

Plane Storm

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Rating: K+

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--Earth I--

Superman was patrolling the city only few days after leaving the hospital where he'd ended up after an uncontrolled fall from high orbit to Earth. New Krypton, the abomination of a landmass Lex Luthor had created, was in a stable orbit beyond Mars.

Metropolis was quiet, too exhausted from the past few days to muster a crime wave. The fact that the National Guard had been called out to patrol the streets also helped.

He'd only been back to Earth for a month, and only a week back as Superman, after having been gone for nearly six years, searching for something, some meaning. Looking for his home in the depths of space. That was when all hell had broken loose, thanks to Lex Luther.

There was no sign of Luthor and his cronies. Luthor had managed to escape the landmass he'd created using stolen Kryptonian technology before Superman flung it into the asteroid belt. Luthor was somewhere, planning something that boded ill for both him and humanity. It was only a matter of time.

He heard Lois Lane calling him from the rooftop of the Daily Planet. "We have to talk, Superman!"

He came down beside her. "Yes, Lois?"

"I need to talk to you about Jason, my son," she said.

"What about Jason?"

"Do you remember what I said to you in the hospital?"

"Yes, I think so," Superman said. "I remember you telling me that Jason was very strong, and that he was my son."

"So what do we do?"

"Lois, I promise I'll be there for him when, if, his powers manifest. But that's all I can promise."

"And what about us?"

"You have Richard, Lois. You don't need me," he said, referring to Lois's fiancé of five years. Richard White was the nephew of Perry White, and assistant editor of the Daily Planet newspaper. He was a good man and Superman actually liked him as a person; rather, Clark Kent liked him. Richard was a very likable guy.

Lois had moved on in the six years he'd been gone, trying to find his roots, trying to find Krypton. She'd had a son, gotten engaged, won a Pulitzer. He loved her still, but he knew without any doubt that they had no possibility of a future together. It was too dangerous for her. Besides, she only loved the man in the 'suit', Superman, not the man he was raised to be: Clark Joseph Kent from Smallville, Kansas, adopted son of Jonathan and Martha Kent. She didn't see Kent even though he worked beside her every day. Kent was a bumbling fool, not worth a second glance.

"Why don't I remember being with you? Why don't I remember the night Jason was conceived? Was I so disappointing that you shut me out, denied me those memories of us?"

"It wasn't you, Lois," he said sadly. "It was me. I thought we had a chance together. I was wrong and I hurt you. I'm sorry. I should never have done what I did."

"Sorry? You're sorry?"

He took a step backwards, away from the venom of her voice. She had every right to be angry with him, but it didn't make it hurt any less. "Lois, I don't know how to return your memories of that time. I don't know if it's possible. But if you're game, we can try."

"How?"

"Come with me to the Fortress of Solitude, my 'ice palace'," he said. "I need to do some

work there anyway. It might jog your memory."

"When?"

"Now's as good a time as any," he said. "You might want to let your boss know you're going to be out for at least the rest of the day."

He watched as she pulled her cell phone from her purse and pulled up Perry White's personal number.

"Perry? Lois. I'm going to be out for the rest of the day, maybe longer," she said. "Could you have Richard pick Jason up at school?" She listened for a moment as Perry replied. "No, I don't want to say anything about what I'm working on yet, in case it doesn't pan out."

"Tell him Clark's going with you," Superman said softly, almost mouthing the sentence.

She raised one eyebrow at him but said into the phone, "Oh, and Clark's coming with me, so I hope you haven't given him anything that can't wait a day or so."

"Kent lit out of here like the devil was after him about ten minutes ago," Perry said over the phone. Superman's acute hearing picked up the conversation from Perry's office as well. "You two'd better have something good for me when you get back," Perry warned before hanging up his phone.

Lois put her phone back in her purse. "So Clark's coming with us?"

Superman shrugged. "I'd rather he didn't get into more trouble than he's already going to be, if this works."

"Why would Clark get into trouble? Where is he?"

Superman smiled. "Just trust me on this one, Lois. Please?"

In his office on the 60th floor of the Daily Planet building, Perry White looked over at his nephew, Richard. He was Lois Lane's fiancé, as well as the newsroom's assistant editor, a job the young man had earned by being one of the best in the business. It hadn't hurt him, though, to be the boss's nephew.

"Richard, what *is* Clark working on?" Perry asked.

"Something Norm Parker was working on before he died. The trouble Americans with foreign dependants have getting through all the bull Homeland Security throws at them," Richard told him. "From what Clark's told me, he's got enough material for a whole series on it."

"Isn't he supposed to be working on the building collapses?"

"Yeah, and he's already turned in the first two articles."

"Good. So what's up with Lois?"

Richard looked uncomfortable. "She hasn't been herself since Superman came back. She told me she was over him, but..." He shook his head. "She said she was over Superman, but I didn't think to ask her how she felt about Jason's father showing up again. People have been asking why I haven't left her now that Clark's back. Although," he added, "with the way she's been treating the poor bastard, I'll be surprised if he doesn't ask for a transfer to Tokyo soon. Why did you even hire him back?"

"Because he's one of the best writers in the business," Perry said. "And I owe him a second chance after what I did to the two of them."

"And what was that?" Richard asked, knowing what the answer was.

"I let Cat Grant talk me into sending Mad Dog and the Boy Scout on an undercover assignment as newlyweds, knowing full well what the gossip mongers would do to them. Knowing what Lois would do to *him* afterwards when she caught wind she was being set up.

I'm surprised he bothered to come back at all, considering how he left. He came in one morning and told me he was leaving. I tried to talk him out of it. Even offered him a raise and the assistant editor's post that was open, but he wouldn't budge. He just finished that day's assignments and walked out."

--Earth II--

"The next time, you're the one carrying the baby to term," Lois Lane-Kent complained as she sat on the side of the bed, rubbing the small of her aching back.

"That's what you said when you were carrying CJ, and Lara, and Jordan," Clark Jerome Kent, her husband of ten years, reminded her with a smile, taking over massaging her back.

"I look like a blimp! I feel like a blimp. How can you love a blimp?"

He nuzzled her neck. "You do not look like a blimp. You never look like a blimp. You look like a well-loved woman who's having a baby any day now."

"I'm a week overdue!"

"Lois, they've *all* been a week overdue," Clark said with an even broader smile. She turned in his arms to gaze into his warm, dark chocolate eyes. She kissed him, hard.

"Uh, honey, you keep this up and we're going to be late for work. Again." He said it lightly, pulling away from her only far enough so he could talk. "Besides, I have to get CJ and Lara to school, and I have a meeting at nine with the board of directors."

"We are going to continue this discussion later, you know," Lois warned him with a grin as he headed to the master bathroom to get dressed for work.

"I'm looking forward to it," he called back as he shut the door.

--Earth I--

Lois Lane inspected her surroundings, the white crystals that made up the Kryptonian-designed structure, the control console with shafts of sunlight glistening across its crystal clear surface.

"I remember this was burnt up, destroyed," she murmured, touching the console with one tentative finger.

"The father crystal wasn't in the console," he told her. "I'm not sure how it happened, but it wasn't with the others. It wasn't destroyed. I was able to regenerate the console and the other crystals with it. Those were the ones Luthor stole from me."

"So what are you doing?"

"I'm regenerating the rest of the crystals and making a copy of the father crystal for safekeeping."

"I thought Luthor stole the father crystal," Lois said.

There was amusement in his unearthly blue eyes. "I got it back," he said. "I found the father crystal in the wreck of Luthor's helicopter. I don't know why Luthor didn't find it."

"What about the others?"

"I don't know where they are," he admitted. "I just hope Luthor doesn't have them. Even without the father crystal, he could do a lot more damage than he's already done."

He placed the father crystal into its place in the console, twisting it just so. "This is going to take a while," he said. "What would you like for lunch?"

"We had dinner here before, didn't we?"

He nodded.

"You gave up your powers so we could be together."

"Yes. I was told that if I wanted a human woman, I had to be human. I couldn't just live like one, I had to *be* one."

"We spent the night together."

He nodded. *Was she remembering, or just logically linking the facts together* He was afraid to ask. He was the most powerful being on the planet and he was afraid to ask her if she remembered his other name.

"I remember watching your face while we watched TV, watched the disasters across the world. I watched you suffer because you couldn't do a damn thing for them," she said softly. "I told you to come back here, see if there was a way to undo the damage."

"There was a way," he said. "But the price was the ability to be with you. To share your life. I watched you suffer at work, trying to deal with the fact that we'd lost any chance to be together. I thought I was doing you a favor."

"You watched me at work?" she wondered aloud. He just looked at her. *How could she not see it? She was a top investigative reporter. How could she miss all the clues he'd given her over time? How could she not see him?*

"What would you like for lunch?" he repeated.

"Chinese?" she said. "Clark knows a little place somewhere with funny fortune cookies in Chinese. They have the best *mu gu gai pan*."

"I know the place," he said with a smile. He gave her a tiny bow and flew off faster than she could see.

--Earth II--

"Richard, Penny!" Clark yelled from his office door. "When can I see something on the Goldman murders?"

"Waiting for one more confirmation, Chief," Richard White answered, glancing over to his partner, Penny 'Lane'. She nodded her head.

Clark stepped back into his office, the editor-in-chief's office. From his desk Clark could watch the entire newsroom. He loved the energy of the bullpen. From his office, he could watch it all happen, see the paper come together as he directed, just as Perry had done before him.

It was the best job in the world, next to being an investigative reporter. And one of the beauties of being the boss was that no one asked questions when he disappeared in the middle of the day to handle a job as Superman. At least, no one asked them very loudly.

Richard White, Perry White's nephew, had joined the Daily Planet five years before. He had been an award winning reporter at the Planet's London bureau and had covered the Middle East. So when an opening appeared in Metropolis for someone with his skills, Perry offered it to his nephew. Richard had jumped on it and hadn't looked back.

Perry assigned the young man to work with Penelope Landris, an up-and-coming city beat reporter who had taken the pen name of 'Penny Lane'. The Landrises were old money in Metropolis, and hadn't taken kindly to one of their own becoming an investigative reporter. But it was a match made in heaven, much as Perry's match up of Lane and Kent, nine years earlier. *Fourteen years ago - how time flies.* White and Landris would be celebrating their second wedding anniversary next month.

Clark checked his watch. Lois was meeting him for lunch over at a new bistro she'd found not too far from Centennial Park.

--Earth I--

"That was fantastic," Lois commented, finishing the last egg roll. "So where is this place with this great food and funny fortune cookies?"

"Shanghai," Superman answered with a crooked grin.

She gave him a puzzled look as if she couldn't get her mind around the obvious. He watched her and realized, with a sinking feeling, that there was something seriously wrong if she couldn't put the facts together even when they'd been practically thrown in her face.

"Do you remember any more?" he asked gently.

"I remember making love to you, here. I remember seeing a beautiful blonde woman dressed in white. She was very sad when she talked to you."

"That was a hologram of my mother, Lara," he explained. "It, she, is part of the Artificial Intelligence that is part of this place, part of the crystals." A musical chime rang out from the crystal console. He got up from his seat beside Lois and stepped over to the console.

"The backup father crystal is complete," he said. "We can head back to Metropolis now, unless you want to stay and talk some more."

She shook her head. "I remember most of it, I think. Like waking up from a dream. But there's still something I'm not catching. Something that's just out of reach. I remember being at Niagara Falls with Clark and you coming to save a little boy who'd fallen. Then we were here." She looked up at him. "We didn't just abandon Clark there, did we?"

"No, we didn't abandon him there," he said with a smile. At least she was concerned for his alter ego. Maybe things were starting to come together, finally.

--Earth II--

"You're not eating," Clark observed. The bistro was as good as promised, but Lois was picking at her food.

"I've been thinking," she said. "Have you heard from Zara and Ching recently?"

"The last I heard from them was that they were planning on visiting soon after the baby's born. They still want to foster one of their kids on Earth and would really like to foster one of ours."

"Not going to happen, Clark," she warned. "I am not sending one of my babies off to that hell-hole. I nearly lost you when you went there and I know you still have nightmares about what happened to you the year you were gone. I am not going through that again."

"I've already told them that," Clark assured her. "I suggested that maybe when CJ's old enough for high school... He'll be old enough to make his own choice, and he is an heir to the ruling house..."

He expected an explosion from her, but she simply sighed and rubbed her belly. "Well, at least I have five years to get used to the idea," she said finally. "Let's go take a walk."

--Earth I--

They were flying back to Metropolis and were fast approaching the city.

"Superman, what's that?" Lois asked, looking back over his shoulder. He paused in midair to turn and look behind. A quarter of a mile back, the blue sky was gone, replaced by a curtain of roiling black clouds lit up by phosphorescent green lightning. Wind began to whisper around them. The afternoon sun had vanished behind the black clouds.

"I don't know, " Superman admitted. Lois was surprised to see worry in his face. The wind grew louder and stronger and Superman dropped to the ground, hunkering down to protect Lois from the brunt of the wind.

The storm was on them. Gale force winds shoved at them and even Superman's strength wasn't quite enough to stand against them, which surprised him. There was a piercing wail as if the universe itself was crying out in agony. The sound drove through their skulls. They covered their ears, but the keening wail was too knife-sharp, driving itself into their brains. It was louder even than the thunder that rolled all around them. Lois screamed.

Then, the world fell *up*.

The knife sharp scream stopped. The thunder stopped. The lightning stopped. The slashing rain stopped.

They stood and looked around. The afternoon sun was shining through a cloudless blue sky.

"What was that?" Lois asked. Superman's face was pale and his eyes were dark with worry.

"I don't know. I've never seen or felt anything like it."

"Maybe we'd better get back to Metropolis," she suggested. He nodded agreement, picked her up in his arms and took off again, toward the city.

--Earth II--

They walked through Centennial Park, taking time to sit beside the fountain where he'd first proposed to her, and where, later, she proposed to him.

"Are you okay?" Clark asked. Lois had been unusually quiet.

"I'm fine," she said, brushing a dark strand of hair away from her face. "Have you told Richard and Penny yet, about Zara and Ching, I mean?"

"I've told them they're expected sometime this week," Clark said. "But I haven't filled them in on the details. I didn't want them to get their hopes up."

"It's a pity they can't have kids," Lois said. "Richard's so much like you it's scary sometimes. He'll make a great dad, and Penny will make a pretty good mom."

"Well, you certainly shaped up, Mrs. Kent," Clark said with a grin, nuzzling her neck.

She slapped his chest then grabbed her belly, wincing in annoyance more than pain. "I think this one's just about ready to make an appearance."

"Do you want me to get the car, or do you want..." He made a sideways waving motion with his hand, their sign for Superman.

She repeated the sign back to him. "My water hasn't broken yet, but this kid is on its way."

"Stay right here, and I'll be right back," he promised.

If the first sign that something was amiss was the unnatural storm, the second sign had to be that the Wannamaker building was still standing.

The city below them was undamaged. Superman looked closer and realized there were other differences from the city they'd left only hours before. Buildings had been subtly shifted. The Daily Planet building was the most changed. It was the same height and similar in appearance, but there was no mistaking the building was not the same as the one he and Lois had left that morning.

"Lois, I don't think we're in Kansas any more," Superman muttered.

Lois's eyes followed his gaze to look over at the Daily Planet building. Her eyes widened as she realized what he meant.

"Where are we?" she asked, heart pounding.

"I have no idea," he admitted with a frown. He could hear Lois's heartbeat next to him, but Jason's was missing from the city. And, more oddly, there was another heartbeat below him, in Centennial Park, that almost matched Lois's. This one belonged to a pregnant woman who was in labor and appeared annoyed. She had dark hair pulled back into a loose French braid.

"Superman!" she was calling quietly, as if she didn't want to be overheard by bystanders.

He landed softly near the fountain, setting Lois on her feet before approaching the dark-haired pregnant woman.

"You called, ma'am?" he asked. The woman turned and her eyes widened in an odd mixture of shock and disbelief.

"Who the devil are you?" she demanded before doubling over with a hard contraction as her water broke.

--Lois II--

Lois Lane-Kent took a deep breath as she straightened up to look more closely at the tall man wearing the Superman suit. The suit design was different, a little darker, and definitely more alien, almost New Kryptonian. He was tall, at least two, maybe three inches taller than her husband, with the bluest eyes she'd ever seen.

"I'm Superman," the tall man said, scooping her up easily. He turned to the business-suited woman standing a little way from the fountain. "Stay here, I'll be right back."

He took off for Metropolis General Hospital.

--Lois I--

Lois Lane watched as Superman scooped up the pregnant woman and sped off into the sky. She was alone in a city that looked only vaguely like the one she was supposed to be in and she was annoyed. Who was he to tell her to stay, as if she were a dog, or someone he could simply order about? She was Lois Lane, Pulitzer winning writer and top reporter for the Daily Planet.

"Uh, miss?" A man said, clearing his throat.

She turned to see a man wearing a Superman suit standing next to her. Her eyes widened in confusion.

"There was a pregnant woman here," he continued. "Where is she?"

"Superman took her to the hospital," she said. She watched as astonishment, confusion, and something else, flickered across his face. She noted that his eyes were a warm brown. He was shorter than the Superman she knew. A little over six-foot, maybe, and built like a quarterback. But the strong presence was there, the ineffable aura of 'good' that she was familiar with.

She put out her hand. "I'm Lois Lane, Daily Planet."

To her astonishment, he took a step back and looked up into the sky, hands out in supplication. "Come on! Give me a break here, will you!" After a moment, he seemed to come to a decision and held out his hand to her. "Okay, Miss Lane, let's find out where your Superman took my Mrs. Kent."

"Mrs. Kent?" Lois repeated as Superman scooped her up and let go of gravity.

A moment later, they touched down in front of the emergency room entrance of Metropolis General Hospital. He set her on her feet and strode into the building, keeping hold of her hand so she had to hurry to keep up with him.

Superman, her Superman, was standing to one side of the room, trying to keep out of the way. The brown-eyed one let go of her hand and walked over to the admissions desk.

"Has Lois Lane-Kent been checked in?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, Superman," the admissions clerk said. "She's on her way up to the birthing suites. *He* brought her in." She nodded her head in the direction of the other Superman.

"Relative of yours?"

"Not sure yet," the brown-eyed one said. "At least he's not a clone. I'm not all that fond of clones, you know."

The clerk chuckled. "I assume Mister Kent is on his way."

"He should be here in a minute," the brown-eyed one said. "In the meantime, is there a place I can put them until he gets here?" He indicated Lois and the blue-eyed Superman.

"There's a little waiting room around the corner," the clerk said. "They should be okay there."

The brown-eyed Superman beckoned for Lois and her Superman to follow him to the waiting room. He stopped the taller one. "Kal-El, I presume," he said. Her Superman nodded. There was a worried look in his eyes.

"I assume you have some civvies?"

Again, he nodded.

"You might want to change," the brown-eyed one suggested. "You'll be less conspicuous. And try to stay out of trouble." He looked straight at Lois. "If that's at all possible."

He left the room, closing the door behind him.

Lois turned to her companion. "Superman, what is going on here?" she hissed.

"We're in an alternate dimension. A different universe. I don't know how, except maybe that storm we went through. It wasn't a normal storm, I know that."

"So what do we do?"

He gave her a crooked grin. "Try to get on *his* good side. I haven't done such a good job of it, so far. Mrs. Kent was waiting for *him* to show up. She was seriously annoyed with me."

"Mrs. Kent?" It suddenly dawned on her. "Lois Lane-Kent?"

He nodded. "Clark Kent's wife. He's married. To Lois Lane." He had the most peculiar look on his face, almost as if he couldn't quite believe what he'd just said. "He's right, though. I'd better make myself less conspicuous."

"You have a change of clothes?"

Again, that impossibly familiar grin. "I'll be right back."

--Clark II--

Clark had gone to the side of the building and changed into his business suit and tie at superspeed. He hurried to the birthing suite on the fifth floor, where he knew Lois was already harassing the birthing room nurses.

"There you are!" his wife called as soon as she caught sight of him. "Who was that other fellow?"

"Superman, I guess," Clark said. "Remember, this *is* Metropolis, land of the weird and home of the crazed."

Lois grimaced at another contraction and he held out his hand for her to squeeze. One of the perks of being Superman - she couldn't break his hand with her vise-like grip.

He took a moment to look around the room. This was the third delivery they'd had in this very room. CJ had been born at STAR Labs, before Doctors Klein and Anderson determined that half-Kryptonian newborns were indistinguishable in any way from normal newborns. The room itself looked like a regular bedroom. Only the medical equipment in the side-room indicated it was more specialized.

The attendant came in and checked under the sheet to see how his wife was progressing. After three previous deliveries, Clark was still embarrassed to be present while a stranger examined Lois's cervix. He watched Lois's face instead as she relaxed between contractions.

"I figure another hour or so," the attendant said.

"Lois, I need to take a minute and check on our 'friends' downstairs." He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. "I'll be right back."

"You'd better be," she warned. He feigned a shudder and she giggled.

He hurried down to the waiting room where the other Superman and Lois were supposed to be waiting.

To his surprise, they were still there. They'd gotten cups of coffee and another couple had joined them in the waiting room. The other, younger, couple looked grief stricken. Clark noted that Kal-El and his Lois were talking to them, reassuring them, offering condolences.

Clark wondered if this Kal-El and Lois had children. He'd noted an engagement ring on her hand, but no wedding band, and wondered what that meant. His journalist instincts were kicking in and he knew he would be going after answers. He was also going to have to introduce Kal-El to a tailor. The gray suit his counterpart was wearing was simply too out of date to be believed, not to mention it didn't fit as well as it could. Oddly, he wasn't wearing glasses.

All the Clark Kents he'd met during various inter-dimensional treks wore glasses as part of their persona.

Clark cleared his throat to catch their attention and both couples looked up at him standing in the doorway. He nodded to Kal-El and Lois. "Superman told me you were here. I'm Clark Kent."

Kal-El stood and shook his hand. "I'm... Charlie King and this is..." He looked back at Lois.

"Wanda," she announced. "Wanda Detroit." She looked disconcerted when Clark began to chuckle.

"Well, Ms. Detroit," he said, fighting back laughter. "I'm sure the Stardust Lounge will be pleased to know you're back in town."

He searched his pockets a moment, found his business card case and handed 'Charlie' one of his cards. "I think it might be best if you two went down to the Planet and waited there for

me. I'll call my assistant to let her know you're on your way."

--Clark I--

He looked down at the business card in his hand. The Daily Planet logo was embossed in one corner. *Clark Kent, editor-in-chief, the address and office phone number, fax, email.* Editor-in-Chief? He looked at the other man in surprise and increased respect. This Clark Kent couldn't be more than five, possibly ten, years older than himself. He was editor-in-chief of the largest newspaper on the east coast?

He handed the card to Lois and saw the same confusion in her eyes.

"Thank you, Mister Kent," Kal-El said. "We'll do that."

"I'll see you there in a couple hours, then," Clark Kent said. He nodded a good-bye to the other couple and left the waiting room.

"Clark Kent is the editor of the Planet?" Lois muttered. "But he's..."

"A hack from Nowheresville?" Kal-El asked, using X-ray vision to follow his counterpart to the stairwell beside the elevators. "I don't think so, 'Wanda'. He may be wearing a Marvin the Martian tie, but that's not a cheap suit. He is definitely not the Clark Kent you know." He looked back at Lois. "We'd better get over to the Planet. He'll be expecting to find us there."

"And being on *Mister Kent's* good side will help us how?"

"Don't be difficult, please," Kal-El said. "We're going to need all the help we can get."

--Lois I--

They were able to catch a cab in front to the hospital and 'Charlie' directed the driver to the Daily Planet. Lois watched her companion out of the corner of her eye. Dressed in a gray three-piece suit, even if it was a little out of date, made him look 'human', approachable, and disconcertingly familiar. Annoyingly familiar.

"So Charlie, is that your real name?" she asked.

He grinned at her. "No."

"So what is it?"

"Right now I don't think you'd believe me if I told you," Kal-El stated.

She could hear an oddly sad bitterness in his tone and again she felt that odd sensation that she was missing something. Like she was looking all around whatever it was but couldn't focus on it. Her companion was Superman, Kal-El of Krypton, Metropolis's favorite son, savior of the city - just not this city. They had their own Superman. But Kal-El had another name, of this she was positive. And somehow, she knew she once knew his other name.

The cab stopped in front of the Daily Planet building and Kal-El pulled cash from a worn leather wallet to pay the driver. She forced herself to overcome the urge to grab the wallet from him to see what his identification said.

"Coming?" he asked, getting out of the cab.

Wanda climbed out after him, then stopped to gaze, open-mouthed, at the larger-than-life poster set in a display case on the side of the building. Richard White, looking charming and debonair, with a handsome woman standing beside him. The photographed pair smiled out at passersby. The caption read *Lane and White, hottest team on the Planet*. Lois didn't recognize the woman.

"I see Richard has a counterpart here," Kal-El commented. "And that's Penny Landris, if I'm not mistaken. She's a new hire at our version the Planet."

"How do you know?" she wondered.

"I know," he assured her with a crooked smile, leading the way in to the building.

The lobby held a coffee kiosk and newsstand. The cashier gazed at them incuriously as they made their way to the elevator banks, past framed front-pages of famous events covered by the Daily Planet - the Hindenberg, the first Moon landing, the first appearance of Superman.

"This is dated fourteen years ago," Kal-El pointed out, scanning the articles. "He showed up here five years before I did."

The doors to one of the elevators opened and they entered. Wanda hit the button for the editorial floor. "And Clark Kent is the E-in-C," she said. After a few minutes, the elevator slowed and stopped, the doors opening into the Daily Planet bullpen.

Again, the room was familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. The crowded desks, the flat-screen monitors hanging off the support columns, the offices and conference room on the outside walls were familiar components, but the colors were different, warmer. Half the desks were currently unoccupied. Wanda/Lois knew from experience that these reporters were out on the street and would be returning in a few hours to complete their assignments for the next edition.

A petite oriental woman in a blue business suit caught sight of them and strode over to where Lois and Kal-El were standing in the elevator lobby outside the bullpen. "You must be Charlie and Wanda," she said with a wide smile. "I'm Margot Tanaka, Mister Kent's assistant. He called and said you were on your way." She held out her hand and Kal-El shook it.

"You're free to look around, and we have a computer in the conference room if you want to check email or do some research. The visitor's password is taped under the keyboard," she continued. "Or you can wait in Mister Kent's office. Just stay out of the way, but I suppose you know that."

Kal-El and Lois nodded. "We're familiar with newsrooms." Kal-El said. He took Wanda's elbow and guided her to the conference room. "We can use that computer to check out this place," he murmured to his companion.

"I wonder what happened to Perry?" she murmured back.

"Let's find out," he said, closing the conference room door behind them.

--Lois II--

Lois's contractions were close. She had hold of his hand as he coached her in breathing, panting along with her. "Another big push," he told her. One part of her mind, the reporter, noted his glance at the midwife stationed between her legs. The midwife nodded.

"Come on, push, Lois, push," Clark told her. She grabbed his arm through the surgical gown he was wearing and squeezed. She was thankful he was invulnerable to most things. She'd be leaving bruises otherwise. It wasn't good to leave bruises on her husband, even if he did deserve them, sometimes.

"The baby's crowning," the midwife announced. "Give us another good one, Lois."

Lois was sweating and her hair was damp, pointing in all directions as the latest contraction rolled through her body. She looked a mess, she knew it, and it annoyed her, even though she also knew that Clark didn't care how she looked right now.

She grimaced as she put all her energy into the muscles of her belly, aiding the contraction, pushing the baby out of her body. Another moment's rest and another push. After three previous births, it still wasn't any easier. Why had they decided on having one more? Oh, yes, Clark, an only child and adopted at that, wanted a big family. Well, *he* was having the next one.

She groaned as yet another contraction hit and she bore down.

"Come on, just a little more," Clark said. The midwife moved even closer and there was a sudden wail from a new life arriving on the scene.

"You have a daughter," the midwife announced, placing the bloody, slimy new arrival on her mother's belly.

"She's beautiful," Clark marveled as Lois caressed the baby's body. He bent closer to his wife and kissed her. "Just like her mother."

--Clark I--

"Perry's obituary," Kal-El pointed out the article on the computer screen in front of him. "He died of ALS two years ago. Survived by his wife and sons. Kent was the assistant editor and was promoted to E-in-C on Perry's death. He was thirty-eight at the time, which made him the youngest E-in-C in the Planet's history."

"He showed up here about the same time their Superman first appeared," Wanda observed. "Why are you so interested in Kent?"

He chose not to answer her question. *She doesn't get it*, he thought to himself. *Why can't she see it? What did I do to her six years ago that she can't make such an obvious connection*

His thoughts were interrupted by a commotion outside the conference room. Wanda opened the door to listen. A man with reddish-brown hair was standing at the railing to the elevator lobby holding his hands up for quiet. The room had more occupied desks now as the reporters trickled in to write their stories for tomorrow's paper.

"I have an announcement to make, everybody," the man said. He looked to be about thirty-five. "Martha Michaela Kent arrived at 1:44 PM today. Seven pounds, ten ounces. Mother and child are doing fine. Dad is a basket case, as usual." There was a round of applause at the announcement.

Kal-El heard a cry for help somewhere uptown, made a lame excuse to Wanda, and headed for the stairwell to escape the building. The local Superman was busy with family matters and whether or not this was his universe, he was needed.

--Clark II--

The midwife took the baby to be cleaned up and checked out, leaving Clark alone with Lois.

"Ya done good, partner," he said. Even sweaty and exhausted, she was beautiful and once again, as he did almost every moment of every day, he marveled at how lucky he was to have her.

"I know," Lois said with a tired grin. "When can we go home?"

"In a couple hours," Clark said. "You need to rest a little, let them check you out. You know the drill."

'*Kal-El?*' Zara's voice intruded inside his head. '*Ching and I will be landing in four hours. Can you have everything ready?*'

'Yes,' Clark replied mentally.

"Clark, what's wrong?" Lois asked.

He had realized many, many years ago that he couldn't hide anything from her. Not since she figured out that Superman was Clark Kent's alter ego. "Zara and Ching are on their way. They'll be here a little after six."

"So soon?"

"I have the impression they're in a hurry," he told her. "And she did say they'd come after the baby was born."

"I figured they meant a few days, not a few hours," Lois commented. "You'd better get things ready for them."

He kissed her, a long, lingering kiss, tasting the sweat that was still on her face. "I'll be back to get you as soon as I can," he promised.

--Lois I--

That odd feeling of missing something was even stronger. Kal-El's excuse for leaving was as bad as one of Clark's. And Superman certainly didn't need an excuse to go handle an emergency.

He came back less than twenty minutes later, smelling of burnt rubber and gasoline. "There was a multi-car smashup on the West Channel Bridge," he explained. "No serious injuries, thank goodness."

"Good job. Thanks," Clark Kent said with a grin as he walked into the conference room. He had a small, dark-haired boy on one hip. The boy had large, brown, almond-shaped eyes that watched her solemnly. "Oh, this is Jordan. Jordan, say hello to Wanda and Charlie."

Jordan hid his face in his father's chest.

"He's a little shy," his father explained with an embarrassed smile. He looked over at Kal-El. "Who handles the Superman exclusives where you come from?"

"Lois or Clark. Our Clark," Kal-El said.

Clark checked his watch. "Well, you have forty-five minutes to give me something. We've got a great shot of the visiting Superman for the front page."

"And Superman sells papers," Wanda said. It was something she'd heard often enough over the past week from Perry White. Her Perry White.

"Almost as good as tragedy and sex," Clark said. He went to the computer and logged onto the system for them.

"Almost?" Wanda asked.

Clark shrugged. "Well, Superman's been in Metropolis nearly fourteen years. He's not exactly old news, but it has to be a pretty big problem to make the front page anymore. Now, a different Superman visiting, that's news."

Kal-El had already started typing on the computer keyboard, fingers moving faster than any normal human's. Wanda noticed that Clark didn't seem surprised at Kal-El's typing speed. *What does he know??*

Clark turned and headed back into the newsroom. Wanda watched as he approached two of his reporters. Richard White and his partner had come in and were settling in at their desks.

"Richard?" Wanda murmured. He looked so much like her fiancé it was unbelievable. But she saw that he only had eyes for his partner, Penny.

"He's not the Richard you know," Kal-El said softly, not looking up from the computer screen.

"I know," Wanda said. She watched the Daily Planet's E-in-C as he spoke quietly with his two stars. Whatever he was saying had surprised and pleased Richard and Penny. Wanda couldn't remember the last time *her* Richard had looked so happy. Before Superman came back into her world. Maybe even before that.

Clark disappeared into his office and Wanda went over to where Kal-El was writing. She peered over his shoulder at the screen, forearm resting on his shoulder as if it was the most natural thing in the world. "You don't say anything about how we got here. For that matter, you left me out altogether."

Kal-El shrugged and patted her hand. "There are some things better left a mystery. This needs to be about the new Superman arriving on the scene in this Metropolis. I think Mister Kent will be relatively pleased with it."

"Good quotes. You do good work. Most people can't write about themselves, especially in third person."

"Thank you, ma'am." Again, the crooked smile that was so annoyingly familiar as he sent the document over to Clark. Kal-El tipped his head to one side, listening, watching something she couldn't see. "He's finished writing the sidebar, welcoming the new Superman to Metropolis."

A few moments later, Clark walked back into the conference room, Jordan once again on his hip. "Good piece," he said to Kal-El. "I have to get the other kids from school, and since you're obviously staying at my house, tonight at least, we'd better get going."

"What about putting the paper to bed?" Wanda asked. Perry would never leave before the next edition was locked down and ready to go to press.

"Unless somebody blows up the Lexcorp Tower in the next couple hours, we're ready roll," Clark said. "Besides, my assistants all have my cell number. And I do usually answer it." He beckoned them to follow him out.

He led the way to the elevators, down to the lobby and out to the parking garage, to a champagne-colored Windstar van. He chirped the doors unlocked and belted Jordan into the car-seat in the middle row of seats. Wanda noted a booster seat in the back row and wondered how many children the Kents of this world had.

"Who's sitting up front?" he asked.

"I'll sit back here," Kal-El volunteered, allowing Wanda the front passenger seat. She gave him a grateful smile. She didn't like being a passenger and being in the back seat only made it worse.

As it turned out, Clark was a reasonably good driver, if a little cautious for her taste. But then, she realized, she had gotten more cautious after Jason was born. She was startled when she recognized the route he was taking to pick up the 'other kids'. The same route either she or Richard took nearly every weekday to pick Jason up from school.

"Something wrong?" Clark asked. Wanda hadn't realized she'd actually jumped.

"No," she said. "I just recognize the neighborhood. My son goes to school here."

He raised a dark eyebrow at her. "How old is he?"

"Five years, four months," Wanda said.

"Same age as Lara," he commented. "How long have you been married?"

"I'm not," she said. He gave her a look she couldn't decipher. Surprise, puzzlement, consternation? She glanced back at Kal-El. His expression had gone bleak and more than a little guilty. "My son's father disappeared without a word or a trace six years ago. I moved on. I had to," she explained. "My fiancé is a very good man. He's stood by me, helping raise my son when his biological father was nowhere to be found."

"I see," Clark said, very quietly. She was sure he didn't understand. How could he understand something when she didn't understand it herself?

Clark pulled the van into a parking space in front of the school. Two children, a boy about eight or so and a younger girl, came running across the driveway to the van. The girl had the same dark hair and eyes as her father. The boy's coloring was a little lighter, with hazel eyes. Kal-El got out and let them climb into the van before settling back into his seat beside Jordan.

"CJ, Lara, this is Wanda and Charlie," Clark introduced them. "They'll be staying with us a few days," he added. The older boy gave Wanda an appraising look, as if trying to decide who and what she really was.

"Has the baby come yet?" Lara asked. The girl reminded Wanda of Jason. Same fine features, knowing gaze. She was going to be a knock-out when she was older.

"Yup," Clark answered, starting the van and pulling into the street. "A little before two."

You have a baby sister."

"When can we see her?" Lara demanded.

"Well, I was planning on dropping you guys off at home with Grandma, then going to pick Mommy and baby Martha up and bring them home, too. I want all three of you monsters on your best behavior. Mommy's going to be really tired and it's going to be a long day," Clark told them. "CJ, you remember Lady Zara and Ching, don't you?"

The boy nodded. "Mommy doesn't like them much," he said.

"I know, but they're on their way, and Richard and Penny are coming to talk to them tonight."

The van headed north over the City Center Bridge to the Lafayette neighborhood, one of the suburbs that had undergone a rebirth in the past ten years, becoming a magnet for middle and upper managers who wanted to live close, but not too close, to the city.

Clark turned the van down an impossibly familiar street, pulling into the driveway at three-twelve Riverside Drive. Wanda recognized the two-story house surrounded by a white picket fence. It was the house she had awoken in that morning, before that impossible storm and the even more impossible situation she found herself. Herself and Superman.

One of the garage doors opened by remote control and Clark parked the van beside an older model Jeep Cherokee.

Kal-El let himself and the three kids out of the van and the youngsters ran into the house yelling "Grandma! Mommy had the baby!"

Wanda followed them into the house, Kal-El close on her heels. The layout was the same, the furniture different, naturally. Educational toys, children's books, and stuffed toys were strewn across the family room. These were well-loved kids.

An older, gray-haired woman came into the family room from the kitchen and gave the kids hugs. She gave Wanda and Kal-El a curious look over the heads of the children.

"I'm Wanda Detroit and this is Charlie King," Wanda introduced herself.

The older woman gave her a disbelieving look and began to laugh. "Clark, what gives?" she asked as she caught sight of Clark.

"Martha Kent, Mom, I'd like to introduce you to Lois Lane and Kal-El. They're visiting from another time-line, another dimension," Clark explained.

Wanda felt her jaw drop. How did he know? Had Superman told him? Why hadn't he said anything earlier? Her astonishment started to turn to anger. He'd been laughing at her, at them! But wait - he knew they were from another dimension? And Martha seemed to take that announcement in stride like they'd just come in from out of town.

"Lois, honey," Martha said with a grin. "Anyone who knows Clark's wife knows she uses Wanda Detroit as a pen name, among other things. I've seen her sing at the Stardust, too."

"Mom, I have to get Lois and the baby, plus, Zara and Ching are on their way," Clark explained.

"Zara and Ching?" Martha repeated. Wanda could tell the older woman was not happy. "Clark Jerome Kent, you're not planning on letting those two take one of these babies, are you?" There was a definite threat in her voice.

"Hardly," Clark assured her. "It'd be worth my life to even suggest it. It's Richard and Penny they'll be talking to. But I admit, there's something a little odd going on, too. I wasn't expecting them to show up so soon."

He grabbed a newborn's car-seat and started to head back to the van. "I'll be back in a little bit with Lois and the baby." He turned to 'Wanda' and Kal-El. "Please try to stay out of

trouble."

As soon as Clark left, Martha took charge of her grandchildren, ushering them into the kitchen for snacks. She beckoned for Wanda and Kal-El to join them.

"Would you like some coffee or tea?" Martha asked.

Wanda nodded. "Coffee would be nice."

"Mrs. Kent, who are Zara and Ching?" Kal-El asked. "And what are you afraid they want?"

Wanda watched conflicting emotions cross the woman's face - worry, relief.

"Zara is the First Lady of New Krypton, acting head of the ruling house, which happens to be the house of El. Ching is her consort. Clark tried to explain it all to me but I still don't understand it. It's just too foreign," Martha said. "Under Kryptonian law, Kal-El, our Kal-El, and Zara are in a binding contracted marriage between the House of El and the House of Ra, but are legally separated since he refuses to live on New Krypton. She has control of his lands and estates until his heir goes to New Krypton to accept the titles and responsibilities as head of the House of El."

"And you're afraid they're coming to take one of the children to become his heir on this other planet?" Kal-El asked.

Martha nodded.

"How barbaric," Wanda found herself saying.

"It's a barbaric place," Martha said. "He almost didn't come back when he went there eleven years ago to help stop a civil war."

"Wait a minute," Kal-El said. Wanda watched as astonishment and disbelief washed over Kal-El's face. "There were survivors of Krypton?"

Martha nodded. "A whole colony. Believe me, it was a surprise to us, too. I guess nobody on your Krypton believed Jor-El when he warned them the planet was doomed."

"I guess not," Kal-El said. "What keeps them from coming here and trying to take over? I mean, they'd be super-powered."

"There's only a couple ships that can make the trip, for one. And two, a couple of Lord Nor's followers tried it, and our military took them out pretty handily. There's not a lot of kryptonite around, but we know how to use it," Martha said. "I'm also told that Zara and Ching have emphasized to their people how barbaric and dangerous Earth is and how courageous and self-sacrificing Kal-El is to stay here and 'lead us to civilization.'"

Martha turned her attention back to her three grandchildren. "It's homework time, CJ. Lara, piano practice. Your recital's next week."

Lara made a face but headed off to the living room. Wanda followed her, leaving Kal-El talking with Martha over a second cup of coffee and a plate of doughnuts. Wanda's head was spinning. She was a reporter, but she wasn't making a lot of sense of what Martha had told them.

The little girl sat down at an electric piano, turned on the power and began practicing scales. Wanda sat down beside her. "My son plays piano, too. And he's your age."

Lara didn't stop playing. "He is? What's his name?"

"Jason Peregrine White."

"I'm Lara Ellen Kent," the little girl announced. "After two of my grandmas. Daddy was adopted, you know. So I have three grandmas, but one of them is dead."

Lara continued her practice, switching to 'Heart and Soul', the piece Jason had been working on for weeks. Wanda's heart began to ache for her son. Lara reminded her of him so

much it was frightening. She wondered if she would ever see him again. If she and Kal-El, 'Charlie', would be trapped here forever, in this version of Metropolis where Clark Kent was Superman, was married to Lois Lane, and had four kids - not to mention a wife on a different planet.

Clark Kent was Superman. It sounded right, like something she'd known before. But for some reason, she still couldn't get her head around it. *What the hell had he done to her? Did he even know what he'd done??* There was no way that Kal-El could possibly be the Clark Kent she knew. That Clark was a geek, a nerd, a hack - a brilliant, idiotic, clumsy dweeb who tripped over his own feet and could barely talk coherently. *No way! It was impossible! But still...*

She left the piano bench and walked back to the kitchen. Martha was cleaning up and Wanda could hear Kal-El talking to one of the boys in the family room. She walked in to see Jordan sitting on Kal-El's lap as they both sat next to CJ at a computer. Kal-El seemed so natural, so easy, with Clark's kids. *He'd make a fantastic father. What am I thinking? Jason has a father, and not one who ran out before he was even born!!*

She stepped closer to him. "You're good with kids," she said. "You'll make a great father, someday."

"I am a father, remember?" The hurt was palpable in his face, his voice. "I just don't know how I fit in to his life, or yours."

"I don't honestly know yet. I've got memories floating around in my head. I know some of them are real, but some of them, too many of them, I still can't grab hold of, still don't make sense. What really happened?" Wanda asked. She suddenly felt her pent up anger starting to boil over. *"Why did you leave me like that? What aren't you telling me? What did you do to me?"*

--Lois II--

Lois waited for Clark to help her out of the van. Baby Martha was asleep in her carrier, wearing a yellow jumper that was far too big for her. But like all the previous Kent kids, she'd grow into it in no time.

Clark had explained to her that Wanda and Kal-El would be staying overnight, and possibly longer, if a way to send them back to where they belonged couldn't be found. Wanda would have to share a room with Lara, or stay with Martha at her apartment.

"They're not together?" she asked.

Clark shook his head. "She has a son Lara's age, and a fiancé, but it's not *him*." Clark grabbed the baby and followed Lois into the house. "She said her son's father disappeared six years ago and she moved on. I'm pretty sure Kal-El's the father. He looked awfully guilty when she was talking about it."

"Why did you leave me like that? What aren't you telling me? What did you do to me?" Wanda was practically screaming at Kal-El when Lois and Clark walked in.

CJ's eyes were wide in surprise, as were Jordan's. Kal-El's eyes were narrowed in that peculiarly Kryptonian fashion Lois was familiar with, the one that said 'back off now'. Lois also noted that Wanda didn't seem to be getting the hint.

"I've got her," Lois murmured to her husband, taking the baby from the carrier.

"I'm on him," he murmured back.

"Wanda, come with me, please," Lois ordered firmly. She saw Wanda's eyes widen in surprise and was pleased when the younger woman's mouth snapped shut. "*Now.*"

Lois started toward the living room, then stopped as she realized Wanda wasn't following. She turned back and grabbed the younger woman's arm and led her away. "I will thank you not to yell at your boyfriend, or whatever, in front of my kids," she hissed.

"He's not my boyfriend," Wanda grated.

"Whatever. Absentee father of your child? Irresponsible lout that got you knocked up?"

"You don't understand," Wanda said.

"Then explain it to me," Lois said, settling onto the leather sofa and cuddling her newborn. She kept her voice low and controlled.

Wanda sat down on other end of the sofa, turning to face Lois. "Kal-El and I had a relationship six years ago. Hell, relationship isn't the right word. One night stand. Then he decided it wouldn't work, and he did something to my memories, erased them, shut me out of his life, shut me out of his world," Wanda explained. "A month later he left without saying goodbye, disappeared without saying a word to anyone. He was gone for six years. *Six years*. I didn't know if he was dead, if he'd just gotten tired of rescuing people who wouldn't take care of their own problems, if I'd done something to drive him away. We, I, didn't know I'd gotten pregnant. I had a baby and I didn't even know how it happened. I did what I had to."

"And then he came back?" Lois asked.

Wanda nodded. "I won a Pulitzer for an editorial on why the world doesn't need Superman. And then he comes waltzing back into my life as if he hadn't been gone all that time, as if he could make it all up to me, to my son, wave his magic cape and it'll all be better. I have a man who wants to marry me, I have a good life." Tears were running down Wanda's face.

"Wanda, if your Superman was so horrible to you, why were you with him when whatever it was happened that brought you here?" Lois asked.

"We were trying to recover my lost memories," Wanda explained. "Even though he

doesn't want a relationship with me. He can't have a relationship with me."

"I assume you mean Superman can't have a relationship with you?" Lois asked.

Wanda nodded.

"You do realize that Superman can't have a relationship with a real person, because he isn't a real person? He's a character in an improv play with the world as a stage who wears a blue body suit and red cape. He's not real." Baby Martha had started to protest and Lois put her to her breast.

"Of course he's a real person," Wanda protested. "You're married to your Superman. You should know."

"No, I'm married to Clark Jerome Kent, who happens to have a second job that doesn't pay at all well, that involves dressing up in a blue body suit and red cape so he can go flying around rescuing people, and having bad guys shoot at him," Lois said. "Clark Kent is the one who said 'I do', who takes the kids to school, helps pay the bills, holds my hand, sleeps in my bed, and was my birthing coach for four babies. Superman didn't do any of those things. He can't. He's not a person, he's a job. You need to be looking for the man *doing* the job."

It was a vast oversimplification, Lois knew, but Wanda just seemed so oblivious. She hoped Clark was having better luck with his counterpart.

--Clark I--

"*Why did you leave me like that? What aren't you telling me? What did you do to me?*" Wanda's words kept reverberating in Kal-El's ears, despite Clark's glower in his direction.

"You're with me," Clark repeated. Kal-El set Jordan on his feet and unfolded himself from the chair.

"You are in so much trouble," CJ muttered, shaking his head. "Nice meeting you."

"CJ..." Clark warned. He beckoned Kal-El to follow him downstairs.

Kal-El didn't remember Wanda's house having a basement. He followed Clark down carpeted steps to a large office lined with books and native art. The rest of the basement was finished as well, and appeared to be an art studio.

"You have some explaining to do, mister," Clark began.

"You sound like my father," Kal-El commented.

"I'll take that as a complement."

"I've already had the 'responsibility' lecture from my mother," Kal-El said, taking a seat in the chair by the door. Clark was leaning against the desk, arms folded across his chest. His expression was one that Kal-El recognized from himself - annoyed Superman. It was more than a little disconcerting to be on the receiving end of that cool gaze.

"I didn't know she was pregnant when I left," he started to explain. "I would never have left if I had known. I don't know what I would have done, but I wouldn't have left."

"So where did you go?"

"Krypton. There were reports, supposedly verified reports, that Krypton had been found, and there were signs of life," Kal-El said. "I had to see for myself. It was like a compulsion; I had to go and see it. The reports were wrong. In fact, the reports were completely false, planted by a psychopath who wanted Superman out of the way."

He looked up. Clark's expression hadn't changed.

"Krypton was more than just dead. It was poison. I almost didn't make it back. When I did get back, I discovered Lex Luthor was using Kryptonian technology to recreate Krypton on Earth. He damn near succeeded in destroying the planet." He noted a flicker of interest in Clark's eyes at the mention of Luthor and Kryptonian technology.

"The Luthor here died about twelve years ago," Clark said. "And so far, he hasn't come back again yet. And the only Kryptonian technology I know about on Earth is the spaceship I was sent to Earth in and the programming in the navigation module. And I didn't get access to those until I'd been in Metropolis for six months or so."

"You don't have access to Jor-El's AI?"

Clark shook his head.

"Lucky you," Kal-El commented. At least Clark had stopped glowering at him. "That damned AI is one of the things that got me in trouble with Lois six years ago. I was told that in order to have a relationship with a human woman, I had to *become* human. Give up the powers, everything. So I did. The worst mistake I ever made up until that time. Everything else afterward came from that one decision."

"Go on," Clark said. The stern father was still in the older man's voice, but 'annoyed Superman' was gone, at least.

"I couldn't stand to not have the powers, to lose that part of myself, to not be able to help. I convinced the AI to let me have my powers back. The price was having a relationship with Lois, with any human woman. She didn't take it very well. So I went ahead and did another incredibly stupid thing, I erased her memory of what we had. I don't know exactly how I did it,

but I did. And now she would cheerfully finish what Luthor started with his kryptonite dagger in my back."

"Do you blame her? You took away her freedom of choice. For all intents and purposes, you raped her. You abused your powers to take away her right to choose," Clark said harshly. He was sounding more and more like Jonathan Kent, or at least how Kal-El thought his father would have reacted. "Right now, I would like nothing better than to tan your hide like cheap leather," Clark added.

"You are not my father."

"No, but I figure I've got about twelve years on you in the Suit. So that makes me the voice of experience. And the voice of experience says you, buster, are acting like a spoiled brat. 'Lois couldn't handle being dumped by Superman so I went and hit the reset button.'?"

"That wasn't it. I told her the truth, who I really am."

"And who are you?"

Kal-El gave him a puzzled look. "I'm not sure I understand."

"When you look in the mirror in the morning, who looks back at you? Clark Joseph Kent, son of Jonathan and Martha Kent, or Kal, son of Jor and Lara of the house of El? When they find your dead body, who do you want them to identify you as?"

Kal-El slumped back in the chair. Clark was annoyingly perceptive and he wondered if it was due to the man's having more life experience - twelve years seemed about right - or if he was simply brighter and more competent. Kal-El couldn't see himself ever handling Perry White's job and this Clark seemed to be taking it in stride. He found that he was actually jealous of the older man.

"Clark Kent, I suppose," Kal-El said finally. "That's who I've been for as long as I can remember. I only found out about Kal-El when I was seventeen, when my powers came in, right after my dad died. The AI wanted me to stay in the Fortress for years to learn to become Kryptonian. I wasn't exactly cooperative. I didn't stay. I went out to see the world instead, went to college."

"Did it ever occur to you that the AI was being less than truthful?" Clark asked. He'd left the 'stern father' mode and had switched to what Kal-El mentally labeled 'reporter' mode. "The AI wanted you to be Kal-El and Kal-El can't have a relationship with a human woman; it's too dangerous for everyone involved. But what's keeping Clark Kent from being with someone?"

"Lois Lane never gave Clark Kent the time of day."

"And whose fault is that?"

Kal-El didn't answer the question. "I don't know how to undo the damage I did," he admitted instead. "I was trying to jog her memory, help her get things sorted out, when we ended up here. I don't know how I even managed to do what I did."

"Kryptonians are telepathic, at least with people they're close to," Clark said. "A few of them are a lot stronger than that. I'm betting that's how you did it, even if you didn't realize it."

"So how do I undo it?"

"The same way you did it?"

"I doubt she'll let me get that close," Kal-El said with a grimace.

"You can but try."

--Clark II--

Clark was not proud of losing his temper. As Superman he couldn't afford to ever lose control that way. And it simply wasn't Clark Kent's way. Doctor Friskin was going to have a field day at their next session. But Kal-El had been so blasted obtuse. In fact, of all the varied versions of Clark Kent he'd met from various alternate time-lines, this one had to be one of the densest. Erasing someone's memories? *Give me a break.*

He checked his watch. Half an hour until every one showed up. It was going to be a long night.

"Why don't you go talk to her now?" Clark suggested. Kal-El's expression was bleak, defeated. He sighed as he stood and headed up the stairs to the main floor.

After a few moments, Clark followed him up the stairs.

Clark went up to the master bedroom and changed out of his suit into black trousers and a black turtleneck shirt. He refused to wear the black Kryptonian body suit that still hung in the back of the hidden closet with his other 'suits'. His one concession tonight to signify his Kryptonian obligations was a blue enameled pendant with the sigil of the House of El.

Coming back downstairs, he noticed Kal-El and his Lois had gone out to the back deck to talk.

"How did it go?" he asked his wife.

"Was I that galactically dense?" she wondered aloud.

"No," he replied, busying himself with setting out snacks on the dining room table for their soon-to-be-arriving guests. "Wasn't it Herb who said you were simply blinded by love?"

"He only said that to make me feel better about it taking so long to figure you out," Lois said with a grin. "I mean, who'd a thunk it? The Man of Steel was just a disguise for the Hack from Nowheresville Perry was trying to set me up with." She came over to the table. "No chocolate?"

"You know Lara and Jordan are allergic and you can't have any until the baby's weaned. Sleep good, baby wired on chocolate bad, remember? Have some carob kisses instead." He popped one in to her mouth.

"It's just not the same," she complained.

There was the sound of a car driving up and stopping in the driveway. A moment later, the doorbell rang.

"I got it," CJ yelled, running to the door and opening it. Standing on the front porch were Richard and Penny, and just behind them was the Kent family lawyer, Constance Hunter.

"Come on in," Clark said, waving them into the house. "Zara and Ching aren't here yet, but should be any time now. Oh, Constance, this is Penny and Richard White."

The attorney gave the couple a nod in greeting. "Constance will be the one handling the necessary paperwork, assuming everything comes together," Clark added as explanation.

Richard gave Penny a hug. Clark knew they had high hopes for tonight's meeting. Like him and Lois before them, they'd been turned down by adoption agency social workers. Even the foster care system thought the risk of placing a child with a pair of Daily Planet investigative reporters was too great.

"I assume the natural parents are aware of the documentation they need to have?" Constance asked.

"The message was passed to them, so I assume they'll have proper documents with them," Clark said. "We may have to translate them, however."

Constance nodded.

Clark had told her early on it was to be a privately arranged fostering involving foreign nationals. He hadn't added any details aside from the fact that fostering was a normal part of the culture among the high-ranking families of that nation. He assumed Constance had done her homework and realized that no current Earth culture was doing that sort of thing these days.

Clark glanced out the French doors to the back deck. Kal-El and Wanda were still talking. Then he leaned over and kissed her, a long tender kiss. He pulled away and Clark saw Wanda's eyes widen. Then she slapped Kal-El. Hard.

"That had to have hurt," Richard commented.

"They have some serious issues to work out," Lois said.

--Earth I--

"Uncle Perry, have you heard from Lois yet?" Richard asked. He had five-year-old Jason Peregrine White on one hip as he walked into his uncle's office.

Perry shook his head. "Neither she nor Kent has called in and I haven't been able to reach them on their cells. You know, Lois hasn't run off like this in ages. She usually gives me some sort of rundown on what she's working on before she takes off."

"Ralph asked me a little while ago if the two of them had run off to Niagara Falls again," Richard said. "He's lucky I didn't punch him." He set Jason on his feet. "Jason, why don't you go to my office and draw? I need to talk to Perry."

"Okay, Daddy." Jason headed off to the adjacent office.

"Okay, son, what gives?" Perry asked.

Richard looked solemn. "I'm worried about them. The two of them going missing is just going to make the rumors that much worse. It's bad enough the whole newsroom knows Clark's Jason's father, and now they're going to think Lois is two-timing me with him."

"Do you think she is?"

"No," Richard said, "But, Uncle Perry, the opposite of love is indifference, not hate. And since he's come back, she's been treating him like he's her ex. I know she still has feelings for him, even if she won't admit it. I admit I've been hoping all this time that she'd come around, that she'd feel for me what she felt for him before whatever it was happened that made him leave. I just hope she can get through her anger at him leaving when he did, so she can forgive him."

"Do you want her to forgive him?" Perry asked.

"I want what's best for Jason," Richard said. "Whatever Lois decides, she needs to do it quickly, for Jason's sake."

--Lois I--

Wanda had never seen Kal-El looking as glum as when he came into the living room where she and Lois were sitting. Or maybe she had and just couldn't remember.

"We have to talk," he said, head bowed, hands in his pants pockets. His posture was so familiar, so Clark-like. She almost had it... and it was gone again.

Lois gave Wanda a little nod. Wanda stood up and followed Kal-El out to the back deck. It was about an hour before sunset and the western sky was beginning to glow pink and red.

"They're happy," Wanda said, looking at the clouds. "Married ten years, four kids, two cars, a mortgage. They're in love and they're happy." She glanced at Kal-El. His head was still down, looking at his feet, not at her.

"She was trying to convince me that Superman was nothing more than a character, a job. Somehow I can't quite get my head around that either."

"I think Mister Kent was channeling my father," Kal-El said. "I know my dad would have been terribly disappointed in me for what I did to you. And he asked me some questions I'm not sure I have good answers for."

"And what were the questions?"

"Just one really. Who am I, really? And I don't have an answer. I've spent seventeen years trying to be the person my birth father's AI thought I should be. And in that time, the person I ought to be, the person I really am, has turned into someone I don't even like. He's a clumsy, cowardly fool and I'm not even sure how it happened."

"Do you always refer to yourself in the third person?"

That brought a touch of a smile. "It helps me keep on track. I don't really have disassociated personality syndrome. It just looks like that sometimes."

There was a long silence as she tried to put more pieces together. "I know, intellectually, that you're also Clark. But I still can't quite believe it."

"He told me that Kryptonians are telepathic. He suspects I may have used that talent on you without intending to."

"Can you undo it?"

To answer, he stepped closer, tipped her head up with his hand and kissed her. She remembered the sweetness of his mouth, the soft lips, the fervent promise of more.

He pulled back and the memories of that night, the night Jason was conceived, the night in the Fortress of Solitude came flooding back, overwhelming her senses. There was more than just that night - all the things she hadn't put together afterwards, all the sly comments at work when it was discovered she was pregnant and Clark Kent, her partner, had disappeared to parts unknown, the understanding looks from Perry, the orders from Perry to go with Clark to do a story at Niagara Falls. Clark's unconvincing arguments against it. It all came into focus and she was furious.

She slapped him as hard as she could.

He took a step back and she could see the confused pain in his impossibly blue eyes.

"I'm sorry," he murmured.

"Was it your idea to do that story at Niagara?" she demanded.

"Is that what you remember?" he asked, confusion obvious in his voice.

"Was it?"

"Hardly. It was an idiotic fluff piece and you know it. Jimmy could have written it," he answered. "Perry went and gave the story I was working on to Mike. You have no idea how

furious I was." He paused, watching her warily.

That was something. The Man of Steel was afraid of her. She felt the beginnings of a hysterical laugh and ruthlessly quashed it.

"What else do you remember?" he asked.

"I remember Niagara Falls. And things I didn't put together then, that didn't make sense at the time," she said. "We were set up. Somebody had a great laugh sending Mad Dog off on a honeymoon with her dweeby partner. Even if nothing had happened, they would have said it had. Only something did happen, and then you took off and they blamed me for it. Oh, nobody actually said it, and Perry was so understanding, and you hadn't placed any blame on anybody for you needing to leave. And then when Jason was born and he looked just like you, only you didn't come back..."

"Lois," he said quietly. "You're babbling."

She stopped. To her horror, she was crying. She stepped toward him, recognizing through her tears that oh-so-familiar deer-in-the-headlights ready to bolt look. "I'm sorry," she said. "It just came at me too fast." He seemed to relax just a bit, enough for her to put her arms around him. "I missed you. I missed my friend."

"I missed you, too. I should never have left," he said, resting his cheek on the top of her head.

"If I had stopped you, you would have ended up resenting it, resenting me," she said. "We both know that."

"So where do we go from here?"

"I have no idea," she admitted. "But it's a moot point if we can't get back home."

"You know, you're not nearly as mad at me as I thought you'd be," he said. "How's your hand?"

She flexed it experimentally. "Nothing broken. And I haven't decided how mad I am. When I do, you'll be the first to know. We have some serious trust issues to deal with. Not to mention how the devil I'm going to explain all this to Jason, and Richard, and Perry. This isn't over yet." She looked over at the house, into the room beyond the French doors. "We seem to be the floor show."

--Lois II--

The couple on the deck seemed to have come to some agreement. Lois saw them glance back at the house, and then start for the doors. As they came into the living room the doorbell rang and once again, CJ ran to get it.

"CJ, wait," Lois yelled. The eight-year-old opened the door instead. Three figures, a man, woman and small child, all dressed in form-fitting black, stood on the porch. The man was holding a metal case about a foot high and wide and two feet long.

"Kindred in the bonds, I greet thee thrice," Clark greeted the newcomers with the slightest of bows, hands held out in the Kryptonian fashion. "Lady Zara, welcome to my home."

Zara smiled, moved forward and gave Clark a hug. The Kryptonian woman was un-customarily friendly, given how formal Clark had been. Lois knew that Kryptonians were not given to public displays of affection. It was one of the problems Clark had during his year on New Krypton - he was a very physical person and having to deny that part of himself, his need for physical contact, had hurt him very badly.

"Clark, it's so good to see you," Zara said. "But we need to talk privately when this is done." Lois saw the strain in Zara's face and wondered how things were faring on New Krypton.

Ching had followed Zara into the living room, ushering the child before him. Clark crouched down in front of the small boy. "And who is this little guy?"

"This is Jos-Ra, heir to the House of Ra. My son by my consort Ching."

The boy looked to be Lara's age with medium brown hair and hazel eyes like CJ. His long hair was secured by a blue headband.

Zara looked around the room, stopping at Richard and Penny. "Mister and Missus White?"

Richard nodded. "Yes, Lady Zara?"

"It is our custom to foster our male offspring to allied Houses," Zara explained. "However, one of the Great Houses, the House of El, does not currently have a presence on New Krypton and is not readily available for this type of alliance."

Richard looked to Clark for guidance, or at least an explanation.

Clark gave him a crooked grin. "Among other things, I happen to be the equivalent of the Consul General for New Krypton," Clark said. "I have been asked to facilitate such fosterage on Earth on behalf of the House of El. I wasn't going to go into details until they got here. I didn't want to get your hopes up."

"Oh, wow," Richard muttered. "When you said foreign, you really meant it. The House of El is Superman's family, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Clark answered.

"Does he, I mean will he, have Superman's powers?" Penny asked. "He's so small."

"Superman has said his powers didn't fully manifest until he was nearly eighteen years old," Clark explained "So it's unlikely Jos-Ra will show any powers or anything to mark him as being anything other than human until he's an adult,"

"Unless he's under great stress," Kal-El added. "Strength shows up first and it is possible for that to manifest at an early age *if* he is under life-threatening stress."

"How do you know that?" Richard asked.

"I know," Kal-El said with a sigh. "It's complicated."

Zara gave Kal-El a curious look. The tall man pulled to his full height and gave the Kryptonian woman a polite nod.

"Lady Zara, may I present Charles King and Wanda Detroit," Clark said. "They're new here."

Ching had moved closer to Lois and now leaned over to speak with her. "Lady Lois, which house is he with?" Ching asked softly.

"The House of El from an alternate time-line," Lois said. "Like he said, it's complicated." Ching stared at her in obvious disbelief.

"Clark and I have had some experience in this sort of thing," she explained. Ching didn't look convinced. "How did you know he's Kryptonian?"

"His life aura is as strong as Kal-El's," Ching said quietly. "Earth humans don't radiate quite as strongly."

Lois's attention was drawn to Zara crouching down beside her son. "Jos, this is Richard and Penny. Lord Protector Kal-El, Superman, has arranged for you to stay with them."

The child looked at his mother with wide worried eyes. "But I want to stay with you and father and Suren. Why can't you stay with me?"

"We've talked about this. Your sister has to stay home with your father and me. You will be under Lord Kal-El's protection and you will learn many things here, many things you can bring back to us when it's time," Zara explained patiently. "Mister and Missus White will take care of you just as though you were their child and Clark and Lois will be here for you too."

Lois wasn't sure how she would act if their positions were reversed. Her heart broke at the thought of leaving one of her children with strangers, giving them up for treaty obligations, even if it did make political sense. Children shouldn't be pawns in political games, and if that was the price of being royalty, she wanted no part of it. They were never getting one of her babies.

Constance cleared her throat. "It's getting late and we need to get these documents squared away."

"Yes, of course," Ching agreed.

The document signing only took fifteen minutes or so. Constance had everything ready and the signature lines were highlighted for them. Legally it was simply an open adoption. In the documents, the child's name was now 'Jason Ryan White'.

As soon as the papers were signed, Clark hurried Richard, Penny, Jason, and Constance out the door.

"File the rest of the Goldman murder story tomorrow from home, then take the next couple days off. Family leave," Clark ordered with a smile.

--Clark I--

Aside from meeting Superman/Clark Kent earlier today, Kal-El had never met another Kryptonian. Had never dreamed that such was possible. But now, two Kryptonians who had evaded the holocaust that had brought Krypton low, that had blasted the planet into poisonous shards, were here, on Earth.

They were both a little shorter than he had expected, dressed in black Kryptonian bodysuits with their house sigil emblazoned across their chests. The woman's outfit was completed by a cape-like coat of a slightly heavier material than the body suit, with a high collar. He wondered a little that Clark had chosen not to dress as a Kryptonian at this meeting, but then Richard, Penny, and Constance obviously didn't know that Clark was also their world's Superman.

He recalled his father's lectures on Krypton's social structure. El, Ar and Us were the oldest, most honored of the twelve houses. Those three had been founded first by the three representatives whose efforts had finally brought peace to the warring nations of Krypton. Ra, Et, and Ah were close in time, and the others evolved from other powerful families. Martha had said something about a civil war. Had the checks and balances that Sor-El, Pol-Us, and Kol-Ar created somehow failed in the new colony?

"Okay, Zara," Clark said as soon as Richard and Penny had 'Jason' well away from the house. "Why are you fostering Jos here on Earth? You know how dangerous it'll be if the other Houses discover Earth isn't the hellhole you've been telling them it is. You also know how hard it's going to be to re-assimilate him back into New Kryptonian society."

Zara looked over at Ching, worry written across both their faces. "We didn't see that we had a choice, Clark," Zara said. "For the past year or so, the House of Et has been attempting to reestablish itself and destabilize the other houses. Nor's nephew, Xon, has been making noises about bringing the House of Et back to its former glory. Trey is dead and several heirs to the other houses have been assassinated, forcing those houses to reconsider their birth marriage contracts and their fostering options. Xon has demanded Suren's hand in contract."

"We have no intention of acceding to his demands, of course. He is not getting control of our daughter," Ching added. "But we need to have Jos safe from Xon's agents. And as to Earth's danger - I admit it may be a risk, but we have been successful in getting our people convinced that not only is Earth a barbaric and dangerous place, but the planet is the property and domain of the House of El. Hence your title of Lord Protector. They also know what you tried to do for our people, and how you killed Nor to save us from his madness."

"That's just wonderful," Clark commented. Kal-El wasn't sure if Zara and Ching heard the sarcasm in his voice. "And how soon before Xon starts gunning for me to avenge his uncle's death?"

"It's unlikely he'll come to Earth, Clark," Zara said. "He is more cunning than that. And that is what we need to talk to you privately about."

Clark sighed. "Come down to my office," he said. "We can talk there." He led them down the stairs to his basement office.

Kal-El took a moment to inspect the bookshelves that lined the living room. At home, he owned nearly every one of the books here, with the exception of the romance novels - they obviously were Lois Lane-Kent's choice of reading material.

One volume caught his attention: **A Year on New Krypton** by Clark Kent. He skimmed the book, stopping to read certain passages more closely.

"Mrs. Kent, how much of this book is fiction?" he asked.

"The part where Clark Kent *isn't* Kal-El," Lois replied. "Why?"

"Krypton was an advanced, peaceful society. According to this, the colony of New Krypton was a barbarous war zone. How did it happen?"

"I don't know," Lois said. "I don't know if they know what happened or why, except to blame Nor." Lois's expression became distant. "Except for what he wrote there, and a handful of things he was actually proud of, Clark won't really talk about what happened to him while he was gone. It still gives him nightmares, and it took nearly six months before he was willing to put on the suit, to come back to his other job. I've read what he wrote and I know he left a lot out." She hugged herself as if suddenly cold. "I remember the scars he came back with. Some of them were so awful, we thought he'd never heal."

"You don't like them much, do you?" Wanda observed. Lois shook her head.

"I know Zara and Ching try to understand Earth society, mores," Lois said. "They try, and I know the multitude of cultures here confuses them, but they don't understand that life has to be more than pragmatic analysis of needs. There has to be joy and love and hope. There has to be art that has no purpose other than to be pretty or sentimental, poetry and music that aren't dirges or military marches. And I don't like the way they assume they have priority in my husband's life."

Kal-El canted his head to one side, listening. Zara was talking about Nor's daughter and her child. A child who, if Zara could be believed, was biologically Clark's daughter. It was Zara's solution to the political problem such a child presented to the stability of New Krypton that appalled him.

Downstairs, Clark was shouting at them. "You're the brilliant military strategist, Ching. You come up with a different solution, 'cause I'm not buying into the one you've got. Superman does not kill! And I will not sanction the death of a child in any case!"

"I don't see that you have a choice, Kal-El," Ching said.

"There is always a choice," Clark insisted. "And I have made mine."

Kal-El heard a whoosh and a moment later a sonic boom.

"They must have gotten him pretty upset," Lois said softly. "He doesn't normally take off that fast from the house."

"They asked him to do something completely reprehensible," said Kal-El. "They asked him to kill."

--Clark II--

Ching had grabbed the metal case he'd brought with him and carried it downstairs with him. Clark noted the case was sealed and he didn't see an obvious way to open it. It was lead-lined so he couldn't see into it. That worried him.

"Clark," Zara began as soon as all three of them were behind the closed door of Clark's office. "We have a crisis on our hands. Not only has Xon been trying to destabilize the Great Houses, but he's specifically targeted the Houses of Ra and El. A few weeks ago our people caught Nor's daughter Conza. She was pregnant, close to term."

"I remember Conza, I think. She was only about five years old when I killed Nor. She was there that day," Clark said. "She was with her mother, watching."

He closed his eyes against the unbidden memories. Memories of that last duel with Nor, when he was forced to use every trick he'd learned from Ching in drei combat. Nor was taller, more experienced, and simply meaner than Clark. But luck, desperation, and a few moves from martial arts movies, and classes Lois had made him take, had been on Clark's side. Somehow, he brought Nor to his knees and the Kryptonian quarterstaff down on the back of Nor's neck. The photon emissions had burned through skin and bone. *No doubts, no mercy. Only the kill.*

"The mother swore vengeance against the House of El," Ching said, continuing Zara's explanation. "She was one of the leaders taken out in the final raids against Nor's strongholds before you left for Earth. The daughter disappeared, and we had assumed she had died as well."

"We don't know who had her, who raised her, but when she was found, she had become what you would term a 'terrorist'. We believe she was responsible for the assassinations of the heirs," Zara went on. "When she was caught and discovered she was in the hands of the Houses of El and Ra, she tried to kill herself and the unborn child with her. We managed to prevent it only to discover when the child was born that she carried the genetic markings of the House of El. We assume they got your genetic material when you were held by Nor."

"That's probably a safe assumption, considering I don't remember most of what happened while Nor's people had me," Clark said. What little he did remember was best described as a drugged out nightmare. Not that he'd had any experience with drugs prior to that. On Earth, under the yellow sun, they didn't affect him at all. But it wasn't an experience he ever wanted to repeat.

"What happened to her, to Conza?" Clark asked.

"After the child was delivered, she managed to end her life," Ching said. "I swear we had nothing to do with it. We wanted her alive to stand trial for her crimes."

"So what's the crisis?" Clark asked. He trusted Ching, trusted his judgment.

Zara sighed and shook her head. "Clark, biologically, the child is yours. A female member of the House of El out of Et, as such she is a valuable pawn in whatever Xon has planned."

"So give her back to him," Clark said. "I haven't been on New Krypton in ten years, so obviously I didn't consent to any union with the child's mother."

"Clark, you're being dense," Ching said. "The child is a pawn. She was bred to take down the House of El. Whether you claim her as a member of the House or not, Xon can make the claim that the child's mother was your bound concubine as right of victor, and the child has the right of inheritance in preference over your natural, half-breed heirs. Your only choice is to repudiate any claim the child might have on you, and take steps to ensure Xon has no chance of using her against you."

"But you just said he'll use her whether or not I claimed her."

Zara and Ching just looked at him. He saw pity in their eyes and he finally realized what they were referring to.

"No!" Clark found himself shouting at them. "You're the brilliant military strategist, Ching. You come up with a different solution, 'cause I'm not buying into the one you've got. Superman does not kill! And I will not sanction the death of a child in any case!"

"I don't see that you have a choice, Kal-El," Ching said.

"There is always a choice," Clark insisted. "And I have made mine."

"Clark, just sign the repudiation documents," Zara insisted. "Your hands will be clean. Ching and I can handle the rest."

"No!" He found he had his fists clenched and he was shaking with fury. He stalked out of the office and blurred his way through the underground passage that led from the house to the river's edge. Then he took off, into the sky, as fast as he could, without bothering to change into the blue and red suit. The night was a good enough disguise.

He headed north, to the glacier he frequently used as a refuge when he was close to losing control. The glacier had taken a beating over the years. This time, instead of taking his anger out on the ice, he simply sat, head in his hands.

He didn't understand Zara and Ching. Even on New Krypton life was precious. They'd started out with only one hundred thousand colonists, and the number had dropped to half that between the harshness of the planet they were on and Nor's war. But now they wanted him to authorize the death of a child whose only crime was to be born.

He heard the swoosh of a Kryptonian coming to ground and looked up to see Kal-El standing a few yards away, wearing the familiar blue and red.

"I don't think I like the Kryptonians in this universe," Kal-El said conversationally, sitting down on the ice facing Clark. The aurora borealis streamed above them in the darkness, coloring the landscape.

"I *know* I don't like them," Clark replied. "And I don't understand enough of Kryptonian law to argue against them. Assuming they're not making things up as they go along. I know Nor was. By the way, how did you find me?"

"There are only four full-blooded adult Kryptonians on the planet. It wasn't that hard."

"I'm not used to having other Kryptonians around," Clark admitted. "And I admit that I have a bad habit of avoiding emotional confrontation by taking off." He sighed. Ten years of therapy hadn't broken him of the avoidance habit. "I should be working on a way to get you and your Lois back to where you both belong. But the usual suspects haven't shown their faces yet, either to apologize or to gloat, depending which one, so I don't have a lot to go on."

"There are 'usual suspects'?"

Clark nodded. "Oh yeah. There's H.G. Wells and his time machine. When he shows up it's usually to apologize for messing us up again. Then there's Tempus; he's a psychopath from the future who will do just about anything to keep Lois and me from doing whatever it is he thinks we're going to do. He almost got himself elected president ten years ago. And then there's Mix'm. I'm not going to say his name. I don't want to attract his attention. He's a demon or imp from another dimension and he just loves making my life miserable. It's his idea of fun."

"H.G. Wells, the writer?" Kal-El asked. "Isn't he dead?"

"Sometimes," Clark said with a bemused smile. "And then, sometimes he just shows up out of the blue and Lois and I end up plane hopping, or time hopping, or both. It gets a little weird, sometimes. I've lost count of how many alternates I've met, or heard about."

"Maybe I should be glad I don't know him," Kal-El said. "I don't recall seeing any humans, or imps, when that storm hit us. And I've never seen, or felt, a storm like it. It was like it had intelligence, like it was following us. And it was moving fast, faster than anything natural. When it hit us, it was like the world turned inside out. If I were back in my own time-line, I could ask the AI in the Fortress of Solitude."

"I don't have one of those, at least not since I outgrew the tree house in the back yard," Clark said. "And there was no AI there. Dad wouldn't even let me bring in power."

"I wonder..." Kal-El murmured. He reached behind him, to a hidden pocket in his cape, and pulled out the copy of the father crystal he'd made just before he and Lois had ended up here. "There was no memory crystal or memory block with your ship?"

"There was a navigation module with recorded messages, but nothing that looked like that," Clark said. "But then, the ship that brought me here was stolen not long after I arrived. I got it back a little before I went to New Krypton. It's possible there were more modules, but I doubt it." He held out his hand and concentrated. The small blue and green globe of the Earth that normally rested on a shelf in Clark's office appeared in his hand. It shifted into its red Kryptonian view.

"That's a neat trick," Kal-El commented.

"It's tuned to me," Clark explained. "But I still haven't figured out all the things it can do."

Suddenly, the globe in his hand began to glow bright white as it levitated away from him. Clark saw that the crystal in Kal-El's hand had also started glowing. Kal-El opened his hand and the crystal floated up to a spot only inches from Clark's navigation module. After a long moment the light became even brighter and Clark found himself shielding his eyes against it. Then, there was a musical chime and the crystal went dark, dropping to the ice. The sphere's glow dimmed to a more tolerable level as it sped away from the two men.

"Hey, get back here," Clark muttered as he stood and watched the sphere disappear over an ice ridge.

Kal-El held out a hand. "Wait."

The glacier quaked and steam billowed from the far side of the ice ridge. Soon, even the ridge was enveloped in the steam. There was a sound like crackling ice cubes, only a thousand times louder and Clark saw huge shafts of crystal thrusting upwards out of the ice, coming together at odd angles, creating something resembling a structure. The crystals glowed from some light shining within the structure.

Finally the quaking ended, the lights dimmed, and the only sound that remained was the icy arctic wind.

Clark saw a puzzled frown on Kal-El's face. "That's odd," Kal-El murmured. "It's not the same."

"It's different than the one you have?"

"Yes. It's simpler, somehow. Like from an earlier age," Kal-El said. "Shall we go in and look?"

--Lois I--

Kal-El handed Wanda the book he'd been skimming through, **A Year on New Krypton** by Clark Kent. She opened it and glanced through it. It read like something her Clark, Kal-El, would write, except, as far as she knew, he'd never been a war correspondent and this was about a war as vicious as any she'd heard about. The writing was as clear, as understandable, as understanding as anything she'd ever read. So much like her Clark. But there was so much death, so much pain, so little hope. *This world's Clark went through all this and came out okay? Jimmy spent three months in Chechnya and almost didn't make it back at all. He still drank too heavily.*

She put the book back on the shelf where it belonged and looked more closely at the other books in the case. Several had Wanda Detroit listed at the author. *Wanda Detroit? No wonder Mister Kent had laughed.* The titles indicated they were probably romance novels.

She pulled one out and looked at it. It was almost identical to the unfinished novel Wanda had on her computer at home. This Lois had not only finished it, but had gotten published as well. Wanda was struck by a pang of jealousy as she put the book back in its place.

She heard the sonic boom that indicated something - or someone - had broken the sound barrier fairly close by.

"They must have gotten him pretty upset," Lois said softly. "He doesn't normally take off that fast from the house."

"They asked him to do something completely reprehensible," said Kal-El. "They asked him to kill."

"They what?" Wanda said in disbelief. "Who?"

"They were talking about a threat to the House of El, a child," Kal-El said. "Nor-Et's granddaughter."

"Clark would never agree to something like that. Never," Lois said.

"I know," Kal-El said. "I'm sure that's why he took off."

Wanda gave him a curious look.

"He needs to get his head together, before he does something rash," Kal-El said. "At least, that's what I would do. I'd head north, to the Fortress of Solitude."

"Clark doesn't have anything like that," Lois said.

"I'll be back shortly," Kal-El promised. He blurred into his suit and went out onto the back deck. He looked back at the two women standing in the living room. "They do say that two heads are better than one. We'll come up with something. I hope."

With that, he disappeared into the night sky. A second sonic boom echoed over the river.

--Lois II--

Lois heard footsteps coming up from the basement, from Clark's office.

"What the hell do you think you're playing at, asking Clark to kill a child?" Lois hissed at them.

"Considering the gravity of the situation, we didn't see another solution," Ching said. At least he had the courtesy to look uncomfortable in the face of her fury.

"We had hoped that when Kal-El killed Nor ten years ago, that the threat he posed was over, that no one else would make the attempt to overthrow the legitimate government Kal-El and I represent," Zara said. "Kal-El and I were bred to lead. I was raised to rule. Kal-El, for reasons I still do not fathom, was sent to Earth instead of New Krypton. He does not understand the needs of our ruling system."

"I think you're wrong," Lois said. "I think he understands too well. What you don't understand is that this planet has invented and discarded more political systems than most people can imagine. Clark spent some time researching that when he came back. And believe it or not, he found precedents in Earth history. I mean, calling you 'La Princessa', wasn't exactly a complement."

"I was aware of that," Zara said. "Although I admit I was not aware of the full connotation at the time and I know it annoyed him when I refused to be insulted by the title. If he'd been raised on new Krypton, or just accepted his duties to his home world, we wouldn't be having this discussion."

"Zara, I've met a Kal-El that was raised on New Krypton. The one I met had his Zara and Ching murdered for betraying him. He was a monster, worse than Nor. His greed and ambition nearly destroyed New Krypton *and* Earth," Lois told her. "Remember, in Earth mythology, Satan, the lord of evil, was born an angel."

"We have reason to believe that the priests may support Xon's claim that your children, being half-breeds, are not valid heirs to the House of El," Ching said softly. "We're not sure where the guilds stand. I know that when Kal-El was on New Krypton, he made allies of many of the guild masters. I admit, that was something I had not considered to be of strategic value, but it was one of the things that helped us, then."

"And the elders?" Lois asked. After Clark's return, she'd spent many hours trying to understand the political realities of New Krypton. She knew the council of elders was the real ruling power, as it had been on Krypton before its destruction. Each of the twelve major houses was represented on the council. Each had one vote, and how the votes went on an issue was usually determined by backroom deals, marriage contracts, 'gifts' and just plain schmoozing. Ethics, even in theory, were not part of the process.

"At this time we are fairly certain we have the support of a majority of the elders in the council, but with Trey's death our position is becoming difficult," Zara said. "We need for Clark to at least give the appearance of having concern for our position in the council and the threat Xon poses, not just to our Houses, but to the council as a whole."

"And killing a child will do this?" Wanda wondered.

"This child is a time bomb in our midst," Ching said. "We don't know what else to do."

--Clark I--

The Fortress was smaller than the one his father crystal had made, simpler, less like a cathedral than a simple temple to some god that had no name on this planet. A temple to Rao perhaps. But then, did Rao still have dominion on Kryptonians who considered themselves more human than not? He had his doubts. It was something, Kal-El decided, he should discuss with Father Daniel, his spiritual advisor of many years, when, and if, he got back to his own time-line.

One thing that was at least similar to his own fortress was the raised central console - only this console held the spherical navigation module as its centerpiece instead of the father crystal. The module glowed with a comfortable yellow light that was more than sufficient to light the interior of the crystal construction. Surrounding the spherical module were a set of metallic blocks. *Memory modules?*

"It's beautiful," Clark said, looking around. "Is this what Krypton looked like?"

"Well, the Krypton I was born on did, sort of," Kal-El said. "They grew their buildings, re-engineered their planet. They were too proud to recognize they didn't control everything. They couldn't believe their own sun could betray them."

"Except for Jor-El," Clark said. "And here, somebody must have listened to him, because New Krypton is still around."

Clark stepped up to the console and placed one hand on the navigation module. A holographic image of a tall, slender man wearing a white tunic bearing the sigil of the House of El appeared in the space in front of the console.

"Kal-El, I know you do not remember me. I am Jor-El. I am your father," the hologram announced.

It wasn't the same white-haired man Kal-El had seen in his own Fortress. This man was younger, thinner than his own father. But he still had a distinguished look about him, with a shock of white hair that was held back from his face by a silver headband. His almond shaped eyes were a warm brown.

"On the console beside the module that guided your ship to Earth are memory modules covering the scientific and cultural facts of the twenty-eight galaxies known to our scientists," the hologram continued. "Here you may ask questions so that we may explore the answers together."

"Tell me about the colony of New Krypton," Clark asked. The hologram smiled.

--Clark II--

"I assume you are referring to the industrial colony originally designated Halos I, financed by the House of El, in alliance with the trading and industrial guilds. It was also an experiment in self-determined governance. The colony was considered a success for over three generations, and paid back its debt to both the parent guilds as well as to the House of El within two generations. The House of El maintained close financial and personal ties with the colony."

"It was an experiment in self-determined governance?" Clark repeated. "Could you explain that?"

The hologram's pleasant expression didn't change. "The governance of Krypton has traditionally been based on a balance of power between the noble houses, the industrial and trading guilds and the priesthood. Halos I was granted the right to use a more representational form of government much like ones my great-grandfather had observed on other planets, including Earth. The experiment was surprisingly successful and suggestions were made to allow this form of government to be permitted in future colonies.

"Unfortunately, no other colonies were founded prior to my discovery of inherent instabilities in Krypton's orbit due to the imminent death of its sun."

"So what happened to the colony?" Clark asked. "If it had a representational government, why is it now ruled by the great houses? Why was there almost a civil war?"

"Some members of the Council of Elders took my warning seriously enough to evacuate themselves to Halos I and apparently made the attempt to recreate the political structure of Krypton in that new environment," the hologram said. "I must assume their attempt was only partially successful."

"The general population didn't want to give up their rights," Kal-El surmised. "The guilds sided with the Houses of Ra and El, didn't they?"

"Yes, I'm pretty sure they did," Clark admitted. "Ching was surprised I even bothered to contact the guilds when more of the houses started to side with Nor, demanding the heir of the House of El, namely *me*, take his rightful place as ruler beside Zara or allow Nor to do it. Zara wasn't about to marry Nor and I wasn't about to become king. I refused to betray Lois's trust. "

"But Krypton hadn't had a monarchy in millennia, not since Pol-Us, Sor-El and Kol-Ar crafted the government that brought peace to Krypton," Kal-El said. "I'm assuming that's true of the Krypton in this time-line."

The hologram appeared to blink its eyes as the AI recognized Kal-El's presence. "Correct. The government created by Pol-Us, Sor-El and Kol-Ar brought about the Great Peace, allowing Krypton to become the most evolved and enlightened society in the known twenty-eight galaxies."

"Modest, too," commented Clark. The AI had given him a little background on the political situation on New Krypton, but nothing he thought he could use yet. It certainly didn't explain Zara and Ching's demand that Nor's granddaughter be killed, unless... "Explain property inheritance among the noble houses."

"Within the Great Houses, the eldest legitimate male heir inherits both his father's property and title. In the event there is no legitimate male heir, the property and title will devolve onto the eldest legitimate female heir, then to the eldest male heir born to a noble concubine, then to the eldest female heir born to a noble concubine. Any offspring, male or female, born to non-nobility are not eligible to inherit either property or title without special dispensation of the Council of Elders."

"Bingo," Clark murmured to himself. "According to the original charter of the Halos I colony, who owns the land, the property, the colony is on?"

"The House of El. Specifically, the High Lord of the House of El," the hologram replied. "You."

"That's Xon's plan," Clark said to Kal-El. "Disenfranchise my kids since Lois isn't Kryptonian nobility, and then announce the granddaughter is my heir by a noble concubine, whether or not I ever slept with her. Whether or not I was even on the planet. The granddaughter inherits the lands and titles, which happens to include the whole blasted colony. It's property, not politics." He turned back to the hologram. "Is there a legal mechanism to sell or otherwise dispose of this type of property, say deed it over to the Council of Elders or to a consortium of the guilds?"

"Negative. Only *individuals* of noble birth may own property. Also, a property transaction of this magnitude to another House must have the unanimous support of the Council of Elders."

"Damn," Clark muttered to himself.

"So what do you plan to do about it?" Kal-El asked.

"I still don't know," Clark admitted. "I'm not sure there is a viable solution. I can't claim her; that'd be feeding into Xon's lie. If I repudiate her, she can still be used against me. I can't foster her out on Earth 'cause he may find out and attack Earth. I could try to find Herb and send her off to another time-line, but there's still a chance she could be used against the Kal-El of that world."

"Assuming you could find this sometimes-dead time traveler?"

Clark nodded. "And assuming he was willing to help. He hasn't shown up yet. I don't know what that means, except that Utopia isn't threatened."

"Utopia?"

Clark nodded. "According to Wells, my descendants, Lois's and mine, will found a Utopian society centered in Metropolis. No poverty, no crime, the whole nine yards. Wells intervenes, or tries to, when he sees that future in jeopardy. He's very invested in that future."

"And since nothing has happened yet to endanger your children, there is no threat to the future Wells is protecting," Kal-El reasoned. "Obviously a second Superman and Lois doesn't have an effect."

"Or something will get you out of here before you do effect it," Clark said. Again he turned back to the hologram. "What is known concerning inter-dimensional travel or inter-dimensional rifts?"

"Please insert the eighth memory module into the reader."

Clark looked through the blocks on the console until he found one with the proper Kryptonian number engraved on it. He placed the module into the square hole beside the navigation globe. The hologram appeared to change, its expression growing more solemn.

"Kryptonian law forbids research into that area," the hologram began. "Kryptonian theory is that transferring matter from one dimension to another would alter the static state of each universe affected, potentially destroying both universes. Another theory has that a transfer of an individual would initiate a chain-reaction throughout all related realities, shifting each counterpart into an adjacent reality. The energy requirement of this shift also has the potential of destroying one or more realities."

"I know from experimental evidence and personal experience that both of these theories are incorrect," Clark said. "It is possible to transfer one or more individuals from one time-line

to another without transferring out their counterparts. Given that fact, there is no evidence to support the theory of a chain-reaction throughout all related realities, and maintaining the static balance between realities appears to simply require that the mass be balanced, not the individuals."

Clark continued, "Is there any evidence to support a natural phenomenon being able to create a dimensional transfer or dimensional rift?"

"There is a phenomenon known to the Dakaari as the Nexus. They believe it to be a primordial super-string. Should the Nexus phenomenon in one reality intersect the Nexus in another, it would be theoretically possible to use the phenomenon to transfer from one time-line to another, or to travel backwards in time within a time-line. However, the gravitational anomalies created by the approach of the Nexus can and has destroyed entire star systems, including the Dakaari home world."

"Any other possibilities?" Clark asked.

"There is also a phenomenon known as a 'tempocane', a highly localized magnetic storm that is theorized to be able to create a conduit between dimensions or different points on a single time-line. According to the scientists of Aldierra, a tempocane nearly always returns to its initial site of manifestation within seventy-two hours and creates a reverse effect, returning transferred objects back to their original space, if not time."

"Can you describe the physical manifestation of a tempocane?" Kal-El asked.

"It is reported that a tempocane within an atmosphere appears as a severe cyclonic atmospheric disturbance that is frequently mistaken for a severe thunderstorm, except for the magnetic disturbances within the storm's epicenter. It is also reported that the static discharges appear to be shifted to the blue end of the spectrum. Green is the most commonly reported color," the hologram reported.

"A severe storm with green lightning," Kal-El murmured. "That's what it was. That's what brought Lois and me here. And it may reappear sometime in the next sixty-six hours or so, so we can go back home." Kal-El suddenly looked worried. "What if it's already come and gone? I'm on a different part of the planet altogether from where it dumped us. And so is Lois."

"According to Aldierran science, a tempocane magnetically marks the matter that was initially transported and is attracted to that marked matter upon its reappearance," the hologram explained. "However, it is postulated that the two ends of the tempocane can shift, causing the transported matter to be left in a different reality than it originally came from, unless a 'homing beacon' is established to guide that matter into its home time-line."

"Translation," Clark said. "It's going to come after you, but there's no guarantee it'll take you back to where you belong."

Something else crossed Clark's mind, something he'd wondered about for the past eleven years, ever since he'd found out about the existence of New Krypton. "Father, why was I sent to Earth instead of New Krypton?"

The hologram's expression turned sad. "It was to save your life. I became High Lord of the House of El following the assassination of my elder brother, his wife and two sons. It was not my choice to become High Lord. I much preferred my scientific studies. The assassins were never found and it was assumed by the Council that the conviction of General Zod and his accomplices had put an end to the threat. However, I had reason to believe that my son and heir, you, was still in danger from Zod's followers, specifically, members of the House of Et. There were attempts made against both you and your mother. Lara, Zor, my younger brother, Sen-Ra, Zara's father, and I decided it was better to send you to a safe haven known only to

myself, Lara, Sen-Ra and Trey, our seneschal on Halos I. I programmed the navigation module to land in an area known as Kansas, in the proximity of individuals whose psychological makeup was such that they would accept and protect you."

"Thank you," Clark said. "I'd always wondered how I managed to land so close to the two people most likely to take me in." He turned to Kal-El. "I think we should be getting back before Lois has a fit. She hates it when I take off and it's not an emergency."

"You want to find a safe place for the memory modules and the master module," Kal-El reminded him. "You don't want anyone else to get hold of them."

"The voice of experience?" Clark wondered. There was something in the other man's tone that told him it was more than a simple suggestion. That Kal-El had experience in this.

"Let's just say I've had to put better locks on the doors."

Clark looked around the crystal structure. "There aren't any doors."

"Yeah, I know."

--Lois I--

Wanda looked up at the sound of two swooshes at the back of the house. After a few moments the French doors opened and Kal-El and Clark walked into the living room. Kal-El was back in his gray suit.

"Figure out something?" Lois asked.

"Something, maybe," Clark said, sitting down on the sofa next to his wife. He was looking over at Zara with a familiar, speculative look in his eyes. "I found another function in the navigation module. Cultural and historical data on the Halos I colony, also known as New Krypton. I also looked up property ownership and property transfers."

Zara looked puzzled. "I don't understand."

"Zara, Xon isn't trying to take out the House of El. He's trying to usurp control of the entire colony; away from the Council of Elders even. He's smarter than Nor. Nor only thought in terms of a military coup when he couldn't marry you and rule at your side. Xon is planning on making Nor's granddaughter the heir to the House of El since Lois isn't a member of Kryptonian nobility."

"I still don't understand, Clark," Zara said. "I know Xon can use the child against you, to undermine, even take over the House, but how can he use that to take control of the colony without the support of the council?"

"Lady Zara, according to the colony charter, who owns the real estate the colony is on?" Kal-El asked.

Zara thought for a long moment, looking at Ching in puzzlement. "I honestly don't know. I had assumed the Council owned the property. Assuming anyone does."

"But my information says that under Kryptonian law only noble *individuals* can own real property. Therefore the Council cannot own the colony," Clark said. "And the transfer of properties as large as that requires the approval of the entire council."

"That would be to prevent a House with a lord in financial difficulties from cashing out the House property to the detriment of the House's standing. It would also prevent a single lord from suddenly accumulating large amounts of cash, for whatever reason," Ching explained. "What are you getting at, Clark?"

"Assuming my information is correct, *and* the council hasn't made changes to the charter, *I*, as High Lord of El, own the colony on behalf of the House of El," Clark said. "Xon doesn't need the council's approval to take over if he can convince the council beforehand that Conza's baby is mine, however it happened. He bides his time, sends an assassin to finish me off; she inherits with him as regent. Then he can legally take out the council and the guilds, not to mention the other Houses, because he will be the only real estate owner in the colony. They own *nothing*."

"So not only do you need to repudiate the child," Ching said slowly. "But we need to legitimize your heirs."

Wanda's head was beginning to ache. She'd never liked political discussions, and legal matters, aside from libel and copyright law, left her cold as well. Libel and copyright weren't exactly warm and fuzzy either, but they did impact her job so she tried to keep on top of them.

She looked over at Kal-El. He seemed to be listening intently to the discussion between Clark and the other two Kryptonians. A faint frown occasionally crossed his face.

He looked over at her watching him and came to sit beside her. "I am so glad I'm not him," he murmured softly. "Earth politics is bad enough, but this is straight out of the middle ages."

"Great Kryptonian political writers: Sun Tzu and Machiavelli," Clark said with a chuckle.

"We both forgot about superhearing," Wanda muttered back to Kal-El.

"I am not familiar with those writers, and those are not Kryptonian names," Zara said.

Ching was trying to suppress a grin. Obviously, Ching recognized who Clark was talking about. Clark went to one of the bookcases, pulled out two slim volumes and handed them to Zara. Wanda didn't need to see the titles to know what they were: **The Art of War** and **The Prince**.

"I admit I haven't come up with a good solution for the problem of Conza's daughter, but unless there's a rule against noble adoption of females, there is a mechanism for solving the legitimacy problem. Remember, I adopted Ching as my brother, raising him to the nobility so you and he could be together and your children by him could be in line of succession in the House of Ra," Clark reminded her. "And if I understand correctly, Ching was my heir until CJ was born."

"But Lois is an Earth human," Zara said. "We're not even the same species. Your children by her are half-breeds."

Wanda glanced at Lois. Her face had gone white. Clark's expression was unreadable. Kal-El just looked puzzled. *Something is seriously awry here.*

"Wait a minute," Wanda interrupted. "I assume we're using the same definition of species here, right? Genetic populations that can successfully interbreed in nature are the same species?"

Ching nodded his head. "That is the working definition of a species."

"So, since they have four kids, and I have one by a different Kryptonian..." Wanda stated. "And since all the necessary parts are there and working appropriate to their age, we are talking about one species here. Different races, maybe, but one species."

"Logically, that is impossible," Zara stated. "We evolved on two different planets."

"Logic be damned, Zara; look at the evidence," Wanda stated. "Besides, isn't there a theory that all life started in a single place and spread out from there?"

"You're thinking *panspermia*," Kal-El said. "But there is the fact that in *our* reality, Earthers and Kryptonians do come from the same stock. Kryptonians did not evolve on Krypton, could not have evolved on Krypton. We either emigrated there or were planted there by someone else. Given that our genetic structure was obviously manipulated so that we could survive such a harsh environment, it's probably the later. I don't think whoever did it realized exactly what they'd done, how powerful those minor changes were. They certainly didn't expect any of us to come back to Earth."

"Minor changes?" Zara challenged.

"The genetic differences between Earthers and Kryptonians is so minor that a standard DNA analysis won't even detect it unless it's being specifically looked for," Kal-El said. "I know this for a fact. The key differences are in the mitochondria, and in a special type of cell in the skin that acts as a solar collector and battery. The other differences are actually normal genetic variations, some of which have been found in the Earth's population. We just have more of them together. We don't have third molars, we don't have appendixes, we do create our own vitamin C. But there are Earthers who have the same variations."

Zara looked back to Clark. "The council won't accept it," she protested.

"They will if you will," Clark pointed out. "Or is the whole 'Krypton was the most evolved and enlightened society in the known twenty-eight galaxies' a bunch of crap? "' Cause what I see here, and what I experienced on New Krypton, tells me that Krypton was and is ruled by a

bunch of racial and religious bigots. Quite frankly, right now I'm ashamed to even admit I'm one of you."

--Lois II--

This is getting out of hand, Lois thought to herself. *It's sounding like Thanksgiving with my parents*. "Ching, what happens if we don't do anything? If Clark doesn't repudiate the child and we let you and Zara raise her?"

Clark stared at her, tirade short-circuited. She knew he was scrambling for an answer and couldn't find one, but fighting with Zara and Ching wasn't going to solve anything. She looked over at Ching.

"I doubt we would be allowed to. Xon claims Conza was Clark's concubine by right of victor. However, as Conza's nearest male blood relative on New Krypton he can ask, and would no doubt be granted, the right to act as her child's guardian, granting him much authority within the House of El since Clark chooses not to live on New Krypton," Ching explained. "Xon could also theoretically have authority over Earth, since the Council of Elders officially declared Earth to be a territory of the House of El, at Xon's insistence."

"They what?" Lois nearly screeched. "Those pompous, asinine, self-centered, idiotic, full-of-themselves jerks! How *dare* they!"

"They dare because Clark insists on living on Earth and by definition, anywhere the High Lord of a House has permanent residence is a part of that House's territory. Clark annexed Earth by coming back here," Zara explained. "Besides, we had already established that Earth was being protected by Kal-El and therefore the House of El. The council simply played into Xon's hands by making it official."

"Just annexing the house where we live wasn't good enough?" Clark asked. Lois could hear the annoyance Clark was trying hard not to show. *He was trying not to be upset*.

"They felt they were being magnanimous. Giving you what they thought you wanted, dominion of Earth. They don't understand how you can choose to be a servant to... They can't understand why you choose not to rule," Ching said. "Clark, if you don't like us, don't like Kryptonians, why have you been helping us? You arranged the fostering for Jos. I don't understand."

"It's the same reason Lois and I invite her family over for the holidays every year," Clark said. "We know they probably won't show, and if they do, we'll have a major row about something, and Lois will end up crying, the kids will be unhappy, and I'll be praying for a volcano or tornado or earthquake somewhere, anywhere, so I can get away from them for a while. We do it because they're family and we were both raised in a culture that values family. Like or not, you are family. New Krypton is family and it's as dysfunctional as they come. Instead of alcoholism and psychological abuse, my birth family tends to murder, and megalomania."

Clark paused to watch Zara and Ching. Lois saw that they looked confused. *They're confused?*

"It's about family, about kinship," Clark continued. "You can love them, you can hate them, be ashamed of them, despise them, but it still comes down to ties of kinship. When family calls, you help. Despite the wrongs they've done, you care."

Lois watched Ching's face as he struggled with the concept Clark was trying to express. It had been something she'd fought with for years. *You can love them, hate them, be ashamed of them, despise them, but it still comes down to blood ties. When family calls, you help. Despite everything they've done, you care*.

"The council does not need to approve an adoption, you know," Ching said. "It's common practice. It's simply a mechanism for bringing new blood into the Houses and ensuring

succession when circumstances warrant, like now."

"But Lois is from Earth," Zara protested.

"What does that matter?" Lois demanded. *Like hell Zara is going to get away with this. I thought she was smarter, better than those know-nothing oafs on the council, the ones who demanded Clark's help and then sent him back to me without so much as a by-your-leave when he tried to make changes for the good of his people. Sent him back wounded, physically and psychologically..* "I would think that if there was anything wrong with my kids, Doctor Klein or somebody would have mentioned it before now. My children are *not* mules! And I have it on good authority I will have grandchildren."

"Zara, please be reasonable," Ching said. "You know how much this means to my brother."

Ching understands. Lois's anger abated a little as she watched Clark's anger and confusion fade into wonderment. *How long has it been since Ching and Clark referred to one another as brothers? Too long, I think.* That he had adopted Ching and brought him into the nobility for Zara's sake as one of his first acts on New Krypton was one of the few things Clark had willingly shared with her when he first came back. It was something he'd been proud of, keeping his vows to her and helping Zara and Ching get together, despite what the council had wanted.

"Besides," Ching continued with a smile. "With the four children in line of succession before me, I am a much lesser target."

Zara looked at her consort. "We have spent much too much time on this sloppy planet. We're getting soft," she said, glaring at Ching. After a moment she sighed. "We will need to make a public announcement, and of course, there is the paperwork. And there will be the matter of making the announcement to the Council of Elders, and letting Xon know that any attempts made against the High Lord and his consort, or their children, will be met with the full wrath of the Houses of El *and* Ra..." She smiled. "He won't be allowed to think he can get away with threatening my consort's brother, or my sister."

"Besides, it'll be fun, annoying the council some more. We have to maintain the House of El's well-deserved reputation of being troublemakers and rabble-rousers," Ching added. "The entertainment guild is still putting out their daily news service on the colony info-net, you know. The council can't figure out where they're uploading from." Ching was grinning. "Of course, they do have some help."

"I wasn't sure the idea would take," Clark admitted. "It was a tough concept to put across. The people's right to know isn't always well accepted, even here. How do you want to make the public announcement?"

"I believe your newspaper is involved with an equivalent of our info-net?" Ching asked.

"We call it the Internet, and yes, the Planet has a presence there," Clark said. "I can place an announcement on the website, in the personals, maybe."

"We can circumvent any action of the council by stating the actual adoption took place when we were here before CJ was born. I distinctly recall calling Lois my sister during that visit," Zara said. She glanced at Ching. "We have definitely been around Earthers too long."

"I wouldn't dream of accusing you of being sloppy and emotional, my lady," Clark said.

"Is everything okay down here?" Martha asked, coming down the stairs from the second floor and entering the living room. "It got kind of quiet."

"It's okay, Mom," Clark assured her. "I assume you got the kids to bed?"

"Yes, of course," Martha smiled at him. "And they'll probably stay asleep so long as you

don't start yelling at Zara and Ching again. By the way, Lara thinks Jason is cute."

--Clark I--

Kal-El stood and walked out to the kitchen. He was getting restless and needed to move. He couldn't say exactly why he was restless, but maybe uncomfortable was a better description. He was uncomfortable with his realization that the Superman of this world really was Clark Kent, a human with Kryptonian powers who had a family, and family problems. Kal-El had spent most of his adult life believing, as a Kryptonian living on Earth, that he was, for that fact alone, superior. He made life and death decisions all the time. So he had decided that Lois hadn't needed to remember their all-too-short time together; he had decided to leave for six years without thinking of the consequences to those he'd left behind.

The coffee carafe was empty, so he quickly looked through the cabinets for the coffee and started another pot.

"Are you okay?" Wanda/Lois asked. He hadn't noticed her approach. *I'm getting careless...* He didn't bother to look at her, staring out the kitchen window at the river instead.

"Yeah," Kal-El said. "It's funny, though. I've known all about Krypton since just after high school, but I knew nothing about Kryptonians except that I was the last one. I'd idealized them, a proud, noble, doomed people. He's known about Kryptonians for nearly that long, but knew nothing of the planet they're from. He thinks I'm a self-centered, selfish fool. And he's right."

"Clark? Or would you prefer Charlie or Kal-El?"

"I not sure. Kal-El is my birth name. Clark isn't exactly someone I'd like to know. He's a clumsy, unreliable fool. And the other one, Superman, is a fiction," Kal-El admitted. "The real problem is, I really don't know how to change. Part of me, a big part, says I shouldn't have to. Superman shouldn't care for just one person, shouldn't be bound by family, shouldn't be bothered by mundane matters."

"Sounds lonely," Lois observed.

"Yeah." He turned to look at her, finally. "Just out of curiosity, are your holidays better than theirs?"

Lois shook her head, keeping her voice low. "You've met the General. I'm lucky I don't commit murder over the holidays, although he has been behaving a little better since Jason was born."

Kal-El did remember Lois's parents. Her father, General Sam Lane, was an equal opportunity hater. He'd hated anyone he thought Lois, or her sister, was interested in. It didn't matter whether or not they actually had an interest, the fact *he* thought they did was all that mattered. He loathed Clark Kent, for various other reasons, not the least of which was that Clark disagreed with the General's politics. He could hardly imagine the General's reaction to finding out that *he* was Wanda's son's natural father. Lois's mother, Elinor, was an alcoholic and had been in and out of treatment centers most of Lois's life.

"I'm sorry," Kal-El said, softly.

"For what?" Lois asked. "For my family being as screwed up as hers? Comes with the territory. As much as I hate it, I wouldn't be who I am without them."

"Your dad's going to flip when he finds out about Jason, about us," Kal-El said. "Assuming you tell him."

"He already knows you're Jason's father," Lois said. "Everybody at the Planet knew the first time they saw him. Perry figured it was just a matter of time before you showed up again and took responsibility for your actions. We just didn't think it would take six years."

"I'm sorry."

"You keep saying that. I know you're sorry. But sorry isn't the same as being there when your child takes his first step, or says his first word, or scrapes his knee, or cries all night because of an earache. Sorry doesn't mean a lot when you're simply not there, when you're not willing to take the steps to be there for the people who need you."

"Even when the world needs me more?"

"Don't be so full of yourself. The world got along fine for six years without you," Wanda reminded him.

--Clark II --

"We still have one problem left," Clark said to Zara. "Conza's baby. Logically, I know you and Ching are right. But I just can't do it. I mean, I'll go ahead and sign the repudiation documents, but I can't let you kill her. She's probably the only innocent in this whole mess."

"But we can't take her back to New Krypton and we can't leave her here," Zara reminded him. "I don't see that there's another solution."

"I do," Wanda announced, coming back from the kitchen. "I can take the baby. Charlie and I are from an alternate time-line. I doubt Xon, or whatever his name is, will be able to find her. And you can go ahead and announce the child died or was fostered somewhere away from Earth. I assume there are other inhabited planets around?"

"Yes," Ching said. "Humanoids are spread throughout the galaxy. Many of them seem to be fully human. We try not to have much contact with them. We're not great explorers. We never were and life on New Krypton is hard enough without letting everyone know where we are and how poor we are."

"Or how the mighty have fallen?" Clark observed.

"That, too," Zara said.

"Lois, do you know what you're doing?" Kal-El asked. "She'll be fully Kryptonian."

"Do you think I don't know that?" Wanda demanded. "My son threw a grand piano across a room and killed a man. My five-year-old son. Besides, I think it's a pretty good solution, assuming we ever get back to where we belong. It's not like I'm planning to do this alone."

"According to the memory modules, the storm that brought you here should return within two-and-a-half days at the outside and take you out of here. Hopefully back to where you came from," Clark said. "Assuming you two can find some sort of beacon to guide you back to exactly where you came from. There aren't any guarantees."

He thought back over the many alternate time-lines he and Lois had visited, heard of. He knew there were thousands, millions, of possibilities. "You could wind up almost anywhere. You could end up in a time-line where humans don't exist, where Superman doesn't or can't exist or he did exist and things went bad, either he turned to the darkness, or he died or worse. There are worse things than dying, you know."

"I know," Wanda said. "But I have a son who needs his mother."

--Lois I--

Wanda couldn't say what possessed her to make the offer to take the child, except it felt exactly right. She wasn't surprised that Kal-El had objections. Some part of her recognized that for all his power, he was afraid of commitment. Afraid of being tied down, of having responsibilities. Not that being the savior of the planet wasn't a responsibility, but that didn't entail the day-in and day-out grind of being truly committed to a relationship, of being responsible to and for another person.

In many ways he was like she had been the day they had met. Mad Dog Lane had interviews instead of dates and had been unable to tell the difference. She was a workaholic and smoked too much. She had fallen for Superman because he was unobtainable. He belonged to the world. And when she was finally ready for a relationship, he wasn't, either as Superman or as Clark Kent.

Instead, she'd found she was pregnant, without knowing how, without knowing who.

"Here is the child," Ching said, handing her the metal case and a metal card with Kryptonian glyphs inscribed on it. "She is in stasis. When the case is opened with the key, the unit will revive her."

"How old is she?" Lois asked.

"Only a few hours," Zara answered. "She is healthy and is the offspring of Lord Kal-El and the Lady Conza Nor-Et. Our medics found no unusual genetic predispositions."

"Wanda, you don't have to do this," Kal-El reminded her.

"Yes, we do," Wanda stated firmly. "I'm a mother. I won't let a child die if I can help it. And you're Superman; you rescue people. Are you willing to turn your back on an innocent? Do you want to have Zara and Ching handle it, lie about it, destroy what trust they've built up with Clark and his family?"

He had a grace to look ashamed. "Of course not. But how do we explain coming back from an investigation that didn't pan out with a newborn?"

Wanda smiled. "I'll think of something." She turned to Clark. "What do you think she'll look like?"

"Based on what I remember of her mother and her grandparents, she'll look something like Lara, brown eyes, dark hair, a little exotic, maybe. Why?"

"Just curious," Wanda said. "Plus, I have an idea."

"I'm not going to like it, am I?" Kal-El asked. He was eyeing her warily.

"If I know my Lois Lanes," Clark said, "you'll be lucky to live."

Wanda saw the familiar deer-in-the-headlights look she'd so often seen in Clark's eyes. It was so odd to see it in the face she now recognized as Superman's. "Would it help if I promise not to kill you, and I promise not to tell the world that Superman is a disguise for Clark Kent?"

"Maybe," Kal El admitted. "But I'd still like to know what you're planning."

"Clark," Zara said. "Ching and I have to get back to the ship and we still need to sign the documents."

"We can do that downstairs. We can also place that ad in the Planet," Clark said, leading them back to the basement office. He beckoned Lois to come with them, leaving Wanda and Kal-El alone in the living room.

"I'm in love with you, you know," Wanda began. "At first, I admit, I had a crush on Superman. He was perfect, unobtainable, safe. No strings, no commitments, no next morning recriminations because he was too good, too upstanding to do anything that was less than perfectly gentlemanly."

"Then I discovered the partner Perry had foisted on me. A tall, good-looking fellow with thick glasses, who so exemplified Midwest values as to be unbelievable. He was honest, brilliant, and so terminally shy we all wondered how he could possibly get any leads or do any interviews because he was afraid to even talk for fear of stammering. But he was one of the few men I'd ever met who could stand up to me, not to mention to my father. He was my friend. Only he disappeared without a word. He never even said goodbye."

"I did try, Lois," Kal-El said. "That last day at the Planet. I tried to say goodbye, but you were too preoccupied with the story you were working on. You never even looked up."

"I'm sorry," she said, not looking at him. "I was so used to having you around, it never even occurred to me you might not be there the next day. I was furious at Perry for not stopping you, for not telling me what you were planning. Everybody in the newsroom thought we'd had a lover's spat. That you'd come back in a few days, all puppy dog eyes, and things would be back to normal. Only you didn't come back. And that hurt."

"I didn't mean to hurt you," he said. "I swear I didn't."

"What about us?" she asked. "Is there even a chance?"

"This morning I would have sworn we didn't," he admitted. "That the problems we would face were too big, too many. I believed my own PR. Superman can't have any relationships like that."

"And now?"

"Lois, I fell in love with you the first time I saw you," he said. "You were beautiful, intelligent, strong, stubborn, opinionated, and brilliant, with an uncanny ability to attract danger. You needed me. And I was too stupid to see that I needed you even more. Do you think we have a chance?"

"We won't know unless we try," Wanda said. She reached up and pulled his head down to her level, kissing him gently.

"What about Richard?"

"Richard knows," she told him. "He's just waiting for me to decide."

--Lois II--

Lois watched as Clark double-checked the documents he and she were to sign. Zara and Ching had managed to transfer the electronic copies of the documents from the transport to Clark's office computer. *How many people on Earth have Kryptonese as a printer font? How many people need to actually print anything using it, much less legal documents?*

"You don't trust us?" Zara asked.

Clark chuckled, not stopping his reading to look up. "I trust you just fine, milady. But I am a journalist by trade. 'Trust but verify'." Finally satisfied, he handed both the English and Kryptonian adoption documents to Lois for her to sign.

Lois scanned the English version. The date on the document set it at eleven years before - the day Zara and Ching took Clark away from her. She gave Zara a questioning look.

"For an adoption to take place, we both need to be present. That was one of the few times we were together in front of witnesses," Zara explained. "I distinctly recall calling you my sister in front of the people who were attending Superman's goodbye conference."

"Lois Sen-Ra?" Lois wondered aloud.

"Well, Lois isn't exactly a Kryptonian name, but I have a feeling it's going to be. We already have a number of 'Clark's and even 'Jerome's," Ching said with a smile. He turned to Clark, expression more solemn. "I know that year with us was extraordinarily hard on you, but you have no idea how many people you affected, how much your presence was felt, even after your return to Earth. And if you should ever consider just visiting, please know that you, and Lois, would be welcomed with open arms."

"Thanks, Ching," Clark said. "It's nice to know I did some good."

Lois signed both copies of the adoption papers and handed them to Zara. Zara signed them with a flourish.

"Welcome to the House of Ra, sister," Zara said formally then pulled Lois into a hug. "I always wanted a sister."

Clark took both documents and folded them neatly. He pulled out a signet stamp that Lois recalled seeing occasionally, although she knew he usually kept it in the wall safe. It was engraved with the sigil of the House of El with an additional glyph Lois remembered meant 'child', the meaning of the Kryptonian name 'Kal'. His name meant 'child of the stars', or 'child of hope', depending on the translation.

She watched as Clark wrapped white silk ribbon around each document, then used his heat vision to soften a stick of old-fashioned red sealing wax. He sealed both papers with the sealing wax, imprinting the stamp into the warm wax. "I'll take our copies to Constance for safe-keeping," Clark said when he was done.

The second set of documents only required Clark's signature to repudiate, to deny, Conza Nor-Et's daughter as a member of the House of El. Again, Clark sealed the documents, handing the Kryptonian copy to Zara. These documents she and Ching signed on the outside, above the seal, as witnesses.

"One last document," Ching announced, placing two more sheets in front of Clark. "I know the two of you are legally married on Earth. But also you know that under New Krypton law that wasn't a legal joining. This will take care of that."

"A marriage license?" Lois asked.

"Not quite," Zara said. "It's the same arrangement Ching and I have. Kal-El and I are bound by law in a birth contract marriage. We cannot break that contract. However, our law does allow for secondary 'marriages' if the contract partners are unwilling or unable to fulfill

the more intimate requirements of the contract marriage."

"You make it sound so clinical," Lois commented.

"Just realistic," Zara corrected. "Clark and I are not the first birth marriage partners who discovered we had other wishes, other desires, and we won't be the last. This document legitimizes your relationship with Clark, even though legally it does make you a bound concubine rather than a wife. It also ensures that your children are properly legitimized so they are in line of succession to the House of El."

"Don't feel bad, Lois. Legally, I'm a bound concubine as well," Ching said with a chuckle.

Clark once again checked both documents, signed at the appropriate places and handed them to Lois. Lois signed her new Kryptonian name in the proper places, and again Clark sealed the documents. Zara and Ching signed the outside as witnesses on both documents.

"Hopefully the council won't have any problems with these," Clark said.

"Zara can be very persuasive when she needs to be, as you well know, brother," Ching reminded him. "We need to get back to the ship. Even with the new star drive it takes several days to get back."

Lois led the way back to the main floor. She noticed Kal-El and Wanda seated on the sofa, and based on how quickly Kal-El moved away from Wanda, she suspected they'd been necking.

"I gather you've managed to resolve some of your issues?" Lois asked with a chuckle.

"We're working on it." Wanda grinned. "Are all Kryptonian men such great kissers?"

"Mine is." Lois laughed. "Why do you think I married him?"

Clark grinned at his wife, then turned to Zara and Ching. "Safe journey, brother, milady." This time it was Clark who pulled Zara into a hug. "We'll keep you posted on how Jason is doing. And keep me posted on what's happening with Xon, okay?"

"Of course, Clark," Zara promised. With that, they were gone.

Lois looked over at the dining table with its now nearly-empty plates of snacks. "Tomorrow. I'll clean it up tomorrow," she promised.

"I'll take care of it later," Clark promised. "It's time you went to bed. I'll be back in a little while."

She smiled and gave him a kiss. "Go do your patrol. I'm pretty sure your mom's up in the guest room, so I guess these two will be sacked out in the living room tonight."

"Actually, I wouldn't mind going on patrol," Kal-El said. "It would seem *normal* after everything that's happened today."

--Clark I--

The sky was clear, the stars bright hard diamond points above the city. Clark had assigned Kal-El the north portion of the city so he could stay close to the house in the event the tempocane returned sooner than expected. Clark covered the warehouse district and downtown. It was a surprisingly quiet night. A couple car alarms going off for no apparent reason, two convenience store robberies, a couple fender-benders.

After another circuit of New Troy Island, Clark came to rest on the top of the Daily Planet building, his usual roost. After a few moments, Kal-El joined him.

"Your city's only a little different from mine," Kal-El said. "I love Metropolis. Ever since I got off the bus from Smallville, I've loved the busyness, the people, the energy."

"Having Lois there doesn't hurt," Clark commented with a grin.

Kal-El's expression became more serious. "What happens if we can't get back?"

"Well, I guess we'll have a second Superman on this Earth," Clark said. "I'm sure I can get the two of you new identities. It helps to have friends in low places."

"I meant, the AI mentioned needing a beacon to find the proper plane," Kal-El said. "But I have no idea what it meant."

"I would guess that a telepathic link with people you know who belong to your home plane would work," Clark said.

"But I'm not telepathic," Kal-El protested.

'Really?' Clark thought at him. He watched Kal-El's eyes widen in surprise. *'I can show you.'*

"Okay," Kal-El said aloud.

Clark touched his face, placing fingers on his temples. *'Here.'* Clark pointed out mental pathways, neural nodes that weren't normally used.

'I see.'

'Clark, we've just gotten word that one of Xon's men may be on Earth with an Andelon assassin, 'Zara's mental voice rang out in Kal-El's mind as well.

Clark swore to himself.

"That was Zara, wasn't it?" Kal-El asked. Clark nodded. "Who or what is an Andelon assassin?"

"A nightmare," Clark replied. "We need to get back to the house."

--Clark II--

A year on New Krypton had strengthened Clark's natural telepathic abilities, although his strongest link was still to his wife. That link had existed even before discovering Kryptonians were telepathic. He gently touched Kal-El's face near his left temple. Lois had once commented the gesture looked like a Vulcan mind-meld. But then, she had also expressed the opinion that Gene Roddenberry probably knew some Kryptonians.

Finding the telepathic links and strengthening them was easier than he'd thought it was going to be.

Then: '*Clark, we've just gotten word that one of Xon's men may be on Earth with an Andelon assassin,*' Zara's mental voice sounded.

Clark swore to himself. He certainly hadn't expected Xon to move so quickly.

"That was Zara, wasn't it?" Kal-El asked. Clark nodded. They'd been linked when Zara made contact. "Who or what is an Andelon assassin?"

"A nightmare," Clark replied. "We need to get back to the house." Xon's man would be after the kids, and maybe Lois. He hoped she remembered there were kryptonite bullets in the office safe, and a police revolver locked in his desk. He launched himself into the air and was halfway across the city before Kal-El responded.

"You don't sound too surprised," Kal-El observed, catching up with him.

"Annoyed, maybe, but not surprised," Clark said. "I had a hunch Xon was already on the move. I've fought an Andelon before. They're tough. I was very lucky to survive."

"But you're Superman."

"Your point?" Clark landed softly on the. "An Andelon assassin doesn't need super powers. It uses your own powers against you. It adapts unbelievably fast. It can also disguise itself as anyone. And I do mean *anyone*."

"So how do you tell the difference?" Kal-El asked.

"Smell, and mind feel," Clark said.

"And Xon's man?"

"I'm sure he'll identify himself."

--Lois I--

Wanda woke with a start, finding herself on the sofa, an afghan wrapped around her. She looked around to see what had woken her. Kal-El hadn't returned yet, or if he had, he wasn't where she could see him.

A dark figure separated itself from the shadows. It wasn't human. "Where is Kal-El?" the figure whispered.

"I don't know," Wanda said. He was scaring her. His eyes glowed in the darkness.

"His death was promised to me," the figure said with a hissing voice. "But do not be concerned. You will survive to mourn him. There must be mourners. A death is not complete without those who mourn."

A motion outside the house caught her attention and the figure turned its head to see what she was looking at.

Clark and Kal-El were back, both still in their blue and red suits. Kal-El took a step toward the French doors, but Clark laid a hand on his arm to stop him.

"What do you want here?" Clark demanded, looking at the creature standing in *his* living room.

"The death of Kal-El, of course," the creature said. He looked at both men standing on the patio and Wanda could tell the creature was confused.

"I'd rather you didn't," Clark responded. "In fact, I'd rather you just leave and go tell your master to bugger off."

"Such a charming way with words," another voice said from the darkness. "Lord Kal-El, always playing with words like a guildsman." The last word was spoken with venom. "But then, the House of El always favored the guilds, the under-classes; never their own kind."

"It's nice to know I'm in good company," said Clark. "Are you here to watch the assassin take me out, or are you going to do the honors yourself?"

"I would not sully my hands with your blood," the voice said.

"But you would sully them with the blood of women and children?" There was a hardness in Clark's expression and tone that Wanda wondered at. Her Kal-El had never sounded so cold, even when talking about Lex Luthor and his crimes. She saw Kal-El watching Clark, as if waiting for a cue.

She saw Clark nod ever so slightly, and Kal-El disappeared. Literally. She speculated that he was simply moving faster than the human eye could see. She hoped the man still hiding in the shadows wasn't Kryptonian. She hoped he hadn't seen Kal-El moving.

There was a whisper in her mind. *'Keep him distracted.'* She didn't have to ask who was being referred to.

"When Lord Nor told Lord Xon of your arrogance, I didn't believe it," the voice said. "And now I find you've recruited another fool to your cause."

"I wasn't aware that Xon had been made Lord of the House of Et," Wanda said. She moved slowly to the lamp on the table beside the sofa she'd been sleeping on.

"You must be the concubine," the voice said. "You are younger than I had been told. But that will make my taking you away from him so much better."

"Don't bet on it, buster," Wanda muttered to herself.

The assassin headed outside. He left the doors open - the September chill in the air didn't seem to affect him.

He launched himself at Clark.

It was now hard for her to think of him as just Superman. He was Clark Kent, editor-

in-chief of the Daily Planet, Lois Lane's husband. Superman was just another job. She tried to stay calm as she watched the fight outside.

Clark side-stepped, allowing the alien to land on the patio deck. The alien came at him again, this time with a drawn dagger. The blade glowed green in the darkness.

Again, Clark slipped away from the assassin's grasp, but the dagger caught his sleeve, slashing open the fabric. It was hard to see in the darkness, but she thought she saw Clark grimace in pain as he danced away from the assassin.

"I'm told you are a wizard," the assassin grated, coming after Clark once again. This time Clark blocked the attack with one arm, wrenching the dagger from the assassin's hand and throwing it into the river beyond. The assassin slashed at him with his claws, tearing more of the suit.

Three shots rang out, one on the deck and two in the house.

--Lois II--

Lois had sensed, rather than heard, her husband's warning that there was an Andalon assassin on the loose. She quietly got up from the bed and slipped on her robe.

There were voices downstairs. One was a sibilant hissing that she recognized from eleven years before - Tez, only Tez was dead, so this had to be another assassin from the same planet. Why couldn't they just leave her family alone?

"His death was promised to me," the hissing voice said. "But do not be concerned. You will survive to mourn him. There must be mourners. A death is not complete without those who mourn."

He had to be talking to Wanda. Did they think she was Clark's wife, or was it Kal-El who was going to do battle this night?

The answer to that question came as Kal-El's voice sounded in her mind. *'Is there a safe place for the children?'*

She covered her surprise and thought back at him, giving directions to Richard and Penny's house. He was gone from her mind.

She made her way downstairs, taking care to not step on the squeaky tread. Turned the corner for the basement. She kept tight rein on her thoughts. When she and Clark had discovered, after he came back from New Krypton, that Kryptonian telepathy extended to Earth humans as well, they had practiced shielding their thoughts. The link between them was a strong one and they had found they were prone to distracting one another with the strength of their link. Although it did take love-making to a whole new level.

The basement. She knew about the gun in Clark's desk and the kryptonite ammunition in the safe. As much as Clark hated guns, it was one of the concessions he'd made for their safety. They had both taken gun safety training from the MPD police trainer, and as soon as CJ was old enough, he would go through training as well. Black powder rifles in scouts just wasn't the same. Clark had proven to be a competent shooter. Lois had a standing offer from the MPD to come in as a SWAT team marksman. She assumed it was a joke.

She found the gun and loaded it with the glowing green bullets they kept in a lead lined box. If she was lucky, she could get at least one shot off before the other man, the one she assumed was Xon's agent, knew she was there. She hoped he hadn't been on Earth long enough for his powers to come in.

She climbed the stairs back to the main floor and peeked around the corner. The assassin was on the patio with Clark. So far, Clark was holding his own, but she knew the Andalon was learning, making itself stronger, more in tune with Clark's fighting style. She didn't dare give in to the despair she felt at seeing the assassin ripping into Clark's suit.

Lois spotted the man standing in the shadows. He was wearing a Kryptonian-style black body suit. He started moving toward Wanda at a measured pace. Wanda stepped back, reaching over and turning on the lamp beside the sofa. He had his back to Lois, but she waited for a clearer shot. He turned as if hearing something and she fired just as she had been taught by MPD arms instructor. *Shoot to stop. Shoot to kill. No doubts, no mercy.*

--Clark I--

Lois's directions to Richard and Penny's house were clear and precise. *She's seen the house from the air*, he realized. He hoped the couple was still awake. He didn't want to have to waste time rousing them.

He had picked the two boys up first, not from any chauvinism, but because their room had an open window. He flew them to the Whites' house, hovering outside the master bedroom window as he tapped on it. Richard, at least, was still awake and unlocked the window.

"Superman, what's going on?" the reporter asked as Kal-El handed him the two boys.

"It's complicated," Kal-El said. He had no idea how he was going to explain what was going on at the Kent house. "One of the New Kryptonian factions sent an assassin after your Superman. And he's over at the Kents'. I'll be right back with the other two kids."

He didn't wait for a reply, speeding back to the Kents' for the two girls. Martha Michaela was sleeping in her carrier. Lara was awake and waiting for him with a solemn expression on her face.

"The bad man wants to hurt Daddy," she said quietly.

"Well, I'm going to make sure the bad man doesn't hurt you, or your brothers, or the baby, then I'll be back to help your daddy, okay?"

She seemed to accept his statement, cuddling against him as they flew to the Whites' house.

Richard was waiting at the window to take the children, handing them over to Penny.

"Does Clark need help?" Richard asked. He'd pulled a pair of jeans on over his sleep shorts and was pulling a t-shirt over his head.

"Do you have a gun and Kryptonite bullets?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. Right here," Richard said, picking up a lead-lined bag large enough to hold a handgun. "And before you ask, I have a permit. The chief has a certain paranoid streak when it comes to Kryptonians."

"Not Superman," Kal-El protested.

"No, all the rest of them," Richard said. "So I suggest you stay on his good side."

It took only a few seconds to get back to the Kent house with Richard. They set down under cover of the trees near the fence.

Superman's suit had rips across the chest and Kal-El saw blood seeping from a gash on Clark's arm. The assassin kept coming at him, hands clawed, and Clark kept evading him, using as little of his powers as possible.

"How good a shot are you?" Kal-El murmured to Richard.

"Not as good as Lois," Richard admitted. "But good enough, I hope."

Kal-El backed away as Richard pulled his gun out of the lead-lined bag. Richard aimed and pulled off a single shot. Two other shots rang out from inside the house.

The assassin faltered for just a moment, and Superman took advantage of the assassin's distraction to throw the alien into the river. A simple martial arts throw, but an effective move. The assassin sank like a rock.

--Clark II --

The gash in his arm hurt like hell. But he paid little attention to the pain, concentrating on keeping the assassin occupied, using as few of his powers as possible to keep the assassin from learning from him. The dagger was poisoned and he was getting tired.

He noted the arrival of Kal-El and Richard White, then turned his attention back to the assassin front of him. On New Krypton, he'd done some research on the Andelon assassins. Zara had called them animals, but they weren't, really. Andelon was a harsh desert planet. Death was all they knew, all they were trained for. But one thing he had discovered about them - Andelons had dense bones. They could not swim in fresh water.

He heard the shot, saw the Andelon stagger. It took all his remaining strength to grab the assassin and throw him into the river.

The fight was over, with a little help from friends. He was so tired. He staggered but was kept from falling by a supporting arm - Richard.

"Let's get you into the house," Richard said quietly. "Penny's watching the kids, and I expect she's called the police."

Clark allowed Richard to help him into the living room. "Lois is going to kill me if I bleed on the carpet," he muttered. He looked over to the black-clad body on the floor and the blood that was already soaking into the Berber carpeting. "Then again, hardwood floors might not be a bad idea. The carpet is definitely getting replaced."

He heard Richard as if from a far distance. "Lois, I think he's delirious."

"The Andelon had a dagger," Clark murmured. "It's in the river. It was poisoned."

He felt hands helping him to the sofa, then the world went black.

--Lois I--

The assassin was dead in the river. The unidentified Kryptonian was dead on the living room carpet of the Kent house, the police were at the door and Superman was unconscious on the sofa. That pretty well summed up the evening for Wanda. It'd be a great story, if anyone would believe it.

Kal-El had already retrieved the dagger the assassin had used. The edge still glowed green and Kal-El hurriedly handed the dagger to Richard for safe keeping in the lead-lined bag. Kal-El went to stand beside the French doors, arms crossed over his chest in his typical stance, expression calm and watchful.

Wanda let the police into the house, standing aside as uniformed officers came in, followed by Assistant Police Chief Bill Henderson.

"What happened?" Henderson asked, after instructing one of his people to call for an aid car. Lois was tending to Superman.

Martha had come downstairs and had bandaged the gash on his arm. Lois was placing a cold compress on his forehead. He was still unconscious.

Lois looked over at the officers. "We had word from New Krypton that one of the rebel factions had sent assassins to take out Superman. The assassins came here looking for him," Lois explained. "One of them hurt Superman; kryptonite and some sort of poison on a dagger, it looks like. Then we found *him* in the house." She nodded to the body on the floor.

"He's New Kryptonian?" the female officer asked. Her name tag identified her as V. Adams.

Lois nodded. "He was threatening me and the kids. I shot him. I do have a permit."

"You shot and killed a New Kryptonian," Officer Adams observed. "I thought they were invulnerable."

"Not to Kryptonite," Lois explained. "My husband represents Superman as the consul general of New Krypton. We have taken certain precautions against the arrival of 'unfriendlies' from there."

Adams looked to Henderson for guidance. The older man looked to Lois. "Lois, since this house is technically part of New Krypton, it really isn't in our jurisdiction. What do you and Clark want us to do?" Henderson asked.

"Could you get the body out of here?" Lois asked. "I'm sure the medical examiner would love to have another crack at a New Kryptonian corpse." She said it lightly, but Wanda could see the strain in her face.

"Where is Mister Kent, by the way?" Officer Adams asked.

Henderson answered. "Oh, he'll show up. Don't worry."

Lois gave him a grateful smile.

Henderson knows, Wanda thought to herself. Does our version know? Does Kal-El know if he does?

The aid car finally arrived. Wanda ushered the two emergency medical technicians into the living room, to where Superman was lying, unmoving, on the sofa. She noted how carefully they moved him from the sofa to the gurney, as if they were afraid of hurting the Man of Steel. Despite their efforts, he gasped in pain. "Sorry, Superman," one of the technicians murmured as he secured the safety straps on the gurney.

--Lois II--

It wasn't the first time Lois had ridden in an aid car while they took Superman to Metropolis General. And she hated the feeling even more now than she had the first time. The feeling of helplessness, when all there was left was hope and prayers. It had been a long time since he'd been exposed to kryptonite and even then he hadn't fallen unconscious.

He was so pale and his hands were cold when they put the stretcher into the van. She had to sit in front, with the driver. There wasn't room in the back for her. It wouldn't look right, in any case. Publicly, she was married to Clark Kent, not Superman. Superman was married to the Lady Zara of New Krypton. *Oh, if they only knew how complicated it really was.*

Doctor Klein would be waiting for them. She had called him before the aid car left the house, rousing him from bed.

Clark was starting to gasp for breath, never a good sign. The technician tending to him placed an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth. *Superman on oxygen. He hates that. He hates that feeling of helplessness. Dear God, let him be all right.*

Bernie Klein was waiting in the emergency room when the aid car rolled in. He trotted beside the gurney as they wheeled their patient into the waiting examination room. "What happened?" he asked Lois.

"An assassin had a poisoned knife. Kryptonite and something else," she explained.

"He started having trouble breathing about ten minutes ago," the EMT said.

Clark's breathing had gone from bad to worse even as the emergency room team transferred him from the gurney to the examining table. One of the technicians pushed a thick, black, hose-like tube down his throat and set up the respirator. The rest of the team was already starting their protocols. Determine current condition, check for other injuries, start IVs, take samples. The suit was cut off his body, put in a bag for later examination.

The lighting had already been shifted to a redder light spectrum. After fourteen years of having Superman in Metropolis, the largest, most modern hospital in the region was actually prepared to treat an injured Kryptonian.

Klein, a medical researcher at Star Labs, had hospital privileges for only a handful of patients: Superman and the Kent family. Lois knew that Klein had told the hospital administrators that Clark's year on New Krypton with Superman had altered his physiology to closer to Kryptonian than expected. He'd also dropped hints that Kryptonians had visited Earth before and left offspring who'd bred into the population. According to this theory, there was the possibility of humans with minor Kryptonian traits, like fast healing and an 'allergy' to kryptonite, being part of the general population. It was a brilliant ruse.

"Okay," Klein said. "We're under the Red Sun protocol. No one is allowed in here unless expressly allowed by myself, or Mrs. Kent, here. There will be a security guard outside this door at all times." He turned to the EMT still standing there. "Oh, and thank you, you can go. But please keep this confidential. We don't want bad guys to find out what's happening."

"Is he going to be okay?" the technician asked.

"I don't know yet," Klein admitted. "First we have to figure out what's wrong with him."

Lois stood in the corner, watching, waiting. The medical personnel had put her out of their minds. *How many times had she stood like this? Not that many, really. Most wives would never experience this even once. But then, she wasn't most wives...* Clark was Kryptonian, immune to Earth diseases, except when depowered by kryptonite, or under the effects of a red sun like Krypton's had been.

"Heart rate 55, BP dropping, 80 over 60," one of the nurses announced. She turned

Clark's head to one side and Lois could see bright red blood pouring from his nose. The fresh bandage on his arm had turned crimson.

He was bleeding to death before her eyes. *Dear God, help him.*

Klein barked out instructions, and activity in the room became frenetic. She watched as one of the nurses - Kenyon, Lois recalled from reading the name tag - started more I.V.s, pouring fluid into Clark's veins. An orderly brought in bags of blood, and more tubes went into Clark's body. Klein had talked Clark into keeping a supply of his blood in storage at the hospital some years ago. Lois wasn't sure how much blood they'd set aside, but there was so much blood on the floor now.

The phone rang and one of the nurses answered. After a moment: "The lab says the main toxin looks like a warfarin derivative, but there are other things they haven't IDed yet."

"That gives us something to work with," Klein said. "Mephyton, 50 milligrams, slow I.V., 1 milligram per minute, no more, so keep an eye on it." He turned to Lois. "It may take a while. Maybe you want get some coffee or something."

Lois managed a smile at the scientist/physician. He didn't have any other patients and his bedside manner frequently left something to be desired, but Klein's social skills had improved somewhat over the past fourteen years. "Thanks, but I'll stay," she said, hugging her coat around herself.

--Clark I--

Calling this a long day and night was putting it mildly.

Martha and Wanda were trying to get the blood off the leather sofa. Kal-El flew Richard back to his home, back to Penny, who was watching the Kent children.

"What happened?" Penny asked, obviously seeing the stricken look on her husband's face.

"An alien assassin attacked Superman. He's in the hospital," Richard explained. "We don't know how bad it is."

Penny covered her mouth with her hand. "How're Lois and Clark?"

"Lois is well as can be expected, considering," Kal-El said. "She went to the hospital with him. I was going to take the kids back to their house. Their grandmother and Wanda can take care of them."

"We can watch them," Penny offered. "No need to wake them. But the baby should be with her mother."

"I'll see to it," Kal-El promised.

Within a few moments he was heading to Metropolis General with a baby in a carrier, looking for the child's mother.

X-ray vision revealed Lois was seated inside the door of an examination room. A guard stood outside the room and a medical team was hard at work over a dark-haired man. Kal-El realized with a start that they were working on Clark. He wasn't invulnerable. *Kryptonite, or was it the poison?*

He landed outside the emergency room doors and walked inside. As late as it was, the emergency room was busy.

An attendant spotted him and the baby. "Superman, can I help you? What's wrong with the baby?"

Kal-El wondered for a moment how he was going to explain. "Nothing's wrong. Her mother came in a while ago, with your Superman."

"Mrs. Kent," the attendant said. "They're in treatment room five, right over here." She led him to the room with the guard at the door.

The guard opened the door slightly and spoke to Lois. "The other Superman is here, with a baby."

Lois came out into the hallway. She looked exhausted, dark circles under her eyes.

"Richard and Penny offered to watch the children but suggested baby Martha should be with you," Kal-El explained, handing the carrier over. "I found the assassin's body in the river and disposed of it. I didn't think you'd want any surprises on that front."

"How?" she asked.

He tapped the side of his face next to one eye and smiled. The smile faltered as he looked beyond her, into the treatment room. "How is he?"

She shook her head. "They've mostly stopped the bleeding, but they've gone through all the blood he had put away here. Doctor Klein is wondering if they can use fresh human blood instead. But we just don't know. They can't get his blood pressure up, even with the anti-shock garment. He's never lost this much blood before. They have him hooked up to monitors I never knew existed."

"I'm not sure if human blood would be a good match. I mean, Kryptonians are human, but there are differences," Kal-El said. "Maybe... I don't know how close a match I am, but we can check, assuming we can even get a sample from me."

"They should be able to," Lois said. "Depending on how you react to red sunlight."

"Is that how they're keeping him vulnerable?"

Lois nodded and led him into the treatment room. "Kryptonite exposure turns off his powers, but it's too dangerous to use, and it takes a long time for him to recover. Red sun spectrum is safer." She stepped over to Klein and beckoned him over to Kal-El.

"Bernie, this is Kal-El. He's Superman's counterpart from an alternate time-line," Lois explained. "He's offered to donate blood, assuming it's a match."

The doctor looked both surprised and relieved, shaking Kal-El's hand as he looked over his shoulder at one of the nurses. "Manda, can we get a type and cross-match here? He's volunteered to donate."

The needle actually stung as the nurse found a vein to take a blood sample to test.

"You've never had blood drawn, have you?" the nurse asked, seeing the surprised expression on his face as he watched the needle enter his skin.

Kal-El shook his head. "I've been invulnerable since I was about five or six, except when I've gotten exposed to kryptonite. And even then, I recover pretty quickly."

Manda took the sample and methodically cross-checked it against Superman's blood. "Perfect match," she announced. "We'll have to draw the blood in here, though, so we can keep you vulnerable under the red spectrum. It shouldn't take more than ten minutes."

She pulled out the chair that sat beside the storage cabinet and moved it closer to the door. Manda set up the equipment next to the chair and motioned for Kal-El to sit down. "We're just going to do this as if you were fully Earth normal. I'm going to draw one pint and then we'll see how you feel. Let me know if you feel faint."

"I can probably give as much as you need, so long as I can get some unfiltered sunlight in between the donations," Kal-El told her.

She smiled and patted his hand. "Let's just follow the protocols to begin with. Then we'll see how it goes."

Lois moved her chair closer to him, holding baby Martha close to her chest. "Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome," Kal-El responded. He watched the blood in fascination as it went down the plastic tube attached to his arm.

"You've never seen your own blood before?"

"Not like this," Kal-El admitted. "I never dreamed I'd ever see this." He gave her a puzzled look. "They all treat him, and me, like we're pretty much fully human. Like being Kryptonian isn't much different than being black or Irish. And they don't think it's odd that Clark Kent's wife is hanging around Superman while he's in the hospital."

Lois chuckled. "I was hanging around Superman, in the hospital and out, long before I got married to Clark. I've been his chief press contact since almost the beginning. I named him, remember?"

"Nobody wonders about it?" He pitched his voice low, quiet.

"I've been accused of betraying my husband with him, yes," Lois admitted. "But that was when Clark and I were first married, and we were able to prove the photos were faked. Since then, people pretty much understand that I'm a relative, sort of. I'm Superman's sister-in-law. Clark went to New Krypton with him. He's his brother, like Ching is. Superman doesn't have any blood relatives on Earth, so we're his family. The hospital accepts my authority as next-of-kin since Clark isn't here and there's no one else they can call. I admit, it's a little odd, but we are talking about Superman, after all."

"And it works?" Kal-El asked. It seemed too simple, too obvious.

Lois considered his question. "Superman appeared in Metropolis as an adult from Krypton, fourteen years ago," Lois said. "No family, no contacts, no connections. He comes here and makes friends, me for one, and Clark for another. He helps people and disappears, probably to another emergency somewhere else in the world. It's a big planet."

Manda came over to check on him. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay, so far," Kal-El told her. "I was telling Mrs. Kent how strange it feels, you and your team treating him, and me, as if we were 'normal'."

"Right now, you are," the nurse reminded him. "And since treating humans is all I know, I'll assume you're human until that assumption stops working." She smiled and began undoing the tubing from his arm. She put a piece of gauze over the wound and flexed his arm to hold the gauze in place.

She took the newly filled bag and placed it on the IV stand with a second bag of clear fluid. The man on the treatment table didn't move.

"Let's keep our fingers crossed," Klein announced as they began the next blood transfusion.

--Lois I--

Wanda and Martha got most of Clark's blood off the sofa.

"The carpet's a lost cause," the older woman muttered, mostly to herself. "I guess they really should have gone with hardwood, like Clark wanted in the first place. A nice light oak, I think. At least we'd be able to mop it down."

Wanda found herself smiling, wondering if her Clark's mother was like this woman. *Probably. The two Supermen were similar enough even though they were completely different.*

Martha stopped, wiping her eyes and adjusting her glasses. "I just wish I could be there for him. It's so hard."

"At least Lois is there," Wanda reminded her.

"But she's there as a friend, not as his wife," Martha said. "Superman doesn't have a wife or a family. Certainly not a mother who's worried about him."

"Lois will call when she has news," Wanda promised.

"I know she will, honey," Martha said, hugging herself. "I just wish I could be there with her, be there for my baby."

"What was he like, as a baby?" Wanda asked.

"He was the sweetest little thing, fit into my arms like he was my own. Big brown eyes, always looking at everything. Jonathan and I were so afraid someone would come for him, someone would find out we'd found him in a spaceship. He was so happy and sweet, hardly ever cried, and he loved everybody. When he was about three or so, talking pretty good, he would invite the grocery clerks home for dinner. He would tell them what I was planning to cook and he'd just invite them over."

"Did anybody ever take him up on it?"

Martha laughed. "Heavens, no. They all knew he was just being friendly and helpful, even the ones who looked down on Jonathan and me for adopting somebody else's illegitimate baby, especially one that looked a little 'foreign'."

Wanda was horrified. "That was horrible. How could they think that?"

"It was easy," Martha told her. "When we found him, we had to come up with an excuse for having a baby, since we couldn't have one of our own. We told everybody he was my cousin's baby, and that she'd died. We never mentioned a father. So people assumed the worst. I know people said things and Clark heard, but he never mentioned it. But Jonathan and I always made sure he knew how much we loved him and how proud of him we were. I just wish I could be there for him."

--Lois II--

"How are you feeling?" Lois asked Kal-El when he came back from a flight to the upper atmosphere to regenerate in sunlight. He'd started to look a little pale before leaving the treatment room after giving blood.

"Better," Kal-El responded. "How's he doing?"

"Better," Lois told him. "The bleeding's stopped, finally."

Doctor Klein spotted Kal-El and Lois and came over to them. "I think he's out of the woods. His blood pressure is coming up and we're getting ready to move him into the isolation ICU. As soon as we're sure the poison is out of his body, we'll go to the yellow sun radiation so he can begin to regenerate."

"And when will that be?" Kal-El asked.

"Tomorrow, most likely," Klein told him, then turned to Lois. "I'd like to keep him here a couple days at least, to make sure he doesn't have a relapse."

"Well, you already know how hard that'll be, once he starts feeling better," Lois reminded him. "Since things are looking better, I'll have Kal-El take me home. I'll come back later, after I've gotten some sleep."

"I'll give you a call if there're any changes," Klein promised. "We'll be keeping him sedated, so you won't have to worry about him escaping, at least till later tomorrow."

"Thanks, Bernie," Lois said, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. He blushed.

Outside the hospital, Kal-El picked Lois up while Lois held onto the carrier with baby Martha. It was a quick flight to the Kent house, but Lois noticed he was distracted.

"What do you see?"

"I'm not sure," he admitted with a frown. He landed on the deck, setting Lois on her feet. It was nearly dawn.

Lois opened the deck doors and walked into the living room. She heard voices in the kitchen and followed the sound. Wanda and Martha were sitting at the breakfast table having coffee.

"How is he?" Martha asked.

"The blade *was* poisoned. They were able to stop the bleeding, finally," Lois said, making herself a cup of herbal tea. She wanted coffee, but caffeine and Kent babies didn't mix. It was going to be a long year until this one was weaned. "They got him stabilized and Doctor Klein was having him transferred to the isolation ICU when we left."

Lois sat down with the other two women. "I've never felt so helpless, watching them work on him. They were working on Superman, for God's sake." The day's events finally caught up with her and she began to cry.

Wanda put her arm around the other woman. "Believe it or not, I really do understand. Kal-El, my Superman, fell out of the sky less than a week ago. There wasn't anything our doctors could do for him except wait."

"I'm not sure how long I was unconscious," Kal-El said. He was standing in the kitchen doorway. "I don't remember falling."

"They managed to keep you in the hospital for all of about twenty-four hours," Wanda told him. "You know, there might be a story in who is paying for your hospital stay and the equipment they wrecked trying to work on you."

Kal-El chuckled. "They should know by now if they can't stick a needle in me, they shouldn't expect anything else to work right."

His head came up, eyes focused on the outside as he listened to something in the distance.

"I think the storm's back."

--Clark I--

Kal-El saw the sudden worry in Wanda's face.

"We need to leave," he said.

Wanda stood up, giving Martha and Lois hugs. "Thank you for everything," she said.

"Good luck," Lois said. "Remember, be gentle with each other."

Kal-El went to the living room and grabbed the case with the Kryptonian baby. Wanda opened the doors to the deck, and then allowed Kal-El to take her in his arms. They floated up, away from the house, then headed for the storm.

'Lois?' Kal-El thought at her.

'Clark?' she responded. "This telepathy thing is going to take some getting used to."

'The AI in the new Fortress of Solitude said we needed a beacon from our home time-frame to guide us back.'

'How are we supposed to do that?'

'If we're lucky, we'll be able to find our Jason, Richard, and Perry. I'm hoping we can identify a time-frame with the proper ones, then we can home in on them.' He knew he didn't have to tell her how unlikely it would be for them to find exactly the right combination.

"Praying might help, too," he added aloud.

They could see the black clouds in the distance, coming at them. Again, the gale winds whipped at them. Again, the piercing wail, the sound driving through their skulls.

'Think about Jason, Lois, think! Find Jason! Find Richard!' Kal-El thought at her above the storm.

He cast his mind out into the vastness of universes, searching for a mental signature he recognized, a mind that knew him and Lois. He saw Jason and Richard through Lois's mind as well. A Jason and Richard who were worried that their Lois hadn't come home last night. He had a path through the storm and dove for the center, following the traces of mental energy that would lead them home. They had their beacon.

--Earth I--

The storm vanished as suddenly as it had before. Lois Lane and Superman found themselves in Metropolis, in Centennial Park, beside the crater Superman had created when he fell to Earth only days before. The sun was already high in the sky.

"Are we back?" Lois asked.

Superman looked around. "Looks like it. We should check in with Perry. He's probably worried."

She put out a hand, placing it on his chest. "We're going to have to come up with some excuse for showing up with a newborn. Something convincing."

"I know," he admitted. "But I'm all out of ideas right now. And I'm not sure why you agreed to take this on."

"Do you trust me?" Lois asked.

Superman considered the question for a long moment. "Do I have a choice?"

She didn't answer his question. "I'm going to the Planet, give Perry some sort of excuse for you and me being gone. We need to find a village in South America that was destroyed or evacuated in the past week or so. Considering the drug wars happening down there, you should be able to find someplace like that."

"Why South America?"

"Because that's where Clark was for the past six years, isn't it? Give me about an hour. Then, assuming the baby's okay, bring her in, as Superman. Then follow my lead."

"I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"Probably not. But I can't think of anything else, can you? By the way, what's your blood type?"

--Earth II--

Lois Lane-Kent walked through the front doors of Metropolis General Hospital. She'd managed a few hours' sleep.

She made her way to the tenth floor, to the ICU, to the isolation room where Superman was. Bernie wasn't there, but one of the ICU nurses recognized her and instructed her on what she needed to do before entering the hospital room. Thorough hand washing, a surgeon's cap for her hair, a long-sleeved gown over her clothes.

Clark looked like he was asleep, but Lois suspected he was still unconscious; whether from his ordeal or from the sedation she knew Klein had ordered, she wasn't sure. She took one limp hand into her own, taking care not to dislodge any of the myriad tubes and wires that were attached to his body. He was off the respirator and Lois assumed that was a good sign.

"Clark, I don't know if you can hear me, but I miss you, and I want you back." She kissed him on the forehead. He was warm, a little too warm, maybe. His body temperature was normally a little higher than Earth normal, but kryptonite exposure gave him a fever.

'Lois, ' Zara's mental voice sounded in her brain. 'I can't find Clark; is he all right?'

'He was injured by the assassin, but we're hoping he'll be okay, ' Lois responded. 'You might want to let Xon know that his assassin and his spy lasted about ten minutes on Earth.' She sent a brief mental image of Clark's battle with the assassin, and Richard's help in defeating him, then her own actions in taking out the New Kryptonian invader.

Lois felt a stab of astonishment from Zara. *'That was Xon himself. He must have wanted to watch Clark die, to make sure the job was done right. Lois, with Xon dead at the hands of Kal-El's consort, an Earther no less, I doubt we'll have any more problems with his people. And I can almost guarantee no other New Kryptonian will ever visit Earth without the express permission of you and Clark.'*

'You did very well, sister, ' Zara thought at her. Lois could feel the pride in Zara's thoughts.

"Lois?" Lois heard Clark's voice. He sounded weak and hoarse, but she'd never heard anything more beautiful. "What did Zara want?"

"She wanted to be sure you were okay," Lois told him. "Now, you just relax and let us take care of you. I love you, you know."

"Love you," Clark replied with a faint smile. "When can we go home?"

--Earth I--

Lois considered her plan. First, a quick stop at an engraving shop, then to the Planet.

"And where have you been?" Perry demanded, catching sight of her as she walked into the bullpen. "And where's Kent?"

"I left him at the INS office," Lois told him. "But I have a feeling it's not going to pan out. They're just not budging."

"Budging on what?" Richard asked, stepping over to her. He gave her a quick hug, then stepped back as she stiffened in his arms. *It's over. It's really over.*

"I promised Clark not to say anything until we knew for sure how they were going to jump," Lois said.

"How who were going to jump?" Perry asked. He guided her to his office, Richard following them.

"The INS and Homeland Security," she said. "You know that story Clark was working on, about immigration problems? Well, it's personal, too. And before you say anything, Perry, that's why we started working on it together. It was too personal for him."

There was a commotion outside the office and Lois looked out to see Superman walking through the newsroom carrying a tiny bundle wrapped in a blanket. He looked like he was ready to bolt and was forcing himself to stay firmly on the floor. She hurried out of the office, knowing Perry was on her heels. As she went, she pulled a dirty med-alert necklace from her pocket, palming it. The dirt came from a flowerpot outside the engravers.

"Did you find the village?" she asked him.

Superman took a deep breath. "They were all dead. Less than twenty-four hours." He swallowed hard. "I don't understand how..."

"There's nothing you could have done. You can't be in more than one place at a time," she told him. His expression cleared a little, but the wariness remained. She reached out and took the bundle from his arms, uncovering it. It was the baby girl. The baby fussed a little, hands flailing, looking for her mother. "And is this...?" Lois asked.

"Yes," Superman answered.

Lois opened her hand to reveal the necklace, making it look as though she'd found it in the blanket. She dropped it into Perry's hand. His eyes widened as he read the engraving. Lois knew what it read: Clark J. Kent, blood type O negative, allergic to penicillin. *Jason's allergic. It stands to reason his father is too.*

"Superman, who are this child's parents?" Perry asked.

Lois held her breath as she waited for his answer.

Superman considered his answer for a long moment, as if reluctant to admit the truth. Finally: "Conza Nor-Et and Clark Kent."

"That's what you and Clark were working on?" Richard asked Lois.

Lois nodded. "He got married while he was down there. But then he found out he couldn't get her into the U.S. That's one of the reasons it took him so long to come back to the States. I asked Superman to help. I figured maybe if she was already here, it might help, only..."

"Only she's dead?" Perry completed for her.

Lois nodded. *They're buying it.*

"Does Clark know?" Parry asked, looking to Superman.

"I haven't seen him," Superman said. "I have to go."

"Superman, thank you," Lois said as he headed for the nearest window. He looked back at her and nodded once before disappearing.

"He's scared to death of you," Perry observed.

"He's just a little off-kilter," Lois explained. "This whole thing with Clark and the INS has been hard on him, too. They've always been pretty close, you know."

The elevator doors opened and Clark Kent stepped into the elevator lobby, crossing the floor to the newsroom. He noted the sympathetic looks he was getting, especially from Perry and Richard.

"No luck?" Lois asked as he came closer.

Clark shrugged and shook his head.

"I'm so sorry, Clark, but Conza's dead," Lois continued. "I asked Superman to go down to find her for you, but everyone was dead, except..." She handed him the bundle. "Conza's baby." The baby started to fuss a little more. No doubt she was finally hungry.

Polly stepped forward. "How about I run downstairs and get some formula and stuff?"

Clark tried to shift the baby onto one arm so he could get out his wallet. Polly shook her head. "Don't worry about it, Clark," she said, taking off toward the elevators.

"Let's go to the conference room," Lois suggested, taking Clark's elbow. He allowed himself to be led away. "What's her name?"

Clark paused, thinking. "Esperanza Ester," he finally said. "Esperanza Ester Kent."

Richard watched them go. "She's decided," he told his uncle. "Is that post in Paris still open?"

Perry nodded.

"I can choose my own assistant, right?"

"Of course."

"I'm thinking of asking Penny Landis. I think she'd do a good job for me and she speaks French better than I do. Plus, we've hit it off the last couple days."

"If that's what you want, son."

"I think that's what's best, right now," Richard said, watching Lois and Clark through the windows of the conference room. Lois was hovering over Clark like a mother hen. "We'll work something out concerning Jason. I know they'll both be fair about it."

"What have I gotten myself into?" Clark asked aloud as he sat down on one of the chairs in the conference room. The baby started to wail and he held her to his shoulder. "What have I done?"

"What you always do," Lois answered, noting how natural he seemed with a baby in his arms. "What you're best at. Rescuing people. And I can't think of anyone who needed rescuing more than this little one."

"I can't do this by myself," he protested. It finally sank in as to what was happening. What Lois had planned for him.

"You won't have to," she assured him. "We'll all be here to help."

"I don't know if I can do this."

"Nobody ever said being a parent was easy. But welcome to the human race, Clark Kent. This is what being human is all about. From today on, every action you take, every decision you make, will take into account the needs of another person. She will never be far from your thoughts," Lois looked out at the newsroom, to the audience outside the conference room. "Besides, your marriageability quotient just went up about a thousandfold. A widower with a baby."

"And what about *him*? What about...?" He made the slightest upward motion with one

hand.

"Clark, I promise you, we'll make this work; after all, *they* did. And besides, despite the fact that I would like nothing more than to knock your block off for lying to me, erasing my memory, *and* running off for six years, I'm in love with you. *All of you.*"

"And I've loved you since the first time I saw you. Will it help if I promise never to do those things again?"

"It won't hurt."

--Earth II--

"It's so nice to be home," Clark Kent told his wife of ten years.

"It's good to have you home," Lois Lane-Kent told him, giving him a kiss.

He looked around the house. "Have *they* gone home?"

Lois nodded. "Not long after he donated the blood that probably saved your life."

"I didn't get a chance to thank him," Clark said. "Do you they'll make it?"

Lois nodded. "I think they have a chance, once he gets over the shock of becoming a daddy. Once they figure out that with love, anything is possible."

"Even the impossible?" he asked with a grin.

"Especially the impossible."