

Linda's Day

by Marcus Rowland

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Rating: K+

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This is part of my "Supergirl Returns" series, taking in multiple fandoms which I'll list at the end. As usual all characters belong to their creators and vast megacorporations of doom, not me, and there is no intent to derive them of income or infringe on copyright. Some bad language, spoilers for earlier stories in this series and for one other story, *Give the Boys a Great Big Hand*, no other warnings.

Note - if you haven't read the earlier stories in this series, this version of Supergirl is loosely based on the 1984 film, not the current TV series. She visited Earth for the first time in 2000, and returned to Earth in 2008, a year or so after Superman returned (*Superman Returns*). Her secret identity is Linda Lee, Clark Kent's cousin, a Los Angeles engineer and inventor, now working for her Masters degree in several subjects.

07.31 PDT (Pacific Daylight Time), San Francisco

"...spoke to her after last night's safe deposit robbery."

"Supergirl, what's the story with you and Nightwing?"

"We're friends."

"Just friends?"

"If I'm in the area I'll usually stop to say 'Hi,' and lend a hand if he needs it, as I did tonight, but I'd do the same for Hancock, Batman, or my cousin."

"You have a lot in common; you're about the same age, and you're both superheroes."

"Earth has endless heroes; your firemen, policemen, rescue workers, those who go into danger without powers to protect themselves, they are the real heroes. Nightwing is one of them. One moment... I'm sorry, I'm needed."

"Supergirl left at that point, leaving reporters with more questions than answers. We spoke with relationship counsellor Phoebe Halliwell, author of 'Finding Love':"

"We've seen a lot of Supergirl in San Francisco recently. I wondered if Nightwing might be someone she inspired to become a hero, and went looking for evidence. You'll recall that Supergirl wrote her own account of the Luthor killing in the style of a Kryptonian novel. At several points she references an ancient Kryptonian folk-tale, the legend of crime-fighters Nightwing and Flamebird, comparing both to Batman and the detectives involved in the case. My guess is that our Nightwing either read a proof of the book or heard the story from her directly, since his first public appearance was several weeks before the book was published. Draw your own conclusions."

"In other news..."

Dick Grayson switched off the clock radio and swore.

"Gurrrrrhhh..." Kara Zor-El, alias Linda Lee, known to the world as Supergirl, groggily sat up in bed beside him.

"How are you feeling?"

"Okay, I guess, just a little tired. Did you find out anything after I went to bed?"

"I ran a sample through the mass spectrometer, it's identical to the Kryptonite Luthor was selling on the black market when he couldn't con suckers into buying a fake. It must have been his main stash for the West Coast, just bad luck it was in that vault. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine, really. I just need to get some sun, build up my energy reserves." She climbed out of bed and went into the bathroom.

"So why were you swearing at the radio?" she asked over the noise of the shower.

"She mentioned Nightwing and Flamebird; if the Metropolis stations carry the report Jason is going to start asking about teaming up again."

"Blame Clark, not me; he was telling Jason Kryptonian stories when I was still light years from Earth. Besides, you've got to admit that it would be a great cover for him, a good way to get some experience without revealing that he's Superman's son. Give him some fake gadgets so it looks like he's using them, not his powers, and he'd be a really cute Flamebird to your Nightwing."

"For the five minutes before someone notices he's sixteen and swears out a warrant on me for child endangerment, or accuses me of being a paedophile."

"You said you were a kid sidekick, Batman must have got away with it in your world." Linda came out of the bathroom, suddenly clean and completely dry, and began to dress.

"Yeah, well, that was a whole different world, where capes were a hell of a lot more common and there was a long history of sidekicks; also, he was Batman, and older and even scarier than the one here. Nobody wanted to see his reaction if they spread stories about him. Anyway, there are things that a kid that age just shouldn't see; things I should never have seen. Batman seemed to have a knack for keeping me from the worst of it, but I lost my innocence way too early, and I doubt I'd be as good as he was if I had to try to control a sidekick that was faster than a speeding bullet."

"You're right, I guess. He's a good kid, but he already seems to have a knack for finding trouble. Remember that thing with the robots in Wales? Or the kidnap attempt?" She finished pulling on her clothes as she was talking.

"Neither of those were really... hey, not fair! What am I supposed to do, take his side and offer to make him my sidekick because he'll get into trouble anyway?"

Linda pretended to pout. "You spotted my fiendish plan."

"Seriously, no; I can't work with a super-boy, not and do my job properly. Clark's going to have to find another way to handle this."

"I know. But if you think of anything, let me know. I've got to run, I have an early lecture and I want to talk to the speaker afterwards."

"Take it easy!"

Linda kissed him, scanned through the walls to make sure that nobody was watching, then went out onto the balcony outside his bedroom and vanished into the sky. By the time he blinked she was half-way to Los Angeles.

07.40 PDT, Los Angeles

Linda checked her house from three miles up, making sure that there were no intruders or watchers, and darted inside and switched into her civilian clothes before any of her neighbours could possibly move to a position where they could see her arrive. There wasn't going to be time for a leisurely breakfast, so she poured some cereal, switched on the coffee machine, and put a couple of pop tarts in the toaster, then went to feed Streaky and Shelby Junior. Shelby tucked into his dog food enthusiastically, Streaky was nowhere to be seen. Linda shrugged and poured some dry food into his bowl and topped up both pets' water.

There was a rattle and Streaky came in through the cat flap, followed by two other cats. One of them came forward and yowled *"We are on errantry and we greet you"* in the feline version of The Speech, the language of magic.

"Again, guys?" Linda asked incredulously.

"Sorry," said Streaky. *"We've got some visiting wizards stranded on the Moon, one of them somehow broke the return gate. It's messed up the hyperstrings enough that we can't teleport anywhere close to fix it, and they don't know this system well enough to get back on their own."*

"What do you need me to do?"

"Carry us up there," said one of the other cats, "it's an easy fix once we're on site."

"Okay. Can you take care of your own air?"

"No problem," said Streaky. "We'll set up outside, we'll be ready by the time you've finished eating."

"The Moon. Great..." Five minutes later she went outside to find the cats waiting in a shimmering bubble about five feet across, checked for watchers again, and headed up into space.

07.57 PDT, Tycho

The visiting wizards looked like bipedal purple armadillos. Linda waited long enough to confirm that the cats had things under control, posed with the aliens to let them take their equivalent of a selfie, then headed back to Earth for another quick shower - Moon dust gets everywhere - more coffee, and her car. She got a few minutes of sun in space, but probably used most of what she gained to power the flight.

08.55 PDT, UCLA Campus

Linda parked her car, sprinted (at human speed) to the lecture theatre, and settled down for the visiting speaker's talk on string and gravitational theory. She tried not to wince every time he got something wrong; at least he acknowledged the existence of Kryptonians and other fliers, and admitted that current scientific knowledge didn't have all the answers.

At the end of the talk a student Linda didn't know asked "Professor Fleinhardt, why don't we ask Superman or Supergirl to give us the facts?"

"Let me answer that with a story. A few years ago I was a payload specialist on one of the last of the old-style shuttles to the International Space Station. This was just after Superman returned, and the new *Genesis* shuttle had to be grounded for several months because they wanted to make sure it hadn't been damaged by Luthor's magnetic pulse. So we took off in an obsolete tin can, on top of fifteen hundred tons or so of explosive fuel, and all the way up there was a blip on the radar to one side. Someone asked the pilot what it was, and he said that Superman was following us into orbit, ready to rescue us if something went wrong."

"So the guy who was sitting next to me said 'Wouldn't it be a lot safer if Superman carried us up?' And I thought about it, and I realised that it would. But he was missing the point, and I think you're missing the point. That was a journey we had to make for ourselves, and so is this. We can't sit back and let the Kryptonians feed us the answers. That's not science, it's a cargo cult. We can accept a helping hand, I think, if something goes wrong, but we have to make our own mistakes if we're going to learn from them."

Linda raised her own hand, waited to be acknowledged, then said "I don't think it's safe to assume the Kryptonians had all the answers anyway."

"Good point," said Fleinhardt. "Can you justify it?"

"Krypton exploded, and they say it was some sort of industrial accident."

"Exactly right. At some point someone on Krypton must have decided that everything was okay with whatever technology they were using. And they were catastrophically wrong." He paused, then said "If anyone here is ever in that sort of position, try a little humility. The life you save might be your own... or all of us. Okay, I think I've gone past my allotted time, and all of you have other things to do. Thanks for listening, and try not to blow up the world."

There was a ripple of uneasy laughter, and the audience began to leave. Linda waited for the rush to subside, then walked to the podium. "Can you spare a few minutes, Professor Fleinhardt?"

"Probably. What's it about?"

"Cheap gravity wave detection."

"Go on."

"A few years ago I invented a range of science sets for girls called 'Linda's Laboratory.' Ballitoy sell them, they're pretty popular. We also have a boy's version, 'Leo's Laboratory', which is basically the same equipment with more angular casings and boy-oriented packaging and experiments, and we're starting to offer the same equipment in gender-neutral designs for schools and colleges. Most of the kits include sensors that can be networked through a kid's computer, so the kids can get involved in on-line projects like

monitoring climate change and pollution. Accuracy is about on a par with the instruments other companies sell to high schools, but we can sell them for about a tenth the price because of the numbers we sell. At the last count there were about two hundred and fifty thousand active users in the US, another two hundred thousand in the rest of the world, and about seven hundred collaborative projects running on our servers. There are at least four radio stations in the LA area that prefer our data to the usual weather services."

"That's interesting, but I don't quite see..."

"One of the packages I've designed is a comparatively cheap gravity wave detector, about the size and shape of a broomstick. One on its own wouldn't tell you much, but if you had a few thousand of them distributed around the world and networked the array would be about as sensitive as one of the current laser interferometer detectors, and a lot cheaper. The trouble is that we can't sell them."

Fleinhardt looked surprised. "Really? Why not?"

"If we launch a new package we generally expect to sell around forty thousand units in the first year, ten to fifteen thousand a year after that if they're popular, so the usual first production run is about fifty thousand. If we made that many detectors the manufacturing cost would be around twenty-seven dollars per unit, which means we'd have to look at a wholesale price of at least sixty dollars, so a retail price well over a hundred. That's a lot more than our other packages. If we make less the price rises - a lot of the initial cost is set-up, not actual production, so if you halve the initial run the manufacturing cost per unit goes up to forty-eight dollars. They're also an awkward size for shops and for shipping, so stores probably won't want to stock them. Worse of all, there's nothing else you can do with them. No fun experiments you can do at home, for best results you have bury them or embed them in concrete, and most of the time they'll just be giving a neutral reading, which means that the kids would be bored and their parents would want their money back."

Fleinhardt rubbed his head. "I guess I see what you mean, but I don't really see how I can help with this."

"The idea I had was for someone else to pay for the detectors, then we hand them out free to schools and kids who are already participating in the distributed experiments. I've talked to the Wayne Foundation and they'd be interested in funding it, and Ballitoy would reduce the wholesale price if the Foundation bought out the entire run, but there needs to be a solid grant application and some commitment from someone at the top of the field. You'd be perfect, because it lets us play the astronaut card and that always interests the kids."

"I'm not sure I'd be able to run a global experiment along with my existing commitments. Hmm... you say that this is aimed at girls, had you considered approaching Doctor Samantha Carter? She hasn't published much lately, but I believe she's still active in the field."

"I'll be honest, I already asked. Doctor Carter's a serving Air Force officer, she doesn't feel able to fit it in with her other duties."

"Such a shame, her work on wormholes was a revelation."

"You wouldn't need to do much except write an introduction that explains what we hope the results will tell us, and use the data once we've got it. Ballitoy already runs science clubs and the network, it's great publicity for the toys. The kids earn points for collaborating in experiments, so if we offered a free detector to every school that uses our gear and to everyone who has more than a hundred and fifty points that would be roughly twenty-eight thousand units, with a few hundred every month after that. You'd need to get someone to program adaptive data collection algorithms, because you're never going to have users spread entirely evenly around the world or have all of them on line, but that could probably be an adaptation of the code we use for our seismometers. All of it's on line for developers."

"You have seismometers?" Fleinhardt was suddenly more interested. "Do you think it would be possible to compare gravity wave and seismometer readings?"

"I can't see why not. The seismometer is one of the advanced kits, so that would probably correlate pretty well to a lot of the kids with more points..."

They talked for another few minutes. By the time they parted Linda was reasonably sure he would apply for the grant. She stifled a pang of conscience - while all of the components in the detectors were normal

Terrestrial technology, the way she combined them probably wouldn't have occurred to most of Earth's engineers for another few years. But the research would be Fleinhardt's, and that's what really counted.

11.15 PDT / 14.15 EDT (Eastern Daylight Time), Gotham City

"I think Fleinhardt is interested," said Linda, looking out across the city and wishing it wasn't overcast, "so unless he makes a real mess of the grant application we should get the gravity detectors rolled out early next year."

"You're sure they're sensitive enough to detect starships?" asked Bruce Wayne.

"Most of the common drives generate gravity waves. If we get reasonably even distribution they should pick up anything larger than a scout ship this side of Jupiter, and anything large enough to have crew within a couple of million miles."

"And Fleinhardt's research?"

"They'll be fine for that, don't worry. He won't have anything to complain about."

"I always worry."

"Of course you do. You're Batman."

"Not in this office."

"I swept for bugs before I came in. So did you."

"You're learning. Would you be able to check something for me in Africa?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"One of the scientists the Foundation sponsors has missed three check-ins..."

11.40 PDT / 20.40 CAT (Central African Time), Zimbabwe, Africa

Selina Kyle drank some of her water and moved closer to the truck, pausing occasionally to scan around it with her night vision goggles. The opposition were still sitting around their fire, drinking beer and talking, a radio playing... she listened again... Bantu hip-hop. Nobody paying attention to the truck, but she could see someone sitting in the driver's seat, apparently asleep. He was probably supposed to be a guard. She carefully loaded a hypodermic, moved to where she could see the driver's neck, and fired. The noise of her dart gun was drowned by the radio. He slumped sideways against the truck door.

She crept forward again, avoiding a small snake that slithered off into the undergrowth, and carefully opened the door and rolled the guard out. There was a noise from the back of the truck, something moving inside a cage. She climbed aboard and pulled the door almost shut, keeping as far as possible below the level of the windscreen.

The keys weren't in the ignition, and she thought about hot-wiring the truck as she checked the glove box and above the driver's mirror, eventually finding them under the driver's seat cushion.

She listened again, heard nothing different, scanned the area ahead of the truck to make sure there weren't any obstacles, took a deep breath, and turned the ignition, putting the engine into gear and pumping the accelerator pedal as soon as it was running, praying it wouldn't stall. There were shouts as it lurched forward, and after a few seconds the first shots. She hunched low and kept moving, zig-zagging as she made her escape.

It took less than a minute for headlights to appear behind her; too soon, she was still miles from cover. Tracer bullets flashed overhead, but nothing hit the truck. They didn't want to risk damaging her cargo. She tried to think... there was a river a few miles ahead, and no safe crossing for at least twenty miles in either direction. She needed to shake them long enough to double back. Her only advantage was the goggles, and she suddenly realised that she lost that advantage every time she hit the brakes, the lights must reveal her position.

It was time to do something stupid. Without braking she steered the truck into a curve around a small copse of baobab trees, continued round until she was facing the oncoming jeeps, pushed the goggles out of the way, and stamped on the accelerator. About fifty yards out she snapped on the lights and aimed for the lead jeep, ducking down again as the glass shattered. She was nearly on top of them when they realised she wasn't stopping and the driver frantically swerved to avoid the collision, collided with the next jeep, and both

came to a sudden halt. She side-swiped a third jeep and felt one of the rear wheels start to judder; she'd probably ripped a tyre. The last jeep was still after her, and more bullets hit the top of the cab; they weren't going to let her get away.

Abruptly the juddering stopped, and the truck surged forward so fast that Selina was forced back into the driver's seat, streaking across the plain at a speed she wouldn't have risked in daylight. And, she slowly realised, flying a few feet above the ground. She switched off the engine, but it made no difference, and quickly lost sight of the jeeps as the truck took a round-about route and eventually landed at Selina's camp. She climbed out, shaken, and a woman's voice said "Doctor Kyle? Are you all right?"

"I think so. What happened?"

"You missed your last three check-ins, the Wayne Foundation asked me to make sure you were okay."

Selina remembered the goggles, pulled them down, and saw her rescuer. "Supergirl? Thank you."

"You're welcome. Why did you take on the poachers on your own?"

"My radio's broken so I couldn't get help, and I wasn't going to let them get away with it if I could stop them."

"Let's see..." Linda examined the radio, then her hands blurred into super-fast motion as she opened the casing, did something to the circuit board, and focused a burst of red heat vision on a connection. "Try it now."

Selina switched on, took a few moments to make contact, and left a brief message to say that things were under control.

"That's great. Can you help me unload them?"

"Sure." Linda opened the rear doors, revealing two narrow cages, one containing an angry leopardess, the other three large cubs. "They're adorable. Where do you want them?"

"I need to get blood samples and tag them, then release them. If you wouldn't mind holding them I can get it done without tranquilising them."

"Sure. Which one first?"

"The mother. Let me get some sample kits."

Linda carefully held the leopardess still while Selina took the samples, allowing the big cat to chew on her sleeve and hoping she wouldn't try a more serious bite and break a tooth. "What are you testing for?"

"Mainly FIV strains, the cat equivalent of HIV. It started in Africa, if we find new strains here we may be able to develop treatments early." She clipped a small tag to its ear and as Linda put it back in its cage said "Okay, now we need to be quick with the cubs, handle them too much and mom might reject them..."

"Okay." Linda opened the cage, quickly wrapped the first cub in her cloak, and pulled it out. "That ought to smell of detergent, not me."

"Great." Selina quickly dealt with it, then they repeated the process with the other cubs.

"One thing, I have friends with cats. How careful should I be about infection?"

"It spreads through saliva in wounds, there isn't much chance of infection but if you wash your costume that should eliminate all risk."

"Okay, that's simple enough."

"They trapped them about eighteen miles north-east from here, if we could release them there they should be okay. If the poachers don't come back, of course. And my jeep's parked a few miles further on, if you wouldn't mind retrieving it."

"They won't be back. I melted their engine blocks and guns, and notified the anti-poacher patrol. They should round them up fairly soon. Okay, do you want to come along for the ride or wait here?"

Selina smiled. "I'd love to see them released."

"Then you might as well get back in the truck, it'll be easier than carrying you and the cages at the same time..."

13.55 PDT / 16.55 EDT, Gotham City

"I think you'd like her," said Linda. "She's smart, brave, beautiful, fights for the things she believes in,

and doesn't have the theme criminal vibe at all. Which makes me wonder just how much you've interfered in her life since Dick told you about the version in his universe four years ago..."

"Not much," said Bruce. "You've actually had more of an effect on her life. Do you remember the environmental report you wrote after talking to Poison Ivy?"

"Sure. She made some good points, it seemed like a good idea to filter out the crazy and pass them on."

"That led to the Wayne Foundation setting up a variety of scholarships in biology and environmental science. Miss Kyle was one of the first recipients, she was on the verge of graduating when Greyson told me about her. All I did was make sure that she became aware of a research opportunity well away from Gotham."

"Which by some strange coincidence was a perfect match to her qualifications and interests."

"And your point is?"

"Nicely done. Anything else going on I should know about?"

"Doctor Quinzel took a job in Miami; it pays much better than Arkham, so with any luck she'll never go anywhere near the Joker. And Oliver Queen's appeal was rejected by the Supreme Court this morning."

"It's a shame you had to stop him, Dick thought his world's Arrow was a good guy."

"I doubt he killed fifty-five people."

"I'll grant you that. I'd better get on." She yawned and stood.

"Are you all right? Nightwing told me what happened last night, if I'd known earlier I would have asked Clark to check the situation in Africa."

"I just need to get a couple of hours of sun. I've got a couple of other things to do first, but I'll take care of it later."

"Make sure you do."

Linda left with a soft whoosh of displaced air, and Bruce rearranged the papers on his desk and turned to the latest WayneTech fiscal reports.

13.57 PDT, Los Angeles

"Holy fuck," said Debra Morgan, putting down the case summary she was reading. "I knew working here would be different, but you guys are just... you seriously had to deal with smuggled nukes?"

"Seriously," said Callan. "Who could make that one up?"

"Thom Gemcity, maybe. Sounds like one of his plots."

"It raises the bar kind of high, I guess," said Kensi Blye, "but most of our cases are a lot less exciting."

"I hope so. I kinda fucked up when I was in Miami, missed noticing something that was right under my nose, I'd hate to do that if the city was going to blow up if I got it wrong."

"We all do that some time," said Sam Hanna. "What was it, crooked cop on the next desk?"

"Nobody told you?"

"Marty knows something, I think," said Kensi, "I think he recognised your name when Hetty told us you'd be working here while he's on the training course. But he wouldn't say anything."

"Don't know why he bothered, it's not like I'll be able to keep it quiet," said Debra. She rubbed the back of her neck with both hands, clenched her fists, then made a visible attempt to relax. "You'd better know too, then it won't come as a surprise if someone mentions it. My brother was a serial killer and I never spotted it."

"Okay," said Callan. "That's different, I guess."

"That's just the start of it. He was a forensic scientist, our precinct's blood guy, must have been involved in most of the homicides we handled. And he was targeting murderers. Every case he was involved in had to be reopened and checked to make sure he didn't fuck up the evidence. They didn't want me involved in the process, which killed my career in Miami. My old boss pulled some strings to get me a job out here, then this transfer came up after my brother's appeal failed."

"I think I remember that," said Sam. "The Bay Harbor thing? A few years ago? Gibbs' team caught him?"

"That's the one."

"You must have done something right," said Callan. "Hetty would have talked to Gibbs before you were

offered the transfer, you wouldn't be working here if he'd said you were incompetent."

"Fucked if I know what," said Debra.

"You might want to watch the language a little," said Kensi. "Hetty doesn't approve of swearing."

"What is it with her anyway? And what's with all the rails of clothes around the place, like what's-her-name in The Incredibles, Edna something." She changed her voice to a bad German accent, and said "No capes, dahling!"

"In fact that character was inspired by me," Hetty said (inevitably) from behind her, "but there's nothing wrong with a cape when it's worn with the right outfit. I'm working on a costume with one now."

"Kara?" asked Sam.

"Yes. She does present some interesting challenges. She's dropping by with some swatches in a few minutes, you might want to introduce her to Detective Morgan while she's here." Hetty left as silently as she'd arrived, leaving Debra gaping behind her.

"She's like a teeny ninja," said Debra. "Is she serious about the film?"

"Read the end titles," said Kensi, "she's got a design credit. I think she did the costumes for Syndrome's girlfriend. And lay off the size jokes. Seriously, just don't do it."

"Weird." Debra turned back to the case file, turned a couple of pages, then said "so who's this Kara chick?"

"She's helped us out with some cases," said Kensi, "she has to make a lot of public appearances and Hetty was a little critical of her fashion choices, so these days Hetty helps her with designs. So far it's worked pretty well."

"Couldn't she just go to a regular fashion designer? Or buy her clothes in a boutique?"

"I would, but there are some unusual problems." Debra turned and gaped slightly as she recognised Supergirl, who had an oddly incongruous sports bag in one hand.

"Kara," said Kensi, "this is Debra Morgan, on temporary assignment from LAPD."

"Hi, Debra, pleased to meet you."

"Fuck! Sorry, none of these assholes told me who they were expecting. Kinda took me by surprise."

"Don't worry, I get that a lot." Debra looked round and saw, as expected, that the others were all grinning.

"I guess. Umm... so what are the problems. Uh... with the clothes, I mean?"

"The fabrics are special materials designed to take a lot of punishment, and they have to be woven to exact dimensions, not cut, and fused together with a heavy-duty laser, not sewn. There's only one person with the machinery to handle them, and he's not a fashion designer. Hetty has some design software to give us the shapes that are needed, then he makes the cloth and puts things together."

"How tough are we talking here?" asked Debra. "Could you make a bullet proof blouse or something?"

"Not really," said Linda, rummaging in the bag and producing a large square of silky blue cloth. "the cloth wouldn't tear but you'd take most of the force of the bullet through it. Even if the bullet didn't get through the weave, it'd still penetrate your skin. For real bullet-proofing you'd need lots of layers; it would be as bulky as any other bullet-proof vest and cost about ten times as much."

"Okay... so it's not protective clothing?"

"I don't need protection, but my clothes do. They have to be strong enough to take a beating, if I wore ordinary fabrics I'd wear them out in a couple of days. I'll give you an example, a couple of hours ago I gave a zoologist a hand and a leopard chewed my sleeve; ordinary fabric would have been in ribbons, with this material all I had to do was wash off the slobber. It isn't essential, but I really don't want a 'wardrobe malfunction'" - she mimed the quotes - "in front of a news camera or something."

"I can see that," said Debra.

Hetty came back to the office area. "There you are, my dear. What have you got for me this time?"

Linda held up the cloth. "Nothing really radical. Some stretch fabric that ought to be better for tops, and a new version of the material I use for capes and skirts, it's tougher and a lot more fire-resistant but the

flexibility and drape are a little different. And new boots, we've beefed up the strength of the heels again but I think they make my ankles look a bit thick."

"Come through to my work-room, we'll see what needs to be changed." Linda followed her out.

Debra banged her head on her desk. "Could I be any lamer?"

"Relax," said Kensi, "that was a reasonably coherent conversation. The first time Marty met her he got out about three words. I don't think I did much better."

"Sam and I were lucky," said Callan, "we met her at a crime scene, we were too busy dodging bullets to be tongue-tied."

"And aren't you glad to know that Supergirl worries about her ankles looking thick?" asked Kensi.

Debra grinned. "I guess it's nice to know that she has to work to look that perfect."

"She does look a little tired today," said Kensi, "though you'd barely notice."

Debra lowered her voice. "Maybe she had a busy night. According to the tabloids she's dating Nightwing, the vigilante in San Francisco. Wears a tight blue costume that doesn't leave much to the imagination."

"God bless spandex."

"Amen to that."

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"How are you, my dear?" asked Hetty, sketching a slightly different boot design into her graphics pad. "Is it my imagination, or are you just a little under the weather?"

"There's no fooling you," said Linda. "we ran into some Kryptonite and I'm way down on my power reserves. I had to fly a rescue mission to Africa a little earlier, it took me fifteen minutes to get there and I was nearly too late."

"And of course it would be night in Africa, I doubt it helped much."

"I've got the rest of the afternoon clear barring emergencies, I'm going to soak up a few rays."

"That's an excellent idea." She rendered the image in 3D. "What do you think?"

"I like it; the shape of the heel really makes a difference, and it ought to be as strong as the first version."

"It's a little more flattering, I think, but with legs like yours you really have nothing to worry about."

"Thanks!" Linda blushed a little.

"As for the cloth, I think that the sketches you already have work well, I wouldn't change anything."

"Great! I had a feeling it'd be okay, but it never hurts to have a second opinion."

"While I remember, Miss Sciuto asked me to remind you that it's Agent DiNozzo's wedding on Tuesday, he and Ziva are really hoping you'll be able to attend."

"Abby knows I'll get to the reception if I can," said Linda, "but she's got some idea I should make a speech, and the way things usually go I'd just be getting started when someone robbed a bank across the street. It's better if I just drop by and grab a slice of cake when I can."

"Very well. But if you do feel like dressing up a little, I've taken those Kryptonian designs you showed me and come up with a few variants..." She sent several images to a big wall screen.

"They're gorgeous," said Linda. "I don't know why you don't do this professionally."

"I am, after a fashion, if you'll excuse the pun. Hadn't you noticed? Every costume I design for you is licensed by the Superman Foundation, and gets adapted for general fashion use, masquerade costumes, toys, and everything else you can think of. Last year they raised more than ten million dollars for the charities the Foundation supports."

"I hadn't thought of it in those terms. But nobody knows it's you that's doing it, which is a real shame."

"I'm operations manager for a covert government agency, my dear, the last thing I need is fame. One of these days we'll probably need your help again, as we did with Ziva, and that will be all the reward I need."

"Okay. I guess I can see the sense in that."

"Now run along; I want to tweak things a little. When I'm done I'll send the designs to you, you can pass them on to your mystery tailor."

14.42 PDT, Mojave Desert, Nevada

Linda checked for satellites and other prying eyes then swooped down for a landing, spread out a towel on a flat rock, swapped her costume for a bikini, and stretched out with the *L.A. Tribune* to soak up some rays. Since there wasn't anyone around she didn't bother with the fake sunblock she used on her occasional trips to the beach. Three minutes (and most of the paper) later, she reached for her phone.

"Clark, have you seen today's entertainment news?"

"I was wondering when you'd notice."

"CBS are making *Ultra-Girl*, a show 'inspired by Supergirl,' and you wondered when I'd notice?"

"The Foundation's lawyers have an eye on it, but I don't think we can stop it without stirring up a lot of speculation about things like secret identities. They're not claiming that the character is you, or that her life is anything like yours. They're taking care that her powers and origin are a little different, so there probably isn't much we can do about it. If anyone should be worried by it it's me, they've got her working in a magazine office for what sounds like a female version of Perry White. That's nothing like your life, but it's a lot like me."

"She's a secretary. They didn't even make her a reporter! Talk about cliché central."

"It isn't the first time something like this has happened. Ask Hancock about the 'John Henry' TV series they made in the fifties, but be ready to duck fast."

"I've seen clips. Amazing how a show inspired by a black hero ended up casting a blond guy in the lead. Okay, I guess I see what you mean."

"Keep an eye on it, of course, but the best advice I can give you is to laugh at it, and copy any useful ideas they come up with. They won't want to rock the boat by giving you a hard time about it."

"I guess. Okay, let's leave it at that. How are Lois and the kids?"

"Lois is fine, she's up for another Pulitzer for her Intergang expose. Jason's still talking about going public as a hero. I think I've persuaded him to wait until he's eighteen, and we're working on a cover story that I brought back some frozen embryos and a womb device from Krypton."

"Wouldn't that mean he'd be younger?"

"It's one of several problems, we're still working out the details. But at least it will explain Jonathan when he's old enough, and any other kids Lois and I have. Or you have, for that matter."

"Unless I vanish for a good few months it'll be pretty obvious where any of my kids come from."

"I guess." Clark sounded uncomfortable. She guessed that he wasn't happy with the idea of a pregnant active superhero. *"If necessary we could find a cover to explain your absence. I'd rather that than risk a child."*

"Me too, I'm just saying it might not be possible."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Now I'd better get on, we've got to a lot to do before deadline."

"Okay. Talk to you soon."

Linda turned back to the paper, completed the Sudoku, Kakuro, and cryptic crossword puzzles in twenty-seven seconds, and settled back for a nap.

14.55 PDT, Mojave Desert, Nevada

Linda woke to a distant rumble of explosions, scanned the horizon, and said "You've got to be kidding me." She hastily changed back into costume, and streaked across the desert towards the Hoover Dam.

"Stop it, you idiots, before someone gets hurt."

The battling giant robots, one red, silver and blue, the other steel coloured, ignored her, firing energy beams and throwing boulders and cars at each other with no regard for the fleeing tourists and workers, or the safety of the dam. Nine smaller robots fought in a confusing melee. Linda snatched one rock from the air, melted two more with her heat vision, and started to feel the beginning of a headache. The next boulder was even larger, and Linda caught it and tossed it back at the steel robot's legs. One buckled under the impact, and the robot collapsed sideways into the dam's runoff channel. It roared defiance and started to change shape,

rods and girders folding out to take the damaged leg's place. The other robot started to hack at it with an axe, about twenty feet long with an blade of shimmering energy, and the damaged robot promptly stabbed it with an energy weapon resembling a giant light sabre. The smaller robots circled them, looking for openings.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," said Linda. She flew off a couple of miles to build up speed, circled back, and rammed through the chests of the giant robots before they had time to react, then vaporised the flying debris with her heat vision before it could hit anything. Both robots collapsed, twitching, as metal components started to move to repair the damage. The smaller robots drew back, watching her and each other.

"I can keep this up all day," Linda bluffed. "Can you?" She barely had enough energy left to fly, let alone carry on the fight.

All of the robots seemed to stare at her.

"You're Cybertronian, aren't you?"

The more colourful robot said "You are well informed."

"Kryptonians visited your world about seventy thousand years ago. I'm sorry - I'm pretty sure they started your wars."

"How?" demanded the steel robot.

"According to our records, they didn't have much experience of non-organic life, and thought you were in an evolutionary dead end, going through repetitive cycles rather than adapting to changes in your planet's environment. And they could see the place was headed for an ice age, most of the resources you needed to survive would have been buried under the ice. So... well, they decided you needed some help. A jump-start to get you evolving more rapidly. They came up with an energy matrix that boosted your creativity and intelligence, set it loose so it would spread to all of you. They screwed up big-time."

"Why did it start the wars?" asked the colourful robot.

"What they did was like overclocking a human-built computer - it speeded up processing but didn't do much to fix the underlying hardware, so everything got more unstable. Sure they gave you more creativity, but they also gave you madness, greed, and anger. When another ship visited a few hundred years later you'd made huge advances, but there was some sort of weird religious war going on and your ecology was in ruins. They didn't even dare to land, their ship would have been torn apart in minutes. It's one of the reasons why Kryptonians eventually gave up space travel, what they'd done was a horrible violation of your evolutionary freedom."

"Weird religious war?" the steel robot repeated, and started to laugh. "We fought for thousands of years because some of us thought the Spark was divine. You're telling us it was a... a programming error?"

"Not exactly - you were already sentient, that part of you is natural. What my ancestors did was... well, it's another analogy but it'll have to do... like giving them a massive dose of stimulants, ones that didn't wear off and were passed on to their descendants."

"And the All-Spark?" asked the colourful robot.

"I've no idea what that is."

It projected a hologram, depicting a metal cube covered in complex patterns resembling cogs and circuit board traces. "It stores the Spark of Cybertronians after death, and can bring life to the inanimate."

"Some of those markings look like archaic Kryptonian, and that's early crystal age engineering. Let's see if I can read it... 'something energy containment... something...' then a lot of chemical data. I'd have to examine it to be sure, but I'm guessing it's one of the storage units they dropped on your world. I guess it would store energy once the original matrix was released."

"Heresy!" shouted the colourful robot. "It is unique, the holy vessel, not an empty container." It struggled to get back on its feet again but couldn't quite make it.

"Sorry," said Linda. "I'm pretty sure we had a couple that looked similar in the museum in Argo City. There's an easy way to tell; if I'm reading it right the chemical data is the procedure for making copies. You soak it in a strong solution of sodium silicate, boric acid, and some other chemicals, it'll double in size then

split in two."

The robots stared at her.

"Let me guess... this whole time you've been fighting over the thing because you thought it was unique?"

"It can bring life and health," said the steel robot. "It is a priceless asset. It was essential to keep it for our own use and deny it to our enemies."

"So in other words if both sides have one and the means of making more, at least one of your reasons for fighting disappear."

"Heresy!" the more colourful robot repeated.

"I'd be interested," said the steel robot. Some of the smaller robots seemed to nod agreement.

"I'm guessing you're not the one that has the All-Spark," said Linda.

"True."

"What about it? Could you end your war if you both had one of those boxes, and I gave each of you the location of a different uninhabited planet with all the metal you could ever use?"

"And if we don't?" the colourful robot asked.

"I'll have to use more force. And I think my cousin and Hancock would probably enjoy helping. If you don't know who they are, look it up. Then again, this world hasn't been visited by a Green Lantern lately, it might be time to call in the Corps. Haven't they thrown you off a few inhabited worlds already?"

There was a long awkward pause.

"A truce," said the steel robot. "Fetch the chemicals and we will test this claim. If you dare to show the All-Spark," it added in the direction of the colourful robot.

"I compute an 87% probability that you will try to steal the All-Spark," said the colourful robot, "but a 96% probability that Supergirl will stop you. Very well, please get the chemicals."

"I compute a strong probability that you two will start fighting again if I leave," said Linda. "Let me make a phone call, I'll ask Kal-El to get the stuff."

- S -

Twenty minutes later Superman flew in carrying a shrink-wrapped pallet loaded with drums of chemicals, flew off again, and came back with a vat the size of a swimming pool, then mixed the chemicals at super-speed to Linda's directions. She watched, and felt her energy reserves slowly replenish in the desert sunlight.

"Okay, we're ready for the cube," said Linda.

The colourful robot hesitated, then opened a compartment in its chest and pulled out a cube about the size of a toaster-oven.

"I think we mixed too much of this stuff," said Superman, comparing the pool and the cube.

"It expands," said the colourful robot, doing something to the cube. It began to unfold, doubling in size repeatedly, until it was about the size of an SUV. The robot cautiously stood and walked to the pool.

"Just lower it in," said Linda, "the solution is conductive so don't immerse your body, there might be a short circuit."

The solution began to bubble around the cube, and one of the faces began to look fuzzy as thousands of crystalline needles grew from it. Slowly a duplicate cube formed, first as needles, then as a mesh which gradually darkened and became more solid. With a loud 'Crack' the old and new cubes separated. Linda flew to the old one, lifted it out, and gave it back to the colourful robot. The steel behemoth rumbled forward, but Linda said "There's still some crystal growth going on. Give it a few more minutes, it's nearly done."

"If this is a trick..."

"No trick. It's got all the information it needs from the original cube, it just needs to finish firming up." She watched with microscopic and x-ray vision, and eventually added "It's done."

The steel robot lifted out its cube, examined it, and said "You appear to be truthful." It did something to make the cube shrink, and stored it inside its casing. The colourful robot had already hidden its cube in the

same way.

"They should both contain equal amounts of energy. Before you leave I'll give both of you a full set of instructions, they have some capabilities I don't think you've been using."

"Leave?" said the steel robot. "Why should we leave? We have what we want, and this planet has plenty of resources. Including Kryptonite." A hatch in its head flipped open, revealing a familiar green glow. The robot leaped towards Linda, who started to recoil, looked more closely, then stood her ground. At the last second she grabbed the glowing rock and punched the robot, throwing it back about fifty feet.

"You don't want to believe everything you see on line," said Linda. "But this stuff's radioactive enough to hurt someone, we'd better get rid of it. Kal-El, your pitching arm is better than mine."

Clark took it and threw it into space at several times escape velocity, aimed for an eventual collision with Jupiter.

"Now, are you going quietly, or do you want us to get really physical?"

"You promised coordinates and instructions," said the colourful robot.

"I did," said Linda, taking one of the empty chemical drums, slicing out two squares of metal with her heat vision, then scratching the data into each of them with a super-sharp fingernail. "Both sets of coordinates are worlds about forty light-years away in different directions, they're comparable in resources and conditions. I have no idea which would be best, so you might as well pick one at random. Left or right hand?"

The colourful robot hesitated, then said "Left."

Linda tossed it the metal plate. It read it, tucked it into another compartment, then said "To me! Assemble!"

Four of the smaller robots joined it and locked to its body, and it folded in on itself then expanded as a gleaming metal cylinder. "My thanks, and my apologies for the damage we have caused." The cylinder rose into the sky, accelerating rapidly, and vanished with a flare of light.

"What about this idiot?" asked Clark.

"Are you going to behave now?" asked Linda.

"I appear to be beaten," said the steel robot. "There is nothing for me here while this planet has such defenders."

"Okay. You've got your cube, here are the coordinates and instructions." She tossed it the other plate. It stood, sullenly, and the remaining robots merged with it to form a gigantic winged shape, which flapped into the air and flew off in the same direction. Clark followed it up, and returned a minute later. "I think they're trying to follow the others."

"Good thing I suggested they should take indirect routes."

"They'll probably be back sooner or later."

"We'll cope," said Linda.

In Kryptonian Clark added *"How are you feeling?"*

"Okay. I recharged a lot while I was talking to the robots."

"How did you know that wasn't real kryptonite."

"Most black-market kryptonite is fake, and that piece was too big and too green. Probably one of Luthor's replicas, the colour matched the fragments we found in Gotham City. I've no idea where the robots got it, but if they paid for it they were gypped."

"Well spotted. Can you manage the clean-up without me? I need to get back to Metropolis and file a couple of stories, then I've got to go to Manhattan."

"Emergency?"

"Poker game, Hancock's hosting. While I remember, don't forget Lois's birthday party next Friday."

"No problem," said Linda, switching back to English.

"See you." Clark leaped into the air and left with a sonic boom, headed east.

16.45 PDT, Mojave Desert, Nevada

Linda finally finished the clean-up and the all-important task of talking to the authorities and press and

getting everyone to calm down and shut up because OMG Alien Robot Invasion! was over. It helped that the robots were gone and hadn't really done a huge amount of damage. The part that took the longest was filling out the environmental impact statement and forms to get the chemicals and the vat removed safely by an approved contractor. The Superman Foundation would probably end up helping to pay for that, and Linda made a mental note to raise some more money for them. She could convert some coal into diamonds or find some buried treasure, but the tax paperwork was always a pain. Maybe it was time to write another book and assign the rights to the Foundation. She remembered dozens of Kryptonian tales, and most would probably interest a human audience.

She thought about going back to sunbathe for another hour, but ended up flying a coastal patrol down to Nicaragua then back up to Alaska, rescuing a few swimmers and sailors in difficulty, stopping a drive-by shooting in Portland, and warning four pods of whales off Baja that a Japanese "research" whaling ship was in the area. Most of the time she was in the sun, and by the time she returned to Los Angeles she was feeling much closer to normal.

19.10 PDT, Los Angeles / San Francisco

Linda stopped by her house and did a few chores, put a large pepperoni pizza in the oven, and took Shelby for a run, then put some clubbing clothes and a dark wig into her sports bag, put the pizza into an insulated bag, and flew everything to San Francisco. Dick was still dressing for the evening, strapping on weapons and tools and making sure that they were concealed by his suit.

"Nice disguise. I wouldn't recognise you if we'd met in the street."

"Not my favourite mask," said Dick, patting the prostheses and moustache that disguised his features, "but it does the job. Does it smell okay?"

Linda kissed him and grimaced slightly. "Still some spirit gum smell, but it'll soon fade. The pizza should cover it pretty well."

"Talking of which..." He grabbed a slice, and they sat down to eat.

"Any idea what Lois might like for her birthday?" asked Linda.

"Another Pulitzer?"

"She's been nominated, but it's still a few weeks before we'll know if she's won. And no, I'm not going to use my powers or ask Bruce to find out early."

"Chocolates?"

"Dieting."

"A new laptop?"

"That's what Clark's getting, I think."

"Theatre tickets?" suggested Dick. "Bruce can help you get them, WayneTech does a lot of corporate entertaining. They probably have tickets for most shows."

"That might work. The *American Gods* musical is getting good reviews, and they both like show tunes."

"Problem solved. Ready to go?"

Linda took a few seconds to wash and change her clothes, and put on the wig and a little makeup. "You never did explain what this is about."

"I couldn't just be taking you out for an evening on the town?"

"Riiight..."

"Okay, there is just a small problem. A lot of odd incident reports centred on an up-market club. Place called P3, I thought we should check it out. Weird coincidence, it used to be owned by Phoebe Halliwell, the counsellor we heard on the radio this morning."

"Coincidence? Really?"

"It's been on my 'to do' list for a while, and I've swung past the place a few times but never got there soon enough to see anything. When I heard her this morning I thought that we might learn more if we went in as customers."

"Worth a try, I guess. Okay, how are we going to do this?"

"I've booked a table for eight-thirty for Karen and Roger Ellsworth, we're supposed to be celebrating our first anniversary. I'm in advertising, you're a web designer for the same company. We'll take the BMW convertible, that's registered in the Ellsworth name." He gave her a wallet with ID and credit cards for Karen Ellsworth, and a diamond ring.

"Shiny! This isn't some cunning plan to hook me without actually proposing, is it?"

"Actually that comes next."

Linda stared at him. "What?"

"Why did you think I didn't give you the wedding ring too?" He dropped to one knee. "Linda... will you marry me?"

"You're not joking?"

"I've never been more serious in my life."

"We'd both have to make a lot of changes."

"I'm aware of it. We'd need a bigger place, somewhere your pets could live. And with room for children eventually, I hope."

"That's... okay."

"Okay?"

"Of course okay, you idiot," said Linda. "Did you think I'd say no? Now shut up and kiss me."

A few minutes later Dick reluctantly let go and said "We need to get moving if we're going to check out P3."

"I thought you'd made that up."

"Sorry, no, there really is something weird going on there."

"Okay. Better give me the wedding ring too, but the real thing will have to wait a few months. We've both got a lot to do first."

01.30 PDT, San Francisco

"Demons," Linda said from the shower, washing the last slime from her hair and wondering if she should go over it with reflected heat vision to remove any lingering traces. "Why did it have to be demons?"

"It's a good thing you had that witch on speed-dial." In the utility room Dick finished loading their clothes into the washing machine and chose its pre-soak and super-wash cycles, and put in three tabs of biological detergent.

"Willow's helped me with the supernatural a couple of times, it comes in handy. I'll have to do something nice for her. I'll sound Doctor Summers out, she'll probably be able to suggest something suitable."

"The linguist you mentioned?"

"That's right." Linda decided that washing was probably enough, and dried her hair with a towel.

"Can it wait for the morning?"

"Rao, yes."

"Then let's get to bed."

"Only if you switch the alarm off. I think we've both earned a lie-in."

"You've got it."

04.45 PDT, San Francisco

Linda's phone began to ring...

End

Characters and Fandoms

Kara Zor-El / Linda Lee / Supergirl - *Supergirl* (1984)

Dick Grayson / Nightwing - *Batman / Nightwing* comics. This version is a refugee from another dimension - See *Five Dates Supergirl Didn't Enjoy...*, and *One She Did*

Phoebe Halliwell - *Charmed*

Talking cats - *Young Wizards* series by Diane Duane - See *Cat Chaser*

Larry Fleinhardt - *Numb3rs*

Bruce Wayne / Batman - *Batman Begins* and sequels

Selina Kyle - *Batman* comics and the *Cat Tales* fanfic series by Chris Dee

Debra Morgan - *Dexter* TV series - see notes below

G. Callan, Kensi Blye, Sam Hanna, Hetty Lang - *NCIS Los Angeles*

Cybertronians - *Transformers* movies

Clark Kent / Kal-El / Superman - *Superman Returns*

Also Mentioned

Lois Lane, Jason - *Superman Returns*

Doctor Samantha Carter - *Stargate SG-1*

Doctor Harleen Quinzel a.k.a. Harley Quinn - *Batman* comics.

Oliver Queen - *Arrow* TV series

Thom Gemcity - Pen-name of Timothy McGee, *NCIS*

Abby Sciuto, Ziva David, Tony DiNozzo - *NCIS*

Jonathan Kent - Lois and Clark's second son, named for Clark's adoptive father, invented for *Red Chief Protocol*

Hancock - *Hancock*

Willow Rosenberg, Dawn Summers - *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Notes

"the kryptonite Luthor was selling on the black market when he couldn't con suckers into buying a fake" - See *The Return*

"Remember that thing with the robots in Wales? Or the kidnap attempt?" - See *Jason and the Cybernauts* and *Red Chief Protocol*

"a range of science toys for girls called Linda's Laboratory" - See *The Return*

In *Five Dates Supergirl Didn't Enjoy... and One She Did* Dick Greyson gave Bruce Wayne a list of criminals from his home universe, including several that were yet to commit any crimes in this universe. He monitors them and tries to steer them away from crime. He also has a list of heroes, including Oliver Queen, and for the purposes of this story intervened after it became clear that Queen was killing criminals.

"...the environmental report you wrote after talking to Poison Ivy?" - See *The Return*

"I doubt he killed fifty-five people." Oliver Queen's estimated body count in *Arrow* S1

"The Bay Harbor thing? A few years ago? Gibbs' team caught him?" - see my story *Give the Boys a Great Big Hand* - which wasn't specifically set in the *Supergirl Returns* universe, but there's no reason why it couldn't be. Now imagine Harleen Quinzel as Dexter Morgan's new prison psychologist...

"...we met her at a crime scene, we were too busy dodging bullets to be tongue-tied." - see *Adventures in House-Sitting*

"it's Agent DiNozzo's wedding on Tuesday, he and Ziva are really hoping you'll be able to attend." - gratuitous fix-it for events in *NCIS* S13; Kara intervened and one result was that Tony and Ziva got back together.

The *L.A. Tribune* was the daily paper in the TV series *Lou Grant*.

The *Ultra-Girl* series was, of course, suggested by the current *Supergirl* TV series, and by *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*, in which Lois Lane used the identity of Ultra-Woman when she briefly had super-powers. My inspiration for the *John Henry* series was numerous examples of white-washing in films, TV and book cover illustrations.

For story purposes the Transformers haven't been on Earth long; both groups landed at about the same time, and brought their fight with them.

Linda's contact with Dawn Summers and the supernatural is first mentioned in *Yesterday's Ghost*.