Superman and the Illuminati

by phoenixnz

Summary

Clark and Lois face their biggest test yet as they are targeted by a mystery group calling themselves The Illuminati, a supposedly mythical group with designs on destroying Superman.

Notes

Collaborative fic with baron_de_suberbielle on KSite. I cannot guarantee the French is perfect. I know very little French and my collaborator's translations might not be accurate.
Episode 1: Part 1

Chapter Summary

Three men ask to meet with Lex, with a hidden agenda

Episode One – Corruption

A dark Cadillac limousine pulled up beside the Luthorcorp Building and double parked beside the line of parked cars. Traffic came to a shuddering halt behind it and drivers honked their horns impatiently. The uniformed chauffeur got out, staring snootily at the other drivers, while a police officer on a horse approached.

“You can’t park here, buddy,” he said.

The chauffeur ignored him, nose in the air, hat pulled down to shade his eyes. He quickly moved around to the back door, opening it wide and allowing his three passengers to get out. Two were dressed in the finest European fashions money could buy. Both were wearing long cloaks which seemed incongruous in the warmth of a late Metropolis summer.

They were clearly extremely wealthy and so arrogantly full of themselves that they paid absolutely no attention to the continued shouts and horns of the drivers still trying to pass the huge vehicle.

The third man was dressed simply in a black suit with a white shirt and grey tie. He joined the other two waiting at the kerb.

One of the cloaked men, a man with an aristocratic nose and long, silvery dark hair, spoke rapidly in French to the chauffeur.

“Gustave tourné autour de l'immeuble ” he ordered.

“Oui monsieur,” the chauffeur nodded.

The three men went inside while the chauffeur went back to the vehicle and got in, driving off. The police officer had written out a ticket and placed it under the windscreen wipers, but it soon flew away.
The dark haired man swept in as if he was attending a premiere event, rather than heading toward the bank of elevators. The other two followed him into the lift, waiting as the car ascended to the fifth level where the main Luthorcorp reception area was housed.

The man swept out of the elevator and stared at the woman at reception.

“Something you want?” she asked casually, glaring at the three men.

“Monsieur Luthor, s’il vous plait.”

“Name?”

“I ‘ave already told you. Monsieur Luthor, s’il vous plait.”

“I meant your name,” she said, with an uninterested air.

“I am Baron Yves de Rochefort,” he told her, expecting her to be impressed.

“Un huh. Do you have an appointment? Mr Luthor is a busy man.”

“I? I do not need an appointment,” he said with a heavy accent. “I am the Baron de Rochefort. And I am a very busy man myself. Mr Luthor, s’il vous plait. And I do not care to repeat myself once again.”

The woman sighed, yawned, then picked up the phone.

“Yeah, Luce, there’s some guy here wanting to see Mr Luthor. Says he doesn’t have an appointment. Yeah, I told him that, but ... I don’t know. He’s got kind of an accent. I can barely understand a word he says. Some baron, or something.”

She looked up at the man once again.

“What was your name again?” she asked.

The baron harrumphed in impatience. “I am the Baron de Rochefort.”

“Is there something I can do to help you gentlemen?”

The Baron turned and looked at the redheaded woman. She was beautiful. Her facial features seemed to be European in their ancestry. He wondered if her family had come from France, or a neighbouring country.

“And you are?” the Baron enquired.

“Tess Mercer.”

Yves de Rochefort snorted in derision. English. The name’s origin was either Scottish or English, but the meaning was that of a purveyor of fine silks and fabrics of great luxury. Unless, of course, her name was derived from that of le Mercier, but never mind, he thought.

“I am ‘ere to see M’sieur Luthor. Kindly direct me to him.”

“Mr Luthor is a busy man. Please state your business.”

“Very well, Mademoiselle Mercer. My business is that I wish to discuss an, ‘ow do you say, alliance, with Mr Luthor in regard to the one known as Superman.”
Tess’ eyes widened and she nodded. “Follow me,” she said.

The three men followed the redhead to the bank of elevators and joined her in the car. They stared straight ahead, aware of the curious looks of the redhead. But she said nothing.

It wasn’t long before the elevator reached the sixtieth floor of the Luthorcorp building. Tess opened the double doors and walked in.

De Rochefort saw the bald man sitting at the glass topped table. He knew much of Luthor’s recent history. Luthor had disappeared four years earlier after what had been publicised as an accident at a drilling site in the Arctic. Two of Luthor’s men had been killed at the site, after an avalanche had caused the collapse of the structure. Luthor had somehow made it out and had been virtually crippled.

During that time, he had used stem cell research to restore himself back to full health. Lesser men, de Rochefort supposed, would not have been able to survive under such circumstances. But Luthor himself was unique.

“Tess, what the hell?” Luthor said.

“I’m sorry, Lex, but they insisted on seeing you and wouldn’t leave until ...”

De Rochefort strode forward. “M’sieur Luthor, I am Baron Yves de Rochefort. This is my associate, the Marquis Antoine de Sade and Doctor Francesco Donatello. We wish to discuss an alliance with you.”

“An alliance?” Luthor looked puzzled. “What alliance?”

“May we sit?”

Luthor waved his hand. “Of course.”

De Rochefort smiled. But it was not a smile of friendship. Lex could see that this was a man who was used to getting his own way. The Marquis, as well. Both had the look of European aristocrats. The doctor, Donatello, was clearly Italian. His suit was well-cut and obviously by an Italian designer. Armani, perhaps.

Lex got up from behind his desk, not wanting to appear unapproachable.

“We know you are an extremely clever man, M’sieur. We have learned much about you and your miraculous recovery from your accident four years ago. We know about your Project 33.1 and your work with, uh, ‘ow do you say, mutants? We would propose an alliance against the alien known as Superman and we would like your assistance in a very special, er, ‘ow do you say, project?”

“What project?”

“The hybrid. We wish to study it.”

“Hybrid?” Lex asked, puzzled. He thought for a moment.

Doctor Donatello seemed to take his silence for refusal.

“We can take the child with or without your assistance, Mr Luthor. We wish to study it.”

Lex still remained silent, trying to think of a way out of this. Firstly, Superman was his enemy, and something he considered to be his property. Secondly, Lex might be a lot of things, but he would
never kidnap an innocent baby. From what he’d heard, Lois Lane had given birth to a baby girl a month earlier. There’d been an announcement in the Daily Planet. Mara. That was her name.

Given that he’d lost his own brother in infancy, he was loath to take an infant away from its mother. No matter who the father was. Lex might hate Clark Kent and all he stood for, but he wasn’t about to let these aristocratic bastards get their hands on the half-human child of Clark Kent. Not if he didn’t want to incur Superman’s wrath.

“What is your answer, Luthor?”

“There will be no alliance. Superman may be an alien and a thorn in my side, but he is my problem and I will not ally myself with the likes of you.”

“You do not comprehend who you are dealing with, Luthor,” de Rochefort told him. “We are very powerful men, you see, and we will do this with or without your aid.”

“Get out of my office,” Lex hissed. “And stay away from Superman.”

De Rochefort turned to his associate and spoke rapidly in French. So rapid that even Lex had trouble keeping up.

“Cette américain refuse une alliance avec nous! Ses gens la sont des vrais barbares ... voila pourquoi il faut aussi surveiller Luthor je refuse que ses anciennes colonies sans histoire et cultures nous donne des orders a nous des européens sans nous il existerais même pas ses primitifs.”

Lex knew a lot of languages and he got the gist of the Baron’s words. In essence the Baron was berating Lex for refusing an alliance and that Americans were barbarians, without history or culture. The Baron was suggesting they should monitor him as well. Lex didn’t appreciate that. Nor did he appreciate the idea that they felt because of them, or their ancestors, America would not exist.

De Sade held out a hand and spoke in French as well.

“Biens sur baron mais nous devons être intelligent nous aurons tout le loisir de les manipuler patience ...patience mon cher ami bientot. “

(Baron, we are on his property, we have to be smart and wait for an opportunity. We need to handle this with patience. Patience my friend. Soon.)

But when the Marquis and the Baron turned cold, sadistic smiles on him, and Tess as well, he shuddered, as if someone was walking over his grave.

De Rochefort’s tone was as cold as ice as he continued.

“Listen to me, M’sieur Luthor. You have no choice. You work with me and my associates. I have many friends here in America and we could ruin your company. You would end up a pauper, miserable and alone, forced to wander the streets. I have a good relationship with your government and with some very powerful businessmen who would ... ‘ow do you say, be desirous to become majority shareholders.”

Take over his company? Over his dead body, he decided.

“Your empire is very powerful M’sieur Luthor, but my Illuminati brotherhood control the world and the system.”

Lex drew in sharp breath. The Illuminati? They were supposedly a shadowy group which claimed to
be the power behind the world’s governments and were behind events designed to bring about a new
world order. But Lex had never believed in it and as far as he was concerned it was just a conspiracy
theory. But what if they weren’t, he asked himself.

“You understand now?” de Rochefort asked, his face a cold mask.

“I don’t take kindly to threats,” Lex returned, a lot braver than he felt. “And as for the Illuminati, they
are a myth.”

De Rochefort grinned, reminding him of his father’s own shark-like grins when he was about to
destroy someone.

“You have one week to reflect on what I have suggested. I am staying at the hotel Sheridan. If you
change your mind, you may contact me there.”

Lex watched them leave, then looked at Tess.

“Find out everything you can on these people. And I mean everything.”

Tess nodded. She walked out, then pulled out a small communicator as her manicured finger pressed
the button on the lift. But instead of pressing the down, she pressed up. As soon as the lift doors
opened, she walked in, staring straight ahead as the doors closed.

Less than thirty seconds later, Tess emerged on the roof of the Luthorcorp building. She pressed the
communicator into her ear and activated it.

“Watchtower, this is Mercer. We have a problem.”

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The lift ground to a squeaky halt and the doors opened with a creak. A pair of feet in patent leather
high-heeled shoes walked out backwards, followed by four wheels of what could only be a baby
carriage. The wheels spun around and the high heels turned, walking forward.

The woman was dark-haired and beautiful with hazel eyes that seemed to be rimmed with gold. She
walked with confidence as she pushed the carriage along the corridor, ignoring the looks from co-
workers as well as the whispers. Her waistline still showed signs of a pregnancy, her belly soft and
slightly rounded.

A hand came down to gently stop the carriage. Lois Lane-Kent stared up at her tall, dark and
handsome husband. She lifted her hands, circling her eyes in what was by now a familiar gesture.
Clark Kent looked absently at her, then his eyes widened.

“Honey,” she said. “I know you hate wearing them, but this was your idea, remember?”

Clark hurriedly pulled his horn-rimmed spectacles out of his pocket and put them on. Instantly he
went from tall and rather spectacular to stooped and, for want of a better word, nerdy. His hair was
slicked back and he smiled sheepishly.

“What are the two of you doing here anyway?” he asked as he opened the door to their small office.
Lois noticed the names on the door. The name Clark Kent was written above hers. She supposed it
was done alphabetically, but she was top banana in this working partnership and everyone knew
that. The only time Clark Kent ever got top billing was ... actually, she told herself, she still got top
billing there too.
“Mara was missing Daddy,” she answered finally, taking the opportunity to check out her husband’s tush of steel. “She kept asking for you.”

“She’s a month old, Lois. She’s not even talking yet.”

Caught, she thought. Ah well, can’t win ‘em all.

“Okay, sue me. I missed this place.”

“Lois, you’re on maternity leave,” Clark sighed.

“Yeah, and who knows what you’ll mess up while I’m gone,” she said as he picked their daughter up in his arms just as she started to cry. It was still amazing to her how his super-hearing could pick things up in an instant. He began to rub his daughter’s back and she began to coo.

“It’s amazing how you can do that,” Lois marvelled.

“I guess I just have the magic touch, Lois.”

“Cute Kent. But I am still getting those Ops guys to change the door.”

“That’s if you can find them,” Clark commented dryly. “Since they heard Mad Dog Lane was on the prowl, they’ve developed skills in hiding that even Superman would be hard-pressed to beat.”

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De Rochefort paced the hotel suite. It did nothing to settle his mood. He was pissed at Luthor. But never mind, he thought. Luthor was but an insect to be crushed.

De Sade entered the room and spoke in rapid French.

“Les hommes viennent d’arriver à la ferme.” (The men are on their way to the farm)

“Excellent,” de Rochefort smiled. But the smile didn’t reach his eyes. “What have they told the sheriff’s man?”

“Exactly what you told them to say.”

One hour earlier

“Sheriff Rutherford?”

A man aged in his late thirties was sitting at the desk in the sheriff’s office in Smallville. He looked older than his age of thirty-eight – he would be thirty-nine in three months. His face had a drawn, pale look to it and his eyes appeared sunken. There were dark shadows underneath.

“Yes?” he said, looking at the two men who had walked into his office. They looked official enough, with what appeared to be expensive suits.

One of them waved an identification badge which looked suspiciously like government agent. But there was something off about them. They didn’t smell like government agents – or at least the government agents he knew. Since most government agents were poorly paid and these guys looked like they didn’t buy off the rack.

“We’d like to talk to you about a Mr ...” the man consulted a notebook. “Clark Kent?”
“What for? And let me see those badges again.”

“That isn’t necessary, Sheriff,” one of them said coolly. Rutherford’s hackles were instantly up.

“I don’t give a rat’s ass what you think is necessary. I want to see those badges again. Now whip ‘em out.”

He peered at the badges, noting down their numbers and the departments the two men, Crawford and Hammersley, worked for. He would make some phone calls later.

“Now, what do you want with Mr Kent?”

“You’re an intelligent man, Sheriff. So we’ll get straight to the point. Our agency is investigating Mr Kent.”

“What for?”

“That’s classified.”

“Like hell it is. Mr Kent is a citizen and a respected member of this community, not to mention the fact that he is the son of a United States Senator. And believe me, he could make a lot of noise, and not just through that paper he works for. If you think I’m going to look the other way, while you boys turn that farm upside down, well you can forget it.”

Crawford and Hammersley walked out of the office, sighing. Obviously the sheriff’s reputation as a straight arrow was right on the money. They had already decided that buying their way into getting onto the farm weren’t going to work with the sheriff.

On the other hand, they thought, there might be hope yet with the sheriff’s deputy, Kelley.

“Mr Kelley,” Crawford said. “Might we have a word?”

They pulled the younger man aside, out of the hearing of Rutherford.

“It must be difficult, trying to raise a family on your wages,” Crawford said. They’d already done their research on the younger man and had learned he worked two jobs just to feed his family.

“It has its moments.”

“We know some people. In the Bahamas. We can get you a good job. You can leave Smallville, with your family.”

Hammersley took out a wad of cash and Kelley eyed it greedily. They’d known he was not above corruption and bribery, for the right price.

“The Bahamas, huh?” he said.

The two men nodded.

“And what do you want in exchange?”

“You screen any calls about any intruders at the Kent Farm. We know that Kent is working at the Planet today and his wife is out. We just need two hours max.”

“Do I want to know what this is about?”
“It’s better you don’t. Do we have a deal?”

Kelley was still eyeing the money. He nodded cautiously, then took the money.

“You guys better not be kidding about the Bahamas.”

“Sure,” Crawford smiled. “We’ll be in touch.”

They headed to the farm and began their search. They were looking for anything which might connect Kent to Superman. Their superiors suspected that Kent was Superman, but they needed proof.

Crawford started upstairs, checking the master bedroom. There was a wedding portrait on the wall next to the bed of Lois Lane and Clark Kent. Married a year and already with a baby. He snorted in derision. Freak, he thought. He hated Superman. There was no doubt in his mind that Clark Kent was the alien. And it bugged the hell out of Crawford. Superman thought he was so superior, up on his high moral pedestal, telling people he was here to guide the people of Earth, not to interfere in human affairs. Sure, Crawford thought.

That was why the Illuminati was so interested in Superman. His presence upset their plans for the new world order.

He made his way into the next bedroom. It had been converted into a nursery. There were motifs on the walls. Fairy tales and nursery rhymes. Idiotic parents, Crawford thought. Well, it wouldn’t be long before they would have the hybrid child. And once they had that, they could control Superman.

There was a yell from downstairs and Crawford ran, drawing his gun. He stared at the beautiful blonde holding Hammersley up against the wall by the throat.

Supergirl.

“Who are you and what are you doing in my friends’ home?” she said with a glare that Crawford was sure would have turned them both to ashes if the alien girl had been so inclined.
Crawford pointed his gun at the blonde.

“Put him down Supergirl, or I shoot.”

Supergirl smirked at him. “Guns can’t hurt me,” she said.

“No,” Crawford smirked back, holding up the gun. “But Kryptonite can. We came prepared. This gun is loaded with Kryptonite bullets.”

Supergirl’s blue eyes turned fierce. She was assessing the situation. Unsure whether he was bluffing or not. It didn’t matter, Crawford told her silently. She would give in.

She dropped Hammersley.

“Who are you?” she said.

Crawford pulled out his identification, thinking quickly.

“NSA?” she asked, staring at the badges curiously.

“We have been investigating Smallville,” he told her. “Specifically some odd incidences which have occurred over the past twenty years or so.”

Kara crossed her arms over her chest and glared at them. “That still doesn’t explain why you’re in the Kent home.”

“We had hoped to talk to the Kents. Specifically Clark. He has lived in Smallville all his life.”

“Why?”

“Because we suspect there are links to a terrorist organisation here.”

Crawford continued to watch Supergirl. He knew she was concerned about the peace and safety of Smallville’s citizens. As well as Metropolis. He paused, waiting to deliver the punchline.

“What link?”

“Do you know Lex Luthor?” he said.

She continued to glare at them. Supergirl was an enigma. She had appeared on the scene almost two years ago, raising the profile of the so-called ‘superheroes’. Crawford studied her. She certainly was beautiful. What he wouldn’t do to have those long, golden legs wrapped around him. His dick throbbed as he pictured himself pounding inside that hot, tight flesh.

Supergirl was saying something and he looked at her, realising he’d become distracted. He wanted to
find out who she was when she wasn’t in uniform. He would love to capture her. Take her as his own.

The blonde was clearly not happy at their presence. After berating them, then seeing the two men off the farm, she flew off.

Two and a half hours later, Crawford reported to de Rochefort at the hotel. Crawford bowed in total respect to his superior.

“Monsieur, je regrette, we were unable to search the farmhouse thoroughly. We were interrupted by Supergirl.”

The baron swore in French.

“Who is this Supergirl?”

“We are not sure, Monsieur, but I intend to find out.”

“Do that!” the baron snapped.

Crawford bowed again and left to join Hammersley at the NSA office in Metropolis where he began making a few phone calls. He had a friend in the Department of Domestic Security, and he was sure the friend could shed some light on things. There had been an incident a few years ago that he was sure ...

Crawford idly tapped some keys on his laptop and found himself searching through the net for something on the girl. He found some photographs taken of the girl when she’d first come to Metropolis. She certainly was very beautiful.

Crawford glanced at his colleague. Hammersley remained completely ignorant. But then no one had figured out that Crawford had been placed here by his superiors in the Illuminati. Members of their group had infiltrated every part of American society, from politicians to police officers. Crawford himself had been born in the Netherlands. He’d changed his name from Jan van Kraayenoord to John Crawford as part of his cover.

As he continued to stare at the images of the girl, he felt himself hardening. He moaned as quietly as he could, the brief fantasy he’d had in the farmhouse still on his mind. No one else knew about his sexual proclivities either. At least, not that he knew of.

He finally managed to reach his friend in the DDS.

“Supergirl? Yeah, I think there was some incident a few years back. But the guy you want is dead. Can’t help you.”

“Who was he?”

“Carter. Look, I don’t know what happened, since I wasn’t in Washington at the time. All I know is, Carter was claiming there was some kind of ship found in Kansas in 2007. And there was some kind of incident involving a lab tech who apparently let a girl get hold of his security pass. She broke into a DDS secure facility. And the tech claimed it was Supergirl. “

Crawford reported this information to the baron, who was pleased with the information. But it still wasn’t enough. All it suggested was that Supergirl had been on Earth a lot longer than she claimed to be.
Their research showed that Clark Kent had had a cousin from Minnesota. The story was supposedly that the cousin had been the daughter of Jonathan Kent’s cousin David. Crawford mused over that little bit of information. It sounded as believable as Clark Kent being from Earth, he decided. Since he knew for a fact that the cousins had been estranged and there was no way the daughter of some distant cousin would come to visit Smallville, let alone stay for an indeterminate period.

De Rochefort himself looked satisfied as he read the full report. De Sade looked on.

“This is the proof we need, no? They are cousins.”

“Not yet,” de Rochefort told him. “But Supergirl is clearly protective of the Kents. This may be of use to us.”

“In what way?”

“Send Crawford to talk to the girl.”

De Sade smirked. ‘Given his proclivities ...’

“I am certain he will do whatever it takes to get the girl to see things his way.”

The two men smiled evilly.

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Tess marched into Watchtower, flinging the doors open. Chloe glared at her.

“You know, when I had to disappear off the radar for a few months, I said you could help. I didn’t say it gave you free reign to come and go whenever you pleased.”

“This is important, Chloe, you know I wouldn’t be here otherwise. When are you going to stop treating me like the enemy?”

“You happen to still be working for the enemy,” Chloe pointed out.

“And you know very well I’m only working there to keep the League abreast on everything Luthorcorp. Especially since Lex forced Oliver out.” She sighed. “Besides, it’s a good thing I was there today.”

Superman chose that moment to drop in. Green Arrow wasn’t far behind. Oliver pulled off his hood and looked fondly at Chloe. He patted her on the backside.

“Hey,” he said.

“Watch the hands Queen,” she said grinning at him.

“Party pooper,” he told her. “You know, we really should get some kind of bed in here,” he leered suggestively at her.

“Ugh, I may throw up,” Tess intoned.

Clark just raised an eyebrow. “Get used to it. Those two are still in the honeymoon phase.”

“Hey, just because we have a healthy sex life,” Oliver protested.

Clark sighed. He’d known what that was like once. Before Mara came along. He loved being a
father – he really did, and he understood that Lois needed time to recover from the birth, but he missed those days when he and Lois could slip away for a little fun without having to worry about deadlines, or a baby screaming for attention.

Chloe had returned for good nine months after Oliver had been captured by the Suicide Squad. Chloe had explained that she had had to exchange herself, then go underground to learn what she could about the threat they were all facing. Once it had been neutralised, she had returned.

Oliver, ecstatic that she was back, had proposed and they had married three months ago. And they took every opportunity they could for some ‘alone time’.

“So what’s going on Tess?” Clark asked.

“Lex had some visitors today. Have you heard of a group called the Illuminati?”

Chloe quickly typed on the computer, bringing up some information on the screen. They read quickly.

“The Illuminati,” she said. “Historically the Bavarian Illuminati, from the Enlightenment period. They were a secret society, founded in 1776.”

“That’s one interpretation,” Tess told them.

“There have been others, though. Through fiction,” Chloe said, reading.

“Remember the Da Vinci Code? Angels and Demons?” Clark said. “Supposedly the Illuminati were involved.”

“And they’re supposedly behind the push for a New World Order. Survival of the fittest.”

“Yeah, but we’re getting into the realms of conspiracy theories,” Oliver pointed out.

“What if we’re not?” Tess said. “Because I just met three people today who claim to be the Illuminati. Or one branch of it.”

She quickly related to them what had happened in Lex’s office.

“They’re asking for an alliance with Lex? And they threatened to destroy Luthorcorp if he didn’t go along with it?” Clark asked. “What did Lex say?”

“What could he say? He tossed them out of his office. But that’s the problem Clark. This baron, whoever he is might just look like he can do it.”

Chloe was quickly doing some research on the computer.

“Well, he’s certainly connected,” Chloe told them. “He’s not only from one of the oldest families in France, but he’s also a powerful figure in the French government.

“Yes, but why would the Illuminati want Mara?” Clark asked.

“Because she’s half Kryptonian,” Chloe answered, before Tess could. “And they could study her. Use her against Superman.”

“But ...” Clark frowned. Then he seemed to understand. “Superman is a threat to the New World Order.”
Tess nodded. “There was a journalist, forced to go underground. Several years ago he wrote several books on that subject. He postulated that every event, whether it was Kennedy’s assassination or the planes flying into the World Trade Centre was all part of a plot to take control of the world’s governments.”

Chloe looked at them. “There’s also the theory that this baron is part of another secret society.”

“La Rose Noire,” Tess said.

“The Black Rose?” Oliver asked. Chloe nodded at her husband.

“Essentially, it’s a group who seek to influence governments all over the world. It’s been going since the early seventies and one of their major interests was in creating one government. And their idea of doing this was through nuclear power. That’s why a lot of the superpowers have been stockpiling nuclear weapons. And that’s why the French government was undertaking nuclear testing in the Pacific. Especially places like Moruroa Atoll.”

“I thought Greenpeace managed to stop that?” Tess asked.

“Maybe in the area, and that was only after French secret agents bombed one of their flagships in New Zealand.”

Clark looked questioningly at Chloe.

“What?”

“The story goes that the Rainbow Warrior was visiting New Zealand, because the government had declared New Zealand a nuclear free zone. Any ships that carried nuclear weapons or was nuclear powered was not allowed in their ports. And it was believed that the DGSE Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure sent agents to stop the Warrior from sailing to the atoll to protest the latest round of testing.

“There were apparently two bombs on board. The crew were evacuated when the first bomb exploded, but a photographer went back to get his equipment so he could take pictures of the damage and he drowned in the second blast.”

“Wasn’t there a huge outcry?” Oliver asked his wife.

Chloe nodded. “There were only two agents caught and arrested and the French government threatened economic sanctions which would have crippled the country if the agents weren’t returned.”

“Okay, so how does this relate to La Rose Noire?” Clark asked.

“De Rochefort is rumoured to have villas in Tahiti and in New Caledonia. That’s near where the nuclear testing took place over thirty years ago. And while the French government admitted responsibility for the bombing, there are some that suggest that there was a bigger influence behind it.”

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Lois was just getting Mara off to sleep when she heard the screen door open downstairs.

“Clark?”
She turned, heart pounding as she saw Kara in the doorway.

“Kara. God, you almost gave me a heart attack.”

“I’m sorry, Lois. I just wanted to make sure you and Mara were okay.”

“Why wouldn’t we be?”

Lois stared at the blonde, puzzled. But she quickly grew concerned when Kara told her what had happened that day.

“Does Clark know?”

“Not yet,” Kara told her. “But he will.”

Lois sighed. If it wasn’t one thing, it was another. Were they ever going to have a peaceful life?
The baron is less than happy with progress and orders a diversion to get Superman away from the farm.

The Baron was less than happy with progress. Crawford had reported all he had learned about Supergirl, but it wasn’t enough. He wanted proof that Clark Kent was Superman.

“Si nous pourrions peut-être obtenir quelque chose de lui, nous pourrions tester son ADN.” (“If we could perhaps get something of his, we could test his DNA),” Donatello suggested.

“Mais ils savent déjà que nous avons eu des gens fouillant dans la ferme” (“But they already know we have had people searching the farm) de Sade reminded them.

“Et s’il y avait une certaine façon de garder Superman occupé ? comme une sorte de diversion?” (What if there were some way of keeping Superman occupied? Like a diversion?) Donatello asked.

“Qui connaissons-nous dans le Comté Lowell ?” (Who do we know in Lowell County?) Rochefort asked.

The matter was discussed at some length, with the solution fairly quickly agreed upon. They would set up a diversion in the town centre, enough to keep Superman away from the farm. Once the decision was made, the call went out. By nightfall, the right people had been contacted and the plan would be instigated.

By tomorrow evening, they would have what they wanted. And then they would bring Superman to his knees.

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“The Illuminati? Clark, they’re a myth!”

Clark nodded as he drained the last of his juice. “I know, Lois, but that’s what Tess told us.” He stood up, grabbing their plates and taking them to the kitchen to rinse before putting them in the dishwasher. Lois followed him.

“I don’t like this Clark. Especially if they’re after Mara.”

“Then we’ll have to be on our guard Lois.”

“I just don’t get it. The Illuminati, the society of the Black Rose. These are just conspiracy theories.”

“Maybe not. Anyway, Tess and Chloe are working together to track down the journalist who went underground. Now tell me what happened this afternoon.”

“All I know is what Kara told me. There were two men who claimed to be from the NSA here. She heard them snooping about. And one of them said he had Kryptonite on him.”
“NSA? Well, Chloe did say something about them having people everywhere.”

“You think there’s a connection?”

“There has to be.” Mara began crying upstairs. Clark looked at his wife. “I’ll get her,” he said.

Since Clark was still working full-time for the Daily Planet, plus his duties as Superman, he didn’t get as much time as he liked to spend with his baby daughter. Maybe she didn’t know the difference at this age, but he liked the time he had with her. Changing her, bathing her. The only thing he couldn’t do was feed her.

Mara was still crying when he went into the nursery. And she smelled ripe. Clark grinned.

“Somebody’s a stinky baby,” he said.

Mara turned her head toward his voice and stopped crying. She knew Daddy was here to take care of things. She wriggled a little in the crib until he picked her up, putting her gently down on the changing table. He set to work, undoing the tape on her diaper. The smell hit him.

“Whoa! Who knew so much could come out of someone so tiny,” he commented. Mara screwed up her face, looking as if she was going to cry again. “Oh no, don’t cry, Daddy will fix it.” He grabbed the baby wipes and began cleaning her up. Within a few minutes the soiled diaper had been put in the pail and a clean diaper had been put on. “Let’s go see Mommy,” he told his daughter, talking to her as he held her in his arms and carried her downstairs.

Lois smiled up at him from the sofa. “She okay?” she asked as she held her arms out for her hungry daughter.

“Yeah, just a dirty diaper.”

Mara latched on to her mother’s breast, suckling contentedly. She was a placid baby. She was yet to show any of her father’s abilities, but they guessed that it would be a while yet before they’d see what abilities she would have.

“What are we going to do?” Lois asked. “If these people are after Mara ...”

“The Justice League are going to take care of it,” Clark told her. “Oliver called in Bart and Victor. They’ll be here tomorrow.”

“Kara said she’d keep an eye on things, too. I still don’t like this Smallville.”

“I know, Lois. The thought of you being alone on the farm makes me uneasy. Especially with the idea that they’re targeting Mara.”

“My sentiments exactly.”

Clark turned, startled. He’d obviously been so distracted, he’d forgotten to use his super hearing and hadn’t heard the car pull up. His startled expression turned into a scowl.

“What are you doing here, Luthor?” he growled.

Mara instantly felt the change in her parents’ mood and started to cry. Lois put her daughter over her shoulder and immediately started trying to soothe her. But Mara kept crying. Lois stood up and touched her husband’s arm.

“Honey, why don’t I take her upstairs and see if I can settle her?” There was an old rocking chair in
“What are you doing here?” he growled.

“I know you’re aware of a certain visit to my office today. You know, the only reason I tolerate Tess’ betrayal is the fact that she is my sister.”

“What’s your point?”

“My point is, Clark, they made threats not only against your daughter, but also against my company. And I don’t take kindly to threats.”

“Why should I care about you and your damned company? Considering everything you do is unethical, immoral and downright illegal.”

“And you make it your life’s work to destroy me. This isn’t about our differences, Clark. It’s about a group of people who mean what they say and have the power to do it. To destroy both you and I.”

“Why should it bother you that they’re wanting to destroy me?”

“Personally, I couldn’t care less about them wanting to destroy Superman. But I have never, nor will I ever, allow an innocent child to be caught up in our problems. You know what happened to my brother, Clark. I don’t make war on children.”

“That’s a given. It still doesn’t explain why you’re here.”

“Because I’m suggesting an alliance between us. A temporary truce, if you will. Until the threat is over.” Lex sighed. “Look, they came to me suggesting an alliance with them because they know about my projects. They could either use that information to help or destroy me.”

“Why me?”

“Haven’t you heard the saying ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’, or perhaps ‘better the devil you know than the devil you don’t’?”

“Are you comparing me to the devil?”

Lex glared at him. “I still don’t trust you. I still think you’re here to conquer the world. And that opinion isn’t about to change. But from what I’ve learned about the Illuminati, the very thought that they might one day be in charge of this planet is much more worrying.”

“Why? What do you know?”

“Clark, these people will do anything, and I mean anything, to get what they want. They’ve already done it in various parts of the world. Like mass genocide. Terrorist attacks.”

“The World Trade Center, the Rainbow Warrior,” Clark nodded. “We were discussing that this afternoon.”

“There’s more. Clark, these people will do to this planet what the likes of Zod did to Krypton. They’ll destroy it.”

“How do you know about Zod and Krypton?” Clark asked.

“I have my sources,” Lex said smugly. Then he sighed. “Clark, I’m not asking you to like this. But I
am suggesting that we can work together on this. For our mutual benefit.”

In other words, Clark thought, Lex would find a way to profit from this. That was, after all, the Luthorcorp bottom line.

Lex left the farm shortly after, hoping he had given Clark something to think about. As much as the two of them hated each other, there were bigger issues at stake here. He, for one, wasn’t going to let some French aristocrat take his company out from under him. And despite their mutual enmity, he had meant what he said. He would never willingly make war on children and the three men had instantly earned his distrust by suggesting they wanted to take the child of Superman and use her in the eternal struggle between the seats of power.

Lex had his own ambitions. He planned to become the youngest president of the United States. But if the Illuminati, or whoever these people were, had their way, that wouldn’t happen.
Chapter Summary

A motorcycle gang hit Smallville

The Wild Coyote had fallen into hard times in the past few years. Its bartender/manager had been murdered after being involved in a plot to kill Lionel Luthor. Since then, no one had really wanted to continue working in the place. It had been taken over a year ago – a hangout for most of the rough crowd that hung out on the fringes of Smallville.

But on this particular evening, the bar was crowded with an even worse group. At least fifty motorcycles were parked outside the bar, and even more people were packed inside. They were drunk, or high, dressed in leathers from head to toe. This was the local chapter of a gang which considered themselves Smallville’s answer to Hell’s Angels. And even the roughest crowd gave them a wide berth.

The bartender had attempted to close the bar when the noise became too raucous. He’d even called in the sheriff, but that had also failed to deter the crowd. The only consolation was they’d done an inordinate amount of business that night.

Around six in the morning, a man, clearly the leader, got up.

“Let’s go,” he told the gang.

The bartender watched, relieved as the men left the bar. The motorcycles roared into life and sped off into the slowly lightening sky. Little did he know that the trouble was just beginning.

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The midtown area of Smallville was just beginning to come to life. The milk deliveries had been done and the stores were beginning to open. Fordman’s Department Store did not open until nine, but some management staff were already entering ready to start the day’s work. The Beanery, which had been taken over and reopened with the destruction of the Talon, was getting ready to open for the early morning workers, wanting coffee before they started work at the Luthorcorp plant.

The fertiliser plant was still the biggest employer in the town. Its operations had expanded little in the intervening years, but there were still rumours of secret projects going on. Even during Tess Mercer’s reign as CEO of Luthorcorp, she interfered little with the day to day workings of the plant, and had little interest in any of the secret projects. Especially after she’d changed sides.

When Lex had returned from the dead and taken over the helm at Luthorcorp once again, he’d chosen not to rebuild the Talon. It was now a parking garage, which had been Lex’s original plan when he’d bought the building. Lex now cared little for the economic problems of the town, his main interest in controlling Metropolis.

Smallville had seen a number of economic woes in the past five years. Many farms had already been broken up, the land sold, the owners either choosing to get jobs at the plant or moving on to other towns and cities. The recession had hit the small town, named for Ezra Small, a man who, it was
claimed, had the ability to see the future. His prophetic visions were written in code, but some suggested he saw the coming of a visitor from another world who would be raised by humans.

The second meteor shower had been the catalyst. Restoration and rebuilding had, for a short while, eased the economic burden; the worldwide recession that followed saw to it that the town never recovered from the disaster that struck in the spring of 2005.

At six-thirty in the morning, the streets were mostly empty. Very few cars were on the road. All seemed fairly quiet and peaceful. But it was soon to be shattered by the roar of motorcycles through the main streets.

They made passes in groups through each street, using whatever weapon they had available to break windows and cause as much destruction as they possibly could in the shortest amount of time. Within minutes, those few staff cowering behind shop counters had called the police, but Sheriff Rutherford could do little to stop the invasion. He was short-staffed and ill-equipped.

He parked his car across the road; an attempt to block the motorcycles. He ordered his two other men with vehicles to try and block the sidewalk. But they were only three men and they didn’t stand a chance against the onslaught of fifty or more men who caused violence and mayhem on a regular basis.

A young woman was walking down the street. She was aged around twenty, slight, slender figure. She was wrapped warmly against the cool Fall wind. As she turned down the street, she stopped, staring in horror at the scene awaiting her. There were at least half a dozen men with weapons ranging from shotguns to baseball bats, smashing windows, doors, parked cars. With a scream, she turned in the opposite direction and began running. Two of the men saw her and laughed, giving chase. She screamed in terror.

Rutherford looked at his men.

“We need help,” he said. Neither of his men were sure whether he was actually speaking to them or himself.

Rutherford went to his car, picking up his radio.

“Dolores, patch me through to a number will you?” He paused. “Yeah, 555-0145.”

***

Clark blinked, rolling over and squinting in the sunlight peeping through the drapes. He was used to rising early. At least in the old days when the farm had been a working farm, he would have. But on weekends now, he took advantage of the time he had to sleep in.

Something had woken him, but he wasn’t sure what. He’d been dreaming. Of Krypton, no less. Of showing his birth parents his wife and baby daughter. Lara had held his daughter in her arms, her hair shining and golden in the light, smiling down at the infant.

“She’s beautiful, Kal-El.”

“We are proud, my son,” Jor-El smiled in a rare showing of emotion. From what Clark had been told, Kryptonians were not emotional as a whole.

Mara had started to cry, the cries echoing oddly in the crystal structure. Then there was the sound of something ringing.
Clark pushed back the bedclothes, quickly getting to his feet and pulling up his jeans. He padded barefoot downstairs and looked at his wife, who was sitting in Jonathan Kent’s old armchair, the baby at her breast.

“Lois?”

“It’s the sheriff,” she said, pointing to the cordless phone next to her. He picked up the receiver.

“Sheriff?”

“I apologise for disturbing you and your wife so early in the morning Mr Kent. But I was hoping you might be able to contact Superman for me. We have trouble in the town.”

“What kind of trouble?”

The sheriff quickly outlined the problem. It seemed a motorcycle gang had started causing havoc in the town. The sheriff called them the Wild Bush 300. They were a Kansas answer to other motorcycle gangs and at least three hundred members strong in the Kansas chapter. At least fifty, maybe more, had invaded the town.

Hanging up the phone, Clark quickly dialled another number.

“Chloe,,” he began.

“Do you realise it’s six-forty-five on a Saturday morning, Clark?” she asked.

“I know. Sorry. But I need Oliver. We’ve got trouble. Tell him to round up the others. Whoever he can find.”

“What is it?”

He quickly told her. “Look, Superman can’t handle this alone.”

Lois looked at him. “A motorcycle gang?” she asked.

“Yeah. I’m going to change,” he said, zipping back upstairs to change into his Superman uniform. Within seconds he was back downstairs.

“Clark, be careful,” Lois told him.

“I plan to be,” he said, opening the screen door and taking off into the air. Here, at least, they were fairly isolated, and there was little chance of his identity being exposed.

A minute later, Superman touched down beside the sheriff’s car.

“Superman,” he said. “It seems Mr Kent reached you. Did he explain the situation?”

“Yes.” Superman was already scanning the street and saw the young girl being threatened by two of the men. She was trapped against a brick wall in the alley. He took off again, landing right behind the two men.

“Problem, gentlemen?” he said.
The two men turned. One pulled out a large bowie knife, attempting to slash Superman.

“New in town?” Superman inquired. He grabbed both of them by the collars of their shirts, lifting them up in the air. Their feet dangled. They stared at him, then each other, then back at him. With a smile, Superman dumped them both in the trash bin. “Just taking out the garbage,” he quipped. With his heat vision, he welded down the lid.

Superman turned to the cowering girl.

“Are you all right, miss?” he asked.

He knew the girl. She was a neighbour. She worked part-time in the Beanery and was studying at Central Kansas A&M.

“Yes, Superman, thank you. I’m fine.” She wasn’t. She was shaking like a leaf. But he let her go.

Turning, he went back to the problem at hand, trying to gather as many more of the gang as possible. But even he couldn’t round up fifty men in a short time. After an hour, he was relieved to see Oliver on the roof, aiming arrows at the tyres of each motorcycle.

While he was taking care of the next lot, another three were bowled over like pins and he knew Bart had joined the fray.

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Lois had just laid the baby down and had turned the television off. KPAZ was reporting live from downtown Smallville. The female blonde reporter was gushing enthusiastically for the efforts of the Justice League who were kept busy rounding up the gang.

She heard a crash from upstairs.

“Who’s there?” she asked.

Grabbing an iron poker from the fire, she started up the stairs.

“Someone there?” she asked. “I must warn you I have a ... weapon.”

There was still no answer. Lois began to assume she had imagined things. She heard it before she saw it. There was a slight hissing sound, then she saw smoke.

“What the hell?” she said to herself.

No sooner had she spotted the smoke then she began to feel dizzy and nauseous. Fighting the faintness, she struggled to get to her daughter’s room, but the blackness was already overcoming her. She collapsed to the floor.

Crawford smiled down at the fallen body of Lois Lane-Kent, then dragged it into the nursery. He continued his search through the house, confident there would be no one to stop him. He checked in the bathroom, gathering everything he thought would give him the evidence he needed, placing them in small bags which he sealed.

Stepping back out into the hallway, he started down the room to the nursery.

“Dude! Something I can help you with?”

Crawford stared at the man standing at the top of the stairs. He saw him glance into the room that had
become the child’s nursery, then spot the woman’s body on the floor.

Crawford didn’t understand. The gas should have been enough to knock out an elephant. But this young man wasn’t even showing any ill effects. Granted, it had been a few minutes and the gas had had some time to dissipate, but he still should have shown some signs.

AC glared at the man. Clearly the man had tried to do something to hurt his friends and he didn’t stand for it.

Oliver had called him, asking him to come to the farm, since he was in the area. He knew there were problems with gang activity in town, and he had been surprised that Oliver hadn’t asked him to go there, but now he was glad that Oliver had asked him to keep an eye on Lois and the baby.

AC grabbed the man by the collar. “What are you doing here?” he asked.

Crawford struggled to get out of AC’s grip, thrashing. He felt himself being pulled downstairs. Fortunately, Crawford had once again come prepared. They were faced by another of the Baron’s men, holding a gun.

“Drop him,” the man ground out harshly.

AC bit his lip, but did as he was told. The man lifted his weapon and cold-cocked him, knocking him out.

“I’ve got what I needed,” Crawford told him. The two men walked out of the farmhouse without a backward glance.

***

Clark and the others quickly rounded up the remaining men and handed them over to the sheriff, who had also called in the State police. The gang leader was taken into custody and would be held at the Smallville jail.

Not waiting for his friends, knowing he would be reporting to Watchtower later, Clark flew back to the farm. He quickly noticed AC on the floor. He was already stirring, a large bump on the back of his head. With trepidation, Clark sped up the stairs. Lois was still passed out on the floor of the nursery.

Clark spotted the gas bomb and saw red. Someone had tried to hurt his family. Picking up his wife in his arms, he carried her to their bedroom and lay her down on the bed. Then he checked on his daughter, who was sleeping peacefully. The gas hadn’t drifted into the nursery and Mara was unharmed.

Going back downstairs, he saw Oliver waiting for him, tending to AC, pressing an ice pack to his head.

“What the hell’s happened?” Oliver asked.

“It was a diversion. To get me out of the house. I’m sure of it,” Clark said.

“What are you going to do?”

“Talk to the leader. Lois is still passed out upstairs. They gassed her.”

“Oh my god! Is she all right?”
“Yeah. And Mara’s fine. Stay with them. I’m going to the jail.”

“Clark, don’t do anything rash.”

“I don’t intend to,” Clark said, but even Oliver knew he was lying.

At the jail, he persuaded the sheriff’s man to let him talk to the man in the cell. As soon as he strode in, the man glared at him.

“Who sent you?” Clark asked, in his most intimidating tone.

The man refused to look at him. Clark lifted him, pushing him against the wall.

“Tell me,” he ground out.

“You won’t beat them,” the man said. “They’re everywhere.”

“Who?”

“The Illuminati,” the man grinned.

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The Baron received the report from Crawford with a smile.

“It begins,” he said.
Episode 2: Part 1

Chapter Summary

Baron de Rochefort's visitor to a man in Clark's past

Episode Two: Revenge

Part One

1989

Yves de Rochefort had yet to inherit the lands and title which would grant him the right to be called ‘Baron’. Yet, as was his breeding, he was already known for his arrogance and his certainty that he was vastly superior and a servant of none. At the age of twenty-nine, he had already spent years travelling the world and learning his responsibilities as befit his station.

De Rochefort was not a naive man. He had been taught from an early age about his family’s involvement in secret societies. They considered it not only a privilege and an honour, but their right as titled members of the French upper crust to be members of such organisations as La Rose Noir, the Skull and Bones society, the League of Shadows and such like. There were many names for them, but they all were controlled by one – the Illuminati.

Their plan was simple. Create an environment which would necessitate the forming of a world government. Either through acts of terrorism, economic depressions and world wars. It would be a slow process. They would not make the same mistakes of their predecessors. Woodrow Wilson, supposedly a member of the Progressive Movement in the early years of the twentieth century, had been one of their ‘puppets’. But his League of Nations plan had been a failure. The United Nations was better, but it was seriously undermined by various international bodies who had no interest in being overruled by it.

But they could wait. The Illuminati had been working toward their goal for centuries and they learned from their mistakes. Now they were working on creating an era of violence, terror, and moral bankruptcy, secretly financing those they saw fit to come to power. Those they decided would make the perfect puppets for their plan to eventually create an outcry for a world government.

Nothing, Yves de Rochefort decided, would get in their way.

“Dr Swann will see you now.”

De Rochefort studied the brunette. Bridgette Crosby was attractive. Aged in her early thirties, she had large, luminous eyes, clear, olive skin and a slender figure. He had learned she was French-Canadian by birth, but had lived in the United States for some years.

He followed Bridgette through the New York Planetarium, musing why Virgil Swann had chosen to live in such a place. He had known the man had become eccentric, ever since a car accident had robbed him of the use of his body, turning him into a tetraplegic, and a virtual recluse. But it was his quest to find life outside the solar system that had driven him here. Dismissed as a crackpot by the
greater scientific community, nevertheless, Virgil Swann had refused to compromise and had been adamantly his search would not be fruitless.

“Dr Swann,” he said with a smile which did not reach his eyes. “Thank you for seeing me.”

Virgil Swann might be in a wheelchair, and not in complete control of his faculties, but his mind was razor sharp and his eyes reflected that sharpness. He glared at this man, this interloper. He disliked him on sight. From his long dark hair to his patrician nose.

“What brings a member of La Rose Noire here?” Virgil asked.

De Rochefort raised an eyebrow at him in surprise. It was clear he had not realised Virgil’s research would have gone that in-depth. De Rochefort started to speak in French but Virgil quickly canted his head in a gesture of dismissal, and if not a little anger.

“At least have the courtesy when you come into my sanctuary to address me in my native language,” he said coldly. De Rochefort’s eyes flashed in anger and arrogance, but he didn’t voice his thoughts.

“I apologise, monsieur Swann.”

“‘Doctor’, if you don’t mind,” Virgil said coolly.

De Rochefort made a small bow. “Doctor, then. I came to discuss with you your meetings with Lionel Luthor, Robert Queen and Edward Teague. I believe you call yourselves the Veritas Society.”

“It is merely an astronomy club,” Virgil told him, refusing to show his alarm. How had this arrogant man known about the society. He was tempted to glance at Bridgette. She was one of the few who did know about the true nature of the society.

“You place a great deal of trust in these individuals, all for an astronomy society. Is that really its purpose, or is there something darker in its nature? The word Veritas ...”

“Is Latin for truth,” Virgil answered. “I am aware of that. Roman mythology names her as the goddess of Truth yet she was an elusive creature.”

“Ah, but truth is always elusive, is it not?”

“When you consider universal truths, perhaps. And men have died seeking the answer to those truths.”

“An unusual title, then, for an astronomy society, do you not think so? I do not believe it is an astronomy society, Dr Swann,” de Rochefort said, placing emphasis on the name. “I believe it is so much more. Something far more dangerous.”

“Is that so?”

“I believe you are searching for someone known as ‘the Traveller’.”

This time, Virgil’s eyes did flick to Bridgette. She flinched under his gaze and he knew that she had spoken out of turn. The two of them had once shared an intimate relationship, but that had ended after his accident. He had chosen to live the life of a virtual hermit, but she had continued to work with him and for him. He now knew she had betrayed him.

“I know nothing of such things,” Virgil said, returning to gaze steadily at de Rochefort. “This
interview is at an end. Good day, sir.”

With a dismissive flick, Virgil turned his wheelchair and left the room. Bridgette glanced at the visitor.

“I’ll see you out.”

Present Day

As Yves de Rochefort gazed out of the window of his hotel room in Metropolis, he reflected on that conversation. Both Swann and Bridgette Crosby were dead. One at the hand of Lionel Luthor, the other, he believed, at the murderous hands of Genevieve and Jason Teague.

Genevieve, he recalled, had ancestry dating back to medieval times in the French aristocracy. It had been prophesied centuries earlier of the coming of - if not the messiah, then a being with the power to rule the world. To bring the Earth into a new age of heroism. The Illuminati could not have that.

He had known, when he talked to Virgil Swann, that the Veritas Society had known about the Traveller, the being now known worldwide as Superman. He had hoped to persuade Dr Swann into giving him everything he knew about the being from another world. Such a being would be the perfect instrument with which the Illuminati could have launched their quest for power. If he could be controlled.

Had the young boy who had become Clark Kent, and thus Superman, been raised by a member of that society, the Earth would be much different.

Donatello entered the room. He bowed deeply to the baron.

“Mon ami,” he said, "Les résultats du test sont de retour. L'ADN récupéré sur objets trouvés dans la maison Kent ne ressemble à rien que nous ayons jamais connue. Clark Kent est Superman. C'est confirmé.”

De Rochefort nodded. "Bien."

"Nous avons aussi la transcription de l'équipement de surveillance implantés il ya quelques jours. Lex Luthor a effectué une visite à la ferme des Kent le même jour ou nous avons visité la Luthorcorp."

"Tout comme je l'avais prédit,” de Rochefort told him. “Luthor a toujours été machiavélique dans son approche des affaires et de la guerre."

"Somme nous en guerre?"

“Pas encore ,mon ami,” de Rochefort smirked. “Mais c'est clairement la croyance Luthor qu'il ya un avantage à former une alliance avec son ennemi, pour battre un ennemi commun. Je comprends Luthor. Plus je le sait.Luthor a été enseigné par son père pour faire des affaires comme l'on pourrait mener une bataille. Il a été élevée avec les écrits des grands philosophes. Platon, Socrate, Machiavel et Sun Tzu. Avez-vous jamais lu l'Art de la guerre, mon ami?"

“Je ne peut pas dire que je l'est fait.”

“Nous devons enseigner une leçon de Bonne maniere a Luthor,” de Rochefort smirked. “Nous lui avons offer une alliance et il a choisi de travailler contre nous.”

“Et qu'est-ce que Sun Tzu a à voir avec cela?"
“Sun Tzu dit : ‘dans l’art pratique de la guerre, la meilleure chose est que dans tous les pays prendre l’ennemi intact et entier est meilleurs que de le briser et de détruire’.”

“Vous proposez de prendre sa compagnie?”

“Précisement. Mais le plan est double. Luthor a une soeur.”

“Nous l’avons rencontrée. Tess Mercer. Elle a été adoptée quand elle avait cinq ans, et elevée en Louisiane par un imbécile qui ne savait pas lire, et abusé d’elle je crois.”

“Bah! L’homme était un fou! Quant à Lionel Luthor, il a abandonné petite fille, mais bon il est mort. Elle est une femme belle, non?”

“Très belle.”

“Ensuite, cela ne serait pas difficile pour vous, mon ami. Pour citer le philosophe une fois de plus, il est essential de recherché les agents de l’ennemi qui sont venus à faire de l’espionnage contre vous ensuite de les soudoyer pour vous server. Leur donner des instructions et des s’occuper deux..”

Donatello smiled. “Vous voulez que je séduise la belle Tess Mercer.”

De Rochefort looked at his friend. Donatello was an attractive man, and, being Italian, well versed in the art of seduction. He was sure that Tess Mercer would indeed be seduced.

“Et la persuader de travailler pour nous.”

Donatello bowed again. “Ce serat fait monsieur et avec le plus grand plaisir.”

** Translation:

“My friend, the test results have come back. The DNA recovered from the items found in the Kent home is like nothing we have ever known. Clark Kent is Superman. It is confirmed.”

“Good.”

“We also have the transcripts from the surveillance equipment planted several days ago. Lex Luthor made a visit to the Kent Farm the same day we visited Luthorcorp.”

“It is as I predicted.” Luthor has always been Machiavellian in his approach to business, and in war.”

“Are we at war?”

“Not yet, my friend. But it is clearly Luthor’s belief that there is an advantage in forming an alliance with his enemy, to beat a common foe. I understand Luthor. More than he knows. Luthor was taught by his father to conduct business as one would conduct a battle. He has been raised with the writings of the great philosophers. Plato, Socrates, Machiavelli, and Sun Tzu. Did you ever read the Art of War, my friend?”

“I cannot say that I have.”

“We must teach Luthor a lesson in manners. We offered him an alliance and he chose to work against us.”

“And what does Sun Tzu have to do with this.”

“Sun Tzu said ‘in the practical art of war, the best thing of all is to take the enemy’s country whole
and intact; to shatter and destroy it is not so good’.

“You are suggesting taking his company?”

“Precisely. But the plan is twofold. Luthor has a sister.”

“We met her. Tess Mercer. She was adopted when she was five years old, and raised in Louisiana by an imbecile who could not read, and abused, I believe.”

“Bah! The man was a fool! As for Lionel Luthor, abandoning the girl-child, it is good that he is dead. She is a beautiful woman, no?”

“Very beautiful.”

“Then it would be no hardship for you, my friend. To quote the philosopher once again, ‘it is essential to seek out enemy agents who have come to conduct espionage against you and to bribe them to serve you. Give them instructions and care for them’.”

“You wish me to seduce the beautiful Tess Mercer.”

“And persuade her to work for us.”

“It shall be done, Monsieur. It will be my pleasure.”
The plane descended into Vancouver and Chloe looked at her husband. He looked nervous for some reason.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm just a little worried," he said. "These Illuminati guys are clearly after Mara. But what could they want with her?"

"Well, it's a good bet that it's the same as any other so-called super-power would. If they can't control Superman by one means, they'll control him through his family."

"This could tear them apart. Clark and Lois."

"No. They love each other."

"This is something that Clark's always feared though. Remember? That his family could be used against him."

"Ollie, we've done all we can to protect Mara. They're staying at the clock tower, and it's far more secure than the farm. It's not like these Illuminati guys have super powers."

"But they are powerful," Ollie reminded her. "Who knows who they have in their pockets. My door man could be one of them."

Chloe got up and went to sit in his lap. The plane had completed its descent and was taxiing along the runway.

"Honey, you can't worry about what ifs. And we're doing the right thing by trying to track these people down."

Tess came in from the other cabin. "Chloe's right," she said. "The best chance we have at beating these people is to learn what we can about them. And as for who's in their pockets, well I think we just have to be careful who we trust."

***

De Rochefort looked at his companion.

"Are you certain?" he asked.

"Yes, my friend. My contact says the Queens are on their way to Vancouver. We believe they are searching for a journalist."

"Ah yes, the illustrious journalist Mark Anders," Anders had published several books on what he claimed was the conspiracy for world power. "They will be in for a surprise, no? Call our friends in
De Rochefort contemplated the situation. The Illuminati had been waiting hundreds of years to achieve ultimate power. They were a patient people, prepared to wait it out even longer. Each step they made was a step toward victory. This new acquisition in Smallville was just another step in that process.

"What do you want to do about the Kents?"

"I understand they have gone into hiding, yet Superman is still visible. Such arrogance," he spat. "He believes he is invulnerable, no?"

"We will find the woman and the child," his friend said.

***

Kara had donned her dark wig and glasses, choosing to go undercover as she flew to Washington. By conventional means rather than by her own. Clark had emphasised the need to keep a low profile and given how worried he was about his wife and daughter, Kara was only too happy to comply.

She didn’t like flying by conventional means, however. In the sky, flying by her own power, she wasn’t subject to the usual issues that came with flying these huge, lumbering behemoths. And this plane was being buffeted by high winds and rough turbulence.

She also didn’t like the idea of being stuck in the narrow seats, Especially since there was a child sitting right behind her kicking the back of her seat.

Kara had sat for the last half hour wondering for about the twenty-seventh time why she had chosen to do this. But there was more than her own ego at stake here. These people had intruded twice on her family and she wasn’t going to stand for it.

The kid behind her kicked her seat once more, making her lurch forward. Her drink, which had been sitting on the pull-down tray in front of her, fell over, soaking her lap. Kara tried to count to ten, meditate, whatever, but as she felt the sticky orange juice drip down her leg, she decided enough was enough.

She turned in her seat, peering at the kid behind her. He was about eight years old and clearly a little brat. He just smirked at her. The little monster, she thought. He knew exactly what he’d done. The mother’s attention was diverted elsewhere so Kara took a chance, grabbing the fork she’d used to eat her dinner with. It was tough plastic and certainly not easily broken. Well, she thought cynically, they clearly didn’t want to take a chance that it might be used to stab someone.

“See this?” she said in a low voice. She bent the fork until it broke. “This is going to be you if you don’t stop kicking my seat. Got me?”

The kid’s eyes went wide and scared. Kara had remained perfectly calm, her voice reasonable throughout the ten second exchange, but she got her point across.

There wasn’t a peep out of the kid until the plane descended into Dulles Airport. Fortunately, there were no other incidents, which she found a relief.
As she made her way out of the terminal, she saw a man standing with a placard. He looked official, wearing a chauffeur’s uniform of black wool trousers, black blazer and white shirt, with a black tie, as well as a peaked cap. The placard had the name Linda Danvers on it.

“That’s me,” she said as she stepped in front of the man.

“Miss Danvers. Your aunt sends her apologies that she could not be here to greet you herself. Please come this way. I will take you to her apartment.”

“Thank you,” she said politely, following the man.

***

As they prepared to leave the plane, Tess’ phone rang.

“Tess Mercer. Lex? What is it?” She looked up at Oliver and Chloe. ‘I’ll catch up,’ she mouthed, going back into the plane. Oliver and Chloe just looked at each other and sighed.

They had a car waiting for them as they left the airport. Tess called them as they left.

“Sorry guys, I’m going to be here a while. I don’t want to hold you up.”

“That’s fine, Tess,” Oliver said. “Don’t worry about it.”

As they drove through the streets of Vancouver, it began to rain. At first it was just spots, then it began to rain heavily.

“Great,” Ollie sighed. He felt it was a sign of things to come.

“Ollie,” Chloe said, clutching his arm. “Stop worrying.”

“Chloe, I can’t help it. It seems like every time we seem to be on track, something happens to screw it up again.”

“Like what?”

“Like when you disappeared for nearly nine months.”

“It was more like eight months,” she said. “Honey, why are you still ...”

“And then, you know, after Lois and Clark’s party, you decided to take that job in Star City.”

“Yeah, and you came with me. Star City’s where you were born, Ollie.”

Chloe had taken a job as a reporter with the Star City register, but the move had been twofold. She had wanted a base to work from so she could track down other superheroes and recruit them to the Justice League. Oliver had joined her there, returning to the city where he had grown up.

When Lex had returned, Oliver had had some legal issues to sort out. Lex had threatened to sue him for trying to take Luthorcorp illegally. For the past month, Oliver had been in Metropolis to sort out the legal wrangles.

Chloe, meanwhile, had been concerned that Tess might have fallen back into her old ways when she’d rejoined Lex at Luthorcorp. The two women had been sniping at each other ever since, especially since Tess had started redecorating Watchtower as if it was an extension of her own personality. In some ways, Chloe still thought of Watchtower as hers, even though it had been a year
or so since she’d actually worked as Watchtower.

Tess had, of course, explained that the only reason she was at Luthorcorp, working under her brother, was so she could get information about his activities to Watchtower. But Lex wasn’t stupid. He knew Tess had switched sides. He’d made that very clear.

But that was neither here nor there. Right now, they had bigger issues to worry about than Lex Luthor.

Chloe tried to reassure her husband.

“Honey, I know things are bad at the moment, but we’ll get back on track. I promise.”

Oliver looked down at her, a soft smile on his face. “It’s just that, well, you know, we have been talking about having a family.”

“And we will,” she said. “I promise.”

She looked out the window. They were pulling up beside an apartment building that reminded Chloe of some brownstones she’d seen in New York. Except this one was in much worse condition. It looked like the kind of place a journalist would use if he wanted to remain anonymous.

“Come on, honey,” she said, grabbing his hand as she got out of the car. They ran through the driving rain to the entry, hurrying up the cracked and worn concrete steps.

“Careful you don’t slip, babe,” Oliver told his wife.

The building was definitely well overdue for some maintenance. He glanced at the nameplates on the main entryway. There was nothing to indicate a journalist lived there. But Chloe seemed to know where they were going, pressing the buzzer for the third level apartment. There was no answer.

Chloe turned and frowned at him.

“Maybe he’s out,” Oliver said, unnecessarily.

She shrugged. “Maybe.” But she looked doubtful. Oliver wasn’t sure if she’d made any effort to contact the journalist before they’d come here.

He still felt uneasy, as if hairs on the back of his neck were standing up. There was something not quite right about this.

“Maybe we should go, Chloe,” he started to suggest, but then a woman came out of the door, holding an umbrella. Chloe took the opportunity to grab the door before it closed and went in, glancing at Oliver. Sighing, he followed her in.

Chloe ran up the stairs to the third floor, following the dingy corridor to apartment three fourteen. She knocked on the door, but they quickly realised there was no point. The door was open. Frowning, Chloe entered the apartment.

“Hello?” she asked.

Oliver stared. The apartment was a mess. Either the writer had left in a hurry or someone had been searching the place. Or both. Oliver had a feeling it was both.

From the dishes left in the sink, they decided that they’d only just missed the man by a day or so. Dejected, Chloe and Oliver left the building, calling Tess at the plane.
“Dead end,” Chloe sighed. “He’s gone.”

“Mr and Mrs Queen?”

Oliver turned and looked at the two men. They were wearing slickers against the heavy rain, their peaked caps dripping wetly.

“Something we can do for you gentlemen?” he asked.

“Mr Queen, we are under orders to take you and your wife into custody.”

“What?”

“You are under arrest.”

***

Kara was escorted into the main lobby of the apartment building Martha Kent lived in. It was certainly quite luxurious compared to the farm house, with marble flooring. The lobby itself had several couches where tenants could sit with guests. A coffee shop was installed on the floor and the delicious aroma of coffee brought back memories of Kara’s brief sojourn at the Talon.

“Miss Danvers?”

Kara turned and looked at the older man. He was probably in his sixties, with fine, grey hair. He wore a dark uniform – obviously the official uniform for staff in this building.

“If you’ll follow me,” he said as she acknowledged him, “I will take you to your aunt’s apartment.”

“That’s very kind of you,” she returned. “Thank you.”

“Is your luggage to follow?” he asked politely.

“Oh no,” Kara smiled, showing him the duffel bag she was carrying. “I’m only staying a couple of days.”

“I see. Well, come with me,” he said, waving her into the middle of a bank of three elevators.

Kara stood nervously in the elevator, wondering what all the fuss was about. Even after having spent the last two years on Earth, getting to know their customs, she still had trouble adjusting. There were still some things humans did that puzzled her. It was so much easier for Kal-El. No, Clark, she told herself. She had to remember to call him by his Earth name when he was in the Clark Kent guise.

The doorman, or whatever he was, showed Kara to Martha’s apartment, opening the door for her.

“Your aunt should be along shortly. She sent a message saying you should make yourself at home.”

“Thank you again,” she said.

Kara went into the apartment, looking around. It was simply furnished, and a perfect reflection of Martha’s tastes. There was a vase filled with roses on the counter and Kara smiled. She wondered if they were from Perry White. She knew Martha was still seeing Perry, but they still hadn’t discussed marriage. Perry was too busy being an editor and Martha was still working as a senator.

Kara opened the refrigerator and pulled out the pitcher of juice she found there, pouring herself a glass. She drank slowly, wandering around the apartment. There was a picture of Lois and Clark at
their wedding on the mantelpiece. And another of Lois, big with child. A picture of Jonathan Kent stood next to it. Kara liked the look of the man. He seemed a warm, friendly kind of man. Clark had told her stories about growing up with his father. She felt she would have liked the man a lot.

There was laughter in the hallway and Kara looked around as the door opened. Martha came in, followed by a tall, dark-haired man and a woman with dark hair pulled up in a French knot. Kara looked at the woman, who wore glasses similar to the ones she wore for her disguise.

“Linda,” Martha said, greeting her niece with a hug. Kara noticed quickly how Martha had used her other name, rather than her Kryptonian one.

“Aunt Martha, it’s good to see you. I haven’t see you since ...”

“...Lois and Clark’s wedding,” Martha agreed.

It really had been a beautiful wedding. Clark and Lois had looked so in love as they said their vows. Kara had watched her cousin marry the woman he loved and she wished she could have that some day.

“Oh, sweetheart, this is Steve Trevor. And his assistant Diana Prince. They’re just here for some papers. Steve, Diana, this is my niece, Linda Danvers.”

Kara nodded politely. “Mr Trevor. Miss Prince.”

“Miss Danvers,” the man returned. “or do you prefer Linda.”

She smiled. “Linda’s fine. Do you work with Aunt Martha?” she said, noticing Martha going into the next room which she assumed was the office.

“No, I work with the Secret Service now,” he said. “I used to be in the Air Force. Retired now, of course.”

“Oh?” Kara raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

“I was stationed in Europe for a time. My squadron was out on manoeuvres when my plane went off course and I crashed near an island in the Greek Isles. My injuries sustained in the crash unfortunately meant I was forced to retire.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

Diana was looking at her with an odd expression. Almost as if she was remembering something. But Kara didn’t have a chance to ask her about it as Martha came out of the office.

“Here they are, Steve,” she said, handing him a folder.

“Thanks Mrs Kent.” He handed the folder to Diana, who took them meekly, then nodded to Kara. They turned and went out.

Martha waited until the door was closed, then smiled at Kara.

“Kara,” she said, pulling her onto the sofa. “Tell me, what’s been going on in Smallville?”

“Where do I start?” Kara said with a watery smile.

“Tell me about these people you met at the farmhouse.”
Kara told the story of how she’d met John Crawford and who he claimed to be.

“You’re not sure?” Martha asked.

“I don’t know. According to what Kal-El, I mean, Clark told me, he is NSA.”

“But you think there’s more to this? It’s one of the reasons I wanted you to meet Steve and Diana.”

“You mean, because he’s Secret Service?” she asked.

“That, and more. You see, he knows Wonder Woman.”
“What are the charges?” Oliver asked.

He and Chloe had been taken to the central police station, but he had the feeling it was just a temporary measure.

“We’re not prepared to discuss that with you right now, Mr Queen,” the officer said.

“Well, I know my rights,” Oliver told him, “and I have the right to know what we’re being charged with.”

“Mr Queen, considering the amount of trouble you and your wife are in, I would suggest you exercise your right to silence. At least until your friend manages to find you counsel.”

Chloe had used their one phone call to contact Tess, who had been shocked and dismayed at this turn of events. And she’d promised to get an attorney there immediately. But that had been two hours ago and they’d been sequestered in separate interrogation rooms ever since.

Just what in the hell was going on?

***

John Crawford smirked as he put the phone down. His counterpart in Canadian intelligence had just confirmed that Oliver and Chloe Queen were in the custody of Canadian police. Isabelle Lewis was a hard woman, but she was loyal to the cause and Crawford had been pleased so far with her work. She had so far managed to convince the entire Canadian police network that Mark Anders was a known subversive who had betrayed his own country.

Of course, the truth was that Anders had been investigating the society for years and he had come dangerously close to convincing a large percentage of the population of their true intent. The Illuminati could not have themselves exposed, hence the strike back against the journalist.

Neither could they allow the possibility of Chloe Queen meeting up with Anders and learning everything he knew. It would only be a matter of time before that information got back to Superman.

Crawford wondered what the baron intended where Superman was concerned. As was usual for the society, only the people at the top knew everything. Crawford was well down in the pyramid of power; told only what was necessary to do his job. It was the reason the Illuminati had managed to exist in secret for hundreds of years.

***

A man hurried along the streets of Vancouver, bending his head against the driving rain. He’d stood across the street from the building where he’d seen the couple taken away by police. He knew there was nothing he could have done to stop it, but he felt guilt nonetheless. The couple were innocent
pawns, he knew that much.

He sniffed audibly, rubbing his nose with his sleeve. He’d caught a cold after being on the streets for two days. Whoever at the local tourist board said that Vancouver was a beautiful city, obviously didn’t see the city’s underground.

He bumped into a redheaded woman as he stumbled past the police station. He’d already tried one of his contacts to get them to help the young couple, but the former security intelligence officer had told him there was nothing he could do. The orders had come from higher up.

The man quickly uttered an ‘excuse me’ to the redhead, who nodded briefly. She looked stressed as she stepped to the kerb to cross the street. He hesitated, wondering if she was there about the young couple. There had to be someone he could trust. Since all his old contacts had let him down.

“Excuse me, Miss?”

The woman stopped and turned, looking at him curiously. Then her eyes widened.

“Oh my god! It’s you!”

He frowned. What did she know?

“I don’t understand.”

“Chloe and Oliver – they were looking for you.”

“The couple?”

The redhead nodded. “They were arrested right outside your building.”

Anders nodded understandingly. “I saw them.”

“What’s going on?”

“It seems the Canadian security intelligence service has decided to declare me Undesirable Number One.”

The redhead frowned. “What?”

“Never mind. Bad joke. Listen, miss ...?”

“Mercer. Tess Mercer.”

“Miss Mercer, your friends are in terrible danger. The police have arrested them because of me. The orders have come from higher up than the police department.”

“You mean the intelligence service?” Tess asked, eyes widening. “On what grounds?”

“I don’t think it really matters,” he said. “They can trump up some charge. Most likely treason.”

“They’re American. Not Canadian.”

“It makes little difference,” Anders told her. “Look, we need to get out of this rain and work out how to help your friends.”

“But if you know the how and why, can’t you ...”
“I’ve been declared persona non grata, Miss Mercer.”

They ducked under the shelter of a storefront. Tess bit her lip.

“Look, my brother is ... well, he’s Lex Luthor.”

Anders stared at her. “You have got to be kidding me!”

“Why?”

“Because Luthor is wanted just as badly as ... well, Superman.”

“How do you know about that?” she asked.

“How about that?”

“Superman!”

“What do you mean?” He shook his head. “Look, all I know is this. The Illuminati are a group of very dangerous, power-hungry individuals who have been content to stay in the shadows controlling things for hundreds of years. Suddenly along comes Superman and all hell breaks loose.”

“And what does this have to do with Lex?”

“How well do you know your brother?” Anders asked her. “Do you know about his experiments a few years ago? I think it was called 33.1.”

“I’m familiar with it,” Tess told him.

“Well, believe me, the Illuminati know all about that as well. Tell me, who do you think helped Lionel Luthor on his road to power?”

Tess stared at him, then her phone beeped. It was a text.

“The attorney. He’s in the station now. We need to talk more about this,” she told Anders. “Where are you staying?”

“Trust me, you don’t want to know. Look, go get your friends out of that police station and back to the States. The intelligence service have no evidence on them, but that could change. Just get them off Canadian soil. And fast.”

“What about you? There’s so much more we need to know.”

“I’ll find you. Your brother – he lives in Metropolis, yes?” Tess nodded. “Good. I still have a couple of contacts I can trust. Do you have a business card?”

“Of course.” She fished one out of her purse and handed it to him.

“I’ll call you when I get there. There’s a lot you need to know if you’re going to save Superman.” With that he turned and began hurrying away through the driving rain. Tess stared after him, wondering what he meant by that.

She hurried across the street to the police station.

***
Kara stared at her aunt.

“Wonder Woman?” She frowned. “I met her. In California.”

Kara had spent a little time in California over the past year. When Jor-El had told her that she needed to leave Clark to face his own destiny, she had thought about going forward in time. But she had changed her mind, instead preferring to see a little of the world that Clark had grown up in before she took the ultimate journey. Now that she knew what they were facing, she was glad she had waited.

“So, how does Steve Trevor knowing Wonder Woman help?”She had met the Amazon woman on one of her trips. Kara had been rescuing a busload of children when the driver had collapsed at the wheel. The bus had almost gone over a cliff. She’d just been pulling the yellow school bus back when Wonder Woman had turned up.

“Well, it looks like you have things well in hand, Supergirl,” she smiled.

Kara stared at her. “Who are you?”

“They call me Wonder Woman.”

Kara grinned. Wonder Woman’s costume was almost as skimpy as her own and just as colourful with the red, white and blue combination.

“You know, I bet my cousin would love you,” she said.

Wonder Woman had smiled back at her, then gone to the aid of the collapsed driver, who, it seemed, had had a heart attack. Kara stayed long enough to make sure the children were okay and that help was on the way. The children stared in awe at the two superheroes, even going so far as to ask for autographs.

Kara had talked long enough with Wonder Woman to know that she had, until recently, lived on an island that was populated only by women. And that she was immortal.

“She’s some kind of princess, I think,” Kara told Martha.

“I remember Clark talking about getting Wonder Woman to join the Justice League some time ago. He told me that Chloe met her when she was underground for a while.”

“I don’t think she has yet,” Kara, who had had a few meetings with the League, answered.

“Then perhaps you should talk to her.”

“What about Mr Trevor? How can he help?”

“Well, he is in the Secret Service. And because of his work in intelligence, he will know of any rumours of secret societies.”

“But that’s the whole point, isn’t it? About them being secret.”

“I’m sure Steve will at least be able to find out a little more. Especially when we tell him that Mara is in danger. Or rather, when Wonder Woman tells him.”

“But how do we let him know without revealing that Clark is Superman?” Kara asked.

“That is a difficult one,” Martha conceded. “Why don’t we sit down and have some dinner and we can talk about this some more. I have to admit though, Kara, I am concerned. Especially because my
grand-daughter is in danger. Clark and Lois can take care of themselves, but ...”

“I know,” Kara answered. “It doesn’t seem right that they’re going after an innocent baby.”

***

Clark had wanted to go out and patrol, but Lois had begged him not to go out this one night and he’d called members of the Justice League to patrol in his place, concerned at his wife’s behaviour. She’d become increasingly nervy since the assault on the farm, and far more protective of Mara.

He paced up and down the penthouse apartment, holding his screaming daughter in his arms, trying to rock her back to sleep. Lois was on the couch looking through some files on the laptop. She looked up, frowning.

“What’s wrong with her?” she asked.

“I don’t know. She won’t settle.”

“She can’t be hungry. I just fed her.”

“She’s not wet either. I think she’s just upset,” Clark said. He stroked the baby’s head gently and crooned. Mara hiccuped, then began crying again. He looked at his wife helplessly, then resumed pacing.

“Have you heard anything from Chloe and Oliver?” he asked.

“Not since Tess called about the arrest. I hope the attorney she got them managed to get them out of there.”

“Me too.” His hearing picked up the sound of the elevator and he looked up toward the rusty door. “You know, Oliver should really get that door replaced.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I think he thinks it adds to the ambience, or something,” Lois grinned. “It can’t be Oliver. They wouldn’t be back from Vancouver yet.”

Clark used his x-ray vision to look into the shaft. His eyes widened in surprise as he saw who it was coming up in the car. Still holding the baby, he strode over to the lift as the doors opened and Lex Luthor stepped out.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he asked.

“You weren’t answering your phone,” Lex said simply. He looked at the baby, who was still screaming. “Your daughter doesn’t seem very happy.”

“She’s unsettled. Which isn’t surprising given the events of the last few days.”

Lex nodded. “You’re right. But why do I get the feeling you’re holding me partly responsible? I meant it when I said we should work together against these people.”

“The same way you told me to fight Darkseid?” Clark asked.

Lex reached out to the baby. “May I?”

Clark closed his arms protectively around his daughter and Lex sighed.

“Look, I know you think I’m the devil incarnate, and in other circumstances, we would be enemies.
But it so happens I do have a little experience in this area.”

“You were twelve when your mother had Julian,” Clark pointed out.

“Yes, but I remember him crying a lot in his first few weeks. It was probably one of the things that drove my mother to kill him. That and the post-partum depression of course. Please. Let me try something.”

Reluctantly, Clark handed the baby over, hearing the shocked gasp from Lois. Lex took the baby in his arms, holding her upright against his chest, using it to support her head while he bounced her up and down. Mara cried a little longer then her cries began tapering off until she was just hiccoughing.

Lex smiled down at her.

“There, that’s better isn’t it?” He looked back up at Clark. “She’s got colic.”

Clark frowned at his former best friend. “How did ...?”

“My guess is, it’s something in Lois’ breast milk. Probably to do with what’s happened as well.” Clark continued to frown at him. Lex huffed. “Look, even emotional upsets can affect breast milk,” Lex explained patiently. “It can increase the acidity, which causes the stomach upset in the baby.”

“I see,” Clark said, taking his daughter, who had fallen asleep in Lex’s arms. “I’m sure you didn’t come here to teach me about fatherhood.”

“No, unfortunately I’m unable to have children of my own,” Lex said sadly. “The meteor shower made me sterile.”

Clark blinked. “Lex, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“It’s not your fault, Clark. You might have come down in the meteor shower, but you are not responsible for my, uh, affliction. And it was more a blessing in disguise anyway, considering how many women I slept with in my misspent youth.”

Lex offered a grin that was reminiscent of the old days. It made Clark pause. Why was Lex being so friendly all of a sudden?

“Look, don’t get me wrong here, Clark. We’re not friends. Frankly, your ‘other vocation’ causes some serious hurdles where my plans are concerned. But I can put those aside for the sake of our mutual enemy. Being the Baron de Rochefort.”

“Why? What is he planning?” Clark asked.

“I just got word today that the baron has purchased a great deal of land in Smallville. And he plans to build a hotel resort in the town.”

“The city council would never go for it,” Clark said.

“They did,” Lex told him. “The papers were signed just today.”

“I don’t get it. Why Smallville?”

“The baron and his people can mine the land for all the Kryptonite. Think what would happen if he controlled all the meteor rock reserves. Those that I haven’t managed to find myself.”

“He could kill me,” Clark said. “Or worse.”
“Precisely.”

“If the resort gets built, de Rochefort has a base he can work from. And the Illuminati ...”

“The Illuminati are already here.”

Both Clark and Lex looked around at the newcomer’s voice. Clark stared at the man in the dark suit with the armour moulded to the chest. On the head was a mask with what looked like ears, and a huge cape flowed from the back of the suit, making him look like ...

“Batman?” Lex said in surprise.

“Luthor,” Batman said coldly, his voice hoarse. Clark guessed he was using some sort of voice modifier.

Lois got in between the visitor and Clark and Lex, taking the baby from Clark.

“I'll go put her down upstairs,” she said softly, clearly not wanting any part of the discussion.

Clark nodded, his eyes still on the Batman.

“Chloe told me about you,” he said.

“Your friend Chloe talks too much,” Batman rasped. “But that’s not why I’m here. There’s been rumblings among the criminal fraternity, even in Gotham, that the Illuminati is targeting Superman.”

“That’s what we’ve heard,” Clark said.

“They tried to form an alliance with me,” Lex confirmed. Batman just glared at him.

“I’m surprised, Luthor, to see you here. Considering your anti-Superman stance of the last year.”

Lex shrugged. “I learned a long time ago that the best strategy is sometimes to do the unexpected.”

“Well, it will cost you. My contacts have already informed me that there are moves to destroy Luthorcorp. And trust me, they are capable.”

“What do you know about it?” Clark asked.

“Let’s just say I’ve had my own battles with one particular incarnation of them. Called the League of Shadows.”

Lex raised an eyebrow. “Batman, are you suggesting that the League of Shadows has ties to the Illuminati?”

“What’s the League of Shadows?” Clark asked.

“They’re a group of terrorists who most believe date back to even the time of the Caesars in Rome,” Lex explained. “When they see a society becoming too decadent, they destroy it. Isn’t that what they tried to do in Gotham?”

“They created an economic depression,” Batman said, nodding. “Attempting to destroy the city by stealth, rather than overtly. The League claims responsibility for the great fire of London and even the plague.”

“That sounds kind of similar to what’s been happening in Smallville,” Clark said.
“Of course,” Lex said. “Encourage businesses to fail, driving out the population, allowing them to take control.”

“And of course, Luthorcorp is totally blameless,” Clark returned.

“I acknowledge I played my part in it,” Lex said. “But Smallville has been dying for a long time. And at least you still have the fertiliser plant, even if it is failing.”

Clark sighed. Lex did have a point.

“So what can we do?” he asked Batman.

“We start with the Justice League.” He glanced warily at Lex. “And while I do have doubts about your sincerity, Luthor, I believe you are right that it is in both of your best interests to form an alliance. However undesirable it is. You are both being targeted by the Illuminati.”

***

Baron de Rochefort smirked as he sipped his cognac. While it was an inferior liquor compared to that produced by his own distillery, it was still reasonably good. And it was the only one available in this god-forsaken country.

He congratulated himself on having convinced the mayor of Smallville of his plan. The resort would ensure that he and his people controlled the town’s economy. And with that, he could slowly begin to destroy not only Superman, but Luthorcorp as well.

It was a shame, he thought, that Luthor had decided to turn down his alliance and offer his allegiance to Superman instead. But it mattered little. De Rochefort knew it was only a matter of time before he crushed Luthor and his ego.
Lois and Clark quarrel

Lois was brushing her long hair when Clark finally went to bed. He had had a long talk with both Lex and Bruce about the proposed alliance. Bruce had made a lot of salient points which even Lex had been forced to agree with.

He dropped the towel from his shower and put on his pyjama pants. They were a comfortable cotton, in a solid blue. Definitely not plaid. Lois had bought them for his last birthday. He moved behind his wife, going to drop a kiss on her bare shoulder. She shook him off.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

She threw the brush on the dresser and turned to look at him.

“What’s wrong? You can ask that after what happened downstairs?”

Okay, he thought. Clearly his wife was angry with him about something.

“What did I do?” he asked.

She glared at him. “You let that ... that ... snake! You let him get his hands on our daughter.”

“What did you want me to do, Lois? Tell him no and act paranoid?”

Lois stood, gesturing angrily. “You should have just thrown him out, that’s what you should have done!”

“How? You know what Bruce said. Lex and I are both targets now.”

“That’s not the goddamn point, Clark! I don’t trust him. Lex Luthor is a lying snake-in-the-grass. You know, it’s a damn good thing Tess changed her mind about going to see Lex the day he returned from the dead because it’s a pretty good bet he would have killed her.”

“You don’t know that,” Clark told her.

Tess had told them she had been planning on going to see Lex, but had changed her mind at the last minute, fearing what Lex might do. She’d even confessed she was going to use some serum they’d been developing at the now defunct Summerholt Institute, hoping she could wipe Lex’s memory, therefore protecting Clark’s secret.

Tess had stayed away from Lex until her brother had held a press conference, announcing his return. She had then stepped up to the podium with a smile on her face. Only Lex knew it was a fake smile. To the cameras and the reporters, it was a happy reunion between brother and sister. Lex had, of course, been furious, but he had hidden it well. Always the consummate actor, Tess had told Clark afterwards.
Once the press conference was over, Tess had confronted Lex, telling him that if anything happened to her that certain evidence would be released to the Attorney General, pointing the finger at Lex. It didn’t matter whether it could be proven. Tess had worked for Lex long enough and been around his influence long enough that she knew how to manipulate evidence to suit the story. She’d given Lex a choice. Let her back in to Luthorcorp or face a Grand Jury.

“It doesn’t matter, Clark. You think I don’t know what he’s doing? He’s trying to manipulate you. Manipulate us. Lex has always had his own agenda.”

“And what do you think he was doing when he was holding Mara? Planting a bug on her? You’re being ridiculous Lois.”

“I’m being ridiculous? You don’t see it, do you? Did you really think Lex cared about your friendship, even when you were friends? He wanted your secrets. He always wanted your secrets.”

“What does that have to do with the Illuminati?”

“He wants to use you, Clark. He’s doing exactly the same thing that these Illuminati people are doing, except he’s more subtle about it. He’s always been power hungry and he doesn’t mind exploiting you to get it. Or our daughter.”

Clark sighed. “Lois,” he began, going to take her hands. She pulled away.

“Don’t touch me, Clark. I’m not in the mood.”

He glared at his wife. “Fine! Why don’t I just go and sleep downstairs?”

“You do that,” she said, going to the bed and shoving the bedclothes back.

Clark went to the door, then paused, looking back at Lois. She had got into bed, pulling the blankets back up and was turned away from him. Sighing, he closed the door and went downstairs, grabbing the spare blankets from the closet. Not that he really needed them, he thought, since he didn’t really feel the cold.

***

It had stopped raining when Chloe and Oliver were finally let go by the Vancouver police. It was dark as they made their way down the steps of the station. The attorney Tess had hired was apologising profusely.

“Mr and Mrs Queen, I am so sorry. We can file suit with the police department in the morning.”

Oliver turned and looked at the attorney.

“Forget it,” he said, gesturing angrily. “We both know this goes a lot higher than the Canadian police.”

“But detention under false pretenses ...”

“I said forget it. Chloe and I just want to go home.”

“Thank you for your help,” Tess told the attorney, “but I agree with Mr Queen.” She glanced at the blonde couple and they both nodded.

They headed to the car Tess had waiting. As soon as they were in the relative privacy of the vehicle, Tess looked at them.
“What the hell happened in there?” she asked.

“We don’t know. They wouldn’t tell us a damn thing.”

“It’s a message,” Chloe said. “It has to be.”

“What do you mean?” Tess asked. “These Illuminati people?”

Chloe nodded. “They wanted us to know that they have control. If they can hold us, without charge, for several hours, then imagine what they could do if they really wanted to. We need to warn Clark.”

The redhead nodded. “We’ll do that when we get back to Metropolis.” She paused. “There’s something else. I ran into Anders. I didn’t want to say anything until we were out of there.”

“What? Where?”

“He saw you guys get arrested. He’s going to meet us in Metropolis. There are a few questions I’d like to ask him,” she said.

“Yeah, me too,” Chloe said. She yawned. “Let’s just get home. I’m beat.”

***

De Rochefort smiled evilly at Donatello.

“Donc tout se déroule conformément a mon plan,” he said. “Les Queen on recu le message non?”

“Oui.” Donatello nodded.

“Et le maire est plus que heureux de repondre a nos désires non? Une fois le projet commencé nous contréleront l’économie de smallville.”

“Puis je vous conseiller de le reconsidérer,” another voice said. “Notre organisation a essayé autrefois.”

De Rochefort stared at the newcomer, sniffing.

“Ducard. Je ne me rapelle pas vous avoir invité a cette discution.”

“Néanmoins,” Henri Ducard began, moving further into the room, “J’ai jugé nécessaire de venir.”

Donatello stared at him. “Je penser que Batman vous avait tué?”

“Les rumeurs sur ma mort on était grandement exageré cher docteur,” Ducard continued speaking in French. As he moved out of the shadows, Donatello could see a jagged scar on the left side of his face. He had survived his ordeal, but barely by the look of it. “Si vous voulez defaire Superman vous devait mettre en pratique des actions plus affirmative.”

“Nous avons commencé a mettre nos plans en actions. La Ligue Des Ombres na pas sa place ici.”

“Mon cher Baron le temps de la subtilité est passé la Ligue Des Ombres tente de prendre le controle de Gotham et nous avons commencé une guerre contre Batman.”

“Je n’est nullement besoins de vos conseilles je conduis ma campagne,” de Rochefort snarled, speaking as the general he was. He held much higher rank than Ducard and decided he knew better how to conduct his campaign against the likes of Superman.
“Mais comment avais vous survécue?” Donatello asked Ducard. “La dernière fois que nous avons entendu parler de vous etiezz sur un train monorail fou.”

“J'ai appris plusieurs choses dans les montagnes du Bhutan,” the man also known as Ra’s al Ghul said nonchalantly. “Et une de ses lecons et que parfois pour defaire un ennmi il est plus évident d'etre en apparence vaincu , Maintenant c'est le moment de l'attaque,” he said, his steely gaze once again on de Rochefort.

“Et je choisi ma propre méthode d'attaque,” de Rochefort told him, turning away from Ducard, as if pointedly dismissing him. He looked at Donatello. “Dans les deux prochains jours Tess Mercer va se rendre a Washington vous savez ce que vous devait faire.”

Donatello bowed. “Considérez que c’est fait, mon ami.”

***

Kara went out the next day while her aunt was at work, exploring the city. But she had been thinking over what they had discussed the night before. They had agreed to talk to Wonder Woman about the situation. The question was, how did she find her? Martha had told her that the Amazon was here in the capitol and there had been a few stories in the local newspaper, but nothing about where she was.

As she wandered, she listened in to the sounds of the city, remembering how Clark had taught her to use her super-hearing. She had only met her cousin just a few hours earlier, and recalled feeling surprised at how long her ship had been trapped in mud. While she had been out looking for Clark, who she believed had just been a small child, her ship had been found by government agents. The ship’s self-destruct had been activated, emitting an alarm which interfered with a lot of radio frequencies.

Clark had taken her to the top of the Daily Planet, telling her to focus her hearing so she could pick up the alarm. At first, she had only been able to hear the wind, and she’d scoffed. But then her super-hearing and kicked in, and it was like thousands of percussion instruments in her head. She clutched her head.

“Make it stop,” she screamed, groaning in pain.

“I know it’s loud at first, but you have to focus, okay? Eliminate the sounds one by one.”

Clark had told her how he had first learned to use his super-hearing. It had helped that he had been blind at the time, after a freak accident in which he’d burned his retinas. He’d used all the tools in the barn, trying to filter out each sound.

Kara remembered that lesson now, filtering out all the sounds which were just the normal, everyday sounds of traffic. And then she heard it. The sound of a girl being hit. Kara ran toward the sound, blurring into her Supergirl uniform, shedding the wig and the glasses as she went.

But as she got to the location, it seemed someone was there before her. Wonder Woman turned and smiled at her, her hand still on the pimp who had been beating up a prostitute.

“Hello Kara.”

“Wonder Woman. I was hoping I would find you here.”

“We must talk,” the Amazon said, and Kara nodded. She waited while Wonder Woman dealt with the situation, handing the pimp over to the police.
Wonder Woman led Kara to an apartment in the central city. Kara looked around and realised why she had had that odd feeling the night before when she’d met Steve Trevor.

“You’re Diana Prince!” she breathed.

“Yes. Just as you’re Linda Danvers. Your aunt is a remarkable woman,” Diana said.

“Does Steve know? About you?”

“No.”

“But you plan on telling him, don’t you?”

“It would complicate the relationship,” Diana said, shaking her head. “And it would make it more difficult for me to continue the work I do.”

“We need your help,” Kara said. “Actually, we need both yours and Steve’s help.”

“What is it?”

“There is a group. They’re calling themselves the Illuminati. My cousin – you know, Superman. His daughter is in danger from these people.”

“Your cousin is Clark Kent?” Diana asked. Of course, Diana knew Martha Kent was her aunt.

“There is more. I believe there are some government agents who are with this group. I found them at the farm where my cousin and his wife were living.”

“Tell me.”

“One of them is named John Crawford. He’s with the NSA.”

Kara shivered. The way the man had looked at her made her feel a little strange. Creeped out, as Bart would say. When she’d told her aunt about it, Martha had suggested it might have been lust.

She told Diana about the way she’d found the two men and the subsequent raid on the farmhouse when Lois and the baby were at home.

Diana nodded. “I will ask Steve to look into it. What do you want me to tell him about the child?”

“I don’t know. Aunt Martha and I talked about this last night and we both agree that Steve cannot know Clark is Superman.”

“Yet it is his daughter who is in danger from these people. What do they want? Do you know?”

“From what Clark said, they want to study her as the first, um, alien-human hybrid.”

“Why?”

“All we can think is that they see Superman as a threat to their plans for the New World Order.”

“Of course,” Diana nodded. She looked thoughtful. “Perhaps their plan is to study the child in order to see how they can control her. Use her as their instrument. But tell me, why do you think they broke into the farmhouse a second time?”

Kara shook her head. “I don’t know. Maybe they didn’t get what they came for the first time.”
“That is possible,” Diana mused, but her expression suggested she thought there might be more to it.”

***

Clark had sneaked upstairs to check on his wife. Lois was sleeping, although from the way the bedclothes were twisted, it hardly seemed restful. He wanted to climb into bed and hold her in his arms, but he wasn’t sure what reception he would get if he did. Lois would get over it. They’d talk and she would eventually let it go, but meanwhile he could expect the cold shoulder for a day or two. His wife could be unpredictable at times. She could be working on a story and be practically bouncing off the walls, but next minute her mood could have swung completely in another direction. It was one of the things that sometimes irritated Clark, but also one of the things he loved most about her. Her passion for life was one of her most attractive qualities.

He heard his daughter stirring and went into the small room Oliver had helped him turn into a small nursery. Since Oliver and Chloe had spent a good part of the last year and a half in Star City, the clock tower apartment had been mostly empty. Oliver might have had four bedrooms but most of them had not been furnished.

“Well, look who’s awake,” Clark whispered, smiling down at his baby daughter. “You look like you want to play, baby girl,” he grinned. He picked her up gently, then held her over his head so he could sniff at her diaper. Nope. She wasn’t wet. She didn’t seem to be hungry either. She was cooing contentedly in his arms as he cradled her.

Wrapping a baby blanket around her, Clark took her downstairs to the couch, sitting down with her in his arms. It was just starting to get light. He was unsure if Chloe and Oliver had returned from Vancouver. Tess had called hours earlier letting him know that the attorney had argued successfully for their release and that they should be out of the police station in the next hour or so. He hadn’t heard them come in but then again he had been sleeping fairly soundly.

Clark yawned. Normally he didn’t have to sleep much, given his alien metabolism, but he did still have to sleep. And it was fairly early, even for the former farm boy. He lay on his back on the couch, his daughter resting on his chest. He grinned sleepily down at her. She seemed quite content, dribbling on the t-shirt he’d put on when he’d left the bedroom.

An hour or so later, Lois crept down the stairs, not eager to face her husband after the fight they’d had, wanting to forgive him but still not quite ready to. She stopped at the foot of the stairs, wishing she had a camera. Clark was stretched out on the couch, his bare feet sticking over the edge, his mouth open, quietly snoring, while the baby was curled up on his chest, her little body rising and falling in rhythm with her father’s breaths. Lois snickered to herself. Damn, that was cute. She so wanted to wake him up so she could tease him.

Then she remembered she wasn’t talking to him. So she tiptoed into the kitchen to pour herself some juice. As she tipped the container into the glass, she heard the sound of footsteps on the stairs. There was a pause, a light snicker, and more footsteps. Then the swinging door was pushed open.

“What’s with Sleeping Beauty?” Chloe chuckled as she came in.

“Which one?” Lois cracked.

“Both,” her cousin grinned.

“What time did you guys get in?” Lois asked, drinking her juice.
“Around three, I think.” Chloe began making the coffee, pulling out the filter and emptying the grounds. “So, uh, Lo, why is Clark sleeping on the couch?” she said, frowning.

“We had a fight,” Lois said.

Chloe looked at her cousin, raising her eyebrow. “You had a fight? That’s not like you two.”

“Are you kidding? We fight all the time!”

“Since you two got married it’s like you’ve been practically joined at the hip.”

“Well, that’s somewhat of an exaggeration.”

“So what happened?”

“Lex happened.”

Lois told her cousin about Lex’s visit the night before. Chloe frowned, then looked concerned as she heard what Lex had done with Mara.

“And Clark doesn’t see anything wrong with it. It’s like ...”

“Well, he is right in one way. I mean, it would make him look paranoid. On the other hand, you have every reason not to trust Lex.”

“That’s what I said. But he ...”

The kitchen door opened and Clark came in, rubbing the back of his head. He was holding Mara in the crook of one arm. His hair was sticking up in all directions.

“I take it you’re talking about last night,” he said.

Lois pointedly turned her back on him. Chloe looked at the couple with sympathy.

“Clark, I have to agree with Lois on this one. I can see why you did what you did, but when it comes to Lex, you’ve always had blinders on.”

“No, I haven’t,” Clark said, rocking his tiny daughter when she stared to grizzle.

Chloe shook her head. “This from the man who thought there was something worth saving in that ... Lex.” Chloe had been intending to say something else, but she changed her mind, not wanting Mara to hear her cursing. Okay, so the baby was only five weeks old, but it was good practice. “Clark,” she sighed, “when are you going to learn that not everyone wants to be saved! And trust me, if Lex wanted to change, he would have done it a long time ago. With or without your help.”

“If it hadn’t been for Lionel ...”

“We get it, okay,” Chloe said, trying not to raise her voice. Mara was squirming in her father’s arm, getting more upset. Lois took her daughter with a sigh and sat down in the rocking chair to breastfeed the baby. “I mean, you’ve talked often enough about how Lex would have been different away from Lionel, and you’re right. But what you don’t see is that Lex still made his own choices. You can be raised by someone like Lionel and still make different choices. There are scientific studies that prove that. So, yes, Lionel was an utter bastard to Lex, but you can’t blame Lionel for the choices Lex made. Just like Lex can’t make you take responsibility for his actions. You’ve always
had a guilt complex when it comes to anything involving meteor freaks. When will you see that none of that is your fault? For god’s sake, Clark, you were barely older than Mara when your parents put you in that ship. Lex becoming what he became is not your fault. Nor is it your responsibility.”

She looked steadily at him.

“As for this alliance between you and Lex, I agree that you both need to find some common ground to fight these people. After what they did to me and Oliver yesterday, I think we need as many people on our side as we can get. But it doesn’t mean you have to trust Lex. Remember that he still has his own agenda for standing up to these people.”

Clark regarded her silently, looking at Lois, who was looking down at their daughter, her face hidden. But he could see she was upset. He sighed. Chloe was right. For as long as he’d known Lex, he’d wanted to believe the best in his former friend. But the truth was, Lex had been making bad choices even when he’d been trying to be good. From his investigation into the accident when he’d hit Clark, to allying himself with the journalist Roger Nixon or crackpot scientist Stephen Hamilton, Lex could have made different choices, but he hadn’t.

“You’re right, Chloe,” he said softly. He bent down to his wife. “I’m sorry, Lois. I guess I wasn’t thinking straight last night. Forgive me?”

Lois shrugged, still hiding her face. He brushed her hair off her cheek and kissed her gently. Lois finally looked up, smiling wanly at him.

“Okay, you’re forgiven, Smallville,” she said.

Clark grinned and put his arms around his wife, kissing her deeply. She pulled away and snickered.

“Don’t even think about it, Kent,” she said. “Especially not in front of the baby.”

Clark put on his ‘puppy dog’ look and she laughed. Mara looked up at her parents and seemed to smile. Clark picked her up and put her over his shoulder, rubbing her back.

“I’d use a towel if I were you,” Lois warned, just as Mara let out a milky belch, spitting up all over his t-shirt. Lois just rolled her eyes. “Yeah, nice one Smallville. You’re on laundry duty.”

“I’m not the one who put a red sock in with my white shirts,” Clark smirked at his wife.

“One time, and I can’t believe you’re still holding that against me!” Lois complained. Then she hit on an idea. “I have two words for you, Kent. Elmer and Fudd.”

They could both see Chloe frowning at them, but they didn’t care. It was an old joke between them.

“Ay ay, sailor,” Clark grinned.

“Don’t talk dirty in front of our baby,” Lois told him.

Chloe was looking utterly bewildered at the exchange, but neither one of them were prepared to explain the joke, or the ‘lap dance’ Lois had once given him in retaliation for the pretend lap dance she’d had to do years ago when they’d barely even been friends, let alone acknowledging their mutual attraction.

There was the sound of someone clearing their throat and the three of them looked around at Oliver,
standing at the kitchen door. He’d clearly been there for some time.

“I hate to interrupt, guys,” he said, “but Tess just called. Anders called her. He’s in trouble.”

Clark handed his daughter back to his wife.

“Looks like this is a job for Superman,” he said.

He sped out in a blur, returning downstairs within two seconds, dressed in his Superman uniform.

“Where is he?”

“Canadian border. From what Tess said, the cops have sniffed him out."

Clark sped out, going to the terrace and taking off from there. The others set about preparing breakfast, knowing Clark would be back before long.

They’d barely had time to get breakfast on the table when Clark returned, with Mark Anders in his arms. The man seemed unsteady as Clark touched down.

“Thanks Superman, but please don’t be offended when I say that’s an experience I don’t wish to repeat.”

“No offence taken,” Clark smiled. “You look like you could use a hot shower.”

“And some clean clothes, perhaps?” Anders smiled.

Clark quickly made the introductions. Chloe looked at the journalist.

“I’ll see what I can do about the clothes,” she said. “What happened?”

“Well, after I left your friend, Tess, I contacted a couple of friends of mine, who got me as far as the border. That’s when all hell let loose.”

He told the group that armed police had been at the border. A friend who had contacts within the Canadian police had told him that the authorities had put out something similar to an all-points bulletin on him. They had been instructed to proceed with force. Anders could only speculate that the Brotherhood had manipulated the authorities into believing he was dangerous.

Thirty minutes later, dressed in clean clothes Oliver had managed to dig out, and with a hot cup of coffee, Anders sat comfortably in the living room of the penthouse. Clark had flown away as Superman, returning only when Anders had been in the shower, and introduced himself in the Clark persona. Anders had nodded, but Clark had had the impression he was a keen observer. Why he hadn’t called Clark on the Superman thing, then, he didn’t know.

“What can you tell us about the Illuminati?” Chloe asked finally.

“Okay, from what I can surmise, it works like this. The world is like a pyramid, which is probably why the Brotherhood use the symbol of the period. It’s like any organisation, where the people at the bottom don’t know what’s going on above them. This is the way the Brotherhood structure their organisation. There are a select few at the top who know everything. This Baron de Rochefort is, I believe, one of those select few.

“So, you have the people at the top who know how everything will fit together, and everyone else plays their part in ignorance. And what the Brotherhood do is make sure that only their people or those who won’t cause trouble for them reach the levels of power which allow them to make the
decisions governing their whole agenda.”

“Tess said something about Lionel Luthor,” Chloe prompted.

“Yes. Now, you know, of course, that Lionel Luthor was part of a plot to murder his parents and that he built his own company on their life insurance. It’s partly true. But the amount of insurance paid out was never going to be enough to build up Luthorcorp to what it was in his day. He needed help. And he got it through the Illuminati. Of course, he wasn’t aware of that at the time.”

Clark frowned at Anders. “How, then?”

“The Brotherhood gave Luthor a certain amount of leeway. Giving him enough financial backing to do what he needed to do to succeed. And they made sure he succeeded by getting the right sort of people to invest in Luthorcorp. Without that investment, Lionel would have ... excuse the expression, fallen over on his arse.”

“So what happened?”

“We have an expression. Lionel got too big for his boots. He became arrogant, too caught up in his own delusions that he was king of all he surveyed. So they set about creating his downfall.”

“So why are they after Superman?” Lois asked, her hand tightening on Clark’s.

“I think you may have figured out part of it,” Anders said. “The issue is, Superman is not part of the Brotherhood. And yet the people of the world look up to him. Superman could easily conquer the world, lead people to better themselves. That isn’t part of the agenda of the New World Order. So they want to control him. By whatever means necessary. And if they can’t control him, they’ll destroy him.”

Translation:

“So all is going according to my plan. The Queens have received the message, no?”

“Yes.”

“And the mayor is more than happy to accommodate our wishes, no? Once the project begins we will control the economy of Smallville.”

“May I advise you reconsider. Our organisation has attempted this before.”

“Ducard. I do not recall you being invited to this discussion.”

“Nevertheless, I felt it necessary to provide my input.”

“I thought Batman killed you.”

“Rumours of my death, my dear doctor, are greatly exaggerated. If you wish to defeat Superman, then you must do so by affirmative action.”

“We have already set our plans in motion. The League of Shadows has no place here.”

“My dear baron, the time for subtlety has passed. The League of Shadows attempted to take Gotham by stealth and started a war with Batman.”

“I will hold counsel on how I conduct my campaign.”

“Just how did you survive? From what I heard, you were last seen on a runaway monorail train.”

“I learned a great many things in the mountains of Bhutan. And one of the lessons was sometimes to defeat your enemy, one must appear to be defeated. The time to strike is now.”

“And I will choose my own method of striking. In two days, Tess Mercer will go to Washington. You know what is to be done.”

“Consider it done, my friend.”
Episode 3: Part 1

Chapter Summary

There's a new player on the board

Episode 3: Power

The woman walking into the offices of the Daily Planet appeared nervous. She walked with a stride that appeared hesitant, even as she made it through the lobby. Glancing at the elevator, she sighed, her shoulders moving up and down. The bag on her shoulder appeared to be heavy, dragging one shoulder down slightly, and she hung on to it as if afraid if she took her hand off the strap for a second it would disappear.

Her brown eyes darted here and there. She appeared to be searching for something, then strode over to the wide staircase, hefting the bag on her shoulder once more and beginning to climb.

Anyone watching would have easily overlooked the woman. She was dressed in a plain black jacket and skirt, with a white blouse underneath. Her dark brown hair was pinned back neatly into a sort of bun, held in place by a large clip. She wasn’t tall. Perhaps no more than 1.65 metres, but she had a slim build and long legs which made her appear taller than she was.

She wore make-up on her face, but it looked as if an amateur had done it. The eyelashes were lightly coated with mascara, but it was not even, with clumps in the corners. Over her eyes, the woman wore a pair of square frames which were not flattering to her face shape.

If it hadn’t been for her apparent nervousness, the woman would never have been noticed at all. Except for the fact that she was so busy looking around her that she didn’t see the tall man descending the stairs until it was too late. They collided, papers in the man’s hands falling to the steps.

“Oh, god, I’m so sorry,” she said.

Simultaneously, the man spoke, apologising profusely. He touched his horn-rimmed glasses, adjusting them on his face.

“Totally my fault, Miss,” he said. “I should have been watching where I was going. Could I perhaps be of assistance?”

Light from one of the windows glinted off a gold band on his left hand. The woman bit her lip, fidgeting, even as she bent down to help Clark Kent gather his papers.

“Um, that’s okay. I, uh, have an, um appointment,” she stammered, blushing furiously, her face turning almost a blotchy red.

“An appointment? With who?” Clark said, frowning.

“Oh, um, the editor-in-chief.” She pulled the bag around to her front and rummaged in the pocket,
bringing out a small notepad. “Perry White?”

“Oh, yeah,” Clark said. “But he’s up on the tenth floor. You sure you don’t want to take the elevator?”

The woman half-smiled, looking awkward. Clark had the impression the woman didn’t smile very often.

“That’s okay,” she said. “The exercise is good for me.”

Clark wasn’t sure the woman could handle a walk up ten flights of stairs, but he made no comment.

“I’m Clark. Clark Kent,” he said.

“Moana,” she said, taking his proffered hand and shaking it.

“That’s an unusual name,” Clark said. He frowned. The woman had some kind of accent, but he couldn’t place it.

“It’s Maori,” she said. “It means an expanse of water.”

Clark’s frown became even deeper, lines forming on his forehead.

“Maori?” He tried to pronounce it as she had, but the words didn’t roll easily off his tongue, coming out sounding more like ‘mouldy’.

“Sorry, I’m guessing it’s not something you Americans hear every day. I’m from New Zealand. I’m a journalist attached to the exhibition in town.”

Clark had vaguely heard something about an exhibition of art works and artefacts from down under, but he hadn’t taken much notice. Well, he’d had a lot of other things on his mind lately.

“Oh. Well, welcome to Metropolis,” he said. “Is this your first time in the States?”

She nodded. “Never been out of the country before, to tell the truth. Except for about a week in Australia. Big cities really aren’t my thing, but, well, I got assigned to this and you know what it’s like. When your editor barks you jump.” She laughed, then glanced at the cheap gold-plated watch on her wrist. “Well, I should get to that appointment. It was very nice to meet you, Clark Kent.”

“Likewise,” Clark smiled. He watched as she started to climb the stairs, then gathered the rest of his papers from the floor before continuing on his way.

Moana hesitated at the top of the stairs, watching Clark’s back. She hated lying, but sometimes lies were necessary. It wasn’t a complete lie. There was an exhibition in town, and she was asked to report on it. But that wasn’t all she was here to do. Somewhere in this god-forsaken city was a man responsible for murder. And she was going to flush him out. Somehow.

***

Antoine de Sade had grown up knowing more about politics than he cared to, but his father had often told him that he would inherit not only the title, but all the political problems that went with it. So he was comfortable here in Washington DC. Not as comfortable as he would have been in Paris, of course, but he at least understood the seats of power.

He had been here about a week, taking the opportunity to attend some public senate committee hearings to observe the methods these Americans used in their democratic processes. De Sade was
not impressed with the so-called democracy the Americans were so proud of. They had tried to sell the idea that the people had some input into the decisions made in government, but as de Sade had seen in the past week, this was just a fallacy.

He glanced at his Rolex watch. Only the finest quality, of course, for a man born into a title which had been in existence for hundreds of years. Unlike his errant ancestor, who had been known for his sexual proclivities and his outspokenness, Antoine de Sade had learned the value of subtlety. He had bided his time, listening to the various conversations until he found the information he needed.

His fourth day into his visit to the nation’s capital, he saw her. A woman of African descent, aged in her mid-sixties. She walked with a limp, and her hair, once a gloriously ebony colour, was now flecked with grey. Her face had previously been smooth and unlined, belying her age, but now it appeared as if she had aged ten years in the past two.

She often came to these sessions, from what de Sade had heard, in an effort to draw support in the senate for a new organisation she was attempting to form in place of her old one.

This particular day, de Sade followed the woman from the halls of power as she limped out of the building. But his path was quickly blocked by a skinny man of average height who wore glasses and a patch over one eye.

“Why are you following us?” he asked.

De Sade began to speak in French, although he could very well converse in English, hoping to throw the young man off track.

“Please excuse me,” he said. “I do not speak English very well. I am but a poor man filled with curiosity.”

There was a sound of a click as the hammer of a gun was pulled back.

“Pourquoi,” said Amanda Waller, late of Checkmate, speaking in fluent French, “ai - je l'impression que vous mentez?”

(“Why do I get the impression you’re lying?”)

De Sade smirked.

“I see you have lost none of your touch, Dr Waller.”

Waller frowned, her brow furrowing.

“Do I know you?”

“We have met. When you were still working for Task Force X and Valentina Vostok. Now I understand you are no longer working for Checkmate.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about me, Mr ...”

“Marquis. Antoine de Sade.”

Waller’s eyebrow shot up, either in an expression of alarm or suspicion. But she let her arm drop, disarming the gun.

“You’re with the Illuminati,” she said.
“Good. Then you are familiar with our work. We have some questions for you. Particularly about the man we now know as Superman.”

The dark-skinned woman frowned. “Everything was destroyed when the Kandorians set fire to Checkmate headquarters,” she said. “There is nothing more I can tell you that you do not already know.”

“That remains to be seen. Come. We should talk.”

Reluctantly, Waller allowed herself to be led away.

***

“Mr Luthor, thank you for seeing me. I know you’re busy.”

Lex stared at the woman. She was attractive, in a nerdy sort of way, with olive skin and dark brown hair. And she spoke in an accent which told him she was from the south Pacific. Maybe the Antipodes. Lex had spent a week in his teens staying near the Great Barrier Reef and had met a few of the locals.

He was busy packing documents in his briefcase, ready for a trip to Washington.

“As you can see, I’m about to take a business trip.”

“Of course. Well, you know how important this exhibition is to my people,” she said. “They’re grateful for the use of the Luthor wing of the museum.”

“Your people?” Lex frowned.

“The indigenous population of New Zealand.”

New Zealand, that was it. He remembered now that the country had become famous for the filming of one of his favourite movie series: The Lord of the Rings. And clearly the woman, Moana, was descended from one of the indigenous population.

“Well, I’m always happy to support the efforts of another country,” he said.

Moana smiled. She opened her mouth to ask another question but was interrupted by a knock on the door. Tess came in.

“Sorry to interrupt, Lex, but I’ve just spoken to the pilot. He’s fuelling up and should be ready to leave in about an hour.”

“Good. Tess, this is Moana Rangihau.” Lex grinned. “Sorry, did I pronounce that correctly?” he said, looking at the journalist.

“Close enough,” she smiled back, but the smile didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Tess Mercer,” the redhead nodded, shaking Moana’s hand. “I believe you’re here with the exhibition. Such an interesting culture. I look forward to hearing more. Are you in town long?”

“A few days,” Moana nodded.


Lex turned back to Moana. “Was there anything else?” he asked.
Moana nodded. She dug in her bag, pulling out a photograph.

“I was wondering if you could help me on a personal project. Do you know this man?”

Lex looked at the photograph. It was the Baron de Rochefort. He quickly schooled his expression into a neutral one.

“No, I’m sorry, I don’t. Who is he?”

“A murderer,” she said.

***

Clark looked around at Watchtower. This had been their ‘clubhouse’ for over three years and he still didn’t completely understand how everything worked. Oliver had clearly gone all out when he’d outfitted this place with the latest in technology, from the one-touch screens to the high-level access to government satellites. And that was one thing that worried him. If they had access to Big Brother, then surely it could work the other way around?

“You worry too much, Clark,” Chloe had once told him.

But if the past few weeks had taught him anything, it was that his worry was valid. He thought back to the Vigilante Registration Act. Now he knew that it had been initiated by someone who had been possessed by an entity which wanted to bring darkness to Earth. But even though he’d had a victory over Darkseid, the battle against the darkness in humans was still raging.

It felt like they were still at war. And that bothered him. He remembered something Carter had once said.

“I’ve been around long enough to know that the only way to win a war is to strike first.”

Carter Hall had been his friend, but Clark wasn’t sure he believed in that philosophy, any more than he believed in killing.

Jor-El had once advised him that in order for there to be balance in the world, there had to be an equal weight in both darkness and light, good and evil. Yin and Yang. And ever since Lex had returned, supposedly from the dead, Clark had found himself harking back to the old Kawatche prophecy of Naman and Sageeth. He’d long ago written the prophecy off as a story, but maybe it hadn’t been.

Lois nudged him with her elbow.

“You look kinda deep in thought there, Smallville,” she said.

“Just thinking,” he told his wife.

“What about?”

He sat down on the couch, pulling her down beside him. Mara was asleep in a small room off the main room of Watchtower. Lois never let the baby out of her sight these days, which was unsurprising, given the scare they’d had over three weeks ago.

And it was strange that these people, the mysterious Illuminati, had made no moves since then. That was what worried him.

Lois touched his hand and he looked down at his beautiful wife. Her long dark hair was brushed
back off her face in an untidy knot, her colour making her look wan. She was tired. Mara was now over six weeks old, but Lois still wasn’t getting much sleep. Clark tried his best to help out, but he’d had to patrol a lot more recently, since Oliver and Chloe had gone back to Star City. Chloe wanted to stay under the radar for a bit, at least until she could get a handle on this threat.

And the thing that worried him lately was that criminal activity seemed to sense that Superman was distracted. He’d missed so many crimes lately. Maybe they were taking more care to not get caught, but Clark doubted it somehow.

“Honey, you’re drifting.”

“Sorry, Lois,” he said. “I was just ...”

“Over-thinking. You always tend to over-think things, Smallville. Now talk to me.”

“I don’t know,” he sighed. “There’s so much going on and I’m not even sure where things stand right now.”

“What’s bothering you right now?” she asked.

“Everything.”

“Well, that narrows it down,” she said with a smile. “Why don’t we start with the basics and work our way up?”

“Did I ever tell you about the legend in the caves?” he asked.

Lois’ eyes darted and she frowned at him.

“The Kawatche caves?”

“Yes.”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t think you did.”

“Well, there’s a painting on the wall of a two-headed monster. Kyla Willowbrook told me that it was Naman and Sageeth.”

“Whoa, back up there, Smallville. Kyla?”

“I sort of, um, dated her. Well, not really. I mean, we got together a couple of times, but ...”

“When was this?” Lois asked, with the slight bitter tone of jealousy in her voice.

“Sophomore year.” Lois seemed happier with that.

“Okay. Go on.”

“Kyla’s grandfather had been searching for the caves, which got buried sometime in the late sixties. I stumbled across them. Well, more like fell in. Anyway, Kyla told me that there was a prophecy of Naman, who came to Earth in a rain of fire, had the strength of ten men and could shoot fire from his eyes.”

“And of course, she naturally assumed that was you? How did she know about your powers?”

“Uh, well, she found me when I fell. It must have been about a hundred feet, and I didn’t have a
“I see. So where is this Kyla now?”

“She died. It’s a long story. But anyway, back to the legend, it said that Naman and Sageeth were like brothers, but somewhere along the way they were supposed to become enemies. One good, the other evil.”

“That sounds a lot like you and Lex,” Lois commented.

“Yeah, it does.”

“So you were thinking about Lex?”

“I suppose. I mean, even Dr Fate told me Lex was destined to be my greatest enemy. But I was thinking about something Jor-El said. That there always had to be a balance in the universe. A Yin to someone’s Yang.”

“What does this have to do with what is happening now? With the Illuminati?”

“It just seems like we defeat one evil only to come up with something bigger.”

“That’s why it’s so important to never give up, honey. To keep fighting. Remember that silly movie we saw one night before Mara was born? Totally cheesy, but there’s a line in it that always stuck.”

“Never give up. Never surrender. You’re right. It is cheesy.”

Clark got up and began playing with the keys on the main computer.

“I met someone today. She seemed ... I don’t know. A little odd.”

“In what way?”

“I don’t know. She seemed awkward, but I just got the feeling it was all an act. She’s supposedly here with the exhibition in town.”

“Do you have a name?” Lois asked.

“Rangihau.” He thought that was how it was pronounced.

“Rangi what?” Lois got up and went to the computer. “What exhibition?”

“The one in the Luthorcorp wing of the Metropolis Museum,” he said.

“From New Zealand?” Lois frowned. “Okay, let’s see what I can do here,” she said, beginning to type.

***

De Rochefort peered at the screen at de Sade.

“J’ai pris contact avec Amanda Waller,” Antoine was saying. “Je crois que ce n’est qu’une question de temps avant qu’elle ne vienne a travailler pour nous.”

“Excellent, mon ami.” Yves told his fellow Illuminati. He signed out and glanced at the clock showing the current time in Bavaria. Almost time.
“I’ve made contact with Amanda Waller. I believe it is only a matter of time before she comes to work for us.”

“Excellent, my friend.”

Meanwhile, a man sat in a large conference room in the state located in the south east of Germany. He was surrounded by computer monitors, the room looking more like the bridge of the Enterprise than a conference room. The man smirked at the thought. Americans and their television, he thought. If they’d stopped watching the idiot box long enough, they might actually have noticed the little coup going on in their own country. But they hadn’t. And sleeper agents had managed to infiltrate the seats of power with barely a murmur.

A monitor flickered into life and he stared at the screen. Other monitors began flickering.

“Welcome, brothers and sisters,” he said, smiling in welcome. “We will begin our briefings momentarily.”

He waited until all were online, then nodded in satisfaction at the figure in the first monitor.

Like himself, every one of the six members were dressed in black. The men in black business suits with black silk shirts, in the finest quality money could buy. The women were also dressed in silk, in conservative dresses – form-fitting, but so well cut they hid more than they showed. Every one of the six were slim. The Illuminati made no allowances for imperfections.

The man known only as Annaboth to those who knew him, had been elected to his seat a few years earlier by each known branch of the brotherhood. His name was kept confidential, for the most part, and to others outside this elite group of seven, he was known only by his rank. Number One.

Each member wore a simple badge, giving proof of their membership, on their lapel or pinned above the breast. The badge held the symbol of the Illuminati – a light-emitting giant eye, hovering above a pyramid and surrounded by a pentagram.

Number One stood, waiting, allowing a calm to wash over him.

“We shall begin. Number Three, brief us on the status of your mission. And speak in English.”

Number Three nodded in reverence. He may have a very high rank in the Brotherhood, but he knew when to bow to his superiors.

“Thanks to our brothers and sisters in Paris and London, as well as the Brussels headquarters of the European Union, we have succeeded in creating economic instability. Despite various governments’ actions to avoid bankruptcy, shareholders have fled to Asia, and we have seen multiple demonstrations against poverty and unemployment. In North America, there have been recent troubles with loans being called in – all, of course, orchestrated by our loyal friends. The Americans now have economic bankruptcy to match their moral bankruptcy.”

The others nodded. One clapped softly for a few seconds, until Number One turned to them, nodding slightly. The woman stopped. Number Three continued.

“There is, however, a threat... these so-called superheroes with their strange powers. And thanks to our agents placed in government organisations, and to our investments, we can now begin to move against these superheroes.”

“To what purpose?” Number Six asked.
“To study them. I have personally been overseeing a plan to take a hybrid of the one called Superman. We know his true identity. Our testing has confirmed this. We are currently preparing underground bases purposely built for the study of these beings, and for those we now know to have power mutations by the substance known as Kryptonite. I have personally made a significant investment in a town called Smallville, and I will use the opportunity this gives me to gather more of this substance.”

De Rochefort smiled evilly.

“I am prepared to be patient, my friends. The United States, with its Vigilante Registration Act failed, but we will not fail, my friends.”

“What is your plan, Number Three?” Number One spoke.

“Soon, Number One. Soon the foolish American public will no longer believe in their hero, and we will crush Superman.”

This time, the applause was deafening.
Moana visits Lex

Lex stared at the young woman.

“A murderer? How so?”

Her brown eyes were reserved as she looked him over.

“That isn’t important right now, Mr Luthor. And I understand you have a plane to catch. I won’t keep you, but I would like to talk more on this when you return.”

“Of course. I expect to be in Washington no more than about three days. Will you still be in town then?”

“The exhibition runs for a month. I’ll be around,” she said.

Lex nodded. “Please excuse me,” he said. “I have some things to finish here before I leave. You can give your card to my assistant.”

“Of course,” she said coolly. “Thank you.”

When she had gone, Lex found himself staring into space. The woman intrigued him. She dressed like someone who wanted to hide. Rather a lot like Clark in the years they’d been friends. And how he dressed now. Clark had often dressed in high school like he was trying to blend in. But someone as tall as he was and as good-looking as he was had no chance of hiding.

Even now, Clark hid his true self behind ugly horn-rimmed glasses, a bad haircut and a long, tan-coloured overcoat that would have looked better on a homeless man, or a flasher. All Clark needed to complete the look was the two-day old stubble.

Lex sighed and got up from his desk, going out to his assistant.

“I want you to find me all you can get on Moana Rangihau. Dig up every piece of dirt you can find. Understand? I want it on my desk when I get back from Washington.”

The assistant paled, but nodded. “Yes sir.”

Everyone in his office was absolutely terrified of him. The only one who didn’t show it was Tess. Of course, the stunt she had pulled at the press conference announcing his return had ensured that he couldn’t just easily get rid of her. And since her allegiance was with the so-called Justice League, he at least had a way of keeping tabs on the so-called heroes.

As much as Lex hated to admit it, he needed the heroes right now. The Illuminati triumvirate were making moves in Smallville which could seriously damage his corporate bottom line.
Amanda Waller was nothing if not intelligent, and she quickly recognised the implied threats from de Sade. The man no doubt had connections very high up. But what bothered her most was the way the man appealed to her innate curiosity. Waller had been intrigued by Superman since he’d made his debut. She was desperate to talk to the superhero, find out what made him tick. And with any luck, convince him to work for the US government.

But, of course, since the debacle of the Vigilante Registration Act, Superman, Green Arrow and their cohorts had rejected any overtures from the government. As Oliver Queen, aka Green Arrow had spat back, the VRA had seen to it that anyone with any kind of super ability could not trust those in power not to exploit their abilities.

Waller was still uncertain of the superheroes’ agendas. Were they in this for profit or something else? She knew there had been several in the seats of power who had wondered quite vocally if Superman was planning on taking over the world government. He certainly had the power.

She recalled Oliver’s impassioned speech on a television broadcast over two years ago. The reporter had been scathing in her criticism. Of course, Oliver had ‘come out’ in an atmosphere of distrust of any hero who chose to hide his face. So her scepticism was natural.

“This isn’t about who I am, it’s about what I do,” Oliver had said. “And I don’t think I’m the first rich boy who felt that way. It was John F Kennedy who once said ‘ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can for your country’.”

The woman had frowned at him, surprised by his passion, and somewhat cynical in his use of the slain former president.

“So, now you’re – you’re comparing yourself to a fallen hero of this country?”

“Well, why not? He saw the hero in all of us. I’m not dwelling on revenge for past atrocities or looking ahead to what I can purposefully gain from a few tax breaks, drilling oil wells in the ocean, putting up razor-wired fences to keep out immigrants who only want what our grandparents wanted. In this world of arm-chaired bloggers, who’ve created a generation of critics instead of leaders, I’m actually doing something, right here, right now for the city, for my country.”

A great speech to be sure, Waller thought, but what did it all mean in the end? Superman was out there preventing crime, stopping bank robberies, rapes and murders, while shying away from international affairs saying it wasn’t his business to interfere. He remained politically neutral. And as the British were fond of saying: ‘Never the Twain shall meet.’ There would never be any compromise, no meeting in the middle.

“Pourquoi les Illuminatis sont intéressé par Superman?” she asked de Sade as she sat in his hotel room, sipping from a glass of fine French cognac.

“Ah directe et franche Madame,” de Sade said. “En effet pourquoi?” He smirked and sat down beside her, patting her knee, a move that rankled. Amanda Waller was not a touchy-feely kind of person and she didn’t like anyone getting in her space. De Sade did not seem to notice her distaste.

“Superman est un ennemi pour notre existence.”

“Comment cela?”

“Les Gens, se tourne vers lui non?”

Waller was suddenly aware that they were both speaking French, yet it seemed as natural as her native English.
“Superman est une menace pour le Nouvelle Ordre Mondiale,” she surmised.

“Les Illuminati ont maintenu leur existence secrète pendant des millénaires, non, plus que cela. Oh, bien sûr, il y'a toujours des suppositions, des mythes. Mais aucune théories n'a jamais réussi à prouver notre existence, sans l'ombre d'un doute. Mais Nous guidons, non...” He seemed to have difficulty coming up with the right phrase and he waved his hands in the air as if he was manipulating something. Waller frowned in thought.

“Vous voulez dire que vous tirez les ficelles. Comme des poupées, des Marionnettes.”

“Ah oui c'est exactement cela.”

“Et bien sûr, Superman ne peut pas être manipulé, ne peut pas être contrôlé.”

“Vous avais compris Madame.”

Of course she understood. The Illuminati had been rumoured to be behind almost every dark event in the history of the so-called civilised world. Whether it had been the rise of Third Reich in Nazi Germany, or, more recently, the felling of the twin towers in New York, they had been pulling the strings of every organisation, terrorist group or political party. Their influence spread wide.

“Mais Superman est Politiquement neutre,” she pointed out. “Jusqu'ici, tout ce qu'il a fait est de prévenir la criminalité dans Métropolis et les aider les gens dans une des rares catastrophes naturelles.”

“Je ne crois pas que vous soyer naïf, Madame.”

Waller frowned. No, she wasn’t that naive, but she still didn’t see the point he was making.

“N'est-ce pas un de vos contemporain, un solliciteur général qui a dit: 'Une société amortis par un réseau d'étouffement de lois, tout en trouvant la libération dans le chaos moral n'est pas susceptible d'être heureux ou stable'?"’

“Robert Bork?”

The law professor had been Solicitor-General in the eighties, and had also been an acting Attorney-General, with a failed nomination to the Supreme Court.

“Vous dite que vous voulais le Chaos?”

“Je crois qu'il y'a un terme pour cela, inventé par un auteur particulièrement connue pour son franc-parler. Il l'a appelé problème-réaction-solution.”

Of course, Waller thought. Create the problem, allow it to escalate to the point where the public begin to protest, then provide the solution. It had been done with the Great Depression in the 1920s. Many sociologists had expounded the theory that over-spending on vast amounts of credit was what had led to the economic downfall and the crash of Wall Street, leading to the rise in popularity of socialist policies. It was no coincidence that Roosevelt’s ‘New Deal’ and other countries’ political reforms showed remarkable similarity.

Superman had only been known in Metropolis a couple of years. Before that, of course, he’d been known as the Blur. But the crime rate in Metropolis had decreased considerably. People were happier, more hopeful, because they had their hero to look up to.

And that was something the Illuminati could not allow.
“Why would the Illuminati be interested in Superman?”
“Ah, direct and to the point, Madame. Why indeed? Superman is a threat to our very existence.”
“How so?”
“The people, they look up to him, no?”
“Superman is a threat to the New World Order.”
“The Illuminati have kept their existence a secret for a millennia; no, more than that. Oh, of course, there is always supposition, myth. But no one living has ever managed to prove our existence beyond a shadow of a doubt. We guide, no? We ...”
“You mean you pull the strings. Like puppets. Marionettes.”
“Ah, yes, this is so.”
“And of course, Superman is someone who can’t be manipulated. Can’t be controlled.”
“You understand, madame.”
“But, Superman is politically neutral,” she pointed out. “So far, all he’s done is prevent crime in Metropolis and help out in a few natural disasters.”
“I do not believe you are that naive, madame.”
“Was it not one of your people, a Solicitor General who said: ‘A society deadened by a smothering network of laws while finding release in moral chaos is not likely to be either happy or stable’?”
“Robert Bork?”
“You’re saying you want the chaos?”
“I believe there is a term for it, coined by a particularly outspoken author. He called it problem-reaction-solution.”

***

The flight had been, thankfully, short. Tess had watched her brother, anxious to get the flight over and done with. Lex had been on the phone the entire time, to his attorney, from the sound of it, and had ignored her. For that, Tess was grateful.

They were supposedly attending a dinner that evening and Martha Kent was supposed to be there. Tess hadn’t seen the senator since Clark and Lois’ second, more successful wedding, two weeks after the aborted one. Tess was fond of the Kent matriarch, although it had taken time for the two women to build a rapport. Martha had been initially reserved. Tess could understand that, however. After everything the Luthors had done to the Kents, it was no surprise.

As soon as the plane had taxied in to the hangar, Tess picked up her bag and briefcase, following Lex out to the limo. He still ignored her and she wondered if he was thinking about the young woman who had come to his office earlier. She knew he had already started investigating the woman.

The limo stopped outside the hotel and Tess continued following Lex, trying to keep up with his longer strides. He was clearly in a bad mood and she wasn’t going to do anything to make it worse.

Once up in the penthouse suite, Lex went to the master bedroom. Tess found the second bedroom and shrugged out of her travelling clothes, going to the shower. Ten minutes later, she came out of the adjoining bathroom wrapped in a towelling robe, her long wet hair wrapped in a turban.

She sat on the bed and picked up her cellphone, dialling the number on her speed dial.

“Clark, it’s Tess.”

“Hey Tess. What’s up? I thought you were in Washington?”

“I am. Listen, Lex had a visitor at his office today. A woman. A reporter, actually.”
“Let me guess. Moana?”

“You had a run in with her too?”

“Yeah. She was at the Planet to see Perry.”

“Did anything strike you as odd about her?” Tess asked.

“Actually, yes. Lois and I are looking into it. We’ll let you know if we find out anything.”

“I’m sure Lex has asked his assistant to investigate her too.”

“Any idea what she wanted to talk to Lex about?”

“It sounded like she wanted to interview him, but there was something off about her. I don’t know. Maybe I’m paranoid.”

“I doubt it,” Clark answered. “Don’t worry about it, Tess. Just ... watch your back. You know how Lex is. And say hi to my mom for us.”

“Will do.”

Tess disconnected the call and began unpacking her suitcase, pulling out the formal dress she was planning on wearing to the dinner. It was a lavender silk strapless dress with a tight bodice. She shook it out and hung it up.

The door was flung open and Lex walked in. Tess glared at him.

“Lex, have you ever heard of the word privacy?”

“I wanted to make sure you knew the agenda for tonight.”

“Yes, Lex. Mingle, talk to a few senators. I was acting CEO for you for over a year.”

“Before you sold me out to Oliver Queen,” Lex sneered. “Just make sure you keep to your role tonight. You’re representing Luthorcorp, not your ‘friends’ in the Justice League.”

“I am perfectly aware of my place, thank you,” she told him coldly. “Now get out so I can finish getting ready.”

“Be careful, Tess,” Lex said. “I gave you your position because you were my flesh and blood. And I don’t tolerate betrayal.”

“Hence your throwing Lionel out a sixty storey window.”

“Lionel’s death was a suicide!” Lex returned.

“I’ll believe that like I’ll believe you never had any intention of killing me when you returned. Don’t worry, Lex. I know how to behave like a Luthor.”

Tess glared at Lex’s retreating back, wishing she had heat vision like Clark. Sometimes Lex treated her like a glorified assistant rather than an executive VP. Hatred bubbled up like bile in her throat.

The only reason she’d chosen to return to the family corporation after Lex’s return was because her friends needed inside information. But since Lex already knew she was working with the League, it was all kind of pointless.
She really needed to re-assess her life.

The biggest problem was, Tess was lonely. Sure, she was surrounded by good friends, but she hadn’t dated anyone in months, and the last guy she’d slept with had tried to kill her. Not tried, really. He had killed her. It was only Granny Goodness who had brought her back to life. And just the thought of what that evil woman had been capable of gave Tess shivers.

An hour later, Tess left the suite and made her way down to the waiting limo outside. Lex was already waiting for her, looking handsome in a black tuxedo, his bald head shining.

“You’re late,” Lex commented, nose deep in some folders. He nodded his head toward some other folders lying on the seat. “Study them. Those are the people I want you to mingle with. I happen to know Senator Kelley is a sucker for a beautiful woman.”

“Are you suggesting I seduce them?” Tess asked.

“It’s good business,” Lex told her, still reading. “Know your enemy.”

“These aren’t your enemies. These are senators.”

“Senators who happen to be on the committee for Armed Services, and thus have veto power over any projects with military applications.”

And Luthorcorp needed the research and development contracts, Tess thought. She picked up the folders with a sigh and began reading.

Most of the guests had already gathered in the ballroom and were politely mingling. Tess saw Martha and immediately went to greet her.

“Senator Kent,” she said.

“How’s Clark?”

Tess looked at the newcomer. Kara, of course, in her guise as Linda Danvers. She was wearing a brunette wig and large glasses.

“You know Clark. They’re hanging in there. Did you manage to talk to ...”

“Yes, I did,” Kara told her. “In fact ...” Her eyes widened and she gasped. “It’s that man who was in the farmhouse. The NSA agent.”

Tess frowned, looking at the agent. Crawford was as blonde as Oliver, with a slightly sallow complexion and short stubble around his chin and on his upper lip. He was tall, possibly 1.83m and extremely good-looking.

He spotted them watching and winked. Tess turned back to Kara.

“Do you think he recognised you?” she asked the young woman also known as Supergirl.
“I don’t think so. At least, I hope not.”

“Well, I hope not either,” a voice said. Tess turned and looked at the tall dark-haired man. He smiled briefly. “Miss Mercer. Or are you using the name Luthor now?”

“Tess is fine. Mr Wayne. I’m surprised to see you here.”

“Well, your brother and I do have similar business interests.” He turned, his eyes sparkling as he studied Martha. “And this must be the lovely Senator Kent. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise, Mr Wayne,” she said.

He smiled congenially. “Please, call me Bruce.” He then turned his attention to Kara. “And you are ...?” Although he clearly knew exactly who she was. Tess figured he was doing it for the sake of the people gathered around them.

“This is my niece, Linda Danvers,” Martha told him.

Two others came to join their little group. Tess was immediately taken with the tall, dark-haired man whose expression and laughing eyes were a complete contrast to Bruce’s more taciturn expression.

“I don’t believe you have met Steve Trevor and Diana Prince,” Martha continued.

“No, I can’t say I have,” Bruce answered.

Tess noticed Lex shooting her a look and she quickly excused herself, with a roll of her eyes. Martha smiled at her and nodded with complete understanding. Tess mingled for a while, intent on at least fulfilling part of her obligations to Luthorcorp.

“Miss Mercer, what a surprise to see you here. And may I say you look very lovely tonight.”

Tess turned and looked at the man.

“Signore Donatello,” she said.

“Please,” he said, lifting her hand to kiss it. “I must insist you call me Francesco.”

Lex turned away from watching the exchange and focused his full attention on the older man. Ross Webster was an ass, and probably his biggest rival in the field of biotech research and development.

“Where is your sister this evening?” Lex enquired.

“Oh, she’s around somewhere,” Webster said. “Of course, you know my friend Lorelai,” he added, grasping the arm of a blonde woman about twenty years his junior.

“Of course,” Lex nodded.

“I see your charming sister is accompanying you this evening,” Ross said, leering at Tess’ cleavage. Lex bristled. “My sister is not your concern,” he snapped.

Webster smirked. “Careful, Luthor. You know what your old man used to say about mixing business and family. It never ends well.”

Webster turned away with another smirk. Lex sipped his champagne, glaring at the man’s back. As he glanced around the room, he saw Tess frowning at him. He scowled at her and stalked off.
Clark came downstairs from the bedroom to find Lois sitting on the couch flicking through the channels. She sat back with a sigh.

“He has cable and still there’s nothing on.”

“You sound restless,” Clark told his wife.

“I am. Mara okay?”

“Yeah, she’s asleep.”

“God help me, but I can’t wait until she starts sleeping through the night.” She looked up at him, seeing him dressed only in loose pants and t-shirt. “I thought you were going to go out on patrol?”

“I don’t want to leave you here alone,” he told her.

“I’ll be fine. It’s not like someone’s going to fly through the terrace doors, now is it? There’s only one flyboy in this neck of the woods. Go, patrol.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“You know, I could always call Kara to ...”

“Kara’s in Washington again, remember? She said mom invited her to the dinner tonight and she wanted another chance to talk to Diana.”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot.” He zipped upstairs and returned within a couple of seconds with his suit on. He leaned down and kissed her. “Don’t stay up too late.”

He flew off from the terrace over the city, tuning in with his super hearing for any trouble in the city. It seemed mostly quiet. Mostly. There were a few accidents and fires, but they occurred within a couple of blocks from assistance, so he knew he wasn’t needed.

Just as he was planning to give up on patrol and head back to Oliver’s clock tower apartment, he spotted a young woman being followed by two very large men. The woman looked vaguely familiar. He flew down, intending to land, just as the two men decided to try and rob the young woman. She turned and glared viciously at them.

The two men laughed.

“You can take us on, little lady?”

She smirked. “Well, let’s see, you’re both way out of shape and heart attacks waiting to happen, plus you’re old and ugly. What do you think?”

Clark snickered. She had guts. He watched a little more as the two men looked at each other and launched at the woman. She easily dodged them. They turned and tried to corner her against a dumpster, but she ran up the wall and somersaulted, wrenching out of their grips and giving them both kicks in the back.

The two men stumbled, crashing against the wall and turned, looking stunned at being so beaten by a slip of a girl. They looked at each other and shrugged, then took off running. The woman looked
disgusted.

“Is that all you’ve got? Morons!”

Clark almost split his sides, laughing. She clearly didn’t need his help. The woman turned and resumed walking.

“Enjoy the show, Superman?” she asked.

He stopped floating in the air and joined her on the ground.

“You were doing so well on your own,” he told her.

She laughed. “Yeah, idiots thought they could rob me. I’m no Buffy, but I can hold my own.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Buffy?”

“Yeah, you know. Buffy. Blonde, little, kills vampires?”

“That’s a tv show,” he answered.

“That was a joke,” she returned.

She resumed walking and he began walking with her.

“What are you doing out here this time of night?”

“Oh?”

Clark frowned. Her voice sounded familiar. It almost sounded like ... but the accent was different. She talked with an American accent.

“Maybe you can help,” she said. “Do you have an email, or ... No, of course you don’t. That would be ridiculous.”

“You can contact me through Clark Kent at the Daily Planet.”

“Oh, right,” she said, nodding. “They seem to have the exclusive on you.”

“Well, Clark Kent and Lois Lane are friends of mine.”

“Great. I’ll give Mr Kent a call tomorrow.”

“Would you like me to walk you home?” he asked.

“Thanks Superman, but I’m sure I’ll be fine. You probably have better things to do than babysit.”

“Well, goodnight then, Miss ... I don’t know your name.”

“I didn’t give you my name,” she said with a smirk. “Good night, Superman.”
Episode 3: Part 3

Chapter Summary

De Rochefort's wife comes to town

The dark limousine slowly entered through the main entry to Metropolis International Airport. Two small French flags were mounted on either side of the car’s long hood and the registration showed diplomatic identification. Members of the public stared, wondering what dignitary could be inside the long, black vehicle, or who it might be collecting.

The limousine parked in a loading zone, its driver ignorant of the glare from security. Simon Valmont emerged from the front seat of the vehicle, his nose in the air as if he barely deigned to acknowledge the man in security uniform standing before the main doors. He moved around to the pavement side of the rear of the limousine and opened the door with a flourish.

Yves de Rochefort stepped out, acknowledging his man with a nod. Simon followed his employer into the main terminal, always two steps behind, signifying his importance. De Rochefort headed to the small café and sat in the booth. Simon sat across from him, removing his chauffeur’s cap. For all that de Rochefort was his employer, Simon was trusted with all de Rochefort’s secrets.

A waitress approached the table with a pad in hand. She was blonde, attractive, with a large bust which threatened to burst the buttons of her white blouse. Yves looked her up and down appreciatively. He believed himself to be a connoisseur of women and he enjoyed the female figure in all its forms.

“Good evening,” she said politely. “Can I get you gentlemen anything?”

"Oui," Simon told her in French. "Mon employeur souhaite du Café Français, avec un café mais pas de crème, avec un peut d’édulcorant et je voudrais un noir court."

The young woman frowned, then nodded. "Je reviens tout de suite," she said in French.

Within five minutes she had returned with the coffees. The baron sampled his and scowled.

"Pouah, ce n'est pas du Cafe Français," he told Simon. "Les Américains n'ont aucune idée de ce qui est un bon café. Il est imbuvable." Simon grimaced at the taste of his own coffee.

"C'est tout aussi mauvais", he said, putting the cup down and glaring at it as if it was poison.

"Pah!" Yves said. "Le Café américain est comme tout le reste des américain.Inférieur."

"En effet," Simon agreed."Mais qu'est-ce que vous pouvez attendre d'une nation de barbares,” he laughed.

They left the coffee aside and began to talk of trivial matters until there was an announcement over the loudspeakers.

“Announcing the arrival of the Minerva, flight Whiskey Alpha Tango 461 from Bordeaux at Gate 42.”
"Elle est là," Yves said.

The two men rose. Simon left cash on the table – the precise amount of the bill and no tip. He knew the waitress would silently curse them, but he cared little. He followed his employer out of the café and pointed to the sign indicating where Gate 42 would be. It would be a little while before their passenger would clear through the border checks, despite her being on a private jet, and they took their time walking down to the arrival gate.

Thirty minutes later, a tall woman with blonde hair pulled back into a tight chignon appeared, walking quickly down toward them. She was a woman of wealth. Her clothes were made from only the finest quality fabrics and the latest in contemporary fashion for a woman in her late thirties. Two other women followed closely behind, both dressed in black pantsuits, their black hair cut very short.

The woman was at least fifteen years younger than the baron. Or so it appeared to every passer-by. She was, at least, youthful in appearance.

"Stephanie, ma chère, vous êtes venue," Yves said, moving forward to greet his wife.


"Comment etait le défilé de mode?" he asked.

Stephanie de Rochefort was the editor of a French fashion magazine, Madame. She was often required to attend fashion shows at the invitations of companies advertising in the magazine. She was a woman extremely conscious of her image, but she wore it well.

"Ah, la mode ces jours-ci," she said, shaking her head. "Les concepteurs sont plus jeunes et les jupes sont plus courtes. Je ne sais pas ce que ces filles pensent. Ils n'ont pas de gout," she complained.

"Tandis que vous, ma chère, vous avais toujours eu un goût charmant. C'est ce qui m'a attiré à vous depuis le moment où j'ai posé les yeux sur vous."

Stephanie smiled. "Vous avez toujours été si charmant mon cher mari. Maintenant, dites-moi comment votre petit projet progresse?"

De Rochefort took her arm, guiding her gently toward the exit.

"Nous allons en discuter dans la voiture, ma cher. Il y'a pas qu'une raison du pourquoi je vous est demandé ici."

"Tout ce que vous voudrais, mon cher mari."

Simon opened the car door for the couple and they slipped inside. The two bodyguards made their way to a vehicle parked behind, getting in the back. Simon closed the door and moved to the driver’s side.

Stephanie looked at her husband as he took a small tablet from a compartment. She looked at the image he brought up on the screen.

"Lex Luthor," she said. "Je me souviens d'un article il ya plusieurs années dans le magazine Forbes."

Yves nodded. "Je veux que vous leséduisiez," he said.

"Je prend cela, il a refusé l'alliance?"
"Il a. Mes collègues ont déjà commencé à chercher des alliances et se déplace ailleurs, mais je persiste à croire Luthor sera le meilleur choix."

"Vous souhaitez pour le discréditer, qui entre à son tour vers le bas dans le domaine des valeurs boursières de sa société."

"Oui, très bien."

"Mais mon cher mari, je dois demander. Je connais la réputation de Luthor. Il est impitoyable et franchement je ne vois pas comment le public va se retourner contre lui, même dans sa disgrâce."

"Bah, le public sont des moutons!" de Rochefort growled. "Et si nous faisons suffisamment de bruit, ils suivront n'importe quelle direction ou nous voudrons les diriger."

Stephanie understood at last. De Rochefort would make himself the ‘victim’, the cuckolded husband; he would be vocal in his outrage and it would curry favour with the public.

“Voulez-vous le faire?"

Stephanie smiled evilly. "Mais bien sûr."

“‘Yes. My employer wishes for French roast, no cream, with a little sweetener and I would like a short black.’"

“I’ll be right back.”

“Ugh, this is not French Roast. The Americans have no idea what is good coffee. It is undrinkable.”

“This is just as bad.”

“Pah! American coffee is just like everything else American. Inferior.”

“Indeed. But what can you expect from a nation of barbarians.”

“There she is.”

“Stephanie, my dear, you made it.”

“I am very pleased to see you my dear.”

“How was the fashion show?”

“Ah, the fashion these days. The designers are getting younger and the skirts are getting shorter. I don’t know what these girls are thinking. They have no taste.”

“Whereas you, my dear, have always had charming taste. It is what attracted me to you from the very moment I set eyes on you.”

“You have always been so very charming yourself, husband. Now, tell me how your little project is progressing.”

“We will discuss that in the car, my dear. There is a reason why I asked you here.”

“Anything for you, my husband.”

“I remember an article many years ago in Forbes magazine.”

“I want you to seduce him.”

“I take it he has refused the alliance?”

“He has. My colleagues have already begun moves to seek alliances elsewhere but I still believe Luthor will be the better choice.”

“You wish to discredit him, which will in turn drive down the stock values of his company.”

“Yes, very good.”

“But husband, I must ask. I know Luthor’s reputation. He is ruthless and frankly I fail to see how the public will turn against him, even in his disgrace.”

“Pah, the public are sheep! And if we make enough noise, they will follow whatever direction we lead them.”

“Will you do it?”

“But of course.”
Tess found the Italian doctor to be extremely charming as he talked. She remembered him from the earlier meeting with Lex and knew, of course, of his agenda, but as he spoke, she wondered if he was completely in agreement with his Illuminati ‘brothers’.

He was very eloquent; flattering but without seeming as if he was trying to ... what was the expression? she thought. Butter her up?

Tess had always been fairly cynical. She hadn’t considered herself to be the type of person who would fall for empty words of praise. Then again, she hadn’t had much praise in her life.

Her father, or her adoptive father, had been a drunk and abusive with it. He had been physically abusive, breaking her arm three times and rupturing her eardrum when he’d beaten her about the head.

She hadn’t learned to read and write until she was nearly eight, and that had been only after a former teacher had taken pity on her and given her a reader. Tess had soaked up the knowledge like a sponge and begged for more, although it all had to be in secret. Hank Mercer had never seen the need to educate girls and he had destroyed any books in the swamp house in Louisiana. Tess’ mother had been little help. Just as ignorant as Hank, Beth had died of typhoid when Tess was fourteen – a disease which had been eradicated in all but the most poverty-stricken areas of the country.

Determined that she would never become a victim to that kind of ignorance, Tess had worked hard to get high grades, even if it made her the most unpopular girl in her class. The state had finally intervened when Tess was ten, forcing her parents to send her to school. And Tess had made the most of it, testing out of the grade appropriate for her age not once but three times, earning a full academic scholarship to Harvard at fifteen. Free of her father at last, Tess had gone on to the university to study for a degree in Marine Biology.

Eleven years ago, at nineteen, Tess had been on a ship, taking part in a study in the South Pacific when the ship had been taken over by drug runners. They had been forced to sail to an island and it was there that Tess had met Oliver Queen who, coincidentally, had been marooned by the same drug runners two years earlier.

The two of them had managed to escape the drug runners and find their way back to the States. For a short time, Tess had embarked on a relationship with the Queen Industries scion, but she had caught him cheating on her with a seating hostess from their favourite Star City restaurant and she had left him feeling bitter and swearing never to allow herself to be that vulnerable again.

Tess had been surprised when she was head-hunted by Luthorcorp and offered a job working in their marine science division. She’d later been assigned to work on Project Mercury in Honduras, helping to gather viruses. But their camp was destroyed in an explosion and she was badly hurt.

After her recovery, which had been personally overseen by Lex, Tess had begun to think of him as her mentor and she had become an eager pupil. She had honestly believed her hard work and dedication had led him to promote her to a regional VP and to take over as acting CEO when he’d disappeared but she knew better now.

There were times when Tess wondered if Lex had been planning on disappearing the day he’d gone to the Arctic. But she knew that somehow Lex’s plans had gone awry with the collapse of Clark’s fortress. And he had obviously never planned on her learning of the way he’d used her.

Tess knew she had made some bad decisions in the past. Some of those had been motivated by the
fact that she had refused to allow herself to be vulnerable. She had been bitter from the abuse by her father, then by Lex’s betrayal. It was only through Clark’s friendship that she had learned to step off the destructive path she was on and as such, had become a valued member of his team.

“You seem deep in thought, my dear,” Francesco said with a smile.

He had studied Tess Mercer thoroughly and knew what motivated her. The woman was someone who had known little love in her life and he wanted to use that to seduce her to their side. Tess began to answer, but Lex stepped in.

“Excuse me,” he said rudely. “I need to speak with my sister. Alone, if you don’t mind.”

Donatello waved a hand nonchalantly. He disliked Lex intensely and felt he would sooner work with the devil than with this man. But the Luthors owed them a great debt. After all, it was they who had helped Lionel make his way to the top of the corporate world. As it was the brotherhood who had assisted Morgan Edge to become Metropolis’ own answer to Al Capone. And the brotherhood never let go of their debts.

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Kara had spent much of the night at Martha’s side, wondering if she should at least pretend to mingle. But Martha had been sensitive to her quandary, telling friends and colleagues that ‘her niece’ was shy. Kara hadn’t meant to appear so clingy, but she had been reluctant to let the senator out of her sight, given what had occurred in the past few days.

Steve Trevor, however, appeared to take matters into his own hands.

“Senator, would you care to dance with a man with two left feet?” he asked.

“Well, I wouldn’t,” Martha laughed, “but I will dance with you.”

Steve chuckled, taking Martha’s hand and leading her to the dance floor. Bruce, who had been hovering nearby, seemed to take it as an invitation.

“Miss Prince, would you like to dance with me?” he asked, playing the role of the Gotham playboy to the hilt.

Diana nodded sedately. “Thank you,” she said.

Kara glanced at the dark-haired couple, wondering if Bruce was aware that Diana was Wonder Woman. She knew from Clark that Chloe had met with both of them while she had been underground all those months, but whether that meant she had revealed to either of them their mutual existence was another matter.

Standing alone, Kara became aware of the interest of the NSA agent. She shivered slightly, hoping that the simple disguise of the brunette wig and large black-rimmed glasses were enough for him not to recognise her. But she doubted it.

The intensity of the man’s stare unnerved her. As Lois would say, he ‘freaked her out’. Kara smiled as she thought fondly of Lois. The woman might not always think before speaking, but she certainly had a way with words. Kara had to admit that she and Lois had definitely not got off to a great start. Well, she had attacked Lois when she’d seen both Lois and Clark by her ship after it had been released from the mud at Reeves Dam. They’d had a long talk about that once Lois had revealed she knew of Clark’s Kryptonian origins and they’d both apologised for their actions.
Lois could still be brash at times, but Kara could see how much she loved Clark and that was enough for her.

“May I have this dance?”

Startled, Kara turned and looked at the NSA agent.

“Excuse me?” she said.

“I’m sorry,” he answered with a smile. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I just saw you standing here, all alone, and I thought I should ask a pretty girl to dance.”

“Thank you, but I’m afraid I’m not a very good dancer,” she said.

“I’ll take my chances.” He held out his hand. “Unless you’re afraid?”

Kara shook her head. “Of course not.” She took his hand reluctantly. Perhaps he did not know who she was after all. But she decided it was a good opportunity to try and learn his agenda.

“My name is Linda,” she said, as she stepped onto the dance floor with him.

“John. I understand Senator Kent is your aunt?”

Kara nodded.

“You seem very close,” John prompted.

“We are. I’m very fond of my aunt, and my cousin.”

“I hear your cousin Clark is quite the reporter in Metropolis,” John told her as they danced.

“He is. So is his wife, Lois. She’s on leave at the moment.”

“Yes, I did hear she had a baby. Are they living in the city now?” he asked.

Kara quickly schooled her emotions. She knew that he knew Lois and Clark were not at the farm anymore, but she wasn’t about to tell him exactly where they were. She quickly changed the subject.

“What do you do, John?” she asked, wondering if he would tell her. He smiled.

“Figures,” Kara thought.

John smiled to himself. It seemed ‘Supergirl’ had learned a thing or two about fishing expeditions while she’d been on this planet. He was so tempted to question her further, but he didn’t want to reveal that he had seen through her meagre disguise too soon. The last thing he wanted to do was make her defensive. He would let it be. For now.

***

Martha changed places with Diana, dancing with Bruce, who seemed only too delighted with the change.

“I must say, Senator, you’re an excellent dancer.”

“Please, call me Martha,” she said. “And yes, I did have dancing lessons when I was a child. My
father was a lawyer in Metropolis."

"I take it he did not approve of you marrying Jonathan?" Bruce commented.

"Afraid so. He and Jonathan even came to blows once. But I loved Jonathan and I was happy with him. Our marriage wasn’t perfect, but neither were we."

"It must have been difficult, knowing you couldn’t have children of your own."

"But Clark more than made up for it," she said. "And I now have a beautiful grand-daughter. I’m not complaining."

The music ended and Bruce suggested a breather. He went to get drinks while Martha stood in one of the small alcoves of the ballroom. Her ears caught a conversation.

"Well, I for one don’t trust him."

"Superman? He has done nothing but help the people of Metropolis."

"And don’t you think Luthor has a point? Or have you forgotten his speech late last year? Superman is still an alien and therefore we must question his agenda."

"You’re what’s known as a xenophobe, Miranda," her male companion laughed.

"Just because I happen to dislike other cultures ... Look, all I’m saying is, Superman needs to be curtailed. In fact, I wouldn’t mind getting him in a government lab to study him. Find out what makes him tick."

Martha snorted in disgust. Senator Miranda Clifford had been giving a speech just last month in which she spouted racial invectives. She was the type of senator Martha would prefer to have nothing to do with. She was prejudiced in the extreme.

Martha glanced up as a hand touched her arm and realised Bruce had returned to her side with a glass of wine. But her snort had been heard by the two senators.

"Senator Kent," Miranda said snidely. "I am not surprised you disagree. Everyone knows of your bias."

"And what bias would that be?" Martha asked.

"Your son and his wife seem to write a lot of stories in praise of Superman. It seems as if the alien can do no wrong in their eyes."

"Superman has done nothing but help people, or are you forgetting that he saved the world from Apokolips?"

"You really think I believe Lois Lane’s nonsense about that so-called planet? It was a meteor. Or an asteroid. There were experts ..."

Martha scowled. After Clark had sent Apokolips back into space and driven Darkseid out, the 'experts' had come out in force, arguing about the true nature of the planet. Most of them had agreed it had been an unusual astronomical event, but none of them could agree on what it was. Most had preferred to call it a large meteor or an asteroid. But Martha and a select few had known the real truth.

"Those experts were wrong."
Miranda shook her head. “And what makes you so sure?”

“But I told her myself,” Bruce said. “My head of research and development had his own team of experts looking into the phenomenon and they all agreed it was no meteor.”

Miranda’s attitude changed. She still bristled visibly, but her manner turned flirtatious. The senator was fortyish, but clearly could appreciate the fine male form in front of her.

“And I suppose you think Superman can do no wrong either, Mr Wayne?”

“I didn’t say that,” Bruce told her, with a warning squeeze of Martha’s arm. “I’m not saying I trust him, but I don’t distrust him either. I just prefer to keep an open mind. Unlike you, senator, I do not judge people on their race or their culture, but on their behaviour. Personally, I believe if you had your way, we’d still be keeping slaves on plantations.”

Miranda sniffed. “I have the right to think how I see fit. And certain people should be kept in their place.”

“By ‘certain people’ it sounds to me like you believe African-American people are inferior. Well, for your information, senator,” Bruce added coldly, “my head of research and development happens to be of African-American descent and he has one of the most brilliant minds I’ve ever come across.” He glared at her, making her shrink under his icy gaze.

He turned away, leading Martha away from the other woman’s bitter vitriol.

“My god,” Martha said, as soon as they were out of earshot of everyone. “And she wants to put Superman in a lab?”

Bruce sighed. “I’m sorry you had to hear that, Martha. The woman is a bitch.”

“But you don’t trust Superman either,” she said.

“Maybe not, but I would never suggest studying him in a lab. I may be wrong, but I think she may be part of the same group we’re currently battling.”

“You mean ...” Martha gasped, a hand on her mouth.

“It’s well-known among conspiracy theorists. The Illuminati hate anyone of colour. They also are known for their hatred of anyone who does not fit in their agenda. And Clark is at the top of their list.”

***

Lex had watched the exchange between the two senators, seeing the anger on Martha’s face. While he felt Superman was not to be trusted, he didn’t agree with Senator Clifford’s views either. And he was just as concerned as Bruce that the senator was part of the same group now targeting him.

He saw Ross Webster in a heated discussion with a woman in her fifties. Lex frowned. The woman looked like Amanda Waller from Checkmate. After he’d returned, he had learned that Tess had been recruited by the organisation and he’d done his research on them.

Waller was with another man. Lex recognised him as one of the men who had visited him in his office a few weeks ago. This couldn’t be good, he thought. If they were talking to one of his biggest competitors, then their agenda seemed pretty clear. They were trying to bankrupt him.
Ross Webster had seen Lex glaring at them and smiled. He knew what Lex was thinking, and he’d be right.

“Perhaps we should discuss this somewhere more private,” he suggested.

De Sade and Waller nodded in affirmation and followed him to another room. Webster studied them carefully. He cared little for their agenda. All he cared about was beating Luthor.

“So you’re telling me that you can see to it that Luthor loses his military contracts and instead they’re awarded to Webscoe Industries? So far, I’m liking this plan. But what makes you think the military will go along with it?”

Waller spoke up.

“Some years ago, Luthor was developing a project: a weapon called Leviathan. The project was sabotaged by Arthur Curry, whom we also know through various sources is a member of the Justice League. Luthor lost millions on the project. He has since been involved in a number of other military projects. Ares, for one. Each project has failed and Luthor’s balance sheet took serious hits.”

“Luthor has been obsessed with finding a solution to what he called the ‘alien question’, ” de Sade told him.

“It’s what brought him to the attention of Checkmate, after all,” Waller said smugly.

“Of course, my dear,” de Sade smiled.

Webster tried to hide his distaste for the smarminess in de Sade’s expression. The man was a con artist. Clearly he cared little for Webscoe Industries and his agenda was in taking Luthor down a peg or two. Webster didn’t mind that, necessarily. In fact, he would enjoy taking his biggest rival down.

“All right,” he said. “Count me in.”

***

Bruce, Diana and Steve had separately watched proceedings that night and they all came to the same conclusion. Something smelled rotten.

Diana didn’t know Tess Mercer, since they had only just met that night, but she had sensed that the woman was someone with a lot of darkness in her. And it wasn’t because of her bloodline. Diana guessed that Tess had a murky past and had done some things she probably now regretted. But that wasn’t what concerned her the most. The way Tess was responding to the handsome Italian doctor was even more worrying.

Tess Mercer was a woman who needed an emotional connection. She needed to know she was desired. That someone cared for her. And it appeared this Donatello was playing her like a ... what was the American expression? Like a Stradivarius, she thought with a small smile.

Diana felt Steve take her arm and she looked at him. She loved him. Had loved him from the moment he’d crashed his plane in the water off Themyscira. She’d come to the States to watch over him and found herself being forced to use her own abilities to help others.

When she had run into Kara in California, it had not been the first time she had run into someone from Metropolis. But when Chloe Sullivan had engineered a meeting with her, Diana had been
reluctant to join with the Justice League, knowing it could complicate matters. Now, however, she believed she had reason to change her mind.

It felt like the net was slowly closing on Superman and his family. And there was little they could do to prevent it. It was clear the Illuminati brotherhood were strong. After all, they had spent centuries planning their eventual takeover of the world governments. They were not about to let a little thing like an alien superhero stop them.

Steve led her over to Bruce, who was watching Kara talk with the NSA agent.

“I don’t like this,” Bruce muttered to Diana, making it clear he knew exactly who she was.

“I’m going to talk with my contacts in the morning,” Steve told them. “Find out more about this NSA agent. Linda seems to be in over her head.”

Diana nodded her agreement. She knew Kara could handle herself, but she had seen the ill-disguised lust in the man’s expression. Kara was not naive, but she also wasn’t used to the attentions of men. Especially those with dubious intentions.

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Miranda Clifford really hated being talked down to. Even by someone as powerful as Bruce Wayne. She had spent the rest of the evening, and most of a sleepless night cursing the handsome billionaire playboy.

She rose early the next morning and immediately began making phone calls, suggesting she and her colleagues meet for an emergency breakfast meeting. She placed one final phone call.

“It’s me,” she said when the phone was picked up. She quickly related what had occurred the night before and told him her plan.

“Excellent, madam,” Baron Yves de Rochefort told her.

Miranda hung up and dressed, leaving the hotel room and descending in the elevator to the hotel restaurant. Her colleagues were waiting for her.

“So what’s this plan of yours?” Senator Abrams asked as they sat back drinking coffee. It was swill, but Miranda drank it anyway.

“I believe it is time we sent Superman a message,” she told him.

“And what do you propose?” Senator Kelley asked. “Have him submit to study? Perform a vivisection on him?”

“No. I think we should start a little closer to home,” she said. “Martha Kent is well-known for her connections in Metropolis. I’m beginning to think it’s more than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, don’t you think it’s a little suspect that every time someone speaks out against Superman she’s right there defending him? I think it’s time we found out exactly what Martha Kent’s relationship is to Superman.”

“You’re suggesting we have her investigated?” Kelley asked.

“Exactly.”
Tess had ignored Lex’s continued efforts to contact her after she had left the ballroom with Donatello. The man fascinated her. He was the kind of man who knew a little about a lot of things. They had spent half the evening talking about everything, from deep sea diving to botany. Both of which were subjects she had taken an interest in during her years as a marine biologist.

When Donatello had suggested a match of wit and skill, Tess had not taken him too seriously. Until she’d found herself standing on a mat in the middle of his hotel room in defensive stance, waiting for him to attack. They were both dressed in loose workout clothing.

Donatello struck and Tess moved quickly to block the attack, then returned with a kick which would have crippled the average male. But he was too swift for her, blocking her attempt. Tess circled him on the mat, a devilish grin on her face. Donatello returned the grin. And suddenly it was all on. What had started off as a game quickly became a battle of wills as Tess used all her Aikido and kickboxing skills to beat her opponent. But he was too good. Tess found herself on her back on the mat for about the fifth time. Donatello was laughing above her. Panting, Tess took the man’s hand so he could help her up.

“You’re good,” she said.

“As are you, my dear. But I, of course, am better.”

“Modest too,” she laughed.

Clark yawned, stretching as he made his way downstairs to start breakfast. Lois was already on the couch, having got up to feed Mara.

“How was patrol?” she asked, following him into the kitchen.

“Uneventful, really. Oh, well, there was this woman who was almost mugged.”

“Almost?”

Clark grinned as he told Lois about the woman and how she had held her own against the two would-be attackers.

“Bet they were surprised,” Lois chuckled.

Clark grinned. “No doubt.” His cellphone rang, the ringtone sounding shrill in the early morning stillness of the apartment. Clark frowned. “Mom,” he said.

“Hi mom, what’s up?” Lois was saying into the phone. “Really? Yeah, that is a concern. Sure, I’ll tell Clark. Don’t worry. I’m sure between him and Oliver they can come up with something.”

Clark frowned at his wife as she hung up.
“What was that all about?”

“Mom just got a call from a friend of hers in the senate. Abrams?”

Clark nodded.

“Well, it seems mom ruffled somebody’s feathers last night and she’s about to start an investigation into Mom’s connection to Superman.”

“Who?”

“Senator Clifford.”

Clark remembered her. She was a hard woman known for her prejudices. And she had been very vocal in speaking out against Superman. As if they didn’t have enough troubles going on with the Illuminati. Clark’s heart skipped a beat as his brain made the connection.

“You think she might be one of them?” he asked. “The Illuminati, I mean?”

Lois chewed on her bottom lip. “It does make you wonder, doesn’t it?” she said.

Just as Clark began to pour the batter into the skillet, there was another call on the cellphone. This time the ringtone was normal, signifying it was an ‘unknown’ number. Clark frowned again.

“Who could that be?” he asked.

Lois went to answer it.

“Lois Lane.”

“Sorry,” a woman’s voice said with an odd accent. “I was expecting Clark Kent.”

“I’m his wife.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said. “I got this number from Perry White. Is he there? Can I speak to him?”

“Is it about a story?”

“No. Actually, I need to contact Superman.”

“Why would that be?” Lois asked.

“Because I need his help. I need to stop the Illuminati. Before it’s too late.”

“I can try to contact Superman for you,” Lois said. “But I need to know where I can reach you.”

“Okay, well, you can contact me at this number. Double oh, six four, two five, six one three, five five two seven. My name is Moana. The phone’s on international roaming.”

The woman hung up. Lois looked at her husband.

“Well, that was the strangest thing,” she said.

“What is it?”

“It’s that woman you were telling me about yesterday. She’s definitely got something to do with the Illuminati.”
Episode 3: Part 4

Chapter Summary

Moana’s story

Southern Hemisphere: Dateline July 2008

It was somewhat of a legend among Moana’s people. Stories of a great warrior who claimed to possess the powers of a god. Much of those claims had been dismissed, over a thousand years later, as a myth, a story told to explain how much of their world came to be. Moana knew most of the stories were exaggerations, but the powers were not.

Much of those abilities had been lost through marriage – the bloodline ‘diluted’ as it mixed with other bloodlines. But still, some of them remained, giving each warrior strength greater than those of their Hapu – their tribe, and great powers of the mind. The powers were meant to have been passed down through the male bloodline. None of the whanau had expected those powers to be passed on to the first girl in six generations.

Moana had grown up knowing she had been given this great gift, but also taught that she had a responsibility toward that gift. It had been taught to her from the time she could walk that she must not expose those abilities. As a child, she had fought against those restrictions, knowing she could do so much good in the world if only she could use those abilities.

But she had learned from others that there were many who would seek to take that power for their own gain.

At thirty years old, Moana was a journalist for a small metropolitan newspaper. She worked for the newspaper during the day, but still keeping her eyes and ears open for trouble. It was not that she went out looking for trouble. It was just that trouble seemed to find her.

Walking alone late one evening, after attending yet another dull council meeting, Moana had passed a group of men sitting around smoking and yelling out offensive remarks to any woman that passed by. When she ignored them, she heard them yelling more abuse at her, then realised they’d begun to follow her. She was outnumbered, even with her strength, but there was no other option.

She turned to face the five men, glaring at them as they laughed at her.

“Little girl thinks she’s going to fight,” one of them laughed.

Steeling herself, Moana dropped her bag on the ground and waited for the first man to come to her, then lashed out with a hard punch to the jaw. A second man tried to circle around her and grab her from behind and she kicked out, using the first man for balance. Before she could take on the other three, however, she saw two men fighting them.

One of the men she had been fighting grabbed her in a bear hug from behind and she pretended to struggle, pulling away from the man enough to be able to walk up the wall in front of her and twist out of his grip in a mid-air flip, landing behind him. She kicked him in the back, sending him
crashing hard into the wall, then turned to the other man, shoving him with enough force to propel him into the wall of the next building.

Moana looked around to find that the two men who had come to her rescue were staring at her, open-mouthed.

“Well, hey, nice moves,” the darker one said.

“Yeah. Guess you didn’t need our help after all,” the shorter, blonde one grinned.

“Still, it’s appreciated,” she told them. “You’re American.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Yeah,” the blonde man said.

They were both young. One was probably in his early twenties and the other was most likely still in his teens.

“What brings you here?” she asked.

“We’re looking for someone. A friend. His name’s Clark. He disappeared about a month ago and we thought he might have ended up here.”

“Why?” she asked, walking with them down the street toward the centre of town.

“Well, he was up in the Arctic. Don’t ask why he was there. But we heard there was a Greenpeace ship in the area. Thought they might have picked him up.”

She highly doubted the ship would have come in so soon. Not that distance. But she let it go.

“So, uh, that thing you did,” the younger man began.

She looked at him. He didn’t seem all that shocked, which gave her pause.

“Where did you get those …” the other man said.

“Those what?”

“C’mon. You practically threw that guy clear across the alley. At least ten feet. A girl … I mean, someone of your, um, stature …”

“I was born with it,” she said. “I’ve always been strong.”

“Oh. By the way, name’s Victor. That’s Bart,” he said, indicating the younger man.

She quickly introduced herself.

Bart grinned. “So, know somewhere we can get anything to eat?” he asked cheekily.

She grinned back.

Twenty minutes later found them sitting down in a local fast food restaurant. Moana stared, open-mouthed as Bart wolfed down his food. He’d ordered almost two of every item on the menu.

She looked at Victor, who just seemed exasperated at Bart’s behavior.

“Bart, man, come on,” he said.
“What?” Bart asked innocently. “I’m hungry.”

She shook her head, fighting back a laugh. “I thought I ate well. Where do you put it?” she said, looking him over. Bart was slender and not very tall.

“So what’s your story?” she asked, looking directly at Bart.

“Nothing to tell,” he said.

“Yeah, right,” she said.

Victor glanced around.

“This really isn’t the greatest place to be talking about this.”

The two young men walked her home and Moana invited them to stay the night, since they hadn’t got around to getting a room in a hotel. Victor offered to sleep on the floor, while Bart took the couch.

“So, really, what’s your story?” she asked again.

Bart looked at Victor, who shrugged.

“A few years ago I was in an accident. I got sort of struck by lightning. Ever since then I can run pretty fast. And I have a really fast metabolism. That’s why I have to eat so much.”

“You mean why you eat like a pig,” Victor retorted.

Bart just glared at his friend.

“And what about you?” she asked Victor.

“Yeah, I was in an accident too. Car crash. I wasn’t supposed to have survived but they decided to use some experimental technology on me and ... well ...”

Moana watched in stunned silence as Victor peeled back a piece of his skin to show what looked like machinery.

“I see.”

“You can’t tell anyone though.”

“Believe me, I know the drill,” she said. “What happened to your friend Clark to make you think he ended up all the way down here?”

“Well, Clark is ... I mean, he kinda has these abilities too. Like you, he was born with them though. Anyway, he went chasing after Lex Luthor in the Arctic and that’s the last we heard of him.”

“Who’s Lex Luthor?” she asked, genuinely puzzled.

“He’s this guy ... he tried to turn me into a rump roast once.”

“I’m sorry?”

“He found out about my speed and wanted to know how I got my abilities.”

“He’s known for experimenting on people with abilities. Like us.”
“What did he do to you?”

“Well, his company bought the same company that did this to me. He was going to have them erase my memory.”

“And most likely turn you into some kind of foot soldier for him,” Moana said, nodding. “Yeah, I’ve heard of people like that before. Do you think he might have had your friend taken?”

“Anything’s possible with that freak,” Bart said.

Moana made some calls when she got in to work the next morning, then called Victor.

“Sorry. I’ve talked to a few of my contacts with Greenpeace and they don’t remember picking up anyone who matches Clark’s description.”

“Well, you tried,” Victor said, sighing. “Thanks anyway. Listen, be careful, okay? We know what it’s like to be chased for ... well, you know.”

“Yeah. I know. I promise.”

What she had never told Victor or Bart was that she knew full well the consequences of exposing her abilities to the wrong person. Some years earlier, she had become friends with a man who had been a journalist attached to the environmental group. He had been one of the crew members on the ship the Rainbow Warrior when it had been bombed in the harbour in Auckland City more than twenty years ago.

While two French agents had been arrested for the bombing, her friend had begun to dig a little deeper and he’d learned that there was far more to the bombing than even the government knew. The orders might have come from the French secret service, or whatever they called it, but someone even higher up had given those orders.

Her friend had dug even deeper and found that there was far more at stake than nuclear testing. He’d learned of a secret base in New Caledonia, run by a group he claimed had links to the Illuminati.

Moana had at first scoffed at that, until her friend had been found stabbed to death in his own apartment just a year earlier. The police had called it a home invasion because his safe had been broken into and papers scattered everywhere. But Moana had known exactly what that safe contained. It would have been worthless to any average criminal, but not to an organisation like the Illuminati, she thought. The only real item missing was a journal, with all his notes and research on the Illuminati and their plans for the world.

Inside that journal was also a list of names. People who had been targeted by the group for either elimination or alliance.

When Moana returned home that evening, she pulled up a loose board she used to hide any valuable information she had gathered over the years. Her friend had given her a copy of everything that had been in the journal. Thumbing through the pages, she located the list and read through it.

Listed under alliance were the names Lionel and Lex Luthor. Lionel was dead, and Lex was who knew where.

As if drawn to it, Moana found herself turning the pages to another section of the journal. Where her friend had got this information from, she didn’t know. But it appeared to be the excerpt of notes from either an essay or a secret meeting between the Illuminati.
Her friend had made notes in the margin of the excerpts.

It is now possible to envisage the establishment of a kind of ‘international highway’ where all these machines are interconnected. (The Internet) her friend had written.

The constant of the ‘Electronic Technology’ will make sure all the means to file, identify and monitor all individuals of the populations of the West’. (Big Brother – Hmm, Orwell might be right)

Expand the ‘leisure society’ that has been so profitable to date. By using the invention of the ‘video’ we have funded, and games attached to it, end up perverting the morals of youth. Offer him the opportunity now to satisfy all his instincts. A being possessed by his senses, and a slave to them, we know, has no ideal, no inner strength to defend anything. (Subliminal messages? Brainwashing? Violence in video games leading to chaos?)

PRESENT DAY

Clark stared at Moana as she related her story. He’d phoned her to set up a meeting with her as Superman and asked her to meet with him that afternoon in Metropolis Park. She’d spent the last hour telling her story.

“If you knew who I was the other day, then why didn’t you tell me the truth?”

“For the same reason you wear glasses at the Daily Planet,” she told him. “I couldn’t risk exposing you any more than I could risk exposing myself.”

Clark glanced over at the bushes where Lois was hiding with Mara. She’d spent much of the last hour walking around the park but had returned to sit on a bench on the other side of the shrubbery, watching them. He nodded slightly, telling her it was safe to come out of hiding.

Moana said nothing as Lois appeared, making it clear she was not surprised by it.

“How do you know it was the Illuminati who murdered your friend? For all I know, this journal could have been just some elaborate fabrication.”

“And Superman is just a myth. Like my ancestor.”

Mara began crying, having clearly woken from her nap.

“How do we know we can trust you?” Lois asked, rocking the carriage to help the baby settle down.

“You don’t. Any more than I can trust you, I suppose. You could always ask Bart and Victor to corroborate my story. About meeting them, I mean.”

Clark remembered his friends talking about someone they had met while searching the southern hemisphere for him. But they’d made it clear she wasn’t a team player.

“Why now?” he asked. “Why didn’t you come to me with this years ago when you found out who I was?”

“Because I didn’t have a full idea of the Illuminati’s plans until now. I got word from another journalist friend who told me that they have begun to gather their forces. They are prepared to strike. At you. Or rather, Superman.”

“We know they’re after Superman,” Lois said, clutching Clark’s arm. “According to another journalist we talked to, Superman is enemy number one.”
“And anyone who stands with him,” Moana pointed out. “Look, there’s always been this fear that the world is going to end soon. I mean, with all the so-called natural disasters going on in the world—the talk of global warming, the destruction of the environment, the economic disasters and the wars—it’s all just a smokescreen to hide the Illuminati’s real intentions.

I’m telling you now, if the Illuminati get what they want from you, the world as we know it will cease to exist. And believe me, they have planned this for years. Centuries, even.”

“How do we stop them, then?” Lois asked. “You and everyone else who seem to know the Illuminati claim they are more powerful than anything we’ve ever come up against before. And Darkseid was pretty powerful.”

Moana snorted. “Darkseid was a pussycat compared to these guys. I mean, these people are the face of true evil. And the problem with true evil is, you can’t identify it by some symbol on a forehead. They can come across as normal as you please, unless they choose otherwise.”

“Why you?” Clark asked.

“I once went to one of the tribal elders who claimed they could see into the future. He told me there was a reason why I inherited the abilities of my ancestor, rather than my brother. That I had a destiny to help save the world. I never told my parents any of it because he swore me to secrecy.”

“Not to mention the fact that you’d probably be laughed out of town,” Lois surmised.

Moana looked at her steadily.

“Yeah, well, all these conspiracy theorists are just a bunch of crackpots with too much time on their hands, right? There’s a reason why all this is happening now. Because they’re ready to move.”

“If they’re so powerful, then why is Superman such a threat to them?”

“Look, they want chaos. They want the gangs controlling the streets, the violence getting out of control. They want to force the lawmakers to make laws which will amount to removing the rights of individuals. Every human right that people take for granted.”

“Why?” Lois asked. “What good will it do them?”

“Have you ever heard of a former solicitor-general by the name of Robert Bork?”

“No,” Clark said, vowing to look it up.

“He claimed that if we smother the population with too many laws, then it will lead to instability. I’m paraphrasing, but that’s about the crux of it.”

“I don’t understand,” Clark told her.

“Okay, let me put it to you another way. They’re constantly making laws which are designed to restrict our freedoms. Like the Internet. They say it’s about file-sharing but it’s really about denying people freedom of speech while at the same time allowing Big Brother to monitor the average citizen. It’s common knowledge that all communications are monitored anyway and they have certain keywords which they use to identify possible terrorist or illegal activity. But they can take it further.

“Back home, they introduced a law to protect children against violence. Parents who spanked their children could be charged under that law. There is supposed to be a line drawn between what is
reasonable force and what isn’t. But no one seems to know what that line is. A guy was arrested for flicking his kid’s ear, even though the kid totally deserved to be disciplined because he’d done something really stupid.”

“So without the discipline, kids can just run amok,” Lois said, clearly beginning to understand. Laws that were too restrictive would do more harm than good as people would fight them.

“And of course all the violence in youths today is blamed on the violence of video games,” Clark. “And you think the Illuminati are behind all this.”

“Well, I didn’t come up with the theory,” Moana said. “But yeah, I think you’re getting it.”

“And this is why Superman’s a threat. It’s not just about him giving hope to the people. It’s about the numbers,” Lois said. Clark frowned at her and she turned to him. “Well, think about it, honey. Crime has dropped. Maybe not hugely, but it has still dropped. And it’s continuing to drop.”

“Which takes away one of their reasons for calling for a formation of a world government – one body to rule the entire world. A government controlled by them.”

Clark shuddered. The thought of someone like the baron in charge of governing the entire world didn’t bear thinking about.

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Ross Webster strode into his office a week later without even sparing his assistant a glance. He was anxious to get to work. There was nothing Ross would like better than to take Lex Luthor down a peg or two. And he knew just where to start.

His sister, Vera, a very unattractive, horse-faced woman in her late forties, entered the room

“Where’s the fire?” she asked tersely.

“We have work to do, Vera,” he snapped.

“Does this have anything to do with the man and woman I saw you talking to the other night?”

“It has everything to do with them. I want the names of every man and woman on the board of Luthorcorp.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re going to take it over.”

“Lex owns fifty-one percent of the stock,” she told him.

“Not after I go to the media.”

“Saying what?” Vera frowned.

“You’ll find out.”

“I don’t see what this has to do with the board,” she began.

“Vera, for christ’s sake, stop questioning and just get me that list!”

***
Lex stared in disbelief at the man he’d considered to be his chief supporter within government circles.

“You’re what?”

“We’re awarding the contract to Webscoe Industries,” Senator Kelley told him.

“I don’t understand. You told me this was an absolute certainty. You guaranteed it.”

Project Sirius was going to be the company’s saving grace. After several failed projects, including Ares, Gemini, Leviathan and several others, Lex had been working on a weapon that had incorporated all of those ideas and more. But he had depended on government funding to cover the shortfall. The project was going to cost the company billions of dollars and eat up a good proportion of their profits for the next five years but he had considered the risk was worth it.

He’d already spent half of the promised funding in research and development and was close to a successful prototype.

“I’m sorry. This is not my decision.”

It galled that they’d chosen his biggest business rival in the end. Webscoe Industries had been Luthorcorp’s biggest competitor since Lionel had taken a fledgling agricultural company and made it into a multi-national corporation.


“It’s come to light that there have been certain unethical projects going on in Luthorcorp and the government just does not want to be associated with it.”

Unethical projects? The senator knew very well what those ‘unethical projects’ were. And they had been no worse than what the government had been funding for years.

Something smelled bad about this, he decided.

But he had little time to ponder the problem. Tess had taken off with the Italian, choosing to spend a few days in DC with the man. Lex suspected the Italian was conning his sister, but there was no way Tess would listen to him now. He had burned his bridges with her.

Lex sat back behind his desk, wondering why everything was beginning to fall apart. He remembered something he was sure he’d read in one of Machiavelli’s treatises. He couldn’t remember the exact quote without looking it up, but it boiled down to the fact that once a man with high ambitions had reached his lofty perch, there was only one way to go and that was down.

Lex realised that was exactly what was happening. He was about to head for a very nasty fall.

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Clark stood in Watchtower, facing the huge plasma screen. Chloe smiled at him from the screen.

“I think this Moana is legit,” she said. “Everything checks out about her story. And I talked to Victor and Bart. They both liked her. And yes, she does have those abilities, as you’ve seen for yourself.”

“What about the journalist friend she spoke of?”

Chloe nodded. “I checked it out thoroughly. Andy Bell was stabbed to death in his apartment about a year before Bart and Victor met her. The police theory is he interrupted a burglar as nothing of any
value was taken. They still haven’t found the killer.”

“Thanks Chloe.”

His friend smiled. “Don’t mention it.” She looked to her left at something. “Don’t you have a press conference to get to?” she said.

“Oh yeah,” he said, glancing at the clock. “Listen, have a good time in Europe. Second honeymoon, right?”

Chloe snorted. “Considering Ollie never took me on our first honeymoon ...”

Oops, Clark thought with a grin. He’d stepped into that one.

He left for the press conference at Webscoe Industries. He hadn’t wanted to go, since this was just an announcement of the corporation winning a government contract, but Perry had ordered him to attend. As he entered the main reception area where they’d set up for the conference, he noticed a man in a leather trench coat and black fedora.

Way to be inconspicuous, he thought. Frowning, he peered closer at the man, who was also wearing dark sunglasses and doing his best not to be seen by the two security guards watching the gathering journalists. Glancing back at the guards, he realised his staring was attracting their attention and quickly turned away from the man.

But even as he tried to pay attention to Ross Webster, he was distracted by a sharp ‘hsst’ from the man.

Clark shifted on the balls of his feet, then deliberately dropped his notebook, kicking his pen away to the far wall.

“Excuse me,” he whispered. “Sorry, dropped my pen.”

The journalists gathered around him groaned quietly. The mild-mannered geek, otherwise known as Clark Kent, had struck again. He made his way to the back row, picking up his pen and looking directly at the man who beckoned to him. With a gasp, which elicited a glare from his colleagues, Clark realised who it was.

“Lex,” he whispered as he sidled up to him. “I mean, Luthor, what are you doing here?”

“I knew I’d find you here,” Lex told him. “I needed to talk to you.”

What could be so important that Lex needed to talk to him now? Lex nodded his head in the direction of the exit.

“Come on,” he said.

“You know, you could have just picked up a phone,” Clark admonished him as they stepped outside.

“I tried. Your wife wouldn’t take my calls and I couldn’t get through to the Planet. Ever since Bruce took over the newspaper, I can’t even get advertising,” the bald man complained, taking off the hat and rubbing his head. “Damn, I forgot how much that itched.”

Clark had forgotten about that. When Lex had returned, he had tried to censor any stories about Superman. Fearing there would be a battle brewing, Clark had asked Oliver to try to intervene. Chloe had then suggested Bruce Wayne negotiate the takeover of the Daily Planet. It had taken
several months, but he had finally signed on the dotted line a month ago.

“Lex ... what is this about?” Clark asked.

“It’s about this. The contract going to Webscoe. Luthorcorp was supposed to get that contract. It was a done deal. All it needed was for the paperwork to be signed.”

“So why didn’t it?”

“Remember what Batman said about them destroying Luthorcorp?”

“You mean the Illuminati?” Clark asked.

Lex nodded. “It’s starting. And I don’t think even you know how to stop them.”
Chapter Summary

Chloe and Oliver in Paris

Episode Four: Seduction

The morning sun shone brightly through from the balcony, giving Chloe full view of the famed tower in the distance. She sipped her coffee, looking out at the beautiful city, which seemed untouched by the cool temperatures of the waning Fall season. Almost as if the city was still desperately trying to live up to its reputation as one of the most romantic cities in the world.

The clink of silverware against china attracted her attention and she saw that her husband was buttering a croissant. She smiled to herself as she watched him, his brow furrowed as if in concentration. He took his food very seriously.

He looked up and grinned at her.

“So, what did you want to do first?” he asked. “A little sightseeing, maybe? We could stroll along the Avenue, take a boat down the Seine, visit the Eiffel Tower.”

Chloe pretended to consider it for a long moment. She wanted to do all those things, but there was one place she did want to see.

“I want ... coffee,” she said.

He frowned at her. “You have coffee,” he said, nodding at her cup.

“This is hotel coffee. I want real coffee.”

Oliver was looking at her like she was nuts. But Chloe had always loved a good cup of coffee. In fact, she considered herself a connoisseur of good coffee. Lana Lang, when she had run the Talon, had always turned to Chloe when she’d been trying out a new flavour.

“Not just any coffee. There’s this cafe ... Café des 2 Moulins. It featured in that French film, Amelie. It’s famous.”

Oliver groaned aloud. Chloe knew what he was thinking. That it was so like her to focus on a café in a film, given her addiction to coffee.

“You know,” he said dryly, “it’s not good for you to drink as much coffee as you do. Anyone would think you’re addicted. You really should give it up.”

“Hmm,” she answered, equally dryly. “Some might say I’m addicted to you. And you might not be good for me either. Does that mean I should give you up?”

He stared at her, his brown eyes widening. Chloe bit back a giggle at her husband’s reaction.
“Why you little …” he growled.

She got up, knocking her chair over in her haste, but ignored it as he chased her from the living area to the huge bedroom of their suite. As he captured her in his arms, or rather, she allowed him to capture her, and tossed her to the bed, she laughed up at him.

“You are a very bad girl, Mrs Queen,” he told her, leaning down to kiss her hard.

“That’s Sullivan-Queen, and don’t you forget it.” She ran her finger down his cheek, eliciting a shiver from him. “You know, we could always go sightseeing tomorrow,” she said seductively.

He cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Are you trying to seduce me woman?” She giggled, then pouted at him when he let her go, sitting up as he straightened up and looked up at him questioningly. He grinned back. “I’m going to need sustenance if you’re planning on having your wicked way with me,” he told her.

Chloe followed him back out to the main room and watched as he finished the half-eaten croissant then moved on to the eggs. She grabbed a slice of toast and buttered it, sitting opposite him at the glass-topped table. Chloe kicked off her slipper, running her foot up beneath her husband’s pyjama pants, all the while keeping a neutral expression on her face.

He stopped chewing for a moment and narrowed his eyes at her.

“Don’t think I’m not on to you,” he told her.

Chloe continued caressing his leg with her toe. He moved his leg aside, forcing her to move her foot. She bit back a smirk. She was nowhere near done with this game. Lifting her leg higher, Chloe ran it up and down in the gap between his thighs. Ollie started, dropping his fork, then glared at her. Chloe knew she was playing with fire, but she couldn’t help herself.

It wasn’t long before Oliver took his revenge on her, teasing her until she begged for mercy.

“Revenge is sweet, my darling,” he told her, pressing his length against her. So close, and yet so far.

“I thought revenge was a dish best served cold,” she returned.

“That too,” he muttered, groaning as she slipped a hand between them to take him in her hand. “Oh god, Chloe, don’t … ugh … don’t stop!”

“I want you,” she groaned back.

“You have me,” he returned.

“Please,” she said, her body overheated with the flush of desire, her pulse throbbing as her heartbeat increased. God, how she loved this man! “Ollie, please, I need you!”

He moved, grunting as he slipped inside her and she wrapped herself around her beloved husband as they slowly began to move to the rhythm of a dance that was theirs to hear and theirs alone.

Chloe woke a short time later to see her husband snoring beside her, his arm curled around her shoulders. He would later wake and complain of pins and needles in his arm, but only to tease her. He would never admit it, but he loved waking up with her cuddled next to him. Who would have thought that Oliver Queen would be a cuddler, she thought.

She looked down at his handsome face, tempted to trace her finger over him, from his finely sculpted...
brow and cheeks to his aquiline nose, even down to the dimple in his chin and the cute little mole below his left eye. She smiled fondly. Loving him had been surprisingly easy for a girl who had had a crush on someone else all through high school.

She thought she had loved Clark. And she did. But that love for the boy who would become Superman was always a platonic kind of love. When she thought back, her so-called fantasies of being with Clark were mere reflections of a desire to be loved and needed and were far tamer than the fantasies which had sustained her in the months of separation from the man she had truly loved.

Chloe’s lip tightened as she thought of the time she had been gone. The day she had put on the helmet of Dr Fate and it had told her that Oliver needed to go on a journey that she couldn’t follow. That it was something he had to do himself. She had been shown what was to come, and had known then that Oliver would need to seek deep within himself to even begin to have faith in the man he was. Loving him wouldn’t change that.

She, too, had needed to go on her own journey of self-discovery. Chloe needed to learn that she could be many things. She could still be Watchtower. She could still be the reporter. And she could still be Chloe Sullivan as well as Chloe Queen. That loving someone didn’t mean losing her own identity.

She reached out to stroke her husband’s cheek and he woke, his brown eyes full of warmth and love as he looked up at her.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked her.

“You, funnily enough.”

“That’s cause I’m strong and handsome and brave of heart.”

“And you have an ego to match,” she said snarkily.

Oliver grinned and rolled over, tickling her until she was once more begging for mercy.

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Clark tried adjusting his tie for about the fourth time, still dissatisfied with the way it looked. With a sigh, Lois reached up, taking the ends of the bowtie and redoing it for him.

“Now stop playing with it,” she told him. “It looks fine.”

He watched as his wife twirled in front of the mirror, checking out her reflection.

“Are you sure this looks okay? I mean, my stomach still isn’t flat and my boobs are …” She placed her hands on the top of the bodice and hitched it up.

“Lois, you look great. You look beautiful.”

She frowned at him. “That’s because you’re biased,” she said.

Clark looked her over, trying to see the black dress with a critical eye. He knew why she’d chosen black, as it was supposed to be slimming. Personally, he couldn’t see anything wrong with her womanly curves. She’d just had a baby two months ago, so of course her body would take time to get back to her pre-pregnancy shape.

Lois sighed. “I’m still not sure we should go to this shindig,” she said. “I mean, what if Mara …”
“Honey, Mara will be fine,” he said, putting his hands on her shoulders. “Oliver said the woman he hired comes highly recommended. Plus she has, you know, abilities. I’m sure she’ll be able to protect the baby.”

“But Smallville, we don’t even know this woman.”

“That’s why we’re only getting her to babysit Mara for tonight,” he explained patiently. “Just as a trial run. I mean, you’ve been talking about going back to work and I fully support that. But we do need someone to take care of Mara when we can’t be there.”

He knew Lois had been torn between her desire to protect their daughter and go back to work. She missed her job. For someone who had initially pooh-poohed the mere idea of being a reporter, Lois had embraced the profession with open arms. And she had become extremely good at it. Her first article on the emergence of Superman after Darkseid and Apokolips had finally been banished had won her accolades the world over, and a nomination for a Pulitzer. She hadn’t won, but Clark figured it was only a matter of time before she would.

As much as he too wanted to protect his family, he had learned the hard way that being over-protective would add to their problems, not solve them.

He planted a kiss on his wife’s head.

“Don’t mess up my hairdo,” she grumbled, touching the French knot with a delicate hand.

Clark glanced at the clock.

“Come on, honey, we have to be at the Metropolis Hotel in about twenty minutes.”

“I still don’t see why we have to go to this shindig,” she repeated.

“You know why,” he said. “Since Lex told us this was apparently going to be the party to announce the launch of the Rochefort Resort in Smallville.”

“I don’t know why you’re trusting him,” Lois grumbled, again, for about the fiftieth time since he and Lex had begun working together on some strategies to beat the Illuminati.

“You know why,” he told her.

After Lex had approached him at the press conference the two of them had decided they needed to call a temporary ceasefire to the hostilities between them. Lex was close to losing everything and while Clark had no sympathy for the man, he knew that LuthorCorp was all Lex had. Since his return from the dead, so to speak, Lex had thrown himself into the corporation; his primary focus had been to build the company his father had built into a powerhouse that was equal to that of Superman’s.

Lex had been stunned by the revelation that the Illuminati had been the ones to help Lionel’s rise to the top. It had clearly been something that had been so well-hidden that even Lex, with all his skills and contacts, had never been able to uncover. He had assumed, naturally, that Lionel’s meteoric rise had been due to his mother’s money. Lionel might have loved Lillian Luthor, but his initial goal had been to marry her for her inheritance and her social status, adding to the meager benefits he’d received from the murders of his own parents. Clearly both had not been enough.

So far, neither of them had been able to come up with a way to stop the Illuminati. But the problem was, they knew so little about them. They only had the testimony of Mark Anders and Moana to go on. And neither one of them could offer any answers on how to beat back the enemy at the gates.
“This isn’t like Darkseid,” Moana had told him. Or rather, told him and Lex, since she’d agreed to meet with the bald billionaire, or soon to be former billionaire, despite her intense dislike of him. Clark still didn’t know what Moana had against someone like Lex and she wasn’t forthcoming on that front.

He had learned a few interesting things about the Maori journalist, however. One of which was the fact that she was semi-telepathic. She couldn’t read minds, per se, but she could tell when someone was lying to her or hiding something from her. The only person she couldn’t really read, understandably, was Clark.

Clark also knew that Moana had gone to visit Lex in his office before he’d left for Washington. She’d pointedly asked Lex questions about the Baron de Rochefort, gauging his stance on the man. She’d known Lex was lying when he’d denied knowing the man, but had been satisfied, at least, that Lex was not interested in pursuing an alliance with the French aristocrat, or with the Illuminati.

The ancient door to the elevator opened with a creak of rusty metal and a young woman stepped out. She was dressed plainly in a pair of jeans and a loose shirt.

“Mr Kent?” she said timidly.

Clark smiled. “Hi. You must be Ria,” he said. “Thank you for coming over.”

The blonde girl nodded. Clark frowned slightly at her. She wore no make-up and seemed very shy. Her blonde hair was pulled up into a tight ponytail, slightly marring the skin of her face.

“The baby’s room is upstairs. She’s been fed and changed and there are more bottles of milk in the refrigerator. You know how to take care of a baby?”

“Oh yes,” she said, her smile animating her otherwise plain features. “I took care of my foster sisters all the time on the … uh, at home.”

“Great,” he beamed, feeling a little happier. “I’m not sure what time Lois and I will be home.”

Clark only intended to spend an hour or two at the launch party, and then he was going to take his wife out to dinner and dancing. It had been a while since they’d actually had a date; since about three months or so before Mara’s birth.

Lois grabbed her purse.

“Our cell numbers are on the counter beside the refrigerator,” she told Ria. “If there are any problems, and I do mean any, you call us immediately.”

“Don’t worry,” the young woman assured her. “Your daughter’s in safe hands. I promise.”

Satisfied, Clark took his wife’s arm and led her to the elevator. He glanced at the blonde as the door began to close, hoping he had done the right thing in trusting Oliver’s judgement.

Twenty-five minutes later they walked into the ballroom of the Metropolis Hotel. Lois immediately made a beeline for the waiters walking around the room with trays of champagne filled glasses. Clark quickly intercepted her.

“Uh uh, you’re breastfeeding,” he told her.

“One drink,” she pouted. “It’ll help me relax.”
“No,” he told her firmly. “You don’t want Mara to get an upset tummy, do you?”

“He has a point, Lois,” Lex’s voice said beside them.

Lois glared at the bald man. “No one asked you,” she snapped.

“Honey,” Clark admonished softly.

Lois shook him off and stalked away. Clark sighed, watching her go, then looked at his former friend, who shrugged.

“I wouldn’t worry about it, Clark,” Lex said philosophically. “I seem to have that effect on most women.”

***

Lois was still fuming as she made her way to the bar, asking for a glass of orange juice.

“You seem a little piqued, my dear,” a heavily accented voice said beside her.

Lois turned and looked at the man. He was almost as tall as Clark, with a stocky build, round, pale face and high receding hairline.

“Oh, no, it’s, uh, I’m just …”

It wasn’t like her to be flustered. The man’s eyes seemed kind and she would give anything to be able to confide in someone who was not part of the inner circle. It felt like lately the only friends she had were Clark’s. She loved her husband; adored him, really. But there were times when she wished she had her own circle of friends which weren’t part of the group of super-friends. Just so she could feel what it was like to be ‘normal’. As much as she loved them, being part of the group had its own series of complications.

The man smiled at her and signaled a passing waiter.

“Perhaps some champagne would help you relax,” he said, taking in the glass of orange juice.

“Oh no, I … I shouldn’t be drinking,” she said. “I had a baby two months ago and I’m still …”

“Oh, of course,” he said. “Forgive me,” he added, lifting her hand to kiss it. “When I see a beautiful woman it is in my nature to be like, how do you say, a knight in armour?”

“And that is very gallant of you,” she answered, taking pleasure in the game. “Would that I knew my knight’s name.”

“Yves de Rochefort, at your service, my lady. And you?”

“Lois Lane,” she answered, pretending she knew nothing about this man. She fought back the kneejerk reaction, knowing that this was the man who was trying to tear her family apart.

“Ah, you are the famous reporter,” he said, clearly pretending he knew very little about her.

“I don’t know about famous,” she smiled, “but thank you for the compliment.”

“Your reputation precedes you, Miss Lane,” he answered with his own smile. How could she have thought this man’s eyes were kind, she thought as she continued to exchange small talk with him. They weren’t kind. They were calculating. He knew exactly what and who she was, and who Clark
was.

At least there was one thing she could say about Lex. She always knew the way he thought. She
could always tell when Lex was scheming something or the other. And he did care about his city. He
might want power, but he would never pursue power at the cost of innocent lives. From what she
had learned about this Illuminati, innocent lives were just collateral damage. And it appeared as far as
they were concerned, there was no such thing as an innocent.

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Lex continued to watch the proceedings with a sigh. He’d heard the talk from those around him.
That he’d lost his edge. He was close to being a laughing-stock of the business world, thanks to the
deal the government had made with Webscoe Industries. While that had pissed him off, he knew
there was no point in raging against the unfairness of it all. Especially since everything had been
slickly manoeuvred behind the scenes.

He realised there was only one thing he could do, and that was continue to work to find a way to
stop the Illuminati for good. Maybe then he would have a chance at becoming what he’d always
wanted.

Part of him wondered why he hadn’t just given in to the baron or his cohorts. After all, they could
have helped him achieve his lofty ambitions. But Lex didn’t need anyone to help him on his way to
greatness. As he’d once told Victoria Hardwick, he planned on being great all by himself.

He glanced over toward the bar where Lois was ordering a glass of orange juice. Lex was well
aware of Clark’s wife’s feelings toward him. She had never trusted him, from the first moment they’d
met. There were times when Lex had entertained ideas of trying to seduce her himself, knowing that
having a reporter in his corner would have been an advantage. And it wouldn’t have been a
hardship. Lois was smart, gorgeous, sexy. She would be more than just eye candy on his arm.

His eyes widened as he saw who had approached Lois.

“Clark,” he said warningly.

“What?”

“That’s him. That’s the baron.”

Clark looked at him, then at Lois, who was smiling as she talked to the older man. To the untrained
eye, it would appear that nothing was amiss, but even Lex was able to pick up on the tension in the
way she stood. Lois knew exactly who she was talking to and it was taking every weapon in her
arsenal to not strike at the man who was threatening everything she cared about.

“I’ll see you later, Lex,” Clark said, going quickly to his wife.

Lex nodded and turned away, looking for a waiter to replace the empty champagne glass in his
gloved hand. He grimaced at the sight of the black leather glove. It had been the focal point of his
nightmares for years, back when he had still trying to be the good man everyone thought he was; the
man who had been trying to be a good friend to Clark. He flexed his hand, thinking how it had come
to this.

He could continue to blame Clark, he supposed, for his downfall. But even he had to admit to
himself that it wasn’t Clark who had caused it. It was probably something that had always been
there. A darkness in him that he’d most likely never had a chance of defeating. Maybe his father’s
criticism had been right all along. He was weak. He had never been strong enough to fight the
Lex looked up, startled to find an extremely attractive blonde woman watching him with a small smile on her face. It seemed wistful.

“Hello,” she said, her voice heavily accented. “You’re Lex Luthor.”

“What gave it away?” he asked, chuckling.

“I have desperately wanted to meet you,” she said, almost breathlessly.

“Oh, really?” he asked.

She nodded. “I have followed you. Your ... career.”

What career? he thought.

“You have quite a reputation,” she continued. “Not only ruthless in the boardroom, but ruthless in ...” She stood by his side, whispering the last word in his ear. “...bed.”

Oh, that was subtle, he thought.

“Who are you?” he asked. His immediate thought was she was a stalker, like the girl Eve Andrews many years before, or Shannon, who had murdered Eve to frame him. Had he slept with this woman?

“It does not matter,” she said.

“I think it does,” he said, grabbing her arm.

She smiled, as if she knew a secret that he didn’t.

“My name is Stephanie,” she said. “Stephanie de Rochefort.”

Lex stared at her, stunned. This beautiful young woman was married to ... that? He looked around at the baron, who was talking with Cat Grant. The young blonde reporter clearly had no idea the danger she was in.

Stephanie seemed uncomfortable with the way Lex was scrutinising her husband.

“Please don’t,” she said softly, her tone fearful. “If he sees me with you, he’ll ...”

Lex looked at her again. She was trembling, her shaking hand touching her face.

“What will he do?” he asked.

“No, I cannot. I ... this was a bad idea. I am sorry.”

She went to turn away and he hesitated. Then went after her.

“No, wait,” he said. He stopped her, grasping her arms. “You seem afraid.”

“My husband is a ... powerful man. A violent man. I thought ...” She turned her head away from him. Lex gently coaxed her to look at him with a hand under her jaw.

“You thought what? That you could seduce me into perhaps doing something to him?”
“It would be no more than he deserves,” Stephanie said bitterly.

“If he beats you, then why don’t you talk to the police? There are laws ...”

“Pah! He owns the police. They would never believe me. But you ... you are a powerful man, M’sieur Luthor. You could ... no, I could not ask it of you.”

“I could do what?”

She looked up at him, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

“There are things I know. About his business. About him. I could give you these things.”

Lex thought for a moment. Stephanie would have inside information. She could indeed be very useful.

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The young blonde checked on the infant, satisfied she was sleeping soundly. She had to admit the baby was very cute with her thick dark hair, so like her father’s. She was sure that little Mara Kent would be a force to be reckoned with one day.

Closing the door to the nursery, the girl crept down the hall quietly and returned to the television in the living area. She dug in the pocket of her jeans and brought out a small flip-top cellphone, dialling a number. Two rings and it was picked up.

“I’m in.”
Diana had been out on patrol, making sure the streets of Washington were safe for their citizens. It was a quiet night, giving her time to think about both her personal and professional situation. She wanted to help Kal-El keep his family safe, but she had no idea how to approach it with Steve Trevor.

Thinking about the former air force major led her to thoughts of the last time they had been together. She loved him and he loved her. But he had no idea that his mousy assistant, Diana Prince, was the Amazon princess in disguise.

She sighed. Steve was a good man, if a little blind. How he had not made the connection between her and her alter-ego, Diana could not fathom.

“Good evening, Princess. Out for a stroll?”

Diana whirled, poised to strike, until she realised it was the very man she had been thinking of.

“Major Trevor,” she said softly.

He approached her, his gaze warm, but with a hint of regret.

“Steve. You used to call me Steve.”

I used to call you a lot of things, my love, Diana thought to herself. But we know we can never be.

She had never thought, back on Themyscira, that she would ever meet, let alone fall in love with a man. Most especially a man like Steve. He was the antithesis of everything she had believed men to be. Since coming to the United States, she had learned that there were differences in the men. Some men believed in equality, in peace. There were more of these types of men than she had initially believed.

She remembered the first time she had left the island, so many years ago. Diana had found herself in a world full of violence. A world she believed she and her sisters were better cut off from. But Diana had been unable to silence the cries of her Earth sisters, calling out for help from someone, anyone. Her heart cried for those in turmoil, trapped by the ways of men who sought to do them harm. She had made it her duty to help those women. To teach men the evil of their ways.

The men of this century, this world, had laughed when she first appeared on the scene. But not after Diana had stopped two young men from brutalising a young girl and proceeded to teach them a lesson by roping them like some animal at a rodeo and chaining them together to a crane at a construction site.

Wonder Woman had made an auspicious debut.

She had since learned, especially since the arrival of Superman, that not all men were alike. There
were good men like him, who were prepared to sacrifice everything to keep the world safe. Men like Steve Trevor who, though they didn’t have powers, were still prepared to give their all to ensure that innocent people could sleep safely in their beds at night.

“May I walk with you, Princess?” Steve asked and how could she say no when his expression was so earnest. If only they could have found a way to be together in this world. A way in which they could both come to terms with her dual identity. For there was no possible way she could ever be one or the other. She was needed.

Steve was silent as he accompanied her. She wanted to say something to him, to try and explain, but there was just no way he would ever understand.

Steve stopped in the street and turned to her, taking her in his arms.

“Princess, I just don’t understand why ...”

“I have a duty here, Steve,” she said quietly. “People need me.”

“What about my needs?” he protested. “Diana, you must know I love you. I told you that on the island.”

“I know. I know you do,” she said sorrowfully.

There were times when she wished she could go back in time to that place. That moment when he had changed her life.

The daughter of the Amazon queen, Hippolyta, Diana was blessed with the gifts of super strength and speed. Themyscira was a world unlike that of what the Amazons called ‘Man’s World’. There, on the small island in the Greek Isles, it was a matriarchal society, preaching the principles of love and peace. Hippolyta also believed men and women could be equals.

Not all of the young Amazons believed the same as their queen. There were some who felt men should be punished for their evil deeds. Some believed all men were evil.

Diana’s adopted Amazon sister, Aresia, was one of those believers. The young blonde had been found as a child, floating on debris from a ship which had been wrecked off the rocks. Diana had wondered if the witch Circe had caused the shipwreck, as she had been known to do for centuries. Aresia had been little more than five years old and would have drowned had it not been for the captain of the ship, who had sacrificed his own chance of survival for the little girl. He had died in Diana’s arms, gasping his final breath.

Aresia had been walking with Diana, gathering herbs, when they came upon the wreckage from a plane.

Aresia dropped the herbs she had been carrying and hurried over to what Diana had at first thought was just debris.

“Diana,” Aresia cried. “It’s a man!”

Diana ran to her sister’s side, turning the man over. He was tall and athletic, with dark hair and a rugged, handsome face.

“Go, fetch my mother,” she told Aresia. “He is still breathing.”

“We should leave him here,” the blonde said, her expression darkening.
“And leave him to die?” She shook her head. “Go Aresia. Get help.”

Aresia hesitated. “The queen ...”

Diana glared at her. “Would you rather I tell my mother you refused to give mercy to an injured man? Now go,” she ordered, using the authority only a daughter of a queen was permitted. Aresia nodded and fled.

A small party returned a short time later, bearing a stretcher. Diana had done the best she could to clean the man’s wounds with a rag and sea water, but she would not know the extent of his injuries until she could examine him fully.

She returned with her sisters to the village and watched as they placed the man in one of the unused huts. Diana followed them in and watched as they settled him on the bed.

“Leave us,” she said. “I will tend to him.”

“Very well, Princess.”

The pilot had remained unconscious for three days before he’d shown any sign of waking. Diana had tended him, using all the ancient Amazon knowledge she could draw upon to help heal the cuts and bruises on his skin. She did not think he had any internal bleeding, but of that, she could not be sure.

“I’m dead,” he commented when he finally stirred. “I’ve died and gone to heaven.”

“I beg your pardon?” Diana asked.

“You look like an angel,” he told her.

Diana glanced down at the flowing, white dress she wore.

“How do you know what an angel looks like?” she replied with a smile.

“They look like you,” he breathed.

Diana continued mixing the herbs she was using on his bruises, then painted the resulting ointment on his skin. She used more herbs to make a hot tea, placing them in the bottom of an earthen cup, adding steaming hot water and allowing them to steep. Then she gave the cup to the sick man. He grimaced.

“Oh, okay, now I know I’m not in heaven because nothing in heaven would taste this bad.”

“It will help heal you,” she said softly.

“How long was I out?”

“We found you three days ago.”

“We?” he asked, raising an eyebrow at her.

“Myself and my sisters.”

“Where are they now? Your sisters, I mean.”

“They are here; on the island.”
“And where is here?”

“Do you always ask this many questions?” she asked, teasing lightly.

Over the next few days, while he recuperated, she learned his name was Steve Trevor. He was a major with the United States Air Force. He had been assigned to the NATO forces at Souda Bay, supporting the Hellenic Air Force – Greece’s answer to the US Air Force, and had been out on training manoeuvres when his plane’s navigation system had failed. That had then caused a short in other systems until he had eventually lost an engine. Flying too low to parachute away, Steve had been forced to crash in the Mediterranean Sea.

“I guess I’m lucky I ended up here,” he told her.

Diana had told him a little of her own history, although she had left out the part of her Amazonian heritage. Steve was an intelligent man, and she was acutely aware he would figure her out, sooner or later.

The more time she spent with Steve Trevor, the more she realised she was falling in love with him. Just as he was with her. They had yet to even kiss, but it was inevitable. Steve was everything she had never known she wanted.

Queen Hippolyta called her to her side.

“Mother,” she said, kneeling by her queen.

“Daughter, I am concerned. You are spending much time with your young man.”

“Mother, I ...”

Her mother smiled.

“I once met a young man very like your Steve. He was charming and handsome and I loved him. As he did me. But we both knew it could never be. He belonged in his world and I belonged here.”

“What must I do, Mother?”

“That is your choice, child. But he must return to Man’s World. He cannot remain here. His people may come searching for him.”

The island itself was cloaked from human devices such as radar and satellites, but it did not mean they could not stumble on it purely by accident.

“And if I go?” she asked. “I will not be able to return.”

“Yes.”

Diana bowed her head. “I hear them, Mother. I hear them crying out for a champion.”

“I hear them too.”

Diana returned to Steve, heart breaking at the thought of losing the man she loved. She sat beside him, not knowing how to tell him.

“Let’s go for a walk, Princess,” he said.

They walked along the sand, watching the waves breaking over the shore. She remained silent.
“You seem sad, my love,” he said.

It was the first time he had acknowledged his own feelings for her. Diana looked at him, her gaze searching.

“Steve ...”

“I know,” he said, stroking her cheek tenderly. “I know I have to return to my world. But you could come with me.”

“I can’t,” she whispered.

“Why not? We could be together.”

“It isn’t that simple,” she said, her eyes filling with tears. “We belong in two different worlds.”

“Princess, you know I love you. And I know you love me. Why does it have to be so hard?”

Diana sought her mother’s counselling once again, but all the queen would tell her was that it was her choice. Torn between her world and her love for Steve, Diana prayed to the goddess Artemis to give her the answer she sought.

A few days later, the answer came in an unexpected way. Another Amazon claimed the right to return Steve to his world. To accompany him to the United States and to stay, to become Earth’s champion. Diana knew she could not let this happen and also stepped forward to proclaim her right.

“I have nursed him and cared for him these weeks,” she told the assembled Amazons, standing proudly. “It is my right.”

“You have already been to Man’s World,” her Amazon sister Rena argued. “I have not.”

Queen Hippolyta clapped her hands.

“There is only one way to settle this,” she announced. “A competition. Whoever wins will be the champion.”

Diana sensed her mother’s sadness, realising she would not be able to return to her home for some time. If ever.

The day of the contest was set for two days hence. Diana prepared in silence, meditating alone in her quarters. The night before the match was to begin, Steve came to visit.

“Princess, you don’t have to do this for me,” he said.

“Yes, I do,” she answered quietly but firmly.

He looked at her for a long moment, then nodded solemnly.

“I understand.”

She looked at him, her gaze searching. “Do you?”

“Yes,” he said, his gaze full of love. “Diana, Princess ...” His expression was pleading and she could no longer resist him. She allowed him to place his lips gently on hers. But neither of them wanted gentleness and they pressed their bodies close together as their tongues performed the ancient dance.
Unable to hold back her passion for this man any longer, Diana sank to the floor, pulling him on top of her. She felt him undress her slowly until she was naked before him, her very soul bared to him.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmured. “Diana, sweet Diana.”

She loved the way he crooned her name. The gentleness in his touch, the tenderness in his gaze.

Her eyes fell on the jagged scar on his thigh where some of the fuselage had torn into him. In spite of the healing, the scar would never fade. But Diana’s heart didn’t see anything but the man she loved.

Steve still slept in her arms in the grey light of dawn the day of the contest. Diana awoke, wondering what had stirred her, then heard Rena and Aresia talking.

“Diana is a fool,” Rena said. “He will betray her. That is what all men do.”

“Yes,” Aresia agreed. “That is why you must win the contest.”

“I intend to, Sister,” the other girl told her. “And once I do, I will make sure that Major Trevor will never reach Man’s World. I, on the other hand, will show them all.”

Their voices faded, leaving Diana holding Steve close. She had no other choice now, she decided. She must win the contest and return to Man’s World with Steve. To protect him, and other men like him.

The dawning of the new day brought much excitement to the Amazon village. Diana knew her queen was concerned for her. She was, after all, the queen’s only blood daughter. She had to press on, regardless. Diana had realised in the cold light of early dawn that she could not allow Rena or Aresia the chance to bring their hatred of men to the world.

The contest would consist of several events. Much like the ancient Olympics, Diana’s skills in strength and speed would be tested to their limits. Rena, who was almost as strong and as fast as Diana, would also be tested. But it was Diana’s strength of will that would be tested the most.

As the day wore on, Diana noted Steve watching anxiously, but she could not afford to be distracted by her lover. She steeled herself, knowing the final test was about to start.

Queen Hippolyta was presiding over this last competition. She presented Diana with the gold headband and bracelets which would belong to the champion once she was chosen. Diana nodded reverently to her mother and prepared herself.

She heard Steve gasp in horror as another Amazon took a small handgun from a wooden box. Diana meditated briefly, knowing if her focus was off she would lose. The competition so far had been almost equal and this would be the decision-maker.

The gun was fired and Diana thrust an arm in front of her, letting the bullet ricochet off her bracelet. A second bullet ricocheted off the other bracelet. Bullets were fired in quick succession and Diana managed to avoid each and every one.

Rena, on the other hand, was not so lucky, Diana thought. She missed one, causing it to hit her in the shoulder. The competition was over. Diana had won.

The queen officially presented her with the bracelets, ignoring protocol and hugging her daughter.

“Be safe, my child,” she said softly.
As Diana’s thoughts turned to the present and the man walking beside her, her heart cried out for her lover. Soon after returning to the United States, she had realised that she would have to make a choice between Steve and her duty as a champion. Working with him, beside him, gave her the opportunity to hear of other Earthly problems, without revealing her true identity to the world. But it left little room for romance.

As much as she wanted to have both Steve and her duty, the Fates had other plans.

“What do you know of the Illuminati?” she asked.

“I believe they’re a secret society trying to create a New World Order,” he said.

“What would you say if I told you they were out to steal a child. And not just any child, but the daughter of Superman?”

Steve frowned. “Superman has a daughter?” he asked.

Diana nodded. She had been trying to think of the best way to tell Steve without arousing his suspicions, but had realised there was no other way to approach this.

“They believe Superman is a threat to their plans for world domination,” she said.

“And by taking the child, they think they can control Superman? I would think it would do the exact opposite,” he said. “It would only anger him. And I would hate to get on Superman’s bad side. I mean, Superman must have to exercise a hell of a lot of control over his emotions to be as calm as he is.”

“Yes. So you can imagine how powerful his anger would be if his family was threatened.”

“Who is the mother?” Steve asked.

“I do not know. All I do know is that he has left his daughter in the care of a couple he is considered to be very close to.”

“What do you need from me, Princess?”

“I have a friend. She is the cousin of Superman and she has met a man she believes is involved with this Illuminati.”

“Do you want me to do some digging?”

“Yes,” she answered. “Please.”

“What’s his name?” Steve asked.

“John Crawford. I believe he is with the National Security Agency.”

Steve looked thoughtful, then nodded.

“Yes, I’ve met him. Don’t worry. I already had plans to have the man investigated.”

Diana thanked him and turned to leave.
“Princess ...”

She turned back and looked at him. His message was clear in his eyes. She sent him a sad smile, then turned and sped away.

Diana decided to head to Metropolis to check up on Superman and his family. She had her own plane which was invisible not only to those on the ground, but also to all monitoring equipment. Not that Diana couldn’t fly under her own power if she wanted to. She just couldn’t fly long distances, unlike Kara’s cousin.

Kara had informed her that Kal-El and his human mate were staying in the clocktower apartment of a friend. Diana made her way to the balcony, doing her best not to be seen through the huge glass door. She gasped as she saw the young woman pacing, holding an infant in her arms.

Aresia!
Episode 4: Part 3

Chapter Summary

Tess continues to fall under Donatello's spell

Tess sat on the terrace, sipping from a cup of coffee. Unlike the large cups which American cafes seemed to prefer, this was a delicate cup of fine bone china. She grimaced slightly at the bitter taste. Italian-made espresso coffee was much stronger than she was used to, but she was slowly becoming accustomed to it.

There was a rustle of clothing and Francesco settled into the seat beside her.

“Is the coffee not good?” he enquired.

“It’s just a little strong,” she said. “A little more than I’m used to.”

“American coffee is weak and they often burn the beans.”

Tess smiled at him. “You don’t like Americans much, do you?”

“Some have their … how do you say, charms?”

“Like some Italians,” she laughed.

He leaned forward and handed her a napkin. Tess took the linen cloth with a smile and wiped her mouth delicately.

“May I ask what it is you have been contemplating, my dear?” he asked. “I have observed you out here for the last half an hour.”

Tess had spent a lot of her time out on the balcony, enjoying the sea views. The handsome Italian doctor had invited her to spend a few days with him at his villa in the city of Salerno, off the Amalfi Coast. The city itself was rich in culture and Tess had enjoyed browsing through the various market places. She had marvelled at the way the city appeared to be separated into sections from the medieval to the post-war modernism.

The villa she was staying in had been built in the 19th century, although much of it had been modernised. Francesco had told her that while he had preferred the ‘old-fashioned’ look he had become resigned to renovating the house to make it less of a drain on finances.

Francesco was not so much a medical doctor as he was a scientist. Tess’ first thought when the geneticist had told her of his background was that he had joined on in the upcoming battle against Superman so he could study Mara. The cynic in her had decided the man was not to be trusted on this basis alone.

Still, the Italian doctor had a way about him that was incredibly attractive and Tess thought she could use that attraction to learn more about his plans, or rather the Illuminati’s plans for Superman. Her loyalty was first and foremost to Clark and the Justice League. Even more so than Lex. After all, it was Clark who had believed in her; showed her a better way. In the years since they’d met, she had
come to trust Clark more than anyone and given her past difficulties with men, that was a huge step.

“Why are your people so interested in Superman?” she asked.

Francesco sat back, looking thoughtful, stroking the top of his lip.

“Should we not be concerned about him?”

“Superman doesn’t get involved in politics. All he’s doing is trying to help people.”

“Yes, but wasn’t it one of your own American writers who said ‘Power attracts the worst and corrupts the best’?”

“It was Abraham Lincoln who said ‘Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power’. Besides, what makes you think Superman is corruptible?”

“Touche,” he smiled. “What makes you think he isn’t?”

“I know Superman. He’s a ... he cares about the people of Metropolis. The people of the world, really.”

“But that still does not mean he is not dangerous. A man with that much power is a man who should be watched carefully.”

“Well, of course you would think that, since he’s dangerous to your group’s ambition,” Tess argued, enjoying the debate.

Donatello smiled. He loved the fire in this woman’s eyes. She clearly knew much more about Superman than she let on, but of course, he knew this already, having studied her for the past three or four years. He knew of her loyalty to the Justice League. She was not going to be seduced easily. He understood that.

“Beware of a man who would be as a god, for he sees himself as above us and therefore not bound by the laws of men.”

“I don’t think Superman sees himself as a god,” Tess answered.

“Yet he has the powers of a god,” Donatello replied. “And like any god, he could easily smite anyone in his wrath, should the need take him.”

“He would never do that,” Tess told him, although he had clearly hit a nerve. He knew she had been subject to Superman’s wrath a few times.

It was now only a matter of chipping away at the armour of trust in her. Sooner or later, he would convince her.

***

Chloe looked at her husband as she grabbed her jacket from the hanger.

“Are you coming?” she asked.

“Why do we have to meet Lana?” he asked, sounding suspiciously whiny.

“Because she’s my friend and because you love me. Besides, she’s spent a lot of time here. After everything fell apart with Clark, she came back here to clear her head.”
Reluctantly, Oliver grabbed his own jacket and began to follow her out the door. They walked slowly along the path beside the Seine until Chloe spotted a familiar dark head. Lana was standing beside a bridge, talking animatedly to a man. He was tall, with bright red hair which stood out a mile, even on this cool, grey day.

“Lana,” she grinned, waving.

Lana waved back, touching her companion’s arm. They turned and began walking toward the blonde couple.

Lana hugged her.

“Chloe, it’s wonderful to see you. You look great. Marriage certainly agrees with you.”

“Thanks Lana.” She looked pointedly at the red-haired man.

“Murphy O’Shea,” the man said, holding out his hand. He had a very strong Irish accent. “Top o’ the mornin’ t’you.”

“Murphy was just telling me about some great cafes we could go to for breakfast,” Lana told them.

“Sure, lead on,” Oliver said. Chloe glanced at him, wondering why he was glowering at the Irishman. O’Shea had what appeared to be a small badge on his lapel. It looked like a white triangle with a red cross above. Chloe frowned slightly. The red cross reminded her a little of the research she had done into the Knights Templar, which had been an early military order now supposedly affiliated with Freemasons.

They followed Lana and her friend to a busy cafe and sat down, ordering coffee and croissants.

“So, Lana, how have you been?” Chloe asked.

“I’m fine, Chloe, and you?”

“Busy. You know how it is.”

“Yeah. I heard Lois and Clark have a daughter. What’s her name?”

“Mara.”

“That’s a beautiful name,” Murphy commented. “Where’s it from?”

“Oh, Clark wanted to combine the name of his birth mother and his adoptive mother,” Chloe told him.

“How old is she?” Murphy asked.

“About two months now, I think. Maybe close to three.”

“Ah babies at that age are very precious.”

“Do you have any kids yourself, Mr O’Shea?” Oliver asked.

“Please, call me Murphy. No, I haven’t been that lucky. Yet,” he added, smiling at Lana, who returned the smile.

Chloe shuddered. There was something about this man she did not like. She dearly wanted to tell her
friend to be careful, but she knew Lana wouldn’t listen to her.

The brunette had had her battles over the past few years. After she’d left Clark, they had tried to keep in touch, but both Lana and Clark had known they were fighting a losing battle. Chloe had often wondered if Clark had fallen for Lois on the rebound, as he’d seemed to forget Lana in an awful hurry, but he’d told her that once he’d been able to step back and look at the situation objectively he’d realised that he’d only gone back to Lana because he’d been afraid of his feelings for Lois. He’d taken the safe and familiar route, even knowing it was doomed to failure, and that hadn’t just been because of Lex.

When he’d decided to give it a shot with Lois, he had enlisted Chloe to help him search for Lana and had confronted her. Here in Paris, as it turned out. He’d told her what he was feeling and had finally ended it between them, knowing if he had kept her hoping for a reconciliation of sorts, it wouldn’t have been fair on either of them. Clark had then reported back to Chloe telling her that Lana had admitted to having the same doubts. At least they had ended things fairly amicably.

“So what do you do, Murphy?” Oliver was asking.

“I work in the Paris Tourism Bureau.” He laughed. “Yeah, I know. An Irishman in a French tourist office. Can’t miss the irony, can you?”

Oliver laughed as well, but his laughter seemed forced. The conversation turned to more trivial things while they ate. Murphy offered to assist them in finding places to visit, even taking the trouble to point out some romantic spots perfect for a couple on their honeymoon.

It was only later, back at the hotel, that Chloe had a chance to figure out why the man bothered her so much. She was checking through her notes on the Illuminati and other secret societies and had come across the badge Murphy wore.

“Ollie, look at this.”

Oliver frowned as he sat beside her and looked at the screen.

“Golden Dawn. Isn’t that a political group in Greece?”

“Not them. Golden Dawn of Ireland. They supposedly have some kind of connection to the occult.”

“You’re not thinking there’s some connection to the Illuminati?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “But it does seem awfully coincidental that he and Lana become friends just as the Illuminati decided to target Clark, don’t you think?”

Oliver sighed. “Yeah. Very.”

***

Rochefort grinned at his wife as she entered the room. Her blonde hair was set in a loose knot at the nape of her neck and her face was made-up very skilfully.

“Préte pour rencontrer Luthor ma Chérie?” he asked.

Stephanie nodded.

“C’est un Homme très Intelligent, Yves. Le tromper ne sera pas Facile.”
“Pourtant votre approche semblez efficace la nuit dernièrem,” he said, having observed his wife talking quietly with the bald man.

“Etes vous en remettre en question mes méthodes, mon chéri?” she asked, sounding not a little uneasy.

“Simplement pour vous rappeler de votre place ma chére,” he told her smoothly, with just a slight hint of a threat in his tone. “N'est ce pas moi qui vous ai arraché a une relative obscurité pour devenir l'une des Femmes les plus recherchés de Paris? N'étais-ce pas moi qui vous ai pris et enlevé de votre Île Natale lorsque vous avez pour finir désiré la Quitter?”

“Bien sur,” she said. “Et je t'ai Toujour aimé pour ça, mon Chéri,” she added, her arms around his neck. “Ma fidélité est pour vous, pas...”

“Vos Soeurs adoptés? or une en particulier?”

“Aresia sait ou se trouve ma Loyauté,” Stephanie answered.

“Pourtant, je crois que son plan est d'enlever l'enfant de ses parents, avant que nous soyons prêts.”

“Elle croit que le plan est de prendre l'enfant et de l'élever loin de l'influence des Hommes.”

“L'enfant serait en effet devenu puissant que toute ses Soeurs evantuelle, mais ce n'est notre plan.”

“Je vais lui parler de nouveau et lui dire de pas bouger jusqu'a ce que vous me donner l'ordre.”

Rochefort decided a change of subject was in order.

“A propos de Luthor?”

“Vous avez deja commencé le plan pour le ruiner financierement,” Stephanie replied. “N est ce pas?”

“Je l'est fait,” he nodded.

“Alors je vais jouer mon rôle et vous garantie, qu'il va etre complétement ruiné. Aie Confiance a moi mon cheri.”

He did trust her. That was not the problem. There were too many other players on the board in their little ‘chess’ game. This new alliance he had been hearing of between Luthor and Superman, for one, and Stephanie’s ‘sister’ Aresia, for another. Aresia was known to hate all men. She had her own agenda where the half-alien child was concerned, and that was something he could not allow.

He had enjoyed the little cat and mouse game with Lois Lane the previous evening. She was certainly a beautiful woman, and deceptively intelligent. Had he not been looking for the small signs, he would never have known that she had recognised him. Of course, then her husband had joined her and ruined the game. He was certain Luthor had alerted Clark Kent. Given that the two men were sworn enemies, de Rochefort did not understand this new alliance between them.

He watched his wife leave with a smile that did not reach his eyes. Yes, he trusted her. He owned her, body and soul. She could not leave him even if she wanted to.

“Off to meet Luthor, my dear?”

“He is a very intelligent man, Yves. Deceiving him will not be easy.”

“Yet your approach seemed to be effective last night.”

“Are you questioning my methods, husband?”
“Merely reminding you of your place, my dear. Was it not I who plucked you from relative obscurity to become one of the most sought after women in Paris? Was it not I who took you from your island home when you desired to leave?”

“Of course. And I have always loved you for that, my husband. My loyalty is to you, not ...”

“Your adopted sisters? Or one, in particular?”

“Aresia knows where my loyalty lies.”

“Yet I believe her plan is to remove the infant from her parents, before we are ready.”

“She believes the plan is to take the child and raise her away from the influence of men.”

“The child would indeed become powerful as one of the sisters, but that is not our plan.”

“I will speak to her again and tell her not to move until you give me the order.”

“What of Luthor?”

“You have already begun the plan to ruin him financially. Have you not?”

“I have.”

“Then I will play my part in ensuring he is ruined completely. Trust in me, my husband.”

***

John Crawford’s agenda was twofold. One, he wanted to distract the young Kryptonian from her family and second he was extremely attracted to the beautiful blonde. While the disguise of the glasses did little for her, combined with the dark hair they did make her very striking in appearance.

He had finally convinced Kara/Linda to have lunch with him, after a week of phone calls trying to convince her he was harmless. He knew she had her suspicions; after all, she had caught him at the farmhouse, but he hoped to convince her to at least give up some information.

Kara had agreed to meet him at a cafe a couple of blocks from the apartment where her ‘aunt’ lived. Crawford waited, a little nervous at the thought of meeting with a girl who could most likely crush his windpipe without even breaking a sweat.

She walked in, wearing a knee-length pleated skirt and matching blazer in a grey that brought out the blue in her eyes. He rose to greet her.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” she said, appearing nervous.

He smiled. “That’s all right. I haven’t ordered yet. Would you like a drink?” Slow down, he told himself.

Crawford had dated a lot of women but Kara was the first woman he’d ever had such an intense attraction to. What he wouldn’t give to have her spread out under him, he thought, then blinked as Kara frowned at him.

“Um, ice water with lime would be lovely, thank you.”

He relaxed, sitting back down and gesturing to the waitress, ordering the ice water, deciding to order the same for himself.

“I have to admit,” she said, “I was curious. Why did you ask me here?”

“Is it a bad thing for me to ask a pretty girl to lunch?” he asked.

Kara blushed, looking coy.

“No, it’s not a bad thing. It’s just ... I don’t date very much.”

“Well, I would say that’s a pity,” he replied, “but I can’t say I’m sorry.”
The waitress came over with a pitcher of ice water. Normally, Crawford would be all over the woman, flirting, thinking how he could get the girl into his bed, but all his focus was on the young Kryptonian. He had no doubt the girl’s powers would make her more of a challenge in bed.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes to take your order,” the waitress said coolly.

“Thank you,” Kara said, picking up the pitcher and pouring herself a glass of water.

She glanced at the NSA agent. The man made her more than a little uneasy, but she had decided the best way to find out what he was up to was to get close to him. From what Diana and Bruce had been saying at the party a few nights ago, she was sure that John Crawford was an agent of the Illuminati and he was one of a number of people who had infiltrated government organisations like the NSA to give them inside information on what was going on behind the political scenes.

“So, tell me more about your aunt. Does she enjoy being a senator?”

Kara smiled. Martha did enjoy her work. She had been a city-bred lawyer’s daughter and despite the twenty-odd years of being married to a farmer, she had never truly let go of the skills she had learned at her father’s knee, so to speak. Martha Kent was a woman of gentle grace and quiet intelligence who never hesitated to speak her mind without sounding like so many other politicians who seemed to think their opinion mattered over others. Martha was strong in her convictions, but open-minded enough to listen to another’s point of view.

“So tell me,” John said, curiosity in his expression. “What is your aunt working on at the moment?”

“Oh, you know I can’t tell you that,” she said.

“Sure you can,” he said, eyes twinkling.

Kara picked up her menu to avoid his gaze.

“Um, so, I think I’ll have the Chicken Kiev with side salad.”

Her companion picked up his own menu and perused it.

“Hmm, I think I’ll have the Capellini Pomodoro.” He put down his menu and looked at her. “So, since you can’t tell me what your aunt is working on, how about we talk about you. How long are you in town for?”

“Oh, I am only here another few days,” she said. “I will be going to Kansas to visit my cousin and his wife and spend some time with my niece.” She looked at him. “Do you have any family?”

“I have a sister who is married and lives in Europe with her husband. Their son is almost two years old now. I don’t see them that often, more’s the pity.”

Kara nodded. “I’m glad I’m so close to my cousin,” she said.

“I understand Clark was adopted by the Kents,” John said after the waitress had taken their orders.

Kara nodded again, sipping her water. “His birth parents were killed when Clark was just a baby. They were my real aunt and uncle, but I still think of Martha as my aunt. I mean, she did raise Clark.”

“I understood you were orphaned as well.”

“Clark and I didn’t find each other until I was eighteen,” she said.
When she’d returned to Earth after searching for survivors from Krypton, neither she nor Clark had known then that Lois knew Clark’s secret. When she had helped rescue Lois from DeSaad’s, Lois had questioned Clark at length about Kara’s connection with him. Worried that Lois had been getting too close to the truth about him, Kara had suggested he let Lois think Kara had been exposed to meteor rock while living in Smallville with him.

Of course, after the truth had been revealed, Lois had told them they needed to come up with a better cover, especially if Kara was going to be in disguise. It had been Lois’ idea to say that both Clark and Kara had been orphaned at a young age and that ‘Linda’s’ parents had been killed while travelling abroad. Together, the three of them had decided Linda Danvers had been adopted by an American couple living in England, and when Linda had come to the US trying to find out more about her birth family she had found Clark.

Oliver had used his considerable resources to help them create the new identity which stood up to closer scrutiny than even Clark’s, which Lionel had arranged through a fictitious adoption agency, Metropolis United Charities.

John continued to ask questions about her family and her personal life, which left Kara in no doubt what he was trying to do. He was trying to figure out what made her vulnerable. He might know about the meteor rock, but there were ways around that. It was just a question of knowing what he planned to do with the information.

***

Martha had just walked out of a senate committee meeting when she literally ran into Daniel Abrams. He immediately put out a hand to steady her.

“I’m so sorry,” he said, looking apologetic. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“No, of course not,” she answered, frowning slightly at him. She didn’t fail to notice the glare from Miranda Clifford who was standing a few feet away.

Abrams nodded and continued on his way, while Martha walked to the bank of elevators and pressed the button to call the car. As soon as the doors closed, Martha looked down at the small slip of paper Abrams had managed to pass off to her.

Need to talk. Meet me at three, Washington Monument Grounds.

Martha glanced at the gold-plated watch on her wrist. Jonathan had bought her the watch for their twentieth anniversary. He had never been much of a traditionalist but he always remembered their anniversary. It was almost two-thirty. She would have just enough time to check her messages.

She opened the door to her office. Her assistant, Louise, looked up.

“Senator. Just two messages for you. One from your son and a man who didn’t want to identify himself. He did say it was urgent though.”

“Thank you, Louise.” She handed the girl the notes from her meeting. “Will you please type these up for me? I have another meeting to get to. Did the man leave a number?”

“Yes ma’am,” Louise said, handing over the slip.

Martha frowned. The number was a Gotham exchange.

“Thank you, Louise. I may be out for the rest of the afternoon.”
Martha dropped her briefcase in her office and left again, walking briskly out of the building and hailing a cab at 15th Street.

“Washington Monument,” she said.

“Yes ma’am,” the driver answered.

It was a short trip and she was there about ten minutes before she needed to be. Martha took the message slip and dialled the number.

“This is Senator Martha Kent.”

“Senator, it’s Bruce. I won’t waste your time with pleasantries, but I felt it prudent to warn you.”

“About what?”

“I have it on good authority that you are under investigation by several individuals within the state Senate.”

“Yes, I am aware of that.”

“Are you also aware that they are attempting to uncover your relationship to Superman? If they were to discover Superman, or rather The Blur’s activities in Smallville more than ten years ago, the trail would most definitely lead back to you and seriously damage your credibility in the senate. It is well-known in political circles of your work against the VRA.”

“That is a matter of public record.”

“Far be it from me to criticise, Senator, but your son has not exactly been known to be discreet in the past.” He paused. “Senator, you’re an admirable woman; some would say formidable, and even more so when it comes to protecting your son’s secret. I am not out to expose his identity to the world. What I am trying to do is make you aware of the dangers you face. If the likes of Senator Miranda Clifford should learn his identity there is every likelihood she will call for you to be expelled from the Senate. And Clark could end up on a DDS examination table.”

“I know all this. The question is, what is your interest in all this, Bruce? Or perhaps I should say, Batman?”

“Yes, it’s true that my interest is purely professional. However, I feel the need to point out that if Clark’s secret were to be exposed, it would only be a matter of time before we all find ourselves the subjects of investigation. I don’t think I need remind you of a certain former general now calling himself Deathstroke.”

“No, you don’t,” she returned. “I take it you have something in mind?”

“Miranda Clifford is suspected to be a member of the very organisation which is hoping to bring down Superman, and with him, every other member of the Justice League.”

“I thought you were not a member?” she asked.

“I’m not. Yet. I’m reserving judgement.”

“You still have not answered my question.”

“I have information on Miranda Clifford which I hope will stop her investigation in its tracks. The trick is proving it.”
“I’m meeting with someone who may be able to help.”

“Senator Abrams is a good man and you can most definitely trust him.”

“Speaking of whom,” she said, spying the very man. “I just spotted him.”

“I will discuss this with you later, Senator. Give my regards to your son.”

Martha hung up and approached the senator. He smiled and led her to a wooden bench to sit.

“Martha, you know I am a great admirer of yours and I would do anything for you, but this thing that Miranda is pursuing ...”

“Tell me about her,” Martha coaxed.

“Why?”

“Because if we can prove her to be unreliable, we may be able to stop this investigation before it happens.”

“I’m afraid she’s not the only senator with concerns about Superman. He is, after all, an alien. What makes you think he is as benevolent as you say?”

“Daniel, my son and his wife have been covering stories on Superman since his arrival in Metropolis.”

She was careful to keep that vague, knowing people still debated when exactly Superman appeared on the scene. “They are both great believers in telling the truth and they wouldn’t say Superman was here to help if they didn’t believe it.”

“I know, but Miranda ...”

“Miranda isn’t interested in taking down Superman because she thinks he’s a threat to the people of this country. She believes he’s a threat to something else.”

“Like what?”

“Like the Illuminati.”

Daniel frowned, then laughed nervously.

“The Illuminati? Martha, it’s a fairy story.”

“No, it isn’t. Trust me on this, if we don’t stop this investigation in its tracks, Superman will not be able to stop them when they make their move. Then the entire world will be in danger.”
Lois was beginning to feel more and more uneasy with the girl Clark had hired, on Oliver’s say-so. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust Oliver’s judgment. It was just that something didn’t feel right. The way the girl looked at her sometimes, or looked at Clark. She did her best to hide it, but Lois sensed the girl didn’t like Clark. Every time Ria was in the apartment, she would look at Clark as if she was the one wishing she had heat vision.

Lois had sent Ria out to take a couple of hours off. Ria had protested she didn’t need the time off and was only too happy to be there to help Lois with the baby, but Lois had insisted. Ria had finally acquiesced, leaving Lois with Mara. She quickly bundled her daughter up in warm clothes and put her in the stroller.

“Come on, Mara, we’re going out to see Daddy.”

Mara probably didn’t understand a word she said but Lois wasn’t particularly concerned.

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Aresia knew Lois Lane was suspicious of her. The woman was clearly extremely insightful, which did not bode well for the plan. She dialled a number on her cellphone.

“’Allo?”

“It’s me,” she said.

“Aresia, quel est le problème?”

“It’s Lois Lane,” she said, determinedly speaking English. “I think she suspects ...”

Stephanie signed. “Dear sister, have I not warned you that Lois Lane is a femme très astucieux and she is extremely protective of her family.”

“I don’t understand why we cannot take the baby now,” Aresia asked her spiritual sister.

Stephanie cursed in French.

“That is not our plan, sœur.”

“You mean your husband’s plan,” Aresia said sulkily.

“Mais oui.”

“Why do you trust him? He is a man. Men are not to be trusted.”

She heard the ice in her sister’s voice as Stephanie answered.
“You will do as I say, child and that is the end of it!”

Aresia hung up and sighed. There were times when she questioned Stephanie’s loyalty. She still remembered the day she had found the young girl on the island. Aresia had been only a young child then, still a little ignorant of Themyscira and its mysteries.

She had been playing in the clear blue water when she had seen the plane in the air, its engines ablaze. Her eyes widened as the plane crashed into the sea. Turning, she ran in the direction of the village and went to find someone who could help.

Princess Diana and Rena followed her, quickly getting a boat into the water as the wreckage from the downed plane began to drift toward the island. Aresia had watched anxiously from the shore as they brought in the bodies of two adults and a girl child. The girl was a little older than Aresia and she was alive.

***

Stephanie de Rochefort, nee Valliere, sighed as she crossed the avenue to the cafe where she was meant to meet Lex Luthor. They had had several meetings now but Luthor was a difficult man to persuade. The problems within his company had made him wary of any approach by her.

Stephanie touched a hand to her blonde hair. Seducing someone like Luthor was never going to be easy, considering his taste ran to brunettes and redheads, or so she had read. Still, Stephanie was a great believer in the idea that a ‘type’ was not something that was measured by appearance, but by character. As long as Luthor believed she was just an innocent, caught up in something she did not fully understand, the easier it would be. He had, after all, taken advantage of the innocence of Lana Lang.

She glanced up the street, her mind recalling the brief conversation she had had with Aresia. The young Amazon was becoming almost cagey. She was eager to move and Stephanie was not ready for this part of the plan. Correction, she thought, her husband was not ready. Aresia had always been rather headstrong. It had been the same since they were children.

Stephanie’s birth parents had been jewellers in Toulouse. While they were not as wealthy as they would have preferred, they were comfortable enough to own their own small private Falcon.

Laurence and Raymond Valliere had been on their way to Greece with their young daughter for a family vacation in the jet, dubbed Desire d Etoiles when the plane’s engines had malfunctioned, sending it crashing into the sea.

Stephanie had been taken to Themyscira’s Island of Healing by Princess Diana and she had grown up among the Amazons. The sisters had given her a new name: Ephiny. For a while, she had been happy, but she had been old enough when the plane crashed to miss life in Toulouse. Queen Hippolyta had sensed her restlessness and offered her a choice. She could return to Man’s World for a few months and decide which life she truly desired.

When she returned to France, she spent some time learning what she had missed. One evening she had attended a party being hosted by some old friends of her father’s and had met Yves. She had eventually told him the truth of her parents’ deaths and where she had been. He had responded by offering her a life by his side and a position in a fashion magazine. She knew then there was no returning to Themyscira and had believed she would never see her Amazon sisters again, until Aresia had sought her out.

Aresia hated all men, believing the world would be a better place without them and resented
Superman, thinking he was only perpetuating the myth of the patriarchy by using his abilities. Stephanie didn’t necessarily buy into the proposition that a matriarchal society was any better.

When de Rochefort had told her it had been confirmed through tests that the daughter of Clark Kent and Lois Lane was half-alien, Stephanie had brought Aresia in on the plan. She hadn’t counted on the girl wanting to remove the baby from her parents so quickly. Aresia was impatient and she was quickly becoming a liability with her demands.

***

Lois waited while the retina scan read her and confirmed her identity, tapping her foot a little nervously as the lift made its way up to the control deck of Watchtower. There had always been high-tech security measures to keep intruders out; not that they had been totally effective. She still remembered Chloe telling her about the time Tess had broken in to Watchtower and the system had shut down.

Then there had been the time Carter Hall aka Hawkman had tossed Oliver through the huge observation window. Not to mention the time Clark Luthor from the Earth-2 had paid an unplanned visit, dropping through the top of the dome. Well, she supposed that was something they hadn’t been prepared for when they’d come up with the security measures.

Now they had extra safeguards to make sure that no one unauthorised could break in.

The lift doors opened and Lois pushed the stroller in front of her, reaching out to open the double doors. Clark had told her he would be at Watchtower for about an hour after work, using the more sophisticated systems to do some research.

He was standing at the main console, a deep frown marring his features, but looked up and smiled when she came in.

“Hey you,” Lois said with a smile. “Hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

He grinned. “Actually, I could use the distraction. What are you two doing here, and don’t tell me it’s because somebody was missing me,” he added, looking down at his daughter.

Lois threw her arms around his neck. “Well, maybe I was missing you,” she said, pouting slightly. He kissed her. “You are up to something.”

“Actually,” she said, pulling away from him with a sigh, “I needed to talk to you about something.”

She sat down on the couch and he joined her.

“What is it?”

“It’s Ria.”

He frowned. “What about her?”

“I get a bad feeling about her, Clark.”

“What kind of feeling?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged. “Just bad. I mean, I see her looking at you sometimes, and ...”

“Lois I would never ...”
“Not that kind of look,” she said. “More the wishing she had heat vision so she could fry you to a crisp kind of look.”

“Oliver wouldn’t have recommended her, if …”

“Yes, but you know Oliver can be kind of flaky sometimes. I mean, you know I love him. He’s one of our best friends, but still, he does kind of overlook things sometimes.”

Clark took her hands. “Sweetheart, maybe you’re just feeling a little cabin fever. Look, why don’t I call one of the guys and get them to look after Mara for tonight.”

“Not Bart,” she told him.

He grinned. “All right. Not Bart. How about Dinah? I know she’s been dying to spend some time with Mara.”

“What are you going to tell Ria?”

“We don’t have to tell her anything,” he said. “We’ll just say that we’re going out somewhere that lets us take Mara with us. It’ll just be a little white lie.”

“Because we both know you suck at lying,” Lois said with a grin.

“I do not!” he protested. “Okay, maybe I lied badly in the past, but then I hated lying. Now I lie to protect you and Mara, and that can’t be a bad thing, can it?”

“You know that really flies in the face of Superman’s policy of never lying.”

“Superman doesn’t lie,” he told her firmly. “Clark Kent, on the other hand, has to lie every day.”

“Semantics.”

“Just for that,” he growled, “I might not take you where I was planning tonight.”

“I’ll be good,” she said hastily. “Where were you planning on going?”

“Well, there’s this new club that opened up. It’s sort of a retro club. You know, music from the seventies and eighties. I don’t know if they play Whitesnake songs, but …”

“That’s okay,” she said, beaming. “I love that idea. Do we have to dress retro?”

“Probably better not to,” he answered, “since I was planning on surprising you with dinner at your favourite restaurant.”

Lois threw her arms around her beloved husband once again.

“You, Mr Kent, are firing on all cylinders tonight. You never know, you just might get lucky.”

Mara chose that moment to wake up and began crying noisily. Clark went to pick her up and his daughter stopped crying instantly.

“Daddy’s girl,” Lois smiled as she watched her husband cradle their daughter in his arms. She looked so tiny compared to him. Clark had an adorable grin on his face as Mara looked up at him with what was clearly the baby version of complete trust.

“Remember that time you and Lana found a baby in a crater?” Lois said. “I knew then you’d be a
great dad,” she added, taking her daughter’s tiny hand in hers and shaking it gently. Mara was still gaz ing up adoringly at her father.

“Lois, you weren’t there, if I recall,” he said, frowning slightly. “Weren’t you still trying to patch things up with your dad?”

“Well, you know how the general is,” she said. “Besides, your mom told me the whole story when I was pregnant with Mara.”

Clark returned to the couch, lightly stroking his daughter. She lay contentedly in his arms, cooing.

“What was she saying?”

“Well, I was being Ms Doubting Mustafa,” she said, reminding Clark of a Disney movie they’d once sat down to watch about a week before Lois had given birth. “You know me, I never did have much faith in my parenting skills. Of course that all changed once I held this precious angel in my arms, didn’t it, munchkin?” she said, her finger caught in Mara’s little fist. “Anyway, your mom told me all about Evan and how devastated you were when he died and I just knew. Dad and I also had a long talk about things and he told me my mom went through the same doubts before she had me. I guess it’s normal.”

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Moana had spent half the day checking into some leads and talking to a couple of contacts, but so far had not been able to come up with anything clandestine about the proposed resort in Smallville. De Rochefort’s plan seemed simple enough. Use the natural resources available in Smallville to turn it into a ‘spa’, making it an attraction to those seeking a getaway destination, thereby improving the town’s economy and creating jobs. He was selling it as the mid-west’s answer to Palm Springs and Las Vegas all in one.

The prospect of the town being overrun by tourists and rich people, not to mention gamblers had brought protestors out of the woodwork. The plan was quickly dividing the town between those who desperately needed jobs and those who wanted to preserve the town the way it was.

Moana scowled. Now she was stuck on babysitting duty, so to speak. Luthor had asked her to meet him at some cafe, where he was now talking with a blonde woman and acting very friendly. She had approached the table only for him to glance up at her and shake his head slightly, then shift his gaze to a table next to them. She had sat down, ordering a coffee and listening to the conversation.

She had always had a good head for facts and figures, but names and faces tended to elude her memory unless she had good reason to remember them. So when she saw Luthor’s companion, she had a vague feeling of familiarity, but the name escaped her. Trying to appear casual, Moana had grabbed the society section of the Daily Planet, hoping to read more about the launch of the Smallville resort.

She glanced through the photographs, recognising Sir Alistair Phillips by his photograph. According to one of her contacts, the man had connections to Freemasons, a known affiliate organisation of the Illuminati and was a Knight of Malta, also affiliated with Freemasonry. Her friend suspected he was very high up in the Illuminati hierarchy; perhaps even at the very top of their organisation.

Still, Phillips, to all appearances, was just a director of Chatham House, also known as the Institute of International Affairs. Chatham House was a think tank, a non-profit organisation which was tasked with research and advocacy on topics like social policy and political strategy. It seemed rather unusual that the think tank would take such an interest in a small town.
Moana continued to read, half an ear open to the conversation. The woman seemed to be trying to seduce Luthor, judging from what she could hear. Moana continued to pretend to be totally absorbed in the newspaper, opening her senses to the woman. She was definitely lying to Luthor about her purpose, but it seemed Luthor was already aware of it. The emotions she read off the bald man were anger but more than a little curiosity as well. While he knew what she was trying to do, he was letting it play out so he could try and turn it in his favour.

She returned her attention to the newspaper as the woman got up, kissing Luthor on both cheeks. The two spoke rapidly in French, clearly saying their farewells and the blonde walked away, passing Moana’s table. Moana glanced up at her, then back down at the photograph. Crap, she thought. She’d totally missed the fact the woman was married to de Rochefort.

“Well?” Luthor asked, sitting down at her table.

“Well what?”

“What did you think?”

Moana narrowed her eyes at him. He knew what she could do. He knew what she was.

“You bastard!” she said, getting up. He caught her arm.

“Don’t play games with me, Ms Rangihau. I called you here to confirm my suspicions about Madame de Rochefort. You and I both know you are not just some mediocre reporter here to follow some exhibition from the Antipodes. Tell me what you know about her.”

“She is trying to seduce you, is that what you want to hear?”

“I’m aware of that,” he said, confirming her own suspicions.

Moana shook him off and walked out of the cafe. Luthor followed her. Moana soon realised her path was blocked by a woman who was as tall as an Amazon but twice as deadly. She was clearly carrying a gun underneath her suit jacket, the bulge obvious at the waist. Moana turned on the bald man.

“Don’t test me, Luthor!” she spat. “The only reason I agreed to this in the first place is because I promised someone else I would do what I could to help.”

“I’ve no time for your petty grievances,” Luthor retorted.

“Petty? You call dragging me out of my home in the middle of the night to study me petty?”

Even Clark didn’t know the real reason for her hatred of Luthor. It had been a few years ago, but she still remembered it well. Of course, she had never been able to prove it had been Luthor, but she had not been amused when she’d been woken in the middle of the night and forced to go with them to what looked to all intents and purposes like an old warehouse. She’d been poked and prodded and generally made to feel like a lab rat, all because Luthor’s people had been interested in finding out what she was.

“I was not responsible for that and I give you my word I will find out and have them brought to justice.”

Moana scoffed. “You disgust me, Luthor!”

“I don’t have time for this. I promise you now I will find who was responsible, but we have more
important things to be concerned about. Do you know what her plans are?"

“I don’t read minds,” she told him. “It doesn’t work that way. I can only read feelings.”

“Then what do you read?”

“Fear!”

“Of me?” he asked.

Moana shook her head. “Of him. Fear of failure. You, she hates. She’s just one in a very long line.” She shook his hand off. “Now let me go before I do something we’ll both regret. I don’t like to be touched, especially by scum like you.”

Lex stared after her as Moana ran off. Maybe he wasn’t able to read emotions but he had seen the anger and the pain in her eyes. Returning to his office, he opened up his laptop and began searching through files which had been buried for at least seven years, or even longer.

It had taken some time to sift through all the projects Luthorcorp had been behind. 33.1 of course had been the most ambitious one before Ares, but he hadn’t been lying when he said he hadn’t been responsible for what had happened to Moana Rangihau. He hadn’t known the name, but something had sparked inside his brain when he’d first spoken with her. There had been another project; a precursor to 33.1.

Years earlier, there had been a small facility in the Antipodes. Unlike Sydney, which Green Arrow and his band of merry men had done their best to destroy, this one had remained off the grid. The scientists at this tiny facility had relied on word-of-mouth information and had heard rumours of a young woman with superior strength and an uncanny ability to read people.

They’d done their due diligence had eventually managed to track her down, forcing her out of her apartment in the middle of the night to study her. They’d performed all manner of tests, drugging her to make sure she complied. They’d given her more than was necessary, for a normal human, but it had been abundantly clear she was not normal.

Still, as Lex realised from her reaction, there was far more to the story than he’d first understood.

Picking up the phone, Lex dialled a number.

“It’s Lex,” he said. “I need to speak with Dr Randall.”

The person on the other end was curious, but put him through. Lex quickly refreshed the doctor’s memory on the project.

“What happened to her?” he asked the doctor. The man seemed almost evasive, until he pushed for more information. “During the time you had her. Doctor, I am not in the mood for playing games. Either you tell me ...”

Finally, the doctor spoke at length, telling Lex exactly what had happened. By the time Lex had hung up his face was drained of colour. It was little wonder she hated him, if she held him responsible for this. He hadn’t been lying when he’d told her he wasn’t the one responsible. It had been his father!

Lex took out the card she had left when she had first come to see him, then dialled her number.

“It’s Lex. We need to talk,” he said.
“I have nothing to say to you,” she told him, still sounding bitter.

“Moana, please, I am telling you the truth. I had nothing to do with what happened to you all those years ago. I know you know about 33.1, but this was nothing to do with that. Check your dates. It happened before I took over Luthorcorp.”

She was silent for a moment, obviously thinking it over.

“If you’re not responsible, then ...”

“It was my father.”

“It still changes nothing. Do you really think you’re any better?”

“At least I never raped anyone!” he told her defensively, telling her he knew exactly what had happened. She’d been drugged, locked up in one of the rooms, and a guard had taken advantage of that to force her to have sex with him.

Moana scoffed. “You think because there was nothing sexual in what you did to others it wasn’t rape? Ever hear of mind rape, Luthor?”

“These were people who were a threat ...” he began.

“And what did that make me?” she returned. “Am I a threat? You really think you can justify what you did because some of those meteor freaks you’ve been studying turned out to be psychotic? And what are you, Luthor? I know you were exposed to the meteors. That makes you one of them. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised you would turn on your own kind. That’s just the kind of snake-in-the-grass you are.”

She hung up abruptly, leaving him staring at the phone. He sat back in his chair, turning and staring out the window, his hands steepled under his lip.

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Moana turned and looked at her visitor. She had been surprised to get the call from Anders. She’d heard of him, of course, through numerous circles, but they’d never met.

“Lex Luthor?” Anders asked, raising an eyebrow. “You’re working with him?”

“Because Clark asked me to,” she said.

“You seem to have a lot of faith in Clark, even if what I heard was true.”

“It’s true. I don’t talk about it. Look, my ability lets me know who I can trust, and I still don’t trust Luthor, but ... well, you know what happened with the Somervilles.”

There had been rumours floating for decades that James Somerville had been working with various financial kingpins, not to mention federal and international spy agencies with ties to the Illuminati in a campaign to get his son William into the presidential seat. However William had refused to go along with some of the demands each organisation made, some of which couldn’t be fulfilled until he was in office. It had even been postulated that James had only become as rich and successful as he was because those organisations had been working behind the scenes to get him there. William had tried to expose the deceit and had been killed for it.

“Sometimes it’s better the devil you know,” she said, “and if someone like Webster continues to let
himself be manipulated into power ... Luthor refused to be their puppet, and now they’re out to destroy him.”

“But if Luthor wins this war …”

“He can be controlled a lot more easily than Webster because at least Superman knows his weaknesses. He understands Luthor. Have you never read Sun Tzu?”

Anders frowned at her. Clearly not, she thought.

“Luthor’s fond of quoting from the Art of War. Sun Tzu said: ‘If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the results of a hundred battles’.”

“I see.”

Moana shrugged. “But I think we’ve gotten off the reason for your visit.”

“I thought you should know there’s going to be an article in the Inquisitor tomorrow.”

“That rag?” she asked.

“They may be a rag, but the Daily Planet would never print the article. They’re not into conspiracy theories.”

***

Vice President Jeffery Madison sat down to breakfast in his apartment at the White House. Ivan had outdone himself this morning, he thought, serving him bacon and eggs with whole wheat toast and maple syrup and more of that delicious French Roast coffee he always liked. Clearly the man was trying to butter him up for something.

There were newspapers scattered on the table and Madison glanced over them. It was usually his job to peruse the major newspapers and check the headlines for any negative news on the president. He glanced over the Washington Post, the New York Times and his gaze fell on the headline above the fold on the Daily Planet.

Superman and Justice League save Chemical Plant
Hundreds of workers saved from toxic fire.

Ivan had also thought to add the Metropolis Inquisitor to the pile, and the headline practically screamed at him.

Illuminati link to Vice President and CIA

Madison gasped, almost spilling his coffee on the carpet as he began reading.

Papers crossed the news desk today detailing a link between the Vice President, the director of the CIA and the Illuminati, an organisation purported to be behind various moves to create a New World Order.

Photographic evidence shows the VP at private party with various American dignitaries which our correspondent claims to be connected with a number of secret societies with ties to the New World Order conspiracy, including Freemasons, the Skull and Bones Society and La Rose Noire.

Former journalist Mark Anders, who is currently being sought as a fugitive by Canadian authorities, came out of hiding long enough to release this evidence saying he has distributed it to all known
media organisations in the country.

Well, Madison thought, that would throw cold water on the idea of trying to sell it as just another crackpot theory, especially if major news media picked up the story and ran with it. He would have to nip this in the bud, and fast!
Episode 5: Part 1

Chapter Summary

The Vice President of the United States is worried about a news article

Episode Five: The Architects of Fear

Madison glared at the newspaper as if he had Superman’s heat vision. His mood, which had been quietly simmering the moment he’d got up, was now at boiling point. Hand trembling with his anger, he pressed speed dial one on the keypad of the phone beside him, obtaining immediate connection to Langley.

“Joshua,” he barked without preamble. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you deliberately dropped the ball.”

“Jeff, what are you ...”

“Don’t tell me you have no idea what I’m talking about!” Madison spat angrily. “How long have we been friends? We have discussed this over and over and I thought we’d come to some understanding on how to handle PI 40 and the not so little problem of these so-called superheroes and now I see this garbage in the daily newspaper.”

“Jeff, calm down! Yes, I’ve seen the morning newspapers, but you don’t really think ...” He sighed, sounding tired. “Look, it’s not my fault our beloved el presidente,” which was said with much sarcasm, “is practically in Superman’s lap. The man, or alien, or whatever you want to call him, did save the world from that giant planet, or whatever the hell it was.”

“I’m not talking about that, you idiot! Did you not see the goddamned Inquisitor?”

“That rag?” the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency spluttered.

“I’m talking about Mark Anders. Listen to me, Josh. You know I plan to campaign for the presidential nomination this time around. You want to become Vice President, then we need to get rid of the likes of Anders. If he and his so-called Friends of the Truth get more people on side ...”

“I know, I know Jeff, but ... what about Superman?”

Madison sighed. “Well the VRA was a miserable failure and Superman is more popular than ever. We’re just going to have to go to the mattresses.”

Josh groaned at the quote from The Godfather.

“You’re saying you want to play dirty,” he said.

“That’s precisely what I’m saying. Superman is a threat to our way of life and the sooner the people see that, the better.”
“How? You’re not suggesting ...”

“You know very well what I’m suggesting. Neither one of us have the power that de Rochefort and Masters do. Or would you prefer to leave it to the ‘Men in Black’?” he asked, not without a little dark humour at his old friend’s expense.

“Another thing,” he continued. “Have you got names of anyone who belongs to this Friends of the Truth?”

“We’re looking into it.”

“It’s not good enough. Look, I can feed information on Anders to the press and sell them the story that he’s a drunk or a drug addict; anything to discredit him, but I need some help from you. If we don’t nip this in the bud ...”

“I have already been in contact with Trenholm, not to mention the directors of the FBI and the NSA. They’re pooling their resources.” Trenholm was director of the DDS and she was only too happy to comply with Josh’s requests.

“Damn it, Josh ... Listen to me, unless we find something to discredit Anders completely, the entire operation could be blown! Just handle it!”

Joshua Appleby stared at the phone as the call was abruptly cut off. His friend was panicking, he thought. He saw his own campaign to gain the future presidency in jeopardy and that clearly worried him. There was only so much he could do, he thought.

He accessed his files and opened the folder on Superman. It was already extensive, filled with newspaper clippings from Superman saving Air Force One over two years ago to his latest exploits in Metropolis. There were dozens of editorials, both vilifying and supporting the alien. Some of his agents had even tried to link Superman’s activities to various incidents in Smallville and in Metropolis over the years but they had no definitive proof that Superman was behind any of it. As far as anyone knew, he had only come to Earth a few years earlier.

He was so deep into his reading that he didn’t hear the quiet knock on the door.

“Sir, there is an Isabelle Lewis to see you.”

Frowning, he beckoned the woman standing behind his assistant to enter. She was tall, with long blonde hair. She was a beautiful woman, although a good twenty five years younger than him and her face was indeed very striking. She had an intelligent look, although the sharp angle of her eyebrows gave her face an almost sly expression, like she was forever scheming something.

“Ms Lewis?” He racked his brain, trying to remember where he had heard her name before. She smirked at him.

“You’re thinking, where have I heard of or seen you before? You don’t remember, Director?”

She had a soft accent which was vaguely similar to American, with a slight inflection.

“Canadian Security Intelligence Service,” he said. He had met the woman about five years earlier, around the same time he’d taken up the post of CIA director.

“Very good,” she said. “You were not expecting me?”

“I admit I was not aware of your visit, but ... what can I do for you?”
“Mark Anders. He is a problem, no?”

“You’re asking for an extradition? What exactly has this man done? Other than be a pain in the ass.”

“He is suspected of treason against the Canadian government. We take care of our own, my dear director.”

“I still need a formal request.”

“You shall have it. I have already made a request to the Ministry of Justice in Ottawa. You should receive a formal request in a month or so.” She smiled slyly. “It may help your case somewhat if it became known that Superman ignored our laws and aided and abetted a fugitive from our government.”

Josh was well aware that various spy agencies spied on other agencies as a matter of course, and to have her blatantly admit to knowledge of their ‘problem’ with Superman was confirmation.

“I will see what I can do,” he said. He would have to put pressure on the FBI Director, but they would find Anders. Superman couldn’t protect him forever.

XXXXXXXXXXX

“Ollie!”

“I’m coming honey,” he called out, washing his hands.

“Well, hurry up,” Chloe said petulantly. “You know what the crowds can be like at the Eiffel Tower.”

“I don’t know what’s so special about it,” he said. “We’ve seen much more incredible things than some old tower.”

His wife looked at him, her nose crinkling.

“Oliver Queen, you have no sense of romance,” she said.

“No sense of ...” He stared at her incredulously. “What about last night? Wasn’t I romantic last night?”


“I will have you know I can be very romantic. I just don’t see anything romantic about a great big hulking piece of steel.”

“It’s not the construction, honey, it’s the idea of it. I mean, it’s the reason people choose that particular location to propose to their partners, year after year.”

“Still not seeing it,” he said, shaking his head.

She sighed. “Yes, dear, whatever you say.” She grabbed his hand. “Come on, let’s go. Lana and Murphy are meeting us there.”

“I still don’t trust that guy,” he replied, following her out of their suite.

“I know, but you know Lana. I mean, this is the woman who fell for Lex and his lies.”
The elevator opened and they entered the car, holding hands as they waited for it to descend.

“Yeah, speaking of Lex,” he said, scratching his upper lip. “Why is Clark having anything at all to do with him? I mean, I kind of agree with Lois. He’s not to be trusted.”

“Well, you know that saying, ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’? I think Clark and Lex have a lot more to deal with than their own issues. Especially with the baron.”

“You haven’t been able to find out anymore on him?” he asked as they left the hotel and began walking along the Avenue to find a taxi. Oliver could have called for a car, but he liked the idea of having a little anonymity. He wasn’t well known in France.

“Basic background stuff. Long ancestry, aristocracy, blue blood, the whole shebang. The family dates back even further than the Rockefellers and the Rothschilds and according to our ‘friend’, those families are very high up in the hierarchy and pretty much control everything in the financial world.”

“Still doesn’t tell us how to beat these guys.”

“No. That’s the thing about the Illuminati. They’re insidious.”

“Meaning?”

“Subtlety was never your strong point, was it my darling?”

“I can be subtle.”

A taxi stopped for them and they got in. Oliver spoke in rapid French to the driver, telling him to take them to the Champ de Mars, close to the tower.

Chloe snorted. “You? Hmm, let’s see, when you first met Clark you told him you’d pictured him to be a lot more nerdy.”

“Well, that was the way Lois described him,” he said, shrugging.

“You dress up in green leather for your ‘other job’.”

“Oh, okay, you got me there. What about when we first got together?”

She pretended to frown, pressing close to him to whisper in his ear. “Hmm, you showed me how to shoot one of your arrows. I seem to remember feeling another ‘arrow’ pressed against my backside.”

Oliver’s eyes widened in mock incredulity.

“Hey, can I help it if I get aroused when I have a beautiful woman in my arms?”

“You were all about, what was it you said? Sometimes you have to take the fun where you can get it?”

“Well, that night was fun, wasn’t it?”

“Oh yeah, we had fun all right. We had fun in the middle of Watchtower, in your bed, in your shower, in your bed again, not to mention the living room floor ... I had so much ‘fun’ I could barely move the next day. On the upside, I lost three pounds.”

“That’s what you got out of all that? You lost three pounds?”
“Well, it’s not like I didn’t need it.”

“Are you kidding? You lose any more weight, you’d be skin and bone. I like your curves.”

Chloe sent her husband a loving look. “I’m really glad to hear you say that because in a few months I’m going to have a few more curves.”

Oliver stared at her, slowly breaking out in a huge grin.

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” he asked.

She nodded. “I asked Emil to run some tests last week. I was going to tell you over a romantic dinner, but I just ... I mean, I can keep a secret, but this was just too good to keep to myself.”

“Chloe ...” he said softly, looking deep into her eyes. His gaze slowly dropped to her flat stomach. “We’re going to be ... I’m going to be ...”

“Yes, baby, you are.”

“I love you,” he sighed happily, pulling her close and kissing the top of her head.

The taxi stopped and they got out. Chloe waved to Lana, who was waiting with Murphy. Lana grinned back.

“Hi.”

“Were you waiting long?” Chloe said.

“No,” the brunette answered, shaking her head. She frowned slightly at Oliver who was still grinning like the Cheshire Cat even as he talked with Lana’s companion. “What’s he grinning at?”

Chloe glanced at her husband. “Oh, nothing much. Why don’t we go inside?”

The two women chatted as they made their way up to the restaurant 125 metres above the Champ de Mars. The men slowly trailed behind them, still talking. Chloe had the impression Oliver was trying to dig for more information from Murphy, but the man was clearly on to him. As she’d told her husband, subtlety had never been his strong point.

Le Jules Verne restaurant was busy. Chloe was thankful they had made a reservation weeks in advance. The staff led them to their table, which overlooked the Champ de Mars.

“This is great,” Lana smiled.

The two couples talked on a variety of topics but Chloe was careful to avoid anything that might be political. She watched Murphy’s reactions every time Lana tried to steer the conversation toward anything to do with their Smallville past, noting that the Irishman took a peculiar interest in their reminiscences.

“Remember that guy Ian?” Lana was saying.

Chloe nodded. “I remember him trying to kill us both.”

“The only reason either one of us went out with him was because we were mad at Clark.”

“Yeah, I know. That was when we decided we would never let our feelings for Clark get in the way of our friendship.”
“Clark?” Murphy asked.

“I told you about him, remember?” Lana told him. “He’s our friend from high school. I used to date him.”

“Oh, right,” the redhead grinned.

“He’s married to my cousin,” Chloe said, glancing at Oliver who raised an eyebrow then took the hint and quickly changed the subject.

“So, Murphy, why don’t you tell me a bit about this restaurant,” he suggested.

Chloe shot him a grateful look as Murphy launched into a history of the restaurant and of the Eiffel Tower. He seemed to enjoy having a captive audience, his stories growing more outrageous the longer he went on. Chloe was glad to have the distraction.

Lunch was just as delicious as the reviews had promised although Chloe begged off having any wine. She glanced at her husband, who just winked at her and continued to fill her glass with water. She knew Lana had noticed as her friend cocked an eyebrow at her, but she didn’t make mention of it.

Chloe touched her stomach briefly. She was only about two months along, from what Emil could calculate but the only symptoms she’d had were brief periods of feeling tired and slight sensitivity in some areas of her body. She had expected morning sickness but Emil had told her that not every mother-to-be experienced the nausea and vomiting that Lois had through much of her first trimester with Mara. She’d even been hospitalised at one point due to dehydration, since she’d been vomiting so much. Clark, of course, had been frantic with worry, unwilling to leave her long enough to go out on patrol until Lois had virtually kicked him out of the hospital room. At least morning sickness didn’t run in families, she thought.

She couldn’t help noticing Murphy peering at her with interest. Chloe fought a shudder. It wasn’t just the pin he wore or the organisation he seemed to be affiliated with. There was something just creepy about the man. He was a good actor. She would give him that. Still, she just couldn’t find anything to like about him.

Chloe wanted to see the third level of the Eiffel Tower, just to get some photos. Oliver had visited France years before, in his early teens, and he declined, saying it was something she should experience without an old cynic butting in where he wasn’t wanted. Chloe cracked a grin at that, loving her husband all the more. Oliver Queen might come across as brash and obnoxious at times but he had a self-deprecating sense of humour.

Heading to the elevator alone, after Lana also decided not to go, Chloe glanced back, frowning as Murphy excused himself, taking out what appeared to be an i-phone. She shook her head as she waited with a tour group.

Oliver continued to chat with Lana and Murphy, who had returned from making his phone call, wishing Chloe would hurry. He wasn’t a huge fan of Lana’s. Not that he didn’t think she was nice enough. She certainly seemed to have done a lot of growing up in the past few years, but from everything he had heard about the woman, it was little wonder that Clark had often felt like a marionette on a string. Not that he thought Lana meant to toy so much with Clark’s emotions. There had been fault on both sides, he supposed. Clark had still been trying to find himself. Still, Lana’s return to Smallville before the experimental procedure which had given her super strength and speed had confused Clark to the point where he had turned to what was familiar.
That was the problem though, Oliver thought. The writer, or whoever it was who had made up the saying, had been right in saying familiarity bred contempt. Okay, so it was more along the lines of the longer someone did something, or knew someone, the more they would take things for granted, but it worked the other way where the longer a person knew someone the blinder they were to their faults.

He had turned his attention back to the brunette when he heard what sounded like an explosion. Startled, he looked up from his vantage point to see the elevator carrying the woman he loved, as well as the tour group she had joined, fall several feet.

“My god!” Murphy said, staring white-faced. “It’s gonna fall!”

Oliver pulled out his phone to tap out a message to Clark, but he’d forgotten about Lana. She dashed forward in a blur. Oliver was stunned to see her grab hold of the bottom of the elevator just as if started to fall and slowly bring it down the shaft to stop on the level.

Chloe looked shaken but unhurt as the doors were pulled open by the operator, who was visibly upset but grateful as Lana stepped onto the level, clearly relieved at the quick conclusion to the emergency.

As soon as she dusted herself off and finished helping the passengers out, a man began babbling to her in French. Oliver couldn’t hear what they were saying to each other but he was too busy hugging his wife.

“God, are you okay?” he asked. “Is the ...”

“We’re fine,” she said softly, gently stroking his face. “We’re fine.”

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Diana had chosen to don her ‘civilian’ disguise as she wandered the streets of Metropolis, watching her sister. The night before, Aresia had been given the evening off babysitting Kal-El’s offspring and the couple had left their daughter with one of their friends for the evening while they had gone out to dinner and dancing. Diana was relieved that Aresia had not been left alone with the child.

She had wanted to tell the couple the truth about her sister; that she was pretending to be someone else. The problem was, she had no idea how to approach the matter without seeming like she was interfering. Kal-El could take care of himself, and Lois Lane-Kent was just as tough and independent. It was something the Amazonian princess greatly admired about the reporter and mother. She had no doubt that Lois would be fiercely protective of her family.

Diana was strictly non-partisan. She had a mandate to protect those who couldn’t protect themselves. Still, she was torn between her duty to her sisters – Aresia included, and her duty to protect the child. There was also the legal system’s idea that a person was innocent until judged guilty. She didn’t want to think she was judging Aresia purely based on her own prejudices and fears about her sister.

She realised, however, that those fears were not unfounded when she saw Aresia meeting with yet another of their sisters, who had turned her back on the Amazons. Unlike Aresia, who had been granted her powers by the gods, the other, Ephiny, had not been granted powers. She had been allowed to visit Man’s World and had met a man she later married.

Diana had since learned that the man Ephiny, or rather Stephanie, had married, was none other than the very man who, according to Kara, was threatening Mara Kent; Kal-El’s child!

Concerned at the turn this was taking, Diana had decided to head to the apartment where Kal-El and
his wife were currently living, determined to enlighten the couple on the danger they were in.

She was not expecting to be confronted by a woman with olive skin and dark brown hair as she stood on the sidewalk, hesitating by the entry to the Kents’ building.

“What are you doing?” the woman asked, scowling at her.

Lois watched her husband as he chattered away to their daughter. Mara giggled, her legs in the air as she presented her bare backside to her father. She seemed to be refusing point blank to wear the diaper Clark had been trying to put on her and was quite happily lying on her back on the thick towel he’d laid down after her bath.

“Isn’t it a little cold for her?” Lois asked from her vantage point.

Clark looked at her. “We’d know if she was cold. Look at her. She’s quite happy.”

He shook the rattle and Mara turned her head toward the sound, fascinated by the toy. Clark grinned at his wife.

“Mom says sometimes it’s better for the baby to just let them play for a while. Even without clothes. She told me I used to run around naked for the first few months.”

“I know,” she smirked. “I’ve seen the photos. You were such a cute little boy.”

“I’m still cute,” he said deadpan and she laughed.

You have no idea, she thought, remembering the night before. True to his word, Clark had left Mara with Dinah, who had cooed over the baby and promised she would take good care of her while they enjoyed themselves. Lois might have had her issues with the Black Canary but like everyone else in the League, Dinah was besotted with the baby.

Clark had taken her to dinner at Chez Jacques. It was a restaurant which usually required bookings months in advance, but Lois supposed it helped knowing a billionaire. Or two, as the case may be, she thought, thinking of Bruce Wayne, who had been keeping an eye on the current situation.

Lois had been well aware of the sacrifices her husband had to make to be Superman. Ever since Jor-El had temporarily transferred Clark’s powers to her, she had realised just how difficult it was for Clark, especially when he heard a lot of different people in trouble all at the same time. She had often asked him, after she’d learned his secret, how he decided who to help and who not to. Clark couldn’t really give her a straight answer, since it all depended on who needed it most. She still wasn’t clear on it, even after experiencing it for herself, but she at least understood it better.

She continued to watch her husband kneeling on the floor, playing with the baby, knowing how much he needed these little moments to remind him of the good in humanity. He’d often told her she was the one thing that kept him grounded. Superman often saw things in black and white, but she always gave him a good dose of a reality check. He did the same for her in many ways, but he also helped to tone down her natural brashness. Lois could never be accused of being shy.

She sighed softly as the baby began to grizzle. Mara was getting tired by the sound of it.

“Sounds like it’s time for you to go to bed, munchkin,” Clark commented. Mara’s brow scrunched in a passable imitation of a scowl. Clearly Daddy had said a bad word, Lois thought with a laugh.
He quickly got their daughter into diaper and pyjamas, despite her protests, and lifted her, carrying her carefully in his arms as he walked toward Lois.

“Say goodnight to Mommy,” he said.

When Lois had been a teenager, she had gone to visit an old friend of her mother’s. Or rather, her father had gone to visit them and she’d been dragged along. The woman had had a baby about three months before. Lois had watched as the woman spoke baby talk to the infant and she had rolled her eyes, wondering how anybody could do that when it sounded so inane.

Now that she had her own baby she understood. She supposed she was still a little cynical about it, but there was less of the rolling of the eyes when Clark did it. He seemed to enjoy it and Lois had to admit that it did help their daughter learn to communicate.

She kissed her daughter goodnight, then kissed her husband for good measure.

“What do you say we get an early night?” she whispered suggestively.

Clark grinned. He had taken a few nights off patrolling, leaving it to Bart and Victor to keep an eye on things.

“Feeling a little frisky?” he asked, winking at her.

“Hmm, mayyybe,” she said, winking back.

Everyone she knew who had children had told her having a baby tended to put a damper on any kind of sex. It was true that for the first few weeks, Lois had been too tired to do anything except fall into bed, but Clark had done more than his fair share of the work. They had agreed when they’d decided to have a baby, especially so soon after getting married, that they would share in the parenting. Clark loved being a father and he didn’t mind taking on his share of caring for Mara. Now that their daughter was sleeping through the night, that meant her parents had more opportunity for ‘alone time’.

Take the night before, Lois thought. After dinner, Clark had taken her to Wonderland, the retro music club, where they had danced to a selection of seventies and eighties music. Okay, so Clark wasn’t the best dancer in the world, especially when he’d tried some moves to the likes of Staying Alive, but he was a lot better than he used to be, and when it came to the slow dances, well, he was no Fred Astaire but she didn’t care.

A man had tried to persuade her to dance when she had come back from the bathroom to rejoin her husband and had refused to let her go, even when Clark immediately moved to her side. The man wouldn’t believe Lois was married, especially to the geeky-looking guy standing in front of him. Of course, Clark had continued to keep up the persona, even when they were out together, just so no one would connect him to Superman.

“Clark, honey, don’t worry. I can handle this.”

“But Lois,” he protested, using his thumb and forefinger to shift the glasses on his face, giving an aura of discomfort. His posture was stooped, making him seem shorter than his full height of six four and that put him almost at the same height as the creep trying to make time with Lois.

“I said I’ll handle it!” she told him, turning back to the jerk. “Why don’t you get lost?”

“Come on. Ditch the geek. One dance.”
She growled at him. “If I hear you insult my husband one more time, I will deck you!”

“Hey, lady, no need to get violent!”

The man backed off. As he did so, Lois noticed what looked like Amanda Waller sitting in another booth, watching them. She was with a man she recognised from photographs. If she wasn’t mistaken, it was the Marquis de Sade, one of the men rumoured to be with the Illuminati!

Lois looked up from her reverie. She’d forgotten about seeing the man the night before. As Clark returned from putting their daughter down, she started to tell him about what she’d seen, only to be interrupted by the intercom. Clark frowned and went to answer it.

“Who could that be at this time of night?” he asked, then pressed the intercom. “Who is it?”

“It’s Moana. I need to ... oh hell, just let us up.”

Lois cocked an eyebrow at her husband. Us? she mouthed, wondering who was with Moana.

That question was answered a couple of minutes later when the lift doors opened and Moana came out, followed by a woman with dark hair and glasses.

“Forget the intrusion, Kal-El,” the woman said softly.


“Forget me, Mrs Kent, or perhaps I may call you Lois. Your cousin, or rather Kal-El’s cousin, has told me much about you and I have become something of an admirer.”

“Oh?”

“My name is Diana,” she introduced herself. “I am princess of the Amazons.”

Lois frowned. “Amazons? I thought they were a myth?”

Moana looked from Clark to Lois, then at Diana.

“Actually, so did I, but then I presumed the stories told about my ancestor were just myths too. Amazons exist, Lois. And we have one hell of a problem.”
Episode 5: Part 2

Chapter Summary

Lois and Clark learn who they have let into their lives

“What are you talking about?” Lois asked, staring at Moana.

“I’m talking about the Amazon you’ve let into your home.”

Immediately the couple turned to look at Diana. The princess shook her head.

“No. I am sorry to tell you this but my sister, Aresia ...” She looked away.

“Diana?” Clark asked.

“Aresia is ...”

“Ria!” Lois exclaimed, turning to her husband. “I told you there was something off about her. So much for Ollie and his screening.”

“I don’t think it’s Mr Queen’s fault,” Moana told her. “From what I’ve heard about these people, they are very good at covering their tracks. I’ve been helping Lex with another matter.”

Clark stared at her. “Helping Lex?” he echoed disbelievingly.

“Trust me,” she said wryly, “I wouldn’t be doing this if it wasn’t for the principle of the matter. There’s a woman. Stephanie. She’s been trying to seduce Lex.”

“What does she have to do with anything?” Lois said.

“She is not only the wife of Baron de Rochefort, she is also a former Amazon who denounced their ways to return to this world. And she’s working with Aresia.”

Diana nodded. “This is true. I have seen them together.”

“Why would an Amazon work with these people?” Clark asked. “I thought you were given powers by the gods to defend mankind.”

“Yes, but Aresia has no trust in men. She would sooner see all men disappear from this Earth than allow them to rule.”

“Which begs the question ... again,” Lois replied. “Why is she working with these people?”

Moana looked at Diana. The Amazon princess didn’t seem to have an answer to that, but she felt sure she did.

“It sounds to me like she may have her own agenda in this,” she said. “I mean, think about it. If she were to take Mara and raise her as an Amazon, think how powerful that would make her cause against men?”
“There is no way I’m letting that little bitch take my baby,” Lois said fiercely.

“Honey ...” Clark warned her.

“No, Clark! I am not going to just sit here and wait while these people threaten my child.”

“Sweetheart I know that, but getting angry isn’t going to help the situation.”

Moana nodded. “Clark’s right, Lois. Getting emotional clouds your judgement.”

“That sounds like something Batman would say,” Lois growled in frustration.

Moana looked at her. “Batman? I ... I don’t think I’ve met him.”

Diana glanced at the other woman. “Batman tends to keep to himself. It is not to say that he does not work well with others, but ...”

“He prefers to fight his own battles,” Moana sighed. “I understand.” After all, before she had met Bart and Victor she had felt the same way. Even knowing there were others like her in the world hadn’t changed her perspective on the matter.

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De Rochefort stood before the bathroom mirror, trimming his beard. He was considered a meticulous man, fussy about his appearance, but he had learned a long time ago that image was everything when it came to power. He might not be the most handsome man in his country, but he knew how to make the most of his Gallic looks to get what he wanted.

Stephanie entered the room, dressed in a long silk nightgown, her long blonde hair flowing loosely down her back.

“How was your encounter, cherie?” he asked.

She sighed. “Je suis préoccupé par l’utilisation D’Aresia Elle a clairement sont proper ordre agenda.”

“You lui avez clairement fait savoir, vous n’ignorez pas les consequences si elle continue à travailler contre nous?”

“She did, but she’s stubborn.”

“Peut-être a t’elle besoin de plus d’éducation.”

Stephanie took the hint.

“C’est une Amazone avec des Pouvoirs d’une Amazone.”

“Il ya des façons de faire, meme avec des Amazones,” he answered, smiling silkily. Stephanie appeared to shudder. De Rochefort smirked. For all her pretence, she was clearly bothered by the casual way he could plot to destroy someone. Especially someone so close to her.

He turned and held her jaw firmly with thumb and forefinger, pressing hard enough to bruise.

“Ne vous inquiétez pas au sujet de votre sœur, ma chère. Elle va bientôt comprendre qu’il n’est pas dans son intérêt de me doubler.” He let her go and turned back to the mirror. “Dites-moi comment vont les affaires avec Luthor.”
"Il est resistant. C’est comme si il en savez plus que ce qu’il veut bien me dire."

"Vous pensez peut-être que quelqu’un la averti?"

She nodded. "Je crois que oui."

He turned once again and smirked at her. "Alors peut-être qu’il est temps de le convaincre, non?"

Without warning, he lashed out, slapping her hard across the face, then wrapped his big hand around her throat and squeezed just hard enough to make her choke. Stephanie gasped in pain, blood spurting from a small cut where she had bitten her lip. She stared back at him, one manicured hand covering her face where he had hit her, while the other pushed in vain at his hand at her throat. Even through her hand, de Rochefort could see the skin reddening, swelling a little. Good, he thought. He dismissed his wife, ordering her to go to bed. She nodded, her eyes wet with unshed tears. He cared little that he had caused her pain. She would do as he bade her because she was his wife. His possession. She would never refuse him.

De Rochefort finished preparing himself for bed, thinking of the many women he had had under his control over the past few years. Stephanie might be his wife, but he was well aware she was not in love with him. Nor he with her. She was in love with power, and that was fine by him. After all, he was a member of the most powerful organisation on Earth. They wouldn’t have existed for hundreds of years had they not been.

“How was your meeting, my dear?”

“I am concerned at using Aresia. She clearly has her own agenda.”

“You have made it clear, have you not, the consequences if she continues to work against us?”

“I have, but she is stubborn.”

“Perhaps she needs further education.”

“She is an Amazon, with Amazonian powers.”

“There are ways, even with Amazons.”

“Do not worry about your sister, my dear. She will soon understand it is not in her best interests to cross me.”

“Tell me how it is going with Luthor.”

“He is resistant. It is as if he knows more than he is saying.”

“You think perhaps someone has warned him?”

“I believe so.”

“Then perhaps it is time we convinced him, no?”

XXXXX

Lex sat in his huge office on the sixtieth floor of the Luthorcorp building, glaring at the letterhead. It was time for a change he decided. He didn’t want his company to be known as just another glaring example of nepotism, as he’d once been accused of. He didn’t want it to be a legacy left behind by someone who had built themselves a virtual Tower of Babel. It was ironic that Lionel had also once accused Lex of the same thing, the year he’d been searching for the stones he now knew formed Superman’s fortress. What was equally ironic about that accusation was that Lionel was the one who had been searching for the stones in the beginning.

Sighing, Lex turned his chair around and stared out at the surrounding buildings. Only a few yards away, the globe atop the Daily Planet spun, continuing its orbit to emulate that for which the newspaper had been named. A few years ago, there had been an explosion and the globe had fallen amid screams from innocent bystanders below, until Superman, then known as the Blur, had managed to halt its descent and returned it to its place. The engineers sent to repair the globe hadn’t
been thrilled to find Superman had used his heat vision to weld the thing in place, since it meant they’d have to totally reconstruct the framework that kept it spinning.

It was something the general populace never considered about Superman. To them, he was their hero. Their saviour. The fact that there were times when he caused thousands, even hundreds of thousands of dollars of property damage in the wake of his pursuits of justice was something they tended to ignore. Not Lex. Ever since the Man of Steel had appeared on the scene, Lex had sent dozens of missives to media organisations reminding them of the amount of taxpayer dollars being spent to clean up Superman’s messes.

Still, none of that changed the fact that he was forced to work with Superman, as much as he loathed the idea, simply because there appeared to be a force with even more power than him. He didn’t like the idea of the Illuminati trying to control the world, but every piece of literature he had read had postulated the same thing. That they sought to control the world’s population, firstly by political and economic means, then by violent ones.

“You seem deep in thought,” an accented voice spoke.

Had Lex been less experienced in feminine wiles, and he had a meteor-affected female to thank for that, he might have fallen for the soft tone, the musical lilt in the voice and the gentle way she spoke. Except he had long ago learned that lesson. He looked up, then was immediately alarmed to notice the pallor of her skin, the bruise she had attempted to hide with make-up.

“What happened?” he asked, unable to hide his concern.

“Nothing,” she said, avoiding his pointed gaze.

Lex got up from his desk, approaching Stephanie with cautious steps, anxious to keep her calm while he remained neutral, a voice in his head telling him not to be fooled by appearances, while another couldn’t bear the thought of a woman being beaten.

But didn’t you do the same to Lana, that voice asked and Lex brutally dismissed it. With Lana it had been different, he told himself, taking Stephanie’s hand and leading her to the leather sofa.

“Stephanie, did he do this?”

“He is my husband,” she told him.

That was not an answer. Lex gently touched the edges of the bruise at her throat. That bastard had not only hit her, he’d choked her.

“Stephanie, he can’t... you can’t let him get away with this. He could have killed you.”

“You do not understand.”

“Don’t tell me I don’t understand,” he said, as gently as he could.

He’d always sworn when he was married he would never treat his family the way his father had treated his mother and himself. He recalled there had been fights between his parents; fights in which Lionel had hit Lillian. Still, domestic abuse was a phrase that was never spoken in wealthy circles. It didn’t happen.

“You have to leave him.”

Lex recalled once begging his mother to do something similar, the last time she had been beaten by
Lionel. Lex had been eleven and old enough to be more aware of the various nuances of his parents’ behaviour. He’d known then that his mother was afraid of his father. He’d once looked into her eyes and they’d reminded him of a stray dog he’d once tried to adopt, before Lionel had had it taken away. The dog had cowered miserably, tail between its legs, and its eyes showed fear and something else.

“You cannot ask me to do that,” she said sadly, looking away from him.

Lex knew it would be pointless. He could not force her to leave. It had to be her choice.

Part of him still wondered if she was using what her husband did to her to gain his sympathy. It just seemed too convenient in many ways. Still, he had never been able to resist a beautiful woman, especially one in pain. At least this way it would give him the opportunity to see whether all this was really just an act or it was genuine.

“Have dinner with me,” he suggested quietly. “I can have my assistant drive you to the penthouse.”

She looked dubious. “I don’t know,” she said slowly.

“At least we can have some time to talk about this.”

Stephanie nodded. “Very well. I will go to your penthouse and we will talk.”

Lex called his assistant, who came in, looking very sombre.

“Mr Berg is here. Also I have the assessment from HR about the applicants for your new security team.” She handed him the file as she spoke.

“Excellent. Sylvia, please drive Madame de Rochefort to the penthouse. Take the BMW.”

His assistant sent him an odd look, but nodded. She glanced at Stephanie, who smiled briefly, then followed the older woman out. Just as the two women left, a man came in. He had a stocky build and short, curly brown hair. An unattractive woman with a large bust followed behind him.

“Otis,” Lex said.

“Yes sir, Mr Luthor. Reporting back as you requested.”

Lex had found Otis a few years earlier, or rather, Otis had found him, saving his life. He had no idea how Otis had come to be near the Arctic, but for him it had been a happy coincidence. After the collapse of the ice crystal structure which had been Clark’s Kryptonian stronghold, Lex had managed to fight his way free of the snow and ice and staggered out into the cold. He had no way of knowing just how far he had managed to walk, collapsing in the snow.

Otis had pulled him out of a snowdrift, frozen and suffering from hypothermia and frostbite, carrying him on his back as he made his way south. From there, Otis had managed to find a medical facility to tend to Lex, who had suffered multiple injuries when ice had fallen on top of him. The staff at the facility had been astounded at Lex’s resilience, but for Lex it had been nothing new. He’d survived worse, after all.

The other man was about as close to being a friend as Lex would have.

“Otis, tell me what you found.”

“You were right, Mr Luthor. There was a facility there, financed by your father.” Lex already knew
that but he had sent Otis there with the purpose of checking the facility’s status.

“And the residents?” he asked, smirking at the euphemism. They had been less residents than they were prisoners, although one or two had volunteered for testing. Rather like the meteor mutant who Lex had promised would be given access to as much of the meteor rock serum his father’s scientists had developed as he wanted, as long as he would do him one small favour. Still, when Tommy Lee had chosen to take Clark’s then girlfriend Lana hostage, he had gone too far.

Otis was continuing to give his report.

“The facility was shut down some time ago after some government types started nosing around. We talked to Dr Randall and he said the New Zealand government only got involved after some guy started making all kinds of claims. Some journalist.”

“What can you tell me about Ms Rangihau?” Lex asked. He’d sent Otis down under shortly after he’d realised the journalist was working with Clark.

The woman behind Otis, who had been curiously silent while Otis had been speaking, finally spoke.

“We had difficulties getting any information on her.”

Joy Taylor had been exposed to Kryptonite at an early age. She’d been born with brittle bone disease, but the exposure had given her strength and agility which was above the normal level for a human being. Like many others, she had become mentally unstable, locked up in Belle Reve after trying to attack a group of students at Smallville High. Of course, Clark Kent was the one who had sent her to Belle Reve.

Lex had once employed her as a bodyguard cum assistant, until it became patently obvious that she harboured romantic feelings for him. The last female assistant who had shown such feelings, Gina, had ended up being murdered for her trouble. Lex did not want yet another female bodyguard with such an infatuation and had hoped sending Joy with Otis on such a mission might have eased her obsession. Clearly from her expression it had not helped.

“Do tell,” Lex told her.

“Ms Rangihau is an intensely private person. She has little or no social life and few friends and is not close to any of her work colleagues. She does not volunteer information about her personal life.”

“I see.” Lex had seen evidence of that the few times he’d met with her. “How did my father’s people find out about her?”

“It appears she was seen saving someone from an attack in the city’s clubbing district. They noted she had a peculiar strength. The rumours grew from there about a young woman who was often seen performing such heroics.” Lex smirked. It reminded him a lot of Clark when he was still in high school.

Joy went on to tell him that Moana had been kept at the facility for well over a month, until they’d been forced to let her go, along with all the other ‘residents’. They’d talked to the journalist who had first exposed the facility, but he had refused to give them any more information.

Lex was disappointed at the reports. Neither one of them had been able to tell him something he hadn’t already known about Moana. It seemed she had covered her tracks extremely well.

“There was something else,” Otis said before Lex could dismiss him.
“What is it?” he asked, already weary.

“There have been other people asking about her. That’s what we were told by the guys she worked with, Mr Luthor.”

“Who?”

Otis frowned at him, then his eyebrows shot up as he comprehended Lex’s meaning.

“We don’t know. They just said the people had foreign accents. Like French, maybe. Or Italian.”

Well, that was different, Lex thought. It seemed that Moana hadn’t been as good at covering her tracks as he thought, especially if the people asking questions about her were connected to the Illuminati.

He sent Otis and Joy away, flicking through the thin file Otis had given him. Some of the reports contained in the file were observations from the facility. The doctors had concluded that Moana’s abilities were natural rather than attained, which was the same as what Lex had learned just from observation. She had been at least semi-co-operative, although he concluded it was mostly the drugs the doctors had used to keep her docile, until a few days before they’d been forced to release her. It was then Lex realised she had been assaulted by the guard.

Randall had taken no action against the guard, who still remained in Luthorcorp employ to this day. After the facility had been forced to close down, the man had taken a position in one of Lionel’s satellite companies. He’d been promoted to head of security at that company before being transferred to the Metropolis corporate headquarters. Lex himself had signed the approval.

Forgetting for a moment that his assistant had been escorting Stephanie to his penthouse, Lex pressed the buzzer for the intercom. When he received no reply, he went out, realising where she had gone, and decided to head down to the security wing. The guard on duty stared at him, then stood up.

“Mr Luthor, sir, how may I help you?”

“You can call your boss out here.”

“Uh, sir?”

“Benjamin. I want to see him. Immediately!”

The man’s face paled, then he turned on his heel and opened a door, disappearing through it. A few moments later, a tall bearded man came out.

“Mr Luthor?”

“Benjamin. I’d like to speak with you privately.”

“Uh, sir, I have a lot of work to ...”

“Now!” Lex said with a glare. He made it clear it was an order that better be obeyed. Benjamin swallowed visibly.

“Yes sir,” he said, turning to the guard. “Hold down the fort.”

Lex turned and strode out, not looking back to see if the security man was following. He returned to his office and picked up the file with Moana’s photograph.
"You have some explaining to do, Benjamin."

"I don’t quite understand, sir."

"Don’t you? I have it on good authority that you not only abused your position you also took advantage of a young woman."

Benjamin stared at him, his blue eyes incredulous.

"Coming from you, Mr Luthor, I hardly think that’s fair."

"Don’t talk to me about what’s fair!" Lex hissed. "She was vulnerable and you forced her to have sex with you. In the eyes of the law, that is rape and I will not condone it."

"She wanted it."

"She was drugged." He glared at the other man. "Pack your things. You’re fired! After I am through with you, there will not be a company in this city that will hire you."

"I’ve got a wife and kids ..."

"You should have thought of that before you raped the girl. Get out! And if I see your face on these premises, I will have you arrested."

"You goddamn hypocrite! You and your old man were experimenting on these people and you’re calling me a criminal? The only thing I did was have a little fun with the girl! You on the other hand think it’s fine to fuck with their heads."

"Don’t presume to tell me ...

Lex didn’t have a chance to finish as Benjamin whipped a gun out seemingly out of nowhere. Lex required all his corporate security staff to be armed but he had figured the security chief wouldn’t be. He stared at the other man, realising he should have really thought about this confrontation. He ducked out of the way as the first shot went wild, hitting the glass pane. A second shot grazed the wooden desk and a splinter gashed his cheek, less than a quarter of an inch from his eye.

Suddenly there was a whoosh and a swirl of red in front of his face. Shots bounced off the not inconsiderable chest as Superman stood tall. Benjamin screamed in rage, whirling to leave and Superman was there in a heartbeat, stopping the man from leaving, tapping him on the head.

He turned and looked at Lex, who had finally got up, his cheek bleeding.

"What was that all about?"

"Nothing,” Lex said. “A misunderstanding.”

"I doubt that,” Clark answered. “People don’t try to kill you over a misunderstanding.” He canted his head. “Then again ... I remember people trying to kill you over less back in Smallville.”

For a moment, Lex was reminded of the boy he knew. He smiled briefly.

"Thanks, Cl ... Superman,” he amended, eyeing the uniform. “This is a personal matter.”

"I can drop him off at the police station,” Clark offered.

“No. I ...” He heard the sound of a cough and looked up, realising to his consternation that Moana
was standing in the doorway. “How long have you been there?” he asked.

“Long enough,” she shot back, glancing over her shoulder. Security had clearly heard the commotion. “Superman,” she added coolly, who nodded just as coolly.

Lex wondered the reason for the attitude, until he realised that the two of them were just trying to keep it professional in view of the circumstances.

“I can handle this,” he said, glancing back at the unconscious man. “I’ll place a call to the police right now.”

Clark nodded. “All right.” He was gone in a flash of red and blue.

Lex looked at Moana, who was now staring at the unconscious man. It was clear she recognised him.

“What did you do?” she asked.

“Tracked him down. Turns out he has been working here in this building for the past year.”

“And what were you planning on doing with him?”

“Making sure he paid for what he did to you,” Lex answered.

She stared at him, incredulous. “You really think that makes up for everything that happened to me? Or everything you’ve done?”

“I told you, I don’t condone ... I would never ...”

“You just don’t see it, do you? You don’t think you’ve done anything wrong.”

“Those people are dangerous and psychotic. If they could be contained ...”

“Those people? You mean, people like me.”

“You’re not psychotic.”

“And who are you to decide who is? What the hell makes you think you’re qualified to make those kinds of judgments?”

“Look, I just ...”

“Don’t you dare put this back on me,” she told him, clearly reading him. He’d just been going to remind her of what he’d done to the man who had hurt her. “Maybe I’m not perfect but I have never exploited someone for their differences. You, on the other hand, think you can play God with people’s lives.”

“I’m not the one playing God,” Lex shot back.

“If you think that’s all Superman does, then you don’t know him at all.”

“Oh look, it seems Superman has his very own fan club,” he snarked.

“You’re just jealous because people trust him. Besides, he’s not the one you should be worried about.”
She was right. They had bigger problems than Superman and his agenda. Lex still thought Superman was the advance man for his alien civilisation. Even as he protested his innocence, Lex was sure there were other Kryptonians out there just waiting for the opportunity to take Earth for themselves. There were times when he wondered if he had made a mistake turning his back on the Illuminati. Anything was infinitely more preferable to becoming slaves to an alien race.

“Don’t make that mistake,” Moana said softly after the security team had taken Benjamin away to be dealt with by the police. Lex would send the police a report later, leaving out Moana’s name. It didn’t matter if information about the research in the facility came to light, since his name was not connected to any of it. Lionel was dead and the law couldn’t prosecute a son for the sins of his father.

“What mistake is that?” he asked finally.

“Trusting the Illuminati. If it came down to a fight between Kryptonians and the Illuminati, they would crumble. Superman would be our only hope, and you know it.”

Lex chose not to answer, no matter how right he thought she was.

Moana sighed, clearly coming to an understanding.

“I appreciate what you were trying to do,” she said, “but it still does not change my opinion of you, or of the things you’ve done. You’ve experimented on people without their consent and that’s no better than what that man did to me. Like I said the other day, it doesn’t have to be physical.”

XXXX

Huntsville, Texas

Naja da Silva stared sullenly at the older man, wondering what he could possibly want with the Wild Bush 300. Especially after the confrontation with Superman in Smallville.

The sheriff had learned there were a number of outstanding warrants for da Silva in Texas, and he’d been transferred to await trial.

“What do you want?” he asked the older man.

“My name is Henri Ducard. I am here to help you.”

“Help me do what?”

“Get revenge on Superman,” Ducard smiled.
Sir Allistair Phillips entered the private office, closing the door. His staff at Chatham House knew when he used this office that he was not to be disturbed for any reason. He had heard the matter discussed by some of the younger ones and understood their curiosity, but he never disclosed his reasons, and certainly did not allow anyone else in this office.

Crossing to the desk in the centre of the room, the man known only to those in the inner circle of Illuminati as Number One pulled out what appeared to be a keyboard shelf from beneath the desk and pressed the underside of the desk top above. A screen was lowered from a small alcove and moved smoothly into position in front of a bookshelf.

Sir Allistair opened a drawer on the right hand side of the desk and pressed a key on the small keypad. The screen showed only black for a few seconds before an image appeared. A redheaded man wearing the badge of the Golden Dawn looked calmly at him.

“What news do you have?” Number One asked the Irishman.

While Golden Dawn was not officially a part of the inner circle they were given certain leeway, allowing them to pass on important information. Their members were able to contact those in the upper echelon, but were never told their true identities. Allistair was well aware that the other man only saw him as a distorted image.

He studied Murphy O’Shea for a few moments. He had, of course, read the dossier on the man, who was currently working in the tourism bureau in Paris. It was a cover, since he had been assigned to locate one of Superman’s allies.

“The elevator fell as planned but we have a new complication.”

“Elaborate.”

“Lana Lang. She has extraordinary abilities. We had hoped Superman would turn up but he did not show.”

“I must know more. Have you questioned her?”

“She merely implied she came about these abilities naturally.”

The Illuminati leader highly doubted that. This merited more investigation. Clearly someone had not been doing enough to learn more about Superman’s allies.

He ordered O’Shea to continue to get close to the woman and try to find out the truth about her abilities while he made plans to get one of his people to do their own investigation. Perhaps Yves or his wife, he thought. Sir Allistair signed off, then sat down in the chair, leaning back and steepling his fingers as he contemplated the situation. Lana Lang having her own set of abilities was a complication, but
nothing he couldn’t resolve.

Lana dressed in a simple skirt and chiffon blouse, adding light dabs of perfume at her pulse points on her throat as she contemplated her reflection in the mirror. Arms snaked around her waist.

“I could come with you,” Murphy suggested lightly.

“It’s the Louvre,” she told him. “You’ve probably seen it a hundred times already.”

The redhead pouted. Lana sighed. What was it with men and their puppy dog looks. The only man who had never done it to her was Lex, but then again, he usually tried to manipulate her to get what he wanted.

She couldn’t believe that Clark and Lex were working together, albeit reluctantly. Lex Luthor was a man not to be trusted. She and Oliver didn’t agree on much but at least they agreed on that.

There had been times, over the past few years anyway, when Lana had wondered if she should go back to Smallville. It was, after all, the only real home she’d ever known, even if Nell had long since moved to Metropolis.

She remembered once telling Clark that life was about change. “Sometimes it’s painful, sometimes it’s beautiful. Most of the time it’s both.” That was the way she thought about Smallville at times. Her memories were painful, but she had some good ones too. Most of those, of course, involved Clark.

The last time they’d met up in Paris, they’d had a long talk. It had been painful both physically and emotionally for Clark, since she was still pretty much a walking meteor rock magnet.

She still remembered that day. Clark had asked for Chloe’s help in trying to find Lana. She had been walking along the Seine river when she had seen him, stopping in her tracks.

“Clark!” she said breathlessly.

“Hi, Lana,” he said, sounding a little hesitant. She stepped toward him and he took a step back.

“Sorry,” she said. “I forgot.”

“It’s okay, but I’d rather keep my distance, if you don’t mind.”

The last thing she wanted to do was hurt Clark. He was, after all, the man she’d once thought was the love of her life.

“Do you mind if we, um, walk?” he said.

“How did you find me?” she asked as they began walking.

“Chloe.”

“Oh.”

“Lana, I ...” he began, just as she said: “Clark, I ...”

“You first,” he said.
“I’ve been thinking a lot since I’ve been here. About us. And the thing is ... the thing is, I sometimes wonder if we were ever meant to be.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I know. I’ve been thinking about that too. Lana, it’s not that I don’t still have feelings for you, but they’re more like ... I don’t know, fond memories, I guess. It’s like, you know, watching home movies. You remember having those feelings, in those moments, but ...”

“They’re like a distant memory,” she sighed.

“I keep thinking about those weeks when you came back to Smallville. I have to ask, Lana, did you really come back for me, or Prometheus?”

“I’d be lying if I said it was just for you,” she admitted.

“Did you take it simply because you didn’t want Lex to have it, or because you really thought you could do some good with it?”

She looked at him evenly. “I think you know the answer to that. Look, Clark, I know I screwed up a lot of things. I guess I just didn’t want to see that being with Lex changed me in ways that I couldn’t imagine and couldn’t possibly foresee.”

“You once said life is about change, but the thing is, it shouldn’t fundamentally change who you are, or what you believe in. You once believed in doing good things. You once believed in me.”

“I still believe in you, Clark.”

“Do you? I mean, when did it become about my powers, Lana? When did you start believing that the only way we could be together was by us both having powers?”

“I don’t know. I guess I always wondered why you shied away from me. It’s like you were afraid to hurt me.”

“But when you got powers you did hurt me. Even if it was because of Lex.”

She stared at him.

“Why are you talking like this, Clark?”

“I ... I’m in love with someone. I haven’t even told her yet. Actually, we kind of haven’t even been on a date yet. I guess I’ve known there’s something there for a while, I just didn’t want to face it. I just ... I didn’t think it would be fair to you, thinking there was a chance ...”

“It’s Lois, isn’t it?”

He looked at her, then nodded.

“I think I always knew,” she said softly. “Ever since she arrived in Smallville, I always knew there was something between you two.”

It hurt. In fact it hurt like hell. Like her heart was being ripped out. Still, Lana was being truthful. She had seen it right from the start, even if Lois and Clark had been in denial.

The months she had spent in Paris, licking her wounds, Lana had gone over and over everything that had happened and she had wondered if the reason she had let herself believe it would work was not because she truly loved Clark, or at least, was in love with him, but because it was something familiar.
The thing was, the last time she had gone back, she hadn’t gone back for Clark at all, but because
Oliver had asked her to go back for Chloe’s wedding. So she could be there to support her friend.
After all, Chloe was the one who had offered her a place in her home when Nell had moved to
Metropolis, so she could stay at Smallville High.

When she’d seen Clark again, she’d been torn. Some of the old feelings were still there, but in many
ways they had changed, becoming something like an old blanket that she should have thrown away
long ago, but kept because it reminded her of warmth and security. Yet her relationship with Clark
had been anything but warm and secure. There’d been so many fights. So many times when she’d
wondered if it was worth the heartbreak.

She’d been prepared to tell Clark that she’d moved on from them. She had seen it in his eyes too.
He’d begun to move on. Then he’d kissed her and her resolve to keep things platonic between them
had gone out the window. It wasn’t just that Clark was not afraid to have sex with her – probably
because she now had powers, but she supposed it was because he too felt it was safe and familiar.
Lana thought she knew, even then, that he had feelings for Lois, even if they were just new, but he
hadn’t been ready to face them.

She had wondered if perhaps Clark had turned back to her because he hadn’t been ready to leave his
‘comfort zone’. It was like a person who hated their job but they were afraid to try getting another
one because it was something new. Some people just couldn’t handle change.

“I can’t say that I’m not hurt, but I’ve had a lot of time to think about things. I think I always had my
doubts about us. I guess that’s why we kept going back and forth all the time. Like the reason we
could never catch a break was because it wasn’t meant to be. And you’re right, about the distant
memory thing.”

Clark stopped walking and looked at her.

“I need to know that you’re going to be okay,” he said. “I never wanted to hurt you, Lana.”

She smiled gently at him, even if it still hurt. She would always love him, but she realised now it
would never be a lifetime love.

“Do you really love her, Clark?”

Clark smiled, his expression giving her all the answer she needed. His face lit up, his eyes sparkled.
That was definitely the face of a man in love.

She wished she could touch him, even to hug him goodbye.

“Hey, where are you?”

Lana looked up at Murphy. They had only been seeing each other a few weeks. She hadn’t slept
with him and wasn’t sure she wanted to. After all the disastrous relationships she’d had, Lana had
learned the hard way to take time to get to know her partners. To be really sure of her feelings before
she got too involved.

“Just thinking,” she said.

He turned her around and put his arms around her.

“About what?”

“Oh, nothing. Just old memories.” She glanced at the clock. “I better go. I don’t want to be late
meeting Chloe and Oliver.”

Murphy frowned. “I’m not so sure about this Oliver. How well do you know him?”

“Hey,” she said, jabbing him lightly in the ribs while keeping her tone light. “He’s married to my best friend and I trust Chloe. He’s a good guy.”

“All right.” He seemed satisfied. “You better get going or you’ll be late.”

“Meet you for dinner later?” she asked.

“Sure,” he smiled.

The smile faded from his face as soon as Lana had walked out the door. Murphy turned and began looking through the papers in the desk drawer before taking out a flash drive and plugging it into the computer as he switched it on. He pressed a couple of keys and the drive began working, taking copies of all the files on the hard drive.

Once he was done, Murphy made sure the laptop was shut down and nothing was out of place. He left the apartment, heading to his car and driving to his own place a few blocks away.

Once in his apartment Murphy opened up his own laptop, booting it up and downloading files from the flash drive. Once the files were on the computer he began perusing them. It didn’t take long before he found exactly what he needed. It was an email from a Dr Groll with the subject line: ‘Prometheus’.

Ms Lang, as much as it pains me to admit it, I have been unable to find an antidote for the Kryptonite. Mr Luthor was very specific in his demands when we designed the Prometheus suit. The procedure cannot be reversed and the Kryptonite cannot be extracted. To my knowledge there is no substance or machine with that capability, not without completely neutralising the suit. You would lose your abilities.

Prometheus, he thought. He picked up his phone and fired off a quick message to his superiors in the Golden Dawn. They would get a message to the Illuminati. Murphy might not have found all the answers but he had a place to start.

Meanwhile, Lana walked quickly toward the Louvre. She paused at the glass and steel pyramid, shaking her head. The construction had been controversial at best. Many Parisiennes hated it and looked down on those who loved it.

Chloe and Oliver were waiting for her, talking quietly. They turned at her shout and smiled.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said breathlessly.

“That’s okay. We were just talking,” Oliver answered, looking around. “No Murphy?”

“He had to work,” she told him, frowning a little at the expression of relief on his face.

“Do you want to get a coffee first?” Chloe suggested.

“Honey ...”

“Decaf,” Chloe assured her husband. “I’m drinking decaf.”

Lana frowned at her friend. Why would a coffee junkie like Chloe suddenly switch to decaf, unless she was ...
“Chloe? Are you ...?

Chloe grinned. “Yeah, I am. Just don’t tell Clark and Lois. We want to tell them.”

“Oh, my lips are sealed.”

They began walking toward the nearby coffee shop, sitting down in a booth just inside the door. The waitress came over and took their orders.

“So, when are you due?” Lana asked.

“Next summer.” Oliver answered this time, putting a hand on Chloe’s and looking lovingly into her eyes.

Lana would not have believed it had she not seen it for herself. She and Oliver hadn’t really had that much to do with each other, especially since when he’d first moved to Metropolis she had been living with Lex. She’d always thought Oliver Queen was too much of a playboy, but he clearly adored Chloe.

The waitress returned with their drinks and Oliver turned his attention away from his wife.

“So, anyway, we wanted to talk to you first. About Murphy.”

“What about him?” she asked, sipping her French Roast.

“We don’t trust him.”

Lana had learned a long time ago that Chloe could be brusque when she needed to but she never said anything without good reason. She asked her friend to elaborate.

“Have you seen the pin he wears?”

She nodded. “He told me it was for a group back home. Like Freemasons.”

“You know the Freemasons are rumoured to be connected to the Illuminati.”

“That’s just a fairy story. Isn’t it?”

“Not when they’re targeting Mara, no,” Chloe answered. “Anyway, we just wanted to ... Lana, the thing is, we’re concerned about your friendship with him.”

“I haven’t slept with him.”

Oliver shook his head. “We didn’t need to know that, but I’m relieved you haven’t. It’s just ... how did you meet him, anyway?”

“I was just walking and bumped into him. We got to talking and he asked me out.” She frowned at them. “What is the big deal?”

Lana listened as Chloe told her the pin Murphy wore was for a group known to dabble in the occult and with a suspected affiliation to the Illuminati. She knew Clark and Lois had been targeted, especially for their baby daughter, but she had no idea they might be targeting Superman’s allies as well.

Part of her wanted to dismiss it; tell them they were imagining things, but she’d lived with Lex Luthor for months and had learned to spot when someone was not being completely honest with her.
There were things about Murphy that didn’t seem right. Niggling doubts that had her second-guessing him.

Senator Miranda Clifford strode with purpose through the halls of power. A tall woman with a severe hairstyle, she inspired fear in the executives that worked in the Capitol building and was known as formidable to her enemies.

As she entered the meeting, it was clear there had already been some discussion. The men turned to look at her. Senator Kelley raised an eyebrow, his expression clearly remarking on her tardiness, but she didn’t care. She never apologised for being late to meetings. Or for anything else.

Committee head Dawkins glared at her.

“Senator, we were just discussing these documents,” he said, holding up a sheaf of papers. “Frankly, I’m concerned that you would even suggest such things about a member of the senate.”

“Nonetheless, I believe my concerns merit investigation.”

“You believe Martha Kent has connections with Superman?”

“Since that ... alien ... appeared on the scene, Martha Kent has been outspoken in her support of him. She refuses to acknowledge that he may pose some threat to our way of life.”

“The man, or whatever he is, is out there helping people. I fail to see how that constitutes a threat.”

Miranda still remained standing instead of sitting as Dawkins bade her. She felt it gave her a position of power over the four men in the room.

“Superman is dangerous.”

“Dangerous to your ambition, perhaps,” another senator sneered. “What a bitch!”

She canted her head at the man, while shooting him a hostile glare.

“Let’s not descend into exchanging childish insults like we’re on a playground,” Dawkins cautioned.

“I still say Senator Kent’s activities need investigation,” Miranda told him. “Or are you not aware that her son and daughter-in-law appear to have a close friendship with Superman.”

“They do write a lot of the stories in the Daily Planet,” Kelley pointed out. Miranda shot him a look, but said nothing.

“That still does not give me cause for concern. A lot of people support Superman. Even our own president is in full agreement.”

“Which just goes to show our president is more interested in winning votes than in actually looking after the interests of the people,” she returned.

“The people or your pocket?” another senator muttered.

“How dare you?” Clifford responded.

“Well, let’s face it, Miranda, your financial investments have taken a bit of a pounding since Superman appeared on the scene.”
“Perhaps we should be investigating your bias against Superman,” a third senator asked.

“Just what exactly are you implying?”

“The crime rate in Metropolis was climbing sky-high before the Blur, aka Superman showed up.”

“I’ve heard enough,” Bruce said, bringing the recording to an end.

Diana and Steve Trevor looked at him. Diana was dressed in her civilian attire. Plain suit and black-rimmed glasses. Bruce wondered again if Steve knew Diana’s true identity and why she continued to hide it from him. Still, it wasn’t his problem.

“I’m interested to know what investments they were talking about. Senator Clifford is from Gotham, isn’t she?”

“She could still have investments in Metropolis,” Diana pointed out quietly.

“Still, Steve has a point. I’m also curious as to the nature of these investments. If I’m understanding what they’re implying, she may have connections to some criminal organisations. I have a powerful friend. I’m sure I can get him to talk to his contacts and see what he can find out.”

Diana shot him a look. She knew he was Batman, but it was clear Steve didn’t.

“Well, I hope your friend is as intimidating as he looks. I know I’m intimidated,” he said.

Bruce offered an awkward smile.

“Have you heard any more about the people targeting Superman?”

“No,” the Secret Service agent answered. “But I have been doing a little more digging into this John Crawford character.”

“The NSA agent,” Bruce stated. “What about him?”

“He’s been seen with Senator Kent’s niece. From what I’ve heard about him, the guy has strange tastes.”

“I’m sure Linda knows what she’s doing,” Diana said softly.

Steve shook his head. “Linda strikes me as a little naive. I really don’t think she knows what she’s getting into. Besides, I’ve heard the guy has ‘connections’. Do you know of an Isabelle Lewis?”

Bruce shook his head. “Should I?”

“She’s with the Canadian Intelligence Service. She’s a bitch, and that’s being civil. According to my information, she knows Crawford very well.”

“Well, I’m sure the NSA and the Canadian Intelligence Service would work in similar circles ...”

“We think perhaps there is more to it,” Diana answered. “We think that Mr Crawford and Ms Lewis are actually working for the Illuminati. That they were placed in their respective agencies by the group.”

Then Kara was in more danger than she realised, Bruce thought.
Kara looked at the man standing beside her. John seemed nice. Even friendly. She still worried sometimes about his agenda, but so far, he hadn’t made any moves on her that alarmed her. That was half the problem. The waiting.

She knew he knew exactly who she was, but he still hadn’t revealed that fact. He just kept asking her out, wining and dining her as if he was just a normal guy asking a pretty girl out on dates. She’d caught him looking at her a couple of times with an expression on his face that could only be lust, but it was something so dirty that it made her shudder inwardly.

Kara had learned a long time ago how to lie. How to hide her abilities behind a mask. As much as she hated the idea, she knew she had to protect not only herself, but her cousin as well.

“So what do you think of our nation’s capital?” Crawford asked.

He’d offered to take her on a tour of DC, showing her sights she imagined weren’t on any of the normal tourist attractions. She’d seen enough to realise that he was trying to impress her with his knowledge, clearly thinking that she would be interested. Not that she wasn’t, but she was too nervous, wondering what he was trying to achieve.

Lois had once told her that sometimes men tended to over-think things when they were trying to, as Lois put it, get in a girl’s pants. Kara was beginning to get the feeling that that was John Crawford’s ultimate goal. His mission, or whatever it was, seemed to come second to that.

John looked at his watch, then took her hand.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“You’ll see,” he said mysteriously.

Kara let him lead her to the street alongside the mall. There was a limousine waiting on the corner. As soon as they approached, a man got out, wearing a typical chauffeur’s uniform and hat. He nodded solemnly and saluted, opening the back door.

Kara frowned as the chauffeur held out a hand and helped her inside the car. It seemed her companion was going all out to seduce her. What purpose could he possibly hope to achieve, she thought.

John watched the young woman as the limousine was driven through the streets. She seemed curious and impressed in spite of herself. He knew it would take a lot to impress the girl, but he was prepared for that. He had reserved a table at the finest restaurant in DC and planned to persuade her that he was just a normal guy with nothing more on his agenda than to romance a pretty girl.

The truth was, he hoped to turn Kara to his side, thinking that with a super hero on their side the Illuminati would be invincible. Unlike Superman, who appeared to be incorruptible, Supergirl had a vulnerable side. She understood that sometimes the price of being what she was knowing that she would always be alone.

He smirked as Kara exclaimed over the opulence of the restaurant. It had been expensive, but worth it just to see the look on her face. Kara was clearly easily swayed by what any normal woman would consider a romantic gesture.

Later that night, Kara said goodbye to John, standing on the steps of the apartment building. As soon as the limousine turned the corner, Kara went back down the steps and into the alley, first making
sure no one could see or hear her, then launched herself into the air. She landed on the fire escape outside the apartment window, which was ajar, and climbed inside.

“Kara, sweetie, what is it? Why are you using the fire escape?”

“It’s a long story, Aunt Martha, but right now I need to change my clothes.”

She returned from her room within seconds wearing black clothing.

“You’re going out again? Kara, it’s after midnight.”

“I know, Aunt Martha, but ... I will explain later, I promise.”

“Does it have anything to do with the man you have been seeing? The NSA agent?”

“Yes,” she said, nodding. “I think he’s trying to convince me to work with him and his people.”

“Kara, dear, please be careful.”

“I will,” she said, giving her aunt a brief peck on the cheek. “I promise.”

She left the apartment, launching once again into the air, managing to locate the limo which was only a couple of blocks away. Kara followed the car until it reached the hotel where John was staying. He had an apartment in Metropolis, since he was primarily based there, but had told her he was in DC on ‘business’.

Kara perched on the roof of the building opposite the hotel, watching as Crawford went in, only to emerge a few minutes later in a black saloon. She followed the car as it drove out of DC and along the highway to Fort Meade. It seemed he was heading to NSA headquarters. What was he planning on doing this time of night, she wondered.

Kara flew over the security gate and used superspeed to evade all the sensors and security cameras. She hovered just overhead, waiting until someone opened the door, clearly going outside for a break and slipped in before the door closed.

She continued on through the complex, glancing through office doors until she found one that wasn’t occupied. Again she wondered why people were still working at this time of night, but it seemed that ‘intelligence agencies’ never stopped.

There was a small office which seemed no more than what Clark and Lois would call a ‘cubbyhole’. It was so tiny there was barely any room for the desk on which was a desktop PC. Kara went to switch on the computer, glancing around and frowned at the painting on the wall. It was big enough to cover the entire back wall of the office and seemed far too big for such a small office.

She narrowed her eyes, using her visual acuity to focus in on the painting. She had studied a little art history and realised the painting was one that was supposedly in the British Museum. It had been painted in the mid-sixteenth century by a Dutch Renaissance artist.

The most interesting thing about it was not the painting itself, but the safe behind it. Kara quickly moved over to the painting, taking it off the wall to reveal the safe with the old-fashioned tumbler. Using her super-hearing, Kara quickly spun the tumbler until she heard the clicks and opened the safe.

Inside she found a pile of folders. She glanced at the names and held her breath. They were dossiers on Clark and Lois as well as several members of the Justice League. Beneath those was another
folder, and a memo from the office of one Allistair Phillips of Chatham House, addressed to John Crawford. Kara frowned. What possible connection could a think tank have with the Justice League?

She skimmed what was in the files, her ire growing by the word. There was clearly a lot more to Chatham House and Sir Allistair Phillips than just a ‘think tank’. She needed to get this information to Clark.

Just as she shut the safe and returned the painting to its place, she froze, hearing a voice coming down the corridor. Kara stared through the wall. Crawford!
De Rochefort glanced at his Rolex as he emerged from the limousine and swept into the restaurant of the Metropolis Hilton, ignoring the seating hostess, who called after him.

“Sir, you can’t just ...”

He turned and glared at her coldly.

“I am Baron Yves de Rochefort, madame.”

“Sir, there is a waiting list.”

“I am a guest at this hotel,” he told her, his accent heavy. “I wait for no one.”

“Sir, we have no empty tables.”

“I do not care,” he told her brusquely. “Empty a table.”

“What is the problem here?” A man in his late thirties came out from an office. He had a badge on his blazer stating ‘Manager’.

“This ... girl tells me I must wait for a table,” de Rochefort told him snootily. “I am a guest at this hotel and I wait for no one.”

The manager looked at the girl.

“Find him a table,” he snapped.

“The restaurant is full and I have no reservation.”

“I do not need a reservation,” de Rochefort snapped at her. Stupid young woman, he thought. “I am a guest at this hotel.”

“Of course, sir, please come this way,” the manager said, sending the girl a vicious look.

De Rochefort followed the man into the dining area of the restaurant, smirking to himself. He would speak to the hotel manager in the morning and make sure the girl was fired. How dare she tell him what he could or could not do?

He was led to a table with a reserved sign on it, which was taken away. He sat down, ignoring the stares of the other diners.

“Are you dining alone this evening, sir?”

“Mais oui.”
“Perhaps I can interest you in a drink?”

“Cognac,” he replied.

“Of course, sir, coming right up.”

He ignored the man, who snapped his fingers at the waiter and spoke harshly to the young man, who appeared to be barely out of his teens. Clearly eager to please, the manager had the staff hopping to serve him and de Rochefort was served quickly and efficiently his dish of Coq au Vin made almost to perfection.

After dinner, he sat smoking a cigar and sipping from his third glass of cognac. He heard the protests from other diners, but ignored them.

“Vous savez fumer à l'intérieur est illegal maintenant, mai pas pour vous?” a woman said.

“Je me soucie peu des lois.”

“C’est ce que j’al toujours admire dans l’aristocratie francaise. Vous pourriez commettre des assassinat et personne ne dirait rien.”

He looked at the woman. She had the classic blonde hair, blue eyed look so sought after by many. She spoke with a soft accent which suggested some German ancestry.

“Puis-je me joindre a vous?” she asked.

He waved his hand and she clearly took that as assent.

“Où est votre charmante épouse ce soir?” she enquired.

“En d'un voyage d'affaires,” he told her. “Vous êtes?”

“Mon Nom est Elsa. Elsa Brunning.”

“Je vois.”

“Non, Baron, je ne pense pas que Vous voyez, j'ai été un adepte d'un homme du nom de Gordon Godfrey. Êtes-vous familier avec son travail?”

“Non je le suis pas.”

“Godfrey a essayé de raconter au monde sur les vigilants et quand Superman s'est révélé à nous, Godfrey a été vilipendé.” She leaned forward. “Je ne sais pas ce qui s'est passé avec Godfrey , mais je fais partie d'un groupe qui croient Godfrey avait raison. Superman et la soi-disant Ligue de Justice ne sont que des vigilants. J’écris un blog et je n'ai plus de cent mille fidèles.”

De Rochefort was interested in spite of himself, but she was yet to explain why she had approached him.

“Je connais votre intérêt pour Superman, Baron. Nous avons besoin de votre aide. Vous voyez, cent mille adeptes n’est pas suffisant. Nous devons faire passer ce message là que Superman est une menace pour notre mode de vie. Je sais que la planète a des discussions quotidiennes de la façon dont le crime a diminué depuis Superman est apparu sur la scène , mais je pense qu'il nous berçait dans un faux sentiment de sécurité. Nous, à Gaia ...”

“Gaia?”
“C’est le nom de notre organisation,” she told him. “Nommé d’après la déesse de la Grèce antique, la mère de tout les Titans.”

He frowned at her. “Pourquoi Gaia?”

“Parce qu’elle a élevé Zeus qui finirait par vaincre les Titans.”

He wondered if she believed the Titans in this scenario were the members of the Justice League. In that case, Superman was Cronos, the god who swallowed his children to try and prevent his destiny, his defeat at the hands of his son.

“Que voulez-vous de moi?” he asked.

“You êtes un homme puissant, Baron, avec une grande influence. Nous avons entendu parler dans certains milieux que vous êtes haut placé dans les échelons supérieurs des Illuminati. Nous savons que vous avez des contacts qui peuvent nous aider à raconter notre histoire. Godfrey a essayé de révéler la vérité sur Green Arrow et le reste de la Ligue de la Justice. Nous voulons que le monde sache la vérité sur Superman.”

“Et qu’est-ce qui serait vrai?” he enquired.

“Qu’il est là pour nous conquérir, pas nous protéger.”

“You know smoking indoors is illegal now, don’t you?”

“I care little for the laws.”

“That’s what I’ve always admired about the French aristocracy. You could commit murder and no one would bat an eyelid.”

“May I join you?”

“Where is your charming wife this evening?”

“On a business trip. You are?”

“My name is Elsa. Elsa Brunning.”

“I see.”

“No, Baron, I don’t think you do. You see, I was once a follower of a man named Gordon Godfrey. Are you familiar with his work?”

“I am not.”

“Godfrey tried to tell the world about the vigilantes and when Superman revealed himself to us, Godfrey was vilified. I don’t know what happened to Godfrey, but I am part of a group that believe Godfrey was right. Superman and the so-called Justice League are nothing but vigilantes. I write a blog and I have more than a hundred thousand followers.”

“I know of your interest in Superman, Baron. We need your help. You see, one hundred thousand followers isn’t enough. We need to get the message out there that Superman is a threat to our way of life. I know the Daily Planet talks of how crime has gone down since Superman has appeared on the scene, but I think he is lulling us into a false sense of security. We at Gaia...”

“Gaia?”

“It is the name of our organisation. Named after the goddess from ancient Greece, the mother of all Titans.”

“Why Gaia?”

“Because she raised Zeus who would ultimately go on to defeat the Titans.”

“What do you want from me?”

“You are a powerful man, Baron, with great influence. We have heard talk in some circles that you are high in the upper echelons of the Illuminati. We know you have contacts who can help us tell our story. Godfrey tried to reveal the truth about Green Arrow and the rest of the Justice League. We want the world to know the truth about Superman.”
“And what truth would that be?”
“That he is here to conquer us, not protect us.”

XXXXX

Lex put his keys down on the table in the hallway and entered the doorway on his left. Stephanie sat primly on the leather sofa, drinking tea in a cup and saucer, watched by one of Lex’s security team. Lex nodded at Hope and indicated her to leave.

He sat on the sofa beside the woman.

“Stephanie, I can help you. If you’ll let me.”

“My husband would kill me,” she said.

“It looks to me like he’s already tried,” he said, reaching out to look over the bruising that her make-up could not hide. Or perhaps she did not want to hide. It struck him as odd that a woman who was an editor of a French fashion magazine would make a simple mistake with make-up.

“Why are you really here?” he asked. “And please don’t tell me you have come here for my help, because I don’t believe you.”

Stephanie turned a wounded look on him. “How can you ask me that?”

“Have you ever heard the term Judas Goat?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Well, of course, the term relates to the Biblical character of Judas Iscariot, but the goat is an animal trained to herd sheep and cattle to lead them to a specific location. Usually that means to the stockyard where they are to be slaughtered.”

“And you think I am this Judas Goat?”

“Yes, Stephanie, I think you are. I think you and your husband are trying to use me as a pawn in whatever dangerous game you are playing with Superman. I know you’ve been trying to seduce me. Let me give you a piece of advice. Don’t go up against Superman. You really don’t want to piss him off.”

She got up, staring at him.

“How dare you?” she asked indignantly.

“How dare I? I dare, madame, because I do not like to be manipulated. Hope!”

The bodyguard came back in.

“Escort Madame de Rochefort back to the hotel!”

XXXXX

Tess tossed and turned in her bed in the guest room of Donatello’s villa. Over the past few days the man had been charm itself, taking her to visit various museums and historic sites. He knew her love for art and had managed to talk the curators into allowing Tess to see works that were not on the normal tour list.
She could so get used to this life, she thought. Being the sister of Lex Luthor certainly had its downsides, despite her being a member of one of the richest families in the whole of North America. Lex kept a tight rein on her, clearly anxious to avoid any kind of a scandal.

Lex would be furious if he knew she was practically having an affair with a married man. Not that Donatello had admitted that, but she was shrewd enough to have done her homework. She hadn’t slept with him yet, not for want of trying on his part, but she had made so many mistakes with men before, the last thing she wanted to do was make that same mistake with a man she had convinced herself she was only with because he was the key to her learning the truth about the Illuminati.

Tess lay on her back thinking about all her relationships. She certainly hadn’t had the best track record. There had been Oliver, who had cheated on her with a waitress after they’d been together about two years. Then when she’d taken up the post of acting CEO of Luthorcorp he had slept with her again, clearly to get something out of her.

She wouldn’t have called her sleeping with Zod a relationship. She had been trying to learn all she could about the Kryptonian general’s plan to regain his powers in the hope that she could prevent her own death in the dystopian future she had seen in Lois’ vision. Of course, then Zod had killed her and Granny Goodness had brought her back to life.

Oh, but Donatello ... He had offered her so much. He had claimed he could use his own influence to get her membership into the order. She could become a woman of great power and influence as part of that elite group and when the time came for them to take power, she would be privy to all that only the crème de la crème would receive.

It was so tempting, she thought. To be free of Lex’s influence, yet more powerful than her brother.

Yet, she was torn. Clark had believed in her, enough to give her a place in Watchtower, to make her an affiliated member of the Justice League. He had given her the one thing she had always craved growing up, but had never had until she met him. A family.

XXXXX

Kara looked around anxiously as Crawford’s footsteps approached the office. Holding tightly to the file she floated up to the ceiling, hovering there as the footsteps paused outside the door and the knob began to turn. She held her breath, thanking her Kryptonian abilities that allowed her to hold her breath for several minutes.

“John, a word?” a voice said in the corridor.

“Of course, sir,” Crawford replied. The footsteps began to move away and Kara let herself breathe again. She floated down to the floor and x-rayed the corridor. There were two skeletons in what looked like an office a few doors down.

Kara opened the door and sped out, making her way along the corridor to the exterior door of the complex, then pressed the door release to let herself out.

She flew to Metropolis, knowing she needed to get this information to Clark as soon as possible. The penthouse apartment was dark. Clearly Lois and Clark were in bed, but she knew she had no choice. She let herself in through the terrace doors and into the secret room where Oliver usually kept his Green Arrow gear.

She had no sooner managed to find Clark’s laptop and access some pages on the net when the light snapped on, brightening the room. Lois glared at her.
“Kara, what the hell? It’s three o’clock in the morning.”

“I know,” she said. “I’m sorry. This couldn’t wait.”

“What couldn’t wait?” Clark asked, running a hand through his already mussed hair as he stared sleepily at her.

She gave him the folder. He quickly read through it.

“What is this?”

“Chatham House. It’s a think tank, officially, but I just found some sites that claim connections with anything from Checkmate to Area 51.”

“Checkmate?”

“Area 51?” Lois echoed. “What would a think tank be doing with Area ...” She looked at Clark. “Oh crap!”

“What?”

“Area 51, Smallville! Alien autopsies! Independence Day?”

“Lois, that’s just a story.”

“What if it’s not?” she asked. “I mean, think about it. I’m betting they have all sorts of doodads there.”

“Doodads?” Clark raised an eyebrow at his wife.

“Oh, you know what I mean!” She clapped a hand to her mouth. “Oh my god. Mara!”

“Honey, she’s fine. I just checked on her!”

“No, Smallville, you don’t get it. I think Kara’s just stumbled on part of their plan. They’re going to experiment on her!”

“Experiment on that sweet little baby?” Kara asked. “I would never let that happen.”

“Neither would I,” Clark answered. Lois didn’t look very reassured.

YYYYY

Aresia picked up the phone as it rang once.

“Yes?”

“It’s me. It appears that Luthor knows part of our plan. We are out of time. You must proceed, sister. Time is now of the essence.”

Aresia disconnected the call, concerned at the urgency in Stephanie’s tone. If time was of the essence, then she knew what she had to do.

YYYYYY

Moana was woken by banging on her door. She got out of bed, pulling on her robe and roughly pushing her hair back from her face as she walked barefoot out to the living room. Mark was sitting
up on the couch, bleary-eyed.

“Ms Rangihau? Open up this door immediately!”

“Who is it?”

“Open the door. Now!”

She shrugged and sighed, making sure the chain was on and opened the door a crack.

“It’s three o’clock in the morning,” she said in protest.

A badge was waved in her face.

“I don’t care what time it is,” the man with the badge snapped. “Federal Agents. We know Mark Anders is here.”

“Let them in,” Anders told her, shrugging his shoulders in defeat. He clearly thought there was no other choice.

Two men entered the apartment as soon as she took the chain off.

“What do you want?” she asked.

They ignored her and pulled Anders to his feet.

“Mark Anders, you are wanted for treason by the Canadian authorities. You are ordered to accompany us down to FBI Metropolis headquarters.”

“Very well, but Ms Rangihau stays out of this. She had no idea ...”

“Ms Rangihau is under arrest for aiding and abetting a fugitive,” the first agent snapped as his partner cuffed Anders and started to lead him away.

Moana knew she couldn’t try and fight her way out of it.

“Let me get some clothes on first,” she told the agent.

“No. You’re coming with us right now.”

There was no pleading for leniency. They were clearly both in a lot of trouble. She let herself be led down the stairs and out of the building. Across the street was a dark car. Moana stared at it, noticing the window was down. A blonde woman stared back at her. Isabelle Lewis, she thought. Canadian Intelligence.

This whole thing smelled like a set-up, she thought.

XXXXX

Lex never slept much these days. He was fortunate if some nights he left the office before midnight and he certainly never slept more than two or three hours. His business day usually started at five am. God forbid he ever miss any new developments on the stock exchange somewhere in the world.

He wasn’t surprised to get a call at six in the morning from one of his contacts in the Metropolis branch of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Ever since he had helped them bring down Lionel Luthor and expose the plot between Morgan Edge and Lionel Luthor to murder his grandparents,
Lex had made sure to have at least one federal agent in his pocket, so to speak.

“Luthor.”

“They’re holding Ms Rangihau for aiding and abetting. Her visa’s likely to be revoked and she could be deported.”

“Aiding and abetting who?”

“Guy named Mark Anders. Some kind of journalist. He’s been freelancing in the past few years, trying to sell some bullshit about the Illuminati. The Canadian authorities have been trying to get him for months on treason.”

The agent went on to tell him that the charges were phony, since their investigation hadn’t turned up anything even which could be misconstrued as treasonous. Lex smelled a set-up. He recognised a good opportunity when he saw one, however.

“See if you can stall the process and have Ms Rangihau released to my custody,” he answered.

It couldn’t hurt to have her owe him at least, he decided. Not that she would see it that way, of course. Still, Lex wasn’t one to throw away a good opportunity when he saw one.

Moana was released from custody a couple of hours later. Lex had her picked up in his limousine and brought back to his penthouse. She looked pale and exhausted. Clearly they had been questioning her at length about her association with Anders. They hadn’t even given her decent clothes to wear. She was still dressed in the nightshirt and robe she had been wearing when they had picked her up.

When Lex had learned this, he had had Hope go out and buy the woman a few items of clothing, handing her the package when she arrived.

“I figured you could use a shower and a change of clothes,” he said.

Moana said nothing, taking the package and going in search of a bathroom. She came out about twenty minutes later dressed in jeans and a cerise coloured blouse. She still had dark circles under her eyes, but at least looked a little more refreshed.

“Coffee,” Lex said, handing her a cup.

She sat down, still ignoring him, but the coffee was clearly welcome.

“You want to tell me what happened?” Lex asked.

“Not much to tell. They kept asking me about Mark and what he’d told me. I knew the charges against him were trumped-up, and they knew that too. I got the impression the orders had come from high up.”

“Don’t worry,” he assured her. “I have an excellent attorney. I’ll do what I can to help Anders.”

“By the time you manage to get your attorney on it, he’ll be in Canada,” she told him. She sighed and looked up at him. “There’s more to this. I think there’s a reason this is happening now.”

“What reason?”

“I think the baron is about to make his move. We need to warn Clark and Lois.”
Amarillo, Texas.

Naja da Silva walked in to the bar, standing in the doorway to let his eyes adjust to the dimness. A man approached him, yelling.

“Da Silva? I thought you were history, man?”

He shook his head. “Where are the others?”

“Scattered. But I know how to reach them.”

“Good. Gather them. We need all the help we can get.”

“Why? What’s up?”

“We’re going up against Superman!”
Lex shuffled through the papers as he walked through the apartment, his phone precariously balanced on his shoulder, his neck at an odd angle.

“I’m not asking, I’m ordering. Find me a competent attorney or find yourself another job.”

Unlike other phones he couldn’t exactly slam this one down so he settled for letting the phone drop into his hand and a hard press of the ‘end’ button.

Moana looked up from the laptop.

“You sure know how to win friends and influence people,” she remarked.

“I didn’t get to be CEO of Luthorcorp by winning a popularity contest,” he retorted.

“No, you got that by first sending your old man to prison then tossing him out of a window.”

“My father committed suicide,” he replied.

She stared at him evenly for a moment, giving him the feeling he was being analysed.

“You keep telling yourself that, Luthor. We both know what really happened the night Lionel died. Not even you can hide that from me.”

Damn her and her strange ability, he thought. Moana turned back to the screen, pointedly ignoring the subject.

“I left a message for Clark and Lois. Clark called back and said he would make sure Lois and the baby were under constant guard by the League.”

“We both know it won’t be enough,” Lex commented. “If I was the baron, I’d be creating some kind of diversion which would involve the entire League.”

She looked up at him, her gaze once again assessing.
“You’ve thought about this, of course,” she said. “Even so far as to considering what you would do to stop Superman.”

“Let’s not forget that Superman and I are enemies. We may have a detente at the moment, but that is because we have mutual interests.”

“Mutual?” she snickered. “Right. Your interest is in stopping the Illuminati so you could have all that power to yourself. Superman is just trying to save humanity from making the same mistakes as his own people. Sure they’re mutual.”

“I do not care to get into a philosophical argument with you,” he said, grabbing the phone as it rang. “Luthor.”

“I found an attorney. Well, attorneys really,” Otis babbled. “Actually in Canada they don’t call them attorneys they call them solicitors.”

“Get to the point!” he snapped.

“Raymond and Grace Caron. They have an office in Ottawa. I’ve already apprised them of the situation and they are willing to meet with you.”

“Good. Have the jet fuelled and ready for wheels up in thirty minutes.”

“How many should I tell the pilot?”

“Two passengers. Myself and Ms Rangihau.”

“Uh, hasn’t her passport been confiscated?”

“I’m trusting you to take care of that,” he told Otis.

“Yes sir, Mr Luthor sir.”

Lex ran a hand down his face as he hung up, hoping Otis got the message. He would need to make sure they weren’t met by airport security. He looked at Moana.

“Pack up whatever gear we’ll need. We’re flying to Ottawa.”

She stared at him but didn’t question it, moving to shut down the laptop and gather up what notes she had already made on Mark Anders and everything he had told her about the Illuminati.

***

Da Silva looked around then began walking casually up the narrow alleyway to the warehouse entrance. A large gull squawked up above him, clearly looking for food in the dirty river about a hundred yards away from where he stood.

He continued along the alleyway, his eyes darting from left to right as he scoped out the situation. There were two men watching from above. He knew he would have to tread carefully.

The click of a gun had him whirling.

“Don’t move!” a voice said.

“I’m here to see the boss,” he said quietly, inwardly cringing at the cliché which he’d been told to say as an identifier. These guys had been watching way too many bad gangster flicks, he thought.
“Yeah? What for?”

“That’s between me and him,” da Silva replied.

He was suddenly shoved toward the east wall, something hard nudging him in the back. The man behind him forced him to spread his legs, his hands held high above his head, palms pressed flat to the wall. Da Silva knew from experience the angle would make it near impossible to escape.

The man began patting him down. The gang leader smirked as he heard the clinking sound of his bowie knife being thrown to the ground. It was joined by the small .33 calibre pistol he kept in an ankle holster. It had a short range but was still effective.

There was murmuring behind him and he guessed another man had come to join them.

Once the men were satisfied he wasn’t carrying any more concealed weapons, the Wild Bush 300 leader was led through a doorway into a darkened warehouse. A dark-haired man stood waiting for them, appearing to stand guard over several crates.

He turned and smirked at the three men.

“Mr da Silva.”

Da Silva cocked an eyebrow at the other man. He appeared to be either in his late twenties or early thirties.

“Bruno Mannheim.”

Da Silva frowned. Mannheim was supposed to be imprisoned on Stryker’s Island. He’d murdered his boss so he could take over Intergang. Lois Lane and Clark Kent had got themselves caught in the middle of a counterfeiting operation and had continued investigating to prove Mannheim a killer.

“How did you get away from Stryker’s Island?” he asked.

“Let’s just say I know a few people in high places. Speaking of which, a mutual friend told me you were looking for weapons.”

The gang member nodded.

“As many as you can provide,” he said.

“To do what, exactly?” the man inquired.

Da Silva began explaining the plan to the head of Intergang. Ducard had discussed the plan with him telling him exactly what the purpose was. Da Silva had the manpower, he just needed the firepower.

Chaos was the name of the game, and he was about to be at the centre of it.

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“Lois, I know you hate it when I get over-protective but if what Moana told me is right, then we need to be on our guard.”

Clark rolled his eyes as Lois launched into another tirade which could seriously damage his eardrums if he wasn’t careful.

“Lois!” he snapped, trying to get her to shut up. He held the phone away from his ear as she began
berating him. He’d been worried after the phone call and he wasn’t about to take any chances. Lois was still being resistant, however. He sighed and looked up at the sound of someone entering Watchtower and smiled at Bart, who was eating a Burrito.

“Chloe will kill you if you get any of that on Watchtower computers,” he said mildly, ignoring his wife still yelling on the phone.

“I’m hungry,” Bart said with a shrug. He raised an eyebrow when Lois’ voice came clearly through the phone.

“Clark Kent, don’t you dare ignore me!”

Clark groaned quietly then turned back to the phone.

“I wasn’t ignoring you,” he answered.

“I heard you talking to someone.”

“Honey, that’s Bart. I told you ...”

“And I told you, I don’t need a protection detail.”

“We’ve been over this, Lois. I told you what Moana said. Something bad is going down and she thinks they’re going to make their move. I can’t be everywhere at once and you can’t protect Mara by yourself, not if Aresia is involved.”

“I am perfectly capable ...”

“Against any ordinary human, yes, but this is an Amazon, Lois, with powers of an Amazon. I’m not going to keep arguing with you about this.”

“I don’t care!”

“Well you will care if she takes Mara!” he pointed out. “I’m sending someone to guard you and the baby and that’s it. I can’t do my job if I’m worrying about you and Mara and I don’t want to hear another word.”

Clark hung up, growling. Bart looked at him.

“Trouble in paradise?”

“You know how Lois gets,” he sighed. “She thinks she’s perfectly capable of taking care of herself.” He took a deep breath and blew it out, controlling it enough so he wouldn’t blow away everything in his path. “I need you to go over to the clocktower. Lois is working from home today.”

“I thought she was still on leave?” Bart asked.

“No, she started back part-time last week. Bart, you’re probably about the best I can get for this. After AC got whacked by those men who broke in to the farmhouse, I don’t want to take any chances. You can at least move quickly.”

“Mamacita isn’t exactly going to be welcoming me with open arms.”

“I don’t care, Bart. I’m worried and I’m taking precautions. Aresia knows the penthouse and if she is working with these Illuminati people, she may have been recruited for Mara. From what Diana tells me, Aresia has her own agenda, which makes her doubly dangerous.”
Bart nodded.

“Hey, don’t worry, Supes. It’s me.”

Clark sighed. Yeah, that was what he was afraid of. Bart was a good guy, but he could be a bit scatter-brained at times. Still, he was fast and wouldn’t be caught easily.

His friend disappeared in the blink of an eye and moments later the phone rang.

“You send Short Stuff as my protection detail?” Lois screeched.

Oh lord, he sighed. Here we go again.

“Lois!”

“I hate you, Clark Kent!”

“Really? Can I get that in writing?” he asked, knowing he’d regret opening his mouth.

“You wait, Smallville. I’ve got ways of dealing with you. You’ll be damned lucky if I let you get within a hundred feet of me when this is all over. I’m gonna boil you in oil! I’m gonna torture you with every trashy shark movie ever made. I’m gonna make you sit through all four Jaws movies. Especially the 3D one.”

Clark winced, sticking his finger in his ear, trying to block out the screeching. Damn his super hearing, he thought.

He looked up as someone dropped through the panels in the top of the glass dome.

“Diana,” he said. “Welcome to Watchtower.”

“I could not help but overhear, Kal. Your wife does not seem pleased with you.”

“That’s a bit of an understatement, I’m afraid.” He groaned as Lois realised he was once more ignoring her.

“With your permission, Kal, perhaps I may speak with her.”

Clark frowned at her, not sure how much good Wonder Woman could do, but nodded. The brunette smiled and left the same way she had come in. Clark’s frown deepened. He hadn’t known Amazons could fly but he guessed he didn’t know everything about Amazons and their abilities. He supposed Diana, being the daughter of the queen, would have more than most, since they were allegedly blessed on her by the gods.

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Diana made her way to the clocktower, entering through the balcony. She realised her error swiftly, however, when she was ambushed by someone she didn’t see until he was upon her. When she regained her composure, Diana realised it was a young man, perhaps a year or two younger than Kal’s Earth age.

“Who are you?” he growled.

Lois Lane-Kent entered the room, her expression clearly showing her earlier anger at her husband. She scowled.
“Bart, calm down. That’s Wonder Woman.”

“Yeah? So you say.”

She rolled her eyes. “Bart! Aresia is blonde.”

“Oh.” Bart stood back. Diana gazed at him curiously as he folded his arms and glared at her. “So why did you come in through the balcony?”

“I apologise,” she answered. “I did not consider it would be a cause for concern.” She looked at Lois. “I come on Kal’s behalf.”

“Hmph,” the other brunette replied, turning away.

“Kal?” Bart asked, cocking an eyebrow at her.

“His true name is Kal-El.”

“Oh, yeah. I knew that.” He seemed to relax his pose although he still had his arms folded. “So Wonder Woman, huh? That mean you’re an Amazon?”

Diana bowed her head in acknowledgement.

“I am Diana, daughter of Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. Blessed with power from the great goddesses of old.”

“Cool!”

Bart continued to look her over and Diana began to feel uncomfortable with the scrutiny. Lois came back into the room.

“Impulse, stop trying to flirt with her.” She rolled her eyes. “Ignore him. Bart does that to everyone. Well, everyone female.”

“Impulse?” Diana asked.

“Well, I wanted to go with Flash, but ...” Bart began.

“There’s a reason why you didn’t get to pick your own code name,” Lois told him.

Diana followed her into the small office off the living area, which was where Lois was apparently working. Lois sat on the swivel chair.

“Okay, let’s hear it.”

“I beg your pardon?” Diana asked.

“You don’t have to be so polite you know. I was raised by an army general. I’ve hung around with Navy Seals and Green Berets all my life. I’m not exactly a delicate flower.”

Diana nodded. “Perhaps not. However, I have observed that the men in this world do seem to put their women up on pedestals.”

Lois sighed heavily. “Okay, I know I’m over-reacting.”

“I know you are not incapable of protecting yourself but you must consider your daughter. She is just
“an infant. While you are not completely defenceless, Aresia will not allow you to deter her from her mission.”

“How do you know Aresia is working for them?”

Diana sighed. They had been through this before. She could understand Lois’ scepticism but now was not the time to be questioning every little thing.

“Lois, you must know that you and your daughter are in danger.”

“Why? What could Aresia do?”

“She is an Amazon and she has abilities. Not as many as I, but enough, and she will use whatever power is at her disposal to achieve her goal.”

“I still don’t see why the protection detail,” Lois answered, glancing at Bart, who had obviously gone to help himself to food from the fridge. He stood in the doorway, chewing as he watched them.

“If what we believe about these Illuminati is true, they will go to great lengths to take your daughter. Even if that meant killing you.”

“You don’t really think they would, do you?”

“Yes. Moana believes it.”

“Oh. Her. What makes you trust her?”

“Because she is descended from a long line of warriors.”

“That doesn’t answer my question. Oh you know what, never mind. I’m sure you superheroes have your own way of telling.”

“We do. Lois, I know we are not friends but I would hope that you will understand that Kal only has your best interests at heart.”

“His name is Clark.”

“His true name is Kal-El.”

“He was raised as Clark!” Lois was insistent and Diana thought it prudent to just agree.

“Yes, I see. I apologise.”

A sound of a baby crying came from the small monitor on the edge of the desk. Lois sighed.

“I have to go get her up. She needs her diaper changed.”

Diana frowned at her. Since she had never had a child herself she wasn’t familiar with the different ways babies could cry to let their mothers know what was wrong. She had been around babies on the island but their care was always left to the mothers or the warrior charged with that care.

Diana stepped aside so Lois could go out and looked at Bart.

“Mamacita isn’t all that happy with the situation,” Bart observed. Diana nodded. She frowned at Bart’s use of the term, not quite certain it was correct, but didn’t call him on it.
She brushed past the man called Impulse, still feeling a little uncomfortable with the way he kept looking at her. It wasn’t that she had little experience with men, apart from Steve, but she had never really been accustomed to the way men looked at women like they were little more than objects. Not that she was suggesting Bart was in any way, she decided.

Lois had come down the stairs with the baby in her arms. Mara was fussing, nuzzling her mother’s breast, indicating she was hungry. Lois looked at her, then went to sit down on the couch. She settled the baby on her lap and opened her blouse to begin feeding her daughter. Glancing up, she clearly remembered Bart was still in the room and picked up a soft blanket to cover herself.

“Why do you do that?” Diana asked curiously.

“Do what?”

“Cover yourself. Breastfeeding is a natural part of being a mother.”

“I’m sure in your world it’s considered completely natural and no one bats an eyelid, but in this world ...”

“Ahh. Yes, I see.” Diana seemed to be apologising a lot to Lois.

“Americans like to think they’re liberal and all that, but really a lot of them are conservative.”

“You mean prudes,” Bart interjected.

Lois ignored him. “I went to this cafe once to meet Clark. I’d just had Mara ... well, she was a couple of weeks old and I had to feed her. Somebody complained, even though I’d covered myself pretty well with a blanket. Clark was so angry.” Lois sighed and shook her head.

“I can understand that,” Diana said. “Sometimes people here are so certain their way is best that they are not prepared to hear any other point of view. And I see where you are going with this,” she added with a smile. “You are very clever, Lois.”

“I just want you to know where I’m coming from. Look, I love Clark, but he can be over-protective at times.”

“Is it wrong of him to want to take care of his family?”

“No, it’s not wrong, but he needs to realise that not everything is his responsibility. If Aresia tries to take Mara, I will deal with it. My way.”

“Lois, I am not trying to dissuade you, but you do not know my sister like I do. She will not listen to reason. If Superman were here protecting Mara she would fight him.”

“Do you think Aresia has her own agenda?”

Diana was again reminded of their earlier conversation.

“I do not doubt it. I find it unusual that Aresia would work for a man like the baron, considering how much she hates men in general.”

“Why? Why does she hate men?”

“Perhaps she blames the ways of men for the deaths of her real parents, even though it was the ship’s captain who saved her life. She refused to believe my mother when the queen told her what really happened the day her parents died.”
“It still doesn’t explain her behaviour.”

“Nor excuse it. Lois, I do not know what to tell you. The Amazons are a matriarchal society. Many of our warriors fear the world of men because it is men who are mostly in control. It is changing, but still there are some men who would prefer to go back to the old ways.”

“Like the Illuminati?”

Diana shook her head. “No, their way is a different one entirely. They have women in power the same as men.”

“Like who?”

Lois listened as Diana told her of the meeting that took place two days earlier and their belief that Miranda Clifford was not only part of the Illuminati, she also had business interests which had been affected by the dropping crime rate.

“Major Trevor is continuing to investigate the matter,” she assured Lois.

“I thought he was with the Secret Service?”

“He is.”

“Well, I mean, the agents are supposed to protect the country’s financial interests. Why would he investigate someone like Senator Clifford?”

“You do not know? Lois, the senator is believed to be involved in profiteering, for one.”

“Okay, I get that.”

Diana watched as Lois held the fussing baby over her shoulder and patted her back gently. Mara began cooing.

“Bruce Wayne is also looking into the senator’s affairs. He believes there is a connection with Isabelle Lewis.”

“Who is she?”

“An intelligence agent in Canada.”

“Canada? Wait a second, Lex and Moana have gone to Canada because her friend was arrested.”

“What friend is this?” Diana enquired.

“Mark Anders. He’s a journalist who knows more about the Illuminati than we could ever hope to.”

Diana looked at the other woman, now feeling very worried.

“Lois, if this journalist has been arrested then we are all in more danger than you know. He may have been the only one who could prove the Illuminati exist.”
Chapter Summary

Lex and Moana are in Canada

It was a good thing, Lex thought, that he had anticipated any difficulties they might have as soon as the plane touched down on Canadian soil. Calling ahead to the attorneys had prevented the Canadian police from arresting Moana on the spot for illegal entry. Not that Moana was very co-operative, he saw. She’d been prepared to fight as soon as security surrounded the jet as it taxied in.

Lex put a hand on her shoulder.

“You can’t fight a dozen men, especially when they’re each over two-fifty,” he cautioned her.

“I can try,” she replied eyeing the men warily.

“I’ve no doubt it would be a good attempt,” he said, looking up to see a man in a dark suit pushing his way through the men, waving what appeared to be legal papers.

“Mr Luthor? Raymond Caron. Come this way, please. Miss Rangihau ...” he added, placing a hand at the small of her back. “Make way please,” he told security. Two men refused to budge.

“We were under orders to take this lady into custody if she should step onto Canadian soil.”

“And I have a cease and desist order from the highest judicial authority in this province,” the man announced almost pompously. “Ms Rangihau has committed no crime and this is harassment. You can trust I will be filing suit for illegal detention.”

The man the lawyer was facing backed off, clearly uncertain what their next move should be. Lex followed Caron and Moana away from the airstrip to his car, a Daimler Limousine.

“Mr Luthor, I’ve been researching this extensively since your assistant called this morning. Mark Anders is now in the custody of the Canadian Intelligence Service. He’s charged with high treason.”

“Anders has never done anything to betray his country,” Moana growled.

“Yes, ma’am ...”

“Moana, not ma’am. Or Ms Rangihau.”

Raymond coughed. “Yes, quite. Uh, Isabelle Lewis is the agent who has claimed to have gathered evidence of Mr Anders’ treason.”

“What can you tell me about Isabelle Lewis?”

“Very little, I’m afraid. Most of the information on agents in Canadian Intelligence is classified.”

“Then find someone who can,” Lex instructed. “If there is a connection to the group we are investigating then we need to find it. And fast.”
De Rochefort stood in his hotel room, sipping coffee as he glanced over the newspaper. Stephanie sat in the armchair, hands folded primly in her lap. She had remained quiet since she’d been escorted back to the hotel room apologising for the failure of their plan to seduce Luthor. De Rochefort told her it mattered little.

There was a gentle tap on the door and de Rochefort called ‘enter’. Antoine de Sade entered the room, smiling broadly.

"Quelles nouvelles avez-vous?" the baron asked.

"Donatello rapporte que Mademoiselle Mercer est encore résistante, mais il est persuadé qu'elle sera influencée et se rangera de notre côté."

"Excellent et a propos du Docteur Weller?"

"Elle a fait appel à d'anciens membres de l'Escadron Suicide et qu'ils sont en attente d'ordres."

De Rochefort nodded, satisfied with the way the plan was slowly being executed. He turned and looked at the chessboard on the smoked glass coffee table. There were various pieces scattered around the board which clearly showed the white king in check.

Another knock and command to enter brought Henri Ducard. The League of Shadows master smiled as he came in.

"Eh bien?" de Rochefort asked, almost impatiently. He had very little time for the League of Shadows, which was, in many ways, a distant cousin to the Illuminati itself.

Ducard spoke smoothly, with little inflection. It was as if he was discussing a business meeting rather than the death and destruction which would ensue.

"Da Silva est en négociations nous parlons. Dans quelques jours, Metropolis sera embrasé. Il n'y aura rien que Superman et la Ligue de Justice peuvent faire pour l'arrêter." He paused. "J'ai pris la liberté de communiquer avec un de mes associés pour mener une attaque similaire sur Gotham."

"Pourquoi Gotham?" de Sade asked.

"Batman!" de Rochefort replied.

"Précisément."

The Marquis still looked perplexed. “Notre intérêt est dans Superman!”

"L'homme connu comme Batman a beaucoup d'influence politique," Ducard explained. “Il exerce dans un pouvoir que Superman n’a pas.”

De Rochefort walked over to the chessboard and slid the black king into position, taking the final white pawn.

"Ensuite, nous aurons un échec et mat," he said, using the pawn in his hand to knock the white king down.

The phone buzzed, indicating the front desk was calling. De Rochefort nodded to his wife to pick it
up. She got up and picked up the receiver.

“Yes? I see. Please let them up.” She quietly replaced the receiver in its cradle and looked around at her husband. “Un homme et une femme qui prétendent être des employés de Lex Luthor ont demandé une audience. J'ai informé la réception de les envoyer jusque ici.”

He nodded. There was little point in sending them away. He had no doubt they would persist in their attempts to visit his suite and it was best to hear them out.

The couple arrived within moments. De Rochefort greeted them cordially enough, taking the time to study the pair. The man was stocky, with close-cropped, curly brown hair. The woman was unattractive, her hair straight and worn short.

“Je suis ...”

“I know who you are, Baron,” the man cut him off tersely. “My name is Otis Berg. My associate Joy Taylor,” he added, indicating the woman by his side. “I come from Mr Luthor.” He glanced at Stephanie, shooting her a look which even the baron, who considered himself well-versed in body language, could not interpret. “He felt it only prudent to warn you that whatever you are planning, you should not attempt it.”

“Je vois. Et qu'est-ce que vous fais pensez que je planifie?” the baron asked, deliberately speaking his own language.

Otis, it seemed, was unfazed. He continued to speak in English although he clearly understood de Rochefort.

“Mr Luthor assumed you would have received the message he sent through Madame de Rochefort.”

Of course he had, but de Rochefort cared little for subtlety.

“Est-ce que Monsieur, Luthor est prêt à négocier?” he asked coolly, although he sincerely doubted that was the case.

“Mr Luthor suggests you leave rather than continue with your plan to go up against Superman. Between you and I, sir, you do not want to piss Superman off.”

The woman beside Otis remained silent, although she continued to look around her with a curious expression. Baron wondered briefly what her purpose was, but paid little attention. She was of no importance.

“S'il vous plaît pouvez-vous transmettre un message à Monsieur Luthor que je ne suis pas facilement intimidé, en particulier par un Extraterrestre connu sous le nom de Superman.”

Otis smirked. “Yeah, I figured you’d say that. Don’t say we didn’t warn you.”

“What news have you?” the baron asked.

“Donatello reports that Miss Mercer is still resistant but he is confident she will be swayed to our side.”

“Excellent. What of Dr Waller?”

“She has called in former members of the Suicide Squad and they are standing by for orders.”

“Well?” de Rochefort asked.

“Da Silva is in negotiations as we speak. In a matter of days, Metropolis will be set aflame. There will be nothing Superman and the Justice League can do to stop it.” He paused. “I took the liberty of contacting an associate of mine to lead a similar attack on Gotham.”
“Batman!” de Rochefort replied.
“Precisely.”
The Marquis still looked perplexed. “Our interest is in Superman!”
“The man known as Batman has much political influence,” Ducard explained. “He wields power Superman does not.”
“Then we shall have checkmate,” he said.
“Yes? I see. Please let them up. A man and a woman who claim to be in the employ of Lex Luthor have requested an audience. I advised the desk to send them up.”
“I am …”
“I see. And what is it do you think I am planning?” the baron asked.
“Is Mr Luthor prepared to negotiate?”
“Please convey a message to Mr Luthor that I am not easily intimidated, particularly by the alien known as Superman.”

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John Crawford stood by the railing, waiting for the ferry to dock at Stryker’s Island. He watched the penitentiary come into view. It was a fairly old building although it had been extensively renovated to house prisoners with super-human abilities. Since the Justice League had come on the scene, there had been more and more prisoners added to its roster.

Senators in DC had recently been expressing concern about the costs of incarcerating dangerous criminals inside its walls, but in Crawford’s view, it just made it easier to access those who could do what he required of them.

Crawford alighted from the ferry and walked the half mile to the secured entry to the penitentiary, flashing his NSA identity. The guard nodded and allowed him entry, asking him to sign the log and state the purpose of his visit. Crawford scribbled in the log and followed the second guard through to the warden’s office.

Warden Draper greeted him cordially enough.

“What brings the NSA to Stryker’s Island?” he asked.

“I need to speak with Winslow Schott. He has some information which our agency requires.”

“I see. Mr Schott is in solitary.”

“I’m aware of that, sir, but this is important.”

“Of course. I will have the guard escort you.”

Crawford followed the guard to another wing, hiding his smirk. The warden hadn’t been aware that Crawford’s superiors had already secured the release of one prisoner. Bruno Mannheim was free to run Intergang; free only in terms of being protected from incarceration of course.

“Well, a visitor,” the plump man in the cell exclaimed gleefully.

Crawford studied the man known as the Toyman, otherwise known as Winslow Schott. He had heard the man had a childlike quality about him, although for all his immaturity he was highly intelligent, logical and strategic in his thinking.

“Crawford, NSA,” he said.

“Have you come to play?” Schott said, his eyes lighting up at the thought of a new ‘playmate’.
“No.”

“Pity,” the older man pouted.

“I need information. The whereabouts of John Corben.”

“But that’s not how the game is played,” Toyman answered.

Crawford bit back an impatient snort.

“What game are we playing, Schott? Chess? Snakes and Ladders? I care little for your games. I want Corben and I know you know where to find him.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Schott sniffed.

“You listen to me,” Crawford spoke quietly, aware the conversation was being recorded. “You will give me Corben, or you will suffer the consequences. Trust me, you do not want to be dealing with my superiors.”

Making sure he was out of sight of the surveillance cameras, Crawford allowed Toyman to see the pendant around his neck. A pendant which signified his membership in the Illuminati. It was a small coin, depicting a pyramid. At the apex of the pyramid was an eye. Otherwise known as the All-Seeing Eye.

Schott’s eyes widened and Crawford knew he had won. Every criminal he’d spoken to in the past trembled with fear at the thought of the Illuminati.

Schott rattled off a number, his gaze darting uneasily toward the surveillance camera in the left-hand corner of the room. Crawford made no promises to the man as he left. The truth was, the Illuminati had no use for a psychotic freak like the Toyman, no matter how intelligent he was.

He returned to his apartment, glad to be back in Metropolis at least. The encounter with Kara had been pleasant, although she was still continuing to pretend she knew nothing about him and wasn’t aware that he knew she was Supergirl. He’d enjoyed messing with her head a little, especially with the sliver of Kryptonite he’d kept in a small lead box, no bigger than a ring box. He’d exposed her once during dinner and had enjoyed her discomfort while she tried to figure out where it was coming from.

Still, as much as he wanted to continue his visits with her, he had a task to complete. The orders had come from Number One himself and he always dropped everything to obey the man at the top, especially if he wanted to rise within the ranks himself.

As soon as he had received the orders, he had paid the good doctor a visit. Edward Groll was a nervous-looking bespectacled man. Throughout their conversation, the scientist had continually shifted the glasses on his nose, as if the wire frames gave him discomfort. Crawford was swift to notice the way the man sweated profusely.

He had initially refused to reveal anything about Project Prometheus until Crawford had used his credentials to threaten the man with a federal investigation. Groll had questioned why the NSA would be interested in a scientist who now basically worked in a basement lab working on obscure and probably useless projects, but Crawford had avoided giving him an answer.

“Tell me about the project.”

“You clearly already know everything,” Groll said, wiping a hand over his brow, his fingers coming
back gleaming with moisture. “As I told Miss Lang, there is not a machine that can remove the suit. There is nothing to my knowledge that can draw the meteor rock from her body.”

The scientist had been adamant there was nothing that existed that was powerful enough, yet from what Crawford had learned about the Toyman, he had studied something which could be adapted to fulfil such a purpose. Had, indeed, done so already.

Crawford smirked as his mind returned to the present, then began to dial a number.

“If you know what’s good for you,” he told the other party on the phone, “you will be at the location I am going to give you in one hour. If not, well, I know of a few government agencies who will be very interested in what I have to tell them.”

The other person was quiet for a moment.

“What do you want?”

“We’ll discuss that. In one hour. 1012 Abbotts Lane.”

An hour later, Crawford was waiting at the location. He looked around the room, noting the furnace at one end of the room. There had been a large board on the wall where it appeared articles and other documents had been pinned up.

There was a crash and the man walked in. Crawford smirked.

“Hello, Mr Corben.”

***

Batman crouched above the balcony outside the apartment, watching the occupant inside as they moved back and forth. They were, as yet, unaware of his presence, but he planned on remedying that fairly soon.

He waited patiently, even knowing there was other criminal activity going on in the city. He had heard from Commissioner Jim Gordon there was a new investigation into a Congressman who was suspected of working with various criminal elements. Batman wanted to assist in the investigation but the problem with the Illuminati was more pressing.

The door to the terrace slid open and the occupant came out, lighting a cigarette and staring out at the city. Batman moved quietly down, landing with a thump on the terrace. The woman whirled, staring wide-eyed at him.

“What?” she said.

“Senator,” he rasped.

Miranda Clifford glared at him.

“I would think, Batman, you would have better things to do than spy on a United States Senator.”

“That would depend, madam. Perhaps I have reason to spy on a senator.”

“Have you now?”

He glared silently at her. In the years he had been working as Batman he had learned a few things. Sometimes criminals folded at the first threat, while others were more intimidated by the silent glare
of something most people tended to fear. It was the reason, after all, that he had chosen this particular costume. Fear was a natural reaction to bats, which, to most, weren’t exactly the most attractive of animals. While most people denied it, they did tend to judge on appearance.

Miranda Clifford was no exception, although with her known xenophobic views, she was more extreme than most.

He continued to glare at her, refusing to state his business. She began to fidget after a few moments of the two of them glaring at each other, her cigarette burning down to the end without her inhaling more nicotine. She hissed in pain as the hot ash burned her fingers, throwing the cigarette away.

The woman became even more nervous the longer Batman glared at her. She shifted on her heels, her gaze drawn to him even as she tried to look away. Just as she managed to break the stalemate and turned away to go back inside, he was on her, pushing her against the glass of the sliding door.

“What are you doing?”

“Tell me about the Illuminati,” he rasped.

Her eyes widened. Then she appeared to catch herself and snickered.

“The Illuminati? It’s a fairy story, told by conspiracy theorists.”

“It is no fairy story,” Batman replied, his voice more a growl so as to sound more menacing. “Tell me who they are.”

“Why? You cannot stop them,” the woman sneered. “They have worked for centuries to create an environment which would allow them to take control and nothing will get in their way.”

“They will fail,” he told her. “We will see to it.”

“You and who else? That alien freak called Superman? I’m afraid you’re mistaken, Batman. Soon you and your ‘friend’ will be far too concerned with other matters.”

“What are you planning?”

“I am planning nothing. Events have already been set in motion, Batman, and there is nothing you nor anyone can do to stop it.”

“I will stop it. Their scheme will fail, as will any other scheme you involve yourself in. Your duplicity will be exposed, senator.”

“Oh? What duplicity is this?”

“I know about your involvement in Marionette Ventures in Metropolis. I know of the attempt to drive down real estate prices so you and your cohorts could buy properties surrounding the Metropolis Aquifer. I also know you attempted the same scheme here in Gotham. You’ve been consorting with criminals, senator.”

She tried for an innocent look.

“Is it a crime to take advantage of low property values and invest in a fledgling business venture?”

“It is when you ally yourself with those whose activities bring about those low property values.” He sneered at her. “It’s a good thing, isn’t it, that Superman came along and put a stop to that scheme. I’d hate to think what would have happened if you and your cohorts did get control of the Aquifer.
You would have held the entire city to ransom.”

“It’s called free enterprise,” she proclaimed loftily. “One of the very things this country was founded on.”

The woman was arrogant in the extreme. She clearly thought she had it all. Batman hoped she would soon get her comeuppance.

When he returned to the cave, Alfred was waiting for him with news.

“Commissioner Gordon has been hospitalised,” he reported. “He was attacked in the sewers.”

“I’m going to pay him a visit,” he said, stripping off his costume.

“I doubt they will let you in,” the butler cautioned.

“They’ll let me,” Bruce told him.

Not wanting to draw too much attention to himself, Bruce elected to visit the hospital wearing a black hooded jacket and using the voice modulator he always used while in costume. Gordon wasn’t aware of his true identity and he wanted it kept that way.

Gordon was pale and clearly in pain. Bruce learned he had been shot and was about to be killed but had managed to escape. The older man was lying on his back on the bed, his heart rate and blood pressure continually monitored.

“Knew you’d come, my friend,” the commissioner said, his voice hoarse.

Bruce didn’t waste time with small talk.

“Who did this?”

“He called himself Bane.”
Bane takes over Gotham as the plan begins to come to fruition

He was enormous, at least in the eyes of the terrified Gothamites currently facing the man leading the charge on Gotham’s financial district. Tall and broad, but not fat, his appearance was unusual, to say the least. No one knew why he wore a mask over the bottom half of his face, the remaining half slightly distorted by the pressure of the tight straps holding the mask in place.

His brusquely stated orders sounded muffled, although it appeared he was using some kind of modulator as he directed a dozen armed men to surround the hub of the Gotham Stock Exchange. Men in suits were shoved brutally back toward the crowd currently populating the exchange floor, some tripping over themselves in their hurried retreat, fear making them clumsy.

The group of armed men surrounded the huge bank of computers, their weapons pointed at the crowd. One man set up a laptop, plugging in to the computer and tapped out a few commands. There was a short pause, where some members strained to see what was going on, but the transaction was hidden by the remaining gunmen.

The leader strode forward, pressing some kind of device against the wall. As the assembled people watched, a light began flickering rapidly and a loud beeping echoed through the chamber. The beeping began to increase in speed until it became a loud ringing, causing the witnesses to cover their ears.

Suddenly the computers flickered, then died. Anything within the same radius that contained any electronic components also died, making it clear what the device had been.

Elsewhere in the darkening city, similar devices were being used to shut down everything from communications to the electrical grid.

Within hours the city was in chaos, laid siege by the criminal known as Bane and his soldiers. Various other criminal factions decided to take advantage of the opportunity, breaking into local banks once kept secure by vaults with electronic locks.

Batman did his best to round up the criminals, but he was only one man and it became very apparent that he was out of his depth. Not even the thousand metropolitan police officers loaded up with riot gear could stop the overwhelming tide.

***

Clark watched the television screen, his handsome face marred with a frown. Police are calling for martial law in Gotham tonight as the chaos continues. Witnesses report that Batman ...

He looked at his wife.

“I need to go.”
She waved her hand at him. “Go then.”

“I don’t want to leave with you mad at me,” he said.

“My being mad at you won’t change what’s happening in Gotham. Bruce needs you.”

Bart looked up from his position near the balcony, having clearly been keeping his distance from Lois, not wanting to stir her anger even more.

“Don’t worry, Stretch. I can keep an eye on things here.”

Clark nodded. As he went to change into his Superman suit, he heard the phone ringing. Lois called him back in from the secret room. Oliver had always kept his Green Arrow gear in the room, hidden by a panel which showed part of a clock face. Clark had found the room years before when he’d first met Oliver.

Now, he kept his Superman uniform there, knowing it would be safe from prying eyes.

“Smallville! Phone!” she repeated, her tone more impatient.

He sighed. When she called him Smallville she either wanted to tease him or she was mad at him. He zipped back into the living room, picking up the phone.

“We got problems, Boy Scout,” AC told him.

***

Da Silva checked his weapon, then looked around him at the assembled men. This wouldn’t be like Smallville, he thought. There the attack hadn’t been carefully planned and most of the men in that attack were still scattered in various prisons.

Mannheim had done a good job ensuring there were enough weapons to go around. His men had been sent to raid military bases all over the country, coming back with all manner of assault rifles and handguns. There were even top-of-the-line rocket launchers among the stolen cache.

Da Silva nodded to Frank Bennett, who opened up the box containing one of the rocket launchers. Bennett was a former special ops soldier who had once been stationed with General Sam Lane at Fort Ryan until he was caught stealing weapons and selling them off to the highest bidder. He was considered by some of the group to be the foremost expert in handling high-end weaponry.

He was also certifiably insane. Da Silva wasn’t sure exactly what had happened, but it appeared that he had been in Smallville at the time of the second meteor shower. There were rumours he had some kind of meteor power, but what that was hadn’t been revealed. What was clear was that he had gone on a rampage about three years earlier, bombing various locations around Metropolis. He’d been caught by Superman, who had been known as the Blur back then and witnesses had claimed the man had laughed even as he was led away, with a high girlish giggle.

Their instructions were clear. Hit as many areas of Metropolis as they could and keep the superheroes busy.

Da Silva led the charge, taking about a dozen men with him to begin the attack on the central city. Bennett laughed as he readied the rocket launcher and aimed it at a vacant store. The building exploded, glass shattering, flames fanning out from the empty windows, eating at the dry wood which formed the frame of the building itself.
Again Bennett giggled, sounding almost like a hyena. Da Silva didn’t like the man and normally didn’t want anyone that crazy working alongside him, but he at least served his purpose.

A couple of the men ran into another building, dragging out the occupants, who were screaming in terror. As the gang leader watched, the two men dragged the woman into the alley. He turned his attention to the central city branch of the First National bank, nodding to his men. Two of them began firing their weapons into the glass windows of the shopfront. Security alarms began to blare. He again nodded and sent the two men into the bank. About a minute later there was a bang from inside.

Two police cars drove up and one of the officers spoke from inside, clearly using the car’s equipment to send out a message via speaker.

“This is Metro PD. Put down your weapons or we will be forced to fire.”

Da Silva snorted. The police wouldn’t be able to stop them and he knew it.

***

Clark flew over the city, his heart breaking as he saw what was happening. Reports of armed men attacking shopfronts, pulling residents out of their homes, were spreading all over the city. He had called in as many of his friends as he could.

“Kal-El.”

Kara hovered in the air, staring in dismay at the escalating violence. Once the local criminal factions realised the police weren’t going to be able to control the gangs they had begun looting the stores.

“Kara, we need to round up as many of them as we can.” He landed on the ground near a police cordon, his cousin coming down softly behind him.

“Captain,” he said to the police officer sheltering behind his car.

“Superman. I’ve called in as many of my men as I can but I don’t know what we can do against such firepower. We heard there were raids on armouries all over the country.”

Clark nodded. “I’m aware of that, Captain. My friends and I are going to do what we can to re-establish order.”

He winced as another explosion lit up the night sky. The first thing he needed to do was try and take care of that rocket launcher, he thought.

“Superman, Supergirl,” another officer called. “They’re all over the city. We heard they’re going to attack the LexCorp Power Plant.”

Kara stared at him, her eyes wide with alarm. The power plant was one of the few subsidiaries of LuthorCorp still intact despite the apparent collapse of Lex’s company.

“Kal-El, that is a nuclear reactor.”

“Go, Kara.”

“What are you going to do?”

“What I can.” He turned back to the Captain. “Have your men fan out and try to take out as many of the armed men as you can. Use the tasers if possible.”
“You know we can’t avoid ...”

“I know, sir.”

As much as he wanted to preserve life at all costs, he was resigned to the fact that the police might have to use deadly force against the armed men. He would do his best to avoid that happening, but there was only so much he could do.

He rose up into the air so he could get a better perspective of what was happening down on the ground. The men had begun to fan out in all directions, firing their weapons at vehicles and causing pile-ups. Drivers began trying to flee, only to have bullets fired in their wake.

The men had clearly planned this, Clark thought, watching in horror as the men placed the civilians between themselves and the armed police, essentially using them as hostages. He flew down as the men continued to fire on the helpless and terrified population, doing his best to block the bullets. One man giggled as he aimed a rocket launcher and fired. Clark caught the projectile and flew up into the air, throwing the explosive into the stratosphere a mere second before it exploded.

He then flew down and landed hard on the ground behind the man, aiming his heat vision at the back of the rocket launcher, which began to glow as it heated up. The armed man gasped and dropped the weapon on the ground.

Before Clark could round him up, another man turned on him, firing his Uzi. Clark effortlessly stopped the bullets but the other man continued to advance on him, throwing away the Uzi and pulling out a 9mm handgun.

***

In a villa in the city near Rennes le Chateau, a woman was speaking via videolink to Baron de Rochefort careful to keep her expression neutral. She didn’t agree with this latest scheme, but wasn’t about to reveal that fact to the man on the other end of the link.

“Oui je-comprend! Je vous fais confiance... pour résoudre ce petit problem.”

The woman switched off the camera and relaxed against the sofa cushions, turning to her guests, her expression changing to an uncertain but welcoming smile.

“Votre Frère a un problem?” Leon Mader enquired.

He was a man of average height with blonde, thinning hair. He was once considered a handsome man but years of too much wine and too much rich food combined with too little exercise had led to obesity and had ruined him.

The mistress of Villa Nemeton sighed.

"Mon frère est un idiot de s'attaquer à Superman et à la Ligue de la Justice. Il va échouer ... Je veux l'empêcher de faire des choses stupides."

Mader’s companion, a young French-Israeli woman, with the dark complexion and strong features common to those of her ancestry, frowned.

"Comment vous pouvez le savoir? Votre frère a rarement connu l'échec."

"Je suis Medium. Je peut voir le Futur …et je vois que mon Frère va connaitre l'échec."
Slowly Gaëlle de Rochefort rose from her seat. She was a tall woman, almost as tall as her brother, with brown hair and hazel eyes that could look green in a certain light. She approached the window to look out at the landscape, down to the bank of trees and the small church known around the world as the Church of Saint Mary Magdalene. It had gained fame due to supposed documents detailing the history of the Priory of Sion which later became the subject of a best-selling novel, The Da Vinci Code, but the documents were forgeries and the story was considered the biggest hoax of the twentieth century.

At least, that was what the Illuminati wanted the world to believe.

"Pouvez vous m'aider Léon, Sarah?"

"Nous allons vous aider," the young redhead replied.

"Mais cela va être difficile," Leon added.

A third woman entered the room, smiling. She was a statuesque blonde with an aura of absolute trust. She smiled as she joined them, standing beside the villa’s mistress.

"Puis je vous présenter Hélène Kosmatos une Dame Amazone de Grèce," Gaëlle announced with a sweeping gesture.

"Bonjour. Je suis ravi de vous aider."

"Yes, I understand! I do trust you ... of course to solve this little problem."
"My brother is an idiot to attack Superman and the Justice League. It will fail ... I love him and I want to keep him from doing stupid things."
"How can you know? Your brother has rarely experienced failure."
"I'm psychic. I can see the future ... and I see that my brother will fail."
"Can you help me Leon, Sarah?"
"We'll help you."
"But it will be difficult."
"I present you Helena Kosmatos a Amazon lady from Greece."
"Hello. I am happy to help you."

***

"Ollie!"

Oliver heard the urgency in his wife’s voice and got out of the shower, quickly wrapping a towel around himself. Still dripping, he went out to the bedroom where Chloe was watching something on the television.

“What is it, honey?”

She didn’t need to say anything, pointing at the television.

“Et vous pouvez voir les photos envoyées par nos collègues américains journalistes vivent aux Etats-Unis. Une insurrection par des éléments criminels dans les villes de Metropolis et de Gotham City.”

“And you can see by the pictures sent by our fellow Americans journalists live in the USA. An insurrection by criminal elements in the cities of Metropolis and Gotham City.”

New images appeared of Metropolis where there appeared to be fires burning and streets in chaos. The newscaster was speaking French but he got the gist of it soon enough.
“I need to get back to Metropolis. They’re going to need me.”

Chloe stared at him, her eyes wide and frightened.

“Ollie, what if this ...”

She paused. It was fairly clear what she was thinking, since he was thinking it too. While they hadn’t been able to prove it, the attack in Smallville had been the precursor to the Illuminati’s attack on the Justice League, or rather, Superman himself.

Chloe got off the bed, picking up her clothes.

“I’m coming with you,” she said firmly.

“Honey, you’re pregnant. I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“I won’t,” she told him. “I’ll stay in Watchtower and co-ordinate. You’ll need someone central to help keep you up to date on attacks.”

He picked up the phone and dialled a number.

“It’s Oliver Queen. I need the jet to take us immediately to Metropolis.”

There was a pause, then someone else came on the line, quickly explaining they were an airport official.

“I’m sorry, Mr Queen, but Metropolis Airport has been locked down. No trains either and the National Guard has been called in. No one gets in or out of Metropolis.”

Oliver moaned in frustration, running a hand through his wet, spiky locks.

“I don’t think you understand. I’m needed there.”

“I’m sorry, sir. There is nothing I can do.”

“What about Gotham?”

“Gotham is under siege as well,” the official told him. “Everything is blocked off. There is no way in or out.”

He hung up, looking at Chloe.

“Both Metropolis and Gotham are a no-fly zone,” he said.

Chloe frowned. “What?”

“The National Guard has been called in.”

“What do we do?”

He shrugged. “What can we do?”

“Well, I’m not going to just sit here. There has to be something I can do. What if this is the Illuminati trying to get Clark away from the apartment?”

Most of the time, Oliver loved his wife’s frenetic energy. She was a passionate woman and that often meant she was never happy unless she was running around frantically. As Oliver’s old nurse, who
was English, would have said, ‘running around like a chook with its head cut-off’. There was a time and place for it and as much as he hated the fact he couldn’t get them home to help his friends, there was little he could do about it.

“Honey, I really don’t think there’s much we can do from Paris.”

She pulled off her nightgown and began pulling on jeans and a sweater.

“We’re going to Lana’s,” she said firmly. “Get dressed.”

He stood at attention and saluted her. “Sir, yes sir!”

“Smart ass,” she said dryly. “Hurry up. I’m just gonna call Lana.”

He went back into the bathroom and quickly dried off, dumping the towel on the floor. Chloe would probably nag him about it later, but since she was in such a hurry to get to Lana’s, he figured he had about half a day’s grace.

“Ollie!”

He muttered something unintelligible, then went back out to the bedroom in the nude to dress in jeans and a shirt. He looked up, frowning as he heard his wife calling him once more from the living area of their suite, followed by bangs and crashes.

Oliver ran out, startled to find a man had burst in the door and was holding Chloe up in the air. She was struggling in the man’s grip, trying to pull away. The man was tall, although not quite as tall as Oliver, with dark brown hair and stocky build.

Oliver noticed the man wore a t-shirt that seemed a little misshapen, covering something over his torso. He rushed the man, striking him hard with a full fist, only for it to almost break his hand.

The man dropped Chloe and grabbed Oliver instead by the throat. Oliver choked, trying to pull the man’s hand away. He found himself tossed through the air, crashing into the wall. Dazed, he lay there, his ears buzzing, barely hearing his wife’s frightened scream.

Chloe watched helplessly as the man tossed her husband across the room. She peered at him, thinking she should know him.

“Oh my god!” she breathed. “Corben!”

She backed away as he came for her again.

“No!”

“Leave her alone!” a feminine voice ordered firmly.

Chloe was never more relieved to see her friend in her life. She quickly realised that Lana must have heard what was happening through the phone and had come to put a stop to it. Her friend moved at speed toward the man who had come to be known as Metallo but for some inexplicable reason she stopped before she could shove him away.

Corben grabbed her by the throat. Lana struggled, grunting. To Chloe’s shock and consternation, the Kryptonite heart he’d been given began to emit an eerie green glow. Lana groaned as if she was in pain, still fighting. Chloe stared as the heart began to glow even brighter. It seemed as if Lana’s power was being sucked from her.
Her friend dropped to the floor, gasping for breath. Suddenly an arrow came out of nowhere and Corben dropped like a stone. Chloe turned and looked at her husband as he dropped the compound bow. He’d shot Corben with a tranquiliser dart.

She ran to him, hugging him.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She touched the cut on his forehead. “I should be asking you that question,” she said softly.

“Fine. Nothing a good night’s sleep won’t cure. Who is he?”

“That’s right, I forgot. You never met John Corben.”

“The guy the Kandorians experimented on?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

Corben rolled over, groaning as he started to get up. Oliver cocked an eyebrow.

“There was enough tranquiliser to drop an elephant,” he said.

Corben stumbled toward Lana, who was still on the floor, her face pale. She was clearly weak, as if her powers from the Prometheus suit had been stripped away.

Oliver started to move toward the man, who turned and looked at them, before he took out a phone, breathing heavily as he pressed a couple of buttons.

“Threat is neutralised,” he said, before he tried to stumble out. He didn’t get far, his legs suddenly unsteady, causing him to collapse to the floor.

“Guess the tranquiliser worked better than I thought,” Oliver muttered.

Chloe wondered. It looked to her as if Corben had absorbed all the Kryptonite in Lana’s body, powering up his heart further, but it looked a little like overload.

“What threat?” Chloe asked.

He stared up at her as if he didn’t recognise her.

“Guy ... said he ... w-wanted me to ... Lang.”

“You’re not making any sense,” she said.

Corben clearly tried to pull his thoughts together, taking a deep breath. He began to speak haltingly, telling them he had been working as a consultant when he’d had a call from a man claiming to be from the NSA. The man had told him to meet at the old building the former reporter had once owned, which he’d been planning on using as a base to pursue the Blur. It was the same building where his sister had lived before she’d been murdered by an escaped convict. Corben had blamed Clark for her death.

The agent had basically blackmailed him into going to Paris to take out Lana Lang saying she was a threat that needed to be neutralised.

Chloe got down beside her friend.
“Lana? Are you okay?”

Lana looked up. Her colour had come back and she seemed better. Still weak, but better.

“What happened?” she asked.

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” Chloe told her.

Together, she and Oliver helped Lana up and sat her down on the couch. While they were otherwise occupied, Corben managed to get himself up and slip out the door. Lana stared at them.

“What’s going on?” she asked.
Ross Webster was at his desk on the fifty-seventh floor of the Webscoe Industries building going over some paperwork. His plans for the takeover of Luthorcorp were slowly coming to fruition. He’d borrowed from a page of Lionel Luthor’s handbook on how to destroy companies and had had his people try to dig up every scrap of dirt on Luthorcorp’s board members. He planned on taking said information and using it to blackmail the members into selling their shares.

Lionel Luthor had done that once, years ago, when he’d been teaching his son a lesson on corporate politics. Of course, that had got him shot and almost killed for his trouble.

His mistress, Lorelai, was rubbing his shoulders. He’d met the blonde three years earlier. She wasn’t the brightest of women and not what he would call a brilliant conversationalist. His sister Vera would call her a bimbo, but she had her uses.

Sounds travelled up through the open balcony door from the street several hundred feet below. He could hear sirens from various emergency vehicles. Irritated by the noise, he shrugged off the hands of his mistress and picked up the remote on his desk. Panels slid back in the wall to reveal a widescreen television. On the screen, a news anchor was struggling to keep his expression neutral while describing scenes of utter devastation and chaos in the streets.

Just as Webster began to settle in to watch the newscast, the lights began to flicker. He frowned, touching a button on the intercom. The lights again flickered and went out. The television suddenly switched off.

“What the hell?” he asked, picking up the phone on his desk. There was no dial tone.

The lights came on again but they were at half their usual capacity which clearly meant an emergency generator had kicked in. The main door burst open and a man in his early sixties rushed in, puffing and panting. He looked clearly panicked, his security uniform grubby and, if Ross was not mistaken, torn in several places.

“Mr Webster, sir. You need to evacuate the building.”

“Whatever for?”

“The people in the streets. They’ve attacked the building and shut the mains down. Those staff who were still working have already left.”

The powerful CEO glanced at Lorelai, who just shrugged and looked at her painted nails as if this was just an every day run-of-the-mill occurrence and she had more important things to think about.

“I see,” he said. “Rather a coincidence, wouldn’t you say?”

The guard frowned at him. Webster had never even bothered to deign to learn the man’s name. He was a lowly peon and not worth the effort in his mind.
“I have a helicopter on the roof waiting for you, Mr Webster. I suggest you leave now.”

Vera burst in, looking pale and frightened.

“Ross …”

There was the sound of squawking coming from the guard’s radio.

“Yes?”

Ross watched as the man turned away and listened to the radio, speaking urgently into it, before he turned back.

“Sir, this situation has now become a Priority One. You must evacuate now.”

He glanced once more at his mistress and his sister. Both seemed very eager to leave.

“Very well,” he said, touching a switch under his desk. The two women followed him to the back wall of the office where another panel had slid aside to reveal stairs to the roof. Just as he ushered the two women up the stairs he turned. Half a dozen armed men ran into the office, shooting the guard. Webster fled.

***

Lex barked into the phone.

“You listen to me, Otis ...I want …”

He paused, listening. Moana sighed and turned back to the television screen where she could see images of rioting in the streets of Metropolis. Another screen showed similar images in Gotham. Luthor continued to rant to his assistant but she ignored it, changing the channel to another news network. Her eyes widened as she saw the image on the screen.

“Luthor,” she began, but he was still ranting. “Luthor!” she said, louder this time. He turned to look at her and she pointed to the screen.

It was Luthorcorp. The rioters had clearly broken in as the wide glass windows to the lobby had been smashed. The news reporter related stories of fires on several levels of the building. Then they crossed live to the scene showing images of some of the rioters. The ringleader was none other than the security guard Lex had fired just days earlier. He was smirking into the camera.

“Benjamin!” Lex growled. “You son of a bitch!”

As much as Moana hated Luthor, she hated what that guard had done to her even more. Now it looked like the man was getting his revenge.

Two days earlier

De Rochefort sprawled casually in the large armchair, gazing up at the younger woman.

“Je l’avoue,” Elsa told him, “J’ai été surprise de recevoir votre appel.”

“J’ai des informations que je pense vous trouverez ... intéressant.”

She sat opposite him, taking a notebook out of her purse.
“Dite moi,” she said.

“Connaissez-vous bien Lex Luthor?”

“Seulement ce que j'ai lu dans les medias,” she said regretfully.

“Depuis de nombreuses années, Luthor a été impliqué dans un certain nombre de projets, mais celui de vous intéresser est appelé 33.1. Bien sûr, comme vous le savez, il ya 33 degrés de la franc-maçonnerie.

He continued. “En Ésotérisme, 33.1 signifie 33 maîtres ainsi que celui qui est invisible. Pour le dire autrement, les Illuminati sont derrière la franc-maçonnerie ou Black Sun.

Elsa leaned forward, clearly curious as to where this was going.

“Je ne suis pas sûr que je comprends.”

“Dans le passé, les Illuminati ont aidé Lionel Luthor dans son ascension au pouvoir.”

“Qu'est-ce que cela a à voir avec Godfrey?”

“Cela n'a rien à voir avec Godfrey. Il a tout à voir avec les Illuminati. C'est notre organisation.”

“Les Illuminati veulent Superman?”

“Nous voulons le détruire. Vous avez raison dans votre première hypothèse, Mademoiselle Brunning. Superman est une menace, mais il est une menace beaucoup plus importante que vous vous rendez compte.”

“Pourquoi me dites-vous cela?”

“Luthor dispose d'une documentation sur le projet 33.1. Nous le voulons. En échange, je vais vous donner un accès complet à ce sujet et plus sur nos objectifs pour Superman.”

“Que voulez-vous que je fasse?”

“Je crois que l'information est détenue dans le stockage sécurisé de LuthorCorp. Trouvez-le et apportez-le moi.”

“Comment?”

“I admit, I was surprised to receive your call.”

“I have some information I think you will find ... interesting.”

“Do tell.”

“How well do you know Lex Luthor?”

“Only what I have read in the media.”

“For many years, Luthor has been involved in a number of projects, but the one of interest to you is called 33.1. Of course, as you know, there are 33 degrees in Freemasonry.

"In Esoterism, 33.1 means 33 masters plus one who is invisible. To put it another way, the Illuminati is behind Freemasonry or Black Sun.”

“I'm not sure I understand.”

“In the past, the Illuminati helped Lionel Luthor in his rise to power.”

“What does this have to do with Godfrey?”

“It has nothing to do with Godfrey. It has everything to do with the Illuminati. That is our organisation.”
“The Illuminati want Superman?”
“We want to destroy him. You are correct in your first assumption, Mademoiselle Brunning. Superman is a threat, but he is a much bigger threat than you realise.”

“Why are you telling me this?”
“Luthor has documentation on the 33.1 project. We want it. In exchange, I will give you full access to that and more about our goals for Superman.”

“What do you want me to do?”
“I believe the information is held in secure storage within Luthorcorp. Find it, and bring it to me.”

“How?”

He showed her a photograph of a man who had once worked for Luthorcorp as a security guard. The man was currently in jail awaiting trial for rape and attempted murder. Elsa nodded.

She left the hotel and made arrangements to visit the man in the jail. Benjamin was bitter and angry.

“That bastard framed me,” he spat. “My wife left me.”

As the man continued to rage at her, Elsa was left with no doubt that the man had done exactly as charged. The way he looked at her reinforced that idea. Still, she knew the man could give her valuable information.

There was no way, however, to get him released on bail, but opportunity soon presented itself in the form of riots in the streets. As the cops were fully occupied with the chaos in the streets, it was easy for her to walk in to the jail and release Benjamin, telling him what she needed.

Benjamin smirked at her. It was his pleasure, he told her.

***

Moana just continued to watch the screen as Luthor raged at the wanton destruction of his property. She ignored him, figuring it was best he get it out of his system. She was still trying to focus on the news broadcast when the door burst open and three men came in. All three were wearing masks and carrying guns.

“Come with us and you won’t get hurt.”

Lex stopped mid-rant and glowered at the trio.

“I don’t think so,” he said.

Moana was already on her feet, charging one of the men and smashing the heel of her hand into his nose. Another of the men fired but Luthor had already grabbed his arm so the shot went wild. Moana twisted, kneeling the attacker in the groin and rounding on the second man who had tried to grab her from behind in a bear hug.

The third man managed to overpower Luthor just as she shoved the second man away. He grabbed her, one arm around her neck. She fought him, pulling him with her until she was an arm’s length away from the wall and she pushed back against him, using him for momentum as she walked up the wall and twisted, landing behind him. She cut him down with a sharp kick to the small of his back.

Lex stopped mid-rant and glowered at the trio.

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Luthor had managed to recover by this time and he used another gun to pistol whip the attacker into unconsciousness. Moana saw a wallet in the back pocket of one of the men, looking up at Lex in
horror as the identification revealed the man was Canadian Intelligence.

Why they’d chosen to mask themselves was a mystery, until she saw the pendant he wore around his neck. The All-Seeing Eye. Crap, they were Illuminati, she thought.

“You better call Caron and get him down here.”

***

The Daily Planet was normally fairly quiet this time of night with only a skeleton staff, but editor-in-chief Perry White had called for all hands on deck as the rioting in the street continued. Jimmy Olsen, a new photography intern, had been living up to the name of his late brother and was eagerly taking photos from the window.

Cat Grant, who was still entirely too perky for Lois’ liking, was eager to earn her stripes as a reporter and at least bring herself up to the level of her sometime nemesis. She was forever complaining that just because she’d kept her ‘youthful good looks’ it meant that she wasn’t taken seriously as a reporter.

Lois had often been heard thanking her lucky stars that Clark was now permanently assigned as her partner instead of working with the blonde disaster.

Perry held court in the boardroom.

“All right people, what have we got?”

Ron Troupe spoke up.

“My sources tell me they’re using a cache of stolen weapons from armouries all around the country. The Joint Chiefs are calling for blood.”

“How many of them are out there?”

“At last count, there were at least a hundred, maybe more.”

“Cat?”

“I’m trying to get in touch with Superman,” she said, determined not to let someone like Lois have the monopoly on him.

When Superman had first appeared, there had been speculation that he was a new superhero, until they’d seen the ‘S’ on the chest of his uniform and realised that Superman had been working in the shadows for years.

Lois’ first real interview with Superman, aka the Blur, had implied that he had been raised on Earth, sent to the planet so he wouldn’t be killed in a cataclysm which had destroyed an entire race of people. The article had been sympathetic, painting a picture of a man who had resembled humans but wasn’t one of them. Cat had scowled at the article but secretly felt sorry for the superhero, unable to imagine just how terribly lonely it must have been for him.

It was a complete turnaround from a year earlier when she had first begun listening to the likes of Gordon Godfrey, who had tried to paint the Blur as nothing but a vigilante menace. Then again, Superman was almost always front page news and every reporter worth their salt would rather keep him on-side so they could get their turn at the money-spinning headlines.
“You don’t ‘get in touch’ with Superman,” one of the other reporters at the table said. “He contacts you. Or rather, he doesn’t. We all know Lane has the monopoly on that.”

“Has anybody ever considered that there might be something between her and Superman? Like personally? I mean, what does she see in that nerd Kent anyway?”

Perry glowered at Steve Lombard. The sports reporter glared back. He had left the newspaper a year or so earlier to work for the Daily Star, but the newspaper had suddenly called it quits after its circulation dropped dramatically and Lombard had returned to the Planet. Perry never let him forget it.

Perry was still seeing Martha and the couple had yet to formalise their relationship. As far as he was concerned, no one had any right to say anything against the young man he looked on fondly as almost a son.

“What Lane and Kent see in each other is no one’s business but theirs,” the editor told the assembled group, just as a crash could be heard outside.

Men with guns marched into the board room. Everyone assembled rose up from the table in panic.

“No one leaves. You all sit quietly and no one gets hurt.”

Perry looked at the lead man, who he recognised as the motorcycle gang leader Superman had sent to prison just a few weeks earlier.

“What do you want?”

Da Silva grinned at him, showing gaps in his teeth.

“Straight down to business. I like that. Here’s what we want. One hundred million dollars, all in unmarked bills, and safe passage out of the city.”

Great Caesar’s Ghost, Perry thought. This was a fine kettle of fish.

“And what if we refuse to be a part of this?”

Da Silva placed a small device on the table. Perry frowned at the green glow. The armed man smirked as he pressed a button. There was an LED lit on the small console which Perry realised was a timer. It began counting down from three hours.

“Get on the phone, old man,” da Silva ordered.

“And who are you suggesting I call?”

“How about Senator Martha Kent?” the other man grinned evilly. “I hear she’s a close, personal friend of yours.”

Perry chewed on his lip nervously, glancing around at the pale, frightened faces of the gathered reporters. The last thing he wanted to do was involve Martha, but he had a feeling the man knew exactly what his relationship with her was. It seemed the man also knew a lot about Superman, if the green glow of the bomb was anything to go by.

He picked up the phone and dialled Martha’s office. Her secretary, Louise, picked up.

“Louise, it’s Perry White. Is Martha in?”
“She’s in a meeting, sir. I can’t ...”

“Louise, I understand you’re doing your job but there are a dozen men with guns aimed at several of my reporters demanding one hundred million dollars. If their demands are not met within less than three hours, the Daily Planet will be blown to kingdom come. I don’t want to tell you your job, Louise, but if you don’t find the good senator and tell her, I cannot be held responsible for the consequences.”

He’d heard the gasp on the other end and knew she understood him completely.

“I will talk to her immediately,” she said. “Are you all right?”

“No one has been hurt. Yet.” The operative word being ‘yet’, he thought.

He hung up the phone and looked at da Silva.

“That good enough for you?” he asked.

“Excellent.”

Two men were left to guard the hostages while the rest gathered outside. Perry sat down with a heavy sigh, his gaze locked on the device. There was no way he could turn it off, he decided, as the gang leader must have rigged it somehow.

Lombard looked at him.

“You think they’re going to kill us?” he asked.

Perry ran a hand over his face, groaning softly.

“Probably,” he replied.

Cat shook her head. “No, they need us as hostages. We’re too valuable.”

“I doubt whether they’d care, to be perfectly frank.”

Jimmy, his face pale, decided he couldn’t sit around. He fidgeted in his seat, his hand on his camera.

“I could try to get pictures,” he said in a low voice, glancing up at the two men standing guard at the door.

“Don’t be stupid, Jimmy. I forbid it. I’m not about to let you get killed over some damn pictures.”

“But Chief,” the teen began.

“Don’t try to be a hero, Jimmy. If I know Superman, he’ll help us.” He glanced once again uneasily at the bomb, but didn’t point it out to the others.

“Good. This might be my chance to get an exclusive interview with him,” Cat said.

Perry groaned quietly. The woman was obsessed with trying to get the best of Lane and Kent. Superman was going to be far too busy trying to prevent a catastrophe to stop for a damned interview.

***
Martha stared at Louise, her face white with shock.

“What did you just say?” she asked.

“Perry White and some of his staff are being held hostage at the Daily Planet. I contacted Agent Molino in the FBI. He managed to hack into the CCTV network at the newspaper and confirmed it.”

Martha knew there was no time to waste.

“Louise, get me the President’s office in the White House.”

She looked at the two senators and smiled apologetically.

“I am sorry. It seems we have an emergency situation.”

“Think nothing of it, Martha. If we can help in any way ...” Daniel Abrams smiled.

The two men left and Martha picked up the phone, dialling a number.

“Mom?”

“Hi sweetheart. I hear things are rather chaotic there at the moment.”

Lois sighed.

“That’s a word for it.”

“Well, I hate to add to the problem darling, but Perry called.” She told her daughter-in-law what Louise had told her.

“Don’t worry, Mom,” Lois replied. “We’ll sort it out, but maybe you need to call the President just in case.”

“I already have Louise on it. Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. You know me.”

Martha smiled. She knew Lois very well indeed.

“I love you,” she said.

“Love you too, Mom.”

***

Lois hung up the phone and looked at Bart.

“You need to go find Clark right now,” she said.

Bart frowned at her. “What about the communicators?”

She’d forgotten about the communicators Chloe had given them. Her cousin had never got around to telling them about the man who had invented them. Lois got up and went to the green room as she called it, using the remote control to activate the doors.

The communicators were in a small case. One was not sitting in its usual place, which meant Clark had taken his. Lois took her own out and pressed it into her ear.
“Goldilocks to Boy Scout,” she said, ignoring the light chuckle behind her.

“Boy Scout here,” came the reply within a moment.

Lois could hear sirens and the breaking of glass. She hated pulling Clark away from what was clearly a tense situation but she had no other choice.

“The Daily Planet is under siege,” she told him, keeping it all business, just in case someone might have tapped into their frequency.

“How many?”

“Big Momma says about a dozen. Proceed with caution Boy Scout.”

She couldn’t tell him much more than that, but she knew Clark would be on it.

“Understood, Goldilocks. Boy Scout out.”

Lois turned back to Bart.

“Well, we warned him,” she said. “It’s up to him now.”

“He’ll get there in time,” Bart assured her with confidence.

She nodded. “Yeah.”

She looked gratefully at her friend. They had their ups and downs. Bart could be brash and impulsive, hence the name Impulse, but he was always there when he was needed. She had been at Met U when Clark had met the younger man the first time, but she had heard enough to know he had a good heart.

Mara let out a cry from upstairs, letting her mother know she was awake. Lois glanced at the clock. It was almost nine. Clark had already been out fighting for five hours.

“I’ll go,” Bart offered, already making his way to the stairs to head to the nursery.

Lois resumed pacing the living area, watching the drama unfold. She’d already seen the way the rioters had destroyed Luthorcorp and she worried they would head to the clocktower next. Watchtower probably wouldn’t fare much better. No security system in the world could stand up to a dozen men with weapons and destruction on their minds.

There was a loud screeching from the direction of the elevator and Lois tensed, wondering if the rioters had hit the building. She ran toward it, grabbing a large brass vase as she passed, watching as a figure slowly came into view.

Ria! Or rather, Aresia!

***

Perry watched in despair as the figures on the display clicked over to the ninety minute mark.

“We should do something,” Jimmy whispered.

“There are a dozen men with guns, Olsen,” Perry replied. “I told you. No heroics.”

The phone rang and da Silva moved around the table to pick it up. He listened briefly, then handed
the phone to Perry.

“Perry White,” he said gruffly.

“Mr White, this is Agent Molino of the FBI. Can you tell me what the situation is?”

“We have a dozen men with weapons trained on this room. I have six reporters and one photographer with me and what looks like a bomb on the table, with less than ninety minutes on the countdown.”

“Our people are doing what we can, sir.”

He sighed, wishing for the first time in years that he had a drink. He’d once been a full-blown alcoholic, but had given up the drink after nearly getting himself killed in Smallville a few years earlier. It was thanks to Clark that he’d been given the wake-up call he needed to get off the drink and get his life back.

“It’s not good enough,” Perry growled. “I’ve been in the trenches and I know a bad situation when I see one.”

“We have you on surveillance and I know you’re doing your best to keep everyone calm. I’m asking you to keep it up for a little while longer. It’s going to take time to get the money together.”

“I don’t think you understand,” he told him. “We don’t have time!”

The gang leader took the phone from him.

“Listen up, Agent. You got less than ninety minutes to transfer one hundred million bucks to a bank account in the Caymans. If we don’t get that money, the only thing left of the Daily Planet will be a gigantic crater, got me?”

There was the sound of breaking glass and something flew past Perry in a blur of red and blue. Superman, he thought.

Da Silva dropped the phone. He seemed surprised when the gun disappeared from his hand. The rest of the guns also vanished from the other men, who appeared confused. Superman appeared in the outer office, crushing the weapons.

The gang leader grinned.

“Superman! How nice of you to drop in.”

“Da Silva,” the superhero growled. “It’s over!”

The man smirked. “You think so?” He looked at the device on the table. Perry stared at it. The glow had seemed to brighten in the superhero’s presence. He glanced up at Superman, who seemed to stumble slightly. “I had it specially designed. There is no stopping it, Superman.”

To Perry’s shock and dismay, the counter seemed to speed up. It was as if the device had been programmed to respond to Superman’s unique energy signature.

“Uh, Superman ...”

Superman stared at the device, then blew on it, freezing it. The counter still kept counting down.

“Nice try.”
Perry growled and rose to his feet, moving to tackle the gang leader. The others followed his example, rushing the other men. Superman moved at speed, clearly in pain as he approached the bomb, which was still counting down.

Clark stumbled, feeling the old nausea and weakness as he grew closer to the bomb. It appeared da Silva had thought of everything. He knew there was no choice. There was enough explosive to level three blocks and enough Kryptonite that it could possibly kill him.

His blood seemed to be boiling in his body as he picked up the device, his hands turning green, the veins bulging. Hissing in pain, he cradled the device, which had less than a minute, then took off at speed through the window.

Perry had managed to knock the gang leader out and had turned to help the others with the rest of the men when a brilliant explosion lit up the night sky.

“Superman,” he whispered, going to the now smashed window.

***

Batman dropped to the roof of City Hall where Bane and his men were currently holding hostages. There was a skylight on top of the dome and he smashed through, the wings on his cape slowing his momentum slightly as he landed on the floor in front of the tall man.

“Batman,” the distorted voice cried almost gleefully.

“Bane,” Batman growled, his voice raspy.

Two of Bane’s men came forward, looking to fight him. Bane waved his hand.

“I’ve been looking forward to this,” the other man told him.

“Then it’s time we end it,” Batman returned, lashing out.

Bane responded with a powerful punch of his own, shoving Batman into a pillar. The Dark Knight returned the punch with a series of punches and kicks which seemed to have no effect on the powerful man.

They fought like two boxers in a ring, while the gathered henchmen formed a circle around them. Batman grunted with each hit, blood spurting from a cut on his lip. Bane continued to beat him back until the Dark Knight looked beaten and exhausted.

“Theatricality and deception are powerful agents to the uninitiated... but we are initiated, aren’t we, Bruce?” Bane said.

Batman stared up at him. His research had led him to the discovery that Bane was a member of the League of Shadows. Or at least, he had been, until he’d been ex-communicated.

“The League of Shadows was nothing but a gang of psychopaths,” he growled back.

“I am the League of Shadows, and I’m here to fulfil Ra’s al Ghul’s destiny,”

That told Bruce one important thing. The League of Shadows was a distant cousin to the Illuminati. This had all been a set-up to destroy Gotham and keep Batman distracted.

Batman had one more ace up his sleeve. He pulled out a small explosive. It wouldn’t be enough to kill someone as powerful as Bane, but hopefully enough to injure him. He threw it, but the resulting
explosion didn’t even stop the man in his tracks.

Batman fought as Bane continued to beat him.

“I will show you where I made my home. Then I will break you.”

Batman struggled to his feet, aiming punch after punch at the man, to little effect. His vision was greying out, his entire body burning with pain. He could barely stand as Bane grabbed him by the collar and the waistband of his uniform, lifting him into the air before slamming him down over his knee. Bruce gave one final scream at the agonising pain in his back, then knew no more.

Bane stared down at the broken body, peculiarly unsatisfied. It hadn’t seemed much of a fight. He turned to his henchmen, about to order them to pick up the fallen knight, but a woman dropped to the floor in front of him. She wore a red and gold bustier and tight blue pants with stars painted all over.

Bane looked at her.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Diana,” she said. “You are Bane.”

“What do you want?”

“You!” she said, her voice like ice. Bane turned away from her, dismissing her as just a woman. He glanced at one of the henchmen, who aimed his gun at the woman.

She moved swiftly, using bracelets on her wrists to deflect the bullets until the man’s gun was empty. The other men just stared at her. Bane growled in impatience, turning to deal with her himself. No sooner had he done so than she had vanished, taking the broken body of Bruce Wayne with her.

***

Lois decided to play dumb for now.

“Ria. What are you doing here?”

The younger woman glared at her.

“Let’s not play games, Miss Lane. Where is she?”

“You’re not taking my baby.”

“I don’t want to hurt you, Lois, but I will if I have to.”

“Do your worst,” she said. “You really think I’m going to let an Amazon take what is mine?”

Aresia smirked. “I see my sister has already warned you about me. Never mind. You cannot fight me, Lois. I am an Amazon. I will take the child away from the land of men.”

“And do what? Raise her to be a man-hater like you are? You’re so blinded by your own hatred you can’t even see you’re insane.”

Aresia screamed in a sound that reminded Lois of a show she had watched as a child. She quickly raised the vase, using it to defend herself against the attack, hoping Bart had heard Aresia come in and managed to get Mara to safety.
She dodged the younger woman’s blows, hitting back with some of her own, but it was like hitting concrete. Aresia was definitely stronger, although how much stronger Lois couldn’t tell. Diana had told her the younger Amazon had similar powers, although not as much as Diana and definitely not as strong, yet they were still more than human.

Still, Lois had been learning martial arts from the age of five and she knew how to turn a person’s strength against them. She continued to dodge the Amazon’s blows, yet landing a few of her own.

Aresia screamed in frustration. Moving too fast for Lois to react, she leapt into the air, tumbling over and over and coming to a halt behind Lois, sweeping her across the room. Lois tried to slow her momentum, only to crash into the wall and falling to the floor. She attempted to get to her feet, a roaring in her ears. As she raised her head, she saw Bart running at full speed at the Amazon, who just swept him aside. He fell, then got to his feet and again rushed the woman.

“You’re not touching her,” he screamed.

Aresia seemed to be unfazed as Bart aimed a punch at her, holding him at arm’s length with a hand on his head. Dazed, Lois began to get to her feet, grabbing a bow and arrow and aiming it at the girl. The Amazon caught the arrow in mid-air and snapped it in two. She paused, canting her head as if listening for something, then knocked Bart out with one punch before turning and leaving.

Frowning, Lois wiped at the blood on her lip and checked on Bart, who was lying unconscious on the floor. She heard the sound of a helicopter on the roof and, in spite of her dizziness, went running up the spiral staircase to her daughter’s room.

Lois gasped in horror. The crib was empty, the blankets pulled roughly back.

“Nooo!” she screamed, falling to her knees in agony.

Above the city, Stephanie de Rochefort held the baby in her arms. Mara was screaming, clearly frightened. The blonde did her best to calm the infant as the aircraft flew through the darkness. As she cuddled the child, she smirked in triumph.

Phase Two of their plan was complete.
Moana and Lex learn Superman has been hurt

Episode Seven – Receptui

Moana stood at the huge window overlooking the city, trying to ignore the conversation going on behind her, but it was difficult. Lex was in a rage and he wasn’t going to back down.

“These men attacked us, Caron.”

“They are agents of Canadian Intelligence, sir,” the solicitor argued.

“I don’t care if they’re agents of God himself!”

“I am doing my best, but you must understand that Director Lewis will consider this an act of treachery.”

Lex almost spat at the man.

“Fine. Then you have Ms Lewis arrest us.”

“That is not advisable, sir. I can only ...”

“Arrange a meeting, Caron, or find yourself another high profile case.”

Caron grumbled something under his breath. Moana sensed his frustration and anger. There was little he could do to ease an already tense situation and Lex was not making it any better.

The solicitor left, presumably to arrange the meeting Lex demanded. Moana turned to look at the bald man.

“How quickly they forget,” she said coldly.

He frowned at her. “Excuse me?”

“Wasn’t it you who threatened to turn Chloe Sullivan into the DDS when her boyfriend wouldn’t do your bidding?”

“Are you suggesting I am being hypocritical?” he accused. “Perhaps those who live in glass houses shouldn’t be throwing stones.”

“And what have I done that’s hypocritical, except defend you against attack, and help you figure out Stephanie de Rochefort’s scheme!”

“I’m fairly certain you would love nothing more than to see me rot in hell,” he said.

“I’m a lot of things, Luthor,” she hissed, “but I would never put someone in a dangerous situation to get my rocks off. I would never wish you dead, but if it did happen, I wouldn’t be crying over it.”
“Spare me the holier-than-thou attitude!” he snapped back. “You’re as bad as Superman!”

“Superman doesn’t put himself on a pedestal. And FYI, just because I’ve been trying to help him with this, doesn’t mean I trust him any more than I trust you. Which isn’t saying much where you’re concerned.”

“Oh, you’ve made that very clear.”

Caron returned, looking white-faced.

“You had better see this,” he said, picking up the remote from the desk and switching on the big screen. A news anchor looked shaken as they spoke into the camera.

There have been witnesses all over the city who claim to have seen Superman fall out of the sky following a massive explosion. We are unable to substantiate ...

He touched his ear, as if listening in to his producer.

We have breaking news. Superman has been found unconscious in Centennial Park. We’re crossing now live to Carmen Alvarado. Carmen, what’s the situation?

An attractive woman, who appeared to have some Hispanic ancestry, appeared on screen with a microphone in hand. She seemed to be shivering, but it was difficult to tell whether it was from shock or cold. She stood in front of a police cordon which was blocking off an area of what Moana assumed was Centennial Park.

It’s completely chaotic here, Marty. There are still gangs rioting in the streets and we have been hearing reports over the police band that they are still working on rounding them up.

About an hour ago we heard that staff at the Daily Planet were being held hostage with a bomb. Superman flew in and flew out with the bomb. A few seconds later, witnesses reported a green flash in the sky before something fell to Earth.

Then just a few minutes ago we heard police reports saying a homeless man who had been living in the park had found Superman. We don’t know yet if Superman is alive, but what we do know is that paramedics have entered the park and ...

She was forced to step aside as paramedics came through the cordon, moving as quickly as possible with a gurney where Moana could see Superman was strapped. He had an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth.

“Jesus,” Lex said.

Even in the darkness, they could see the uniform covered in blood, and what appeared to be a green glow.

“Kryptonite,” Lex whispered. “There must have been Kryptonite.”

“Gee, I wonder where they would have got that from,” Moana murmured sarcastically.

He turned and glowered at her. “I never told anyone.”

“Hmph. No one except your former assistant. What was his name? Regan? Wasn’t he the guy your sister beat to death? God, it’s a wonder anyone in your family is sane!”

“Unlike your family which claims to be descended from a man who thought he had the powers of a
“Considering we have our own superhero who does have the powers of a god, that’s not sounding so impossible now is it?”

“Would a god be felled by a simple rock?” Lex countered. “I think you over-estimate your hero.”

“Superman is not my hero,” she returned. “I don’t need one.”

“Right! Because you’re so capable of taking care of yourself.”

“Enough!” Caron said. “Your bickering is pointless. You are here. He is there,” he added, pointing to the screen. “Arguing will not help him, or your situation here.”

Moana bit her lip. The man did have a point. Lex sent her a smug look and she turned her back on him.

***

It was chaos. Not even the warzone outside could match the utter devastation on the faces of those watching as the ambulance came to a hurried stop and the paramedics flung open the doors. Crowds gathered, watching in dismay as the gurney was pulled out, trying to catch a glimpse of the blue suit.

It was as if they were watching a scene in a movie with the sound at the lowest volume it could get without being set on mute. They could hear the voices of the doctors as they rushed their hero to emergency, but they were so muffled they couldn’t make out what was being said.

One such medic, a man with olive skin and dark, curly hair, with thick square-framed spectacles, glanced toward the doors leading to the ambulance bay, then rolled his head, squaring his shoulders before turning back to the job at hand.

“Let’s get the uniform off,” he instructed.

Emil Hamilton gazed at his friend, wondering what the hell had happened. The uniform was spotted with blood seeping from numerous tiny wounds that seemed to be almost glowing. The nurse beside him gasped.

“What is that?” she asked, staring wide-eyed at the greenish tint to the superhero’s skin.

Emil grimaced. When the Blur had first emerged from the shadows to become known as Superman, he and Lois had made the choice not to tell the world about his one vulnerability. The last thing Clark had wanted was for people to know there was one substance that could kill him.

“Now we really know he’s an alien,” someone murmured.

Emil was deeply offended on behalf of his friend, but had to maintain his professionalism. He continued to work, trying to dig out the particles of Kryptonite which were keeping the other man from healing his wounds.

The doors to the emergency room were flung open and a blonde in blue top and red skirt rushed in. She gasped, looking almost sick at the sight of the man on the bed. Emil quickly realised what was happening and barked orders at the nurses to keep them working, removing the Kryptonite from Superman’s body. He pulled Kara out of the room.

“Is he?” she asked.
“No, but his life is in serious danger. Kara, you need to find Lois and tell her what’s happened.”

“I ...” Her blue eyes were wide with panic. “She ...”

“Kara,” he said, shaking her. “You need to tell her. And while you’re at it, you need to find J’onn J’onzz. From what I understand, he saved Superman’s life once before. Find him and tell him we need his help urgently.”

She nodded, still staring through the open doorway at her cousin. The nurses had placed electrodes on Superman’s chest and hooked him up to an EKG. Emil left Supergirl to her tasks and went back in, glancing uneasily at the monitors. He hadn’t been sure the EKG would even register, given his friend’s dense molecular structure, so it was more than likely that the Kryptonite had drained him of his abilities.

***

Kara flew through the city, well aware of the urgency of the matter. She made her way to the police cordon where the rest of the Justice League members were helping to keep order.

“Supergirl ...”

Zan, one of the Wonder Twins, had formed himself into dense fog to blind some of the gang members and confuse them while Cyborg, Stargirl and Aquaman rounded them up. Zan reformed into human form and looked at her questioningly.

“How is he?” he asked.

She didn’t have to ask for clarification to know what he was talking about. It would have been all over the police radio network.

“They don’t know yet. I just came from the hospital. Have you seen Manhunter?”

“He was around here somewhere,” Zan said.

There was a terrified scream from one of the gang members who had somehow managed to break loose and the manhunter in question came around the corner, pushing the man in front of him. He shot the others a grin. Despite her shock and fear for her cousin, Kara managed a grin in return. He’d clearly showed his true form.

“J’onn,” she said, quietly enough so the gathered riot officers wouldn’t hear. “Dr Hamilton needs you at the hospital. It’s Ka ... Superman. He’s in grave danger.”

J’onn’s grin faded swiftly.

“Of course,” he said. He handed his prisoner off to one of the other officers. “I will go straight away. Where will you be?”

“I need to see Lois Lane.”

He nodded, glancing at the officers, who seemed more interested in getting their prisoners into the van than in paying attention to them. Kara nodded in reply and took off into the air, flying to the clocktower penthouse.

A devastating sight greeted her. Lois was on her knees, staring into space, while Bart Allen stood by looking helpless.
“What happened?” she asked.

Lois looked up at her. Her face was streaked with what appeared to be mascara-laden tears. She dropped her head again, rocking back and forth.

“Bart,” Kara said.

“It’s my fault,” he said hollowly. “I tried to stop her.”

“Who?”

“Aresia.”

“She was here?” Kara asked.

“They took the baby.”

This was just getting better and better, Kara thought. Superman was near death and Mara was gone. Kidnapped.

“I need to get Lois to the hospital,” she said.

“I’m all right,” Lois answered flatly.

“Physically, yes,” she said, although she scanned the other woman just to be sure. There were a few bruises, but nothing that wouldn’t heal in a few days. Aresia had clearly been under orders not to kill Lois, although the young Amazon clearly would have if she could. “Lois, there is no easy way to tell you ...”

Lois finally looked at her properly, seeing the fearful look in the girl’s eyes.

“What is it?” she asked, trepidation making her heart skip.

“It’s Kal-El. He’s been wounded. Dr Hamilton sent me to fetch you.”

She felt faint. Blackness seemed to be creeping over the edges of her mind and the roaring in her ears blocked out everything but Kara’s voice telling her her husband needed her.

Kara pulled her to her feet, taking her hand.

“Do you trust me?” she asked.

Lois suddenly had a memory of when she and Clark had been locked in the virtual reality world by the VRA. Clark had been so sure what they were seeing and feeling was real that he hadn’t trusted Chloe. It was only when Lois reminded him of the night he’d told her everything that he’d really begun to believe.

“Just trust yourself,” she had told him.

She knew she had to trust in her family if she was ever going to help her husband find his way back. She needed him to find their daughter and defeat the Illuminati.

It was as a former buddy of her father’s had once said.

“Don’t get mad, get even.”
Bart called that he would follow them there as Kara left the apartment. Lois closed her eyes against the cold breeze as the blonde superhero flew through the slowly lightening sky, landing at the hospital within about a minute.

“I flew at half-speed,” Kara told her, helping steady her. Lois marched into the hospital, but she was quickly blocked by a security guard.

“Sorry ma’am. No press allowed.”

Kara sent the man a glare.

“This is Lois Lane and she’s not here as press. She’s here as a friend.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but orders are orders.”

“Well, I’m the one giving those orders,” Emil said behind the guard, “and I asked for Miss Lane personally.” He held out a hand. “Miss Lane, Supergirl, would you come with me please?”

Kara couldn’t have been gone more than twenty minutes, but it seemed they’d managed to do a lot in that time. Emil took them both into an office.

“He’s stable, but still critical.”

“What happened?” Lois asked, trying to keep her emotions in check.

“From what I can gather, he was basically at ground zero of an especially dirty bomb. It looks like it was designed with him in mind. They used Kryptonite.”

“How would they even know where to get Kryptonite?” Kara asked.

“That’s a very good question, but the only one who might be able to answer it isn’t here to do so.”

“Lex!” Lois growled.

Emil nodded. “Yes. Some of his researchers at Luthorcorp have been working with the meteor rock for years, but as far as I know, there are only a few people outside of this room who know exactly what that stuff can do to Clark.”

“Tell me the truth, Emil. Will he live?”

It was the question Lois was dreading the answer to, but she had to know.

“It’s too soon to tell, Lois. I’m sorry, but I know how you appreciate straight-talking. What I can tell you is that atomic particles of Kryptonite have become embedded in his skin. We’ve done what we can to get them out but I’m afraid it’s going to take more than tweezers and a scalpel.”

“You mean you can’t get them out?” Lois gasped.

“Lois, the particles are too small for us to even see and we don’t have enough information on Clark’s physiology to understand exactly how it affects him.” He brushed a hand over his face. “I called in J’onn J’onzz but there isn’t much he can do either. Kara can’t get near him because the Kryptonite makes her sick as well.”

She remembered something Clark had once told her about Davis Bloome. The man that had become Doomsday had been exposed to liquid Kryptonite until he died. Of course, he had come back again, but that was neither here nor there.
She turned to Kara.

"There has to be something. Maybe we can take him to the fortress," she suggested. "Clark told me once about the ship neutralising green meteor rock. It saved his life then."

"Even if we could get him to the fortress, we don’t know that Jor-El can help," Kara argued. "Lois, I know you ..."

Emil’s pager beeped. He glanced at it, then looked up in shock.

"It’s Clark," he said, his face draining of colour. "They just called a Code Blue."

***

Diana gently laid the broken body of Batman down on the table. It was difficult to tell just how broken he was. She looked around the cave, noticing the computer and the panels which were clearly hiding the rest of Batman’s equipment.

Beside the computer was what appeared to be a phone receiver. She hurried over to it and picked it up, looking around for the dialler, but on listening discovered there was already a tone.

"Master Wayne?"

"No, this is Diana. Is this Alfred?"

"Yes, miss. How did you get in the cave?"

"I will explain later. Please, can you come down?"

"Of course miss. I will be right down."

She waited, standing anxiously beside the unconscious man. There was the sound of gears grinding and she saw the cage which clearly contained an elevator of some sort, descend to the cave floor. An older man emerged, hurrying over as he spotted her.

"What happened?" he asked, staring down in dismay at his charge.

"Bane," she said. "I am not certain, but I think his back is broken. I immobilised him as best I could before I moved him."

"We must get him upstairs," he said.

"You will not be able to take him in your elevator," she said. "I will carry him into the manor."

She knew Alfred was wondering why she hadn’t done that in the first place, but she hadn’t wanted to take the risk of anyone else who might be present in the manor seeing Batman wounded, or revealing Bruce’s identity.

Between them, they carefully stripped Bruce’s armour off and returned it to its hiding place. As soon as the young billionaire was undressed he began shivering, his body glistening with sweat.

"He is in shock," Diana said, knowing there was already too much time wasted. Alfred nodded.

"I will prepare his bed for him and call in help."

"I do not know if you will be able to reach anyone," she said. "Bane has the city locked down and
under his control.”

“Do not fear, Miss Diana. We have our own way of getting around the likes of Bane.”

She smiled at him. “Of that I have no doubt, Alfred.”

She carried Bruce out of the cave and up to the manor, taking care with every step not to jar the wounded man. He was still shivering and there was little she could do about that until she could get him warm.

Alfred was waiting anxiously in the doorway as she reached the manor’s front entry. He helped her carry Bruce carefully upstairs and lay him on the king size bed, removing the pillow and covering him with thick blankets.

“Will you wait?” he asked. “I have already called for assistance. He will be here shortly.”

“Of course,” she said, although she was anxious to learn what had happened to others in the city.

Alfred clearly sensed her dilemma.

“There is nothing you can do about Bane,” he said kindly. “You are just one person.”

“I am Diana, daughter of Queen Hippolyta of the Amazons,” she said proudly.

He nodded. “Yes, I understand, but I am afraid it would take more than the blessings of the gods to beat someone like Bane. If this is how Master Bruce looks after an encounter with him, then I am afraid you will not fare much better.”

He looked grieved as he gazed at his unconscious charge.

“I never wanted this for him, you know. A few years ago, Bruce disappeared. Seven years he was gone. Those seven years, I waited, hoping he wouldn’t come back. Every year, I took a holiday in Florence. There’s a cafe, on the banks of the Arno. Every fine evening I would sit there and order a Fernet Branca. And for a moment I would think that I would look across the tables and see him there with a wife and maybe a couple of kids. I never wanted him to come back to Gotham. Become what he became.”

Diana felt sorry for the man who clearly loved his charge as a father would a son. Even though they weren’t blood-related, she knew their connection was deeper than that.

“I have never had a daughter,” she said, “but if I did, I know I would never choose this life for her. I know what my mother felt when I left her and the island. Yet, Bruce and I, we are not our parents, and these are our lives, our mistakes to make. Bruce became Batman because he believed he could achieve some good, change his home for the better. Because he could no longer ignore the voices crying out for someone to help them. As I could not.”

Her eyes crinkled in sympathy for the old man.

“It must be difficult for any parent to watch their child suffer. How difficult must it be for Bruce to watch another child experience what he himself suffered? Especially if it lies within his power to prevent it.”

“You offer a rather unique perspective, my dear,” another voice said.

She turned and looked at the man, who had dark skin and silver hair.
“Lucius Fox, ma’am,” he said.

“I am Diana ... Prince,” she returned.

He bowed as gracefully as his aged body would allow, then quietly requested they step out of the room. Alfred paced the hallway anxiously. After about an hour, Lucius emerged, looking worried.

“Lucius ...” Alfred began.

Lucius sighed. He was a man of many talents whom Bruce had discovered in the research and development division of Wayne Enterprises years earlier. Still, his talents didn’t stretch as far as medical expertise, despite his high intelligence.

“I am no doctor, but it appears to me he has a compression fracture of the lumbar spine. He would need x-rays at the very least to be sure, but I don’t believe the spinal cord has been damaged. It will need to wait until the swelling goes down.”

“What do you suggest?” Bruce’s guardian asked, while Diana continued to look on quietly.

“Keep him as still as possible, and flat on his back. He is not to be moved.” Lucius looked keenly at Diana. “You took a risk bringing him here but you had limited choices I expect.”

She nodded. “I must return and see what I can do to help the people of Gotham.”

“Is that wise?” Lucius asked. “Bane’s men are all over the city. You are but one person. What can you do?”

“What I must,” she said.
Chapter Summary

Lana, Chloe and Oliver learn the devastating news. Lois fights for her husband

Lana looked ill as Chloe related the whole story and what they suspected. Oliver had gone out to get some ice from the machine for his head and returned with hotel security. One of the other guests had called them, complaining about the noise. The manager had also been called, speaking in rapid French that not even Lana could keep up with. Oliver told the man what had happened and offered to pay for the repairs. The matter presumably settled, the manager had left them, promising he would alert the police about the attack.

“You think these people are after Clark’s daughter?”

Chloe nodded at her friend. “We’re sure of it.”

Oliver was sitting in the armchair, holding the ice pack to the massive bruise on his temple. He had switched the television on and was watching the French news broadcast. He suddenly sat bolt upright, drawing Chloe’s attention.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Superman’s been injured!”

Chloe stared at her husband. “What? How?”

“A bomb.”

“We better call Lois,” she said.

“I doubt you’d get through,” he told her, his gaze still on the screen, even as she went to pick up her phone. “They’ve just declared martial law in the city.” He was silent for a few moments as he continued to watch the broadcast. “They just said Gotham’s under the control of someone called Bane.”

Chloe frowned, itching to get at her laptop so she could start doing some digging.

“I know what you’re thinking, honey, but what good will knowing it do? Even if we could get back there, we’d be fighting a losing battle without Clark.”

“Don’t you get it, Ollie? This is exactly what they want. They want us to be cut off. They ...”

She stopped, the awful truth dawning on her.

“Call Mrs Kent, right now!”

“What?”

“Ollie, just do it!”
“Why?”

“Because I think the baby’s gone!”

Lana stared at her. “Chloe, what ...?”

“About a month ago they used the same tactic in Smallville to get Clark out of the house so they could get at Mara.”

“If that’s so, why didn’t they snatch her then?”

“Maybe because they needed proof that she’s the child of Superman. Maybe they needed a sample of her DNA,” she said.

Oliver quickly got on the phone, calling DC. He managed to get Martha’s apartment.

“It’s Oliver,” he said. “I know it’s early, I just ... Yeah, we saw the news. How did ... oh my god! Is there anything we can do? You’re right. We’ll just pray they’re all right.”

He hung up and looked at the two women.

“I think you’re right, Chloe. I think they were trying to keep Clark from getting home. Mara’s been kidnapped. They almost lost Clark. He’s still critical.”

Lana seemed to be almost in tears.

“Lois must be going out of her mind,” she said. “What did Martha say we should do?”

“Hang tight,” he told her. “There’s nothing we can do here.”

“Oh, you’re wrong about that,” Chloe said, her mouth tight. “There is one thing we can do.”

“What’s that, Chloe?” Lana asked.

“I think it’s time we talked to your boyfriend.”

“Murphy? Why would he know anything?”

She looked at her friend. She had been thinking about it for days, sure that Murphy’s presence at the time of the accident at the Eiffel Tower had been no coincidence. She had a horrible feeling they had been set up that day. It made her wonder what else they’d been set up for, or rather, who had been set up.

“Lana, I hate to say this, but I think Murphy may have been manipulating you.”

“Why?”

Oliver bit his lip.

“I would say because they know of your connection to Superman.”

“You really think he’s part of this group?”

“Yes, we do,” Chloe told her.

“If you’re right, then I should ...”
“No, Lana. We should. Together. We’re not going to let you face this guy alone.”

***

In the midst of the chaos in Metropolis, a limousine with diplomatic plates left the Hotel Sheridan and drove slowly through the streets toward Metropolis International airport. A few minutes later it was stopped at the cordon controlled by the city police and National Guard. A sergeant carrying what appeared to be an assault rifle and wearing army fatigues along with a hard helmet, approached the car.

“Sorry gentlemen, but the city is under martial law. No one is to leave the city.”

Simon Valmont glared at the man. As far as he was concerned, his employers were high rank enough not to have to abide by the federal laws.

“Do you not see the diplomatic plates?” he said haughtily. “These men are official representatives of the French Republic.” Knowing there was a good chance they would be stopped, he had prepared a folder with documents. “These are their papers and accreditations.”

The sergeant looked at him steadily, then turned away to speak into his radio. Simon didn’t hear the exchange but the man was gone for a few minutes. He returned, his expression stoic, but he was clearly pissed.

“You’re cleared to leave. Sorry for the confusion, sir,” he said, although it obviously hurt him to say. “Do you wish an escort?”

Simon chose to be courteous, not wishing to make an already bad situation even worse.

“Yes, indeed. We are in somewhat of a hurry. Thank you, sergeant.”

The man gestured and several military vehicles and police mounted on motorcycles moved to positions both in front and behind the limousine. The convoy accelerated with screaming sirens and revolving lights.

Baron de Rochefort watched this activity for a moment, then turned to look at Henri Ducard.

“Bonnes nouvelles. Nos informateurs à Metropolis général nous disent que Superman est mort, ou va bientôt mourir.”

“Excellent,” Ducard responded. “Vraiment excellent. Je propose que nous célébrons avec une bouteille de notre meilleur champagne pour fêter notre victoire.”

De Rochefort nodded. “Oui, Superman est mourant et sa fille est entre nos mains.”


He waved his hand airily.


“Good news. Our informants in Metropolis General advise Superman is dead, or will be dead soon.”

“Excellent. Really excellent. I propose we celebrate with a bottle of our finest Champagne to toast our victory.”

“Yes, Superman is dying and his daughter is in our hands.”

“We must be prudent. The Justice League still remains.”
“It will not be a problem. We have the hybrid. She is a perfect hostage and object of study.”

The limousine continued on through the streets, its occupants ignoring the chaos they had left behind. The brilliance of the early morning sun indicated it was going to be a glorious Fall day in the city, belying the mood of its citizens left to wait for news of the fate of their hero.

***

Martha gently placed the phone receiver and sighed, glancing out the window of her apartment. She had a good view of the Potomac, and most days she loved to look out over the river, but not today.

She had told Oliver to stay put and protect Chloe and Lana in Paris, but there was no way she could stay. Not with her family in danger.

Decision made, she picked up the phone and dialled the office of the Senate President Pro Tempore.

“Janet, this is Martha Kent. I know it’s early, but I need to speak to Senator Francis.”

“Can I say what it’s about?” she asked.

“Of course. I need a leave of absence. My grand-daughter has been kidnapped.”

There was a gasp on the other end.

“Oh dear god! That’s awful! I will call him straight away!”

“Thank you, Janet.”

While she didn’t know the senator’s executive assistant very well, she had always found her to be a personable young lady and knew she would be sympathetic to her plight. She hung up and poured herself a cup of coffee, sipping it while she waited. She didn’t have to wait long.

“Senator Kent, this is President Martinez.”

“Mr President,” she said, almost dropping the phone in shock.

“We heard about Superman. I know you are close to Perry White at the Daily Planet. Have you had any news?”

“No sir. All communications out of the city have been cut-off.”

She didn’t want to lie, but she had to protect Clark’s secret identity at all costs. If even the President knew she had been visited by Kara in the early hours of the morning, when no one knew that Linda Danvers was in fact Supergirl, or that she knew Supergirl in any way, she would be putting it at risk.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Martha.” There was a pause and he seemed to be speaking to someone in the room. He returned to the phone. “I just heard about your grand-daughter. Is there anything my office can do?”

“I would like to take a leave of absence and be with my son and daughter-in-law.”

“From what I understand, they have declared martial law in the city. Having said that, I think I can help. I need a courier to take a diplomatic packet to the British Consulate in Metropolis. I can have a Secret Service officer escort you.”

“I’ll do it, Mr President,” she said without hesitation.
“Great! Martha, please do keep us updated on the situation there. I have nothing but praise for Superman and I’m sure the entire country is hoping he will recover.”

“Thank you.”

She hung up after President Martinez told her an agent would be there within the hour to escort her to the city. Martha quickly moved about the apartment to pack her things.

As promised, the agent knocked on the door an hour later. Martha was pleasantly surprised to see it was Steve Trevor. She locked up and picked up her suitcase and briefcase. Steve solemnly handed her the diplomatic packet and she locked it in her briefcase while he took her bag from her and led her to the elevator.

Airport security didn’t even question the diplomatic papers Steve handed them and let her through with just a cursory inspection, nodding at the agent. It seemed the president had also arranged a private plane to take her to Metropolis as there was only a short wait while the gate was cleared.

Martha found herself fidgeting during the two and a half hour flight, desperate for any news on Clark. Steve seemed to understand, finding a Metropolis station still broadcasting and letting her see the news. There was no mention of Superman. Normally she would see it as a good thing, but she couldn’t help feeling nervous. What if Clark hadn’t survived? She wasn’t prepared to bury her only child.

She tuned out from the rest of the coverage of the rioting, staring out the window and thinking back to more than twenty years earlier and a little boy who had found them in a cornfield.

She remembered Jonathan calling out her name, sounding surprised. She turned her head to see a boy with dark curly hair, no older than about two or three, smiling at them through the smashed window of the truck cab. He had been naked as a newborn, walking over the debris, picking his way along the burnt earth as if he’d been walking over freshly mown grass.

Still dazed from the crash and hanging upside down in the truck, she barely remembered her husband pulling her out of the cab and helping her upright. Meanwhile the little boy just gazed up at her and she couldn’t resist picking him up. She found a blanket in the truck and wrapped it around his little body.

They found themselves walking along the same path the boy had taken, trying to figure out where he had come from.

“Kids don’t just fall out of the sky, Martha,” Jonathan had said.

She knew that, but still, it was what she had wished for. She had been devastated when she had learned that she would never be able to have children, thinking she had somehow let Jonathan down. While he had wanted to be a father, to him, having a child was not as important as her health and she had let it go, choosing instead to believe that it would happen some day for them.

The discovery that the sweet little boy in her arms had indeed fallen out of the sky, albeit in a small ship, was incredible, and she felt a duty to protect him. She had just known the moment she held him in her arms that she was meant to be his mother.

It was not to say it had been easy raising him. Clark, as she had decided to call him, using her maiden name as his first name, had had difficulty with the language at first. Not to mention the strange Earth customs, like eating or taking a bath, or even toilet training.

It had been fairly clear from the beginning that while some things had been taught to her son during
his inter-galactic journey, certain others, like hygiene and control, were things she would have to teach him.

His first bath had been an interesting experience, she thought with a smile. She’d filled the bathtub with water and Clark had been fascinated by the running water under the faucet. He’d tried to catch the water and she’d had to pull him back, not wanting him to scald himself.

“No sweetie,” she said, gently moving his hand and pulling him away. “That’s hot.”

He’d looked at her, his eyes wide in confusion.

Once the bath was filled, she’d lifted him. Immediately he’d tried to get out, reaching for her.

“No baby,” she told him. “We need to get you clean.”

Eventually he’d got the idea, even giggling at the way the water had run over his little body and the sound it made when he splashed.

Toilet training a toddler who couldn’t understand what she was telling him had been the most difficult. There had been a few little accidents in the house, especially when he’d decided he didn’t like the training pants she’d bought and preferred to run around bare-bottomed.

Still, the little difficulties were nothing compared to the joy she’d had of being a mother at last. She remembered her first Mother’s Day, coming downstairs to find her son ‘helping’ his father make her breakfast. He’d been covered almost head to toe in flour, but was grinning ear to ear.

“Happy Mommies’ Day, Mommy,” he’d said, running to her to give her a hug. Martha didn’t care that he’d also covered her in flour. She was just happy to be celebrating the day.

Martha fought back tears, blinking as she realised she had dozed off. Steve was gently shaking her, telling her they were about to land in Metropolis. She sat up straight and put on her seat belt, tightening it. She had never really enjoyed flying since the night Brainiac had crashed a plane in the Arctic Circle.

The airport was crowded with travellers waiting impatiently for clearance to get out of the city, berating staff for not letting them go. Martha caught snatches of conversation, glad that she wasn’t the one having to face irate passengers who didn’t care that it had been ordered by the National Guard and sympathetic toward the plight of the helpless airline staff having to tolerate the abuse.

The entrance to the airport was cordoned off but the man beside her kept his cool, handing the diplomatic papers to the sergeant.

“Senator Kent is here on official business for the President of the United States,” he said.

“Yes sir,” the sergeant said, looking harried. Martha frowned as the man turned away, wondering what was going on as he spoke with another man in a rapid-fire conversation. She heard something about another diplomat, but it wasn’t enough for her to draw any conclusions.

They were let through the cordon and Steve drove through the eerily quiet streets. Martha guessed the majority of the rioting was located in another part of the city.

“Where first, senator?”

As much as she wanted to visit the hospital first and find Lois, she knew she wouldn’t want to leave without trying to get news on Clark, or the baby, so she told him to drive to the consulate. He
nodded, seeming to agree with her assessment. She assumed he had been told the situation when
given his orders.

She spent an hour at the consulate making sure the packet was delivered to the right person, before
the agent drove her to the hospital. There was a huge crowd waiting outside in the parking lot and
she had no idea how she was going to get through. Her escort, however, just pushed his way
through, waving his identification at the police officers standing guard.

Someone had at least been alerted to her coming, Martha thought, as Emil Hamilton appeared in the
main vestibule.

“Senator,” he said.

She smiled at him. She’d met Emil very briefly when Lois and Clark had got married.

“How is he?” she asked.

Emil glanced at Steve, who just nodded.

“Senator, I’ll take my leave now. I’ll have your bags delivered to Queen Tower.”

“Thank you, Steve. You’ve been very kind.”

“Just doing my duty, ma’am.” He handed her a card with his number on it. “If there is anything you
or your family need, the President has instructed me to see to it personally.”

“Thank you, again.”

She followed Emil along a corridor and up the stairs to the intensive care wing.

“Martha, I ... I have to be completely straight with you. Clark’s wounds were fairly extensive and we
don’t know if we managed to extract all the Kryptonite. We lost him, very briefly. We managed to
revive him, but he fell into a coma...” He swallowed, sounding almost as if he was on the verge of
tears, then cleared his throat. “Uh, anyway, we have him closely monitored.”

He opened the door to a small room. Martha gasped, seeing the still figure in the bed, hooked up to a
range of monitors. He looked so pale and forlorn, she thought.

She had been used to seeing her son so powerful. Nothing could have ever prepared her for seeing
her child deathly ill. Or for how so much smaller he seemed in the bed.

There was an audible gasp on the other side of the room and Martha looked over to see Lois get up
and run into her arms.

Martha held her daughter-in-law, trying to soothe her as Lois sobbed.

“It’s all right, baby, I’m here.”

The other woman’s words were jumbled among her sobs but Martha could understand Lois’ grief.
Her beloved husband was gravely ill and her baby was gone.

There were raised voices outside in the corridor and the two women raised their heads. Lois started
to wipe her eyes and Martha reached for a Kleenex from the box on the shelf, handing it to her
daughter-in-law.

“I’ll go see what the trouble is,” she said softly.
Lois nodded. Martha went out, closing the door softly behind her. Perry was in the corridor, arguing with a stocky man with a bald pate. A young woman stood beside the pair looking uncomfortable.

“Perry,” she said.

The Daily Planet chief turned and smiled at her. He looked exhausted and a little bruised but otherwise unhurt from his ordeal the night before.

“Martha,” he said.

She went to him and hugged him.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“I’m fine. I thought you were in DC?”

“I came in on special orders from the President.” She turned and looked at the other man. “Hello Sam. Lucy.”

“Martha, I came as soon as I heard about the kids. How is Lois?”

“Barely holding it together. Perhaps we should find somewhere quiet to talk.”

“How is Superman?” Perry asked as they walked along the corridor to find an empty waiting room.

“Still critical, I’m afraid.”

“Is there nothing anyone can do?” Lucy asked, looking pale and upset.

“The doctors are trying,” Martha assured her. “All we can do now is wait.”

“There has to be something more they can do,” Sam said. “Lois needs ...”

Perry found an empty room and opened the door, letting them inside. He quietly closed the door. Martha looked at Sam, wondering what he was about to say.

“What does Lois need, Sam?”

“She needs her husband. I know my daughter, Martha. I raised her to be independent, but I also know how fragile she can be. If she loses him ...”

Martha glanced at Perry, who nodded. He had told her months ago that he knew the truth about Clark, but he had chosen not to reveal that fact to Lois and Clark, knowing the couple valued their privacy and also knowing Clark’s fears about others learning about his abilities.

“Sam, how long have you known?”

“I suspected it the night he saved her from the explosion at the Talon, but when I saw him as Superman it confirmed everything. Martha, while I have my concerns about it, I know he puts his family first and does everything humanly possible to keep them out of harm’s way. Which is why I find it so morally reprehensible that someone would kidnap my grand-daughter.”

“We believe that there is a deeper issue at work here, Sam. Have you heard of the Illuminati?”

He scowled. “It’s a fairy story.”
“Not from what my sources tell me,” Perry said. “They have infiltrated every network on the planet. I even believe some of my own staff are connected to them, but I’ve yet to find out who. These are fanatics who believe in a new world order and that Superman is a threat to that order.”

“What about Mara?” Lucy asked hesitantly. “Why would they take her?”

“For one thing, it gives them control over Superman,” Martha said. “Another, they may either want to experiment on her or raise her to work for them.”

“Well, I’d hate to be them when Clark does recover,” Perry told them. “He will take this as a personal threat.”

“I know, dear,” Martha replied. “Which is why we need to find out what has happened to her first.”

Sam nodded. “You’re absolutely right, Martha. I will contact everyone I know in the military.”

“Be cautious, Sam. Even those who you consider your allies may be involved.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“The Illuminati isn’t an underground organisation. There could possibly be some involvement at the top level.”

Martha frowned at Perry.

“What are you saying?”

“About three weeks ago, some papers crossed my desk. Most people would dismiss the theories as complete rubbish, but the Inquisitor ran with the story. These papers claim a link between Vice President Madison and the Illuminati. I tried to contact the journalist who left them but he was arrested less than a week ago by the Canadian authorities. For treason.”

“Why did you sit on the story, Perry?” Sam asked.

“It takes time to verify the sources and unlike the Inquisitor, the Daily Planet is not a tabloid rag. While we are fairly certain the Illuminati is behind Mara’s kidnapping, I am not going to add fuel to the fire by releasing that information.”

“What else did these papers claim?” Martha asked.

“There were a few names on the list. Some in the senate.”

Martha nodded. She had a feeling she could name at least two on that list.

They left the room when someone knocked on the door, heading back along the corridor to Clark’s room. Emil Hamilton was checking Clark’s vital signs while Lois stood quietly observing. Her eyes widened as she saw her father and hugged him tightly.

“How are you holding up, sweetheart?” he asked softly.

She just shook her head. She didn’t want to start crying again, knowing it wouldn’t help the situation. She hugged her sister, grateful for her presence. Emil glanced up from his examination and frowned, but said nothing further.

Kara came in, looking dishevelled, her Supergirl uniform dirty. Lois hugged her.
“The league has managed to round up all the gang members but the authorities say it’s going to take a couple of days before the city can get back to normal. How is he?”

“I’m afraid there is nothing more we can do,” Emil said. He glanced uneasily at the rest of the group.

“We’ll wait outside,” Martha said, gently propelling Sam, Lucy and Perry out of the room.

“There has to be something you can do,” Lois said.

Emil sighed regretfully. “Lois, the problem is, I really don’t know enough about his physiology so that I can help. It looks like there’s still far too much Kryptonite in his system and I’m afraid our intervention hasn’t helped at all. At this point, it is up to him.”

Lois didn’t want to think about the possibility of Clark dying. It just didn’t seem real. It couldn’t be true. Not after the things he’d told her about seeing himself in the future.

“Are you saying he could still die?” Kara asked.

He shrugged helplessly. “I just don’t know, Kara. I’m sorry. I know it’s no comfort.”

“You’re doing your best,” she sighed.

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For a moment, Clark thought he was in the fortress. He could see the same crystalline structure, but underfoot it seemed more like glass than ice. As he looked up, he could see a red sky through the clear crystal roof, rather like the image he had of the alternate future Lois had visited.

“Where am I?” he asked.

“Krypton,” a feminine voice told him.

He looked around and saw a woman with long blonde hair wearing a flowing white dress.

“Mom?”

“Kal-El,” she said softly, smiling at him.

“I don’t ... I don’t understand,” he told her. “How did I get here?”

“You are near death, my son.” Clark stared at the older man, who just nodded. “This is a parallel world. A dream world, if you will.”

“Death?” Clark echoed.

“The bomb contained Kryptonite and tiny fragments embedded themselves in your skin. Your enemies have your child, Kal-El.”

Terror froze his heart. They had Mara! The thought of what they were doing to her, of those evil men laying their hands on his daughter terrified and angered him at the same time.

“No! How do I get back?”

“You must fight, Kal-El,” Lara said. “If you do not, they will destroy the Earth, as Zod once did Krypton. You must not allow this.”
“I don’t know how.”

“Let your human consort be your anchor, my son. She alone can guide you back.”

There was a bright flash and he saw his beloved wife standing beside his parents.

“Clark, I need you. Don’t leave me.”

He reached for her, but his hand went straight through her.

“Lois!”

“I’m here,” she said. “Please come back to me.”

“Lois ...” He reached for her once again, desperate for her touch.

In the hospital room Lois dozed next to her husband’s bed. She woke with a start and looked around dazedly, wondering what had woken her. The sound came again, just a low moan, but for a moment the hand in hers shifted, as if it was trying to find something to hold on to.

“I’m here,” she whispered. “Come back to me, my darling.”

“Lois.”
Episode 7: Part 3

Chapter Summary

Sam Lane attempts to find someone who can help them find his grand-daughter

Lucy paced the apartment, talking on the phone. The communication restrictions had been lifted an hour earlier and she was desperate to get hold of her boyfriend, who was currently in Chicago on business.

“Matt, I’m fine. No, really. We’re staying in Queen Tower. Daddy just thought it best if the family stay close.”

Martha heard her pause as the general’s raised voice drifted through from the other room.

“Now you listen to me. I don’t care if you have to call in the whole … no, I will not. My grand-daughter has been kidnapped and I …”

Lucy sighed, responding to her boyfriend’s query.

“It’s just Daddy putting the hard word on someone. You know what he’s like.” She chuckled. Martha grinned. She knew the story of how Sam had ‘ambushed’ Clark to test Lois. Lucy paused again. “Uh, Matt. I gotta go. There’s another call coming in. Yeah, but it might be the hospital with news. Okay, I’ll see you when you get back. Hello? Lois? Oh my god, that’s great news! Yeah, I’ll tell them! Love you too, sis!”

She hung up the phone, her eyes shining as she turned to Martha.

“He’s awake!” she said, sounding giddy. “Lois is coming home to change her clothes but she’s going to go right back to the hospital.”

“That’s wonderful news,” Martha smiled, relieved.

The elevator door lifted and Bart entered, looking apprehensive.

“Is it safe to come in?” he asked.

Martha stood up from the couch and greeted the young man.

“Of course it is,” she said. She noted with concern the bruise on his jaw and reached out, but he flinched away. “What happened?”

“Aresia,” he said. “Lois was pretty upset with me for not guarding the baby.”

Martha wanted to hug him. He clearly felt guilty for not being able to keep the baby from being kidnapped.

“Sweetie, you were trying to help Lois. You weren’t to know.”

“I should have done. Clark said my job was to protect Mara and I let him down.”
“You stop that right now, young man,” Martha said. “You were doing the best you could. These people clearly planned it all.”

Bart still looked upset. “If anything happens to that sweet little girl, I’ll never forgive myself.”

Martha’s heart broke for the young man. The Justice League was the closest thing he’d had to a family in a long time. His own parents had, by his assessment, frozen him out after the accident which had given him his unique abilities. They just hadn’t been able to deal with the sudden change in their son.

There had been times when Bart had acted much younger than his age but Martha felt it was more a defence mechanism than anything else. As if he used his behaviour to hide the fact that he was more vulnerable than most, afraid of being rejected the way his parents had. She had heard many theories of people using humour to hide their insecurities.

She’d had similar thoughts about Lois when she first met her. Lois had put on an air of toughness but the more Martha had got to know her the first year she had come to live at the farm, the more she realised that Lois hid her true feelings behind sarcasm and a mean right hook. As much as she liked Sam Lane, she resented him for the years when Lois had been crying out for attention from the father she loved only to be met with reprimands and orders instead of the hugs she so badly needed.

One by one, the members of the Justice League drifted in, eager for news of their leader, for Clark was their leader in all the ways that counted. Martha greeted each and every one of them with a hug. They were all looking the worse for wear after the night’s events, but they seemed to swiftly perk up when they heard that Clark was awake.

“Lois is on her way back to change,” she said. “I’m sure she’ll give you more details.”

“Martha,” J’onn said. “I am sorry I could not do more.”

She nodded. Emil had told her that J’onn had gone to the hospital to see what he could do to help, but short of flying Clark to the sun, thereby losing his own powers once more, there was little he could do. None of them had been sure that the sun could even help clear the toxins in Clark’s system.

Lois came in, looking happier than when Martha had left her. Courtney hugged her.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

Lois nodded tiredly. “I will be once I’ve had a shower and something to eat. I’m going right back to the hospital as soon as I’m done though.”

Sam came out of the other room, still barking into the phone. Lois raised an eyebrow at her father but said nothing. He nodded at her, pausing his conversation for a moment as he stared at the others, then turned on his heel and went back out again.

“He knows, honey,” Martha told her quietly.

Lois shrugged. “Figured he did. He’s no slouch.” She smiled wanly at the others. “Excuse me,” she said. “I just ... I really need a shower.”

Kara came in from the terrace, her eyes shining.

“I just heard the news,” she said, hugging Lois. “I was going to stop by the hospital, but ...” She seemed troubled.
“What is it honey?” Martha asked her niece.

“There’s still trouble in Gotham. I just came from there. It’s under siege by a man named Bane. Batman . . .” She swallowed hard. “Batman was badly injured. Wonder Woman asked if we could bring help. Alfred tried to call in a doctor he knew but Bane has the whole city locked down.”

“How many are we talking?” Lois asked.

“I don’t know. From what Wonder Woman told me, Bane had about thirty men to start with, then he had prisoners released from Blackgate Penitentiary. A lot of them are violent criminals. He also opened up Arkham Asylum.”

“Kara, I know it’s asking a lot, but go to Gotham. Everything seems to have quietened down here, and we’ll have the National Guard for another couple of days, I imagine.”

Lois looked at the others, not expecting them to step forward. They were already worn out from the stress of fighting the gangs in Metropolis. AC was the first to volunteer.

“It’s what Clark would do,” he said simply.

“Thank you, AC.” Lois smiled at him.

“You can count on me, boss,” Bart said. Lois found herself grinning. It seemed that she had become leader by proxy.

“Count us in,” the Wonder Twins volunteered. As did Victor, Zatanna and Stargirl. Dinah nodded sombrely. There was clearly never any question of them not helping.

The question was, how would they all get there, Lois thought. That problem was quickly solved by the general.

“I can get you all on a military transport,” he said, clearly having overheard.

“Daddy . . .”

“Lo, let me do this. We can’t have criminals like this Bane taking over and threatening good citizens. If the Justice League can put a stop to it, I say let them.”

Lois kissed him on the cheek. “Now I really do need a shower,” she said. “Clark was asleep when I left, but I want to be there when he wakes up again.”

“No need.”

They all turned and gasped. Clark stood there, barely upright. He looked pale and weak, but he was there. Emil stood beside him, supporting him. Lois ran to her husband and hugged him.

“You shouldn’t have left the hospital,” she scolded. “But I’m so glad you’re here.”

“I’ll be all right, honey. I just need some time in the sun.” He looked at Kara. “What’s happening in Gotham?”

“Bane has it under his control. Batman . . . Wonder Woman thinks his back is broken, but she doesn’t know how bad it is. I could x-ray, but I’m not sure what I would be looking for.”

Emil nodded. “The best thing would be to get him to a hospital, but I’m guessing that is not an option.”
Kara shook her head. “It’s too dangerous. If he should suddenly turn up at Gotham General, Bane will learn his true identity.”

“Unfortunately there is very little choice in that case. The equipment necessary to comprehensively diagnose his condition isn’t portable. As you say, you could x-ray, but you would not know what you’re looking for. I could guide you perhaps.”

“That might be our best option,” Clark said. He passed a hand over his face, looking almost as if he was going to pass out. Lois immediately grabbed him.

“Honey, sit down before you fall down.”

She led him to the couch and sat him beside his mother, who immediately hugged him.

“Easy Mom,” he said. “I’m still a little shaky.”

Lois kissed his cheek. “I’m going upstairs to take a shower,” she said.

The others gathered everything they needed and made moves to leave. Sam returned from having called for the military transport.

“Good luck,” he said.

“Thank you sir,” AC replied.

Sam looked at his son-in-law.

“Are you a sight for sore eyes, son.”

“Yes sir.”

“When we left the hospital you were at death’s door,” the older man remarked. “How did you ...”

“Well,” Emil explained, “it seems that Clark’s body needed to shut down to expel the Kryptonite from his system.”

Clark glanced at his mother, then back at his father-in-law, frowning. It was fairly clear that Sam knew his secret. His mother nudged him gently, whispering she would explain later.

“So what you’re saying is, the coma was what saved his life.”

“I believe so.”

Kara gently prodded Emil.

“We need to get to Gotham. Do you get motion sickness?”

“No, but I have travelled by super speed before. I must say it was an interesting experience,” he added, smiling at Clark.

“Flying is a little different,” Kara returned with a grin. “You may want to close your eyes.”

With that, she led the doctor to the terrace and took off. Clark watched this for a moment, then heard the sound of a footstep on the spiral staircase. Lois had never been known for her quick showers.

“Lois?” he said, standing up when he saw his wife slowly coming down the stairs. She was holding
a teddy bear, her eyes brimming with tears.

“Mara,” she whispered.

He wrapped his arms around her. “We’ll find her,” he said. “We will find her and bring her back home. I promise, Lois.”

***

Somewhere above the Pacific, a small jet flew through the air. The blonde head of Stephanie de Rochefort appeared in the window, looking out over the ocean.

The infant had been crying off and on for hours and nothing Aresia could do would calm her down. She might be only three months old but she clearly knew who her parents were.

“Aresia, elle me donne un mal de tête.”

“I’ai tout essayé, mais rien ne fonctionne.”

"Aresia, she is giving me a headache.”

“I’ve tried everything, but nothing is working.”

Stephanie sighed. In a matter of hours they would be arriving at the villa on Admiral Jean Jacques Island, but in the meantime she had to put a stop to this. If Yves didn’t need the child alive, she would have cheerfully throttled her.

Stephanie didn’t want children. She had never been particularly fond of them. She had no patience for a screaming baby.

“Merde!” she swore.

Aresia just rocked the baby in her arms, wishing she could have just taken the baby herself, but she knew they would never have allowed it. Even if she could have got away, they had made sure she couldn’t betray them by taking a hostage. There had only been one other on Themyscira who Aresia cared for, and Stephanie had known that when she had ordered the child to be taken. If Aresia disobeyed them, her beloved Sera would be killed.

Mara finally dropped off to sleep, exhausted from crying. Aresia sat beside her sister Amazon.

“Qu’elle est cet endroit, ou nous allons?” she asked.


“What is this place we are going to?”

“It is an island in French Polynesia. We have a villa there. The locals call it Hine-nui-te-po, named after the Maori great goddess of darkness and the underworld. Legend has it that a man named Maui tried to force her to make all men immortal by penetrating her body. She crushed him to death.”

Aresia snorted. It was typical of the arrogance of men, she thought, trying to control the world through such physical acts. It was ironic that such a place was owned by a man as arrogant as Yves de Rochefort, who sought to control the world by using a female child to control the one man who appeared to be the greatest threat to his ambition.
It was going to be an interesting few days, she thought.

***

Lana put the phone back on its cradle and looked at Chloe and Oliver.

“Murphy will be here in thirty minutes. Are you sure you want to do this?”

Oliver nodded. He had already suited up in his Green Arrow uniform. He’d packed it, never dreaming for a second that he would actually need it, since he and Chloe were meant to be on vacation.

“Are you really okay with this, Lana?”

“I need to know Chloe. I really do. God, I feel like such a fool for falling for it.”

“Lana, you’re not a fool. He’s just good at what he does. Besides, there’s nothing wrong with wanting to believe the best in people.”

The brunette sighed. “I seem to have a bad habit of falling for the wrong people,” she said.

“Lana, you can’t beat yourself up over this,” Oliver told her kindly.

Chloe poured her friend a coffee and sat down on the sofa with a glass of orange juice for herself. Lana sat next to her.

“Were you able to get through to Metropolis?” she asked.

“The lines are still overloaded,” Oliver answered.

“Well, at least they’re allowing external communication,” Chloe commented.

The three fell silent, each thinking over the events of the past few hours. For Chloe, it was tough to think of how her cousin was feeling and knowing there was very little she could do about it. She had tried calling Lois but it seemed like everyone had been trying to call family in the city all at once.

They’d watched the news broadcast for the past couple of hours, waiting for anything which would tell them the fate of Superman, but not even that was forthcoming. Chloe would have thought that if Clark had died they would have already told the world. Unless Lois had called for a blanket ban on any coverage. Still, the rest of the world didn’t know that Lois Lane was Superman’s wife. As far as they were concerned, he belonged to the world.

A knock on the door had them looking up. Murphy stared in surprise at the wreckage.

“What happened here?” he asked.

“That’s something we’d like to ask you, Mr O’Shea,” Oliver said, his voice disguised by the modifier he always used.

“Why are you ...” He squawked as Oliver grabbed him and pushed him into an armchair.

Chloe and Lana both got up and shut the door as best they could, considering it was still damaged, and barricaded it.

“Lana, what?”
Oliver once again grabbed him by the jaw, forcing Murphy to look at him.

“Don’t look at her,” he said. “We want information, Murphy.”

“I don’t know what ... information?” he asked weakly.

“Let’s start with the accident on the Eiffel Tower,” Oliver said. “Why don’t you tell us what really happened that day.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” the redhead protested.

“Oh, we beg to differ,” Chloe said, arms folded as she glared at him. “We know about your little badge there, Murphy. Golden Dawn? We know it’s connected somehow to the Illuminati.”

The man’s green eyes flashed with fury, but he hid it quickly. Chloe had to give the man props. He was a fairly decent actor.

He continued to protest his innocence, even as Oliver threatened him with the small crossbow and the tazer arrow.

Chloe became aware of the phone ringing, signalling someone from the front desk was calling. She glanced at Oliver and shook her head, shifting her gaze to Murphy before picking up the phone. Her husband continued to keep the Irishman covered.

“Oui?” she said.

“Madame Queen,” a heavily accented voice spoke. “This is the assistant manager Jean-Paul. You have a visitor.”

“We’re not expecting anyone,” she said with a frown. “Can you please ask the visitor to state their business?”

“Sûrement.” There was a pause, then he spoke again. “The mademoiselle says her name is Sarah Levy and she wishes to speak with you on an urgent matter quant à Baron de Rochefort.”

Chloe frowned. She didn’t know anyone named Sarah Levy but the baron’s name got her attention.

“Very well. Send her up, s’il vous plait.”

“Mais oui Madame.”

“Merci.”

Lana looked at her.

“What was that?”

“It appears we have a visitor who claims to need to speak with us urgently about Baron de Rochefort.”

Murphy paled visibly and Oliver prodded him with the crossbow.

“Looks like you know that name very well, O’Shea. Care to enlighten us?”

“Not really,” the man said defiantly. “You know, I don’t know about the laws in your country, but in this country it’s illegal to hold someone against their will.”
“As illegal as it is to kidnap a three-month-old baby?” Lana accused, glaring at him.

“Lana, how could you think I would have anything to do with that?”

“Yet the fact that you know exactly what we’re talking about speaks volumes,” Chloe said coolly.

Murphy flushed hotly, realising he’d just been caught. Chloe went to answer the gentle knock on the door and stared at the dark-haired, dark-complexioned woman.

“Mrs Queen?” she said in accented English.

“Miss Levy?”

“I apologise for the intrusion, ma’am, but time is of the essence.”

“Please come in and tell us what this is about.”

“Instead, perhaps I can show you. I have for you an invitation from Gaëlle de Rochefort.”

“Wait, I thought you told the desk downstairs this was about the baron.”

“It is,” Sarah replied. “Please, will you come? Madame de Rochefort believes she can help in your battle against the Illuminati.”

“Why would she want to?”

“Because she despises her brother for his ambition and ultimately believes his plan will fail, but not without some assistance.”

“Where?”

“She has a villa in a place called Rennes les Chateau. She will be expecting you tonight. All of you,” she added, her gaze sweeping over Murphy as well, making it clear the invitation included him.

With that, Sarah bade them goodbye and left the suite. Chloe looked down at the invitation, which gave only the address and directions to the village. She looked at Lana and her husband and shrugged.

“What have we got to lose?” she said.
Emil was stunned to find he was at Wayne Manor when Kara landed gently.  
“Bruce Wayne is Batman?” he said.  
“Please keep that to yourself,” Kara warned him as she knocked on the huge front door of the manor.  
“Oh, of course. What I meant was, it makes perfect sense.”  
She nodded. The door opened and an older man looked out. He smiled.  
“Miss Kara.”  
“Hello Alfred. This is Dr Emil Hamilton. I’ve brought him to see if he can help Bruce.”  
“Of course miss. Doctor, please come this way.”  
Emil followed the man up a grand staircase and down a dark hallway.  
“Please excuse the lack of lighting. It appears Bane and his henchmen have taken control of the power grid.”  
“It’s no problem,” Emil said.  
He could hear a man raging behind one of the doors and raised his eyebrow.  
“I’m guessing that would be Mr Wayne.”  
“His bark is worse than his bite, sir.”  
“I doubt that,” Emil muttered under his breath. Kara must have caught it as she smiled and winked at him.  
Alfred opened the door and led the way into a fairly large room. A dark-haired man lay flat on his back, the blankets thrown back. He was clearly trying to get up.  
“Master Wayne, the doctor is here.”  
“What doctor? I don’t recall asking for a damned doctor. Let me up, Alfred.”  
“I cannot do that, sir,” Alfred said stiffly.  
“I think, Mr Wayne, it would be best if you keep still. At least until I have had a chance to examine you. Now,” he said, turning back to Kara, “can you scan him and tell me what you see?”  
Kara did so, taking a notepad and drawing a crude diagram of what she saw.
“Well, for a man who is not a doctor, I would say Mr Fox was incredibly accurate in his assessment. You have a compression fracture in the lumbar spine. You were very lucky, Mr Wayne, that Bane didn’t break the spinal cord. Complete bed rest, for the next few days at least, and some analgesics for the pain. I suggest too, Kara, that we get a back brace for now. You should be able to return to some light activity with a few days’ rest, but I do mean light. No acrobatics, Mr Wayne.” He looked meaningfully at the other man.

Bruce grumbled about doctors and their bedside manner. Emil huffed, thinking he had been friendly but completely professional. He shrugged it off as Bruce being in too much pain.

There was the sound of breaking glass downstairs. Emil raised an eyebrow at Kara and Alfred started for the door.

“Looters, probably,” he said.

“All the way out here?” Emil asked. They were at least ten miles from the central city.

“You never know what people will do in times of crisis, Dr Hamilton,” Alfred told him.

Kara listened with her super-hearing and heard two voices. She flung open the bedroom door and hurried down the stairs to confront the two intruders. One was a woman with long, black hair, wearing a tight leather catsuit and the other was a man in his late twenties.

“Can I help you with something?”

The woman looked up at her.

“Who are you?”

“I asked you first.”

“Selina. If you must know we were looking for shelter.”

“Maybe you were, but I was hoping to find someone,” the man said. “John Blake. I work for Commissioner Gordon.”

“Who exactly were you looking for?” she asked Blake.

“Batman.”

Selina scoffed. “Yeah, like he’s going to help us now. He’s just like the rest of them. Abandoned us to Bane and his henchmen.”

“I think you’ll find things are about to change,” Kara said. “The Justice League is coming.”

“What good are they against someone like Bane?”

“I think you’ll be surprised,” Kara told Blake. She glanced at Alfred who had come down the stairs. “Alfred will see to you. I must go.”

Meanwhile, the League had made it to the edge of the city where they were held back by the National Guard. Bart handed the sergeant the papers given to them by General Lane.

“You really don’t want to ...” the man started to say.

“Yeah, we do. We’re here to take back the city, whatever it takes.”
“The man is holding an entire city hostage. What can you do?”

“You’d be surprised,” Victor said.

They gathered together. Bart looked at his friends.

“How do you want to do this?” he asked.

“I opt for a stealth approach,” AC replied. “We hit ‘em quickly and quietly.”

“Sounds good to me,” Zatanna answered. She’d been late to the party in Metropolis but had joined in with gusto. While she wasn’t a full-fledged member of the league she had helped them on several occasions.

“Don’t forget about me,” a voice said behind them. They turned and looked up at Kara.

Bart grinned. “Hola, chica.”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “Chica?”

“Let’s get moving guys,” Dinah urged.

They began to move together across the bridge, slowly making their way to what they called No Man’s Land. Bane had practically cut the city off from the outside world by creating a minefield. Anyone who tried to escape would be risking their limbs being torn off by a mine.

AC dove into the sea so he could use the water to gather his strength. He was going to use the sewer tunnels to get in under the city.

Kara quickly pointed out the various mines and those who didn’t have Bart’s super speed or Victor’s ability to deactivate the mines without setting them off. Zan and Jayna activated their own powers. Jayna turned into a panther while Zan became a series of clouds, able to drift over the field.

The group split up, each with their own purpose. There were at least a hundred men they needed to take out before they could get to Bane, possibly even more, but they were prepared for a fight.

While on the military transport, they had speculated the reason for the siege, coming as it did at the same time the gangs had taken Metropolis. It was Zatanna who had finally pointed out that the League of Shadows seemed to have close ties with the Illuminati, and that Bane had been a member, albeit ex-communicated.

It seemed entirely logical that the attack on Gotham had just been another distraction. A way of keeping Superman busy while the Illuminati took Mara.

***

Tess woke from yet another restless sleep, the images from Gotham and Metropolis preying on her mind. As she pushed back the covers and stared out at the blue ocean, she couldn’t help but think she was not doing any good here. Yes, she was away from Lex, but at what cost to her friends?

Dressing in light cotton pants and a long, flowing tunic, she wandered out to the terrace. Donatello sat at the glass-topped table, greeting her with a smile.

“Ah buongiorno, Lutessa,” he said. “Did you sleep well?”

She had told him some time ago that she had been given the name Lutessa at birth and while she had
detested it, preferring to use the nickname she’d had since she was five, it sounded almost lyrical with his strong Italian accent.

She didn’t answer, slipping into her seat and curling up, her bare feet resting comfortably on the edge of the chair.

“I see that you have not slept well at all. What troubles you, my dear?”

“I worry about my friends in Metropolis. I feel I should be there, not here.”

“And what good would you have been able to do there, hmm?” he said, pouring coffee from what appeared to be an antique silver coffee pot. “Have your friends contacted you since you have been here? Has your brother?”

“Well, no,” she admitted, but she reasoned they probably had far too much to do to worry about her.

When she had first told Clark she was going to Italy to spend some time with Donatello, he had expressed concern. He knew that she was perfectly capable of assessing any potential danger, but he still worried, especially considering who Donatello was linked to.

“Then do not worry about it. I am sure they are getting along fine.”

“The city is in chaos. I could be there, co-ordinating ...”

“I believe your friends’ silence speaks volumes,” Donatello said, sounding a little exasperated. He seemed to catch himself, speaking in a milder tone. “What is it that is really troubling you, Lutessa? Is it that your friends have proved they do not need you?”

“Of course they need me,” she said.

She knew what he was trying to do. It was, after all, the purpose of the Illuminati, to turn the members of the League against each other. Divide and conquer. Lex would probably have come up with some kind of allegory about Roman generals, or Alexander the Great, to illustrate the point.

“Tell me, Lutessa, what is it you feel when you are with your friends in the Justice League? Do they make you feel needed?”

“You don’t know, you don’t know what it was like before,” she told him, emotion tightening her chest.

“Tell me,” he said.

“My father, my birth father, had me placed in an orphanage when I was five.”

“Lionel Luthor.”

She nodded. “The orphanage was run by an evil woman, only to the outside world she was kind and benevolent. She tried to keep me, but Lionel found a home for me with a childless couple from Louisiana. They were almost as bad. Illiterate drunks. I see now that it was a test, to see if I would rise above it, as only a Luthor should. Still, he left me there, with an adoptive father who chose to beat me. He shattered my eardrum and he broke my arm three times.”

“That would be a difficult childhood for anyone, but you are not that Tess now,” Donatello said. “You are a strong and beautiful woman,” he added, lifting her hand to his lips to kiss it.

“Are you this romantic with your wife?” she asked pointedly, smiling to take away the sting.
“My wife and I have an ... what you would call an arrangement. I have my mistresses and she pretends to know nothing about them.”

“Is that what I am?” she asked. “One of your mistresses?”

He smiled tightly.

“Oh no, my dear, you are much, much more. We want you, Lutessa. We could make you more powerful than your brother, if you would join us.”

“Join you?” she scoffed. “Join the Illuminati? What makes you think you’re any better than Superman?”

“Superman is a powerful man, yes, I will give him that. But in the end, he is still just a man. Why do you continue to believe in him? Why do you let your brother put you down like a dog?”

“I have my reasons,” she said, but as he continued to ask her, to push her, Tess found herself wondering why she did put up with the abuse from Lex. If there was one thing she could say about Clark, he inspired her to believe in not just herself, but something bigger than herself. She had rejoined her brother’s company believing she could help Clark, by keeping him apprised of Lex’s activities but how much help had she really been?

“Lutessa, my dear, you allow yourself to be put in this position because you believe that is your self-worth. You could be so much more. Let us show you the way.”

She bit her lip. On the one hand, she knew Donatello was trying to seduce her, to persuade her to join the Illuminati. She had told herself when she decided to join him in Italy that it was a way of trying to uncover the Illuminati’s secrets. Yet, another part of her was really beginning to believe in what he was suggesting.

“You want to help your friends,” Donatello said softly. “You cannot help them this way. We are the future, Lutessa. Not even your friends can prevent that. Become one of us and you will understand.”

***

Rick Flag had spent a good twenty years in the US Army following orders from his superiors and finally giving them as a Colonel. Two years before the Vigilante Registration Act, he had been recruited by Amanda Waller and her cronies into what she called the Suicide Squad, a team of specialists sent on missions which would be too dangerous for any average human.

Yet the members of the squad weren’t average humans. There was Deadshot, assassin for hire who could shoot with unerring accuracy using an ocular scope.

Then there was Plastique. When Flag had met her, she was young, already mentally scarred from years of self-abuse. She had first run away from home as a teenager and had clearly spent a lot of time on the streets. Flag had often wondered whether the girl had been sexually abused, as she had found it difficult to trust anyone. He had found her by accident after she had managed to escape Belle Reve.

Plastique had the unique ability to project high frequency energy blasts, which meant she was a real bitch when she was angry, Rick thought sardonically.

Lastly was Emil LaSalle, who could teleport. At least, those were the squad members Rick knew.

The others ... he didn’t know them and he didn’t much care to know them.
Waller, on the other hand, didn’t seem to care for his opinion either way. As far as she was concerned, she gave the orders and he was supposed to pass it down the chain of command. He’d never much liked Waller. He didn’t like her approach. At least Chloe Sullivan had been smart enough to respect them for their individual talents.

Waller had disappeared a couple of years earlier after a fire had ripped through the mountain castle which had housed Checkmate. Flag had tried to get information out of Chloe about it, but she had refused to take the bait. He had learned, however, that it was believed members of an alien race had been responsible for the fire, killing almost everyone inside. Only Waller had managed to outrun the flames, but not without a crippling injury.

“What exactly are we doing here?” he asked, confronting the dark-skinned woman.

“I have a mission for you,” she said, pulling up the schematics of what appeared to be a small facility. He noted the co-ordinates placed it somewhere in French Polynesia.

“What kind of mission?” he said.

She began to talk, outlining what sounded to Flag like bodyguarding and he said as much.

“It isn’t,” she told him curtly. “The people we are working for have a very sensitive project underway and they cannot be interrupted.” She glowered at him, her gaze meaningful.

“Meaning League interruptions,” he stated flatly. The League members weren’t exactly his favourite people, considering Superman had tried to stop him from bombing several anti-Vigilante installations, but he wasn’t about to go up against the man again.

“Let me make this quite clear to you, Colonel,” she said, reminding him just how much she really knew about him. “I give the orders and you obey them. If you so much as put one foot out of line, certain information will be leaked to various government agencies. I do still have some allies there and trust me, you will not enjoy the consequences.”

“Threaten me all you like, Ms Waller,” he said, “but how far would you get if you were dead?”

He heard the click of a gun behind him and he whirled to face the gunman, staring in surprise at the man who appeared to be in his late forties. He seemed to have a heavy French accent as he spoke.

“And how far would you get, Monsieur, if you were also dead?”

Flag turned and glared at Waller.

“What the hell is this?”

“Meet our employer, the Marquis Antoine de Sade.”

“Merci,” the man said, bowing to Waller before coming to stand by her side.

Flag continued to stare at the pair, wondering what the hell he had gotten himself into. He had heard enough about this man to know he was a French aristocrat, rumoured to be involved with a number of secret societies. He was also considered to be a very dangerous man.

“This deal is getting worse all the time,” Flag muttered.

Waller just smirked at him.

“Have your team ready to go by 2100 hours,” she told him.
Lois sat on the couch, appearing lost in thought. Clark stood in the doorway, still feeling very weak, in spite of the few hours he’d spent in the sun. His powers hadn’t returned yet and he doubted they would for a little while. Not until the Kryptonite was fully out of his system.

“Are you okay, sweetie?”

Clark looked at his mother, so grateful for her presence. She seemed to have a calming influence over Lois, who had spent the rest of the day after the League had left trying to call a number of sources in an effort to find out what had happened to their daughter. She had refused all offers of comfort from him, or her father.

“I’m okay, Mom,” he said, giving her a hug. “Nothing a good night’s sleep won’t cure.”

“You gave us all a scare,” she said.

“I know, Mom.” He sat down in one of the armchairs, watching as she sat opposite him. “You know, I had a dream while I was out. I saw my parents – Lara and Jor-El. They told me my enemies had Mara. I ... I wish I’d been here.”

He glanced at Lois, who still hadn’t spoken, although she did seem to be listening.

“I wonder if she blames me for not being here.”

“Sweetheart, hindsight is always twenty-twenty. Besides, you had Bart here and there was little even he could do. No matter how strong you are, or how fast you are, sometimes it isn’t enough.”

“I know, Mom. It just kills me that there’s nothing I can do. We knew they were going to try, yet nothing we did made any difference.”

“You will find her. You will find her and you will bring her home.”

Clark wished he had his mother’s confidence. For all that he had done to try to protect his family, he still had lost Mara. Somewhere out there, she was being held by people who wanted to experiment on her, use her in their own quest for power. He was damned if he was going to let that happen, but he still had no idea where to start looking.

“Clark, you listen to me. Both of you,” his mother said, glancing toward Lois. “No matter what, you cannot start blaming each other for this. My god, Clark, we almost lost you today!”

“I know, Mom, but ...”

“No! Do you think I’m not terrified of what they will do to Mara? Do you think I don’t wish I could turn back the clock and change a lot of things? I do, Clark. Every day. There are times when I wish it was me who died instead of your father, because I would have gladly taken his place.”

“Mom, you can’t mean that,” Lois said, speaking for the first time in a long while.

“So, I’m not allowed to feel regret? Do you know how many nights I have lain awake wishing he was there beside me? Yes, I get angry at the world. I even, god help me, got angry at you, Clark, because of all the things you can do, the one thing you couldn’t do was save him.”

“Mom ...” Clark choked.

“Sweetheart, even mothers aren’t perfect, no matter how much you want me to be. It’s human nature
to rage against something we can’t control, even if we tell ourselves getting angry will do no good.”

“This is different, Mom. This is our daughter.”

“I know that, baby, but for all your powers, you are not omniscient. You can do everything you are capable of to try and protect your family, but sometimes it isn’t enough. If what Perry has told me about these people is true, they have been around long enough to plan for every contingency.”

“Mom are you saying ...”

Clark watched as his mother sat next to Lois and gently stroked her hair.

“What I’m saying, sweetheart, is that yes, they have planned for this, and they probably knew that Clark would have left someone here to guard you and the baby, just as they knew neither of you would be able to ignore what was going on in the city. But that doesn’t mean you should give up. Because I know you. I know how formidable you both are.”

“We’ll get them, Lois,” Clark said, sitting on his wife’s other side and wrapping his arms around her. “That is a promise.”

Neither of them had been aware that the general was also listening. As was Lucy, who was in tears.

“Lo, I am going to do everything in my power to find these people and we will make them pay.”

“Daddy ...” she said, choking on a sob.

Lucy knelt down before her sister and held her tightly, saying a silent prayer for the safe return of her baby niece.
Episode 8: Part 1

Chapter Summary

Lex attempts to blackmail Isabelle Lewis

Episode Eight: Duellum

Lex Luthor was the picture of cool as he sat in the office of the Canadian Director of Intelligence, Isabelle Lewis.

“I am not sure how I can assist, Mr Luthor.”

“Are you denying that one of your own citizens has been arrested on charges of treason?” Lex asked.

“I deny nothing. What I do not understand is the reason for your presence here. Or for this meeting.”

“I believe Mark Anders has valuable information in regards to some business I am involved in.”

The blonde looked at him coolly.

“What sort of business would involve a former journalist such as Mr Anders?”

“That is confidential information,” he replied. “What is the basis of the charges against Mr Anders?”

“That, I’m afraid, is confidential.”

Touche, Lex thought. It was a pity Moana couldn’t have come with him. He was certain the woman would have added some interesting dynamics to the conversation.

“I suppose the men who broke into my hotel room yesterday were acting independently?” Lex said, deciding on another tack.

“Those men will have been dealt with,” Lewis answered calmly. “Believe me, Mr Luthor, my agents are not in the habit of arresting American citizens.”

“What about threatening visitors to my country?”

“If you are referring to Ms Rangihau, I believe she was questioned by your own federal agents in regards to her involvement with Mr Anders.”

“Her detention was illegal, Ms Lewis.”

She arched a finely sculpted eyebrow at him.

“I rather thought your business was in military applications and agriculture, Mr Luthor. Last time I checked, you did not have a law degree. I repeat, Ms Rangihau was detained by agents in your own country.”

“Be that as it may, I have my attorney filing papers against this agency for not only the illegal
detention of Ms Rangihau, but also for illegal search and seizure of property.”

He knew it was a longshot. Clearly someone like Isabelle Lewis wasn’t fazed by such threats. However, he still had one more ace up his sleeve. Knowing it would only aggravate the precarious truce he had with Superman, Lex had taken the legal approach rather than the path he wanted to take, which was blackmail. He had Otis still working on that, trying to find information about the intelligence director’s background. By pursuing the legal option, there was a good chance it would get out and generate negative publicity for the agency; something the Canadian government would not appreciate.

***

Having made their way across No Man’s Land, the Justice Leaguers continued on into Gotham city centre, on the alert for any of Bane’s people. Kara pressed the communicator in her ear as she stood atop Gotham Tower, surveying the destruction below. She called for all those about to do battle to check in.

Wonder Woman had told her that prisoners had been released from Blackgate Penitentiary and were now taking up arms to fight alongside Bane. Kara knew in order to get to Bane, they had to get through those prison inmates first.

It wasn’t going to be easy. The prison contained some very dangerous criminals. Men who had committed murder, rape, armed robbery. She had no fears for herself, but there were others who were not equipped with the same abilities.

Her blonde hair blew in the soft breeze coming in from over the bay. The sun was just beginning to rise. The city had already been under siege for at least sixteen hours, although it felt longer. The citizens would be frightened and exhausted. Very few would have got any rest that night.

Kara took stock of those Leaguers who had joined in the fight. Impulse, Cyborg, Aquaman, Zatanna, the Wonder Twins, Stargirl, and Black Canary all checked in and gave their positions. The communicators operated on a secure frequency, so she was sure that Bane’s people wouldn’t know they were coming. Of course, that all depended on whether the man had contacts on the outside.

“Boyscout to Mighty Maiden.”

Kara again touched the communicator in her ear. When she had first been summoned by Jor-El to hold back the darkness, the media had called her the Maiden of Might. Clark had come up with the codename.

“Go ahead Boy Scout.”

“I have some new friends coming your way. They’ll be with you in about five minutes.”

“Understood Boy Scout.” She didn’t need to ask who they were. She was sure she would find out soon enough.

She wanted to ask her cousin how he was feeling, but he had sounded exhausted over the communicator. Exhausted and grieving. She pursed her lips. When she found those responsible for taking her cousin’s child, they were going to regret the day they were ever born.

First things first, though, she thought. They had to take back Gotham.

She heard the sound of displaced air and realised someone had used superspeed. A slim figure in a black t-shirt landed beside her. Kara frowned, then gasped as she stared at the teenager.
“Conner?”

One hour earlier

Clark was resting on the bed in the room he shared with Lois, knowing he needed to gather his strength. Normally it would just take sunlight, but his body was still trying to expel the poison from the Kryptonite and it would likely take a couple of days. The last time he’d been hurt that badly had been when Van McNulty had shot him with a bullet made from the radioactive substance.

All he remembered from that horrible experience was being out in the field with his father when he heard the crack of a gun. He put his hand out to catch the bullet, only for it to go through his hand and into his shoulder. His skin had immediately felt like it was on fire and he’d fallen to the ground with the impact. The pain had been like nothing he’d ever felt before.

When he was a kid, Clark hadn’t been completely invulnerable. His strength had saved him from a lot of nasty accidents, but he had still had his fair share of bumps and bruises until his skin had become invulnerable. That was why he’d been so shocked when Lex’s car had hit him then crashed through the barrier on Loeb Bridge the day Clark had saved his life. No normal teenager would have survived that crash.

“I could have sworn I hit you.”

“If you did, I’d be … I’d be dead,” Clark had told him, looking up at the bridge wondering how on Earth he’d managed to be hit by a car and lived to tell the tale. The very idea had made him lightheaded.

Being shot with a Kryptonite bullet, feeling the poison spreading through his veins, even as his parents had fought to get the bullet out, had been the most painful experienced he’d ever had. Luckily, when he’d finally passed out from the pain, he had only been out for a short time. No more than an hour, he guessed.

This time, however, was completely different. His body ached all over, rather like the flu Lois had suffered from for a couple of days when she was pregnant with Mara. She had complained for two days of feeling hot and achy and Clark had been just about run ragged trying to take care of his wife, file a couple of stories at the Daily Planet and fulfil his duties as Superman as well as lead the Justice League.

He opened his eyes as the bed dipped.

“Hey Smallville.”

Clark looked up at his wife, giving her a weak smile. He was much too tired for anything else. She smiled and nodded as if she understood.

She lay beside him and he automatically wrapped his arms around her, holding her close. They didn’t talk, just let the closeness of the embrace warm them.

Clark wasn’t sure how much later it was when he heard a knock on the door.

“Come in,” he said.

Lois had dozed off beside him, clearly exhausted from the night of stress and worry about him, as well as their daughter’s kidnapping.

His mother opened the door.
“Conner’s here,” she said softly.

Clark eased himself off the bed, trying not to disturb Lois and quietly left the room, going down the stairs to see to his visitor.

He was surprised to see not only the teenage Superboy, but also Jay Garrick, Megan Morse, Jaime Reyes and Mia Dearden. Conner immediately hugged him.

“Don’t ever scare us like that again,” he said, trying to look stern and failing.

Jay shook his hand and grinned at him.

“What are you guys doing here?” he asked.

“Well, the Wonder Twins called and said there was trouble in Gotham. General Lane said the League was already there, but I figured the more the merrier. Plus it would be good training for the Titans. I mean you’re not exactly fit.”

Clark nodded. Jay Garrick, a.k.a the Flash, had been a member of the Justice Society, led by Carter Hall. When Carter had decided to come out of retirement, he and Stargirl had tracked down those society members who were still willing to help. They’d found Jay but he hadn’t been willing to reunite with the society, especially after Chess had destroyed his reputation. Eventually, Clark had managed to talk him round and he’d moved to San Francisco, opening up a school for gifted children.

Conner had chosen to attend the school and along with the others, was now part of the Teen Titans. They weren’t exactly official members of the Justice League, but they had helped them on a couple of occasions.

Conner had originally been enrolled at Smallville High, but with Clark and Lois getting married, he had told Clark he thought it was best if he left them alone to enjoy their new married life. Clark had, of course, protested, telling him it would be fine. Conner still felt guilty for the things he had done to Lois while under the influence of the Red K, and while she seemed to be fine about it, he was not. When Clark had told him of the school Jay had created, Conner had jumped on the opportunity.

Mia, a former street kid and prostitute, had been found by Oliver Queen. Seeing her potential and her hand-to-hand combat skills, he had taken her in as more or less his apprentice. At first, Mia had been suspicious of his motives and frightened of her pimp, who had forced her to take him to Oliver, with the intention of kidnapping him.

Oliver hadn’t given up on her, teaching her archery. She had begun working with Dinah Lance until Chloe had convinced her the school would be good for her.

Then there was Jaime Reyes, who reminded Clark so much of himself as a teenager. Jaime, a timid and rather shy boy had been bullied by some of the kids at his high school and lacked the confidence to stand up for himself. Then he’d come across alien technology which transformed him into the Blue Beetle. At first unable to control it, with the help of Booster Gold, a visitor from the future, Jaime had mastered it and now used those skills to help.

Clark had managed to convince Jaime that the school would be beneficial and he was now an official member of the Teen Titans.

Megan, on the other hand, was a different story. She was the only survivor of a race of White Martians, sent to Earth as an infant by her parents, to save her from the war raging between her race and Green Martians. J’onn J’onzz was the only surviving member of his own race.
Megan had been taken in by a doctor who worked for Chess, protected and sheltered by him until the destruction of Chess headquarters. Angered by the death of her protector, Megan had taken it upon herself to hunt down and punish criminals. She’d eventually been tracked down by J’onn and Batman, who had helped her realise her own potential.

The school was still in its infancy, but if Jay had brought them here, then Clark knew he felt they were up to the task.

“Thank you, Jay. I’m sure they can use all the help they can get.”

Jay put a hand on his shoulder.

“Thank you, Clark. You reminded me of why I joined the Justice Society in the first place. Carter would have been proud of what you’ve accomplished.”

The Teen Titans left and Clark contacted his cousin through the communicator to warn her.

Kara grinned at her … she supposed she could still call him cousin, even if he was what Lois had once called the ‘genetic love child of Clark Kent and Lex Luthor’. It was just weird.

“What are you doing here?” she said.

“We figured you could use the help.”

She nodded. “Yes. There are at least a hundred men, maybe more. Some of them are inmates at Blackgate Penitentiary.”

“Yeah, we heard they let them out. Who’s this Bane?”

“I’m not sure. I think he’s some kind of escaped convict from South America, but I think he was also once with the League of Shadows. He’s very strong, from what Wonder Woman told me. I think it’s through a drug they call Venom.”

Conner nodded. “Don’t worry. We’re going to stop him.”

“So, who’s with you?”

“Jay’s leading the team. Jaime, Megan and Mia came with me. They’re waiting just below.”

“All right. Let’s go.”

They both flew down to the others. Kara quickly brought the Teen Titans up to speed.

“The others are here and they’re ready for battle.”

“Good,” Jay said. He was wearing his old Flash uniform, his red hair covered with a tight hood. The group stood in a circle as he lifted his arm and the others responded, their right hands formed into fists. Five voices could be heard.

“Titans! Go!”

***

Cyborg and Impulse stood against the wall of a large brick building, watching as six men, clearly former prison inmates, patrolled in front of an apartment block. Bart could see people huddled inside, looking cold, hungry and terrified.
“Okay, Tin Man, you’re up,” he whispered.

Victor glared at him. “Say what?”

“I was the bait last time,” Bart protested.

“Look, short stuff, there’s six of them and two of us.”

“Yeah, and I can knock ‘em down like bowling pins.”

“Like hell.”

“Star Labs kind of have this theory. Something about maximum velocity and … I dunno. I forget.”

The former Met High football star arched an eyebrow at him.

“Are you kidding? Did you forget I was a wide receiver when I played football?”

“Yeah, well now you’re just a Tin Man, Tin Man.”

“Why you …” Victor’s eyes widened as he realised one of the men had come to investigate. They’d clearly been arguing a little too loudly. “Crap!”

Bart turned and followed Victor’s gaze.

“Oh double crap!”

Both looked at each other, then Bart zipped behind the man, tapping him on the shoulder.

“Hey dude,” he said.

The man whirled, glaring at him. He was at least half a foot taller than Bart and at least half-again wider. It was almost like déjà vu as Bart tried to punch the other man, only to feel the man’s big paw on his head, holding him back as he windmilled his arms.

Victor whistled.

“Hey, jerkoff,” he said.

The man turned to face Victor and tried to punch him, only to hit Victor’s endoskeleton. His fist collided with a clang and he yelped.

“What the …”

He tried to hit the young African-American again. There was a resounding crack. It sounded to Bart like he’d just broken a couple of bones in his hand. Bart shrugged.

The activity had attracted the attention of the five other men, who were now raising their weapons. Leaving his friend to deal with the moron with the broken hand, Bart took a deep breath, gathering as much energy as he could, and ran in circles around the five men, creating enough velocity to knock them down, exactly like bowling pins.

Just when he thought they had managed to get them all, he heard a noise behind him. He whirled, only for a tazer gun to emerge seemingly out of nowhere. Bart barely had time to recall the last time he had been knocked out by an electric shock before he fell.
Victor looked up from the man he’d managed to knock unconscious only to see his friend down for the count. He swore to himself, looking up at the man holding the stun gun.

“Shocking!” the other man grinned.

Victor scowled at the assailant. He looked weird with green hair and his face painted white, almost like a clown. His eyes were bordered with black make-up which looked menacing.

At least four more men surrounded the other man. Victor’s cybernetic implants had given him extra strength and stamina, but he knew they wouldn’t be enough, not when he was outnumbered five to one. Especially when they were all armed with semi-automatics and rifles.

“Overcompensate much?” he muttered.

He tried to surreptitiously touch his ear to try and contact Kara and let her know he was in trouble, but the green-haired man shoved him against the wall.

“Wanna know how I got these scars?” he said almost gleefully. Victor frowned, not sure what the man meant, until he saw them up close. The man had a large knife in his hand. “My old man, he was a booze-hound. And he was crazy. Like Norman Bates crazy. So one night he’s going off his rocker and my mom grabs a knife. He gets it way from her and makes me watch as he cuts her, laughing, then he turns to me and says: ‘Why so serious?’ . He comes at me with the knife and puts it in my mouth. ‘Let’s put a smile on that mouth’, he says.”

Victor held his breath as the psycho swiped the blade over his throat, almost like a loving caress.

“Get off me, man,” he said, trying to shove the other man.

The lunatic didn’t seem to like that. He turned to the men behind him and jerked his head in Victor’s direction. There was nothing for it, he thought. If he was going to go down, he was going to go down fighting.

***

Bruce rolled over, grunting in pain, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed and gripping the sheet as he tried to get to his feet. As soon as he tried to stand, his knees buckled and he fell to the floor.

His butler must have been standing just outside as the door opened and he heard footsteps on the parquet floor.

“Master Bruce, you were given strict instructions that you were to stay flat on your back for at least the next few days or so.”

“Gotham is under siege …”

“And Miss Diana and Miss Kara have already gone to take care of it.”

Bruce tried to suppress the scream of pain as Alfred grasped his arm at the shoulder and managed to pull him back onto the bed. He grumbled as his former guardian covered him in the blankets and told him not to move.

He heard footsteps leaving the bedside and two male voices out in the hall. Huffing impatiently, Bruce knew he had no other choice.

Alfred closed the bedroom door and looked at Emil.
“Master Wayne has always been rather stubborn.”

“Yes, well I’m afraid he is just going to have to be patient for a few days. Otherwise he risks further injuring his back.”

The two men heard the sound of running steps and looked around at the woman with long, black hair. She was carrying a fairly large package.

“Miss Kyle,” Emil said.

She was followed by John Blake. When the pair had turned up at the manor a few hours earlier, Emil had asked them to go to Gotham General Hospital and find a back brace. The sooner Bruce had the brace, the sooner he could get back on his feet again, although it would still take a few days.

He had no idea who Selina Kyle was and he didn’t much care. Right now, all he cared about was the fact that the Justice League needed everyone working together.

“I still don’t know why you didn’t take him to the hospital,” Blake told him.

“Because, idiot, that’s the first place Bane’ll look for him.”

Emil frowned at Selina. “Are you saying that Bane knows Bruce is …”

She looked away briefly. “Uh …”

“Miss Kyle, if you know something about …”

Her face turned red.

“I was told that if I gave Batman to Bane, I could get the slate wiped clean.”

“So your freedom is more important than a man’s life?” Blake asked her.

“You think I wanted this?” she accused the detective.

“I think you would sell your own mother if the price was right.”

“Well you …”

“Enough,” Emil said. “Arguing about this is pointless. What’s done is done. We can only hope now that the League is able to stop the men.”

“There are at least a hundred of them out there,” Blake told him. “What good is the Justice League? With Batman and Superman out of action …”

“Have a little faith, detective,” Alfred said calmly. “You’d be surprised what men are capable of in the face of such adversity.”

“True. And don’t count Superman out just yet.”

“I don’t get why all this is happening,” Selina sighed.

“We believe it is the work of an organisation called the Illuminati,” Emil told her.

The woman frowned. “What?”

Blake looked equally puzzled. “What the hell is the Illuminati and what does it have to do with
what’s happening in Gotham?”

“It has everything to do with Gotham, Master Blake,” Alfred told him. “Scholars the world over have continued to debate the existence of the Illuminati. They are an organisation shrouded in secrecy yet they have permeated all levels of society.”

“To what purpose?”

“I believe some would call it the New World Order.”

“But why now?” Selina asked.

Blake looked thoughtful. “The Justice League. Or Superman, maybe. Like he’s a threat to their plans.”

“Indeed, Master Blake,” Alfred replied. “Indeed.”

***

Meanwhile, on Admiral Jean Jacques Island, Yves de Rochefort stood on the balcony of his villa, overlooking the Pacific Ocean. He sighed, content, master of all he surveyed.

“Pardonnez l'interruption de votre … la méditation.”

The baron looked around at Ducard, who approached him slowly.

"A propos de quoi?" he asked.

"Des nouvelles de Metropolis. Superman a survécu."

De Rochefort waved his hand.

"Cela ne nous concernent pas. Nous avons l'enfant."

"Et que dire de la bataille dans Gotham? Mes sources me disent la Ligue de la Justice est arrivée."

"Je suis certain que votre ami va les tenir occupés."

"Ne pas sous-estimer la Ligue, Baron."

He scowled. "Ils ne sont rien. Le plan est déjà en mouvement. La Ligue ne peut plus nous arrêter maintenant."

Ducard looked as if he wanted to argue, but he let it lie. De Rochefort turned back to look once more at the ocean, satisfied that all was as it should be. The infant was in their hands and there was nothing Superman nor the Justice League could do.

“Pardon the interruption to your … meditation.”

“What is it?”

“News from Metropolis. Superman has survived.”

“This is not a concern. We have the infant.”

“And what of the battle in Gotham? My sources tell me the Justice League has arrived.”

“I am certain your friend will keep them occupied.”

“Do not under-estimate the League, Baron.”

“They are nothing. The plan is already in motion. The League cannot stop it now.”
Chapter Summary

Dinah and Zatanna work together

Dinah glanced at Zatanna as they waited in their hiding place. There were three men smoking, their weapons on the ground, standing outside a large building. They were talking casually as if they weren’t expecting trouble.

Dinah looked her companion over. Zatanna was dressed in her usual uniform of black leather jacket, black shirt and black pants. It was slightly different from her stage costume when she was performing magic. Dinah’s uniform consisted of a black leather jacket, hot pants, fishnet stockings and boots. She kept her blades in thigh holsters.

“You ready for this?” she said.

Zatanna nodded. Dinah acknowledged it with her own brief nod before she ran a few steps then somersaulted, twisting so she landed in a crouch, facing the three men. Her eyes, framed by the black mask she always painted on, looked even more intense. The men stared at her, then hurriedly picked up their guns, fumbling with them.

With a smirk, Dinah somersaulted away before they could fire one shot, coming to a stop behind them so they were forced to turn around. She held a blade in each hand.

Zatanna, meanwhile, sauntered up to the men, a smirk on her lovely face. The trio looked at her, seeming mesmerised by the woman in front of them.

“Pord ruoy snug,” she said, her eyes flashing for a moment.

The men dropped the weapons as if hypnotised, looking thoroughly confused. Just as Zatanna and Dinah began to approach them, more men emerged from the building. Dinah swiftly pushed Zatanna out of the path of the gunfire and screamed. Sonic waves swept over the men, their guns disintegrating.

The men looked at each other, then charged. One of them went for Zatanna, aiming a sharp jab which she easily dodged. Zatanna grabbed his arm and twisted, kicking hard with her knee in the small of his back. He went down with a grunt, slightly stunned. A second man tried to grab her. She faced him, arms and legs posed in a defensive stance and blocked his blow. The two circled each other.

Dinah was locked in combat with two men at once. One had his arm around her neck, while the other had pulled a knife out of his pocket. Using the man behind her for leverage, Dinah kicked the knife out of the other man’s hand with enough force to at least cause a sprain, then kicked him hard in the knee, causing him to collapse. She stepped back, giving a powerful thrust of her hips, which sent the man holding her flying over her shoulder. She once again performed a series of somersaults, throwing her knives to knock two more men down.

She glanced at her companion, but Zatanna seemed to have it all in hand. As she watched, the
magician cried out some kind of incantation and out of nowhere, chains slid around the stunned bodies of the six men. They all screamed in fright, wondering what was going on as they were effectively chained together around a light pole.

Zatanna smirked as she turned to Dinah. The two women turned away, ready to combat more.

“Hey, you can’t leave us like this,” one of the men called out.

Dinah turned and glanced at the man, then turned away with a shrug.

***

Zan grasped his sister’s arm as they rounded a corner. She stared at the dozen men, her expression showing more than a little fear.

“I don’t think we can take them on all at once,” she said.

Zan agreed. On the plane, the twins had changed into the Teen Titan uniforms, eager to prove to their teacher Jay Garrick that they were more than capable of being heroes. It hadn’t always been that way though.

When they’d first met Superman, he had been patrolling the city as the Blur. Eager to boost his image, the twins had used their own abilities to stop crime, leaving his symbol everywhere. However, they hadn’t considered there would be consequences to their actions. One of their gifts for the Blur had been a group of undercover cops. Their next attempt to apprehend someone had resulted in a power blackout over the city. The Blur had taken a lot of flak for that.

Luckily for them, the Blur had been on to them and had asked Chloe to keep watch over them. He at least understood they had good intentions. When he’d heard Jay was setting up a school for kids like them, he’d sent them to California, knowing they could learn much from it.

It hadn’t been easy. In their last attempt at heroism, they had had a painful lesson in what happened when they didn’t step back and assess the situation first.

This time around, they would rather err on the side of caution.

Jayna gasped and pointed.

“Look,” she said.

Zan followed her finger. A couple of the men were sitting with a young girl, who was their age. She was dirty and bleeding from cuts, her hands vainly trying to protect what was left of her dignity. Her clothing was torn and it was fairly clear she had been sexually assaulted.

Zan felt rage bubble up inside him. If that had been his sister, he would have killed them. Even now, despite the lessons of Superman, he wanted to tear them limb from limb for having violated someone so young.

Jayna clearly agreed with him, turning to take his hand.

“J, we can’t. We’re outnumbered six to one.”

“Superman wouldn’t let that stop him,” Jayna said stubbornly.

“Superman is bigger and stronger than us, and look what happened to him.”
Jayna sighed, looking tearful. Neither of them could believe that their friend had been struck down so easily.

“You’re right. So what do we do?” she said.

“I think I can help with that.”

The twins looked around and grinned at Megan.

“What’s going on?” she asked. She was still in human form, her red hair bright against the sky.

“There’s twelve of them and two of us. Sorry, three.”

Jayna nodded. “There’s a girl. She looks like she’s our age.”

Megan glanced over and saw what the twins were referring to. Her form shifted slightly in anger. After her adoptive father had been killed, she had spent her time going after bad guys, making them pay for their crimes. It didn’t matter what they’d done, whether it was murder or theft, she still punished them the same. For those who sexually assaulted young men and women, she wanted to tear them limb from limb.

Batman and J’onn had told her that no matter what they had done, it was still not her place to punish them.

But that was then and this is now, Megan thought darkly. These bastards would pay.

“Let’s go,” she said firmly.

The twins turned to each other and raised their arms, joining hands.

“Powers activate!”

Megan watched as Jayna turned into a cougar. The big cats were fast and strong and skilled at stalking prey. Megan would have felt sorry for the men if she wasn’t already angry.

Zan transformed into water vapour, drifting into the street. The men began to look at each other with puzzled expressions as the vapour began to envelop them. Each man waved his hand, attempting to clear the fog, to no avail.

Finally, Megan shifted into her natural form. As a White Martian, she was terrifying; a seven-foot-tall and thin humanoid creature with pale skin, pointed claws and teeth and red eyes.

She heard the growl of the cougar as Jayna stalked the men and flew into action, knocking out the two men still holding the young girl. Jayna snarled and a man screamed in terror. One man came running past her, the cougar chasing him at a more leisurely pace. Megan couldn’t help grinning to herself at the expression on the cougar’s face. Jayna was enjoying herself.

There was a shot and another scream. Megan whirled just in time to see Jayna leap at the throat of the man who had shot at her, snarling. He dropped his gun and threw up his arms to cover his head.

Zan, meanwhile, had transformed again into a sheet of ice. The four men trying to run from them slid on the ice in their haste to get away, falling hard and knocking themselves out.

Megan took care of the remaining four, using her mind control powers to put them to sleep.

The twins transformed again into their human forms and Megan followed suit. The young girl looked
up at them.

“Who … who are you?” she asked.

“We’re friends,” Megan said.

“But you … you looked …”

“It’s okay. We’re not going to hurt you.”

The girl looked tearful. “Those men … they …”

“We know,” Jayna said, taking off her jacket and wrapping it around the shivering girl. “I’m Jayna. This is my brother Zan, and that’s Megan.”

“Cassie,” the girl said.

“Where are your parents?” Zan asked.

Cassie shook her head.

“My mom’s in Egypt. I never knew my dad.”

Megan frowned. “What’s your mom doing in Egypt?”

“She’s an archaeologist. She’s on a dig. I was in school when they … when they …”

She passed a shaking hand over her eyes.

“We should take her to the hospital,” Zan said.

Megan nodded, watching as Jayna touched the communicator in her ear.

“Kara, it’s Jayna. We found a girl. She’s been attacked.” There was a pause and Jayna nodded. “Okay. We’ll keep her warm and wait for help.”

They looked around at the twelve unconscious men. Megan arched an eyebrow.

“Think they’ll wake up?”

Zan shook his head and grinned. “Nah, they’re out.” He chuckled. “Oh man, did you see that guy’s face when he saw J? Never saw a guy wet his pants before.”

“Or how about when that guy slid on the ice, Z?” Jayna giggled, windmilling her arms.

They sat Cassie down and made her comfortable, still talking about the way the men had reacted. They were so caught up in recapping events they didn’t see the figure approach.

Megan gasped as she noticed the woman wearing what looked like a bustier in red and gold and blue shorts which reminded her of the American flag.

“Cassie?” the woman said, looking down at the girl with a concerned expression.

The girl looked up. “Diana?”

The twins stared in shock, looking the taller woman up and down.
“You’re … you’re …”

“I believe they call me Wonder Woman,” she said kindly. “Thank you for taking care of her.”

“You know her?”

“I am a friend of her mother’s.” She lifted Cassie into her arms. “I will take her somewhere safe,” she promised. “They will take good care of her.”

***

Emil was talking quietly with Selina Kyle. Blake had decided to go back to town and see if he could find out what had happened to Commissioner Gordon. The last time he had seen the man was when he was in the hospital, but he’d since disappeared. Whether that was Bane’s doing or something else, he claimed to have no idea, but was determined to find out.

“So, how long have you known Mr Wayne?”

Selina chewed on her lip.

“Well, I’ve sort of known him since we were kids, but I don’t think he remembers. I was there the night his parents were murdered. I was the one who told them it was Joe Chill.”

Emil frowned. “So, after all that, knowing what he went through as a child, you still chose to turn him over to Bane?”

“I didn’t have a choice. Besides, I figured he was spoiling for a fight with Bane. I didn’t know Bane would break his back.”

“If there is one thing I have learned from Superman, Miss Kyle, it’s that there’s always another choice. Bruce was not ready for the fight. He had no idea what he was up against.”

“And you do?”

“No, Miss Kyle, but then, I’m a doctor, not a superhero. I just work for them.”

There were voices downstairs and Emil rose, going to the door. Someone was in the foyer. He looked down over the balustrade at the woman in bright uniform. Alfred was helping her support a teenage girl.

“Alfred?” he called down.

“Doctor,” he said. “This young lady has been injured.”

Emil nodded and went downstairs, only vaguely aware of Selina following. She made a small sound of disgust when she saw the girl’s torn clothes. Emil understood her annoyance.

“Let’s take her upstairs to one of the guest rooms,” Emil said. He looked at the older woman. “Uh …”

“Diana,” she said.

“Perhaps you would like to stay with her?”

“I need to get back to town,” Diana replied. “There are still more men out there.”
“I understand that, Diana, but from the looks of this young lady, her injuries are more than superficial and I think she would rather have someone she trusts.”

Diana nodded reluctantly. She was clearly torn between looking after her friend and trying to help take back the city from Bane.

Emil let Alfred lead the way to one of the guest rooms. Once the girl was settled on the bed, he turned to Selina.

“I will need a first aid kit, perhaps a sterilised needle and thread. She may require stitches.”

Alfred nodded. “Come, Miss Kyle. I believe I have everything required.”

Emil glanced at Diana.

“I’ll need you to reassure … what’s her name?”

“Cassandra. Cassie.”

“All right. Cassie. Could you please reassure her that I’m a doctor and I just want to examine her so I can see the extent of her injuries.”

“Of course,” Diana nodded. She spoke quietly to Cassie, who looked unhappy at the prospect, but resigned.

***

Victor struggled in the grip of the three men holding him. His cybernetic implants had given him greater strength, but even he couldn’t fight off three of them. He found himself shoved into a huge room where at least two hundred people were gathered. Most of them looked ragged and bruised.

There was a thud beside him and he glanced over to see an unconscious Bart had been dumped on the floor.

“And who do we have here?”

The man with the clown face shoved Victor forward. Cyborg stared at the man sitting on a huge chair. It looked almost like a royal throne. He had a feeling he knew what this was. The man in front of him was clearly self-proclaimed king and the psycho who had captured them was most likely a jester. It reminded him of a passage he’d read in a novel he would never in a million years have admitted to reading as a kid, where the king had been the judge, which made the jester an officer of the court. A kangaroo court.

As if to confirm this, the ‘judge’ tapped his gavel on the arm of the chair beside him while those assembled began chattering nervously.

“Silence in the court!” he bellowed.

Victor took a good look at the man. He was tall and thin with wide eyes framed by wire-rimmed spectacles. His black short hair was tousled and looked greasy.

“Now,” he said. “Would you care to tell the court your name?”

“Not really,” he said.

There was a giggle and the ‘judge’ sent the culprit a vicious look. Victor wasn’t surprised to realise it
was the psycho beside him.

“Joker, really, you are not helping.”

Victor huffed. So that was the Joker. He’d heard enough about the man to know that he was completely unhinged. Joker was sent out of the room.

“Now,” the judge said, leaning forward, his expression almost maniacal. “How about that name?”

Victor gazed steadfastly at the man.

“Perhaps your friend will be a little more co-operative, hmm?”

A man came forward with a bucket of water, throwing it over Bart, who came awake with a start. He got to his feet, still looking a little out of it from the tazer.

“Now, since your friend here isn’t forthcoming, perhaps you can tell us who you’re working for.”

“You want a name?” Bart smirked.

The man grinned and nodded. “Please.”

“We work for a guy named Mister Kiss my Ass. Want me to introduce you?”

There were more titters around the room. Victor rolled his eyes at his friend. The judge rolled his eyes.

“Kill them,” he said.

Before Impulse could move into action, they were both grabbed by two beefy men. Victor could have easily thrown his guy off, but Bart couldn’t. He let himself be dragged out toward the door, glancing at the man being brought in. His face was grey and he looked ill.

“Commissioner Gordon. How lovely of you to pay us a visit.”

Victor resisted the guard’s attempts to push him out. So, that was the commissioner he thought. He stopped moving, watching the proceedings.

“Crane. I thought Batman had got rid of you.”

Victor frowned and filed the name for future reference. He let himself be pulled out and dragged along the corridor which was covered in rubble. There were a few stragglers but most of them appeared to be civilians. He turned and shoved the man guarding him into the man hauling Bart, then punched him hard enough to knock him out. Bart did the same to his guard, shaking his hand and yelping in pain.

Victor looked at him.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, just bruised.”

He grasped his friend’s arm. “Yeah, well, we gotta help the commissioner. Crane and his kangaroo court are probably gonna fry him.”

“Crane? Did you say Crane?”
Victor looked at the older man limping toward them. He looked old and tired.

“Yeah, that’s what I heard the commissioner say.”

The other man ran his hand over his face.

“Jonathan Crane is a dangerous psychotic.”

“Yeah, from the looks of it, so are the rest of them in there,” Bart said. “Who are you?”

“My name is Lucius Fox. I work for Mr Wayne. And you are?”

“Victor Stone. My friend Bart Allen. We’re …”

“Justice League. Yes, I am aware of you people. Where are the others?”

“We don’t know. The Joker and his men had our communicators removed.”

“Well, we’ll see what we can do about that. Come with me.”

Victor shook his head. “I’d like to, but we can’t. They’ve got Commissioner Gordon in there,” he added nodding his head toward the big room.

“And what do you expect to be able to do from here?” Fox asked. “You are outnumbered by at the very least, twenty to one. You cannot help the man without help yourselves.”

“I think they have that covered,” a voice said.

Victor looked around and smiled at Kara. She was accompanied by Mia, aka Speedy, and AC.

“About time you showed up, Fish Stick,” Bart quipped.

“Can it, short stuff,” he replied, not realising what he’d just said. Victor shot Bart a look before he could say anything.

“I’m sorry we’re late, Cyborg,” Kara said softly. She noticed the fresh bruise on Bart which had clearly only just happened. His metabolism meant he healed swiftly. “I was keeping a watching brief atop Gotham Tower when I heard you were captured.”

“How many in there?” Mia asked.

“At least two hundred. Most of them are civilians I think. What’s the strategy, Supergirl?”

“We round up as many as we can and separate the civilians from the rest.”

Lucius looked at them.

“Pardon me, Miss …”

“Supergirl is fine.”

“I would suggest you proceed with caution. It may not be apparent who is the hostage and who is the civilian.”

Kara frowned at him, not understanding what he meant. The Wayne Enterprises CEO explained that when Batman had been trying to apprehend the Joker a few years earlier, the psychotic criminal had taken hostages, disguising his own men as the hostages and the civilians as the criminals. Kara
recalled something similar happening in Metropolis when Clark had been trying to stop an explosion.

She nodded.

“I understand. I think our first priority is to help Commissioner Gordon. We also need to find
Gotham’s police officers. I believe they have been trapped underground somewhere.”

“I can take care of that,” AC said.

Mia frowned.

“You know, I don’t get how all this has happened so quickly. I mean, this has all happened in less
than twenty-four hours.”

“I think you’ll find, miss, that this has all been happening by stealth for months. We just didn’t see
the signs until it was too late.”

Kara agreed with Fox. Batman had been fighting a losing battle for months and it was fairly clear
that he was outgunned and outnumbered. It seemed to her that someone else had been helping the
League of Shadows if things had escalated this quickly. They seemed to know everything about the
city. She stored this little tidbit of information to share with her cousin later.

“Let’s go,” she said.

***

Meanwhile, in Washington D.C. two men met in the Roosevelt Room of the White House to discuss
the situation in Gotham City.

“The Justice League showed up to help the local police and the National Guard,” CIA director
Joshua Appleby reported.

Vice President Jeffery Madison grinned.

“Good, very good. We shall bring order out of chaos. Inform our masters in Nuremberg.”

Appleby frowned, wondering if Madison was about to spin it to make it look like he’d sent in the
Justice League himself. It rather reminded him of something he had read in some book written by a
conspiracy theorist. ‘Problem, reaction, solution’. They create the problem, the people respond, and
they provide the solution, making them look the heroes.

“Of course,” he responded. “What about the woman, what was her name? The one with Anders?”

“The New Zealander? What about her? I thought she was in the hands of the FBI?”

“My contact says they were forced to let her go when Luthor intervened and threatened to sue.” He
sighed. “Her embassy weren’t exactly happy with the investigation.”

“Where is she now?” Madison enquired.

“She was supposed to be on the next plane home, but we think she may have gone with Luthor up
north. He may be trying to get Anders out of custody as well.”

Madison frowned. “Hmm, well that is a problem, but one I’m sure we can resolve. Let’s not report
this to Nuremburg for now. Not until we’re sure the problem exists.”
“Should we inform the Attorney General?” Appleby asked his friend.

“For what, exactly? That the New Zealand Government may intervene? As I said, let’s watch the situation, but do nothing until we know for sure.” He scratched his upper lip. “In the meantime, have one of our media team send out a press release on Gotham. Have them spin it so it appears we called for Justice League involvement. Above all, make sure the President’s name is not mentioned.” He smirked.

Appleby understood the implications. A few years ago, a former president had been soundly criticised and vilified in the press for his alleged refusal to act when a terrorist group took hostage several civilians. The hostages had been subsequently murdered. Yet, Appleby knew in that instance that it had been a decision the President couldn’t make on his own.

It seemed Vice President Madison was trying to follow in his ancestor’s footsteps by ousting the current leader to become the President himself.
Selina Kyle had spent most of her life on the streets. She hadn’t seen her mother since she was about nine years old, but she firmly believed her mother was going to come back to Gotham. Some day. She didn’t know who her father was. Her mother had never told her. She didn’t care. Selina had stopped caring years ago.

She knew what it was like on the streets. People might think they were criminals, but for most of them, they stole to survive. To stay alive. Yet even the police painted them as criminals.

She’d been there the night Bruce’s parents were murdered. She’d watched, frozen, as blood pooled around the bodies of Thomas and Martha Wayne, unable to comfort the screaming boy. Afraid the killer might come after her, Selina had made no sound, waiting until the killer had run off, then she herself had vanished into the shadows.

Less than a month later, she had told Jim Gordon, who had been a detective in those days, that she had information for him about the murders; at the time only doing so to prevent herself being sent to Juvenile Hall. Gordon had tried to protect her, even having her stay at Wayne Manor for a few days until someone sent assassins after her. Selina always recalled those few days with a smile. Bruce had been a little uptight then. Still, it had been fun.

After that, it was back to life on the streets and stealing to survive.

These days, of course, Selina was paid to steal. Through almost a lifetime spent learning the trade, she had become very successful at it. Yet for all that, she did have a conscience. She knew it was wrong, but it was all she had. One day, she vowed, she would steal something which would give her enough money to set her up for life and she could leave Gotham behind.

At least, that was what she continued to tell herself.

She’d been promised a clean slate if she delivered Batman, a way for her to start a new life, but she wasn’t so naïve that she believed Bane would actually deliver. Bruce would have asked her why she did it anyway, and the truth was, she had no answer for that. She’d betrayed him and Bane had sent men to kill her. No one, but no one tried to kill Selina Kyle, she thought.

Bruce probably hated her for her betrayal. Nothing she did now would ever make up for that. Still, there was a war going on in Gotham. In her city. She was damned if she was going to let someone like Bane take everything she loved.

“Miss Kyle?”

She stared at Alfred, who was holding out what appeared to be bandages, a bottle of rubbing alcohol and needle and thread, along with a bowl of warm water. She frowned at him.

“You seem well-prepared,” she said.
“Master Wayne has an alarming habit of injuring himself. One must be prepared for any eventuality.”

She nodded and took the items, thinking about the young girl upstairs. She had been lucky enough never to have been in that position, but she had seen enough assaults to know exactly what had been done to the girl. Most of the victims survived but were often never the same.

Back when she’d been a teenager, about a year after she’d met Bruce Wayne, a twelve-year-old girl had come to live on the streets. Her parents were both dead and she had no family. Selina had begun watching over the girl, making sure she had food and a place to sleep.

One night, Selina had gone out to get more food for the girl and had come back to where the girl had been squatting to find two boys only a couple years older than her holding the twelve-year-old down while a third boy assaulted her. Enraged, Selina had screamed, then gone after them with a rebar she’d found nearby.

Two of the boys had been able to get away, but the third she had managed to beat to a bloody pulp, leaving him crying on the ground. She’d picked her friend up and taken her to the nearest charity hospital, but the girl had died from her injuries.

Selina had taken it upon herself to learn how to fight, and fight dirty. She soon garnered a reputation for her toughness and not even the pimps dared try anything.

If she ever got to face the men responsible for what had been done to the girl upstairs, she would make sure they could never do it to another.

She went back upstairs, entering the room. The girl was lying on the bed, eyes closed, a sheet covering her. Emil and Diana were quietly talking just out of earshot, but stopped when she came in.

“Thank you, Miss Kyle.”

Emil took the items and approached the bed, talking quietly to the girl to reassure her. Selina watched as Emil began cleaning up the girl’s cuts and abrasions, then turned away to look at the other woman. She was wearing a red and gold bustier with blue hot pants.

“What are you supposed to be?” she asked.

“They call me Wonder Woman,” the woman said proudly.

“Uh-huh.” She wrinkled her nose.

“Why did you betray Batman?” Diana asked.

“Does it matter? Look, Batman goes around these streets thinking he’s some kind of hero, but the truth is, all he cares about is putting away people like Falcone. The rest of us have to muddle on through.”

“I do not necessarily think that is true.”

“Isn’t it? Bruce Wayne can sit up in his ivory tower and judge us all he likes, but he will never truly understand what it’s like to be so desperate to eat you’ll do anything to survive. Think he knows real fear because he goes about dressed as a bat? Think he knows real pain because his parents were murdered? The real pain is what I saw every day as a kid. People in the streets, starving, trying to find shelter against the cold. Little girls who should be with their families and instead forced to … forced to …”
Diana reached a hand out, patting her shoulder.

“That is why we are here,” she said. “Because those voices are no longer silent in the darkness. We may not know what it is to feel hunger, Selina, to know fear like you have known fear, but we do hear it. That is why we cannot let people like Bane win. Why we must fight together. You have done things which you perhaps should not have, but I sense deep down you are a good person, Selina. I saw how upset you were when you saw Cassie.”

“You can’t fight Bane. He’s too powerful.”

“It is not just Bane we should be fighting,” Diana said gently. “If we allow others such power, then we all lose.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Find your friends. Show them they can fight back. My friends in the League will do what they can, but Gotham is your city. This is your fight.”

Selina nodded, before turning to leave. She paused in the doorway, glancing at Cassie, then at Diana, who smiled encouragingly. Selina opened the door and walked out.

***

Lois was frustrated. Her father had been on the phone for hours, as had Martha, yet neither one of them had been able to come up with something which told her where her daughter was.

She sat on the couch, arms folded, glaring angrily at her husband. He shifted uncomfortably under the weight of her glare, but said nothing.

Martha came in with a tall man with dark blonde hair. Lois recognised him as a secret service agent.

“I’m sure you’re doing what you can, Steve,” Martha said.

“I wish I could do more. I really do. The truth is, we’ve been concerned about these people for some time, but …”

“Yeah, we get that,” Lois snapped, drawing the concerned gaze of her mother-in-law. Her father also paused in mid-conversation to stare at her. “It’s not enough though, is it.”

“Lois, calm down,” Clark said.

“You calm down, Smallville!” she growled. “Do you know what they’re doing to our baby? Do you? They’ve probably got her in some lab experimenting on her.”

“We don’t know that, honey,” he said.

“I know this is no comfort but the first forty-eight hours …”

“I don’t want to hear the statistics Mr Secret Service,” she shouted. She turned the full force of her grief and pain on her husband. “This is all your fault, Kent. If you had been here, they wouldn’t have … you should have been here.”

She got up and left the room, her heels clacking loudly on the metal steps as she stomped up the stairs to the bedroom.

“Lois!” Clark called, but she was in no mood to listen.
Aresia wandered along the hallway, checking for guards. She didn’t like these men and she certainly didn’t trust them. She peered around a corner, noticing a guard in what she had been told were army fatigues, standing outside the window. He was holding a huge gun in his arms, the barrel pointed up toward the sky. She had no doubt the man had very quick reflexes.

Continuing to watch him with a wary eye, Aresia moved noiselessly to a room she had been forbidden from entering. Stephanie was sleeping off jet lag in the master bedroom. Aresia had had no such rest. Despite the time difference and the long flight, she wasn’t tired.

She tried the door of the forbidden room and found to her dismay it was locked. She could have easily broken the lock but then Stephanie would know she had tried to break in. The only other way was through a window, or if the room had doors which opened onto the terrace she could try that way.

Aresia went back along the hallway and tried the door to the outside. Locked, with no key she could use to unlock the deadbolt. Was she a prisoner here, as much as her beloved Sera? It would seem so.

“Ne perdez pas votre énergie,” Stephanie told her. Aresia whirled and stared at her ‘sister’, who smirked and continued.

"Vous savez très bien pourquoi nous l'avons prise, pas vous? Nous savions que vous voulez prendre l'enfant pour vous-même, de l'élever loin du monde des hommes. Nous sommes bien conscients de votre haine pour tous les hommes. L'emmener loin de son père n'est pas notre objectif principal, vous le savez."

"Où est ma soeur?" Aresia demanded.

"Maintenant, si je vous ai dit, vous partiriez et essaieriez de l'obtenir dans mon dos."

"Je la veux de retour!"

"Vous n'êtes pas en mesure de faire des demandes, Aresia!" the other woman snapped. "Vous avez fait tout ce que nous avons besoin de vous jusqu'à présent, cependant, nous ne vous faisons toujours pas confiance pour que vous alliez laisser les choses. Quand mon mari aura ce qu'il exige de l'enfant, alors seulement votre bien-aimée Sera vous sera retournée." She spat the words as if they were distasteful. “En attendant, vous allez rester ici jusqu'à ce que nous ne avons pas encore utiliser pour vous.”

“Don’t waste your energy.”

"You know why I had her taken, don’t you? We knew you would want to take the child for yourself, to raise her away from the world of men. We’re well aware of your hatred for all men. Taking her away from her father is not our main purpose, you know that.”

“Where is my sister?”

“Now, if I told you that, you’d run off and try to get her back.”

“I want her back!”

“You are in no position to make demands, Aresia!”

“You have done everything we have required of you thus far, however, we still do not trust that you will let matters lie. When my husband has what he requires of the child, only then will you have your beloved Sera returned to you.”

“In the meantime, you will stay here until we have no further use for you.”

Aresia narrowed her eyes at Stephanie. Her sister had always been her ally; had always been in full
agreement with Aresia’s feelings about men, but since she had been with the baron, she had been
corrupted by the power of the man. Aresia had learned a long time ago that man’s power lay not in
his masculinity, but in wealth. Even the strength and goddess-given powers of the Amazon, they
were no match for such dominance.

She continued to glare at the other woman. One day she swore she would choke the life out of the
baron, no matter what the consequences.

***

Kara led the way into the chamber, flinging open the doors. Commissioner Gordon stood weakly in
the middle of the room, his face pale.

“What is this?” Crane asked from his ‘throne’.

“Jonathan Crane, you are hereby ordered to stand down and present yourself for detention.”

“On whose authority?” he scoffed.

Supergirl stood with her hands on her hips, her cape billowing behind her.

“By authority of the Justice League and the city of Gotham.”

“You have no authority here,” he said, waving his hand. “Kill them.”

Several men opened fire on Supergirl. Knowing if she tried to block the bullets they could very well
ricochet into the crowd, she turned her heat vision on the fire while the others began to work quickly
to separate the innocent from the guilty. When the heat vision wasn’t enough, she ran at full speed,
collecting as many bullets as she could.

Bart ran behind the men, using his momentum to knock them down. Mia followed behind, grabbing
the guns and tossing them aside. One of the men got to his feet and aimed a hard punch at Speedy,
but she was quick enough to dodge it and get in one of her own into the solar plexus.

Cyborg ran to the Commissioner, punching out his guard and helping the older man to stumble
weakly out of the room. He handed him over to Fox and a man who the Commissioner recognised
and clearly trusted.

“Get him to safety,” Cyborg told the older man.

“Will do.”

The sounds of battle could be heard from the room. Victor turned and went back into the fray
without stopping for a thank you. He saw A.C. battling it out with two men and went to help.

Crane was trying to hide in the crowd of people who were still huddled at the end of the room,
terrified. Working together, the three original Justice League members managed to pull Crane out of
the crowd. A.C. was still the strongest one of them and he hauled the man up by his collar.

“Where’s your boss?” he growled.

“My boss?” Crane looked scared. “I don’t know who you’re talking about! Please, please don’t kill
me,” he said in a high-pitched tone. Suddenly, he pulled something out of his pocket and A.C. was
hit in the face with a powdery substance. He looked down and saw his skin was drying out.

A.C. yelled and dropped the man, who quickly tried to scramble away, laughing maniacally.
Supergirl saw what had happened and ran to them.

“What is it?” she cried, watching Aquaman screaming. Bart and Victor could only shake their heads in confusion.

Before Crane could make it out the door, she grabbed him.

“What did you do to him?”

The skinny former psychiatrist just smirked at her.

“Nothing. Perhaps he is just imagining it.”

She scanned him quickly and saw a small vial in his pocket. Supergirl grabbed the pocket and pulled at it, ripping it as she clutched the vial.

“Impulse, take this and get him out of here. I’ll deal with this. Whatever you do, don’t get any of it on you.”

Bart nodded and helped A.C. up, dragging him out of the room.

Crane still smirked at her. She glowered at him.

“Think that’s funny?” she said.

He continued to giggle. Kara grabbed him and sped out of the room, looking around quickly before flying him to the roof of the highest building, which in this case was Gotham Tower. She dangled him over the edge.

He looked down but seemed to be tamping down on his fear.

“You … you won’t drop me,” he said.

“How much would you like to bet on that?” she replied.

Clark probably wouldn’t approve, but she wanted to teach this guy a lesson. It wouldn’t do much good if he was as dangerously psychotic as Fox had claimed, but it would at least make her feel better. She let him go, taking a small satisfaction in hearing his terrified screams as he fell.

She flew down and stood on the ground, ignoring the men gathering around her. They were all armed and clearly intent on trying to do her harm, but she turned her back on them, waiting the few seconds for Crane to reach the bottom. He was still screaming as she steadied herself, making sure it wouldn’t hurt the man when she caught him. He stared at her for a moment, eyes wide, then began babbling something about psychotic women.

Kara chuckled as she recalled something Lois had said to her once.

“Pot? Kettle calling on line one.”

Of course, Lois had had to explain the reference to her, but Kara had found it amusing all the same.

As soon as she turned around, intending to fly Crane back to Arkham, the men who had been watching proceedings gasped and dropped their weapons. For a moment, Kara thought it had been because of her, until she saw what appeared to be a vicious Doberman approaching them at speed. Jayna, she thought. She’d worked a couple of times with the Teen Titans, helping them learn to control their abilities.
Blue Beetle was busy fighting two other men, punching them hard enough so they smashed against the wall, bricks turning into powder. Conner was also fighting but glanced up and grinned at her before turning his attention back to the two men he was battling.

Kara flew off with Crane, locating Arkham Asylum quickly and taking him inside, dumping him in one of the cells. Crane didn’t resist, not even looking up. She grabbed his collar.

“What did you do to Aquaman?” she growled.

“Fear,” he whispered hoarsely. He finally looked up at her. “You won’t win, you know. Bane has this whole city locked up.”

“We’ll see about that,” she said, turning away.

She locked the cell, making sure there was no way he could break out. He would have company very soon, she told herself.

She returned to City Hall. The others had already started to round up the rest of the men. Kara pulled Cyborg aside.

“See if you can locate the main power grid and get the power back up over the city before it gets dark again.”

He nodded. “On it,” he said before leaving the room.

Blake returned.

“Bane trapped most of Gotham P.D’s officers down in the sewers.”

“Show me where,” she said.

Meanwhile, Bart was in what had been the mayor’s office, watching as A.C. writhed in pain, clearly out of his head. He looked at Fox.

“What is it?”

“It’s a toxin which causes painful hallucinations. Usually of our worst fears.”

“Can you help him?” Bart said.

The older man nodded. “It will take me a while but I have a small generator in the research and development lab at Wayne Enterprises.”

“How long?”

“Not long. With the power down, I can only do so much, but …”

“If there’s anything you need, just tell me.”

Fox nodded and walked away. Victor came in to check on them, passing the older man in the doorway.

“How’s he doing?” he said, nodding at A.C.

Bart shook his head. “Not so good. Mr Fox is going to try to make an antidote.”
“Kara sent me to try and locate the main power grid for the city.”

“Good.”

There was a groan from the couch. Commissioner Gordon was trying to sit up. Bart went to him.

“Commissioner, you shouldn’t be trying to move.”

“Need to help.”

“You’re in no shape to be doing anything, sir.”

The commissioner frowned at him. Bart was still wearing the red hood and he had fashioned a dark mask to wear over his eyes instead of the dark sunglasses he’d worn in the old days.

“Who are you?”

“They call me Impulse, sir. I’m with the Justice League.”

“Oh. Good. What about Batman?” he asked wearily.

“Batman’s still out of commission, sir. That’s why we’re here.”

Bane had taken up residence in what had once been the headquarters of Gotham Police Department. He felt a delicious irony being in what was known as the bullpen where so many of his cohorts had been held before being taken to the likes of Arkham Asylum or Blackgate Penitentiary.

He’d heard the reports of Justice League members all over the city but none of that mattered to him. He had what he’d come for.

There was a disturbance from the main hallway and he looked up, wondering who would be foolish enough to attack him here.

“Get your goddamn hands off me!”

He arched an eyebrow in surprise at the woman trying to shake off two of his men.

“Miss Kyle. I am rather surprised to see you here.”

“I want what I was promised,” she said, shoving one of the men and kicking the other in the leg. Bane waved his gloved hand, dismissing the two men.

“Clean slate? But as you can see, Batman is not in my hands. You did not deliver what was promised.”

“I delivered him. Is it my fault you couldn’t keep him?”

He chuckled. “Semantics. Our deal, Miss Kyle, was I get Batman and you get a whole new life. Of course, I never actually stipulated what that new life would entail.”

“I figured you might say that,” she snarled, taking a knife from her boot and throwing it at him. He swatted at it as if it was just a pesky insect.

“Did you really think you could just march in here and try to kill me?” he laughed.

“No. Just as I knew you would never have let me leave here alive. It’s a good thing I brought an
Bane frowned at her, then looked past her as several people crowded inside, each holding a weapon of some kind.

“Gotham belongs to us and we’re taking it back,” she said.

Bane laughed. “Is that supposed to scare me?”

“It doesn’t matter. We’ll go down fighting if we have to.”

One of Bane’s men pushed through the blockade and approached the bigger man.

“Supergirl sent Cyborg to turn on the power to the city.”

Bane began laughing anew.

“Well, if he does, he’s in for a surprise, now isn’t he?”

Selina frowned.

“What does that mean?”

“It means, my dear, that as soon as the power is back on, the explosives I have had planted around the city will be activated. In one hour, this city will be nothing but a chasm.”

***

Meanwhile at the Paris residence of the president, the Elysee Palace, the Marquis de Sade waited in the Cleopatra salon. He had arrived back in the country two days earlier, having ensured that all had gone according to plan.

The secretary general, Joseph Scipion de Bauvans entered the room, hands outstretched in welcome.

“Mon cher ami comment c’est passé votre rencontre avec les Americains?”

"Eh bien ... très bien , tout se passe comme prévu et l’hybride est entre nos mains."

“La fille de Superman.” De Sade could hear a breathlessness in the man’s voice, detect the reverence in his tone. “Et vous pensez que ce est dangereux?”


“Donc, il peut être utile dans notre création du nouvel ordre mondial?”

After a few moments of quiet reflection, de Sade answered.

“Oui, en effet. Avec l’ éducation politique appropriée de cours.”

“Le baron est de retour?” the secretary general enquired.

De Sade shook his head. “Pas encore. Il a encore des affaires à regler sur l'île de l'amiral Jean Jacques”

“Le président a été informé?”

De Sade was about to reply when President Nicole Beauregard entered the room. She smiled at both
“Bienvenue Monsieur de Sade. Je vais nous commander un café et thé, puis vous me direz tout sur l'hybride.”

“My dear friend, how did your meeting go with the Americans?”
“Very well … very well, it all goes to plan and the hybrid is in our hands.”
“The daughter of Superman. And you think it is dangerous?”
“Very dangerous. But for now it is just a baby.”
“So it may be useful in our creation of the New World Order?”
“Yes, indeed. With the proper political education of course.”
“Has the baron returned?”
“Not yet. He still has business to attend to on the island of Admiral Jean-Jacques.”
“Has the president been informed?”
“Welcome Mr de Sade. I’m going to order us some coffee and tea and then you will tell me everything about the hybrid.”
Selina turns to her fellow Gothamites.

“Don’t let anyone else leave,” she ordered.

A man holding a baseball bat stepped forward. Selina couldn’t recall his name, but knew him from the street. He was one of the many homeless people who populated the Narrows. He looked fearful as he nodded at Bane.

“What about him?” he asked in a low voice. “We can’t fight him.”

“You have to try,” she said. “I have to warn someone about the bombs.”

“He’s bluffing,” a heavy set man said.

She shook her head. “No, I don’t think he is. I think he’s mad enough to do it. Blow us all sky high.”

She pushed her way through the crowd, hoping they wouldn’t back down. They might be willing to fight for Gotham, but not in the face of possible annihilation. She had to try to get to Supergirl, or Cyborg and warn them.

The question was, where was the power grid?

As she made her way toward City Hall, she was confronted by at least five men. They were filthy and clearly out for blood. She smirked at them, standing with her hands on her hips, gazing warily at them, taking in the guns on their hips and the knives in their hands.

“Oh, so you wanna play, huh?”

All five grinned and began snickering.

“Think you can stop us?”

Selina arched sinuously like the cat she had become known as in her many criminal exploits. She had been on the streets long enough to learn how to fight, and to fight dirty.

“Come on then,” she taunted.

They all approached, clearly not knowing what they were in for. She let one of them take her by the shoulders as if he was going to try to kiss her, and smacked her head hard against his before kneeling him in the crotch. She then used his body for balance as she kicked out, her heel catching the second one in the stomach. A third tried to grab her in a bear hug from behind and she let him drag her a few feet. She kicked in the air but the man was too strong for her. She mentally cursed, realising she had under-estimated him.

Just as she was trying to figure out what to do, a blade came whizzing out of nowhere, embedding
itself in the man’s shoulder. He cried out in shock and pain. Selina whirled, gazing at the blade for a second in surprise, realising it was a double edged knife of some kind.

She heard the click of a gun being prepared to fire and whirled, only to witness the man dropping the weapon. A figure began flipping in a series of somersaults toward them, before landing on her feet, crouching low to the ground. Her eyes could be seen through a mask that appeared painted on, adding to her threatening demeanour. In many ways, she reminded Selina of a cat with eyes glowing in darkness.

A second woman was fighting the fifth man. She was tall with long, dark flowing locks. As Selina watched, the woman blew some kind of glitter over the man and he appeared dazed.

“Whoa,” she murmured.

The masked woman had knocked out the gunman and was walking toward her. She backed away a little.

“It’s all right,” the woman said. “We’re with the Justice League.”

Selina’s eyes widened. “Oh! We have to warn Supergirl.”

The taller woman approached.

“Supergirl? Why?”

“Because if the power comes back on Gotham will be blown to smithereens.”

“What?”

“Bane. He’s planted bombs around the city.”

The masked woman turned away, clearly speaking on some kind of communicator. The other woman looked at her.

“Zatanna.”

“Selina. I’m, uh, a friend of Batman’s.”

Zatanna nodded toward her friend. “That’s Black Canary.”

There was a kind of whooshing sound and Selina was startled by the appearance of Supergirl.

“Miss Kyle?”

“You two know each other?” Zatanna asked.

“We’ve met,” Kara said coolly. “What can you tell me about the bombs?”

“Not much,” Selina said sadly. “Bane said that once the power grid goes on, the bombs will be activated.”

“How much time do we have?”

“I don’t know. He said something about one hour. I don’t know if he meant one hour from now or one hour from when the bombs are activated.”
“We’ll have to assume the former,” Kara said. “Nothing on a location?”

Selina shook her head. “I didn’t hang around to find out. He’s in Gotham’s police headquarters.”

“I’ll deal with Bane,” Supergirl told her. She pressed her ear and spoke aloud. “Cyborg, have you located the power grid?” There was a pause. “Hold off. Bane has planted bombs around the city. We don’t have a location as yet.”

“You really think Bane is going to tell you?” Selina asked. “He’s not afraid of anything. He beat Batman for goodness sake.”

“Because you betrayed Batman to him,” Supergirl said coolly, before flying off.

Kara x-rayed the building housing Gotham Police headquarters. She could see several men standing in one corner, clearly not sure what to do. They were armed with what appeared to be baseball bats. She assumed they were not working with Bane.

A very tall, broad-shouldered man was holding court in the centre of the room, clearly unfazed by the activity going on around him. He stood far taller than the people around him and made an imposing figure.

She moved forward, entering the building and pushing her way through the crowd. A man tried to block her and she pushed him aside. She stood in the middle of the room, hands on her hips.

“Bane.”

“And who might you be, little girl?” the man asked, his deep voice muffled by the mask he wore.

“My name is Supergirl, and you under arrest.”

He laughed. “You’ve come to arrest me? Are you sure?”

She frowned. That was an odd thing for him to say, then again, he seemed so arrogant, so sure of his own superiority that she decided he just thought she had no power over him.

“Where are the bombs, Bane?” she said.

“Little girl, you have no idea who you are dealing with.”

“I think you’ll find it is you who has no idea who you are dealing with,” she said, moving forward and grabbing him by the shoulders.

He lashed out, punching her. Kara felt the impact. Bane was clearly strong, but still not strong enough against a Kryptonian. She took the punch, then grabbed his other gloved hand as he tried to punch her again, hearing the bones crunching as she used her strength to crush it.

She heard the click of a gun and turned her head, using her heat vision to fry the gun, forcing the man to drop it.

“I want the locations of the bombs,” she told him.

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Really?” she said. “Why don’t I believe you?”

Bane attacked her again, punching hard enough to send her flying backwards. He stood in the centre
of the room, laughing behind his mask. Kara got to her feet and looked around, seeing more of Bane’s men surrounding her. She very quickly sent them packing, while Bane started walking away.

The small group of men with bats decided they weren’t going to let her fight alone and attacked Bane’s men. She left them to their battle, using super-speed to get between Bane and the door.

“You’re not going anywhere until you tell me where the bombs are,” she warned. “And then the only place you’ll be going is to prison.”

“There isn’t a prison that can hold me,” he boasted.

“We shall see about that,” she returned, dodging his next attack.

Bane again tried to attack and she dodged, hovering above him and kicking him hard in the chest. Her foot caught the edge of his mask and he gasped, falling to his knees. He appeared disoriented, even dizzy.

Kara landed on the floor and grabbed the villain by the straps of his tunic, pulling him up.

“Where are the bombs?” she growled.

Bane didn’t answer, not that she expected one. There was nothing else for it, she thought. She flew out of the room with the man in tow, hauling him to the Municipal building. Stargirl, Megan Morse and the Wonder Twins were waiting for her.

“Keep him secure,” she instructed.

“What are you going to do?” Megan asked. “If there are bombs threatening the city …”

“He won’t talk. There’s only one person who can help me now.”

***

Clark had managed to get a couple of hours’ sleep. It would be enough. It had to be, he decided. There was still a lot of clean-up work to do.

He wanted to be out there searching for Mara. Or the baron. Or something. Anything other than sitting around waiting for the phone to ring. Waiting for Lois to talk to him.

She hadn’t spoken a word since she’d left his side. Clark had felt it prudent to leave her be for now, knowing there were no words to make up for what had happened. She had lost her only child and he just had to give her time to come to terms with it.

“How are you doing, son?” the general asked.

“Okay, I guess. Lois is …”

Sam sighed. “You just have to give her time, Clark.”

“I know. It’s just … I feel so helpless. I keep going over and over in my mind what I should have done.”

“Look, even I know you can’t be everywhere at once. And hindsight is always twenty-twenty. Blaming yourself for what’s happened isn’t going to bring Mara back.”

“Have you heard from any of your contacts?”
The general frowned, looking distinctly unhappy. He thrust his hands in his pockets and stretched up to stand on his toes for a second.

“So far no one seems to be talking, which makes me think this thing goes a lot deeper than even I anticipated.”

Clark glanced at the couch, hearing his mother moan softly in her sleep. Not wanting to wake her, he quietly stepped outside to the terrace, looking down at the city. Sam followed him out.

“I don’t know what to do,” he said. “I’ve read every book I can get hold of on these people and none of them can give me a clear answer, or even tell me how I’m supposed to find her.”

“I know you’ll do everything you can,” the general comforted.

“Kal-El.”

Clark looked up, realising Kara was hovering a few feet away.

“Kara.” He chose not to admonish her for using his birth name. “What’s wrong?”

“I need your help. Bane has planted several bombs around Gotham city. If we turn on the power grid, the bombs will explode.”

“And if you don’t?”

“I don’t know,” she sighed. “Selina told me Bane said turning on the power would activate the bombs.”

“How much time do you have?”

“One hour.”

Clark turned to his father-in-law.

“Sir, wouldn’t the bombs give off some kind of energy signature?”

The general considered this for a moment.

“If they’re connected remotely, yes, they would.”

“Can you contact your sources at the Pentagon and see if they can get a lock on the bombs?”

The general nodded. “Consider it done.”

“We’ll need Watchtower for this,” Clark told his cousin. She nodded and flew off.

“Clark?”

He looked around at his wife.

“Lois, honey…”

She sighed. “You’re leaving again.”

“I have to. Bane has bombs placed around Gotham. We need to find them or millions of people will die.”
“It’s always something,” she grumbled.

“Lois …”

“Clark, I get it. Helping Gotham is more important than you finding our only child.”

“That’s not …” He huffed. There was no point in arguing with her. Did she think that he wanted this? That he was choosing to ignore their own daughter to save the people of Gotham? This was exactly the kind of thing he’d dreaded when he had fallen in love with Lois. That some day she might expect him to choose between her and their family and the lives of millions of others.

There was no way he could choose between the two and she knew that, but he couldn’t just wait for news. They had called everyone they knew and those people were calling everyone they knew. Someone, somewhere, had to have information which would lead them to their daughter.

“Lois, I’m sorry. I have to go.”

He quickly changed into his Superman suit. Lois glowered at him.

“Superman, if you even think of flying off, don’t even think about coming back.”

He stared at her. “What?”

“You heard me.”

The general looked torn between his daughter and his duty. He took a deep breath.

“Son, time’s-a-wasting.”

“Yes sir.” He wrapped an arm around his father-in-law. “You’ll need to hold tight, sir.”

“Don’t worry, Clark. I’ve been on rougher rides on a military transpo …”

His words were cut off as Clark flew quickly to Watchtower. Kara was already waiting.

“Kal-El, are you sure …” she said, gazing uncertainly at the general.

“The general knows about me, Kara.”

“What about the Watchtower computers?”

“Think I haven’t learned anything from watching Chloe?” he asked with a small smile. He was still hurting from what his wife had said to him, but he had to thrust it out of his mind. He turned to his father-in-law. “You just tell me who to connect you with.”

“Right.” The general gave the details and Clark made the call.

A man in full military regalia appeared on the screen.

“Sam. What can I do for you?”

“General Kirby,” he said, standing erect as if he wasn’t wearing civilian garb. “Superman requires the assistance of the Pentagon.”

“Of course. How can I help Superman?” the general replied, quickly noting the seriousness of the situation.
“General Kirby, we have been informed that several bombs have been placed in Gotham and will be activated once the power grid is reconnected.”

“What of the siege in Gotham?”

“Sir, the Justice League has managed to round up most of the individuals behind the siege, including the ringleader, Bane. However, the situation is still unresolved. We need to locate those bombs.”

“Understood. I will contact my people and see what we can do to help.”

Clark turned to his cousin. “Kara, go back to Gotham. Tell everyone to stand by.”

She nodded, taking off into the air. Clark sighed softly. Once again he had to wait. Sam put a hand on his shoulder.

“Son, let me give you a piece of advice. It’s not easy being a general. Whether you’re commanding a platoon of soldiers or the Justice League. Sometimes you have to make sacrifices and not everyone understands that. There were times when Ella didn’t understand it either and it would tear me apart, trying to figure out how to appease her and do what was needed for my country. Lois is a lot like her mother.”

“She’s a lot like you too, sir.”

He knew what it cost his wife when he had to fly off on missions. Years ago when she had been dating Oliver, she had wondered why he seemed to disappear. Then finding out he was Green Arrow had been the deal-breaker for her. She hadn’t been able to live with it.

At the time, Clark hadn’t known he would fall deeply in love with Lois and had encouraged her to keep trying with Oliver, telling her it could still work, but Lois had been adamant.

“She’s got this one side that I’m not sure I can live with,” she’d said.

“How would you know if you don’t give it a chance?”

She’d sighed and told him that she and Oliver weren’t destined for each other. Clark realised now that was the truth, but he hadn’t been able to see that it was really him and Lois who had been destined to be, not Oliver and Lois.

Still, he had told her it wasn’t like her to give up.

“Normally when things get challenging, that’s when you get interested.”

“This is different,” she said. “My dad was a general, and he cared about me. But I learned really early that his role in the world was a lot more important than being a father. And you know what? For good reasons. And Ollie’s life is demanding too.”

“Just because someone’s life has great responsibility doesn’t mean your life has to take second place.”

“Of course it does, Clark,” she said, her voice breaking. “Can you imagine what it would be like to look into somebody’s eyes and know that their destiny is so much greater than yours that you will never compete? You will always be left behind.”

“That would be hard for anyone, but …”

“No, I can’t be left behind one more time.”
Clark had promised when they got married that he would never leave his wife or his family behind. That they would always come first with him.

So why did he feel like that was exactly what he was doing in trying to save Gotham rather than looking for his daughter?

“Clark, I know this is no comfort right now, but you have done everything you possibly can, short of actually going out and looking for Mara. Frankly, I’m not even sure I’d know where to start.”

Clark sighed. He did know. The trouble was, the baron was nowhere to be found. He’d left Metropolis and it seemed he’d disappeared off the face of the Earth.

***

Kara gathered the members of the Justice League and the Teen Titans together. AC seemed to be doing better since he’d been injected with the antidote to the fear toxin, although he was still a little pale.

“Superman has contacted the military leaders in the Pentagon and they are going to help us trace the bombs. Once we have the locations, we must act quickly. We cannot take the chance that the bombs are not linked.”

“Are you sure Bane wasn’t bluffing about this?” Victor asked.

She shook her head. “I cannot be sure of anything, Cyborg, but if Bane is true to what I have already read about him, this is not a bluff.”

“Where is Bane now?” Zatanna asked. Kara glanced at Stargirl.

“He’s locked up in a secure ward at Gotham Mercy. The doctors thought they should keep an eye on him while he’s in withdrawl from Venom.”

“Venom?” Bart asked. “What the hell is that?”

“It’s some kind of drug,” Cyborg replied. “I read it in the file they had on Bane while he was incarcerated in South America. I think a doctor in the military developed it.”

“So, what does it do?”

“It acts like a steroid giving the subject increased strength. Almost super-human.”

Kara nodded. It was little wonder that she’d had some trouble fighting the man off.

“So, this drug has some side effects, I would expect,” she replied.

“The least of which is he returns to normal human strength, or so the doctor explained,” Stargirl told the group. “When he’s ready, we’re going to take him to Stryker’s Island.”

“Good.”

There was a whoosh and Superman landed before them. He had General Lane with him.

“Supergirl, I have the location of the bombs and I have investigated a couple of the sites. This will not be easy.”

“How so?” AC enquired.
The general explained.

“Each bomb is linked remotely to the other. If we try to disarm one, it will trigger the rest. They must be disarmed simultaneously.”

“Why can’t you just throw them into the bay, or in the air?” Bart asked.

“Because they can also be triggered by motion.”

Wonder Woman landed on the ground beside Superman.

“How can I help?” she asked. Clark looked at her.

“Unless you are able to call on the assistance of your gods, Princess, there is little you can do, I’m afraid.” He turned to Victor. “Cyborg.”

“I’m in. Just show me those bombs.”

“Good. The Justice League frequency is hopefully different enough from the frequency used to remotely trigger each explosive device.”

Kara frowned. “Are you saying that even our communicators could set these things off?”

“Hopefully not,” Superman told his cousin.

“What about the rest of us, Boy Scout?” Bart asked.

“Once Cyborg has determined a way to deactivate the bombs, we will maintain contact via League communicators.”

“How many bombs are there?” Zatanna asked.

“Six in total. All set up in different areas of the city. Even I am not fast enough to stop them all going off at once.”

“What’s the blast radius?” Jay said.

“From what I can tell, up to about a mile,” Sam replied.

The Flash whistled. “That’s huge.”

General Lane nodded. “Six explosions of that magnitude will not only flatten Gotham, but it could potentially wipe out the population as well.”

Clark knew time was of the essence. There was no telling exactly how long they had to stop the bombs. He had taken his father-in-law, at the man’s request, to two of the bomb sites. One had been hidden in one of the subway tunnels. They had both surmised that the explosion would cause the subway infrastructure to collapse, which would have repercussions for those living above it.

The general had seen his fair share of explosive events and had described the devices he’d seen as particularly dirty bombs. Whoever had created them had used everything from chemicals to C4 and complicated electronics to connect all six. Each would not only create an explosion equivalent to that of a thirty kiloton atomic bomb, but they contained noxious gases. Those who hadn’t been killed instantly would soon succumb to the gas.

They had requested more assistance from the Pentagon but knew that even if they managed to get
help from the experts, it would not be in time to stop the explosions. There was no other choice. Even General Lane knew it.

Clark took off in the air with Cyborg, showing him one of the devices. Victor quickly assessed the circuitry, pronouncing it difficult but not impossible, confirming that each device would have to be deactivated at the same time, and with great care not to disturb the chemical which made up one component of the explosive.

They returned to the others. Not wanting to take the risk of anyone else being injured, Clark asked for volunteers. Kara immediately stepped up. Zan wanted to volunteer but Jay told him he wasn’t sure it was a task he could handle.

Superboy put up his hand. That left two more. Impulse raised his hand, reasoning he could run from the scene if anything went wrong.

“Not that I’m thinking it will,” he said confidently.

Wonder Woman, seeming a little piqued at Clark’s assertion that she would not be of much help, also stepped up.

“I will also volunteer,” she said, her glower daring Clark to refuse.

He nodded. “All right.” He accessed his phone and pulled up the map locating all the devices and assigning one to each of them. “Report in as soon as you have reached the location and found the device. Do not do anything until Cyborg gives the go ahead. He will instruct you further.”

It was a tense group that waited, listening in on the communicators. Clark had told them to get clear in case, but none of them moved.

“Cyborg, how do we get to the circuitry without upsetting the chemical?” Supergirl asked.

“Very carefully,” he replied. “I wish I was being facetious.”

“Why don’t we just freeze the chemical?” Superboy asked.

“Did you not listen to the general, kid?” Impulse replied. “Any movement will trigger the explosive!”

“Worth a shot,” Superboy returned.

“Go ahead then, if you think you’re so smart.”

There was silence for a few moments, then a dejected sigh.

“It’s sealed and too far down to be effective.”

“Nice try though, hotshot.”

“That’s enough, Impulse. Superboy, it was a nice idea but unfortunately not a success. Cyborg?”

“You’ll need to disconnect the motherboard. Superman, I wouldn’t suggest heat vision. It may heat the chemical.”

“If super breath didn’t freeze it, what makes you think heat vision will affect it?” Impulse pointed out.

“You really want to take that chance, short stuff?”
“Can it, Tin Man.”

“Wonder Woman, can you get to the circuit board?”

“Yes, I can.”

“Good. Everyone, prepare to disconnect on my mark. One, two …”

“Are you gonna say three, or …”

“Bart!” Three voices cried out.

“Again, one, two …”

The remaining superheroes looked at each other, waiting anxiously in the silence that followed. Even the general appeared to be holding his breath.

“Got it, we got it!” a triumphant voice cried. It was hard to tell whether it was Bart or Conner.

“Crap!”

“What?”

“There’s a secondary trigger mechanism, hidden beneath the circuit. I’d say we got about fifteen seconds. Damn, this guy’s good.”

“Holy sh …” Impulse cried out.

From the communicators came whooshing sounds. Ten seconds later a series of explosions could be heard in the upper atmosphere.

“What was that?” AC asked.

Superman, Supergirl and Superboy appeared before them.

“It appears they anticipated someone would try to disarm the bombs by getting to the circuitry and created a secondary trigger.”

“Well, looks like they didn’t anticipate everything,” Dinah replied.

It was an exhausted group which assembled in City Hall later that day, facing Commissioner Jim Gordon.

“You have done this city a great service today,” he told them, his face still deathly pale.

Superman nodded sombrely. “Thank you, Commissioner, but we were just doing our jobs.”

Most of the criminals had been rounded up. Some were being sent to Iron Heights in Central City until repairs could be made at Blackgate. Others would be sent to Kansas State Penitentiary. As soon as Bane was declared well enough to leave Gotham hospital, Superman personally escorted him to Stryker’s Island.

Meanwhile, on the island of Admiral Jean Jacques, Baron de Rochefort coolly faced his opponent over the black and white chessboard.

"Vous pansez toujours que ce est une victoire même si Gotham tient toujours?"
"La destruction de Gotham était votre agenda, Ducard, pas le mien. Mais oui, je considère toujours que c’est une victoire."

"Comment? La Ligue de la Justice a gagné la bataille."

"Cette bataille, oui. La guerre, cependant, ne fait que commencer."

“Qu’est-ce que la guerre? Votre but est de détruire Superman, n’est-ce pas?”

"Et je l’ai déjà commencé," de Rochefort expliquait.

"En prenant son enfant."

De Rochefort sourit enigmatiquement au homme connu sous le nom de Ra’s al Ghul. Cela lui semblait dommage, il pensait, que l’homme pense à des termes aussi linéaires. Il n’était pas suffisant de prendre l’enfant. Non, Superman doit être écrasé.

Plus tard dans son bureau privé, de Rochefort écouta de nouveau la bande-son envoyée à lui par son seul agent restant à Metropolis.

“I can’t do this anymore, Clark.”

“Lois, can’t we talk about this?”

“There is nothing to talk about. You weren’t there, Clark. You weren’t there when she took our baby away.”

“Lois, I did everything …”

“No, you didn’t, because you weren’t here. I can’t … I need you to go.”

“What?”

“Leave Clark. Please. I … I can’t even look at you.”

“Lois, you can’t mean …”

De Rochefort s’assit en arrière, tordant ses doigts, un large sourire satisfait sur son visage.

“You still feel this is a victory even though Gotham still stands?”

“The destruction of Gotham was your agenda, Ducard, not mine. But yes, I still consider this a victory.”

“How so? The Justice League have won the battle.”

“This battle, yes. The war, however, has only just begun.”

“What war? Your goal is to destroy Superman, is it not?”

“And I have already begun.”

“By taking his child.”
**Episode 9: Part 1**

Chapter Summary

Chloe, Oliver and Lana visit Rennes le Chateau and find an unlikely ally

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**Episode Nine: Fortitudo. Part One**

Chloe frowned as she peered out the windscreen into the darkness.

“Are we going the right way?” she asked.

“We’re going the right way,” Oliver confirmed, his gaze focused on the road ahead. Like many of the roads to the smaller countryside villages in France, the road he was driving on was full of steep curves and bends and was extremely narrow. There would be a very tight squeeze if they met another vehicle coming the other way, he thought.

“I still don’t know why it was necessary …” Murphy began complaining in the backseat beside Lana, who glowered at the redhead and told him to shut up or she would shut him up.

Chloe went back to her phone, her fingers flying furiously over the keypad as she typed out a message to her cousin.

“Anything?” Oliver asked.

“They still haven’t been able to find someone who might know where they’ve taken Mara,” his wife replied. She glanced up. “Watch it,” she warned and Oliver swerved around a couple of boulders lying in their path, narrowly missing the edge of the road on the other side.

“I still can’t believe she would toss Clark out like that,” Lana said.

None of them could believe it. Lois and Clark were solid. They were so in love it was almost sickening to watch. Oliver had heard of cases where a couple had lost a child and it had broken them completely, but he had never thought this would happen to his two closest friends. He could understand Lois’ anguish, but this was a time when she needed Clark. Yet it was apparent that she blamed him for Mara being taken.

It had been an issue that worried even Oliver. Especially with learning just a few short days ago that his wife was pregnant. Being Green Arrow made Chloe more vulnerable. There were times when Oliver had been torn between his duty as a superhero and his wife, so he understood exactly what it was like for Clark when duty called.

He had the feeling that was exactly what the Illuminati had been counting on when they had started the riots in Metropolis. It had all escalated far too quickly, requiring the aid of all available Justice League members. To top it off, they had incited something similar in Gotham, making sure Superman would be too busy trying to co-ordinate efforts to take care of things on the homefront.

These people were vicious and mean and clearly didn’t give a damn who they hurt in the process.

He slowed the car, grimacing at the way the gears seemed to grind as he changed down. He could
drive a stick shift fine, it was just this car’s transmission seemed to be rather old and in very poor shape. They had been forced to rent a car at the airport at Toulouse and drive the eighty or so miles to Rennes le Château, since no driver would have taken them this far.

“There,” Lana said, leaning forward in her seat and pointing with a slim finger. “That’s the turn off.”

“You sure?”

“She’s right,” Murphy confirmed.

Oliver glanced at his wife, then shrugged. He wouldn’t put it past the redhead Irishman to lead them along a road which could very well result in them going over a cliff or something, except that would be a very foolish thing for even the Irishman to do.

The road became even more windy, which didn’t bode well for the travellers. Nevertheless, Oliver drove on, watching carefully while Chloe read the directions given to them by Sarah Levy.

She had tried investigating the woman they were going to see through her various contacts and through the ‘net, but nothing of any significant help came through. Either Gaëlle de Rochefort was a very private person, or she was very good at hiding herself.

Finally they reached the long drive up to the villa. Oliver continued to drive carefully while Chloe looked out the window. Her eyes widened as she saw the beautiful house. Well, it wasn’t really a house, as such. It reminded Oliver of the Scottish ‘castle’ Lex had lived in in Smallville. Of course, that was more a symbol of the arrogance of the Luthor family, since Lionel had had it brought over from Scotland stone by stone, but had never professed an intention to live in it. When Lex had been exiled to Smallville, he had taken over the mansion.

Oliver preferred to think of the French as a little less arrogant and a lot more ‘noble’. He guessed the villa was pre-revolution, although it appeared a lot of restoration work had gone on.

“It has to be at least three hundred years old,” she mused.

Oliver nodded. “At least,” he said. “The people here built them to last.”

“Not like home, really, is it? There we tear down old buildings all in the name of progress.”

“It’s a shame,” he agreed.

A heavy-set man came out through the brick archway to greet them as Oliver pulled the car to a stop.

“Welcome,” the man said as they got out. He offered his hand to Chloe. “My name is Leon Mader.”

“I’m Chloe Sullivan-Queen, this is my husband Oliver. Lana Lang and Murphy O’Shea.”

Mader gazed at O’Shea for a long moment, clearly sizing him up.

“If you will please come this way,” he said, leading them through the archway to the huge wooden doors.

Chloe frowned at her husband but followed the older man, still wondering what this woman could possibly want with them. From what she had learned, which wasn’t much, Gaëlle de Rochefort was the older sister of Yves de Rochefort. She didn’t seek attention and hadn’t left the county for years, living in isolation not far from the village of Rennes le Chateau.

They had no idea what her allegiance was to her brother. All they knew is that she had summoned
them and since they had no other possible leads in which to help Clark reunite his family, they had left Paris.

Leon gestured toward huge double doors. They appeared heavy, with old-fashioned hinges which seemed to be made from iron. The whole villa reminded Chloe a little of the castle which had once stood in Smallville, now nothing more than vacant land. Tess had been planning on rebuilding, until Lex had returned from the dead, so to speak. Chloe was never sure whether the Lex who had returned was a clone or if his scientists had found some way of regenerating damaged tissue.

Of course, he’d sold some story about stem cell research repairing the damage caused by the avalanche in the Arctic and no one except Lex really knew the truth.

She shook her head and sighed, following Leon into the room, which appeared to be a parlour of some sort. She had no idea what the French term was for sitting room and it wasn’t really relevant.

On a sofa sat a woman who was almost six feet tall in her stocking-feet, with sharp features which reminded Chloe of the images she had seen of Yves de Rochefort. There was nothing remarkable about the woman’s features. Her nose was too bulbous and her face too rounded for her to be considered attractive. As she smiled, her eyes lit up, but were shadowed by the puffy skin beneath.

Leon bowed slightly as he greeted the woman in French.

“Gaëlle, Monsieur et Madame Queen, Mademoiselle Lana Lang, Monsieur Murphy O’Shea.”

Immediately the woman stiffened as she glowered at the redhead. Clearly, even though he was invited, the invitation had not been offered under friendly terms.

Chloe frowned slightly but kept her attention on the woman who spoke in French.

“S’il vous plaît dites-leur de s’asseoir et de se mettre à l’aise et si cela ne vous dérange pas demander donc à Sarah de venir. Ensuite, si vous s’il vous plaît, un peu de café? Ou peut-être le thé, si telle est leur préférence.”

Leon turned to them and translated. Chloe nodded.

“Some tea would be wonderful, please,” she said, not wishing to reveal her pregnancy. At least, not until she knew exactly which side this woman was on.

Lana, clearly not wanting Chloe to feel like the odd one out, ordered tea as well.

"S’il vous plaît dites-leur que j’ai du mal avec l'anglais," the older woman told Leon. He nodded.

“Miss de Rochefort begs your forgiveness. She has difficulty with English and would prefer if I or Sarah translate for her.”

Oliver nodded. "Je parle un peu le français,” he said, in that language, speaking directly to the woman.

"Comme je le fais," Lana advised, also in French.

“Gaëlle, Mr and Mrs Queen, Miss Lana Lang, Mr Murphy O’Shea.”

“Please tell them to sit and make themselves comfortable and if you wouldn’t mind asking Sarah to come in. Then if you please, some coffee? Or perhaps tea, if that is their preference.”

“Please tell them I have difficulty with English.”

“I speak some French.”
“As do I.”

Chloe grimaced. She’d learned a little French at school but she was not nearly confident enough to be able to speak it in this situation.

“Please, I have no wish to make you uncomfortable Mrs Queen,” Gaëlle responded, translated through Leon. She had clearly seen Chloe’s expression.

“No, I’m the one who should be begging forgiveness. We are, after all, in your home. You shouldn’t feel the need to apologise for not speaking our language.”

The woman beamed as Leon translated, making Chloe feel as if she had passed some sort of test. They sat in comparative silence as the man went out to order the coffee and tea. A minute later Sarah Levy came in. She smiled at them.

“I am very glad you came,” she said. “Gaëlle was rather anxious to see you.”

“We’d like to know what this is about,” Chloe said.

Sarah quickly translated.

“In good time,” Gaëlle responded through the other woman with a gesture which wasn’t quite dismissive.

While she had an aristocratic air about her, she was softly spoken and courteous, yet also seemed rather shy and uncertain. Chloe wondered how this woman came to have a brother who was arrogant in the extreme.

Leon returned with a tray of coffee and tea, setting it down on the table in front of their hostess. The cups were delicate bone china, clearly quite old. The design on the front had what appeared to be yellow and pink roses. It was quite pretty, although not really to Chloe’s taste.

Gaëlle smiled at the man as he poured coffee from a matching pot into one of the cups and gave it to her. He poured more coffee and tea, offering cream and sugar, or lemon and honey, which Chloe took with a small smile. She recalled a scene in a movie in which the character was asked if milk and sugar were meant to be in Earl Grey tea. Lana caught her eye and smiled. They’d watched the movie together so she clearly knew what Chloe was thinking.

Gaëlle looked at them finally.

“I know about your friend Superman,” she said. “I have called you here today to stop my brother from making a grievous error.”

“I think it’s a little late for that,” Oliver told her gently. “Your brother has had my friend’s daughter kidnapped.”

“There is still time to save her. My brother believes she will be able to help the Illuminati’s cause.”

“What exactly is your brother planning on doing with her?”

“I believe he has had her taken to a secret base for now where she will be tested for any unique abilities. This may take several days, or weeks, depending on how many tests they wish to perform.”

“She’s just a baby,” Lana said. “She doesn’t have any abilities.”

“Not yet, no,” Gaëlle replied, “but that is what they wish to determine.”
“Why? What do they want her for? How is this going to help the Illuminati?”

“Because they want power,” Murphy interjected before Gaëlle could respond. “They think she is the key to controlling Superman.”

Lana turned on the redheaded Irishman.

“And you’re a part of this? I cannot believe I trusted you. I thought you were my friend!”

“I’m sorry, Lana.”

Chloe snorted at the man’s expression. He tried to look contrite, but failed.

“No, you are not sorry,” Gaëlle answered. “You are just as greedy and unscrupulous as my brother.”

“I don’t understand. What is the Illuminati’s plan?” Chloe asked.

“How much do you know of the Illuminati?” Gaëlle asked.

“New World Order, controlling the world’s governments …”

The aristocratic woman nodded.

“Yes. You see, there is a belief among some that when the Earth begins its new phase of existence, a select few will survive the purge.”

“Purge?” Lana frowned, clearly not liking the sound of that.

“Do you read the Bible?” the woman asked.

“Yes.”

“Then you know of the Book of Revelations.”

“The apocalypse,” Chloe nodded.

“The Illuminati believe a small, elite group of about 40,000 will be the ones to survive the apocalypse. They alone will have control of the planet and its resources.”

“And the Illuminati believe it’s them?”

“Only the upper echelon of the Illuminati will ‘ascend’ as it were.”

“You’re talking about survival of the fittest,” Oliver nodded.

“Yes, indeed.”

“And Superman is a threat to that, being the strongest man in the world.”

“Strength cannot be measured by one’s ability to lift, for instance, a planet, into space. Even Superman must abide by the laws of your governments.”

“Plus he’s non-partisan,” Chloe continued. “He doesn’t get involved in politics.”

“Precisely.”

“So,” Lana began, speaking slowly as if she was trying to get it all straight in her head. “All the
things that have been happening … the terrorist attacks, the so-called Jihadist movements in the
Middle East …”

“Has all been manipulated behind the scenes,” Gaëlle confirmed.

“They’re wanting to start World War Three.”

“It has already started my dear,” Gaëlle replied, looking sadly at Chloe.

“And without Superman, we won’t stand a chance,” Oliver commented.

“I am afraid so.”

“By taking Mara, they’ve crippled him. They might just as well be controlling him,” Lana said. “We
can’t let this happen. Where is the secret base?”

“I am afraid I cannot help you. Only a select few in the upper echelons of the Illuminati know the full
truth, know everything. It is unfortunate, but I am not one of them.”

The trio looked at Murphy, but he shook his head.

“Sorry, but she’s right. Even I don’t know.”

“There has to be someone who knows,” Chloe said.

“There is,” Gaëlle replied. “My brother. He will return eventually to his home.”

“Where is it?” Chloe asked, intending to pass this information immediately on to Clark.

“It is called Castle Montfaucon.”

“Wasn’t Montfaucon the name of an execution site?” Oliver asked.

Chloe grimaced. Rather a morbid name for a castle, yet so fitting for the character of Yves de
Rochefort.

“Ah, yes,” the older woman replied, “but it is also the name of a commune.”

“Commune?” Lana asked, clearly thinking of the American definition of commune which was
usually a place for religious cults or hippies.

“Like a township,” Murphy told her. “Where exactly is it?”

“In the department of Dordogne.”

“That’s about 240 miles from here,” Oliver explained. “Do you know when he’s likely to return?”

She shook her head regretfully.

“It is difficult to say. He may still be overseeing the tests.”

“Do you know of anyone else who might know?” Chloe asked.

“There are many political figures who profess an allegiance to the Illuminati. I do not know their
rank. As I explained, we in the lower ranks are not privy to such information.”

Chloe sighed. Someone had to know, but the only other person she knew of who had had dealings
with the Illuminati personally was Lex, and there was no way she was going to trust him.

That was something she would have to work out, she supposed.

Lana was studying the older woman.

“Can I ask, why are you helping us? Especially if you’re part of the Illuminati?”

“Please understand, I am not your enemy, but I am not your friend. I am doing this to save my brother, and the world. I have watched Superman and I know of his power. I fear this power. If Superman were to lose his faith in humanity, he would become very dangerous. I know this. I have seen it.”

“What do you mean, you’ve seen it?” Oliver asked.

“I have power too. I can see the future and it will be a very dark place indeed. Should Superman fail to find his child, he will unleash a fury on this world that we have no hope of defeating. The Illuminati will not win this way. They will be crushed under his might.”

Chloe exchanged a look with her husband. She knew what the woman meant. Clark had a dark side and she had no doubt that he would be tempted. Without Lois, and without Mara, he would never be able to control those dark impulses. His family was his humanity. Without that, they were lost.

A tall woman entered the room. She was a statuesque blonde with an athletic figure. Chloe frowned. The woman rather reminded her of Wonder Woman, particularly in her manner.

“Ah, may I present to you Helena Kosmatos.”

Chloe studied the woman, who took Gaëlle’s hand and smiled.

“Hello,” she said, her voice soft and lyrical.

“This is Chloe and her husband Oliver, Lana and Murphy.”

Helena nodded. “Yes, I understand. I am aware of the circumstances of this meeting and I must apologise for the actions of my sister.”

Lana frowned at her. “Your sister?”

“Her name is Aresia. She is the one who has taken the young daughter of the man called Superman. My queen is very concerned.”

“Queen Hippolyta?” Chloe asked.

Helena raised an eyebrow. “You know of her?”

“I know another sister of yours. Diana. She has been helping the Justice League.”

Helena looked saddened. “Yes, of course. My sister left us to live in the world of Man, never to return.”

“Why is that?” O’Shea asked.

The blonde looked coolly at him. Clearly she had heard of his role in the conspiracy.

“We are but a small, uh, community, and isolated from the world of Man. It is our belief that this
world is corrupt, yet we are not free from corruption ourselves. My sister Aresia’s mind has been poisoned. That is why we believe she has joined with those who work for the Illuminati. She has a deep-seated hatred for all men.”

“You live in a matriarchal society,” Chloe pointed out.

“Yes, but while we do not allow men among us, we also do not believe all men are corrupt or evil.”

“Why are you here?”

“I am here to help. I also wish to find my sister and return her home, where she belongs.”
Episode 9: Part 2

Chapter Summary

Lois has kicked Clark out of the apartment. The family attempt to reason with her.

“Sweetheart, Clark called again.”

Lois sat in the rocker, just staring at the crib. Her face was pale, with a pinched look. There were dark circles under her eyes and they were red and puffy from crying.

“I don’t want to talk to him,” she told her father. Her voice was heavy and full of grief

The general came in and crouched beside the chair.

“Lois, I know you’re hurting and angry right now, but don’t you think he’s hurting too?”

“You don’t understand Daddy. He wasn’t there! He could have stopped it, but he wasn’t there!”

“You don’t know that he could have,” he said reasonably. “If these people knew his vulnerability they would have used it against him.”

“I don’t want to hear it,” she said stubbornly.

Sam sighed and rose, going out and shaking his head. He looked at Martha.

“She won’t see reason. I don’t know what else to do.”

Martha looked just as grieved as they all felt, shaking her head.

“Maybe I’m only her boss,” Perry said quietly, “but if I know Lois, she’s not the type to forgive easily.”

“She gets that from me, I’m afraid,” Sam sighed. “She’s always been the more stubborn one of my girls. Lucy can be headstrong and she doesn’t think things through, but since Lois and Clark have been together, hell, even before they began dating, she seemed to settle down. I was so proud of her when she became a reporter. She seemed so happy in her work and lord knows, she needed that focus.”

“We have to find Mara,” Martha said. “It’s already ripped the family apart. I can only imagine what Clark will do if they don’t find her soon.”

The lift mechanism whirred and the door lifted. Steve Trevor walked out.

“Senator, General Lane, uh …” He frowned at Perry.

“Perry White. And you are?”

“Steve Trevor. I’m with the Secret Service.”

The older man nodded. “I see,” he said.
“I escorted Senator Kent here when we heard about her grand-daughter and I’ve had several of my people look into the people responsible. We suspect some of our own people in the White House may be with the group but we have yet to find proof.” He bit his lip. “We do, however, have a lead on someone in the CIA, as well as the NSA.”

Martha nodded. “Yes, this man called John Crawford. I believe Supergirl is already looking for him.”

Steve faced her with a half-smirk. “I would hate to be Crawford then. If Supergirl is as angry as her cousin …”

Sam frowned at the man. He was unsure if Trevor knew the truth about Superman. Martha had mentioned he knew Wonder Woman, but it was hard to tell whether he knew the woman who assisted him was that same superhero.

Speak of the devil, he thought as the Amazon stepped onto the terrace. Trevor looked over toward her and for a moment Sam could swear he saw a message between the pair. Hmm, he thought. So that’s how it is.

“I apologise for the intrusion,” Wonder Woman said quietly. “I was looking for Kal-El.”

“He isn’t here, Princess,” Martha told her. “I believe he may be at the farm.”

“Thank you, I will look for him there,” she said, glancing once more at Steve.

“You!”

Wonder Woman turned toward the circular staircase and stared up at Lois, who looked angrier than Sam had ever seen her.

“Miss Lane …”

“Your family did this!” Lois accused. “Your sister took my baby!” She began screaming. “I trusted you and now because of you and your cursed family my baby is gone! How dare you come in here …”

Sam immediately grabbed his daughter before she could fly at the other woman. He was sure Wonder Woman could protect herself, but the last thing he wanted was for Lois to give away her husband’s secret identity. While it wasn’t confirmed if Trevor knew that Mara was actually the daughter of Superman, there had to be a reason why Diana chose not to reveal her own secret to the agent.

“Lois, that’s enough,” Martha said sharply. “Princess, I am sorry. As you can see, we are all rather upset.”

“I understand, Senator Kent,” Diana said quietly. “I’m sorry that the actions of my sister have hurt you, Lois, but I promise you we are all doing our utmost to find her.”

“Get out!” Lois screamed. She turned in her father’s arms and sobbed against his shoulder. Sam patted her back, not knowing what else to say or do.

As he watched, Steve went out to talk to the Amazon Princess, but he had no idea what they were saying. He looked helplessly at Martha.

Lucy came in from the living room, holding the television remote in her hand. She pressed a button
and another monitor came on. Superman was on the screen, looking grieved. Sam could see he was exhausted.

Superman, can you tell us if there has been a ransom demand?

That had to be Ron Troupe, Sam thought. He had been at the hospital and tried to catch Martha for an interview until Perry told him to back off. Still, sooner or later, someone was going to ask the question. Why was Martha at the hospital when Superman’s life was in danger?

The attending medics had of course been sworn to secrecy about Lois’ presence there, but at least they had managed to get out that Lois was a good friend of Superman’s, hence her being brought in with Supergirl. Still, that would fool all but the sharpest of reporters.

There has been no demand at this time, Superman replied.

Why would someone kidnap Clark and Lois’ child? Another reporter … it sounded like Cat, asked.

I cannot be certain Miss Grant, however they may have wished to get at me since they know of my friendship with Miss Lane and Mr Kent.

Are you looking for the kidnappers?

Believe me, Mr Jeffries, I am doing everything within my power to find the kidnappers and their hostage.

Supergirl broke in. Clearly she was there to support her cousin.

Thank you, my cousin and I wish to resume our search. Thank you again.

***

Clark managed to leave the room without breaking down. Kara followed him, a hand on his back, supporting him.

“Clark …”

“I have to find her, Kara. I have to find her before my whole family falls apart.”

“I could go and talk to Lois,” she suggested gently.

“No. I don’t think she really wants to see any of us right now. I heard her screaming at Diana just now.”

“There must be something we can do.”

“Find this Agent Crawford,” he said. “He has to know something.”

Kara nodded. “Will you be all right?”

“I’m going to go back to the farm. Maybe if I find some work to do I can focus on something other than Mara.”

Kara doubted he would. He was probably going to sit up in the loft and mope about his broken family, wanting to turn back time, do anything to fix this. That was Clark.

She flew into the central city, looking for the central headquarters of the NSA office. Crawford
hadn’t been in D.C so there was a good chance he had returned to Metropolis. Of course, there was also the chance that he might be trying to avoid her.

Kara quickly changed into her street clothes, putting on her black wig and the huge glasses she wore. They seemed a little too big for her face and probably a little old-fashioned and she probably came off as someone who wanted to hide who they truly were. Still, the disguise worked for Clark. Mostly.

The NSA building was downtown, a forty storey steel and glass monstrosity that was more than likely built by one of the Luthorcorp subsidiary construction companies about twenty years earlier. Luthorcorp’s construction brief seemed to be the same for every building. Steel and glass. No aesthetics at all.

Kara had been in the Luthorcorp tower a few times and had seen just how cold that office was. Before Oliver Queen had merged Queen Industries with it, Luthorcorp offices had always been decorated in basically three tones. Black, silver and purple. All rather cold colours in her opinion. Austere, unforgiving.

She had visited Oliver in his office not long after she had returned to Earth, having had no success in searching for her family, hoping they might have survived the cataclysm which had destroyed Krypton. She had liked the reds and browns he used which made the office seem warmer somehow. Kara didn’t know much about aesthetics, but she knew enough to know what felt good.

The NSA office did not feel good at all. While it lacked the coldness of the Luthorcorp offices, the main lobby had no colour to it. No warmth. Even the guard on the reception desk exuded a sort of dullness. There was no smile in welcome. He wasn’t cold, just … neutral, she supposed.

“I need to see Agent Crawford,” she said.

“You have an appointment?” the guard asked in a lackluster tone, as if he was just waiting until his shift was over.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “Could you please just tell him Linda Danvers is here to see him?”

The guard frowned at her, but told her to take a seat. She watched him type something on what appeared to be an i-pad. He then resumed whatever it was he’d been doing before she had come in.

Kara glanced at the clock above the security desk and waited. The guard ignored her as the time ticked slowly. Ten minutes. Twenty minutes. She was beginning to grow impatient, but figured Crawford was making her stew on purpose.

Finally, after thirty minutes, he approached her.

“Linda, I’m so sorry. I was stuck in a meeting.”

Sure you were, she thought, but schooled her features into a concerned smile.

“Oh, I didn’t know you were in a meeting, otherwise I would have called.”

“It’s all right. Would you like to get some coffee?”

“Thank you. Yes I would.”

He placed a guiding hand on her back as they walked out of the building. Kara was left in little doubt that he wanted to do more than lay a hand on her back. She quickly x-rayed him and saw he was
“So, do you want to go to the coffee shop on the corner?” he asked.

“No, let’s go to Centennial Park,” she said. The park was about a block away from the building. It was still wrecked from the rioting and part of it was closed off. That was where Kara wanted to take him.

John immediately looked uneasy, his hand going to his jacket, and the gun at his waist. Kara caught his hand, wrapping her own around his wrist and applying just enough pressure with her super strength to make it clear she wasn’t taking no for an answer. His eyes widened.

“Don’t make a sound,” she said under her breath. “If you do, I will crush your wrist so badly it will be completely useless. I know you’ve been playing me, Agent Crawford. I also know about your affiliation with the Illuminati. I was in your office in D.C and I’ve seen the contents of your safe.” She smiled at him as some people passed them.

She nudged him to start walking toward the park. They walked in silence for a few minutes until they came to the park entry. John turned to her.

“Linda …”

“Why don’t we just dispense with the theatrics, John,” she said. “I know you know who I am. I also know you know I can hurt you. I guess you assumed I didn’t realise what you were up to, especially the day you first broke in at the farm. I warn you now, John. I’m in no mood for games.”

“Fine, Kara. Or Supergirl. Whatever you prefer. What do you want?”

“I want names. I want locations. And most of all, I want my cousin’s daughter returned to her family.”

“You’re going to have to do better than that, Supergirl,” he said, grinning cockily. “I’ve been trained in interrogation techniques, and in torture. There is nothing you can do to me that I can’t overcome.”

She studied him for a moment, then nodded. “Perhaps you are right. However, I am not the one you will be dealing with.”

She looked at the man who had come out of the bushes, along with a teenaged girl. At least, that was what they looked like from the outside. As soon as John saw them, he smirked.

“If you think you can …”

His smile faded as J’onn and Megan morphed into their true forms. So much for the trained agent, Kara thought.

“What the hell are you?” he asked, his voice trembling.

“He’s all yours,” Kara told J’onn.

J’onn reformed into the human disguise.

“Agent Crawford, we have met before. In this form, at least. I am J’onn. This is Megan. We’re Martians.”

Crawford began to splutter in disbelief.
“Martians? There’s no life on Mars.”

“Not now there isn’t,” Megan told him. “We’re all that’s left of a war that destroyed all life on our planet.”

“You can’t …” He stumbled as J’onn approached him from one side while Megan approached from the other. “What are you doing?”

“You may be trained to withstand any interrogation technique, Agent Crawford, but you have little control over your subconscious mind.”

Crawford struggled in Megan’s grip, looking in alarm at Kara.

“Kara, don’t do this!” he cried as J’onn’s hands began to glow.

“It’s too late to protest,” she told him. “J’onn …”

The NSA agent screamed, more in fear than in pain, as J’onn placed his glowing hand on the man’s forehead. Crawford collapsed to the ground, panting. J’onn glared at him, his eyes glowing red.

“You are a very sick man, Crawford.”

“What?” Megan asked. “What did you see?”

“Nothing you need to concern yourself with, M’gann.” He looked up at Kara and pulled her aside. “He only knows what they tell him. However, I know the name of his immediate superior and some of the names of his affiliates. A woman named Isabelle Lewis is one of them. She is with Canadian Intelligence.”

Kara nodded. “Yes, I know. Steve Trevor told me. Who is his superior?”

“The Illuminati have many levels. How the system works is they have a few in the upper echelons who know each other’s position, but not their true identity. They in turn recruit others to the next tier, but have pledged an oath not to reveal the identity of their counterparts to anyone. Crawford reports to de Rochefort, who he believes is number three, but he also knows who number one is.”

“Who is he?” Kara asked, frowning.

“Sir Allister Phillips.”

She nodded. That made perfect sense.

“What about his immediate superior in the organisation?” she asked.

“The Vice President of the United States.”

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Moana glared at Lex.

“Did you really think that was going to make any difference?” she asked.

“In my experience, sometimes the most prudent approach is the best way to negotiate your position.”

“Isabelle Lewis will not negotiate,” she told him curtly.
“But at least we know where we stand,” Lex told her.

“Which is nowhere. We can’t get in to see Anders …”

“Not by a legal standpoint, no.”

She sighed. “You’re being obtuse.”

“If that is your way of calling me an idiot, Ms Rangihau, I am not the one who affiliated themselves with a known subversive.”

“Anders is no more subversive than you are, and at least he’s not a ruthless jerk bent on buying his way into the White House.”

“My ambitions are nothing to do with this.”

“Except that the Illuminati are the only people standing in the way of your ambitions,” she pointed out. “We both know this whole thing against Anders is a whitewash, instigated by Isabelle Lewis. And we also know why. They planned this. They wanted you out of the way, since you wouldn’t ally yourself with them.”

“Divide and conquer. I’m familiar with the strategy.”

“If you’re going to start giving me lessons from Sun Tzu or from the great Roman Empire, Luthor, let’s not and just say we did.”

Lex rolled his eyes at her. She was right on one thing. His visit to Isabelle Lewis’ office had achieved nothing. They could not even get an answer from her on what Anders was charged with, let alone any legal basis with which to see him. The Canadian justice system did not answer to the American one and the solicitor Lex had employed could not come up with any solution.

Since Moana was considered persona non grata to the Canadian government as well, they couldn’t exactly step out the door. Caron had reported that intelligence officers were stationed at various points waiting for the moment Moana stepped out, ready to arrest her.

Meanwhile, his company was falling apart. Tess was in Europe and not answering any calls from Otis. Lionel … at least the one from the alternate reality, had made sure there were funds in various hidden bank accounts, but Lex couldn’t access them from Canada. Not unless he wanted Isabelle and her agents to confiscate the funds.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, the one person Lex could have counted on to keep Clark from going off the deep end had kicked him out. Lex might not trust Superman, but if there was one thing he did know, it was that Lois kept him in check. Who knew what Clark would do without the hand of Mad Dog Lane holding on to his leash and pulling him back when he tried to break his self-imposed boundaries.

If anything was going to send Superman off the deep end, it was this.

Moana sighed heavily and he looked at her.

“What?”

“You’re not wrong. About Superman, I mean.”

He frowned at her. Since when could she read minds?
“No, I haven’t read your mind, if that’s what you’re thinking. I was just thinking about something you said when Superman first came on the scene. About how he cannot be completely trusted. We both know Clark isn’t perfect. He’s been brought up human, with human frailties. If anything is going to make him ignore his upbringing, and his conscience, it’ll be this.”

Her brown eyes were troubled. She turned and looked out of the window.

“If we don’t stop these people, I fear for the world. If that child isn’t returned to her father, he may unleash a terror on this world that we’ve never seen. If we thought Darkseid was bad, imagine what an angry Superman would do.”

Lex swallowed. It would be Armageddon, he thought.

***

Plastique studied her boss. Flag had done a lot of things as a member of the Suicide Squad but this was something else.

She could hear the infant crying as the doctors worked on her, taking samples, from blood to spine fluid. Bette winced at that. While she had never had the procedure done, that she knew of, she knew from some of the kids she had worked with in the Injustice League that it was painful.

She moved closer to the Colonel.

“Why are they doing this?” she asked softly. “She’s just a baby.”

“It’s not our place to question,” he told her. “We’re just here to secure the premises.”

She bit her lip.

“Well, it’s wrong,” she said. “I’ve done a lot that could be bad, but they shouldn’t be doing that to a little baby. She can’t hurt them.”

Flag glared at her and told her to shut up. Bette moved back to her post, glancing over at Lawton, who just shrugged. He clearly didn’t like security detail, but then he was a trained assassin. How that was supposed to help them stop anyone from coming on to the island, Plastique had no idea.

She strained her ears, trying to hear what was going on. The scientists seemed to be trying to talk quietly but occasionally their voice levels rose when they were excited by something.

“The hybrid …” Again their voices dropped. Bette frowned. Hybrid? What were they talking about? The baby wasn’t an animal or a plant. How could she be a hybrid?

She again strained to listen, but heard nothing for the next few hours. A bearded man walked in, completely ignoring them as he passed, going in to the bunker to talk to the scientists.

“Ah, baron,” one of the scientists greeted him. Bette quickly realized they were speaking in French, but she could understand it. How much the others heard and understood, she had no idea.

"Qu'est-ce que vous avez les résultats des tests?" the man said.

"Eh bien, malheureusement, les résultats ne sont pas concluants. La peau de l'hybride n'est pas indestructible, mais nous avons remarqué qu'il est beaucoup plus difficile que celle d'un humain.Nous avons utilisé une évaluation beaucoup trop fine et cela a cassé l'aiguille. L'enfant aura la force comme son père ..."
"Et qu'elle autres pouvoirs peut-elle avoir?" the 'baron’ asked.

"Il est beaucoup trop tôt pour le dire. Vous devez comprendre. L'enfant est âgé de quelques mois seulement."

"Il doit y avoir quelque chose dans son bilan sanguin."

"Bien sûr, le bilan sanguin est très similaire à l'échantillon que nous avons de Superman...”

“What results have you from the tests?”

“Well, unfortunately the results are not conclusive. The hybrid’s skin is not impervious but we have noticed it is much tougher than that of a human’s. We used much too fine a gauge and broke the needle. The child will have strength like her father …”

“And what other powers will she have?”

“It is far too soon to tell. You must understand. The child is only a few months old.”

“There must be something in her bloodwork.”

“Of course, the bloodwork is very similar to the sample we have of Superman’s...”

Again the voices dropped. Bette glanced into the laboratory inside the bunker in horror, realising now why the baby was being termed a ‘hybrid’. She was Superman’s daughter!

Bette looked once more at Flag, but he refused to look back at her. She wanted to say something but had no idea what.

“Plastique, you’re dismissed.”

She frowned at Amanda Waller, who limped toward her, smirking.

“What?” she asked.

“Go. Your shift is over. Report to the bunkhouse and take your meal break, then bed down for the night.”

Bette nodded, then walked off. As she got her meal at the bunkhouse, she couldn’t help looking up toward the only villa on the island. It was high up on the hill, which looked like any ordinary hill to anyone flying overhead, but hid the bunker in which they’d built the secret laboratory where they were now experimenting on Superman’s child.

She took her meal to one of the tables and sat, chewing thoughtfully, turning events over and over in her head. Everything about this felt wrong.

Bette certainly wasn’t perfect. Her abilities had caused her to be tossed out of the family home in Quebec and she’d been forced to live on the streets for years. She wasn’t sure what had happened. All she knew was that her mother had been born in Smallville, then met and married a French Canadian man Phillipe Sans Souci when she’d moved to Quebec for work. Not long after Bette was born, her parents had divorced and her mother had returned to Kansas.

According to Phillipe, Bette had always been a ‘difficult’ child. She had not got along with her stepmother and when she had run away from home she had decided to go looking for her mother. When she was twelve years old, she had been hunted down by men from Luthorcorp and imprisoned in a facility in Montana. She’d been let go after about two years but while others who had been set free had been tagged, she hadn’t.

Tess Mercer had had people hunt her down, then a friend of Bette’s had betrayed her, telling Ms Mercer where she was. Bette had been trying to get out of town on a bus when the new CEO of
Luthorcorp had got on, intending to try and talk to her. Feeling trapped, Bette had blown up the bus using her ability to create energy blasts.

When Chloe had found her, Bette had been cynical at first, wondering what Chloe expected of her. Afraid of her abilities being discovered, Bette had killed her friend Tommy, then prepared to run, only Chloe had figured it out. Bette hadn’t wanted to attack someone who had been the first real friend she could remember having, but she had felt she didn’t have a choice.

Clark had stopped her and talked her into going to Belle Reve so she could at least get her head straight. Only she had agreed instead to work for Ms Mercer.

Clark hadn’t made any demands on her and had tried to help her. Sure, after the second time they had met he had had her placed in Belle Reve, but her time there and his frequent visits to see how she was doing, had really helped her. When she’d been recruited to the Suicide Squad, she had decided to do so because she thought she could do some good.

Of course, she hadn’t really thought about what she was getting herself into. She hadn’t considered the consequences. Now she was older and wiser and she understood what was happening was wrong. She owed it to Clark to protect his little girl. To stop these horrible experiments. God knew, she understood what it felt like to be experimented on. To feel scared and alone with no one to turn to. To feel helpless.

There had to be something she could do. Someone she could turn to.

She stopped chewing on a lettuce leaf and gazed out toward the shore. Tess Mercer.
Clark sat in the recliner which had once been his father’s, gazing miserably at the blank television screen. He was unkempt, unshaven. He hadn’t shaved in days and now had the beginnings of a scraggly beard. There were dark circles under his eyes, showing signs he hadn’t been sleeping. Maybe he didn’t need much sleep, but he still needed it, and when he didn’t it showed in his face like everyone else.

There was a photo album open in his lap. Sighing, Clark looked down at it. They had photos on Instagram but Lois was much more of a traditionalist. Not to mention the fact that she’d wanted to protect their baby and didn’t have much faith in the safeguards on the Internet. Yet she’d taken a ton of photos in the first few weeks after Mara’s birth.

He still remembered the night she’d announced her pregnancy. They hadn’t exactly been talking about having kids but she had mentioned it in passing, so he knew she wanted them. In spite of her fears, Clark knew she would be a great mom.

She’d been acting kind of antsy at work that day, sneaking off to an appointment without telling him where. Not that he could have followed, since it turned out he would be occupied with a bank robbery, both as Superman and as Clark, reporting on it. By the time he got back to the office, she had returned and he’d been too busy writing up the robbery to notice what kind of mood she was in.

“Do you have to patrol tonight?” she asked.

“I figured I’d do a fly-by. Why?”

“Oh, no reason. I just thought it would be nice for us to have dinner at home. At the apartment, I mean.”

Clark had frowned at her, but said nothing.

“Um, so, I was going to make Beef Bourguignon,” she said.

While she had been trying to learn how to cook, she still wasn’t that great at it. The one thing she did know how to make, however, was Beef Bourguignon. Someone had taught it to her at one of the army bases when she was a teenager and it was actually very good. Since the recipe she had included about two and a half hours cooking time, she didn’t make it very often. What with their busy lives.

“Sounds great, honey,” he said, beaming brightly.

“Well, anyway, I figured I’d just take some of this home with me,” she said, indicating the pile of papers she had to read for a story she was working on.

“Sure,” he said, returning his focus to his own story. She kissed him on the cheek, chuckling at his absent-mindedness, and went out.
By the time he returned home, the dinner was almost ready and smelled delicious. He had spent a couple of hours patrolling but apart from a few crashes, nothing major seemed to be happening.

Lois greeted him with a kiss and a bottle of his favourite beer. She had changed into loose pants and a shimmery blouse in a gold colour that brought out the hazel in her eyes. Clark eyed her with an appreciative grin.

“Mm, you look gorgeous,” he said, pulling her close and kissing her.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back, before pulling away. Clark frowned at her.

“What?”

“Dinner’s almost ready,” she said.

“What if I didn’t care and just wanted to make love to my wife?”

“I’d say hold that thought baby,” she replied with a smile. She turned away, picking up a glass which was clearly juice from the counter. Clark frowned at her. Normally Lois liked a glass of crisp white wine to end her day.

“Why don’t you go change,” she said, pushing him toward the bedroom. “Relax for a bit. I’m just finishing up.”

Clark changed into jeans and t-shirt and sat in the recliner, drinking his beer from the bottle. He didn’t turn on the television, knowing that it sometimes irritated his wife to see him watching a game or something. They usually watched football games together – not that she was a huge fan, but she did it because he liked football. Just as he watched programs on monster trucks because she loved them.

Half an hour later he heard the sound of Lois beginning to serve up dinner. He dashed into the kitchen and helped her with the casserole dish, putting it on the table. The rich aroma of the sauce drifted above and he sniffed appreciatively.

“Smells great, darling,” he said.

She brought out the platter of vegetables – steamed carrots, beans and broccoli, and set it on the table. She returned to the kitchen and brought him another beer. Again he noticed that there was no wineglass.

“You’re not drinking?” he asked.

“I don’t feel like it,” she said.

They began to eat, talking about their day. Clark told her about the bank robbery and she told him a funny story involving an article she was writing but she seemed distracted. Clark finally dropped his napkin on the table.

“Is everything okay, Lois? You seem a little distracted.”

“Everything’s fine, honey. Better than fine. Uh, you know that appointment I had today?”

He frowned at her. “What appointment?”

“Well …”
She suddenly turned very green and got up quickly, dashing to the bathroom. Clark followed her, worrying that her appointment meant something bad. He could hear her retching.

“Uh honey?”

“I’m okay,” she called out before she retched again. Clark glanced back at the dinner table, taking in the glass of water by her plate. He heard the toilet flush and Lois came out, looking pale but otherwise fine.

“Lois, sweetheart?”
She looked upset. “I had this whole romantic evening planned where I was going to tell you, but …”

“What? What is it?”

“I’m pregnant,” she said.

He stared at her in disbelief. “What?”

“I’m pregnant. We’re having a baby.”

He let the words sink in. He’d never thought it would be possible, considering they literally came from two different worlds, but …

“That appointment,” she said, going to the kitchen to pour herself another glass of water to rinse her mouth out. “I went to see Emil. I’m about six weeks.”

Clark couldn’t help the goofy grin on his face. This beautiful, gorgeous woman, the love of his life, was going to have his baby. Lois looked at him and laughed.

“You should so see your face right now,” she giggled.

He wrapped her in his arms and held her tight.

“Wow!” he said. “You’re having a baby.”

“Clark?”

He looked up from the album at his mother.

“Oh sweetie,” she said.

“Mom, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“But you have to. Look, I know things look bad right now, but …”

“Mom …”

“No, honey. You’re both hurting. I’m sure Lois didn’t mean what she said.”

“She meant it, and frankly, I can’t blame her.”

“You shouldn’t be apart like this.”

“There’s nothing I can do, Mom. Except try to find Mara.”

“We’re doing everything we can.”
“Not you, Mom. Me. She’ll never take me back if I don’t come back with Mara. Even then I’m not even sure she’ll let me come back.”

Clark heard the hitch in his voice. He missed Lois. He couldn’t sleep without her, but he couldn’t go back. Not until …

He tightened his fist in his lap, thinking what he would like to do to the baron once he got hold of him, imagining wrapping his hand around the man’s neck and squeezing. Or using his heat vision, doing to the man what Zod had once done to Oliver. Very like the huge scar Jor-El had given him all those years ago when Clark had resisted the training. Jor-El had later told him it had been a test of his maturity, to see if he was ready to accept his destiny but Clark had admonished the A.I. of his birth father, telling him that wasn’t the sort of test he appreciated.

The fact that Clark had run away to the city showed the ‘test’ had been a dismal failure. He hadn’t been mature enough or strong enough in his own convictions to stand up to Jor-El.

He wanted to view this latest problem as just another test; one he was failing miserably. What kind of superhero, what kind of example would he be to the people if he gave in to the feelings of hatred and the desire to commit murder, no matter how justified? What he had once told his friends in the League was that no matter what, they could not bring their personal feelings, their personal biases into the fight.

Yet the Illuminati had made this personal by stealing the one thing that reminded Clark of his place here on this planet. Yes, he had been sent here by his Kryptonian parents to guide the people, to save the planet from its own extinction, which his father had failed to do on Krypton. He was raised on Earth, however, and no matter how alien he was in his abilities, his heart was human, able to feel human emotions. Lois and Mara reminded him of those human emotions. Without them, he might just as well be dead. At least as Clark Kent.

“Clark …”

He looked up again, realising his mother was still standing in front of him.

“Honey, I know you’re angry, and it’s understandable, but you can’t let your feelings turn you into something you’re not.”

He glanced down, realising he’d crushed a beer bottle in his hand. He hadn’t even been aware of picking up the bottle in the first place. His mother had grabbed a rag and was trying to clean him off without cutting herself on the broken glass. He quickly gathered up all the glass with superspeed and tossed it in the trash, then washed his hands before going back out into the living room.

“You don’t understand Mom. I … I can’t think of anything else lately.”

“Sweetheart, I know, and believe me, I want to do the same to these people. Mara is my granddaughter after all. But we have to be better than that.”

“Did you and Dad ever …”

She smiled ruefully. “Well, you know your father always had a short fuse, especially when it came to protecting you. Do you remember when Phelan caught you saving that bus?”

He remembered. Phelan was a dirty cop who had once worked for Lionel Luthor. He had met with his father in the Beanery, basically blackmailing them into getting Clark to work for him. Phelan had threatened to tell the authorities about Clark and his father had attacked the man.
The police detective had then framed his father for a murder, only promising to clear it up if Clark did what he wanted.

“I know what Dad would do to protect me, but this is different. They took Mara, Mom. They took my daughter.”

“I know, baby. This is your child, your flesh and blood, but wanting to hurt them isn’t going to help you find her.”

He raised his head and looked evenly at his mother.

“I don’t want to hurt them, Mom. I want to destroy them.”

Martha stared at her son. She had seen him angry before but not on this level. The look in his eyes was frightening. She had no doubt that he meant what he said. Her fear was that he might just destroy the entire world along with them.

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Aresia had spent days wandering the villa, aware of every guard. Stephanie had still refused to let her go and she was growing impatient with her sister. She resented the fact that Stephanie seemed to be listening to the man she called her husband. Power usurper, she growled to herself. The cretin had taken everything Stephanie had once been as an Amazon and made a mockery of it.

Her sister had refused to tell her where her beloved Sera was. The young Amazon was a few years younger than Aresia and had left Paradise Island, hiding her Amazon identity in a fake one. Aresia had been furious to learn what her sister had done, as had Queen Hippolyta. Several months earlier, saddened that the princess had left Themyscira with the American Steve Trevor, the queen had decreed that no others were to leave without her blessing and the blessing of the goddess Athena.

Still, Sera and their sister Vania had envied Diana and talked at length about leaving to explore the world of Man. Aresia had thought she had talked them out of it, telling them the world was a dangerous place and Man did not like their power being taken by a woman.

Once she realized Sera and Vania had gone, the queen had dispatched both Helena and Cora to find the girls, Aresia had also left, determined to find Sera and drag her back.

She eventually managed to track her to Glasgow in Scotland where her beloved sister had taken the name of Mary, while Vania had taken the name of Anna. They both worked at a museum and no one knew about their Amazonian powers. Vania had even found herself a young man named Daniel who she claimed she was in love with.

Furious, Aresia had fought with her sisters, telling them they didn’t belong in this world, but they had both been adamant that it was their choice and they wanted to stay.

Knowing she could not challenge them, Aresia backed off, but the argument had been overheard by someone who, it turned out, was in the employ of the Baron de Rochefort. He had realised who and what they were and told the baron, who had told Stephanie.

Aresia now realized that Stephanie had betrayed her as well. After she had tried to insist that her plan in taking Superman’s child back to Themyscira to raise her as an Amazon was a better plan than the baron’s, Stephanie had told her that Sera had been taken.

“Que voulez-vous dire, par prise?” she asked.
“Certains hommes d'une organisation américaine a découvert ses pouvoirs.”

“Luthor?” Aresia asked, knowing from what she had overheard that Lex Luthor was interested in trying to exploit others’ abilities.


“Mais vous voulez l'enfant d'abord.”

“What do you mean, taken?”

“No. I believe they call themselves Veil. Aresia, we can help Sera, but you must help us first. The baron is a very powerful man and he has influence over these people. We have contacts in the American government. We can secure Sera’s release …”

“But you want the child first.”

Aresia sighed, recalling the conversation. She’d begun to realise that there was no Veil, or if it did exist, it was actually working for the baron. She would make Stephanie tell her the truth, she decided, striding angrily down the corridor in search of her traitor sister.

“Stephanie …”

Her sister was lounging on a sofa, reading a fashion magazine. She didn’t even bother to look up.

“Stephanie …” Aresia said again. The blonde former Amazon dropped the magazine and glared at her.

"Aresia, ces petites crises de colère de la vôtre parts sont des plus ennuyeux."

“Je veux savoir où ils gardent Sera.”

“Je vous l’ai dit…”

“Je sais ce que vous me dites, et je ne vous crois pas. Maintenant, répondez-moi!”

“Aresia!”

“Aresia, these little temper tantrums of yours are becoming tiresome.”

“I want to know where they are keeping Sera.”

“I told you …”

“I know what you told me, and I don’t believe you. Now answer me!”

“Aresia!”

She didn’t care. She grabbed the woman’s arms, picking her up from the sofa and tossing her across the room. Stephanie got to her feet, appearing to be dazed. She looked to her left and picked up a brass vase, brandishing it like a baton.

Aresia approached her, shoving her sister against the wall and holding her by the throat. Stephanie began to choke, her face turning blue.

“Dites-moi!” Aresia growled
“Tell me!”

Stephanie didn’t reply, one hand on Aresia’s wrist, desperately trying to pull her hand away. Aresia squeezed a little harder, feeling something pop in her sister’s neck. Stephanie gave a gurgle, her hand dropping limply to her side. Her lips were blue, as was her throat. Her windpipe had been crushed.

Aresia dropped the body like a stone, staring in horror. She had killed the traitor without getting an answer. She had no idea where they were keeping Sera and now that Stephanie was dead, the baron would most likely order the same to be done to her sister. Never mind that Amazons were hard to kill.

What had she done?

The door crashed open and two armed guards stared at her. She snorted to herself in derision. For security men, they were slow at responding to the ruckus.

As soon as they saw Stephanie on the floor, clearly dead, they raised their guns. Aresia ran at them, grabbing the barrel of one gun and forcing it to point at the ceiling, then broke the man’s grip, knocking him out with the butt of the gun before turning on the second man. Neither one of them had had time to react.

She had no idea where she was going to go as she ran out of the villa. They were on an island in the Pacific. There were only two ways she could get off this accursed island. By plane or by boat, and she had neither.

There was, however, one guard who patrolled the shore. When he saw her running toward him, he frowned, but didn’t raise his gun.

"Vous! Dites-moi, ou il ya un bateau."

He stared at her blankly.

“Un bateau, imbécile!” she screamed.

“You!” she said. “Tell me there is a boat.”

“A boat, you imbecile!”

She heard shouts behind her and realised the two men had recovered. They were running toward them, shouting. The guard stared at her like an idiot. Aresia punched him.

“Un bateau,” she screamed again. "Enlevez-moi de cette île."

“A boat! Take me off this island.”

The guard tried to subdue her and she hit him hard in the face, hearing the bones of his nose crunch on impact. She paused long enough to see him fall to the ground, screaming in pain, before she made her way to the boathouse. There was a power boat inside. Aresia had no idea if there was fuel or where the closest landfall was, but she couldn’t stay on this island another minute longer. She had to escape.

Still, she didn’t know the first thing about boats. When she had left Themyscira, she had stowed away on board Helena and Cora’s invisible plane.

She circled the boat, wondering how she was supposed to use it.
“Pensiez-vous vraiment que ce serait si facile?” a voice growled.

“Did you really think it would be that easy?”

Aresia looked up and realised it was Gustave, the baron’s chauffeur. He also employed Simon Valmont as a personal bodyguard and chauffeur but had left Gustave on the island. She stared at the man with thinning blond hair as he pointed the automatic weapon at her. Aresia might be an Amazon, with abilities blessed by the goddess, but she knew when she was defeated.

“Vous êtes chanceux je ne te tue pas. Au lieu de cela, je pense que je vais vous laisser pour le baron à traiter.”

“Vous ne pouvez rien faire pour moi,” she told him.

“Vraiment?” He gestured with the barrel of his gun. “Je ne voudrais pas être vous, Amazon, lorsque le baron apprend que vous avez tué sa femme.”

“Il l’aime tant que ça?”

Gustave shrugged. “Qu’est-ce que l’amour? Elle lui était utile.”

“You are lucky I do not shoot you. Instead, I think I will leave you for the baron to deal with.”

“You can do nothing to me.”

“Really? I would not like to be you, Amazon, when the baron learns how you killed his wife.”

“He loves her that much?”

“What is love? She was useful to him.”

Just as she thought. The baron knew nothing about love, but he knew about power.

Aresia tried to draw the man out. The baron had stayed in the villa two or three days before he’d left for some unknown destination. Aresia had heard enough to realise it was another island where they would be keeping the child. The infant half-Kryptonian.

If she could not escape this wretched island, she thought, then she would find some other way to use what little time she had left to find her sister. Then, together, they would find the child and take her to Themyscira. A child with the powers of Superman would be an extraordinary Amazon.

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Steve Trevor was a lot of things, but he was not stupid. He’d known the moment his colleagues in the Secret Service had learned of the kidnapping that the grand-daughter of Senator Martha Kent was no ordinary child. Especially after the things Diana had told him a couple of months earlier. She’d asked him to help her protect the child of Superman.

The senator had been staying at the apartment belonging to Oliver Queen but had left to go to Smallville to talk to her son. Steve had only remained long enough to ensure that Lois Lane was being looked after by her family, telling General Lane that he would do everything in his power to learn the whereabouts of his grand-daughter.

That had been a week ago and he hadn’t seen Diana since Lane had screamed at her. While Steve could understand the woman was grieving at the loss of her daughter, he couldn’t help but think that maybe she had gone a little too far in blaming the princess.

Steve had been working out of the Metropolis office of the Secret Service, trying all of his contacts, both in the Air Force and in the service, trying to dig up more information on the Illuminati. For an
organisation that seemed to have people everywhere, it was incredibly difficult to track.

He decided to leave the office and head to the local sandwich shop, hoping the walk in the brisk fall air would clear his head. He wasn’t surprised to see Diana follow him in her Wonder Woman costume.

Supposedly, his assistant had been away on another project, but her absence had coincided curiously with the problems in Gotham. Steve had realised a long time ago who his ‘assistant’ really was, but he had chosen to respect her distance, knowing she thought a relationship between them just wasn’t possible. Yet she had chosen to work with him in a civilian capacity. It was flattering in a way, that she cared so much about him that she wanted to keep him safe, but he could take care of himself.

“Princess,” he said.

“Steve,” she said softly.

“Are you all right? After what Lois …”

“I cannot blame her for being upset with me. Or with Clark. She is grieving.”

“Diana, I must know the truth. The baby … you said she was Superman’s. But I saw the photographs. She’s a little young but I can see some of Lois.”

“I cannot answer your question, Steve.”

“Why not?” He stopped walking and faced her. “Princess, please do not treat me like I am an idiot. Clark Kent is …” He lowered his voice. “Superman.”

She sighed in resignation, then nodded.

“You must never tell anyone,” she told him. “You’ve seen what has happened. If the rest of the world were to know the truth …”

“I understand,” he told her. “Believe me, I do understand the need for secrecy.”

She smiled at him. “I know you do,” she replied. “There is something else. Supergirl contacted me. She has managed to learn the identity of someone high in the chain of Illuminati. He is not as high as the Baron de Rochefort, who we believe has Mara Kent, but he is high enough that he may have some information.”

“Who is he?”

“Vice President Madison.”

Steve looked at her, remembering an article which had appeared in a tabloid newspaper several weeks ago. It had been dismissed as a crackpot theory by the Service, but now he had cause to wonder.

“What is it?”

He continued walking, gently taking her arm.

“There was an article a few weeks ago, by a man named Mark Anders. He claimed the conspiracy went right to the White House but because there was no proof … The article named the Vice President, and the director of the CIA. We’re also fairly sure Senator Miranda Clifford is part of the conspiracy.”
“They will not tell the truth.”

“Not without you, no,” he told her. “I believe you might have the answer to that,” he added, looking down at her lariat. She followed his gaze, then smiled.

“I believe you are right, Major Trevor.”

“Come with me to Washington,” he said. “Senator Kent has gone to stay in Smallville and doesn’t need me.”

“Yes, I will,” she replied.

Steve grinned at his former lover. If he could show her a way for them to work together, not just within the Secret Service, but in another capacity, then perhaps there was some way he could persuade her to resume their relationship.
Detective John Blake glanced in his rear-view mirror as he turned in to the gateway to Wayne Manor. It had been more than a week since the siege had ended and most of the culprits had been rounded up. Everyone was back at work, helping to clean up the city. Still, he couldn’t help the need to be cautious.

He continued up the driveway, stopping the car outside the main door, and got out, looking around. The manor seemed quiet, but if he knew Batman as he thought he did, it wouldn’t be that way for very long.

“Detective Blake.” The gravelly voice of the butler greeted him from the open door. Clearly Alfred had seen him coming.

“Alfred. How is the invalid?” he asked.

“Perhaps you should see for yourself,” Alfred replied wryly.

Frowning, Blake followed the butler down the long hallway and down a small flight of stairs, through an open doorway. There were grunts and groans from inside. Blake realised the source of the groans when he saw Bruce with some kind of pulley and rope contraption. The rope was looped around his waist and pulled taut, then attached to the pulley. He appeared to be trying to walk with only the rope holding him up.

Selina Kyle was watching with a resigned expression. She turned her head to stare at him, then sighed and shrugged.

“I’ve already tried,” she said. “Dr Hamilton tried. Mr Fox has tried, even Alfred. He won’t listen.”

Blake shook his head, offering a wry grin to the woman.

“Stubborn ass,” Selina muttered.

Bruce wiped sweat from his brow and glared at them.

“What are you two standing around for?” he growled.

“Watching an idiot try to injure himself even more,” Selina shot back. “You should be resting.”

“There is no time to rest. With the Illuminati …”

“You can’t help the Justice League if you injure your back again,” Blake replied.

“I’ll be my own counsel on what I can handle.”

Selina huffed and turned away, walking toward Blake.
“I came here to check on Cassie. Wonder Woman thought it best she stay here until her mother could be found in Egypt.”

“How’s she doing?” Blake asked.

“She’s okay. Still a little spooked but I think she’s going to be okay. Wonder Woman has been stopping by to check up on her.”

“What about you?”

Selina shrugged. “I’m pretty much used to all this crap.” She glanced back into the room where Bruce was still trying to work. “He’s doing too much. I mean, I know he wants to help find the kid and beat these guys and everything but he’s just going to hurt himself.”

Blake bit his lip, studying her. She clearly cared about Bruce even though her other identity made her a natural enemy of Batman’s. Still, it was fairly obvious that the pair went back some years and had a good deal in common.

It still rankled that she had betrayed Batman to Bane. The Gotham police detective knew why she had, but she had to have known that she would have never got what she wanted. Bane was supposed to have some kind of genius intellect. He knew exactly how to manipulate people to get what he wanted.

It was a damn good thing Bane was now locked up.

“How is Commissioner Gordon?” Alfred enquired, stepping out of the room.

“Recovering,” Blake assured him. “Slowly.” After the siege, Blake had been tasked with making sure the Commissioner didn’t try to do too much. It was easier said than done. The commissioner took much pride in his work and didn’t like delegating. He’d been that way since, as a young detective, trying to clean up the streets of Gotham as well as a corrupt police force. At least he was winning one battle. Batman was helping with another.

“Has anyone heard what’s been happening in Metropolis?” Selina asked. “News reports said there’s been no sign of Superman for days.”

“Superman has much more on his mind than the petty troubles of the citizens of Metropolis,” Bruce replied, limping unsteadily out of the workout room, blotting his face with a soft towel. “He is out looking for the Kents’ child.”

Blake frowned at him. “Why would Superman concern himself with …”

“It doesn’t matter why, but for your information, Clark Kent and Lois Lane were the reporters who revealed Superman to the world and since then he’s had a rather unique relationship with them. Or have you forgotten the stories Lois Lane wrote about Superman when he was known as just the Blur?”

Blake shook his head. It made sense, he thought. Although what this had to do with the Illuminati, he had no idea. He had the strong impression there was something Bruce wasn’t telling them.

Bruce continued past them, ignoring Alfred’s frown of disapproval. He turned and looked at Blake.

“Don’t you have a job to do, detective?” he practically snarled.

“Right now I’m more concerned about you. It’s still pretty hairy out there. The local gangs are taking advantage of Batman’s absence.”
Bruce cocked an eyebrow at his butler.

“See?” he said.

“All I see, Master Bruce, is a man who has been gravely injured. You should not be going out there.”

“I’m perfectly capable …”

“Dr Hamilton expressly forbid it,” Alfred replied with a tone that suggested a relationship that was less butler and employer and more father and son. Alfred had explained what had happened after Bruce’s parents were murdered. Thomas Wayne had stipulated in his will that Alfred should be Bruce’s guardian and it seemed that the two were very close despite the fact that Alfred was the family butler. Blake could tell the old man was worried about his ward. Bruce continued to glare at his surrogate father. “And don’t give me that look, Master Bruce,” Alfred scolded. “Dr Hamilton does not believe you are sufficiently recovered to take on anything physical and frankly I agree with him.”

“We could always ask the Justice League to help,” Blake replied. “I believe Mr Garrick and some of his students are still in the city.”

“An excellent solution, Master Blake,” Alfred beamed.

“I can call on some of my friends on the streets,” Selina offered quietly. Blake found himself approving of the young cat burglar. She might not be the most honest of people, but when it came to defending her city, she was fully on board.

“I suppose you expect me to just sit around and do nothing?” Bruce growled.

“Well, that would be a start, Master Bruce. However, since you stubbornly refuse to do so, I suggest perhaps that you lend your talents to other pursuits.”

“Like what?” Bruce grinned at his guardian, although the grin still had a steel edge to it. “Polish the silver?” He eyed Selina with a knowing look. “That is, anything that Selina hasn’t already hocked off.”

She glared at him, clearly outraged. Blake suppressed a chuckle. At least Bruce did seem to have a sense of humour.

Alfred chuckled. “Quite, Master Bruce. I am sure, however, that your time would be better spent learning all you can about this man who you believe may have taken the infant?”

Bruce grumbled, but it seemed to be out of stubbornness. Alfred turned away, having heard the doorbell, and went downstairs to answer it. Blake couldn’t help but notice the looks between Selina and Bruce and wondered what the history was between them. He’d tried looking up information but the systems were still down and the I.T. department was still trying to recover the files on the servers.

Alfred returned, talking to an older woman who looked a little like the young girl upstairs. She had blonde hair flecked with silver. Clearly she spent a lot of time in the sun as her skin was tanned, although it hadn’t taken on the leathery look of someone who refused to use some kind of sun block. It looked as if she had come straight from the airport as Blake could see dark circles under her eyes.

“Master Bruce, this is Doctor Helena Sandsmark. Cassandra’s mother.”

She looked apologetic as she turned to Bruce, her expression showing surprise and more than a little
worry. Blake could see her gaze taking in the slight hunch in Bruce’s form, although he tried to straighten his back so as not to appear vulnerable in front of a stranger.

“Mr Wayne, I must apologise for the upheaval . . .”

Bruce waved his hand. “No problem, Doctor Sandsmark. I’m glad we were able to provide some assistance.”

The archaeologist turned to Alfred.

“If you don’t mind, Mr Pennyworth, I’d like to take my daughter home.”

“Of course, madam. Please call me Alfred.”

Blake raised an eyebrow at Selina, but she didn’t comment. They all stood, although it was clear Bruce was tiring as he had turned pale. Blake was about to suggest the playboy turned superhero go sit down when the older woman returned with young girl. She still looked pale but otherwise much better than when Blake had first seen her.

Bruce seemed to stand up even straighter, smiling gently at the teenager.

“Cassie,” he said softly. “How are you feeling?”

She bit her lip but nodded. “I’m okay,” she said.

“If you ever need anything, you’re welcome here any time,” he told her.

Blake refrained from commenting. While he understood the trauma Cassie had gone through, Bruce’s manner surprised him. It wasn’t like the normally taciturn man to be so gentle with anyone.

“Thank you Mr Wayne,” she said quietly. “Thank you for everything.”

Helena hugged her daughter. “Let’s get you home, honey.”

Blake stepped forward. “Ma’am, I’m a detective with Gotham P.D. I will do everything in my power to ensure the men who attacked Cassie will pay for what they’ve done.”

“I appreciate that. Thank you.”

Selina put a hand on Cassie’s shoulder. “I’ll stop by, okay?”

Cassie smiled gratefully at Selina. Blake had no doubt that the other woman would be taking the girl under her wing. If there was one thing he did know about Selina Kyle, it was that she had little tolerance for men who attacked defenceless girls.

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The Senate was out of session by the time Steve and Diana made it through security. He’d insisted she at least wear civilian clothes so security wouldn’t question her odd appearance. He didn’t mention it, but Diana had the feeling that he understood more than she realised. It spoke a lot of the man he was that he had said nothing to her, apart from perhaps the odd hint.

She spotted the blonde head of Miranda Clifford walking out of the elevator. The woman was walking with a distinguished older gentleman who she recognised as Senator Daniel Abrams. From what she had learned from Martha Kent, Abrams was at least on their side.
Steve doubled his pace, hurrying to catch up with the female senator. Diana had to increase her own pace to keep up, forced to keep her abilities under wraps for now.

“Senator …” Steve called out, but the woman didn’t pause. He spoke louder.

“Senator Clifford.”

She turned, a smile on her face which Diana saw was completely false. She clearly didn’t like her conversation with the other senator being interrupted, although she was trying to be pleasant.

“Yes?”

Steve pulled out his Secret Service badge.

“Major Trevor, ma’am. With the Secret Service. This is my associate, Diana. We were hoping we could speak with you privately.”

She glanced at Senator Abrams, who just shrugged and smiled at them. Diana nodded politely, shooting him a look. He nodded in reply, shooting a glance at Senator Clifford, who appeared not to notice the exchange.

“I have little time,” she said.

“It’s in regards to an investigation,” Steve told her. “Into Senator Kent.”

Abrams had told them of Miranda Clifford’s own efforts to have Martha Kent investigated, particularly in connection with her ties to Superman. When they’d first discussed their strategy, they’d realised the only way to get the senator’s attention was to pretend they were investigating Superman. It was not exactly a lie, but Clifford didn’t have to know that.

Her demeanour changed immediately. She seemed only too eager to assist them, clearly thinking that at last she was going to get Senator Kent expelled.

Steve led the way out of the Capitol Building and out to his car. The plan was to take the senator to an office building used by the Secret Service on occasion.

The senator was ushered into the backseat. Diana sat beside her, remaining quiet.

“I don’t believe I’ve seen you before,” the senator said, gazing curiously at her. “Are you with the Secret Service too?”

“Yes ma’am,” Diana replied, deciding it was better to agree for now, although technically since she was Steve’s assistant in her civilian guise it was correct.

The office building was five minutes’ drive away from the Capitol Building and they arrived within a very short time. Steve again led the way inside, unlocking the door to a small conference room. The senator still didn’t seem to notice anything wrong.

Diana glanced at Steve and he nodded. She went out while the senator made herself comfortable and quickly removed the civilian clothing, revealing her costume. She made sure the lariat was securely attached before returning to the room.

Miranda Clifford stared at her.

“What is this?” she asked slowly.
“I did say it was in regards to an investigation into Senator Kent. I didn’t say exactly what that would entail,” Steve told her coolly.

The senator started to rise but Diana put a hand on her shoulder. The senator’s eyes widened as she realised just how much strength Diana had.

“Who … who are you?” she asked, clearly trying to recover her composure.

“They call me Wonder Woman,” Diana said.

The other woman scoffed. “You’re one of them, aren’t you?”

“By them, are you referring to Superman or the Justice League?” Diana returned, keeping her voice even. “I’m well aware of your xenophobic beliefs, Senator. That is why we are here.”

“You have no right to bring me here under false pretenses,” the woman protested.

“On the contrary, Senator, we do,” Steve replied. “By way of the Patriot Act.”

She stared at him. “I am a patriot, you cannot …”

“Tell us about the Illuminati,” Diana said quietly.

The woman turned her gaze back to Diana. “What?” She had an odd way of pronouncing her ‘wh’, almost blowing out the sound.

“Don’t pretend you know nothing about them, Senator,” Steve snapped. “We know you know about them. Just as we have ways of getting the truth out of you. Now, tell us how to contact them.”

“This is ridiculous. I will have your job for this! How dare you accuse a United States senator of terrorist acts …”

“Bluster all you like, ma’am,” Steve replied, drawing out the ‘ma’am’ to sound derisive. “We want the truth.”

Diana took that as her cue. She removed the lariat from her belt and looped it around the senator, who stared, uncomprehending.

“What …?”

“This compels you to tell the truth,” Diana said simply. “Tell us about the Illuminati.”

From the expression on her face, they could both see that she was struggling not to tell them anything, but the lariat worked its magic, forcing the woman to speak.

“The Illuminati are a secret organisation determined to take over the world. They believe at the end of days only a select few will be chosen to survive the apocalypse.”

“And they’re stacking the deck?” Steve asked.

“Only the strong survive.”

“And who do they say are the weak?”

The woman went on to say that the Illuminati had manipulated every event in history which had resulted in millions of deaths, from the wars to the plagues. Diseases like ebola and AIDs had been
created in order to eradicate those who didn’t conform to Illuminati standards. It was fairly clear that they were completely bigoted, hating anyone who wasn’t white, or heterosexual.

Diana could only listen with a growing horror to the woman’s vitriol. She clearly believed everything she was saying and revelled in it.

By the time the senator was done, Diana could only look at the man she loved with a sense of unease. Steve shook his head.

“What do they plan to do with the child of Superman?” he asked.

“Use her in their quest to gain power. The Illuminati have waited hundreds of years for this and they can wait a little longer, until the child is old enough to lead them against those who oppose them.”

“Meaning Superman and the Justice League.”

They had enough to take to the authorities, or at least the head of the Senate. Miranda Clifford would be expelled from the Senate and in all likelihood, face charges of conspiracy against the United States. There was just one more thing they needed.

“Where is the child?”

“I do not know,” the woman replied. “I did my part by placing doubt over Martha Kent’s loyalty in the minds of others in the Senate.” She then explained her reasoning that Martha’s possible connection to Superman could bring into question her loyalty to her country, despite the fact that Superman had stated his own loyalty to his adopted nation.

Diana had a feeling they would be facing the same idiocy from the Vice President. At least the President was on their side.

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Moana sighed for about the twentieth time, frustrated with Luthor’s inability to get them any closer to answers. They still had no idea where Mark Anders was being held, since Isabelle wasn’t likely to keep him in any of the local jails.

Luthor returned, having gone downstairs to a meeting with the solicitors. He frowned at her.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing. I guess I shouldn’t have expected anything else.”

“Well, oh ye of little faith, I do have some news. I know where they’re keeping him.” He looked smug.

“Don’t hold back,” she replied.

“Grace Caron knows someone on the inside. He told her Anders is in custody in one of their safehouses.”

“Well, then let’s go,” she said.

Luthor shook his head. “Not so fast. Don’t forget, Canadian Intelligence is determined to detain you as well.”

Moana huffed. Surely the solicitors would have got in touch with the New Zealand Embassy or
something? Luthor didn’t seem optimistic when she asked that question.

“The Commonwealth Government could still have you deported,” he told her.

She rolled her eyes at him.

“It’s been over two weeks, Luthor. Do you really expect me to believe you brought me here for this? To just keep me locked up in a goddamned hotel room?”

“Oh course not,” he said, “but …”

“Let me guess. Your money isn’t as good here as it once was.”

He huffed back at her in annoyance. His company was close to collapsing, thanks to Webscoe Industries and with the loss of his wealth, so went the power of his name.

“I’m going,” she said stubbornly. “Those bastards can try to stop me.”

Luthor shook his head. “You’re insane!”

“Look who’s talking!” she muttered.

Sure enough, as soon as she stepped into the hotel lobby, she spotted two men trying to look inconspicuous, but it was only too obvious, at least to her, that they had been watching for her. She ignored them, walking at a casual pace as if she was going out shopping, aware of them following behind her. Luthor also followed, clearly wondering what she was doing.

One of the men grabbed her arm as soon as they got outside, trying to propel her toward a car parked on the other side of the street.

“Don’t try anything, Ms Rangihau,” he said. “We prefer not to make a scene.”

She turned and glared at him.

“Get your hand off me!” she growled. “Before I do something you’ll have cause to regret.”

“We just want to talk,” the other man replied.

“Right, and I’m the Queen of England!” she spat. “I said, get your damned hand off me!” She shook the man off and shoved him backwards hard enough to send him flying. A third man was getting out of the car.

Luthor grabbed her hand. “Run!” he hissed.

She ran with him along the street, the three men in pursuit. A vehicle pulled up alongside the kerb and the back door was flung open.

“Get in!” a woman yelled.

Moana didn’t hesitate, diving into the car along with Luthor. With a squeal of rubber, the car pulled away and the woman drove at almost breakneck speed, barely avoiding two cars coming through an intersection.

Moana looked at Luthor. “Must have graduated from the same racing school you did,” she commented, bursting into laughter. He shot her an odd look.
The woman continued to drive, turning around corners until it seemed fairly clear she was trying to confuse their pursuers. It wouldn’t stop them for long, she realised, knowing that as soon as they reached the safe house the guards would alert their superiors. Still, she hoped it would give them enough time to talk to Anders.

“I think we lost them for now,” the woman said. Moana frowned at her. She had reddish, brown curly hair and a British accent that sounded a little upper class, although not quite aristocratic. Like she had been brought up in a wealthy household and attended the likes of Eton or some other school usually frequented by the rich and famous of Britain. The woman turned and smiled at Luthor. “Never thought I’d be seeing you like this, Lex,” she said.

Luthor smiled back at her.

“Well, Victoria, you know what they say about business making strange bedfellows.”

“I thought that was politics,” she replied. “Then again, when it comes to you and I, it’s pretty much the same thing.”

“How is Sir Harry?” he asked.

Moana stared at them both. “You two know each other?”

“We go way back,” Victoria replied. “Victoria Hardwick.”

Moana frowned. She had heard of Sir Harry Hardwick. He’d been forced to declare himself bankrupt some years earlier, but surely that had nothing to do with … She narrowed her eyes at Luthor.

“Let me guess. You’re the one behind what happened to Hardwick Enterprises. You sure do get around, Luthor.”

“Ooh, she’s clearly no fan of yours,” Victoria remarked.

“Don’t get me started!” Moana said dryly.

The other woman explained that she now worked for Grace and Raymond Caron, mostly as an assistant, but because she had a background in business, thanks to working for her father, she sometimes helped them in another capacity.

“I never thought I’d be helping you evade Canadian Intelligence,” she said with a smirk.

A few minutes later she pulled up at what appeared to be an ordinary looking apartment building in the city centre. She held up two handguns. Moana refused hers.

“Don’t be stupid,” Victoria warned. “These people are well-trained and they’re dangerous.”

“So am I,” Moana returned. Victoria sighed and shook her head. Luthor took the handguns from her and put one in his pocket.

“Thanks,” he said.

She smiled. “Listen, if you survive this, do you want to … old times’ sake?”

“Maybe,” Luthor smiled, causing Moana to roll her eyes.

“All right. Let’s just get this over with,” she told him, practically shoving him out the door.
The apartment where they were keeping Anders was on the seventh floor. Moana couldn’t sense anything, but she didn’t want to take any chances. She followed Luthor up the stairs, frowning at the lack of guards in the stairwell. Either the agents were cocky or there was something else going on.

“You know this has to be a trap of some kind,” she hissed at the bald man.

“Yet you came along anyway,” he reminded her.

He stopped on the final stair and took out a mirror, holding it up so he could look around the corner at the apartment. There were not that many apartments on each floor and the layout was basically the same through the whole building.

“Watch a lot of James Bond, did we?” she asked, amused.

Luthor rolled his eyes. “No!” he said shortly. “It just occurred to me that this would be the safest thing to do.”

“One of these days, Luthor, you’ll learn to develop a sense of humour!”

“Touche,” he replied. “There are two men on the door.”

Moana thought for a moment.

“Okay, you wait here.”

“What are you going to do?” he asked, but she was already moving. She ran toward the two guards, then past them through another doorway. She waited a few seconds, then turned her head to look back. One of the guards had followed, clearly curious.

He was at least a foot taller than her, but she still managed to reach up and cut off his air by putting a hand over his mouth and nose, long enough to make him pass out. The second guard, wondering what was up, followed suit. She dealt with him the same way.

Luthor frowned at her as she jogged back to his side.

“Piece of cake.”

“How long will they be out?”

“A few minutes, I guess.” She was no medical doctor, but she imagined they would come to within a minute or two, but it would take a moment for their heads to clear. It would give them time enough to break in.

Luthor knocked on the door and tried to disguise his voice.

“Hey, looks like we have a situation out here.”

Moana bit her lip. Crap. Luthor’s pronunciation was slightly too American which would no doubt alert the men inside that all was not well. She'd noticed little differences in the way some Canadians pronounced things to American.

The door opened as another guard came to investigate. Luthor answered her by punching the man in the face, then pointing his gun.

“Where’s Anders?” he growled.
“You broke my nose!” the man whimpered.

“He’ll break more than that if you don’t answer!” Moana snarled.

The man nodded his head in the direction of another room. She strode off in that direction and flung open the door. Anders stared at her from the bed. His wrist was cuffed to the bedpost and his face looked bruised. She glanced at Luthor, then went to the bed, grabbing the cuff and pulling it free with all of her strength.

“Wait … you’re not just thinking of breaking him out of here, are you?” Luthor asked.

“What did you expect I’d do?” she returned. “Wait for those idiots to show up so they can throw us all in jail?”

“I repeat what I said. You’re crazy!”

“If we can get him out of the country, we’re home and hosed.”

“I don’t even know what that means,” Luthor told her. “All right, fine! Damn woman!”

Anders looked at Luthor as if he agreed with him. There was a noise out in the hall. She guessed the other two guards had woken up. Moana nodded her head at Luthor. “Help him! I’ll take care of the men out in the hall.”

Lex shook his head as she ran out. This was just getting better and better, he thought. He helped the older man get to his feet, hearing bangs and crashes in the hallway. With Anders’ arm around his shoulders and one arm around the other man’s waist, he stumbled out. The third guard was too preoccupied with his bleeding nose to pay them any attention.

The other two guards were unconscious on the floor, with obvious bruises. Moana turned and looked at them.

“Let’s go,” she said. “Your little girlfriend better be waiting for us downstairs.”

“She’s not my girlfriend!” Lex shot back, then gazed at her. “Jealous?”

“Of her?” she snorted. “For one thing, Luthor, I wouldn’t touch you with a ten-foot pole. Not even if I was desperate. Second, I’m far too smart for you. Judging from her, you like them pretty but dumb. Which counts me out completely.”

“Don’t kid yourself. You’re an attractive woman,” Lex told her. That wasn’t a lie.

“I wasn’t exactly fishing for compliments, Luthor!” she snapped.

Between them, they managed to get Anders downstairs. Victoria had clearly been circling the block as she drove up as they came out.

“Oh bloody hell!” Victoria exclaimed.

“Not a word,” he told his ex-girlfriend. “Just get us somewhere we can hide him.”

She smirked. “I know just the place.”

After what seemed like hours of driving in circles, presumably to put the intelligence agents, and wasn’t that a bit of an oxymoron, off the scent, she pulled up at a house which looked to be at least a couple of hundred years old.
Anders was barely conscious, which made Lex think he had been tortured somehow. They pulled him out of the car and into the house.

“Won’t people see?” Lex asked, glancing uneasily at the other houses in the street. He was sure he saw a curtain flickering.

“No,” Victoria assured him. “People keep to themselves here. You’ll be safe enough.”

Moana was silent as the other woman showed them into what appeared to be a living room.

“I’ll get something for those cuts,” Victoria said, indicating the cuts on the man’s wrists and face. As she went out, Lex considered how much the woman had changed from the girl he’d known.

“Moana…” Anders said weakly.

She leaned over and smiled at him. Lex hadn’t thought she could smile.

“I’m here,” she said. “Don’t try to talk.”

“You have to get out of here.”

“We can’t leave you like this.”

“No… listen. The Illuminati… they have the child. Superman…”

“We know.”

“You must… stop them. The baron… he has a home in France.”

“Where?” Lex asked.

“Dordogne. You must go… to Dordogne.”

Lex looked at Moana and she nodded.

“Rest,” she told the ex-journalist. “Just rest for a bit. Then we can talk about how to stop these people.”

Anders nodded and closed his eyes, leaning back against the couch. He was asleep within seconds.

Lex glanced once more at Moana.

“I’m going to Dordogne.”

“I’m going with you.”

Yeah, how did he know she would say that?
Episode 10: Part 1

Chapter Summary

Lois goes to Paris and meets with a mysterious 'source'.

Episode Ten: Reprehendo

Kara landed in the field just behind the barn in Smallville and moved quickly to the shelter of the barn. Shelby whined at her as she entered, raising a paw.

“What’s the matter, buddy?” she asked softly. The golden retriever ran out, then back in again. Kara got the impression the dog was lonely.

She hadn’t exactly got along well with the dog when she had first come to live in Smallville, but then again, they didn’t really have animals as pets on Krypton, so she hadn’t known how to react to the dog.

Lois tended to sneeze around the dog. The only time she hadn’t was when she was pregnant with Mara.

Thinking about Lois, Kara felt tears well up in her eyes. On one hand she thought Lois was being unreasonable, but considering what she’d lost, she could understand on some level.

Changing from her Supergirl uniform into jeans and shirt, Kara quickly bundled up her uniform and took it into the house, planning to put it in the wash.

“Oh, let me take that sweetie,” Aunt Martha said, then frowned at her. “You’re not wearing the wig.”

Kara frowned, then remembered. “Oh, shoot!” She knew only too well the need to wear her disguise when she was on the farm. She dashed upstairs to get her spare and put it on, noticing the bedroom where Clark slept now that he was living back at the farm was neat as a pin.

Come to think of it, she hadn’t seen him in a couple of days. She figured he would have been out working on the farm, but that didn’t explain the bedroom.

“Aunt Martha,” she began, coming down the stairs. “Where’s Clark?”

“I’m not sure, honey,” her aunt said, coming out of the laundry with a full basket of clean clothes. “He left a couple of days ago but didn’t say where he was going. I assumed he was going up to the fortress.”

Kara shook her head. “No. I went up there myself yesterday. Uncle Jor wasn’t exactly happy with me, considering he wanted to send me into the future last time we spoke, but he did say he hadn’t seen Ka … um, Clark, in a while. Do you think he’s gone back to Lois?”

“Lois would have said something when I talked to her,” Martha mused. “At least, I think she would.” She put the laundry basket down on the chair and sighed. “I wish there was some way to get them to at least talk to each other. I can’t stand to see them both so hurt.”
Kara nodded. This was a time when Lois and Clark needed each other. They were stronger together than apart.

“I’m going to fly to Metropolis,” she said. “I have to talk to Lois.”

“At least wait until after dinner, sweetie,” her aunt advised. “I know you don’t have to eat, but having the company would make me feel better.”

Kara hugged her aunt, nodding. With Perry working in the city, Martha was alone out here. Alone with her thoughts and her grief over losing her grand-daughter.

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Lois finished packing her case. Chloe had called from Paris once they’d returned from their trip to Rennes le Chateau and told her about the baron’s sister. Lois had hung up from that conversation determined to find out more.

Her father stopped by the bedroom she shared with Clark while she was trying to zip up her suitcase. Lois’ hand shook as she thought about her husband. Wondering where he was, what he was doing. She missed him. God, she wished …

“Honey, are you sure about this?” he asked, entering the room and zipping the case up for her.

“I’m sure, Dad. I don’t think I’ll be able to rest until I find her. This is the first real lead we’ve had.”

“Have you told Clark?” he asked.

“No. Why should I?”

“Because he’s your husband and he deserves to know about Mara.”

“Well, I’m sure Oliver would have told him by now. Besides, even if we find her, I’m not guaranteeing I’ll take him back.”

“This is not his fault, sweetheart. You know that.”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t Dad.” She looked up at her father. It wasn’t like him to defend Clark, since in the beginning he had put Clark through the wringer when she had first told her father who she was dating, but …

“Lo, honey …”

“Could you please take that downstairs for me?” she asked. “I need to find my passport.”

Her father sighed in resignation, but lifted the case and took it downstairs. Lois checked the drawers and found her passport along with Clark’s. She bit her lip, trying to stop the trembling. You’re not going to cry, she admonished herself. You’re not going to cry.

Once downstairs, Lucy looked at her mournfully.

“I wish you’d change your mind,” she said.

Lois wrapped her arms around her little sister. The last thing she wanted to do was reveal the fact that what she was about to do was very likely going to be dangerous. She was going to find this baron and demand that he tell her where her daughter was.
They drove in silence to the airport. Her father and sister waited until it was time for her to go through the security gates.

“I love you, Lo,” the general told her, giving her a hug.

“I love you too, Daddy. I’m not coming back without her.”

He smiled wanly. “I know,” he said. “Just as stubborn as your mother.”

She offered an equally wan smile in return. “Actually, Mom would have said I got that from you.”

He snickered, then nodded in agreement. Lois turned to Lucy.

“Take care of Dad, okay sis?”

“I will. I promise. I love you.”

“Love you too.” She took out her passport and boarding pass and made her way through security, waiting for her small bag to be checked and x-rayed, then let herself be checked. She glanced back at her family, who stood watching, then continued on through.

She had been given a window seat in the plane. Since it was about a ten hour flight, it probably wasn’t going to be the most comfortable, considering the flight was nearly full, but she wasn’t about to make a fuss.

A man sat on the aisle seat.

“Hello,” he said, clearly wanting to flirt. Lois just sighed and looked out the window.

“And here I was thinking this flight was going to be boring,” the man said. “Only to find myself sitting next to a beautiful woman.”

Deliberately, Lois shifted her left hand and began playing with her wedding band and engagement ring. Things might not be so good between her and Clark right now, but she wasn’t about to let this man know that.

“I apologise,” he said. “I can see you are not in the mood for talking.”

She almost snorted, but pretended to watch out the window even as the flight crew went through the safety procedures. The man began to take papers out of a briefcase as the plane took off and Lois glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, still pretending to look out the window. As she did so, she noticed a small symbol on one of his documents. The man wasn’t even being subtle about it. It was the ‘all-seeing Eye’. From what the journalist Clark had rescued had told her, it was the symbol of the Illuminati.

Great, she thought. They clearly were keeping an eye on her. No surprises there.

She managed to doze off for a little while, although the seats weren’t exactly conducive to restful sleep. By the time she woke, she guessed they were about an hour out of Charles de Gaulle airport, so named for the founder of the fifth French Republic.

The man seated beside her was also dozing. Lois grabbed her phone and switched it on, typing a text message to tell Chloe she was almost there. Oliver and Chloe had arranged for her to be picked up from the airport. They had been planning to do a little bit of travel around France for the rest of their vacation, but after everything that had happened, they had chosen to stay in Paris.
She noticed the crew performing their duties as the captain announced their descent into Paris. They seemed unhurried. Lois wondered if she was being paranoid to have thought that something might have gone wrong with the flight.

She returned to gazing out the window, although there wasn’t much to see. She had already visited Paris a couple of times. Once when her father had been stationed in Germany for a year. Lois had gone as part of a trip with the international school when she was twelve. She hadn’t thought much of Paris then.

Not long after they’d got married, Clark had flown her to Paris for breakfast in a small café. Lois smiled as she thought of her husband. Call him sappy, but she loved that he was so thoughtful. She felt a brief pang of loneliness as she was reminded of why they were apart.

Her seat companion made no comment, clearly having got the message that she wasn’t in the mood for flirting. Now that she knew what he was, she was definitely not in the mood. Still, she sensed him following her as she left the plane and was processed through customs. She had made sure to get a tourist visa, not wanting the security staff to question her. There had already been threats of terror attacks from a jihadist movement and the last thing she wanted was to be caught up in any of that sorry business.

“Lois!”

She looked in the direction of the voice, then smiled, walking quickly over to Lana, hugging her. Lana’s smile was welcoming, although a little subdued.

“You look tired,” Lana said.

“It was a long flight. I’m fine. I just need some real sleep.”

“Chloe wanted to come but she wasn’t feeling so good. Um … she’ll probably kill me for saying so, but she’s pregnant.”

Lois nodded, barely taking in what the other woman had said. She blinked for a moment as the words actually sunk in.

“Wait, what?”

Lana grinned. “Yeah. She wanted to tell you herself, but after everything that’s happened …”

Lois frowned at the brunette. “What? Did she think I wouldn’t be happy for her?”

“Of course you would. I think she just thought that … oh, it doesn’t matter. Anyway, she was just feeling really tired and Ollie wouldn’t leave her, so I said I’d come pick you up.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

Lana looked a little nervous.

“Uh, so have you heard from Clark? We’ve been calling but Martha said he left a couple of days ago and we don’t know where he is. He hasn’t contacted anyone. No one’s even seen Superman.”

Lana stopped beside a small Citroen, getting keys out of her bag.

“Yeah, I got a call from Cat wanting the scoop. I pretty much kicked her to the kerb over that, but yeah, I told Perry to tell people that Superman was out looking for Mara. The League is looking after
Metropolis.”

“I bet that went down well,” Lana snorted derisively. “People seem to think Superman’s their own personal superhero.”

“I guess,” Lois said glumly, letting Lana take her suitcase and put it in the trunk of the car.

She watched as Lana skillfully negotiated the traffic, glancing now and again at the woman who had been Clark’s first crush.

“So, how do you like living in Paris?” she asked.

“I love it,” Lana smiled. “I really feel like I’ve found my place here.”

“That’s really great. I’m happy for you.”

“I just wish there was something I could do about this whole mess, Lois. I mean, I know we’ve had our moments, especially over Clark, but I know he was happy with you. Happier than he ever was with me.”

“Yeah, me too,” Lois replied. “I mean, I was happy with him too.” She felt the prickling of tears in her eyes. “I love him so much, Lana, it’s just … Mara … God.”

Lana stopped the car as Lois began to cry, wrapping her arms around her.

“We’ll find her,” she said, patting her back. “I promise we’re going to do everything in our power to get her back.”

The crying jag seemed to help release some of the tension she had been feeling. Lois was able to take more of an interest in what was going on around her. Lana drove off again, heading toward the hotel where Chloe and Oliver were staying. She glanced now and again in the rear view mirror.

“Uh, maybe I’m being paranoid, but I don’t think so. I think we’re being followed.”

Lois glanced in the wing mirror. There was a black sedan following. She couldn’t see the driver.

“There was a man sitting next to me on the plane. I’m pretty sure he’s one of them.”

“Well, that’s not fishy at all,” Lana mused.

The car behind them turned off a short time later. Lois chewed on her lower lip, wondering if she had just imagined things. She didn’t think so, though.

Chloe and Oliver hugged her when she got to the hotel. Her cousin looked apologetic.

“Sorry, I wanted to come, but …”

“It’s okay. Lana told me.”

Chloe looked at her friend, clearly upset.

“Lana, I thought I said not to tell her …”

“Chloe, for goodness’ sake, you don’t have to walk on eggshells around me!” Lois spluttered. “Mara’s not dead!”
Her cousin looked at her guiltily. “I’m sorry.”

She shook her head. “It’s fine. Look, I’m probably just tired. I haven’t been sleeping. I’m gonna go wash off the travel grime and then sleep off the jet lag.”

By the time she’d had a few hours’ sleep in the room Oliver and Chloe had reserved for her, she was feeling much better. She returned to their suite and caught up with everything they had learned so far.

“Can you figure out a way to get me to this chateau?” she asked.

“Legs, I really don’t think …”

She shot Oliver a look and he shut up. Yeah, she thought. You better. Chloe sighed.

“Lois, I know you want Mara back. We do too, but I just think you need to really look at the situation before you go off and get involved in something dangerous. I mean, you know what lengths they went to to get Mara.”

She bit her lip. Her cousin was right. It didn’t mean she liked it.

She spent most of the next day studying everything they had dug up, or rather Chloe had dug up and talking to Lana’s ‘friend’ Murphy. He was not happy at the whole situation, but at least he was cooperating by telling her everything he knew. He did mention that he had spoken with someone he believed might actually be one of the high muckety-mucks but couldn’t confirm it.

After two days, however, she was still no closer to figuring out a plan. She had gone out shopping with Chloe and realised she was being followed.

“I’ve got to do something,” she sighed, as they re-entered the hotel. “I’m going crazy.”

“I’m still not sure you should be messing with this,” Chloe replied as they headed to the elevator.

“I don’t know what else to do, Chlo. I want my baby back.”

Her cousin sighed in sympathy. “I know. I can only imagine how difficult this must be for you. Have you heard from Clark?”

She shook her head. “No, but then I’m not exactly on speaking terms with him right now.”

“But can’t you … I mean, this is not his fault, Lois.”

“No,” she said firmly.

Lois’ expression darkened, and she heard a hitch in her breathing. She missed him. God, she missed him! She took a deep breath and sighed.

Her phone beeped. “Hang on, Chlo, I’ve got to check this message.”

Chloe frowned at her, but said nothing as Lois looked down at her phone, then quickly replied to the text.

“There’s a guy I need to interview,” she said. “He’s a freelancer who lives here in Paris.”

Chloe looked puzzled. “Interview? What for?”

“He knows a lot about the baron. Chloe, I have to go. He’s really hard to pin down. I mean, he
travels all over the world but he just recently set up base here in Paris. He just sent me a text to meet him at his apartment.”

Her cousin adopted a dubious expression as they walked out of the lift and down the corridor to the suite. “Oh no, Lois. You can’t seriously be thinking of meeting some strange guy at his apartment.”

“It’s my only chance. He wouldn’t meet anywhere else.”

Chloe rolled her eyes. “Journalism 101, Lois. You never meet someone for the first time in their own territory. Not for something like this.” She turned from the door, keycard in hand, and looked at Lois. “Look, let me do a work-up on this guy …”

“No,” Lois said adamantly. “Look, he’s kind of cagey and if he thought for a second I’d been doing some digging on him …”

“You can’t just go in without knowing what you’re facing.”

Lois sighed. “Chloe, come on. It’s not like I can’t defend myself. I’ll be all right. Look, if it makes you feel any better, I will text you as soon as I get there and when I’m leaving, okay?”

Chloe paused for a moment, then sighed. “All right.”

Lois quickly changed her clothes, then left the hotel and made her way along the avenue. She walked at a fairly steady pace, glancing now and again in windows as if checking her reflection. She was once again being followed.

The apartment building was located in the fifth arrondissement. It was only about five floors and looked to be early eighteenth century.

There were buzzers beside names belonging to each tenant. She pressed the buzzer for apartment 5B, next to the name Delacour. A few moments later she heard a deep voice in what seemed like a high class French accent.

“Oui?”

“It’s Lois Lane,” she said into the microphone.

“Bien. Montez.”

The main door to the building made a buzzing sound and she opened the now unlocked door. She glanced uneasily at the lift which was more or less a cage. It seemed too rickety to be stable, but she didn’t see an exit to stairs so figured she had little choice. She got in, pulling the door closed and pressed the button for the fifth floor. Sure enough, the lift was slow and creaked as it rose.

She quickly found the apartment. The door was open. Chewing on her lower lip, Lois stepped inside. The apartment was tiny, furnished by a double bed and a chair and small square table. Next to that was a couple of cupboards, a counter-top with a sink and a door which she guessed led off to the bathroom.

The door slammed behind her, engaging the locks. Before she could move a hand grabbed her and she found herself pushed up against the wall, her mouth captured by soft lips surrounded by soft hair. A tongue thrust in her mouth as hands held her firmly, claiming ownership.

When he pulled back, she found herself staring into a pair of brown eyes. He had dark hair which was grey at the temples, his face covered with a full beard. She gazed at him for a long moment
before pulling him back down to her, mouths connecting. She moaned as his hands circled her waist and pulled her into him, feeling unmistakeable arousal.

He picked her up so she had to lock her long legs around his waist. Still kissing, they somehow made it to the bed. Just as he started to undress her, pulling at the hem of her blouse, she pushed him away.

“Wait,” she said breathlessly. “I need to text Chloe. I don’t want her thinking you’re an axe murderer or something.”

Brown eyes glinted at her in amusement as she went to pick up her bag from where she’d dropped it when he’d ambushed her. She quickly sent off a text to her cousin, then shoved the phone back in her bag.

She turned back to him, slowly taking off her skirt, revealing long, shapely legs. His eyes followed her movements as she took off the blouse, then slowly removed her bra. Lust showed in his expression as she dangled the bra by a strap, then tossed it on the chair.

She knelt on the bed. He had her on her back before she could blink. Lois wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down to her as they began to make love.

Afterward she lay, curled in his arms.

“Delacour?” she snickered.

“Harry Potter,” he replied with a shrug.

“God, I missed you,” she said. “Remind me why we’re doing this.”

“You know why,” he said softly.

“But we’re hurting …”

“I know, but it’s to protect them,” he told her. “Baby, I know this is hard, but it’s the only way we’re going to find her.”

She stroked his face, gazing at the grey hairs.

“How did you …”

“I sort of borrowed a glamour from Zatanna. Told her that I wanted to be able to fit in, at least look my age. She didn’t ask questions.”

“And the brown eyes?” she asked, squirming as he ran his hand over her body. “Clark, don’t … stop it, that tickles.”

“You love it when I do that.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Contacts,” he said. “Come on, you didn’t think I’d just come to Paris and not have some sort of disguise.”

“I know,” she sighed. “I mean, I like the grey. It makes you look sort of distinguished. But that beard has gotta go.”

“Not yet, honey. Not until we’re close to getting the baron.”
“Honey, I know you’re angry at the baron for what he’s done, but …”

“What has he done, Lois? Invaded our lives? Turned them upside down? You know why we planned this. If I hadn’t found those transmitters …”

Clark gazed at his beloved wife, remembering the night he’d found the transmitters. It had been the same night they’d left Ria, or as it turned out, Aresia, to babysit Mara, while they’d gone out to the baron’s function.

He’d gone downstairs to heat up a bottle for the baby and had decided to check the voicemail on the cordless phone when it cut out with a burst of static. He’d then listened with his super-hearing and heard the slight hum of the electronics. Using his micro-vision, he’d found the transmitter and realised they were all over the apartment.

Instead of removing them, he decided to say nothing. The next morning, however, he’d taken Lois and their daughter out for breakfast, making sure they weren’t spied on. Lois had noticed his demeanour.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“We’ve been bugged. I don’t know how long they’ve been in the apartment.”

“Ria?” she asked. He could see her eyes flash with anger. It was bad enough that these people were threatening their daughter, now they were violating their space too.

“Could be,” he replied.

“Well, let’s go home and get rid of them.”

He shook his head. “I have a better idea,” he said. “They’re clearly trying to play with us. I think it’s time we played them at their own game.”

Lois’ eyes twinkled. “Ooh, intrigue. Tell me more.”

When Diana had told them exactly who their babysitter was, they had realised they were right, figuring the baron was trying to use whatever he overheard to get some kind of control over them.

They’d formed a plan, pretending to play right into the baron’s hands. Clark’s show of over-protectiveness, the bickering, the arguments, had all been pretence. Neither one of them had wanted Mara to be kidnapped but it had been the perfect catalyst ending in Lois asking Clark to leave. The separation had been a necessary part. Even if it had been pretence, it still hurt like hell to be apart from the woman he loved.

The next part of their plan was to somehow get to the baron’s chateau and try to learn the truth about their daughter’s whereabouts. Lois wanted to get into the man’s home and see what she could dig up on him, while Clark was planning on trying to get in his own way. Hence the new identity and the disguise.

Once they were both in, they would unleash the full force of their anger on the man who had done his best to destroy their family. The man had no idea what he was in for.
Tess sits on the terrace, a glass of Campari in one hand as she contemplates the setting Italian sun.

“So, what do you think, Lutessa?” Donatello regards her calmly, with more than a hint of a smirk in the upturned angle of his lips.

She frowned slightly at him, wondering what it was about this man that attracted her, yet repelled her at the same time. Part of her knew he was trying to seduce her and in the past she had been easily seduced by promises of wealth and power.

Yet since becoming friends with Clark, learning the secrets of her own birth, Tess had cause to wonder if that was really what she wanted now. The thought of knowing the secrets of the Illuminati was definitely an attraction, but did she really want to sell her soul in order to find out?

Therein lay the problem. She had sold her soul once before, never knowing the recipient was actually her half-brother. Clark had offered her redemption by giving her a place in his life: a purpose. Did she really want to betray that?

You cannot help your friends, Donatello had told her. He’d meant, the only way to help them was to become one of the Illuminati, a keeper of their secrets. She still questioned exactly how many of those secrets they would willingly impart. The brotherhood, like any other secret society, had its hierarchy. She would just be low man, or woman, on the totem pole.

On the other hand, by pretending to join the Illuminati, she might indeed be able to help Clark and their friends. A foolish notion, to be sure, she thought, considering how many hoops she would have to jump through in order to make her way to the top of the pyramid. It was no accident the avatar of the all-seeing-eye cult was a pyramid as it symbolised the structure of the brotherhood itself. Those in the know at the top, with selected information trickling down to those at the bottom.

“Come,” Donatello coaxed, and she knew she would join him. There wasn’t really any other choice, she thought. Not if she wanted to help.

The Italian doctor had convinced her to at least watch the ceremony, even if she would not be initiated that night. Tess donned the hooded cloak, something very similar to that monks would wear. The hessian cloth was abrasive on her sensitive skin, but she understood the symbolism, since it had a religious context - something to do with penance or atonement of sins.

There were at least twenty others chanting, standing in a circle in a chamber below what, to the outside world, looked like any other medieval ruin. Lit torches burned brightly from the walls, the flames flickering as a cold wind blew through the chamber. Tess shivered involuntarily, wondering if it really was the wind or if it had been something else entirely. She hadn’t failed to notice in her descent of the steep, spiral staircase the hanging cages where undoubtedly prisoners had faced slow death or torture. Deep within the recesses of her mind she could almost hear the screams.
It was clear from the moment the ceremony began that this was an ancient cult, steeped in tradition dating back hundreds of years. Modern society had failed to pervade those traditions.

Tess normally considered herself a tough woman, but the chanting echoing through the stone chamber, and the words written on the walls - words like ‘War’, ‘Death’ and ‘Power’, and the ancient symbols of all the offshoots of the Illuminati brotherhood, began to frighten her. She desperately wanted to get away but knew if she did so she would draw attention to herself.

She had no choice but to persevere, hoping she could learn something which would tell her exactly what the Illuminati had planned. It was a faint hope, but it was all she had.

***

Lois finished dressing, her head down as she concentrated on buttoning up her skirt. Clark sprawled lazily in the bed, brown eyes twinkling as he watched her. Lois glanced up at her husband, still getting that slight jolt of alarm as she studied him. He looked so different with the beard and the brown eyes.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said.

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do,” he replied. “Because I know you. Just like you know me. Remember?”

She frowned. “No.”

He smiled. “It was when I was trying to stop Lana from getting involved with Lex.”

She racked her brains, then recalled the incident. Clark had taken to stalking Lana outside her dorm room at Metropolis University. He’d broken up with Lana at that point, still thinking he was in love with the brunette. Lois had given him some advice.

“Sometimes you gotta tuck your feelings away until it’s the right time. Like stuffing dollars into a piggy bank for a bike you can’t quite afford.”

“Except I can’t quite imagine there is anyone else out there,” he’d replied, never thinking for a second that the woman standing in front of him was the woman he’d been destined to be with. Mind you, Lois thought, she had never really considered it then either.

“There are times when I think you don’t know me at all … and others where I think you know me better than anyone.”

She understood now. They’d always had a connection to each other, even when they were too busy trying to pretend they didn’t feel anything. Now she couldn’t imagine her life without him.

Lois knelt on the bed and kissed him.

“I love you,” she said. “I just wish …”

He stroked her arm. “We’ll get her back,” he told her.

She bit her lip. “Just … promise me something, okay? If you ever feel like going … I don’t know, like super destroyer on them, promise me you’ll talk to me first, okay?”

“You really think I would do that?” he asked.
She sighed and nodded. “Yes, baby, I think you would. Remember the night Lex … well, clone Lex, kidnapped me and left on the cross? You nearly throttled him to death. Just please … don’t do anything like that.”

He looked down. “I can’t promise that, Lois. I’m just so … angry.”

She stroked his face, feeling the soft hairs of his beard. She hated that beard, since it hid so much of his handsome face, despite its purpose of creating a disguise.

“I’m angry too,” she said, “but Chloe told me something. There’s this woman. She claims to be psychic or something. She said she had seen you unleash your fury on the world because of something bad that happens to Mara. That scares me, Smallville.”

He smiled suddenly, showing his white fangs in the corner of his mouth. Lois loved those fangs. Just a slight imperfection in an otherwise perfect face.

“You haven’t called me Smallville in so long,” he said. “I missed it.”

“God, I miss you,” she said with a long sigh.

“I miss you too,” he replied.

Her phone beeped and she got up to check it.

“Chloe. She’s probably itching to call out the National Guard or something.”

“I think they call them gendarmes here,” he said.

“Whatever.” She leaned over the bed and kissed him once more. “I better go, before she calls out the whole Justice League.”

Clark stayed in the bed as he watched his wife leave, closing the door softly behind her. He heard her tapping out a message on her phone, most likely to Chloe, letting her know she was safe and sound.

He got up and padded naked to the small window overlooking the street, waiting for one last look at his wife as she crossed to the other side of the road. She paused and turned her head to look up at him. He could see the same look of longing that he felt, that pain deep down in his gut from their forced separation. While it was for a good cause, it hurt. Maybe not physically, since he couldn’t feel pain like a normal human, but pain nonetheless.

Clark waited until he could no longer see her, then went to shower. He emerged seconds later, his hair dripping and skin still wet. Grabbing a towel, he quickly dried himself off, the towel a blur as he moved at super speed. He glanced in the mirror and stroked his beard. Lois hated it, but it was necessary. He didn’t want anyone recognising him, especially not the man responsible for all this.

Dressing in designer jeans and a crisp, silk shirt, and slipping on dark glasses, Clark left the apartment and walked along the avenue, pretending to be completely nonchalant. He noticed the glances from passers-by, some in admiration, others with a certain sense of unease, but ignored them.

As he neared the hotel where Chloe and Oliver were staying, he spotted the couple walking hand in hand. Chloe had a small package from a local jeweller in her hand - clearly Oliver had been spoiling his wife. The blond archer glanced at him as Clark passed but there was no look of recognition in his expression. He’d passed the first test, he thought. If his best friend didn’t recognise him, then the baron wouldn’t either.
He carried on walking past the hotel. There was a dark coloured sedan parked across the avenue from the building, a man at the wheel. The driver was reading a newspaper. Clark x-rayed the vehicle and saw an older man sitting in the back of the car, hidden behind tinted windows. He recognised the man as the baron.

What was the man doing, Clark thought, realising the man’s gaze was focused on the hotel’s lobby. Lois was seated just inside on a leather sofa, talking to Lana.

As much as Clark wanted to warn his wife she was being watched, he had the impression she knew anyway. Lois had always been very astute.

He moved on before the man could spot him watching.

***

Kara landed on the terrace of the apartment, glad of the cover of darkness as she entered through the huge French doors. The lights were dim but the room was not in complete darkness.

She had meant to catch up with Lois two days earlier, but had decided Martha needed her. Her aunt was worried about Clark, who hadn’t called to say he was okay, worried about Lois, who also hadn’t called, and even more worried about her baby granddaughter.

Perry White was staying at the farm for a couple of days, keeping Clark’s mother company, so Kara took the time to slip away.

As she walked into the living room, a young woman was sitting on the couch, watching something on the television. When she heard Kara’s entry, she turned, glaring at her.

“What … oh, god, it’s you, Kara,” she said.

“Lucy,” Kara replied softly. “Where is Lois?”

The younger Lane frowned at her. “Didn’t my dad tell you? Lois left a couple of days ago to fly to Paris.”

Kara bit her lip. “No. I’ve been helping Aunt Martha on the farm.” She sighed. “I’ve tried to keep her from doing too much, but …”

Lucy sent her a half-smile. “No, I get it. My dad’s the same. He focuses his energy on work, that way he doesn’t have to think about how he’s feeling.”

The man in question walked in, talking on the phone.

“That’s good, sweetheart. Give my love to Chloe and Oliver. Promise me you’ll be careful.”

He looked up at them and nodded, then turned away.

“All right. Did you want to talk to your sister?”

Lucy looked at her father hopefully, but he didn’t turn around again or give her the phone. Lucy’s face fell as he switched off the phone, then turned back to face them.

“Kara. Is there any word from Clark?”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry. I was hoping Lois might have heard, but I didn’t know she’d gone to Paris.”
“Something about a lead on who might have taken Mara,” he replied. “She’s staying with Chloe and Oliver. They apparently decided to stay in Paris and work from a base there.” He looked worried for his daughter, which was understandable, but Kara knew from the few times she’d talked to Clark that Lois had a penchant for getting in trouble, but she always managed to get through it.

“Lois is strong, sir,” Kara said, trying to sound comforting.

He nodded. “She gets that from her mother.”

Lucy shook her head, but didn’t comment. The implication of the gesture was clear. Ella Lane wasn’t the source of Lois’ strength, in Lucy’s opinion.

“I just wish she and Clark had been able to work things out. This wasn’t Clark’s fault,” Lucy said with a sigh.

Kara nodded. “I know, but we don’t know where he is, so we can’t fix this.”

Sam shook his head. “It’s up to Lois and Clark to fix this,” he said. “As much as I want to knock their heads together, Lois wouldn’t thank us for interfering.”

Kara sighed. “If we could find Mara …” she said.

“I’ve contacted everyone I know. Either they know nothing or no one’s talking,” the general told her. “Given what I’ve been hearing about how deep this goes, I’m guessing it’s the latter.”

“I hate these people,” Lucy grumbled. “What did Clark and Lois ever do to them anyway?”

Kara agreed with Lucy, but the fact was, Clark’s very existence was the problem. Given her cousin’s humanity, he couldn’t help but try to guide the people he was sworn to protect and that was something the Illuminati could not allow.

Worse, though, was the thought that if they could not find Clark’s precious little girl, his anger and grief could cause him to do something humanity would never forgive him for. Kara knew her cousin. As controlled as Superman was, probably because Superman was as controlled as he was, something like this could shatter that control.

She nodded goodbye to the general and left, flying to Watchtower. A.C and Bart were in the tower. As usual, the shorter man was stuffing his face, while A.C was reading something online.

“Hola Chica,” Bart said.

Kara sighed and shook her head. “Any news?” she asked A.C.

He shook his head in reply. “Sorry Supergirl.”

She sighed. “Well, I guess we couldn’t expect any so soon. Lois has gone to Paris, something about a lead.”

Bart frowned at her.

“By herself?”

“Her father told me she’s gone to stay with Chloe and Oliver. They’ve set up base in their hotel suite.”

“Mera’s been talking to friends online,” A.C. put in, “but so far not even a whisper.”
Kara bit her lip. She’d forgotten A.C. was married. Mera hadn’t been able to leave Miami to help when the riots were happening in Metropolis, or when Bane took over Gotham.

“I don’t know what else we can try,” she said. “It’s like either they don’t know anything or they don’t want to know.” She slumped down on the couch, sighing in helpless frustration. “Clark is nowhere to be found and I …”

There was a call for help in the streets below. Kara knew she couldn’t ignore it. Especially with Clark not around. The others were clearly familiar with Superman’s body language as A.C quickly accessed the police activity log.

“Carjacking on East and 45th,” he said.

She nodded and left Watchtower, flying out through the opened skylight.

***

Moana closed the bedroom door behind her and leaned against the wall, arms folded as she glowered at Lex.

“So how exactly are you planning on getting us to France?” she asked.

Lex glared back at her, annoyed with her. “First of all, there is no ‘us’,” he told her. “You’ve made that abundantly clear.”

She narrowed her eyes at him.

“There is no way in hell I’m going to let you go to France alone. I have my own bone to pick with these people.”

Lex sighed. Stubborn woman, he thought. He ran a hand over his bald head, gazing at her wordlessly. She wasn’t going to give up and he knew there wasn’t much of a choice. Still, with Canadian Intelligence on their trail, they would both stick out like sore thumbs.

Moana huffed and shrugged, going back into the bedroom where Mark Anders slept. They’d managed to wake him up long enough to get him into the room so he could sleep more comfortably and recover from the injuries the agents had caused. He’d slept for almost twenty-four hours.

Lex went out into the kitchen to make himself a cup of coffee. Victoria stood leaning against the counter, drinking tea.

“You sure can pick them, Lex,” Victoria smirked, making it clear she had overheard the brief exchange.

He ignored her as he picked up the coffee pot and poured himself a cupful.

“She’s got a point you know. How do you plan on getting out of Canada? Border agents will pick you up in a second. You’re not exactly inconspicuous.”

“I was hoping you and the Carons might be able to help with that,” he said, leaning against the counter.

“Look, I get it, and I’m always up for a little intrigue. We were quite the hellraisers when we were kids. But that was a long time ago and I happen to like my freedom.”

“Meaning what?”
“Meaning if I help you get out of the country and get to Paris, I’d be pretty much signing my own arrest warrant.”

“What’s to stop Canadian Intelligence from arresting you anyway? What I know about Isabelle Lewis, she’s likely to do it anyway, without evidence. That she hasn’t already faked, that is.”

Moana wandered into the kitchen and shot Lex a vicious glare, hinting for him to move out of the way. God, what a bitch, he thought. He was glad he hadn’t done something idiotic, like sleep with the woman.

He stepped aside so she could get a cup and pour her own coffee. It was getting rather crowded at the counter, so he moved over to the other side, sipping his coffee.

“So what exactly do you need to go to France for?” Victoria asked. She had never been the brightest of women.

“I thought we covered this last night?” Lex said. “The people trying to ruin me have a place in Dordogne.”

“This baron guy, whatever.”

“The Illuminati,” Moana murmured.

“Illuma who?” The other woman looked confused.

“Never mind,” he snapped, shooting Moana a look which said ‘shut up now’. She rolled her eyes at him.

Victoria snorted. “No wonder you can never get laid, Lex. You always did have a horrible temper.”

“I do just fine,” he replied. She huffed and walked out. Lex looked at Moana. “How is he?”

“He woke up for a couple of minutes, but went back to sleep again.” She sighed and shook her head. “What the hell was that woman trying to prove?”

“Looks to me like she was torturing him for information,” he replied. “I’m guessing she had him in the safehouse so she didn’t have to report anything on paper.”

“Why would she need to do anything? Everything he knows about the Illuminati is written in his books.”

“Maybe she thinks he knows more,” he suggested.

Moana shook her head again. “The Illuminati have a hierarchy. I don’t know where she’s placed in it, but I’m guessing not high enough for her to know everything. Maybe that’s it. Maybe she’s bucking for a promotion to the next tier and wanting to know how to get there. Like who she has to kill.”

He nodded. That sounded plausible.

“So the baron … he’s upper level?”

“Mark thinks he’s at the very top. There’s a secret circle where the members are known only as numbers. Only Number One knows the identity of all the others. At least, I think so. I could be wrong on that point.”
“Why even keep it a secret?”

“Because a secret that good is too dangerous to reveal to just anyone. Imagine what you could do with that much knowledge.”

“Knowledge is power,” he said, nodding. Of course. It was the same as him knowing Clark’s identity as Superman. By not telling the world, he could hold that knowledge over Clark’s head, so if things really heated up between them, he could use the threat of revealing it to the world to ensure Clark’s own silence about his activities. It wasn’t a perfect strategy by any means, but at least it kept Clark from revealing plenty of Lex’s own dirty little secrets.

Moana looked thoughtful.

“I have an idea. We can’t get to France unless we fly, and we can’t fly without going through an airport. We could ask Bart or Supergirl to …” She looked at him. “Uh, maybe not. Not after what you did to Bart.”

Lex looked at her, then remembered having held Bart in the Ridge Facility before the League blew it up. She was right. Bart wouldn’t help them. Not that he liked the idea of being carried to France by someone who could run at supersonic speed anyway.

“There is another option,” he said. “If we could find someone who runs contraband. We could get passage on a ship out of Quebec.”

She clearly hadn’t considered that.

“Okay. That sounds like a plan. Where are we going to find contraband smugglers though?”

Lex knew exactly who he could call on to find out. He put a hand on Moana’s shoulder.

“Leave that to me,” he said. “I just need to make a call.”

Victoria looked impressed when he told her his plan and gave him the phone. Lex called Otis back in the States and told him what he wanted. Otis was not the brightest of men, but he’d spent a couple of years in prison after he’d helped a friend by acting as a courier, smuggling drugs into the country. Otis had been arrested after the authorities had begun to notice a pattern.

Otis promised to call him back within an hour. Lex glanced up as he hung up from the call, frowning at Mark Anders, who had come out of the room and was drinking coffee.

“You’re really going through with this?” he asked, not explaining what he meant. Lex assumed, however, that he was referring to Lex’s idea of how to get them out of Canada.

“I know of no other way,” Lex replied. “We’re all fugitives now. If we try to leave the country by legitimate means, we’ll be detained and right back where we started.”

The journalist nodded. “You have a point, Mr Luthor. I don’t like it, but I think you’re right.”

***

Bette chewed on her nails nervously, wondering if she was doing the right thing. All she could think about was that poor baby and what she was going through with all those doctors poking around. She remembered those long days in the facility at Black Creek in Montana and knew exactly how it felt to be poked and prodded and told to demonstrate her abilities.
The problem was, getting to a phone so she could make the call. While they were essentially there to guard the facility, from what she could tell, it was fairly clear none of the staff trusted them.

Flag had already caught her trying to sneak out of the makeshift bunkhouse in the middle of the night. He clearly knew she was up to something but Bette had done her best to not arouse further suspicion from the squad leader. It wasn’t easy. Flag was naturally a suspicious man. More to the point, he’d always kept a tight rein on her, giving her orders and refusing to allow her to do her own thing.

There was only one thing she could do, Bette thought as she watched her commander. There was a risk that he would realise what she was doing, but she knew of no other way.

She glanced past him to the small inlet. Some barrels, containing what she hoped was fuel, had been placed near a small truck. If she could just direct her energy toward the barrels, the resulting explosion might send them scurrying in a panic. She could use it as a diversion and run to the little shed where they kept what she assumed was a satellite phone. Since there were no towers nearby, staff within the facility had to use satellite communications.

She focused, shooting her energy toward the barrels. A small heat wave emanated from her and the metal containers quickly heated up. To her relief, it worked. The barrels exploded and all the men began scrambling to put out the blaze. Bette ran to the shed while the men’s backs were turned and grabbed the phone.

She swiftly figured out how to use the communicator and placed the call, watching the activity outside anxiously.

“Come on, come on,” she said.

She didn’t know Tess’ number, but with any luck, someone in her office would know how to reach her.

“Luthorcorp. How may I direct your call?”

“I need to speak to Tess Mercer. It’s an emergency.”

“I’m sorry. Miss Mercer is currently unavailable.”

“You don’t understand,” she said, practically hyperventilating in her anxiety. “I’m on this island. I don’t know where. But there are these people and they have this baby. They’re hurting her.”

“They’re hurting a baby?”

“Yes. You gotta talk to Miss Mercer. The baby needs help. She needs help.”

“I can try to get a message to her. Who should I say is . . .”

A hand wrenched her arm, pulling her so hard she dropped the receiver. Bette looked around in a panic, her eyes widening as she realised Flag was standing outside, his face livid.

The person on the other end of the line was calling out, but she froze, staring at her squad leader.

“Come with me,” he said coldly.

She swallowed hard, knowing she was in deep trouble.

***
Tess was laying on the bed in the guest room, a cold wash cloth over her forehead. So many things were going through her mind, making her dizzy. The ceremony had been horrifying, making her wonder exactly what kind of people these Illuminati were.

Her phone buzzed and she frowned, sitting up and staring at it before reaching for the handset. It was the number of the Luthorcorp answering service.

“Tess Mercer.”

“Miss Mercer, this is Jeannie, from the answering service. One of our operators took a rather odd call and we thought it best to contact you.”

“Of course. What is it?”

“The caller wouldn’t say who they were and the conversation was rather brief and to be honest very muddled. She said something about a baby being hurt and that she needed help.”

“The caller?”

“No. The baby. The young woman said she was on an island, but the call was ended rather abruptly. Our operator heard a male voice.”

“Is there anything else you can tell me about the call?” Tess asked, grabbing her laptop. “What was the number?”

The service manager gave her as much information as possible. The number told her nothing, but she began a search anyway, sending the same information to Watchtower, knowing Chloe would get an alert. Whoever had tried to contact her felt it important, but they clearly hadn’t realised it was the middle of the night in Metropolis, she thought, checking the time on her laptop. Which meant wherever they were was a different time zone.

As she began flicking through the screens, her eyes widened as she accessed Watchtower systems for the first time in weeks and saw the message pop up on her screen. Now she understood the mysterious message from the service. Mara had been kidnapped!
Connor visits the farm and Bruce has a visit of his own

Connor made sure no one was around before he landed on the gravel drive next to the red barn. He glanced at the building. The colour was starting to fade. There was a cobweb in the corner, under the eaves, which meant Clark hadn’t been keeping things up.

The barking of a dog had him turning and he looked down as a golden retriever emerged from inside the barn. He bent, wrapping one arm around Shelby and giving him a quick squeeze.

“Hey Shelby,” he said, ruffling the dog’s fur. “Where is everybody?”

The dog barked, then turned and ran toward the yellow farmhouse. Connor started toward the house, stepping up on the porch as the screen door opened.

“Oh, goodness!” Martha said, one hand on her chest. “I heard Shelby barking. I didn’t know you would be coming home.”

“Oh, yeah, Mom. I just wanted to check up on things here.”

It had been a difficult time for both of them when Connor had officially met Martha Kent. She had been a little leery of him after discovering he’d once shot at her; not that he remembered. She’d been stunned to learn he was a clone, with both Lex’s and Clark’s DNA fused together. How that had been possible was something he didn’t really want to think about.

When they’d learned the truth, Clark had balked at the idea of Connor being his ‘son’ and they’d settled on being brothers instead. At first, he hadn’t known how to address Martha, who was not really his mother, but once they’d come to grips with everything, she’d suggested he call her Mom.

It was one of the reasons he had decided to spend some time with her in Washington instead of going to school like any normal teenager. Martha was also the one who had encouraged him to join Jay Garrick’s school.

Jay and most of his classmates were still in Gotham, helping to keep order. Batman was still out of commission, although from all reports, he was growing surlier by the day. Megan had gone off a couple days earlier with J’onn, which, considering the two of them were from two factions who had been at war with each other, made for an odd sort of alliance.

“Is everything okay, sweetie?” Martha asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just ...” She opened the screen door again and started back inside. A cold wind had blown in and he could see she was feeling the cold. “Have you heard from Clark? Or Lois?”

She shook her head. “Sam said Lois went to Paris. No one knows where Clark is.”

He frowned. There hadn’t been a Superman sighting in days. Still, at least Supergirl was doing her bit to keep the criminal population from taking advantage of Superman’s absence.
“I’m worried about them,” he told her.

“So am I, honey, but they need to work this out by themselves.”

He frowned. “I just … I don’t get it. How could she blame Clark for this?” he asked, following her into the kitchen and watching as she switched on the coffee pot and rinsed out some cups. “I mean, it looked to me like this whole thing was timed right down to the second.”

He’d talked it over with Jay and some of the others and they’d all come to the same conclusion. The riots and attacks had all been carefully planned and executed so the Justice League would be distracted, giving the kidnappers time to get the baby.

“I know, sweetie,” Martha said, “but you have to remember that when people are grieving they often say things they don’t mean.”

“Do you really think that’s true?”

She poured some coffee for them both and gestured to the table.

“Did Clark ever tell you about the summer he ran away?”

Connor shook his head. “Clark’s never talked much about anything when he was growing up. Except how much he loved you and J … Dad.”

She smiled gently.

“Clark wasn’t always perfect. He made a lot of mistakes when he was younger. He tended to think with his heart and not with his head.”

“Jay kind of says the same thing about me sometimes. He thinks I’m impulsive and I don’t always think things through.”

Martha shook her head at Connor’s guilty expression.

“Sweetheart, don’t ever think that that’s a bad thing. Your mistakes help you learn and grow. Yes, sometimes things don’t always turn out the way you want them to and they can have serious consequences, but you have to take the bad with the good.”

He nodded and sipped his coffee, trying to understand what she meant. He messed up sometimes, and pretty badly. Jay was always taking him to task over it, which made him feel even worse. He thought Clark couldn’t have done anything that was nearly as bad, and he told Martha that.

“Oh dear, I don’t want to burst your bubble, but Clark could and did make terrible mistakes. You see, around the time Clark turned sixteen, his father … Jor-El, that is, told him he needed to leave Smallville and train. Clark wasn’t emotionally ready to do it and to stop his father from forcing him to leave, he used Kryptonite and blew the ship up.”

Connor stared at her, wide-eyed. “You mean the ship he came to Earth in? Why would he do that?”

She grimaced. “Well, as I said, Clark didn’t always think rationally when he was your age. Jor-El still got his way in the end. Clark ran away.”

“Why did he run away?”

“You see, I was pregnant. It was a miracle, and I won’t go into how that happened, but when Clark blew up the ship, your dad and I were on our way back home and the shockwave from the explosion
caused the truck to overturn. I lost the baby. Jonathan … Jonathan was so hurt and so angry he
turned on Clark and said something which Clark thought meant his dad blamed him for the
miscarriage.”

Connor gasped. “Oh no. Mom, that must have been horrible.”

“For both Jonathan and Clark. Jonathan blamed himself for Clark’s running away and we spent three
months trying to find him. We nearly lost the farm in the process. Clark blamed himself for that too.
So, I can understand why Lois said some things in the heat of the moment, so to speak. She’s
grieving and neither of them are thinking rationally.”

Connor bit his lip. “Mom, what if …”

“What?”

“What if they never get her back? I mean, do you think Clark …”

Martha put a hand on his.

“If you are afraid of what Clark might do, you’re not alone. I think it’s up to us, as his family, to try
to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

He frowned at her. “But what are we supposed to do? We can’t lock him up! We don’t even know
where he is!”

“No, that’s true.”

There was the sound of something thudding on the porch and Shelby got up from the rug, shaking
himself, before trotting to the screen door to investigate. He began growling, clearly not happy at
whatever it was.

“Shush Shelby,” Kara called out.

Connor rose from his chair and went to the door, just as his blonde cousin opened it and stepped
through, followed by a tall fair-haired man with a sallow complexion.

“Who’s this?” he asked, folding his arms and glaring at the man who looked to be more than a little
shell-shocked.

“I’ll explain in a minute,” Kara said. Shelby was still growling at the man and Martha called to the
dog, clearly disturbed by his attitude toward the visitor. Kara nodded at her aunt. “I’m sorry, Aunt
Martha. I think I know why Shelby’s upset.” She turned and glared at the man. “You. Sit down at
the table and don’t move a muscle.”

He inched gingerly past the still snarling dog and sat at the table. Shelby, hackles up, perched himself
at the man’s feet. The man paled visibly.

Connor turned to ask Kara what was going on but a rush of wind and a whoosh told him she was no
longer there. She re-appeared in seconds, dumping several small items on the table. Connor peered at
them, realising they were transmitters. They’d been bugged?

“And others?” Kara snapped at the man.

“Uh, no. I think you’ve got them all,” he said, still glancing warily at the dog.

The blonde superhero looked up at them for a moment before crushing the transmitters into dust.
“This is …”

“I know you,” Martha said. “You’re that agent. NSA.”

The man nodded slowly. “Uh, yes Senator.”

“What is he doing here, Kara?” she asked.

Kara quickly explained what she had done a few days earlier, recruiting J’onn and M’gann to help her get information out of the man, who she told Connor was called John Crawford. She related how Crawford had broken in at the farm not once, but twice, the second time to not only get DNA, but also to plant the transmitters. He and his partner had used some kind of gas to knock Lois out.

After J’onn had interrogated Crawford, he’d been sent back to his agency to gather information about his superiors in the Illuminati. The man had been reluctant, but Kara had asked J’onn to use his shapeshifting abilities to keep an eye on the agent. Crawford hadn’t had a moment’s peace in the days that followed.

Connor glared at the man, wanting to snarl at him as Shelby was doing, as he learned the agent was also an agent for the same people who had kidnapped Mara.

Martha looked equally angry.

“Where is she? Where is my grand-daughter?”

Crawford shook his head. “I don’t know. Please, senator, you have to understand how the organisation works. We’re each assigned our part and not privy to …”

“I don’t care how your organisation works!” Martha snapped. “You people have no idea the force you may be unleashing on this planet. If you think I’m angry, imagine just how angry her father is and what he’s capable of.”

Crawford shrank under her heated gaze as her tirade continued. She berated him about poor judgement, stopping short of calling him names, but making it very clear she wanted to rip him to pieces.

Kara stood silently watching as the Illuminati agent took the abuse, his expression suggesting he deserved every cutting word. Connor continued to stare at Martha, realising everything he had heard about a redhead’s temper was true in this case. He also understood what Clark had always meant when he’d talked about how strict his father was, but his mom was even scarier when she was angry.

“What are you going to do to him?” he asked.

“He’s going to help us get Mara back,” Kara told him.

“And if he doesn’t?”

Kara smiled smugly. “I’ve already told him what my Uncle Jor-El did to criminals on our planet.”

Crawford looked nervous, swallowing hard. Martha began to laugh.

“Well, if you ask me, I can’t think of a place any more fitting than the Phantom Zone,” she said, her blue eyes cold as she glared at him. “Prison is definitely too good for him.”

Crawford looked even more worried, beads of sweat rolling down from his forehead.
Bruce had spent most of the past few days researching everything he could about the Illuminati and the Baron de Rochefort. There had been a small article in a French newspaper saying the baron’s wife had been found dead. The aristocrat had made a one-line statement which suggested to Bruce he cared little for his wife.

Selina had stopped by a couple of times, as had Blake, but Bruce had rebuffed them both, preferring to focus on his research as well as his recovery. He continued to work out, in spite of Alfred’s attempts to stop him. The pain in his, back was less but there was still no way he was up to active duty.

He was frustrated with the slow healing, using all the techniques he had learned from the League of Shadows to try to speed up the process, to no avail.

As he stood in the room he’d set up as a workout room when he’d rebuilt the manor, he leaned on the parallel bars, breathing heavily as painful sensations, rather like pins and needles, only far more painful, travelled up his spine. His legs shook with the effort. Perspiration dampened his forehead.

He’d learned a long time ago to push the pain down deep, to work through it, but it was all too clear that he was not going to be able to do that this time. He knew some serious damage had been done to his back and he had been fortunate it hadn’t been completely broken, but it was frustrating all the same.

“Master Bruce …”

“If you’re here to lecture me again, Alfred, save it,” he replied.

“On the contrary. Sir,” Alfred added in that snotty tone he always got when he was pissed at Bruce. “You have visitors.”

Bruce looked up, rivulets of sweat running down his face, the salt stinging his eyes. He blinked at the butler, then glanced behind him at the tall man with dark blond hair and the tall brunette in glasses standing beside him. Diana and Steve Trevor.

“Escort them to my study, please Alfred,” he said, using a polite tone in the hope that his former guardian would at least rein in his annoyance. He took it for granted that the older man would do it anyway and see that his visitors were served coffee or tea. “I’ll take a shower and be right out.”

He was done in less than ten minutes, using a walking stick that had been his father’s to lean on as he made his way to the study. He overheard Alfred chatting with the couple.

“Master Bruce has always been stubborn,” the butler was saying. Bruce heard the clink of china and figured the older man was serving coffee or tea.

“I’m not surprised,” Steve Trevor was saying.

Bruce frowned. He still wasn’t sure how much the Secret Service agent knew about him and his alter ego and it worried him a little that Diana had brought him. Still, he could understand why the woman trusted him. It was fairly obvious from the looks that had passed between them that they were a couple. Maybe they weren’t sleeping together but they both clearly wanted to. It was also just as clear that Trevor knew Diana’s true identity and it didn’t bother him one bit.

He entered the study and tried for a smile, realising from the odd look Trevor shot him that it had come out as more like a grimace. He glanced at the butler, who just nodded and went out.
“How are you feeling, Mr Wayne?” Diana asked solicitously.

“It’s slow, but I’m getting there,” he replied.

“Seems to me you’re pushing yourself rather hard.” The Secret Service man frowned. “How did you injure your back again?”

“I told you, it was a fall,” Diana said, turning her head to look at her lover.

“Oh, right. Of course.”

Bruce sat down with an effort. “What brings you here?” he asked.

“We thought you would want to know what we learned from Senator Clifford,” Diana answered.

“Who, by the way, is now being investigated by the Feds,” Steve interjected.

Bruce nodded. “No doubt she will be forced to resign from the Senate.” He sighed. “It changes nothing. Someone else will take her place.”

“True, but with every small victory, we may yet win the war,” the Amazon princess claimed.

“What about the child?”

“She doesn’t know where the little girl is,” Trevor told him, sighing. “The Illuminati have some sort of hierarchy.”

“Meaning only those at the top know everything. What else did she tell you?”

“Names. People in certain seats of power. Enough to have them investigated.”

“This still doesn’t help find the child.”

Alfred returned, holding a cordless phone.

“Master Bruce, you have a phone call.”

He frowned at the older man. “Who?”

“Lex Luthor.”

Bruce stared at him. “Why would Lex Luthor be calling me? I haven’t had anything to do with the Luthors in years.” He didn’t mention the visit he’d made a few weeks earlier to the clocktower apartment as Batman.

Alfred just sent him a look which suggested he was just as puzzled as Bruce was. Bruce took the phone.

“Bruce Wayne.”

“Wayne. Why don’t we dispense with the formalities? I don’t know where the Kents’ daughter is, but I know where I can find someone who can lead us to her. Dordogne.”

“What’s in Dordogne?” he asked, remembering it was a department in France.

“You’re asking the wrong question,” Luthor replied, and hung up. Bruce frowned, then handed the phone back to his butler.
“What’s in Dordogne?” Trevor asked.

“I don’t know, but Luthor claims to have a lead to the whereabouts of the Kents’ daughter.”

Diana looked at him evenly. “Then perhaps we should contact Batman,” she replied, making it clear she hadn’t told her lover the truth about his alter ego.

He nodded. “Indeed, Diana. Indeed.”

The couple left shortly after. Bruce waited until the main door closed then turned to the butler.

“Alfred …”

“I attempted to trace the call but unfortunately there was insufficient time.”

Damn, Bruce thought. He hadn’t been keeping proper tabs on Lex. The last he had heard was that Luthor’s company had collapsed.

He made his way down to the cave and switched his computer on. Immediately an alert popped up telling him he had several emails. There was one from Senator Kent.

_Bruce, I’m sorry for disturbing you. I know you are still recovering, but I was hoping you might have heard from Clark. He has disappeared. Lois has gone to Paris to follow up on a lead and the general has not heard anything more. I’m worried, Bruce. I know what Clark is like when he is upset or angry._

He quickly sent off a reply, telling her he hadn’t heard anything but would do his best to find out.

Curiously, there was another email which had slipped past his spam filter. Bruce would have dismissed it if it hadn’t been for the reference in the subject line. **A man can only attain knowledge with the help of those who possess it.**

It was such an obscure quote yet he couldn’t help being reminded of what Luthor had said before he had hung up. He opened the email. A video file immediately popped up and Luthor appeared on the screen.

“Good to see you’re keeping up, Bruce. I’m currently stuck behind enemy lines in Canada. I’ve had to resort to bouncing this message off several locations just to avoid being tracked. A certain source believes the answer is in Dordogne. The city of Mont-Faucon, to be more precise. It seems that Baron de Rochefort owns a castle there. If we can get out without being detected, we’re going to head there.”

_We?_ Bruce thought. _Who was we?_

Luthor continued, telling him of his plan to contact someone involved in smuggling contraband through one of Canada’s main ports. If they could get to the coast without the country’s intelligence service finding them, they would smuggle themselves out of the country. Knowing the likelihood that the American authorities would have been alerted, Luthor added they would have to leave port at another foreign country. Probably South America or South East Asia. Somewhere that wouldn’t have as good a border patrol.

Bruce accessed his files on the baron. Sure enough, a castle in Mont Faucon had come up in his research. Something was about to go down in the castle. He was sure of it.

He called the number Steve Trevor had left, making sure the call couldn’t be traced.
“Major Trevor,” he said, using the modulator to create the husky growl he used as Batman. “I have a lead on this Baron de Rochefort.”

“What is it?” the agent asked.

“The man has a place in Dordogne. If my instincts are correct, something is about to go down there.”

“I’m in touch with Wonder Woman. I’ll relay the information.”

“Good.”

Bruce hung up and dialed another number.

“Senator? It’s Bruce Wayne.”

“Mr Wayne?” the voice said politely. “How can I help you?”

“Perhaps I can help you. Is there somewhere we could meet?”

“I understood you were injured, Mr Wayne. A fall, was it?” Of course, she’d already mentioned that in her email, but he guessed she was just trying to protect his identity.

“I’m mobile, Senator. I can be in Metropolis in a matter of hours.”

“I’m staying in Smallville.”

Bruce declined, feeling it wasn’t safe, even though Martha assured him it was. She suggested another location and a meeting time the next day. He agreed.

Gotham was a few hours’ drive, but Bruce decided it would be better to fly, using the company jet. He was met at the airport by a limousine, which took him through the central city to Broadway.

It was clear the city was still recovering from the riots as some store windows were boarded up. Construction crews were busy working on the buildings, patching up what they could. The city centre looked almost like a ghost town.

The limousine pulled up at 355 1000 Broadway and the driver opened the door. Bruce got out with difficulty, a little stiff from sitting for too long. He entered through the revolving door and approached the security desk.

“Bruce Wayne.”

“Fifteenth floor,” the man replied, sounding bored. “Corner office.” He pointed to the bank of lifts.

Bruce grimaced as he saw the age of the elevators. The building itself was at least a hundred and fifty years old but had seen some modernisation. Clearly not enough, he thought as he entered the lift and heard a suspicious creak. He pushed the button for the fifteenth floor and the car slowly ascended.

After what seemed like an interminable period, the doors opened with a ding and he stepped out, heading along the corridor, entering through the double doors. A woman glanced at him.

“Bruce Wayne,” he said.

Her eyes widened. “Oh! Mr Wayne! Of course, Mr White is expecting you.”

She got up from the desk and knocked on the doors on the other side of the room. A voice called out
and she glanced at him, nodding for him to enter.

Perry White sat at the head of a long polished table. On his right was Martha Kent. On his left was a stocky man wearing a military uniform, whom Bruce assumed was Lois' father, since he'd never actually seen the man in person. Bruce recognised the young brunette sitting beside Martha as Linda Danvers, aka Kara Kent, albeit disguised. She looked at him and nodded.

Bruce limped over to the table and sat down with difficulty. Martha looked at Kara.

“It’s clear,” Supergirl replied.

“Clear?” Bruce asked.

“The farm was bugged,” Martha told him. “We couldn’t take any chances.”

He wondered why they didn’t use Watchtower, but given the fact that Perry White and the other man were present for the meeting, he supposed they couldn’t use that location.

“I didn’t want to suggest Watchtower,” Martha said, clearly reading his mind.

“If we don’t know the location, it can’t be tortured out of us,” the man, clearly a decorated general, added.

“You’d know something about torture, General …” he prompted, feigning ignorance.

“Lane,” the man said in a clipped tone. “Which you would know if you paid attention to the news once in a while, Wayne, instead of acting the fool.”

“Sam, we weren’t going to bring that up,” Martha scolded.

He looked sheepishly at her, which appeared rather incongruous for a man of his calibre. Then again, Martha Kent was no shrinking violet.

“Mr Wayne,” Perry said. “Let’s not pretend we don’t know why you’re here and what this is about. What do you know about Mara’s whereabouts?”

“Unfortunately nothing. Yet. I have it on good authority that something is about to go down in Dordogne. Luthor himself is headed there.”

“Luthor,” the general growled. Kara looked equally annoyed.

“All I know is, Luthor was going to try to smuggle himself out of Canada. I don’t know who else was with him, but he did say ‘we were going to try to get out’. It seems he’s now considered a fugitive by the intelligence service there. I spoke to one of my contacts in an intelligence agency here and he’s also on their most wanted list.”

He quickly explained about the baron and what he had learned so far as well as what he had been told by Diana, but kept the location of the castle vague.

“I’m going to France,” he told them. “There’s only so much I can do here. I have a few contacts I can talk to there. They might be able to give me some more insight as to what is happening in Dordogne.”
“Then I’m going too,” Kara said. Bruce had anticipated that. He looked at the other three.

“I’m sure you all want to go as well, but I don’t think that’s such a good idea. If the baron is what I think he is, then he’s dangerous.”

“What do you hope to find, Bruce?” Perry asked.

“It’s not so much what I hope to find as what I hope to prevent. If we don’t stop the baron and his so-called brotherhood, well, what happened with Darkseid will be a picnic compared to what they could unleash.”
Baron de Rochefort appreciated beautiful women. While he knew he was not exactly what one would consider an ‘oil painting’ he exuded an aura of power that attracted women of all types. His wife, or late wife, for instance. She had been attracted to his power, rather than to him, but he cared just as little for her. She was useful.

Truth be told, he enjoyed having power over a woman who had once been part of a matriarchal society, where women held all the power and men had no place in it. He supposed it could be considered a rather misogynistic attitude but power, after all, was the only true ambition. Money could ensure his entry into a number of circles, but power would be the thing to keep him there.

He sat in the lounge of the Four Seasons Hotel, drinking cognac and smoking a cigar. He’d already ignored several requests from the management not to smoke inside. Not even the threat of the law would stop him from doing as he pleased. After all, many of the men within the local police force were members of the brotherhood, albeit much further down the chain than he was.

“Vous ne devriez pas fumer, vous savez,” a voice said in perfect French. The tone was only slightly admonishing, rather like a mother scolding a child for getting into mischief, unlike the staff who had become more insistent. He recognised the voice instantly, looking up from the newspaper he’d been pretending to read, acting as if he hadn’t expected the intrusion.

“Je vous demande pardon?”

Lois Lane-Kent sat down in the chair opposite him. She appeared to be cool and calm but he knew inside she was probably seething with rage. He had studied the woman extensively. She was a woman of many talents, and many tempers, much of which, he believed, she inherited from her father, General Sam Lane. The Illuminati had once approached the general, long before he had moved up the ranks, trying to gauge his interest in joining the brotherhood. Of course, the general hadn’t known the true purpose of the approach, since they had not identified themselves, but he had still sent them packing. The man was incorruptible; a trait to be admired, to be sure, but would ultimately be his downfall when their plans came to fruition.

The woman continued to gaze at him, her expression wary. Yves had heard much about the beautiful Lois Lane and he could understand why she would be attracted to the man who was known to the world as Clark Kent, aka Superman. Of course she was attracted to the alien’s power.

“Mon père fume Chavelos. Même après ma mère est morte d'un cancer du poumon, il refuse d'arreter.”

He gazed at her with a curious expression. Her French was flawless.

“J'ai passé deux ans à Bruxelles quand j'étais un enfant,” she told him, obviously interpreting his expression. “Mon père me traîner comme un morceau de bagages. toujoure a charger.”
“Je vois.”

"Ou est ma fille?"

He stared at her, raising an eyebrow at the abrupt change of subject. Lois leaned forward.

“Où est-elle?”

“Madame, je ne sais pas de quoi vous parlez.”

“Ne pas jouer à ses jeux, Baron. Je sais que vous êtes derrière l'enlèvement de ma fille, comme je sais que vous avez eu m'a suivi depuis mon départ aux États-Unis. J'ai rencontré un de vos ‘frères’ dans l'avion.”

He shook his head.

“Mme Kent, je suis désolé pour vos ennuis, mais je n'ai rien à voir avec cela. Je suis, qu'un simple homme d'affaires.”

Her expression darkened. He noticed her glance at her left hand and realised she wasn’t wearing her wedding and engagement rings. He chose to suppress a satisfied smirk. It seemed that all he had heard was true. The couple were on the verge of breaking up.

He leaned forward, placing a hand on hers, his voice gentle as he spoke.

“Je suis désolé,” he said. “S'il vous plaît dites-moi ce qui est arrivé. Je voudrais aider.”

She frowned, looking uncertain.

“Je suis sûr,” she said. “Mon mari …” Her voice trailed off and she swallowed hard. He noticed the tears in her eyes. She cleared her throat and began again. “Ma fille a par une femme. Je ... Elle était, la femme, je veux dire ... Elle avait la force comme rien d'autre que je avais jamais vu. Je pense qu'elle était une Amazone.”

He gasped appropriately, pretending horror as Lois continued with her story, telling him of the Amazon. Of course he knew it all, but pretended to know nothing, asking her how she had come to the conclusion that he was the one behind it. That it was the truth was irrelevant.

He knew through all the transcripts of her conversations with her husband, Superman had been convinced of the truth of it. That was why he had chosen Aresia, knowing her hatred of all men. After all, what was more plausible in Lois Lane’s world? A secret organisation kidnapping a child with the potential to have abilities like Superman’s, or a man-hating Amazon determined to take a child to raise as her own away from the world of men?

“Je comprends que vous êtes en deuil,” he said, his voice dripping with sympathy. He supposed he was laying it on a little thick, but he felt certain she would respond to it. "Moi aussi, je suis en deuil."

She stared at him.

"Qu'est-il arrivé?" she asked, clearly not so deep in her own grief that she could not feel for someone else’s troubles.

"Ma femme ... elle a été assassinée. Je viens d'apprendre de cela il y a une semaine." He schooled his expression into one of a man whose world had fallen apart even though he felt nothing at all. She had outlived her usefulness.
“Je suis vraiment désolé. Quelle horreur.”

“Merci,” he replied. “Ma femme était une femme très belle et je sens terriblement sa perte.”

"Bien sûr," she said, nodding. He studied her for a moment, detecting no duplicity in her expression. Either she was genuinely sympathetic or she was a good actress, he thought.

He nodded his thanks at her. His phone vibrated in his pocket. He glanced apologetically at his companion and pulled it out.

“Oui?”

“Un Monsieur Delacour exige une rencontre avec vous, Baron,” Valmont replied.

“Maintenant?”

“Il insiste, monsieur.”

“Oui je vois. Très bien.”

It went without saying that he expected an extensive background check on the man before he would agree to the meeting. He hung up the phone and rose.

"Je suis vraiment désolé," he said. "Il semble que ma présence est demandée ailleurs.”

The reporter nodded. "Bien sûr. Je suis désolé de vous avoir retenue."

He leaned forward and took her hand, raising it to his lips, giving it a brief kiss.

"Ce fut un plaisir de vous revoir, Madame Kent."

"Lois, ou Mademoiselle Lane," she said. “J'utilise mon nom de jeune fille professionnellement.”

"Ahh, bien sûr." He nodded. “Mademoiselle Lane.”

“You really shouldn’t smoke, you know.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“My father smokes Chavelos. Even after my mother died from lung cancer, he refuses to quit.”

“I spent a couple of years in Brussels when I was a kid,” “My father used to drag me around like a spare piece of luggage.”

“I see.”

“Where’s my daughter?”

“Where is she?”

“Madam, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t play games, Baron. I know you’re behind my daughter’s kidnapping, just as I know you’ve been having me followed since I left the US. I met one of your ‘brothers’ on the plane.”

“Mrs Kent, I am sorry for your troubles but I have had nothing to do with it. I am but a simple businessman.”

“I am sorry. Please tell me what has happened. I would like to help.”

“I was so sure. My husband … my daughter was kidnapped by a woman. I … She was, the woman, I mean … she had strength like nothing else I’d ever seen. I think she was an Amazon.”
“I understand you are grieving. I too am grieving.”
“What happened?”
“My wife … she was murdered. I just learned of this a week ago.”
“I’m so sorry. How awful.”
“Thank you. My wife was a very beautiful woman and I feel her loss terribly.”
“Of course.”
“Yes?”
“A Monsieur Delacour demands a meeting with you, Baron,”
“Now?”
“He is insistent, sir.”
“Yes, I see. Very well.”
“I am very sorry. It appears my presence is requested elsewhere.”
“Of course. I’m sorry to have kept you.”
“It was a pleasure seeing you again, Mrs Kent.”
“Lois, or Miss Lane,” she said. “I use my maiden name professionally.”
“Ahh, of course. Miss Lane.”

Lois watched him leave, pasting a smile on her face until she was absolutely certain he was gone. Her smile dropped into a calculating smirk, one she was sure he was also wearing. She pulled a phone out of her pocket and began tapping out a text.

*I think he took the bait.*

A reply came back within seconds.

*Well done, my love. Now it’s my move on the board. Love you.*

*Righbackatcha,* she replied.

She put the phone back in her pocket and began to make her way upstairs to her room. Lana intercepted her.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I saw you meeting with the Baron.”

“Lana …”

“How could you meet with that …”

Lois pulled her friend’s arm before she could say any more, quickly opening the door to her room. She pulled out her phone and accessed an app Clark had had Jor-El place on her phone. It looked like a normal barcode scanner, except it wasn’t. It could scan a room and tell her if there were any electronic devices present, then jam their transmissions.

Lana stood watching in confusion as Lois scanned the room, a blue-coloured ray emanating from her phone. Sure enough, there were bugs everywhere. She pressed the pound key to activate the jammer, then looked up at her friend.

“Lana, what I’m about to tell you, you cannot tell anyone. Not even Chloe.”
“What?”

“The room is bugged, Lana. Jor-El gave Clark instructions on how to create an app on my phone so I could jam any transmissions. That’s why I’m telling you this now. Frankly, this whole thing is beginning to get on my nerves. I mean, I know he’s got a good reason for it, but it’s driving me crazy, not being with him and I …”

“Lois, you’re babbling.”

“Sorry. Clark and I cooked this up together. We’re not really separated. Clark is here. In France. We’re going after the Baron, but we want him to think we’re not together.”

Lana looked stunned. “But … don’t you think …”

“Lana, promise me you’ll tell no one. Not Chloe, not Clark’s mom. Not even Kara. No one, do you understand? This could put us all in danger if the Baron gets wind of our plans.”

“Why? What are you going to do?”

Lois chewed on her lower lip. Just from those few minutes of the Baron talking to her, she could tell he had more than a passing interest in her. If she could just get herself invited to his castle in Dordogne, she could hopefully discover where he was keeping her daughter.

Lana looked worried as Lois outlined the plan to her.

“This is dangerous, Lois.”

“I know, but Clark and I agreed on this together. We’re going to get Mara back, come hell or high water.”

“This is insane, Lo.”

“Any more insane than a secret organisation kidnapping the daughter of Superman? I know how this looks, but Clark and I have thought this through very carefully.”

“So why tell me this now? Why not tell Chloe?”

“I love my cousin, and I know she’s good at keeping secrets, but I can’t take any chances. Besides, you saw me talking to the Baron.”

“I guess I didn’t give you much choice,” Lana replied. “All right. Fine. I’ll keep this quiet. How long do you think it’ll take before …”

“I don’t know,” she said with a shrug. “Clark’s already activated the next stage of our plan.”

Lana bit her lip, clearly still worried. She had little chance to say anything else as Chloe burst into the room, wide eyed and breathless.

“You better come and see this,” she said. “Watchtower picked up an alert.”

Frowning, Lois followed her cousin out the door, aware of Lana following behind. They hurried up the stairs to Chloe and Oliver’s luxury suite.

Chloe led them into the main part of the suite. She had her laptop set up to access Watchtower systems.
“What is it?” Lois asked her cousin, glancing at Oliver, who appeared anxious.

“It’s a message from Tess. I think she may have a lead on Mara.”

Hardly daring to hope, heart pounding, Lois began to read the message from Lex’s half-sister. She explained a mysterious call through the message service which she had been trying to track. All she had been able to discover thus far was that the call had come in via a satellite phone from somewhere in the Pacific.

Sighing, Lois looked up at her cousin.

“Sure, it’s a lead, but the Pacific’s a huge ocean. How are we supposed to…”

“I’m trying to narrow down a location,” Chloe told her. “What I do know is that it’s south of the Equator.”

Well, that did narrow it down a little, Lois thought. It still didn’t help much. If only there was someone who knew … Her eyes widened as the answer came to her. Of course. Moana!

Both Chloe and Oliver frowned as she explained. They hadn’t met Moana, although Chloe had done a background check on her.

“Why would this Moana be able to help pinpoint the location?” Lana asked.

“She mentioned something about a friend who was connected to the Rainbow Warrior. What if all those nuclear tests in the Pacific were just a cover for something else? Something more sinister?”

“Like secret meetings held by the Brotherhood?” Chloe asked.

“Exactly.” Lois sighed. “The trouble is, Moana’s stuck in Canada. With Lex Luthor, of all people. At least, last time I checked she was.”

Chloe scowled. “It just keeps getting better and better,” she grumbled.

***

Somewhere in the North Atlantic

A lone figure stood on the deck, listening to the clanking and the occasional clash of metal against metal, wincing at the squeal as rusty parts protested at being forced to move. Moana stared out at the vast ocean, feeling more than a little overwhelmed by the fact the only thing between her and the shadowy depths was a rusting hulk and about a dozen men.

The sound of footsteps across the deck alerted her to the presence behind her.

“I’ve been looking all over for you.”

She turned and snorted at Lex.

“You can’t have been looking very hard,” she retorted. “There aren’t that many places to hide.”

“This was the only choice,” he told her, clearly aware of her dismay at their current predicament.

“I know that!” she snapped.

He raised his hands in mute apology. She sighed and turned back to looking out over the ocean. The
sea had always terrified her. It was a huge part of her culture, one she had been taught to view with great respect. The sea was how her ancestors had travelled from the ancient homeland to the country she had been born in.

She knew there had been little choice. When Otis had contacted Lex to tell him the only way they were going to get out of Canada without the authorities catching up with them was on a fishing trawler, she would have thought Lex would be the first to protest, but he hadn’t said a word.

“How do you plan to get into the Baron’s castle?” she asked. “I hardly think we could walk in the front door, given the fact he’s basically made us wanted fugitives in both the United States and Canada.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it,” Lex told her, clearly not willing to share his secrets.

“I really hate that saying,” she said, sighing.

She felt his hand on her back. For all that she disliked the man, his touch was oddly comforting. She chose not to pull away.

***

Clark glanced at his watch, looking up from his seat on the bench of the Jardin du Luxembourg. A few tourists were still wandering around, despite the fact the sun was setting. He sprawled casually, pretending to enjoy the view, his gaze wary.

He noticed two men standing near the Medici Fountain. One was just under six foot, with pale skin, indicating he had spent some time out of the sun. The other was about an inch or so taller, with skin the colour of cocoa. He had one hand firmly on the shorter man’s elbow.

Clark caught the man’s gaze and nodded slightly, leading his companion to the bench.

“Kal-El,” the darker skinned man said quietly.

“J’onn. You brought him,” he said, speaking in his birth language.

The other man glared at him. “Who are you? Why did you bring me here?”

Clark gestured with his hand for the other man to be quiet, then spoke to J’onn, again in Kryptonian.

“Do the others know you’re here? Kara, for instance?”

“No, Kal-El. I have kept my promise to you, and to your wife. I still do not think this path is advisable, my friend, but I trust you have thought this through.”

Only J’onn J’onzz, Clark thought, could have seen through the dangerous charade. Only J’onn had the ability to read a Kryptonian’s mind where others were unable to break through the shield. When the Martian Manhunter had confronted Clark with what he knew, Clark had known he had no choice but to confess all. His father’s enforcer friend had been equally concerned when Clark had asked him to bring back an old foe in the hope that he might share his knowledge with them.

Clark’s gaze swept over the Manhunter’s companion. He recalled when he had met Curtis Knox. The man had been posing as a neurosurgeon, claiming he could cure the meteor-infected, when he’d really been harvesting organs to transplant to his wife, hoping the concentration of Kryptonite in each organ would make her immortal, as he was.
Clark had, of course, confronted him when the man had planned to harvest Chloe’s heart. The ensuing fight between them had knocked out Sophia Knox’s life support. Knox had turned on him in rage and grief. Clark had asked J’onn to take care of Knox, at first thinking J’onn would send him to the Phantom Zone. Instead, J’onn had taken the man to the fortress, where Jor-El had placed him in suspended animation. He’d then flown Knox into space.

Now they needed his help.

“Who are you?” Knox continued to ask. “What language are you …”

“Be quiet and listen,” Clark said, his tone rough. He’d learned through his training with Jor-El how to alter the timbre of his voice at will, giving him a fairly effective disguise. “I have a deal to discuss with you.”

“You’re American?” the immortal man asked.

“I was raised American,” Clark informed him. “Now listen. I’m prepared to give you your freedom …”

“Kal-El, I do not think it is wise …” J’onn began in Kryptonian. Clark shot him a look. He continued on as if J’onn had not spoken.

“In exchange, I want information. You will tell me everything you know about the Illuminati.”

Knox scoffed. “You will give me my freedom,” he said. “How can I trust you at your word? I don’t even know …”

“We’ve met before, Knox.” He quietly reminded Knox of his wife’s death. The dark-haired man raised his eyebrows, his eyes widening as he recalled those events.

“Clark Kent.”

“One of my names.”

“What’s to stop me from telling the world who you really are?”

“If there is one thing I’ve learned from Lex Luthor, it’s that power can provide a strong motivation for silence. Francis Bacon once wrote that knowledge is power. After all, wasn’t knowledge the very reason Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden?”

Knox smirked. “It seems you have matured in many ways, Kent.”

“I have,” Clark replied. “There is a condition to the deal.”

“Of course there is.”

“If you return to your ways, I will come after you and the deal will be off. You can have your life back, but only if you do the right thing.”

He could see the man was considering the deal. He was sure Knox would agree, rather than be sent back into the cold reaches of space.

“What do you need to know?” he asked finally.

“Everything. Who they are, how they came to be, what their chief aims are and their weaknesses.”
“You ask a lot.”

“I’m giving a lot,” Clark told him.

J’onn was looking around. The park had grown darker.

“Kal-El, perhaps it would be best if we take this discussion indoors.”

“You’re right. Knox?”

The other man nodded. “All right.”

***

Tess had known as soon as she learned of Mara’s kidnapping that she had no other option. She had to pretend to still be interested in Francesco Donatello and his brotherhood. Having been unable to pinpoint the location for Mara, she hoped she could learn it another way.

She had taken advantage of the opportunity of Donatello’s absence, he having left the villa on some errand, to search through the papers in his office. Fearful of his return at any moment, she frantically searched, unable to find anything which might give her some idea of where to start looking at least.

“I’m disappointed, Lutessa.”

Startled, she looked up at the man’s deep voice, her eyes widening at the ice-cold glare.

“Francesco, I …”

“I had hoped,” he began, approaching her with measured, slow steps, “that we had come to an understanding.”

She felt a frisson of fear and poised to strike, even knowing she was not nearly good enough to defeat the man. She tried desperately to recall her lessons in martial arts but her fear of this man and his cohorts and what they were capable of had paralysed her.

“Now I find you have been sending messages to Metropolis and then I find you ransacking my office. What are you looking for, Lutessa? Hmm?”

She shrank back as his hand touched her cheek. She tried to push him away but he grasped her wrist in a painful grip and pulled her hard against him.

“Now, is that any way to treat your host? I would have given you everything, Lutessa. If only you could have seen things my way.”

“Your way? Does that include kidnapping an infant, taking her away from her parents? What are you planning on doing to her?”

“It is not for you to know,” he told her.

“Superman is a good friend of mine. If you hurt that child, there is no telling what you will unleash on the world.”

“You think we have not existed for hundreds of years only for someone like Superman to interfere? You think we have not anticipated his every move?”

“I think you have no idea what you’re dealing with,” she returned. “And I can’t wait to find out what
he’ll do to you when he catches up with you.”

“It’s a pity then,” he said, “that you will never have that opportunity.”

It happened without warning. She felt something slide between her ribs and stared up at the man. For a moment his visage slipped and in that moment before the icy cold grip of death took hold, she saw the face of true evil. Lex Luthor might be ruthless and destructive, but his brand of evil came from a place of mental instability. Tess knew that. Yet, Donatello’s evil was something she couldn’t even fathom. It was her last thought before everything went black.
Episode 11: Part 1

Chapter Summary

Clark finds out more about the Illuminati. The gang begin to gather in France as Clark and Lois work to set the trap.

Episode Eleven: Concursus.

“You really have no idea what you are dealing with.” Knox was pacing the room. If Clark didn’t know better, he would have said the man was terrified. “The Illuminati - there’s a reason they exist in secret.”

Clark stood, leaning against the door frame.

“Tell me.”

Knox sighed and stopped pacing, biting his lip. J’onn stood nearby, watching warily but choosing not to comment. He maintained the illusion of his human appearance, but Knox chose to keep a safe distance from the Martian.

“Why do you want to know?”

Clark considered his options. He didn’t think it was advisable to tell the other man what the Illuminati were suspected of doing. If Knox knew about Mara, it was possible he would use the information to hit back at Clark, despite his apparent acceptance of their deal.

Calling on his football experience and some advice Jason Teague had given him once, Clark stood at his full height and glared at the other man. The best defence is a good offence, Jason had once told him. Clark spoke to the immortal in a harsh tone.

“It’s none of your concern why I want to know about the Illuminati. The only thing you need to know is what it will cost you if you continue to stall. Now start talking or I’ll ask my friend here to take you back.”

Knox’s eyebrows shot up in alarm. He turned to look at the enforcer, shuddering.

“No,” he said. “Not that. Anything but that.”

“Then tell me what I want to know.”

He seemed to weigh up his options, then nodded slowly.

“According to history, the Illuminati was a post-Enlightenment sect started in Bavaria in 1776, but eight years later all secret societies were banned by Karl Theodor. The sect survived, but history is wrong. Secret societies have been around for much, much longer than the eighteenth century. Are you familiar with the Knights Templar?”

“I’ve seen the movie.”
Knox snorted. “As have I, but this is nothing to do with the descendants of Christ, which, by the way, is no hoax.”

“Get on with it.”

“Secret societies have existed for at least a thousand years, maybe more. The Knights Templar was one of them. They were initially a military-religious order formed around the time of the First Crusade but it grew throughout Western Europe. The order became less about protecting pilgrims and more about protecting valuables. Some suggest their method of conducting this business was a precursor to modern banking.”

He paused, looking at Clark.

“You know about the families involved in banking and their manipulation of the world’s markets.”

“Yes,” Clark returned quickly, not caring that his tone sounded impatient. Chloe had done a lot of this research beforehand and he’d read everything he could lay his hands on.

Knox shrugged. “The Knights Templar became one of the most powerful political and religious orders of the time and many of your conspiracy theorists believe that they have passed this knowledge on. Others also believe that they were the founders of various secret societies. The truth is, they’re right. Except for one thing. All these secret societies are one thing. They are the Illuminati. It doesn’t matter what they’re called. La Rose Noire, Golden Dawn, Freemasons, Skull and Bones. Each one of them are led by someone who is among the top tier of the Illuminati. They only break up into these so-called societies to keep all the other members out of the loop. The only way they continue to remain secret is by ensuring that none of the members below them in the hierarchy know those at the top.”

“Do you know who is in this top tier?”

Knox shook his head, his expression regretful.

“No. I mean, I’ve been around long enough to have heard things, but nothing I could substantiate. The Illuminati don’t tend to like Immortals like myself.”

“What happened to these Knights?” J’onn queried. “You said they founded various secret societies but what forced this?”

“The Templar Knights fought in various crusades but their chief goal was in regaining their hold over the Holy Land. It’s said that eventually they became fractured and lost their purpose. They were forced to retreat to the island of Cyprus. Not to mention King Phillip of France at the time didn’t trust them. Or their power.”

“Why?” Clark asked.

“When he inherited the kingdom, he also inherited its debt, which was owed to the Templars. He had several members arrested and accused of heresy. Those that escaped either joined other religious orders or went underground. There was no such heresy. It was all a ploy to take away their power.”

“Instead it just forced them underground?” Clark replied.

“Yes.”

“What do they want?”
Knox shot him an incredulous look.

“Have you not been listening? Power. That’s all they want. They’ve been working for centuries to get it and from the rumours I was hearing a few years ago, they were very close to their goal. Except for one thing.”

“Which was?”

“You. Your powers. Your inherent capacity for good.”

Clark nodded. He’d heard it all before, of course, but Knox’s theory seemed to solidify it. He realised the reason they had chosen to take Mara was because she was probably the only being strong enough to go up against him. Or she would when she was older. Even if what Lois had told him about the baron’s sister’s vision was true and he were to go ballistic, the baron must think he had plenty of time. After all, if these people had been working for centuries to regain their power, then they were obviously very patient.

The immortal man gazed at him, his face pale.

“You are afraid,” J’onnn observed.

“Of course I’m afraid. You should be too. These people … they’ve manipulated every event in history to their own ends.”

“Why? I heard what you said about power, but how does manipulating the path of these events help them regain their power?”

“You’ve heard of ethnic cleansing? Viral epidemics? These are not just random occurrences. The Illuminati use them to wipe out certain sections of the population. It’s survival of the fittest.”

Clark had heard that too through the League’s research but it had never been painted in such black-and-white terms before.

His phone rang and he glanced at the screen before pressing the key to pick up the call.

“Oui?”

A woman spoke in French.

“Monsieur Delacour, j’appelle de la part de Monsieur le Baron. Il sera heureux de vous revoir. Demain matin a dix heures. Est-ce que cela convient au monsieur?”

“Oui, bien sûr,” he replied.

“Très bien alors. Il vous verra dans son appartement parisien. Connaissez-vous l’adresse?”

“Donnez-le-moi,” he instructed, pretending he was writing it down. He’d spent days researching the Baron and his personal dealings. While at the farm, when his mother hadn’t been around, he had communicated with the A.I. of Jor-El, using it to get as much information on Baron de Rochefort as he could.

“Monsieur Delacour, I am calling from Monsieur Baron. He will be happy to meet with you. Tomorrow morning at ten. Will this suit the monsieur?”

“Oui, of course.”

“Very well, then. He will see you at his Paris apartment. Do you know the address?”
“Give it to me.”

J’onn looked at him questioningly and he nodded.

“Let Knox go,” he told him, speaking in English for the benefit of the other man. While Knox knew almost all the languages of Earth, including some dead ones, he appeared to prefer English.

“What are you planning?” Knox asked.

“That’s not your concern.” He gestured at J’onn, who grasped the other man’s arm.

“I think it is my concern,” the immortal replied, struggling against J’onn’s grip. “You say you’re allowing me to return to my life. If you are going up against the Illuminati, there may not be a world for me to return to.” The dark-haired man looked worried. “Just who the hell are you?”

“As you said, Mr Knox. I’m the thing that stands in the way of the Illuminati’s quest for ultimate power. Trust me. You do not want to piss me off.”

Knox swallowed visibly. “I’m beginning to think it is not the Illuminati I should fear.”

“A wise decision,” J’onn interjected, with a look at Clark that he could not interpret. “I hope you know what you are doing, my friend,” he added in Kryptonian.

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Chloe sighed, running a hand through her short hair in frustration.

“Honey, you’ve been at this for hours.”

She waved away her husband’s efforts to get her to sit back and relax.

“Ollie, this is the first, closest lead we’ve had to finding Mara.” Her eyes were practically glued to the screen on her laptop. Oliver loved his wife, but there were times when her one-track mind got on his nerves. He still recalled the story of how she had spent a whole night, long before they had got together as a couple, trying to break through firewalls which Tess’ ‘expert’ had continued to use to block her.

“How exactly are you going to be able to narrow the field?” he asked.

“I’ve hacked into several communications and I found a flight plan which was filed from Metropolis to an area in the South Pacific.”

“How do you know you’re on the right track? I mean, I hate to get all logical on you, but why would they file a flight plan that tells us exactly where they’re going?”

“I don’t know if I’m on the right track, but given what Tess tried to tell us, where ever they’re keeping Mara, it has to be somewhere in the vicinity.”

Lana entered the room, followed closely by Lois, who looked worried at the way her cousin was hunched over the laptop.

“Is she still at it?” she asked Oliver.

He sighed and nodded. “You know how she gets.”

“Has there been any more word from Tess?” Lana asked anxiously.
“No,” Oliver replied. “We tried contacting her but there’s been no answer.”

“What if something happened to her?” the brunette said.

Lois frowned at her. “I thought you didn’t like Tess?”

“I don’t. Not really. But she’s like everything else that comes in contact with Lex.”

“Yeah, no one survives an encounter with Lex Luthor unscathed.”

“Oh, surely I’m not that bad?”

Four heads looked up, startled, staring at the bald man. He was accompanied by a woman and a man Oliver recognised. He gaped at the trio.

“Mr Anders? We thought you were in custody in Canada?”

Oliver could see the older man was bruised and clearly exhausted. There were dark shadows beneath his eyes.

“It’s a long story,” Anders replied, glancing uneasily at Lex.

“Moana,” Lois said, greeting the woman. “I’m glad to see you. Maybe you can help us narrow down the search.”

“Search?” Moana asked, sounding just as tired as Anders.

“We got a message we think may have something to do with Mara.”

“You’ve found her?” Lex asked, barely able to conceal the gleam in his eye.

“Don’t even think about it, Luthor,” Lois replied with a growl. “If, uh, I mean when we get my daughter back, if you even lay a finger on her …”

“Feisty as ever, Lane. I’m surprised your husband hasn’t managed to curb your wild ways.”

A strange look crossed Lois’ pretty features and she stepped toward Luthor. Lana quickly stepped in between them.

“Lex, unless you want to be thrown out of that window, I suggest you apologise.”

Moana added her own glare. Lex glanced at her then retreated, muttering what sounded like an insincere apology.

Chloe frowned at him. “How did you even know about Mara?” she asked. “You’ve been stuck in Canada for weeks!”

“You’d be surprised what I can discover, even as a fugitive,” Lex replied.

“Why are you even here?” Lois asked.

“Is it so difficult to believe I might actually want to help?” he said smoothly.

“You’re a Luthor,” Lois shot back. “Every Luthor has an ulterior motive.”

“Are you including my sister in your oh-so-high-and-mighty claims?”
“No, because Tess at least got out before Lionel could get to her.”

Chloe frowned at the bald man. “How did you get here, anyway? Last we heard you were basically under house arrest.”

“It’s a long story,” Moana explained, “but we managed to get passage on a cargo ship across the Atlantic.” Lex smirked at her and she shrugged. Oliver knew what that meant. The owners of the ship were probably smuggling goods across the Atlantic and didn’t care if they were fugitives from authorities.

“We left the ship when it docked in Portugal and chartered a small plane to France.”

Oliver cocked an eyebrow as he stared at his former prep school enemy.

“Yeah? How did you manage not to get caught? They’ll have agents everywhere.”

Lex practically rolled his eyes at the blond.

“Credit me with some intelligence,” he replied. “So, what is this about a search?”

“We got a message from Tess,” Lana explained. “Someone left a message with the service. We don’t know who and we haven’t been able to track the call.”

“Other than to suggest it’s in the South Pacific,” Chloe chimed in. “That may be where you come in,” she told Moana. “Lois tells me you know a bit about the area.”

“I know enough,” Moana replied. “What have you found out so far?”

“A flight plan was filed giving co-ordinates somewhere in this region,” the former Watchtower told her, circling an area on the monitor with her finger. “I’m afraid this is about as sophisticated as I can get right now. We have access to Watchtower systems, but we’re pretty much only as good as this laptop.”

“We still don’t know if this flight plan is genuine,” Oliver cautioned.

Lex looked at him and shrugged. “Why not? If the baron is as arrogant as we think he is, he won’t give a damn how much we think we know.”

Oliver cocked an eyebrow at him. “What’s this ‘we’ stuff?”

He watched Moana and Chloe as they bent their heads over the laptop screen. Lois was by the window, looking down at the screen on her phone. Oliver frowned at her.

“Everything okay, Legs?” he asked.

She looked up at him, appearing to be startled out of a daydream.

“Just checking my messages,” she said. “I was hoping I might have heard from my dad.”

Lana moved to join her by the window, but stopped as the phone rang. She picked it up and spoke in French, although Oliver couldn’t hear much of the conversation.

“Merci,” she finally replied, hanging up. She looked up at the others.

“We have visitors downstairs. Do you know Bruce Wayne?”
“I would think so,” Lex replied. “He’s an old business rival.” He shot Oliver a look but didn’t comment further.

Oliver sighed. It seemed Bruce had the same idea they all had. The question was, what information did he have that they didn’t?

***

Lana moved quietly to stand beside Lois while Chloe continued to work on the laptop. She glanced at Anders warily, biting her lip. Lois, with that sixth sense she seemed to have, put a hand on her arm.

“He’s okay. He’s about the only one of them I do trust,” she added, nodding her head at Lex and Moana.

Lana frowned. “You feel it too? It’s no wonder you’re such a good reporter. Just who is this woman?”

“I’m really not sure. She claims to be a descendant of a line of powerful warriors, but there’s just something about her. I mean, I guess she’s on our side, but I get the feeling she doesn’t like Clark very much.”

“Speaking of whom … have you heard from him?”

“He was having a meeting with someone. You might remember him. Curtis Knox?”

Lana looked alarmed. “The doctor who tried to kill Chloe?” she said with a gasp. She glanced uneasily at the others, but their conversation didn’t appear to have been overheard. “I thought he was dead!”

“Not dead. J’onn took him out into space, kept him imprisoned there. Clark thought Knox might be useful, or at least have some good info.”

“You can’t trust him …” Lana began.

“I trust Clark,” Lois told her firmly.

Lana still felt uneasy. She didn’t like this whole plan Lois and Clark had to trick the Baron and force him to return their daughter. Her friends were smart; Clark of course had the advantage of his Kryptonian intelligence, not to mention the seeming omnipotence of the A.I representation of his Kryptonian father, although Lana wondered if that was less omnipotence and more an ability to accurately anticipate the course of events.

“I still think this is crazy,” she said. “You’re going up against someone …”

“He has our daughter,” Lois told her, pressing her lips together stubbornly. “And I’m not going to let him use her in his quest for power.”

“Just what is Clark’s plan, anyway? How is he going to convince the Baron …”

Lois shushed her, looking up. Lana looked around as Oliver opened the door to Bruce’s knock. Lana stared at the dark-haired man who was leaning on a cane of some description. A much older man was beside him, standing tall and dignified. A willowy brunette and a tall young man flanked the others. Behind them was Kara, Clark’s cousin.
“Hey, hey, the gang’s all here,” Lana heard Lois murmur.

***

Aresia continued to pace the room which had become her prison. Even after all of Gustave’s warnings, she had yet to experience the wrath of the Baron. It was fairly clear he cared little about his late wife or else Aresia was certain the man would have either ordered something to be done in revenge or would have done it himself.

She knew now she had been used, both by the woman she had once called sister and the baron himself. She felt justified in her hatred of men, sure that Stephanie had been manipulated, brainwashed into capitulating to the whims of the man she had married. Men were evil and the sooner she freed herself and escaped their world, the sooner she could find her beloved Sera and show the men the wrath of the Amazons.

Once she was free, she would go to Queen Hippolyta. Appeal to her surrogate mother and try to convince her sisters of the evildoing. Then she would find Sera and together they would find the child of Superman.

She glanced out through the window. There were bars criss-crossing the frame, making it nearly impossible for her to get out. Even if she were strong enough to bend them, the noise she made would bring the guards running. Then again, she thought, if there were two of them, they would both fear using their weapons, especially if she moved fast. She could use one of them as a shield.

A plan began to form in her mind.

***

Clark entered the room, striding confidently forward as he approached the Baron de Rochefort with one hand out. The older man looked him over with an arrogant manner, but shook Clark’s hand. There was no sign of recognition.

Clark had dressed with care that morning in dark pants and a white silk shirt. He had called on some of the various quirks he had observed from Lionel and Lex in the years he’d been close to the younger Luthor, adopting those quirks to assume the manner of someone very familiar with the Baron’s social circle.

“Je dois avouer, monsieur Delacour, ma curiosité est piquée. Pourquoi avez-vous insisté pour cette réunion?” the Baron asked in French as they sat in lounge chairs.

"J'ai des renseignements qui me semblent utiles, Baron. Il est bien connu dans mon cercle que vous êtes sur une quête. Pour la puissance. La méthode que vous avez choisie, cependant, prendra quelques années pour se concrétiser."

“Je ne sais pas de quoi vous parlez, monsieur.”

Clark smirked at him. “Allons, baron, me prenez-vous pour un imbécile?”

“Alors éclucider.”

“Le nom Virgil Swann vous dit-il quelque chose?”

The Baron looked interested in spite of himself.

"Je connais ce nom," he said, clearly not willing to give anything else away.
“J'ai travaillé avec le docteur Swann pendant quelques années,” Clark told him. Well, it wasn’t exactly a lie. “J’étais au courant de certaines informations. Des informations que je trouve très précieuses.”

"Peut-être."

Clark sat back, relaxing in the lounge.

“Vous connaissez votre Bible, Monsieur le Baron?”

"Pah, bien sûr."

The man scowled as if anyone thinking the opposite was a complete idiot.

“Alors vous savez que la raison pour laquelle Adam et Eve ont été expulsés du Jardin d’Eden était parce qu'ils ont pris quelque chose de l'Arbre de la Connaissance. Car même Dieu sait que la clé du pouvoir est la Connaissance.”

"Que suggérez-vous?"

"J'ai des informations à vendre, Baron. Des informations qui pourraient vous montrer un moyen d'atteindre une véritable bibliothèque de connaissances."

“Où est cette bibliothèque?” the older man asked, his eyes gleaming.

“L'emplacement est connu d'une seule personne, mais je peux vous obtenir la clé."

"Où est-il?” the Baron asked eagerly.

Clark raised a hand. “Mais d'abord, nous négocions, n'est-ce pas?”

The reply was a cautious nod.


"Quand est ce rassemblement?"

"Demain soir."

Clark nodded. “Demain soir alors.”

“Mon assistant vous donnera les details,” the Baron replied.

“I must admit, Monsieur Delacour, my curiosity is piqued. Why did you insist on this meeting?”

“I have some information which I believe may be of some use to you, Baron. It is well-known in my circle that you are on a quest. For power. The method you have chosen, however, will take some years to come to fruition.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about, Monsieur.”

“Come now Baron, do you take me for a fool?”

“Then elucidate.”

“Does the name Virgil Swann ring any bells?”

“I am familiar with the name.”
“I worked with Dr Swann for a few years. I was privy to certain information. Information which I think you will find very valuable.”
“Perhaps.”
“You know your Bible, Monsier le Baron?”
“Pah, of course.”
“Then you know that the reason Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden was because they took something from the Tree of Knowledge. For even God knows the key to power is Knowledge.”
“What are you suggesting?”
“I have information to sell, Baron. Information which could show you a way to attain a veritable library of knowledge.”
“Where is this library?”
“The location is known to only one person, but I can get you the key.”
“Where is it?”
“But first, we negotiate, n’est ce pas?”
“Of course. Negotiate. But not here. I am holding a gathering. A masked ball at my castle in Dordogne. A perfect opportunity to negotiate business without fear of interference, you agree?”
“When is this gathering?”
“Tomorrow night.”
“Tomorrow night then.”
“My man will give you the details.”

Clark left the apartment shortly after, knowing the trap was set. He’d known it wouldn’t take much to appeal to the man’s lust for power. It was one of the lessons he had learnt from Lex, after all.

Tomorrow night, he thought, and the Baron would learn what happened when one pissed off a Kryptonian. Not to mention a general’s daughter.
Steve Trevor and Diana prepare for their own journey. It's getting a little crowded in Oliver and Chloe's Paris suite.

Steve Trevor was busy packing a bag in his Washington apartment when his doorman buzzed.

“Miss Prince is here,” the man told him.

“Thank you Frederick. Send her up.”

He returned to packing his bag, glancing at the 9mm gun on the bed, debating the advisability of taking the weapon with him. Given the security concerns, despite his position in the Secret Service, he was hesitant.

Diana knocked on the door. As Steve went to answer it, he thought about his former lover. He had told her the truth, that he knew of her other identity, before they’d gone to interrogate the now former senator. Diana hadn’t been happy at the revelation, telling him she had only been trying to protect him. She was only too aware, especially after what had happened in recent weeks, of the dangers they faced.

He didn’t feel the same as her, thinking that not knowing would keep him safe from any potential dangers. Lois Lane certainly hadn’t been any more protected from not knowing the truth about her hero. He still couldn’t see why they couldn’t be together, but he hadn’t been able to get her to see reason.

He loved her and knew she loved him. So much that the thought of anything happening to him was tearing her apart.

Diana gazed sombrely at him when he opened the door. She was wearing normal civilian clothes, including the glasses he hated. Not that he didn’t find women with glasses attractive. It was just that the glasses she wore hid so much of her vibrant personality.

“Pr … Diana,” he said, catching himself. Not that there was anyone in the corridor to overhear, but they didn’t want to take any chances. “I’m just finishing packing.”

She nodded. “The plane is leaving in three hours. We must be at the airport soon.”

Steve had opted for booking flights to France on a civilian aircraft instead of using his Secret Service identification to get them a military transport. He’d also vetoed using Diana’s invisible plane, wanting them to be travelling under the radar, so to speak.

He went back into the bedroom to zip up his bag. Diana saw the gun on the bed.

“Were you taking that?” she asked.

“I considered it, but then I figured I could pick something up in France. What with all the terrorist activity lately, I didn’t want to take any chances with the authorities.”
She sat on the bed, watching as he grabbed his passport and checked his wallet.

“I am still not sure how we will get into the baron’s castle,” she said.

Steve was not sure exactly how Diana had learnt of the castle in Dordogne, but assumed Bruce Wayne had managed to contact Batman who had passed on the information. He’d always found the Gotham billionaire to be a rather odd man. Then again, who was he to question the eccentricities of the wealthy?

He went to her, touching her face, gently coaxing her to look at him.

“Princess …”

“Steve, no.”

“We must talk about this some time,” he told her quietly. “I’m going crazy working beside you but not being with you.”

“You know why we cannot,” she said. “Look at what has happened to Superman and his family.”

He wrapped his arms around her. “That’s them. I’m talking about us. You must know I love you.”

“As I do you,” she replied. “But it’s impossible.”

He wanted to argue the point, but knew it would only lead to a bitter fight between them. They’d already fought over it and he didn’t want to hurt his beloved Princess.

He let her go and stood up, picking up his bag. “We should go,” he said.

“Yes.”

***

Bruce watched Lex warily. While the Luthor scion had given him some good information, he remained suspicious of the other man’s motives. Lex ignored him, his pose defensive as he spoke with Oliver. Even the Star City billionaire looked a little worried.

Bruce glanced at Lois, who nodded, then went back to talking quietly with the pretty brunette. She hadn’t bothered to make any introduction, not that he was expecting her to. He gathered from what he’d learnt from Diana, Lois was still angry over the Justice League failing to protect her child.

Selina stood beside him, clearly anxious that he didn’t overtax himself. The flight had been long, despite him using the Wayne Enterprises jet, and it had been hard on his back, but he’d stubbornly refused to show any sign of weakness.

She was eyeing the woman sitting beside Chloe Sullivan. Or rather, Sullivan-Queen now, he assumed. He’d met Chloe more than three years earlier and had found her to be a rather formidable young woman. He’d briefly entertained the thought of a relationship with her but she had stopped that before he’d even expressed it by informing him she was in a relationship which she intended to resume once she had done what she needed to do.

He had heard, of course, of her marriage to Oliver. News tended to travel quickly in his social circle.

“Who’s she?” Selina murmured.

He frowned, wondering who the sometime cat burglar was meaning. He followed her gaze and saw
she was indicating the brunette beside Chloe.

“No idea. Why don’t you see what you can find out?” he told her quietly. Selina had a way with people that often made her the perfect foil for him. They’d practically grown up together and she knew him better than he knew himself at times. Not that he’d really ever had anything close to a romantic relationship with her. Romance just wasn’t part of the equation when he had a job to do.

There was another knock on the door and Oliver sighed. He glanced at his wife, who shrugged, then waved at him to answer the door.

Bruce watched as the blond billionaire opened the door. A statuesque blonde smiled at him and spoke softly. She was tall with pretty features and a trim figure.

“Mr Queen.”

“Helena,” he replied.

She peered beyond his shoulder. “I see you have guests.”

He snickered. “Well, I’d hardly call them guests.” He stood aside to let her in. Bruce watched as she walked gracefully past Oliver. “You know my wife and Lana, of course,” Oliver was saying. “Uh, this is Lex Luthor,” he said, nodding to the bald man. “The woman with my wife is, uh, Moana. Sorry, I can’t remember her last name.”

Bruce shifted awkwardly as Oliver continued to introduce all those present. Helena smiled gently at Lois.

“I am very sorry for the actions of my sister,” she said.

Lois frowned at her. “How do you …”

“There is much to explain,” Helena replied softly. “You are a very courageous woman, Miss Lane.”

From the way the woman gazed at Lois, Bruce had the feeling there was a lot more that wasn’t actually being said. It was as if the woman knew something about Lois.

“Uh, thank you,” Lois replied, clearly a little disconcerted.

Finally, Oliver led the blonde to Bruce’s side.

“This is …”

Bruce leaned on his cane, putting his hand out.

“I’m Bruce Wayne. This is my butler, Alfred.” He waved his hand in Selina’s direction. "My associate, Selina Kyle and this is John Blake.”

“I am Helena Kosmatos.”

“She’s an Amazon,” Oliver told him.

Bruce nodded. “I believe I know someone who also claims to be an Amazon.”

“It is no claim,” Helena responded coolly. “We, my sisters and I, have been blessed with powers from the goddess Athena.”
“I see,” he said. He frowned at her. “I spent a few years travelling abroad yet I never heard anything about Amazons. What do you call your country? Amazonia?”

Oliver coughed into his hand and shot a glare at Bruce, who stared back.

“We live on an island, called Themyscira, although among my sisters and I, we call it Paradise Island. It truly is a paradise, where the world of Men is a distant world.”

“Do you not like men?” Bruce asked. “And if there are no men on this island, how do you, uh, procreate?”

Selina, who had been watching Moana and Chloe working, returned to his side.

“Bruce, shut up and sit down before you fall down. You look dead on your feet.”

He turned to look at her, raising an eyebrow. She glared at him.

“You heard me. I may not know a lot about Amazons, but I do know when you need to take your head out of your ass and stop trying to antagonise people. Now sit. I don’t think poor Alfred has the strength somehow to pick you up if you suddenly find yourself off-balance.”

Her meaning was clear. If he wouldn’t do it of his own volition, she would make him.

“I do suggest you listen to the young lady. Sir,” Alfred added.

He raised an eyebrow at his guardian. It appeared he was outnumbered. Huffing, he did as he was told, actually relieved to get off his feet.

“May I enquire as to what happened?” Helena asked.

“You may, but it doesn’t mean I’ll answer to your satisfaction.”

Selina stood on his foot. He shot her a wounded look.

“Stop it,” she said. She looked at Helena. “It was a man, called Bane. Bruce went to fight him and got a broken back for his trouble. Fortunately, the damage was repairable.”

“Unless of course Master Bruce decides to do something foolish,” Alfred added.

“Huh, sounds a lot like my husband,” Lois interjected. “Stubborn.”

“Men,” Lana said with a grin at Lois. “Can’t live with ‘em …”

“Can’t shoot ‘em,” Chloe said with a laugh.

Oliver spluttered and looked at his wife.

“You can’t be including me in that?”

“Oh, you’re the worst one of all,” she said.

“Gee thanks. Love you too, baby.”

She grinned at him, then returned to looking at her laptop.

“So, uh, Helena, what can we do for you?” Oliver asked.
“As you know, my friend in Rennes le Chateau has great concerns for the success of your mission. She sent me with some information she believes may help you in your quest. Her brother is holding a masquerade ball at his home in Dordogne tomorrow night. She feels that this may be the opportunity you seek.”

“A masquerade ball?” Lex asked. He looked at Oliver. “She’s right. It’s the perfect cover.” He turned to Helena. “I take it this thing is by invitation only?”

“Which my friend can provide,” she said, eyeing Lex warily. “You are a very dangerous man, Mr Luthor. I can see why the Baron sought an alliance with you. Your hatred and mistrust of the man known as Superman will not serve you well if you continue down your dark path.”

“I rather think that’s none of your business, Miss Kosmatos,” he told her coldly. Moana looked up at him with a frown. “Besides, even I am well aware of the dangers of placing trust in a being that can crush a man with his bare hands, should he chooses.”

“You better not be suggesting what I think you’re suggesting, Luthor,” Lois replied. “You and my husband may have reached some sort of détente but I’m warning you. If you so much as sneeze in the direction of my family, you will have me to answer to.”

“Then I trust you will be the one to keep that husband of yours in check, Lane,” he told her snidely. He sneered at her as she blanched. “Oh, that’s right. You two aren’t speaking to each other right now, isn’t that what I heard?”

Lana quickly got in-between Lois and Lex before the other woman could smack him.

“Luthor, you just can’t help yourself, can you? Leave Lois alone or you’ll find yourself on the other side of that door with my footprint on your ass.”

“What she said,” Oliver told him folding his arms and glaring at the other man.

Bruce continued to watch in amusement as Luthor faced off with his ex-wife.

"Considering how much damage you did the last time you tried to kick my ass ..."

This time it was Lois who had to hold Lana back as she threatened to go for the jugular.

“Please, I beg of you,” Helena interjected. “We all clearly have our differences but please, we must focus on what is at stake. We are all here to save a child, not to quarrel amongst ourselves. I apologise, Mr Luthor, if what I said offended you in any way. I only meant to caution you.”

“Caution all you want, Miss Kosmatos, but I choose my own path.”

“Even if that path will ultimately cause self-destruction?” Moana put in. “Look, Luthor, I may not like you, but even I have to admit that I’ve seen glimpses of the good man you could be if you would just let go of your hatred and your bitterness. I might have objected at the time, but what you did for me with Benjamin … your heart was in the right place.”

“You don’t trust Clark any more than I do,” Lex told her.

“Maybe not, but then again, there is not a soul in this room that can say with absolute certainty that they trust me. Look, all I’m saying is, it’s not the power that makes someone trustworthy. It’s how they use it, how they control it. If you give someone who is untrustworthy the power to raze a building, then chances are that’s exactly what they’ll do. Without conscience. If there is one thing I can say about Superman, it is that he would never commit such an atrocity, not as long as he has his
family to temper him. I may not trust him, but I trust Lois Lane."

“Is this a feminism thing?” Blake asked, speaking up for the first time.

“Excuse me?” Moana asked.

“You’ll trust Miss Lane, but you won’t trust Superman? The guy helps people.”

“Maybe he does, but if we can’t find the child, there is nothing to keep him from going ballistic.”

“I’m confused. I thought we were here to help find the Kents’ baby? Why would Superman go ballistic?”

Lois looked at Bruce. “Does he not know?”

Bruce shook his head. “I thought he did.”

Lois glanced at Moana, then shrugged. “Clark is Superman,” she said.

Blake stared at her. “Oh.” His eyes widened. “Oh. So, you’re saying they kidnapped the baby so they could …”

“Control Superman,” Lois explained.

“God, I’m so sorry, Miss Lane,” he said. He looked at Moana. “I understand now.”

Bruce stretched, then gasped as he felt a sharp stabbing pain in his back. For a moment he feared he was paralysed.

“Master Bruce, perhaps it would be best if you rested for a while. You have had a long journey.”

He debated whether to argue with Alfred, but the pain in his back acted as a reminder that he wasn’t fighting fit. At least, not yet.

He struggled to his feet, reaching for his cane.

“Of course, Alfred. You’re right.”

He noticed Selina exchanging a look with the older man. He knew what she was thinking. The fact that he hadn’t even put up a fight made it obvious he was in pain.

“We’re all tired,” Oliver said. “I think we should all retire for the evening.”

Lana followed Lois back to her room, waiting until Lois had activated the shield before speaking.

“I thought it was going to come to blows in there for a while.”

Lois nodded. “Me too. Tempers are wearing a little thin.” She chewed on her lip and sighed, sitting on the bed. “I want my family back, Lana. I can’t keep this up much longer.”

Lana sat beside her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

“I want to say I know how you feel, but I’m not sure I do. After what Lex did to me, finding out about the fake pregnancy - it made me realise I’d been so blind to a lot of things. In a way, it was a blessing, because it opened my eyes. But you … the thing I always admired about you is your strength.”
“I don’t feel quite so strong now.”

Lana shook her head. “No, you’re wrong about that. You are strong, Lois. That’s why you and Clark are so good for each other. Separate, you’re strong. Together, you’re formidable. That’s why he needs you.”

The phone on the nightstand rang, indicating it was the front desk. Lois picked up the receiver.

“Lois Lane.” Lana watched as she listened. An odd expression crossed her face. “All right. Could you connect me please?” There was another long pause, then Lana heard the click of a line being connected. Lois again spoke into the phone. “Baron, I received your message.” She laughed, but the laugh sounded a little fake. “Oh, thank you. Yes, I would be happy to accept your invitation.” Another pause. “Oh, it sounds like fun. I shall have to find a costume.” Yet another pause. “Thank you. I look forward to it.”

She hung up and looked at Lana.

“The Baron just invited me to Dordogne. He’s going to have a car pick me up in the morning.”

Lana bit her lip as she looked at her friend. “Lois, I …” She saw the resolve in her friend’s face. “Okay, but promise me you’ll be careful. We don’t exactly know who or what’s going to be there.”

“Don’t worry. Clark will be there,” she said with a confident nod. “As long as he’s there, I know I’ll be safe.”

***

It was late by the time they reached the Paris hotel. Diana, in her guise as his assistant, had ensured they had rooms reserved. Steve had wondered why she had booked separate rooms, instead of a suite. Even if they’d slept in separate bedrooms, with a suite they would at least be closer.

“Do not give me that look,” Diana admonished him. “At least this way I will not be tempted.”

So it was as difficult for her as it was for him, he thought. He nodded, watching as she set off for the elevator.

“Diana?”

She stopped walking and looked around at the tall blonde woman standing in the lobby. Steve frowned. She seemed a little familiar, as if he had met her somewhere before.

“Helena?”

The two women embraced, kissing each other’s cheek. Steve hesitated, but then Diana beckoned him to join them.

“Major Trevor,” Helena greeted him. “You are well?”

“Yes, thank you,” he said, finally recognising her. “Helena. From Paradise Island. I thought you weren’t supposed to …”

“There is much to tell you,” she replied. “Let us retire to your room, sister.”

Steve followed the two women as they stepped into the lift. The operator glanced at him, then at the sisters, but said nothing. The journey to the fifth floor of the hotel was completed in utter silence.
Diana led the way to her room, closing the door softly behind them. Steve sat in one of the chairs, keeping his distance, not sure how Helena would react to any implied intimacy.

“Sister, what has been happening?”

“Our former sister, Ephiny, is dead. I am not sure, but I believe Aresia killed her.”

Diana frowned. “Dead? But how do you know?”

“There was a story, in the French media. She was the wife of the Baron de Rochefort, thus a prominent member of this society. As for Aresia, there is someone who has the power to see.”

“As in what, exactly?” Steve asked. Diana looked at him, her gaze soft and loving.

“She has the gift of premonition.”

“What is Aresia now?”

“I do not know exactly, Princess. However, I have been given information which may lead us to her. On the day Ephiny left Metropolis, there was a flight plan filed with the authorities. The Baron, in his arrogance, must have presumed we would not discover this flight plan. There is an island in the South Pacific.”

“We must go there. Aresia must know where the child is.”

“Aresia must be returned home. To the island. There to face the Queen’s punishment.”

“We were going to go to Dordogne,” Steve interjected.

Helena shook her head.

“There is no need. The Baron will meet his fate there, without our help. Sister, if we can find Aresia, we can perhaps prevent another tragedy from befalling this world.”

“Yes, you are right, sister.” Diana looked at Steve. “We will go to this island.”

“When?”

“We must leave now,” Helena replied. “Time is of the essence. If the Baron should learn of our presence here, he may order his people to hide the child.”

Steve frowned. They’d just been flying for several hours, on a passenger jet. How could they even get to the island in time? As well as undetected?

Diana seemed to read his mind. “I can call the plane to me,” she said.

As much as he questioned the advisability of using her invisible plane, he knew it was their only option. The plane was capable of flying incredible speeds and was undetectable by any technology. Diana normally kept it in Washington, but could program it to fly to her anywhere in the world should the need arise.

“All right,” he said. “How long?”

“We can be ready to leave in just over an hour,” Diana told him.

“He is coming with us?” Helena asked.
“Yes sister.”

“You trust him?”

“With my life,” Diana said with a smile.

***

She sat up, her heart pounding, looking around in confusion. Where was she? How did she get here?

She could see what looked like tables with what appeared to be equipment for laboratory testing. There was a computer at the far end of the room, showing some kind of readout on the monitor.

The surface under her body was hard, almost like a hospital gurney. Which made sense in some respects, since the last thing she remembered was lying in a hospital bed. Was she in a morgue? If so, it was an odd kind of morgue. She couldn’t see any other bodies around.

She twisted herself around, getting off the table, or gurney, whatever it was. A cool draft of air blew over her, making her shiver. She looked down and realised she was naked. A quick survey of the room showed her a coat of some kind and she grabbed it, slipping it on.

She spotted a mirror on one wall and approached it uneasily, wondering what she would find. Yet her reflection seemed perfectly normal. No scarring, no injury.

A door opened and she whirled, staring at the newcomer.

“Well, look who’s finally awake. How are you feeling Miss Mercer?”

“Who are you? Where am I? What happened to me?”

“What do you remember?”

She thought for a minute. She could remembering being in a hospital, but not why she was in the hospital. She racked her brain, trying to recollect.

“I … I don’t know. I was in a hospital, I think.”

“You were in an accident, Miss Mercer. You’ve been in a coma for the past five years.”

Her eyebrows shot up in alarm. Five years? That couldn’t be possible! What the hell had happened to her?
Chapter Summary

Aresia tries to escape. Plastique makes her own escape. Chloe fears for her cousin and learns something about Lex and Moana.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Aresia had taken the few clothes she had in the small room that had become her prison and used them to fashion a costume of sorts, one more fitting a child of the Amazons. She had decided that since she was going to have to fight her way off this accursed island, she would do it in a way that showed those men exactly what an Amazon was.

It was a pity that the golden bracelets that had once belonged to her queen had left Paradise Island with her sister. Diana had turned her back on her people in order to follow a man. Deep down, the young Amazon knew there was much more to her sister’s banishment than that, but she still felt the Princess had betrayed them.

No matter, she thought as she stood in the centre of the room, calming herself. She would escape from this island and then the world of Men would feel the wrath of the Amazons. No longer would Men hold power over women.

She smoothed the short skirt she had fashioned from a pleather one Stephanie had packed. Faux leather had apparently become the rage in some fashion circles, although it would never hold up as well as actual leather. Nevertheless, it would do for now, Aresia thought.

After her last attempt to escape three days earlier, Gustave had had her locked in a room with a heavy door. It had clearly been designed with her in mind. She had bided her time, working to put together the costume.

She had no weapons. Gustave was no fool. He had made sure there were no weapons to be had. Aresia had been forced to use plastic cutlery to eat the little she was given, imprisoned as she was. Not that she had eaten much. She was fairly certain they had been drugging her food to keep her from turning on them.

She was dizzy from a week of near-starvation, but knew she had one chance to escape. She looked out the window, through the heavy iron grille preventing her escape. The sun was on its descent. She calculated it was close to four or five in the afternoon, which meant Gustave would send one of his men with a tray of food.

They usually stood in the doorway, placing the tray at their feet before sliding it into the room, then quickly closing the door. They were smart, figuring she would try something. Aresia had considered other options, but there was only one way out.

She listened for the steps that signalled a guard was coming to the door, then moved quickly on bare feet, grabbing the needle she had used to sew her costume together. Clearly they hadn’t considered the thought that she might use what was in the sewing box Stephanie had left. Aresia had considered
her sister’s hobby of needlework to be pointless but now she considered it good fortune. She prepared, picking up the paper she had fashioned into a tube. They’d given her peas in her meal a couple of days earlier and she used one now, inserting the eye end of the needle into the vegetable. As soon as the door opened, she blew hard through the paper tube. The needle hit the man in the neck, making him clap a hand to the area. Aresia quickly dropped down to knee height, kicking out with one leg in a wide, sweeping arc, her movements quick. The man barely managed to dodge. She screamed, her cry of war echoing down the hallway. The guard stared at her, clearly wondering if she had lost her mind. He didn’t see the blow coming as she lashed out with a fist. She grabbed at his tie, pulling it tightly together to cut off his air supply.

“Arrêtez!”

She whirled around, turning her glare on Gustave and the second guard who had obviously come running at her scream. Gustave had a gun trained on her.

“Arrêtez!” he said again. “Je vais tirer.”

“Allez faite le,” she snarled, shoving the man toward the Baron’s puppet. “Mais pouvez-vous frappe rune cible mobile?” she added, before performing several flips toward the end of the corridor, kicking the table. A vase which had been sitting on the table toppled as she broke the legs and grabbed two. Aresia got to her feet, flipping the table legs in each hand and brandishing them.

Gustave fired, but she was already moving back toward him, flipping end over end, kicking out with another Amazon cry. She landed on the shoulders of the first guard, who stumbled at her weight on top of him. She again performed a backward flip, kicking the man into the other two.

Or at least, she tried. Gustave dodged then aimed his gun at her.

“Vous êtes une fille stupide,” he growled. “Le baron devrais vous avoir tué.”

“Alors vas-y,” she shouted. “Tuez, moi! Vous êtes tous les mêmes! Vous êtes maléfique et je ne me reposerai pas jusqu’à ce que j’aie efface du monde vos existences stupides et inutiles.”

Gustave snarled at her, his finger on the trigger of his weapon.

“Stop!”

“Stop! I will shoot.”

“Go ahead. But can you hit a moving target?”

“You stupid girl. The baron should have killed you.”

“Then go ahead. Kill me! You men are all the same! You are evil and I will not rest until I have wiped the world of your stupid, pointless existences.”

“Enough!”

Aresia stared in confusion at the blonde head of her sister, Helena. Beyond her, she saw the dark hair of the Princess. Behind her was a man, none other than the man Diana had left the island with.

Gustave turned.

"Qu'est-ce que c'est?" “What is this?”

“Drop your weapon,” Diana said calmly.

Gustave scowled at her and turned his weapon on her, but Diana blocked each bullet with her golden
bracelets. Aresia watched as the three men battled the three newcomers, and were quickly subdued.

Diana approached Aresia and touched her shoulder.

“We are taking you home,” she said.

“Not until I get what I want,” Aresia replied.

“The daughter of Superman is not your concern,” the princess told her. “You will return to Paradise Island, there to face your punishment.”

Aresia shook her head. “No! I will not.”

“That is enough, sister,” Helena told her before Aresia could shake them both off. “Diana is right. You will go with us.”

“No!” She knew there was no escaping her punishment. Diana and Helena together were far stronger than her, given that they had been blessed with their abilities from birth. “Sera,” she said.

Helena and Diana exchanged a look.

“Your sister?” the man with them asked.

“She left Paradise Island, wanting to know the ways of the world,” Helena explained. “Where is she, Aresia?”

Aresia shook her head. “I do not know,” she told her sisters unhappily. “That man … the one Ephiny married, said she had been taken by an American group, but I know it was him. He had her taken. Ephiny told me as much. She said they took Sera to keep me from taking the child for myself.”


“Answer him!” Diana told her.

“Veil. They call themselves Veil.”

The major nodded. “It’s in my research. They’re an offshoot of some of the groups affiliated with the Illuminati, but they’re controlled by the mafia. Supposedly. It doesn’t surprise me that someone like the baron would have ties to the mafia.”

“Nor does it me,” Diana told him. She looked at Aresia. “We will find Sera.”

“How?”

The princess frowned, then looked at Gustave, who was stunned, but conscious. Major Trevor smiled at his lover, watching as she took the golden lariat from her belt and looped it around Gustave.

“Where is my sister Sera?” she asked.

***

Aresia was not the only prisoner. After Flag had discovered her trying to get a message to Tess Mercer, Bette Sans Souci had found herself locked in what amounted to a storage shed. She had no idea how, but he had managed to block her powers so she couldn’t use energy blasts to blow her way out of the shed.
Bette paced the room, taking stock of her situation. Most of what had happened to her in the past few years had been her own doing. She hadn’t asked to be born with the abilities, but she had them nonetheless. The one thing she did remember Clark telling her on his infrequent visits to where she’d been incarcerated, was that she still had a choice.

Knowing that the infant that had been brought to the island hideaway was Superman’s child; knowing they were experimenting on a baby who couldn’t understand what they were doing or why, Bette couldn’t just allow it to continue.

After three days of no word, she had realised Tess Mercer wasn’t going to fly in to her rescue. She had to assume that her message hadn’t got through. Which meant it was up to her to do something. The question was, what?

She stopped pacing, hearing footsteps outside and stood in the middle of the shed, waiting. As the door opened, she tensed. Amanda Waller limped in, smirking at her.

“Well, isn’t this a mess?” she commented.

Bette stared at her, wondering just what the older woman was up to.

“Let me make something very clear to you, Plastique. You … work for me. You are a member of the Suicide Squad. That makes you … expendable.”

“Don’t you even know what they’re doing? She’s just a baby.”

“That is nothing to do with us. We’re merely there to ensure the work is done without interruption.”

“Work? That’s not work, that’s … it’s wrong.”

Waller shook her head and sighed. “I had hoped that you and I could have come to some compromise, but I see I’m wasting my breath.”

Bette stood back at the look of malice on the other woman’s face. She knew what was coming. She’d heard what Waller had done to Icicle once she’d had no use for him. There was no way she was going to allow the same thing to happen to her.

She backed away, terror and anger warring inside her, her limbs almost paralysed as she stared at the other woman. Waller had turned to the doorway. There was a click and Bette knew what that click meant. Flag walked into the room and it seemed as if he was moving in slow motion. Or it was her own fear making it seem that way, Bette thought.

What would Superman do? she asked herself silently. Superman wouldn’t be afraid, or if he was, he wouldn’t allow his fears to paralyse him. Flag raised his gun. Bette chewed on her lip, waiting for that moment when the energy would flow through her but somehow it didn’t. Something in this shed was causing it, she realised.

She darted forward, now in a fight for her life as she grabbed hold of the long barrel of the gun. Flag was a strong man, with years of military training, but she had the agility of youth. She managed to get a good grip, wrenching the gun in her hand so the butt hit the man in the jaw. She slid under him, using the momentum to flip him over her head.

Once she was free of the man’s grip, she ran and kept running, knowing even as she did that Flag or someone else would try to stop her. Sure enough, as soon as she neared the facility where they were keeping the infant, Lawton and one of the other Squadders tried to stop her. Bette had killed before, but having decided to reform, she knew that wasn’t a path she wanted to go down. She glared at the
two men, feeling the energy build inside her. She aimed that energy toward them, heating their weapons and causing them to drop them.

“Don’t try to stop me,” she warned.

“Flag will kill you,” Lawton told her.

“Probably,” she said, refusing to say any more. Lawton stared her down. The man had worked for years as a gun for hire. He was an expert marksman, but even he knew there was no possible way he could stop her. Not now that she was free of whatever it was suppressing her ability.

LaSalle looked at her and shrugged. His only ability was teleportation. Bette realised that he could easily teleport inside the laboratory and take the baby. Why he hadn’t was a mystery. Then again, she knew so little about the man known to the Squad as Warp.

She ran past the two men as Flag gave chase, his shots going wide. Plastique kept going, her lungs feeling like they were ready to burst. The doors to the facility were locked tight, but she used her energy blast to overload the electronic circuitry locking them. The scientists stared at her as she ran in.

"Éloignez-vous du bébé," she shouted.

The men stood their ground. Plastique turned her gaze on a computer and blasted it.

"Je ne veux pas vous tuer, mais je le ferai si je le dois".

One of the men scoffed. "Vous? Vous n'êtes rien."

"Je suis quelqu'un que vous ne voulez vraiment pas contrarier," she told him. "Sortez du chemin ou je vous fais exploser."

“Get away from the baby.”
“_I don’t want to kill you, but I will if I have to._”
“_You? You are nothing._”
“_I’m someone you really don’t want to piss off. Get out of the way or I’ll blast you._”

“Plastique!”

She whirled and faced her squad leader and Amanda Waller. The older woman was panting hard, having run the distance. She was clearly unfit.

“I’m warning you, Plastique.”

She laughed in the older woman’s face.

“You’re warning me? Look at you! You look like you’re about to have a heart attack.”

The woman’s face was practically grey with the effort. Still, she glared, turning to Flag and nodding. The man raised his gun. Just as he fired, Plastique felt herself being pulled away. She felt a momentary dizziness and closed her eyes against the energy field that suddenly surrounded her.

When she opened her eyes again, Emil handed her a small bundle.

“Prenez l’enfant et partez,” he told her.
She frowned at him. "Quoi?"

"Cache-la. Regarde, je sais qui est son père et fais moi confiance, tu ne veux pas contrarier quelqu'un comme Superman."

She frowned at him, then remembered LaSalle had been with Flag when they’d used a missile to blow up the coffee shop in Smallville. They’d been trying to assassinate General Lane. Instead, Superman’s future wife had almost been killed. Superman, or the Blur, as he’d been known then, had been extremely angry. Plastique knew Emil was right. Superman would be very angry if he knew exactly what they’d done to his daughter.

"Je ne sais pas comment …"


"Take the kid and go."

"What?"

"Hide her. Look, I know who her dad is and trust me, you don’t want to piss off someone like Superman."

"I don’t know how …"

"You’ll figure out a way. You’re a good kid. Smart. You’ve still got a chance. Unlike the rest of us."

She frowned at him but was unable to ask him anything further as he teleported away. She wasn’t sure what his range was, but as she looked around, she figured he had taken her to another part of the island. Somewhere the squad couldn’t find her.

Bette knew she would have to find a way to get the little girl back to her parents. Somehow. The baby started to cry and Bette began to rock her.

"It’s okay, baby,” she crooned. “I’m gonna take care of you until I can get you to your family. Don’t be scared, okay?"

She awkwardly held the four-month old infant, looking down at her. The baby stopped crying, as if she knew she was in good hands.

***

Chloe bit her lip as she watched Lois pack an overnight bag.

"Lo, I don’t know. You can’t trust a man like the baron."

Lois shook her head. “What if we’re wrong about him, Chlo? I mean, maybe I don’t know him very well, but he’s been very kind. He’s invited me to his castle to stay for a couple of days and frankly I need the break."

“You mean from us?”

“No,” Lois said adamantly. “From all of it. I can’t keep sitting around waiting for news, Chlo. Mara’s out there, somewhere, and I’m going crazy trying to figure out what to do. You’ve been searching for days now and you’re still no closer to finding out where she’s been taken.”

Lois stopped in the middle of stuffing a sweater in her bag and moved toward her.
“Chloe, you know I love you. But I just can’t deal with this anymore. It hurts too much.”

“Is it because I’m pregnant?” Chloe asked, wondering if that was what was bothering her cousin and best friend.

“No! No way,” Lois assured her. “I’m thrilled you and Ollie are having a baby. Really I am.”

Chloe watched as her cousin went back to packing. She leaned against the doorframe, wishing there was something she could do to take away her cousin’s pain. She didn’t want to be angry at Clark, but she wondered what had possessed him to up and disappear the way he had. This was a time when he and Lois needed to be together, not apart. Lois was the one person who grounded him, kept him honest, so to speak. Chloe was afraid that if they didn’t find Mara soon, everything the baron’s sister had predicted was going to come true.

She had a feeling they were running out of time.

Lois hugged her goodbye as she picked up her bag and went downstairs to meet the baron’s driver. Chloe had tried to dissuade her cousin, but the brunette didn’t want to hear it. Chloe couldn’t understand it. Why was Lois so ready to trust a man so devious, so manipulative? But then again, maybe that was the point. He had to be manipulating her. It was the only answer.

Lana entered the hotel room, fuming.

“That man!” she growled.

Chloe smiled at her friend. “Do I even need to guess?”

“How did I ever let myself fall for that rotten, no-good, manipulative …”

“Easy, sweetie. I remember what happened the last time you let that man get to you.” She sighed. “Look, I hate to admit it, but we need his brains. If we’re going to defeat these people, then we need everyone on board.”

“He’s only in it for his own ends. Come on, you know Lex. If he can find a way to manipulate the situation to profit from it …”

“Yes, I’m aware of that. I’m also very aware that right now he’s technically a fugitive from the authorities and as much as we both hate him, I don’t want to throw him to the lions, so to speak.”

Lana pouted. “Why not?”

“Because that’s not who you are,” Lex said behind them.

Chloe turned to look at him. “Lex …”

He raised his hands. “Water under the bridge, Chloe. Truth be told, I wouldn’t blame you if you did throw me to the lions, but if I know Clark as well as I think I do, he would tell you that’s not what the Justice League is about.”

“You’re right,” Lana said. “Damn it!”

He looked at her. “Lana, for what it’s worth, I did love you. You may not believe me, but it’s the truth.”

“You’re right, I don’t believe you.”
“That’s your prerogative.”

“Prerogative?” She stared at him incredulously. “Lex, you injected me with hormones to make me believe I was pregnant, just so you could trap me into marriage. Did you really think I wouldn’t find out about it?”

“Let’s face it. Would you have married me if I hadn’t? I know you, Lana. Or at least, I knew you then. You were raised as the proverbial girl-next-door. You couldn’t live with the shame of being pregnant out of wedlock. I remember how you reacted when you learned your mother had had an affair with someone else while she was separated from Lewis Lang.”

“That didn’t give you the right …”

“Maybe not, but I was desperate to hold on to you. I knew you still loved Clark.”

“Did you really hate him that much, Lex?” Chloe accused.

“It’s not about hate, Chloe. I did once think of him as my best friend. My only friend.”

“Right. A friendship you cultivated once again for your own ends,” Lana told him. “It took me a long time and a lot of thinking but I realised something. Something that Clark probably still tries to deny. You weren’t interested in friendship. You were only interested in his secrets and what he could do for you. You manipulated him from the start.”

“You’re wrong. I tried.”

Chloe glanced at her friend, thinking that Lana was almost as guilty as Lex as she had often let Clark’s secrets come between them. It mattered little in the end. Lana had eventually learned Clark’s secret but she hadn’t been able to deal with it. Unlike Lois.

“No, they’re right,” a voice said behind Lex. Chloe frowned at Moana. She tapped her temple. “If you had truly been Clark’s friend, Lex, his secrets wouldn’t have mattered. That’s why it could never have worked. Besides, you had nothing in common. You were a rich kid from the city and he was a farm kid from a small town. You were forced to grow up long before you should have, whereas Clark didn’t have the emotional maturity to handle friendship with someone like you.”

He cocked an eyebrow at her. “Is that your expert opinion?”

“I’ve always been able to read situations more clearly than most. And I’ve had time as well to think about the things you told me about your friendship with Clark Kent.”

Chloe frowned at her. “What makes you such an expert on friendship?”

Moana chewed her lip. “Since I don’t have any friends, I doubt I could consider myself an expert.”

It was Lex’s turn to frown. “Why don’t you have any friends?”

She shrugged. “I’ve always known that with my abilities, friendship is one of the things that I’ve had to sacrifice.”

“That’s kind of sad,” Lana said, her expression showing sympathy for the other woman.

“Sad?” Chloe asked. “It’s pathetic. Friends are the thing that keeps you fighting. It’s no wonder you don’t trust anybody.”

Moana scowled at her. “Look, I learnt a long time ago that the only person I can rely on is myself.
You think my parents liked it that I inherited these abilities rather than my brother? They hated it. Girls aren’t supposed to be warriors.”

“That’s just stupid!” Lana argued.

“It’s how it works in my world.”

“This is straying off topic,” Lex interjected. “The point I was trying to make is, you can believe what you want of me, but I am in this fight too and you can’t keep me out just because you don’t trust me.”

“It’s your agenda we don’t trust.”

“I said it once and I’ll say it again. Every hero needs his villain.”

“So you think you qualify?” Chloe asked.

“Moana is right about one thing. Clark and I really do have very little in common, except for the fact that in many ways we are complete opposites of each other. I acknowledge his parents were far from perfect, but he had a far better upbringing than I did.”

“And that excuses you from committing murder?” Moana accused. “You know what I hate the most? People like you who cry foul because their childhood was oh-so-difficult and think that gives you a defence for being a bastard. Cry me a river!”

“Oh get off your soapbox! You’ve done nothing but preach at me from the moment we met.” Lex glared at her. “You know what? You need to get laid! Maybe then you won’t be so goddamned uptight!”

She glowered at him. “You applying for the position, Luthor?”

“God no! My extremities would probably fall off in that toxic environment.” He emphasised his words by raking his gaze over her body.

She narrowed her eyes. “You wish, Luthor!” With that she stalked off. Lex looked at the two women for a moment, clearly expecting them to say something, before he too turned on his heel and practically stomped out of the room.

Chloe cocked her eyebrow at Lana.

“Wow! They’ve got it bad!”

Lana waved a hand in front of her face. “Now I know what they mean when they talk about UST. Of course, I also now know what they mean by love and hate being two sides of the same coin.”

Chloe nodded sagely. The tension between the bald man and the other woman was getting worse. She’d already witnessed two arguments between them. As much as Moana protested that she hated Luthor and everything he stood for, there was clearly some chemistry between them. It also seemed from the little exchange between the pair that Moana had much in common with the Luthor scion, and that was probably what had bothered her the most.

In the past, Lex had always tried to do the right thing, even if the execution hadn’t exactly been ethical. She remembered what Clark had told her about Lex’s efforts to uncover Clark’s secrets, including hiring a reporter, or rather, blackmailing the reporter into working for him. It was only when he had begun to value his relationship with Clark that he’d tried to back out of it.
That hadn’t stopped him the next year from digging even further. Chloe often wondered what had caused the turnaround. Clark’s theory had been that his brief encounters with red Kryptonite and the discovery of the caves had reawakened Lex’s obsession. He’d tried to justify himself by saying he didn’t like mysteries, but Chloe had long since come to the conclusion that it was Lex’s own insecurities, his own envy of Clark’s strength that had led to him becoming what he eventually became.

She was no psychologist, but it seemed to her that the one thing Lex had taken from the abuse he’d suffered at the hands of his parents - and yes, she did think his mother was abusive after all Lana had told her about the so-called paragon Lillian Luthor - was the desire for the power to overcome that abuse. He’d tried to compensate for his own apparent helplessness in the face of that treatment by creating power. What he’d failed to realise was that power had to come from within.

Chloe had done her own studies on Moana’s childhood and learnt her family had denied her abilities. To the point where as a grown woman, she had little to do with her extended family. Moana Rangihau was very much a loner; a woman who kept to herself and didn’t have much of a social life to speak of. The only thing she was really interested in pursuing was the Illuminati. She was as obsessed with stopping the secret organisation as Lex was obsessed with Clark’s power.

They were both obsessed with power and powerful people. Even if they were technically on different sides. Although there were moments when Chloe wondered exactly which side Moana was really on. She didn’t trust the heroes any more than she trusted Lex.

So where did that leave them?

Oliver entered the room, looking a little shell-shocked. Chloe frowned at her husband.

“What is it, honey?”

“I saw it, but I don’t believe it.”

“What?”

“Lex and … what was her name? Moana? In a lip-lock. I think the temperature went up like thirty degrees or something. I thought they hated each other?” He ran a hand through his blond locks. “They’re hating each other all right. Extremely loudly. Anyway, they disappeared into a bedroom.”

Chloe looked at Lana and began to laugh. Denial, it seemed, was not just a river in Egypt.

Chapter End Notes

While I don’t condone the things Plastique has done in the past, as portrayed in Smallville, I think a case could be made for a young girl who has known nothing but fear and pain. I chose to write her as a sympathetic character who is just trying to do the right thing for the baby, knowing what she went through at Black Creek.

I also drop a bit of a bombshell with Lex and Moana’s behaviour. Let's just say they're both trying to find an escape, and that's all it is. As Lana says, hate and love are two sides of the same coin.
Tess Mercer had a million questions. If she had been in a coma for five years, how had she suddenly woken up? From what she knew about coma patients, it took time to come back to full consciousness. After all that time, her muscles should have atrophied. After five years, she should have had to re-learn how to walk, how to talk.

As she wandered around the complex, which she’d been told was a rehabilitation facility of some kind, she wondered how it was she actually standing upright. Come to that, if this was a rehabilitation facility, where were the other patients? Was she the only one?

The man who had greeted her on her awakening had been evasive, to say the least. He told her she’d probably lost some memories. Yet why had he commented on her being awake?

There was something about this that didn’t make sense.

She spent some time trying to recollect the details of her last memory. All she knew was that she had been in a hospital, in great pain. Yet she couldn’t remember the exact circumstances.

She wanted answers, but knew she wasn’t likely to get them from the staff, of which she had yet to see more than a couple.

The ‘doctor’ or whatever he was, had been to see her a couple of times in the past day, but hadn’t said anything about her being able to go home. She wanted to go back to the mansion, resume her job at Luthorcorp, and get back to some semblance of normality.

She had at least been allowed to work out in the centre’s gym, or rehabilitation room. Whatever it was. It was equipped with what she expected for a rehabilitation facility but something still felt off.

She was working out in the room, gloves on her hands as she punched a bag, her body wet with perspiration, when the doctor came in.

“Well, Miss Mercer. How are you feeling today?”

She stopped and looked at him. He held a chart in his hands and was wearing a white coat, as she expected a doctor to do.

“Fine,” she said shortly. “When can I leave?”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Leave?”

“Yes, leave. As in, get back to my normal life.”

“Well, I don’t think you’re quite ready to resume your, as you say, normal life, my dear,” he said with a smile that caused Tess to shudder involuntarily. “After all, you’ve been in a coma for five
years.”

“About that …” she began, but he looked down at his coat pocket and took out a phone.

“Yes? All right. I will be right there.” He turned and looked at her. “I’m very sorry. I’m needed elsewhere.”

Frustrated, Tess went to change her clothes and made her way to the small recreational room. While there was no television, there were books and magazines. She’d been told it wasn’t good for her ‘recovery’ to try to catch up all at once and the magazines were at least three years old.

She sighed and picked up an old issue of Time Magazine. On the cover was a red ‘S’ with the word Hero? Tess had tried to read the article where it questioned whether the Blur was a hero or a menace. She didn’t remember the article, but she remembered the Blur. Clark was probably still angry at her for the things she had done with the Kandorians, but she had thought she was doing it for the good of the planet.

At least, that was what she had read from her diaries. For some reason, the memories just weren’t as clear. Again, the doctor had explained it was due to the coma from the accident. Tess didn’t know much about comas or amnesia, but she would have thought it would feel familiar at least.

She had to get out of here! The world had gone on for five years without her and she had to see for herself what had changed.

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Kara watched as Chloe and Oliver talked to a blonde woman. She was tempted to use her super hearing to tune in to the conversation, but decided she was better off staying out of it.

Bruce looked at her.

“You look troubled, Supergirl.”

“Not troubled, just … I’m not sure.”

“You’re worried about your cousin.”

“I spoke to Aunt Martha an hour ago. She said no one’s heard from Clark. I think J’onn may know something, but …” She shook her head. She’d seen her uncle’s old enforcer friend in action and if the Martian Manhunter knew something, he was hardly likely to tell her.

Lex was relaxing in an armchair, talking with Mark Anders. The woman from the Antipodes was sitting opposite him, scowling. Kara just could not understand the relationship. The fact they were sleeping together, given how much they professed to hate each other, confused her.

“I don’t understand them,” she said.

Bruce smiled at her. “I’m afraid when it comes to sex, sometimes people do it for the strangest reasons.”

“But don’t you have to have feelings at least for someone?”

“Sadly, that is not the case in all relationships. Sometimes sex is used for comfort and sometimes it’s just something people use to express themselves.”

“I still don’t understand.”
Neither do I,” Bruce said with a sigh. He looked around as Selina entered the room with John Blake. Kara watched as Selina spoke quietly to Bruce then looked at her. The man known as Batman turned once again, leaning on his cane. “There’s a call for you, Supergirl. Or should I say, Linda?”

She frowned, wondering why the caller had used that particular name. She nodded at the Gotham billionaire and followed Selina, who said nothing as she walked with Kara to the other room.

“Hello?”

“Kara? Sorry, I mean Linda.”

Crawford. “What do you want?”

“Uh, I found something. Something of great interest to you. There’s an island in the South Pacific. It’s actually an island in an archipelago. You told me to see what I could dig up and I think this might be it. The island is owned by the French government. Last week the President made an unauthorised visit to the island. She didn’t tell her advisors she was going and normally she has to plan everything weeks in advance.”

Well, that sounded promising.

“Tell me where it is,” she demanded.

“I can send the information to your phone,” Crawford told her. There was a pause as she gave him the number. “Kara, I …”

“Save it,” she snapped. “You have done enough to my family! After this, you will forget you ever heard of me or Superman.”

“The Illuminati …”

“Nothing, do you understand me? I would suggest you find another occupation, Agent Crawford.”

John Crawford winced at the crack as she slammed the receiver down. He had hoped he could have redeemed himself in her eyes, but it appeared that was not to be. He quickly sent the information to her phone and deleted all his files. He removed his badge and threw it on the desk. Kara was right about one thing. It had suddenly become very dangerous for him inside the NSA. It wouldn’t be long before the Illuminati zeroed in on him.

He walked out of the NSA building, shivering, unsure if it was the cold wind making him shiver or something else. As he started to cross the street to get his car, he heard the sound of an engine rumbling. There was no time to react as a truck came barrelling through the intersection and hit him full on, sending his body flying several feet. John Crawford was dead before his body hit the pavement.

Kara looked at the message on her phone. Crawford had sent her a map of the island. She returned to the other room where Chloe and Oliver had finished talking to the other woman.

“Kara, this is Sarah Levy. She’s organised invitations for us at the Baron’s party tonight.”

Kara frowned at Chloe. “What will you do once you get there?”

“See if we can find out more about the Baron so we can expose the Illuminati and get them to shut down.”
Kara shook her head. She wasn’t convinced it would be that easy. Crawford had told her the secret organisation had been around for hundreds of years.

“I have something,” she said, showing Chloe the message. She’d already told them about forcing the NSA agent to work for them. “I’m going to check it out. I’m hoping I’ll find Mara there.”

“Well, be careful,” Oliver told her. “We’d hate for you to disappear like Clark.”

Chloe frowned at her husband. “We don’t know that Clark’s just disappeared,” she said.

“Well, I don’t see him here, do you?”

“No, but we have to think he has good reason for staying away. Now, come on. We need to organise costumes.”

“Costumes?” Kara asked.

Chloe nodded. “It’s a masquerade ball. We’re supposed to be dressed as lords and ladies of the revolution. Kind of apt, don’t you think? Since that’s exactly what the baron is trying to stir up. Except on a global scale.”

Kara had read some of Earth’s history and knew of the French Revolution, as well as the American Revolution. Chloe was right. The theme of the masquerade ball did seem rather apt, given the circumstances.

“Are you sure you can trust the information this NSA agent gave you?” Bruce asked.

Kara nodded. “He knows what I will do to him, or rather, what J’onn will do to him if his information turns out to be false.”

Bruce frowned. “J’onn?”

“An alien enforcer,” Chloe quickly explained. “He’s helped Clark on more than one occasion.” She bit her lip. “I just wish I knew where Clark was. He’d probably want to go with you to help search this island.”

“You need not concern yourself with Kal-El,” a deep voice said.

Kara looked around at the tall man, then smiled at J’onn.

“We were just talking about you.”

“Yes, I know,” he replied. “Kal-El is following his own leads,” he continued.

“You’ve seen him?” Oliver asked.

“I have, but I am afraid I cannot tell you exactly what he is doing. The truth will be revealed in its own good time.”

Oliver huffed. “I hate it when they get all cryptic.”

Chloe nodded, still obviously concerned for Clark, but she had long ago learned not to question her best friend’s motives.

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Clark watched the preparations from a distance. The baron didn’t need to know that he was already here. As far as the man was concerned, Clark, or rather, Monsieur Delacour, was still on his way to the great house.

He’d spent a few hours getting to know the lay of the land. Montfaucon, the town in which the castle was located, was built in a gorge along the river Dordogne. The town itself was on the lower slopes while above it rested historical monuments and churches where it was said that worshippers made pilgrimages every year to pray beneath the statue of the virgin Mary.

Clark’s parents had never been particularly religious although when his grandmother Jessica had been alive she had made a point of encouraging them to go to church regularly. His father had often said that there was too much to do on the farm, since work never really stopped on Sundays. There was no such thing as a day-off for a farmer.

Clark had pretended to be just another tourist, taking in the quaint village shops, yet careful to ensure he was not seen by the baron’s own staff. A man about four feet tall wandered in and out of the shops, followed by a much taller man. It seemed incongruous, but the smaller man was definitely in charge, a scowl on his face as he walked, snapping his fingers impatiently at the other man. Clark had heard enough to learn the smaller man was the baron’s chief manservant, who ruled over his domain with an iron fist. He also had a temper to match. He was clearly stocking up for the gathering that night.

Clark wondered what the purpose of the gathering was. The baron was throwing a masquerade ball with revolution the main theme of the evening. It seemed appropriate, considering he had begun his own revolution to establish a new world order.

Growing bored with wandering the town, despite its many attractions, Clark had made his way to the castle. Like many medieval castles of its kind, the chateau had been built and rebuilt after surviving several battles. Set high in the hills above the town, it dominated the landscape; an imposing figure casting a shadow over the more cheerful atmosphere of the village.

He studied the battlements, calling up his memory of blueprints he’d downloaded from the city engineers. Like most other historical buildings, the castle’s blueprints had been filed with the authorities, if only to guide them should the need for restoration ever arise.

The tower reminded him a little of the crow’s nest he’d last used the night he had battled Zod. The night he had fallen, supposedly to his death, while his father’s enemy had been caught up in the wave, pulled through the portal into another world. Lois had told Clark how she had found him, the blade made from blue kryptonite still in his abdomen. He realised then it was Lois who had pulled him back from the brink of death. She’d saved his life, without really knowing what it meant. She had realised he was the Blur, but the truth of who he was and where he came from was still unknown.

He had eventually told her the truth. It hadn’t been an easy story to tell, despite his realisation that she had already discovered some of it for herself. He’d loved the fact that she had still let him tell her in his own way, quietly encouraging him all along without revealing what she knew. There had been no fanfare. She’d made it fairly clear from the start that it was his secret to tell and she would never reveal it to anyone.

Still, Lois had taken a little time to accept that he was an alien. She had been overwhelmed at first, practically bombarding him with questions. He’d been relieved to know that she had actually been okay with it. That to her he was still the same Clark she had fallen in love with. Alien superpowers or no. He was her Smallville and that was never going to change.
God, he missed her!

A car pulled up in the driveway and a servant came out to greet the passenger. Clark sucked in a breath as his beloved wife alighted from the limousine. She stood, lifting the strap of her bag to her shoulder. Some instinct made her turn around and for a moment it felt as if their eyes met, yet Clark was still so very far away. Her expression was unreadable but he felt a brief twinge of pain.

“I’m here Lois,” he said softly. It didn’t matter if she heard him. He had a feeling she would know anyway. Their connection was deeper than any he’d ever known.

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Tess stared with a growing horror at the hulking ruin of the castle she had once called home. When or how it had burned to the ground she didn’t know. The last time she had seen it, it hadn’t been a ruin.

She’d managed to escape from the rehabilitation centre, or whatever it was, by cornering the nurse or orderly or whoever and threatening to break his neck. She’d grabbed his keys before running full tilt, hoping she didn’t run into any guards.

The building was situated in the warehouse district of Metropolis, near where some new developments were going on in New Troy. Again, it only served to remind Tess of how much she had missed, since the last she had known of the developments was that they were still being planned.

Figuring that answers were at the mansion in Smallville, Tess had managed to hotwire a vehicle and drove there. To her utter despair, the mansion was gone.

The only other place she knew of was at Luthorcorp, but when she got to the sixty-storey building, she saw that it was no longer the building she had known. Luthorcorp had become LexCorp, which confused her. When had Lex returned?

The building itself was a shambles. It looked to her like some kind of riot had gone on outside the building as several of the glass panes were smashed. It seemed deserted.

She walked the streets, not sure what to do. Everything she knew was gone.

“Tess?”

She turned and stared at the older woman.

“Who …”

“Martha. Martha Kent. You seem a little confused.”

“Everything’s different,” Tess said. “I don’t know …”

“I thought you were in Italy,” Martha replied, frowning.

“Italy?” Tess was even more confused. “I don’t understand.”

Clark Kent’s mother looked just as confused. “Why don’t you come with me?” she said. “You don’t look well.”

Tess followed the older woman, realising she was being led to the clock tower where Oliver had once lived before he had merged his company with Luthorcorp. She was startled to be greeted by an older man and a young woman.
“Sam, this is Tess Mercer. Tess, this is Sam Lane, Lois’ father.”

“Miss Mercer,” the older man replied. “My daughter, Lucy.”

“I think we could all do with some tea,” Martha suggested. Lucy nodded.

“I’ll get it.”

Martha sat down on the couch and invited Tess to sit with her.

“Now, let’s see if we can’t straighten any of this out.”

“I don’t know what’s going on. Everything’s different. The mansion is gone, Luthorcorp’s in ruins and I …”

“Tess, what do you remember?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. Not much. They said I’ve been in a coma for five years but I don’t understand how that’s possible. I woke up a couple of days ago. They wouldn’t give me straight answers, so I ran.”

“A coma? Tess, don’t you know?”

“I don’t know anything.”

The general looked from her to Martha.

“It has to be Lex and his experiments.”

“What do you mean?” she asked. “Experiments?”

“The last time I saw you, it was at a party in Washington DC.”

“I haven’t been to DC in a long time,” Tess said.

“What is your last memory, Tess?”

“I was in a hospital,” she said, faltering. “I …” She lifted her hand to her head, unsurprised to find herself trembling. “What’s happening to me?”

“That’s something only your brother can answer, I’m afraid.”

She stared at the senator, confused. “My brother? I don’t …”

“Tess, Lionel Luthor was your father. Lex Luthor is your half-brother.”

She gasped, eyes wide. “What?”

“I’m afraid it’s true.”

Tess listened and drank the hot, sweet tea as Martha explained what had happened in the intervening period. She wondered how this could possibly have happened. What could Lex have done to her?

The only answer to that question lay in the doctor who had supposedly been treating her in the rehabilitation centre. Tess returned to the building, walking in the front door. The security guard tried to stop her but she glared at him.
“Where is he?” she asked.

He stared at her, his hand on the butt of his sidearm.

“I won’t ask again.”

Inexplicably, a wind began whipping around them, blowing her long hair in her face. Tess ignored it, continuing to glare at the guard. She ordered him to find the doctor and do it fast. Within a few minutes, the doctor came out.

“Miss Mercer …”

“Don’t! Don’t keep lying to me and tell me I was in a coma. We both know that’s an outright lie! I want answers!”

The wind continued to whip around them, becoming more violent, matching the anger she felt.

“Tess, you need to calm down.”

“Tell me the truth!”

The doctor stared at her, then beckoned for her to follow him. She did so warily, letting him lead her down a long corridor to an office. There was a bank of monitors, reminding her a little of the day Lana Lang had told her she was just another of Lex’s puppets. Of the camera that had been planted in her optic nerve.

The man touched some keys on a keyboard and images came up on the monitors, along with what looked like notes. Tess read the notes, then turned to stare in horror at the doctor.

“He cloned me!”
Chapter Summary

Everyone gathers at the castle at Dordogne. A showdown is coming.

Episode Twelve: Conclusioni

“What exactly do you plan to do once you get there?” Lex asked, entering the salon where Chloe, Oliver, Lana, Bruce and the others had assembled. He stared in amazement, barely able to recognise any of them.

Chloe was wearing a gown with a less formal style than the one Lana was wearing. She had obviously chosen to forgo the corset which would have pushed up her bustline. It had a long skirt which was loosely belted at the waist. While the skirt was still full, it lacked the hoops which would give it that extra grandiose appearance.

Her costume in fact reminded Lex of a portrait he’d once seen of Marie Antoinette, who had created something of a scandal when she had decided to introduce the new fashion for ladies at court. It looked less like something a lady of the court would have worn and more like something the ‘common people would have chosen. Then again, he believed that was the effect Marie Antoinette would have gone for.

He wondered if Chloe was doing the same, or if there was another reason for it.

“You know, Marie Antoinette lost her head in the revolution.”

Lana shot a glare at him. Had he not known her face so intimately, he would not have recognised her with her powdered wig. She had opted for the gown he would have expected all the women to wear. Hers clearly included a corset which had the effect of pushing up her breasts, providing cleavage he had never seen on her. Lana wasn’t exactly flat-chested, but she wasn’t well-endowed either.

She grimaced and pulled at the tight waistline.

“Ugh, I’m glad I didn’t live in the eighteenth century,” she complained. “How did women put up with wearing this stuff?”

“All things considered, I think I prefer the Cleopatra costume you wore when …” Lex stopped talking when she shot him another glare. He couldn’t help remembering how beautiful she had been when she had worn the costume at the fundraiser he had held for Dark Thursday all those years ago. He’d of course gone as Marc Antony.

This time, he’d gone for a costume similar to that worn by Maximilien Robespierre, who had been an influential figure in the French Revolution. The costume was fairly simple, consisting of a long tailed coat, man’s blouse in white and a cravat, also in white. He was forced to wear a powdered wig, but like Lana with her dislike for the restrictive corset, he knew he had no choice. He didn’t want de Rochefort to recognise him. Not until it was too late.

Both Oliver and Bruce were wearing similar costumes. Bruce also had his cane with him, clearly trying not to show how dependent he was on it. Lex knew how his injury had occurred but wasn’t
going to let on to anyone that he knew.

He was about to repeat his question when the door to the suite opened and Lex could only stare at the woman before him. He had not exactly discussed the subject with Moana before they’d chosen their costumes. He had wondered if she would have worn traditional Maori dress, but she had also chosen to go with the revolutionary costume.

While Lana and Chloe were beautiful in their gowns, Moana was … there was no other word for it. Spectacular. She had chosen a cream-coloured lace gown with a corset cinched tight enough to show ample cleavage. Her skin, not quite the colour of cocoa, was set off nicely by the colour and style of the dress. Like Lana, she also wore a hoop skirt, but instead of the powdered wig, she had opted to wear an extension in her black hair, which had been back-combed back so the top was full and bouffant. The length was gathered in a single long ringlet, laying over one shoulder.

Lex couldn’t recall in his readings on the French Revolution whether there had been any women with skin her colour in France at that time, but it didn’t matter. She had taken the theme and put her own stamp on it and she looked almost ... regal. Then again, Lex thought given her heritage and connection to a chieftain of the past, the look was entirely appropriate.

“What are you looking at?” she asked, staring back at him and shifting self-consciously.

“You’re … incredible,” he said.

He knew she was about to make some kind of sarcastic retort, but Bruce, clearly noticing her difficulty, intercepted her.

“I may not always agree with Lex, but on this I have to concur. You, mademoiselle, are exquisite.” He lifted her hand to kiss it, bowing reverently.

“Uh …”

“I can understand now why some of your people are held in such high regard,” Chloe offered.

“Thank you,” Moana said graciously.

Lex wrapped an arm around her waist and squeezed gently. She looked at him, her gaze unreadable. They’d started sleeping together on the ship, mostly out of a need to find some kind of validation for their actions, but Lex genuinely felt an intense attraction toward the woman. She might claim to be just ordinary, even with her abilities, but there was nothing ordinary about her.

“So, Lex, you were saying when you came in?”

“What exactly do you plan to do when you get to the castle?” he asked, turning his attention back to the group.

“Well, that’s where you come in. We think it’s a fairly safe bet the baron keeps information on the brotherhood at the castle. If we can find that information we plan to use it.”

“And what exactly is my role in this?” he asked Chloe.

“I’m sure you’ll keep the baron distracted. Long enough for us to find what we’re looking for. I doubt you’ll have any qualms about doing whatever’s necessary to stall him.”

“Even if that means murder?” he asked, hearing Moana’s sharp intake of breath beside him.
“Well, no one can say you don’t get right to the crux of the matter,” Oliver replied. “We’re not saying murder, just whatever is necessary. I doubt you’ll have a problem with the deception.”

“Are you perhaps suggesting I’m without conscience, Queen?”

“We both know what you are, Luthor. Let’s not pretend otherwise.”

“Hm, I would argue we both have our dark sides, don’t we, Oliver?” He glared meaningfully at the blonde billionaire.

“Don’t even start, Luthor,” Chloe replied. “Oliver made his peace with what happened at Excelsior a long time ago.”

“And don’t start pointing the finger. I made bad choices, I admit that, but you’re the one who refuses to take responsibility for your own actions.”

Lex opened his mouth to argue, but Moana shot him a warning look. If it had been anyone else, he doubted he would have given way so easily, but he stayed quiet.

“We need to go,” Chloe said. “It’ll take a couple of hours to get there at least.”

“What about Kara?” Lex asked, not seeing her.

“She’s gone to check out the lead given to her by the NSA man,” Lana told him. She looked at the others. “By the way, I was checking out news online just before and there was a man killed in Metropolis. They said he was with the NSA.”

Mark Anders nodded. “The Illuminati take care of their own. Especially when they’re betrayed.” The journalist had opted to stay behind, his face still bruised from Isabelle Lewis’ ‘interrogation’.

Lex shuddered, glad he had never agreed to join in the alliance with them. He might have his issues with the Justice League, but at least the League wouldn’t cross that line. He had crossed that line, but only because he had been pushed to his limits.

Moana squeezed his hand and he looked at her.

“Something to say?”

“As much as you try to justify the things you’ve done, and even I have to admit some of them are justified, I know you wouldn’t go that far. You’d set someone up to take a fall, but even you wouldn’t do that.”

“Nice to know you have faith in me.”

“It has nothing to do with faith,” she replied, without explaining further.

***

Diana looked at her lover. While she was perfectly capable of controlling the situation, she decided it was best deferring to him for the time being. She glanced at her sister. Aresia was glaring at Steve as if unable to believe Diana had let a ‘man’ accompany her.

Helena had a firm grip on their sister’s arm, keeping her in line. Diana nodded at her sister before turning back to Steve, watching as he stalked along the corridor.

Gustave had proven extremely helpful, under the influence of the lasso of truth, but still, he had
provided the location of the group holding Sera. The baron’s people, pretending to be this offshoot group known as Veil was often used in what was known as ‘wet works’. Murder and assassination. The baron had them under contract so he could distance himself from the activity. It was typical of the aristocrat’s arrogance, Diana thought. Like others she could name, he hid his illegal activities behind a ‘veil’ of moral conduct.

The group had taken over an old mental hospital when they had kidnapped Sera. It was several miles out of London. Many of those who lived in the small town which bordered the city knew of the mental hospital’s existence but hadn’t known it was currently in operation.

There was a yell and Diana looked up in time to see Steve exchanging fire with a man wielding what appeared to be a machine gun, very like those she had seen on her last visit to Man’s world, when she had tried to help during the war. Steve’s revolver was clearly no match for the bigger gun and she feared for his safety.

She knew there was no option. She turned to her sister, who nodded and spoke to Aresia.

“There may be more armed men. You have one small chance to redeem yourself sister. Come with me and circle around the building so we may intercept the men.”

Aresia nodded. Diana had not been happy when she had learned what Aresia had done to Stephanie. She was already in enough trouble after the way she had conspired with Stephanie to steal Superman’s child and she would have to face the consequences of that once they returned to Themyscira. If she co-operated with her sisters and helped them rescue Sera, the queen might be more lenient.

Without a murmur, Aresia followed Helena back along the corridor. Diana waited a few moments, trying to take stock of the situation. Since the men were more than likely somewhere along the maze of corridors, she would not easily be able to gauge their position and figure out a way to stop them.

Steve ran back along the corridor toward her.

“It’s not good,” he said. “There were two of them. Both had sub-machine guns.” He frowned.

“Where are Aresia and Helena?”

“I told them to circle around and try to come at the men from another way. Tell me more.”

“I can’t tell how many of them there are. From what Carl tells me, there are at least a half-dozen men in the group, although there were rumours one of them was killed in a shoot-out with an NCIS agent last year.”

Carl was their colleague in the Secret Service. He was an expert in research and had come up with the information within an hour of their request.

“We must get to Sera,” Diana told him.

“I know, but we don’t have the firepower. Even with your abilities, Princess. I’m not about to take the risk of you being hit. They could kill Sera before we could get to her.”

“We do not have time to find another way,” she said. “I will take my chances they would not be expecting me.”

Steve looked uncertain. “Very well, Princess. But we do this together.”

She took his hand and nodded. “Together,” she replied.
She waited as he unloaded his empty clip and re-loaded. Together they ran along the corridor and turned the corner. Diana gave an Amazon cry, performing a few somersaults. The two men clearly didn’t know how to deal with this as they didn’t begin to fire until Steve fired off a few shots. Diana landed on her feet, then dodged, using her bracelets as a shield. She knew it wouldn’t be enough, but relied on Steve covering her as she ran then leaped in the air, grabbing an old pipe which must have been used for heating in the old days of the hospital, kicking one man in the face and knocking him down.

One of Steve’s shots hit the other man in the shoulder and he was also down for the count.

She could hear shouts from a distance and knew Helena and Aresia had managed to take down two more. Steve grabbed one of the machine guns and followed her as she began searching for the room in which they were keeping her younger sister.

She came to a sudden stop when she saw Sera in a bed, her body strapped down. She appeared to be in some kind of a coma, a drug being pumped into her system through an intravenous drip.

A man stood over the young blonde, a revolver at her head.

“Don’t even think it,” he said. “You may be fast, but even you will not be fast enough to stop a bullet if I decide to shoot.”

Diana felt her beloved beside her. She knew he would have shot the man but there was still a risk Sera would die. Helena and Aresia ran in, only to be stopped by the sight of the gun at Sera’s temple.

“Nooo,” Aresia screamed. She started forward but Diana screamed back at her.

“No, sister. Stop!”

Aresia looked at her, clearly wondering what she had planned.

“If you kill this girl, there isn’t a rock you can crawl under,” Steve told him. “You would have not only every federal and international agency pursuing you, but you would also have the entire Justice League and Diana’s sisters on your ass. Trust me when I say that it would not be pretty.”

“You think I care?”

“I think you would rather keep your head on your neck,” Steve returned.

Aresia was watching the man with murder in her eyes. She spat angrily.

“You are like all men,” she said. “You are nothing but …”

Helena cut off her tirade with a sharp nudge. “You do yourself no favours, sister.”

“Let the girl go,” Steve ordered, “or I’ll be forced to shoot.”

“If you shoot me, the girl dies anyway.”

Diana knew they were at a stalemate. None of them had the medical knowledge to help Sera. She had no idea what would happen if they suddenly removed the drug keeping her comatose.

She was about to plead for her sister’s life when the glass window behind the gunman smashed and Supergirl flew in. She quickly subdued the man by grabbing his gun and crushing it in her hand.

Diana smiled at the blonde Kryptonian, recalling how several months earlier she had turned up when
Kara had rescued a busload of school children. Diana had contacted the League, or rather Bruce, and relayed what they’d learnt from Gustave. Kara must have decided to see if she could help.


“It may take several hours,” the man said. “She has been in this state a couple of months.” He glanced uneasily at Kara, who glared at him.

“What will removing the drip do?”

“I don’t know,” the gunman replied. “We were only told to keep her in this state until ordered otherwise.”

“By the baron?” Helena asked.

“Yes.”

Diana felt sure the healers on the island would know what to do. It would still take too long for her to get her sister there by plane. Kara seemed to read her mind.

“I can take her back to Themyscira,” Kara offered.

“Thank you, Supergirl,” Steve said. He glanced at Diana, then at Aresia.

“What then?” Aresia asked.

“We will take you back to the island, there to face your punishment.”

Aresia shook her head. “No.”

Helena took her arm. “There is no choice, Aresia. You have done wrong and you must now face the consequences.”

Diana watched as Steve helped Supergirl remove the needle from Sera’s arm, then found a bandage to place over the wound. Supergirl carefully lifted the young girl in her arms and flew away.

Steve called in some favours from the local authorities who agreed to detain the five men until the Secret Service could take over. She bit her lip. Her mother had told her she could never return to Paradise Island, especially with Steve, but she couldn’t leave Helena to deal with Aresia alone.

“I’m sure your mother will understand,” Steve said quietly, sensing her ambivalence.

She hoped so.

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Lois smoothed down the skirt of her costume. Instead of the gown she imagined a woman of royalty would wear in revolutionary France, she had decided to go with a peasant costume. It consisted of a chemise with puffed sleeves and a sleeveless dress in a heavy linen over the top. The costume was loose-fitting, which was one of the things that had influenced her decision. If Lois had to put up any kind of a fight, she wanted to be able to do so without her costume getting in the way.

She held her skirt, trying not to let it drag on the floor as she descended the grand staircase into what she assumed was the castle’s ballroom. She had had little time to study her surroundings as the baron’s servants escorted her to her room so she took the opportunity to look around her.
The castle was every bit as formidable as she had thought. Unlike the mansion in Smallville, which Clark had told her was supposed to have been a Scottish castle, this one was probably a good five hundred years older and even more imposing. It was almost as if she could feel the weight of about ten centuries’ worth of those who had come and gone, of battles lost and won.

Lois hated it. it felt oppressive rather than impressive. She had tried to pretend she was happy to be there but all she could think about was her baby, somewhere out there, and that the man responsible for her disappearance was somewhere in this castle.

She wanted to strangle him, force him to tell her where her daughter was, but that wasn’t the plan. At least, not yet. She couldn’t show her hand just yet. Not until all the pieces were in place.

She couldn’t help thinking back to the moment she had arrived in the castle grounds. She had felt a tingling sort of awareness and looked around. Despite her anxiety, she had suddenly felt almost happy, as if surrounded by a comforting presence.

“Madame?”

She turned, expecting someone tall, and had to look down at the man who was only four feet tall. She had taken an instant dislike to Seraphin Perdrix. She could vaguely recall from her history the first name was also the name of an Italian saint, but the man who stood before her was the last person she would have described as a saint. Especially if his glare was anything to go by.

“Pardon?” she asked, careful to remain polite.

“Monsieur le Baron est dans le salon, madame.”

“Merci,” she replied.

The butler looked her up and down. Lois suppressed a shudder. The man gave her the creeps, but no more so than the baron. She pasted on a smile, knowing Clark was depending on her to keep up the deception.

De Rochefort smiled at her as she entered the salon, escorted by the butler. The smile didn’t quite reach his eyes as he looked her up and down. There were a few people gathered at the far end of the huge room, some glancing their way. They were all wearing costumes, some with masks covering their eyes.

"Mademoiselle Lane. Votre choix de costume est plutôt intéressant."

"Eh bien, vous avez dit que le thème de votre balle était la révolution, monsieur," she replied. "Vive la revolution," she added, looking down at her peasant costume. After all, the peasant population had played an important role in the revolution, from what she could remember of her history.

"Bien sûr" he said. “Je voulais seulement dire que je pensais qu'une femme de votre beauté n'aurait pas été hors de propos dans la robe d'une femme de la royauté.”

Oh how she hated empty flattery.

Lois busied herself with picking up a glass of champagne. Of course, the man had had only the finest and most authentic champagne brought in.

“Profitez de la soirée, Mademoiselle Lane. Comme vous pouvez le voir, certains de mes invités sont déjà arrivés.”
“Monsieur baron is in the salon, Madame.”
“Thank you.”
“Mademoiselle Lane. Your choice of costume is rather interesting.”
“Well, you did say the theme of your ball was the revolution, Monsieur. Vive la revolution.”
“Of course. I only meant I thought a woman of your beauty would not have been out of place in the dress of a woman of royalty.”
“Please enjoy yourself, Mademoiselle Lane. As you can see, some of my guests have already arrived.”

The butler returned just as Lois turned away. She heard the man murmur the name Delacour. The baron nodded and followed the smaller man out. Lois quickly controlled the urge to smile widely, knowing the baron’s guests would find it a little odd. Clark was here!
Episode 12: Part 2

Chapter Summary

Everyone is at Dordogne for the ball. Tess meanwhile searches for answers.

Chapter Notes

Ok, so I couldn't resist the little nod to another favourite fandom.

Tess stepped out of the cab and looked up at the building on Broadway. It was practically next to the hulking tower which was Lut … no, LeXCorp. She couldn’t forget. It was typical of the man’s ego, she thought, that he would use the nickname he’d been given to pronounce himself king of all he surveyed.

She reached out a hand, pressing her palm flat against the revolving door and stepping inside the lobby. Even there, everything seemed to have changed. There was a security guard sitting at a desk. Tess ignored him and walked toward the bank of elevators.

“Excuse me, miss.”

She pressed the button for the elevator, still ignoring the call.

“Miss?”

She felt a hand on her shoulder and looked around.

“Yes? I was just going up to my office,” she told the guard. He was a beefy man who looked as if he’d had too many carb-laden meals. He had a bushy beard which was mostly salt and pepper, while his hair was thick and grey, yet he was probably in his early forties.

“Your office, Miss?”

“Yes. I’m the publisher,” she replied.

He looked her over with an odd sort of grin.

“That’s funny, Miss. You don’t look like a man.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“The publisher of this newspaper is Bruce Wayne.”

She shook her head. “Luthorcorp owns the Daily Planet.”

“They used to, but only up until a few months ago. It’s owned by Wayne Enterprises now.”

She frowned at him. “That’s ridiculous. Luthorcorp wouldn’t sell …”
The guard shook his head. “Afraid I can’t let you go up, Miss.”

“And why not?” she asked tersely.

“Because there were riots here a couple of weeks ago and someone tried to kill the editor.”

“Who’s the editor?”

“Perry White, Miss. Please wait there, while I call …”

Tess bit her lip. She remembered Perry White had been an editor on the foreign desk, or at least, the last time in her memory. The man was a recovering alcoholic and he had no love for the Luthors. She recalled it had something to do with Lionel and him trying to destroy the newspaper man’s career. If he knew she was Lionel’s daughter, he might not be so welcoming.

She had only two options. One, she could talk to Perry White and see if he would let her look through the archives, or she could try Watchtower. That was if Chloe would let her into the building. The last time Tess had broken in, things had got decidedly unpleasant.

“Look, never mind,” she said. “I’m sorry to have troubled you.”

She began quickly walking away, not seeing the guard pick up a phone at the desk and speak urgently into it.

Tess walked the streets, wondering if she was doing the right thing. She felt so confused. Everything was different.

Why had Lex done what he did? When exactly had he done it, since the last time she knew, he was supposed to have been dead. More questions arose in her mind. If she was the clone, then how had Lex managed to keep it so secret? If she wasn’t the clone, if she was the real deal, then what purpose could Lex have had for letting her clone out and keeping her basically a prisoner for so long?

She was hurt but most of all she was angry. When Lana had told her about the micro-camera in her optic nerve, Tess had begun to question everything Lex had told her. He’d clearly been manipulating her from the start. Then again, when had all this actually started? Had he known she was his sister?

She stopped walking, staring up at the domed building just a few hundred yards away. Watchtower. Shrugging her shoulders, Tess found the entrance and pulled the door open, getting in the lift. There weren’t any buttons that she could see. Only what appeared to be some kind of scanner and a built-in microphone.

“Begin voice identification process.”

Tess started, looking around for the source of the voice. Clearly Chloe had upgraded the security systems.

“Begin voice identification process.”

Well, obviously the elevator car wasn’t going to go anywhere. Tess chewed nervously on her lip, then leaned forward to speak into the microphone.

“Tess Mercer.”

“Voice identification confirmed. Tess Mercer. Stand by for retina scan.”

Retina scan? That must be the scanner, she thought, stepping close to the plate. If the voice
identification had allowed her this far, then it couldn’t hurt to try the scan. She stood still as a blue light flashed from the scanner and swept over her eye.

“Retina scan confirmed.”

The elevator began moving upward. Tess blinked, still confused. Why had she been given security clearance for Watchtower?

It was a short journey up to the main room. Tess tentatively opened the double doors and stared at the bank of computers. There was a young man working, watching the screens. He turned and looked at her, smiling.

“Hey Tess. We thought you were in Italy.”

“Uh, I guess not,” she said. She frowned at the boy. He reminded her of someone, but she couldn’t quite figure out exactly who.

An older man stepped up behind her.

“Miss Mercer. This is an unexpected visit.”

She stared at him. He was aged somewhere in his late forties and looked very familiar. Her eyes widened as she recalled exactly where she had seen the man before.

“Jay Garrick!”

He nodded. “Yep, that’s me. Clark told me about your little mess with Checkmate. Sorry we haven’t had a chance to be introduced, but well, I’ve been busy with the school and everything.”

“School?”

He nodded again. “Teen Titans.” He looked at the young man. “Connor, any word from Superman?”

Tess stared at him. “Su - Superman?”

He turned back to look at her, frowning. “Are you all right, Miss Mercer? You look a little pale.”

“Um, no.”

“I’ll get you some water,” Jay said kindly.

“There’s a message from my mom,” Connor said. “She’s staying with General Lane at the clocktower. He thought they could co-ordinate everything there.”

“Your mother?” Tess asked. “Who …”

Connor frowned at her. “You feeling okay, Tess?”

She let Jay sit her down on the long couch, taking the glass of water he gave her. This was just so crazy. Why did this Connor look so familiar? And how did he know her?

Connor turned back, clearly listening to a message. When he was done, he looked around at Tess.

“We’ve got a problem,” he told Jay. He approached, bending down to look at Tess. “Do you … do you remember me, Tess?”
She shook her head. “I don’t know. I don’t remember anything about the last five years.”


“Something about Kandorians. I was in a hospital. I think, I think I died!”

“What did your mother say?” Jay asked.

“That she found Tess on the street yesterday. She seemed very confused. She didn’t know anything about Lex coming back, or him being her brother, or …”

“Why is he doing this to me?” Tess asked, aware her tone sounded more like a wail.

Jay looked at her, his expression full of concern.

“Tess, don’t worry, we’ll figure something out.”

“You don’t understand. I saw it … something about a clone.”

“You mean me?” Connor asked.

She stared at him. “You? I don’t understand!”

“It’s a long story.”

“I don’t think it was about you. I mean me. He cloned me!”

“What?”

The rage she had felt when she had learnt of Lex’s schemes built up in her once more. She could feel her hair being tousled by an inexplicable breeze. It was as if a whirlwind had suddenly swept through Watchtower and surrounded her.

“Uh, Tess, I think you need to calm down,” Connor said uneasily.

Jay put a hand on her shoulder. “He’s right. Tess, look at me. It’s all right. You’re among friends.”

“Friends? I don’t even know you!”

There was a crash. Tess stared as a monitor fell to the floor. Both Jay and Connor looked as if they were fighting some kind of force, yet they could still stand upright even as the whirlwind increased in strength.

Jay continued to speak calmly. “Tess, it’s all right. I’m here to help you.”

She began to panic, not understanding what was happening to her. All she could feel was fear and rage.

There was another crash of something in the building. Tess turned her head in the direction of the sound, then started when she felt a hand on her shoulder. It was warm and comforting.

“Tess, look at me,” the voice said, still calm. She blinked and looked at Jay, who smiled at her.

“That’s it. Breathe, sweetheart. That’s good. You’re doing great.”

She felt calmer, continuing to look at the older man’s face as he breathed deeply. She found herself copying his actions.
Once she felt like she could breathe again, she could only stare in dismay at the two broken monitors. She had a vague recollection of destroying the building she’d been kept in. The ‘doctor’ had barely managed to survive the storm.

“Oh god, what is happening to me?” she asked.

***

Martha returned to the living room and smiled at Lois’ father.

“Jay’s got it under control.”

“Does he know …” Sam asked.

“He and Connor are going to do some research. He tried contacting Chloe but she was on her way to Dordogne.”

“Poor Tess,” Lucy said sympathetically, pouring coffee for them all. “Imagine being in her shoes.”

“I’m very glad you’re not,” her father told her, wrapping his arm around her and kissing her temple.

Martha’s phone rang and she picked it up, her brow furrowed.

“I need to take this,” she told Sam.

He nodded. “Don’t mind us.”

Martha got up from the couch and went into the next room.

“Daniel?”

Daniel Abrams sounded almost cheerful as he spoke.

“Martha, I thought you’d want to know the Feds have been all over the Capitol. There are a few people under investigation, including the Vice-President. The President’s going to be issuing a statement some time today.”

Thanks to the Justice League, Martha had been kept up-to-date with what had been happening in the senate and in Congress. After Steve Trevor had formally accused Miranda Clifford of a conspiracy against her own government, she had chosen to turn state’s evidence to save her own ass, as AC and Bart had put it. The two superheroes, along with Victor, had gone to DC to keep an eye on the situation there.

While Martha was happy something was happening in Washington, she had a feeling it would change little. The Illuminati would quickly move to stop any further damage and might even retreat to lick their wounds. Still, it would more than likely prompt the government to step up its screening procedures on people placed in positions of power.

“Thank you for letting me know, Daniel.”

“I don’t mind telling you, Martha, this thing has got a lot of us running scared. We don’t really know how deep this goes, but the fact that they could threaten the security of the entire world …”

“I know, but at least something good is going to come out of this,” she said.

“How are things there? Is there any news of your family?”
“Nothing yet,” she said wistfully. She hadn’t heard from Clark in days and even Lois was curiously silent. She had called her father two days ago but had refused to answer any questions about what she was up to. Chloe had called her uncle, telling him Lois had gone to stay with friends but had been curiously evasive. Martha trusted her daughter-in-law knew what she was doing, but she couldn’t help worrying.

She just hoped her children were all right.

***

Clark eyed the baron, suppressing the anger he felt. He fought the urge to wrap his hands around the man’s neck. Steady, he told himself quietly. All the pieces were not quite in place yet. The baron didn’t look pleased as he gazed at Clark’s outfit. Clark had deliberately not dressed in costume, donning black from head to toe. He wore a long coat which reminded him a little of the two-thousand-dollar coat he’d bought when he’d been exposed to Red K the first time. It was also very similar to the all-black ensemble he’d worn a year before he’d revealed himself to the world as Superman.

"Monsieur Delacour, je suis tellement ravi que vous puissiez le faire."

“Baron,” he said with a nod.

The older man waved his hand toward the people gathered in the salon. Clark had immediately noticed his wife, who was doing her best to ignore his presence. He could feel her tension from across the room.

“Comme vous pouvez le voir, j’ai un petit rassemblement. J’insiste sur le fait de rester et de prendre un rafraîchissement. Il sera temps de discuter de notre activité plus tard. Est-ce que je peux?”

“Pas du tout,” Clark replied, turning away from the man to join the others. He approached the group of men assembled at the far end and nodded at the woman with them. He recognised her as the country’s president.

“Monsieur Delacour, I am so pleased you could make it.”

“Baron.”

“As you can see, I am having a small gathering. I insist you stay and partake of some refreshment. There is time to discuss our business later. Do you mind?”

“Not at all.”

Two men, both aristocratic in appearance, were wearing what appeared to be clothes in the style of revolutionary characters. Both wore powdered wigs.

“Ah, Monsieur, et qui êtes-vous censé être?” one of them asked.

Clark was conscious of Lois behind him but he couldn’t turn to acknowledge her.

“Monsieur Delacour,” he said stiffly. “Et vous êtes?”

One of them bowed. “Je suis docteur Francesco Donatello.” Clark nodded, having recognised him from Chloe’s research. The last he had heard the man had taken Tess Mercer with him to stay at his villa on the Amalfi Coast. Clark didn’t dare ask him where Tess was, knowing it would give him away.

“Et je suis le Marquis Antoine de Sade,” the other man replied, eyeing Clark warily. “Je dois dire
que je suis surpris . . ."

“J’ai des affaires personnelles avec le Baron,” Clark snapped.

“Bien sûr. Pardonnez-moi.”

“Ah, M’sieur, and who are you supposed to be?”
“Monsieur Delacour. And you are?”
“I am Doctor Francesco Donatello.”
“And I am Marquis Antoine de Sade. I must say I am surprised . . .”
“I have personal business with the baron.”
“Of course. Forgive me.”

The two men walked away, leaving Clark alone. He grabbed some hors d’oeuvres from a tray as a waiter dressed in the costume of a revolutionary-era peasant passed by and helped himself to some champagne. As he turned, he saw Lois eyeing him, her hazel eyes glistening. He wanted to sweep her up in his arms and take her away, but they had to finish this. For Mara.

She turned back to the man she was talking quietly to, holding her champagne glass. Clark smiled, remembering Lois was not a big fan of champagne. Not since the spiked champagne they’d all drunk the night of the bachelor/bachelorette party. She was more a beer girl anyway.

He frowned as he looked the man over. Ross Webster. He had obviously managed to escape the riot in Metropolis. The baron must have invited him here. Clark remembered the man from the few times he’d spoken with Lex about the fall of his company. Ross Webster was no genius; not on Lex’s level by any rate. The only reason his company stock had risen in value was because he’d fallen for the baron’s promises. Clark doubted the man understood exactly what he was letting himself in for. Rather like Lionel, Clark thought. The Illuminati giveth and they taketh away.

He turned to head outside on the terrace to join others taking a tour of the gardens. He had no interest in the extensive grounds, or in the gardens themselves, although admittedly they were beautiful. For all his cruelty, the baron clearly employed a skilled gardener.

Just as he was about to step through the French doors, he heard the unmistakeable sound of Chloe’s voice. He glanced over to the entry and saw Chloe walking in. She was accompanied by Oliver and Lana. And was that Bruce? Clark thought. The man was leaning heavily on a cane. He was flanked by a brunette and a younger man.

What surprised Clark the most was the two others who followed closely behind. He recognised the woman by her dusky skin. Moana. The man would have been unrecognisable except for the way he walked. Clark knew that swagger. Lex!

***

Lex’s eyes swept the salon. He quickly spotted Lois, unsurprised to see her in a peasant costume. Of course, only Lois Lane would have the nerve to wear something that went against everything the baron was trying to achieve. He claimed, after all, to be a man of power and like those of the revolution more than two hundred years before, would have been too arrogant to think that those beneath him would come to wield just as much power.

Good for her, he thought.

He continued to sweep the room, trying to recognise some of the guests. He thought he saw the baron’s companions from their first visit to his office. He frowned, wondering where Tess was.
Hadn’t she gone with Donatello to Italy? If so, why wasn’t she here?

Lex excused himself from the rest of the group as they introduced themselves to the rest of the guests, using the names Sarah Levy had given them. Since Chloe and Oliver had given him carte blanche, so to speak, he thought it best he get the ‘lay of the land’.

He joined the small group out on the terrace, pretending to be entranced by the beautiful gardens. He spotted a tall man in a long coat on the edge of the terrace. The man was bearded, his hair grey at the temples.

As Lex watched, the man began walking away with an arrogance in his stride. Lex frowned, wondering why the man seemed so familiar. The other man paused, turning to the waiter to place his champagne glass on a tray and help himself to another. For a moment, Lex saw him in profile. The beard did its best to cover the man’s face, but there was no mistaking the fact that the youthfulness in the face belied the age he was pretending to be.

My God, Lex thought. Clark!

The man suddenly turned and stared at him, brown eyes widening in dismay. Brown? Lex thought. Could I be mistaken? Clark had green eyes, not brown. When he was Superman, his eyes took on a bluish hue.

The man, Clark, glanced at him once more and began moving away. Lex followed, helping himself to champagne on his way through the small crowd gathering on the terrace. He walked down the path toward what seemed to be a summer house. No one else was there.

Just as he reached the path, a hand grabbed him and pulled him behind a thick tree trunk. Lex stared at the bearded man.

“What?”

“Quiet,” Clark growled, speaking in what sounded suspiciously like Mandarin. “Do you realise you could have just wrecked everything?”

Lex frowned at him. He hadn’t realised he’d said Clark’s name out loud.

“Clark, I …” Lex spoke in the same language, knowing Clark had chosen it deliberately so anyone overhearing wouldn’t understand.

“Shut up. Don’t say that name. I’m Delacour!”

“What are you doing here?” Lex said. “And looking like that?”

“What do you think I’m doing here? I’m going to get my daughter back.”

Lex immediately understood. The baron wouldn’t recognise Clark in his disguise. He obviously had some kind of plan.

“Is there anything I can …”

“Stay out of it!”

“Chloe and Oliver …”

“I saw. Look, you do what you have to do but whatever you do, stay away from the baron. He’s mine.”
“What exactly are you going to do, Clark? Kill him? Superman doesn’t kill!”

“If he doesn’t tell me where my daughter is, trust me, he’ll wish he was dead.”

Clark strode angrily away, leaving Lex to stare after him, dumbfounded. Clearly Clark was unhinged and angry enough to do something drastic. Only one person could stop him.

Lex returned to the salon, seeking out the one person he knew could put a stop to this before things got out of hand. She was speaking quietly with the president of France.

“Excusez-moi,” he said politely, breaking in to the conversation. “Madame la Presidente,” he added with a bow to President Beauregard. “Je m’excuse, mais je dois parler à cette femme sur une question urgente.”

“Excuse me. Madame President. I do apologise, but I must speak to this lady on an urgent matter.”

Both women frowned at him, but nodded. Lex held out his hand and led his companion to a quiet corner of the room.

“Clark is here,” he said.

“I know,” Lois replied.

He stared at her. “You … Lois, do you even know …”

“I know all I need to know,” she said. “Clark will do what he needs to do to get our daughter back.”

“Even if he breaks every moral code he’s been raised to believe in?” Lex asked.

“This is not your concern, Lex,” she said. Still, she began to look worried, her eyes darting toward the terrace where Clark was pretending to be engaged in conversation with Donatello.

“You’ve been in on this from the beginning, haven’t you? Your so-called separation … what’s to stop me from going to Chloe and telling her the truth?”

“If you do, Lex, you’ll destroy everything Clark and I have worked for. I’m begging you. Please don’t! I don’t want the baron to hurt any more of my family. He’s already done enough damage.”

***

Somewhere on the Amalfi Coast

The young officer bent down, looking at the face of the redhead. She had clearly been a very beautiful woman. Now her hair was a bedraggled mess and there were small puncture wounds on her face from where she had been bitten by whatever had been in the water.

The poliziotto looked at the doctor, an older man in his late seventies at least.

“Dici che l’hai trovata, signore?” he asked.

“In realtà, il mio giovane collega l’ha trovata,” the man said haltingly. “Perdonami, il mio italiano è un po, polveroso ... no, mi scusi, arrugginito.”

The officer smiled, in spite of his discomfort. “Va tutto bene.”
The old man nodded toward a younger, dark-haired man.

“Il signor Palmer e io siamo stati qui a consultare un caso comune per i governi italiani e americani. Il signor Palmer è stato qui per un po’ di aria fresca, credo. Quando ha trovato il corpo della giovane donna, è venuto a prendermi.”

“Io vedo.”

“Non suppongo, uh, passo sulle dita dei piedi, giovane ...”

The officer looked at him, confused.

“Ahh, questa è un'espressione. Scusami. Significa semplicemente che non suppongo di superare i miei limiti eseguendo un esame su questo povero figlio quando sono certo di avere professionisti medici qualificati per svolgere tale compito.”

The man continued to ramble on as the carabinieri examined the scene. It was fairly quickly determined the woman had not drowned but had in fact been stabbed in the chest and her body dumped. She had been dead probably a week, but that would be confirmed with autopsy.

The American doctor continued to ramble on about needles in haystacks, something the young officer couldn’t quite make sense of.

Donald (Ducky) Mallard looked kindly at the young officer. He was clearly very new to the job. His face had taken on that greenish hue that told the medical examiner that his stomach was churning uncomfortably.

“Questa è la tua prima scena del crimine, lo prendo?”

The young man nodded. “Mi scuso, dottore.”

"No, no. Ci vuole tempo per abituarsi a tali cose. Perché mi ricordo la mia prima scena del crimine. Era …"

He was cut off in his rambling by one of the other officers. He held a small device, similar to a smart phone.

"L'identificazione è tornata," he said. “La donna era americana. Le sue stampe corrispondevano a una donna con il nome di Tess Mercer. È da Metropolis, Kansas.”

Ducky looked down at the dead woman’s face.

“Now, Miss Mercer, what are you doing so far away from home?”

“You say you found her, sir?”

“Actually, my young colleague found her. Forgive me, my Italian is a little, uh, dusty … no, excuse me, rusty.”

“It’s all right.”

“Mr Palmer and I happened to be here consulting on a joint case for the Italian and American governments. Mr Palmer was out here for some fresh air, I believe. When he found the young woman’s body, he came to fetch me.”

“I see.”

“I wouldn’t presume to, uh, step on your toes, young man …”

“Ahh, that’s an expression. Excuse me. It just means that I would not presume to overstep my
bounds by carrying out an examination on this poor child when I am certain you have eminently qualified medical professionals to carry out said task.”

“This is your first crime scene, I take it?”

“I apologise, doctor.”

"No, no. It takes time to accustom oneself to such things. Why I remember my first crime scene. It was …”

“Identification has come back. The woman was American. Her prints matched a woman by the name of Tess Mercer. She’s from Metropolis, Kansas.”
Episode 12: Part 3

Chapter Summary

A storm is brewing at Dordogne, in more ways than one.

Penultimate chapter.

Diana could not help feeling a little apprehensive as she approached her mother’s hut. Rena stood guard outside and scowled at the princess.

“You were not to return from Man’s World,” she said with a growl. She glared at Steve, who stood a respectful distance from Diana. “Have you now come to poison our minds with their hypocrisy?”

“Sister, my reasons for my return are my own. I must speak with the Queen.”

“You will not,” Rena replied, barring her way with a long spear.

“I have no desire to fight you, sister. If our places had been reversed, I have no doubt that you would have been returned in disgrace, along with Aresia. I beg of you to allow me to see my mother.”

Rena still refused, until a voice spoke from within.

“Rena, do not presume to know my mind.” Queen Hippolyta came to the entrance and beckoned Diana with a smile. “Come, child. And you, Major Trevor,” she added, nodding to Steve.

Diana followed her mother in, conscious of Steve a few steps behind her. She entered the hut and knelt by her mother’s feet.

“I am sorry, my mother. I know I was not to return, but circumstances …”

“Shush, child. I know why you have come. Sera is with the healers.” She leaned forward from her seat and gently touched her daughter’s jaw. “You did what you must do.”

“What will happen to Aresia?” Steve asked quietly, respectfully.

“She will face her punishment from the goddess. Athena is a great goddess but she also understands the world outside our Paradise is a much different world. Had Aresia continued her quest to destroy Man’s World, she would have caused much chaos. Her punishment will be swift and decisive.”

She went on to explain that Aresia would be stripped of her goddess-given powers and banished to the furthest point of the island, until she repented for her crimes. The queen, as well as the goddess, did not take kindly to murder.

Hippolyta looked at Steve with a smile.

“Go,” she said. “Rest and refresh yourself. Your friend, Kara, has told me what has happened to the child of Superman. You still have a long journey ahead of you and time is short. I must speak with my daughter alone.”

“Yes, your majesty,” Steve replied. “Thank you.”
Hippolyta turned to one of the guards and nodded. “Guide Major Trevor and allow him to partake of some refreshment.”

Diana waited until Steve and the guard had gone, still kneeling at her mother’s feet.

“Rise child. Come tell me of your adventures.”

Diana took the seat beside the queen and began telling her of her time in Man’s World. She spoke at length of the time she had spent with Steve, both as Wonder Woman and as Diana Prince.

“Something troubles you, my daughter,” the queen said softly.

“Mother, I … he knows who I am. I do not know how I can be with him and protect him.”

“Diana, sometimes we do not have a choice who we love and yes, there are times when love is fraught with difficulty.”

“But you gave up your love …”

“Yes, I did, and I wonder if that was a mistake.”

“Mother?”

“The man I loved was a good man, Diana. A powerful man, but still a man.”

“What must I do?”

“The answer is in your heart, my daughter.”

“I want to be with him. I see Superman and the love he has for his companion. She is strong, both in heart and mind, yet …”

“Yet her family has been torn apart. From what Kara has told me, Lois Lane is indeed a strong woman, capable of carrying the burden of being the wife of the strongest man on Earth, even knowing the risk she must face. As is your Steve. He loves you, or else he would not have accompanied you here, risking the wrath of the goddess. Or your sisters,” she added wryly.

Diana laughed softly. “You are right, Mother. He told me you would understand.”

“And I do. But I fear there are still challenges you must overcome before you can truly follow your heart.”

“The child of Superman.”

“Yes. Helena has also told me of a vision, of a world destroyed by Superman’s wrath. That time is very near. You must go with Kara. Find the child and return her to her father, or not even the goddess Athena will be able to stand against him.”

“Thank you Mother.”

Diana left the hut and went to find Steve. She stepped into the hut, searching for her lover, only to see Kara. The blonde Kryptonian was talking to Steve.

“I try to understand, but there are times when …”

Kara was nodding. “I know. I remember a conversation I had with Lois a few months before she and
Clark got engaged. She wondered if somehow he was better off without her.”

“What did you say?”

“The thing is, when we’re out there, saving people, doing what we do, people only see us for our powers. The one thing I’ve learned from Clark is that we don’t have to be the hero all the time. Sometimes we have to be vulnerable, even if only to our friends, because all the other times, we’re expected to be perfect.”

“Like you’re all put up on pedestals.”

“Sometimes we need someone to remind us that we’re not perfect. I may be Kryptonian, but I do have to have time when I’m not the superhero.”

“That’s why you use a disguise when you’re out in public. I get that. It’s just … Diana, she …”

“I may not know Diana very well, but I see how much she loves you. Maybe you just need to talk it through. I mean, Lois and Clark make it work. He often tells me that Lois gives him someone to come home to. She grounds him, keeps him from getting too … hmm, how did he put it? Too full of himself?”

Steve laughed. “Yeah, I get that. Lois would too.”

“She’d just punch him in the shoulder, call him Smallville and they would be okay.”

“That’s why it’s so important we find Mara,” the Secret Service man told her.

“I know. I think I may have some news about that.” Kara turned to look at Diana and the small smile told the Amazon that Supergirl had known she was listening the whole time. “I’m not sure what I’ll be facing there.”

Diana nodded, taking Steve’s hand. He glanced at her and smiled gently before turning back to Kara. “We will be glad to join you,” Diana replied. “Steve, may I speak with you for a moment?”

“Of course, Princess. Thank you for the company Kara.”

“You’re welcome,” the Kryptonian replied.

Diana led her lover to a quiet corner, away from prying eyes.

“I know what you’re going to say …” Steve began, but she shushed him with a finger on his lips. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

When they parted, he stared at her, his eyes wide.

“Princess …”

“I’m not saying no,” she said. “I’m saying yes, but not now. First we save Superman’s daughter. Then when we return to Washington, we can talk about us.”

His eyes twinkled. “Oh you bet, Princess.”

***

Clark had calmed himself down by the time the party was fully underway. He had spent some of the time watching Lex, who had been circulating the room. He had seen his former friend approach
Lois, only to be sharply rebuffed. Lois had turned away, catching his eye and nodded slightly.

Chloe and Oliver clearly had some kind of plan as they had begun circulating among the guests. As did Lana, Bruce and his companions. Clark had had enough time to study the guests and recognised one of them as being the director of a think tank in London. This was the man Kara had told him had signed a memo to the NSA agent.

Allistair Phillips!

Clark had continued to watch for the next two or three hours, as darkness began to fall. Storm clouds had slowly gathered on the horizon and Clark had heard thunder in the distance. It seemed apt that the gathering storm mirrored the storm that was about to begin in this very castle, he thought.

He had noticed the baron had spoken briefly to the man from Chatham House before speaking to the French president. It didn’t seem unusual, but their conversation had been anything but normal. While they had spoken out of earshot of the other guests, Clark had used his superhearing and deliberately eavesdropped. He’d heard enough to confirm his suspicions that both guests were part of the Illuminati. If not the top tier of the pyramid.

The guests gradually drifted to the ballroom to dance. Of course, the baron wouldn’t do something so plebeian as offer contemporary music so his playlist consisted of works by Beethoven and Mozart. Clark watched as his wife was asked to dance by another guest - one whom he didn’t recognise - and tamped down on his jealousy. The man was a skilled dancer, something which Clark had never been able to master, despite his abilities supposedly giving him near-perfect co-ordination.

Lois must have sensed it as she left the man to help herself to another glass of champagne, coming to stand just a few feet away from him.

“I’d much rather dance with you,” she whispered. “Remember that time we danced in the barn? That was the first time you told me you loved me. Remember that, my darling, and think of all the times we will dance together again. You, me and Mara.”

He knew what she was telling him. Have faith.

He left the ball, walking past his wife, who glanced at him as he passed. He smiled briefly at her before leaving the room. He spotted Lex, who was talking with Phillips. The former billionaire was speaking French with an almost perfect accent, something which Clark expected could be explained with the suggestion that the man he was masquerading as was from one of the provinces. Lex eyed him, but made no move in his direction.

Moana, the woman from the Antipodes, was also talking with someone whom Clark couldn’t identify.

“Excuse me.”

Clark stopped and turned to look at the woman who had spoken, realising with a start that it was Lana. Oh god, he thought. If Lex recognised me … Then again, he remembered the year they had been living together and she hadn’t known Bizarro was not actually him. Which at the time had made him wonder if she’d ever really known him at all.

“Is there something I can do for you miss?” he asked, careful to keep his French accent upper class. During his training with Jor-El, he had learnt how to mimic certain accents as well as the tricks to quickly learn the languages.

“You look, uh, familiar,” she said. “Have we met before?”
“I think I would know,” he replied shortly. “Excuse me, miss, but there is someone I must …”

She frowned. “You’re kind of rude,” she complained.

“Is there a problem here?”

Clark almost rolled his eyes. Oliver.

“No. No problem. Excuse me.” He tried to pass but his friend stopped him with a hand on his arm.


Damn him, Clark thought. Of course Oliver would remember that ever-so-brief meeting outside the hotel in Paris.

“Who are you?” Oliver asked.

Clark shook his friend off. “I don’t need to answer that question,” he replied. “Now, if you’ll excuse me …”

He pushed past them, quickly making his exit before he could be stopped once more. Since he’d had time to study the layout of the castle, he knew exactly where the baron’s study was.

It took him little time to locate the vault where the baron obviously kept all his valuables. Clark hoped there was more than just objects of monetary value inside.

The question was, how did he actually get into the vault without setting off the alarm he could see wired inside the door. It was more than likely the alarm was powered by a separate electrical source, and the last thing he needed was for the entire castle to be alerted should he make an error.

He could take a page out of Oliver’s book and use a power surge of some kind. He remembered years ago when he’d first met Oliver, the archer had shown him an arrow which would create an electro-magnetic pulse. Clark’s science knowledge was sketchy at best but he had thought at the time that such a pulse would require a burst of energy greater than Oliver’s arrows could generate, but when the astral projection of Duncan Allenmeyer had tried to kill both Oliver and Lex, Clark had seen the pulse for himself.

Clark searched the room, using his micro-vision, looking for the alarm’s power source. He followed the wiring inside the vault to a box on the outside wall. As he was about to use a burst of his heat vision, he heard a sound behind him.

“Don’t move!”

Great!

Clark turned and looked at Oliver. In the few minutes since Clark had left the ballroom, Oliver had suited up. He was aiming an arrow directly at Clark’s head. It reminded him of the first meeting between him and the Green Arrow. Things had not gone well then either.

Clark debated his options. If he revealed himself to Oliver, his friend would not be happy at the deception. If Oliver tried to shoot him with the arrow, he’d reveal himself anyway. While he hadn’t spotted any listening devices, that wasn’t to say the baron didn’t have some kind of back-up plan.

He was damned if he did, and damned if he didn’t.

“Oliver, it’s me,” he said quietly.
The Green Arrow froze. A look of utter confusion crossed the blond man’s face.

“What?”

“There’s no time to explain,” Clark said, striding toward his friend. He pushed the compound bow away, ensuring the arrow would not be released. “The baron has a vault. I was about to knock out the power source.”

“I still … I’m not …” He huffed. “I should have known it was you back there,” he said. “You look different,” he added with a frown. “How did you …?”

“Oliver, save it. There’s no time,” he repeated.

“Uh, yeah. You’re right. But you don’t need to knock out the power source. Good thing my sidekick does research.”

“Who are you calling sidekick?” Chloe responded, walking into the room. She was carrying a bag which looked to Clark like a laptop bag. Clearly she had been prepared. She shot a glare at Clark. “That’s some disguise. Not even your own mother would recognise you. But I guess that’s the idea. Does Lois …”

“She knows,” Clark told her shortly.

Chloe looked at him, her eyes narrowed, but said nothing.

***

Lana had been dancing with one of the baron’s guests but had stopped to catch her breath. Chloe’s plan had been simple. Now that she didn’t have her power suit, Lana was just supposed to provide a distraction while Oliver and Chloe went to look for whatever evidence they could find. She had done her best to keep the baron from questioning where her friends had gone.

Some of the guests had been wearing masks, but as the ballroom became warmer, some of them took off their masks. Lana was started to realise she recognised one of the guests. A man she hadn’t expected to see.

She used the excuse of catching her breath to go and talk to Lois, who had also left the dance floor to help herself to a drink. She was now drinking some kind of juice.

“Lois,” Lana whispered.

“Lana. Is everything okay?”

“No, it’s not. We have a problem.”

“What is it?” the other woman asked.

“There’s a man here that I went to school with. He hates Clark.”

Lois frowned. “What man?”

Lana turned her head and glanced in the man’s direction, careful not to draw attention to the fact.

“His name’s Kenny. He was on the football team with Clark senior year and lost out to Clark for captain. I also heard he wanted quarterback, but Jason picked Clark over him. He never got over it.”
“How is that a problem?” Lois asked.

“You remember the second meteor shower? Kenny was in it. I don’t remember the exact circumstances, but he was in the hospital for months.”

“Are you talking about Kenny Braverman?” Lex cut in.

Lana turned to glare at him, while Lois nodded. “You know something?”

“Not that I’m admitting to anything, but my scientists studied Mr Braverman.”

“You mean as part of 33.1?” Lana accused.

“I admit nothing,” Lex replied. “All I will tell you is that Mr Braverman was rejected for the project, simply because his abilities made him completely uncontrollable.”

“Then why is he here?” Lois asked.

“That’s a very good question. If I were to hazard a guess, I would say that our friend the baron has anticipated a visit from Superman.”

Lois looked at Lana. “Clark’s in trouble,” she said.

***

Clark stood back and watched as Chloe began working on the laptop. Her fingers flew over the keys as she accessed the baron’s security system, isolating the alarm to the vault.

There was a flash of lightning and a few seconds later a roll of thunder. Oliver looked at him.

“Storm’s getting closer.”

Chloe didn’t look up from her laptop but her tone implied concern. “Out here, lightning could knock out a transformer. The baron only has one back-up system and that’s in here.”

“Seems a little …” Clark began, but then realised it was typical of the arrogance of the man who assumed neither man nor act of God, so to speak, could prevent him from doing as he pleased.

“How much longer, honey?” Oliver asked his wife.

“Shouldn’t be too much longer,” she said.

“Isn’t there an easier way?” Clark asked.

“You wanna drive, be my guest,” Chloe snapped.

“I didn’t …”

“When this is over, you, my friend, are going to be in serious trouble. How you could …”

Chloe’s rant was cut off by the sound of a crash. Clark heard chatter from the ballroom and he quickly checked through the walls.

“Power’s gone out,” he said. “Lightning must have hit a transformer.”

Fortunately, Chloe had managed to access the system just before the power had also knocked out the signal on her computer.
“Ready when you are, Arrow,” she said.

Oliver moved forward, taking a small device from the inside of his leather vest. He connected the device to the combination lock on the vault and pressed a few keys.

“I figured you would use an EMP arrow or something,” Clark commented.

“That’s called overkill,” Chloe replied. “And I figured you would have learned your lesson about subtlety by now.”

“Him? Subtle?” Oliver retorted, smirking at Clark. “The man flies around in a suit and a cape. Not to mention the fact that his, uh, assets are on show for all to see.”

Clark rolled his eyes. Funny. You’re a funny guy, Arrow.”

“Well, I’m sure Lois appreciates the show,” Chloe returned. “Although judging from the fan mail she constantly complains about, I’m guessing not so much.”

“It’s not like I encourage it,” Clark told her.

His friends smirked at him. Now Clark understood why AC became so exasperated at all the fish jokes. When he’d first been revealed to the world as Superman, the League had had a great time making fun of him for the suit. Lois included, although she claimed it was making sure all his newfound fame didn’t go to his head.

The vault lock disengaged with a loud click. Clark listened, feeling uneasy. The sounds of chatter were increasing and he could hear the baron assuring his guests that everything was fine. He still worried the man would come this way.

Oliver entered the vault and began looking around. Clark followed him. They quickly began searching the shelves. Chloe entered and also began searching. Clark wasn’t sure what he was going to find but he figured the baron, being the complete tool he was, would have something he could use as ammunition should anyone in the brotherhood betray him. The man had clearly not risen to his position without stepping on a few toes.

Chloe made a triumphant sound. Clark glanced at her and saw she had grabbed a laptop. She switched it on and took out a flash drive, accessing the laptop’s files through a back door.

Oliver nudged him, showing him what appeared to be a memo. Clark read it, thankful for his abilities which gave him increased mental acuity. The baron had written everything in Latin. The memo was damning. It was addressed to Chatham House and mentioned tests of some kind.

Clark quickly got the gist of it. The baron didn’t trust some of the people in his lower tier, saying they should be quickly dispatched. One of them was named John Crawford, the same man Kara had told him was an agent with the NSA. It appeared that the baron had been concerned about the man’s proclivities and his ambitions.

The voice of the baron had him looking up.

“The baron is coming,” he hissed to his friends. “Chloe, do you have enough?”

“Just a few more seconds,” she told him.

“There’s no time. He’ll be here in less than a minute. He’s coming to check the vault.”
“Come on, come on,” Chloe chanted as Oliver hovered beside her. There was a quiet beep and she pulled out the flash drive. “Let’s go,” she said.

Clark took the laptop from her and shut it down before moving out of the vault. Chloe and Oliver followed him, closing the door and re-engaging the lock. There was no time for them to repair whatever Chloe had done to the alarm.

“Baron, may I have a word?”

Clark glanced at Chloe, raising an eyebrow at Lex’s voice. He listened as Lex began talking nonsense to the French aristocrat about some business proposition. Lex was certainly a smooth talker.

The distraction gave the couple enough time to leave the study through another door. Clark settled himself in a chair, forcing himself to look relaxed and casual.

The baron excused himself from Lex and entered the study, raising an eyebrow in surprise at Clark’s audacity.

“What are you doing here?”

“I thought we were going to talk, baron?” Clark replied. He spoke in English, knowing it would aggravate the arrogant aristocrat.

“I have guests.”

“We have business.”

The baron looked out the window at the dark sky, watching as lightning flashed.

“Delacour,” he said, his tone condescending. “Has it escaped your attention that there is a storm and my castle is without power?”

Clark waved his hand. “Let your servants take care of it. That is what you pay them for.”

“You try my patience, sir.”

Clark stood. He was only about an inch taller than the other man but with his build, he could make anyone look small, or so Lois had often told him. He looked over the bastard who had ripped his life apart, remembering to keep the arrogant smirk on his face.

“If you do not want what I have to offer, baron, then I am wasting my time.”

The other man seemed to consider this, stroking his beard.

“All right. You said you had a key to great power, Monsieur. Where is this key?”

Clark slipped a hand into his pocket and pulled out a crystal. He placed it on the desk in front of the baron, who moved to pick it up. Clark grasped his wrist and stared right into the man’s eyes.

“Uh uh,” he said. “Not yet.”

The two men stared at each other for what seemed like an interminable period. The baron stood back.

“What is this?” he asked, looking down at the crystal. Clark smirked at him. The man would soon
find out. There was no way Clark was going to offer him the key to the fortress. Jor-El had instead helped him create a new inter-dimensional prison, since the Phantom Zone had been destroyed.

“I told you. It is a key.”

“Very well. What are your terms?”

Lightning flashed once again, brightening the room. Clark’s eyes flashed dangerously.

“You will tell me where you are keeping the daughter of Superman.”

The baron stared at him, taken aback. He blinked rapidly, clearly taken by surprise.

“I do not know what you are talking about,” he said slowly.

Clark glared at him. “You lie, de Rochefort. Do you really think the child is so valuable you would pass up the chance to speed up your plans for this world?”

The baron stared at him.

“Who are you?”

“Just tell me!” Clark snapped, the lightning flashing so bright his eyes glowed, making him appear almost alien. “Where is she?”

The man’s eyes narrowed. “I understand now,” he said. “Did you think I would not be so unintelligent that I would not figure it out? You played your hand too early, Monsieur. I know you are an agent of Superman.” He laughed hollowly. “I did not get to be where I am, Monsieur, if I did not have such superior intelligence. Even to your Superman. I anticipated something like this.”

He moved quickly, his hand diving under the desk. Clark stepped back as the baron waved a gun at him. He sniffed haughtily.

“Such an uncivilised weapon, but …” He shrugged. “One must do what one must do.”

As his finger shifted on the trigger of the armed weapon, Clark moved at super speed, taking the gun from the older man and crushing it in his bare hand.

“I will ask you one more time,” he said coolly. “Where is she?”

The baron’s eyes widened as he stared up at Clark. “Superman!”

Clark clutched the man by the shirt collar, tearing it. “Where is my daughter?”

Suddenly he felt waves of nausea. Clark stumbled, letting the baron go. The man stepped back.

“As I was saying, Superman, I anticipated this.”

Clark turned his head, startled to find a man wearing what appeared to be some kind of armour in the doorway.

“Hello Superman, or should I say, Clark!”
A breeze blew Diana’s dark hair back from her face as she stared around her. She could see lush green hills surrounding them, but somewhere in the distance was a small group of buildings.

“What is this place?” she asked.

Steve was frowning down at his phone. “Admiral Jean Jacques Island,” he said.

She knew enough of her geography to understand they were somewhere in the South Pacific, at least a thousand kilometres or more from the top of New Zealand. She had never been to the small island nation, but had heard enough from Moana to know it was beautiful.

“They brought the child here?”

Kara joined them. “I believe so.”

“My source tells me this island is owned by the French Government. We could be creating an international incident by just being here.”

Kara scowled. “They made the first move by kidnapping the child of an American citizen.” She began walking over the sand toward the hills. “We don’t have much time. If we don’t find Mara and get her back to her parents, there’s no telling what Kal-El will do.”

Diana nodded in agreement. She began walking with Kara, Steve following, but quickly became aware of the sensation they were being watched. She looked around, then gasped as a red light from a laser pointer travelled up her lover’s body.

“Steve!” she called out.

A shot rang out but she had just managed to get him down to the ground in time. Kara whirled, quickly taking stock of the situation before rising into the air.

“Princess, I’ll take care of this.”

Steve looked up at her from his position on the ground.

“I’m all right,” he told her.
“You could have been killed!”

“But I wasn’t.” He pulled out his revolver. “Let’s get moving,” he said.

Diana helped him up, keeping her hand in his. Together they began running toward the buildings. Supergirl was already fighting a man with a long-range rifle.

It wasn’t long before they were surrounded by more of them. Diana studied the man she was facing. He appeared to be a hard man, his face slightly marred by a scar, his steel-grey hair cut extremely short in what she knew to be a military cut. Clearly the man had some kind of military background.

He was carrying what appeared to be an assault rifle, but he would be no match for Diana’s abilities.

“What child?” Diana asked.

“Where is the child?” the man asked.

Steve turned, pointing his revolver at the man.

“You wouldn’t be lying to the lady, now would you?”

Kara had already dealt with the man she had been fighting. She moved in front of them, glaring at the man.

“I know you. You are the man called Rick Flag. My cousin has a file on all of you.”

Diana looked at her friend. “What file?”

“They are called the Suicide Squad. They used to work for an organisation called Checkmate.”

“Well, aren’t you a smart one?” Flag sneered.

“Where is the baby?” Kara asked.

“Let me tell you something about the Suicide Squad, lady. We sign up knowing it’s a one-way ticket.”

Another man joined them. Diana stared. He seemed to have appeared from nowhere.

“I will not ask you again.”

Diana began taking the lasso from her belt. Flag stared at her.

“Tying us up won’t do any good.”

“Princess,” Steve warned. She glanced at him and followed the direction of his gaze. There were more men approaching. They were all wearing military garb and carried long-range assault weapons.

Diana knew there was no way she could protect both herself and Steve from twenty assault rifles. She steeled herself, hearing Flag’s mocking laughter.

She had forgotten about Kara, who once again rose into the air, then flew at speed toward the now startled soldiers. Two of the men attempted to fire on the Kryptonian, only for the bullets to bounce off. Kara landed in front of them and glared at them. Suddenly a few of them cried out, as if in pain, and dropped the weapons. The rest stared in disbelief.
Flag, seeing this, turned on Steve and engaged him in hand-to-hand combat. The men dropped their weapons, realising they could not shoot Supergirl, and ran toward the combatants. Diana faced them, giving an Amazon war cry.

The battle was on. For each man Diana faced, another would quickly take his place. Kara joined her and the trio battled side by side. Kara was clearly holding back on her strength, knowing she could kill the humans with one powerful punch.

As they continued to fight, Diana could not help but notice the woman standing in the doorway of what seemed to be a bunker, watching the battle. She had a look of sheer malice on her face. Had Diana been any normal human, the woman’s expression would have drawn a shiver.

One by one the men fell, until only Flag and his cohort were left. The older man glared at them.

“You’re too late. The kid’s gone.”

Steve glared at him. “What do you mean, gone?”

“Where is she?” Kara growled, her gaze dangerously golden. Diana knew from having watched Superman that the Kryptonian was preparing to use her heat vision.

“I don’t know,” Flag said, holding up his hand in apparent surrender. Diana touched the lasso at her belt. “You’re wasting your time, Wonder Woman. I’ve been trained to withstand any kind of interrogation technique.”

“This is different,” Steve told him. “Now, let’s start again. Where is Mara Kent?”

“Gone,” the other man replied. He had what sounded like a French accent. “Safe.”

Kara grabbed the man, turning her glare on him. “What did you do?” He shook his head.

“The girl. Plastique. She took the baby and ran.”

Diana frowned at the man. He appeared uneasy and she knew he was lying about his part in it.

“What?” Kara asked, shaking the man.

“I don’t know. All I know is, it’s somewhere on this island. Far away from here.”

Kara dropped him so he fell almost like stone to the ground. Diana opened her mouth to question Supergirl, but the blonde Kryptonian shook her head and closed her eyes.

“What the hell are you…” Flag began, but one look from Steve shut him up.

“I can hear her.” Kara said. Without warning, she took off into the air, leaving them to deal with the men - those who were still conscious.

***

Kara still recalled Clark’s first lesson on focusing her super-hearing. She was thankful for that lesson as it had allowed her to hear her baby niece on the other side of the island. She also heard the voice of a young girl, who sounded as if she was a little out of her depth.

“I know you’re hungry, baby. I don’t know how to get you any food. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, baby. I wish there was some way for me to get you home, but I don’t know how to get off this island.”
Kara landed gently a short distance away from the girl’s hiding place. She heard the baby crying, much louder this time and began walking toward the sound.

Suddenly a girl emerged from the hiding place, clutching the baby to her chest. Her eyes flashed dangerously.

“Don’t come any closer,” she cried out desperately.

“It’s all right,” Kara said softly. “I’m here to help you.”

“No you’re not,” the brunette replied, looking scared. She wrapped her arms around Mara.

“It’s all right,” Kara repeated. “I’m going to take the baby home. To her parents. Mara belongs with her mommy and daddy.”

The girl looked at her curiously. She studied Kara’s blue and red uniform, her eyes wide as she took in the El family crest on the shirt.

“That’s Superman’s sign!”

“My name is Kara. Kal-El is my cousin.” She smiled. “What’s your name?”

“Bette.”

“Bette, I really am here to help. To take Mara home.”

The girl’s expression showed uncertainty. Kara continued smiling, keeping her voice soft as she spoke to reassure the other girl. She looked young, about eighteen. Not much older than Kara had been when she’d left Krypton.

“You won’t … you won’t hurt her?”

Kara shook her head. “No. I’m guessing she’s probably really hungry by now.”

“She won’t stop crying,” Bette told her. “I don’t know what to do.”

“It’ll be all right. You can trust me. I’m here with Wonder Woman.”

Bette’s eyebrows shot up. “Wonder Woman? You mean, she’s real?”

Kara nodded. “Oh yes, she’s very real.” She held out her hand. “Come. I can take you to her.”

The young girl still looked uncertain, but let Kara take her hand. As if Mara knew she was finally with family, she stopped crying and smiled.

“Wow, look at that,” Bette said softly. “She’s smiling!”

“Yes, she is.” Kara smiled down at her baby niece. “Your mommy and daddy are going to be so happy to see you, little one.”

“Mara? That’s her name?”

“Yes.”

“What’s it from?”

“Well, Kal-El’s birth mother was named Lara, and his adopted mother’s name starts with an ‘M’ so
they wanted a name that honoured them both.”

“That’s so cool! I like that name. It’s pretty.” Bette gasped. “We’re flying!” she said, looking down at the ground below them.

“Don’t worry. I won’t drop you. I’ve had a little practice at this.”

Within a couple of minutes, Kara landed beside Diana and her lover. The Amazon smiled at Bette after she had related her story.

“You have done a brave thing, Bette,” she said, rocking the baby in her arms. “I know Mara’s parents will be very grateful for what you have done.”

Bette nodded. “He tried to help me once, but I …” She ducked her head, her cheeks turning pink with shame. “I didn’t listen.”

“None of that matters now, Bette,” Kara told her gently.

The woman Diana had noticed earlier approached them.

“This is not over,” she said. “The child …”

Bette turned on her. “Don’t even think about it, Ms Waller. I will hurt you.”

“As will I,” Kara added, glaring at the woman. “And I would do the same to anyone who had a part in hurting my niece.”

Mara made a sound, reminding them all that she needed to eat. Diana smiled down at her. “Let’s get you something to eat, little one.”

***

With the power out, the servants began calling the guests, telling them the ball could not continue. Lois observed the president being surrounded by at least three bodyguards and being escorted out of the room. She frowned. The way the older woman had been swept out led her to believe it was to do with more than the storm.

Thunder crashed, making her nerves jump. Lana clutched her arm.

“There’s something else going on,” she said with a gasp.

“I know.” She frowned. “Is that Bruce?”

The Gotham billionaire was leaning on his cane, glowering at someone on the other side of the room. Selina was by his side, clearly begging him not to do whatever it was he was planning.

Moana approached them. “What’s with Mr Wayne?” she asked.

Lois shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“He seems angry, not to mention scared.”

Lana frowned at the other woman. “Scared? Of what, or should I say whom?”

“I don’t know, but I’d be interested to find out.”
There was a loud bang from somewhere. Lois looked at the other two women.

“That didn’t sound like thunder.”

The servant who had shown Lois to the salon earlier approached them.

“Madame?”

“What do you want?” Lois asked, glaring at him. He scowled back at her.

“The master suggests you retire, Madame,” he said in perfect English. “For your safety.”

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“That is not your concern.”

Lana glared at the smaller man. “On the contrary,” she said coldly. “I think it is our concern. Get out of our way.”

Just as Lana began to push past the man, who, along with another servant, had blocked them, there was a scream of rage from the Gotham billionaire. Lois looked up. For a man who had been severely injured less than a month ago, he seemed quite agile, rushing toward the other side of the room.

“Ducard!” he screamed.

Selina and John Blake were unsuccessfully trying to pull Bruce back as he charged toward the other man. Lois looked at Lana, raising an eyebrow. The other woman shook her head, clearly just as confused.

Without warning, the man Bruce had screamed at grabbed what appeared to be a decorative sword from his belt. Lois could only watch with a growing unease as Bruce dodged the man’s attack.

“Have you learned nothing from our previous encounters?” the man accused.

Moana headed toward the two men. Lois reached out to grab her arm but the other woman shook her off. Just as she was about to attack Ducard, someone else attacked the antipodean. It was the man known as Donatello.

***

Weak from the Kryptonite, Clark called on all the skills he had learnt while training with Jor-El. Lois had thought it would be a good idea for him to learn some hand-to-hand combat skills so he would at least be able to defend himself even when weakened by Kryptonite. He had spent a day at the fortress before coming to France being taught a Kryptonian style of martial art.

Clark fought the waves of nausea, forcing himself to face his high school nemesis. Kenny Braverman had been insanely jealous when Clark had won the coveted starting quarterback position senior year. He still remembered his shirt almost being tossed in the toilet. He was sure Kenny had been the culprit.

The other man had gone out of his way to make Clark’s life miserable, even resorting to trying to bully Clark into quitting the football team. It hadn’t helped that Clark had been an excellent student as well. While his grades weren’t perfect - there were some things he still had to work at, despite his abilities, he’d often tested on the high side of the spectrum, which also annoyed students who barely scraped through. Kenny had been one of them.
Clark had heard that Kenny had been caught in the second meteor shower and had been hospitalised for months. There were times when Clark still felt guilt for what the meteors had done but Lois had helped him get over that, telling him that it wasn’t his fault. Even Jor-El had eventually told him that it hadn’t been his fault either. The ship that had been locked in the asteroid had been activated by a signal from the Crystal of Air - that had been caused by contact with human blood. His birth father had told him that there was no way Clark could have foreseen the consequences and had Jor-El’s artificial representation of himself been programmed to take human emotion into account, things would have turned out differently.

As he confronted the other man, he quickly assessed the situation. Kenny was wearing some kind of battle suit. It appeared to have been made by someone fairly adept at using hi-tech. Kenny’s family had been fairly well-off, although his father had neglected his only son. Clark suspected Kenny had been taking drugs through school, although he’d never been able to prove it.

“You gonna make a move, Kent, or you gonna just stand there?” Kenny taunted.

Clark ignored him, trying to think of a way to get control of the situation. There was still the baron to deal with although he’d noticed the bastard had quickly disappeared into another room.

Kenny was clearly impatient. He charged Clark with a roar, fists flying. He had metal gauntlets on his wrists which seemed to glow the closer he came to Clark. The Kryptonian dodged the fist, only for the second one to smash into his jaw. Clark remembered his battle with the Zoner, Titan, a few years before and this felt exactly like he’d been hit by Titan.

Fighting waves of nausea and dizziness, Clark fought back, arm moving back, forming his hand into a fist as he gathered all his strength behind it. He struck out, knocking Kenny back. It only seemed to anger the other man, who again charged forward, head butting his torso. The two men began to wrestle, leaving chaos in their wake.

Kenny shoved him hard, sending him sprawling over the baron’s desk, leaving him no time to recover, grabbing his arms and smashing his head into the wall. Clark responded by grabbing both shoulders and pushing himself off, twisting his body and forcing his opponent into the wall.

The other man just sneered at him.

“I know your weakness, Clark. Think I haven’t studied you? I’ve spent years figuring you out. Working with people like de Rochefort.” He nodded at Clark’s frown. “Oh yeah, my father was one of them. Why do you think they recruited me?”

He pushed Clark away, pulling out what looked to Clark like a nunchuck, except it had a greenish glow.

“Meteor rock,” Kenny told him, practically crowing.

Clark knew he had to get the weapon away from Kenny, standing back as the other man swung it, preparing to attack once again. Clark stripped off his coat, quickly wrapping the top around one hand. It wouldn’t completely protect him from the Kryptonite, but it would at least provide a thin layer.

“Think that can stop me?” Kenny jeered, swinging the nunchuck, aiming for Clark’s head. In a defensive move, Clark swung the coat, the tail catching the nunchuck, forcing Kenny’s hand down. It was a similar move to that he’d used on Zod when they’d been fighting for the blue Kryptonite dagger.
Taken by surprise, Kenny was forced to drop the weapon, which was thrown halfway across the
room. The other man dived for it, but Clark got there first, striking out with an uppercut to the man’s
jaw. Kenny sprawled on the floor amongst the debris, then leapt to his feet, moving in to attack once
more.

***

Oliver had heard the sound of the fight as he stood in what was probably an ante-room. He wanted
to go to his friend’s aid, but Lex stopped him.

“He was pretty clear he wanted us out of it.”

“And why should I care what you say, Luthor?”

“I’ve known Clark a lot longer than you, Oliver. Trust me when I say I have never seen him like this.
If you interfere, he’s more than likely to turn on you.”

Chloe nodded in agreement. “I hate to say it, but he’s right, Ollie. I’ve never seen Clark this angry. I
think this is something he needs to do.”

“What about the baron?” Oliver asked. “That son of a bitch …”

He turned and stared as the man himself emerged from the shadows. He smirked at Oliver, who
quickly aimed an arrow at him.

“Green Arrow. It is no surprise to find you here.”

“Even I’m not so arrogant that I under-estimate Green Arrow,” Lex told him, glaring at the man.
“You think you have won?”

The baron sneered. “Oh, yes, I have won. Superman will not win this battle.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Chloe told him. “You don’t know Superman.”

The baron looked out the window into the storm. “When will you learn that you cannot fight the
Illuminati?” he said. “We are everywhere. Even now, there are men preparing to surround this
castle.”

“I’m sure you anticipated every move the Justice League could make,” Lex told him, “but you’re
wrong. As much as I hate to admit it, they are stronger and smarter than even you and I, because they
have the strength of their conviction.”

The baron’s smile widened. He laughed.

“Yet, you, Luthor, the son of one of the most powerful men in Metropolis, was struck down so
easily.”

“By your manipulation of Webster?” Lex scoffed. “Let me tell you something about Webster. As
soon as he realises what he’s got himself into, he will take off like the coward he is. The man isn’t
smart enough to know when he’s being manipulated. I, on the other hand, was raised by someone
who could have written a book on it. A man who devoured the works of Machiavelli and Sun Tzu as
if they were the gospel. You think you broke me by destroying my company, Baron de Rochefort?
You only made me determined to rise again, bigger, stronger. You thought I would welcome an
alliance with the likes of the Illuminati. Like I once told an old girlfriend. I don’t need anyone else in
my quest for power.”
Oliver shivered involuntarily. He’d always known Lex had high ambitions. Just as he knew that Lex was the type to walk all over anyone who stood in his way. He’d done that with the boy he’d called his only friend at Excelsior. Back then it had been just a hint of what Luthor was capable of.

***

Lois could only watch as Bruce and the man called Ducard began fighting while Moana was fighting Donatello. The Italian doctor seemed rather nonplussed to be fighting the woman. Whether it was because of her strength or that he didn’t believe women could fight was unclear.

“This is getting bad,” Lana murmured.

Lois could only agree with her friend. She grasped her arm.

“Come on. We need to find Chloe and see what we can do to help.”

As she passed the fighters, she overheard Bruce.

“I watched you die! You were on that train.”

“You still haven’t learned to mind your surroundings,” the man told him with a vicious thrust of the sword which Bruce barely dodged. It was clear the Gotham man was not fighting fit. “Just as you have never learned that not everything is as it appears to be.”

“Like you pretending to be my friend?” Bruce returned.

Lois didn’t wait to hear the response, heading down the corridor to find her cousin. There was a loud crash and she looked out in time to see her husband crashing through a huge stained-glass window, landing hard on his back. Another man followed, preparing to beat the life out of Superman.

Lana gasped. “He’s got Kryptonite!” she said.

Lois looked again, spotting the glowing gauntlets. “There has to be a way to get them away from him,” she said. “Before he kills Clark.”

It was like looking at a train wreck. Lois was powerless to stop it, and powerless to look away as the two men struggled for dominance. Clark was clearly tiring. His clothes were drenched from the rain pouring down outside.

Suddenly an arrow shot out from another window, hitting one of the gauntlets. Oliver’s archery skills were unrivalled, but even Lois knew it was a lucky shot. A second arrow almost missed its mark, but it seemed luck was with the Green Arrow.

Braverman screamed like a banshee, practically leaping on Clark and wrapping his hands around the Kryptonian’s neck in an attempt to throttle him. With no gauntlets, the Kryptonite exposure was lessened, although not fully, yet it gave Clark the strength to fight the man off.

A scream could be heard from within the castle. Lois looked at Lana and together the two of them ran in the direction of the scream.

“Get away from my wife, you bastard!”

Lex came running at them down the corridor, his face bleeding. Lana frowned at him.

“Did Oliver …?”
Lex shook his head. “Another archer,” he said. “He fired on Chloe.”

Lois gasped. “Is she …”

“No,” the bald man replied. Somewhere along the way he’d ditched his costume. “I pushed her out of the way and got this for my trouble.”

Lana looked at her ex-husband with a sceptical expression.

“Why do I have trouble believing you?” she asked.

“Believe what you want, Lana. We may have had our clashes, but even I’m not stupid enough to throw Chloe to the wolves. Not if I want to live.”

“Where is the baron?” Lois asked.

Again Lex shook his head. “I’ve no idea.”

There was the sound of footsteps and Lois looked beyond the Metropolis billionaire, breaking out into a relieved grin when she saw her cousin.

“Chloe!” she said, reaching out to hug her.

“I’m fine, Lois, but Ollie … It’s Vordigan.”

“Who?” Lana and Lex both asked. Lois quickly explained that Oliver had been part of a cult of assassins not long after he had returned from his island exile but had left. Vordigan had been his mentor. In an effort to force Oliver to take his place as leader of the cult, the man had shot both Lois and Chloe, then kidnapped Oliver’s student, Mia Dearden.

Lois had had just about enough of this. It was time the baron got what was coming to him. She wasn’t a Lane for nothing and she was about to kick some aristocratic ass.

Turning away from the other three, she began to consider the situation. She had been able to explore a little of the castle, but there was one area she hadn’t been able to explore. The baron’s manservant had basically shadowed her and prevented her from entering one particular chamber.

Lois felt sure the baron was hiding within.

She followed the corridor, trying to recall her earlier explorations. The castle was a maze of stone corridors, all looking almost the same. She stopped walking and stood in the middle of the hallway, looking around her to get her bearings.

“What’s she doing?” Lana whispered.

“Beats me,” Chloe replied.

“You know, that’s why you people have always been so damned annoying when you get involved in my projects.”

“Shut up, Lex,” Lana replied.

“I’m just saying …”

“Shut up, Lex,” Chloe told him.

Lois began moving again, quickening her pace. She remembered now. The chamber was in some
kind of tower and she’d had to go up a spiral staircase. She quickly located the staircase. Predictably, the baron’s manservant, Perdrix, was standing guard outside the chamber door.

“You cannot enter,” he told her coolly, speaking in perfect English.

“Try and stop me,” she replied. “Get out of my way.”

“You cannot enter,” he repeated.

She scowled at him. “What are you? Some kind of drone?” She formed a fist. “Now get out of my way or get a fist in your face.”

“Trust me, little man, you really don’t want to try her,” Lex advised the servant. “The woman has one hell of a right cross.”

The smaller man seemed to consider his options, then stood aside. Lois shoved the doors open. Sure enough, the baron was inside, staring at several screens. Clearly he had a separate power source for this room as well. It reminded her of the Isis Foundation and the secret room where Lana had installed several monitors so she could spy on Lex at the mansion.

The stone walls were decorated with weapons of all kinds, from medieval battle axes and maces to engraved swords.

Lois stepped down into the chamber, staring at the screens. The baron had started to switch them all off, but she had managed to catch sight of a couple of them. One of the people on the monitors was a well-known celebrity.

De Rochefort stared at her, glancing at the older man standing beside him. Lois recognised him from a photo she’d seen not long after Kara had broken into the NSA. They had clearly been discussing something with other members of the brotherhood.

“Miss Lane.”

“Don’t look so surprised,” she growled. “I’ve been on to your little game a lot longer than you think.”

“I really …”

“Oh stop with the denials. We both know you orchestrated the whole thing. Just as you arranged to bug Oliver’s apartment, making sure that you heard every word we said. Did it give you a thrill, baron? Did it make you feel powerful thinking you had the world’s most powerful superhero on his knees? We knew, you bastard!”

“Is that true?” Chloe asked. Lois looked at her cousin, forgetting the others had been following her. It was time to come clean.

“It’s true,” she said. “Clark found the transmitters but we chose to play along. We wanted him to think he was winning.”

“So this was all a ruse? You and Clark …?”

“Sorry, Chlo. I couldn’t tell you.”

“Your parents are going to kill you when this is over, you know that right?”

Lois nodded, giving her cousin a sheepish grin. “Yeah, I know.”
The momentary distraction gave the baron an opportunity to try to get away but he hadn’t reckoned on both Lana and Lex, who blocked the man’s way.

There was another crash and a man came flying through the single window in the tower. Braverman, Lois thought. The man fell to the floor, unconscious.

Oliver ran through the door, almost stumbling on the steps. Chloe looked at her husband. He was bleeding from a cut on his forehead but otherwise fine.

“Vordigan?” she asked.

“Taken care of,” was all he would say.

It seemed the other fighters had the same idea. Bruce limped in, followed by Selina and Blake, who were dragging a barely conscious Ducard. Moana brought up the rear, along with several of the baron’s men, who looked nervously at their master.

“Donatello’s unconscious in the ballroom,” she said.

“Webster?” Lex asked. She shrugged.

“Ran off like a scared rabbit. So did the rest of the guests.”

There was no time for twenty questions as Clark came barrelling through the window, breaking the stone wall surrounding it. He grabbed the baron by the throat, almost choking him and shoved him against the wall, almost forcing the Frenchman right through. Lois was reminded of another incident years ago when Clark had been angry enough to kill. Back then it had been the death of a girl Clark had been dating. Lois hadn’t known Clark that long then, but she had found herself basically running to his side, not to help the guy who had committed murder, but to stop Clark from doing the same.

“Clark!” she screamed, desperate to prevent her beloved husband from doing something he would later come to regret. He’d had his moments over the years they’d known each other. She’d dealt with him on red K, when he had no inhibitions, but while he’d been quick to anger then, it was nothing like this.

She knew if she touched him, he was more than likely to turn on her too. She knew how he felt. After all, this was the man who had tried to tear their family apart. This was the man who had taken their only child in a relentless pursuit of power. Part of her felt the baron deserved whatever he had coming to him but she could not live with the thought of her husband killing a man. Of the man she loved losing control. The one thing she had learnt in the past few years, working alongside one of the strongest men in the world, was that superheroes could not afford to lose that control.

“Clark,” she said softly. “Come back to me. Please, baby. You don’t want to do this.”

Grief was etched in his face, but she could tell that he had heard her.

“Smallville,” she said. “This isn’t you.”

The baron was watching her, a smirk playing on his face. She ignored him, stepping toward her husband.

“Kal-El.”

Lois turned to look at Kara, who stood in the centre of the chamber, holding a small bundle. She was flanked by Diana and Steve Trevor who had formed a protective semi-circle. Along with a girl Lois
recognised as Plastique, or rather Bette Sans Souci. The bundle appeared to be moving. Then there was a soft mewing.

Clark dropped the baron, turning toward the sound. He was by his cousin’s side in a second, his hands shaking as he took the bundle.

“Mara.”

The moment’s distraction had allowed the baron to think he was free to move, but Lois was too swift for him. She stepped in front of him before he could reach his own men gathered in the doorway.

“You kidnap my daughter and think you can just get away with it?”

“I have done nothing …” he replied, his arrogance clear in his expression.

“You are a liar and a despicable man,” she returned.

He smirked at her. “You have a great imagination, Miss Lane.”

“If you ever come near me or my family again, I will expose you for what you are.”

“You can do nothing,” he spat, clearly deciding to drop the pretence. “If you expose me, then the world will know that she is the daughter of Superman. You will never have a moment’s peace, as long as I hold that power in my hands.”

“You bastard!” she said, lashing out with her fist. She heard the crack as her fist hit his jaw and he went down with a smack of his butt on the floor.

Kara, who had been watching her cousin with a smile as he cradled his daughter tenderly, tears falling down his face, turned to glare at the baron.

“I think that is what they call Checkmate,” she told him.

Lois turned the force of her glare on the man she now knew as Number One in the Brotherhood.

“That goes triple for you, Sir Alistair Phillips. I know what you are and who you are and if you so much as step one foot out of line, it will not be my husband you will need to worry about. It will be me. Are we clear?”

His voice wavered as he spoke, but it left her in no doubt that he got the message.

“As crystal, Miss Lane.”

She nodded, then turned to Clark, touching the blanket and gazing down at her daughter’s face. Mara seemed to be unfazed by her ordeal, smiling up at her father.

“How about we go home, munchkin?” she said softly. Her daughter laughed, as if she knew she was finally where she belonged.

Clark looked at her and smiled softly. “Home.”

“Home,” Lois repeated. She lifted her head to look at Diana. “Thank you.”

“It is not I you should thank,” the princess said softly, glancing to her left.

Lois nodded and looked at the young Plastique.
“Thank you,” she said. “It’s not enough, I know. You did more than anyone would do by trying to protect her.”

Bette nodded. “Clar … I mean, Superman tried to help me when I had nowhere else to go.” Her face darkened. “I betrayed him.”

“No,” Clark said. “You were just confused. Lost.”

“When I realised what they were doing to that sweet little girl, I knew someone had to protect her. I knew what it was like to have people poking and prodding me. She’s just a baby.”

“If it wasn’t for you, we might never have got to her in time,” Kara told her gently. “I know I speak for all of us when I say that it is a debt we can never repay.”

“I do know one thing we can do, if you’re willing, that is.”

Bette looked at Clark with a hopeful expression. “What is it?”

“I have a friend who has a school. He can help you learn to use your abilities in a more positive way. Even if you decide not to join us …”

“That doesn’t matter,” she said. “I think I’d like to meet your friend.”

Clark smiled. “Great.”

“Take your daughter home, Superman,” Bette said softly. “Where she belongs.” She looked hesitant. “Would it be okay if I … you know, came by sometimes. Just to see her?”

“We’d like that very much, Bette,” Lois told her. “You will always be welcome in our home.”

She touched her husband’s arm. “Let’s go home, darling,” she said.

They walked away, past the baron who still appeared dazed.

“Honey, just one thing,” Lois told her husband.

“What is it?”

“Shave the beard. Please?”

Clark laughed.

***

Lex watched as the couple walked away, to be eventually followed by Diana, Kara and the others. Only Moana was left to watch as the baron struggled to his feet.

Lex wandered around the room, his fingers brushing an ornamental sword. Unlike the props he’d once kept in the mansion, these appeared to be genuine. He lifted one from its display, hefting it.

“This is not over,” the baron said.

Lex turned to look at him.

“You made the mistake once of under-estimating Superman. Not to mention his wife. It is over.”

De Rochefort stared at him. “You think I believe …”
“It matters little what you believe. You are a fool if you think you and your Brotherhood can take on someone like Superman. You lost, do you understand?”

“The Brotherhood …”

Lex shook his head, huffing. “Stubborn to the last.” He glanced at Alistair who at least knew he had lost. “Lois Lane may have a lot to lose if she exposes you, whereas I, on the other hand, have nothing left to lose. You have already destroyed my reputation, not to mention the company my father built.” He continued playing with the sword, swinging it, recalling the years of fencing lessons.

“You and I are such similar creatures, Baron. Can I call you Yves?”

“Are we?” the Frenchman spat.

“Oh yes, we are. See, we both want power, but the difference is, I know how to get it without using an innocent child to fight my own battles.”

“That is no innocent …” the other man began.

“Yes, of course. It is a hybrid, with powers beyond that of mortal man. You can continue to argue the point, Yves, but the truth is, you were so blinded by your ambition you forgot to take into account that her father is not only one of the most powerful beings on Earth, but he is also capable of causing its mass destruction should you force his hand. I should remind you of the words of Machiavelli. Or rather, let me phrase it in a way that you can understand. The bigger they are, the harder they fall.

“Let’s also not forget that Superman’s own planet destroyed itself through its people’s own arrogance.”

While it wasn’t the whole story, Lex knew enough about the destruction of Krypton to have come to a reasonable conclusion that it was that arrogance that had brought it about.

“Which is why he must be stopped.”

“Oh, I intend to stop him when the time comes. But I need no help, no Brotherhood to do so.”

“Only with great power can you stop such power,” the baron replied.

Lex shook his head. The man clearly had never heard of the subtle approach. How had the Illuminati survived with an idiot like this in charge?

“Join with us and we can …”

He shook his head again. “No. You tried this before and instead you formed an alliance with an idiot like Ross Webster. Who, need I remind you, is the first to run when things get messy. He doesn’t have the intellect to fulfil the task.”

“And you do?”

“Yes, I do. I will beat Superman because there is one thing I know. There are certain things he will never do, because his conscience won’t allow it. Even if said conscience comes in the form of Lois Lane.”

“I do not follow.”
“Probably not. But allow me to demonstrate,” he said, plunging the sword into the man’s abdomen. “Superman could have killed you tonight, but he didn’t,” he continued, gazing directly into eyes filled with fear and great pain. He shifted the sword, hearing the slight squelch as it tore into vital organs. “I have no such impediments.”

As he removed the blood-covered sword, the baron dropped to his knees. He was dead before the rest of his body hit the floor.

Lex turned to face Alistair, holding the sword. The older man didn’t even challenge him.

“It’s over,” he told the Brotherhood’s leader. “Lick your wounds, retreat back into your hiding places. If I hear even a whisper of the word Illuminati, I will come after you.”

It was very telling that Moana hadn’t made a move to stop him. She gazed down at the body of the baron, an odd expression on her face. Lex looked at her.

“Something on your mind?”

“He got what he deserved,” she said coolly. He frowned at her and she shrugged. “I never said I was a hero,” she added.

***

Chloe had been right about one thing, Lois thought as she and Clark were welcomed home a day later. Their parents had been equally ecstatic to see their grand-daughter and furious at the deception. Lois cringed, remembering her mother-in-law’s screech.

“Clark Jerome Kent! I thought I taught you better than that!”

It would have been funny to see her husband, the most powerful man in the world, bowing his head and taking his mother’s scolding like a little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar, if it hadn’t been for her father’s growl.

“Lois Joanne Lane, how could you even contemplate … I swear if your mother were alive, she would have whacked your butt!”

Still, all’s well that ends well, Lois thought, watching her father and Martha cooing over her baby daughter. She felt her husband’s arm around her shoulders, giving her a gentle squeeze. He’d shaved the beard and removed the glamour, so he was back to his handsome self.

“Hey you,” she said.

“Hey yourself,” he replied. “Missed you.”

“Missed you more.”

Little Mara cooed and giggled at her grandparents, clearly none the worse for her ordeal. Lois smiled as she watched her daughter play. Home at last, she thought.
One week later

Lex looked around the huge office. Much of the first floor of the LeXCorp building had been wrecked, not only by the rioters but also by local vandals. Graffiti was being painted out and contractors had been employed to make the necessary repairs.

He was determined to make LeXCorp great again. His balance sheet would have made even a tax attorney cry, but Lex was nothing if not astute. He had squirreled away funds in a bank account in the Caymans. It was only a few million, but still enough to rebuild. All the projects he had started: Leviathan, Ares, Gemini, Intercept, Scion and Prometheus, not to mention his failed senatorial bid, had created serious dents in his balance sheet, but it only made him more ambitious.

His intercom beeped and he pressed the button.

“Yes?”

“Mr Luthor, there is a call for you. From the carabineiri.”

He frowned, but ordered his assistant to put the call through.

“Lex Luthor,” he said.

“Mr Luthor, I am Capitano Moretti,” the caller replied in a heavy Italian accent. “It is my sad duty to inform you that your sister, Lutessa Luthor, was found dead.”

Frowning, Lex listened as the police officer related the details. A man who worked as a medical examiner in Washington DC had found the body. Tess had been stabbed, her body dumped.

Donatello, Lex thought. It had to be. As much as he had wanted to disown his half-sister, he disliked the Illuminati affiliate even more. As soon as he had taken down all the details, he made another call.

“Otis, I have a job for you,” he said.

Donatello would soon learn what happened when one messed with a Luthor.

Lex sat back in his chair, steepling his fingers. The French authorities had descended on the castle, probably alerted by the President herself. No one at the castle, however, would enlighten the authorities on how the baron had come to be killed. The murder weapon had been sterilised. Despite their apparent loyalty to their master, the servants had despised him.

Lex was sure Superman would take him to task over the death, but the bald man no longer cared
what Clark would think. Now that Mara was safely back with her parents and the Illuminati brotherhood had retreated with their proverbial tails between their legs, the détente was over. He was free to go back to hating Superman and plotting the alien’s downfall.

Moana had returned to her home country, but only for a short visit. She and Anders were planning on continuing the momentum, hoping to inform more people about the plans of the Illuminati. Lex knew one thing. The Brotherhood might be licking their wounds, but they would be back. Only next time, Lex felt they would take a more subtle approach.

A couple of hours later, he drove to Smallville to meet with the manager at plant number three. With the town’s economic problems, not to mention the hit he’d taken financially with the destruction of the Talon, Lex was considering the future of the plant. Expansion was not on the cards, especially as the main occupation of the plant was no longer the production of fertiliser but the many research projects that were continuing on Level Three.

Lex had an office on the upper level - part of the executive suite. He’d used it when he had lived at the now-demolished mansion. He’d only used it when he’d been participating in meetings with the plant managers so it wasn’t furnished in the same kind of décor as that of his main office in town.

When he arrived at the plant, he went straight up to his office, checking through the notes in a file his assistant had left on his desk. Suddenly the doors were flung open. Both glass panes smashed. Lex frowned, realising the amount of force that would be required to achieve such a feat.

He rose from his chair, waiting. A woman appeared in the doorway.

“Hello, dear brother.”

He stared at Tess, but quickly schooled his expression, realising what had happened. The two bodies, the clone and the real Tess, had been connected by each other’s bio-rhythms. The death of one had activated the other from a deep coma.

“Tess.”

“How did you do it?” she asked.

“Do what?”

“Don’t play games with me,” she snapped. “You cloned me! You used meteor rock to speed up the process! I’ve seen the files, Lex! I know it was you. The question is, what am I? Am I the real Tess or the clone.”

He didn’t answer, moving out from behind the desk.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said.

She glared at him. “Don’t tell me it doesn’t matter! You played God with my life! How long, Lex? How long have you used me like this? How long have you known the truth about me?”

“A few years,” he admitted. “When your mother was dying of cancer, she confessed on her death bed. Told me about the child my father made her give up.”

“Why?” she asked.

For some strange reason, a wind began whipping around them. Tess’ long red hair flew around her face, as if caught in a whirlwind. Lex was hit by a very strong force.
“Why?” she asked again. “Why did you do this to me?”

Why had he done it? When he’d learnt the truth of his half-sister’s existence, he had been angry beyond words. Not just at Pamela, who had betrayed his mother, but at his father who had proved once again just how much of a bastard he had been. He’d not only cheated on Lillian several times throughout their tumultuous marriage, but he’d sent two children, the result of those affairs, away from their mothers in some kind of screwed-up test.

Lex had tried to bring his brother, Lucas, back into the fold, but after his half-sibling’s experience with Lionel’s brand of parenting, he wanted nothing to do with them. He’d decided to leave the country, changed his name and Lex had never been able to find him. He’d tried again with Tess, recruiting her to work on Project Mercury in Honduras, eventually grooming her to join him at Luthorcorp. Of course, then she’d betrayed him and he’d dealt with her the way he dealt with all others who betrayed him - the exception being his ex-wife.

Cloning Tess had been his way of letting her know that he was still pulling her strings. No matter where she went or what she did, he could still control her.

Tess was clearly getting angry with his lack of response, the whirlwind increasing in strength.

“Tess, we should discuss this.”

She shook her head. “There’s nothing to discuss. You manipulated me, tried to control me. Who’s in control now?”

He found himself pushed backwards, his body buffeted by a wind that seemed to be growing in force to that of a hurricane.

“Tess, you need to calm down.”

She ignored him. Somehow, in a very short time, she had learnt to control the emotions that caused her newfound ability to activate and increased their intensity. The sheer force blew him out the window to the lot below.

Tess looked out at the fallen body of her brother, her own body numb as she watched people gather and stare at their CEO. Lex had fallen several feet on top of a car in the lot, the force of it smashing the roof.

She turned and walked out of the room.

***

Lois walked down the stairs, watching as her husband played with Mara. She had wondered why her daughter seemed so completely unfazed by what had happened. She had known of other cases where a child had been taken from its parents, only for it to scream its head off when finally reunited. Mara had been gone a few weeks and God knew what had been done to her in that time. Yet, she seemed happy.

Clark had suggested maybe it was the Kryptonian in her. Or half-Kryptonian at least. Whatever it was, he wasn’t going to question it. All he cared about was that they had her back and life could return to normal. So to speak.

The phone rang on the counter. Lois glanced at the caller i.d. and picked it up.

“Oliver?”
“I didn’t know if you’d heard, but there was an incident at the Smallville plant. Lex was taken to hospital with massive head injuries.”

“What?”

“We’re not sure what happened. He apparently fell out of a window on the upper level. It was only about twenty feet but I talked to Emil. He says the authorities suspect foul play. The sheer force of the impact suggests it was much more than a fall.”

Lois was not an uncharitable person but she still hated Lex, despite the way he’d worked with them to finally defeat the baron. She suspected the man had been behind the death of the Illuminati man, which had hit news headlines around the world. As much as the bastard had deserved whatever had been coming to him, Lois could not condone murder.

Clark had got up from the couch, holding a wriggling Mara.

“What is it?” he asked.

Lois quickly told him what had happened. He looked concerned, but didn’t comment. There was nothing Superman could do.

Together they took Mara up to bed, then curled up in front of the tv. The news was full of the investigations in Washington DC. Both Martha and Lois’ father had gone to the nation’s capitol to see what they could learn. Martha had reported there would be hearings in a matter of days over the incident.

Wonder Woman’s presence on the island where Mara had been taken as well as Supergirl had not gone unnoticed by the French authorities. President Beauregard, despite being told she was also under investigation for her secret trips to the island, had ordered the authorities to bring Supergirl and Wonder Woman in for questioning. It was looking likely that the French government was going to charge them over their actions.

Lois hoped it wouldn’t come to that. Despite Clark’s assurance that the ordeal was over, she had her doubts. She remembered a quote she had once read. It had often been attributed to Jefferson but had actually been by a nineteenth century abolitionist. *Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.*

Vigilance, she thought, cuddling close to her husband. She would continue to find ways to bring the Illuminati down, once and for all.

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Two weeks later: The White House - Oval Office.

President Thomas Martinez was in his first term in the Oval Office. A liberal Democrat, the man had won the election with a narrow majority in 2009, taking the office in early 2010. The decision had been made back in 2006 to delay the presidential elections by a year after the events of Dark Thursday. It had not been a popular move for some but the White House had held firm.

He looked at the few people sitting in chairs opposite him. He’d called this meeting specially to discuss their options. He was still reeling from the fact that his own Vice President Jeffrey Madison, and the director of the CIA, Josh Appleby, had been forced to stand down from their posts and were now under investigation.

He caught the concerned expression of the beautiful senator from Kansas. Martha Kent was certainly a formidable woman. He now understood why she had earned the respect of all of her peers. Her
family, especially her son, seemed to be cut from the same cloth. It took strength to cope with an ordeal such as they had just gone through, yet here she was, back at work after her short leave of absence.

“Senator, thank you for your presence at this meeting today. I have to say, I’m astounded at what has happened. Almost a fifth of our country’s representatives, people I considered beyond reproach, are under investigation for their part in this conspiracy. And we have no idea how far this goes. To believe that half of the administration of our country is in the hands of secret societies who want to destroy everything this great nation has come to represent …”

He shook his head, his expression incredulous. Martha remained silent, glancing at Congresswoman Julie Baller. As much as she wanted to assure the President, she couldn’t help worrying about her family, who had been at the epicentre of the conspiracy. Lois and Clark were recovering from their ordeal but it would be a long time before they stopped looking over their shoulders.

Julie nodded at Martha and spoke up.

“We’ve let the bureaucracy and the demands of the elitists take precedence over the principles our country was originally founded on, and now we’re paying the price,” she said.

Daniel Abrams nodded his agreement.

“The land of the free has become nothing but a paradise for money. We’ve become victims of our own greed.”

Martha watched as the President held his head in his hands.

“Mr President,” she said quietly, “this is not your fault.”

“Isn’t it?” he asked. “They say ignorance is bliss, but I almost brought this country to ruin through that ignorance.”

“Then it’s up to us, to the people, to take control of our destiny,” she told him.

He lifted his head and looked at her. Martha cleared her throat.

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, ensure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defence, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

He smiled, the smile growing wider as she finished the quote.

“Thank you, Martha. I think we all need that reminder sometimes.” She smiled back at him. “With honest, good people like you, Senator Kent, I have hope for the future of this great nation of ours.”

“As do I, Mr President,” she said, thinking of her super-powered son and his destiny to guide the people of Earth. She was proud of him. Despite what had happened, he was more determined than ever to continue the work he had started long ago in Smallville. “As do I.”

The President’s Chief of Staff, a heavy African American woman, stepped forward. Eloise Kappell had worked for Martinez for years and was highly astute.

“I hate to be the one to remind you, Mr President, but with all the arrests and the forced resignations within the Senate, it may take time to find replacements.”
He nodded. “Thank you for that dose of reality, Eloise.” He looked at the senators. “I’m not sure how we can resolve this.”

“I’m sure the Senate President Pro Tempore will have already set things in motion,” Daniel assured the President.

Richard Federman, the Attorney General, still looked worried.

“I must remind you that these are still very powerful men and women and they are not going to be very co-operative in these investigations. Miranda Clifford has turned state’s evidence, but she is only one among goodness knows how many. Madison has already engaged the services of an attorney. When they talk about justice prevailing, I’m afraid justice may not hold up against such power.”

“It’s already impacted Wall Street,” Treasury Secretary Natalie Batowsky, a woman with dyed blonde hair interjected. “Investors are already beginning to withdraw and sell their stocks in large quantities.”

Such a panic could cause a severe economic recession, Martha thought. If what Lois and Clark had told her about the Illuminati was true, that would be playing right into their hands. She kept silent on this little tidbit, knowing the President was still reeling from everything else.

“We need to work fast,” Senator John Dawkin, a man in his late sixties cut in. He had once held a prestigious post with Harvard as a lecturer in economics. “We need to restore trust with our taxpayers and our banks or else our international allies will begin to doubt us and our rivals will see us as week.”

A young man entered quietly and spoke with the President.

“Mr President, the President of the French Republic needs to speak with you urgently. She is on the phone,” he added, indicating the blue phone beside the President.

Five star General Arthur Balwey leaned toward Admiral Joe Yamamoto, an American-born Japanese man, and whispered in his ear.

“Moment of truth,” he said. The other man nodded.

The room fell silent as the President took the call. Outside, the sky began to darken and a heavy rain began to fall.

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Meanwhile, in a brownstone in Central DC, Secretary of State Robin Writtler was serving coffee to his guest, the French ambassador. Writtler had already had a number of run-ins with Frederic Thyreau, who, like some of his countrymen, tended to be arrogant. The secretary was no oil painting himself but found the other man’s bulbous nose and thick lips to be extremely off-putting.

“Are you aware that one of your own citizens was seen breaking in to a private property belonging to one of our citizens?”

Writtler was already aware of it, as Steve Trevor had reported to his superiors in the Secret Service and advised them of his actions. He had stated in his report a young woman was being held captive in the villa.

Of course, that was not how the ambassador saw it.
“Our authorities are furious, Mr Secretary. Not only were our private citizens attacked by these women called Amazons, but for your own agent, Mr Trevor …”

Writtler raised a hand. “Mr Ambassador, I understand your concerns and I have seen Major Trevor’s report on the incident. As for your attack, it was your people who attacked first.”

“Do our citizens not have the right to defend themselves …”

“Do your citizens also have the right to kidnap a child?” the secretary accused angrily.

Taken aback by the man’s vehemence, the ambassador looked away for a few moments before turning and speaking in a calmer voice.

“The actions of Monsieur de Rocherfort are not those of the Republic. An investigation has been opened by a tribunal in Paris but thus far, the baron’s own people have refused to co-operate.”

“Convenient, don’t you think? The man dies and escapes punishment for his crimes, which I hear are many and varied. Still, I would hope that your democratic and free French justice will continue its good work and co-operate with our own investigations into this matter.”

“I assure you, Mr Secretary, those who are responsible for the child’s ordeal will be found and punished, but still, it is my duty to present this letter from Elysee filing a formal protest at your government’s handling of the investigation into Mr Trevor’s actions.”

The secretary remained silent. As far as he was concerned, since Major Trevor was not acting as a Secret Service agent at the time, it was not up to the government to punish him for his actions. Secretly, he applauded the man’s courage. Still, that would not be good enough for the French authorities, he thought with a long sigh.

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Salle Dorée, Palace of the Elysée - Paris.

President Nicole Beauregard hung up the phone after a half hour conversation with her American counterpart. The woman’s fury showed in her expression. She turned to glare at her staff.

“Je suis fatigué de cet idiot de Mendez.”

“Martinez, Madame,” the Prime Minister corrected. She shot him a filthy look at her tirade being cut off.

“Cet homme est un idiot!” she continued. "Un idiot de la classe moyenne. Il a eu la chance d'avoir été élu président du tout. Non seulement, il est ignorant, mais il ne comprend rien du pouvoir: le plaisir de la politique, la douceur d'être puissant dans l'élite."

Prime Minister Jean Christopher Daribert offered a placating smile.

“Heureusement, nous les Européennes sommes plus réalistes.”

The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sylvie Sévigné laughed.

“Nous avons informé tous nos collègues des pays les plus riches du monde et nous sommes tous d'accord pour dire que l'extraterrestre et ces méta-humains sont un danger pour notre civilisation.”

The President nodded. It was clear she was still focused on the American President. He was obviously so far beneath her that she couldn’t even be bothered remembering his name.
“I met Mendez at the bilateral and international meeting of the G7 and NATO and found him silly and simple. An idealist who submits to Superman and his cohort of monsters. A coward who thinks that the meta-humans fight for justice.” She snorted in derision. “L’homme est un paysan sans culture.”

The director of the DGSE spoke up. Admiral Francois Denain had served in the French navy for more than twenty years before taking up a post with the French foreign intelligence service. He had been one of those who had spoken out in support of the bombing of the Greenpeace flagship, although that had occurred before his time with the service.

“Maintenant que le baron est mort? Quels sont vos ordres?”

Beauregard looked at him.

“Toutes les preuves doivent être détruites. Rien ne doit être lié aux affaires du baron. La République doit être considérée comme propre.”

She was well aware there were rumblings of an investigation into her own actions, but as far as she was concerned, she was untouchable. If they got rid of the evidence, she could not be accused of anything.

General Martin du Guerelec, a pompous man who led the General Directorate of Internal Security, smiled at her.

“Nous avons déjà commencé, Madame la Présidente. Dans deux heures, toute preuve d’activité sur l’île de l’amiral Jean-Jacques sera effacée.”

“I am tired of this idiot Mendez.”

“Martinez, Madame.”

“The man is an idiot! A middle-class idiot. He was lucky to have been elected President at all. Not only is he ignorant, but he understands nothing at all about power: the pleasure of politics, the sweetness of being powerful in the elite.”

“Fortunately we Europeans are more realistic.”

“We have informed all of our colleagues in the world’s richest countries and all agree that the alien and these meta-humans are a danger to our civilisation.”

“I met Mendez at the bilateral and international meeting of the G7 and NATO and found him silly and simple. An idealist who submits to Superman and his cohort of monsters. A coward who thinks that the meta-humans fight for justice. The man is a peasant without culture.”

“Now that the baron is dead? What are your orders?”

“All the evidence must be destroyed. Nothing must be connected with the baron’s affairs. The Republic must be seen to be clean.”

“We have already begun, Madame President. In two hours, all evidence of activity on the island of Admiral Jean Jacques will be erased.”

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Café Kostas, Athens.

An elderly woman sat down at a glass-topped table in the sun and sighed. She looked at her companion.

“Synchóresé me. Ótan eímaste néoi, fovómaste na gernoún. Ótan gernáme, théloume na eímaste kai pálí néoi.”

“Forgive me. When we are young, we fear getting old. When we are old, we wish we were young again.”
“I understand.”

Marie Claire Mandelieu wore her curly hair short. She had thick spectacles which hung from a chain around her neck. Her eyes were creased in the corners from years of squinting her eyes instead of using the glasses.

She lifted the spectacles to her eyes and held them a short distance from her face, squinting to focus on the menu in front of her.

Appoline Oridice was in her late thirties. She taught gymnastics at a private school in Athens. The brunette chose to live quietly, never revealing to anyone that she had once lived among the Amazons and had been blessed, like many of her sisters, with powers from the goddess Athena. She still kept in contact with the queen, advising her on the daily goings-on in the world.

Her elderly friend sat back with a frown.

“Tétoies pigés - mia sti Gallía. Oi efimerídes anaféroun óti i aderfí sou epéplixe tous Gálloous polîtes. Éínaí alítheia?”


“Énas idiotíkós erevnitís?”


“O, egó, ﬁle mou, allá dystychós vlépo óti oi gallikés archés den to kánoun. Exakolouthoún na ischyrízontai óti i Wonder Woman dra paránoma.”

“Me poion trópo? Oi ándres pou chtypíthikan éxo, den skotóthikan. Éínaí oi nómos mas óti den skotónoume an den eínaí ypér tis vasfíssas má i tis patrídas má. Óso gia tin Aresía, échei antimetopíseí tì dikí tis timoría.”

Marie Claire nodded thoughtfully as her companion explained the punishment. Still, the ex-Frenchwoman wondered if there was something she could do to ensure a peaceful resolution. Given that the secret of the island paradise of Themyscira was closely guarded, short of Queen Hippolyta appearing before the tribunal, she could not see how it could be achieved.

“Xéro óti i vasfíssa mou kai oi adelﬁés mou théloun mia eirínikí lýsi epísis. Ekfrázoume tis diavevaíoiseis pros ton Próedró sas óti i Themyscira den thèlei pólemo me ti Gallíki Dimokratía, allá me káthe eilikríneia nomízete pragmatiká óti oi archés tha échoun mia pithanótita katá ton Amazónon?”

“Such goings-on in France. The newspapers report your sister attacked French citizens. Is it true?”
“Only by their interpretation. Wonder Woman was acting for the Justice League. She went to retrieve our renegade sister, Aresia. Helena was recruited by a private detective, a Gaëlle de Rochefort.”

“A private investigator?”

“Apparently, she had some kind of vision of a great catastrophe. I don’t know the full story, but I do know that she told Helena where to find Aresia. When they went to the island, they found Aresia was being held against her will. These men were also part of a group responsible for the kidnapping of our youngest sister, Sera. Their actions were justified, do you not think so?”

“Oh, I do, my friend, but sadly I see that the French authorities do not. They still claim Wonder Woman was acting illegally.”

“In what way? The men were knocked out, not killed. It is our law that we do not kill unless it is in defence of our queen, or our homeland. As for Aresia, she has faced her own punishment.”

“I know my queen and my sisters want a peaceful resolution as well. Convey our assurances to your President that Themyscira does not want war with the French Republic, but in all honesty, do you really think the authorities would have a chance against the Amazons?”

Marie Claire shivered involuntarily. She had been good friends with Appoline for a number of years but she had learnt long ago that the Amazons were not women who took threats to their island paradise lightly.

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One month later. Nuremberg Castle, Bavaria Germany.

The evening had turned stormy. Rain fell heavily and thunder and lightning clashed together like avenging gods over the dozens of luxury vehicles parked within the castle grounds.

Men and women in black suits kept a watchful eye on the collection of limousines, Cadillacs, Rolls-Royces and Ferraris, seeming unfazed by the harsh winds threatening to blow the tops off conifer trees. Each guard carried a sub-machine gun; by their side, a large Alsatian. What they were expecting was undetermined but they provided an intimidating sight.

In a meeting room deep within the bowels of the castle, Sir Alistair Phillips stood before his compatriots, his face hidden behind a mask. Here his name was not uttered. Here he was Number One in the brotherhood, his alias Annaboth.

“The death of the baron and his wife is a tragedy. We have lost the best Number Three we have had in the past forty years.” There was a moment of silence as each of those assembled bowed their head in respect for their dead brother. “He will be missed, however, we must continue with the plan.”

Annaboth glanced over those assembled and noticed the icy cold glare of a large Russian woman. Olga Chiapova, who was now head of the Russian Intelligence service, formerly known as the KGB, was Number Five. She wore the mask of Lillith.

“Superman and his friends are very powerful and too strong. May I suggest that we exercise caution and reflect on this loss before we proceed.”

The new Number Three, a Spanish senator and powerful leader in the agri-food industry, laughed scornfully. He had chosen to wear the mask of Gog and Magog.
“Superman and his friends are nothing. They use their super powers and hold themselves up as divinities. They are nothing but sanctimonious individuals who hide their true intent behind evangelistic preaching. They are crazy to think they can prevent the course of history. As for Superman himself, he is dangerous and must be destroyed.”

Number One studied Number Three through the slits in his mask. He was still smarting from the failure of the baron’s plan. While he agreed in principle with Number Three, he knew it would not be as simple as that.

“You are right. The presence of meta-humans or extra-terrestrials cannot change the future. A future in which we will create a New World Order.”

A feminine voice came out of the speakers. Every person in the room lifted their head to listen.

“You forget our plan to make the daughter of Superman a weapon of war. We must avenge the baron. Power without terror is nothing and neither is terror without subtlety. We must exercise patience. If we are to succeed in our plan, we must be smarter and more ruthless. Trust me, we have the time. Even if it takes ten or fifteen years, Mara will be one of us.”

Chapter End Notes

So we come to the end of this epic journey. The way is left open for a sequel, but whether that happens or not remains to be seen.

This was a tough story to write, due to the plot rather than the characters. I hope you enjoy this epic. It's been an intense six plus years of writing.

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