to Perry. He'd done so a few times, but Lois could see that his heart wasn't truly in it.

Lois was scared for Clark. He was almost a stranger to her now. He was no longer the man who laughed with her, teased her, kept her on her toes. He was quiet, withdrawn, and sulky. He was going through the motions of living, but his spirit was gone. She wanted to help, wanted to take away whatever pain he had. She just didn't know how. And that scared her too. She would have gladly paid any price to see the Clark she knew and loved shine through, if even only for a moment.

Lois heard the water in the shower shut off and a few minutes later, Clark came back into the room. He studied his reflection in the mirror for a moment, absently tracing some of the scars on his chest with his fingers. Even the worst of them were starting to fade. The one he'd borne on his cheek had been the first to vanish. Clark had said that the yellow sun of Earth was responsible for the physical healing. Lois watched as Clark sighed heavily and began to open a drawer to get a fresh t-shirt.

"Clark, no," Lois said, stopping his motions. "It's ok. You don't have to."

He turned to look at her. "Lois, I look like a monster."

"No," she said, rising from the bed and going to his side. "You are beautiful." She wrapped her arms around his waist. Her head was pressed to his chest. She took a moment to inhale his scent deeply, took a moment to lavish in the feel of his cool skin on her own.

Clark's arms closed in around her and he kissed the top of her head. "I love you, Lois," he said soberly.

"I love you, too" she said, squeezing him tightly. "Forget the shirt. Come back to bed and talk to me."

Clark dropped the Midwestern State University shirt that he'd grabbed and allowed her to lead him back to the bed. A grateful look passed his face when he saw the fresh, dry sheets. "I don't deserve you." His voice was so soft that Lois almost missed it.

"What are you talking about?"

"You've been putting up with a lot from me, this past month or so," he said as he pulled the sheets up to his waist. He sat back in the bed, his head resting against the headboard. "I can't have been easy to deal with."

"Clark, I'm here for you, no matter what," Lois assured him. "I'll do whatever it takes to help you."

"I know. And I am beyond thankful for that. If I didn't have you ..." his voice trailed off.

A silence settled over the room. After a few moments, Lois forced herself to broach the one subject with him that she'd avoided.

"Clark, I think we need to talk." Before he could utter a protest, she forged ahead. "I know I promised not to ask you what happened out there," she gestured to the windows. "And I won't make you tell me anything that you aren't comfortable sharing. But sometimes talking about the things that bother us can help us move past those hurts."

Clark ran a hand through his hair. "I've considered that."

"Then what's holding you back?"

"Fear," he admitted. "I'm afraid to tell you because I don't want to burden you with my problems. I thought I could just ... force them to go away. On my own."

"Clark," Lois said carefully. "You'll never burden me by sharing things. I want to help you shoulder whatever burdens you are carrying. I love you. You are my best friend, Clark. You're the man I want to spend my life with. That means I share your pain, your sorrows, your joys, your triumphs."

"You ... really still want to marry me?" His mouth quirked up into a near smile, the first Lois had seen since he'd come

home.

"Of course I do! Clark, you are my heart, my rock, my life."

A ghost of a smile crossed Clark's lips. "You are incredible." He kissed her forehead. He ran his hand through his hair again, a nervous habit of his. "I think maybe, you're right. If you are willing to listen, I think I'm finally ready to share what happened on New Krypton."

"I'm ready," Lois vowed.

Clark gave her a grim look. "It's ... not going to be easy to hear this. And it's not going to be easy for me to ... talk about it. Will you bear with me?"

"I'll be here as long as it takes."

"Thank you," he said.

He grew quiet once more. Lois could almost see him trying to order his thoughts. She placed an arm around his body and drew him close to her. At length, Clark spoke again and began to tell his tale.

~~~~~ Superman ~~~~~

Nearly a full twelve hours had passed since Clark boarded the ship that would take him to New Krypton. So much had happened in those short hours. Ching and Zara had continually been at his side, prompting him in the proper protocol and traditions in his dealings with the Council of Elders. He'd been caught in the flow of things, still trying to get his bearings, when he found himself at the Ceremony of Union, the rite of passage that made it legal for him to consummate his marriage to Zara. The whole affair left him feeling slimy. Not that he and Zara had done anything or planned to — they'd both agreed to be partners in battle and not partners in bed. Zara respected his devotion to Lois and he respected that she was in love with Ching. But for the sake of maintaining good political images and for the sake of holding onto the power that they wielded, they had to maintain their farce of a marriage. Still, even that made Clark uneasy, made him feel like he was cheating on Lois.

Then there had been endless meetings. Everyone wanted to know what Clark intended to do once they landed on New Krypton. Everyone wanted to know what strategy he intended to employ to settle the upheaval. Clark hadn't known what to tell them. They expected miracles of him when he knew nothing of the situation he was walking into. He'd stalled as best as he could, begged them to let him get to the planet and see for himself what was happening.

Now, at last, he was alone. He stood at a window in the bridal chamber, staring as the distant stars sped by. This far from Earth, his powers were weakening. It felt odd, the loss of his powers, without the accompanying pain of Kryptonite. He'd barely even noticed the loss of most of his powers this time. Only when he went to instinctively reach for one of them — his speed or to fly — was he forcibly reminded of the abilities he'd willingly left behind. He wondered briefly if he'd be strong enough to fight once they arrived. All of his life, he'd never needed to worry about his ability to be ready for anything. The thought made him uneasy.

He fingered the ring on the slender chain around his neck. He knew Lois was thinking of him. His heart ached as he wished to be able to hold her, to kiss her, to see her face, to hear her voice. He fought back his tears and sent out his thoughts to her. What he wouldn't have given for some ... device ... some way ... of being able to talk to her, even if he couldn't see her. He was acutely aware of how dependent he'd become on having Lois there to talk to, to air his hopes and fears to. Silently, he cursed himself for agreeing to go on this mission.

*Is this really my fight? he asked himself, echoing the question his father had posed to him. Do I really owe New Krypton anything? Aside from my ... bloodline ... is there anything to bind me to these people? I'm getting their hopes up. What will they do when I leave? Will they ever let me leave?* The thought sent a

shock of panic through him. He hadn't considered that they might deny him a way to leave the planet once the threat of war was quelled. *I'll make them let me leave if I have to. Surely Zara will help me. She's as anxious to be able to pursue a life with Ching as I am to get back to Lois.*

The door to the bed chamber slid open and Zara walked in to stand beside him. She said nothing, only blankly watched the stars zoom by. Clark placed Lois' ring back inside the fabric of his black suit, wishing it was Lois that was pressed to his chest inside of just a symbol of her.

"How long until we arrive?" he asked.

"Another twelve hours," she replied.

"I don't know if I can do this," Clark confided in her after a glance over his shoulder to assure him that they were alone.

Zara turned to him. "Of course you can. It's in your nature."

"Is it?" he mused cynically. "Zara, look at me. I'm not Kryptonian. My DNA might be from Krypton, but my nature is that of a human. For a long time, I didn't understand that. For a long time, I couldn't believe that I could possibly be a human being — an Earthling. Ever since I discovered my roots in that globe a few years ago, I've viewed myself as an alien — as a Kryptonian. But now I know I'm more human than anything else. My upbringing and my ideals make me who and what I am. Not my bloodline."

Zara squeezed his shoulder sympathetically. "I know. But you have to try to be Kryptonian now. Trust in the blood that runs in your veins. You are more Kryptonian than you give yourself credit for."

"How am I supposed to lead these people?" he asked. "I don't even know if saying 'hello' is insulting to the Council. Zara, they want to know what my plan of attack is. What am I supposed to tell them? I don't even know what New Krypton looks like, let alone what political course of action will work with these people."

"You are overwhelmed," Zara observed.

Clark laughed bitterly. "Understatement of my life."

"You forget, Kal-El, that Ching and I are here to help you as you learn our ways."

"I don't *want* to learn how to be Kryptonian," he snapped.

Then, softer, he added, "I should never have agreed to this. I have a people. On Earth."

"We are your people, too," Zara said gently. "And we need you."

Clark sighed heavily. "I know. I just feel so ... alien here."

"I know," she replied. "Come. Ching and I can continue your ... education before you arrive. You need all the information you can get."

"Okay," he relented with a sigh.

True to Zara's word, twelve hours later, New Krypton was in sight. Clark watched with a heavy heart as they grew closer. He could see the docking on a video screen. It seemed so ... final, to be docking on this strange new planet. He fingered Lois' ring as he tried to quiet the butterflies in his stomach. He'd always approached peace negotiations with a small amount of nervousness. It never failed to frighten him, at least a little, when he knew that so many lives rested on his words and actions. At least he'd managed to rest for a few hours, choosing to sleep on the floor of the bridal chamber while Zara slept in the bed. She'd offered to share as a platonic friend, but Clark couldn't force himself to do so. It would be a betrayal of Lois. He missed her terribly.

The ship moved into position, lining up with the docking station. Clark felt the light bumping and jostling as the ship maneuvered against the gangways. He drew a deep breath, like a diver about to make the plunge. He was frustrated. The video screens did not show much beyond the gangways. He could see nothing of the planet he was on.

"Are you ready, Kal-El?" Zara asked him softly.

"No. But I guess I don't really have a choice," he said, clenching his jaw tightly.

They made their way to the ship's exit. The Council of Elders walked before Clark, proclaiming his arrival. Zara walked two steps behind him. Ching followed, last in the procession. Clark's hands were bunched into tight fists in an effort to redirect his nervousness. He stepped foot off the ship, feeling as though he'd walked into some awful trap and imagining an impenetrable door snapping shut behind him, cutting him off completely from Earth. He was in a narrow hallway that he likened to the gangway between an airport and an airplane. At last, the hall ended and he found himself in a vast palace. White, shimmering stone made up the walls and floor. Clark glanced upwards as discreetly as he could. The same stone made up the ceilings as well. It was both beautiful and unwelcoming, impressive and cold. Sometimes, a pillar stood against a wall with a carved bust made of the same strange stone. Sometimes, a tapestry hung, wrought with Kryptonian letters, telling stories of the past kings and the deeds they had done. Clark couldn't read the unfamiliar language but he could guess the content well enough by the pictures that were woven on the tapestries. Sometimes, a door stood to either side or a new hallway branched off from the one he was being led down.

In another time and place, he would have marveled at the stark elegance of the palace. He would have stopped to admire the rich tapestries and asked Zara about the people portrayed. But as it was, he was only able to steal the occasional glance at his surroundings. He felt like a prisoner walking the last hallway on the way to his execution. He could feel Lois' ring against his chest and pictured her in his mind. Before he could do more than picture her smiling at him, the procession halted.

"The Council is to introduce you to the rest of the refugees," Ching whispered to him as he stealthily slid to Clark's side.

"The rest? All of them?"

Ching nodded.

"Oh boy," Clark muttered. "Any special ... protocol ... for this?"

Ching shook his head. "They'll introduce you and expect to you formally claim the throne before everyone. After that, you'll be shown around and you'll meet your military."

Clark frowned. He didn't want to claim the throne. He didn't want to lie to these people. Still, if he wanted to make an impact and to help, he needed to step up to the role he'd been raised to. He'd have to compromise his morals, it seemed.

*No, not compromise. I will act as their king just long enough to stop this war. As much as I hate this, I need that power right now. I need the freedom to act as I need to.*

Clark snapped his attention back to listen to what the Council of Elders was saying to the people. Trey was speaking. Clark wasn't sure if he liked the man or not. He supposed he was a good enough guy, but he was far too formal for Clark's liking. Still, the man seemed loyal and Clark needed as many supporters as he could get. Jen Mai was with Trey, standing at his side. There was something about Jen Mai that Clark definitely disliked, though he couldn't quite place his finger on what it was.

"And so, without further ado, I bid you welcome our Lord Kal-El, last of the House of El, son of Jor-El."

Ching gave Clark a nudge and Clark found himself walking forward, head held high, a new determination settling over his features and mind. Not even as Superman had he ever adopted such grim determination, such a dead calm within his mind. He walked over the threshold, leaving the hall behind and stepping onto a wide balcony. A white stone railing stood waist high. He walked to it and looked out. He'd been before crowds of people before as Superman. He'd held press conferences as Clark Kent, like when Diana Stride had tried to reveal his alter-ego. But nothing had quite prepared him for what he saw now. A thousand

or so people stood in a vast courtyard. They all knelt as he came into their view.

"Do you, Kal-El, accept and claim the throne of New Krypton?" Trey asked.

Clark's jaw twitched infinitesimally. He made his voice ring out. "I do claim the throne and the right to rule."

A roar of applause rang out in the courtyard, intermingled with cries of happiness and shouts of "Long Live Lord Kal-El." Clark raised a hand for silence. Immediately, the gathered crowd grew still.

"Please, stand," he said to them.

There was a murmur of confusion and shuffling feet below as people rose once more.

"Tradition," Zara warned him in a whisper.

"Hang tradition," Clark replied levelly, loud enough for the crowd to hear him. "I will not stand for having people kneel to me. *I am here to serve them.* Not the other way around."

He turned back to the crowd once more. He eyed them for a long moment and smiled as warmly as he could. "I thank you all for your warm reception of me. I know I may seem a little ... unconventional to you all. I grew up on a planet far from here, with no real knowledge of my roots or of Kryptonian customs. So I beg your forgiveness and patience as I settle into a society vastly different from the one that I come from. But I assure you that *I am* here to help you. And I promise, *I will* do whatever I can to help bring about peace to your ... to New Krypton." He mentally kicked himself. He'd almost said 'your planet.'

*Careful, Clark, he thought to himself. For as long as it takes, this is your planet too.*

He turned from the crowd and disappeared from their sight as he reentered the palace.

*That was risky,* Zara chided him, her voice a whisper in his mind.

Clark shook his head. *I promised to rule this planet and to bring about peace. I never promised to give up my personality to conform to ancient and outdated traditions.*

"My Lord," Trey said as he left the balcony. "May I show you around your palace?"

"No," Clark said after a moment, shaking his head. "I want to go out. I want to see this planet. I want to see what sort of terrain my troops will be fighting on, if it comes to war. I want to see what resources we have — fields of crops, water sources, towns, everything."

Trey shifted uncomfortably under Clark's gaze. "As you wish."

~~~~~ Superman ~~~~~

Within a half-hour, Clark found himself on a military transport vehicle. It looked and felt almost like an open-air jeep, except for the fact that it floated about two feet above the surface of the planet. Zara and Ching were the only ones with him, at his insistence. He trusted them, knowing that they were on his side completely. He knew that he could trust whatever information they might give him as he surveyed the strange planet. He could speak freely with them. Clark wasn't sure yet who else he could trust. The jeep, as Clark called it in his mind, sped along the surface of a wholly alien world. The setting sun threw long shafts of red light across the planet, bathing everything in a hellish glow. Clark shifted uneasily in his seat.

Ching explained that New Krypton was roughly the size of Earth, if not a little smaller. But it looked nothing like Earth. It was a barren, wasteland of rock and dirt as far as the eye could see. He saw no water sources, not a single stream, river, lake, or puddle. Ching explained that their water reserves were beneath the surface. Not a plant or tree was to be seen. Not a blade of grass poked up out of the dirt.

"Where are the crops?" Clark asked.

"We grow no food here," Zara said.

"If you don't grow food, how do the people survive here? You have to eat."

"There are other civilizations out there that we trade with. The stone that the palace is made of is highly sought after, so we exchange what we quarry for crops."

"And what happens when you run out of stone?" Clark asked. "Nothing lasts forever. Okay, when we get back I'm going to give a little class on Farming 101. Luckily, I was raised on a farm and I know a bit about these things. If New Krypton is to survive, you need trade *and* you need to be self sufficient."

Zara nodded. "Some of the women have said as much, but the Elders do not listen."

Long, low buildings came into view. Zara explained that they were food storage facilities. Clark nodded and asked to be taken to the main towns. There was only one city that housed the thousand or so refugees. Ching guided the jeep there. It was just on the outskirts of the palace. As they drove along the streets, Clark stifled a horrified gasp. He'd been in Suicide Slum in Metropolis before, sometimes on Superman rescues, sometimes as Clark Kent on a story, and once when he'd been struck with amnesia after failing in his first attempt to destroy the Nightfall asteroid. He knew what a ramshackle neighborhood looked and felt like. The city he was now in was little better. He saw only homes that looked hastily built. There were no businesses, no schools, nothing that, to him, gave a city half of its lifeblood. He asked about it.

"New Krypton was founded just after Krypton exploded, correct?"

Zara nodded. "Yes."

"So it's been around about thirty years now, give or take."

"Yes."

Clark shook his head in disbelief. "All this time and the only city you have is only half a step up from a slum? You haven't done anything to build an actual society? You haven't even tried to work the very soil of this planet to feed your people? You've got more problems that just a civil war here."

"We've spent our time trying to scrape by and live," Zara said stiffly.

"I'm sure that's the case. But you could have made it easier on yourselves. Why are your people living in squalor? I see you had plenty of time to build a pristine palace. Where are your hospitals? Where are your schools?" Clark knew he was letting his anger show. Normally that would have bothered him, but not now. Not when he saw how skewed New Krypton's priorities were.

"We built the seat of power to bind our people together in hope," Ching said. "Now that our rightful ruler is here, we can expand our efforts to ... public works."

"That's not a good enough answer. Your people should have come first, not some palace that no one even had the right to reside in until you came and begged me to come here. Drive us back, Ching. I have some things to discuss with the Council." His voice had a hard edge to it.

Ching swung the jeep around and headed back to the palace. Clark was seething in the front passenger seat. He felt ashamed to be a part of such a society. It was true, he knew, that Earth wasn't a perfect place. There were plenty of people living there in third-world countries and in slums, people who needed help. But at least, he reasoned, there were some people who did what they could to help. Charities that went overseas to deliver food and supplies to those in need. Government-run programs to try and help the less fortunate. New Krypton seemed, to his eyes, to simply turn a blind eye.

"We always planned on fixing the problems you've mentioned," Zara said from behind him. "We just haven't had the chance to do so. It isn't easy carving out an existence on a barren rock of a planet."

Clark turned his head to look at her. "It would have been easier if you had fixed these problems as they arose. Your precious Ruling Houses mean nothing if your people suffer and die." He sighed and calmed himself. "Now, tell me more about this impending war. You keep mentioning it but neither one of you have given me any specifics. I know there are Ruling Houses jockeying for the throne. Now that I am here, what sort of likelihood of war breaking out are we looking at? Because if it's a simple matter of me setting you two up as the ruling couple, I'll get to work on that right away. Then you can have what you both want and peace besides, and I can go back to what I want."

Ching shook his head. "Nice try, Kal-El. I also wish it was that simple. But I am afraid that Lord Nor and his followers will rebel against your right to rule. I think it is likely that he will proclaim war."

"Lord Nor?"

"A noble of a different House — the House of Zod. Ancient traditions bind him as Zara's husband if you fail to maintain your marriage. That makes him the next in line for the throne."

"So ..."

"So, I have heard rumors that Lord Nor is gathering followers that dispute your right to the throne. It is said that already he has the ear of several Elders. They speak in hushed whispers of the ... legitimacy ... of your position. They doubt that a child raised on Earth could possibly be up to the task of ruling *this* planet."

"Which Elders?"

Ching shook his head regretfully. "I don't know."

"But I *am* Jor-El's son. So ... I mean, can they really ... do anything? I mean, what are the laws about something like this?"

"Aside from taking you to court to try and persuade the Elders to revoke your title, he can proclaim war. If you are killed ... well, then there will be nothing to prevent him from marrying Zara and claiming the throne. I think the first option is unlikely. He would need a reason, a real reason, to bring you to court — something like treason or a doubt of your parentage. Your parentage is airtight. And I do not believe that Nor can possibly find a charge to accuse you of to bring you to court. Just mind your tongue and anger, Kal-El. If Nor suspects what we three plan, you will be brought to trial and in all likelihood, Nor and his slippery tongue will turn the Elders against you. The penalty for treason is death."

Clark dragged a hand through his hair as he thought. "Great," he muttered. "Okay, let's get back to the palace. Let's see what we can find out about this Nor guy and what he might have planned. Ching, I think you are probably in the best position to gather information. I don't want to make a move against him until I know for sure what his intentions are. Speculation and rumors aren't enough to justify starting a war. And besides, I'm here to *prevent* war in the first place."

"Nor is extremely dangerous and cruel," Zara warned him. "It may well come to battle with him. It would be better for you if you were to make the first move against him. I do not think that he will anticipate that. The element of surprise may make all the difference."

"No," Clark said decisively. "That's not who I am. I don't start wars. I don't initiate bloodshed. My job is to bring peace and to protect."

The jeep slowed as the palace grew near. Clark appraised the building silently, shaking his head. The palace was the one pristine structure he'd seen on the planet. He wished that even a tenth of the time and effort that had been clearly used to construct it had gone into the ordering and building of the city. They entered the palace together. Again, he had the feeling that he was walking into his prison.

*What now?* Ching thought to him.

*First things first. Call together anyone and everyone responsible for running the city. I want to get started on fixing*

*the problems that I've seen today. You and Zara are both to be with me. You've seen a little of how things are on Earth. I may need to call upon you as witnesses to how truly great a planet can be with enough careful planning. Later on, you'll get your chance to look into Nor.*

*As you wish. I will gather the Elders now.*

Ching bowed, turned on his heel, and swiftly vanished down a hallway. Zara led Clark to their private living quarters. Clark was grateful for a few moments of peace and quiet to collect his thoughts and to calm his turbulent emotions. He sat back heavily in a plush arm chair. As he always did with his notes before writing a story for the paper, he mentally ordered his thoughts. He laid his head back against the crushed red velvet fabric and closed his eyes as he mentally ticked off the points he wanted to make with the Council. His mind made up on how he was going to approach the Elders, Clark went to freshen up, shower, and change into a fresh suit. Not long after, Ching gently knocked on the door. Clark let the man in.

"All is ready. The Council awaits you."

"Thanks, Ching." Clark gave the man a grateful smile. "I don't think I've told you how much I appreciate your support. And your friendship."

Ching smiled back and led Zara and Clark through the palace to the Council's chambers. As they walked, he pointed out the various rooms and areas that they were passing to either side. Clark tried to keep up, but the information soon became dizzying. Before long, they were before the doors of the Council's chambers. Ching reminded Clark of the proper greeting, then opened the door and announced him.

"Brothers in bonds, I greet thee thrice," Clark said, holding his arms spread before him, his palms up. He surveyed the room for a long moment as Ching closed the doors behind him and stood off to one side. On the far wall, a painting of Jor-El hung, the last ruler of Krypton.

"Gentlemen, I've called you here because we have problems. Problems that go beyond the threat of unrest and war. I have been among our people. I have seen how they are living. It pains me to see anyone living in such ramshackle conditions. We need to act *now* to rectify this problem. I have also seen the barren landscape of this planet and I have to wonder, why are we not working the soil, growing food and other goods? Gentlemen, this is a huge problem. In order for New Krypton to grow, thrive, and survive, we need to be able to provide for our own people to the best of our abilities. We need to build a strong society. We need to build and maintain farms. We need to build and maintain homes where families can thrive, not just shelters to protect them from the elements. We need to build and maintain public buildings for the betterment of our people — schools for example. I noticed more than one child in the gathered crowd earlier today. What resources do we have to provide for their needs? Where are our hospitals?"

Clark paused for a moment and took a breath. "I propose forming committees to see to these problems immediately. If we gather our people into a common cause, we can promote unity. If we can successfully sustain crops on our soil, we can be independent of other planets. Trade is a very good and important thing, don't misunderstand me. It is vital to any society. But you must think to the future. What if trade routes fail? What if you can no longer rely on the civilizations that you trade with now? How then, will our people eat? I grew up on a farm. I know what goes into maintaining crops. I may not know much about this red sun of ours, but where there is sunlight and water, something must be able to grow. Let us plant trees and flowers to beautify this planet. I speak from experience when I say that growing things can lift the spirits of the masses. Let us take the artisans who crafted this palace and set them to work rebuilding the city with their skill."

A murmur rippled through the gathered Elders. Clark looked to Zara and Ching. He gestured their permission to speak.

"He speaks the truth," Ching said. "I have been on Earth and I have seen how growing things can affect the mood of the people."

"And it makes sense to try to grow some of our own food," Zara put in. "Earth is a completely self-sufficient planet. They do not require trade with other planets to survive."

A thoughtful silence wrapped the room. Clark eyed the Elders levelly, awaiting their response. At last, a few nods began to nod. Most remained unconvinced.

"Please," Clark pleaded. "I came to this planet, leaving behind everything and everyone I know and love, to help our people. And I do believe that reshaping our society is one of the most important things that we can do."

"I will gather the building crews," said one portly man with soft, round features. His name was Hap Tet.

Clark nodded gratefully to the man. "Thank you. Trey — can I ask for you to gather committees for the ordering of the farms?"

Trey nodded. "As you wish, my Lord."

"One last thing," Clark said as an afterthought. "I know that I'm still new here and getting used to how everything is run. But, uh, why are there no women on the Council?"

More than a few mouths dropped open.

"It is forbidden!" Jen Mai said. "Our laws explicitly prohibit it!"

"Yeah, but why?" Clark persisted. "It seems to me like a little diversity might help make better decisions."

"They do not understand the way of things," Jen Mai pressed.

Clark shook his head. "The smartest person I know happens to be a woman." He touched a hand to his chest, feeling Lois' ring beneath his suit. He made the gesture casual, as if the gesture were only to convey his sincerity.

The Council did not look convinced.

*Well, two out of three changes going into effect isn't too bad, he thought to himself wryly. Much better than I had hoped coming into this.*

"And what of the threat of war?" another Elder asked. He was tall with sharp features and snowy hair. Clark thought his name was either Zen Tai or Ken Lon.

"I'm still gathering information on what threats are being posed. I will not start a war on rumor and speculation. That's all I am comfortable saying at the moment. I thank you all for your time and cooperation."

When it became clear that he was not leaving the room, the Elders began to file out. Clark stood and watched as they left. He felt sure that more than one Elder had looked at him with hidden contempt. Did Lord Nor really have their ears? Or did it stem from his odd, Earth ways? Clark couldn't be sure one way or another. At length, he was alone in the room with Ching and Zara.

"With your permission, Lord Kal-El, I will attend to my ... other duties," Ching said with a slight bow.

Clark nodded absently. Ching turned on his heel and strode from the room. Zara moved to Clark's side and followed his gaze. He was staring at the portrait of Jor-El, wrapped in thought. Zara touched his arm gently.

Clark sighed. "I just hope I'm making you proud, Dad." His voice was a whisper.

"I'm sure he'd be very proud," Zara said softly.

Clark started. He hadn't realized that he had spoken aloud. He gave a grateful smile to Zara. "Thanks." He stifled a yawn. Outside the palace, the night had fallen.

Zara led him back through the palace to their private quarters. Clark stood at the windows for a moment, searching the stars and planets, wondering which was Earth. This far away, it was impossible for him to tell. Zara seemed to sense his thoughts.

"Earth is right there," she said, pointing between two bright stars. Clark could see a faint glittering. A new sense of despair washed over him.

*My heart is out there, he thought to himself. Oh Lois, I should never have left you. I don't know how to be Lord Kal-El. I don't know how to be Kryptonian. I only want to be Clark. I only want to be your husband. And, I admit, I miss being Superman too.*

He sighed. He leaned his arm against the glass and rested his forehead against his forearm, eyes closed.

*I'll find a way back home, I swear, Lois. I love you.*

He pushed away from the window. He pulled the armchair up to a round, glass table. He went to the bookcases in the room and pulled out a scroll with a map of New Krypton. He spread the map on the table and studied the contours of the land. He located several likely places for the experimental farms. Secretly, he hoped that his instincts were right. He truly did hope that they could grow some form of crops. Zara looked over his shoulder and he showed her what his plans were. She nodded in agreement on most areas. On a few of them, she pointed out a few neighboring areas that would be better suited for the job.

*I need you to look through the laws, he thought to Zara, not trusting that the walls might not have ears. See if you can find any sort of loophole for this whole ... marriage thing. See if there is a way that I can set you up as ruler. See if we can block Nor from marrying you. I'd do it myself, but I can't read Kryptonian.*

Zara nodded in understanding and went to retrieve the black leather-bound tome that contained all of New Krypton's laws. She settled onto the bed and began to read. Clark studied his map once more, mentally ticking off the places where he thought they could fight if war broke out. He folded his arms on the table and rested his head against them. Before he knew it, he was asleep. Zara noticed, rose, and gently covered his sleeping form with a blanket.

~~~~~ Superman ~~~~~

Weeks passed. Clark was kept constantly busy as he checked on the progress of each of the public works committees. He worked alongside the farming committee most days, building greenhouses and planting seeds. It felt good, he noted, to have his hands in soil again. Ever since he'd taken on the Superman persona, he hadn't had much time to work on his parents' farm. It was strangely freeing to feel the dirt under his nails and to be giving his committee lessons in farming. He felt a definite moment of pride when one of the makeshift greenhouses produced the first small sprouts. He ordered the committee to begin seeding the fields that had been set aside for the farms. He met with Ching whenever he could, but the man had no news on what Lord Nor and the House of Zod might be planning. Clark began to nearly hope that perhaps Nor wouldn't challenge him.

Nights were the roughest time for Clark. He spent hours every night staring out of the windows at the distant Earth, clutching Lois' ring, sending out his thoughts to her. He wondered desperately if she could hear his messages, although he knew it was unlikely. He slept in a reclining chair, leaving the bed to Zara. The sore necks that he often woke up with were worth it, in his mind. When he dreamed, he dreamed of Lois. He looked forward to those dreams, for then he could feel her touching him, could taste her in the softness of her lips as she kissed him, could see her eyes sparkling with the love she had for him, could hear the laughter that melted his heart, could smell the sweet perfume that was purely her. Waking from those dreams were the worst parts of his days.

The fourth week since his arrival on New Krypton dawned. Clark was jerked from his dreams as an explosion ripped through the air outside of the palace. The walls shook from the force of the impact. Clark was instantly on his feet and at the window. From his vantage point, he couldn't see what was happening. He

was out the door in the next instant, running through the palace halls. As he ran, he met up with Ching. Ching looked relieved to have found Clark.

"Lord Kal-El," Ching called out breathlessly.

"What's going on, Ching?"

"It's Lord Nor. He's gathered an army in secret. I don't know how. He's declared war. The city and palace are under fire."

Clark swore under his breath as they raced to the War Chamber, where the military was standing by, awaiting orders. They reached it in minutes. Clark reached the doors first, threw them open, and strode into the room. His face was flushed from the effort of running and his breath was a little short. He could not hide the fact that he'd been running. He did not care. There were more important things at the moment. He quickly greeted the men standing in the room.

A translucent hologram of a map hung in the middle of the room. Clark stepped up to it, looking at the red areas where the city had sustained damage. A series of red, blinking dots crawled across the map — Nor's troops. The green were his own troops.

Clark addressed his top military officials and found himself quickly briefed on the situation outside of the palace walls. He gave a few orders on troop placement and defensive lines, but acknowledged that his men knew the tactical side of war better than he did. He assured them that he trusted their judgments.

"Open the palace doors to anyone that is hurt or displaced. Get the physicians here *now* to tend to anyone who needs them. Keep a tight guard. Use the main receiving hall. That should be big enough night now. Don't allow anyone to leave that hall. Get search teams out there to look for any dead or wounded." He turned to Ching. "Come with me. You and I are going out there."

Ching's face blanched. "What? I mean ..." he tried to cover his mistake in how he had addressed Clark.

Clark cut him off. "I *need* to do this, Ching."

Ching lowered his voice as the military leaders scattered in every direction to carry out their Lord's wishes. "You aren't Superman here. You can be hurt or killed here."

"I am *not* going to hide behind these walls while my people risk their lives for me," Clark hissed. "Maybe I can confront Nor and stop this before it gets any worse."

Ching said nothing and led Clark to what Clark could only describe as a giant hangar with military vehicles. Ching chose an armored green jeep. They strapped in and sped away. Clark blinked as they came out into the sunlight. Already the day was growing bright. He'd marveled in the past few weeks how the red sun was so like Earth's yellow one, in terms of the heat and light it gave off. Only as it rose and set did it throw any sort of red light. Still, the effect on his powers was devastating. Clark felt naked without them, even after a month.

They entered the city. Clark kept his eyes forward, watching as his troops picked through rubble from collapsed homes. Anger swelled in him. He would make Lord Nor pay for his crimes.

"Stop here," Clark instructed as they came to a decimated row of homes. There was a crying woman picking through the debris.

Ching stopped the vehicle and Clark bolted out the door. He ran to the pile of broken stone, plaster, and imported wood.

"My boys were in there," the woman wailed.

"Stand back," he told her.

Clark began to dig. He grunted with effort as he moved aside wood and stone, sheer adrenaline fueling his strength. Ching appeared at his side.

"Dig," Clark instructed him as he tossed aside a beam of heavy wood.

In minutes, they had cleared away the rubble. In a pocket beneath, the woman's two small boys had been trapped. The older of the two was no more than five years old and the younger was about a year old. Clark eased himself into the pocket,

murmuring soothing words to the frightened children. He dropped into the hole beside them. The older boy protectively held his little brother to him.

"It's okay," Clark said softly, not wanting to further frighten the children. "I'm here to help." He knelt down in the debris and held his arms open. "Come on. Let me get you two out of here. Please?"

The older boy looked at him for a moment, deciding. Then, slowly, he nodded, blue eyes wide from the terror of the ordeal.

"It's okay," Clark repeated. "I'm going to take your brother out of here first and then I'll come back for you. Is that okay?"

The boy nodded and loosed his grip on his brother. Clark picked up the younger of the two, pressing the little one to his chest with one hand and using the other to grab handholds. Carefully, he climbed back out. Ching grabbed his arm and helped him as he reached the top of the hole. He handed the child to his mother and then went back in. He helped the older boy climb onto his back. The child clung to him tightly. Clark pulled himself out of the hole once more, then knelt so the boy could hop off of his back.

"Thank you, Lord Kal-El," the woman said. "You saved my children's lives."

Clark smiled at her and gave her a reassuring touch on the shoulder. "There is help waiting at the palace. Take your boys there. Have the doctors look them over, just to be sure."

He waved over a passing military vehicle and instructed the driver to take the woman and her boys to the palace. He turned and got back into the jeep, Ching on his tail. Clark sat back in his seat, troubled. Ching looked at him.

"Don't say it, Ching," Clark said softly. "I *had* to help. It's what I do."

Ching's mouth quirked up into a smile. "Actually, I was going to congratulate you on a job well done."

Clark smiled. "Thanks. Let's keep moving. There may be others in trouble. And if you see any of Nor's troops, I want you to stop."

Ching put the vehicle into gear. "It is well that the people of Earth call you a hero," he said as he drove.

Clark shook his head. "I've never looked at myself that way. I just ... help ... if I can."

Ching chuckled. "You *are* a hero, Kal-El. You do what's right even when it pains you to."

They drove on in silence. The day wore on. Clark stopped a few times to direct people to the makeshift shelter in the palace. He aided his troops in three more rescues. The early sunset was coming on when they began to finally head back to the palace. They rounded a corner and Ching jammed on the brakes. A small group of Nor's renegade troops stood facing off with a small squadron of Clark's troops. They hadn't been noticed, it seemed. Ching started to slowly reverse the vehicle.

"No. Stop," Clark said.

The jeep halted. Clark threw the door open. He could see a few of his men stealthily circling Nor's men. He slowly advanced, placing each step carefully so as not to make a noise. He signaled to his own men. The group made a tightening noose around Nor's men. There were five in all. All were armed to the teeth. Four held some strange form of machine gun that Clark didn't recognize. One massive man held a rocket launcher. He was easily taller and broader than Clark. Clark motioned silently to his troops. With a sudden shout, Clark and his men sprang towards the renegades. Clark threw himself at the man with the rocket launcher. He'd played football in college and knew how to tackle a man. Taken by surprise, the man went down easily. Clark tried to wrest the weapon from his hands, but the big man's grip was like steel. The man regained his composure and began to fight back. Clark was out muscled and the man gained his footing. Clark hung on to the grip he had on the rocket launcher.

He did not have a chance to spare a look at how the rest of his men were doing.

The man he fought wrenched the rocket launcher from Clark's fingers. He swung the weapon like a club. Clark had barely time enough to avoid being struck in the head. On the second swing, he made a grab for the weapon once more. When he missed, he used his momentum to try and tackle the man again. This time, the man stayed standing. He grabbed Clark by the collar of his suit and lifted him, bringing him within an inch of his face. A murderous smile broke out on the man's dirt streaked face. Clark kicked, bringing his knee forcibly into the man's groin. A look of pain shot across the renegade's face and he threw Clark like a rag doll. As the man sank to his knees, Clark struck the hard packed ground. His head connected sharply with a rock.

For a moment, Clark was stunned. His head ached. He gingerly touched the temple that had hit the rock and felt the wet warmth of blood. He pulled his hand away and inspected the red, sticky fluid that now covered his fingertips. He'd bled before, of course, when Kryptonite stripped him of his protective aura or when his powers had been transferred to Lois for a few days. The sight of blood always unnerved him. To see his own always terrified him.

His troops had subdued the group of Nor's renegades. They were bound hand and foot with glowing white bands of energy. Clark knew that the bonds were as strong as any chain, though he didn't quite understand how the science of how it worked. Nor's men were still trying to struggle, but the military kept them secured. Their weapons were in the back of a topless jeep. Clark peered at the weapons with disgust, his hand still pressed to his head.

"See what you can find out about Nor's plans," he instructed one of the generals. "I want to know everything. Where his base is. How many more men he's got. What sort of weapons he has. But mostly, I want Nor. Find him and bring him to me."

"Yes, my Lord."

"Are you all right?" Ching asked and Clark pulled his hand from his head again. He was still bleeding.

"Fine," Clark replied.

"You are bleeding," Ching observed.

"I'll live. It's just a minor scratch. And I'll probably have a headache for a while. Let's get back."

Ching put the jeep into gear once more. They sped towards the palace. Word of Clark's deeds that day preceded him. As soon as he stepped foot into the palace, physicians were at his side, checking him over. They refused to leave his side until he finally let them see to his wounds. Aside from the cut on his head, he'd managed to scrape his hands and knees. At last, they were satisfied that he was in no immediate danger and he was able to slip back to his private chambers to eat and sleep.

Two days of uneasy peace followed. Clark was troubled. The men they had captured had refused to divulge any information on Nor or his whereabouts. The military scouts had turned up nothing. Clark spent his hours in meeting after meeting. Two of the experimental farms had been razed to the ground.

On the third day, the fighting broke out anew. Once again, Clark and Ching hopped into their jeep and headed into the fray. As they were finishing up the arrest of three more renegades, Jen Mai approached Clark. He pulled him off to one side.

"Lord Kal-El, I have news. I have followed General Zod to Lord Nor's base. Come with me and I will take you to him."

Clark hesitated a moment. He still had a bad feeling about Jen Mai. But what if he was wrong? What if the man truly could offer him Nor's location? After a long moment, he nodded.

"Okay, Jen Mai. Take us to him."

He called for Ching and the group of ten soldiers that were in the area. A convoy was soon arranged. Clark and Jen Mai rode

with Ching. Jen Mai instructed them as they drove through the city. Before long, they were stopped in front of an ordinary looking home. They disembarked from their vehicles. The surrounding area was quiet. The hairs on the back of Clark's neck stood up. Uneasiness roiled in his stomach. Something wasn't right.

The attack happened quickly and from every direction. Clark's men were outnumbered. Clark managed to knock out a few of the attackers but then something hit him on the back of the head. The world went black and he knew no more.

~~~~~ Superman ~~~~~

Clark awoke to find himself laying on a cold stone floor. His head throbbed. Gingerly, he sat up. The movement brought a fresh explosion of pain in his head. For a moment, it threatened to make him black out again. Determinedly, he fought to stay conscious. Nausea roiled in his stomach. It was an effort not to vomit. His vision swam in and out of focus. He closed his eyes and concentrated on his breathing. After a few minutes, he opened his eyes again. His vision was improved. He reached his hands to the back of his head and was mildly surprised when he did not feel any blood. It was an awkward maneuver, as Clark's hands and feet were bound with lengths of heavy chain. Dimly, he wondered why chains and not the energy fueled bonds that he'd seen used on Nor's renegades.

He looked around the room he found himself in. It was carved out of solid stone, like that of the palace, but of a dull, pale gray color. The walls, floor, and ceiling were roughly hewn and he could see not a single joint or crack. It seemed to be all of one giant carved slab of rock. He was locked in a cage, the bars of some unknown metal. He'd seen every type of metal on Earth and a few types in space as he'd moved asteroids. This was unlike any that he'd ever come across. It was jet black and seemed almost to swallow up whatever light touched it. Beyond the bars were a couple of blank video screens on the far walls. Three men stood watching him. Jen Mai was one of them.

"Good morning, *Lord Kal-El*," said the one with the shoulder length, blonde hair. "How are you finding your accommodations?" The voice dripped with mockery.

"Who are you? Where am I? What happened to my troops?" Clark demanded as he struggled to his feet. He gripped the cell bars to steady himself.

Jen Mai approached the bars, reached in, and backhanded Clark across the mouth. Blood gushed from his lips as they tore on the studs of the gloves that Jen Mai wore.

"You will speak to Lord Nor Zod with respect," he sneered.

"Lord Nor?" Understanding crept into Clark's mind, dispelling the lingering haze in his mind. "I always knew there was something not quite right about you, Jen Mai. When the Council finally catches up to you, I swear I will make you pay for your attacks on the people. All of you."

"The Council will soon be mine to control," Lord Nor said. "You are going to ensure that that happens."

"What do you mean?" Strength rang in Clark's voice as he recovered from the blow to his head.

"I mean that unless the Council gives me what I want, you will die."

"What did you do to my men out there?" Clark demanded. Fire burned in his eyes.

"They are dead. Well, all but one who will deliver my message to the Council."

Clark hung his head as guilt flooded his heart.

*I was the one to agree to follow Jen Mai. I should have followed my gut instinct to not trust the Elder. The men who died ... their blood is on my hands. They died following my lead. They died defending me.*

"What do you want from me?" he asked, some of his fire still searing his words.

"Everything. Your wife. Your throne. Your life."

"You know that I'll never give you that, Nor."

Lord Nor tossed his head back and laughed. "You are hardly in a position to refuse me. Besides, I don't need *you* to give me what I want."

"The Council will never bow to you."

Nor gave him an amused glance. "Oh but they will. When they do, you will be my slave. And when I get bored of *that*, you will die. A fitting end for the last son of the House of El." A low beeping rang out in the darkness behind Clark's captors. "Ah, that will be the Council now. General, switch on the screens."

The video screens behind Nor flickered into life. The men turned to look at them. Clark could see a panorama of the Council of Elders. His heart sank when he did not see Ching. He hoped that Ching had escaped. He'd become fast friends with the man. And more importantly, Zara loved him.

*He isn't an Elder*; Clark reasoned to himself. *Even if he did survive the attack, he wouldn't necessarily be present for this ... meeting.*

"Brothers in bonds, I greet thee thrice," Nor said, arms outstretched, palms up. There was a hint of mockery to his tone.

"Lord Nor, what is the meaning of this?" Trey asked. "You openly attack our people. You murder our troops. And now you wish to ... bargain?"

"I'll put it to you simply," Nor replied. "I have the Lord Kal-El. I demand that the Council strip him of his title, his throne, and his marriage to Lady Zara. I will then take over as King and husband. In exchange, I will stop my attacks on the city and allow Kal-El to live."

"You're mad!" Trey exclaimed, horror painting his features.

"General Zod!" Nor said. "Bring the prisoner here. Let us prove to these distinguished men that we do indeed have their precious lord."

Clark's cell door opened as General Zod stepped in. He was a tall, solid man with a stern expression and a close cropped, receding hair line. A series of scars marred the man's face, including one deep, long, white, puckered scar over his left eye. It was amazing that the man could see out of it. Clark saw in the man's eyes that murder came easily to him. He tried to shrink away. General Zod grabbed Clark's collar and roughly shoved him out of the cell to stand before the video screens. The sheer brute strength of the General astounded Clark. He held his head high, putting on as regal an act as he could. Murmurs of shock rippled through the Council of Elders as they watched on their video screens.

"Release him at once!" cried a white-haired Elder.

"Rest assured that no harm will come to Kal-El ... yet," Nor assured them. "That is, provided that you give me what I want."

"Don't," Clark called out. "He'll destroy New Krypton if he rules. My life isn't worth the lives of hundreds."

General Zod cracked Clark across the mouth with his free hand. "Silence!"

"We will never bow to you, Lord Nor," another Elder said.

"Oh please," Nor said with false sympathy. "I'll tell you what. It's a big decision. I'll contact you at this same time in ... oh, another week. If you still refuse, I *will* hurt your beloved son of Jor-El."

The video screen clicked off. General Zod shoved Clark back into his cell, pushing him roughly into the far wall. He punched Clark in the stomach for good measure. Clark staggered and regained his balance.

"We should just kill him now," the General said, his voice like the grating of gravel.

Nor shook his head. "No. He's better leverage left alive. Besides, if we kill him now, it'll just make him a martyr. Already the people are abuzz with how great a leader he is. He's already won the hearts of this planet. Continue your attacks on the city.

Make it known that Lord Kal-El and the Council have refused to listen to reason and that their refusal is to blame for every toppled building and every death.”

General Zod bowed and left the room. Clark followed his retreat as he mounted the steps.

*I must be underground, he thought. He's going up the stairs to reach the ground floor.*

He frowned. It wasn't much of a lead to go on. And it certainly didn't do him much good locked up as he was. But he also knew that even the slightest bit of knowledge could only aid him if an opportunity ever arose to make a desperate escape plan. Nor studied him for a moment, then pushed a button on the wall. The button turned from green to red.

Clark tried to reach out his thoughts to Trey but found his thoughts blocked, as thoroughly as a wall of lead blocked his X-ray vision. He wondered briefly if lead had the same effects on New Krypton. There was no way to tell since all of his powers were gone.

“Don't bother trying to call for help. This bunker is shielded. No one can hear your screams. No one can hear your thoughts. Enjoy your stay.”

He laughed as he exited the room, Jen Mai in his wake.

Clark sighed and slumped to the floor. His cell was completely barren. Not even a bench or a chamber pot broke up the emptiness. At least his shackles weren't attached to the wall, though he saw sturdy rings embedded into the stone. It, like the chains he wore, were of the same dense metal as the cell bars. Clark had been in prison many times before. Usually he was dropping off criminals as Superman. Sometimes, he visited inmates as Clark, following leads on the stories that he and Lois were chasing. Once, he'd even been in prison as an inmate, back when Metropolis had thought that Superman was responsible for the freak heat wave. But in all of those situations, even in his blackest hour of despair when he too thought that Superman was responsible for the heat, he'd never once felt so powerless. He'd never once been scared. Now he was terrified. Terrified that the Elders might give in to Nor's demands. Terrified that they wouldn't. He didn't want to see New Krypton under the rule of a madman. But he certainly didn't want to die either.

*If it comes down to it, I would rather see hundreds saved than my own life, he thought to himself. Lois, forgive me. I'll do whatever I can to bring about peace and return home. But I don't know if I will be able to.*

He pulled the silver chain out from under his suit and studied Lois' wedding ring, just as he had every night since he'd left Earth. He brought it to his lips and kissed it lightly, symbolically kissing Lois in the action. He pictured her in his mind's eye. Memories swept him. This time, he could see her at the Smallville Corn Festival when they'd been trying to help Wayne Irig. He could clearly see her in the country dress that she'd bought at the fair, knowing that he would get a kick out of seeing her in it. He could almost feel her in his arms as they'd danced.

He sighed and replaced the ring beneath his suit once more. He had to keep it hidden from Nor. He couldn't bear to be parted with that small piece of home. That one tangible memory of Lois. Sighing, he leaned his head back against the cold stone. His mind turned to the button that Nor had pressed.

*It must activate the shielding that Nor spoke of. Red must mean that the shield is up. Green must mean that it's off. But why would he risk turning it on and off? Unless ... maybe he needs to take the shielding down to transmit from the video screens? I'll have to try it next time he and the Elders speak.*

A tiny spark of hope bloomed in his heart only to quickly be extinguished as he realized that it would be another week before Nor planned on contacting the Elders. A shiver of fear rocked him as he wondered what that week would bring.

All sense of time was lost in the eternal night of the

underground room. Not a single window was to be seen. There was no hint of sunlight or starlight. Time was marked only by the irregular intervals when Jen Mai brought him food. Mostly, it consisted of a thin soup, a crust of bread, and lukewarm water. For Clark's high Kryptonian metabolism, it was barely enough to survive on. Pounds slipped from his body. He grew weaker.

The week crawled by. Sometimes, Clark was left in utter darkness, the control panel for the video screens and shielding the only lights to be seen in the pitch black. They were the only way he could tell if his eyes were open or not most of the time. Sometimes, the lights were left on, harsh and glaring.

At last, the day came when Lord Nor appeared before his cell again. He pressed the red button. It turned green and he turned the video screens on. Before Clark could gather his thoughts to send a message to Trey, General Zod forced him to leave the cell to stand before the monitors. A swift punch to his gut shattered Clark's concentration. The General smiled cruelly at him and pushed him to his knees.

“Don't get any ideas, *hero*,” he spat.

Lord Nor greeted the Elders once more. “Well, let's cut straight to the chase, shall we? What have you decided?”

“We utterly reject your demands,” Trey said.

Nor sighed in impatience. “Very well. I will give you more time. This time, I will not be so kind to Kal-El. General!”

General Zod produced a dagger from a sheath on his belt. He slashed Clark across his right cheek. Blood poured from the wound and Clark grunted in pain before he could stop himself. A cry of rage erupted from the Council of Elders.

“Stop at once!” they demanded.

“I will stop when my demands are met,” Nor said coldly.

“Don't give in,” Clark commanded through gritted teeth.

“Another outburst from him and you may cut out his tongue, General,” Nor said with a deadly calm voice.

Clark clenched his jaw, the muscles straining. Anger burned in his eyes. He gazed intently at the video monitors, hoping that his expression got his message across. He saw the Elders shaking their heads. He saw the fear on their faces.

“Think well on your decision, gentlemen,” Nor instructed.

“And know that Kal-El will suffer until you agree to my demands.”

The screens clicked off again and the shielding was switched on. Clark was put back in his cell. This time, the General and Nor shut themselves in with him. General Zod pushed Clark into the wall, his dagger still held in his hand. He brought it to Clark's throat and quickly slashed downwards. The finely honed edge sliced through his black suit with ease. He was stripped to the waist, the dagger cutting away the fabric from his body in ragged chunks.

“Can't have blood on your fine clothing, *my lord*,” Nor sneered at him. Twisted amusement glinted in his eyes. “Take the rest,” he said, addressing his General.

General Zod nodded grimly. The rest of Clark's clothing was cut from his body. Nor reached out to the golden ring that hung about Clark's neck. He twisted the chain around his hand once and yanked. The slender chain snapped. Nor examined the ring in his hand.

“What have we here?” He looked at Clark. “Speak!”

“It's nothing that concerns you,” Clark growled.

Nor snorted a laugh. “A trinket from Earth perhaps? A memento to remember your former world by? Well, you won't be needing this. You will never see *that* planet again.”

He slipped the ring and broken chain into his pocket. Clark made a move towards Nor to try and grab the ring back. General Zod stopped his movement with a blow to the head. Clark slumped over, dazed but conscious.

“It means nothing to you,” he said quietly.

“That is where you are wrong,” Nor said, squatting and

bringing his face close to Clark's. "It means something to *you*. Therefore, it means that *I* am *very* interested in it."

Nor stood and appraised Clark. The General had a booted foot on Clark's chest, pinning him down against the uneven wall.

"Teach this mongrel a lesson," he told the man. "And don't spare your arm."

~~~~~ Superman ~~~~~

A wicked smile touched General Zod's features. He paused a moment. Clark suspected that he had sent a message to Jen Mai, for after a minute, the Elder appeared. He had a box with him. Clark watched with growing fear as Jen Mai opened the cell door, entered, shut the door behind, and opened the box. General Zod took a moment to fasten Clark's shackles to a ring on the wall, leaving Clark to face the gray stone. Clark tried to throw a glance over his shoulder, but the angle was wrong and he could see nothing behind him. The General rooted around in the box for a moment.

Clark heard the crack of a whip a fraction of a second before he felt the stinging pain as it connected with his body. He screamed as it peeled away strips of his flesh. Lord Nor laughed his approval.

*No, not a whip exactly. More like a cat of nine tails of some sort,* his mind relayed to him even as his scream broke off.

Five points of searing pain rocked his body. He could feel the pain spreading like fire across his back. He could feel the warm, sticky blood oozing from the stripes. Again pain bloomed over his back as the General brought the instrument into action. This time, Clark was ready. He gritted his teeth and set his jaw against the pain. He did not want to scream. He refused to allow Nor his amusement.

*Snap! Crack! Snap! Crack! Snap! Crack!*

Clark lost count of the lashes he received. His entire body was tense against the blows. He tried to force his thoughts to more pleasant things. He tried to picture Lois sitting by the fountain in Centennial Park when he'd proposed. He tried to picture the kiss he'd given her in the honeymoon suite of the Lexor. He tried to picture Lois in his arms on Spencer Spencer's tropical island. The pain erased all train of thought. Nothing was real but the pain.

After a while, Nor ordered the General to cease the abuse. Clark's chains were removed from the rings on the walls. A punch to his stomach easily crumpled him and he was left alone, naked and bleeding in the utter dark.

Clark lay, eyes closed, in a fetal position. His head was thick with the haze of lingering pain. The cold stone floor offered no relief. Silent tears flowed from his eyes. They were partly born of the agony he was in. Mostly, they were the result of the loss of Lois' ring. At last, the events and pain overwhelmed him. Darkness took him as he passed out.

He awoke, hours later, to Jen Mai outside of his cell. The Elder was bringing Clark his meager daily meal. Clark forced himself to sit up, the dried blood on his back making his skin taut and uncomfortable. He felt a couple of the scabs break with the movement. He ignored it and ate hungrily. Jen Mai pulled a chair over into the middle of the room and watched as he always did. Not that Clark ever took long to eat. Clark stuffed the last bite of bread into his mouth and washed it down with the last sip of warm water. He studied Jen Mai over the brim of the cup.

"Why, Jen Mai?" he asked softly, pleading in his eyes. He had to get the man to talk.

"Because you are unfit to rule."

"And Nor is? Jen Mai, I have to believe that you know better than that." He was taking a huge risk by talking to him. Clark knew that. But if he could only get the man to see reason, he might have a chance of surviving.

"Lord Nor will usher in a new age in which New Krypton will once again rise up in power."

"By killing his own people?" Clark's voice was soft but urgent. "There are only a thousand of us left alive. Less now, after his attacks, I suppose. Don't you see that he's *destroying* New Krypton?"

"And why would a child of Earth care?" Jen Mai looked bored of the conversation. "Besides, we don't need this planet to survive."

"Because the same Kryptonian blood flows in my veins, as it does in yours. I don't want to see our people decimated. A thousand isn't a large population as it is. And I don't like to see anyone suffer or die."

"Then renounce your title to Lord Nor."

Clark shook his head. "I can't do that. Nor *will* lead this world into oblivion." Jen Mai chuckled. "What do *you* get out of all of this?" Clark asked, trying a different approach. Silently, he was glad he'd interviewed so many close-lipped officials in his time. It gave him a slight edge.

"Anything I want. Wealth. Power. I will become the Chief Elder when Lord Nor disbands the Council."

"And how do you know that Nor will deliver on his promises?" Clark still held his voice at the same steady, low tones.

"He will keep his promises. Of that I am sure. Nice try though."

Jen Mai stood and took the tray away. He turned and was about to exit the room when Clark spoke again, in one last ditch effort to get Jen Mai to see the truth about Nor.

"Wait," Clark pleaded. Jen Mai stopped and turned towards him. "What did you mean before? When you said that you don't need *this* planet to survive."

A smile curved the corner's of the Elder's mouth. "When Lord Nor is crowned as our king, he will lead our people in the conquest of other planets."

"Conquest?"

Jen Mai nodded. "We will start with Earth. Lord Nor hears rumors that the yellow sun gives us powers beyond reason there. We will be unstoppable."

Clark gaped silently. "He's insane," he whispered.

Jen Mai fixed Clark with a cold stare. "That's enough out of you," he growled. "Another word and the General will be more than happy to relieve you of your tongue."

Clark sighed and brought his hands up in a gesture of pacification. Satisfied, the Elder turned away and went back out of the room, leaving the harsh lights on. Clark dropped his head into his chest and sighed again.

*I've done all I can. I just hope it was enough. Enough to plant the seed of doubt in Jen Mai. Maybe there is enough goodness left in him. I've always believed that there is good in everyone. He snorted to himself. Is that really true though? Was there any goodness left in Luthor? Is there any goodness within Nor? Luthor was at least capable, perhaps, of loving someone. He proved it when he let me take Lois out of that crumbling subway tunnel. But Nor? Nor is truly evil incarnate. And so is General Zod. He shook his head. Come on Clark! This isn't helping anything. Stop brooding! Think!*

Try as he might, no plan of action came to his mind. He yearned for even five minutes with his powers restored to him. Always before he had dreamed of life as a normal man. Always he wondered what it would be like, not having to exercise restraint every time he took a breath or touched something. Now, he realized what a blessing his powers had really been. He felt empty without them, like half of himself was missing. A new sense of bitterness washed over him. He hugged his knees to his chest and groaned at his situation, ignoring the sharp stabs of protest that his back sent out.

He passed another span of hours alone in his cell. He dozed lightly from time to time. Soon, Nor and General Zod returned.

They entered his cell. This time, the General had a cruel set of brass knuckles adorning both of his hands.

"Have you changed your mind yet, Kal-El?" Nor asked, dangerously.

"Never," Clark said, mustering up every ounce of defiance that he had.

"You really are stupid you know." Nor glanced at General Zod. "Proceed."

General Zod pulled Clark up by his hair to stand. He chained the shackles to a ring in the wall above Clark's head. He cracked his knuckles and then swung his fist. The blow caught Clark square in the chest. Pieces of his flesh were ripped from him as the barbed metal points pulled away from his body. Clark stifled the scream that rose in his throat. Another blow caught him in the stomach. More chunks of flesh were torn from him. Clark clenched his jaw as tightly as possible. He focused his gaze on the ceiling, refusing to lock eyes with Nor. He would not let the man see his pain. A grunt escaped him at a particularly savage blow over his right kidney. Tears brimmed in his eyes. Silently, he pleaded with them not to fall, but a traitorous few did anyway, matching the fat droplets of blood that oozed down his body.

How long the brutality lasted, Clark couldn't tell. Time ceased to exist. There was only white-hot, blinding pain. Eventually, Nor gave the order to stop. Clark was thrown to the floor and immediately sank into the blessed darkness of unconsciousness.

The cycle repeated itself day after day. Clark thought that it must be weeks now since the last communication with the Elders. Always Nor would accompany his General and watch in amusement at the abuse that Clark was receiving. Sometimes the odd cat of nine tails was employed. Sometimes the brass knuckles made an appearance. Occasionally, the General attacked him with a club-like weapon that reminded Clark a lot of a policeman's night stick. Each time, before the beatings started, he was offered the chance of surrendering his title and kingdom to Nor. Each time, Clark vehemently denied Nor what he sought.

He did not see Jen Mai after that initial talk. Sometimes, he idly wondered where the man was. Not that it mattered much, he supposed. He'd failed to talk any sense into him. The General now brought Clark his skimpy meals. He did not try to talk to the man.

Clark's body was crisscrossed in a grotesque spider webbing of wounds. His back was covered with lashes and gouges from the cat of nine tails. His chest and stomach were covered in long lines from the same instrument and were pockmarked with tiny craters where the brass knuckles had torn away his skin. Some of his wounds were beginning to scar over; the majority of them were as of yet unhealed. His skin was caked in dried blood and dirt. His thighs and arms were covered in yellow-purple bruises from the night stick. Several of his ribs were broken or cracked. Breathing was excruciating. His lips were split in three places. His eyes were puffy, bloodshot, and blackened. His nose was broken. He was now so skinny that he could count most of his bones. He was so weak that he could barely stand. Every second of every day was torture. Every sound that he heard put him into an instant panic and a cold sweat as he wondered if General Zod was coming to torture him.

Waking and sleeping blended into one continuous nightmare. Clark's thoughts grew dark. He began to wish for death. He could no longer picture Lois in his mind's eye. He could no longer hear even a ghost of her voice or a fading echo of her laugh. He could no longer recall the feel of her skin against his, taste her lips against his own. He could no longer recall the smell of her perfume. He felt dead inside, a shell of the man that he had been.

The door to his cell clanged open once more. He lifted his tired eyes just enough to see General Zod, Nor, and Jen Mai. He blinked stupidly at them with dead eyes. He didn't even register

the fleeting look of horror in Jen Mai's eyes. He couldn't summon the energy to flinch away as General Zod stepped forward. He allowed himself to be dragged out of the cell. He crumpled to the floor in front of the video monitors, supporting himself on his hands and knees. Jen Mai switched the shielding off and turned the monitors on.

A gasp of horror and outrage rang out among the Elders as they took in Clark's torn and broken body. He forced himself to meet their gazes. He tried to muster up a spark of determination in his eyes but he knew that he wasn't successful.

Lord Nor smirked as he greeted the Elders.

"What have you done?" Trey demanded.

Nor glanced casually at Clark, then brought his attention back to the screens.

"What? That? I *warned* you that I would hurt your precious Lord Kal-El if you failed to submit to my demands."

No, Clark thought to Trey. *Stand firm. I'm being held underground* ... his thoughts were shattered as General Zod cracked him in the skull with the night stick. He stubbornly struggled to maintain consciousness. Blood trickled over his ear.

"Release him at once," Trey demanded. "We will never submit to you."

Nor laughed. "I think not. But I do grow tired of playing these games. You have twenty four hours to turn over New Krypton to my rule. Refuse me again and Kal-El *will die*. Either way, I am rightfully the next in line to Zara and the throne. It matters not *how* I achieve my goal. Think well on it gentlemen."

He ended the transmission and replaced the room's shielding. Clark was thrown into his cell. He stumbled and fell. He did not rise again as he finally slipped into the darkness of the unconscious.

He awoke some time later. His vision swam before him. He blinked rapidly, trying to clear his head. After a few moments, his eyes seemed able to focus. Jen Mai stood before the bars of his cell, quietly watching. Clark shakily pulled himself to his knees. Jen Mai put a finger to his lips, gave a cautious look around, then withdrew something from the folds of his robes. He bent down and slid it between the bars to Clark. Without a word, he vanished back up the stairs.

Clark reached for the object. He grunted with the effort of stretching his body. At last his fingertips brushed it and he took hold of it. He looked at it without understanding for a long moment. His brain seemed to be moving in slow motion. He glided his fingers over it as realization finally dawned. It was a dagger in a tight leather sheath. Clark drew the weapon and inspected it, the haze in his mind suddenly vanishing like shadows at noon.

The blade was thin and delicate looking but strong and finely honed to a razor edge. The metal gleamed bright silver in the hash lighting. Clark ran an appraising finger over the flattest edge of the blade. Dark thoughts swirled in his mind. He could end his pain and suffering with this instrument. Was that what Jen Mai intended? All it would take would be one quick thrust to the heart. Or maybe one precise slash to his wrist. He turned his left arm to look at the delicate, thin layers of skin above the blue veins. One quick slash and he could spill his lifeblood to the stone floor and be done with the torture. He brought the gleaming blade within half an inch of his flesh.

"I'm so sorry, Lois," he whispered.

~~~~~ Superman ~~~~~

Clark closed his eyes, trying to ready himself. His hand trembled violently. After a minute, he pulled the blade away and sheathed it once more. An anguished cry bubbled up his throat. Tears pricked his eyes. For a long while, he just sat, cradling the dagger against his body, openly weeping.

After a while, he mastered his emotions once more. He sat back against the wall, hiding the dagger between the stone and

his flesh. A new resolve hardened within him. He would fight, the next time someone came into his cell. He only hoped that he would have the strength to do so.

He allowed himself to sleep. For once, his rest was dreamless. He had long since stopped dreaming of Lois. General Zod and Nor had invaded his mind instead and Clark often relived the torture he'd received at their hands. He awoke hours later, feeling refreshed in ways that he had not felt since before he'd been taken prisoner.

Hours later, Lord Nor and General Zod reappeared. Clark held the dagger, unsheathed in the shelter of his body as he sat hugging his knees to his chest. A hidden reserve of strength and willpower boiled within him, reserves that he did not know that he had. He kept his eyes down, acting the part they expected to see. He kept his eyes as dull and lifeless as he could. The cell door creaked open. General Zod stepped in to collect Clark. He held a long knife in his hand.

Every muscle in Clark's body was as taut as a bowstring. His heart was beating wildly in his chest. Fear and hope dueling within his soul. Outwardly, though, he maintained the look of a weak wraith of a person. He looked wearily up at the approaching General.

General Zod grew nearer. Clark was ready. He gripped the hilt of his small dagger tightly. The General stooped to grab him. Clark sprang, ignoring the weight of the chains on his wrists and ankles. The dagger collided with General Zod's intestines. It sank to the hilt. A look of shock and surprise covered his face. A roar of pain was all that he could get out before a bright red bubble of blood appeared in his gaping mouth and then burst, staining his lips. A glazed look covered his eyes as he died. The long knife he held clattered to the stone floor even as his body tipped to the side as he fell.

Clark quickly grabbed the knife that General Zod had held moments before. He advanced on Nor, making his way towards the cell door. Adrenaline kept his feet moving forward. Lord Nor screamed in rage. He reached to the holster at his side and withdrew his firearm.

"Just you and me now, Nor," Clark said, brandishing the weapon before him.

A look of mild fear flickered for one brief second in Nor's eyes as he caught the deadly gleam in Clark's eyes. He hadn't expected his prisoner to fight back. He raised the gun and aimed it at Clark's heart. Clark's momentum slowed. His energy reserves were flagging. Nor recognized that fact and grew confident once more. His finger slowly squeezed down the trigger.

"Goodbye, Kal-El," he sneered, venom dripping in his voice. Two shots rang out, the sound reverberating off the dull gray walls.

Clark slumped to the floor as stinging pain ripped through his body. He cried out before he could stop himself. Before him, Nor sank to his knees, as if in a daze. He was dead before he hit the floor. As he fell, Clark could see Ching and Jen Mai standing behind him. Ching held a gun in his hand, a cold look of disgust on his face. Clark gripped at his chest, trying to put pressure on the bullet hole in his own body, trying to hold his precious lifeblood inside. Bright spots of pain danced before his eyes. He fought to stay conscious.

He was dimly aware as Ching took the keys from General Zod's belt and released the shackles that he wore. He felt almost detached from his own body, as though he were looking down on the scene playing out in the dungeon. Ching bent over Clark as several soldiers swarmed into the room. One of the men grabbed Clark in his arms and held a blanket to his gunshot wound, providing the necessary pressure. Clark grunted in fresh agony. He locked eyes with Ching.

"We've got you," Ching reassured him. "Stay with us,

Clark." He lightly draped a fresh blanket over Clark's naked, trembling body.

The meaning of Ching's words did not go unnoticed. He'd called him Clark. It was Ching's way of telling him that all was well. Or maybe it was meant to placate him before he died. Clark knew that his overall body condition was horrendous. And although he was alive now, who knew how bad his newest wound really was?

"Nor ... pocket ..." Clark gasped against the pain and fear that had suffused his body.

Ching moved to Nor's unmoving body and checked the dead man's pockets. From the front right pocket, he extracted Lois' ring. He quickly crossed over to Clark and pressed it into his hand. A thankful smile played over Clark's lips.

A medic arrived with a levitating stretcher. Clark was gently placed on top, then floated right out of the underground bunker. Clark fought to keep his eyes open as they came out into the open. It was sunset. Never before had he been grateful to see the red sun of New Krypton. He took a moment to revel in it before he was put into the back of a white vehicle that resembled an ambulance, though bigger. A team of medics was waiting inside. They fussed over him as they rode back to the palace. An IV line was placed into his left arm. His vital signs were taken. The painstaking cleaning of his various wounds was started, though they did not touch the gunshot wound.

Once they reached the palace, Clark was whisked into a private chamber. His team of physicians quickly sedated him and prepped him for surgery. Five hours later, the surgery was declared a success. The bullet had passed close to his heart but had miraculously failed to hit any vital veins or arteries, nor did it damage his lungs. Clark's broken nose was reset. All of his wounds were cleaned and the worst of them were bandaged. Not much could be done about his broken and fractured ribs. They would have to heal on their own.

When Clark awoke from his sedation, he found himself in his private bedchambers. His was laying in the plush bed, still nude beneath the sheets. A line of oxygen ran from a tank into his nostrils. The IV line was still firmly placed in his arm. He wasn't in much pain. He idly wondered what kind of pain killers they were giving him. He cautiously looked down at himself. He was clean. A thin leather cord hung about his neck, Lois' ring centered between his pectorals. A wave of relief flooded him. He clasped his right hand over the delicate golden band, holding it close.

"Lois," he murmured.

The door to the bedchamber opened. Ching and Zara strode into the room. Tight lines of worry were etched into their brows. Clark smiled, encouraging them to come in. They seemed relieved to see him awake.

"Kal-El," Zara breathed, as though still in disbelief.

"How are you feeling, my Lord?" Ching asked.

Clark managed a bitter laugh. "To be honest, I've been better. I've been a lot worse too. What happened? How'd you find me? Nor had that place shielded so I couldn't contact anyone."

Ching settled into a chair to the left of Clark's bed. "Jen Mai," he said simply.

Clark's eyes widened in disbelief. "Jen Mai?" he repeated, incredulous.

Ching saw the look, nodded, and continued. "He contacted us about sixteen hours after Nor's last transmission to the Elders. He said that he'd made a mistake. That you were right. He said that Nor was out of control. That he couldn't believe the brutality that he'd seen and that if Nor were to take the throne, he was sure New Krypton would die. He told us of Nor's plan to invade other planets. And, he told us where to find you. We assembled a task force and had to fight our way through Nor's renegades, otherwise we'd have been there sooner," he said apologetically.

"I'm just glad you made it in time. Another few minutes and I

wouldn't be here. Thank you." He shook his head in wonder. "Jen Mai. I got through to him after all. I was right. There is goodness lurking in almost everyone." A sudden thought occurred to him. "He hasn't ... I mean ... the Elders haven't ..."

Ching shook his head. "He is in holding but the Elders have not yet tried him."

"Good. Tell them not to do anything until I have the chance to talk to them."

Ching nodded and started to rise. Clark raised a hand to stop him. Ching sat.

"I also want the ... mother ship ... prepared for departure. I need to get to Earth's yellow sun. It'll heal me."

"It will be some days before you are strong enough for that," Zara said gently.

"I know. But the second that I can make the trip, I want to be on that ship. Once I am healed, the Elders can try Jen Mai. Zara, was Nor the only other noble in line for the throne after me?"

"Yes," Zara nodded.

*What happens then if I step down, denounce my title?* he thought to her, not knowing who else might be listening in on their conversation.

Zara hesitated. *I don't know. I've checked every law and every scrap of recorded history. It's never happened before. If a ruler has been overthrown or died or deemed unfit to rule, then the second noble in line has always risen to the throne.*

*Okay, Clark thought back. Then it might be possible for me to convince the Elders to set up you and Ching as rulers.*

*And what if they refuse?*

*I have to find a way of convincing them. I have no intention of staying here on this planet. I never did. You know that. Not after all that's happened. Especially not when Lois is waiting for me on Earth. I came here with the promise of preventing war from breaking out if Nor succeeded to the throne. That threat is no longer there. I need to go back to my home now.*

Ching nodded slowly. He'd been privy to the unspoken conversation. Clark suddenly gave a half smile as a plan began to form in his mind.

~~~~~ Superman ~~~~~

"Ching, can you relay my wishes to the Elders? And can you bring Trey here? I need to speak with him."

"You should be resting," the man said softly.

"I know. And I will. But this is important."

"As you desire," Ching said with a slight bow.

He disappeared from the chamber only to reappear with Trey less than twenty minutes later. Clark had slipped into a light doze while he waited. He awoke instantly as the door to the chamber opened. Trey's brow was crossed with concern. Clark greeted him as he entered.

"My Lord," Trey said with a bow. "How are you feeling?"

"Better now," Clark replied honestly. "Trey, I need a favor."

Trey blinked. "Favor? My Lord, your wishes are my command."

Clark grimaced a little at the man's groveling. He hoped that Trey would mistake the grimace for pain. "I'm going to take some time to heal," he said, choosing his words carefully. "I'm not going to be able to really ... rule ... in the interim. I know that tradition dictates that the men rule here. But I want Zara to have control while I am ... indisposed. And I want Ching to ... advise her."

Trey's eyes widened. He began to stammer. "I ... I ... I ... Uh, of course. As my Lord ... wishes. We'll have to draw up a document of course, to temporarily transfer the power to your wife."

"Do it," Clark said. "Now if you can."

An understanding look passed between Zara and Ching. *Nicely done, Kal-El,* Zara thought approvingly.

*Thanks.*

Trey nodded and took his leave. He returned with a document an hour later. Clark read it over and signed his name. He lay back, relieved that the first phase of his plan was in place. He slept deeply and dreamlessly, thanks to the pain killers coursing through his veins.

Days passed. Clark grew stronger as time went by. When he slept, he enjoyed the dreamless, deep sleep of the heavily medicated. He was grateful for the meals that were brought to him at regular intervals. The IV was removed from his arm and the oxygen line was taken away. As soon as he could, he was up out of his bed, taking short walks in the palace, recovering his muscle tone. The once form fitting black suit hung baggy on his emaciated frame. He didn't see much of Zara or Ching. They were busy in the aftermath of Nor's attacks. More buildings had been destroyed while Clark had been held captive. The death toll stood at hundred and forty-three.

At last, his physicians declared his condition stable enough to make the journey back to Earth's sun. Clark boarded the Floating Palace and paced nervously. His body was still sore and it still hurt to breathe. But he couldn't force himself to sit still. Too much was riding on the next couple of days. At last, the ship was within sight of the Earth's sun. Clark stood alone in his private chambers, stripped naked to allow every inch of his flesh to catch the sun's rays. He stood before the large windows, soaking in the healing rays. He could feel strength and vitality returning to him. He felt his muscles tense as his powers began to return. He felt his bones and flesh knit back together. Pain vanished from his body. Clark stayed like that for a long while, trying to take in as much of the sun as he could. They were close enough to Earth that Clark could use his super vision to see the inviting green and blue of the world and the white swirls of clouds. They were over Africa at the moment. He wished with all his heart that they were over North America, over his home. He looked for a long minute before his super vision cut out on him. He frowned. It seemed that it would take some time before his powers were fully operational again. Still, he took comfort in the brief sight of his planet.

After a few hours of letting the sun do its healing job, he turned from the windows and dressed. He strode purposefully towards the chamber where the Elders would be trying Jen Mai. The trial was ready to begin as soon as he arrived. He pushed open the doors to the chamber and entered. He greeted the Elders.

"Brothers in bonds, I greet thee thrice," he said, palms up, arms outstretched.

They greeted him in return. Clark took a seat and watched as the trial unfolded. Things were looking bleak for Jen Mai. At length, he rose. The room grew silent as he eyed them.

"I'm sorry to interrupt the proceedings," Clark apologized. "But I can't allow you to pass judgment just yet." He sighed as he collected his thoughts and ran a hand through his hair. "What Jen Mai did is inexcusable. He turned traitor to his own people. I know that's hard to look past. But in the end, you have to bear in mind that he did the right thing. He saw past Nor's lies, saw the evil in Nor's heart. And he abandoned Nor. He realized that his actions were wrong. He aided you in finding the hidden bunker where I was being held. He provided me with a weapon to defend myself. General Zod would have killed me if I didn't have that dagger. His gesture gave me hope and strength enough to fight back. He helped to save my life."

"What would you ask of us, Lord Kal-El?" Zen Tai asked.

Clark turned his gaze to the man, held it for a second, then swept his eyes over the entire Council. "I would ask you to spare his life."

Several jaws dropped. A gasp rippled through the room. Jen Mai could only stare at Clark.

"But the laws state that traitors are to be executed!" Zen Tai argued.

"I know," Clark continued, his voice stern and commanding. "But our laws and traditions are outdated."

"And what do you suggest?" asked Hap Tet.

"Strip him of his position as an Elder. Put him to work with the crews that are rebuilding what Nor and his followers destroyed. His actions at the end *have* earned him some leniency." A low murmuring broke out among the Elders. Clark was growing annoyed at their obstinacy. "We've already lost a *hundred and forty-three* people in this whole senseless affair. Do you really want to make it a hundred and forty-four? There are less than a thousand of us left. New Krypton *cannot* afford to kill everyone who makes a mistake."

Clark sat again as he motioned for the Elders to discuss what he'd said. He bent his head and spoke quietly with Zara and Ching. Soft conversation filled the room. At length, Trey spoke.

"It is the decision of this Council that Lord Kal-El's request be granted. Jen Mai, you are hereby stripped of your title and position on this Council. When we return to New Krypton, you will aid in the rebuilding of our farms."

Clark breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you," he said, addressing the Elders.

Tears had welled in Jen Mai's eyes at Clark's impassioned plea. He locked eyes with Clark. "Thank you, my Lord," he whispered quietly.

Clark could only nod at the man. He motioned for Jen Mai to be taken from the room and for the Elders to stay. A guard took Jen Mai away. Clark drew a deep breath to steel himself for what was to come.

"Gentlemen, I've asked you to stay behind for a reason. I need to ... discuss the future of New Krypton with you." He paused a moment, choosing his words. "I can't go back with you," he finally said simply.

A low roar of confusion and outrage broke out in the room. Clark raised his hands before him in a gesture of pacification. The room grew still again.

"Please, hear me out. When I first came to you, I wasn't very honest with you. I can't be your leader. I don't know enough about New Krypton or your laws. And what I do know, I learned from Zara and Ching. *They* are the ones who should be ruling you. My place is on Earth. The people there need me."

"*We* need you, Lord Kal-El," argued Ken Lon.

Clark shook his head. "No, you don't. You need a ruling couple that is committed to our people ... and to each other. I can't do that. My heart resides on Earth." He withdrew the ring on its' leather cord from beneath his suit. "The woman I love is on Earth. My place is with her. And with all of the people who need my help there. Zara and Ching love each other. And they know and love our people. And so, I willingly denounce my title, my right to rule, and my marriage." He left the ring hanging on the outside of his suit, the slender gold band resting atop the S glyph of the House of El.

"You can't do that!" Trey protested.

"I just did. Look, what's more important to you? Archaic traditions or the fate of our people?" He softened his tone when he realized how bitter it had become. "Please. I'm begging you. I know it isn't what you expected of me. But I do think that this is the absolute best way to ensure that both of our planets get the support that they need. You've seen for yourselves over the past week or so how wise Zara and Ching are ... how well they work together for the benefit of New Krypton."

"And we've seen how wise and compassionate a leader *you* are," Trey reminded him.

Clark shook his head again. "I know what works for Earth and I used those ideas to help what I could. It's not that I don't care about our people or that I am choosing Earth over New Krypton. I cared so much about the survival of our people that I left behind everything and everyone that I love. And now, I care

so much that I know that it is best that I step down. There is no future *with* me or *for* me on New Krypton. With Zara and Ching, there is. The ruling line will continue through them. "

"You mean you ... ?"

"I promised my love to Lois. She is the only woman that I could ever love," Clark tried to explain.

"This is all highly unusual," Trey grumbled.

"I know it is," Clark said softly.

"Would you mind if the Council were to speak in private?" Trey asked.

"Not at all."

Clark, Ching and Zara exited the room. Clark's nerves were on a knife's edge. The Council's decision would determine his fate. They reached a small study just down the hall from the Council's chamber. Clark took to pacing back and forth in front of the large windows, unable to calm himself. He tried to levitate as he did so. He managed to float an inch off the floor for a distance of about five feet before his powers gave out again. He frowned. If only his powers would come back online, he might have a chance of making it back to Earth. But in his current state, leaving the ship would be suicide. He rubbed at his neck and rifled his hand through his hair, sure signs that he was nervous. His stomach was twisted into knots of fear. Minutes dragged by. Minutes turned to hours. No one came to escort them back to the Council's chamber. Clark's nerves were shot. He did not cease his movement. The sunlight playing through the windows fueled him.

At last, nearly three hours later, a courtier came into the study. Clark instantly stopped his pacing and looked up, his expression unreadable. It was the same mask that he had carefully constructed for Superman over the years.

"The Council is ready to see you, my Lord," the man informed him.

Clark's heart was in his throat as he resolutely strode back to the chamber where his fate awaited. Zara and Ching were hard on his heels. Outside the chamber door, Clark paused, took a deep breath, and steeled himself. The three nodded to each other. They were ready.

Clark threw open the doors and walked in, head held high. His unreadable mask was still firmly affixed to his face. He'd pled his case and now he would have to accept whatever the Council of Elders decided. He stood before the gathered Elders, Ching and Zara to either side of him. He clasped his hands behind his back and swept his eyes over the room. The faces of the Council were as unreadable as his own and he wondered briefly if it was some sort of Kryptonian thing. His eyes went to Trey, the Chief Elder.

"We have discussed your ... petition ... at length," he said, fixing Clark with a level look. "And we have come to a decision. It was not an easy task. Never before has a leader willingly resigned from the Kryptonian throne. And Ching is not of noble blood."

Clark's heart sank. Stubbornly, he refused to let his mask drop. The only sign of his rising distress was the twitching of his jaw as he gritted his teeth.

"And yet," Trey continued, "we had to take into consideration your background. You grew up on Earth. Essentially, you are an Earthling in all but blood. We believe that even so, you could learn our ways and grow to be the most powerful and compassionate ruler that we have ever known. Your selfless deeds in rescuing our people and your blatant defiance of Lord Nor stands as proof of that."

Hope utterly fled Clark's heart.

"But we had to ask ourselves why that was. Why you would willingly give up the chance to lead our people into greatness. And we realized that you spoke the truth to us. We believe that you feel that you are doing the best for New Krypton. We believe

that you are telling the truth when you say that you will not continue the royal bloodlines with your offspring. Therefore, we accept your resignation and we hereby annul your marriage to Lady Zara. As per tradition, we revoke your title of Lord and hereby exile you.”

Clark realized a shuddering breath that he hadn’t realized that he was holding. He turned to Zara and to Ching and embraced them both.

”Thank you,” Clark said, addressing everyone in the room. “You don’t know what this means to me.”

The following afternoon, Zara and Ching were married before the Council and before all of New Krypton via the video screens. The new ruling couple was announced as Ching accepted a new title of nobility. As soon as he was crowned, Ching called Clark up to the dais on which he stood.

”Take a knee,” he whispered to Clark.

Clark obediently sank to one knee. Ching touched him lightly on the shoulders with both of his hands.

”Kal-El, son of Jor-El, I restore your title of Lord,” he said in a loud voice. “And I hereby revoke the sentence of exile. You will always be welcome on New Krypton. Rise, Lord Kal-El.”

Clark stood and embraced Ching. Ching gladly returned the hug. Zara also embraced Clark. Cheers rang out on the video screens.

”Thank you, Clark,” Ching said softly enough that only Clark heard. Beside him, Zara said the same.

”Thank you,” Clark replied, just as softly. “For everything.”

A feast was held that evening for the newly wedded couple. Clark stayed, feeling obligated to celebrate New Krypton’s newest ruling couple. Still, he was anxious to return to Lois. Now that he was so close to his return home, he was nervous. Would Lois reject him? He’d been gone so long. Had she moved on? Would she take one look at his scarred body and run from him? His physicians suspected that the yellow sun would cause his scars to heal and fade over time. But what about the mental scars that were left behind? He hadn’t slept well since his capture. Every time he closed his eyes, he relived his torture. He relived General Zod’s death at his hands. He’d been putting on an act ever since his rescue. He’d pretended as if his captivity hadn’t affected him. But privately, he knew that he was a changed man. He was merely existing, not truly feeling alive.

As strong as his fears were, he was still impatient to get home. Impatient to see Lois’ face again. As soon as the feast was over, he boarded a ship with Zara and Ching. In no time at all, they were directly above his apartment.

”I can’t thank you both enough,” Clark said, embracing each of them in turn. “Know that you’ll always be welcome to visit. I’d be interested in hearing about New Krypton’s progress from time to time. Zara, I wanted to apologize for the things that I said when we first left for New Krypton. I denounced my Kryptonian blood. I’m ashamed of that. I know now that I am both Kryptonian *and* human. I am of *both* worlds.”

Zara smiled at him. “Goodbye, Kal-El. I wish you and Lois all the happiness in the world.”

”Goodbye, Clark,” Ching said.

Ching flipped a switch and Clark was teleported into his living room, just as Lois was preparing for bed.

~~~~~ Superman ~~~~~

Lois clutched Clark to her. His head was on her chest. Her right arm was curled around his body. Her left hand was stroking his head comfortingly. Her faded purple T-shirt was wet with Clark’s tears. His body was shivering as he once more relived the mental and physical horrors that had befallen him on New Krypton. Lois bent her neck and buried her lips into Clark’s silky black tresses. She kissed him lightly several times. Clark relaxed a little as she caressed him. He listened to the steady rhythm of her heartbeat, the one heartbeat in the world that he knew as well

as his own.

”I’m sorry, Lois,” he said after a minute.

”Sorry? For what?”

”I must disgust you.”

”Disgust me?” she echoed. “Clark, you could never do anything that would make me look at you with anything but love.”

Clark shifted and sat up. He looked at the woman at his side, the one woman in the universe that he’d ever loved. Lois reached over and brushed away the tears that glistened on his cheeks.

”But ...” he stammered. “When I was telling you about what happened in that dungeon, you shuddered.”

”That’s because I never realized how close I was to losing you,” Lois said, a warm hand caressing his cheek.

Clark couldn’t meet her gaze. “I killed a man, Lois.”

”A man who would have killed you,” she pointed out. “Clark, you acted in self-defense.”

”That’s inexcusable for me!”

”Clark,” Lois said, cupping her hand beneath his chin to raise his head, forcing him to look at her. “If General Zod had killed you, everyone on New Krypton would have suffered and died under Nor’s rule.”

Clark sighed heavily, dropping his haunted eyes to the comforter once more. “I know. But it still doesn’t wash away the guilt that I feel. I’ve never had blood on my hands before. Not as a direct result of my actions. It has always bothered me when I am too late to save someone. But to have *taken* a life ... it makes me sick.” He paused a moment, fresh shame washing over him. “It’s not just that. Lois, I tried to kill *myself* out there. I *wanted* to. The only thing that stopped me was my lack of nerve. I was weak. I mean, I *knew* that killing myself wouldn’t do any good. I knew it would only give Nor his victory. I knew it would only disappoint you. But God, all I could think of was ending my pain. I should have been holding on for you. Thoughts of you *should* have been what stayed my hand. I couldn’t do it because I was a coward. Lois, I’ve always valued the sanctity of life above anything else. How could I even *entertain* the idea of taking my own life? Even if only for a second?”

Lois drew Clark into a hug. “Clark, stop being so hard on yourself. What you endured no one should ever have to experience. I can’t imagine what it must have been like for you. So, you had one fleeting moment of weakness. You rose above it. Something within you recognized that life is worth holding onto.”

”What if I *had* done it?” he pressed, his voice husky and tortured. “Do you know how many suicide attempts Superman has foiled? How can I go back out there and tell people how wrong it is, how nothing is so bad that they need to end their life? I’d be a fraud.”

”No,” Lois said, shaking her head as she pulled away. She looked deep into his eyes. “If anything, Clark, you understand those people even better now. And you *did* rise above that moment of utter despair. I’ve seen you talk people down from ledges before when they’ve wanted to jump. I’ve seen you talk a man out of putting a gun to his head. Those are times when I’ve seen the real man behind the suit shine through. Those are the times when the aloof personality of Superman vanishes and Clark’s good and caring soul comes to the forefront. People respond to you because they can see how much their lives mean to you. And now ... you’ve lived what they are going through, worse even. I think they’ll recognize that aspect of you, even if they don’t know why. Clark, every experience that we live through helps to shape who we are. We all have to choose whether our experiences will destroy us or if they will strengthen us. What will you decide?” There was a mild note of challenge and defiance in her voice.

Clark’s mouth quirked up into a slow smile. God, how he loved Lois’ fire and determination! He’d always thought of

himself as the eternal optimist in their relationship. Now the tables were reversed. She truly was his rock.

Outside the bedroom windows, the sky was painted in pastel blues and pinks. They had talked the night away. A new day had dawned.

"Thank you," Clark said sincerely.

Lois smiled sweetly at him as she saw some of his vitality return. "For what?"

Clark pulled her against his chest. "For loving me. For listening to this whole, horrific story. For standing by me. For not turning away from me."

"I'll always love you, Clark. I'll be here for you, no matter what. No matter how long it takes for you to heal."

"I think," Clark said slowly. "I think I already have begun to. I mean, some of the scars on my body have faded away already. And as for my mind ... I feel ... lighter ... now that I've told you everything. Lois, I've dragged my feet long enough. I need to start living again. I think it's time for Clark to return to work, say ... on Monday? I think I've been ready for the last week or so. I've just been ... kind of nervous about it. I know I've been moody and withdrawn lately. I knew that I couldn't go back so ... changed. It would raise too many suspicions." A thought occurred to him. "Do Jimmy and Perry know that I'm back?"

"Yes," she said, feeling a little guilty. "They suspected it the day after you came home. I guess I must have looked more relieved than I had in months. I told them that you needed some time before you could come back. They understood, but they miss you. Especially Jimmy. He looks at you like an older brother."

"I know. I've missed them too. Even Perry's ridiculous Elvis stories."

"Maybe you don't have to wait until Monday to see them. Remember the *Metropolis Series* I told you about?"

"Yeah. All the local papers are playing softball games to raise money for charity."

"Well, our last game is on Saturday to see who makes it to the finals. We could use another player. Chuck slipped on his son's skateboard last week and broke his arm. You *can* hit right?"

She was teasing him now and he knew it. He grinned, his face lighting up as bright as the noonday sun. How she'd missed that! It made her heart skip a beat. For the first time since Clark had come home, Lois' worry for him lifted a little.

Clark snorted in mock indignation. "I think I can manage to hit. Who are we playing?"

"Team Perry White against Team Leo Nunk." She did her best announcer voice.

"Nunk?" Clark repeated, incredulous. "Oh, we *definitely* can't let *him* win." A fresh, mischievous grin curved his lips.

"Good! I'll get you one of the extra shirts and iron KENT on the back after work today."

"How about we go out for dinner tonight?"

"Sure. Where do you want to go? I can make reservations."

"I was thinking ... I know this great little farmhouse in Kansas. The food is excellent and so is the company. It's been far too long since we've been there."

"I think your parents would love that," she agreed.

"Oh! And one more thing."

Lois caught the light of hope and love in Clark's eyes. "What's that?"

"Lois Lane, will you marry me? No planning, no waiting. Let's just do it. Before anything *else* can interrupt us."

Lois smiled against his firm chest. "Absolutely." She pulled away to kiss him deeply.

After their kiss, Clark's gaze glazed over. Lois knew the look well.

"Someone need you?"

"Yeah," Clark said, haltingly. "There's a fire."

"Well go!"

He hesitated for a few, precious seconds.

"Clark, you've been avoiding this for two weeks now. I know it's killing you inside to ignore the cries for help."

"I guess I've been afraid that ... well ... Superman wouldn't be welcomed. I ... he ... left them, Lois."

"Trust me. Superman *will* always be welcome. The world has really missed him. Now go!"

He considered her words. In an instant he'd spun into the once familiar blue and red suit. The spandex was still a little loose in places. Clark still had some weight and muscle to gain back. He flashed a smile at her and bent to kiss her lightly. In the next instant, he was gone. A sonic boom rang out in the air beyond his apartment. Lois lay back against the pillows, awaiting his return, planning. In a few hours she'd call Clark's parents and let them know they would be coming by for dinner. She'd also have to tell Perry once she got to work that Clark was ready to return. She'd swear him to secrecy so that Clark could surprise Jimmy. They'd also have to set up a press conference for Superman so that he could formally announce his return to Earth. It wouldn't take long for word to spread once he appeared at the crisis he'd flown off to. But fact would be tainted by rumors. They would plan it for the next morning, giving them the day to carefully construct the official story that he'd give the world. It would be up to him to decide just how much he wanted to tell. But she could help him by editing his copy. She figured that they would do it at *The Daily Planet*, since that was where Superman had announced his departure.

Meanwhile, Clark hadn't needed to fly far. There was an apartment fire on Chelsea. Firemen were standing back from the blaze, trying to control it. Flames roared as a team was preparing to enter the inferno to look for those trapped inside. An ambulance wailed in the distance as it sped to the scene. Beyond the police barricades, onlookers were gathering in the early morning light.

As soon as Superman was spotted, fingers began to point upwards. A cheer rang out as the knowledge sunk into the crowd. Their hero had returned to them.

Superman alighted next to the fire chief.

"Superman!" the man gaped, surprise evident on his face.

"What's the situation in there, sir?"

"The top five floors are inaccessible from the inside. The flames are too thick. We've got a crew getting the ladders into position now but it's a lot of ground to cover."

Clark leapt into action. He shot away in a blur of blue and red. Seconds later, he appeared with an elderly man in his arms. As soon as the man was on solid ground, Clark was away again. For twenty minutes he repeated the process, finding survivor after survivor. The blaze was still out of control. He stepped back to X-ray the place to look for anyone else when a couple approached him.

"Superman, our little girl is still missing. Please, you have to save our Mandy." It was the child's father.

"Which apartment?" he asked.

"9B."

Clark shot away and into the apartment in question. Carefully, he picked his way through the burning timbers. He called out to the little girl. He scanned with his X-ray vision and tuned his hearing, trying to pinpoint a heartbeat.

"Mandy!" he called out. "Mandy! Where are you?"

He came to a door with flowers painted on it. A little girl's bedroom door. He pushed it open.

"Mandy!"

He heard the sound of a cough a moment after he caught the sounds of a heartbeat. Both were nearly drowned out in the roar of the blaze. He opened the closet door, careful not to move too fast and scare the child. A blonde little girl of four years looked

up at him with fear-filled green eyes. As she registered the suit he was wearing, she stood and stepped into his arms.

Clark stooped to pick her up. He held her securely against his chest. Her arms tightened around his neck. He smiled at her in reassurance. She buried her face against his neck.

"Let's get you out of here," he said.

In the next instant, he had retraced his steps out of the apartment and out of the window that'd he entered by. A second later, they were free of the inferno. Clark floated gently back to the ground. He placed the child in her father's waiting arms. He turned back to the blaze. Quickly, he scanned the building once, twice, then a third time. Satisfied that no one was left inside, he drew a deep breath and began to blow out the flames. In minutes, his super breath and the firemen's hoses had quenched the last of the fire.

As he surveyed the smoking building, Clark felt a tiny tug on his cape. He turned. Mandy was at his side, staring up at him. He knelt, bringing himself to her eye level. She smiled shyly at him and then threw her arms around his neck once more, hugging him.

"Thank you, Superman," she said. "Welcome home."

Clark beamed a smile as he hugged her back. He could already feel some of his mental scars beginning to heal.

THE END