Strangers in a strange land

by Alphalover

Summary

LST Sequel. L&C go to the alternate world to free it
Chapter 1

Clark woke up alone. He focused his keener than keen hearing on the sounds of the house to isolate the unmistakable calling card of her presence. Her heart beat. It was racing. And it was accompanied by sounds of fear.

He found her immediately with his vision and saw that she was safe from anything alive and tangible – her demons were in her head.

It had happened before, and the first time he had actually rushed to the scene, faster than the eye could see, flinging open a door with force too rough to keep it on its hinges. And Lois had cried out, jerking back in terror in her huddled heap on the floor in the laundry room, a place that he was more familiar with than she, as guilt from her captivity had led him to take on as many of the menial chores as he could.

He had backed away, she had eventually calmed and both had been awkward and apologetic – she for reacting that way, and he for being so violent in his reaction.

So now he looked in through closed doors. Realizing that even that was something worth apologizing for, but understanding it was the lesser of two evils. Violate her privacy, or scare the crap out of her.

This happened more and more now, and he was beginning to get a horrified feeling that her ability to be around him had been a momentary lapse of horror for her. Had she been too broken in that world to ever truly be with him?

Remembering his laughing beautiful bride, it brought tears to his eyes.

He learned not to go find her. Even a gentle inquiry into her well being would only hurt her more in the end, because she would remember later, when the fear had receded and Lord Kal had morphed back into Clark that the man she loved had looked at her with such pain in his eyes. And that would just hurt her more.

She had been hurt enough.

So Clark got up, and guiltily went about the morning as if his wife wasn’t huddled, cringing in the laundry room. Every time he had to pretend it wasn’t happening, he wondered if he was doing the right thing. How long should he let her stay like that? She had never been able to definitively answer that question, so they both agreed silently that he would just pretend that nothing was happening.

Lana had checked her out and surmised that there was nothing that indicated psychosis or the need for any kind of drugs or hospitalization. Not that Clark would have cottoned to drugging or chaining her in any way. It would have been too much like what Kal did. So Clark just pretended like everything was normal.

He was downstairs making coffee, hoping the fumes would break through her terror and that she would survive the day, relapse-free. Sometimes they got lucky that way. Other times, he could sometimes see her fighting for normalcy under the public eye, but when he looked at her surreptitiously, she would be shaking with the effort of self-control. Those were the worst for her. Under pain of torture, she would never want to indicate to the world that her marriage was less than perfect. Not after all the anti-Kryptonian grandstanding she had done when she first returned
to her home-world.

The fumes did the trick. He was at the table, drinking coffee, thinking desperately about their desperate life, when he heard her behind him. By her footsteps, she was not afraid – but awkward and nervous in her embarrassment. Embarrassment trumped fear. He could work with this.

She grabbed a cup, and joined him. He looked at her, trying to be friendly and calm. Why let her know he had known where she was?


She broke off, and began to cry.

“Hey,” he replied, his voice kind, as he reached out to gently grip her hand. “I know you feel badly on my behalf, but maybe if you could shelve that, and focus on yourself – you’d feel better.”

“You’re saying I don’t hurt you,” she challenged.

“I said I knew it would be hard,” he responded back.

“I feel like I’ve forced you into servitude,” she said. “As revenge for what he did.”

He was silent. Words of protest had no use here. It hurt that he could even see their relationship as something toxic. Even if she saw herself as the villain.

“I love you,” he said calmly. “I don’t regret our marriage.”

“I’m a freaking mess, Clark,” she bit out with self loathing. “Why the hell is he always in my head now?”

Clark shook his head.

“Why now? Why is it getting worse? God, I see things in my nightmares that never even happened to me. Sometimes I see horrors and it’s like I’m seeing it from his point of view. Like Harry Potter and Voldemort,” she exhaled harshly. “I’m going crazy.”

Clark looked up at her sharply.

“You might be onto something,” he said with sudden intensity.

“What? That I’m going crazy?” Her tone was irritated due to her lack of sleep. He liked that she could be short with him even on the heels of an awful morning like this.

“The telepathic connection between you two, do you think it transcended universes?”

She stopped and looked at him unseeingly.

“Oh… my… God,” she said. “I don’t – it could be. It could! I – suppose – why not? Did you ever pick up on the other Lois’s and Clark’s thoughts?”

“No,” he said. “No. But – I think this is different. Shorter duration of time together, and telepathic communication isn’t something we shared much. With Lois, not at all and with Clark, only when he came here to help.”

“So what do we do? How do I find out if this is true? What would I do about it, even if was true? I can’t go back there and tell him to knock it off!” She shuddered at the mere mention of the idea.
“But if I could go there and overthrow his regime,” said Clark, realizing how stupid the idea was as soon as he spoke aloud.

“Clark, no,” she said, her voice a horrified emphatic sound. “No. I absolutely do not give permission for that.”

He looked at her. And she looked back. Neither broke their challenging gaze. Inwardly, he jumped for joy at her imperious commands and her steely gaze. These were things he never expected to see from her to him when they first met.

“Lois, what if it’s the only way? What if you can’t break his connection otherwise?”

She looked away.

“They’d kill you instantly, Clark. You wouldn’t last a day.”

“Nice. Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“You know I’m right. They totally outnumber you.”

“A resistance must exist. And Herb would know. I could join up with it.”

“And what… have a Kryptonian work with them? One that looks just like the man they hate?”

“Herb could vouch for me.”

“When Herb vouched for you with me it took me forever to accept that he might be right. If they had a way of stopping Kryptonians, they would use it on you. Either way, you’d be dead in a day.”

He looked down.

“Could you defend yourself against the resistance? Use any kind of force to protect yourself in a situation where you felt guilt about him being your counterpart?”

He looked down. “I don’t know. I couldn’t kill. Or maim… but – self defense – if I was being attacked with Kryptonite and couldn’t use my powers, I’m sure I could.”

“If they used Kryptonite, you’d be dead. They wouldn’t hesitate one bit. This isn’t Luthor and his stupid schemes, it would be people fighting to stay alive. We’ll find another way. Maybe some kind of serotonin suppressors.”

“No,” he said loudly, making her leap a little in fright.

“Sorry, but no Stepford Lois if this is what’s going on. If you … need these drugs because of head injuries or just an inborn imbalance, then you do what works… but if Kal is the reason you’re experiencing these nightmares and flashbacks, then drugging yourself is insult on top of injuries. No drugs. Unless you really want that for yourself. The thought of losing the magic that is you because of this cretin is unbearable. Honestly, Lois, I’d rather just live apart from you than have you try to subdue who you are in order to stay in this marriage.”

"Then what," she snapped at him, frustrated by his roadblocks and lack of suggestions that might actually work.

"We should try to find a way to contact Herb. Okay? That can be a first step. We don't have to commit to anything beyond that. Okay?"
She let out a hard breath.

"Okay. But I'm still completely opposed to your going to that other world. And you aren't going to go unless you can convince me otherwise. Deal?"

He looked at her with admiration.

"Yeah. Deal."
The neat thing about time travelers was that you could meet with them several times within the same day and actually get a good load of information.

They had summoned him with the device he had left behind. Something he did for her because of his endless guilt for his own role in her abduction. They never used it before now, and he took their summons seriously.

“I checked around,” he said as he sat at the table with them. He felt uneasy looking at Clark after spending so much time blipping in and out of that other horrific place. He knew that it wasn’t this man’s fault for another’s deeds, but the physical similarity was startling. “Some of what you describe happening actually did happen.”

“Was it dangerous for you,” asked Lois, hating herself for putting this man in danger.

“No, no,” he said. “I was always a button press away from safety.”

She shuddered. “Still… I’m sorry you had to do that.”

“For you, my dear, no sacrifice would be too much to ask.”

She kept silent. Herb couldn’t know how bad it could get.

“Of course, I would die before revealing the secrets of time travel. My device is set to self destruct should my heart stop beating.”

“Don’t tell anyone else that,” Clark said, alarmed. “If you mention it there, it could be disastrous!”

“No, no. Nobody will know. Thank you both for worrying about me, but what we need to do is eliminate the connection between you and the other Lois.”

“The other Lois,” said Clark. “Didn’t you say -“ he trailed off. No point in taking this further.

“Most of what Lois is seeing is from her counterpart’s perspective. Her longstanding exposure to … forced telepathy left her mind – it’s like a wound almost. Never healed, and that pathway into her mind is something that – that other telepaths can exploit.”

Clark looked uncomfortably at the table. He was a telepath and on more than one occasion he had gone and seen what was in her mind without her express permission. The word exploit made it sound ugly even though his intent had never been to hurt her.

“The other Lois was also forced into becoming a receptive-telepath. However, since then, she has trained with other Kryptonians to become a powerful sender.”

“I think the truck really needs to be backed up here,” said Clark. “You said ‘other Lois’. I’m kind of having trouble getting past that one.”

“She’s alive.”

“But you said she was dead.”

“And I was wrong,” he said in a rush. “Apparently Ching and Zara rescued her. I think they had reached their limit of how much suffering they felt she could handle. So they rescued her. Not long
after that, she rose up to the ranks as leader of the human-Kryptonian resistance. Lois is single
minded and driven. All … human kindness has basically been wrung from her soul. She’s a harsh
battle-scarred warrior. She is devoted to the task of getting rid of the Kryptonian dominion. More
than anything, she wants to kill Lord Kal."

“Join the club,” said Lois bitterly. “So all along, she’s been alive and I got to take her place.”

Clark winced at that. He felt hot rage as well, but he wasn’t about to show it here. When you are a
variation of the monster being discussed, it behooves you to just keep a lid on scary strong
emotions.

“So there’s a strong resistance, then,” he asked a hopeful tone in his voice. “With both humans and
Kryptonians?”

“Yes. Ching and Zara are part of it. They hate Lord Kal almost as much as you and the other Lois
do.”

Clark winced again.

“Lois isn’t deliberately sending, I’d wager,” said Herb. “Why would she torture you? It makes no
sense. Kal-El’s transmissions are probably not deliberate either, as he thinks that you’re dead.”

“Rumors of my death have never been more pleasing,” she muttered.

“There’s only one question then. How do we stop them from inadvertently making Lois’s life hell,”
asked Clark bluntly. “We can’t go and ask them to switch to a different radio frequency. I’m sure it
doesn’t work that way.”

Herb smiled. “No. I doubt it. However… it’s possible the other Clark might be able to help Lois
train herself against being an inadvertent receptor. After all, he did spend a lot of time with the new
Kryptonians.”

Lois shuddered. Once again, she hoped against hope they would never come to her earth.

“But that’s going to be upsetting,” said Clark, misunderstanding her reaction.

“Clark, it’s worth it,” said Lois looking at him point blank. “I want that world out of my head. Do
you think Clark would do it,” she addressed Herb.

“I bet he would. I think knowing you were suffering would be enough inducement.”

She thought how bizarre it was that 2 Kal-Els cared so much for her that her suffering hurt them,
and one only lived to make her suffer more.

“Let me go ask,” he said, and he disappeared from view.

“I never get used to that,” she muttered.

“No. No, I don’t either.” And he chose not to add, ‘And I can move at super speed’.

The others appeared within minutes.

“Sorry to take so long,” said Herb. “I tried to coordinate the time entry better.”

“Herb, you took about 2 minutes,” said Clark, shaking his head at the man.
“I should have been instantaneous.”

“It’s because you like to do things with a flourish,” said the other Lois. She smiled at both of them.

“Hey. It’s great to see you both again.”

Lois angled her eyes to her Clark and watched as his face suffused with pleasure at the sight of her doppelganger. She knew that she herself was the one he loved, but now that she was so off and on, did he miss the healthier non-scarred version of Lois Lane?

They embraced, and Lois noted that her double didn’t hesitate, didn’t flinch, didn’t anything that was in anyway indicative of emotional problems. Meanwhile, she shyly looked at Clark’s counterpart as he hesitated. He clearly wanted to do the same with her, but he was afraid of scaring her.

Refusing to let any fear disrupt what should happen, she moved forward and hugged him. She said quietly to him how glad she was to see him, and his arms around her were so gentle, she knew he was walking on eggshells. The way her Clark had done, and then had stopped doing, and had now begun to do again.

Clark insisted on serving coffee and that helped break the awkwardness that still prevailed. She saw the two Clarks smile at each other in fraternal welcome and felt a surge of pain for her soul-mate that he had no blood relatives, even though having more Kryptonians on earth was not a good thing.

When they were seated, conversation immediately went to the point of the matter.

“Herb told us about what you’ve been going through,” the other Clark said directly to her. His voice was kind and his expression a mix of anger and sympathy. “As if you haven’t been through enough, now you have to go through this.”

“Did… did he tell you why we –” She couldn’t even ask the question. She felt like a tongue tied child.

“Zara and Ching helped me with the telepathy thing,” said the other Clark. “They taught me a lot about how to block myself from sending and block others from sending to me.”

“I feel like I’m in an episode of Star Trek,” said the other Lois.

They all smiled dutifully at her comment, but nobody felt like going with it.

“I could try to train you,” said the other Clark. “If you think you’d be up for it.”

She flushed nervously at the idea. It was terrifying doing this. With Clark, but also Kal. And would she see his memories of being Lord Kal, even if it had been for such a short time?

“Nobody is going to make you do anything,” said her Clark. “If you can’t do this, then that’s okay. We’ll find another solution.”

“I want that world out of my head,” she reiterated. “And Clark… you – Clark,” she said to the other one, “If you’re willing to do this with me, then so am I. It might get weird and upsetting – for both of us. I guess I can handle it. But what I want you to know is if it’s too hard for you, don’t feel you have to expose yourself to some of my more primal feelings.”

Clark looked at her, curious. What did she harbor in that mind of hers that she was now going to
expose to his doppelganger?

“Lois, I’ll gladly help,” the other Clark said, sincerely. “I’m not afraid to face the dark stuff,” he said carefully. “It’s worth it if you can be set free of that world.”

“What if it doesn’t work,” the other Lois asked cautiously. “You know me. Contingency girl.”

“Only when it suits you,” said her husband jokingly.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing… “

“Right. Anyway – if it doesn’t work, what’s plan B?”

The two Clarks looked at each other. “If – the others at this table all mutually agree, Clark and I could go – try to help the rebellion,” Clark said, looking at his doppelganger hopefully.

“Clark, we talked about –“

“I’m just offering it as a possible last ditch effort. If we end Kal’s reign, then – we end all these awful sendings.”

“He’d have to die,” said the other Lois grimly. “That’d be the only way. And you both won’t kill.”

“Wait a minute. I fought Nor,” said the other Clark, suddenly clamming up as he saw Lois go pale.

“Nor was in your world?”

“Yeah,” said the other Clark nervously.

“You killed him?”

“The government did,” said the other Lois. “But Clark weakened him.”

“Good,” she said fiercely, taking both Clark’s by surprise. “If he had taken over, your world would be in ruins now,” she said. “He was a sick kind of evil.”

Clark paled. Yet another horrific Kryptonian.

“Let’s focus on this first,” said Lois. “I can’t think past Plan A,” she said apologetically to her twin. “I recognize it might not be enough, but I want to try without worrying about the next step.”

“Then – whenever you want,” said the other Clark carefully. “Whenever you’re ready.”

She paused, and then paled. “I guess I’m ready now.”
Lois looked over at the man sitting in the room with her. The others had left them alone at their mutual request.

“How are you feeling,” he asked her. He could see the blatant nervousness in her eyes and was loathe to propose beginning until she had relaxed a bit.

“I’m doing well,” she lied, trying to affect a calm and relaxed manner.

“Lois, if we are going to do this correctly, there has to be mutual trust.”

She flushed at the implication that she was lying. Kal had always made her pay for dissimilitude.

“I need you to trust me enough to tell me how you really feel,” he continued on gently. “I trust you whole heartedly,” he added that last.

“I’m scared out of my mind,” she said, letting out a nervous laugh.

He smiled at that. Not a happy smile, not a superior or domineering smile, but a smile of solidarity. Of empathy. One that told her he was scared too.

“So do you want to talk that out first? What are you scared of?”

“Lord Kal.”

“Good answer,” he said.

“I don’t want this to go there,” she said, her eyes now fixed on a place on the table. “It could. It could get ugly. You’ve never seen one of my – flashbacks. Clark is used to them,” she said, almost sadly. “Thus his whole eggshell walking abused-spouse routine.”

“What?”

“He’s so scared to upset me that he’s afraid sometimes to make a sound. Like an abused spouse or child…”

“I hardly think he feels that way about your relationship,” Clark responded aghast. “Really, Lois. He loves you. I can see that clearly. “

“But he carries fear with him daily. That’s something you two don’t have. Neither of you fears the other.”

“Do you fear him,” he asked, picking up on the unsaid.

“Only … and I do mean only… when Lord Kal intrudes.”

He nodded. “Well, that makes total sense. “

“He used to force thoughts into my head. A different kind of rape,” she said. She saw her companion’s face get pale and hard at the word ‘rape’.

“So this is … like rape to you,” he asked her carefully. “Are you afraid it will be like that with me? You do know that you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. Right?”
“I… I do have to do this. You know as well as I do. To stop the – unintended messages from coming through. I have to do this.”

He sighed. “Yes. I see that you do. But what I want you to know is that you’re in control of it. I won’t push you into anything you don’t give express consent to.”

“I know that,” she said firmly. “My fears are all my own and not at all induced by you. I trust you. I really do.”

He nodded, realizing how astounding it was that she did. Like his own wife, this woman was remarkable.

“Do you guys ever share your thoughts with each other,” he asked. “I’m not trying to be rude here, but it would help to know before we proceed.”

*He’s like a sex therapist for the mind.*

“Yes,” she said, flushing a little. “We do.”

He saw the blush and decided not to go any further down the line of questioning.

“So not all these experiences feel like a violation? When you two share thoughts, it’s something you – don’t hate?”

She nodded. “We don’t do it a lot. I mean… he’s afraid too,” she said. “He doesn’t want to trigger my bad memories either. Usually when we do it, it’s accidental.”

“Okay,” he nodded. *This is going to be hard.*

“How do we start?”

“When I want to push a telepath out of my mind, I imagine building a wall to keep them out. I imagine a mental tractor pushing them out.”

She began to giggle. “A tractor?”

“I grew up on a farm… so – “

She nodded. “I can do that. Maybe a bulldozer?”

“Whatever works.”

“So how should we –“

“You can try to push thoughts into my head and I’ll fend them off. That way you can feel how it’s supposed to be.”

She nodded. It seemed harmless enough.

She started off by pushing in a nursery rhyme. Suddenly she felt pressure and it reminded her of the precursor to pain she always had with Lord Kal and she broke it off hastily.

Clark must have felt her fear because he looked at her with eyes that were extremely worried.

“Did that hurt you?”
She was gasping a little from the shock.

“I felt like it was going to hurt, even though it didn’t. There was a pressure,” she said rapidly. “Like the point before pain!”

“The pressure is normal,” he said, his voice very calm and soothing. “But pain doesn’t follow it. Not normally.”

“I’m mixing it up. It reminds me of something that did hurt me, so I’m getting it confused. It’s not so different from…” and she trailed off. There was a definite symmetry between her sexual phobia in the past and what they were doing now.

“I guess, yeah,” he said, softly, understanding what she said, even though she didn’t finish her sentence.

“It took me a long time to get past that other hurdle,” she said, emboldened by the fact that he wasn’t laughing at her. “I don’t have time for this. Let’s try again,” she said, a new resoluteness to her tone.

“Ok. Whenever you’re ready.”

She pushed her thoughts forward again, and this time he pushed back. She felt the pressure, but knowing it was normal gave her strength to keep trying, despite her growing fear. She waited long tense moments for the pain to start, but it didn’t. And when she eased off on her attempt to send through his walls, she noticed that he was watching her very carefully.

“I’m okay,” she said, anticipating his question.

“No pain?”

“No. Just – that pressure. That’s not so comfortable,” she said, “but it didn’t hurt.”

“It’s not intended to be comfortable. The goal is to stop an invasion…”

“Right.”

“Did you want to try again, or did you want to try fending off telepathy?”

“Maybe we could try this again a few times so I could feel it again.”

“Whatever you think is best,” he said calmly.

They went on like this for a while, and then finally she said she was ready to receive.

“I just need a moment or two to collect myself,” she said.

“Take all the time you want,” he urged her, not wanting to push her into anything.

“Sorry to be so –“

“Please, don’t. There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

“Okay. I’m ready,” she said, after a few minutes. *Hit me with your best shot.*
Clark inadvertently heard what she thought as an addendum to her words and fought against the wincing. Pat Benatar notwithstanding, such thoughts were not pleasant given her past.

He asked her mentally if she was okay.

She looked at him in frustration. “I heard that.”

“It’s hard to get this on the first try. Really. It was for me.”

They practiced for a while, but she could never keep him out. She looked up at him, her eyes frustrated and worried.

“I can’t do it.”

“I think the problem is you’re afraid that it will be – like with him – that you can’t give your total concentration to the effort. Maybe you can do this with your husband…?”

“Please don’t give up on me –“

“No. I meant – the part where he sends to you. You can –“

“Just give me another chance!”

“I’ll give you all the chances you want,” he said. “I’m not losing interest or patience with this. I just thought it would be better.”

“But this is more effective. The people sending to me aren’t my husband. I need to learn to do this against someone I don’t … “

“Okay. Let’s try –“ he sent her some thoughts and immediately he felt her pushing him back. There was a ferocity and desperation in the pressure he felt.

“Wow,” he said. “I felt that. That was incredible. Did you hear my thoughts?”

“Only the very beginning and then – you were gone.”

“Fantastic. That’s your first success. You’ve proven you can do it.”

They continued on a bit. Each time, she had to take moments to get her bearings and set herself up to not be afraid. Each time, he waited patiently. This man was so much like the one she loved.

“It occurs to me,” she said, “that you and Clark are more alike than not. So – the – energy – that flows between us is very familiar,” she said, trying not to blush at the hidden intimacy of what she was saying.

“Okay…”

“Can you try sending me aggressive and alpha male type thoughts,” she asked nervously. “To be more like what I got in that other world?”

“Lois… I don’t know,” he said.

“It’s what I get from that world. Everything is highly aggressive and angry. What we’ve done so far is good for learning the ropes. But if I want to play in the big league, I need to take it up a notch.”
He looked at her warily for a long while. “I don’t want to upset or hurt you,” he said.

“If you can’t, I understand,” she responded, no trace of anger in her words. “But then I’ll have to ask Clark to do it,” she said, indicating she meant her own husband. “And…”

“And that would be pretty awful for both of you, right?”

“Well…”

“So you do need me to do this,” he said, his voice tense.

“Let me know if you feel that I’m forcing you to do it,” she begged him. “I truly don’t want you to do anything that makes you uncomfortable.”

“Can you… can you send me some of what you’ve been sent? So I know how to do it?”

Her heart skipped a bit in sudden fear as she realized he had agreed to do this with her. Whether or not she wanted it to happen, it was about to happen. She had set it into motion.

She nodded at him, nervously, trying to hide her fear.

“Brace yourself,” she whispered, and sent him the images. She braced herself back for the pressure of his walls, but he didn’t put any up. He withstood the imagery coming into his mind, but she could see by his body language and facial expression that he was not happy.

She broke off, tears forming in her eyes.

“I’m sorry to do that to you.”

He reached over and gripped her hand in a comforting grip.

“I am not sorry you did it. Come on, Lois. This is ‘Operation-Get-Kal-Out-Of-Your-Head’. Okay? And we will succeed at it.”

She smiled at his attempts at soothing her. But then, as she realized what was going to happen next, she lost her smile. Fear began to take root in her eyes.

“You have to – send what he would send.”

Clark hesitated. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re doing this for me. I know it hurts you too.”

“This… this will hurt you,” he said. “But in order to learn to block it, you have to – work past the fear and the pain. Right?”

She nodded, unable to speak, her heart was beating so fast.

“Lois. Seriously. This could be physically painful. Okay?”

“I know,” she said softly. “Clark. I’m not afraid of you. Please. I’m ready.”

Feeling sickened, he closed his eyes because he didn’t want to see her fear. Summoning up what he had seen, and what he had experienced with Lord Nor, Clark tried to channel the lord Kal that had imprisoned her.
He started out with simple menacing statements about her past slavery.

He felt her fear, and he felt sickened by what he was doing.

“Do that again,” she said, her eyes also closed.

This time, he felt it. Pressure.

She grinned at him, and he felt a surge of relief. She didn’t hate him yet. “It worked,” she said.

She gasped, not thinking he would send again so soon.

“You have to keep your guard up always,” he said, gently. “Don’t let me in at all.”

“Did you say something,” she asked him, smugly. He was amazed at her spirit.

He kept throwing rapid angry and alpha messages her way, trying never to go too far over the line with his thoughts. He never mentioned rape or violence, simply messages of ownership and dominance. Each of these she parried, her ability to defend against his thoughts becoming greater with each try.

He paused, and watched her carefully. “You still like me,” he asked her, not really in jest.

“More now than ever before,” she said, her voice heartfelt. “You’ve sacrificed a lot of your own emotional well being to help me today.”

“Well… that… that may change…”

She narrowed her eyes in curiosity and then suddenly she felt it. Horrible angry rage. Dominance. Intent to rape, to hurt, to even kill. It came upon her so fast, she didn’t know what to do. Clark wasn’t smiling at her. His eyes were hard and cold. They radiated cruelty and malicious intent. His hands were now curled into fists, and on some level she knew he was trying to prevent his normally benign body-language from cancelling out the menace of his telepathic sendings.

Knowing he actually meant her no harm was not enough to keep her calm.

She began to feel terror claw at her very essence and she stood up frantically, looking to escape. As soon as she did that, the sendings stopped. She turned to face him after a very long moment, and she saw her emotions mirrored in his eyes.

“You sent that to me, when you wanted me to know what he was sending you,” he said quietly. “And that’s what you need to be able to block.”

*She came back defiantly and sat down.*

“*Do it – “*

Before she could finish her thoughts, he did it again. She felt the horrific and now painful assault,
and she grabbed her head in her hands to stop the pain. Tears were running down her face.

“Stop,” she cried out. “This is hurting me!”

“Stop me,” he retorted back, his voice held an implacable challenge. All gentleness was gone from his tone. “You have to stop me yourself.”

“No,” she cried out as she built the walls, only to have them collapse. Time and again she tried, and time and again, she failed. Her intense emotional response began to feedback on itself and she began to lose awareness of her surroundings.

“No, No,” she held up her hands defensively against the man in front of her. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry,” and she began to beg with him in his native alien language for forgiveness.

Suddenly there was silence in her mind. She waited long and terrified moments for further reprisal.
Chapter 4

While Lois had been training with the other Clark, her husband had been attempting to be social and interactive with her doppelganger.

The other Lois had talked him down already a grand total of seven times from going in and checking on his wife, but he couldn’t help but keep a listening ear open for any signs of distress.

Before the two teams had parted ways, his wife had privately delivered a stern set of instructions, insisting that he resist his natural urge to come to her rescue and let her work through any difficult moments herself. She had made it clear that while she understood this was a very difficult request, she knew what she needed and she expected him to trust her in that respect.

So now, he paced. It was the only thing he could do. And it was one of the hardest things he had ever had to do.

Clark knew he could trust the other Clark not to hurt her with malicious intent, but Lois hadn’t allowed him to privately talk to the other man about how to approach things and he felt a sick sense of dread that without having any idea how to deal with Lois’s past trauma, his doppelganger might not know when to pull back. Seeing that Lois had clearly been afraid of what was to come made it that much worse for him now.

The other Lois had been sympathetic to his fears but tended to brush them aside. This did not fill him with confidence. Neither of the others knew what Lois had gone through. He didn’t either, but he’d had enough experience dealing with her bad moments that he at least considered himself an expert at reading her body language. It was like second skin to him now. Autonomic. This assessing and then re-planning based on signals received.

His Lois had likened him on more than one occasion to an abuse victim. It was a comparison that he hated but understood. Lois felt as guilty about his reactions to her trauma as he did about her negative reactions to him.

He eyed the other Lois, noting the differences in body language between the two women. This one was clearly an alpha female. Very much in charge of most situations and it was obvious precious little cowed her. She had never been truly broken despite whatever traumas in her life had led her to initially adopt a hard veneer before falling in love and learning to trust Clark.

“Listen, oh mighty Kryptonian pacer,” she said, blocking his path so he would have to stop in his tracks. “Relax and talk to me or my feelings might get hurt. And trust me, that’s not a pretty sight.”

“Lois. I’m really worried, okay? I’m not trying to be ungracious or rude or anything.”

“You aren’t. I was just trying to break the silence. Lois is going to be fine,” she insisted. “She’s me, after all and he’s you.”

“We aren’t all the same people,” he protested. “That would make the other Kal –“

“I know, I know,” she forestalled him. “I know. But you and he had similar lives, as did she and I. So we are more alike than not.”

“That’s just it! You are <I>less</I> alike than you think,” he protested, suddenly feeling a wave of fear at the idea that they didn’t seem to comprehend this important fact. “When Clark walks into a room does he have to first look through the doors or walls to make sure you aren’t in a bad
emotional state?"

Lois was tempted to make a joke about PMS but realized to do so would seem to be callous. She was attempting the tough love approach with Clark. He was so afraid of upsetting his wife that it had taken a great deal of persuasion even on his own wife’s part to get him to comply with her rules. Making jokes wouldn’t help her cause.

“I know that she’s endured far worse than I can ever imagine and I know that changed her,” she said softly. “I know you’re afraid of upsetting her.”

“When I fly in after a rescue, I have to make sure I make sufficient noise that she knows I’m there. Then I have to listen to her heartbeat and respiration to see what my arrival has done to her sense of well being. I mostly avoid being ‘Superman’ around her to not trip any bad associations, because even though my appearance as Superman isn’t very close to the way he dressed, I still look alien and I am wearing my house crest like he did. I can’t just pull her in for a hug, give her a kiss or initiate – “

He trailed off feeling astounded that he was sharing like that. He was so tense and overwhelmed that his emotions were threatening to display themselves in the form of a minor melt down.

“Listen to me whine,” he said, sinking down into a couch. “I make myself sick with this. I have no right to say these things. Lois is incredible. I am beyond lucky to have her in my life. And I’m complaining. I’m complaining… and I’m over sharing, which I know would upset her greatly.”

She sat down next to him, not worrying about personal space. She put her hand on his arm and rubbed it with what she hoped was sisterly affection.

“See, even this reaction, Lois… I’m not exactly in control of my feelings here and you aren’t nervous about it at all. You act like it’s no big deal that this super powered guy is slightly out of control with what he’s feeling.”

“You can’t really ever let loose, can you,” she said gently, remembering he had no secret identity. “You always have to worry about freaking people out.”

He looked up at her amazed that she was so insightful.

She chuckled.

“Clark and I have had some major fights along the way. We will continue to do so until death departs us,” she said idly. “I have never been afraid of him angry. Maybe when I didn’t know he was Superman, it was a little disconcerting to see Superman agitated. I know he worked very hard to remain even keel, but there was this one time when he came to see me after I had rejected ‘Clark’ and requested Clark contact Superman… I was considering getting engaged to Lex Luthor,” she trailed off somewhat morosely as she reflected on one of the most shameful periods of her adult life. “Superman was furious,” she said, giving him a quick mirthless smile. “I had no idea I had just rejected him, but he was acting as if I had. He was beyond angry and his body language and the things he said made it clear. And yes – I was – off kilter by that. I was a little nervous. But I knew that no matter how angry Superman ever was, I was never in any danger of physical harm. I had no reason to ever believe otherwise.”

He listened to her story while trying to relax his own frazzled nerves.

“I’m guessing if you came in and said the things he said to me to her, it would have gone down far worse.”
“What exactly did he say?”

“He told me not to bother putting on a robe due to his x-ray vision.”

Clark looked at her incredulously.

“Obviously he wasn’t – serious,” she said, shaking her head at the memory. “He was trying to make me feel as bad as I’d made him feel. I get that. And he did. It drove a wedge between us. It made me see him differently even if, at the time, I didn’t let it stop me from attempting to get him to admit he loved me.”

“You thought he was – less than who he’d put himself out to be because he was doing such an invasive thing?”

“No. I knew it was all – bluff and bluster. The point was that he had to say it in the first place. Superman had never made me feel bad about myself by putting me down before. I’d had that from many other men in my life, but never him. I guess that’s what he did. He humanized himself and that was something I didn’t want.” She paused a long beat and then looked at him. “Why are we talking about me, for Pete’s sake?”

He laughed.

“I know it’s hard for you. I know you have to watch yourself and walk on eggshells sometimes. I know you probably wish you could just for once exist normally and not have to rehearse what you do and say in order to appear non-threatening. And you don’t even have the luxury of having a place where you can just be yourself entirely. You don’t have it out there in the world, and you don’t have it here at home – although I’m guessing home is a lot better than out there.”

“Home is wonderful,” he groaned, feeling sickened by what he had shared. “Lois would be devastated if she knew that I’d shared any of this. She’s afraid she’s damaged my life. And she hasn’t. She is – everything. If she weren’t here, my feelings of isolation would be a thousand fold worse.”

“Sometimes you feel isolated with her, though?”

“How awful is that, Lois?”

“It isn’t awful,” she said, gripping his hand again. “Not one bit. And I wish I could tell you it would get better, but of course – I can’t offer you false words. I can only tell you that there was a time when people were afraid of me. Nobody wanted to work with me, and people I interviewed were practically wetting themselves by the time I got to the interview. I was known as being fierce and ruthless. Clark never backed down from me, and I know that had to have been hard. I think the reason he could was that he had a very strong support system with his parents and also I had a wicked crush on Superman, so occasionally he saw the softer sappier side of Lois.”

He laughed again at her words.

“You always do that.”

“What?”

“End with a joke.”

She smiled. “I know none of this is funny. Please don’t feel badly about talking about her to me. I’m a variation of her, and I’m sure it’s easier to talk to me about this than it is to talk to anyone
else. It’s like this with him. I can tell you things that I can’t even tell him… like how his lead-lined robe comment made me feel.”

He squeezed her hand back in empathy and she leaned into him affectionately, not fearing that this would end up in an unwanted kiss.

The sound of Lois’s cries suddenly hit his ears like a bucket of ice cold water.

She was pleading. In Kryptonian.

Unable to restrain himself any longer, he rushed over to the room where they were and flung open the door, forcing himself not to rip it off the hinges at the last possible moment.

“What the hell,” he cried out, looking at his agitated doppelganger in full-on rage. “What the hell did you do?”
Chapter 5

He was angry. He was shouting at someone and it was about her.

Blind to anything but rage against the man he felt had hurt Lois, Clark advanced angrily towards his doppelganger.

“What the HELL did you do?”

Lois heard the angry words and tried to retreat even further into her safe place.

The other Clark looked up at him briefly, barely registering the other man’s obvious rage. He was focused wholly on the plight of the woman cowering in a corner on the floor.

“I – I don’t know how to fix this,” he stammered.

“Get away from her! Don’t you dare even look at her,” Clark said, focusing all his rage on the other man. In his blind unreasoning rage, his doppelganger had morphed into Kal-El in his mind. He violently shoved the other Kryptonian backwards, putting more space between him and the insensate Lois. Even this hardly registered with his doppelganger.

Lois heard the angry words and knew she was deeply endangered. Kal-El was angry. He would blame her. He would remind her who she belonged to.

You are mine.

She had heard that recently in her mind and had somehow failed to recognize the danger at hand. How had she let her guard down?

You can’t get away from me. You’re weak. You always were weak. I’ll win in the end

She whimpered at the danger to come and tried to shrink further into the corner in which she huddled. She had long learned not to bother with dignity where Kal-El was concerned. It was hard to stand your ground when your assailant was impossibly strong.

The sound of her whimper brought Clark sharply out of his blind rage and he stopped short and watched in horror as his wife seemed to be trying to curl up to the point of invisibility. Memories of how she had been after he had driven her into dark reminiscences on the day of the asteroid rang through his mind. Slowly his anger at the other Clark began to dissipate as he remembered that he was no better.

The other Clark looked at him, finally taking his gaze off the woman on the floor.

“Clark, I’m sorry,” he choked out raggedly. “I never meant to do this to her.”

Clark looked at his doppelganger briefly unable to respond to the other man’s guilt.

“What do we do now,” the other Clark asked him. “How can we help her?”

Footsteps rang and the other Lois was suddenly there breathing somewhat heavily in her attempts to catch up to Clark.

“Oh my god,” she whispered as she saw her own doppelganger huddled in the corner.
“Clark. What do we do,” the other Clark repeated, his tone increasingly panicked.

“Lois won’t appreciate being gawked at like this,” Clark said in a strangely calm tone. “Would you both mind leaving the room?”

His extreme politeness sounded ridiculous in his own ears as he remembered how enraged he had been moments before.

“Clark, I can’t just leave,” his doppelganger replied, unable to let go of his culpability in this situation.

“Please, Go!” This vocalization held some of the anger that had been present in Clark earlier. “Just, please,” he said his voice now anguished. “I’ll … I’ll find a way to reach her, and then we’ll come out. Please. I know her. She won’t want an audience to this,” he said. “I owe it to her to protect her dignity.”

“He’s right,” said the other Lois. “Clark, we’ll be out in the living room. Okay? Don’t worry about us.”

She pulled her husband along with her. It was clear he didn’t want to go, but he wasn’t going to fight the will of his wife on this.

Clark stared after them, his emotions too much in a turmoil to process any of what had happened. After a few seconds, he turned back to Lois having no idea what he should do next. He exhaled in surprise when he saw her eyes were open and looking at him.

She immediately shrank from him and he backed away a few steps.

“Lois. It’s me. Clark.”

He hoped that would be enough.

Lois stared at the floor unseeingly for along time.

“God, Lois,” he exhaled, his voice a low anguished cry at the injustice of the fear she had to deal with on a daily basis.

His emotional response began to leak through into her conscience and she rapidly built up walls. She couldn’t handle his disappointment; she didn’t want to feel his suffering.

He gasped at the sensation and realized that he had been unconsciously broadcasting to her.

She slowly stood up and awkwardly met his gaze.

“I make you unhappy,” she said, after a long moment, processing the small amount of emotions that had come through.

He looked at her in surprise, afraid to make any move at all.

“You don’t,” he lied. “It’s just that I love you and I hate seeing you like that.”

“You wish I were like her,” she said, having felt it in his thoughts before she blocked him out.

“No,” he said, leaning in towards her urgently before he remembered not to do that and checked himself.
She saw his aborted motion and hated herself for it.

“I wish I was like her too,” she said. “I wish I was normal.”

“I love you. Not her. I love you exactly how you are.”

“You do not like this,” she insisted.

“Lois, I’m not complaining,” he begged, frightened that she was now trying to give him an out.

“We have to be honest,” She said, looking at him with the same level intensity that her doppelganger had given her husband when she was trying to get him to leave the room.

“What happened here today was unusual,” he said, trying to change the subject. “It brought up a lot of anguish for you, for me, for him – it’s not your usual day.”

“My usual day begins with me in the laundry room. On the floor. Lost in another world.” Her voice was caustic.

He was silent. He couldn’t argue that.

“Then, you pretend like nothing’s happening, and later we have coffee. If we’re lucky, I don’t get overwhelmed by any other terrible images, memories or flashbacks and we actually get to make love.”

He heard the increasing anger in her voice and held very still.

“On those days, it’s great,” she softened. “It’s beyond anything I ever dreamed of. And then…”

He felt cold. Were there days where making love to him was awful?

“And then there’s days like this. Right? Where you’re afraid to talk to me or hold my hand or move in to comfort me…”

He let out the breath he didn’t know he was holding. Did she want him to move in to comfort her?

“Everyone has good days and bad days,” he ventured cautiously.

“Stop it,” she snapped. “Stop trying to smooth it all over. Stop trying to convince me I’m normal! This sucks, Clark! For both of us. It’s okay for you to say it.”

He shook his head.

“Say it.”

“No.”

“Fine. Lie to me,” she snapped as she turned to walk out the door.

Clark began to build up anger again, only this time he was angry at her. He super-sped over to her. It was time to take the kid gloves off.
Chapter 6

Lois was clearly rattled at his sudden appearance. Under normal circumstances he avoided superspeeding to her because he knew that Kal had done it – appeared out of nowhere, shattering her momentary sense of security. Right now his need to get in a word edgewise overruled his concern for her sensibilities.

He waited in silence for her to regain her momentary loss of composure, refusing to apologize for unsettling her with his sudden appearance.

“You know what? I’m getting tired of the conversation ending whenever you decide it ends. I’m not done saying what I need to say.” His voice was even, but the edge of anger was obvious.

“Then say it, Clark,” she said, staying on the offense. He was clearly angry and it was bothering her on a visceral level.

“You keep yelling at me because you think I’m afraid to be honest with you about my true feelings. Has it occurred to you that I’m afraid to be anything but cautious? I know that things are rough for you and you’ve had one hell of a bad day, but you aren’t the only one suffering here. What’s going on hurts me too, even if I’m not as active participant in all the bad stuff. Watching someone you love hurt the way you do isn’t exactly a walk through the park.”

“I’m not angry because you’re afraid to tell me what you think. I’m angry because you obviously don’t trust me,” she said, channeling all her strong emotions into one directed emotion.

“Where do you even get that? I do trust you,” he retorted hotly.

She saw the anger increase in his eyes and had to steel herself to stand her ground. How she handled this would determine his future actions. If he was afraid to upset her with honesty, she would never get this kind of truthful outpouring of feeling again. She knew that in order for their marriage to be healthy they had to have this honesty.

“I told him to send me those images. And he did. He did what I asked.”

“You were yelling at him to stop – I heard you say he was hurting you!”

“Yes! Did you think that we could do this without it getting a little rough,” she asked in amazement. “How can I block out violent and aggressive thoughts if all he sends me is happy fuzzy things?”

“Lois, I know – “

“What? What do you know?” Her voice was very angry.

He paused.

“I know you’re right,” he said, his anger suddenly gone. “You warned me, and you insisted I not react if it sounded like you were in distress because you suspected what you were doing could trigger flashbacks. And then I did react. And I can see that you would feel that I didn’t trust your judgment.”

She stared at him a long while trying to see if he really meant it.
“Maybe we should just go out there,” she said, finally, unable to stand herself at this point. She had said cruel things to the one person who had never done anything to hurt her and now she was feeling an unhealthy dose of self-loathing.

She turned to go, but then he gently grasped her arm to halt her.

“Wait. I still have something to say.”

She felt a quiver of shock go through her. Clark rarely did something like that. It wasn’t that he didn’t touch her, but he was careful about doing so without making sure his touching her would be a welcome thing. This action didn’t seem to have that usual pre-deliberation and its purpose was obviously to restrain her.

She turned to face him, the lack of the word ‘please’ making her feel a little nervous. She wasn’t afraid of him, but she was afraid of his honesty.

“I concede your point,” he said. “But I have to ask you – how would you have felt if roles were reversed? You can take me to task for not honoring our ‘don’t come to the rescue’ agreement, but you have to know that it’s easier said than done. And I never really agreed. You just gave me an edict and expected I’d follow it.”

“If you didn’t care how I felt about this, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I do care about your feelings,” he said, his voice rising a little in frustration. “But you’re accusing me of not doing what I agreed to do, and I wanted to point out that I never really agreed.”

“Semantics,” she said, getting angrier.

“No! I deliberately didn’t agree because I wasn’t sure I could go through with it. That’s hardly semantics!”

“So what, I have to make sure how I phrase things to make sure you don’t violate my wishes?”

He paled at her words. The implication of what she was saying was infuriating. He refused to take the bait.

“T don’t know. You tell me. We’ve been together long enough for you to have developed an opinion on that matter.”

Lois was stunned at the anger in his voice and words. Isn’t this what you want, though? No kid gloves?

“Why are you getting so worked up about this?”

“You’re basically accusing me of being overbearing with that statement about making sure how you phrase things. It was seriously uncalled for. I did my best, Lois and sometimes I mess up. I heard you –“ he shuddered. “I reacted. And I’m not sorry. I’m sorry I yelled at Clark and made him feel bad because I realize that whatever happened, he obviously never meant any harm, but I don’t feel bad for coming in there! I do feel bad that it made you feel bad, for whatever it’s worth.”

She stood there listening to him. Her heart felt like it was being crushed. She had injured him with her words and now she didn’t know how to recover.

“Look, let’s just go regroup,” he said, refusing to give into his impulse to apologize. She wanted him to dispense with the overly cautious behavior and he was going to give her that. It was clear he
was making her angry when he held back.

“Wait,” she said. “You never asked me what happened between me and him. Don’t you want to know?”

He heard the plaintive tone in her voice and realized she was asking him to be solicitous about her well-being to counteract his current mood.

“Did you want to share,” he asked her in a deliberately disinterested tone.

She felt like he’d thrown cold water in her face. Where was the worried expression and the tender concern?

“You know what? No. Not if you don’t want to know,” she said, turning to go.

“Oh come on,” he groaned. “Please can we not do this?”

“You started it,” she said angrily.

“And we aren’t twelve, Lois! I’m afraid to ask you about how it went because you just yelled at me for interfering in the first place.”

“You should care what happened. I was clearly upset!”

“I do care, but I don’t … I can’t seem to say the right thing!”

“Let’s just go out there then, and regroup.”

“Fine. Let’s go regroup.”

She waited for him to go out the door, but he held back.

“After you,” he muttered and she stalked past him, her back stiff and straight with anger and resentment.

As soon as Lois left the room, Clark was hit with guilt and self-disgust. So great was his fear and anger at what had happened that he had converted it into pettiness and had allowed himself to be drawn into a stupid argument with the one person who had suffered the most.

He sped over to her, once again startling her and once again he bit back his customary apology because he really did want to stop making her mad by being overly cautious.

Her eyes were wet with tears. He reached over to her without checking the water first and pulled her in for a hug.

“I’m so sorry,” he said, emotionally. “I had no business acting that way.”

She clung to him, relishing the feel of him holding her.

“No, I’m sorry,” she responded. “I was feeling ashamed of myself for being so weak and pathetic and I took it out on you.”

He pulled back a little so they could make eye contact.

“I was angry at everything and I decided to act like a five year old. I do care what happened, Lois. I really do care. And I desperately want to hear about what happened and know that you’re okay.
Please don’t think I ever don’t care what’s going on or that I don’t care about what you want.”

She nodded. “I pushed you into a place where you felt you couldn’t ask,” she said. “And I know it had to be torture trying to comply with my non-interference edict. I was asking more from you than I myself could have given and had no business yelling you for failing to do the impossible.”

“I don’t want you to be her,” he said intently. “I can’t say that there aren’t problems but my god, I hope you know that I want you to be anyone else!”

“I said what I said to hurt you,” she said. “As far as the other Lois, I know you envy their marriage. I felt it, Clark, but I’m not yelling at you about it because I envy them too. Why wouldn’t we envy people who are so much like us but without the hideous baggage? It’s not just my baggage either. You have no privacy ever. Everyone knows ‘Superman’ is you. He gets to leave it all behind and just be that normal guy. You and I never have that normalcy.”

“Do you hate it,” he asked her anxiously. “The constant press nightmare that is our life?”

“I wish you had anonymity. For your sake and for mine. Just like you wish I hadn’t gone through what I went through. Either way we aren’t saying we want to be apart, we’re just acknowledging that these things exist, and these things truly stink.”

“I believe the word you used earlier was ‘suck’,”

She laughed and gently punched him on the arm.

“Semantics,” she giggled.

He grinned back at her, loving that they had moved past this. He realized that for the first time in a very long time he hadn’t worried at all about scaring her. His biggest fear was that he was driving away by their mutual misconceptions about how the other was feeling about their life struggles.

She sobered after a few moments of basking in the pleasant moment.

“I have to complete this, you know. I have to be able to push out what I’m receiving from that other world.”

He nodded. “I know you do. I know that working with Clark on this is awful for you, but you have to go through it in order to save yourself a lot of grief in the future.”

“Thanks, Clark,” she said with a smile. “Your acceptance of this makes me feel really confident that I can do it.”

“I know you can do it,” he said. "I felt you push at my thoughts earlier on."

She nodded. "I didn't even think about it. I just knew I couldn't deal with it at that moment."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry for having feelings,” she said with a smile. "Especially when those feelings include love and concern."

There was a natural lull in the conversation, and then she broke the silence.

“We have to go face them. Don’t we?”

“Yeah. I know. “
“Well… we do this together.”

“Although you didn’t act like a jerk to them. I did. Well, to him, anyway.”

“I’m going to lay odds that he will forgive you,” she grinned.

“He was really upset about what went down, Lois. Just so you know. I’m guessing he’s wrestling with his own guilt trip right now.”

“He didn’t do anything wrong and I will try to make him understand that.”
Out in the living room, the other Clark was frantic.

“I have to go back in there,” he said as soon as they came into the living room. His eyes were wild with anxiety and his movements static and sharp like a caged and frightened animal.

Lois watched her husband attempt to keep his extreme distress under control. She knew he had to get it out of his system, and she let him feel what he was feeling without commentary. Every part of her yearned to go give him comfort and tell him nothing was wrong, but she knew to do so would be hollow.

When she didn’t respond, Clark repeated himself, his eyes beginning to take on a pleading quality as he sought her permission to make what even he knew was the wrong move.

“You can <i>not</i> go in there again, Clark,” she said.

His face fell.

“She won’t want to see me. I know that. I know. I’ll make it worse. I broke her down! I made her think of him so completely that she broke down! She’s in hell because of me!”

“Oh, Clark, no,” she said, rushing over to him and putting her arms around his distraught body. “I didn’t mean that at all. The other Clark is the only one who can even hope to help. Our presence there would embarrass and upset her at this point. If she’s anything like me, the idea of breaking down in front of people is anathema to her. We just have to have faith in their love… that it’s strong like ours and that he will be able to reach her.”

“Do you think she’ll be okay,” he asked, begging her for a positive answer.

“Think of what she’s gone through. She was enslaved and tortured for years and then brought back home to live in a world where her tormenter’s identical doppelganger lived in peace with humanity. She went from sheer hatred and fear towards love, and it didn’t take her all that long. She is an amazingly strong person and she’s been through far worse.”
Clark’s face had fallen into planes of guilt as she spoke of the other Lois’s past experiences. He had to brutally remind himself that he was not her tormentor.

“I feel like I … raped her,” he said in a low and agonized tone. He sank down to the couch and buried his head in his hands.

“She told me at the start that she was afraid. We talked about what was worrying her, and she told me that forced telepathy was like rape. She was afraid the experience would trigger memories of a like-rape experience. She trusted me though, and I violated that trust. I caused her physical pain and she was yelling at me to stop.”

Lois sat next to him as soon as he had uttered the words of having raped her. She held his hand without a single ounce of judgment or fear.

“Listen to me,” she commanded softly. “And look at me.”

He hesitated, not wanting to see the same loathing he felt for his own actions reflected in her eyes. After having shared telepathic images with the other Lois, he couldn’t help but think that his wife had no idea just how ugly things could have gotten if he himself hadn’t been benevolent.

“You are not a rapist,” she said, forcing his gaze to stay on hers with the sheer strength of her words and personality.

“I know you don’t think so,” he said, reaching his other hand to place over their joined ones so his hand gently covered hers. “I love that you always believe in me. You were never once afraid of my Kryptonian persona. You never once worried that I’d do something horrible.”

“No. I never did worry about you, Clark. You are the kindest most honest person I know. Except of course for that one little lie, but honestly I understand why you did it. Being here with the other Clark is a rude awakening in terms of what it could have been like if your secret was out.”

“Being here is a rude awakening of what it could have been like if I’d been raised by Kryptonians. I’ve been in her mind… I’ve seen things.” He shuddered. During her breakdown she had broadcast to him. He’d actually seen and even felt Kal pushing her down and hurting her. He had felt her unwavering terror. He had seen his doppelganger’s cruel enjoyment of her terror.
“Would it help to share them telepathically with me,” she asked very carefully.

“No, no – a million times no,” he responded, aghast at the idea of letting her in on that kind of horror.

Lois fought back frustration at being the only one not in the know. She knew that she didn’t want nor need those images, but part of her resented being left out. She shoved that part down. She wasn’t hunting down a story; she was helping people she cared about deal with an awful situation.

“Lois,” he said, after a long silence. “I forced my way into her mind. I sent her ugly images of domination and ownership. And then when she begged me to stop and told me I was hurting her, I kept on doing it. I even told her she had to stop me herself. I let her think I would go on hurting her unless she built walls. And I wasn’t nice about it. I wasn’t smiling, or giving her reassurance, I was trying hard to bring him to mind so she wouldn’t realize that this wasn’t real danger. I wanted to know that even under a true assault, she would automatically throw up her defenses.”

“Like training for self defense under adrenalized conditions,” Lois said firmly remembering the many classes she had taken. “The instructor puts on his ‘costume’ … his, lucky for him, well padded costume, and attacks you. Forcing someone to see an assailant under training conditions is essential to turning the necessary defensive responses automatic.”

He began to look as if he believed her… some amount of the grief and self disgust began to chip away.

“Did it really help you?”

“Undoubtedly. It’s one thing to know the forms and movements of a martial art, but when someone comes behind you and slams you down to a cold icy pavement and you weren’t expecting it, your first thought isn’t proper stance… you’re down there, your head is reeling and all you can think of is the cold and pain and fear.”

He winced thinking how many times she’d faced this. Her job and commitment to her job had led her to be in constant danger.

“You’ve actually been in that situation?”
“More than once… and the first time – it was terrifying. I remember thinking I was dead. But as I was thinking that, I was moving myself carefully and slowly so as not to arouse suspicion, and before I knew it, I was in the perfect position for a lying side kick. As soon as he came near me, I used the most powerful muscles I have to do some serious damage. I didn’t think about it. There was no worry about form or steps or balancing of weight. I just reacted. With the proper training you can react in a way that’s effective without even thinking about it. Fear and anger have to be provoked so that you write the proper responses into your muscle memory.”

He heard her talking and began to realize that she was right.

“Ching and Zara tried that with me when training me to go against Nor. But it was harder to put me in a state of fear because of my invulnerability.”

“If you had trained on new Krypton, it would have been different. You would have bled and you would have been afraid, and you would have learned it in your bones.”

“Bled… they didn’t actually hurt you –“

“I’ve broken my hand and dislocated my shoulder during training sessions, but I have not gone through standard classes. I’ve worked with some tough teachers to make sure I can get out of anything. Before you came along, I was still jumping into danger…”

“Oh, god,” he groaned. “I can’t even think about it.”

“I don’t regret having been injured in the process of having learned to protect myself. While normally it isn’t necessary, for me, it was. I needed to know in my mind that even hurt, I could defend myself.”

“Wow…”

“I just made Superman say ‘wow’,” she giggled at him.

“You’ve done that before…”
“But usually the lights are down low, and there’s a bed…”

He was about to respond when he heard the sound of people approaching.

“They’re coming,” he said to her, his eyes clouding over with anxiety.

The two doppelgangers watched anxiously as Lois and Clark came into the room. Clark’s doppelganger’s gaze was riveted to the Lois who wasn’t his wife. He was unable to even pretend to be casual about their entry in the room.

He sprang up, forgetting that he should let this universe’s Lois set the pace and he crossed over anxiously to where she was. Her husband looked at him, but the other Clark’s eyes were on Lois. He was unaware of the desperate pleading nature of his gaze. He wanted to know that she was okay, that he hadn’t broken her by what they had done.

She kept his gaze and showed no sign of fear. Both the Clarks in the room were on tenterhooks about how the next few moments would progress.

The other universe's Clark had stopped his forward pace after a slight wordless cue from his doppelganger and waited for Lois to approach him, suddenly realizing his forward approach might be seen as menacing.

She did, stepping right up into his personal space and surprised him by putting her hand on his forearm and gazing at him with earnest sincerity

“Clark. I am so sorry for upsetting you that way,” she said, her voice strong and clear. “I know you must be beating yourself up.”

“Oh god,” he said, as he heedlessly pulled her into a hug. “I am so sorry… I am so sorry.”

Her husband watched the proceedings with a strong sense of fear in his heart. Any moment now, things could get ugly. He wasn’t sure pulling her close like that was a good idea given everything else that had gone down, but his doppelganger hadn’t been warned about how to interact with Lois. Lois hadn’t allowed him to have alone time with the other Kryptonian to lay down ground rules.
But nothing bad happened. Lois pulled back from the hug after a few moments of much-needed closeness, and she smiled up at the man who was so much like her husband.

“I want you to know how much I appreciate your willingness to go through this kind of hell for me,” she said. “It means the world to me.”

He shook his head. “I can’t imagine going through what you are going through. No personal amount of discomfort would bar me from helping you get the monster out of your life for good.”

He looked over at his other self.

“That … creature… is – worse than anyone I’ve ever met,” he said.

His Lois shuddered at those words. Worse than Lex? Worse than Nor?

“Have you ever – felt what she receives,” Clark’s doppelganger asked him.

Lois answered the question.

“There was never a reason for me to share,” she said curtly. “I wouldn’t deliberately do that unless there was good reason.”

Her husband thought about that. It bothered him to know the other man had shared this experience with her. And he didn’t think it was jealousy, but perhaps it was. All he knew was that the other man had the ability to commiserate with his wife in a way he never could. Two victims of the same assault almost. While the other Clark obviously didn’t know what Lois really had gone through, he had felt the brunt of Kal’s emotional brutality through Lois.

He looked over at the other Lois, remembering suddenly she was in the room. She was gazing at him with a sad and sympathetic expression that seemed to indicate she understood what he was thinking.

His wife broke the silence by talking to his doppelganger.
“Clark, you know … I didn’t succeed. I have to keep trying to block that out. You don’t have to help me with that… I could wait for it to happen again… but –“

“It would make you feel immeasurably better to know you could block that stuff out in a heartbeat.”

“I don’t want to hurt you again,” she said.

“Very emphatically likewise,” he said, not bothering to go into great detail of how much of an understatement that was.

“Do you want to break on this for a while? Maybe share some wine… dinner…”

“Dinner sounds fantastic,” Lois’s doppelganger said.

“How about we call it quits for today,” Clark asked carefully as he eyed his wife for confirmation of his suggestion. “You both kind of look really exhausted.”

“You mean we look like hell,” asked his doppelganger trying to get him in a little harmless trouble.

“I meant exhausted,” he retorted.

“Is this a good idea, Lois,” his doppelganger checked with Lois. “Ultimately it has to be what you think is right.”

“I think it’s a good idea,” she said, trying not to let her relief flood through. She had been terrified at the idea of doing it again and getting some space between what had happened and what needed to happen yet was something she could easily agree on.

“Is this okay with you too,” she asked the other Clark?
“Yes. It most definitely is. I think it’ll be fun to just hang out.”

“Clark and I rarely get to just hang out with people who treat us normally,” said Lois, failing to see her husband’s eyes cloud over. “It’s good to be with people who don’t carry around the constant awareness that they’re hanging out with Superman.”

“Lana’s not so bad,” Clark interjected quietly.

“No. She’s not. That’s why I said rarely instead of never,” she offered up gently, aware she had caused him some pain. “I’m not complaining. I’d rather live this way with you than live any other way without you.”

“Well, despite the fact that we’re each other’s doppelgangers,” said the other Lois, “we’re glad to be able to bring a little normalcy into your life. I say that you two cook. Lois and I will do the harder task of picking the right wine.”
Chapter 8

Author’s Note: From now on, LST Lois and Clark will be referred to as Lois and Clark, and Canon Lois and Canon Clark will be Lane and Kent. I had hoped to avoid this by clever writing, but the comments from the previous chapter indicate that I wasn’t all together successful.

The next day they all gathered together drinking coffee and laughing about things that had been said the night before. Both couples enjoyed the rare equanimity with people who truly understood the strangeness of each other’s lives.

“I need more coffee,” said Lane, apropos of nothing. “That last glass of wine was one too many.”

“Want some Motrin,” Lois asked her? “I’ll get you some and some water too.”

“I can go get it,” said her doppelganger. “No need to put you out.”

“If you want to come with me, you can. I need more coffee too, and I can only carry so much. No. Sit,” Lois said, ordering the two men as she saw them both rise to go get what was needed. The two women went towards the kitchen, laughing and talking as they did. Their absence left an awkward silence.

Clark looked over at his doppelganger and braced himself for the conversation he knew he had to have. The way he had reacted in such an unfettered anger towards the other Kryptonian weighed heavily on his conscience and last night they had all, by unspoken agreement, tabled any conversation about anything that would be painful.

“Clark. I owe you an apology,” Clark said. “I was really out of control and I said some terrible things to you.”

“You don’t owe me any apology. You were upset that I’d hurt her,” Kent responded, unable to even look Clark in the eyes. “How in the world could I fault you that without being the world’s greatest hypocrite? Believe me, I feel really badly about what I did.”

Clark shook his head in denial of the other man’s guilt.
“You acted in her best interests. I lost sight of that, but I know it now and she always did.”

“Thank you for telling me that, but I can never apologize enough.”

“Well then… apology accepted, buddy,” Clark said to Kent as he held out a hand for a friendly shake. The other man smiled at him and clasped his hand. As weird as it was touching someone who was basically himself, it was even weirder to shake hands with someone who had all his abilities. Someone who wasn’t thinking ‘I’m touching an alien’ or ‘I’m shaking hands with Superman. I hope he doesn’t break my hand.’

“I know I was really riled up,” said Clark, after a moment. “Lois yelled some sense into me yesterday before we came back to talk to you. She said that I was naïve if I thought that this could happen without dredging up some painful things. “

“Lois said the same thing to me – that is… my – wife, Lois. She told me about self-defense training she had done that involved learning while in a state of fear. She said that if you learn to protect yourself under adrenalized conditions, you learn the lessons in your muscle memory and they become automatic. “

“Is that how you knew not to pull back,” he asked, wondering still what was going through Kent’s mind when he decided not to stop sending Lois the negative image despite her obvious misery.

“No,” Kent replied, his face showing his shame and remorse again. “I did it because I just felt it was the right thing to do. I was naïve… and even arrogant for thinking I knew better than she did as far as what was right for her. I should have paid attention to your obvious fear when we set out to do this. I could see you were upset and I didn’t give it the level of credence I should have.”

“Maybe it’s that Superman complex,” said Clark. “We think we know better because we’re so used to playing that ‘hero in charge’ role. Imagine if the world at large knew how confused we both really were on a regular basis. “

Kent laughed at that, but the sound wasn’t pure mirth.

“Right. Like when you’re in a situation that involves evaluating where to grab a plane so it doesn’t come apart – and you don’t want people to know that you’re feeling that way… so you have to fake it with this façade of confidence, when in reality confidence is the last thing that you feel.”
Clark looked at his double with growing amazement.

“I always thought you were that confident,” he said. “You fake it really well. I don’t think I do. And I can’t be that way all the time anyway, so people do get to see me lacking confidence and ease on a regular basis. Mostly when I’m just myself and I’m being attacked by the press.”

“But you still act differently in and out of the suit,” Kent stated as if he already knew the answer.

“I do. I learned the ‘Superman’ act from you and Lois,” Clark said with a rueful smile. “I do think people prefer to see the Superman persona in the suit rather than Clark Kent doing oddly alien things.”

“So when you’re ‘Clark’, and something comes up that would be helped by a negligible and urgent exertion of abilities, what do you do? I usually do what I need to do quickly so nobody notices, but nobody notices because Clark Kent doesn’t have super powers, so super powers obviously weren’t used to solve the problem.”

“I’ve had to help out a few times just as myself because I’m right there, people have already seen me, and it seems the height of arrogance to go off and change just for my own personal sense of ease. I’ve stopped few assaults because I was right around the corner, and put out a few small fires. It’s strange as hell, and it’s hard to even make eye contact after the fact. The assaults, oddly enough, were easier – because stopping someone from hurting someone is something a human could do. Putting out the fire the way I do is not human at all – why reach for an extinguisher and make a big mess if I don’t have to.”

“I admire you, Clark,” said Kent, shaking his head. “I am not sure I could do that.”

“You do what you have to do. I know you helped in secret for years.”

“I had my parents to help. And when I created Superman, they were there and so was Lois.”

Clark nodded. “Before Lois, it was really bad. I really felt – a lot of negativity and depression about my life’s circumstances.”

“I’m sure you did. I’m willing to bet you were mad at Lois and me for the fact that she was the one who convinced you it could work. When you were outed as an alien and then this woman who
actually treated you normally left your universe for another man – I’m sure that made you feel a bit angry at me.”

Clark smiled grimly at his doppelganger.

“I can tell you without any fears of upsetting or scaring you that yes, there were times when I felt a lot of anger your way. I felt that way before. Now – I can’t regret my life because Lois is in it. The one thing I would change, if I could, is her being taken into that other awful place. I’d gladly never have ended up with her if it meant she never had to go there.”

“I know. I believe you in that. That place … god – just those few images she shared…” Kent shuddered at the memory.

“Clark,” said Clark, “I can’t thank you enough for coming and helping out. Receiving those sendings is tearing her apart –”

He broke off at the sound of glass breaking.

At the same exact time, Kent gasped and put a hand to his head, indicating pain and distress. His eyes burning with stress and fear, he looked at Clark.

“It’s Kal-El.”

Both men simultaneously super-sped into the kitchen. Lois was gripping her head, and crouching down at the onslaught of horrible telepathic brutality. Lane was crouched down, trying to get the glass pieces off the floor, to prevent Lois from inadvertently cutting herself.

Clark looked helplessly between the two women. He knew he should help with the glass to prevent any accidents from happening, but he desperately wanted to help his wife. Experience had taught him to try to let her work this out herself, but he felt churlish doing that with the other two here. He couldn’t well say ‘Let’s just go back in the other room and wait until it blows over’.

But Kent forged forward and gripped Lois’s arms heedlessly and urgently. Clark began to feel a strong wave of rage and terror at the idea that his twin, while well-intentioned, was being heedlessly stupid. Holding her like that would bring Kal-El even further into her awareness and that way led disaster.
“Ouch,” said the Lane, suddenly hissing as her finger got cut on glass.

Unable to ignore her, he came over and pulled her gently up. He took the dustpan and brush from her.

“Let me do this,” he said urgently to her, and in a blur, he had cleaned up all the glass. He looked at her hand to make sure there were no slivers.

While that was going on, he turned to see what was happening with his wife and doppelganger. He saw her cringing back from the man holding her arms and Clark was about to step in protectively when he heard the words his doppelganger was gently saying to Lois.

“Lois, I’m here too. I feel it too,” Kent said urgently. “Put up that wall, okay? Come on. Just one brick at a time. I can help,” and he pushed his own mental presence into her mind to give her the awareness that she had help building the wall.

“I can’t do it. I can’t.” Her voice was panic-stricken.

“You aren’t alone. We can do this. Come on.” Kent’s voice was very calm and very gentle in stark contrast to Lois’s terror.

Clark stood there along with Lane staring at the tableau in front of them. Why had it never occurred to him to try to help her like that? He had done that a long time ago when Kal-El had invaded her dreams, why didn’t he do it now?

“One brick at a time, Lois,” his twin gently soothed Lois. “Come on. I’ll even do the lifting. Okay?”

“Oh okay,” she answered back, her voice strained with fear and emotion. Her hands now gripped his arms in return and Clark watched that in amazement. She was actually touching his doppelganger in the midst of a Kal-El mental assault and she wasn’t reacting as if he was the threat. Unreasonable jealousy flooded through him as it occurred to him that his doppelganger was able to bring her comfort and peace in a way he never had been able to.
“Clark,” said Lane uncertainly. “Should I go out there…?”

He looked over at Kent. The other man shook his head helplessly as if to indicate that he had no idea what they should do.

“Yes,” Clark finally said, turning to Lane. “I think we both should.”

He hated to leave, but he didn’t want his wife to feel ashamed of having had an episode in front of her doppelganger and he didn’t think he could do much more for her right now by gawking at the tableau. The main thing is, Kent was proving himself to be able to help, and Clark had to put his money where his mouth was and trust the other Kryptonian.
Lane and Clark both left the kitchen unwillingly.

Clark had to fight every impulse to keep from turning around and going back in and he imagined that Lane felt the same way.

"It's okay," said Lane, gently as she put a hand on his stiff arm. "You know he won't harm her in any way, right?"

"I do know," he said anxiously as he looked down at Lane. "I'm scared, nonetheless."

"I am too," she said softly. "For both of them."

"Oh, I know," he said, taking Lane's hand comfortably. "It hurts him too. I'm sorry."

"Don't. I know he considers it worth any emotional pain if Lois can successfully block Kal."

"He was helping her," Clark whispered in amazement. "He actually helped her build a wall, and... she didn't - react to him as if he was the other... us... she knew. He got through to her!"

Lane listened to Clark's words and read between the lines.

"How did you two usually resolve these times?"

He looked at her, deeply ashamed.

"I left her alone," he whispered in horror. "To face him alone. I did. I was afraid to go in and talk to her or even sit with her, so I avoided her until it was over. I did nothing, Lois. I let her suffer and I did nothing. And then Clark just came right in and helped her build that wall... all this time I could have done that, and I didn't."
"You didn't know how," she said, urging his eye contact. "You did the best you could."

He shook his head, unable to speak now for the emotional burden on his heart. He felt tears prick at his eyes at the idea that he could have helped all those times she had suffered alone.

"I helped her once before," he finally said. "When she first came back, I went into her mind during a nightmare she was having, and I gave her a - a pep talk," he ended on a mirthless laugh.

"Why didn't you ever try that again," she asked, not accusingly, but wanting him to come to his own sense of acceptance.

"I was afraid that it would be a violation. I felt bad enough about what I did then. She had no idea I'd done it. And I felt like I'd done something wrong."

"Did you ever tell her?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

"She said she wasn't angry about it... but I don't really know if that's true or not. Since he violated her thoughts so often, I never wanted to do anything remotely close to it."

"So going in and helping her push him out would've felt like you were violating her - that is, from your point of view?"

"Yeah, but only because I over-thought things."

"Or because my Clark didn't think it through enough," said Lane. "He's not conditioned to worry before acting where 'Lois Lane' is concerned," she gently explained. "He has no history to make his actions premeditated and careful. I never was afraid of him. Going in and helping her seemed like the logical thing to do."
"It all goes back to my walking on eggshells, again, right?"

"Well... yeah. Of course you do... because you've been conditioned to by her responses. Clark feels awful about driving her to that awful state yesterday," Lane said calmly. "But it's different for him. He can reach out without thinking it over because it's his instinct - to rush in and help. I'm sure that's your instinct too, but you've probably learned to curtail it."

Clark stared at Lane in amazement at how perceptive she was.

"That's it... I want to rush in and help and I have to remember not to. Sudden appearances or sudden intense emotional reaction can be devastating to her."

"So you should stop beating yourself up for not having done what my Clark did. I'm sure it had crossed your mind on some level and you dismissed it out of hand because you didn't want to engage in telepathic communication without her express consent."

"What you say makes sense, but It's hard not to feel like I failed her," he mumbled. "No matter what."

They stopped talking when Lois and Kent entered the room. Clark forced himself not to react and let Lois set the pace. Looking at both of them, he saw how the recent invasion had taken a toll on both human and Kryptonian.

His Lois gave him a tight and not quite reassuring smile, but her worried gaze quickly flitted back to Kent.

“T’m so sorry, Clark,” Lois said to Kent, putting an anxious hand on his forearm. "I infected you yesterday, it seems, and now you get to be an unwilling recipient of these horrible sendings."

Kent covered her hand reassuringly with his own and gave her a gentle squeeze.

“Lois, you had no idea that I would start receiving his sendings. How is this remotely your fault?"

“I ... I don’t - I just don’t like you having to deal with this too.”
“I can block him,” he told her with a smile. “Please don’t worry about it.”

“You helped me block him, “ she said, shifting topics as the wonder of what had happened breached her thoughts. “It actually worked!”

"I'm so glad it did," he said, his eyes focused solely on her. "Can I ask you something... about the sending? Feel free to tell me to shut up."

She shook her head. "No. Don't shut up. What did you want to know?"

"Did it come from Kal-El," he asked uncomfortably, hating that he was basically using his own name.


He looked troubled, and then he paced away from them a bit.

“Did the message seem weird at all to you?”

“ Weird as in, I’m getting vicious telepathic sendings from an alternate universe?”

Kent let out a mirthless sound at her words.

“No. As in... “ He paused. “It felt like Kal-El was in pain. He was suffering. He was calling out for help.”

“Um. No... that’s not what it felt like to me. I got - menace... intent to harm... bad stuff,” she said uncomfortably, shuddering at the memory.

“And I go that too, but that was ... encased in the other message, which came across to me as a plea for help.”
“Maybe whoever he was victimizing,” Lane offered meekly, not wanting to upset her doppelganger.

“It was the same voice, though... could he have a split personality, one that hates what he’s doing,” Kent asked Lois.

“Not that I ever saw,” she said harshly. “He never seemed in the slightest bit despairing or remorseful of his behavior. He reveled in it.”

“Look, I’m sorry,” Kent said to her, raising his hands in surrender. “I didn’t mean to imply he’s really a good guy or anything. I’m just wondering what’s going on.”

“Wonder why you didn’t pick up on the distress call,” Lane asked Lois.

“Probably because I panic and begin to have a breakdown every time I get one of these. I’m guessing you didn’t,” she addressed Kent.

“It freaked me out, but I didn’t - it wasn’t enough to - I mean, I never met the guy - so I have no reason to react how you did.”

She shuddered again, wrapping her arms around herself.

“Maybe we should stop talking about this,” said Clark worriedly.

“No,” said Lois. “No. If something strange is going on, we should at least get some idea of what. You know - the sendings started about 4.5 months ago,” she told the room at large. “Do you think maybe there’s more than one - like the way there are two of you here now?”

“Maybe another Herb brought another Kal in to fix the mess that is Lord Kal -?”

“So not the Herb we know... “
“God,” said Lane, “This is hurting my head.”

“That’s the wine,” Kent ribbed her.

“I didn’t drink that much, oh you who can’t get hungover.”

“How can we find out what’s going on,” said Clark. “If there’s another Kal-El in that world and he’s broadcasting a distress signal and Lois is receiving it all we have to do is rescue him to shut off the messages. And it’s kind of the right thing to do too.”

“Or the stupid thing to do,” said Lane. “You’d both get killed. I for one wouldn’t allow it unless I came along”

“That’s even stupider,” said Lois, her voice rising with extreme agitation. “You have no idea what you’re suggesting here. I’ve been there. And there’s no way in hell you should go there,” she addressed her doppelganger. “If Kal saw you and thought you were me... you would wish you were dead.”

“Of course I’m not suggesting we try to be heroes. We go in and get doppelKal...”

“DoppelKal...”

“I don’t know what else to call him.”

“This is dangerous on so many levels,” said Lois, her voice still angry. “Trust me. All of you are underestimating the danger. All of you,” she said sternly. “You have no idea. How could you possibly get it, if you hadn’t been there?”

“We did have an invasion of our own,” said Kent awkwardly. “When the new Kryptonians came. Nor... tried to take over the world... and nobody was really trying to stop him on the Kryptonian side of the equation. I mean - nobody but me, Ching and Zara, but that was a small and fairly useless effort.”

“Nor is a special kind of evil,” shuddered Lois. “But Kal makes him look benign by comparison.”
“What about Herb,” asked Lane. “I’m not suggesting we endanger him, but could he use his soul tracking device to help us out with this?”

“That’s actually not a bad idea,” said Lois.

“Well, of course not,” Lane smiled back “What do you expect from Lois Lane.”
Chapter 10

Shortly after their discussion, they were joined by Herb who listened to their theories with growing concern. After hearing what they had to say, he took out a device and fiddled with it a bit. The others waited with growing impatience that they all fought to conceal. Finally, he looked up at them, his eyes deeply troubled.

“It’s highly likely that there’s a clone of Kal-El in that world.”

“How could you possibly know that? You didn’t even know that here,” said Lois insistently. “When Clark went missing, you said his life force was weakened, but you didn’t detect a clone.”

“No. I didn’t. But after that incident, I modified my inventions to track bio-electric signals instead of simply tracking soul-signatures. Well, not so much soul, as an emanation of -”

“Please, Herb, I’m begging you. Just cut to the chase,” Clark interrupted frustration evident in his tone. It was rare that he showed any negative feelings this way but he knew he was in the company of people who wouldn’t react badly.

“Really, Clark - I’d think you’d show some interest in the science of it, being as how your own species was so technologically advanced from ours -”

“I’m a journalist, not a scientist,” he said, getting a few chuckles from the others in the room - all but Herb who looked nonplussed. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry - I’m just really anxious to know what’s going on. Lois’s well being is at stake here.”

“Right you are, son. And that’s the true point of this. I upgraded my device to detect bioelectric signatures. A clone will have the same bioelectrical signature as its progenitor. A twin would also have the same bioelectric signature as the other twin. When I say ‘same’, I mean very close with a very tiny percentage of differentiation. If two people have as close a bioelectric signature as the ones I’m detecting, it’s guaranteed that we’re dealing with twins or a clone.”

“Kal-El had no siblings,” said Lois shortly, trying to keep it together. “But why wouldn’t this other signature be a doppelganger?”

“A doppelganger would have both a very close bio-electric signature and a close soul signature.
Furthermore, the difference in bio-electric signature between each of you pairs of doppelgangers is greater than what I’m seeing in that other world. That’s because you are from separate universes.”

“God, now my head hurts,” said Kent.

“And you both share a similar soul signature. You also share one with one of the two Kal-Els in the other world. “

Both Kryptonians winced at the reminder that Kal-El was their doppelganger.

“Obviously the signature of a soul doesn’t determine behavior. Because we know these two guys could never in a trillion years act like Kal-El,” Lois said firmly trying to ease their bad feelings.

“You’re correct. You could have a doppelganger that was vicious and cruel, Lois – one who was that way with no just cause, because of the infinite possibilities theory.”

“Which I’m hoping we won’t get into,” said Lane, a warning tone in her voice.

“Ah. No. No. We won’t.”

“So the going theory is that someone cloned Kal-El, and the clone might be broadcasting stuff indiscriminately and because they share the same bio-electric signature, Lois is picking up on it,” Kent asked trying to sum it all up.

“Possible,” said Herb. “There is another possibility though, and this possibility concerns me greatly. Not that the whole situation there doesn’t concern me, but this one specifically relates to the work I have undertaken to perform in my lifetime.”

They paused and waited for him to collect himself.

“If Kal-El is your doppelganger, there’s nothing to be done. I can’t interfere by bringing you in because in order for you to be successful at overthrowing the Kryptonian invasion I’d need far more than just two earth-loyal Kryptonians. I can’t recruit more according to the rules set for me by the group I work with. They would stop me if I tried. But… if Kal-El is a clone and
isn’t your doppelganger, my interference is my duty and my right. If the real Kal-El is somehow out of commission and the one in charge is the clone, then it’s my job to get him out of power and help re-establish the real Kal-El back into his own life.”

“Is that even a possibility,” Lois asked agitatedly. “I just started getting those telepathic barrages several months ago. Isn’t it more likely that the clone was brought to full mental awareness then?”

“Yes… that is a strong possibility,” he said gently to her. “But there’s a chance that it’s not what actually happened. I have to go find out which is which.”

“Can we back up a minute here? Who the hell would clone that freak,” asked Kent. “Seriously. What were they thinking? He’s the leader and his very existence gives him the right to lead. He can’t be impeached unless he harms his own people. So someone could actually usurp Kal-El with his clone and the clone and whoever created it would have ultimate power. Why would Kal-El allow it?”

Lois looked troubled at this conversation.

“I’m sorry,” he said, looking over at her and seeing her expression. “I’m not trying to bring up bad stuff.”

“The fact is, you’re right. The idea that a person like Kal-El would allow this to happen is nonexistent. If a clone were to be made, he would ensure that it was brain dead. If the clone is sending along an emotional tagline of despair along with Kal-El’s sendings that indicates that it – he - isn’t brain dead. That goes against what we know about Kal-El. He’d have monitored it carefully and killed it the moment it showed signs of sentience – a fact he might be able to detect telepathically.”

“So someone else cloned him in secrecy,” suggested Clark. “Like the resistance? Lex was able to clone us, after all.”

“If they did this, it would be a very dangerous maneuver,” said Lane. “Kryptonians loyal to Kal would be risking a treason charge. Kryptonians and/or humans trying to usurp Kal-El would be risking another vicious Kal-El coming into being. They would have no reason to believe that the
clone would be any less dangerous than the one they have.”

“Going along with the theory that Kal-El is the clone and the real one is out of commission – yet still alive… why would anyone do that?”

“Same reason Lex did it. To have someone with a great deal of power at your disposal and command. Maybe the original Kal-El wasn’t despotic,” Lane said, her face coming alive with interest in this theory. “We both saw it happen. We both lived this. What if Kal-El wasn’t a bad person… not every one of the new Kryptonians thought invading earth was a good idea… right… but many of them did. It was one of the reasons the ruling council wanted to discredit you,” she turned to her husband. “Because you refused to condone what they were doing… you refused to call it anything but what it was… a hostile act of war.”

“And Zara felt that way too,” said Kent. “She didn’t want her people on earth because she knew that they wouldn’t be able to live in peace with the human race.“

“Right,” nodded Lane enthusiastically. “You and Clark are not motivated to behave that way because of how you were raised. You feel like you belong here and you are a member of the human race, regardless of where you were born. Zara was fairly exceptional in that she was able to put aside her own temptations for an easy life with fantastic abilities and allow the good of both people to be paramount. The Kryptonians may have enjoyed having the powers, but if they ended up overtaking our world, they would have become monsters and Zara didn’t want that to happen.”

Lois paled and Lane stopped talking.

“I’m sorry, Lois, “she said. “I know this is awful.”

Lois shook her head intently. “Yes. It is, but don’t let me be the obstacle to this conversation. I think it’s beginning to make some amount of sense in the realm of possibility. It is possible that the original Kal-El was a decently motivated Kryptonian who didn’t condone settling down on earth… just like Zara in your world. And quite frankly – the Zara in the world I was in wasn’t ever cruel towards anyone that I ever saw. She stayed out of sight – I barely ever saw her and never made eye contact with her – but she didn’t ever behave in a way that would indicate she enjoyed the status quo.”

“So based on our own experiences,” Lane said, keeping a careful eye on her doppelganger, “Nor in our world was supported by the ruling council who wanted a better home. Earth was strongly appealing to them, and the ruling council members that I interacted with, while not vicious themselves, had talked themselves into thinking that Nor was better than Clark, and having a
dominance relationship over the human race was worthwhile – not just for their own personal comfort and happiness, but also for the good of mankind. Trey, I know, believed that we would be better off under Kryptonian rule… that is until Nor started going all kinds of crazy in Smallville and Trey finally was forced to realize that he had been wrong. Honestly though, I always thought he apologized just to save face with Zara after Nor had been eliminated as a threat.”

“I thought so too,” said Kent. “But there was no way I was going to say that. At that point, I just wanted them all to leave.”

“So what I’m hearing,” said Clark, “Is that it’s reasonably likely that the ruling council in that other world decided to replace Kal-El with one who would support their own agenda. They didn’t kill Kal-El because that would have been in violation to their own deep seated beliefs about ruling hierarchy… instead, they cloned him and replaced him and let him live in some kind of incapacitated state so that they could avoid the whole ‘you killed the ruling head of Krypton’ problem. Maybe they had it set up where they could claim a third party cloned Kal and fooled them all, so if they were discovered, they wouldn’t be sent to the phantom zone.”

“That’s one hell of a thing to do,” said Lane. “The motivation was …”

“Not wanting to keep looking for a home. Earth is a beautiful place,” said Lois. “Why wouldn’t they want to live here. And if Lord Nor was part of this conspiracy,” she shuddered. “Then it makes sense that the idea got traction. Like Kal-El and many other Lords, he was sadistic.”

“Too much inbreeding,” wondered Lane.

“Or bad upbringing,” said Clark. “Or a mix of both.”

“Why would Lois be getting the transmissions now… why not all along?”

“Maybe the original is emerging from whatever incapacitated state they put him in…”

“Maybe someone already rescued him.”

“Remember, these are all theories,” said Herb. “I have to go find out if it’s true. If it is, I have to set things right for the sake of Utopia.”
Everyone in the room reacted with an equal amount of horror.

“How would you find out it’s true,” said Lane, trying not to pass judgment.

“I’d have to be within a certain proximity to Kal-El to get a read on his soul signature.”

“He can move faster than you can even see,” said Lois, her voice rising in agitation. “He has heat vision – he can disable and kill you from a distance the moment he detected your presence. He can hear what you can’t hear and see through things. How the hell do you propose to get his soul signature without getting killed? I agree that world needs help, but you won’t set them on a path to Utopia if what we talked about has happened and we do somehow free the real Kal-El and get rid of the bad one. Lois in that world will never see Kal-El as anything more than a Kryptonian conqueror. I'm sorry... I know this hurts you, Clark - but it was different here.”

Clark took her proffered hand and gave her a small smile to let her know he was on her side of the issue.

“I’ll obviously need to engage the help of the other Kryptonians in that world who belong to the resistance. That’s how I was able to get you out of there,” Herb responded carefully. "And while you are likely correct about utopia, I still have a duty to try.”

“This is unbelievably dangerous,” Kent said, agreeing with Lois, his own voice and manner showing a high level of concern. “There’s a strong chance that you won’t survive – or if you do – you’ll wish you hadn’t.”

Lois paled. “You have no idea, Herb… the lengths he will go to make you pay for daring to do this…”

“I have to know. I have to. And if this is the case, I have to help set things right. The point is, right now I’m not able to help them. But if this theory of Kal being a clone is correct, I can help – it’s within the boundaries of allowed interference. I can’t let them suffer if there’s something I can do to help. Surely you four understand that.”

“We do,” said Clark. “But … it’s a death mission, and you know it. Even trying to recruit help
would be fraught with danger. “

“I have to help them if I can,” Herb said again.

“Nobody is arguing that,” said Kent. “But maybe instead of trying to recruit helpers, you let Clark or I do it. We’d go in, take the reading and leave without being detected because we would move at top speed. How long would the detection take?”

“Almost no time at all. It’s possible you could do it without detection.”

“Then I think it’s settled. One of us has to go to that world and do this,” said Kent.

Silence filled the room as both women turned pale in unison, refusal clearly written in their expressions.
As they argued, nobody noticed the man in the bowler hat fiddling with the tiny electronic ring he wore. With hardly a sound, the man vanished.

The four of them looked at the empty space where he had been, all feeling some sense of panic and guilt for not being quick enough to stop him, or generous enough to let the invulnerable ones go handle the job.

"He's just ... committed suicide" said Lois, terrified on behalf on the man. She better than anyone knew the kind of treatment he would receive were he caught, especially if Kal-El was the clone, and had something to hide.

Before anyone could react to what she said, Herb reappeared in exactly the same location he had been earlier. His entire body was trembling with the excitement of discovery.

"Lord Kal-El is the clone," he said before anyone could yell at him for taking the initiative.

Lois felt like someone had kicked her in the stomach. Hot tears sprang to her eyes. Somehow knowing that Lord Kal had been a pretender to the Kryptonian throne made the whole reality of what she endured seem even more pointless and horrifying – despite the fact that it really made no actual difference.

Clark on the other hand wore an expression of relief at the feeling that a large and painful burden had been lifted from his shoulders. He looked at Kent and saw Kent was equally moved.

"He's not us," said Clark.

"He was never you," asserted Lois emotionally. “Are you sure, Herb? Are you sure you were in the proximity of Lord Kal and not the clone?”

"The man I was near was Lord Kal. Of that I am sure," he said, not wanting to go into detail. He had popped in during a grim moment between Kal and a human slave... one that was surely getting worse. He hated himself for not being able to save the victim, but he knew that to do so would have resulted in his own death and halted any possibility of anyone going in and fixing that world.
"What's wrong," Kent asked him, seeing the darkness in the other man's eyes. Herb looked over at him and shuddered.

"He wasn't alone" Herb said, his tone horrified.

"What… " Lane halted her question almost as soon as she had begun.

"A woman...?" This time it was Lois who asked, only her tone was cold and hard.

"Ah... Yes."

"We have to go save her," said Kent with sudden agitation. "If we can go there now and get her out of there - we can rescue her. We can find a way to bring her to safety."

"And reveal your existence," said Lois. "You can’t do this. You can’t save her."

"She's in trouble. Someone is suffering right now and we could stop it!"

"And then what? What do you think Kal-El would do if she vanished out of the room," Lois countered harshly, hating herself both for condemning a woman to horrors she herself had endured, and then what surely would be an equally horrible death.

"We could go, wait for him to leave the room and get her out of there," Kent persisted, not quite understanding her point.

"And what? Bring her here? Or take her to the resistance? You have to understand, if you rescue her, he will be angry and he will be that much more violent with his next victim. You can't save the one... we have to have a - " Lois trailed off in horror as she realized she was actually proposing that they form a plan of attack. "We can't do anything about that world, you know that."

"But I have to," said Herb. "I have ... a moral duty. To true love, and soul mates and Utopia and a better way of life -"
"There's no way in hell that that universe's Lois will ever hook up with that universe's Kal-El," Lois snapped at Herb. "This isn't some happy fairy land where everything is sunshine and flowers. Kryptonians have damaged that world and its people for a long time. That world's Lois has been brutalized. She knows only a world that's under the rule of a dangerous and despotic people. I was able to get past what happened because I came back to my normal world where the only Kryptonian here was such a tremendously good person, and even that was a difficult and unlikely journey! Even if she can see that he too was a victim, she will never be able to rest easy in his presence."

"Lois is right," said Lane. "Not to mention the other Kal-El wasn't raised on earth. Who knows what his motivations will actually be? He might not be a vicious psycho, but he very well could be someone who doesn't see Kryptonian presence on Earth as a bad thing. Like Trey, for example, in our world," she said to her husband.

"I understand," said Herb, "I am not at all diminishing the truth of what you say. I believe that you are very likely correct in your future projections concerning that world's Lois and Cl - Kal. But I have to go do this. I have to," his voice was impassioned. "I have to try. They deserve that chance. When it works out and soul-mates unite - it is an amazing and rare thing. I have to try. I can't force them together but I can at least help make it possible. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't do something about it."

"I am sorry to say this. But you are human," said Clark bluntly. "They are Kryptonians. You don’t stand a chance against them."

"I can go work with the resistance from the inside."

"Seems a dangerous trick to me," said Lane. "The humans in the resistance are not going to be friendly. They will suspect your motivations. If the Kryptonians don’t kill you, the humans probably will."

"Ching and Zara worked with me to rescue Lois," said Herb. "They believed I was a dimensional traveler and that I was going to bring her back where she belonged."

Lois blinked at that. Zara had saved her. Ching had saved her. She had hated Ching for so long for what he had done and she was never sure what to feel about Zara, the quiet phantom consort who never said anything to anyone unless spoken to first. Once she had thought it was snobbery - an unwillingness to look at human filth, but as time had passed she had grown to see it for what it was... shared misery and fear of making things worse for Lois.
"What's your game plan going to be," Kent asked Herb anxiously. "I still can't bear the idea that someone is suffering right now and we aren't doing anything to help her."

"I need to learn about the original Lord Kal. What was he like? If he's not a good man, then moving forward with rescuing him might not be a good idea."

"Ching and Zara might know those answers," said Kent. "They might well have grown up together until Kal was old enough to be trained for his duties as first lord."

Clark looked at him questioningly.

"I got a crash course in all that when they came to our world," Kent offered up awkwardly.

"My god, what if they ever come here," said Lois.

"If they do, you come get us," said Kent. "I'll help you fight them off. In my world Ching was... dubious, but in the end, loyal to his duty - and he was a man of some type of honor. Zara was an honorable person. She did things that were dangerous and distasteful, but she proved to me that ultimately she was perfect to be ruler of new krypton."

"And if that world's Ching and Zara helped rescue Lois," said Lane, "I'm willing to bet -"

"What are you willing to bet," snapped Lois.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Are you willing to bet your life? What about your freedom?"
"Lois, I only meant -"

"Every single Kryptonian in that world is dangerous until proven otherwise. Joining a resistance, helping out a human or two does not a saint make."

"But they are our best bet for information," said Kent carefully. "We can ask them about Kal-El and find out if he seemed a decent person back in the day."

"And once I know whether he's a decent sort," said Herb, "I will reveal to them what I know. Then the resistance and I can collectively launch a movement to free him. Once he's freed, he needs to assert himself as first lord - I'm guessing the clone's DNA will be slightly degraded from the original so that he can prove he's the original. I'm not a geneticist, but it seems within the realm of possibility."

"I feel I should be helping," said Kent. "I mean... you can't do this alone."

"They'll take one look at you and throw whatever anti-Kryptonian arsenals they have at their command," said Lane. "You know that. If you went, you'd have to send me first to lay down groundwork."

"My god...you're all insane," said Lois angrily. "Seriously? You think it's that easy? Their leader is a rapist and a sadist. He sees you, Lois, and you think you're going to talk your way out of danger? No! And you, Herb... he'll keep you alive ... but you'll wish you were dead. That world is like nothing you've ever endured and you're talking about going in, chatting up the locals and rescuing the original Kal as if it were a walk through the park. What is wrong with you all?"

Silence met her announcement. None of the others in the room could begin to argue her points and they were all ashamed at making her feel like they belittled the danger in that other world.

"What if we were to bring some of the locals, as you call them, here," asked Herb.

"Like who?"
"Zara and Ching. If we can bring them here and explain our theory and get some more information, we'll be safe, and they won't be harmed either. They will also get a chance to see that there are variations of Kal-El that aren't dangerous."

"It took me forever to get to that point," said Lois. "Do you really think an hour will do it for them?"

"Maybe not... but it's better than trying to establish a campaign to free Kal-El in their territory without their help."

Lois started crying.

"You have no idea how badly this makes me feel. Even seeing them... Ching's the one who enslaved me after I got to that world. It was his fault I was ever a prisoner. I can't do this."

“You can’t do this to her,” both Clark’s said simultaneously, each feeling rage at hearing the details of her initial capture.

"I'm not asking anyone here to do anything, Herb insisted gently. "Least of all you. You have suffered so much and I’d never want to make you suffer more. I'll do this without involving the four of you any further."

“But then you won’t have the credibility offered by seeing how the four of us live,” Lois said, trying to get her fear and anger under control. “Bringing them here and having them interact with us is probably the safest and most direct way to getting the information you need to proceed.” She paused. “If Kal-El was originally a decent man and you can convince that resistance to free him, that world will be immeasurably improved. I can’t stand in the way of your first step.”

"Do you think you could just bring Zara,” asked Kent.
"I could try. I'm not sure how easy it would be to get her alone."

"Then try," said Lois, having forced herself back to calm. "If you can't, you can't... I understand that. But I'd prefer it if she came alone."

Herb nodded.

"If I have all of your agreement, then, I'll go bring her here now."

He looked around the room patiently, and upon receiving nervous nods all around, he vanished from view once again.
Chapter 12

As soon as Herb vanished, Lois began to pace in nervous agitation.

"Oh god," she muttered. "I can't believe this is happening."

The others remained quiet in the face of her pacing, not knowing how to help.

"I have to face Zara. And what if Ching comes? To see people who knew me then in that horrible place that I thought I’d left far behind me..."

Silence met her pronouncements and after a moment she looked about the room at them all.

"Thanks for not telling me I can just go wait it out in the other room."

Kent spoke up first.

"Considering you wouldn’t do that, what’s the point in suggesting it?"

She smiled at him sadly.

"I'm that much of an open book?"

"No. But am I wrong?"

She shook her head. "No."

She heaved a sigh and avoided looking her own husband in the eyes. Seeing Kent’s sympathy was hard enough, but she knew that Clark was seriously hurting on her behalf.

"I have to face Zara. And maybe Ching. They saw me... they witnessed so much - they - saw me broken."

"You were never broken," insisted Lane fiercely. "You came out of it and survived - you did more than survive... you flourished."

"I was broken," she insisted back. "But I - healed the cracks," she said. "They've been witness to - moments I'd rather never see the light of day in anyone's mind."

"They're the ones - Ching at least, who should feel shame," said Clark, finally speaking up what he felt. "Zara could have helped you a lot sooner —"

He yearned to go over and hold her or tell her that her fears were groundless from his point of view – that no matter what had happened in that world, she was a fighter and a warrior for having withstood hell and come out reasonably unscathed. But he didn’t, because to do so in the company of others would add to her humiliation.

"Nobody likes to be victimized," said Lane. "We all feel lessened when it happens, even if it's illogical."

"Yeah," muttered Lois. "It's just that I thought I’d put that all behind me. What if it’s true? If Kal-
El is the clone and there’s a decently motivated original out there… won’t we have to go there and help liberate him? I thought I’d seen the last of that place, but now… now I might have to go there again – “

"Lois, under no circumstances should you ever go back into that world," Kent said urgently. "That wouldn't be healthy for you on any level!"

"Are you planning on going," she challenged him. "If we find out that there’s a chance at overthrowing him? Are you going to go?"

“I think I have to,” he said to her. “How can I not when I know right this very second someone is suffering at his hands? It’s been tearing me apart ever since Herb told us what was going on and that’s someone we won’t be able to help. Yes. I want to go there, free the real guy and make things better. I have to go. If there’s a chance. I have to go!”

“Why do any of us have to go,” Lois backpedaled as she saw that the conversation was heading somewhere alarming. If the other Clark went, surely her own Clark would plead his case for helping. And since it was basically her fault that the other Clark and Lois would be putting themselves in danger, didn’t she owe them the protection of her own husband? And if he went, she would have to go as well. If the other Lois gave credibility to the Clarks, she would give that credibility thousand fold. Her own abuse at the hands of the clone would make her one of the resistance… comrades through shared suffering. She shook her head feeling complete and unreasonable rage at the other three occupants of the room.

“Because … we know,” Kent vocalized for his fellow doppelganger. “Now that we really know-“

"You knew about this suffering before," yelled Lois as she lost control of her composure. "You all did. And now suddenly you have to go help? Don’t you see if you go help I have to go with you? I can't let you all face that alone, not when I know the lay of the land... I know the players and the rules -"

"I disagree," said Lane. "You don't have to go. I don't know why you think you do."

"Do you?"

"What?"

"If he goes," she said, indicating Kent, "you would go too?"

"Of course," Lane said, refusing to look at her husband's horrified eyes. "Despite his not wanting me to, yes, I'd go, because as you said earlier about credibility - having a variation of us who loves him would help his case."

"So knowing she would insist on going, what would you do next," Lois challenged Kent. "Would you go without her anyway or would you go with her knowing full well she could run afoul of the same monster who enslaved me? Would you take that risk?"

Kent paled at her words.

"It's not just his risk to take," said Lane. "I want to go there and stop this too. I mean, I don't want to go. But I want to stop this. I want this stopped. And you asked what changed. Now we stand a chance! Before it was a lost cause, but what we know about Kryptonian rights to the throne - if the original Kal can prove at a genetic level that he's the one true Kal, then the people who betrayed
him as well as the clone are no longer going to have the right of leadership. That world can be freed without having to kill off all the bad guys! That world can be free, and that world should be free!"

"You all seem to think I want otherwise," snapped Lois, tears beginning to course down her face. "You make me out to be so cold and selfish!"

"No," said both Clarks in unison. Kent looked sheepishly at Clark and stopped talking.

"Lois," said Clark. "We don't. We know you've been through hell and that you're less optimistic than we are because of the hard realities you had to face. We do get that."

"So you won't go if I say you can't," she challenged him.

"No."

"You'd let Clark handle it all by himself?"

Clark looked at Kent, his expression troubled.

"Yes."

"And if Lois went- you'd stand back while the two of them went, knowing that your being there would make it less likely that she be harmed?"

"Yes," he said, his voice rising a little in frustration. "I've said it over and over, and you know it's true. The fact is, I would refrain from going - and it would be torture, because I know that my friends would be endangering themselves - without me there to help them."

"Then this is why I'm upset! It all hangs on me! I have to agree to something that causes me a great deal of terror. I have no choice. All because we found out Kal-El is a clone. If he had been the original none of this would be necessary!"

"But now that world stands a chance," said Lane.

"Stop repeating that. I get that! I get it, okay? I'm not angry that the world stands a chance now. I'm angry that I have to go back there!"

"So you honestly wish that he'd been the real deal," asked Lane.

"No," she exclaimed angrily. "I don't - that sounds awful -"

"Lois," said Kent emotionally. "I can't regret his being the clone. It's - more than a relief to know that he's not me or Clark. I know that in alternate universes, it's logical that people be alternate - but the idea that - somehow someone who had our soul signature could end up so evil was really disturbing ... knowing it’s the clone makes me feel a whole lot better about who I am and who Clark is."

Clark nodded at that. "I'm sorry, Lois. I feel the same. You have no idea how much better I feel knowing that that monster isn't me with different upbringing."

"I never said that he was," said Lois. "Or... not ... since I got a clue. Clark, no matter who raised you -either one of you Clarks - you'd be good men. I trust that to the bottom of my soul - whether or not Kal was your doppelganger or not."
"I know. I trust that," said Clark. "But nonetheless - it never felt right knowing he was our doppelganger. It was always an ugly burden on my soul."

Lois looked at both men, grief in her eyes as she processed their words. She couldn't fault them at all for how they felt, and yet she still felt an unreasonable amount of rage and fear at the idea that they now were obligated to take action. She wanted to hate her own counterpart for being so open and ready to take on the challenge. Her doppelganger had never been broken. She couldn't ever possibly know what it was like to be a slave.
Chapter 13

AN: The third Lois Lane will be referred to as “LL” except when being addressed.

Chaos erupted as Herb reappeared with Zara and another Lois Lane.

Silence was defeating in the face of the unexpected and clearly enraged tailgater.

Herb sputtered at her.

"I never intended for you to come -"

LL glared at him venomously, murder clearly glinting in her eyes when she saw the two Kal-El's.

"Where have you taken us,” she said in an ugly menacing tone that sounded as far from Lois as it was possible to sound. She rapidly advanced towards Herb, heedless of any possible danger and suddenly Herb pressed buttons on his gadget creating a haze around her that she couldn’t penetrate.

“What the hell have you done to me?" She looked at Zara and saw that her comrade was similarly restrained alongside her. Both Clarks could hear her heart-rate increase to an alarming rate. She was as equally terrified as she was enraged but she hid the fear well from those who couldn't detected it with special abilities.

“Be calm,” whispered Zara to her human ally. “I will not let any of these people harm you.”

“Are you insane,” LL hissed. “Do you see who’s here with us?”

Zara looked at the two Kryptonian men in the room. Her expression was impassive as she tried to figure out who they were.

“Neither of these two men are my husband,” she said quietly to LL. “I promise you that.”

LL stared at them in horror.

“They look exactly like him.”

“Do you trust me,” Zara asked her, looking intently into the other woman’s eyes.

“I trust you,” she said. “I trust you mean me no harm. I don’t trust that you can be sure that neither of these men are Kal-El. We’re trapped like rats, Zara. Even your abilities can’t help us if we can’t get out of here. Try shooting him with heat,” she indicated towards Herb considering him to be her first point of attack.

“I won’t harm him,” said Zara gently. “He has done nothing to harm us. Yet. If I feel the need… then… we will see.”

“Herb, what did you do,” asked Kent, looking at the haze worriedly. It seemed painfully familiar.

“Tell me that isn’t a time window.”

At the sound of his voice, both women looked at him with the wariness of prey eying a predator.

“He sounds like Kal-El,” LL muttered to Zara.

She saw the pained look the Kryptonian man’s face at her words and it confused her.
“Well, yes. It’s a time window, Clark,” Herb began to respond to his friend’s anxious query. “But –”

“Have you lost your mind,” Kent interjected frantically. “They could get lost in that thing. You have no idea how horrible it is to be trapped like that – between dimension – out of time – it was horrific –”

“I assure you, they are in no danger.”

Kent looked worriedly back at Herb, his eyes continuing to radiate remembered fear.

“Not everything is always as you say it will be,” he said. “Sometimes your inventions haven’t done what you expected – you said you were bringing Zara, but you brought –” he tailed off, not wanting to speak her name without her permission.

“She was not supposed to come along. I only intended to bring Zara. Zara and I worked together to free – this universe’s Lois Lane,” he said, indicating Lois, “and so I wasn’t expecting Zara to react with force. But Lois’s doppelganger is another story,” he said, stepping nervously away from the two women in the time window. “I’m not entirely sure I wouldn’t be the victim of a broken neck had I not activated the time window.”

“Then please make it quick,” Kent begged. “Every second they are in there is … a chance that they could get lost in it forever.”

“Quite. Quite right. Ms Lane,” he said, addressing LL who was still emanating fury and rage. "You're in another universe. I - I brought - Miss - uh - Zara here - to talk with her... we've ... ah - we've learned some interesting things about your world and - we wanted to see if our - theories were correct -"

LL cast a venomous eye at the two Kryptonian men.

"There are two too many Kal-Els in this world,” she hissed, making bold and angry eye contact at the two of them as she spoke. She was far too worked up to notice that they weren't holding themselves threateningly or that they seemed as unsure and bewildered as the man who had brought them here. "If you don't send us back this instant, I swear to you, your life is worth nothing. Or is this some kind of sick Lois Lane zoo you’re trying to form?"

"My ... my - ah - good woman,” he said, trying to not say 'my dear', "I meant only to bring her. You - ah - you jumped in after us."

"To save my friend. You think I’d let you take her without a fight?"

Zara meanwhile was standing stock still as she observed all the people in the room. The presence of two Kal-Els was upsetting to her, but she kept herself under control.

"Who are these people,” she asked Herb.

"You may remember... the other Lois," he said, pointing at Lois. "You helped me rescue her from - that awful..."

"That was you," Zara asked Lois, noting that the other woman looked orders of magnitude better now that she was back in her own world. Furthermore, the woman was standing near what looked like two Kal-Els without displaying any signs of being a prisoner.

"Yes. That was me," she said, refusing to let her terror overtake her at being in the presence of one
who had witnessed her suffering. "I am grateful to you for helping me escape."

"It is my doing that you suffered," said Zara. "Kal-El is my husband. His actions are as much my responsibility as his, under our customs."

She eyed both Kal-Els warily as she spoke. They both seemed highly discomfited by LL and her presence, but neither had spoken since one of them had argued with Herb about the time window.

"Both of you go by the name Kal-El," she asked them carefully.

"Both of us were born with that name."

"You don't answer to it?"

"We both were raised on earth. Different universes - dimensions - whatever. Herb understands all that... but both of us came here after Krypton exploded. Our parents sent us here to avoid being killed. We both landed on earth as very young children - and were adopted by Jonathan and Martha Kent."

LL hissed as she heard the names.

"That seems unlikely," she spat out, knowing how deeply the Kents hated Kryptonians.

"Why do you say that?"

LL refused to answer. To give information about her comrades was a number one sin in her book.

"Well... it's the truth," said Kent carefully, finally breaking the stony silence. "I suppose Herb could take you back to my home universe to meet my parents if you wanted proof."

"What happened to them in this world," she asked the quiet Kal-El.

"They died in a car crash," he said. "When I was ten."

"Or... something more sinister, huh? An out of control super-powered -"

"Now wait a minute," said Lane. "That's uncalled for."

Lois flinched as she heard LL verbally abuse her husband and accuse him of killing his parents, but she herself had had similar theories and couldn't blame the other woman for having them. She was grateful to Lane for jumping to Clark's defense.

"Really? Uncalled for. What do you know about anything? This is Kal-El. He's a vicious killer. He'd stop at nothing to get what he wants. Brutality is his drug of choice."

"Lois," said Zara. "They don't seem at all like that. I think we should at least hear what they have to say. The fact that the Lois that was trapped in our world isn't opposed to their presence logically indicates that he may be telling the truth."

"Okay, Spock," Lois said caustically back to her Kryptonian companion. "Let's give it a whirl. Why the hell did you kidnap Zara?"

"We wanted to ask her what Kal-El was like as a child," said Lois.
“What? Why the hell do you need to know that?”

“I met Zara ...” Kent offered nervously. "She indicated that had we grown up in the same world, we would have been friends from childhood due to the marriage pact, which - I'm guessing would have been how it was in your society?"

Zara forced herself not to react with fear. Kal-El terrified her and it was hard to talk to his doppelganger without that same sense of dread.

"If you grew up here, how did you meet her?"

"She came to Earth... looking for me... to - um.... join them, marry her...rule new krypton."

"And what happened? Did they settle here? Are you - ruler of -"

"I only agreed to participate for a short while. My plan was to figure out how to get Zara instated as ruler without needing - a ... man ... to validate her right to lead. Zara and I kept our relationship platonic because neither one of us felt anything ... remotely resembling love for each other," he paused at the reactions - LL scoffing and Zara flinching. "But then.... Nor attempted to invade earth. Trey refused to prosecute - or whatever you call it. I ended up in trouble for treason for supporting Earth and the human race, and finally Earth's armed forces managed to kill Nor. Once he was out of the way, Trey backed off the treason charges, seeing that what Nor had done was clearly wrong, and I was able to talk them into accepting Ching and Zara as the ruling couple."

"You... gave your power to Ching?" Zara's face showed her amazement.

"It was never mine to give. I had no idea they even existed until they came here and I had no desire to be a part of their society."

"Why would you... why be a 'man' when you could be a 'god',” said LL bitterly.

"If he wanted that," said Lane, "He would have approved the invasion of Earth. Then he could have had the powers on both levels."

"But they had weapons to kill you," said LL. "You aren't stupid."

"Seriously," said Lane angrily, “if he wanted to neutralize human threat, he could have. He didn't because he's not that kind of person. You can hate the leader of Krypton in your world all you want for obviously good reason, but lay off of Clark."

LL looked at Lane searchingly

"I'm getting the really repulsive notion that the two of you are together."

Lane glared at her, but said nothing.

"So... Clark - is your name Clark too,” LL asked Clark, her tone dripping with scorn.

"Yes,” he said evenly, not wavering from the intensity and bitter hate in her glare.

"Are you two together," she asked with deceptive calmness, indicating Lois and him.

"We're together," said Lois, suddenly standing up and being heard. "And before you go off on me for that let me tell you that unlike her, I've been to your world, I've suffered - I've been as much a victim as you ever were and I will not stand by and let you denigrate me for my choice. Clark’s a
good man. They both are."

LL glared at Lois, but did not respond. She knew the other woman was right in that she had no right to denigrate her.

"So what did you want to know if Kal-El was a decent child for," she asked, switching tactics.

"We'd like an answer to our question before we answer you," said Kent boldly, noticing how she barely acknowledge his presence.

"I see no harm in answering," said Zara carefully eyeing the other double of her husband. Kal would have reached over and grabbed her roughly for not answering anything he put forth to her. Although earth gave her powers and invulnerability, Kal-El had social power by divine right and he could have her apartments flooded with red radiation at any time to neutralize her threat and hurt her as badly as he could ever hurt a human woman. He had done it before.

"Thank you," said Kent gently, sensing her fear and aversion. The kind of husband Kal-El had been was fairly obvious to him by her reactions and he wanted to minimize her having to deal with him as much as possible.

"He was my friend," Zara said shortly, drawing a gasp from LL. "He was nothing like the man he is now. He was fair, and ethical. He played well with others as a child and he didn't hold his future leadership as something that required compliance to his wishes even then. He never physically dominated or hurt others and he enjoyed competition for what it was - a chance to pit your own will and effort against others. He was a gracious winner and a gracious loser at games of sport or strategy. I always thought he would make a wonderful leader and a good husband."

"What do you think happened along the way," Lane asked her carefully, trying to see if Zara knew anything.

Zara showed confusion and dismay on her face as she continued.

"We were separated at the onset of adolescence. They wouldn't allow us together again until our marriage day. I didn't see him for five years. When I saw him on our wedding day, he radiated menace and power. I was afraid of him but didn't really understand why. I thought perhaps I was just afraid of my new life and my new duties... I - I had no idea - that he had ... become so different."

"A decent man turned into a monster," said Kent.

Zara looked at him searchingly, afraid to agree. Finally, she nodded.

"Yes."

"Did you question that at all," Lane pushed, still not fully trusting that Zara wasn't actually in on it.

"I know that the training for leadership is arduous. I know leaders are taught to be implacable when times require, and we were facing a problem of survival of our species. I know that living on earth was something that my former friend might have thought as giving us an unfair advantage against a people who couldn't hope to stand up against us should we decide to - subvert them... which is exactly what happened. But I know a lot happens on the journey from child to ruler, and in these - desperate times - the training could have been cold and hard enough to - forge a different man from the boy I knew."
"Having never lived through desperate times," said Kent, "to the extent you describe... I have no actual clue if that's right. It seems right that one would be changed, but to go from kind to cruel... seems unlikely."

"Unless they - brainwashed him," said Zara. "A fact that I’ve often considered."

"If they had, could you not restore him in some way," LL asked Zara, beginning to have major questions about this new information. How could her sadistic tormentor ever have been a decent child?

"Kal-El is dangerous and vicious. I have no power or credibility with him. I am simply another woman for him to abuse."

Both Clarks winced at that, and Kent dropped his gaze away from her. He remembered his own ridiculous wedding night with Zara and wondered how awful it would have been to face that other Kal-El instead of an equally recalcitrant Clark.

"Why all these questions," LL snapped at both men. "Other than hurting my friend here with these awful memories, what can you possibly hope to gain?"

There was a long silence and then Herb spoke.

"We have reason to believe that Kal-El is actually a clone of the original. The original is still alive... but we have no idea whether he can be revived - we just know he's somewhere... and he's in pain. He’s suffering."

Both women stared at him in shock.

"How can you possibly know any of this," asked Zara.

Herb used that as an opening to explain what they had found. After a long silence following his explanation, Zara spoke.

"It's possible. It's... highly possible. It explains his personality change. I... don't trust Nor, nor do I trust Trey. They could have masterminded this. Then... I married a clone? I - betrayed my true husband - I committed treason."

"If he's anything like us," Kent said quickly, "He won't see it as that."

She looked at him wildly.

"You're an earth-raised man. You have no idea of our customs and laws -"

He stopped, realizing she was right. His own experiences had taught him that.

"Seems you're as much a victim as he was, anyway," he tried to weigh in.
"We wanted you to know," Clark said. "I'm sure you'll require other methods of validation - but Herb's soul tracker is rock solid technology. If you rescue the original Kal-El, can't you overthrow the existing regime?"

"Sure," said LL. "We'll have it done by next week. No problem."

"I know it's far more dangerous and difficult than what I make it out to be. But it's a chance... it's a chance to liberate Earth."

"Kal-El could just as easily condone the current status quo. It's a case of meet the new boss, same as the old boss. It's not worth the risk."

"Based on what Zara recollects about him," persisted Kent. "That probably isn't going to be the case."

"Really? Because you understand Kryptonian culture so well."

Kent tried not to laugh at the unerring spirit of Lois Lane that had never been broken from this hardened variation of the woman he loved. He wasn’t so much amused as he was enlivened.

"Zara, what do you think," he asked her carefully.

"I think that it’s worth doing," she said. "But without involving the human resistance," she said hastily to LL. "I’d never ask any of you to risk yourselves or the future of your world on this rescue mission."

"Well, congratulations," said LL angrily to the two Kryptonians. "Whether or not you planned this, you’ve managed to doom our world to continued enslavement."

"Where do you even get that," asked Lois, frustrated by her rage.

"Zara and the other sympathetic Kryptonians go on this fools mission. Many of them die. The resistance has no hope of succeeding."

"Or... they save the real Kal-El," said Lane, "And he takes the bad regime out of power and things change for the better. I am absolutely positive that he would not condone this kind of treatment of another species."

"Really?"

"I know two different variations of him that give me that complete confidence."

"Are you willing to be your life on it? Because you sure as hell seem willing to be mine."

"Yes," she said. "I am willing to go into your world and do my part to rescue Kal-El and make your world a better place. Absolutely."

"Well," said LL, eying her up and down. "You would make interesting bait."
Chapter 14

A long silence hung in the air and LL looked around, a challenge in her eyes.

“Nobody?” She asked mockingly after she felt it had been silent long enough. She was focusing her gaze on Lane, still very much afraid of looking either Kal-El in the eyes. She talked a good game, but being in this room with them was enough to make her want to lose her lunch, so great was her fear. It took every strength of will in her not to beg forgiveness, and the occasional and gentle feel of Zara's hand on her arm or back made her aware that her companion was aware and very sympathetic. She knew that Zara felt the same way, but maybe she was better at hiding her feelings, or maybe her own strength and powers as well as the fact that her abuse had been sporadic were enough to give her this annoying calmness.

Kent and Clark both detected her fear. They had known about it since the two had joined them in this world. Zara's unease was no secret either and after hearing her talk, they were both sickeningly aware of why this unease existed. To stand in the presence of three women who had been horribly violated by the doppelganger of someone who was identical to them was very hard for the two Kryptonian men.

“Is the test over,” asked Lois calmly and on the heels of LL's words. “Did we pass?”

LL glared at her mutely.

“We are all reporters,” Lois swept the room indicating herself, Lane, and the two Clarks. “We aren't likely to fall for bluster. But points for trying.”

“You think you know me,” hissed LL, “I stopped being like you -well – like her when the Kryptonians invaded my world.” She indicated Lane with some amount of shame at snapping at Lois. Lois's imprisonment had been partially her fault. While she hadn't ordered it herself as part of a resistance cover-up, she had never sanctioned a rescue mission, despite impassioned requests from both Ching and Zara. The risks had always outweighed the obvious fact that it was the morally correct thing to do. It had been Ching who had finally said to her in anger that she had pretty much lost her own humanity. Stung by the fact that a duty bound and seemingly cold alien would feel herself to be inhumane, she had soldiered on. It wasn't until later, when Herb had arrived, that both Kryptonians had told her that even at the risk of alienating themselves from the resistance effort, they were going to rescue Lois. Seeing Lois here made her feel incredibly guilty about not rescuing her sooner even as she knew that given a chance to make choices again, she wouldn't have changed her decision.

“No,” said Lois, unaware of LL's back story as far as she was concerned. “Of course not. I know, as you well know, how this kind of life changes a person. “Lois” she indicated Lane, “and I are quite different. We react very differently in similar situations. But it's not good strategy to make the clone believe that 'Lois Lane' is alive. He may have believed that I was from another universe, but if he sees another one of us, he's going to suspect the more mundane likelihood that we are clones of the original. He may believe that the original still lives, and once that happens, he's going to find you.”

LL shivered at the other woman's words. Of course she knew all this, and of course using Lane as bait would have been a very foolish and pointless act. It had never truly been on the plate in the first place as Zara had tried to say until LL had shot her a desperate warning look requesting her silence.
“You wanted to see how we would react,” Kent spoke. He noticed Clark was actually afraid to speak up first. He knew that Clark's own experience with his Lois had taught him to be careful at how he reacted to her, and he was obviously transferring that care to LL. But Kent was himself, and he and Lane had a very energetic back and forth flow of ideas and opinions. He had managed to risk upsetting Lois a few times by not checking the water before he did things – like the lessons in blocking telepathy, or his reaching out for her during a telepathic sending, but it was his opinion that he shouldn't be afraid of his own instincts they way Clark was. Perhaps the biggest strength he brought to all of this was his calm and easy belief that things would be okay.

He gave a quick thought to the other Kal-El. The one from whom the clone had been fashioned. What would his own experiences be in that world once freed? Would he seek to make reparations? Kent shuddered at the enormous burden that this version of himself would have to deal with. Violated and attacked by those he had trusted, and also at the same time knowing his clone had violated and attacked his wife as well as countless humans. He shuddered again, remembering that his own clone had believed 'might is right' and could well have done far worse under those beliefs. In fact it was the clone in this present world had actually tried to force himself on Lois. He knew Clark had dealt with fallout after the clone incident from the general public. Although they knew it hadn't been him, the clone's behavior, as well as Lois's earlier anti-Kryptonian articles had amplified the general fear that people generally felt around Clark when they allowed themselves to think how dangerous he could be if he decided to stop being benign. Once again, Kent silently thanked whatever was out there that gave him such a comparatively easy existence.

LL flinched at his voice, but looked at him challengingly.

“But you knew I was bluffing? So I acquired no actual data.”

“You saw that we don't leap to conclusions or get easily goaded into rebuttal,” said Lane. “We aren't stupid, I suppose, is the data point that you acquired.”

“What would you do to protect her,” asked Zara intently, looking at Kent. “Would you hurt someone?”

“That's an open ended and difficult hypothetical question. In the pure abstract, I'd lay down my life, but nobody else's. I'd like to say I wouldn't hurt anyone, but who's to know. What defines 'hurt'? Have I burned guns in hands, causing pain, to avoid people getting shot... yes, I have – but I prefer not to and that's only when I think it's the only way.”

“Neither of these men are thought to be dangerous by the world at large. And in order for that to be true, they have had to be fairly consistent with helping and never hurting. You know public opinion and how any one slip up would be magnified to world-wide threat.”

“I only have your word for it,Lois,” LL said to Lois.

“I think you know I'm not lying,” she challenged LL as she let her gaze remain even and calm. “You don't like us. I'm aware of that. Clark and Clark are the last people you want to be in the room with right now, let alone allow into your efforts. You will have to work with us and strategize with people who remind you of your worst nightmare. You will have to break all your old ingrained reactions with them – like learning to make steady eye contact, although I have to say you've done amazingly well with that. It took me a long time before I could talk to Clark without feeling like I was going to completely dissolve into panic.”

Clark winced at that, and this was noted by both LL and Zara. If this was an act, it was good.

“I need to stop the clone,” said Lois, filling in the continued silence. “I'm getting periodic sendings
from either Kal-El, or the clone... and it's ruining my life. I would rather risk facing him again than having to endure a lifetime of these sendings.” Unspoken in those words were that she would rather die than live as she was. “So whether you work with us or not, we will go into your world and we will mount a rescue mission on the original. Zara's words have assured me at least that the Kal-El in your world is probably more like these two guys than not, no matter what world he was raised on. Zara, you yourself aren't exactly world-conqueror material,” she said very calmly and carefully.

Zara paled.

“I have no desire to behave such,” she said quietly. “I want to lead my people and restore our collective honor.”

“Yes. Because now you're no better than a gang of thugs,” said Lois. “I'm sure it rankled to see my abuse and not do anything about it. I know your personal sense of honor and duty was in conflict with watching someone powerless and helpless repeatedly be abused by someone who so easily could kill her.”

Both Zara and LL paled instantly and Lois knew she had struck a nerve. From the tension in the room, she knew both Kryptonian men were upset by her words as well, but they held it together well.

“We need ground rules,” growled LL. “You have to remember, I'm in charge.”

“I won't say that we aren't going to create conflict,” said Clark, finally speaking up. “None of us are militarily minded, so the whole 'following orders' thing probably isn't going to work. But we won't assume we know better,” he promised, frustrated that she wasn't even looking at him.

“Can you promise their good behavior,” she asked him, her eyes fixed on a wall. It would have been rude and dismissive if the men didn't know of her past. Clark knew it was a mix of fear and disdain that caused her to behave this way.

“I'd vouch for us,” he said, indicating the group. “We aren't ill intentioned. We mean well and we want to help. We are highly motivated to help Lois. I love her. I think they do too. And we also are collectively appalled at the conditions in your world. All together, we want your world to be free, and we know that our experience in this type of thing is very limited compared to yours.”

“Your aid is at my disposal,” she hissed. “No running off and doing heroics. You may have to see and endure the suffering of others in order to keep the truth of your existence a secret, as you are valuable only if Lord Kal doesn't know of your existence. As soon as he knows that there are two doppelgangers with his abilities in our world, you can well believe he will pursue you with a single-mindedness. The same goes for you two,” she indicated Lois. “While the two Kal-Els are obviously extra fire power, you two are virtually useless. Value detraction as opposed to value-add.”

“Mostly I agree,” said Lane. “But having us around to … “

“Shill?”

“What?”

“Shill for them. Like pretending to be a customer when you actually are part of the company who makes a product.”

“I know what 'shill' means. I just don't -”
“We prop them up by our presence,” said Lois to Lane. “Our acceptance of both Kal-ElS gives creden
cence to the fact that they aren't dangerous, even if we ourselves won't yet have much
credibility.”

“You will,” said Zara to Lois. “Once people learn that you were the one in our world. But you,” she
looked at Lane, “might simply be an object of scorn. Believe me when I tell you, the resistance
hates Kryptonians in general. Ching and I are feared and barely tolerated. It's only Lois's
acceptance of our help that enables us to be a part of this.”

“You bring more to the table than they do,” growled LL.

“And you see that,” said Zara. “It took some doing for us to convince you, and you are very
logical.”

LL didn't even try to argue. She just gazed wordlessly at her unlikely friend and ally.

“Lois here has – credibility. She has suffered, and she has been an effective leader. Her own trials
have turned her into something of a legend,” she said, indicating LL. “Her friendship with me is
not considered to be treasonous in any way because everyone knows that Lois hates Kryptonians
and would only trust me if she truly felt that I was trustworthy. Lois doesn't trust many
Kryptonians. Don't think she will work easily with you two,” she told Clark and Kent. “It's likely
she will give off vibes of hatred. It's likely others will pick up on that as well. You will create some
amount of emotional turmoil in our world and you will have to endure much without allowing your
own emotional responses to take over.”

“Then why have them help us,” LL begged Zara to clarify. “Seems like they will harm more than
help just by existing.”

“They look exactly like him – or they could if they tried to emulate him. That's immensely
powerful. While they will upset the general public, they also give off the same body language
emanations that humans do. There is no 'culture clash' as it were.”

Clark flinched, remembering Lois's attempts at self-therapy. She knew what he was thinking and
squeezed his hand gently, reminding him that to her, he didn't look exactly like Lord Kal.

“How do we know it's the right thing to do,” she asked Zara, only daring to appear undecided
because of the great impact of the decision she would make.

“We have to free Kal-El,” Zara said. “One way or the other. It will be easier with more
Kryptonians on our side. It will be easier with these two who are equally motivated. This Kal-El
knows what it's like to deal with someone who fears him for what the other did,” she said, looking
at Clark. “I trust he's learned to hold back his own visceral reactions to fear and hatred that belong
to another man?”

Clark paled at her words, as did Lois. This was bringing back a lot of bad memories for them both.

“Clark endured my attempts at ruining his life with a lot of grace,” said Lois. “He never once asked
me to stop my antil-Clark articles, nor did he ever try to convince me he wasn't a threat. He stayed
out of my way unless absolutely necessary and he let his actions speak for him. And while this
Clark,” she said with a smile at Kent, “doesn't have the same experiences, I believe he is more than
capable of withstanding a lot and not allowing overt hatred of fear to overwhelm him.”

“So you vouch for them,” Zara said. “You trust both of them. Do you trust your own self,” she
said, indicating Lane.
“Yes,” she said without hesitation. “Both of us have historically been likely to explode in the face of things that anger us... but we both have learned to temper that. I trust Lois.”

Lane smiled at her gratefully. She knew compared to both of her doppelgangers, she was a lightweight in terms of life experiences. She knew LL held her in scorn, but to hear Lois speak of her in these terms made her feel good inside.

“This will be very hard. We know that,” said Kent. “We know we might cause more problems initially than we can help resolve. But I accept that you are leader, and I will follow your leadership so long as you don't ask me to hurt people. You are Lois Lane, and I believe that you are well intentioned. I believe as a leader, you are strong and adept.”

“I second that,” said Clark, remembering how his own Lois had launched a long attack against his reputation but had called off her efforts as her commitment to bringing him down waned in the face of the fact that he wasn't living up to her expectations of being a threat.

“You don't know me,” hissed LL, angered and saddened by what they said. It hurt her that they could trust her when she knew she had sunk lower than low on more than one occasion. “I've done things... “

“That, I can believe,” said Kent. “I know your life is different from ours. Your trials and your responsibilities. “We won't always agree. We won't blindly follow if we don't, but we won't assert ourselves over you if we disagree. I can't … convince you of this, you'll just have to take that leap of faith.”

“I have no faith left,” she ground out.

“But I have some,” said Zara. “I recommend they help. The decision, of course, is yours.”
Chapter 15

Displaying a bravado that belied the sheer terror that she was feeling, LL turned to study both Kryptonian versions of the man she hated most in the universe and tamped down the ever present waves of terror that had assaulted her as soon as she had been forced to endure their presence.

She watched them critically, trying to determine if accepting help from them was akin to welcoming two more conquerors into her midst. They seemed harmless, friendly and all too human. There was no trace of Kryptonian body language about them. Nothing that said arrogant, domineering, dangerous. And if Zara felt they could be trusted, it was a strong indicator that they could. If she trusted any Kryptonian, it was Zara. Zara had well earned her trust and her friendship.

Both Kryptonians seemed unnerved by her scrutiny, but they remained fairly calm and steady, returning her gaze with nothing but acceptance and patience.

Of all those here, it was one of her own counterparts who seemed the most aggravated by LL's prolonged scrutiny. The one who hadn't ever been to her world was clearly withholding an irritated outburst. As this thought crossed LL's mind, the Kryptonian who claimed to be married to this version of her, a thought which made LL sick to her stomach, turned to his wife and gave her what looked like an amused half-smile. Was he too picking up on his wife's agitation? She wondered if he would censure her, insisting she to be calm in order to gain a foothold in LL's world. But he didn't. The two shared a look that seemed loving and benevolent before returning their attention to her. Whatever LL might think of these two, their relationship seemed to be on equal footing.

Then chaos broke loose.

The Lois who had suffered in her world and the Clark who was married to the other Lois both seemed to shrink in on themselves as they both put hands to their heads. She, the damaged one, looked at the Kal-El she wasn't married to and choked out words that seemed to come from a place of deep physical pain.

"It's him," Lois cried out to Kent. "Kal-El!"

Kent flinched under his own onslaught, but then his face seemed to relax as he found a quick way to end the attack. He moved quickly, but with human speed, to Lois and gripped her hand in his. LL could see that his grip was gentle, even though his body language was urgent and tense. This other Lois didn't seem to mind the contact, even though she was under an emotional attack from a version of Kal-El who had raped and tortured her.

"Lois," Kent urged her, "You can do this - put up your defenses. You can block him out. You did it before, you can do it now!"

LL saw that Lois's husband was agitated too, but he hadn't moved to help his wife. Instead, the other Lois, the undamaged one moved over to sit next to him, taking his hand in hers and gripping it tightly to comfort him.

There was such weird intimacy between the mismatched couples that a nervous thought ran through her mind. Do they ever swap partners?

The idea made her want to throw up and brought to mind new fears. What if they ever confused her for one of these others. She would have to do something to her appearance to make it vividly clear that she was not one of the ones who would ever accept that kind of relationship with them.
But as the thought came, it went. The contact here between the mixed couples wasn't sexual. It was pure succor and comfort. The Clark trying to help the damaged Lois was talking to her in tones that were soothing and gentle as well as encouraging. And the other Lois had her arm around the damaged one's husband, telling him that Lois was strong and she would overcome this mental assault.

It seemed to last forever, but it really took the place of a few minutes. LL saw her doppelganger come out of the assault and look gratefully at the Kryptonian at her side. She put her other hand on his hand that was already holding hers, and squeezed it.

"Thank you," she told him, her voice and manner heart-felt. There was clearly no game being played here, no forced compliance to a dastardly plan. It was obvious to LL that whatever was going on, these two women trusted and cared for these two Kryptonians and that the feeling was very mutual.

Her heart twisted a little at the kindness that shone from the two Kryptonians. They were handsome men when their faces weren't shaped by haughty arrogance and cruelty, and to see them looking at the women with such love and concern - it was enough to slightly penetrate the bitter cold around her own heart. That kind of love was rare, and the idea that these two had found it with Kal-El seemed inconceivable. Yet the proof was right here.

The damaged Lois looked over at LL sensing her deep turmoil.

LL caught her gaze and let her own gaze soften in appreciation for the horror that her counterpart had endured.

"Are you all right," LL asked Lois, feeling she needed to express her concern out loud.

Lois smiled tiredly back at LL.

"Yeah. I am now. Clark is trying to teach me how to block that sort of thing," she indicated the Kryptonian that wasn't her husband. "But I'm not terribly good at it yet."

Kent shook his head.

"Yeah you are," he said. "You're just too hard on yourself."

LL was taken aback by his use of American english slang. 'Yeah' instead of 'Yes'. It underscored how very human and normal he was under the trappings of having been born on Krypton.

"It takes too long for me to put up the defenses," Lois told him, feeling insecure that she needed his help again. "And without you here, I couldn't have done it."

"You probably could have. But I am here, so why shouldn't I help?"

"I need to learn to do it alone," she fretted.

"Okay, next time, I'll try to stay out of it."

"I wasn't criticizing you," she smiled at him. "I'm glad you helped me out, when it comes down to it."

He nodded with a friendly and accepting smile. He understood the point she was trying to make.

LL felt tears burning under her lids. The idea that these four shared such a warm camaraderie cut
her to the quick. Love and friendship had never come easily to her, and now she felt sure they would never come again.

It didn't so much hurt to watch the Lois and Clark who had never had to deal with Lord Kal. But watching the Lois who had suffered in her own stead share such warm friendship and love with two different variations of Kal-El made her wonder if in fact there wasn't some dim possibility that she and her own world's real Kal-El belonged together. And if that was the case... it simply could never happen. She hated Kal-El - the clone - with every single fiber of her being. And she could barely stand these two, and they were so human - more human than she felt herself. So how she would ever be able to tolerate the real Kal-El in her world - she simply didn't see it being possible. Every single thing about them would make her sick. She had only refrained from completely breaking down by the fact that neither of these two Kal-El's had attempted to come near her. Had they done so, all her bravado would have escaped her and she would have probably had a complete breakdown.

But they had shown compassion, love and tenderness to the other Lois Lane when she was suffering under the onslaught of Lord Kal's sending. And it was this that tipped the scales in their favor. While LL would always find them utterly terrifying to be around, she knew that they had honor and decency and they would commit themselves to freeing her world. She knew this, because she too was Lois Lane, and as sick as the idea made her, they probably would do it for her.
Chapter 16

LL swallowed hard and then cleared her throat, causing all attention to be diverted back to her. Forcing back her fear at being regarded so closely by two Kal-Els, she gave them her decision.

"I - thank you for your offer to help us, and I accept."

The silence following her pronouncement seemed to drag on for a long time. She looked at the Lois that she kept thinking of as the damaged one and saw a rush of emotions cross her face - many of them not positive. She knew this would be a brutal experience for her.

"Lois. You don't have to come," she told her gently. "I will make sure that people know that your husband isn't dangerous."

Lois looked at her with kindness and appreciation, but her gaze told LL that while she appreciated the offer, she knew that LL herself didn't truly accept that either Kal-El wasn't dangerous. She was taking a huge leap of faith to get to this place of accepting their help that was driven by a good first impression as well as a strong need to rid her world of a monster.

"I appreciate it, Lois," she said quietly. "Nonetheless, I will come along. I know it will be ugly and hard at times - but I will do this. I have a very strong desire to see this pretender deposed."

Lois's voice was hard as she finished her statement and LL could hear herself in the other woman. As healed as her doppelganger seemed, there was underlying pain and hatred that would always be there under the surface. Perhaps then, there was hope for her to live and love again one day when this was all over. Just not, as this other had done, with Kal-El. She shuddered violently at the idea, drawing concerned looks from the two Kal-Els.

She shot them both a sharp and venomous look that said very clearly - so clearly they could even hear her in their minds, 'Don't even think about it. I'm not like them. I don't want your careful concern.'

She saw hurt cross both their features, but then they both quickly schooled themselves to calm again. She was impressed, despite herself. At least they were well trained in the art of backing off.

"You have to understand," said Zara, "This will be brutal for you both. You will be hated. People may try to kill you, and you certainly will cause all manner of panicked reactions. Even I upset people - and I've never harmed a single Earther," she said. "Simply being Kryptonian is cause of great upset. Very few earth resistance members can even stand to talk to me. Lois here is pretty much an exception to the general rule."

"Why," blurted out Lois, curious now about their bond.

"Zara brought upon the wrath of Kal-El onto herself," LL said, her voice breaking a little as she recalled it. "She did it for me..."

"It's a story that doesn't need telling," Zara said as she saw the discomfort on the four faces in front of her. "But Lois is a woman of intelligence and honor - and she understood that I truly wanted to help free her and her world from - my - husband."

There was a long silence following those words. Lois wanted to crawl away right now and be alone. Being around LL and Zara was painful as they triggered ugly memories of the past. She shivered a little, wrapping her arms around herself in comfort. Kent looked at her with worry and a
little fear, and Lois smiled at him mirthlessly trying to convey that she would be fine.

Clark of course was fretful about his wife's mental state, but he knew that showing too much concern in the here and now would make her feel weak. He was gratified when she caught his eye after her exchange with Kent, and nodded, letting him know that she was doing all right.

"Should we talk logistics," asked Lane. "How do we even approach this? How do you want to introduce these two to the resistance? Would we live with the other resistance members - or do you all occupy separate premises? The four of us can stick together wherever it is you decide to put us, but would it be awkward and bad if we were around other resistance members? If these two inspire fear and hatred, wouldn't it be better if we all stayed away from the rest of you until needed for planning and execution of plans?"

"These are all excellent questions," said Zara looking with new appreciation for this Lois - the one who had never known Kryptonian cruelty. In her mind, she had somehow thought of this one as the weakest one due to her not having been honed by suffering into the warrior that LL clearly was, but she could see she had underestimated the woman. "We will need to go back and discuss with the others what we have decided here. Should they decide to veto Lois's decision, we will come back and deliver our regrets. But I feel that Lois's persuasiveness will prevail," she said with a small and rare smile at her friend.

"You mean - if Lois can stand to have them around, then ... anyone can," Lane asked without a single amount of irony or flippancy to her tone.

"Lois is not the only one in our midst who has been victimized by Kal-El," said Zara. "Both of you Kal-Els will be faced with women who view you as rapists and men who view you as torturers. You will be assaulted constantly by their emotions of fear and hatred and you will have to put aside your own sense of injustice over being blamed for things you didn't do. Speaking as a Kryptonian, it's essential that you be calm and accepting of whatever they say or do."

"Clark has practice at that," said Lois humorlessly. "I treated him like the enemy for a very long time and he never once showed any anger or frustration of that. I publicly decried him with an article series - turning the tide of popular opinion against him at times, and he withstood it."

Zara nodded. "I'm sure that you did do all that. So your Clark knows what it's like to be around this kind of fear, hatred and mistrust. But you," she looked at Kent. "This will probably be new for you. I'm guessing most people in the world in which you live like you?"

"Whatever negativity my being an alien with nerve-wracking abilities has engendered, I have it pretty easy. But I promise you, I want to help. I won't crack under the pressure and start complaining or yelling at people. I know I have to bear up under it."

"It's more than bearing up. You both seem to be very caring and empathic," said Zara. "You will look into the eyes of people who have been tortured by Kal-El. It will cut you emotionally - to your very soul. I'm telling you this now, because it's really unnerving and upsetting to look at someone and see them react so fearfully to you. For those of us who don't like hurting people, it's very painful - emotionally speaking. So think hard on whether you can handle that, because whatever fear I've dealt with will be nothing in comparison to what you will deal with."

"I don't see that we have a choice," said Clark looking at Kent. "We want your world to be free. We will find ways to cope."

Zara gave them a small smile, seeing in them the man she always believed that her Kal-El would
"I believe you. I won't bring it up again. What I will do is suggest that you find ways to come back to your own world for time to time in order to experience being around people who don't hate you and fear you. I'm not sure how safe that will be... in terms of keeping our enemies out of your universes, but - if it's at all possible..."

"It would be ill-advised to hop between worlds too much," said Herb, "Because of entropy and-"

"Then no gratuitous universe hopping," said Lois quickly, giving Herb an apologetic smile for interrupting him. "I will be fine," she told her friends, "And we'll all stick together. We will make this work."

"I'm am humbled by you," said Zara formally to Lois making her blush in embarrassment. "You are so strong and brave. I know you all have questions and we will come back to answer them. I can tell you that the resistance is scattered, but there are main headquarters that are well hidden despite the Kryptonian ability to hear and see things that are well hidden. You would live in one of these facilities - where Lois herself resides. Your presence in our world should not be too prolonged. We must act quickly and decisively and with the greatest chances of success. That being said, we will all need to spend time together coming up with the best plan for rescuing Kal-El and re-establishing his right to lead my people."

"Do you also live there," asked Lois.

"No," she said softly. "I live with my people. In order not to attract suspicion."

"Isn't that - dangerous," asked Clark. "You stay with him? Won't he know that you know him to be a fake?"

"It is very dangerous. It's unnerving and highly unpleasant to continue to act as his wife, but nonetheless, it's what I have to do."

Identical eyes looked concerned and upset by her words. Unlike LL, Zara was touched by their concern.

"It seems wrong -"

"I know my duty," Zara said firmly. "I will not shirk it. I owe the human race this duty and I will see it through. I can only hope that my memories of the real Kal-El ring true, and that he has become like the two of you. Then perhaps, my duty to my own people - to be his wife and recover from this assault on our very honor - won't be so unpleasant."

Kent looked down, unable to look at her anymore. He and his own world's Zara had never insisted on being intimate with each other as the result of their marriage. The idea that this variation felt it her duty made him feel sick.

"It is our way," Zara told him gently, seeing his distress. "Don't worry about me."

"Well, it's hard not to," Kent said, giving her a disarming smile.

"I know. This is one of many trials. Lois and I are just the first of many victims of Lord Kal-El, and as much as it upsets you to imagine our distress, remember that this is, as Lois likes to say, just the tip of the iceberg."

Kent heard her meaning. She was telling him to basically shape up and deal. Just like his own Zara,
she would put her duty above her own wants, and she expected him to understand that. He nodded at her respectfully. His slight reward was her answering nod, accompanied by a gleam of some sort of respect.
"I'm crazy to be even considering this," Lois burst out as the four of them readied the things they would need to be brought to the other world.

Zara stood silently watching her, guilt eating away at her soul for the harm she brought to this woman. She had remained in this world in order to transport their belongings as well as to begin to develop relationships with the four who were giving up so much to come help her world.

Lane, Kent and Clark ceased their packing activities, activities which the two men could have had done in seconds but had chosen to do at normal speed in order to prepare emotionally for the coming ordeal.

"I'm out of my mind," Lois asserted, stopping and staring at the group. "What the hell am I even thinking? How can I even think for a moment that I can go back there?"

"You don't have to go," said Kent, accompanied by an encouraging nod from Lane. Clark winced at their mishandling of the situation and awaited the fury.

"Of *course* I have to go," she yelled at him. Then she stopped and inhaled deeply. "Look, I'm sorry... I'm not the best company right now."

"Oh, he's used to this from me," said Lane only to get a glare from Lois.

"We are not the same person. Stop acting like we are. "

Lane paled at being at the receiving end of a Mad-Dog Lane salvo and she looked down at the ground feeling ashamed of her trivialization of the other woman's feelings.

"Stop making me feel like it's that easy," she snapped at them. "How could I let you all face this hell without me, when you wouldn't even know about this world if not for me."

"Because we are Kryptonian," said Kent bravely, "And you aren't. Both of you are in grave danger in that other world and should strongly consider staying behind."

"We are hardly useless," snapped Lois angrily.

Zara watched the interplay in fascination. Lois was completely unafraid at yelling at the two Kal-Els. Zara was astounded by this because even she was afraid to make them angry despite the fact that their body language was entirely open and benign. She expected the undamaged Lois to be unafraid, but to see the one who had suffered so much degradation and abuse from their doppelganger's clone be so fearless in her interactions was a testament to the decency of these two Kryptonians.

"Nobody said that," said Clark quietly. "He's worried about the danger and so are you. It's hard for Clark and I to be who we are and not think that you should stay out of harms way. That doesn't mean we are right... it just means we are afraid."

Clark's gentle words diffused some of Lois's anger and she began to feel ashamed at her outburst.

"Yeah. I know. I'm a little out of control right now, guys, and I'm sorry," she said, approaching them to give both Lane and Kent hugs. Another action which caused Zara inward surprise. She wondered how long it had taken before Lois would come within ten feet of Kal-El.
"This could get bad," said Lois softly. "There are no guarantees. If we get captured -" she trailed off as she looked at Lane. "You know what will happen."

"I know," said Lane, nodding her understanding. "I do understand that."

"Oh, but you don't," she groaned out her frustration and fear. "You can't. No offense, Lois, but how could you possibly know or understand without living it? What if the resistance sell us out? What if Ching sells one of us out again to keep you safe," Lois rounded on Zara angrily. "He did it to me... what's to stop him from doing it again? What if he does it to her?"

Both Clarks had the same expression of determination fear and anger and if it wasn't so serious, Lois might find it funny.

"I'll die before I let any harm come to you," Clark said to Lois, "Or her," he looked at Lane. "I suspect you feel the same," he said to Kent.

Kent looked at him with his own steely determination and gave a short nod. He had come up against Kryptonians before and his fear of the situation was rising exponentially. If only the women would stay behind.

"What if the resistance neutralizes you first? This whole thing could be a trap."

"I swear to you," said Zara, breaking her long silence. "I will die before I let any of you fall into that kind of danger."

"And we have your word on it," Lois said sarcastically.

Zara looked away from the woman who's suffering she felt directly responsible for. How many times had she seen Lois suffering and done nothing?

"I realize that counts for nothing," she admitted softly. "I hate Kal-El's clone as much as anyone," she added. "I will see him dead."

The words left a chill in both men's hearts.

"You do know we won't kill anyone... right?"

Kent shot a sharp look at his doppelganger as he remembered how close he had come to killing Lord Nor.

"Clark, that kind of line in the sand is going to be hard to draw. If it comes down to killing him or letting him kill..."

"I am not a killer. Last I checked, neither were you. Or did that change?"

Kent paled at Clark's words.

"I know you're angry, but stop taking it out on me," he snapped back.

Zara began to feel queasy with fear at their obvious anger, and she shot a quick look at both Loises. Neither woman seemed even remotely upset about the altercation at hand. Not even the damaged one.

"Clark didn't kill anyone," Lane told Clark, a sharp tone to her voice letting him know she didn't appreciate him hurting her husband. "In fact he almost died as the result of his convictions."
"I came close," admitted Kent. "In that last battle. If the kryptonite hadn't been deployed, I probably would have."

"You would not -"

"Lois, I would have. I'd talked myself into it. He was Kryptonian like me, so I told myself it wasn't anything like hurting someone from this world. I felt that I had no choice. The elders were in his corner, and even though Zara and Ching knew him to be a dangerous freak, they had little support. We were being enslaved and they would have killed all of us who opposed that. In the end, our earth would have been overtaken. I finally realized that my only choice was to end his life."

Clark listened to his 'brother' talk understanding how deeply his pain ran. He knew his own convictions and recognized how hard it had been for Kent to have reached that conclusion and to be speaking of it so honestly now - especially in front of both Loises.

"Hey look," he said to Kent. "I'm sorry. That had to have been a really hard situation to be in. I'm sorry I threw it at you like that. I obviously didn't understand."

"But you will," said Zara, recovering her voice after having been waiting so fearfully for something ugly to erupt.

Clark looked in her direction. He was avoiding keeping her in his sights because he could feel her fear of being in his presence - his and Kent's. It emanated her in waves at times and it made him think of the early days with Lois.

"I know," he said quietly. "It's easy to take a high ground when you never actually have to face the decision."

"Well - you did with Luthor. Kind of. He was a pretty dangerous and unstoppable threat."

"But there was never a choice. It was never a question of killing him. Ever. I'm guessing that was true for you."

He voiced this as a strong assertion and not a question. He knew Kent would never hurt a human being.

"I might have killed him," said Lane angrily.

"Hey, I already had to deal with Jail-Bird Lane once before, don't make me do it again."

"Very funny."

"Let's finish packing," Lois interrupted wearily. "The sooner we do this, the sooner it's over."

There was a long pause.

"No. I'm not sure," she answered the unspoken question. "But I suppose I just have to deal. Obviously we have to do this, and obviously you aren't going without me. But let me tell you this," she said to Zara, fixing her with a steely resolute glare. "Ching better stay the hell away from me. I don't want to hear any half-baked excuses. If he comes within ten feet of me, I won't be held responsible for my actions."

Zara let the shame she felt fill her returned gaze.

"I promise you, Lois. I will vouch for him. We will outfit you with red-radiation weapons so you
can defend yourself against Kryptonians. Obviously we Kryptonians move very very fast and can disarm you pretty easily, but there are a lot of fail-safes built into the resistance complex which make it really hard for any of us to go rogue. Lois can explain this to you when you come to our world.”
Chapter 18

The four of them waited nervously for LL and Zara to arrive to escort them to their world. They would be transported directly into a room populated by a small group of seasoned resistance fighters.

The resistance members would have weapons that could incapacitate Kryptonians. These weapons emitted red-radiation, not unlike the Kryptonian sun, and would render any Kryptonian powerless. Zara herself had provided the resistance with these weapons when she had initially joined their efforts. She had even allowed them to use these weapons against her to prove to themselves that they truly could incapacitate her. As a result of all this, she was treated as a trusted member of the resistance.

The world wavered around them and the two Loises and the two Clarks found themselves in a room facing a dozen resistance fighters.

Lois immediately felt sick and began to feel strong prickles of terror that threatened to overwhelm and engulf her. Her breathing became harsh and her three companions turned worried gazes her way. She closed her eyes and waved them off with a gesture.

"I'm fine," she gasped, "I'm just a little unnerved."

"Jesus," one of the resistance members swore. "You weren't kidding."

All eyes were fixed in horror and fear on the two Kryptonian men.

"Dead ringers," said a cold female voice. Kent and Clark looked at the woman who had spoken and were aghast to see her physical recoil at their sudden attention. She fingered her weapon nervously.

They quickly averted their gazes, unwilling to make anyone unnecessarily uneasy.

LL stepped boldly up to the four and handed the two women weapons.

"We only arm Humans," she told the two Clarks coldly. "You don't need these to take down a Kryptonian."

Lois held her weapon gingerly. Then she looked into LL's eyes, her eyes narrowing in distress.

"Don't tell me you don't want it," LL goaded her with a hint of scorn in her voice.

"No. I want it. Do we need training on it, or can you talk me through it?"

LL grinned at her.

"That's a good girl," she said.

"Don't patronize me, Lois," Lois said to her, her voice equally hard. "Just show me what I need to do. Is Ching around? Perhaps I can test it on him."

"I'm sure we can round him up for you," LL retorted. "Unless you want to attempt a little friendly fire? Would you two volunteer -"

"No way in hell," said Lane angrily. "I'm all about being armed against the bad guys, but if anyone
thinks they're attacking these two, they have another thought coming."

LL flickered her eyes dismissively over the woman she had once been and shook her head. "You never can tell when someone's joking, now, can you? And what about Tweedle dumb and Tweedle dumber? Cat got your tongues?"

Clark and Kent knew that LL was asserting her muscle in order to show that she could provoke them and not be punished. "We came here to overthrow the clone," said Kent, knowing that Clark was far more upset about being here than he was. "As soon as you've decided that 'hazing time' is over, how about we work on that?"

LL raised her eyebrows at him, impressed at how he stood up for himself without being in any way threatening or demanding. "No pleasantries? How Kryptonian."

Clark shrugged, trying to act calm despite his raging emotions at being in this vile place. "You want us out of here as soon as possible. I know I'm not exactly eager for a prolonged stay. If you have a plan that you are willing to share, how about starting with that?"

LL smirked despite herself. All their 'demands' were phrased as questions. Clever of them, she could hardly smack them down for offering suggestions. "You are here in the world where the woman you love was forced to endure some horrific experiences, and you act like it's nothing," she taunted him.

"Stop it," snapped Lois. "Don't use me in your sick little game. I won't allow it!"

Shame flooded LL. Lois was right. She was using Lois's imprisonment to hurt Kal-El. While she didn't regret hurting the alien, she certainly had no right hurting Lois.

"I'm sorry," LL said to Lois sincerely. "I'm a little wound up right now. And I obviously have my issues."

"As do we all," said Lois, holding out her hand for LL to shake. "I forgive you, but I would like you to understand that my coming here went against every single ounce of my better judgment. I came here because I couldn't bear for them to endure this experience alone. I *desperately* don't want to be here. But we have to make things right here. Can you put aside your desire to hurt them and work with us to take down the regime?"

LL fought against her anger at the censure. Despite it being well-deserved, she had every right to hate these two.

"I understand," Lois continued. "I was filled with hate when I came home. It took me a long time to see who he really was, I was so blinded by visions of Lord Kal."

LL looked quickly over at Clark. She saw the flicker of something in his eyes- a kind of misery which spoke to her of a long and painful struggle, and she looked away, hating that in that moment she felt a surge of pity for him. He was the most powerful man in his world. He didn't need her sympathy. The broken humans who had suffered and then continued to live, to remember the horrors of their attacks, were the ones who needed her sympathy and her anger.
"You can't understand me," she snarled. "Our lives may have been similar, but you escaped away from it. You're free, while we are all still suffering. And I can't understand you. You married him."

"Yes. I did," Lois said, ignoring the obvious disgust and shock from the gathered humans. "I married the most amazing selfless and kind person I've ever met. And Lois and I aren't here to defend our choices. And neither Clark needs to defend their existence to you either. We came here to help. Help is what we want to do. If you want us to go, we will. Just say it. Otherwise, let us help."

"Now I see why you wanted them along," LL said to Clark, trying to keep the venom out.

"We didn't want them to come," said Kent. "We thought it was too dangerous."

"And yet, they are here."

Both men were silent. She was goading them again and they decided not to play.

"All right," she said to the group. "I don't want you here, but I recognize that if you truly are on our side - you will help us immeasurably. The two of you have the distinct advantage of being able to masquerade as Lord Kal and go places where even our Kryptonian allies can't go."

Clark paled at her words, but remained silent.

"I met Kryptonians back home," Kent said. "They came to earth looking for me to help them block Nor's rise to power in their society. Zara was one of them and she frequently offered forth criticism of how I was too human to gain credibility with the Kryptonian elders. If you want either of us to try to fool anyone, we will need coaching on how to act. It's not something we can just do."

Clark winced, not even able to hide his feelings. He remembered bleakly the time that Lois had wanted him to role-play Kal-El so she could perform some ill-advised aversion self-therapy.

LL nodded, biting back the urge to say something hostile and bigoted. She kept having to remind herself not to erupt at them because she found herself unafraid in their presence. As much as she hated to admit it, neither men emanated a single ounce of menace and it bothered her. If they looked so much like Lord Kal, they should be somewhat intimidating instead of carrying themselves as humans.

"My doppelganger was correct," said Zara, who had been there silently all this time. "You will need instruction."

"So is that the plan," asked Clark. "Infiltrate the - whatever they call it? Headquarters?"

"You sound like a bad television show," LL said unable to stop herself. "This is real life, Kal-El. You better take it seriously."

"I do take it seriously, Lois," he told her, using her name, as she had used his. "I apologize if I sound naive. Obviously we have a lot to learn."

She flinched at his use of her name and he instantly regretted trying to make her feel as off kilter as she was making him by calling him Kal-El.

"First on the plan is to introduce you to more of the resistance. If you are going to work with us, people have to get used to seeing you around. Are you up for that?"

Clark and Kent looked at each other.
"No. But let's do it anyway," said Kent.
Chapter 19

All talking ceased when the four of them entered a room containing a larger subset of the resistance.

Clark and Kent both picked up on the intense fear in the room and it made them feel sick.

"So these are them," a sickeningly familiar voice rang out.

Lex Luthor stepped forward and eyed the group with an insouciance that had to be faked. "Amazing likenesses. Let's hope it's just skin deep?"

"We aren't dangerous megalomaniacs, if that's what you mean," said Kent, unable to resist, mentally cursing himself at the sharp inhalations his outburst elicited. He had to remind himself forcibly that he wasn't perceived as 'Clark Kent, mostly harmless' but rather, Kal-El, proven to be deadly.

Lex's eyes narrowed at his words, feeling as if they had been directly addressed to him.

"I take it there's some hidden meaning in your words," Lex asked Kent, his eyes cold and unflinching. "Do tell?"

Lex felt a surge of satisfaction as the Kryptonian seemed to already be regretting his outburst. The Kryptonian looked at his companions uneasily and one of the Lois Lane's smiled at him before answering Lex's question.

"The four of us have had bad experiences with your doppelgangers," said Lane. "Let's just say we're feeling a little discomfited by your presence."

"Really, All four of you?" he asked with sarcastic disbelief. "Kryptonians afraid of my doppelgangers?"

"Well, they *are* dangerous megalomaniacs," said Clark, unable to help himself even though he knew he shouldn't be engaging in battle. "But then again, those are alternate universes."

"Quite. I hope you give me the same benefit of the doubt I'm giving you. Otherwise I imagine we're going to have difficulty working together."

"We're here to help end the invasion," said Kent. "Our feelings about who you are in different worlds has no bearing on anything here. Sorry to have even brought it up."

"So you forgive me my doppelgangers if I forgive you yours?"

"Their doppelganger here is in stasis," said Zara quietly.

"Oh. So you all say. I find it hard to believe that he could be so stupid to have let himself be trapped in such a way."

Zara didn't react to his insult.

"But the evidence suggests that he's the real deal," said Lane in confusion. "We're here to free him and end the invasion that way - if you aren't all on board with that idea, why are we even here?"

"There's a - creature - in stasis," said Lex smoohtly. "It could be a clone. I personally am not so
naive as to think freeing him will make any difference at all to our situation."

"I've explained to Lex the truth," said Zara, "But I'm afraid i have little credibility with him."

"Zara, you are a member of the invading alien force that's enslaved my people," Lex rebutted, his tone hard. "I accept that you hate whatever version of Kal-El you married enough to take him out, but honestly, I don't trust you one bit. You know that."

"I know it. And I accept it. I deserve it. Nonetheless, the plan is to resuscitate the man in stasis so he can rightfully claim his throne and exile the usurper into the phantom zone. If you disagree with this plan and have no intention of helping carry it out, we either need a new plan, or we need to talk about it more."

"I say we kill both Kal-Els. Oh. Not you two," he said looking at the two in the room with barely disguised disdain. He could see that the four interlopers were afraid of him and he relished it. After years of enslavement by this wretched species, it felt good to make a few of them watch their backs.

"If the man in stasis is truly Kal-El," said LL harshly, "Then he is our only shot at removing the clone from power. I believe he is Kal-El. You agreed to go along with this plan, Lex."

"And I intend to. But I'm just making a point that we shouldn't discount getting rid of the real Kal-El either. Cut off the head, and the snake dies."

"I would advise against that," said Zara calmly. "You will bring my people's wrath in full force if you kill their rightful leader."

"And you? Zara, would I gain your wrath as well? Killing your childhood friend? Your rightful mate?"

"My loyalty is to the resistance," she said, still holding her emotions in check. "I cannot fend them all off. In the end they would destroy you - taking me down as well. I will not turn on you, and neither with Kal-El. The man in stasis was a good man once, and I believe he still is. He would never condone what's been done here. I'm sure that's why he was disposed of in this way - because he refused to consider such an action."

"If you sense anything from him that refutes your beliefs, what will you do," Lex asked her, his entire focus on her.

"I will kill him."

They both gazed at each other stoically for a few long moments.

"We've already hashed this out, Lex. Are you with us or not? We can't afford dissenters at this point," said LL in a hard tone.

"Oh, I'm with you my dear," he said making both Lane and Lois shudder, "I trust you, of course. Nobody hates them more than you."

"Then enough of this, and let's get down to planning."
Zara escorted the four back to their living quarters. They were all silent; lost in their own thoughts as they each fretted about the plan.

The plan was for both men to learn how to become indistinguishable from the self-styled Lord Kal-El. They would study recordings of him and be tutored by Kryptonian resistance members well versed in how Lord Kal-El acted and carried himself down to the very ugly last detail.

Then the resistance would have the means to infiltrate the stasis chamber, given that the clone did regularly visit it's progenitor. The infiltrator would not arouse suspicion by visiting the chamber and would be able to gather intelligence on how to free the real Kal-El from his confinement.

The plan sounded reasonable, but there were many horrifying components to it and all involved were deeply troubled.

The four doppelgangers were troubled by the idea that the two Clarks would have to behave in a way that would horrify just about everyone, Lois being the one most troubling to both men. And the resistance members had openly expressed their fear about having to bear any kind of witness to their 'act', given that many of them had been directly harmed by Lord Kal-El.

Secretly, the resistance members feared that both men would gain an appetite for how it felt to be like Lord Kal-El and to evoke fear in everyone who crossed their paths. What if once they tried it, they found that they liked that feeling of absolute power and control? Zara had pointed out that they already had the potential for feeling that way and had never shown any interest in pursuing that kind of behavior, but still the fear remained.

Despite all the fears, the plan had a high probability for success because Kal-El wouldn't have to explain his presence in the chamber and might even be able to demand time alone with his progenitor giving him the opportunity to free this world's Kal-El unnoticed. That opportunity had to be taken, no matter what the risk.

And now, the four doppelgangers brooded over the heavy task ahead, all of them afraid to talk to each other about their deepest fears.

Zara felt herself overwhelmed with gratitude, sympathy and guilt for what they were going through and she wasn't afraid to voice it.

"We can't thank you enough," she told them quietly. "I'm sorry for all the pain you're going to feel doing this."

"I didn't want to ask this in front of the rest of them," said Clark, "But is it possible for us to avoid most people while we do this?"

"You mean avoid me," said Lois, facing him directly.

"Yes. And others too," said Kent. "Anyone who's dealt with this creep doesn't need to watch us attempt to fool people into thinking we're him. I know for a fact I won't be able to do it with an audience of people that I know have been traumatized by the bastard."

"Including me," Zara asked him trying to ascertain how difficult a job training these two would be.

Kent's expression radiated sorrow as he looked at this woman who had suffered so much.
"Obviously we can't avoid you while in character," he said. "You're the one Kryptonian resistance member who knows the most about how he behaves. I'm very sorry for any pain you experience during all of this."

She gave him a small smile.

"It's not for you to apologize. You did nothing wrong. You're the one who's hurting and we're the ones hurting you. I just wanted to know if you would balk at working with me."

"Try to imagine you're actors. Actors sometimes have to act out terrible things," said Lois softly.

"Many of them suffer as a result," said Lane. "I know I've interviewed actors who have been suicidal after undertaking certain roles. I can't imagine it's as easy as saying 'it's all pretend'."

"Of course not," Lois said without any rancor. "I didn't mean to imply that I thought it was. I'll stay out of the way when you're 'in character'," she said, unable to even mention Lord Kal-El's name. "Under the condition that you promise not to worry too much about betraying me by learning to act like him. I know you two well enough to know that's how you see this."

Clark nodded, but his eyes shone with misery. She grabbed his hand lovingly, feeling funny about showing too much affection in front of Zara.

"We can get through this. The sooner we free Kal-El, the sooner this nightmare ends and we go home. I want to be home more than you can imagine. So think about it this way- the faster you learn to do this, the quicker you are to getting me what I most want. It's a heroic thing you've signed on for even if it feels horrific."

Kent shook his head and gave her a smile that said he knew exactly what she was doing.

"Laugh all you want, but it's true. So stop wallowing in guilt already because you're bringing the rest of us down. It's unproductive."

"Yeah. What she said," said Lane, her eyes flashing with her support for the two men. "And anyone who tries to put you down for this can deal with me."

"Well, they're entitled to how the feel," said Clark. "Could I say I'd feel any different in their shoes?"

"Okay. But nobody mess with my boys."

"Your *boys*," asked Lois, lifting her eyebrow. "Aren't they men? And isn't one of them mine?"

Lane gave her a grin. "I guess I can share."

Zara watched the two women try to ease the tension by alternately scolding and teasing the two men. This was a pattern of behavior she'd seen repeatedly amongst the four of them. They seemed perfectly in tune to each other and well able to talk each other out of incipient despair. She saw how much a leader Lois Lane truly was in all three variations, and as far as the two Kal-Els they each would have done an admirable job leading the new Kryptonians. Being around the two men gave her hope for who her true mate would have turned out to be and could even still turn out to be.

"I will take leave of you all now," she said softly breaking into the tightly bound camaraderie. She felt like an outsider, as she did most of the time, but the love that existed between these four made her yearn for the love she had never been able to have with Ching.
"Where will you go," asked Clark, concerned by the darkness in her gaze.

"I have to go to my home. To him."

"You go back every night?"

"I don't spend so much time here as you might think. It would be suspicious if I was never around."

Lois nodded, unaware she was doing it. She had seen a lot of Zara during her imprisonment.

"Is it safe for you," pressed Clark, unable to stop being worried for her.

"My well being can't concern you," she reminded him, saddened by her own harsh tone, but unable to deal with his protectiveness right now.

"It does concern us," said Kent.

"I know that you need me to -"

"No. It concerns us that you have to go back home to that creature," said Lane. "We hate the idea of it and it *is* okay for someone to worry about you."

"I have a duty that's owed to earth. I cannot afford to worry about my own well being. Do not fret for me, Lois. I will be okay."

They all had questions for her - questions about her life, and what she could expect from her interactions with the clone. Did he leave her alone, or was she forced to deal with his physical cruelty? But these were questions that they knew they couldn't ask and so they graciously bade her farewell.

Zara left feeling heavy in her heart. Each exposure to the Clarks left her longing for both her intended mate and her bodyguard Ching. She began to wonder about what the future held for her - for the first time she began to see a potential for a kind of contentment. Would she still be Kal-El's wife having been bound to him at birth? Or would she somehow be able to live out her days with the man she loved? She shook her head, angry with herself. Despite what they said to her, she couldn't be self-indulgent. Not even in her dreams.
Both men stood outside the room where they would be meeting with the Kryptonians tasked with teaching them how to emulate Lord Kal-El.

Each could sense the other's lack of ease, but neither men had any desire to give voice to these feelings right now.

"Okay," said Clark, breaking the long silence between them, before opening the door. "Ready for this?"

"I'll never be ready for this. But let's get it over with."

They entered the room and looked around at the Kryptonians gathered for the task. Both men felt relief at not sensing the thick and anxious fear that the humans radiated whenever they were around, but the Kryptonians were clearly thrown by their stark resemblance to their vicious leader and they could sense that turmoil.

"Greetings to you both," said Zara, who was now a source of familiar comfort to them both. They both gave her identical smiles that radiated warmth and relief. In addition to enjoying the comfort of seeing a familiar face, they were relieved to see that Zara seemed to be well. Since knowing she returned 'home' daily, they both fretted for her well-being. Both men eyed her carefully looking for signs of abuse. Her returned gaze was even and calm and they finally looked at each other, feeling a bit foolish about how out of place they felt with their own people.

"Ah, and greetings to you," said Clark awkwardly. He felt very much a stranger amongst these people. Kent, at least, had interacted with Kryptonians in his universe.

"Let me make you all known to each other," Zara said politely as she began to introduce the two of them to the rest of the group. No hands were shaken and both of them had to restrain the urge to stick out their hands as they were introduced around.

"Perhaps you might tell us about yourselves," one of the women said. "Zara tells us you were both raised on earth?"

"We were sent to earth as infants," said Kent looking to Clark to see if it was okay to take point. Clark nodded and indicated he should continue. "Obviously we were raised on earth by earth parents," he said flashing his typical disarming grin. "I have dual identities where I live, so I can live much of my life as if I wasn't an alien. Unfortunately the same can't be said for my friend here. But he manages all right."

"And you are both married to earth women? Doppelgangers to Lois Lane?"

"Yes."

"But - one of those women endured years of abuse at the hands of Lord Kal. How is it possible she got past your resemblance to her abuser?"

Clark turned pale and tried to beat back the rage he felt at her words - rage that was directed at Lord Kal-El and not the people in this room.

His questioner seemed to stiffen and Clark realized that even to his own kind, his rage was
naturally going to be alarming.

Clark forced himself to relax and then shook his head to show his own confusion.

"I have no idea," he said. "She hated me for a long time, and then everything began to change. I loved her the moment I saw her, but I never planned on telling her until she made the first move."

"You are physically identical to the man who abused her, and yet she fell in love with you. I guess your obvious human mannerisms created a distinction in her mind, but to actually marry you and therefore enter into intimacy with you - it speaks well of who you are that she could ever do that."

Clark reddened, deeply embarrassed now by the conversation.

"I was just profoundly lucky," he said quietly. "I wake up every day grateful for her presence in my life."

"I'm glad she found a measure of peace," the woman responded. "After such experiences - that isn't always possible." Her own face seemed to darken. "Unfortunately to our task, you both *are* very human. The way you walk, talk, and hold yourselves - if we didn't know who you were, we would think you were human."

"Absolutely," said Kent. "I interacted with New Krypton back home, and I didn't fit in at all. I didn't want to, actually. I found their society to be cold, patriarchal and sexist."

"You believe that men and women are social and political equals?"

"Yes," both men said simultaneously.

Kent continued.

"I didn't like the concept of inherited power, either. Back in my world, Lord Nor was a psychotic freak... yet he very nearly became ruler of new Krypton. Zara was a far better choice, and she clearly was in love with Ching. It made little sense to me that she would have to marry a killer, rather than the man she loved just because of who was born to whom."

"Yet if your region is like it was here before our incursion, this democratic system doesn't work so well either. Without absolute authority there is so much strife and back-stabbing."

"Your society led to a situation where a good man is in stasis while a mad man who looks like him runs things," said Clark in disbelief. "How is *that* not back-stabbing?"

The Kryptonian who had posed the question smiled unbidden.

"You are right. I just wanted to see how you would react."

Clark and Kent were both discomfited by her words.

She saw the looks in their eyes and realized she might have offended them.

"I apologize for any offense given. We wanted to try to understand you better before we proceed. I wanted to see where your loyalties truly lie."

"Can I ask you why you defected from your society," Kent rebutted to his interrogator. She paled and for the first time, he saw how young and pretty she was. She had carried herself with a stern authority that made her seem older.
"I was once a concubine," she said, her gaze faraway as she recollected her past. "Born to it. Forced to it by society," she said. "I've had to deal with Lord Kal-El's cruelty first hand. I've also been compelled to aid in the degradation of human females that have appealed to him," she said, her face twisted in distaste. "Choosing to fight for this world's freedom is the same as fighting for my own world's freedom. I don't consider it defection or treason when our leader is a pretender."

Kent looked down as she spoke, ashamed of how he had posed his question.

"We all feel this way," said one of the others. "We may not have been injured in the same way by Lord Kal-El, but we feel he's destroyed our collective honor. We must regain the honor of our people by freeing this world and bringing him to justice."

Clark nodded.

"We understand," he said, knowing he spoke for Kent.

"Good. I know this will be difficult for us all. But difficulty of a task isn't enough to run from it. We can free this world if we do this properly. There can be no room for error."

"Right," Clark said wearily. He exchanged a look with Kent who looked equally depressed.

"Are you both sure you're ready for this," Zara asked them both as she approached. "We will show you our own memories. We will show you recordings - it will not be pleasant."

"We are committed to this cause," said Clark, seeing Kent nod in agreement. "We're ready any time you are."

"Fine. Then we'll spend our time this session going through recordings and memories. How comfortable are you with telepathy," Zara asked briskly, trying to move the proceedings past the awkward beginning.

"Really not a big fan," said Clark. "But whatever. Let's do whatever has to be done. The longer we delay, the more people that get hurt."

"Then I offer my experiences first," said Vina, the former concubine who had first begun to question them.

She reached out a hand to each of the men, inviting them to make contact. Warily they did, each afraid of what she had to share.

She could feel their remorse at forcing her to share unpleasant memories.

"It's okay. I'm not being forced to share this with you. You can let go of your feelings of guilt."

They nodded wordlessly, waiting for the onslaught. When it came, they were both unprepared. Kent had to fight from throwing up barriers, and Clark had to fight from being physically sick.

The images, feelings and memories that she shared were horrific. The fact that she was still sane spoke volumes about her own strength of will. Before coming to earth, Lord Kal-El had abused her horrifically. Once Vina had been strengthened by Earth's yellow sun, Kal-El had used her to aid in the degradation of female slaves. Thankfully Lois had not been one of them, yet it was a small thanks as they witnessed her memories of the abuse of so many human females. The final encounter between Kal-El and Vina had occurred after she had refused to play his sick games any more. He punished her by threatening to kill one of his slaves if she didn't submit to red-radiation treatment. She complied, not wanting the human female to die, and Kal-El had nearly killed her in
the following days. Zara had been the one to rescue Vina and Kal-El never knew that his former concubine had survived. He had killed the human anyway after subjecting Vina to the radiation, and he had forced her to watch.

Kent and Clark both let go of her hands at the same time. They staggered back under the weight of what she had shown them, deeply troubled by her memories.

"Oh god," gasped Clark, trying to regain his sense of momentum.

Kent fought to keep his rage from showing. Clark was much better at that sort of thing due to the circumstances of his life.

"I'm sorry," Vina said, regretting that she had hurt them. She took a step in their direction and the both automatically moved away from her.

"No, I'm sorry," said Clark. "You endured it, so I should be able to bear witness to this without falling apart. I'm sorry. I don't want to draw this out because I can't take it."

"You aren't the only one, buddy," said Kent emotionally. "Could we maybe move on to recordings for now - just until we recover from that?"

"Of course," said Zara, "Let's show you some recordings that give you a sense of his body language in different scenarios."

Kent and Clark both sighed. It was going to be a long session.
Chapter 22

The two men returned back to their quarters clearly depressed over the day's events. They tried to act normal but kept lapsing into heavy silence. Soon the tension amongst the four was so thick that the room felt oppressive and airless.

“Oh, just tell us what happened,” Lane finally demanded. “It's obvious you’ve been through hell and it would be helpful to know what happened.”

Before the men could answer, Lois sprang to her feet and walked away, clearly agitated. She was burning with curiosity – but she was terrified to know all that had gone on behind those closed doors. Had they actually tried to emulate him in the space of the last few hours just a few 100 feet from where they were now? Had they been successful? The idea of either of them behaving like her tormentor sickened and terrified her. Her flight response was kicking in and both men reminded her of Kal-El now more than ever. Every fiber of her being was poised to flee. Her breathing had become labored as she fought to restrain the impending encroachment of panic.

The entire room fell silent while Lane and the two Clarks gave Lois the time she needed to regain control of her senses.

Lois took several deep breaths and practiced relaxation techniques she had learned from Lana. After what felt like an eon, she finally turned back to face the other three.

“I'm all right,” she stated, her body language and voice not inviting further questioning.

Silence fell again and then Kent finally spoke, knowing what Lois wanted to know – and also knowing that he was better suited to say what needed to be said due to not being the man she loved.

“Lois - we never saw anything involving you.”

Lois paled prompting Clark to look at Kent accusingly. Kent doggedly refused to look at his doppelganger. He could feel the other man’s anger radiating and finally he returned his gaze, lifting an eye brow in silent challenge.

Clark's anger faded – he knew that Kent had done the right thing when he answered Lois's unspoken and desperate question. It hurt Clark to see Lois upset, but Kent had done what he had to do.

“Well... so what did happen,” Lois finally asked in a voice that was calm and flat.

Clark stood and began to pace distractedly as he spoke.

“We were subjected to an influx of memories and recordings. Telepathy is a horrible thing.”

“Who was present,” Lois asked, her voice still deadly calm. “Any earthlings?”

“No,” Clark said as he halted his pacing and gave his wife his direct attention. “I can’t imagine - “ he trailed off.

“You’ll have to test your efforts, you know,” she retorted. “You can’t just rely on those who know him - you’ll have to- some of his former victims will have to assess how believable you are.” She shuddered. She knew she could never do it. Memories of her attempt at self therapy loomed large in her mind.
“I don’t see why,” Clark argued, hating the truth in what she said. “There were two Kryptonians present who had been victimized by him. They should be able to give us all the feedback we need.”

“This mission is truly life or death - you know this world's Lois will insist on seeing you – perform.”

“Oh god. I forgot about that,” groaned Kent. “Yeah, she’ll want to - evaluate our credibility... just thinking about it makes me sick.”

“You have to keep reminding yourself that all of what you are doing will free this world if done properly,” said Lane. “Yes, you'll upset people, but they want you to be successful so you can help end his rule.”

“It still feels like a horrific betrayal,” said Kent. “Especially to you,” he said to Lois, waiting to feel Clark's anger in his mind.

“I know,” she responded softly, giving Kent the courtesy of her gaze. “And I’ll be honest with you - knowing you were there, learning to imitate him - it made me angry... at you two. It made me feel helpless, violated and angry. And I'm angry at myself for feeling that way when I know this hurts you too. I feel like my emotions are betraying you and this mission.”

Kent nodded, his expression downcast. Lois couldn’t even bring herself to face Clark after what she had said. If she saw that awful look of bleak desolation in his eyes, she would begin to cry.

“Maybe you three should just be honest with each other about what you feel,” said Lane. “Lois - if you’re hiding your feelings and they’re hiding their guilt - then you all feel badly about what you’re doing without any hope of feeling better. I don't see how all of you wallowing in despair will help.”

Lois fought the urge to snap at her undamaged mirror image. Counting to ten in her mind she realized that Lane was right. Honest discourse was the only way to survive this.

“I won't hide my feelings,” said Lois. “I promise.”

“I promise as well,” Clark said, giving her a look that spoke volumes of how much he loved and respected her.

“So do I,” Kent said. “No matter how awful any of this is.”

Another long and awkward silence filled the room.

“I feel betrayed and angry,” Lois repeated, her voice small and full of her emotional turmoil. “The idea that you both are witnessing his abuse of other women makes me feel violated as though you're seeing what he did to me. Logically I know I've got no reason to be ashamed, but I am ashamed... and I'm so scared that someone will slip in a memory of my abuse. I'm sure Zara is one of the people sharing her memories – and she saw a lot of what I went through.”

After a short pause, Clark broke the silence.

“I can understand that,” he said, thinking of the time that Luthor had him prisoner. “Nobody wants their trauma up on display. You are correct. Zara was there. And she did share her memories... they were really disturbing, but they solely focused on her interactions with that – low-life. We could feel her barriers around things she didn't want to share.”

Lois nodded, tears pricking her eyes. Clark desperately wanted to hold her but held back the
“There was a woman named Vina,” Kent said hesitantly, eyeing Lois carefully. “She... said she knew you.”

Lois gasped, clearly shocked, and Kent regretted his words.

“She’s alive? Thank god for that,” Lois breathed, surprising both men.

“Um... she said - she - “ Kent stopped, not knowing how to ask. Vina had been forced to aid Lord Kal in his degradations - in doing so, she had inflicted physical pain on his victims - forced to do so to keep those same victims alive... had she ever done anything like this to Lois?

“Vina and I had a few unpleasant run-ins,” she confirmed his fear. “If that’s what you’re asking.” Her voice was sharp with pain and anger.

“Oh god,” groaned Clark. “I’m not sure I can interact with her ... now that I know that.”

“She did what she did to prevent worse from happening to me,” Lois retorted. “I don’t bear her any ill will. She was as much a victim as us humans.... I'm just not sure if *I* can face her. The idea that she’s here, amongst us - it’s - hard to take...”

“Lois, I'm sorry,” said Clark. “This must be hell.”

“It is. But it’s not your fault - nor is it yours,” she said to Kent. “So no matter what - hold on to that thought... maybe the next time you see Vina you could ask her to come by to see me? I don’t have the fortitude to seek her out... the less I interact with them - the better, but – I wouldn't mind – seeing her again. Maybe I could get some kind of closure.”

Both men flinched at her use of the word ‘them’ - they were ‘them’ when it came right down to it. Aliens. Off-worlders. Interlopers. Invaders.

She saw their twin reactions and shook her head at them helplessly.

“I don’t mean to hurt you -”

“Yeah. We get that,” said Kent. “It’s fine.”

“So what now,” she asked. "I'm kind of burned out on talking about this for now."

It was late, and it was a time when many of the others were asleep. Lois had far too much nervous energy and residual panic to sleep next to her husband and he knew it. Fortunately the other two were aware of the dilemma.

“Well - anyone for a lethal weapon marathon,” asked Lane. “They have a central server here with movies that you can watch at will. And we have a TV...”

“I’m not sure even Mel Gibson can cheer me up,” said Lois.

“I know... but it’ll at least pass the time -”

"Aren't you tired," she asked her doppelganger wistfully.

"I couldn't sleep right now," lied Lane. "I'd rather hang out and watch some TV with my favorite people in the entire universe."
Lois scoffed laughingly at that.

"Well, I can't argue with that," she laughed. "Thanks - to all of you. I'm well aware you expend a
great deal of energy seeing to my emotional well being."

"You're worth it," said Kent. "Besides, I'm feeling pretty fried myself. This will be a good way to
decompress."
“So how's it going,” LL asked the two men brusquely during a planning meeting. Their presence at this meeting was creating havoc and terror in her heart and she had to work very hard at not letting any of it show. She knew they could use their enhanced hearing, sight, smell – all of the ungodly enhancements to a normal person's sensory arsenal to discover the truth – yet she soldiered on. No point in letting her fellow humans know that she wanted nothing more than to turn tail and hide from them, begging for mercy every time she saw the tightness of anger around their eyes. She shuddered as she wondered how the other Loises could bear to be physically intimate with them.

There was an awkward silence following her question during which time one of them looked at the other as if to figure out who should answer her question. Their obvious awkwardness in dealing with the people of this world was the only thing that gave her strength. Had they been bold, brash and confident, she would have been lost.

“It isn't going well,” Kent answered.

There was another long pause.

“I didn't expect you to say that.”

“What did you expect?”

The narrowing of his curious gaze created a tremor of fear in her heart that almost struck her dumb. He wasn't angry at her – he was simply curious – but the way he narrowed in his gaze – it terrified her- made her feel like she was once more in the cross-hairs of a far more deadly identical gaze.

Clark saw her fear and muttered sub-vocally to Kent.

“Ease off, buddy. She's getting upset.”

Kent looked at him briefly – obviously Clark knew of what he spoke having dealt with Lois's reactions.

“Care to share with the class,” LL’s voice rang disdainfully across the table. She saw the exchange and it angered her. This gave her strength to fight back her panic.

“Not really,” Kent responded, knowing full well he couldn't tell her what Clark had said.

“Not a big fan of secret exchanges between aliens,” she retorted sharply.

“Can we get back on topic,” asked Lois. “you asked a question, got an answer that surprised you...”

“I'm not accustomed to hearing anything but – self-aggrandizement from anyone who looks like you,” she said succinctly. Kal-El would never have admitted failure to anything. He'd sooner kill any witnesses to any failures than ever admit a weakness."

“Well – I don't know how to respond to that,” Kent said quietly. “I just answered honestly. It's not going well at all.”

“So you say,” she egged him on, not sure why she kept insisting on literally playing with fire. It seemed that every time she poked at the two men and didn't evoke rage or punishment she somehow regained a small amount of faith in something – a something she didn't care to define just
“Are you implying that they're deliberately failing?” It was Lane who took offense at LL’s comment. The two men remained carefully controlled.

“Are you really giving it your best effort? I'm not sure you are- maybe you're delaying -“

“Because we want to stay here longer” asked Kent incredulously. “That's incredibly far-fetched.”

“Maybe this all amuses you. Not far-fetched at all if you've ever dealt with your counterpart.”

He shook his head, backing down.

“Nothing I can say will convince you otherwise. I can only say that I’m extremely eager to see an end to all this – for your sakes as well as mine. It just isn't going well. Clark and I are too – ah – human – in how we act. We aren't convincing despite what we believe to be our best efforts.”

“It's worse than that,” said Zara, finally breaking in with her opinion. “They are afraid to fully commit to his behavior -I suspect it has to do with her,” she said, nodding towards Lois. “They feel that acting like him even for this purpose is harming her.”

“That's stupid,” LL snapped, all the while feeling a rush of wistful yearning and hurt at the obvious love that the two men held for her counterpart. One loved her like a brother and the other... she couldn't even contemplate that. She had never known that kind of connection with someone and she was so far broken now, she knew she never would.

“Maybe,” said Clark, quietly. “I don't deny that. We know how important it is – but knowing something and really believing it are two separate things. Yes, the mission is critical – and yes – our best chance at success is being able to fully mimic him. Still, it's hard to convince my subconscious mind to stop interfering with my conscious effort. The fact is, I don't see us improving much.”

She kept her gaze on his for a long and very painful moment.

She exhaled hard.

“I know,” she said, allowing a brief glimpse of her true self to emerge. “I know you want this to succeed so you can go home. That, I get. The world you live in is wonderful and nobody treats you like a monster.”

His face darkened with a flash of misery and she had to stop herself from feeling sorry for him.

“Then we change the plan. You are still the best choice for infiltration, but you can't remain there too long. Go in, gain information and then leave. Do you understand that you can't do anything to draw attention to yourselves?”

“Yes,” said Kent. “We get that.”

“Seriously, Clark,” she said, surprising him with his real name. “You can't try to rescue individuals. Okay? You have to keep a very low profile. Both of you.”

“I can accompany whichever of you goes in,” said Zara. “We might not be approached by people if they think we are having a private conversation.”

“That's a good idea. Her presence would lend credibility. Do I have your word - both of you – no
heroics?"

They both looked uncomfortable by her insistence.

“IT – I don't know,” said Clark. “How can we walk away if someone truly needs help?”

“Clark. If you see someone – a human – being victimized – you have to remember that Kal-El wouldn't care. He'd cheer it on – and yes, I know that sickens you both – but if you blow your cover, this entire operation will fail and the invasion will never end.”

“I know – I'm just telling you that It's not a promise I can make. I'll do my best -”

"That's obviously not good enough -”

"That's not fair,” said Lane.

“What isn't fair is that my world is under siege, Lois,” snapped LL. “It's not fair that I no longer start my morning off with a black coffee and occasional donut -my life is about death, and pain – and plotting against vicious alien dictators.”

“Clark and I aren't stupid,” said Kent without rancor. “We understand the point you're making and will endeavor to achieve whatever goals we have without drawing attention to ourselves or interacting with others. We do understand that being caught out will be disastrous to everyone who's trying to bring an end to the invasion.”

She hesitated and then nodded.

“I suppose I should thank you for your sacrifice and your honesty.”

“No. I'd rather you just told us the plan.”

She activated a button on a device in front of her and a three dimensional image of a map appeared spinning in the air above the device.

“That's cool,” said Clark. “What is it?”

“Very star wars,” said Lane, leaning forward.

They both caught LL's icy gaze.

“Okay. We're done,” said Lane. “Sorry.”

“Well, it's clearly a map,” she said in a voice that questioned their general intelligence. “Kryptonian technology, obviously. You'll have to work on not acting like the Beverly hillbillies when in character. Being awed by everyday technology will point you out as an intruder -”

“Okay,” said Lois angrily, “Moving on.”

“We believe the stasis chamber to be here,” LL began as she gestured towards the map and began to explain the details of the plan.

Zara and Kent waited alone for LL to arrive and give final sanction to the first step in the plan. They would go and infiltrate the Kryptonian stronghold and develop a plan for accessing the stasis lab.
Kent was dressed as Kal-El, but he looked every inch the human that he really was. It was his awkward guilt at presenting himself in this way to Zara that gave her the impetus she needed to treat him like the friend he had become. Mostly she could interact with the two doppelgangers without fear – but sometimes her mind would play tricks and she could barely stand to be around them.

“Where’s Lois,” she asked him politely, trying to make conversation.

“I asked her to give me some space with all this,” he said. “I know she doesn’t have any emotional baggage, but still – I just hate for her to see me like this.”

“Kryptonian?”

“I can deal with that. It’s looking like him -”

“But she never met him -”

“The other Lois did... and I could never face her like this... not again. And if my – Lois,” he used the possessive pronoun carefully and only did so around Zara, “If she saw me like this – it might make the other Lois feel like a coward or something for not facing her fears -”

“I understand, Clark,” she said gently putting a hand on his forearm.

“Thanks. I’m having trouble expressing myself.”

“You’re scared.”

“Yes.”

“So am I. But we will prevail.”

“You’ve prevailed pretty far thus far.”

“Right. So have faith in my ability to prevail again.”

“I do,” he said. “I admire you all so much.”

She flushed under his praise, certain that even her true husband would never be proud of her – not after she had foolishly allowed all this to happen.

“Well, you’ve borne up well. I know this is very hard.”

“I suppose knowing that I’ll get to go home one day helps me deal. This is your home universe, however. And you’ll still be here when the invasion is overthrown.”

“Yes,” her eyes reflected sadness. “There’s no sudden escape back to a world that never heard of Lord-Kal.”

“Nor invaded my home world. I told you that. And it was terrible. He was cruel... and vicious – and – a killer. A rapist too... many people suffered horribly.”

“But they don’t look at you as they did him?”

“I openly opposed the invasion. Nonetheless – how can Nor’s victims not think of me as a potential threat? I know that the invasion gave rise to suspicion and fear – only time can make it less stark.”
“Have you encountered that at all?”

“Most people are on guard around me... even before. I guess what I am and what I can do are scary. Lois – she never felt that way. Not even when she didn't know me.”

“She trusted you completely?”

“Yes. And that level of acceptance was something I never thought I'd find beyond my own parents.”

“But the other Clark didn't have that.”

“And yet they still found each other. And that's – almost a miracle.”

“One that won't happen here,” she breathed. “The real Kal-El and Lois... “ she shook her head.

Kent grew uncomfortable.

“Isn't... he your -ah -”

“We are joined. Yes. The clone was a usurper. When we prove him to be a clone – my marriage won't be dissolved – I simply will be joined to Kal-El. We were bonded as infants.”

“I don't understand much of that,” he shook his head. “I just wondered. I know you and Ching -”

She paled. He stopped.

“Sorry -” his voice and manner were anxious and apologetic.

“It's just – if Kal-El – if the clone – I know he knows. And to have you say that. It almost sounded like an accusation.”

“Oh god. It wasn't. It was - it was - a hope – a hope that you could find happiness at the end of all this. With the man you really love -despite all the garbage the clone's forced you to endure,” he said, his voice low and regretful as he referenced things he'd seen in their shared memory sessions.

She shuddered.

“I beg your pardon, Zara,” he spoke formally. “I overstepped.”

“No, Clark, you didn't. You're starting to try to take care of me – it's your nature. I am bonded to Kal-El. I will honor that bond . Only he can dissolve it. Should he do so – I won't seek out Ching. I can't dishonor Kal-El that way.”

“I don't understand.”

“I failed my mate,” she said. “You've heard me say this before. I failed him – I allowed all this to happen by not investigating when the kind child turned into a cruel adult. I should have seen the truth and I didn't. Because of that, Kal-El has suffered greatly. He will be hated and feared by the actions of those who victimized him... if I go on and seek happiness after causing him so much pain – it would feel wrong.”

“Zara, if he's anything like me - he will want you to be happy and he won't blame you.”

“You are very human, Clark. He was kind and fair – like you – but – he is Kryptonian. He will see where the fault lies. He won't order my death, nor will he banish me to the phantom zone – but he
will be deeply disappointed in me. I won't defy that by living happily when I know he never can.”

“Never say never, Zara. There's always hope.”

“And don't you sound like a big scary looking fortune cookie,” said LL interrupting as she walked in. “You certainly do look the part of terrifyingly dangerous alien invader.”

“Well... I'm not hoping to freak anyone out,” he said deliberately using American slang.

“Give me a little demo, okay?”

“I - “

“Just walk for me, you don't have to interact with me – walk over to Zara and speak with her as he would – as you've learned he would.”

“So I should walk over to the other side of the room first?”

“You want me to block for you,” she mocked him? “I'm not a director.”

He sighed, forcing himself to show any agitation. Ignoring her comment, he walked away from Zara. He paused a moment to collect himself and then he concentrated on mimicking the clone's body language and stance. He turned to face the women and kept his eyes fixed on Zara. She returned his gaze coolly not betraying any turmoil at all, but he could hear the LL's heart rate and respiration had increased dramatically.

She was terrified.

He ignored that and approached Zara as LL had insisted he do. He saw Kal-El in his minds eye and focused on imitating his prowling sense of mastery over every one around him. He uttered a silent apology to Lois and gave himself completely up to the deception. Millions – billions even – would die if he failed.

Once he approached Zara, he began to talk to her as he 'remembered' Kal-El doing. He spoke flawless Kryptonian, his voice hard and arrogant and his manner completely that of someone who knew he was in charge and didn't care at all about the comforts of those around him.

Zara played her part as well, answering his questions as she would if he were the real Lord Kal.

Kent made the mistake of flickering his gaze over to LL and she stepped back sharply on an indrawn breath. Her terror was not well disguised and it broke through his pretense.

He stepped away from both women, his body language his own, and began to apologize – feeling as horribly as he did the day he had forced himself past Lois's mental barriers. The day he had first felt like a rapist.

“You had it,” snapped LL, angry at both of them for her moment of weakness. “You can't just fall apart because you feel bad.”

“I can't help who I am,” he fought back, unable anymore to let her berate him for having a heart. “I'm sorry if it makes it hard for you to hate me – but I'm not that monster and I don't aspire to be.”

“I don't hate you, Kal-El. You hardly exist to me at all. You're just a means to an end. And you better bring about the end of the invasion – and not the human race!”

“Lois,” said Zara, “He did this very well this time. Please back off.”
LL regarded Zara with a mix of anger and exasperation. Zara returned her gaze stoically until LL finally looked down.

“Fine,” she said, turning on her heel. “Go – proceed as planned. Stay in telepathic contact, Zara – and don't go off the plan. If things begin to fall apart, get out without looking suspicious.”

Kent waited for her to leave and then finally spoke.

“She makes it sound so easy -”

“Believe me – she's well aware how hard this is. Let's go, Clark. The sooner we do this, the sooner it's over.”
“Clark needs to go after them,” Lane implored the resistance leadership barely holding in her fear and anger. “Two days is too long not to have heard anything.”

“We knew that this mission could take time,” LL began, trying to keep calm in the face of the other woman's obvious anger. LL had a visceral dislike of Lane, resenting her for all she hadn't endured, and she was hard pressed to treat her fairly.

“They might be prisoners, and we're sitting here doing nothing!”

“A lot of humans are prisoners now, and nothing will be done for them,” LL interrupted her venomously. “Sometimes there are casualties in war.”

“How dare you act like his life is worth less than any earth born person,” Lane raged. “My husband came to this world with a genuine and honest desire to help. You expect me to just accept that he'll be sacrificed to your cause without even any attempt on your part to rescue him? Clark – how can you be okay with this,” she turned her anger towards Clark who looked at her, a helpless look in his eyes. He didn't have a chance to say anything because LL was raring to rebut.

“This isn't a cause, Lois, this is the liberation of billions of people. Do you think your husband would want us to destroy our chances at freedom? If he's as noble as you make out, I hardly think so.”

“No, he won't want that,” Lane snapped back at her. “But I will not abandon him, even if you are willing to do so and even if you are so unwilling to upset any earth person in this world that you'd let him be gone,” she snapped at Clark. “I suppose this is the result of all that eggshell walking you've had to do!”

“Lois, I'm not willing to abandon him,” said Clark, trying not to react in anger. He knew Lane was hurting, but her parting shot had been cruel and when he saw Lois's face turn pale, he knew his own wife had figured out Lane's intended meaning. “I personally don't think he's in danger. I'm not picking up on any -”

“Clark, he's blocking. Okay. He's blocking so that none of the bad Kryptonians will pick up his signals.”

“If he were in trouble, he'd call out for help.”

“No. He wouldn't. Would you? Would you, if you thought it would endanger anyone?”

Clark paused and then shook his head.

“No. I wouldn't.”

“And you two are more than doppelgangers... you're practically carbon copies in terms of how you think and act. Face it. If he's in trouble, you won't know.”

“We can't just charge in there and risk the safety of this mission. Clark knew that going in,” said Lois trying to calm her down.

“The man you love is right here. Alive and well. It's easy for you -”
“I'd like you to stop now for a moment and think about what it is you're about to say to me,” Lois interrupted, her tone one of command. “Really ask yourself if that's true. If I am okay with your Clark being a prisoner of the same monsters who imprisoned me. “

Lane paled and stopped her outburst.

“I'll never win there, now will I? No matter what I may think – my opinion is always going to have no weight in this world with those of you who have suffered.”

“You can't know,” said LL haughtily. “You've lived a happy little fluffy life – it's so sad about your hard life with your struggles with your father, and Claude,” she said sarcastically. “Poor little broken Lois. But you have no idea. What we've endured takes your problems and relegates them to the realm of laughable.”

“That's not fair,” said Clark, looking LL directly in the eye, causing her to visibly stiffen in fear. He didn't care anymore. He wasn't going to let her walk all over him to the point where he wouldn't defend a friend. “Lois's life hasn't been horrifying, true – and I personally can't be anything but glad for that. You might hate her – or resent her – or whatever this emotion is – but whatever this emotion is – but really – there's nothing to be gained for treating her so badly. She came here with Clark willing to help and she's borne your criticism with an amazing amount of forbearance. It's not her fault that she didn't have to live through this.”

“Hey, I don't wish she'd lived through this,” said Lois, ignoring LL's sudden silence.

“I wasn't really referring to anything you said -”

“I think you were on some level... because let's be honest. I've been kind of bitchy to her at times as well.”

Clark went silent.

“And you … and – I know I'm not the most pleasant person to be around at all times – and I'm not asking for you to lie to me here,” she addressed this to both Clark and Lane. “I get it. But while I do think that you,” she nodded at LL, “dislike her, I think that it's not that hard to see why. You're right. It isn't fair, and it's good of you to stand up for your friend... but try to understand – when you've been through hell, you resent the people who escaped unscathed. Just like you might have resented the other world's Clark for not having to deal with his secret exposed all the time.”

Clark reddened at her words, aware that he had confessed this to her.

“I'm sorry,” he finally said, addressing LL. “The thing is, while I can't truly understand, I do see where this all comes from. I can't just say nothing though - Lois may have had the easiest life of all of you, but I don't see that she's denying the truth that her perspective might not be as broad as yours. She's scared for the well-being of someone she loves. And I definitely understand that.”

LL finally found her voice after the horrible attack of dread that struck her when Clark had looked her right in the eyes and spoke in a tone that was so firm and resolute. Like that, he was more like Kal-El than ever before even if he didn't radiate menace or contempt.

Clark wanted to apologize for scaring her but knew that loss of face would infuriate her more than anything, so he kept quiet, waiting for her response.

“Look. I get it. I'm sorry, Lois,” she said, surprising Lane. “And I don't say this out of fear,” she said, her eyes coldly grazing Clark, letting him know that he might frighten her, but he'd never command her. “I realize I'm... broken. I realize I'm hard. It's not your problem and I appreciate that
you consented to allow him to help us. We won't abandon him. But can we just give them a little
more time? There's a lot of intel to gather, and I fear that it will take a few days to do this. Zara is
much wiliier than you think. Her survival instinct rivals ours.”

Clark flinched at the thought of Zara suffering.

“Ah, do you get a sense of her well-being,” he asked LL, refusing to go back to his old way of
sitting silently through meetings where they were both in attendance.

“No, but I don't feel she's in trouble either,” LL responded after a momentary hesitation. She could
see that Clark truly cared for Zara and her heart jolted again with the pain of never having that kind
of feeling in her life ever again. She hated to admit it, but Clark clearly was a very good man.
Selfless and caring, he wanted to save everybody.

“If we don't hear back from them, we'll plan another invasion,” said LL with an ironic look at her
own choice of words. “We'll get them back.”

Lane nodded, her expression and body language still tense and miserable. Clark dared to put a
supportive hand on her arm and was rewarded when she gave him a pained smile.

“I'm sorry,” she said to him. “I was way out of line. I know you want to do the right thing.”

“No worries,” he told her. “Believe me when I say that I understand.”
Kent and Zara returned the following day. They hadn't been discovered and were unharmed, but Kent was clearly not unscathed. They silently waited in a meeting room with the key resistance team ready to debrief. Awash in despair and unwilling to speak unless asked, Kent's gaze fell on the three people in the room who actually cared about him and didn't view him as a dangerous alien. He was in desperate need of comfort. Seeing the conditions and treatment of humans had been a brutal awakening for him, sparking an even stronger determination to see this world freed. He and Zara had remained out of sight and didn't interact with anyone, but he still could observe, and what he observed had broken his heart and stirred his anger.

Kent could see that Lane looked haggard and he knew she hadn't gotten any rest since he'd been gone. His heart went out to her. The times she'd been in danger had always been brutal for him so he knew exactly how she felt. It must have been even worse having no way of going after him to find out where he was. Seeing his regretful and concerned look, Lane flashed him a reassuring smile. She wanted to grab him tightly and never let go, but now was not the time for that. Kent moved his gaze over to Lois and saw that she had been watching him intently. When their eyes met, she drew in her brows, concerned and guilty over what she had put him through. Kent smiled at her, trying to tell her with a single look that none of what he'd experienced was her fault. His sense of protective tenderness for her had grown a hundred-fold after seeing what the human prisoners endured.

LL cleared her throat and Kent's gaze guiltily flew back to her. Oddly, her expression seemed compassionate. The last time they'd been together, he had frightened her with his Kal-El act. After that, he was sure she would hate him forever... not because she saw him as a threat, but because he had made her cower. Lois Lane in all three worlds hated to show fear.

"Are you up to talking about it," she asked them both after the long silence had drawn on too long. Implied in her tone was censure regarding their continued silence,yet she was trying not to be harsh. LL knew that Kent sacrificed for the sake of the resistance and as much as she wanted to hate him for who he resembled, she found she couldn't do it. She couldn't hate the other one either, but this one had suffered for them, and that made him seem more kindred. She laughed inwardly at that. Kindred. An alien and a human couldn't be kindred no matter how hard they tried. And yet somehow... this one was. So was Zara for that matter. She shook her head. Now was not the time to lose focus.

Kent nodded, his body language tight and miserable.

"Well, we don't think we messed anything up," he said cautiously. "I … didn't stop any of the terrible things I saw," he added, his voice filled with self-loathing. "I … just let things happen. Even though I – well… it's the greater good. I'd never had to make that choice before... I never knew how hard it would actually be."

Lane and Lois both itched to go hug him, and they resolutely withstood the temptation.

"The greater good requires sacrifice, Clark, and as much as it feels like it, you didn't do anything wrong by not revealing your presence," said LL. Kent's eyes widened momentarily in surprise at her use of his preferred name. To her credit, LL didn't flinch or wince at his sudden focus on her. Aware that he was staring, he dropped his gaze – no point in upsetting her. After what he saw, he found it incredible that any human who had been victimized by the Kryptonians could bear to ever be within their line of sight.
“Thanks. I know,” he said, finally, well aware it was the truth. He hated himself for this knowledge and this acceptance. He hated the Kryptonian invaders for forcing him to have this knowledge. “I... I hope never to have to do nothing in the face of brutality again, but I couldn't risk the mission. We have to be victorious.”

“Are you ready to share what you've learned?”

Kent sighed.

“Well, we learned something very interesting. All of this – the fact that Kal-El is a clone, the fact that the original is alive – it's all a closely held secret. Even Kal-El doesn't know anything. He knows he's a clone probably, but as best as we can tell, he doesn't know about the original. The original's location changes all the time – they're trying to keep his existence secret. He's tended to by robots which inject him regularly with something. We couldn't risk going near him because he's probably been flooded with red-radiation and he's also under surveillance. I did... do a few walk-bys near where he was and there were several others who seemed to find this alarming, even though they did their best to hide it. He tends to be kept in places where Kal-El isn't likely to ever go.”

“So when we take him, the clone won't know anything is amiss,” said LL, feeling a surge of excitement. This reduced one danger... if the clone knew that his progenitor had been taken, he would stop at nothing to get him back – and to destroy him if need be. But if there was a small group who knew, they might be loathe to raise an alarm at the risk of letting the current “Lord” know before it suited their purposes. Their attempts at recovery would have to be as surreptitious as the resistance's activities were.

“The problem is – taking him,” said Zara. “We probably can't get near him without getting immediately sick.”

“Then a human will have to do it,” mused LL.

“Well, I'll do it,” said Lex.

“Actually,” said an english-accented voice. “I'm afraid I already did.”
Two Clark Kents, three Lois Lanes and one Herb Wells stood by Herb's dimension traveling machine and gazed at the craft's unconscious occupant. LL fought against her intrinsic terror. It was Kal-El, and he was in a state of complete undress. This was him. The Kryptonian – the one unlike the other two already standing too close to comfort. The one who might wake up and become Earth's new enemy. This was the one she might have to kill.

Clark was lost in his own thoughts, and as such, was unaware of LL's turmoil. He didn't even notice that he was standing so close by her side that a slight shifting of weight might brush his arm against hers. His own wife was pressed into his side, her arm unconsciously wrapped around his waist, and his around her back. The two sets of doppelgangers endeavored to avoid physical contact with each other so as not to upset the natives of this universe, but in the face of shock, they had forgotten their self-imposed rules. Clark, for his part, was lost in the memories of seeing his own beloved Lois unconscious and bruised in this very same machine. After a long moment of silence Clark looked over to Herb and broke the silence.

"This was unexpected," he said unnecessarily. The sound of his voice shocked LL back to awareness and she realized with a shock how close they were standing. Trying to hide her motions she edged slightly away from him, relieved when he paid her motion no attention. No matter how benign the two Clarks were, she always feared reprisal for things that would have infuriated her one-time captor. She turned an enraged glare towards Herb, angry that he had acted without her consent.

"They were going to kill him," said Herb succinctly, speaking mostly to LL having picked up that she was furious at his actions. "They thought that 'Lord Kal' had discovered his existence and they decided to kill him to prevent being caught and punished for treason."

"How do you know?"

"I understand their language and I have an excellent hiding place."

"Right. Out of time. Out of sight."

"Something like that."

"So you just took him. Do you have any idea -" LL was trying to hold off her anger, but she was losing the battle.

"Would you prefer I left him to be killed? As much as you probably hate him, he could well be this world's only hope at freedom."

LL was silent. She couldn't deny the truth of Herb's words. She stared at Kal-El – disturbed that he was naked, but able to view him with a kind of curious detachment. His face was devoid of expression and he slept on, blithely unaware of the years that had passed him by. A kind of warped version of sleeping beauty. She flushed at that. She was not the princess to wake him up. She was the evil witch, if anything. And yet, he was handsome. Without her tormentor's customary expression of cruelty, Kal-El was one of the most beautiful men she had ever beheld. And perhaps, he was intended in the end to be with her, mirroring those other worlds, but nausea churned in her at the idea. His body was identical to the other's, and the idea of coupling with him made her sick. She dimly saw how Clark and Lois were holding onto each other – obviously seeking comfort from the other and that made her feel sick as well. LL shuddered and wrapped her arms around herself.
Zara saw the motion and put a comforting hand on her arm. LL looked blindly at her, unable to deny that this Kryptonian had become her closest friend.

“Shall I get him something to wear,” Zara asked LL, aware that his nudity must be troubling to her.

“I'm sure... he'd prefer it,” she responded after a long hesitation. “Being a lord and all... this would be undignified.”

“His state of undress would not trouble him as much as knowing what was done in his name,” Zara said softly. “However... there's the consideration owed to all of the clone's victims.” She eyed Lois carefully as she spoke. Lois turned to her, recognizing her question and shook her head, indicating that Kal-El's nudity didn't trouble her. LL felt a surge of bitterness. Of course it wouldn't. Lois had clearly gotten past her aversion of this particular Kryptonian male body.

“Well... for the sake of others,” said Lane, her voice tentative, “I think we should … address his exposure.”

“He looks so – innocent,” mused Lois. “I hate to wake him up and bring him to this hard reality. None of this is his fault... and yet, he will pay for years to come.”

“Sacrifices must be made,” said LL, clearing her throat to remove the tightness there. The idea of him hurting troubled her too and she hated to think that she was somehow developing sympathy for the alien. His own lack of due care had caused her world to be overtaken. Kal-El should have known that his people would try something like this and he should have guarded against it. She knew that Zara felt guilt of this very same thing, and therefore it was a legitimate expectation.

Later, they reconvened back in the meeting room. Kal-El was dressed and his unconscious form remained in view of the key resistance members. They were unwilling to leave him alone.

“Well, operation retrieve Kal-El has turned into operation revive Kal-El. I welcome ideas.”

“His vital signs are good,” said one of the Kryptonians who had medical knowledge. “I recommend we keep him away from red radiation and expose him to sun lamps. Without the regular injections, he should recover. His blood shows the presence of a chemical designed to keep him in a metabolic stasis. Now that he's not getting them, he will emerge from this stasis. He might be sick – there may be other unpleasant physical consequences – his body will begin to produce waste again, for example and those of us tending to him will need to keep him clean.”

“Better you than me,” said LL with a shudder. ‘I'm nobody's handmaiden.”

“We gladly accept this task, Lois. But it will require supplies. I will discuss this with you after.”

“How long do you think it will take for him to wake up?”

“The poison should be out of his system in a matter of a few days. After that, there's nothing that should be keeping him from waking up.”

“And then, we'll find out whether he's friend or foe,” said LL nervously. “I expect that the telepaths amongst us will keep vigilant for any signs of hostility.”

“I will do what I must,” said Zara. “Even if it means invading his mind without his consent. I will find out his true nature. Can I expect your help in this matter,” she asked the two Clarks. “As you are his doppelgangers, you might be able to see past any attempts at deception.”
“I’m not at all comfortable with the whole lack of consent thing,” said Kent. “But if you need my help, I’ll give it. God. I feel like I’m sliding down that slope already... the further you get from what you think your ethical choice is... the easier it is to do it again.”

“Stop,” said Lane. “This isn’t you being unethical. This is a collective effort to shake off a very dangerous invasion.”

Kent inhaled and then nodded. “I guess.”

“Don't do what makes you uncomfortable,” LL said, surprising him with her attitude. “There are enough Kryptonians here that we can get a wide variety of takes on who he really is.”

Kent nodded at her, grateful for her words. “I will do what you ask, however,” he told her. “I feel it's only right.”

Days had passed and still Kal-El remained asleep. They could no longer take his blood out without exposing him to red radiation and as that was believed to be counterproductive, nobody wanted to do it.

They kept him in an area that was always occupied by a Kryptonian and a human. While LL refused to help tend to his biological needs, she didn't feel like she could trust anyone other than herself or her doppelgangers to protect this particular secret-weapon, so she often times found herself with a Kryptonian physician, trying not to give into the panic she felt at being in Kal-El's presence. After all, hadn't she watched him sleeping so many times after his assault on her? No – not his assault. The other's. And yet, he was identical to that man.

Kal-El stirred fitfully in his sleep and her heart leapt in fear. His eyes flickered open and stared momentarily at her, unseeing, and bile began to rise in her throat. She was going to be sick, but she refused to leave.

“You should leave us,” she told the other Kryptonian. “If I need to, I'm going to use red radiation to keep him from doing any harm.”

The other Kryptonian had no wish to comply, not wanting to expose her human ally to the danger of a hostile Kal-El, but she knew that in order to keep the peace between the humans and Kryptonians, rank had to be respected. LL was the leader, her orders must be obeyed.

“I'll be right outside, Lois,” she said softly. “Send to me if you need help.”

After the door closed, LL released some red-radiation.

Kal-El groaned in pain. She had only released a small emission from her weapon – enough to disable him, but not enough to render him unconscious or further sick. It would wear off in a few hours, so she wanted to act quickly. She wouldn't hesitate to blast him again, but she didn't want to do so more than was necessary. He was their best hope, and killing him would be foolish at this point.

“Kal-El,” she called out. “You must wake up.” She spoke to him in Kryptonian, hating herself for doing so.

His eyes blearily opened and he peered at her in utter confusion. LL fought not to flinch and her heart stuttered in terror as he tried to rise and break free from his restraints.

Unfamiliar pity rushed through her when she saw the flash of panic in his eyes as he took in his unfamiliar surroundings, but she fought it back. She had no place for compassion any more. This
was Kal-El. He wasn't human like the Clarks and she would kill this alien if she deemed him a threat. His fear disappeared from his expression and she watched feeling very conflicted as he rearranged his features into calm. Even more amazing, he wasn't displaying any anger either.

“Where am I,” he asked in Kryptonian, his voice hoarse, surprising himself with its harshness from disuse. She fought against a shudder. He sounded more like her tormentor than the other two. She felt a hand on her shoulder, gentle and steadying and looked over to see Zara. Zara knew that being around another Kryptonian with red-radiation exposure would mildly sicken her, but she didn't care. Zara was there to help no matter what personal pain.

“Greetings, Lord Kal-El,” said Zara in Kryptonian, “I'm Zara. And you are on the planet Earth.”

His eyes widened in shock at the sight of Zara. She looked so different from what he'd expected to see. There was a hardness to her, as well as a sadness. Dread began to fill his heart. How long had he been asleep and why was he on earth.

“Zara, what happened,” he asked her, still speaking Kryptonian. “Where am I? How are you so changed?”

She smiled sadly at him.

“It has been many years, my husband. I am older than you expect because you have been in stasis for quite some time.”

“Stasis? Was I ill?”

“You were betrayed. Those who wished to invade earth were not pleased by your refusal and they rendered you helpless and replaced you with a clone.”

“What? “ Alarmed, now, he tugged on his restraints. LL stepped back in sudden fear, and he turned to look at the unfamiliar woman, shocked at the wild terror in her eyes. Unable to deal with the waves of fear coming from this other person, he turned back to his supposed mate seeking more answers.

“Were you part of this betrayal,” his voice was steady, but his eyes belied his calm. The idea that his old friend could hurt him this way seemed incomprehensible. And yet – a planet where one would have the powers of the gods – would that be so seductive that even a decent woman could be corrupted?

“No. I am with them,” Zara said, indicating Lois. “I am part of this planet's resistance against the Kryptonian invasion.”

He turned his eyes back to LL who was staring at him in horrified fascination. She stepped back under the intensity of his gaze.

“You are an earth woman?” He still spoke Kryptonian, not sure which of the many earth languages this one spoke. Her fear was making him feel very nervous – he knew that she was very specifically afraid of him, and yet Zara didn't seem to upset her so her fear wasn't directed towards all Kryptonians. He wondered fretfully what his replacement had done to these people to get someone to look at him that way. He knew he didn't want to know and yet it was his duty to find out and help free this world.

After a very long moment, LL nodded tensely.
“Am I your prisoner?”

She nodded again, this time not so tensely. Finding her voice, she spoke in her native language, sure that he would know it based on Zara’s instruction.

“We don’t know if you can be trusted. If we determine you can you will be free and you will live. Otherwise, we will terminate your life.”

He heard the truth in her words and saw that she had suffered much. Her eyes were bleak and empty and he felt a very strange and compelling yearning in his soul to reach out to this strange alien and comfort her. He pushed that unexpected impulse aside and focused on regaining his calm. The worst thing he could do now was react in a way to trigger more fear and hatred from this woman.

“I am not your enemy. I will submit to whatever testing you need in order to assure you of that fact.” This time he also spoke in the human woman's native language.

“Will you submit to telepathic probing?”

“Yes. Are... are earthlings telepathic?”

“Some of us are,” she snapped. “Thanks to Kryptonians.”

“What? How is this possible?”

“Lord Kal – perhaps it would be best to talk of this later. A lot has happened and all of it is bad.” Zara’s voice was soft, but there was steel underneath. LL flinched at Zara's use of the title 'Lord Kal'.

Kal-El understood. This human could communicate this way because she had been a prisoner and forced to endure telepathic sendings – perhaps even as a way of torture.

“I am sorry for that,” he said, his eyes fixed on the woman. There was something about her that made his blood want to freeze. “Zara,” he said, turning his gaze away from the human. “Please do not refer to me as Lord Kal. I would prefer you call me Kal-El and leave off the title.”
Employing relaxation techniques learned during a difficult lifetime, LL stood poised to knock at the door of the quarters where the four doppelgangers had taken up residence. She didn't want to be here. She most definitely did not want to be here — yet here she was, and soon she would be dealing with not only her doppelgangers but Kal-El's as well. She heaved a sigh and mentally cursed Zara for leading her down this path. Then again, now, as before, Zara's logic had been infallible.

Hours earlier, LL had been hiding in her office, trying to convince herself that she did not need to engage in telepathic communion with Kal-El in order to trust him enough to bring him fully into the mission. He had been awake for weeks now, and she had avoided him this entire time. The Kryptonian resistance members had interacted with him telepathically many times and had reported back to her that they believed him to be genuine in his desire to free Earth, but the only one who's opinion truly resonated with LL was Zara. Zara believed Kal-El was on their side and while LL wanted to be convinced, she knew she had to find out for herself. Zara herself had said so when she had come, uninvited in, and argued her point with LL, trusting that LL would see her insistence as kindly meant and not the actions of a would-be alien overlord.

LL shuddered. How could she submit to this? Wouldn't it be rape all over again? She exhaled. She knew that the pain the clone had caused her over a mental link had been nothing to the physical pain, but the idea of linking with Kal-El gave her the same feeling of sick dread that she always felt when she had been his clone's prisoner.

It was then that Zara had made the tentative suggestion: Maybe Lois would consent. Maybe because Lois had already opened her mind to both the Clarks she might not find communing with Kal-El so repellent. Zara had made it clear that she wasn't suggesting anyone bully or pressure Lois into such a decision — but she felt they should at least ask for her to do it willingly.

And now, LL stood in front of Lois's door feeling a mix of fear, dread, guilt, shame — things she hadn't allowed herself to truly feel since being liberated. She pushed her fear of facing the two Clarks to the back of her awareness. How angry would they be at her for even daring to ask Lois to do this? And if they were, could she face that?

Angry and impatient with her fears, LL lifted her hand and rang the buzzer.

To her great relief, Lois had been the one to open the door. The others weren't in sight. LL would have been willing to bet that they were all hiding, giving her space to speak with the one they knew she wanted to speak with. They weren't stupid after all.

“You want me to go see him, don't you,” Lois said, sparing her the need of asking after she had entered the room and the door had been closed behind her.

She wanted to ask her doppelgänger how she'd known, but figured it was moot. Lois was a smart woman and she was also LL's doppelganger. It was no surprise she could read her so well.

“This is merely a request,” she responded coolly, showing no fear at all. “I wouldn't push you to do anything you didn't want to do.”

“I don't want to do it,” Lois said, her voice just as cool and her gaze just as rigidly even. “The very thought of it,” she shuddered. “And before you ask about why this is different — it just is."

LL nodded. Of course it was different. As much as she wanted to hate the two Clarks, she knew
that they were very different in the ways that mattered. They were as human as she was – or at least, as she had once been, regardless of their alien physiology. They were more human than she was now. She beat back her feelings about that. Resentment and fury had no place in these dealings. Focus.

“But you will anyway,” she finished softly, seeing the truth in the other woman's eyes. “Because you want to know. You want this mission to be over. You want it to succeed. You want to go home.”

“Yes.” Lois paused a moment. “And.. I understand why you want to avoid this,” she continued, her gaze like a steel drill into LL's own reluctant one. “You're afraid. And don't bother. Because I know. Because I am too.”

LL nodded after a brief pause. This was the longest and more direct conversation she had carried on with this woman – a woman who she had allowed to suffer in her stead for fear of bringing pain upon her own head. A woman that she was deeply bound to by debt of suffering. The very least she owed her was some modicum of honesty and trust.

“I am,” she agreed softly. “How can you even imagine doing this?” As she said these words, LL was amazed that she would allow herself to show vulnerability. She had only allowed this with Zara up until now.

“It helps,” Lois said, tilting her head towards the closed door.

LL nodded, trying not to show any distaste.

“I don't … like telepathy. Neither do they,” she added on, to make sure that LL knew that Clark had never forced it on her. “Ah. My Clark didn't know he could even do that until I came into his life. I was sending to him inadvertently. The other Clark found out when the other Kryptonians arrived—”

LL shuddered. She couldn't and wouldn't think about that world and those other Kryptonians.

“Thank you Lois,” she offered.

“Lois, you will have to do this eventually. I think you know that.”

LL froze at the other woman's words.

“You know that even my opinion or that of the other Lois – neither of these will be enough to convince you. You will have to know for yourself.”

“I can't,” she whispered, shaking her head, appalled now that she was losing control.

The other woman gripped her shoulders tightly and LL had to fight from pulling away. She hated being touched.

“You will.”
After LL left, the others came out from hiding.

“Why don't you let me do this,” Lane asked her, forestalling the others from saying anything.

Clark listened in silence, he didn't want – in any way – to come across as domineering or jealous in this matter. He would say his piece when he had collected his thoughts.

“I have to do this. She asked me. Besides, Kal-El knows of one set of doppelgangers – he doesn't know there are two. This gives us the element of surprise at having at least one weapon he doesn't know about.”

Kent and Clark winced at her use of the word weapon. Neither man wanted her to think of them as dangerous, yet they understood and didn't trouble her to change her terminology.

“You know what I mean,” she insisted softly seeing the quick flicker of discomfort in their identical gazes and they nodded. It was always so strange to watch them together – as strange as it must be for them to watch her and Lane. She grinned to herself for a quick moment.

“What's so funny,” Lane asked her wonderingly.

“We'd make a great synchronized swimming team...”

Lane smiled and nodded, understanding the point.

“Will you be okay,” Kent asked her worriedly, remembering his own disastrous experiences with her during his attempts at training her to put up barriers. Clark gave him a quick grateful look.

“I will, big brother,” she teased him. “Don't worry.”

“Seriously, Lois,” Clark asserted softly. “If you have misgivings - I know you want to go home, but please don't force yourself to do something that will hurt you.”

“Clark you've been wanting to link with him yourself, haven't you?”

“Wanted is too strong a word... but yes I'd feel more comfortable if I could get a personal read on him.”

“So why haven't you?”

“Because Lois doesn't trust me when it comes down to it, and the idea of asking her to allow me to do this... well, it seems premature. I figured eventually Zara would ask.”

“Despite all that, what do you think?”

“Zara thinks he's genuine, and from my link to Zara – I trust her. I have to trust her judgment.”

“Even though she didn't know what had happened in the beginning with him?”

“Yes. She's learned a lot over the years from that one mistake – she's paid dearly,” he added, suppressing a shudder at the memories of what Zara had shared. “I think she's as cautious as the other Lois when it comes to trusting him.”
"As cautious as I was to trusting you," Lois asked Clark, her tone gentle but challenging.

"Perhaps not as cautious, but Zara is Kryptonian – so her ability to fight against an attack is much greater than yours would have been against me... I'm sorry -""

"No," she said, shaking her head. "You're correct. You could have killed me instantly and horribly if you were so inclined. Zara can defend herself quite adequately against Kryptonian powers."

Clark looked down, hating this conversation.

"I know you wouldn't have," she hugged him hard, surprising him. They hadn't been together as man and wife since coming to this world and Clark had been very cautious about showing her physical affection of any kind – even when they were alone. He briefly wondered about the other two – knowing that they had no traumas to impede their intimacy – but would they have felt comfortable doing anything knowing that they could be heard by Clark – or even worse – by any of the other Kryptonians in residence?

He hugged her back gratefully and she felt a twinge of sorrow at having been so withdrawn during their time in this world. Being so close to where all her pain had taken place had left her feeling vulnerable and threatened most of the time, and while she would never have admitted it to either man, she tended to see the 'Kal-El' in them first before the Clark, here in this world, and it always took her a few moments to go back to being easy in their presence. Being constantly on edge like this had taken a toll on her ability to be free with her affections.

She pulled back and looked deeply into his eyes, taken aback by the pure love and acceptance she read in his warm gaze. Her heart swelled with returned love and she suddenly wanted him very much – in every way. But now was not the time for that. She contented herself with tracing a gentle hand down the side of his face, eliciting a grin from him, before she spoke again.

"Are you all right with my decision?"

He remembered how she had accused him of walking on eggshells. She had felt in some way diminished by his overtly caring manner. He wouldn't insult her by continuing that tendency here.

"I trust you to know what's right," he answered.

"Good answer," Kent said, breaking the moment with a bit of sly teasing. "It's a variation of 'yes dear'."

"You're such a brat," Lois grinned at her husband's double.

"I learned from the best," he said easily, giving his own wife a wink. Lane responded by wrapping her arm around his waist as his own arm came around her shoulders.

"I'm scared," she said, forestalling the question. "But that's no reason not to do this. How do you feel?"

"I'm scared," Clark answered her honestly. "I'm afraid it will get in the way of what we have," he admitted. "It was awful when you hated me... I don't ever want to risk going back there again."

Lois had to fight from letting her mouth hang open in shock. Clark had just admitted to such a deep level of vulnerable fear about her feelings for him without trying to reduce the impact of his words.

She hugged him again.
“Thank you for that,” she mumbled against him. “I know it's not easy for you to share your feelings that way.”

“Bravery deserves at least an attempt at it's return,” he answered her, holding her as tightly as seemed appropriate.

She tightened her hold on him and then stepped back again.

“I know that telepathy resonates with horror for the three of us,” Lois told Kent and Clark. “I know you all are worried I'll end up flipping out... you're just too gallant to say anything.”

“But afraid,” said Kent, seriously. “But truthfully, Lois – are you sure?”

“I have to do this. So yes. I am.”
Chapter 29

Lois stood outside the door that would lead her to Kal-El. She tried to bolster her courage knowing that he was expecting her and she wouldn't be alone with him. She wouldn't have to touch him. But she would have to link with him and that made her feel queasy and full of dread. She had not seen him since the day of his arrival and she didn't know if she could bear up against it.

Even if he truly did mean to help them – even if he was more like Clark than his own clone, the idea of him knowing through the link what his clone had done to her made her want to throw up. She almost felt she could bear contempt and mockery over remorse and pity, but she felt sure that the latter was what she would feel from him. She shuddered because this was Lord Kal. He was a Kryptonian who bore that name and who had been raised to rule, and despite any assertions of good-will backed up by the corroborations of those who had linked with him, Lois wasn't at all sure she could face Lord Kal without sinking into a huddled mass of fear.

Fortune favored the bold. She put her hand on the door and entered, nearly walking into the man himself.

She stepped back and gasped. He was standing, moving about the room – she had expected him, somehow to be bed-bound, but there were no restraints. The fine lines around his mouth and eyes told her that he was feeling pain and that he had been regularly dosed with red radiation – but still - the man chose to walk, to be strong in the face of what he felt he had to endure. That level of determination was both admirable and terrifying.

He stopped his pacing at the sight of the earth woman entering the room. He hadn't been able to wait patiently in a chair for her arrival. Knowing that a woman that his clone had tortured for years was coming to link with him had troubled him deeply. He had shared terrible memories with the other Kryptonians – Vina's were especially disturbing and while she had treated him with gentle kindness, he couldn't look her in the eyes, feeling as if he had victimized her himself. Even then, she had been kind with him, and he knew she saw him as one who had also been victimized. This human woman – from an alternate reality no less, had suffered at his clone's hands, and would likely not see him as a fellow victim. As her doppelgänger had, she would look up on him with fear, distrust and hate, and he would know that he deserved every virulent emotion.

“I'm sorry,” he said, speaking to her in her language, taking note of her immediate terror and the tight bracing of her body as she clearly fought the impulse to back away from him in fear. Taking immediate pity on her, he stepped away, knowing he was far too close to her, and gave her the space she knew she must need.

“I – I just got startled, that's all,” she said, recovering quickly from her initial shock. Although this was Kal-El, the uncertainty and guilt in his gaze were more Clark like than anything else. She forced herself to remember that while she had been tortured at the hands of his clone, he had been in stasis – forced into it by the same people who had created the clone in the first place.

Kal-El was surprised that she recovered as quickly as she had. He knew that somehow this woman had overcome her trauma and ended up bonded with Kal-El's own doppelgänger – a man he yearned to meet. He was curious about this Earth-raised variation of himself. The man must truly be decent if he could find his way into this woman's heart after all she had endured. Kal-El fought against the wave of envy he felt. To have someone truly love who you so much that they could look past who you resembled... that was deep love indeed and Kal-El would likely never know that kind of love from anyone. Least of all Zara, thanks to everything his clone had done to her. He
shuddered and pushed aside that feeling. Lois saw his shudder and misunderstood. Her pity overcame her aversion. He was being poisoned at regular intervals. The idea horrified her when she remembered what Clark had gone through thanks to Lex.

“Are you in pain,” she inquired gently. “Do you need to sit down?”

“I should rest,” he said, acquiescing to her gentle and completely unexpected sympathy. He also wanted to be seated to appear less as a looming and overpowering presence. “The red radiation does hurt.”

“I know,” she said, without any bitterness. “I don't know if you know that I married a Kryptonian, but he's been poisoned too, in the past and it really hurt him. I'm sorry you have to go through this.”

Kal-El locked gazes with her from his seated position.

“It's far easier than what you went through,” he said, finally just stating what they both knew to be true. “I can bear it. I thank you, however, for your words. I do appreciate them.”

Lois shook her head to shake out the feeling of how strange it was to interact with a Kryptonian variation of Clark. And then she laughed inwardly at how she had phrased that in her mind. The idea that this man who was named Lord Kal-El didn't initially remind her of the clone was very close to being proof enough for her. At the very least she knew herself to be safe, and years of interacting with Clark had enabled her to move past her initial fear.

“Do you know about me,” she asked him, sitting opposite him across a table, surprising him even more with her boldness. He could sense her fear, but she wasn't letting it show. He admired her all the more for it. Her words brought up anger as well on her behalf and he fought against letting that show. The last thing she needed was his anger. He was well trained in hiding his feelings and kept his gaze calm.

“Yes, I do,” he said. “I know that you spent some time in this world and that you were victimized by my clone. I most deeply apologize for what he did. I am responsible for your suffering, and will make whatever reparations I can.”

His gaze burned with regret.

“No. You aren't responsible for what that monster did,” she asserted strongly. “He is. And the people behind this plan – but not you.”

“I failed my people by not seeing this possibility,” he said. “I should have known they would do this.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“I do.”

“Do you blame Zara?”

“For what?” Kal-El was intrigued by this human woman. She was afraid of him. Every wave of feeling that came from her was laced in terror, yet she was coolly asking questions as if he didn't trouble her at all. For such a fragile creature, she had an immensely strong spirit. Then he'd always known that might didn't equal right.

“Zara didn't foresee this either. When she ended up bonded to the man she thought was you, and he
was cruel – shouldn't she have guessed what had happened?"

His eyes flickered away from hers. The question was too painful to answer. Truth be told, he was deeply upset about this very thing - but he didn't ever want to admit it to Zara. She was also afraid of him and she had suffered enough.

“I suppose... yes, I think she should have known. Yet... I blame no-one other than myself. I am the leader of my people.”

“Lord Kal-El,” she said forcing the words out. “Is that how you wish me to address you?” Her tone was laced with bitterness now, and Kal-El felt a sudden urge to cower against all the pain that she had known that her tone implied.

“No,” he breathed out, his tone one of utter distaste. “My name is Kal-El. If you are uncomfortable calling me that, take the liberty of creating your own name for me. I would request that you never refer to me as … Lord anything.”

Lois nodded, fighting her nausea. Memories of his clone were pushing to the forefront. She could see him there, angry, domineering, his hands on her – striking her down, punishing her for every insolence. She exhaled hard, trying to beat back the flash back and she felt the familiar chills and nausea overtake her.

“Are you unwell?” The insistent voice – his voice – he was asking her something, he was talking to her – he wanted something from her. She looked at him, terrified – what did he want? What should she do?

A woman came over, a Kryptonian, and Lois flinched from her, fearing she was being taken back to Kal-El's rooms. She struggled against her, shaking her head violently. She knew she would be punished, but she couldn't do it – she couldn't submit. Somehow her spirit had grown in her again and wouldn't allow her to submit.

“No,” she choked out. “No – No!” She was breathing in hard inhalations and exhalations, getting dizzier by the moment and suddenly Clark was there, at her side, holding her hand, looking up at her with a troubled gaze. Crouching by her chair.

“She needs help,” she heard him call. “Would it help to bring the one she's bonded with?”

This wasn't Clark, she realized with a wash of terror. Kal-El. It was Lord Kal-El. She pulled her hand out of his virulently and then she began to shake her head.

“I'm sorry,” she babbled in Kryptonian. “I'm sorry-”

Kal-El let out a curse. Things were getting worse and he shouldn't have touched her. He seemed to have made it worse. They needed her bond-mate here. Perhaps he was the only one who could help.

A man came urgently through the open door- it was him – the one that resembled him – the earth-bound Kryptonian. Kal-El looked at him and saw the shock of emotions go through the seemingly human man's eyes. Fear, anger and then understanding. He came over and crouched down in front of Lois as Kal-El had tried to do, and Kal-El moved jerkily out of the way, staggering back into his chair. He watched the man attempt to reach the woman.

“Hey, Lois, hey – it's Clark,” he soothed her, not trying to touch her or force her back into awareness.”You're safe – nobody is going to hurt you. You're safe. This isn't him. Come on, please – focus on my voice!”
Kal-El watched, shocked and transfixed, as the frantic woman ceased her desperate pleas, spoken in his own language no less, and began to regain awareness of her surroundings. Soon her gaze was clear, and he realized he was beginning to get lightheaded from his own hyperventilations, and he focused on slowing his inhalations and exhalations so he wouldn't pass out. The woman looked down at the man crouched down in front of her and began to cry. Kal-El felt self-sick. It was his own fault she suffered.


“You did,” he asserted gently, his voice very kind and loving. “But wow, Lois – these are pretty extraordinary circumstances. Anyone would have broken down in this situation. Please understand that. Please don't feel like you did anything wrong.”

She nodded after a very long moment.

“I know,” she said. “I know.”

He moved to sit in another chair at the table right next to hers.

“What do you want,” he asked her, trying to fight the urge to beg her not to do this today.

Her gaze shifted to Kal-El's. He was watching her with a deep intensity that took her by surprise. Her outburst had clearly upset him and while he was trying to remain calm, she knew he was anything but.

“I'm staying,” she said firmly. “I want to do this.”

Kal watched as his human-seeming doppelgänger comforted his mate. It was surreal to watch these proceedings from the point of view of one who was outside it all. This was who he would have become if his father had followed through with his initial plans of sending Kal-El to Earth. He felt a twinge of longing. Although right now these two were grappling with some serious awful emotions, he could feel the bond between them and it made him feel an empty yearning himself.

“Lois Lane,” Kal-El said formally, speaking her name for the first time. “I would like to apologize to you.”

She froze at his voice and he could see that keeping eye contact with him was troubling her. At the same time, she squeezed her bond-mates hand tightly. She was comfortable, at least, with his doppelgänger, and seeking to draw comfort from him. The sweetness of that interaction made him feel glad for them both.

“Kal-El,” she said softly. “You did nothing wrong. I should have warned you that … I have flashbacks. Clark here is used to this...”

Her bond-mate – Clark – shifted his gaze to Kal-El. He looked over at Lois, unsure, and then reached out towards Kal-El, his hand held out in an earth-style greeting – an offering of initial goodwill.

“My name is Clark,” he said as he held out his hand. “I'm glad to make your acquaintance.” The words were polite, but hid a wealth of meaning underneath. If Kal-El was genuine, then 'glad' didn't cut it. If Kal-El were actually as dangerous as his clone – then it was a whole different set of feelings. But for now, Clark knew that he had to take this first step. Especially when his his initial impulse had been to charge in and shake the other man's teeth out for upsetting Lois the way he had.
Kal-El hesitated for the briefest of pauses before he reached out and gripped Clark's hand in his own.

“I too am glad to be acquainted with you.”
Chapter 30

Kal-El tried not to intrude on the couple. It was obvious that Clark wanted to stay, he was worried about Lois, but she seemed adamant on proceeding without him. Lois’s pride and strength impressed Kal-El. After everything she had endured, she was still unwavering in her resolve to do the task she had set out to do regardless that it terrified her. Kal-El terrified her.

He swallowed against the anguish that idea evoked. He was unaccustomed to evoking fear in others. As future ruler, he knew that he would wield unchallenged power, and he spent his life treating others as he would want someone with his power treating him. To wake up in a world where he was hated by both his own people and another race of people entirely was a brutal shock. How could he face the future if everyone who saw him reacted in terror? How was Clark ever able to get through Lois's initial feelings of hatred and fear, because it was obvious when she saw her husband, she did not see the monster. That was not true when she looked at him, and he felt the difference keenly.

Lois and Clark had reached the end of their conversation and Clark looked over at Kal-El, his eyes assessing and sharp. Kal-El returned his gaze evenly refusing to show discomfort. The other man didn't fear him – yet neither did he trust him. Kal-El knew that it went against Clark's very core to leave Lois with Kal-El unprotected, but he also knew that the man wouldn't insult his wife by refusing to accept her edict. This was a marriage of equals. Kal-El felt a stab of jealousy. Even if this hadn't happened, he would have never known this kind of relationship by the nature of the role he was to play within his society.

Clark gave him a nod – it seemed to carry some amount of reassurance and Kal-El felt warmed by that. Something about his doppelgänger seemed very comforting and solid. He had a presence that left Kal-El with the idea that somehow things would work out.

The sound of the door closing forced Lois to return her gaze to Kal-El. He could see that it was a struggle for her to do so and he tried to channel Clark's body language. It was important to be as unlike his clone as possible to make these moments easier for her. And he desperately wanted to make these moments easier. It wasn't just his own life at stake – there was something about her that made him feel protective – more so than anyone else – he wanted to see her smile. He pushed those thoughts away viciously. He could not begin to have those thoughts about her or anyone like her. Worse, he couldn't afford for her to detect them within their link.

After an awkward silence, Lois spoke.

“I'd like to apologize for my outburst,” she said in a voice that was so even, that it clearly belied turmoil beneath.

“If you will not accept my culpability in what you've endured, surely you know that your reaction to what you've endured is not your fault.”

She nodded slowly, mulling over his words. She had expected him to say them. Clark would have said them. It was important for her to test him even now – any betrayal of expression that might show this was all an act could be a lifesaving thing.

“I suppose we should begin?”

“My mind is open to you,” he said calmly. “Please be at ease to read my thoughts.”
Lois nodded tensely. She would never be at ease for this. Then again, she couldn't imagine he was either. Surely this kind of open invitation was rare – especially for the leader of his people.

“Wait, please,” he interjected suddenly, picking up on her fear.

She looked at him, her gaze questioning and dark with worry.

“You are afraid to do this,” he finally said, after deliberating how to phrase his observation.

“Yes.” Her eyes blazed with her emotions now, she was having more trouble withholding them after her outburst.

“I know reassurances are weak in the face of what you know as truth. I still feel I should offer them. I will not read your thoughts unbidden, nor will I send anything forcibly across the link. It is entirely up to you to send and receive what you will.”

She nodded tightly. She understood what he was saying, and yet she was still very much afraid.

Kal-El didn't offer any more assurances – to do so would clearly upset her.

“Well, here goes,” she muttered. She reached over and grasped his hand and his gaze grew shocked. Lois could feel he was fighting the urge to pull away from her grasp. Likely he could feel her fear even more intensely this way.

“It’s harder to hide what you’re feeling if I’m touching you,” she said boldly as she beat back the terror. *I have to do this. I want to go home and this is what I have to do.*

Kal-El heard her unintended transmission and it troubled him deeply. This woman had willingly stepped back into a world that resonated with horror for her in order to free it. In order to free him. A wave of protective anger on her behalf spiraled through him and he felt her shock and surprise at her returned perception of those feelings. He quickly tried to calm himself down, not wanting to frighten her, but then he felt amusement coming from her.

*That's nothing compared to his anger.*

He squeezed his eyes shut. He didn't want to know anything of the details.

Lois felt his fear and wondered momentarily if he feared she might see something in his mind that he didn't want her to see. She probed and as promised, he remained open to her. His mind was full of raw despair, anger and fear. She could feel how hurt he was that Zara never questioned that the monster was him. That she could forget who he had once been and accept that the clone was who he had turned out to be. He felt betrayed and angry that this was done to him in the first place. He felt overwhelmingly self-loathing over his own weak failure to foresee such an event – a failure that had led to the enslavement of an entire planet. She felt his intense shame at the idea that his clone had raped and murdered an untold number of earth women – women like Lois. She felt the sick guilt he felt in her presence. She was stunned by the weight of those emotions and her own control wavered. She began to flood him with memories of what she had endured and right away she felt him cringe back mentally. He wanted to hide from this knowledge, but he couldn't put up barriers. He had promised to be open and he would, no matter the cost. She felt his own resolve.

*You endured. You suffered. I can at least bear this.*

Lois was the one to pull away. *No. I don't want to share this with you.* it was an anguished plea and Kal-El sent her an image of building blocks around her thoughts. *Lois, Allow me please to assist you.* Gratefully, Lois built the walls around her memories and began probing deeper, needing to learn him more thoroughly. She saw him as a child, gentle, sweet and curious. She felt the love of his parents, even though they died so soon after his birth. She felt the pain of that loss through the
Kal-El was a natural leader who never assumed that his destiny meant he could bully or dominate. She saw him playing as a child with Zara and Ching, she saw him arguing earnestly with the ministers against the plan to 'occupy' Earth. She saw him angry when finally alone after such meetings, and felt the fear that somehow his wishes would be overruled. She felt his powerful determination to do anything to prevent the plan from following through. He knew that Kryptonians wouldn't be content with living amongst the humans- they would not be able to resist the lure of the power given to them by the yellow sun. And now she felt his unending despair at seeing his worst nightmares come to life. His people had invaded earth and wreaked havoc all in his name. She felt his hopeless terror. He had to convince those who had been victimized by a monster wearing his face and name to help him liberate this world. He was alone and terrified. He was hated and feared and all he wanted to do was make things right. How could he convince them that he wasn't like his clone?

Lois pulled back into her own mind and released his hands. Slowly she sat back, trying to process all she had felt from him. Tears were falling freely down her face and Kal-El was deeply troubled at the sight. Lois affected him in a way that seemed to touch his soul. His mind briefly reflected on her doppelgänger – the hatred and fear that he'd felt from her... he couldn't afford to ever start yearning for this woman- it was a disastrous path to take. Besides. Kal-El was bonded to Zara and it was Zara's choice whether that bond would ever be severed.

“I am sorry for your distress,” he said, not knowing how else to try to ease her pain. “And... I am deeply sorry for what you endured.”

“I'm sorry for you,” she returned, softly. “I know you are as much a victim as I am in all this.”

“My duty dictates that I be held answerable for the actions of the Kryptonians. According to my culture, I am responsible for what they have done, and regardless of how you feel about that assertion, I feel it to be true. I will not bemoan my own fate.”

She felt taken aback by the edge to his tone and realized that by calling him a victim, she was unintentionally insulting his honor as he saw it. She knew he wasn't actually angry with her, but a shiver ran through her nonetheless.

She nodded, trying to get past this moments.

“I think I do have some idea of what you mean. It is a good leader who answers for the actions of his people.”

“Do you believe me when I tell you that I wish to free this world?”

She hesitated, giving him a steady and grave look.

She expelled a hard breath.

“Yes. I do.”

Having so recently been linked, Lois could sense his emotions. She felt his surprise and relief – there was something else there as well. Admiration – and … something - attraction? She shivered. It couldn't be that. Or perhaps it was – the lure of their soul connection. Maybe Kal-El had experienced a closeness with her that he hadn't felt with anyone else – a sense of rightness. The
thought didn't horrify her the way it once would have. LL would be an entirely different story. Lois felt a pang of despair for the two – she knew that they belonged together – yet it would never happen.

“Kal-El,” she said, fixing him with an assessing look. She wanted to see how he reacted to her lack of respect in speaking with such an exalted noble. “I can't make any promises. I don't know the weight of my opinion. I love a man who resembles you and the others will take that into consideration. It may lessen the impact of my recommendation.”

“It may strengthen it as well. Clark is obviously not dangerous.”

She gave a smile to that. It was full of love, humor … nostalgia. It made Kal-El's heart hurt.

“Yes. It took me a while to figure that out... I put him through a lot. In the end, it worked out, however...”

“My circumstances are different,” he told her gently, understanding on some level she was trying to comfort him. “You hated Clark – but others didn't. Here – I'm the enemy. I will work to free this world. I will not give up. But... I cannot let myself think I can have a life here as Clark has done in the other world. I don't know what I will do, or where I can go – but I cannot lead my people anymore – nor can I live here.”

“Wait. You can't lead your people - ? Let's go back to that. How do you expect to end this if you don't claim your rightful place as leader?”

“I will do that. And when those who did this are punished,” Kal-El hesitated as he saw Lois shiver involuntarily. He continued after a brief heartbeat. “I will step down. I cannot lead my people. Not after what he's done. And if I may speak with full honesty – I am troubled that the deception was so easily accepted. No-one questioned that I had become so cruel. There can be no trust or love between my people and me. Not after this.”

Lois heard his pain and anger. She felt for him. She knew she would feel the same.

“What about Zara?”

“She is free to do as she pleases,” he said. “If she is wiling, I would dissolve our union. She can lead my people with Ching -”

Lois shuddered and he stopped.

“I upset you just now? I meant – when I said 'my people' to refer to my relationship with the Kryptonian society – not earth -”

“No. It's Ching,” she said, spitting out the name. “I know that my doppelgänger doesn't feel this way for him - but I hate the man. I don't trust him. Not one bit.”

“Did he hurt you,” Kal-El was unaware that his voice had gotten louder and angrier, and his expression intense. Lois's unwitting shrinking away reminded him to stay calm. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry -” he tried to reign his feelings back in.

Lois felt the heart-stopping terror slowly abate and release it's grip on her lungs.

“No... no – it's okay,” she said. “I obviously have trouble with seeing you angry... even Clark is careful not to get angry – then again, he has to worry about that in general. He has to be careful all the time because of what he can do...”
Kal-El considered that. Of course Clark had to be careful. Kal-El hoped he would get a chance to get to know this man better. He was sure he could learn a lot from Clark about living amongst humans if that ended up his fate, regardless that he believed he couldn't – and shouldn't – live here.

“So... ah – about Ching?”

“He was the one who forced me into captivity,” she said. “He forced me to be your clone's slave.”

Tension gripped Kal-El's heart again. He tried not to react visibly.

“I would not have believed that of him,” he breathed. “Might he be a clone as well?”

“He was protecting Zara,” Lois said, her voice hard and tight. She was holding the memories of that awful day at bay and it was hard. Images of the clone were super-imposing themselves on his progenitor. “Oh, god,” she muttered. “Not now... not again.”

“Lois, please,” Kal-El begged her. “We can stop this conversation – I don't want you to get upset.”

She was breathing hard, trying her best to maintain control. She looked away from him as she spoke, not wanting to end this prematurely.

“I think I'm okay,” she gasped. “Sorry – and yes – I know... I know. Ching loves her -” She riveted her gaze back to Kal-El's forcefully. “And your clone abused her. Ching wanted to protect her. There's a longer story involving my doppelgänger... and I can't tell it to you. I'm sorry – you'll have to ask Zara. I can't. But ... Ching – he acted to protect Zara. He sacrificed me to keep her safe. I can't forgive that. But you shouldn't -”

“Agree wholeheartedly with you,” Kal-El asked, incredulously. “He scarified you for her. And while I know that he loves her and I know that love is a powerful motivator, you don't behave that way. You don't - Zara, at least, is Kryptonian – you... it – horrifies me that he would do such a thing.”

“You can't understand a man's actions without knowing the life he's led,” Lois insisted hotly. “I appreciate what you feel, but things aren't as simple as that.”

“I do understand. I understand that sacrifices need to be made at times. I don't understand forcing someone to endure slavery in order to protect another.”

Lois nodded, still not looking to him.

“I hate him. I don't understand either. Fortunately I haven't had to deal with him. You, however will have to. You must put aside your feelings in order to be successful. Do you think you can do that?”

Her lecture shamed him. She wasn't even looking at him, and he felt the weight of her glare.

“I will do it, Lois. I promise you that.”
Chapter 31

After Clark left Lois, he didn't know what to do with his nervous energy. He was afraid for her – tense with worry that she might have another breakdown. He hovered outside the closed door. He didn't know what to do – should he stay here and be ready to help her again, or would that be overbearing? He didn't want to talk to Kent or Lane right now – dealing with their normalcy was a bit much right now. Not that he would ever wish this on them – but they were so happy and relaxed that they left him feeling hollow at times.

“Is she all right?”

He turned, hearing Lane's voice, his heart sinking somewhat at having been found by one of the people he wanted to avoid. He was shocked into silence at realizing it was LL who had spoken and not Lane. She seemed equally discomfited.

“I suppose she is. She says she is... “

LL swallowed hard. Clark felt her unease sharply. He wanted to leave her, but didn't know how to end this conversation.

“She's brave,” LL finally said, speaking to the door. It was easier to forget who he was if she didn't look at him.

“Unquestionable,” he said. He wanted to tell her she was too, but resisted the urge.

“How long before you were friends,” she asked. It was one of the things she'd been desperate to know.

“A year... just about.”

“Seems like such a short time. Considering. You must have pulled out the charm.”

“I avoided her as much as I could,” he confessed. “Although we did have a few encounters... “

“Saved her life?”

“Once... when she first had arrived. She almost got run over by a truck.”

LL gave a half smile – a mirthless smile, more like a wry quirk of the lips.

“That must have been disastrous.”

“She didn't get hit by the truck, so my definition of disaster is... different.”

“What changed the tide?”

It was strange, conversing with someone who looked fixedly at a wall as she spoke. Then again, it wasn't strange. It was very familiar... although back then, when Lois couldn't look at him at all, she also couldn't talk to him. LL was very rigid, her fear obvious, but she was hardened to the dictates of what she felt to be her duty.

“An asteroid nearly hit the earth. “

“So gratitude that you stopped it? I am assuming you stopped it.”
“When she came back – she began to write articles about the threat I posed. Funded by Lex Luthor. I think when I failed to retaliate she began to question her convictions. “ He sighed, remembering the pain. “I just tried to stay out of her way. Then the asteroid became a threat. I knew I had to go stop it, but I didn't know if I could. I knew she had more knowledge of what my ... ah – my people – could do... so – I wanted to ask her – I know. Sounds awful, but ... if the plan was doomed to failure at the start, perhaps an alternate plan could ... “

“It makes sense, Clark,” LL said shortly. “Go on. Don't feel you have to explain.”

“Okay... well... I wanted to talk to her, but I couldn't. So I asked her father.”

LL paled and Clark flinched. Her father was probably dead in this world. He had no idea the fate of so many – his own parents... hers, her sister- but he dared not ask.

“She didn't have answers... but at least she was willing to pass along that message to me. I had also tried reaching out about Lex. I thought he was – dangerous, as did – others that Lois trusted. I tried to give her information that we had on him – but I ended up scaring the hell out of her... after my impact with the asteroid, they thought I was dead. Lois went to my apartment to look for the data on Lex and found me there – with absolutely no memory of who I was. She overcame her aversion to me and worked to help my memories returned. I'm sure it was sheer hell for her, but she did it anyway. And my memories did return. I was able to take care of the asteroid. After that, our relationship turned the corner. We became friends.”

LL was silent, pondering his words. She knew there was plenty that he wasn't saying – but she didn't press. This was enough.

“How did friends – become married?”

“I have no idea how that happened,” he said. “I'm just glad it did.”

“Did...you make the first move?”

“No! No – I could never have told her how I felt. No – she did... because she's incredible.”

LL exhaled harshly.

“You both seem happy together. Like the other two - “

“I believe you can find happiness with more than one person. I do think Lois and I -belonged together – but she and I could have found happiness with others... “

“You're worried I think that Kal-El is my soul-mate?”

“I'm worried that you worry that he is.”

“You don't need to worry about my heart, Clark.”

He was silent, not knowing what to say to that.

She relented.

“I can't … have that life.” She force her gaze to meet his. “You must understand... something of that?”

He nodded.
“I hear what you’re saying,” he said carefully.

She gave him a small smile, which shocked him. Then she looked away again.

“Thank you for not trying to convince me otherwise.”

“It’s not easy to keep quiet,” he said. “But I know better. I don’t know you. I don’t have the right to act as if I did.”

“What do you think of him?”

He hesitated.

“Do you trust him, Clark?”

“Trust is … a tough word to use. My assessment is that he’s sincere, but he’s had years of training with the whole telepathy thing. As a future ruler – he had to learn to disguise his feelings well. So – I don’t know. I’m not so good with the telepathy. It’s possible he’s just very good at hiding.”

“Yet you left her with him.”

“It’s what she wanted. I had no right to override her wishes.”

“Even if he hurt her?”

“I’m out here, aren’t I,” he said, a wry smile on his face as he spoke. His gaze had also been on the wall, but now, he turned and she turned as well, and their eyes met. He saw the burst of fear in her gaze before she covered it.

“So you’re ready to charge in and save her if need be.”

“I felt the radiation on him... in him. I know he’s not 100%. I also trust the medics in there because you do. They can protect her as well.”

“Do … are you angry that I asked for her help? I’m a coward. I sent her in to do my job.”

He paused. He knew how important this was to her. This one question.

“No. I’m not angry,” he said softly. “Not that it would matter if I was... you had the right to ask her, and she had the right to agree or not -”

“But I put her in danger -”

“He’s not dangerous, really – with the radiation -”

“But now he knows about her. If he is dangerous, he might seek to – harm her later.”

“We came here to help free this world. This is a necessary step.”

“Okay.”

“Do you believe me? I’m not angry -”

“Yes...”

“Are … you going to talk with him?”
She paused and then looked at him.

“I'm out here, aren't I?”

“Ah... touché.”

“Yeah. I have to talk to him.”

“I'd be happy to stand guard,” he offered carefully.

“I wouldn't mind that,” she said mildly, looking at her feet.

“Ah – well. Then … absolutely.”

“Lois might need you after this,” she said. “Perhaps - “

“It's okay. I'm going to wait, if that's what you want. I know she'll understand.”

LL nodded feeling ridiculously relieved. Clark made her feel protected and that bothered her in the extreme. How had this happened? Is this how it had happened between the two of them in his world?
Chapter 32

Impatient by nature, LL considered waiting to be torture – that is, until she endured torture for real – and after that was careful never to misuse the word. 'Rape' and 'Nazi' were also relegated to positions of respect – no longer casually bandied about to reflect lesser discomforts and demons.

Waiting here with Clark wasn't quite torture, but it was emotionally painful. She finally believed him to be a good person but she still couldn't relax and make idle conversation with the man wearing the face and form of her tormentor. God, even his voice... his voice... she shuddered, wishing she had the courage at least to sit down and alleviate the ache in her leg.

Clark saw her minuscule shifting of weight – she clearly was uncomfortable standing so long and also unwilling to concede it – a perceived defeat in the face of a perceived enemy. He understood – he would never have shown weakness in front of Luthor either. Hoping to encourage her own rest, he very casually – too casually to be anything but obvious – dropped down to the ground to sit, rather than stand.

She angled her gaze downward to the Kryptonian who now rested on the floor. He didn't meet her gaze, instead staring at a spot in front of him, trying not to unnerve her with his presence. She fought back a bitter smile. This man would shrink himself down into the smallest possible footprint of space if doing so would alleviate her suffering, and yet she couldn't even concede to the gift he had just given her. She remained standing, even though her legs were beginning to hurt even more insistently.

“So how did it happen?”

Her question startled him – he wanted to look her way, to gain more clarity but then he realized she meant his relationship with Lois. He knew how important a question it was, despite her attempt as disinterest.

“I suppose I got lucky,” he finally said.

“I'd appreciate elaboration. I'm going to assume you didn't happen upon her drunk – and... get past her defenses that way.”

“Ah. No. Never that. Although she had a bit of wine – that first civil interaction between us, and I'm certain it was to bolster courage...”

“No amount of alcohol in the world could get me to face him. It's obvious that she no longer saw you as his double if she was willing to drink in your presence in the guise of a 'civil interaction'.”

“Ah... are you referring to him,” he indicated the room, “Or -”

“No... him.”

“Right. Well, yes – I suppose the fact that she could let down her guard that much in my presence is a testament to how far she'd moved away from her first impressions of me... I did take note of it at the time, for what it's worth. To me it was a miracle.”

“You loved her already?”

“I loved her from the start.”
His sidelong glance did not miss the shudder she actually seemed to want to conceal. Revulsion of course made complete sense, but as one who was taught to fear his differences, her revulsion cut to the core. He was an Alien. A thing.

“So … you never did tell me how it happened...”

“When she came home, she started a series of articles designed to raise the alarm about my presence on earth. She claimed I was a conqueror at heart and eventually I'd show my true colors.”

“As I would have done. Brave, when you think about it -”

“Extremely brave.”

“Were you angry?” Her voice was very careful as she asked her question.

“Not even in the slightest... well, not at her. Not even when it seemed to work. I felt a great deal of loathing to those responsible for her suffering – and that includes the jerk who stole her from her world in the first place.”

“Tempus.”

“Yes.”

“Would you kill him if you could?”

“Not for reasons of vengeance... I wonder if I could in self-defense – to say no would be naïve – I simply don't know. I have never wanted to kill.”

“Lucky us.”

“She … hated me. It burned bright – I could feel it – she pushed it out into the ether with her telepathic abilities honed from years living as she did... and I felt it whenever she was near. I didn't even know I could communicate that way until she came back home.”

“Did you try to change her mind?”

“I only once attempted to contact her.”

“I'm intrigued.” Her tone said 'terrified', but he let it pass. She had an infinite supply of passes where he was concerned.

“An asteroid was going to collide into earth – I was asked to try to divert it. I wanted her to have the results of years of investigation that Perry White and I had conducted into Luthor enterprises – “

“Perry,” she whispered. “I miss him so much.”

“I'm sorry,” he muttered.

“No... go on.”

“Okay. She'd worked with Lex to expose the threat she felt I presented... and so I wanted her to know that he was dangerous. I think she already knew by then because he'd behaved in a way that brings to mind a stalker...”

“Yes... Lex is … an interesting man. I suppose if not for the invasion he well could have skewed
towards dangerous.”

Clark was silent. He was very leery of the man, but had no desire to say so.

“You probably should watch out for him, Clark.”

“I... try to keep out of everyone's way.”

“I noticed. It's appreciated.”

“It's the very least I can do -”

“No... honestly none of this is your fault, yet you accept that we dump it on you – the blame. It's admirable, Clark.”

“I just want to see this world freed, and then go home – all of which can't happen if I throw hissy fits over how people treat me.”

She chuckled unwillingly.

“Lois did not react well to my attempt at contacting her – not that I really expected otherwise. Anyways what really tipped things over was when I came back without any memory of who or what I was. She was at my home trying to find the information I'd tried to give her, and I showed up – knowing somehow it was where I lived, but not knowing much else. I thought she was a threat – and – acted as if she was – and... well, eventually it went from two people who though the other was going to kill them to two people working together to get my memories back so I could go out and try again.”

“Wow...”

There was a long pause while she filled in the blanks of what he'd left unsaid. Truly Lois must have been terrified. But the world was at stake and she persevered. Not unlike what LL was doing in the here and now. Trusting that perhaps the dangerous one might not be so dangerous after all. She shuddered. She at least would not fall in love with the Kryptonian.

“So I used to think it was Stockholm syndrome -”

“Yeah.. that makes sense.” He desperately wanted to ask her if she still thought it. But this was the most she'd ever conversed with him and he didn't want to risk ending it. She obviously had her reasons and he was sure it had to do with trusting Kal-El enough to help them.

“And I watched you interacting... and I see that I was wrong. No stockholm syndrome as far as I can discern, maybe alien mind tricks,” she joked feebly, trying somehow to lighten the mood after hearing the subtle pain in his voice.

He remained silent, unwilling to believe she might be making a star wars reference. Likely she was referring to the brutal telepathy she'd been forced to endure.

“That was kind of a joke,” she muttered. “Perhaps I need to work on my delivery.”

“Well – ah – I wasn't sure. But I'll laugh dutifully if it'll make you feel better.”

“I do appreciate your attempt, but no worries. I realized as I said it how unfunny it was.”

“Can I … say something?”
“Okay...”

“I think you knew it was unfunny before you said it, but you are testing me and that's fine. I don't mind – but – as long as there's a some semblance of honesty discourse – I thought I should honestly say how I perceived it.”

“You talk a lot,” she chuckled. “You really are more human than Kryptonian.’

“Well, I was raised... that way. So yes. I suppose in my mind, in my heart, I am - “

“Do you feel defensive about it?”

“I don't want to presume.”

“Oh... yeah. I guess I'm used to the arrogance -it's weird to see the humility.”

“Are the Kryptonians who are in support of ending this invasion arrogant as a rule?”

“Zara isn't. Ching is.”

“Not the biggest 'Ching' fan anyway, he's the one who -”

“I know. I was aware of it. I think he did it to keep me safe – to keep Zara safe too. Do you resent us, knowing that?”

“Never.”

“But he... yes. I do.”

“He's been instructed to keep away from her.”

“Good. Because I'm sure she'd unleash her full wrath on him and that might involve red radiation.”

“So she's threatened.”

“And I... can't say I'd want to help the guy.”

“I get it...”

They were silent a while and then LL spoke again.

“So you think it's probable that Kal-El wants to help us?”

“I sense only good intentions. I sense anger and guilt over what was done in his name. Like I've said, I could be fooled – I'm not good at this form of communication – but still – it's what I feel. And I'll be totally honest – I want to go home. So how much of my believing it really translates to wishful thinking? I just don't know.”

“In the end, do we have a choice? I think it's do or die at this point.”

“Yeah... I see that.”

“If it comes down to die, please go home – both of you groups. Please don't die here.”

He turned at that, meeting her unflinching gaze. He had no idea what to say in response.
Chapter 33

The opening of the door saved him from having to respond. He stood carefully, his eyes now glued to his wife as she carefully closed the door.

“Thanks for waiting,” she smiled at them both.

“Any time,” Clark said, giving her a returning smile.

“It went well,” she told LL not giving the other woman a chance to ask. “My impression is that he's trustworthy. Although I know you'll want to know for yourself.”

Tension filled LL's chest at the idea.

“Yes... is he in shape to do it now?”

“He said he was -”

“What do you really think?”

“He's tired, hurt and angry – scared too... this is really hard for him. He didn't complain, but I felt his fatigue.”

“Do you think I should wait?”

“I think waiting makes it worse. I think he wants this to come to an end one way or the other.”

“I understand that... I suppose we're the ones holding him prisoner -”

“It isn't the same thing,” Lois argued. “We aren't maliciously hurting him.”

“Although face it- there are those amongst us who would,” LL surmised aloud, not really speaking to them, but rather voicing her thoughts. “I'm going to go in then...”

“And – I'll wait,” Clark told her. “I'm here if you need me. I hope you believe that.”

“I do. I don't know how I can trust you,” she laughed. “But I guess I – still have the ability to see past the surface -”

LL wiped her palms on her pants, trying to gain some semblance of calm. Turning the door handle, she forced herself to walk through. She closed the door, her heart skipping in fear at the decisive 'click' – indicating her situation – she was closed off with someone who well could kill her, red-radiation not withstanding.

Kal-El was very ill at ease – this woman was radiating more pain and fear than the other one – he was better able to feel her thoughts – and he assumed it was because they were from the same universe. Her fear made him feel physically ill.

“I – hope you are not troubled if I remain seated,” he told her. “I feel sick.” It was something of a lie. He didn't want to tower over her like he had with the other one – yet he didn't want to seem like a ruler, staying seated while his 'lesser' stood.

She shook her head.
“I... suppose I appreciate it,” her mouth quirked into a mirthless smile. “Do you feel up to this?”

“The radiation sickens me,” he answered. “The more time that passes, the worse it feels. I doubt resting will make me feel better.”

“So now is better than later?”

“I am at your convenience. But now is better than later.”

She nodded and sat down at the chair she knew Lois to have sat in.

“My mind is open to you,” he told her politely. “Have your ease at learning my thoughts.”

“My mind is not open to you,” she snapped. He didn't flinch or change expression, but there was a flicker of anguish in his dark eyes.

“I understand. I must tell you however that Lois – the other Lois – was unable to hold back her thoughts. I did learn of the abuse she suffered through the link despite her best wishes and it may be that I gain more knowledge with you than what you are willing to share.”

“Okay. Thanks for the warning.”

“It merely is a statement of fact. I intend no threat -”

“A warning isn't a threat,” she told him tersely.

“I am unfamiliar with the nuances of this language. I took them to mean the same thing.”

“Ah. Yes. I – forgot. English isn't your language. It quite naturally wouldn't be. Would you rather we conversed in Kryptonian?”

Kal-El fought back his admiration. As terrified as LL was, she was as cool and calm as if she were talking with someone she needn't fear. Even more amazing was her offer to speak his language – something that no doubt was horrifying to her.

“No, I prefer we speak in the language of your home. I don't want this to be any more difficult for you than it has to be.”

“Because I'm only an earthling and therefore can't properly speak your language?”

“Because the circumstances of how you had to learn it – I meant no insult, and if you wish -I will speak Kryptonian with you.”

“No!! No – I don't want that,” she stammered, thrown off balance.

He was silent, waiting for her to make the first move. She looked at his hands uneasily. Lois had held onto them to tighten her link, but then again she was used to that with Clark, while LL – well, the idea was nightmarish.

“We do not have to touch each other,” he told her, not able to pretend he didn't see her conflict.

She crinkled her brow and shook her head.

“I think we should,” she answered. It would be harder for him to hide his feelings with physical contact. She didn't want to say it aloud.
He placed his hands on the table – palm down, letting her make all the moves, and not trying in any way to make her think he might grab her hands.

“Okay... “ she muttered under her breath. “Here goes.”

She placed her hands on his, her gaze targeted to where they touched – not wanting to see the look in his eyes. What if there was that awful cruel – pleasure? It would break her to see it in this man's eyes. What if she was wrong? What if they all were wrong, and he was as bad as Lord Kal?

My name.

His thought floated in between them and she saw that it had been drawn unwittingly out. She felt it. The regret, the wish to draw it back – to have it be unsaid.

You are Lord Kal.

Her 'voice' was contemptuous and angry.

Yes. I am Lord Kal. Ruler of my people. I am responsible for their actions.

She shook her head, not really denying his truth, but denying that his sick loathing of what his people had done was anything but a ruse.

Lord Kal forced me to be his slave - he raped and tortured me – repeatedly -are you sure you want to be known as the man who could do that?

She felt it – pain, loathing, disgust – and she'd hoped to feel those things. She'd egged him on, trying to see through the tight intimacy of the link if subterfuge might also be felt. If he showed the slightest bit of sexual interest at her words, she would know him to be as sick as his clone.

It is not a matter of what I want. It is what it is. I am Lord Kal. You know it as well as I do.

She exhaled hard, shaken by what he'd said. Of course he felt her reaction to him – her sickened, hate-filled, terrified reaction.

Then what will you do to recompense my world?

I will fight for you. I will fight for your freedom. I will die if necessary for your freedom.

The intensity of truth in that last thought nearly sent her to her feet. She felt the essence of everything he was in that one assertion that was more a vow than anything else.

You cannot return to me what was lost.

I cannot.

My honor.

Is that the custom of your people? You are deemed unworthy because of what you were forced to endure?

Isn't it the custom of yours? Don't you think Zara is defiled? Used goods?

She is a person – she is not an object to be used.

She feels defiled.
She feels guilty – she feels she should have known.

And do you feel the same way?

I bear her no ill will.

Will you accept her as your bond-mate when this is over? If we win?

I will not. I will grant her dissolution of our union. I owe her that much. To let her find her happiness where she can.

She could be happy with you.

Maybe once. Now – it is no longer possible. She will see him in my eyes – and even if she could get past that, she will not be able to forgive herself for failing me.

You think she failed you?

She thinks she failed me.

So you find another bond-mate – doesn't the King need his Queen?

I will not be leader to my people.

She flinched from the bitter edge of anger in his thoughts.

I meant you no distress. I am sorry. I am angry at those who perpetuated this scheme. It is hard to hide those feelings in the link.

You could have them punished. Imprisoned. Then you wouldn't have to deal with them.

I cannot lead my people. I have failed them. I too was failed. The only way my people can heal is to have a different leader.

Lord Nor.

Never. Zara would be my choice.

She must have a man at her side.

Ching.

He's not a noble.

I can change that. I can welcome him to my family – and then he will be as a brother.

They won't like it.

She felt what translated to a weary sigh.

I suppose you'll cross that bridge when you come to it?

I think I mean that. Whatever happens. I will not allow this invasion to continue. It will end and we will leave. We will do whatever you wish first to repair the damage we have created, but we do that at your command.
Chapter 34

LL emerged from the room hastily.

Clark and Lois regarded her worriedly. LL was pale and shaking, she wasn't even trying to hide her reaction. Her breath was coming in hard gasps.

“Just give me a moment,” she told them. “I just need a moment.”

“Of course,” Lois murmured and she looked over at Clark worriedly.

She sank down onto the floor, sitting with her knees pulled in, and she wrapped her arms around them protectively.

Clark was getting increasingly worried and angry. He'd seen his own Lois like this, and it had never been a pretty sight. He wanted to go shake the truth out of Kal-El and demand what had gone on between them in that room.

LL leaned her forehead against her knees, painfully aware that she was having a melt-down in front of people that she was loathe to show weakness to. At least – that was true for Clark. Lois knew far too well the horrors that lurked under LL's seemingly steady surface.

“Lois, do I need to go in there,” Clark finally broke the silence.

She shook her head, not looking at him. She paused for a long moment and turned war-torn eyes his way. His heart broke for her. She looked so lost. But at least she was making eye contact – that was a good sign. He'd learned long ago to read the signs.

“I'm... he didn't do anything wrong, Clark. Thanks for the offer, though,” she laughed – a harsh, mirthless laugh. Very wearily she stood up, feeling the weight of the world on her.

“My tormenter and my ...champions – wear the same faces.”

He winced.

“I didn't meant to be hurtful,” she exhaled wearily. “Before... I know I've been cruel to you. And you've taken it well. I just – I'm -”

“All understandable and no harm done,” he assured her.

“What can we do for you,” Lois asked her.

“Make this invasion never to have happened?”

“Oh. Believe me. I wish I could.” Lois's tone was harsh, forcing the other woman to remember that she too had suffered. That LL had actually allowed it to happen. Lois didn't hate her for it, but sometimes she felt the need to remind her that she wasn't the only one to suffer.

“What happened in there,” Clark asked. “If you want to tell me, of course.”

“I saw him. I saw who he's been... who he is, what he stands for... what he's gone through. I felt his
terror – and his anger, and his own suffering... and it humbled me. I've been blaming him, but he's as much a victim as I am, or you are, Lois... he was raped too – in a different way, true, but nonetheless – he was violated. His life was stolen, he was rendered insensate... he was forced to endure his clone's life through telepathic sendings... he's felt the other's sick pleasure at hurting people. At hurting women. And his own moral code has processed what feel to be his own memories. And it's left him soul-sick at the very deepest level of his being. I felt this. Lois, I felt it. Did you?”

“I … did not,” she said. “I felt some of it, but I didn't realize that he'd been under that kind of telepathic assault all these years. Obviously he was calling out for help and I was picking up on it in the other world, even, but... not what you'd described.”

“It's like that disease where you can't move at all, but you're totally aware. It's like he was dead, but his soul was trapped in his body. He remembers the other's actions. I don't know how he can live with himself when this is all over... but I guess I can't worry about him. I didn't do this to him. They did. And... it's his problem and their problem. All we can do is try to free our own world. And then – go back to living life, however we can do that.”

Clark exhaled, feeling sorry for Kal-El, for both Loises and for the human world of this universe.

“Are you willing to trust him?”

“Yes. I mean no. But yes. I'm done. I … vote we – stop poisoning him, and move forward. I'll call a meeting. Be ready to attend.”

Clark nodded.

LL turned to walk away. After she'd moved several feet from them, she turned.

“Thanks... both of you. For everything.”
“Kal-El,” Zara said, entering his room. “A decision has been made.”

He remained silent, allowing her to speak.

“They are choosing to trust you. You will no longer be poisoned. You will be allowed to gain strength and you will be part of strategizing meetings to consider our plan of attack.”

He exhaled, feeling immensely grateful to LL for deciding in his favor. He knew she was the leader.

“Thank you. I thank you all. I thank you, Zara. I know you spoke in my favor. I also am grateful you held by your own principals and aided the resistance.”

“You do not need to thank me. I have wronged you and the human race. My actions are what they should be.”

“You did not wrong me,” he said softly, approaching her carefully. She stood, waiting for his approach, her body stiffening imperceptibly. Kal-El knew she was afraid for him to touch her, and he did not even try.

“I should have known. My Lord, I committed treason against you. When this is over, I submit myself to whatever punishment you deem appropriate.”

“I was under the impression you were unaware that he was a clone. Are you telling me now this was a lie?” His tone was deliberately hard and she looked at him, startled.

“No. I did not know, my Lord.”

“Zara, please call me Kal-El,” he urged, frustrated by the conversation. “I wanted you to see that you did not commit treason. You did not know what they did.”

“I should have,” she shouted, letting her emotions come out. “I should have known – from our very first night together as man and wife – I should have known.”

“Because the person you knew me to have been would not treat you with such disrespect?”

She nodded, her gaze still on his, although he sensed she wanted to look away.

“I … am … somewhat troubled by that as well. However – you believed what was in front of you. He looked exactly like me. You may have believed that time and duty had changed me.”

“But I should have known.”

“You should have. You did not. Nobody is perfect. I am not sure I would have known if they had done this to you, either. We had been separated for many years. When last we saw each other, we were still growing into adulthood.”

She looked away. To her greater dismay, he didn't demand her full attention. He just placed a very tentative hand on her arm.

“I am sorry my clone treated you so poorly. I am sorry he invaded this world and laid such waste – killing so many. I am sorry that you are burdened by the pain of your memories – of what he did. I
am sorry we will never be friends again.”

Her eyes met his, startled.

“I am your -”

“No. You are not. I dissolve our union. It is my right as Lord.”

She flushed.

“You must be with Ching. We both know this to be true. And when this is over and we have won, I will name him a brother. And pass on the rulership to you both.”

“No,” she gasped. “You cannot do that.”

“Why?”

“Neither Ching nor I deserve your trust. You do not know what we both have done to survive - I did not aid the earth people right away – I – saw their suffering.... witnessed it close at hand, and I did nothing. And Ching – he enslaved women -”

“To protect you?”

“Yes. To protect me. To keep him from hurting me -”

“You were all victims. As much as I was. We cannot move forward if we let the past chain us. We must work together and in order to do this, you must let go of your self hatred.”

Tears pricked her eyes. This would have been a worthy man to call husband.

“Kal-El... I will try. I hope one day we can be friends. I know I would like that very much.”

“If you can get past what he did to you, then I would consider myself lucky indeed. But we can only at best be friends. Certainly this union cannot continue. You would not welcome intimacy with me – not when you feel so strongly about Ching, and have all those terrible memories of my clone. So I give you your freedom, in one of my final acts as the leader of our people. Accept this, my friend. Because I have nothing more to give you in recompense.”

She nodded, squeezing his hand, no longer afraid to touch him.

“I must still play my part – with him.”

“I do not like that,” Kal-El said, showing the same fear and anger that the two Clarks had regarding her situation.

“We all must do what we must do,” Zara insisted. “I will give up my life if need be, but I will not jeopardize our mission.”

“You will be a wonderful leader to our people, Zara,” he told her, his eyes glowing with respect. She felt the stirrings of the old pleasure in his company and smiled gratefully for his praise. His clone had never once said a kind word to her.
Chapter 36

*There are two of them. Impressive. They hid this well.*

Kal-El and Zara were conducting a private meeting with two variations of Clark Kent, and three variations of Lois Lane. The 'new' Lois was very much at her ease, regarding him with friendly interest. The warm welcome in her gaze was painful to bear - it held the other two in such stark contrast. He never was one to take offense at a person not liking him, but to be around people who had been victimized by his own clone and to bear the brunt of their fear and anger - it was more than he had ever expected to endure. Yet as a leader, it was his duty. Even if it wasn't his clone who had done terrible things, he answered for all Kryptonians. His own failure to be careful had caused Earth great harm.

He dropped his gaze when he saw sudden sympathy enter hers. He hoped she hadn't read his thoughts.

“I hope you understand why we kept their existence a secret,” Zara explained, her tone cool. She hid her emotions well, but he knew that like two of the Lois Lanes, she had terrible memories of encounters with his clone.

Ching was absent – although he should have been here, Kal had yet to interact with him. Zara had explained the Lois who had been brought here from another world hated Ching because he was the one who took her to Kal's clone. Kal understood her feelings. If he faced Ching right now, he wasn't sure yet how he would react to such a heinous act, even if Ching purported to be attempting to safeguard Zara. Even if safeguarding Zara had greatly strengthened the resistance and saved lives. Soon, however, Ching would need to be brought in to talk to Kal and help craft a plan to reinstate Kal-El as the rightful ruler.

He was the rightful ruler and while they could never hope to win a physical battle against those who enjoyed being world-conquerors, Kal-El had the authoritative power to end the invasion. All he needed to do in the end was prove that he was really Kal-El and that he hadn't willfully given control to those who cloned him. There may be physical battles yet, but many would follow the true lord, reducing the number of traitors.

“If I was dangerous, having me unaware that there are two sets of doppelgangers gave you an advantage. I commend your caution.”

She nodded her thanks to him, her eyes cloudy with dark emotions.

“Perhaps formal introductions, now that you are fully healed?”

Kal was fully healed. It was incredible how this world made him feel. Earth's sun energized him, making it possible for him to do impossible things. However those impossible powers had been used for great evil in this world – and he felt uncomfortable enjoying his power when so many people had suffered horribly. He was also afraid of losing control around humans. He could not risk hurting anyone. Not even accidentally.

He quickly looked over at the Lois of his world. She tensed up hearing Zara's words and Kal knew
she was afraid of what he would do now that he was no longer being kept weak.

He nodded to Zara, agreeing to her plan.

She spoke formally and introduced him to the four extra-universal people.

“I know you have already made the acquaintances of Lois Lane and Clark Kent,” she said, indicating the two he had interacted with. Lois gave him a quick smile and nodded a greeting. He was grateful for even that.

“Now let me present to you yet a different world's Lois Lane and Clark Kent.”

He hesitated. Dare he approach them? How would they react?

They solved his problem by approaching him. Kent's eyes were wary as they regarded Kal, he wasn't 100% convinced that this was a good plan yet – because he hadn't interacted with Kal at all. All he knew was what he'd shared mentally with Lois – the horror of her memories of this man's clone. Lane however showed no fear at all - she was openly curious and seemingly eager to meet him.

She put her hand out when they got close, encouraging him to take it in a standard casual human greeting. It was strange for Kal to comply – he was used to the other two women fearing him, but he accepted her greeting and held her hand gently.

“Are you afraid to hold my hand,” she asked him in a low voice, his handshake was too weak to inspire any kind of confidence. “We tend to judge people by their handshake. A weak clasp makes us think the person is weak – or possibly untrustworthy. I suspect you're being overly careful because your strength is new to you... I advise working on it with Clark – either Clark.”

He was silent in the face of her words, unable to process her tendency to take charge and issue orders.

“I – ah – did not mean to offend,” she added, realizing she might have done so by discussing this publicly. He was after all – a King. She had a purpose to her criticism - to show the others that he could take it. She had full confidence in his ability to handle this situation well.

“I am not offended,” he assured her, hoping she wasn't afraid of him. “I merely was taken aback by your forthrightness.”

“Once you get to know me, you won't be surprised. I realize I can be … a bit much. I just want to help you.”

“I appreciate it. I am afraid to shake hands. You are correct. I would prefer to not come into physical contact at all with humans if it meant avoiding any chance of hurting someone.”

“That might be read as a superiority complex,” LL told him, surprising him with her words. She looked at him defiantly, almost challenging him to do something about her bold gaze.

“I do not wish to – project that I am superior to anyone. “

“You were raised to rule,” LL continued, arguing the point. “So aren't you superior?”

“I am the chosen ruler to my people,” he agreed. “I was raised to take on the role in adulthood. If I come across as - “
“Overbearing? Domineering?”

“Yes, If I do, it is unintentional and must be corrected. I hope you all will tell me if I upset you.”

Color rose to LL’s face at his response to her.

“We’ll tell you if you come across that way,” Lane told him reassuringly. “If that is what you wish.”

“It is. I thank you.” He smiled at her, and she grinned back. The impact of her smile, genuine and not clouded by dark emotions was powerful. He wanted to step back to protect himself. He looked over at Kent and saw that the other variation of him was looking at him oddly. Kal worried that his doppelganger thought he was trying to steal away his wife and wished he could reassure the man.

“Clark and I can help you,” Kent offered. “With your new abilities. With – the other stuff too,” he said, speaking casually to encompass the whole ‘making people uncomfortable’ problem. “The truth is, people will fear you no matter what. Clark and I have each had a few accidental run-ins with former victims of your clone – and it’s awful. It’s bad enough talking to the Kryptonians who have suffered at his hands.”

Kal nodded. He understood. Zara and Vina both troubled him greatly -yet they each treated him as if he didn't trouble them. He knew better.
LL brooded in her private quarters, trying to recover from the emotional onslaught of three Kal-Els in one room. It was hard to think of either earth-raised Kal-El as Clark when they were in the same room as Lord Kal-El. Together it looked like an alien invasion. Zara's presence only enhanced that illusion. LL shuddered. She hoped it was an illusion. It could so easily sway the other way. She was 'free' by their whims. Even Zara's, and she mostly trusted Zara. At least - as best as she could trust any Kryptonian. She shivered, wrapping her arms around herself protectively. How did Lois ever get over this all-encompassing sense of menace enough to be able to befriend Kal-El, let alone... be lovers?

She nervously watched the seconds hand of her clock tick. She should go back in, act as if she needed a bio break. Act casual and cool and in control, but why bother? Lois Lane was having a panic attack. What else is new? That was the problem. The aliens in the room must have picked up on her fear - the increased respiration and pulse speed... let alone her smell - she probably smelled the way prey smells. Frightened. Cornered. Knowing death was near even if she had some small amount of trust that the aliens wouldn't harm her, she had felt the old memories crushing in on her, bringing her down to her knees. She had been so close to slipping into a flashback, into a panic attack. Pleas of mercy had been so close at hand on her tongue - waiting to be uttered.

She couldn't let that happen. Bad enough Zara had witnessed her shame in person- she had witnessed LL cringing and begging Lord Kal for mercy - at least Zara never once mentioned it. Zara had her own ghosts.

She hated the memories of being weak and openly fearful. Begging. Crying. Cringing away on the floor. LL was broken. 'Lord Kal' had broken her. Make no doubt of that. She played a good game, but in the end, she was broken and she knew that the others knew it. The Clarks knew it. Lois and Lane knew it. Zara knew it. And worst of all, Kal-El knew it. He absolutely had to know it – she had gotten so much from him inadvertently during their telepathy session, she knew he also had received as much from her. He had seen her true self. He knew what she was. A weak and pathetic nothing.

She loathed herself for caring what he thought, but she did. Perhaps because she hated his clone so much, she wanted him to see her as strong... but she knew he didn't. He couldn't. And she hated him for that. For not letting her have her illusion. For knowing her. This whole thing happened because he'd been sending inadvertent telepathic messages. She knew he had received sendings from his clone. That meant even without their shared interaction, he knew what his clone had done to her. Perhaps he'd even felt it. Perhaps he'd gotten off on it while in stasis, a remnant of a shared link with the thing he unwittingly 'fathered'.

Worse- she hated seeing him interact with Lane. Lane was so undamaged. She was ebullient and beautiful, because LL knew that she herself had once been beautiful. Lane was what LL would have been without the invasion. Lean, muscled and glowing from exercise and healthy eating, her skin was radiant and her eyes were bright from a life well led. The other damaged Lois on the other hand was shadowed and tentative, like herself, but living back in her home world and no longer coping with the daily trauma of living in a conquered world, she had thrived. She also loved and was loved in return – by Clark. Her supposed soul-mate. LL had nothing. In contrast to her doppelgangers... especially Lane, she was haggard and hard. All beauty long stripped away. Her body suffered the years of privation – nothing about her suggested youth, beauty or vigor. She kept her body taut and strong by ruthless exercise, but nothing could truly make up for the lack of sun and good nutrition. Her skin was sallow, her eyes dull, and even her teeth had seen better days.
But why would her physical inferiority upset her? She knew that Kal could never be hers in that way. The very idea made her sick. Yet seeing Lane and Kal smile at each other, as they had, was deeply troubling nonetheless. Her prettier, more vivacious twin was poaching into her territory. Just because she didn't want Kal-El didn't mean she wanted him to smile at Lane like that.

During their interaction, she'd flicked a quick glance over to Kent – not for long, because although she had formed a connection – brief and tentative though it was – to Clark, Kent made her nervous. He had admittedly borne the name 'Lord Kal' for a short while when his people had arrived on earth so she thought of him as more alien. Also – he had no understanding of what she had gone through. Not like Clark who lived with the repercussions daily. Kent had confused her when he saw his wife with Kal-El– his reaction to the shared smile had been his own returned smile – as if he found something endearing in the exchange. Had Kal been 'flirting' with Lane? And if so, wouldn't that bother Kent? Or did he see it as further evidence that Lane was attracted to him?

And why did she care about any of this? This was the part that bothered her the most. She was upset over a perceived connection between an alien that made her shudder in revulsion and herself from another universe. Was she perhaps concerned that Kal might find her attractive, despite her obvious shortcomings? Or... was she afraid he would never because she was so lacking in beauty now, because Kal, no matter who he looked like, was physically gorgeous – and if he hadn't looked like the man who had tortured and raped her, she would have been transfixed by his perfect beauty. It bothered her to think that her looks were in no way in alignment to his, and then... it bothered her that it bothered her.

She shook her head angrily. Now was not the time for her to have these thoughts. She knew if Kal had shown an interest in her, she would have been sickened and terrified, so why was she dwelling on this? Besides, Kal-El was bonded to Zara. He wasn't seeking another mate. If he was, he wouldn't look to Lane – nor would he look to her. And if he did look to her, she would be horrified. So in the end, this line of thinking was completely unproductive.

She exhaled. It was time to reclaim her world. That was all she should think of. If this worked, they would all be gone. She could forget Kal-El, his clone and all the rest. She would miss Zara... but she yearned for the day that this world was free of all Kryptonians.
“Let's talk logistics. Where should Kal-El reside,” LL snapped briskly re-entering the room as if she owned it.

The others turned to her – and she nearly buckled under another overwhelming wave of terror like the one that had sent her rushing out of the room in the first place. Too many damned Kryptonians. To many Kal-Els. She fought against visceral reaction, and swallowed back nausea. She forced herself to appear calm, but the buzzing in her ears threatened to drive her to her knees. She fixed her gaze on Kal-El defiantly. She would win this. It wasn't the same as successfully defying the monster that had tortured her for so long, but it was as close as she would ever be able to come even if she knew that Kal-El had been as much a victim of his people as she had. Kal-El returned her gaze, and she saw the compassion in his eyes. She forced herself to keep looking at him, wanting nothing more than to run away and not have those pitying eyes regarding her. She almost thought his pity was worse than his clone's menace. Almost.

“He's welcome to stay with us,” Lois spoke, hoping to rescue LL from a panic attack. She could see how rigidly LL stood and knew she was in the grip of something awful. She knew that the other woman's rapid departure from the room had been driven by terror, and she knew that LL would do anything to keep the others from knowing it. Despite her lingering anger about having taken LL's place, she wanted to protect the other woman. She seemed so fragile and lost under all the bluster.

“Really? You can honestly say that wouldn't bother you?”

Lois regarded Kal-El. She felt absolutely no menace from him now that she believed he wasn't dangerous. And she did believe it. The path had been paved for her through her journey into trusting Clark. Even if Kal-El was dangerous, and she was obviously willing to bet her life he wasn't, she knew Clark and Kent would protect her.

“No. I wouldn't be bothered,” she told Kal-El directly. “Not by you, although I do sometimes... well, you saw. I can sometimes forget. I don't mean to hurt anyone's feelings -”

“You shouldn't apologize for that,” LL cut in harshly.

Lois stopped speaking, unable to reply politely. Right now she wanted to snap at LL and tell her it was none of her business. Because it was her business. This was more LL's business than Lois's.

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“Do you accept this,” LL challenged Kal-El. “It's hardly the regal luxuries you'd come to expect.”

“I am grateful for the offer,” Kal-El answered calmly, his gaze steady and even on hers. He knew that LL hated him, and making eye contact with him was anathema to her – but it wasn't his way to avoid eye contact. He was what he was – a man born to lead... to rule, and he couldn't change his mannerisms over night, even if he knew it would be best to avoid looking at her head-on. He had to keep reminding himself to these earth people, even a Kryptonian's gaze could turn into a horrifying fiery death.

“Are you sure about this,” Kal-El asked Lois. He knew she was forcing herself towards normalcy around him. She obviously wanted him at his ease. She felt badly for him – he'd felt it in their link. In fact, even LL saw him as a victim in their link. It was unfortunate that outside the link she kept seeing him as her tormentor. The look in her eyes... it … sickened him. It drove him to despair. To see the lurking terror... the memories, some of which he'd been forced to relive... he wanted to apologize, to – to win this battle and lay the victory down at her feet, as a penance – as something –
just to win a smile from her – because he'd seen that smile when honestly meant – on Lane's face and even Lois's and he'd been drawn to them in ways he couldn't even explain. He couldn't want – more with her. His unsettling urge to make LL happy had to be a desire to right the wrong he had done her by allowing himself to fall prey to those who had committed treason against him. And even if it was something else - he could never let those feelings out.

“I am sure.” Lois smiled, and he felt it again. That pull. That awful empty yearning.

“And what of you,” he asked the others.

“If Lois is fine with it, so am I,” Lane asserted.

The other Kal-Els assented as well, their manner as easy and welcoming as Lane and Lois. Kal-El marveled at how human his doppelgängers were.

“This does represent a security issue.”

“In what way,” Lois asked, knowing she should be the liaison to LL whenever possible. LL had no reason to hate or fear her.

“You aren't from here. And he's … on … probation, I guess.”

“What would make you feel secure? Surveillance devices perhaps?”

LL shuddered.

“No…”

“If it would, don't feel as if you can't do it,” Lois urged. “I know it's … “

“No. I either trust that you all have good intentions, or I don't. I can't delay or threaten our plans by putting roadblocks in the way.”

“Well I'd be happy to live with them,” Lex said, finally breaking his long silence. He knew LL saw herself as leader and he indulged her, but he insisted on being a part of the high level meetings. He would not be made irrelevant.

“I would not be happy with that,” Lois said firmly. “I'd prefer surveillance devices.”

“Even if I was the one watching them?” Lex's tone was mocking as he appraoched her.

“Leave her alone,” Lane snapped, coming over to step in between Lex and Lois. “If you mess with her, I guarantee you're messing with me.”

“Maybe you should call off your wife,” Lex challenged Kent.

“Is that the kind of relationship you had with your ex-wives?” Kent's tone with challenging. Lex refused to back down.

“How do you know I have ex-wives? This world is different from yours. Things that happened where you come from haven't exactly happened here, or do you think in time we'll be privy to another interspecies wedding?” He let his gaze flick between LL and Kal. LL paled, and Kal-El dropped his gaze, hoping to put her at ease, even if it was in defiance to his instincts as ruler.

“I think you're trying to see how far you can push me,” Lane snapped angrily.
“Stop all this,” LL spoke, taking control of the conversation. “Lex, your advice is valuable, but I am not going to stand silent while you engage in pointless taunting. We have a job to do and we won't accomplish it by being childish.”

“I seem to recall a few outbursts from you when these four first showed up.”

“Yes. I did wallow a lot in hostility. I admit that – but I've tried to move past that behavior. We can't succeed if all we do is vent our anger at our invaders on those who just look like them. We have to take the advantage we have and use it in the best way possible.”

“You mean use 'him'. Lord Kal. You are the rightful leader of your species. How do you feel being referred to as a mere tool?”

“It is preferable to the alternative,” Kal said, his tone even and steady. He didn't like this man at all, and he was angered at the way Lex kept trying to upset LL and Lois – but Lane had it under control, and he knew that any anger on his part would be upsetting to everyone. He had to stay calm.

“So it’s settled then,” Lois asked. “Kal-El stays with us?”

“Just don't get confused about who's sleeping with who,” Lex added one final taunt, loving the way Lois grew suddenly pale at the idea.

“Yes,” LL said. “It is a good plan. Truthfully his presence will upset so many people the way yours has done, that it makes sense to keep you all together.” She winced inwardly at how rude that sounded but she didn’t want to apologize. “We will not put surveillance cameras in. If you wished to betray us, you’d be able to do it regardless. I hope you don’t regret your offer, Lois. If at any time you find this living arrangement not to your liking, please feel free to tell me. I want you to feel safe.”

Lois nodded.

“Kal-El does not make me feel threatened.”

Kal-El looked at her, his expression filled with gratitude and admiration. LL saw this and felt a shaft of jealousy. Violently she tamped it down.
Chapter 39

Kal-El surveyed the common room that joined the sleeping areas. There were several sleeping areas off the main room and he knew two were occupied. He would occupy a third one.

“You must have a lot of questions,” Lane urged him gently. “If so, please just ask.”

“I do – have many questions. I am unclear where to begin.”

“Are you curious about me,” Lois asked him bluntly, knowing he was. “Are you wondering about Clark? How we ended up together?”

Kal-El felt warmth crawl through his skin and worried he was showing signs of embarrassment.

“I … would like to know how that happened. I do not mean it in an offensive or intrusive fashion, but – I know that amongst these people who have been so horribly hurt by my clone, I am seen as a shadow of what he is. They know I did not hurt them, but still – they feel as if I did – as if I will and – I have to wonder why you do not look at me like that, Lois? I sense – I trouble you, especially our first meeting – however – you are not afraid to look at me, or to interact with me. You must have been afraid when you first met - Clark,” he said the name carefully. It sounded strange to utter a name so different from his own.

“I was horribly afraid of Clark when I came home to my world. I suffered – badly – at the hands of your clone, Kal-El. And when I learned my world had it's own Kal-El, I was sure he would conquer and enslave us, and do all the terrible things your clone had done.”

She hugged herself in the memory and Kal-El noted how Clark and Kent both watched her – a mix of protectiveness and worry in their body language. He wondered if the two men were angry with him for talking about this.

“Please, Lois,” Kal-El interrupted. “I beg of you not to trouble yourself. I do not need – an accounting. Perhaps it is the very fact that you talk with me, that you – are at such ease with these other two – that I feel that one day – I can – interact with those my clone hurt without all the awful fear.”

“I … am troubled, Kal-El,” her gaze was dark with worry as she looked at him. “I am very troubled and afraid that if I talk about any of this with you it will trigger a … well, you know. You saw. And I don't like going there. To that awful place. It's why I'm here... I was picking up on sendings from this world, and - the person who has the technology to track alternate universes figured out about your existence. He was trying to find a way to help me so I didn't wake up... trapped in those sendings – ones that he learned you were accidentally transmitting.”

“You mean... I... attacked you with telepathic sendings? Even when you were in your home universe.” Kal-El visibly paled.

“You accidentally transmitted – while you were being forced to receive sendings from your clone. I believe that was also unwitting on his part, though I doubt he would care much that he caused you, or I – or anyone else, any grief at all.”

“Regardless,” Kal's entire demeanor was suffused with guilt. “I … hurt you. I crippled your life. Is that what you are telling me?”

His voice and manner were intense and passionate and he took an unwise step in her direction,
almost demanding that she give him a response and she stepped away from him, jerkily, trying to get her feelings under control.

He stopped and looked at the other two men, abashedly.

“I am sorry, I am so deeply sorry,” he forced himself to calm down and he dropped his gaze to show submission. His leadership training had no place in the face of one he had unwittingly hurt.

“It wasn't your fault,” Lois mumbled, trying to regain her calm. “And... I can't help it. I can't...”

“No. It is also not your fault that I upset you. I am sorry for that as well. I obviously cannot do anything about the past, but I promise I will never send anything to you without your permission. I feel as if I - “

“No,” she interrupted. “Don’t. Just... don’t.”

He stopped and then nodded, accepting her edict. He would obey her commands. He owed her that much.

“And... this conversation has to happen, Kal-El,” she raised her gaze to him, and he returned it reluctantly. “So don’t worry. I might not like talking about this, but I understand it's ... what I can contribute to this effort. We can help you learn to relate to these humans – because I am the expert in the subject... so is Clark.”

“No, I'm not,” Clark disagreed, surprising Kal-El with his sudden vocalization after the other man had stood quietly offering his wife silent support. Kal-El noticed that both his doppelgängers had wary body language around Lois most of the time. While Kent and Lane were relaxed with each other, and even now in the privacy of these quarters had taken to casual affection touches, Clark and Lois did not behave in that way. Kal-El wondered just how... real... this relationship was. Was it possible that Lois and Clark were not sexually intimate?

“What do you mean,” he asked Clark. “You overcame her hatred of you -”

“No. She did that.”

“Give yourself credit,” Lois said, coming over and placing a loving hand on his chest. Clark immediately placed his hand over hers. His expression was tender. And it was then that Kal-El saw it. The actual intimacy. The closeness. The love. Yes. Clark wasn't as comfortable about casually touching his wife in affection, but that didn't mean intimacy didn't happen. He was deeply glad of that fact. Lois deserved the best she could have, and a life without intimacy seemed a cold and empty way to live. Even if it was the life he faced. At least he deserved it – for being so stupid and not taking greater precautions against his potential enemies.

“I – hated him. I tried to – warn the world. He never once tried to stop me. He never told me he was angry or hurt. He just … took it.”

“I didn't have a choice. You had to do it. And you stopped it once you began to disbelieve your own assertions.”

“Hooray for me,” she said bitterly. “Not after causing you a lot of trouble.”

“How did you end up – friends? There had to have been – something that happened that eased you from – what you had been to -where you are?”

“An asteroid was going to crash into earth. I had to stop it. I developed amnesia from the collision
and our paths crossed.”

“I had already begun to question my distrust of him – and I was at his apartment, believing him to be dead... I was looking for information I knew he'd compiled on Lex Luthor.”

“Lex – he was in your world as well?”

“Oh, we can talk about Lex later,” said Lois, looking over at the other three who knew well what Lex was capable of. “But I think you are better served with this conversation.”

“By all means... but only if you are able to do so without undue distress.”

“It really is okay, Kal-El,” she said softly, coming over and sitting down where he'd already taken a seat in an attempt to appear less threatening. “I promise to tell you if I need a break.”

Kal-El was shocked at her nearness - that she had willingly come to sit near him - in touching distance. He almost yearned for her to touch him. To make him seem a friend as well, instead of a possible threat.

“You are a remarkable person,” he praised her. “I know if our situations were reversed, I would not be able to behave as you are doing.”

“If not for Clark, I would be a wreck around you,” she confessed, her eyes bleak with bitter memories. “He can tell you about it... anyway. We ended up spending time together – he didn't have his memories. He had no idea I feared him. I know he felt it – but he didn't understand it. We were desperate to get him to remember. That was the turning point in our relationship – it was very difficult and painful at the time, but after that – I ... wanted to be near him. And Lex was harassing me... which meant I needed help. Which I asked Clark for, and he gave it. Whenever I needed him – he was there for me. He never once made me feel guilty about hurting him. It didn't take very long before I realized I loved him... so many women wanted him, and I felt eclipsed by that. I finally told him that I wanted him to wait for me... I took a chance, and found out he felt the same way about me. By then I trusted him not to hurt me, but so many times the ghost of your clone got in the way.I would freak out when he laughed, even – because sometimes that would trigger an awful memory. Clark endured it. He did whatever I needed him to do and he put up with my rages.”

“You make it seem like it was purgatory,” Clark told her, unable to stay silent. He came over and sat next to her, taking her hand gently in his. “It wasn't. You hating me was. Once you stopped, well – the times when you were angry or frustrated with me – those were valuable to me as because you weren't afraid of me. Your flashbacks hurt me because they hurt you, but you never hurt me, Lois. I knew you needed time to get to a place of peace.”

“Well you were... incredible,” she told him, her eyes glowing with love. “You always have been. Without you in my life, I'd never have come back to myself. Ever.”

“Same here...”

Kal-El regarded the two. They were lost in each others gazes, holding each others hands gently. He felt the same wistful empty yearning he'd felt before. He pushed it away. He couldn't think of LL that way. Such a thing would never be possible between them and he couldn't allow himself to believe he could ever belong here. He didn't belong with his former people anymore either, he was an outsider to all. He could never forget that. When this was over and they had won Earth's liberty, he would find somewhere else to go. Even if he was all alone for the rest of his life. He deserved to atone for his failures. Unwitting thought they were.
Kal-El awoke, thrilled to the energy that coursed his body. He was alive, his body thrummed with the great power that this world's sun gifted him. He wanted to test these powers out, especially flight, but he didn't dare do so. He couldn't risk upsetting the Earth people. He didn't want them to feel he took pleasure in abilities that had been used to overtake their world and cause them so much suffering.

He was sure that part of his exultation came from the stark difference between living daily with the red radiation poisoning and suddenly being free of it. This was a gift - a gift from all those who had made the decision to trust him – LL included, and he wouldn't ever risk tarnishing that gift. He would honor the givers by giving them what they needed. They needed to believe they had all the control, and using his powers, even for harmless fun, would take that feeling away.

He looked through the door and saw the four doppelgangers gathered – they appeared to be drinking something. He wasn't sure if he should join them, but they had been very welcoming yesterday – and he knew that this was his first test of courage. Facing Lois would be difficult every time he did it, but if she could steel herself to bear his presence, he could do no less – he couldn't be afraid of her fears.

“Good morning,” he told them as he emerged. He was wearing earth styled clothing after having taken care of his body's needs and cleansing himself in the ‘shower’.

“Good morning,” they all responded, almost in unison. It was a strange experience coming from a set of identical couples. Especially given that he was also identical to the men.

“Want some coffee,” asked Clark. “I made it, so you have nothing to fear.”

“Enough of on my coffee, Clark,” Lois chided him. “I remember the old days when you drank it without complaint.”

“Why do you think I always offered to make it? Besides, I couldn't risk losing your hard won friendship...”

She laughed and shook his head.

“The sad part is, he's right. It is bad. I love not having to drink it anymore. What about you, Lois, can you cook -or make a decent brew?”

“I live in Metropolis,” Lane answered confidently. “I don't need to cook. And... let's just say that I let Clark do the things he does best – it's how a good relationship works.”

They continued to joke back and forth as Clark handed him a mug of something that was clearly hot from the steam rising.

“This contains a substance called caffeine that is supposed to help people stay alert,” Clark told Kal conversationally. “It doesn't hurt us any.”

Kal took it seriously, thanking him, feeling overly formal in front of his easy going doppelgänger. Clark grinned at his words of gratitude and clapped a hand on his arm, his voice and manner easy as he told him 'No problem'. He got the distinct feeling that Clark found his stilted formality somewhat amusing.
“We wondered if you wanted us to talk with you about our experiences here,” Kent offered. “We could fill you in on the lay of the land – how we have managed to keep away from people for the most part. It’s possible not to stay cooped up in these rooms and still avoid encountering anybody unwittingly.”

“I would appreciate that. I do not know what I should do next and the way my life has been, that is an uncomfortable position for me to be in.”

“I suppose as the intended leader, your life was always about routine,” Lois remarked, her gaze thoughtful and not at all fearful.

“I did have a chance to be free as a child,” he answered her. Then he regretted his poor choice of words. Free. When she had been a slave. When this world had been enslaved.

“I’m glad to hear that, “ she smiled, her gaze sympathetic. Kal-El realized that Lois knew exactly what he'd been thinking without the help of telepathy.

“Are you hungry?”

Kal-El considered it.

“I am not. Perhaps the sun of this world also provides my body with the nutrition it needs?”

“It does. However if you want food, just say so. Please don’t worry about expressing your needs to us,” Clark said. “We are the one group of people you can be yourself around.”

“Thanks for including me in that,” Lois spoke, answering Kal-El's silent thoughts once again. “You shouldn’t worry about me either, Kal-El. Just be aware that sometimes... I have difficulties. If you can deal with it, I can deal with it.”

He gazed at her a long moment, wondering how she was projecting so much ease. He knew if they were alone together she might have more difficulties, but with the two Clarks here, she likely felt safe. Of course she had indicated that she trusted him enough to suggest accepting his help without keeping him poisoned, so perhaps her calm demeanor was truly genuine.

“Why don’t we tell you the story of how we came here and what we’ve experienced. Then we can talk about how to navigate the present. Does that sound like a good plan?”

“Yes,” he agreed, grateful that there was a plan. He hadn’t wanted to suggest ‘order’ because of who he was – the progenitor of a vicious overlord... he was relieved to see that these four were as focused to a task as he himself would be.
Chapter 41

It was hard to remain calm while hearing the story behind why the four were even here. He knew what Lois had gone through, but hearing her tell the story made it all the worse. She had spared him the details of her captivity, but even knowing that she'd been receiving his sendings – unwitting as it was – to the point where it was ruining her life... it was nearly more than he could bear.

“You can't keep blaming yourself for something you did while in stasis,” Lois gently chided him. “You weren't consciously making a connection to me. You didn't intend to harm me.”

“Nonetheless, I did harm you.”

“I'm fine. As you can see, I'm fine.”

“No,” he got up and started to pace, letting his emotions show somewhat – something that he'd been cautioned against doing by his many advisors all those years ago. He knew he had to fight against their advice. He wasn't a leader here, he was one of many working together to fight a common enemy. He knew that holding back his emotions and seeming almost machine-like would be off-putting to the humans, and probably even his two doppelgängers.

“No?”

“You are not 'fine',” he reiterated firmly. “You were so injured by what I did that you were forced to come here to stop it.”

“I came here because I wanted to help,” she insisted, coming over to stand near him. A bold action that spoke clearly of her conviction to make him believe her. He knew that she was afraid of his intense reaction to her story – her pulse was racing and her breathing was accelerated, and not all of this was memory-based. “Kal-El, when we learned your clone was the one who had taken over we realized would help free this world by freeing you. You could win this by right of who you are – not exactly a bloodless war, but far less bloody than out and out physical rebellion.”

He winced at her terms, imagining the slaughter if it came to that.

“I accept your apology,” she placed a hand on his arm. He stiffened, terrified he might actually hurt her by accident. These powers were incredibly dangerous. “I just don't accept that you need to give one.”

He nodded, trying to move past this moment and put physical space between the two of them.

“Thank you for that.”

She smiled, and then returned to her seat. He felt her breathing and heart rate ease and knew that it had been hard for her to be so close. He promised himself that he wouldn't force her to comfort him again if he could help it.

“Do you have any questions for us,” Kent filled the awkward silence.

Kal-El nodded.

“I was – wondering about the Lois Lane of this world,” he admitted. “She seems to – trust you two – as best, I suppose as she can ever trust anyone, and I wondered how that happened? She is the
obvious leader and if we are to work together, I would appreciate advice on how to interact with
her so she does not feel threatened."

“She will feel threatened,” Lane offered. “Unfortunately it’s the situation. She’s been... difficult to –
deal with – because of what she went through and it did take her a while to accept that either Clark
would never hurt her. I’m not sure she really believes it in her bones, but I think she realized she
couldn’t keep yelling at them either. At some point she had to accept their help. In your case it’s
different. You... are Kryptonian, while these guys are more human - born on Krypton, yes, but
raised here. There’s also the fact that she doesn’t feel she has to be grateful to you the way she does
us – we came here to help. You already live here. This is the universe in which you belong.”

“And then there is the fact that I allowed this entire invasion to take place,” Kal added. “The fault
lies with me.”

“Because you weren’t able to predict this would happen,” Kent asked, understanding Kal’s feelings.
“You think it’s your fault because you should have known better?”

“Yes,” his face was awash with shame. “I should have know better. The advisors - those who
perpetuated this – I knew they wanted to come to Earth – I knew what their plans were. To show
humans a ‘better way’. To lead them, and live among them. But I also knew that was an arrogant
and unrealistic plan. What right do we have to assume we know the better way? A superpowered
race cannot exist peacefully alongside those without the same powers. Abuse was guaranteed. It is
why I denied the plan. I refused to even consider it, and in my naivete, I did not see that my saying
‘no’ meant that the plan was truly dropped. I should have known they would betray me, that they
would ensure that this happened. Our lives were hard before and this was an easy answer.”

“But to kidnap you, clone you and replace you? That sounds a little ... unpredictable,” Clark
argued. “I mean, who could begin to think something like that would happen to them?”

“I could have. Cloning exists in my world. My people have perfected it. We do it for medical
purposes – we clone organs to prevent illness from taking lives.”

“Had this ever been done to anyone else?”

“No.”

“Then I think that you are being too hard on yourself,” Lois said. “But what we think won’t affect
how you feel. You have to come to grips with it yourself. What about Zara and Ching,” she winced
as she spoke aloud the name of her enemy. “Do you blame them for not knowing? Zara said you
three spent a lot of time together as children.”

“We also spent many years apart. They probably thought the pressures of duty had changed me for
the worse.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“I cannot blame them. They both have suffered enough.”

Lois’s gaze darkened.

“I sure as hell can blame Ching,” Kent said. Clark nodded. “Not for failing to see what happened to
you, but for what he allowed to happen to Lois.”

“I have difficulties with that as well,” Kal said. “What he did had no honor at all. I do not stand by
him in that, Lois.”

“I … don't want to talk about this,” she told them all, her voice tight. “Let's just get back on subject.”

“Unfortunately this is the subject,” Lane said, her voice apologetic. “Can you work with Ching, Kal-El, because you may have to. You have to convince your people who you are. You have to use your right as leader to end this invasion. You have to make peace with Zara and Ching in order for that to happen. You cannot let what he did to Lois get in the way of that.”

Kal-El flicked a guilty look at Lois. He knew Lane was correct, but he didn't want to admit it in front of Lois. Despite what he knew his duty to be, he could not bear to hurt Lois.
Chapter 42

LL paced her quarters. She hated that Kal-El was here. With them. Cloistered with them. Discussing the plans... discussing the future. Her future. And she was unable to participate. She'd lost control, but then again she knew the concept of her having control had at best been an illusion that the others were willing to entertain – only because they trusted that she hated her captors enough to want them dead. She was a useful leader in her singleminded intent.

She wrapped her arms around herself, remembering the way Kal-El had smiled – and it had been a genuine friendly expression, shared with Lane, of all people. She hated herself for being obsessed because she knew that she was not interested in him that way. He wasn't even human. It was grotesque – an alien and an earthling – an abomination, even. But... if he was meant to be hers, then he couldn't be Lane's. Lane had her prince charming. She didn't need to keep a collection.

She fretted about her obsession with Kal-El -in some way it was like the clone's obsession with her. It wasn't healthy and it wasn't as if she could do anything about it, yet she knew the desire to somehow keep him walled off from other 'Lois Lane' variants was some kind of twisted dog-in-the-manger behavior. I can't have him – I don't want him, but I sure as hell don't want her to have him.

She closed her eyes and tried to identify the trigger of her worries. It was the smile. Kal-El had smiled at Lane, and unlike his clone, his smile hadn't been a cruel parody. Instead, it had held the same kindness, amiability and ease that the Clarks' smiles held, depending on who they were smiling at. Kal-El's smile had had tenderness in it, as if he'd been drawn to both Lois's dopplegangers.

The truth is, the tenderness and obvious love between the Clarks and the Loises was what was drilling this hole of yearning in her soul. While she couldn't imagine sharing herself in any way, she still deep down longed for that… for that look – for it to be meant for her. From one who seemingly was meant to be with her. If the whole soul mate thing had validation, and now she was beginning to wonder because of the existence of soul trackers across multiple universes, then she thought that she should at least get a crack at the one meant for her. On her terms, though... not someone else's. At the very least she shouldn't feel threatened that her more attractive other selves wouldn't somehow draw the one meant for her to them. When Kal spoke and interacted with Lane, he'd opened up – he'd smiled, he'd relaxed a bit, and the overall picture had been of masculine perfection. His voice had rumbled in just that right way. She knew without her past trauma she would have fallen head over heels in a second. And Lane already had that. She had hers. She had that moment. That experience, that growth from crush to lifelong relationship – she would continue to have it with Kent. So why did she need Kal-El?

And when Kal interacted with Lois, everything in him exuded kindness, tenderness, concern for her well being and anger on behalf of what she had suffered. Very perversely, LL wanted him to look that way to her, to interact that way with her -to be the first and only ever Lois Lane to get those interactions, but her dopplegangers were stealing it all away from her. Of course, she thought about what she would do if Kal-El did any of that with her – and how she reacted whenever she had to talk to him or look at him, and she knew that it would lead to disaster.

The sense of losing something very valuable, having it stripped away by her unwitting 'twins' left her feeling anxious and tense. But the idea of having him share that– made her even sicker, so what did she do? Do nothing and let them have these moments with him? Moments that belonged to her?

She had to get past the idea that they were soulmates. When she first met the Loises and the Kal-Els she was appalled and honestly revolted that they were together in that way. But somehow Clark
had disarmed the worst of her shell and she'd felt a grudging liking – he had gone through a
gauntlet of hell with Lois. He knew what LL was about. He didn't need to be told how to talk to
her. And his tenderness had been occasionally directed her way. It had been an unwittingly
accepted balm to her broken soul. It was likely Clark who had made her more amenable to even the
most basic interactions with Kal-El. If Clark hadn't eased the path, she wouldn't be able to even
talk to Kal-El, let alone work with him.

She wondered if she should talk to him. The idea terrified her, but if anyone would understand, it
would be him. She expelled an angry breath. This was stupid. She was Lois Lane, leader of the
resistance, and all that mattered moving forward was freeing earth. All this was pointless
distraction. Her brain was taking her on this journey to keep her from fearing the real conflicts that
lay ahead. All that mattered was victory. They had to be victorious.
Chapter 43

A knock heralded a visitor.

“‘Yes?’”

“‘May I come in and speak with you,’ Zara asked politely, not yet having opened the door. LL smiled grimly at yet another illusion of control. Zara was so strong, she could have smashed down the door easily, yet, LL trusted she wouldn't. She trusted that Zara would abide by decent behavior. This trust had been hard won, but shared misery and Zara's own sufferings she undertook in order to protect LL had enabled a close bond to form between the human and Kryptonian. LL was grateful for this. She needed someone to talk to, and Zara was perfect for the task. Zara knew what it was like to suffer at the hands of 'Lord Kal'. She never defied him – she had submitted to red radiation under his threat that if she didn't, he would have killed scores of earth people. Zara had bled for humanity.

“‘Please,’ she answered, grateful for the interruption.

“‘How are you doing?’”

“‘Picking up on my stress?’”

“‘Yes,’ Zara answered calmly, refusing to apologize for her telepathic ability.

“‘Well... what can I possibly do, Zara? This sucks. This really sucks.’”

“‘I know it is difficult.’”

“‘What about you?’”

Zara's face darkened with turbulent emotions. Her war torn gaze met LL's and LL saw the extent of the other woman's despair.

“‘This was the man I was meant to bond with.’”

LL swallowed. Oddly she didn't feel at all threatened that her 'soul mate' had a wife. Zara didn't make her feel replaced or outshone the way her 'twins' did.

“‘You suffered so much,’ she murmured.

Zara squeezed her eyes shut, remembering her first encounter. She had been so young and hopeful. He had left her torn and bleeding.

“‘Kal-El is a good man,’ Zara spoke, as if narrating her thoughts. “I believed he would be a good man, and then I learned I was horribly wrong. Then – we learn that he had been replaced. And I let it happen by being so blind. I should have known. The kind boy would not have become a vicious monster.”

“‘Zara, you can't blame yourself. The odds of this having happened... I know your society uses cloning technology, but to replace someone with a fully grown clone? That seems incredibly unlikely.”
“The boy I knew would not have grown to be the monster I married,” Zara insisted. “In hindsight I cannot believe I was fooled.”

“Does he blame you?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, Zara -”

“He denies it. Although he did say I should have known, but he also believes he should have seen it coming and better defended himself. He blames himself for my suffering... and yours. But when he looks at me, I see the betrayal in his eyes.”

“What is his plan for you two?”

“He has dissolved our bond. He suggested I find happiness with Ching.”

“That is … a good thing.”

“No. Ching... has not behaved honorably. To protect me, and you, he hurt her.”

“If he hadn't, Lord Kal would have gotten her some other way... or killed her.”

“Nonetheless... such a man cannot be ruler at my side.”

“Isn't Kal-El the rightful ruler?”

“He will not be ruler. He says he cannot rule those who did this to him. He cannot trust himself not to fall prey to schemes in the future, and he cannot trust his own people. He is angry, Lois, even if he will not show it. He was victimized as we were. His whole life was stolen.”

LL hugged herself and nodded.

“I know.”

“I am next in line, but I do require a husband.”

“Archaic.”

“Yes. I see that it is, but one change at a time.”

LL smiled sadly.

“I suppose we all live in the fishbowl we are given.”

“Ah. I see. Yes. The walls around you. You do not see them, but they are there.”

“So to rule you need a mate, and it can't be Ching because he behaved dishonorably.”

“I must find one with honor to join me in leading. Kal-El is perfect for this, however he will not agree.”

“Can't you order him to do it if he abdicates?”

Zara smiled at her sadly.

“No. Even if I could, there has been enough forcing... no more. Besides, I cannot imagine laying
with him,” she shuddered. “No. My mind sees a good man, but my reactions would hearken to all the abuse.”

LL paled and nodded, turning to pace away.

“I am sorry, my friend. I did not mean -”

“No. Its okay. It's just, it's been on my mind a lot... them. Together. He and I – meant for each other on some cosmic scale. Lois allowed Kal-El into her life – into her bed. Doesn't that mean it's possible you could do so too ?”

Zara shook her head.

“There are too many reasons why this will not work. The most important one being, I will not hurt him anymore. He does not wish to be leader after knowing what his own people would do to him – and I will not use his sense of honor to push him into continuing in a role that is distasteful.”

“Will he stay here, on earth?”

“Only he can answer that. I imagine if he did, he would live in seclusion. I know he would not ever hurt you or anyone else.”

LL nodded, her gaze shadowed.

“I... don't know, Zara. I'm not sure how scared I should be that I believe you... even if intellectually... “ she shuddered.

“You are afraid because you trust his motives?”

“What does that mean? Does it mean that he's gotten under my skin somehow?”

“Most likely you feel this way because of the two Clarks. They are very nice people – and you see Kal-El as a variation of them. You are a long way from friendship with him, if you fear falling into some kind of 'trap' the way I think you feel your doppelgängers have done.”

She shivered.

“I could never let him touch me,” she said bluntly. “Not like that. Not anyone, really. However – you are right. Clark and the other Clark have changed how I view ... them. Kal-El. In plural. God. In triplicate. But once I see 'Lord Kal' and Kal-El together, I imagine those similarities will override everything. And yes – that terrifies me.”

“He knows, Lois. Kal-El will never trouble you. Of that, I have no doubt.”
“Lois will not be joining us,” Zara told the Kal-El and the four doppelgängers after joining them in their private quarters. She nodded soberly at Kal-El who was incongruously dressed human. Like this, he passed for one of the Clarks.

“How so,” Clark asked.

“She says she has a bad cold,” Zara recited back LL's own self diagnosis. “She can barely walk and she does not want to do anything except stay in bed and sleep.”

“You believe this,” Kal-El asked. “Is she afraid to meet us here, or is she really ill?”

“She really is ill, although I am sure she fears this as well. How could she not?”

“Then let’s proceed as best we can without her,” Lois asserted. “Kal-El – you have made your list of Kryptonians you believe you can trust?”

“I have,” he answered, his gentle gaze briefly connected to hers, to quickly see if she was troubled in any way. She held it together rather well for someone who had been so horribly abused. She gave him a quick smile that told him what he wanted to know. Yes, she was having difficulties, but she had things under control. “Here it is,” he handed it to her, and she looked at him, surprised that he gave it to her alone.

“You can just read it to us,” she told him. “I don't need to check it out first...”

“I – ah – would appreciate your input. You and Zara are the only people present who might know these people and where their loyalties may lie.”

She winced and he apologized, but she shook her head.

“No. Don't do that. This is fine. We have to do what we can to ensure this mission's success. We can't fail. I don't want you worrying about upsetting me.”

“I suppose I have to trust you mean that, Lois,” Kal-El told her soberly. “I put Ching on the list. In fact, he is the one I trust most.”

She paled and nodded.

“The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few,” she laughed mirthlessly, quoting Mr Spock.

“That is, very often true. However I will never apply that thinking to you -”

“No, I'm sorry. I was quoting a movie... I understand Ching did what he did to protect Zara and my other counterpart – however...”

“He threw you under the bus,” Kent said angry on her behalf.

“If only,” Lois said. “That would have been a better fate.”
Silence met her declaration.

“I never tried to help you,” Zara told Lois, her face etched with remorse. “I could have rescued you... I did not -”

“The needs of the resistance were greater than my own. I do know the logic of that, Zara,” Lois interrupted, uncomfortable to be the center of so much regretful attention. “Zara... what do you think about these other names,” Lois said, moving over to sit next to the Kryptonian woman. Zara seemed surprised that Lois moved, but recovered quickly. Together they looked at the list and murmured quietly to each other.

Lois pulled out a pen and began to write notes on the list.

There was a knock at the door.

“It's Lois,” Clark said, using his abilities to look through the door.

“There's something she has in common with you,” Kent remarked, getting it out of the way now as Lois went over to open the door, knowing that it would be best for a human to greet her and not one of the men. “Nothing will keep her down ... not even a bad cold.”

“You don't get ahead by allowing illness to slow you down,” Lane told him. “You never had to really worry about it much – other than Kryptonite poisoning.” She shifted her gaze to follow his distracted one. He was looking at a very sick LL. She was standing upright through supreme effort of will, but it was obvious she was ill. This wasn't a cold. It was more likely the flu. LL was shivering, and holding her arms tightly folded to keep herself warm.

“Jesus,” muttered Clark sub vocally, intending only Lane and Kent to hear. “She's in bad shape.”

“Lois, we can postpone this,” Lois told her doppelgänger as she guided her to a couch – next to Zara who gazed in open concern at her friend.

LL felt a flush of more than illness go through her at the awareness that she was horribly the center of attention in a room filled with Kryptonians. Bad odds – 4 to 3. She forced herself to breath, but that kicked off a round of coughing. It sounded painful and the others winced in sympathy.

“Look, I know you don't want what I have,” LL croaked. “I'm hoping you can't get my germs since you're from another universe... I have to be part of this – we can't delay. Every delay means more people being murdered, tortured, raped... I can't -”

“Don't worry on our account,” Lois told her after getting a nod from Lane. “If we get sick then we'll ask Herb to take us back to one of our homes.”

LL shuddered as a cold chill ran through her. She tightened her arms around herself and nodded, hoping she wouldn't throw up. She felt horrible – she felt as if any moment now she might faint. And she couldn't imagine doing that here. On the other hand, she hated being alone while sick. Some primitive childish part of her wanted to be cared for, and the people here would likely do so without even hesitating. Even the Kryptonians. Especially them. Which was weird. Very weird. She avoided making any kind of eye contact with Kal-El. He was the one who bothered her the most.

“You're obviously freezing,” Clark argued, not bothering to worry about upsetting her. He was done walking on eggshells. They had formed a tentative bond and he was going to trust it. If LL wanted to yell at him, she could. He could handle it.
“I’m okay,” she denied, fixing a glare on him. One he knew well. The patented Lois Lane glare. But there was no fear or loathing... just anger that he dared call attention to a potential weakness.

“If that's okay, you need to redefine the word. Clearly we're in the land of opposites.”

Lois tried not to laugh when she saw Kent, Kal-El and Lane all look at Clark with expressions that contained a bit of awe and surprise that he was risking poking at LL this way. Kal-El appeared most intrigued by the goings on and Lois wondered if maybe there wasn't some part of him that wanted to be more to LL than just a fellow freedom fighter. She shook her head. She had to remember her own awful journey... the odds of anything happening between these two was pretty low. Kal-El likely would leave earth – where he would go, she couldn't imagine, but she knew he wasn't going to stay here where he would be feared by everyone he encountered.

“I wouldn't say no to a blanket,” she grumbled with ill concealed distaste. “And perhaps coffee.”

“Let me -” Zara forestalled Lois who moved to get the blanket. “If you tell me where they are?”

LL held a hot cup of coffee, grateful for it's warmth, as well as the comfort of the blanket. She was furious with herself for being ill, but she had no way of controlling things, and she'd learned the hard way not to allow this sort of thing to consume her.

“So what did I interrupt,” she asked, her voice raspy from her bronchial congestion.

“Here,” Zara handed her the list that Kal-El had compiled. “These are potential allies. Kal-El wanted to know what Lois and I thought.”

“Your opinion is extremely valuable as well,” Kal-El spoke, hoping that he could do so without upsetting her. This entire topic had to be upsetting. She knew more about these people than he did because of her enslavement.

LL nodded quietly. Not looking at him, she perused the list. She took the pen from Zara and made notes herself. After a long silence, she finally spoke.

“The checks mean I agree. The question marks mean I have no information at all, and the 'x' marks means I think not. The exclamation points mean 'absolutely not' unless you can convince me otherwise.”

Zara read her notes and nodded thoughtfully.

“Some of the question marks I feel are trustworthy. We can go through them name by name. Lois, would you care to comment,” she asked, handing the list back to Lois. Lois took the list, giving her a somber nod.

“We should also have a known enemies list,” LL added. “Kryptonians we know to be harmful – in addition to your clone, that is,” she spoke to Kal-El, still not meeting his gaze.

“I have some names,” he said slowly. “People I suspect had an involvement in what was done to me.”

“Then you start, and we'll add,” she indicated herself, Zara and Lois.
He nodded, willing to take direction from LL. She had strong leadership skills. He knew she was upset in their company, and even worse – sick … add to that being forced to examine lists of names of those who may have tormented her – she was holding it together remarkably well. Lois was as well, but somehow this seemed different. Lois had obviously gone on a journey of acceptance where 'her' Kal-El was concerned. In the case of 'his' LL, she hadn't had the same opportunity and was therefore even more impressive in her ability to put her aversions aside in order to work alongside those who resonated horror in her soul. His heart twisted in pity at the idea that she might be suffering far more than she let on. He pushed the pity away. He knew instinctively she would resent it. And he couldn't risk broadcasting his feelings.

The three women worked together as the others waited, and then finally the lists were complete. It was time to discuss them entries one by one. Now was the part Kal-El dreaded most. There was no way this wasn't going to be upsetting.

“How about we start with the trustworthy list and move on to the others after,” Lois suggested, knowing she didn't want to talk about some of the other names on the 'enemies' list until the end.

The others nodded, and she smirked knowing full well nobody but LL would have dared disagree. Being the second most damaged person in the room gave her a kind of strange seniority. She would have gladly given it up to have never suffered at all. Her face darkened in hard memories and the others just waited for her to collect herself. LL was too sick to notice her stiffening, but the others in the room were well aware.

“You okay,” Clark asked her quietly.

She smiled and squeezed his arm, trying to reassure him.

“Then – let's start with Ching,” LL said, eying Lois carefully. “I apologize... but he's the ideal first point of contact.”

Lois nodded, fighting her nausea.

“Are you willing to discuss... your past here?”

“Yes,” Lois answered LL hastily. “I will talk about anything to help our cause. Just bear with me. I might have difficulties…”

“Understood,” she nodded.

Lois addressed the men.

“Fair warning. I might freak out. Don't panic. Okay? And don't feel badly. What happened to me isn't the fault of anyone here. Not even you, Kal-El, even though I know you feel otherwise. Okay?”

He nodded, but his eyes said a different story.

“Remember- you were victimized too.”

“I appreciate your words, Lois,” he told her.

“Ching... was the one who brought me to Lord Ka- to Kal-El's clone,” she said, amending herself hastily. She saw Kal-El turn pale and felt sorry for what she was about to do. “I was taken from my home by a monster named Tempus. He left me here and vanished. I had no idea who he was or
why he'd taken me – or even where and how. I was trying to get my bearings and figure out what the hell had happened when Ching was suddenly there at my side. He told me that his master requested my presence. He was apologetic and told me that I had no choice and I'd best learn to submit.”

She paused, her memories cast back to that awful day. Unaware she was even doing it, she wrapped her arms around her to somehow protect herself. She closed her eyes so she wouldn't have to see the others' reactions knowing they would all be horrified. She couldn't bear to look at the men right now.

“I should have -”

“Zara, no,” she said, forestalling her. “Please. Let me finish. No self recriminations. It's too late. It's over and done with. Besides, you and Ching were the ones who rescued me in the end, weren't you?

“After allowing you to suffer for years, yes,” Zara responded, clearly angry with herself.

“Please let me tell my story. We all trust you here – and that's all that's needed for this mission. Okay?”

Zara looked at her a long moment, reading the sincerity in her gaze, and nodded.

“If you suffer hearing my tale, then consider that your ... punishment. Okay? You may feel you allowed me to suffer, therefore you now must suffer in the hearing of it. The others... well, unfortunately we have no choice.”

“Lois, you can tell us anything. We'll deal,” Lane spoke up, speaking for the men collectively.

She finished the story of how Ching had captured her using his extreme strength, delivering to her tormentor. There was a long silence as they processed her story. She hadn't told them about what the clone had done to her after Ching left, but they were all mentally going there anyway and it was a traumatic moment for everyone.

“Did... did Ching ever – threaten you,” Lane asked her carefully. “Ah... with - “

“You mean, did he ever rape me?”

“Oh god,” muttered Kent, wanting to be anywhere but there. He was filled with rage on behalf of Lois. He knew Clark was as well. He could feel it. He could even feel Kal-El's rage. They all had to get under control to avoid frightening LL and Lois.

“If you can't handle this, you can leave,” Lois told Kent carefully. “You are not a required member of this meeting... no offense intended.”

He held her gaze and nodded

“Understood, but ... I'll stay if you don't mind.”

“No. I don't mind. And for what it's worth, I appreciate that you hate him on my behalf,” she smiled mirthlessly and he gave her a nod of understanding.

“Ching forced me into captivity, but he never hurt me himself. He never seemed to want to hurt
me. He did seem regretful at his actions. If Lois and Zara trust him, then I agree he's a good ally. I have faith that they know what they are talking about."

"Will his presence upset you," Kal-El asked.

"Yes. But that's my problem, not yours. If I can't handle working with him, then I will stay away from meetings he attends. Don't worry about me. I want this world to be free. My sensibilities are not to get in the way of that."

"None of us want to see you hurt," he added warily. "So your feelings do matter. A lot."

"I know they do. I trust in that and believe it. I just meant to me, it's important we succeed. I want to go home. Badly. And I'll endure what I must to make that happen. It isn't a big deal."

"Well, I trust Ching," LL spoke up. "He is well aware of our activities, and including him poses little risk."

"Then it's settled. Let's move on," Lois said, forcing herself to appear calm.

Many names later, LL's cough had worsened and the three men seemed visibly shaken by whatever bits of information Lois and LL had shared. And this was just the 'trust' list.

"We still have two other lists to get through – the hard ones," Lois said, knowing they needed a break but unwilling to propose it.

"How are you," Zara asked LL. "You seem worse."

"I want to die," groaned LL. "But..."

"Isn't there anything we can do for you," Clark asked, feeling frustrated. "Medicine? Anything?"

"Medicine is hard to come by," she croaked. "Maybe... maybe I could just sleep for a few hours – I could take something to put me out so my coughing doesn't wake me up. " She staggered to her feet and then immediately collapsed back down. "Not good... I ... don't see how I'm going to get back."

"You can stay in our fourth room," Lois urged.

"I can't stay here with you," LL gasped.

"You can," Lois said gently. "You trust we won't let harm come to you. I know you do," she whispered as she sat next to her now, knowing she was the only one who could do this without getting yelled at. "I believe you trust the two Clarks and you also know that Kal-El won't turn on you. You know it, even if you don't want to think about it."

LL regarded Lois, trying to subjugate her intense desire to not be alone while sick. A small part of the old LL remained – a woman who, while difficult to befriend, was still capable of being a friend, of relying on friends. Her family. Her sister... she had no idea if they were even alive. The other resistance cells knew nothing of each other for reasons of security, so if Lucy and her parents lived and were resistance members she did not have any way of learning of it. Lois was almost a sister, and LL's heart yearned for that. For someone to care for her. Zara could do it -could be considered her sister despite being a Kryptonian, but she had to go back to that monster, and as a result – she
couldn't take care of LL.

“If you want, we'll relocate the men,” Lois said kindly, her keen eyes reading so much from LL's silence and troubled gaze.

The notion bothered LL and she shook her head. Oddly she felt safe in Clark's presence and having the additional security of of a Kryptonian bodyguard who would never allow harm to come to her if he could help it was seductive. Kent... she didn't know him too well, but Lois trusted him and so she decided to lump him in with Clark. Then there was Kal-El. And while talking to him was hardest of all, being here with them, and sharing that weird bond that was growing between Kal-El and her own counterparts was also very appealing. She shuddered, not wanting to examine the reasons. Kal-El was a fellow victim. Any kinship she felt towards him was based on being a fellow sufferer.

“Hey, Lois,” Clark spoke, coming over and crouching down by the side of the couch, taking a chance. “Look, I obviously can't know how hard this is – but I'm begging you to stay. We will accommodate you in any way you want. The guys and I will leave and stay elsewhere... “

“No,” she blurted out, before she had a chance to stop herself. Clark stopped speaking for a moment and waited. She thought of how Kal-El – no... how the clone had been. How he'd punished her for anything remotely seeming to be disrespect and how these three were so different in contrast.

“No as in, you won't stay, or no, you -”

“I don't want you to leave,” she admitted, her voice a hard rasp. “I don't want to leave either.” Sickness was making her weepy. She felt it in her throat and eyes. She felt completely open and flayed. She was unable to put up a single defense.

“Good,” Clark said, giving her a friendly smile, one that he hoped wouldn't trigger horror. He took a chance, and gripped her hand in his very gently. She didn't pull away, but he felt her breath catch. “My mother taught me to cook. I'll happily provide you chicken soup if you just tell me how to get the ingredients!”

She laughed weakly at his words and nodded. “Zara can help you out with that. I may take you up on it. My throat hurts badly.”

“Just one thing... does allowing me to stay also encompass them? Him, specifically?”

She hesitated and then nodded her gaze fixed on his. His eyes were very kind. Very non Kal-El like. His human trappings and his human mannerisms made it hard to see the monster in him sometimes. For that she was greatly relieved.

“Okay. Then we'll get things set up for you - we won't take too long... and then you can crash if you want. Nobody will disturb you.”

“Wake me up in two hours,” she protested. “So we can continue.”

Clark and Lois exchanged troubled glances.

“I'll be fine.”

“You won't be. You're very sick,” Lois insisted. “How about 4 hours?”

“Or even six.”
“No, six is too long -I can't put this off -”

“Okay, four then,” Clark said hastily.

“Sneaky, Clark,” she grumbled.

“I know. And for what it's worth, we will stay out of your way – the guys and I, I vouch for them both. We won't do anything that might make you uncomfortable... “ he trailed off, not wanting to remind her that he was married to Lois, and Kent to Lane.

She nodded, understanding his meaning.

“I'm sorry to be -”

“Please don't ,” Lois interjected. “Don't worry.”

LL began to lose consciousness. Deciding to stay and be cared for had broken through her resolve to stay alert. The voices around her receded as sleep claimed her.

LL woke up feeling as if she'd been hit by a train. Her throat was closed and felt as if someone had lacerated it with shards of glass. Her head and ears hurt badly. Her skin was burning.

She checked her watch and realized she'd only slept a short while. Someone had carried her to this bed, and she wondered who had done it. Zara in all likelihood.

She staggered to standing, and tried to make it to the door, but halfway there she collapsed, crying out in pain as she did.

“Lois,” she heard one of her doppelgängers call out her name in fear as she ran to the door and banged on it. “Are you okay?”

She looked up at her double and shook her head.

“I can't walk,” she croaked, feeling lower than she'd felt in along while. “I hurt myself... “

Lois came in and crouched by her immediately and LL knew that the others were out there worrying, waiting to see if help was needed.

“Where did you hurt yourself?”

“My shoulder hurts,” she groaned. “I might have broken something when I fell.”

“Can I check?”

LL nodded, not fearing Lois's touch. Lois gently pressed along her shoulder and collarbone. She hissed at the last spot and Lois frowned.

“You might have broken your collarbone. Can I ask Clark to -”

“Is Zara here?”

“No,” Lois answered, her gaze regretful. “She had to leave... “

LL felt a wave of fear. Her only true friend was gone. She was alone with three Kal-Els and her doppelgangers. She squeezed her eyes shut and rememberd that they too were her friends, or at
least, well intentioned towards her.

“Please, I'll stay with you … I promise.”

She nodded. “Just your Clark. Okay? Not - “

“Sure.”

She went out and beckoned Clark to come.

“She needs help,” Lois whispered. “She fell and I think broke her collarbone. She needs help getting into her bed too.”

Clark nodded.

He followed Lois in, and crouched down to LL to make himself seem less threatening. He could hear her fear. Her heart was racing. She looked at him warily.

“Is it okay if I ah – look through your skin to see if you ”

“Yes!”

He did, and then shook his head.

“Nothing broken,” he said, glad to deliver good news.

“Thank god,” LL muttered. “To add that on top of this.”

“Do you need help getting up?”

She nodded, feeling shame at her weak state.

“Look. I've been disabled by Kryptonite,” he told her kindly. “I couldn't stand for any inducement. You'll be on your feet soon!”

“Thanks, Clark,” she murmured, feeling stupid. “If you help me stand and let me lean on you, I can walk to the couch -”

“Or you could catch some more sleep,” he suggested hopefully.

”I will later, I promise. For now I need to work.”

“Okay... is it okay if I help you up?”

She squeezed her eyes and nodded. He gently helped her stand and she fought against feeling shame and fear at the contact.

“Sorry,” he said and she shook her head, her eyes still closed. “I'm the one who fell. You didn't push me.”

He nodded, and said nothing further.

“Thanks for the help.”

“Always glad to oblige you.”

She smiled briefly and mirthlessly. With his help she walked to the couch. She kept her gaze fixed
in front of her so she wouldn't see the others looking at her.

“I had a little fall,” she told the others. “Nothing broken. I'm fine. I'm ready to continue.”

They knew she was still very sick and in desperate need of rest, but nobody wanted to push it. If she wanted to continue – then continue they would.

“Ohay – let's get on with this, then,” Lois agreed. “The sooner started the sooner ended.”
Chapter 45

Everything was pain. Agony flooded her body, along with despair. Freedom had been a dream fueled by desperation. She was back in captivity. She had never left.

Periodically she would awaken and see Zara, seated at her side - but she was too weak and frightened to speak. Better to languish, dying, in whatever bed she lay than risk being summoned back to Lord Kal's presence.

And so she slept, praying never to awaken again.

“She's been asleep for two days,” Lex proclaimed boldly. “It's time for action. I am taking lead. These are, after all, my bunkers which protect and sustain us. Kal-El, are you ready to move forward?”

“I am ready to act, Lex. I am not comfortable doing so without informing Lois of our plans.”

“And if I demand otherwise? You said you would support the resistance. Has your intent changed?”

“My intent has not changed,” Kal-El responded calmly, keeping his tone even and his manner steady. He could tell that the others in the room were very nervous in his presence. All except for the four doppelgängers. “Lois Lane is the leader. I promised to abide her wishes.”

“Because you feel guilty,” Lex spat. “Believe me, she isn't the only victim of this godforsaken invasion. She's not even the only rape victim around here. There are many women in our ranks who were violated by your clone. The woman directly to your right, to start with…”

Lois's gasp cut him off. Her pallor was noticeable in the wake of his brutal words.

“How dare you harass Lois just to win a point against Kal-El,” Lane exploded angrily. “She's suffered enough.”

“It is not my intent to harass anyone,” Lex retorted angrily, even as Lois attempted to calm Lane down by placing a hand on her arm and speaking to her in a low voice. Kent and Clark were visibly agitated, but they remained silent, not wanting to make things worse.

“All I'm doing is reminding everyone our true purpose. Our goal is, and always will be, to free Earth from it's brutal overlords. Right at this moment, people are being tortured and killed. Delay means more people suffer, and more people die. Our only hope of success is if Kal-El can convince his people to stand down. And that is what we need to be discussing. Lois is sick. I'm sorry for that. I hope she gets better. But she is not the lynchpin.”

“How interesting that you are singing the praises of a plan you were so opposed to earlier,” Lane rejoined sarcastically.

“I had every reason to oppose this plan. Kal-El is my enemy's progenitor. He could have turned out to be exactly like his clone. But I'm not stupid. We are facing an enemy that can kill us casually with no weapons and no effort. We will not survive a fight – instead we have to hope that Kal-El can end this peacefully. I am trying to work with you all and not be the blockade and I have to call things as I see them. Kal-El is afraid of upsetting the Lois from my world. He's letting his guilt get
in the way of forward progress and that isn't proper leadership. Kal-El, I'm sorry for your situation – I'm sorry you are having to deal with your people's actions – but this isn't about you, and it isn't about her. It's about us and securing our freedom.”

Lex's gaze was unwavering as he now regarded Kal-El with deceptive calm. Lane had nothing further to say, realizing that Lex was correct and her own reactions to him were tainted by her experiences with his doppelgänger. The tension amongst those gathered was high as they regarded Kal-El uneasily... all but the other doppelgängers.

“I will cooperate with you fully,” Kal-El said, his voice also steady and calm. “I apologize for allowing my own feelings of guilt to get in my way. I support the resistance. Freeing Earth is what matters.”

LL awoke to pain. She was hot, achy and thirsty. Her eyelids felt glued closed. And she wasn't alone. Terror raced her heart. She swallowed and bit back the urge to cry at the intense pain in her throat. Her bedside companion was Zara. Lord Kal-El's wife. Why was she here? Why was she acting as jailer today? Zara had never even glanced at her. She held no interest in the invasion, always seemed to be lost in her own thoughts. Why was she suddenly participating, and what did this mean for LL's well-being?

LL's rapid heart-rate alerted Zara to her wakeful state.

“I was beginning to think you would sleep another day,” Zara spoke kindly after standing and approaching the bed. She smiled, a rare thing for her, but LL was like a sister - a sister through shared suffering and sacrifice. For her, she would smile.

Her smile quickly faded at the terror in LL's eyes.

“What troubles you, Lois,” she asked gently, after looking around to ensure that nobody who might harm LL was nearby.

“Please,” LL croaked. “No more.”

“No more what?”

“No more,” LL began to cry.

Zara grasped her friend's hand urgently trying to comfort her, but LL pulled it away, frantic. Clearly terrified. Realizing something was very wrong, she let her go.

“Do you know who I am?”

LL nodded.

“Do you know where we are?”

LL nodded rigidly.

“Where are we?”

LL shut her eyes and shook her head, trying to deny the truth.

“Do you know who you are?”
LL opened her despairing gaze.

“I am his slave,” she said softly, knowing that her masters often taunted her with the truth of what she was. “I am nothing.”

“No, you are Lois,” Zara told her urgently. “And you are in the resistance headquarters. You are no longer a slave.”

“I know where I am. I know what I am,” she boldly defied her captor hoping at least that the woman wouldn’t suddenly display the taste for cruelty so many of her people had.

“I need … to talk to some people. To help you to see,” Zara told her gently. “You are … safe. As safe as you can be, I suppose with the invasion still ongoing… however you need to know this.”

Zara left moving so quickly LL couldn’t even see. She struggled to her feet, nearly passing out.

She staggered to the door, swaying on her feet.

She made her way through confusing hallways. This was not a Kryptonian ship. She had no idea where she was, but it did seem she was in an earth building. Desperate to escape, she came upon an elevator. Hating the idea of being trapped, but knowing she was too weak to climb stairs, she entered and jammed the button desperately trying to get the doors to close.

They were closing, and Zara suddenly blurred into existence into he elevator car. LL fell down in shock and looked up at Zara, awaiting reprisal.

“You can't go to the top, Lois! He thinks your dead. If you show your face outside, he will learn the truth and hunt you down.”

“No,” she began to cry, leaning against the wall, unable to believe her bid for freedom had ended.

“Please, Lois, I am your friend. You are no longer his prisoner. You are here in a resistance installation underground. We are close to mounting a political assault on the regime. Do you not remember that we discovered Lord Kal is actually a clone? We revived the real one – the one I knew as a friend and he is helping us in our goal to free Earth.”

“Why are you doing this,” LL raged at her, unable to take the mental torture. “Just kill me. End it.”

Zara walked into the car and sat down, hoping to appear less frightening. She left a clear path between Lois and the open door. LL watched her warily, tensed to spring into action.

“You are no longer a prisoner,” Zara said quietly. “You are currently in an underground bunker owned by Lex Luthor. It is one of the many bunkers which house the resistance. You are the leader of the resistance.”

“I don't believe you,” LL shook her head. “That makes no sense. How could I have escaped? This is a trick.”

“Ching and I helped you escape.”

She shook her head.

“I don't believe you.”

“You are welcome to share my thoughts,” Zara replied gently.
“I can feel his presence,” LL said angrily. “I can feel him nearby.”

“You are sensing the real Kal-El. The one who harmed you is a clone. I did not know of this either until recently. We rescued him, and he is with us now. He has pledged to help free this world, or die trying.”

LL regarded Zara with a look of incredulous disgust. How could Zara think her so stupid?”

“Then why not have this mystery doppelganger come convince me,” she said laughing mirthlessly. It was a hard and bitter sound. She knew her chances of escape had passed her by and they were simply toying with her at this point. She wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

“If that is your wish, I am happy to oblige,” Zara sad.
Chapter 46

The room spun wildly while LL tried to maintain her balance. She would maintain what dignity she could and walk on her own two feet, no matter how difficult the task.

Zara hovered worriedly near her – but kept her distance, not wanting to upset her friend.

“Where are you taking me,” LL rasped, her throat was in agony. She squeezed her eyes against the shooting pains – like shards of glass against the tender tissues of her throat.

“To see the truth,” Zara replied. “Lois, you need to know you aren't a prisoner anymore. But first – I give you this.”

LL eyed the proffered weapon warily.

“A radiation emitter?” Kal-El had used this to weaken Kryptonian concubines that defied him.

“You can use it if you feel threatened.”

“This can't be real,” she hissed.

“If you use it on me, you will see that it is.”

LL raised the emitter, her thumb on the button, ready to press.

“It's a trap, isn't it. I try to kill you and I get punished.”

“No.”

“Just take me wherever it is you plan to.”

“If you will follow me,” Zara responded, turning away and walking out the door.

“These are earth people, like you,” Zara told her gently while also trying to appear harmless in front of those her people had harmed. LL had once overcome her aversion to Zara to befriend her wholeheartedly, but Zara knew the other earth people tolerated her, at best.

There were people on the way –so many people. Humans from the looks of it, but how could she really know? These could be Kryptonians, setting up an elaborate hoax – all for Kal-El's amusement.

LL stopped in her tracks. Zara looked at her calmly. The two held eye contact and then LL pressed the button on her weapon without warning releasing a substantial amount of the substance known to be deadly to her captors.

Zara cried out in pain as her body collapsed and she fell down. LL watched dispassionately, relieved that the others in the vicinity did not fall down. If they were Kryptonians, she would have disabled them all.

Zara did not plead for mercy, choosing instead to lie on the ground and take the punishment LL doled out. She kept her eyes on her friend, wanting her to know that she accepted this as her due.
LL snarled and lifted the weapon as if to bash Zara on the head with it. This yet could be an act. This gun could be harmless to Kryptonians - the only way to truly know if Zara was disabled was for LL to make her bleed.

“No, no, no!”

Lex came running down to intercept her. He placed himself between Zara and LL having already been waiting to help LL recover her awareness of where she was, and what they were trying to do. He hated all Kryptonians, but he wanted his freedom. That required Zara's continued existence.

“Lois! You'll kill her. Stop!”

“Why shouldn't I kill her?”

“She isn't our enemy and we have a plan, and this plan will fail without Zara's participation and support. The Kryptonians who we hope are sympathetic to the original Kal-EL will be more easily swayed by her support of him.”

“This is a crazy story,” she cried out, furious that a human was trying to further Kal-El's cruelty, but of all the humans to ally with her tormentors – it naturally would be Lex Luthor.

“Yes it is – completely, but it's true. Look – I can take you to the original. Keep your gun, Lois – you can use it on him -”

Weakness threatened her and Lex grabbed her gun, startling her back with sudden moves.

“No,” Zara groaned from the ground. “Let her have it -”

“She'll kill you – and we need you. Lois, come on. Come with me.”

“If this is a trick – I don't have a choice.”

“I swear it's not a trick.”

He handed back her weapon.

Taking it, she eyed him carefully.

“Then you bring him here,” she rejoined.

Lex eyed the other humans – the larger number had been asked to vacate the area by resistance leaders who now kept a careful watch on the proceedings.

“Prepare yourselves,” he told his audience grimly. “It's startling to see and hear him at first.”

Kal-El took in the scene exuding a calm he did not feel.

Zara was in pain on the ground and he mustered his resolve to allow her to remain in danger. He knew he could not intervene.

He looked over at Lois, afraid to see the other humans fully. He sensed their terror and it was enough. He wondered how the Clarks had been here as long as they had without it driving them to despair.

LL's gaze shifted from Lex's as soon as Kal-El rounded the corner. Her heart raced as terror engulfed her.
“I am here as you requested,” he told her, breaking a horrible silence.

LL reacted quickly, pressing the button and bringing him down like Zara. Kal-El gasped at the pain, but like Zara did not resist. He didn't try to intimidate her with words or threats. His gaze, still fixed on hers, held no anger – just pain.

“Two down,” she ground out.

“And how many to go,” Lex snapped. “You kill these two and we are never going to be free.”

“Open your mind to me,” she ordered Kal-El.

Without waiting for a verbal response she forced contact with him, reaching out with her thoughts as she had been forced to learn simply by Kal-El's repeated invasions.


Shaken, she broke the link.

“They aren't your enemies, Lois,” Lex insisted.

Exhausted, she slid to the floor insensate.
When next she woke, her body still hurt, but her mind was clear. She sat up and moved her legs over the side of the bed, connecting her gaze to Lex Luthor.

"Is Zara okay?"

Lex nodded from his position in an arm chair.

"She'll live," he told her succinctly.

"I'm... sorry I hurt her."

"But not him?"

She winced, remembering.

"I am sorry about that too."

"They seem to be well enough. Not angry."

"I didn't expect they would be. I'm surprised to see you here. Never thought of you as the florence nightingale type."

"I'm not afraid of you," Lex told her. "Others are."

"So you volunteered to keep me from doing something stupid?"

"I insisted."

The tone in his voice told her that Lex would have snapped her neck if need be.

"I bet the others were thrilled."

"I didn't take no for an answer. Four people in particular – and I use the word people loosely – are worried. Maybe you can go alleviate their fears that I've done terrible things to you while you slept."

LL shuddered in distaste.

"You don't worry about what you say to me," she mused.

"Why should I? You've been hurt? Like everyone else here. Why give you special treatment?"

She nodded appreciating his manner. Too much sympathy or concern might make it hard for her to face the others. His cold logical assessment of things was oddly comforting.

"Where are they?"

"Outside in the outer room. You're in their quarters."

"Ah...yes," she remembered that she had collapsed while here. She smiled briefly thinking of Clark's offer to cook for her.

"Let's go reassure your protectors of your recovery."
“Then you can tell me what’s been going on. I know you haven't been waiting for my recovery to proceed.”

“No. I assumed your role. Kal-El was … “ he smiled grimly. “He didn't wish to be disloyal to you, but I told him he was letting his guilt prevent him from doing the right thing. “

She nodded feeling unwanted sympathy for Kal-El.

“And the Clarks and Loises?”

"They aren't going to stop me, but they were vigilant. I don't blame them. Anyway, we have a list of names. Let’s go."

“I need … a shower,” she said, wanting to get the grime of being ill washed from her skin.

“Yes. You do.”

She nodded and opened the door. The others were standing and talking, including Kal-El, and they stopped expectantly, their demeanors carefully amiable.

“Where's Zara?”

“Well – she didn't feel she should be here,” Lois answered. “We can ask her to come.”

LL nodded, aware that she was desperately in need of a wash.

“Let me go shower,” she told her double. “Even I can't stand being around me, and I don't have heightened senses. I'm surprised the lot of you can still stand,” she addressed the Kryptonians.

All but Kal and Lex chuckled dutifully at her remark.

“I assure you,” Kal responded uncomfortably. “Your current state is not off putting. I am relieved that you are finally well.”

“It's a joke,” she told him, her tone careful.

He nodded, aware that he didn't understand their humor.

“Okay.”

“I apologize for hurting you earlier.”

“I accept your unnecessary apology.”

She smiled – a small, tense and fleeting expression, but it transformed her momentarily and Kal-El tried to act unaffected. He hoped she didn't pick up on the way her brief smile drew his soul to hers.
Chapter 48

LL lingered in the shower longer than she normally did. Water wasn't an unlimited resource anymore, but she just couldn't seem to feel clean.

She closed her eyes tightly remembering other times when she'd truly been defiled. Nausea overtook her and she bent over, throwing up in the shower near her feet, dry heaving the contents of a stomach that had only taken liquids to sustain her during her brief moments of lucidity.

“Oh, god,” she groaned, resting her forehead on the tile wall. “I can't deal with this. Not now. Get it together.”

She directed the spray of water near her feet, watching the foul liquids wash away. Clean. But no matter how hard she tried, she would never feel clean again. She let the water fill her mouth, rinsed it out a few times – trying to remove the foul taste. It wasn't as though she'd be kissing anyone anyway.

She exhaled hard. She had a job to do and she honestly had believed she could work with the Kal-Els today – yet after her unwanted memories just now, she wanted simply to hide until the terror abated.

Such luxury could not be hers. Right now, people were suffering horrible abuse. People were being slaughtered. They had to work together and stop the invasion. Her own feelings couldn't get in the way of that.

She dried off, put clothes back on and exited the relative safety and privacy of the bathroom.

“Sorry I took so long,” she mumbled, not making eye contact at the three Kryptonian males. Zara was now there and she smiled at her, an apology in her very manner.

Zara came over and placed a comforting hand on her friend's shoulder, certain now of her acceptance.

LL exhaled slowly. Unlike earlier, the Kryptonian woman seemed a safe harbor once again.

“You've recovered. I'm glad.”

“I am as well, Lois,” Zara responded with her customary seriousness.

Lois watched LL and Zara form her own seated vantage. Zara still made her uncomfortable. She had witnessed much of Lois's abuse by Kal-El's clone – and though Zara had never hurt her- she'd also waited years to help. It still rankled deeply and she couldn't help the resentment.

Kal-El saw her darkening expression and looked at her worriedly.

“Does something trouble you,” he asked her, hoping he wasn't stepping out of line with her.

Lois regarded Kal-El, seeing his resemblance to Clark before seeing his clone.

“I... I'm fine – sometimes... I – just have – thoughts.”

“About me,” Zara said, approaching them. Lois felt a strange urge to shrink back – the woman
wasn't threatening at all, but Lois didn't want to deal with the conversation.

“Yes,” she finally said. “I … forgive you, Zara – but – I can't help the underlying feelings.”

“I should have helped you.”

“In the end you did.”

“Three years you suffered here. And I did nothing.”

“You did things. I know. I know you took his wrath onto yourself at times to protect me -”

“How do you -”

“Lois told me,” she nodded at LL.

“It was my duty to you – to all of you – to all of earth. And now that I know the truth – that the man I believed to be you was actually your clone,” she said to Kal-El, “the fault is even more squarely mine. I was fooled by them and my – failure to see the truth not only cost you your freedom all these years, but countless humans have died – and a countless others have suffered, and are suffering. I failed to pay heed to my inner knowledge that a man as good as you would not have grown to be so cruel. Lois – you should blame me. It really is my fault.”

“Blaming yourself isn't helpful,” Lois answered. “I want to forgive you – and mostly I do – but regardless of how I feel – we have to work together.”

LL was silent through this, knowing that in many ways Lois also had reason to hate her, but going into that wasn't going to help the cause.

“We all have to work together,” LL spoke into the silence. “It's hard. I know. And I'm grateful to you all for remaining in a hostile universe to help people who you owe no loyalty towards. I propose we move forward – acknowledge our anger – and accept that we have it. But we have to move on.”

“I can do that,” Lois told her sincerely. “I want to go home, but … we can't leave until you're free -”

“You can,” LL rejoined. “You've endured enough on my behalf. Kal-El is here and I do believe he means to help -”

“No. I want to see this through.”

“Clark,” LL asked him, wondering what he felt.

“I do too.”

“And you two?”

Kent and Lane both nodded.

“We're in this too. Of our own volition,” Lane spoke for them both.

Kal-El felt awe for the people gathered. Their fortitude and strength of character overwhelmed him.

“I am honored to work with you in this,” he told the group at large. “I too am responsible for what has happened here and I will never be able to apologize enough. But I will see this world free.”
“You were a victim -just like us,” Lois told him. LL regarded him silently.

“I fell prey to their plan, Lois. I am supposed to lead my people – not all into foolish traps.”

“You're young. We all start off naïve,” Lane finally joined the discussion.

“Well most people's naïve failures do not result in the total domination of another species.”

“Brava, Lois,” Lex laughed at LL’s succinct summation of the situation. “I couldn't have said it better.”

“I don't need your admiration Lex.”

“You are absolutely correct, “ Kal-El told Lois, making direct eye contact despite her well hidden fear. “I cannot go backwards in time. I can only go forwards –at least not unless your time traveling friend allows it, and I do not believe he will.”

“Oh no,” Lane smiled sadly. “No, he won't.”

Another silence fell. LL sat herself down and looked at the others alertly.

“So – show me what I've missed.”
Chapter 49

As the conversation swallowed the hours, both Lois and LL showed increasing signs of strain. Lois kept pacing, while LL would occasionally get lost in dark thoughts.

The others were worried – including Lex, who despite his own ambitions and aversions, was beginning to develop a grudging respect for all his 'team mates'. Kal included.

“Are you feeling sick,” Zara asked LL, knowing the others would never ask.

“Sick at heart,” LL muttered. “These names are … bringing back some memories I'd rather keep at bay.”

The entire group, with the exception of LL looked towards Lois who returned their questioning gazes with a nod.

“I am not surprised this is upsetting you,” Zara responded evenly. “How should we proceed?”

“We should proceed as if Lois and I weren't having difficulties. Every delay means more likelihood that our plan is discovered. Kal-El is no longer where they expect him to be, so they must wonder if he's with us. Every moment we delay is a moment where they can put an instant end to our efforts. They could level our installation with a red radiation bomb deployed from a distance.”

Silence followed her pronouncement as the others digested her words. Clark broke the silence first.

“Well … are we done with the lists? Should we strategize Kal-El's approach in dealing with the people we feel will be sympathetic to our cause?”

“Clark, I think that would be the logical next step,” Kal-El said. “Lois, how do you feel,” he asked LL, knowing he had to regard her as leader so as not to resurrect her suspicion of him.

“I agree,” LL said, regarding him with a steady gaze. The two Clarks had made it possible to deal with Kal-El despite his horrifying resemblance to his clone.

“Regarding the men on this list, Kal-El,” Zara said, fixing him with an intent look. “I can tell you that during this awful time, they were kind to me – they helped me out during the worst of the abuse.”

Kal-El paled at her words, his eyes alive with horror. Zara reached out and placed a friendly hand on his arm.

“Do not do this. I am well now.”

“Except you keep returning to him,” Kent spoke up, knowing Zara would not be pleased. He couldn't allow her to sugarcoat the danger she was in. “In order to avoid suspicion, Zara keeps returning to him.”

“This is not the point,” Zara insisted. “Whether I endanger myself or not is not the issue.”

“She is correct,” Kal-El sighed, forcing himself to meet Kent's disappointed gaze.

“I know you want to protect her. I do too. But we cannot allow personal safety considerations to get in the way of liberating earth. Zara may die. I may die, however if earth is free at the end of it, that is what matters.”
“There is no point in outrage on my behalf, Clark,” Zara told Kent and Clark. “we have to work together. Please do not allow your different perspective to create a rift. Kal-El and I are not suggesting we allow humans to be endangered further than they already are. We simply are not allowing our own well being to be an impediment.”

“This is all moot anyways,” LL said. “We have to act now.”
Chapter 50

LL could feel Kal-El's gaze on her as she read his list of trusted names, making her sick with remembered abuse. Lois was seated close enough to touch her and she felt a gentle pressure on her arm and raised her gaze briefly to see the sympathetic expression on her doppelganger's face.

“This is difficult,” Lois murmured, uncaring that all three Kryptonians could easily hear her if they were listening.

She nodded. “But necessary,” she exhaled wearily.

After a long while, LL looked up and forced herself to meet Kal-El's gaze.

“Lois and I agree with all but three names here,” she told him, trying to keep her voice steady.

She passed the note around so that it ended up back in his hands, relieved he hadn't come to retrieve it.

It was her turn to watch him as he read her changes. His gaze, when it returned to hers, was troubled.

“Those you list as not trustworthy were once trusted friends,” he said. “Could time and circumstances have turned good men to bad?”

LL stiffened, wondering if Kal-El was hinting that she was being disingenuous. The others picked up on her tension and also seemed to grow tense. Kal-El was the one who seemed oblivious.

“We have to trust Lois,” Clark told Kal-El. “Her denial is absolute.”

Spurred on by Clark's words, Kal-El finally took note LL's pallor. It wasn't hard to guess the cause.

“I trust you,” he told her, keeping his gaze steady and his voice calm. “I merely question my own ability to judge others.”

“I wonder if maybe you aren't the only one who was cloned,” Lane responded. “Could it have been done?”

“Yes,” he nodded, his expression still troubled as he shifted gaze to the one variant of Lois in this room who wasn't in the least bit nervous around him. “It would have been an extreme effort to clone more than one person in the way I was cloned, however it is possible. I am not sure if is probable, however. It seems a poor idea overall, if someone wanted to maintain control over the situation.”

“However, it is possible. We can't trust anyone,” LL shook her head. “Back to square one.”

“Then announce who you are, “ Lex said firmly. “Challenge your people to test the validity of your claim. Zara said she had expected you to grow up kind. The fact that it didn't happen should lend credibility to your claim... enough so that they would test you on a cellular level.”

Kal-El nodded.

“That is a good idea.”

“It could fail horribly,” Clark said. “You might get killed before you could prove anything. “
“Ching and Zara and the other Kryptonians that already are part of our resistance will have to act as bodyguards,” LL spoke as she wrinkled her brow in concentration. “How quickly can the test be done?”

“Clones can be identified as such. This test can be done in a matter of hours. And I agree. Ching and I will act as bodyguards. Even if Kal-El is murdered, we will demand that the test be done. By right of ascension, casting reasonable doubt on the clone's true identity will force the testing. Not all members of our high council are corrupt people. Some of them have remained silent because of the right of ascension. Kal-El's rule is absolute by our laws. If he engineers an invasion of another world, while our elders may disapprove, they cannot gainsay him. “

“This could work,” LL mused. “Well, it has to, doesn't it? That, or we'll all die. Our entire network will be exposed if this fails.”

“If we do nothing, the consequences are worse,” Lex said. “Eventually they will kill us all. Unfortunately, this is our decision to make. I say we do it.”

“We can put this to a small vote with our own high council,” LL said grimly. “One thing is for sure... you all have to go home. This won't work with extra Kal-El's around. Your presence destroys his credibility.”

“I wish I could argue this point,” Kent said into the ensuing heavy silence. “You are absolutely right.”

“You should leave as soon as possible,” Lex added. “The longer you stay, the more dangerous to our cause.”

“We can leave as soon as we ask Herb. He left us a device to contact him. And I agree. We should leave now.”

“I am grateful to you all,” LL said after another silence. “I was very unpleasant to the two of you, especially... I did you great harm by my silence, Lois, and .. other-Lois, I'm afraid I was very rude to you as well. Yet you all stayed... you worked to free Kal-El, who ironically is our world's only hope. I know it isn't much... but I want you to know how much I value having met you, and appreciate everything you did. I mean this for you all,” she pointedly looked to Clark and Kent.

“We just want you to be free,” Lane filled the ensuing silence. The others nodded.

“I understand why you hated us,” Clark said, meaning himself and Kent. “I don't really know what to say. It seems underwhelming to say 'good luck'. I suppose … if you need us again and have the ability to contact us... we are here to help.”

“I know. But if we fail... we will all die. We will contact you somehow if we succeed. Will Herb agree to that?”

“I don't see why not.”

LL opened the door to her office and gave Clark a half smile. She was shocked at her own ease, as well as her ability to be friendly to this man.

“I was expecting you. You both are afraid I’m doing this under protest, aren’t you?”
“We drew straws,” he joked and she chuckled in wry appreciation of his humor.

After a long pause, he sobered and asked the question directly, looking at her resolutely, unlike his normal tendency of avoiding too long a gaze – with her, and even back in the older times – with his wife.

“Are you absolutely sure?”

She looked at him a long moment, feigning a lack of fear that she didn’t feel.

“What else can we do but move forward. It's dangerous having you both here. So you must leave. And it's also time for you to return to your own lives. You will not have passed time in your universes, but you've still lived all this time and had these experiences. You need to go back and recover from everything. Lois must be emotionally overloaded by now.”

“As you are,” he said boldly, unafraid of confronting her feelings.

“As I am. Yes. And having you here – knowing that you and he would protect me … it's scary to imagine not having your protection. But. I have Zara. And I have Ching.”

“Ching sold her out,” Clark said worriedly.

“Yes. To protect me. Ching's only loyalty is to Zara, and Zara and I are like sisters now. Clark. I'm not giving you a choice. I am ordering you to leave. If you don’t do as I say, you are violating your promise to me. Is that what you want?”

Her words may once have had sting – back in the early days when she was so afraid of him and Kent. Yet now, he knew that she was making it easy. Forcing him to comply would make him feel better about leaving.

“Then we leave now,” he said. “Time is not on your side. They know he's missing. And of course... people are suffering. That has to end.”

“Yes,” she exhaled wearily. “They are. And -it does. It has to end. One way or the other.” Pain flashed through his eyes at what she was saying. She’d rather die than live like this anymore.

She surprised him by taking his hand and squeezing it.

“I bid you a good life, Clark. You and the others. I think... I'll stay here. I don't like exposing my feelings and I might actually be sad about you leaving. For personal reasons. You … have been a treasured friend, even as I was very cruel.”


She smiled, but knew she never would.
Chapter 51

Kal-El waited as the group spoke with Zara. He envied the way the two Clarks could interact so easily with her – feeling guilt at what their doppelganger’s clone had done was far less burdensome then his own guilt. The only crime they had committed was looking like the enemy. He had allowed this to happen. In being so easily fooled, he had caused so much suffering. Even Zara had suffered so much.

He feared the days ahead – not because he feared death at the hands of those who could stop him, but because he feared life. This life was very different from the one he had imagined living. Zara was no longer an appropriate life partner. His own clone had done her great harm. And she clearly wished to be with Ching, even if she wouldn’t say the words. He had read it in her thoughts when she had shared with him what she had been through, at his request. Zara felt the weight of her own responsibility in failing to question why the young good-natured Kal-El had grown into a cruel adult. He shuddered at the thought of how she must have felt when she first realized he had grown to be a monster – it would have been after their bonding ceremony when the two were left to come together for the first time. Had Zara ever known kindness? He doubted it, feeling certain she would never have betrayed their bond.

He would honor her sacrifice. He had already verbally set her free, and he would welcome a union between herself and Ching. Furthermore, he would relinquish his right as leader to Zara, as soon as he was able. He could not stay here on Earth, but he would no longer be able to live as the leader of Krypton – not after everything his clone has done. Too many of his own people had been harmed.

And then there was the matter of the planet Earth. He would leave Earth – they all would, his final and first real act of leadership, and he would assure them that they would never fear Krypton again. He would leave them with radiation emitters so they could defend their world, even if he fell in the future.

He watched wistfully as his two doppelgangers smiled and laughed at Zara, coaxing her out of her constant sober mein. She gave them a smile, hesitant, but clearly one that spoke of her deep affection for them – grown from the time they had worked together. His heart squeezed as he saw Lois’s doppelganger – the one who had been brutalized – reach out and hug Zara. Although Zara still seemed calm and in control, Kal-El could feel her grief and guilt at the woman’s offering of friendship.

Zara fought tears at the farewell she was being given by this remarkable group of people. She would miss them for her entire life, yet she was never so glad to see people take leave of her. Best to go home, she thought. Be safe. Be happy.

“Lois,” she said to the one she had harmed, “I can never truly forgive myself for allowing you to be hurt. I want you to know I pledge myself to your life - should you ever need me for anything you can have me summoned, if Herb will allow it.”

“I need you to be happy, Zara,” Lois answered after stepping back from the hug. “You were as much a victim as anyone. Be happy now and forgive yourself. If you had stopped him from hurting me, he would have killed you – and you were needed by this resistance.”

Zara nodded and squeezed the other woman’s hands gently. “Be happy Lois.”
It was his turn now, he thought nervously at the group’s approach.
“I thank you for my life,” he said as soon as they came near him. He could feel Lois’s fear and it broke his heart. No matter what, she would feel this way, because he wasn’t Clark Kent – he was Kal-El. The differences were very marked – his doppelgangers were men of earth.

“Make it count,” Clark said, his gaze showing steel for the first time since he had met the man. “We expect you to honor your words. Free this world and then leave - no extended withdrawal, no lengthy time between reclaiming your place and freeing those who have been enslaved. Let the last abuse happen at the moment you defeat them.”

He nodded. “I vow it. I will personally see every single prisoner freed, the day I usurp him. And that day will come soon. As early as this week. “

“We will hold you to that,” Kent added. “We like you, and we trust you – but I have had bad experiences with the Kryptonian council of elders. They invaded my world and didn’t even admit it was an invasion. They referred to it as a temporary occupation – but people were being horribly injured nonetheless. I tried to play along, but in the end, I was accused of treason for refusing to allow my adopted home-world to suffer.”

Kal-El paled at his words, easily understanding how that could be. The council of elders wasn’t benevolent, even if all the members weren’t necessarily ill-intentioned. They put Krypton’s needs against all else. He would not do so – which was why he had been neutralized.

“I will not disappoint you. I promise you, I wish to leave this world alone and unharmed.”

“I wish I could see you win,” Clark said. “It would give me great joy to see him defeated.”

“Yet you must leave, for your own protection as well as ours.”

“Yes. And I’d be lying if I said I couldn’t wait.”

“Nor can I,” Lois said, finally finding her voice. Lane had been quiet, but that was due to her not wanting to intrude where she felt the most like an outsider. Lane was afraid of diminishing Lois, and Lois appreciated her forbearance.

“Kal-El, I wish you happiness as well,” Lois added. “You have suffered as well. You were a prisoner. Don’t forget that. You didn’t hurt anyone. He did. And while those of us who he hurt will have difficulty not transferring our fears to you, you did nothing to deserve it. Hold that tightly, because it might be what saves you from despair. And don’t tell me you don’t feel despair – I know you do.”

He gave her a courtly nod.

“I appreciate your words – more than I could ever truly express. I wish you a good life. I hope that you never know suffering again.”

Lois wanted to ask him more about his intentions, but she didn’t want to hurt him. She knew he would forever feel an outcast, and a happy future wasn’t in his cards. As long as he could win the day and free the Earth, that was all anyone could hope for.
Chapter 52

From now on, LL is referred to as Lois.

In the aftermath, Kal-El could feel the rising fear from the group – all but Zara, who seemed to trust him completely.

“Should we plan our next step,” he asked Lois, looking to her as leader.

She nodded, her expression grim.

Immediately after the others had departed, Lois came in, refusing to hide in her office. Without Clark here, she felt desperately afraid and alone. She had no idea that he had come to mean safety to her – in a way that nobody had... possibly since she was a child in her mother’s presence. She already missed him with a ferocity she would have never expected.

The uneasiness seemed shared - but mostly they were all a little worried that Kal-El would suddenly show his true colors and become the tyrant that they were all used to. His question, directed at her, put her a bit at ease – but it was Zara’s lack of fear that gave her the most strength.

“Your people are bound to obey the true leader,” Lex asked.

“Yes.”

“So if they find out you are really Kal-El, they are bound to obey you.”

“Yes.”

“The ones who did this to you won’t listen to your orders. They have no reason to let you live.”

“No. Yet I doubt they will bother trying to kill me. In the end, whether I am alive or dead, as long as there is proof of what they did – they have lost. I will make my order to evacuate immediately clear and precise. Those loyal to the lineage will know it must be obeyed.”

“Who would succeed you in your death?”

“I would,” Zara said. “No matter who they kill, there is a lineage. The ones who betrayed Kal-El will be stripped of their right of ascension in that lineage. Kal-El’s clone will have no right of lineage. The traitors will all be sentenced to the phantom zone.”

“An alternate prison dimension.”

“Yes.”

Lois shuddered. She had always feared being sent there when her time with Kal-El was up.

Kal-El saw her reaction and wanted to reassure her, yet what right did he have? He couldn’t protect her if it came down to it – so why even act like he could? He would be the first to fall if those who had betrayed him decided to fight.

“Then... let’s do this now,” Lois sighed. “If you feel up to it.”

“I will be glad to see the end of this,” he said resolutely. “My people have hurt yours long enough.”
She nodded, feeling a little bit better about the whole thing. Something in his tone and manner reminded her of Clark and she felt as if he was still here – protecting her – a ridiculous notion, as she had never felt safe around either Clark – she knew intellectually they wouldn’t hurt her – but she still felt visceral fear. Yet... after a time, Clark had come to be a friend, and she did feel empty at his loss. To see Kal-El capable of inadvertently reminding her of the other man was strange – even off-putting, but at the moment now – a relief. She would be glad to see him go. She didn’t need any reminders of any of the men he resembled.

Lois fought down terror at the sight of Kal-El dressed as the leader of Krypton, the invader of earth – her rapist, not to put too fine a point on it.

“You need to exude some amount of menace,” Zara told him softly, Her own fears had threatened to creep into her mind at how much he looked like his doppelgänger when wearing his clothes – yet, she had enough life training to keep her feelings in check.

The plan was for Kal-El to simply go to his doppelganger’s seat of power. To do so successfully, he would need to fool the people who saw him as he moved through the place.

“In order go gain the trust of those he has harmed, those of our people, I must not “ he told Zara, disagreeing with her words, but wanting to understand her reasons.

“You need to get as far as his presence, and that means fooling those you encounter before the fact.”

“I will not engage in cruelty, even as a mask – I cannot.”

“No, but you need to do better,” Lois told him, swallowing her fears and coming towards him. “I share my thoughts -”

“I would rather you did not,” he protested lightly, “Do you feel you must for me to succeed?”

“Try to exude a little more menace, and we will see,” she challenged him.

“With you in the room,” he expressed one of his worst fears. “I never want to frighten you.”

She nodded.

“I – appreciate it. But you still have to do what you have to do. Kal-El, nobody expects you to actually hurt people, okay? That’s a line we won’t ask you to cross -but you do need to convince people who you meet. Just until you gain the audience that you seek.”

“Perhaps if you were to leave the room.”

“You were raised to be a leader of your people, and you’re afraid to do this? No wonder they were able to defeat you, Kal-El.”

He felt shamed by her words. She was right. He was a terrible and ineffective leader. In the presence of one who led so bravely, he knew he could do no less than his best.

Lois waited, hating what she had said to him, but hoping to spur him to a little anger – to push him
into exuding menace. She dreaded this, as much as she needed to know he could do it. This was about the Earth’s liberation, and no price was too high to pay.

Kal-El nodded. “I agree. I am not behaving as I must,” he exhaled. “I owe you better than this. I can never let what happened happen again.”

He closed his eyes, and imagined his clone, he remembered the things that had already been shared with him, and he let show his anger at what was done to others as well as himself. He opened his eyes once more and let his feelings of anger manifest in the rigidity of his stance, and hard planes of his face. The sudden racing pulses of the others in the room were testament to how successful he had been.

“That will do,” Lois told him, her tone cool, but her heart was beating so hard that Kal-El was afraid it might do her injury.

“Then we are ready,” he said. His tone authoritative and dismissive. He looked at her as if she were an insect – not worth his attention or respect. The fact that she halted her own startled urge to retreat filled him with admiration and warmth. He couldn’t let those feelings show, they would upset her more than his current farce.
Chapter 53

Walking through the seat of his clone’s power was harder than Kal-El could have ever imagined. It was through sheer force of will that he kept his guise intact. He was deeply within the heart of all the suffering. All about him, people were cowed. No defiant rebels – just enslaved masses who had long lost any hope of being free again. As part of security protocols, he and his doppelgängers never roamed the resistance quarters halls – keeping them out of sight was necessary to avoid security leaks, or chaos.

He was surrounded by people who feared him. He was afraid to actually look at any of them, for fear of making it worse. He also didn’t trust his own ability to keep his emotions from showing. He couldn’t risk anyone learning who he was until he was ready to disclose the truth. He continued to walk, reminding himself to maintain his the body language his clone used, and tried to block out the sensory input of so many terrified people.

He was looking for Zara – they were supposed to have met up already and for some worrying reason, she was delayed. He could sense her presence, and he moved through headquarters so he could get to her. He was both terrified and excited about what was about to happen. The night before had been torture – knowing that people were suffering, and still having to delay action until the council meeting this day, was unbearable. Every second they allowed to pass was a moment in which his clone and others like him could and would cause people a lot of pain - perhaps even kill them, and that thought drove him to despair. He worried for Zara as well, but forced himself to remember that of anyone, she could at least stand up to the clone’s superhuman abilities.

He entered a closed room. Zara was near. But on entry, his presence wreaked such sensory havoc that he nearly bolted from the sensation. It was a psychic onslaught. Terror. Misery and hopelessness alongside. He heard the sounds of muffled weeping. All for him. Unconsciously he clenched his fists, angered by what he was hearing, and this made it worse – and he made the mistake of really looking at his surroundings. He was in the presence of women dressed for only one obvious purpose – pleasuring men who themselves had low vices. Bruises marked bodies and faces, and fear showed plainly in their eyes. Afraid to run, afraid not to run – he couldn’t imagine how that would feel. He aimed for haughtiness, looking at them as if they did not interest him, hoping at least to ease them by his indifference. But it was a hopeless case. Fortunately, Zara’s voice broke the awful silence.

“My lord,” Zara spoke, bowing to show obeisance. “How may I be of service to you? Do you seek a companion?”

Kal-El knew that he had broken some kind of habit in coming into this place of choosing. It horrified him that such a place existed, but he had to hang onto the idea that he soon would take back his place and force an end to the invasion.

“I sought you, Lady Zara,” he spoke, in Kryptonian. The humans understood, and he felt a change as soon as he said those words. Some sense of relief. “Will you give me your companionship?”

She nodded, her gaze lowered. “I am your servant, my lord. Had you sent your messenger, I would have been pleased to answer your command.”

Bile rose in him.

She reached out an arm in an awful parody of courtly manners, and he took it, holding her arm gently. She gave him a nearly imperceptible shake of her head and he knew, he had to do better. He
jerked her towards him.

“I do not like having to seek you out,” he said, coldly, trying to recover his error in protocol.

They departed with alacrity. Kal-El couldn’t bear it any longer, and treating Zara with cruelty made him feel sick.

“I was delayed,” she murmured. “I truly am sorry. There was – an incident - I needed to intervene before lord Nor took what wasn’t his.”

He wanted to reply that none of those women belonged to anyone, but he refused to give into the urge. So he nodded, acknowledging why things weren’t going according to plan.

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“There,” Zara told him, “He is in there with the council. This, as we discussed, is the ideal time to reveal yourself.”

He nodded, his hand now gentle on her arm.

“Go and be safe,” he urged her. “If we fail -”

“It is as much my duty as anyone’s,” she reminded him. “I will not run.” She felt a sudden sense of loss at never having known him.

He nodded, knowing he could do little to sway her. Nor should he. As the lady to his lord, Zara was responsible as much as he was for what had happened. If there was a price to pay, they would both pay it.

“I honor your courage.”

“And I yours.”

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He burst in, no warning preceded his entry, and he saw the startled reaction of those who had betrayed him. Their fear gave them away. Zara and he were armed – and within moments had weakened all the Kryptonians in the room, including themselves. They used enough radiation to make it impossible for any extra abilities to be used against non-Kryptonians. The Kryptonians could function, but they were sick enough that escape would be impossible. There were humans present, for what purpose, he did not know. But the were clearly not here willingly.

“I am Lord Kal-El,” he spoke into the stunned silence. “Many years ago, I was overcome and rendered unconscious – forced to live out the years in stasis. This one has no lineage. He is a clone.” he indicated his clone, a dark and menacing figure that would likely haunt him forever – he was shocked that Lois – either one – could ever be in his presence.

Both he and Zara were suffering from the radiation, but he had only released enough to take away their sun-given powers. Nobody was writhing on the floor. Yet.

“I support his claim,” said Zara. “I demand the testing be done.”
Kal-El’s clone looked murderously at Zara and Kal-El stepped in front of her protectively. He knew that he had let enough radiation into the room to stop the clone from using any extra abilities to harm her, yet he felt the need to protect her from the malice in his clone’s eyes.

“You are a traitor,” the clone spoke. This is an outrage. These are usurpers. He is a clone. I am myself as I always have been.”

“How would a good man turn cruel,” asked Zara. “Many of you grew up with him, as I did, until Kal-El was taken to training his final years of youth. You have wondered as have I at his change. Test him, and you will not be disappointed. I demand it. It is my right.”

“As it will be my right to see you flung into the phantom zone,” the clone hissed.

“We will test him,” Trey, eldest of the council members, spoke out his edict. “I wondered at his change as well. I was one of the voices who wanted to come to this world, and Kal-El had always been opposed. His changing stance was very unexpected, and that is enough to convince me that we must test them.”

"Why did you remain silent," Kal-El asked Trey, needing to know. Trey had been a father figure to him, when he was learning what he needed to lead.

“We did what I believed we had to do,” Trey said. “We continued our people’s existence. I regret what has happened here, although I know you will not believe that. I have come to regret it greatly.”

Kal-El stared at him, trying to read his expression. Was Trey a good liar... or – truly innocent?

“We must test your blood,” Trey said, “Do you agree?”

“No,” raged the clone. “You will not lay hands on me. I am your ruler. I am absolute.”

“You have no choice,” Zara said, her voice filled with loathing. “As I had no choice- or any of the others you have victimized over the years.”

Kal-El held out his arm and offered no resistance to an approaching medic.

“Take all you need.”
Kal-El bided his time, trying not to let his feelings show as he waited to hear his fate. The room he was being held in had radiation emitters and they were on low – enough to keep him from breaking free and wreaking havoc.

Footsteps heralded the arrival of those who would deliver his fate. Zara in full regal garb approached him, as she was the temporary leader of Krypton. She turned off the force field and emitter field, allowing him his freedom.

“My lord Kal-El, I grant you right of ascension.” She bowed down, showing the form of proper protocol.

“Lady Zara, honorable council, I accept the right of ascension.”

He felt her presence before he saw her. Lois. Lois, here in this awful place. She was remarkably calm, and he fought the urge to listen to her heart rate. He faced her, and whatever she might truly be feeling, she did not allow her gaze to falter. Admiration for this brave person filled his heart. He felt a sense of loss, knowing that their paths would never cross again. Whatever they were supposed to have been, it had been destroyed by his own people. Of course that was the least of the horrors wrought by his people’s villainy.

“Welcome,” Kal-El said humbly, faintly lowering his head in respect, letting those present know that he considered Lois his equal.

“I am the representative of my people,” she told him calmly. “I am here to discuss your withdrawal.”

“Yes. We discussed it and agreed that we choose for them to die. We cannot risk them escaping and returning to plague us.”

Kal-El nodded without any expression, but she sensed his approval.

“I am not a leader who seeks to act vengefully or wrathfully,” he told her calmly, sensing her increased heart rate, knowing that words he uttered would trigger painful memories. Nonetheless, they had to be said. “I, however, agree with your assessment. The danger to earth is extreme, and we cannot guarantee that the prison is inescapable.”

“I’m not so high minded. I do want them to die because I loathe them for what they did. And I want them to know it’s me who called for their deaths.”

“You do not need to justify your choice. However, I understand, for what that is worth to you.”

She felt a pang of hollowness in her chest while talking to him. There was a part of her that once was the whole of her – and that part wanted to explain – to not be seen as a vicious and bloodthirsty person. But that part was a very small part now. The woman she now was had been forged from brutality and was no longer capable of compassion to her enemies.

“Then let’s start talking withdrawal.”
Kal-El, Zara and Lois secluded themselves away from the rest of the council by Lois’s request.

“Do you feel safe,” Zara murmured to her, hoping she didn’t offend her friend. “If this is too much, we can do this at the resistance headquarters.”

“If Kal-El has bad intentions after all this, we are doomed anyway. Just want to get this over with.”

Zara nodded and Lois winced.

“Look – you – have been very dear to me – but – we can’t co-exist here. You know that. And I’m just trying to move my world past this invasion and into healing.”

“You owe me no explanations. You are also my dear friend. I see you as a sister. But our time together is at an end.”

Lois smiled at her. “He’s waiting patiently. Let’s go?”

“Lois, I owe you my life – my freedom – everything,” Kal-El spoke awkwardly. “I did not want to reveal this in front of the council, because I was trying to follow protocol. I do want you to know that I am aware without you, I would still be trapped.”

“Just watch your back,” she said seriously. “Don’t ever let this happen again.”

He nodded. “I promise you I will not.”

She exhaled through her tense muscles. He could not really promise not to fall afoul of bad subjects, but at this point, it was all she had. She had to trust that he would be more careful.

“Our first order of business – we will personally free all the slaves from earth. I trust you both to this task, and Ching. I also trust the Kryptonian resistance members that I personally have worked with. With enough people to the task, we should be done within a few hours.”

“Where will they go? Our people have destroyed buildings and many people have no homes or sustenance left.”

“It will be chaos here as we rebuild. I suggest we leave this place as a refugee camp. The resistance quarters too.”

“Will Lex accept that?”

“I am de facto leader of my people. I will insist.”

“Whatever help is needed, we will provide. Those of us that you don’t count as trusted allies will leave as soon as possible – as soon as we can get ships readied. We will keep a close watch on our people to ensure no further abuses happen to yours. And those of us that you do trust will remain to offer our services to aid in rebuilding. We will stay as long as you bid, and leave as soon as you bid.”

“That might be … weeks – months - “

“We will do exactly as you ask. Our help is given because we have wronged you. Our servitude is a small price to pay for your forced enslavement. We cannot undo the horrors of what you endured, but we can at least help. We will share technological knowledge, equipment - anything you need.
As well as red radiation emitters."

Lois nodded, trying to keep her emotions at bay. His talk of servitude kept pushing her towards terror, but she was in shock right now and that was enabling her to function calmly.

“Okay. Agreed. Let’s plan for who can stay, after we free those enslaved.”
The invasion was over and those trusted Kryptonians worked with humans to rebuild the world that had been devastated.

The criminal Kryptonians were locked up and disabled, awaiting punishment – death, as asserted by humanity and those Kryptonians that had aided the resistance were asked to remain and help in accordance to human leadership. The rest left under close watch of those who remained, ensuring no stray potentially villainous sorts remained.

Lex Luthor had properties all around the world and he freely opened them up havens to his fellow humans. Although a difficult man, working to free his home world from invasion had nudged him towards true more selfless tendencies.

Kal-El was in his private office, a space different from the one his clone had occupied. Although he knew that spaces couldn’t hold memories and thoughts, every place his clone had occupied was filled with echoes of pain and fear. He refused to go near the clone’s sleeping chamber.

There was a knock, and moved to the door, opening it, and stepping back, as was his current habit. He knew it was Lois, and he didn’t want to crowd her, ever. She was remarkable. He knew she feared and probably hated him, but she was able to deal with the current events with remarkable aplomb.

“I think I’m as strange a sight as you are,” she said to him, trying to break the tension that appeared whenever they were together – for her sake, more than his. “I’m supposed to be dead. Perhaps they think I’m going to eat their brains?”

He regarded her gravely a moment, and then dropped his gaze – not a ‘leader-like’ action, but knowing why he did it made him seem even more of a leader than ever before. His consideration of his clone’s victims would always supersede his training as Lord Kal-El.

“It was supposed to be a joke.”

“I … yes. It is funny. “

“I didn’t really expect to amuse you,” she said, feeling her own answering horror at memories her own words invoked. “Agh. Bad choice of words.”

“I believe you are trying to make me feel less nervous,” he said. “I appreciate it – however I do not deserve your consideration in this, or any matter.”

“Is that what I did it for,” she asked aloud. “I don’t know. I thought I was trying to make myself feel better. Honestly, I still cant be with you like this without wanting to run away.” She was grateful for her time with both Clarks. They had, by their earth-raised behavior, enabled her to interact with Kal-El as if he wasn’t a dangerous threat. She reminded herself that she would never ever cringe or cower. If someone wanted her dead, they would kill her as she faced them with spitting defiance. She would never break again.

He nodded, making brief eye contact and then dropping his gaze.

“Okay, look at me, all right,” she said in frustration.

He did and she gave him a mirthless smile.
“Are you afraid of what you have to do?”

“Yes.”

“Wow. I didn’t expect you to say that.”

“The people I face today were directly harmed by him. My own clone, who I enabled by being naïve. I am afraid to face them. I am afraid of their hatred and scorn, but more so – I am afraid of their pain and fear.”

“That’s good. That will help them face you. Only way beyond this moment is to endure it.“

“I know. And when I think of how brave you are, it shames me to feel these feelings. Of course, that is why I answered honestly. With you I will never try to hide the truth of my feelings. I owe it to you – you are why I am free.”

“I didn’t rescue you .”

“You made the resistance a force to be reckoned with.”

“I got lucky. An extra dimensional time traveller saved you. Without Herb and the two Clarks... we would still be in trouble.”

“You will not change my mind – this is how I feel.”

She smiled briefly again.

“Okay, then. Then i’ll take this for what it is. I can’t lend you strength, but I will be there. And you will survive.“

"I - am grateful - beyond grateful that you are here. It must fill you with a lot of terrible memories," he said hesitantly.

"I came here by my own volition,” she answered, her tone clipped.

He nodded, his eyes showing his discomfort at having possibly provoked her.

"No seriously - this was my choice - I had to come here to conquer him. I never was in this particular space with him - this room.”

He shuddered. "I was not able to go - to the places he called his own. I - have not had the courage."

"You can only torture yourself so much, Kal-El. If others see you near his rooms, then you will frighten them. It will feel like he's back. Comfort yourself with knowing that, and accept whatever relief it brings you."

"Thank you for that, Lois."

"I'm really good at finding self-justifications when I feel badly about things."

"At the risk of upsetting you, I do not agree with that. You are really accomplished at doing whatever you must - regardless of how terrible the experience will be. You are a role-model to me."

She gave him a grim smile. She knew that she'd had a shoot-first-ask-questions-later where his doppelgangers were concerned. But perhaps she didn't have to work too hard to justify
that feeling.

"I am ready to do this," he added into her silence.

A space, a formerly large ballroom in its old pre-invasion days, was filled with people – a large percentage women. And unlike a normal large gathering of people, was deathly quiet. No silent murmuring, no nervous laughter – just the silence of those who wished to be unnoticed. Kal-El knew for sure that some of the women who were there would have been in the place where he had gone and pretended to be his clone – where he had demanded Zara’s attendance on him. He felt sick at the memory. Putting on the other man’s skin had been revolting.

The doors were open, anyone could leave at will – but these people had been enslaved long enough to know not to leave without being told that they could.

Kal-El came in and moved into a central area where others had been told to expect him. The immediate upswing of fear tormented his neural pathways. He put up his guards immediately. It didn’t help. He could see, hear and smell the fear.

“I thank you for allowing me to speak with you,” he started out, keeping his voice relaxed and non-demanding. He knew Lois was out there, and waiting to step forward if she felt it necessary – but for now, she was keeping herself incognito.

“I do not wish to make matters worse, so I will just deliver to you our intent – we have put all those who invaded your world in a prison – and they will never be able to harm you again. The rest of us are leaving as soon as we can. Our presence here is only to help rebuild what we have destroyed – and we answer to earth authority. “

Nobody answered – the eerie and horrible silence continued. He looked down, unable to deal with looking at them all, but then he noticed they were all looking down as well.

“I will leave now – I do not wish to make things worse. I am always willing to speak with anyone, no matter what anyone wishes to say to me. “

He turned to leave, and he felt the waves of relief at his departure. The fear, the overwhelmingly sickening fear, had enraged him. He was afraid of showing that rage and making things worse.
Lois asked to see him, and this time, he went to her office - not too far from his. He passed many earth people as he moved through the open spaces, and none of them interacted with him in any overt way – he would forever more be a predator amongst prey – hated, but feared- and thus – they would freeze and hope he wouldn’t notice them. He tried to be as harmless as possible in his bearing, he knew that his clone would walk the halls with arrogance and brutal dominance – so he modeled his own body language on that of his doppelgängers. Kal-El had been raised to lead, and with that, came comportment. Defying his own instincts took effort, but it was worth it. He would not add to anyone’s distress on purpose.

Her door was open and he gently knocked on it anyways, but he knew she felt his presence.

“How are things going,” she asked him for a status report. It had been a week since he had addressed those enslaved by the invaders and he had been working non stop to help with the necessary steps prior to leaving Earth. Those earth people who had developed an acceptable level of comfort working with the Kryptonians who were here to help, were never able to accept him. When he tried to help with rebuilding, or clearing out of rubble from rampant Kryptonian destruction of human structures – the fear was so strong he gave up. However on more than one occasion he had worked to save a life from immediate danger, because sometimes the work to be done was dangerous to earth people – yet they insisted on participating because they felt the need to keep an eye on what the Kryptonians were doing. Those times, he had been forced to lay his hands on people – and that had never gone down well - he terrified every single human being, with the exception of Lois Lane, and he even frightened her on a visceral level.

He told her of the progress that had been made, without offering up any expectation of praise. He was not here to be told ‘good job’ - he was here to resolve a broken situation that he had caused. He never forgot that.

“I know it’s hard for you,” she told him after he finished his report. “I appreciate that you keep at it, even though people treat you as if you are your clone.”

“I will continue to do as I must,” he said. “No appreciation necessary, but it is – appreciated,” he gave a small half smile at his overuse of the word.

“You are … making an impression - “

“I just want people to be at ease – ultimately. When we leave, we will never come back. I’ve spoken to your world military about red radiation protection against our return.

He had done so, allowing them to demonstrate the effect of radiation on him. They had exposed him to the radiation and then used sharp implements to draw blood. The leaders did not cower, cringe and try to turn invisible in his presence, but they still feared him – he knew it. That was why he allowed them the freedom to harm him. If they wished to kill him, he would not fight back and some of them had later apologized for their own actions in hurting him.

_You handled that well_ A leader, who referred to himself as ‘President of the united states’ told him. He had answered him and all the gathered world leaders, with resolute acceptence. _I could do no less_ had been his calm response.
“You will be happy to leave,” Lois said. “As will I be happy for you to leave, for whatever that means. Your tireless efforts are speeding up the process. So thank you. You and the others have kept their promises. Everyone accepts our authority without question or resentment.”

“As we should,” he said. “I have not had to insist, however – those of us who have remained are all of the same opinion that we owe you our full and untainted cooperation.”

“What will you do when you leave?”

“I will abdicate to Zara. Our – binding is null and void.”

“Did you annul it, or was it nulled by her actions in binding to him. Is this a punishment of sorts for her?”

“An owed debt of duty,” he answered. “She is not to blame. She is a victim.”

“As are you.”

“It was never her duty -”

“It was. She explained it to me. It was her duty to protect her bond-mate.”

“Regardless of how she sees it – and how our laws even see it- - I see her as a victim – one who has suffered enough, and one who will be free to live with whomever she wants. I hope only for her happiness. I know she will be an excellent leader.”

Lois smiled. A real smile. “She will be. I wish she could... remain. She is - dear to me. But -no Kryptonians can remain, and her duty is important. A strong leader like Zara will not allow this to happen again.”

He nodded. “No – she will not. I believe that too.”

“So what will you do?”

“I will be a member of our society – but not the leader.”

“Will you … find a bond mate of your own?”

“I cannot imagine - all my people had to interact with the clone. So – I will keep to myself. “

“That is … lonely.”

“I accept that. It is no less than what I feel I deserve.”

“Well – I hope for your sake that you find happiness – you actually do deserve it. You were a victim too.”

He gazed uncomfortably at her – knowing they were meant to be together according to the soul mate theory.

“I wish that for you as well,” he said simply, not elaborating.
Chapter 57

It was finally time to leave. He spoke to the world over airwaves – apologizing and making promises.

“We will never return,” he told everyone, “And your world is protected if we do. I will abdicate to Zara after we depart – you can hopefully find some comfort in knowing that I am no longer a leader of my people. My failure to see danger caused this invasion to happen. Zara has proven herself to be a far better leader than I ever was, and she will not be so easily fooled.”

After the broadcast was ended, he looked over at the world leaders.

“Do I have your permission to leave,” he asked them, and they formally granted it. He felt empty – it was over – this vast effort and fixing what was broken, and what faced him seemed so bleak. At the same time, he was relieved to be leaving a world where he was feared. Nevertheless, He … would miss Lois. Her strength had definitely drawn his interest her way. He could not imagine ever being bonded to anyone because of his feelings – but he could never imagine being with her either. Not after her ordeal at his clone’s hands. He would never let her know.

She came to see him before he left – and he knew she would. He hoped she would. He knew she needed closure.

“Thank you for seeing me,” he said honestly. “I did not want to leave without bidding you farewell.”

She nodded, feeling a weird sense of losing something at the idea of his final departure. The soulmate connection – which she hated herself for even giving credence to, made her feel a sense of despair at his leaving. She remembered all her encounters with him since they found him – and he had been kind to her – kind and solicitous. A man of honor and respect. A man she might have loved – if this hadn’t happened. She was so broken now – she couldn’t imagine loving anyone – but – still – the part of her that still remained alive after all her brutal experiences mourned the loss of ‘the one’ she was supposed to be with.


He handed her a long-range communication device.

“This will reach our receivers,” he said. “Even over vast spaces. It bends reality and creates a small wormhole – it will work,” he stopped.

“You can explain it to me – I’m not stupid.”

“Well – I don’t really understand the true science of it,” he said.

She nodded.

“Why?”

“Nightfall might come to your world and if it does, we will help. We won’t all return, but some of us will – to stop the asteroid.”

She nodded.
“I will... keep it safe.”

“I gave devices to your world leaders too. But I did not tell them of nightfall. How could I? We don’t see it now – but it could be out there none-the-less.”

She nodded. “Thank you. And … thank you for everything else.”

She reached out and gripped his hand. “I don’t blame you, anymore,” she smiled. “I forgive you for being easily fooled. You were young – and... I honestly don’t see how you could have seen this coming.”

Her words overwhelmed him, and he placed his other hand on top of hers for a brief moment.

“Your words honor me,”

-Fin
Lois and Clark were finally completely alone after bidding Kent and Lane goodbye from their own home. Kent had insisted that they get him if the other Kryptonians came. And he refused to leave until they promised. The two couples parted sadly – having grown as close as family, but they were doppelgängers and inter-dimensional travel was generally to be avoided.

“It’s over.” Lois exhaled, looking at her home with the eyes of a stranger. No despair. No – musty awful trapped-underground feeling. No fretting about showing too much affection to her husband in front of those who feared Kryptonians. She thought about the last time she’d made this journey – broken – seemingly beyond repair. And of course- her utter terror of the loving man standing at her side.

“I wish... I never hurt you,” she whispered. “I wish I’d come up to you and said ‘I know you aren’t him. Just give it time and we will have it all.’"

He gently traced his hand down her face - after she’d told him that Kal-El’s clone used to use mock tenderness to amuse himself, he’d avoided the caress – but then she’d told him that it was one of her favorite things.

She reached up and traced the side of his face and he gripped her hand gently, holding her close.

“It was worth it – any amount of your hatred of me – was worth enduring because we ended up together. And honestly Lois, just knowing you were safe – that was everything. Even if you never grew to like me.”

She traced his muscles under his shirt. They had not made love since they were last here – because … well – there was close to horror – she had been put back in the world of her nightmares and he was worried about so many things.


“I wanted to wait too,” he admitted. “We had no privacy – with our other selves – and I was really afraid of flashbacks – and the others hearing – not on my account, but yours – because I know that would have bothered you. “

“How do you feel now? It’s been months....”

“I miss you,” he told her honestly, giving her the full truth of his desire. “I love you.” His thumb brushed her lip.

She smiled, feeling awkward after the span of time.

“I love you too.”

Herb reappeared and Clark fought back a groan.

“No, no, I’m not here to take you some place -I just have news – the invasion has ended. Earth is free.”
“Dead. The clone is dead. I feel... so good about that. Does that make me a bad person?”

“No – I don’t think so at all. Why shouldn’t you be glad that someone so horrific is gone forever.”

She hugged him hard. His return embrace was the perfect amount of fierce and tender, imparting strength and love.

“Then let’s get on with our lives. I feel that I can be me again, now. No more sendings. No more... laundry room.”

“If you have flashbacks, or you wake up after nightmares – and you need solitude, you won’t hurt me, Lois. I love you and I know that going through hell is something that can’t just be erased.”

“Kiss me, hard,” she demanded.

He did, pulling her in and fiercely responding to her need. He knew she was testing herself.

“Yeah. I liked that,” she said after he pulled back. “And I want more. But first... I want you to sit down. Okay? Unless you have to go – you do not help me with what I’m doing.”

She went back inside, and found leftovers. No time to cook – luckily they hadn’t actually been gone more than a second from their own timeline, because the food in the fridge was still good.

She prepped the food and brought it to him, along with utensils and a napkin.

She then brought her own food in and sat down.

“Hope you’re hungry?”

He looked down at the food, and at her – waiting.

“Do you need anything else right now?”

“Wine,” he said carefully, knowing it was a test. “Would you mind?”

She did as he asked. Doing it all, pouring. Serving.

“Thank you... “

“So this is how it’s going to be. We are equal partners. And equal partners do equal work. No more lazing around. That’s a promise. I know you don’t get tired, but nonetheless, it’s the psychology of it all. I am your wife – and I will serve you, care for you and tend to you – like a wife should. As you serve, care and tend to me, like a husband should.

He smiled. And nodded.

“You tell me what you want, when you want things. When you want me.”

“All right,” he said, stroking her face gently.

Later...
“Lois... it’s been months. Let’s go upstairs.”

She smiled at him, hiding her nerves, hoping it would be smooth sailing.

“Wear the blue thing,” he teased her. “You look sexy in blue.”

She looked at him in shock. His clone had told her to wear red. She had told him of that awful day. Was he doing as she asked?

“Okay -but maybe you could wear the blue thing. And the red thing? You look sexy in your suit.”

“Oh my god,” he groaned. “Seriously?”

“Come up when I call you... but it might be a while -”

“Are you going to do the dishes,” he asked indicating the mess. “I was told not to help.”

She laughed.

“You can help now. I’ll call you, Superman when I’m ready.”

“Are you serious about -”

“Yup- I love both of you and all of you. Kryptonian. Human. You know that, but now … I feel an urgent need to prove it. I want the you that you’ve been afraid to show me. Be yourself. If you want to move super fast from one place in the house to another, do it. If you want to warm up my aching muscles with a little heat vision – do it – or ice my ankle when if I have achilles tendonitis. Okay? I want the full package.”

“Those are fighting words,” he laughed, knowing she meant the bad pun.

“I might sometimes want a wrestling match too,” she trailed her hand down his arm. “If the mood allows – if it’s organic. Just … lets be.”

“This is a lot, Lois and I’m afraid -”

“I know. Don’t be,” she interrupted. “or do be. I’m being rude, but I needed to show you that I can interrupt , I can disagree – I can do whatever – without fear. And yes – I might have flashbacks, but I promise you that it’s okay too. “

“Hurry up, Lois – it’s been months! You’ll get cooperation only if you do your part." He grasped her and pulled her close into a hard kiss. Then released her. "Otherwise, I’m going to just take you now. Here. On the couch.”

She smiled. She knew he was forcing it still, but it would do. She’d take the lead until they learned the new rhythm of being together without her tormentor in the way.

He came upstairs at her bidding. Not super fast as she had said, because there’s no fun in that.

The room smelt like lavender. And there she stood, in her blue chemise – her skin glistening with oil, her eyes hiding anxiety.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said. He moved in without hesitation and gently stroked her arm, remembering that she had said that ‘Lord Kal-El’ had done that. She was doing personal aversion
therapy without asking him to act in a way that horrified them both and he would honor that. He could sense her nerves. But he would not stop unless she told him too.

“So no wrestling then,” he asked.

“What do do you mean?”

“Slip right out of my grasp,” he growled, as he held her arms and pulled her in for a passionate kiss.

She responded. The initial jabs of concern at her old triggers had faded and she gave herself up to the kiss. No room for doubt. No room for anything.

Except...

“I – actually want to shower too – I haven’t since we returned and I want to get that universe out of me as much as possible,” He said pulling back.

She knew what he meant. That world had pervasive despair that settled into one’s pores.

She grabbed something from her drawer and handed it to him.

Men’s pajamas bottoms and a large robe – Black. Fluid. Sophisticated.

“All in one night?”

“Humor me, okay? Don’t be afraid of ruining my night.”

“Maybe I don’t want to ruin my night.” His voice held slight danger as he said implied things that he didn’t mean. "I'm not sure I can back off."

He was testing her.

“I can’t force you... but I did what you wanted and wore the blue.”

“Okay. You have a very good point. Okay, Lois – if this is what you want. I trust you completely.”

The tall and powerfully built Kryptonian came out wearing black – and yes, it made him look regal. She waited for him in the bed – dressed in something he’d told her to wear. And her skin perfumed from essential oils. The way he’d said he liked it.

She waited for her reaction as she watched his approach. The barely leashed impatient desire he didn’t try to hide... his predatory grace as he approached a woman he hadn’t had in months, and the tender love for her he could never hope to hide broadcasting from his gaze.

He came to her, and dropped his robe on the ground heedlessly. He was never heedless - always worrying she would clean after him. His bare chest tantalized her. She couldn’t wait, and the fire grew in her body. He came down to the bed, and pulled her into his arms, kissing her as passionately as he wanted, not worrying about being too much too fast. An enthusiastic participant, she managed to gain the upper hand, sprawling on him as they kissed. He took this as a challenge and without any effort, slid his hand under her body in order to flip positions.

She smiled up at him, knowing he was taking great risks for her.
He crushed his lips too hers as they enjoyed each other in a more wild and unbidden fashion than they were wont to do. As he did so, he pinned her hands to the bed, his grip gentle but unbreakable. Her body got wetter and he could both feel and smell it.

"You like me holding you down," he growled a sensual challenge, his eyes always radiating his tenderness and love - differentiating him from the horrible monster that he resembled. Knowing it was Kal-El's clone who had done those things had liberated him from feeling personally connected across the dimensions. There was no connection between him and her tormentor - the fact that they looked alike was a deliberate act of treason - and that made it even less the fault of the good men who looked like him.

She gave him a dazed nod, her gaze fixed on his - her passion overwhelming her ability to speak.

"We have all night," he said. "Should I make you wait for release? How many times could I bring you to the edge and back?"

"Don't you dare."

"Sounds like a challenge..."

His words made her even more hot for him as he used his leg to torment her center, the black silk against her own lace covered center and it wasn't enough - it wasn't nearly enough. His tongue on her nipple - hard and then too soft - she needed more to get to the end. He put her hands above her head in one of his much broader hands, and his other hand travelled to her core - he used his super powers to gently vibrate - the lightest touch - and then... nothing. He did this a few times, bringing her close and backing off.

"I'm up for it," he said. "And I don't need sleep. I can do this forever."

"Or you could make love to me - now - as you said, it's been months..."

He gracefully moved off of her.

"How restrained do you want to be," he asked, picking up the tie of his robe. His black robe. The black tie.

Her eyes widened a bit as she processed the thrill of anticipation and apprehension that went through her. This wasn't a terrified sick feeling, it was sheer erotic excitement of being in a situation completely outside her control - yet also completely safe. All she ever had to lose was her dignity and self control, but that was something she now felt safe giving over. She refused to answer him, wanting him to figure this out on his own.

Not seeing anything any negative feelings, only watchful anticipation, he took the silk tie and easily bound her wrists to the headboard.

"But how will you get this off me?"

"How much do you love it? He started to tear it in an implied threat to her outfit, checking that it would be okay.

"Oh god," her body reacted to that implication he might tear her clothes off with far too much primitive excitement. He removed his remaining article of clothing and stood for a moment - proud strong male looming over his mate. His body beautiful and fully aroused.

She never should have allowed him to tie her down. She would self destruct if he made her wait.
His gaze scorching her with his desire, he covered her body again - keeping most of his weight off of her so that she couldn't get the pressure she needed.

"Should i take up your challenge, wife," he asked - a sensual promise and threat.

"Please, Clark- I need you now. As you say - you have stamina -this might end up being just the first of many tonight."

Clark would never spend an entire night claiming and reclaiming her body. She was not invulnerable and they had not been intimate in a while. As much as the thought of exhaustive sex intrigued them both - he would not hurt his wife. And that would end up being painful in the end.

He tore at her clothes - being gentle even in his wildness. He read the desire in her gaze and knew his actions only tantalized her. There was a difference between erotic fear and real fear.

"I can't wait either," he growled and seeing her expression, knew that she wanted him now - and didn't really seem to want careful handling. Modulating his strength, he pushed into her in one resolute strong thrust, and began the old song with a new rhythm - one unfettered and explosive. She made that sound she always made, the one that fired his blood up and he allowed the inflammation of his blood to carry him on to make possessive decisive thrusts as he drove them both to completion.

He hugged her hard as they both regained their senses in the aftermath. She tugged her restraints. "Hey... you forgot these."

"That was just round one, Lois.." his voice and gaze dark and sexy with sensual promise. "And now, round two..."

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